Moderation as Resistance: A Study of Aggression and Response on Twitch.tv

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ABSTRACT

MODERATION AS RESISTANCE:
A STUDY OF AGGRESSION AND RESPONSE ON TWITCH.TV

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Northern Illinois University, 2021
Dr. Jessica Reyman, Director

This dissertation explores content moderation as a form of resistance to online aggression and harassment, essentially asking the question “How do live streamers on Twitch address aggression through moderation?” Although much research in the fields of rhetoric and composition has addressed online aggression, platform affordances, and rhetorical resistance, Twitch—its rhetors, audiences, and communities—is understudied. Through the use of five case studies focusing on women, POC, and LGBTQ+ streamers, this dissertation examines streamer and community responses to aggression and highlights examples of unruly rhetoric (callouts, mockery, shame, jokes, etc.), which served to combat aggression, establish and reinforce community boundaries, and strip power from aggressors to the targeted.

The second chapter establishes context for the aggressive behaviors occurring in the Twitch channels observed, offering a baseline of behavior. The third chapter presents case studies of four streamers and their channels to demonstrate different approaches and strategies for addressing online aggression. The fourth chapter examines a harassment campaign in which a platform affordance and (re)circulation of content was used to target a trans streamer. The concluding chapter encourages scholars and digital citizens to embrace unruly rhetoric and discusses possibilities for future research and ethical considerations.
MODERATION AS RESISTANCE:
A STUDY OF AGGRESSION AND RESPONSE ON TWITCH.TV

BY
TAB M. LONDON
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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Jessica Reyman
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DEDICATION

To all the people clapping back on the Internet, embracing the unruly.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: THE NEED FOR RESISTANCE

Online Aggression, Gaming, and Content Moderation

Online aggression has become a persistent aspect of the Internet, with many people affected by vitriolic, ugly, and incessant content. According to the Pew Research Center’s 2017 report, a “survey of 4,248 U.S. adults [found] that 41% of Americans have been personally subjected to harassing behavior online, and an even larger share (66%) has witnessed these behaviors directed at others” (Duggan, 2017). Witnessing and experiencing online harassment and aggression is a common experience that affects not only the average Internet user but also those tasked with moderating online harassment (Newton, 2019a). The reality of online harassment is that it has severe and far-reaching implications that cannot be ignored. And much of this harassment is directed at women, Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), and LGBTQ+ individuals.

In online gaming communities, harassment is especially prevalent with many instances documented by mainstream and game media websites (Cox, 2014; Campbell, 2016; Fagone, 2015; Hess, 2017; Wingfield, 2015) and scholarly sources (Kwak, Blackburn, & Han, 2015; Consalvo, 2012; Paul, 2018; Poland, 2016). Misogyny. Racism. Gamergate. These words carry
much meaning in a culture fraught with many instances of aggression and harassment. While women have been consistent targets of harassment in gaming culture, especially as evidenced by Gamergate\(^1\) (Golding, 2015, p. 128), all individuals at the margins of society are under attack in online spaces. As noted by Poland (2016), many lives have been “shattered by a torrent of sexist, racist, and transphobic abuse” (1). This hostile environment is due in large part to the prevalence of toxic masculinity in the history of gaming culture where “masculine policing” is often used in gaming circles to boost one’s masculine identity while tearing apart the identities and social standing of others (Condis, 2018, p. 15).

This ugly side of the Internet and of online gaming communities is undeniable, and these spaces are deserving of close scrutiny. But discussions of toxicity and the people and motives behind aggressive content is not enough, and far too many discussions in the past ended with phrases like “don’t feed the trolls” and “if you don’t like it, go elsewhere.” As digital citizens, we must actively resist aggression and oppose discourse that supports aggressors. Acts of resistance are found online, and such moments offer hope for more inclusive and democratic online spaces and platforms. That is the goal of this project—to explore aggression and moments of response/resistance (within the frame of content moderation/moderative acts), with a focus on the live streaming platform Twitch.tv (Twitch). Because I view online gaming spaces as making significant contributions to online culture more generally, I want to show the rhetorically rich and resistant side of Twitch and will seek to describe the various forms of resistance, how resistance operates, and what forms of resistance work and which do not. I do not believe the

\(^1\) Gamergate was an online harassment campaign targeting women and their allies in gaming spaces in 2014. The harassment campaign centered around the hashtag #GamerGate and involved death threats and doxing, among other forms of aggression and harassment.
Internet is a hopeless space or that we must settle with the notion that “the trolls are winning.” Instead, I wish to embrace resistance with the hope of reshaping online interactions and experiences toward more ethical exchanges, especially where participatory media—such as live streaming—is involved.

In the early days of the Internet, many saw hope for a democratic space free of race, gender, and age. Various Internet manifestos included the idea that the web would offer a bodiless space. “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” states, “We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth” (Barlow, 1996). The Internet was supposed to offer great freedom:

On the Net anyone has the freedom to say anything they want, within the very broad confines of libel laws, self-censorship, and liberal community norms. The only insurmountable restriction on freedom of speech in cyberspace is that conversation must remain within the prescribed topic of any given online conference. (Strangelove, 1994)

The Internet was idealized and discussed by people like Rheingold (1993) as an equal space where “race, gender, age, national origin, and physical appearance are not apparent unless a person wants to make such characteristics public” (“Chapter One”). Such discourse suggests the end of gender and of the body in online spaces. But a quick look at online experiences today tells us the Internet is anything but a bodiless space free from social and cultural expectations and norms. Social media, in particular, encourages the creation of user profiles, usernames, personal images, and other “tags” that encourage online identity building tied to physical bodies. As Koh (2002) says in her analysis of IRC (Internet Relay Chat) interactions, “Technology is
increasingly mediating our social relations and self-identities” (p. 222). Despite the belief that anonymity would liberate people from identity markers, the Internet has developed into a charged space where identities clash—the online world resembles the offline. Condis (2018) states, “We have not come to disregard our bodies; nor have we transformed them into accessories. Instead, we imported them into the digital landscape” (p. 7-8).

This importation of bodies and identities into online spaces is sometimes incredibly noticeable in gaming communities, with gaming culture often being described as toxic and defined by maleness and whiteness. In her examination of game studies, Adrienne Shaw (2010) acknowledges that “gamers” are often stereotyped according to three categories: “(a) who plays video games, (b) how they play, and (c) what they play” (p. 22). She also talks about how gaming culture is often discussed by scholars and others as if it is separate from mainstream culture, saying that “this othering of games, whether done in a positive or negative manner, shapes how video games are studied” (p. 22). This othering of games also affects how games and those who play them are viewed in mainstream culture. Despite reports that nearly half of all gamers are women (Entertainment Software Association, 2018), stereotypes of young white male gamers persist. Because of the stereotypes and assumptions about gaming culture, some scholarship and media attention has taken to looking at women and others at the margins as being separate from gaming culture. Shaw cautions against exclusively changing our academic focus to “female gaming groups” (p. 7). Instead, scholars should examine the place of women within broader gaming culture. After all, one project Shaw refers to showed that LGBTQ+ gamers did not view themselves outside of gaming culture (p. 7). This is not to say that individuals do not experience differences within gaming culture due to identity, but we need to
be cautious of reinforcing gaming stereotypes by marginalizing the experiences of others. It is also important to remember that games are as varied as the communities that form around them:

Video games are played by the young and the old, males and females, and across the world. People play violent games, sports games, puzzle games, and action games. Games help players think, force audiences to be active, are social, and engage the body. (Shaw, p. 12)

This is all to say that POC, LGBTQ+ individuals, and women have a place in gaming and indeed have been a part of gaming since the beginning.

Video game culture continues to rapidly expand. According to the Entertainment Software Association (2018), consumers spent $36 billion on the games industry in 2017, and over $29 billion of that was spent on content (as opposed to hardware/console and accessory sales). Those who play games participate in many game-related activities and forums, from watching live-streamed content on sites like Twitch to participating in e-sports. It is too limiting to discuss games and those who play them alone. Those interested in games participate in various gaming activities (solo and as part of communities); they consume game-related content from game media sites (such as Polygon, Kotaku, and PC Gamer) and watch esports; they modify (mod) their favorite games; they create game-related content in the form of wikis, fanfiction, and Let’s Plays on sites like YouTube; they form fan communities and attend conventions; they participate in charity events like St. Jude PLAY LIVE (Schnuer, 2018; Fogel, 2019); and some even turn to game development (White, 2018).

Despite the examples of good we can discuss, it is undeniable that toxicity exists in gaming culture. Some even believe the toxic nature of gaming culture is increasing (Consalvo, 2012). Harassment, controversy, and sexism have become a firm part of the narrative surrounding games, those who play them, and the games industry. The term “gamer” is now
fraught. Recent scholarship seems to suggest that “gamers” are hardcore members of gaming communities who do not participate in gaming activities casually. According to Condis (2018), “Gamers are self-identified members of a subcultural group organized around video game fandom. They do not dabble with video games; they live video games. They think of gaming as constituting an important part of their identity” (p. 2). The kinds of “gamers” Condis describes are certainly male, and feel that women, LGBTQ+ people, and others are encroaching on their turf—the spaces, activities, and products (games) that have long been viewed as belonging to white males. In talking about Gamergate and the ensuing aftermath, Condis says, “the reactionary politics of gamers are an extension of the backlash politics of the American right wing, the politics of the aggrieved straight white man” (p. 3). It’s been slow progress, but games and the industry are becoming more diverse and inclusive. In 2014, Leigh Alexander wrote:

Developers and writers alike want games about more things, and games by more people. We want -- and we are getting, and will keep getting – tragicomedy, vignette, musicals, dream worlds, family tales, ethnographies, abstract art. We will get this, because we’re creating culture now. We are refusing to let anyone feel prohibited from participating.

Today, many of the most popular AAA titles continue to feature white male protagonists and stories of violence, but nuanced games and games breaking from convention do exist. Conflicts have developed in gaming spaces and communities because not everyone is happy about the attempts to diversify gaming, and, as Alexander said, “Gamers are over. That’s why they’re so

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2 It is important to note that “gamer” is used by some now as a pejorative. However, not everyone views the term as representative of toxic video game players, though “gamer” has taken on this connotation in much scholarship and media coverage.

3 AAA (Triple A) games are those developed and published by major game companies like Ubisoft, EA, and Square Enix.

The narrative of gaming being dominated by white males is slowly changing. As a result, toxic “gamers” are becoming increasingly territorial over the spaces and texts viewed as traditionally theirs. In these contested spaces, we are seeing acts of resistance (resistance that is sometimes messy, abrupt, and could be deemed “impolite”) as women and others push back against hostility and long-standing norms.

Disruptive, antisocial, and “bad” behavior is found in abundance across the Internet. The result of such behavior ranges drastically: “spamming wastes time, trolling can lure people into pointless arguments, and flame wars can polarize communities” (McGillicuddy, Bernard, & Cranefield, 2016, p. 1). But we also know that aggression and harassment can push women, POC, and LGBTQ+ individuals from the Internet, limiting their ability to participate, connect, and contribute online. Questions remain regarding regulation, and the responsibility for that regulation, of online behavior.

Perhaps the first line of defense and much of the burden rests on those who develop, launch, and maintain online platforms. In Custodians of the Internet, Tarleton Gillespie (2018) discusses platform moderation, examining the complexity of this task:

Platforms must, in some form or another, moderate: both to protect one user from another, or one group from its antagonists, and to remove the offensive, vile, or illegal— as well as to present their best face to new users, to their advertisers and partners, and to the public at large. (p. 5)

This, of course, is a challenge requiring both technological tools and human intervention. Some platforms place much of the responsibility for moderation on the average user, introducing various tools, such as flagging, for reporting aggressive, violent, and inappropriate content (Crawford & Gillespie, 2016). And sometimes, due to a lack of effective technological tools or
response from the platform, users invent their own methods for moderating harassment, such as the use of bot-based blocklists on Twitter (Geiger, 2016).

Moderation is also a task that is highly contextual and often requires a collective approach (McGillicuddy, Bernard, & Cranefield, 2016, p. 1). Platform moderation, as this dissertation will show, can be handled in a variety of ways, including via platform moderators, outsourced moderation, and community moderators (who are often volunteers), and toward different ends and levels of effectiveness. Moderators must regulate inappropriate behavior while being mindful of fairness, what’s best for the online community/balancing community demands and maintaining and reinforcing community norms.

Deciding what to regulate and when is part of the complexity of moderation: vernacular expression online, just like vernacular expression offline, is a spectrum; not all cases meet the threshold of outright harassment. Much more common are behaviors that aren’t pointedly aggressive and silencing as much as they are, well, strange. (Phillips & Milner, 2017, p. 201)

Another significant challenge is the mere scope of content to be reviewed and regulated. In the case where harassment was directed at Terrence Miller in a Twitch broadcast, “There was so much abuse that moderators were unable to keep up” (Campbell, 2016). A lack of sufficient and consistent moderation results in “bad” behavior slipping through the cracks, exposing Internet users to sexist, racist, homophobic, and violent content daily. Of course, other options are available for the regulation of inappropriate behavior and content such as “explicit rules, reputation systems that provide incentives for people to act appropriately, methods to report inappropriate behaviors, and algorithms that automatically remove offending behavior” (Seering, Kraut, & Dabbish, 2017). However, neither human moderator nor technological tool can screen and catch every instance of aggressive and hostile discourse on the Internet, especially if
platforms rely on contradictory moderation practices or fail to enforce their own guidelines. In short, the task of moderation is overwhelming. We must acknowledge this along with the conflicting messages we send to platform creators when it comes to moderation. As Gillespie (2018) says:

while we sometimes decry the intrusion of platform moderation, at other moments we decry its absence. We are partly to blame for having put platforms in this untenable situation, by asking way too much of them. Users cannot continue to expect platforms to be hands-off and expect them to solve problems perfectly and expect them to get with the times and expect them to be impartial and automatic. (p. 197)

I believe this is where community action and resistance must come into play—including resistance that is messy and impolite. Those developing and maintaining platforms, and those of us that use them, all have a responsibility to moderate the offensive and harmful behaviors that occur online just as we do offline. The purpose of the case studies presented as part of this project will be to understand the responses and resistance of users in the face of aggression that occurs on Twitch.

Research Methods

Background and Methodology

As an individual who frequently watches livestreams on Twitch (for entertainment and study), I have witnessed the growth of a complex platform while participating in various ways. I have watched channels rise to success after years of consistent effort and others slowly dwindle away. I have donated to charity streams and briefly assisted in the moderation of a small channel. But in the six plus years and hundreds (if not thousands) of hours I have spent on Twitch, I have also witnessed other sides to the platform. I have seen racist, sexist, and homophobic slurs
thrown at streamers and fellow viewers in chat; I have witnessed raids\(^5\) devolve into toxicity; and I have joined channels during moments of uncomfortable silence and the physical shifting of streamers affected by the disruptive and toxic behaviors occurring in their chat. I recognize the complexities of the platform—complexities reflective of many spaces across the Internet. However, I acknowledge my experience with the platform is not enough to conduct a study.

When I began the dissertation, I established two personal goals. I wanted my project to be queer\(^6\) (both in terms of rhetoric and methodology). I also hoped to record and highlight moments of resistance on Twitch. My field’s (rhetoric/composition) engagement with queer theory has been mixed. In 2009, Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace stated, “attention to sexual identity in rhetoric and composition has been spotty at best” (p. 302). Alexander and Wallace examined literature relating to queer composition research and found three main themes: “the need to confront homophobia, the desire to be inclusive of LGBT people, and the possibility of using queer theory to break down the homo/hetero binary as a constraining mode of thinking about identity and agency” (p. 305). Implementing queer theory and engaging with identity issues in the composition classroom is a necessary but challenging and sensitive task, and Alexander and Wallace questioned whether the previous scholarship did much to impact the field of rhetoric/composition. Similarly, Jean Bessette (2016) noted that “Queer theory has had some trouble picking up steam in rhetorical studies” (p. 148) and questioned the framing of queer

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\(^5\) When one streamer leads their community to another channel, that is considered a raid. Streamers often use raids to support fellow streamers and to bring attention to other channels.

\(^6\) It is important for me to note that my project is not queer simply because of my identity as a trans/non-binary individual, though that certainly has led me to gravitate toward queer and queer-adjacent topics at times; it is queer, in part, in that it focuses on the marginalized and on the individuals and actions that upset and challenge social and cultural expectations on Twitch.
rhetoric and readings of normativity. In an earlier work, Bessette (2013) defined queer as “an orientation against normativity (p.28); Alexander and Rhodes (2012) define queer rhetoric as the “self-conscious and critical engagement with normative discourses of sexuality in the public sphere.” Common definitions of queerness rely on notions of sexuality and the pitting of queerness against heteronormativity. However, such definitions are sometimes limited in scope. Queer research should not be limited to sexuality; “‘Queer research’ can be any form of research positioned within conceptual frameworks that highlight the instability or taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations” (Brown & Nash, 2010, p.4). Anything that pushes against heteronormativity, systems of power, and the silencing of voices and perspectives is queer. Queer can be messy. Unruly. Unstable. This seems fitting for a project centered on resistance. Within the messiness, the impolite, and the unstable, the marginalized may find the agency and assertiveness to express themselves. That is why I turned to feminist, queer, and rhetorical method/ologies.

Building on my prior knowledge of Twitch, I turned to the work of Hesse-Biber (2014), Maxwell (2013), Banks, Cox, and Dadas (2019), Burgess and Duguay (2016), and others to create a project founded on digital rhetoric, feminist, and queer methodology. My dissertation seeks to better understand online aggression and the rhetorical affordances (moderation strategies, tools/systems, and human actions) that enable and encourage Internet users to respond to, oppose, and resist aggression. I am particularly interested in the responses streamers (and their moderation teams) have to aggression and whether or not viewers mimic those responses when witnessing aggressive behavior. To that end, I believed it important to rely on
feminist/queer and rhetorical theory to interrogate Twitch’s platform design and the systems of power at play.

I followed a feminist and queer approach to qualitative research, referring to Maxwell’s (2013) *Qualitative Research Design* and Hesse-Biber’s (2014) *Feminist Research Practice* as guiding texts for the project’s initial design. Both texts emphasize careful reflection throughout the research process and consideration of the research’s impact on participants and community. When speaking of feminist methods, McIntosh and Cuklanz (2014) stated that “Feminist inquiries pay particular attention to women, women’s stories, and women’s issues as they appear in media and other texts” (p. 281-282). By extension, the experiences of others at the margins are also of concern to feminist scholars as is acknowledging intersectionality. As I conducted this project’s case studies, I chose to focus on Twitch channels run by women, POC, and LGBTQ+ identifying individuals, being careful to consider gender and sexuality as I observed, coded, and reflected on moments of aggression and response.

**Data Collection and Methods**

This dissertation used a mixed methods approach to examine digital aggression and acts of resistance on Twitch, using five Twitch channels as case studies. The project is guided by the following research questions:

- How is aggression experienced and responded to by *streamers* on Twitch?
  - a) How could live streamers on Twitch respond to/resist aggression using platform-provided moderation tools?
  - b) How do streamers address aggression in the case studies?
c) What moderation strategies are being used by streamers, and to what effect?

d) Do important differences emerge between the streamers’ intended strategies and their observed behaviors?

Analysis of Platform

To begin my critical analysis of Twitch, I employed Light's, Burgess', and Duguay's (2016) walkthrough method for studying apps: “The walkthrough method is a way of engaging directly with an app's interface to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences” (p. 882). Using this method, I observed the platform's features, expectations of use, and documentation (such as "Terms of Service" and "Community Guidelines"), being sure to contextualize the platform within its history of governance and vision. The walkthrough method is informed by various frameworks and pulls from "science and technology studies (STS) and cultural studies" (p. 882). One of the strengths of this method is that it encourages analysis of how users resist the intentions behind the platform’s design and bring new meaning and uses to the platform.

The walkthrough method involves taking a deep dive into the various aspects of apps, including the environment of expected use (looking at the app's vision, operating model, and governance), the app's technical aspects (interface, functions and features, textual content and tone, and symbolic representation), registration and entry, everyday use, and app suspension, closure, and leaving. I believe this method is not only valuable in its own right but also because it

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7 While the walkthrough method was designed for the study of apps, the method is applicable to broader platforms, including Twitch which has a website and apps for mobile devices and game consoles. During the data collection phase of my study, I focused specifically on the website, twitch.tv.
helped me to check my knowledge of Twitch, since platforms and their documentation change over time. To reacquaint myself with the basics of the platform (environment of expected use, features, interface, everyday use, current documentation, vision, and governance), I set up my own channel on Twitch, viewed Twitch’s educational content created for aspiring streamers, and revisited various documentation such as the “Community Guidelines.” This process helped to update my knowledge and ensured I was working with current information regarding the platform’s goals, policies, constraints, and rhetorical affordances. I also see value in the walkthrough method because it "avoids interaction with users" (p. 895), and therefore attempts not to disturb them. The authors also encourage that any user data that is collected be treated "through anonymisation" (p. 896). This, of course, aligns with concerns of feminist and queer research methods.

**Twitch Channel Case Studies**

In order to understand the aggression that occurs on Twitch and how streamers and their communities respond/resist, I collected data from four Twitch channels for Chapter 3. Feminist and queer methodology informed how I selected live streamers for this project. As mentioned previously, I decided to focus on Twitch channels run by women, POC, and LGBTQ individuals because I believe their experiences deserve to be further examined in academic research of the platform. While I am not aware of a study that directly shows those at the margins are targeted more than their white, heterosexual peers on Twitch, I do believe much of the Internet mirrors offline social behaviors. We already know that queer-identifying youth and adults are more likely to struggle with mental health problems than their heterosexual peers (Kerr, Santurri, &

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8 I saw value in going through the process of setting up a channel, which gave me knowledge of what moderation tools and information are provided to streamers.
Peters, 2013; Shearer et al., 2016; Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Liu & Mustanski, 2012; Russell & Joyner, 2001; Conron, Mimiaga, & Landers, 2010), and we also know that those at the margins are often limited in their ability to participate and have a voice on online platforms (Poland, 2016; Duguay, Burgess, & Suzor, 2018). The impact of online aggression is severe, and attention should be given to those who are targeted, their experiences, and their insights.

For the four case studies presented in Chapter 3, I followed Maxwell’s (2013) approach to site and participant selection: purposeful selection. This selection process, when paired with smaller samples, focuses on the “times, settings, and individuals that can provide you with the information that you need to answer your research questions” (p. 97). Purposefully selecting a handful of streamers/channels seemed more beneficial than randomly sampling streamers/channels I knew little about. Streamers were selected according to channel size/average concurrent viewer count (50+ viewers per stream), time spent on the platform, consistency of stream schedule (at least twice a week), and identity of the streamers (see Table 1). Each of the streamers selected for this project are partnered and have streamed on the platform for four or more years. To provide a sense of scale, Twitch states that “tens of thousands of Creators are in the Twitch Partner Program” (“Press Center,” 2021). As aggressive acts often target certain individuals and communities due to the identity of those individuals and communities, it was important for me to include individuals who spoke somewhat frequently about their identities or who made no attempts to mask elements of their identities (in fact, as

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9 Maxwell (2013) notes, “In many situations, selection decisions require considerable knowledge of the setting of the study” (p. 99).

10 Streamers with consistent schedules tend to naturally have more of a presence (and stronger communities/audiences) on the platform.
some of the examples in Chapter 3 will show, some streamers highlight those same aspects of identity that tend to be targeted by aggressive viewers). Consciously or not, their presence breaks the norm of gaming’s perceived heteronormative maleness.

Table 1
Streamer and Channel Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Streamer ID</th>
<th>Self-identified</th>
<th>Channel Followers</th>
<th>Years on Twitch</th>
<th>Platform Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jade</td>
<td>Woman, BIPOC, LGBTQ+</td>
<td>600,000+</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coral</td>
<td>Woman, BIPOC, LGBTQ+</td>
<td>57,000+</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruby</td>
<td>Woman, BIPOC</td>
<td>35,000+</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>Woman, LGBTQ+</td>
<td>19,000+</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Partner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I collected data using Snagit between November 7 and December 1, 2019. The program allowed me to record livestreams (approximately 20 hours per streamer), their corresponding chats, and take screenshots of the platform. I was also careful to note channel-specific policies/rules along with platform regulations and documentation, such as terms of service and community guideline policies (this documentation will be discussed further in Chapter 3). I received IRB approval for this study in November of 2019.

In addition to the four planned case studies, a fifth case study is included in Chapter 4. While in the early stages of my dissertation, I became aware of a harassment campaign targeting
a trans streamer on Twitch. As I watched the harassment campaign develop, I thought it important to record instances of the targeted harassment to track and understand how such a campaign unfolds, especially across online platforms. Using Snagit, I took screenshots and videos documenting the aggression on Twitter, Twitch, Reddit, Instagram, and 4chan. Many of the screenshots and videos were captured in May 2020, though I did return to various forums and spaces over the next few months.

With each case study, I made the decision to collect data without being an active participant in the channels I was studying so as not to influence the communities or behaviors occurring in the observed channels. I was careful to protect the streamers’ identities and to anonymize all collected data presented in Chapter 3. In the dissertation, streamers from the first four case studies will be referred to as “Jade,” “Coral,” “Ruby,” and “Amber,” and pseudonyms replace viewer usernames.

Qualitative Interviews

In order to help contextualize the data collected in the four case studies and to expand my understanding of responses to aggression, I sought to include interviews with the streamers whose channels were selected for this study and moderators associated with their Twitch channels. Initial interview requests were sent to streamers via email in late March of 2020 and follow up emails were sent in May. Emails included a brief summary of my project along with an invitation to include their voices and experiences in the project. I received responses from two streamers: one declined an interview and the other agreed to participate. The interested participant corresponded with me via email to set up an interview over Discord on May 18th. The date, time, and virtual means of communication were decided by the participant. Prior to the
interview, the participant received a list of sample interview questions and an informed consent document, which outlined the study and its purpose, risks and benefits of the study, information regarding confidentiality and data collection, and the voluntary nature of the interview. The interview took approximately 60 minutes, during which we discussed the streamer’s experiences on Twitch in regard to her community, aggression, and moderation. Afterwards, I transcribed the interview and analyzed the participant’s responses.

In May of 2020, I contacted eight moderators (from across the four selected channels) through Twitch’s built in private messaging system known as “Whispers.” I briefly introduced who I was, summarized my project, and invited them to share their experiences serving as moderators on Twitch. Three moderators responded to my messages but all declined the interviews.

**Data Analysis**

After collecting data from the case studies, I categorized the data via coding rubrics and then analyzed the data from a rhetorical perspective. I developed two sets of coding rubrics for the project—the first for categorizing acts of aggression and the second for categorizing moderative responses originating from streamers, channel moderators, and general viewers. Data analysis is discussed further in Chapter 2.

**Limitations**

In conducting this study, I do not attempt to make broad or generalized claims; instead, my study illustrates situations particular to each case study and may provide evidence of overall trends but does not necessarily do so. One of the ways this project is limited is that it focuses on a handful of Twitch channels. I attempted to study the selected channels at depth and recognize
that the data and results must be qualified. And while it was important for me to include the voices and experiences of those observed (streamers specifically), finding participants and conducting interviews was a challenge. Ultimately, only two streamers responded to emailed requests, and only one streamer agreed to participate in an interview. Similarly, contacted moderators declined interviews or did not reply.

**Chapters**

Chapter 2, “Aggression on Twitch: An Examination of Platform Affordance and Gaming Culture,” examines aggressive acts that can occur on Twitch. The chapter begins with contextual information for the platform (including history and site design) before focusing on the aggression that was observed throughout the case studies. The aggression occurring on Twitch is not unique from the rest of the Internet; however, the disruptive behaviors reflect toxic gaming culture and the purposeful targeting of women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ people. This chapter also examines rhetorical affordances granted users of the site (such as how users can interact on Twitch through the chat feature) and how those affordances may serve as “gaps” through which aggressive behaviors can pass through and reach streamers.

Chapter 3, “Moderation on Twitch: Streamer Strategies, Unruly Responses, and Resistance,” explores streamers’ moderation practices and responses to aggressive behavior on Twitch through case studies. This chapter examines the channels of four streamers, ranging from channels averaging approximately 70 concurrent viewers to channels averaging approximately 3,000 concurrent viewers. Each case study begins with an overview of the channel and streamer discussed, before analyzing channel moderation and specific examples of aggression and harassment in order to understand how streamer and community resistance can operate on
Twitch. The chapter posits that unruly rhetoric (calling out aggression, making fun of aggressors, and using other rhetorical moves to resist hate) is an effective and sometimes necessary act of moderation and resistance.

Chapter 4, “Circulation and a Case of Cross-Platform Aggression,” explores the use of a specific platform affordance on Twitch (Clips) to fuel a harassment campaign that spread quickly across platforms like Twitch, Reddit, and Twitter. The chapter begins by providing context for the events leading up to the harassment campaign and what followed. A timeline of events is discussed along with multiple examples of aggression and harassment targeting a streamer, FerociouslySteph. As harassers circulated and used FerociouslySteph’s content against her, they crafted a damaging narrative that took over the discourse of events, resulting in wide-spread transphobia and hate. This chapter examines platform affordance, considers the circulation of content, and questions the general state of moderation on Twitch.

The final chapter, “Conclusion: Embracing the Unruly,” argues that digital citizens—general Internet users, teachers, students, etc.—have an obligation to oppose online aggression. We can begin to oppose such behavior by examining our methods of resistance and considering the potential of the unruly and messy. The resistance found on Twitch can teach us about the value of reclaiming spaces on the internet and the methods that can lead us to more ethical online discourse.
Introduction: What Is Twitch?

Twitch.tv (Twitch) is the premiere live streaming platform for video game-related content, surpassing YouTube Gaming and Microsoft’s (now defunct) streaming platform, Mixer, in popularity (Giret, 2020). At times, the platform has drawn millions of concurrent viewers (Erzberger, 2020) and is branded as a place where “people come together live every day to chat, interact, and make their own entertainment together” (“About,” n.d.). The platform is home to millions of channels\(^1\) and boasts a “1,500,000+ average viewership at any given moment” (“Press Center,” 2020). Twitch has grown so popular it has attracted the attention of politicians, celebrities, and professional athletes who recognize the platform’s reach and potential and/or are invested in video games (Vincent, 2018; Sigler, 2020; Ebrahimji, 2020), including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez who streamed Among Us with other popular figures to encourage voting in the 2020 presidential election (Smith, 2020). In the first half of 2020, as restrictions due to COVID-19

\(^1\) As of April 2020, Twitch reported more than 4 million unique content creators stream per month.
kept many people home, Twitch “saw 1.49 billion gaming hours watched in April — a 50% increase since March” (Smith, 2020). Originating in 2011 as a spin-off of the now defunct Justin.tv, Twitch became a subsidiary of Amazon who acquired the platform for $970 million in 2014 (Kim, 2014). On an interface-level, Twitch operates similarly to YouTube in that content is structured around channels run by content creators, in this case live streamers (streamers) or groups of streamers. While the platform has its roots in game-related content, streamers are not limited to live streaming gameplay. Content found on the site includes music, talk shows, sports, arts and crafts, and cooking. Video game developers have used Twitch to feature their products and foster engagement with gaming communities (“Join us,” 2019), and millions of dollars have been raised through various charity fundraising events (Kaser, 2019; Tassi, 2019; “Meyers Leonard to host,” 2020). The platform serves a wide range of audiences and the ways Twitch is used continues to change.

Multiple studies have sought to understand the motivations of streamers and live stream spectatorship (Kaytoue et al, 2012; Gandolfi, 2016; Bründl & Hess, 2016; Sjöblom & Hamari, 2016; Johnson & Woodcock, 2017; Scully-Blaker et al., 2017; Törhönen et al., 2019; Törhönen et al., 2019; Zimmer & Scheibe, 2019; Wohn et al., 2018; Lessel et al., 2018; Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). Generally, research has categorized streamers broadly as “hobbyists” and “professionals,” examined the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of streamers, and discussed the navigation of play and labor in broadcasted activities. Based on my time as a viewer on Twitch, I have come to see the motivations of those who stream on the platform as varied as the content produced there. Some people are interested in sharing gameplay and chatting with fellow fans for the fun of it; some are pursuing e-sports dreams; some are chasing the hype and trends of various
games (such as battle royale titles like *PUBG, Fortnite*, and *Apex Legends*) to spark a career as a streamer. Discussing the origin of live streamers, Johnson and Woodcock (2017) mention “involvement in the competitive gaming industry and involvement in digital gaming culture and content production” as two major factors drawing in streamers. Some streamers impress viewers with their gaming skill and others entertain with their personas, such as Dr Disrespect who is known for his mullet wig, mustache, and action-film villainy (Stephen, 2020).

Regardless of the motivations, Twitch is home to 4 million plus live streamers, and “tens of thousands of [those] creators are in the Twitch partner program” (“Press Center,” 2020). On Twitch, streamers can join the Affiliate and Partner programs, which are part of the professionalization of live streaming. Each program has certain eligibility requirements (such as number of viewers, follower count, and hours streamed per month) and are designed to help streamers earn income from their live streaming endeavors. Streamers can earn revenue from channel subscriptions ($4.99, $9.99, or 24.99 per month), bits (Twitch’s form of currency), donations, sponsorships, and even from games viewers purchase through the streamer’s channel pages. For some, streaming on Twitch is a lucrative career. In a 2018 interview with *Forbes*, Tyler Blevins, known as “Ninja,” discussed Twitch and his success with Fortnite. At the time, Ninja had just topped 140,000 monthly subscribers (subs) on Twitch and was making an estimated $560,000 that month from subs alone (Tassi, 2018). Ninja later switched to Microsoft’s Mixer in a deal reportedly worth between $20-30 million (Liao, 2020). Twitch, Mixer, YouTube Gaming, Dlive, and Facebook Gaming have made similar deals to ensure exclusive access to streamers (Spangler, 2019; Stephen, 2019; Stephen 2019; Perez, 2020). Such streamers regularly bring in tens of thousands (sometimes hundreds of thousands during special
events and game releases) of viewers. These streamers, of course, represent the very top of professional streaming. Many streamers make a living from Twitch even though they do not have multi-million dollar deals.

According to Twitch, the platform receives an average of 17.5 million visitors a day (“Press Center,” 2020). Twitch characterizes its viewers as passionate and social individuals, as seen in phrasing across their website: “Unabashed fans, welcome home. Watch what you love, connect with streamers, and chat with tons of communities” (“About,” n.d.); “Watch esports pros, catch a live tour of Tokvo, or learn how to bake. There’s always something live and new on Twitch”; “Streamers kick it all off, but you help decide what happens next. With chat, emotes\(^2\), and more, this party bus goes where you steer it”; “Chat, laugh, and bond together. It’s like sharing one couch with thousands of friends” (“Watch,” n.d.). The focus is on a variety of entertainment, finding community, and taking part in live streams. In their study of live events on Periscope, Snapchat, and Facebook, Haimson and Tang (2017) found that people deem live streamed content engaging due not only to immersion and immediacy but also because of interactive and social elements (52-53). Immersion\(^3\), immediacy\(^4\), and interactive\(^5\) social elements are a part of Twitch’s goals for its viewership as well. Twitch offers a different kind of viewing experience, one where viewers can take part in the synchronous chat that runs along the right side of every channel (see Figure 1). Including this chat feature makes the platform even more engaging and allows viewers a closer “connection” to live streamers. On Twitch, it is common to hear

\(^2\) Twitch’s version of emojis.

\(^3\) Immersion is the sense of “being there.”

\(^4\) In terms of live streaming, immediacy follows from a sense of immersion. For example, viewers on Twitch see what is happening on stream in “real time” (streams do have some delay, and a delay may be set intentionally in the case of a competitive event).

\(^5\) Interaction on Twitch may include exchanges between viewer and streamer and viewer-to-viewer.
streamers call out new followers and subscribers and to respond to questions and comments posted in chat. This space is interactive and dynamic, and, in some instances, viewers in chat even have a say over certain in-game elements if the streamer is playing a Twitch-integrated game ("How Twitch," 2019). As research has shown (Kaytoue et al., 2012; Hamilton et al., 2014; Lottridge et al., 2017), the audiences attracted to live streamed content form communities, and these communities are social and participatory in nature. This ties into previous scholarship such as Jenkins (2008) who defines participatory culture as “culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content” (331). Similarly, in her book, Watch Me Play, Taylor (2018) refers to game live streaming as “an emerging form of networked broadcasting” and says it is tied to a longer historical trajectory of television and internet broadcasting, yet simultaneously deeply rooted in our contemporary moment, which is filled with online media services, maker/DIY movements, online life, and creative cultural production from all sectors of society. (p. 23)

On Twitch, viewers are part of the show; they can guide the content (especially in channels where views equal revenue for streamers and when certain games are receiving hype); and they occupy the chat, bringing life and interaction to channels. The chat feature on Twitch plays a significant role in the level of viewer engagement found there and contributes to Twitch’s participatory culture. Viewing gameplay on Twitch also has ties to gaming culture. Playing together (tandem play), “has always been a part of videogame history and indeed the history of play itself” (Scully-Blaker et al., 2017, p. 2026). And much like the way players might consult

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6 In Twitch-integrated games viewers may influence what happens in the game being streamed (such as influencing items in game and determining in-game rewards for the streamer) and streamers get to play with their viewers.

7 Of course, not everyone who watches Twitch is an “active” participant. On Twitch, viewers who opt to view and not interact in chat are known as “lurkers.”
one another during couch co-op play, the participants in Scully-Blaker et al.’s study of live streamed gameplay consulted chat and played for their viewers. I have witnessed this behavior numerous times on Twitch—viewers asking, through chat, for the streamer to show or do something in the game being played and the streamer complying. Participation and inquiry are common practices in both couch co-op and streamed gameplay on Twitch.

In terms of interaction, Twitch viewers engage in chat (see Figure 2), through donation and sub messages, and may even find themselves invited to play with the streamer. The bulk of engagement occurs in chat where viewers may talk about the game being played, their lives, or

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8 Usernames and other identity markers have been removed from Figure 1.
say hello to friends. Viewers may interact with moderators (mods) and may seek the attention of streamers. Part of what makes Twitch a unique space—chat—is also what opens the platform to aggression and harassment. This chapter focuses on the aggression that occurs on Twitch with the intent of understanding how the platform’s design and gaming culture might influence such behavior.

Online Aggression, Harassment, and Violence

While some online communities and platforms are more readily recognized for aggression, harassment, and trolling (such as 4chan and Reddit), these kinds of behaviors are not restricted to any particular segment of the Internet, nor is harassment and aggression unique to
gaming communities. From Twitter’s harassment problem (“Toxic Twitter,” 2019) to one star reviews personally targeting authors on Goodreads (Fallon, 2016), online aggression has seeped into much of the Internet and is well-documented (Marcotte, 2012; Fagone, 2015; Campbell, 2016; Duggan, 2017; Lorenz, 2018; Marantz, 2018; Hess, 2017; Newton, 2019). The issue is widespread and continues to be of concern for digital rhetoric scholars and the average Internet user alike.

For the purposes of this project, online aggression will be considered an overarching term for online disruptive, hostile, hateful, forceful, and violent acts, attitudes, and language. Aggressive behavior and rhetoric are not always direct or individualized (but they can be), and aggression can have a secondary effect in online spaces—those not targeted are also exposed and become witnesses. Harassment, a form of aggression, often manifests as persistent and planned acts of intimidation for various purposes, such as pressuring the targeted individual or individuals to stop participating in certain online spaces. Harassment campaigns targeting women and LGBTQ+ individuals, such as the ones launched against Zoë Quinn, Anita Sarkeesian, and other women as part of Gamergate, often include death and rape threats along with doxing. Doxing involves leaking the targeted individual’s personal information (such as phone numbers and addresses) online. Aggression can also take the form of toxic discourse, which may range from name-calling to misgendering and threats of violence.

Trolling is another act of online rhetoric that can verge on aggression or take the form of harassment. Sometimes seen as playful disruption, trolling can too easily be dismissed or minimized. However, the very purpose of trolling is to cause disruption, to distract, and to upset those targeted. Trolling often involves careful manipulation, as Condis (2018) points out when
referring to trolling as “a game of emotional manipulation in which the winner is the one who can maintain an air of cool rationality in the face of provocation” (p. 9). Trolls often spread hate across the internet, perpetuating racism, sexism, and homophobia, and sometimes occupying specific spaces, like the /b/ board on 4chan or certain subreddits⁹. For example, Whitney Phillips (2016) talks about the trolling on 4chan’s /b/ board as “indicative of whiteness” since most of the trolling present there targets people of color (p. 54). However, Milner (2013) views trolls as necessary for nuanced discourse: “contestation is more vibrant than repression. Exclusion is always more antagonistic than voice” (p. 88). Milner acknowledges that trolling can be antagonistic but that it can also be a productive rhetorical act. Because of the complex nature of trolling, any examples in this project will be carefully contextualized.

While online aggression takes many forms, harassment often manifests as sexist and gendered rhetoric. Hess (2017) speaks of the Internet as a space where men dominate and where harassment targeting women is a typical experience. And a 2019 report by Amnesty International found that:

Such abuse [targeting women on Twitter] includes direct or indirect threats of physical or sexual violence, discriminatory abuse targeting one or more aspects of a woman’s identity, targeted harassment, and privacy violations such as doxing or sharing sexual or intimate images of a woman without her consent. (“Toxic Twitter”)

Online toxicity directly limits women’s ability to participate and connect, pushing women into silence. In one of her examples, Hess states that “Feminine usernames incurred an average of 100 sexually explicit or threatening messages a day. Masculine usernames received 3.7.”

Harassment targeting marginalized identities happens disproportionately. It is important to note

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⁹ A subreddit is an online community associated with Reddit. Subreddits are dedicated to specific topics. Ex. r/photography is a community where people discuss photography, promote their work, and share techniques.
the aggression and harassment we see online does not happen in isolation but is instead an extension of offline behaviors, as Poland (2016) and Herring (1999) note. Koh (2002) reminds us that to think of “online” and “offline” experiences as a binary is to “privilege one entity and to downplay the significance of the other” (p. 222). Virtual interactions and experiences should not be easily dismissed, in general. Online harassment has very real consequences offline, especially in the case of rape and death threats and when doxing occurs.

In gaming, instances of aggression and harassment appear to run rampant from discussions surrounding games to the communities gathering around live streamed gaming content (Cox, 2014; Wu, 2014; Fagone, 2015; Kwak, Blackburn, & Han, 2015; Wingfield, 2015; Campbell, 2016; Poland, 2016; Graham, 2017; Hess, 2017; Condis, 2018; Paul, 2018). One of the most notable instances of aggression and harassment in gaming is, of course, Gamergate. This well-documented harassment campaign revealed a lot about toxicity in gaming communities, but harassment in gaming is not limited to the online vitriolic behavior that targeted women and their allies in 2014. Just as with online aggression in general, aggression and harassment in gaming communities tends to target those at the margins. A Polygon article detailed the harassment a live streamer and competitive Hearthstone player, Terrence Miller, faced during a tournament. The tournament was live streamed on Twitch, and the corresponding stream chat was quickly filled with racist messages targeting Miller: “The abuse included hateful language targeting African-Americans, as well as graphic descriptions and imagery” (Campbell, 2016). An example of online harassment with particularly terrifying offline consequences is swatting. Swatting involves making a prank call to law enforcement with the goal of bringing a swarm of law enforcement to a particular address. The New York Times reported on one such
incident targeting a woman named Janet. Janet was harassed by someone on the Internet, going by the username “Obnoxious,” who sent a SWAT team to her home (Fagone, 2015). Fortunately for Janet, her swatting experience did not result in irrevocable violence. However, swatting is incredibly dangerous and can result in fatalities, as it did in the case of Andrew Finch (McLaughlin, 2018).

One does not have to look far for accounts of toxicity on Twitch. Multiple articles discuss issues of harassment, hate speech, swatting, and Twitch’s attempts (and lack thereof) to address inappropriate conduct (Campbell, 2016; Hodson, 2017; Dale, 2017; Hernandez, 2018; Fagone, 2015; D’Anastasio, 2018; Perez, 2018; Rosenblatt, 2019). Accounts of upset and disturbed viewers are not difficult to locate either. In one Reddit thread from 2017, an individual posted:

i was watching the summer finals [part of a tournament event] yesterday, and i made a big mistake, i went out of full screen and saw the chat. the people talking there were so toxic, i couldnt believe my eyes. most prominent example was, when divios [one of the tournament players] showed up on cam, the crowd would be going like “look at divios, typical American: ugly fat kid” those people werent even banned for saying that. how is that tolerated? is this the community we want to identify ourselves as? (“Why is the twitch chat so toxic?” 2016)

The above account is from the perspective of a viewer, a witness to toxic behavior, and demonstrates the branching out effect of aggression and toxicity—one does not have to be the “target” of aggression to be disturbed by it. In a comment to Kisela’s (2018) Critical Hit article, “Twitch Chat – The largely unaddressed dark side of gaming,” one reader posted, “Sooo, twitch is basically a circle jerk for people, like reddit?” Comparisons to Reddit and 4chan are common in discourse about the toxic side of Twitch. Similar to the attitudes and discourse you might find in certain corners of Reddit and 4chan, the comment section of that same Critical Hit article included posts from several readers mocking the concerns of the article and its author.
When the targets of aggression are women or people of color, the aggressive and violent rhetoric seems to intensify. Women, in particular, are often expected to be romantically available to viewers, viewers who donate money and cheers for attention and ask persistent questions about the women’s relationship status. Hernandez (2018) highlights the harassment and accusations women streamers can face on Twitch when viewers feel entitled: the relationship between viewer and women streamers can quickly become more personal for a viewer than the broadcaster intends. When a man on Twitch is nice to a viewer, that’s typically that. When a woman is nice to a viewer, it can more often get misinterpreted as romantic interest or availability.

Women on Twitch are expected to be friendly and available, and when they are not or when they choose not to disclose personal information, aggression and harassment can occur.

Coding and Analysis

In order to perform rhetorical/content analysis of the data collected from the case studies, I developed coding rubrics to help categorize aggressive behavior and moderation/response to said behavior (rubrics for moderation/response will be discussed further in Chapter 3). The rubrics for aggression were adapted from a previous project (London et al., 2020) that focused on aggression and moderation practices in the channels of women-led Twitch channels. The coding rubrics are based on categories of aggression and define where that aggression occurs and who it targets. Coding in this way allowed me to label and organize the data from the four case studies.

The rubrics for categorizing aggression are divided into categories representative of where aggression originates in the channel (in the chat or via the game being played) and the “direction” it travels (who it is directed toward). For example, viewers may enter a channel’s

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10 Some conversations regarding the notion that giving money equals access to women streamers and courtship can be found across the Internet, including this post and thread on Reddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/Twitch/comments/8ts5tc/dear_men_and_boys_stop_donating_to_female/
chat and post a message to antagonize fellow viewers or to provoke a response. Viewers may also use messages in the chat to grab the attention of the streamer or to harass the streamer.

The first coding rubric, “Intra-Chat Aggression” (see Table 2), addresses messages originating in a channel’s chat. These messages may be non-contextual (IC1) in nature such as self-promotion, posting ASCII art (see Figure 3), or the spamming of emotes (see Figure 4). This rubric also includes messages posted in chat that are confrontational or argumentative in nature (IC2). For example, a viewer may comment in the chat that a particular in-game weapon or character is superior and this sparks a disagreement among viewers. Messages may be directed at fellow viewers or moderators or may be written to elicit a reaction from anyone in the channel (this can be difficult to assess at times).

Figure 3: Example of an ASCII  Figure 4: Emotes. (http://www.twitchemotes.com/)

---

11 On Twitch, self-promotion tends to take the form of mentioning one has a channel on Twitch in the chat of another streamer. This behavior may also include posting a direct link to one’s channel or saying something to the effect of “See you guys later. Going to start my stream now!”

12 ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) art combines characters to create visual art.
Table 2
Rubric for Intra-Chat Aggression\textsuperscript{13}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IC1</td>
<td>Non-contextual disruptive comments/images (ASCII, emote spamming, political interjections) and self-promotion.</td>
<td>A Twitch viewer keeps spamming the “keep on tugging” emote in chat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IC2</td>
<td>Confrontation/arguments (chat users devolve into name-calling in debate, sometimes contextual/in response to what streamer has said or other viewers, sometimes not). May include reactionary remarks/attention seeking.</td>
<td>User1: User2 you know it’s easier to insult with correct grammar User2: @User1 its not an insult its honest criticism and im on twitch not writing a paper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second rubric, “Chat-to-Streamer Aggression” (see Table 3), addresses aggression posted in chat that is primarily intended to target the streamer. Such comments may be direct or indirect, hostile or subtle. My approach when noting instances of chat-to-streamer aggression was to record both obvious and subtle instances that fit the category. Categories of aggression in this rubric include comments about streamer body/appearance (CS1), persistent comments (CS2), intrusive comments/questions (CS3), comments related to gameplay/the game (CS4), and stream-sniping\textsuperscript{14} (CS5).

\textsuperscript{13} The categories are based off observations of interactions on Twitch (both from my personal experience with the platform and as witnessed during a previous research project). Examples in the rubrics are based off real exchanges from various Twitch chats.

\textsuperscript{14} Stream sniping may take the form of a viewer joining the same game as a streamer to kill the streamer in-game repeatedly, but it may also be a means of receiving attention from the streamer and their viewers.
It is important to note that it is sometimes difficult to assess the intent of comments in chat or how they are perceived by others. Comments directed at the streamer like “you’re so pretty!” are received differently depending on the streamer and their channel’s community. Because of this, I noted all comments on streamers’ bodies and appearances in the recorded data instead of initially differentiating between comments like “you’re so pretty!” and “i like whats under ur shirt.”

Table 3
Rubric for Chat-to-Streamer Aggression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CS1</td>
<td>Comments on streamer’s appearance/body, and comments sexual in nature.</td>
<td>“Good Afternoon Sexeh Bebs.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“have you thought of doing adult filming?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS2</td>
<td>Persistent comments (may be attention-seeking).</td>
<td>“who opended the door and let [pet] in?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>can u tell me who opended the door? It’s killing me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>plz answer …did your [sibling] openednthe door?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS3</td>
<td>Intrusive comments/questions such as inquiries as to the streamer’s sexuality, relationship status, age, etc.</td>
<td>“not to be rude or anything but are you gay?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“oh, do you have a boyfriend”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS4</td>
<td>Comments on gameplay/related to game or comments on stream quality/elements. This may include mocking the streamer’s abilities/skill, suggestions for how to play, and spoilers.</td>
<td>“can I play with you”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“you’re being carried”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“hey you dont have to PICK UP ammo or building materials, you can just run over them and it auto picks up. guns and other stuff you do have to pick up though”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS5</td>
<td>Stream-sniping (viewer potentially starts in chat and then logs on the same server/game session to ‘kill streamer in-game’/disrupt stream)</td>
<td>User1: awww.. stream sniped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>User2: @User1 BANNED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>User3: I KILLED HER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>User3: I GOTG HER</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After the streams were recorded, I filled out what I refer to as a “stream log,” which helped me to organize the information I had collected (see Table 5). Each log begins with some basic information consisting of the stream category\textsuperscript{15} as flagged by the streamer, the title of the

\textsuperscript{15} Categories help streamers label the content or purpose of their stream, and this also helps viewers filter for content of interest. Categories on Twitch help indicate the stream’s focus (the game being played or that the stream features non-gaming content such as art or travel).
stream, the date of the stream, the title of the recorded file corresponding to the stream, and the length of the recording. An area for general comments followed the contextual information. In this space of the log, I made note of any other relevant observations, such as the number of concurrent viewers when I joined the stream or the use of tags to flag the stream’s purpose. In addition to categories, streamers sometimes use tags to further characterize their streams (“Competitive,” “Hardcore,” “LGBTQIA+,” and “English” are just a few examples of tags).

The next step was to watch each recorded live stream and note instances of aggression and response. This was, by far, the slowest part of processing the data as typing and contextualizing what was occurring in the streams and their chats took time. One aspect that complicated this process was the speed of the chats. At times, in the channels with higher concurrent viewer counts, chat moved quickly, requiring me to pause and even “rewind” the recordings. During the initial pass of a recorded stream, I would generally only make note of aggression and response and left assigning individual codes for a later time.

During the coding stage of the project (I conducted several rounds of coding to reflect on and check my work and process), I was mindful of the context for each channel and stream, taking into account message and audience as I examined aggressive exchanges and responses. I believed it important to rhetorically analyze disruptive moments and hostile exchanges in order to understand online aggression and possible strategies for response/resistance on the platform.

Due to the nature of Twitch chat—a space that can move very quickly with viewer messages flying past—not all instances of aggression were noted. For example, there were times when emote-spamming and backseat gaming were so prevalent that it seemed unnecessary to mark every unique instance.
### Table 5

Example of Stream Log Including Noted Aggression Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Stream Title</th>
<th>Date of Broadcast</th>
<th>File Name and Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fortnite</td>
<td>Solos and chill</td>
<td>Nov. 8, 2019</td>
<td>[channel]_2019-11-08.mp4 2:23:34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**General Observations:** Throughout this stream there was a lot of backseat gaming—viewers telling the streamer where to go, what weapons to use, etc. Many instances of backseat gaming went without comment by the streamer, moderation team, or fellow viewers. Perhaps this behavior is generally acceptable in the channel.

**Tags—**

- **0:12:59 CODE: CS4, VR3**
  - [streamer] is looking for something in game and can’t see it.
  - Viewer 1 (nonsub): it’s right there
  - Viewer 2 (nonsub): right there
  - …
  - Viewer 3 (sub): chat
  - …
  - Viewer 3: saying its right there doesnt help

  **Notes:** Example of backseat gaming and community response.

- **0:16:23 CODE: CS1**
  - Viewer 1 (sub): I like your shirt and whats un- nvm

  **Notes:** This comment goes seemingly unnoticed by the streamer and moderation team.

---

**Data Presentation**

After analyzing the approximately 80 hours of recorded live streams across four channels on Twitch, certain patterns began to emerge in terms of the kinds of aggression most prevalent. For example, comments on gameplay (CS4) were the most numerous regardless of the streamer/channel. Comments on streamer appearance/body (CS1) were the second highest.

The following provides an overview of aggressive behavior per coding rubric and some
discussion of examples to provide a baseline of aggression recorded before discussing moderation and resistance in Chapter 3.

**Intra-Chat Aggression**

Findings for intra-chat aggression were not especially surprising given the behaviors and exchanges I have witnessed on the platform previously and my work on a somewhat similar publication (London et al., 2020). Intra-chat aggression tends to be disruptive in that it interrupts the discourse in chat. Depending on the number of concurrent viewers and how many viewers are active in chat, messages tend to only have a few seconds of screen time before they are pushed out of view by following messages. This can make keeping track of and maintaining conversations more difficult in active chats. And when those chats are full of copied text, repeated messages, and emote spamming, they can become even less coherent to those outside the Twitch community. Sometimes a chat will move so quickly that questions for the streamer or about the content being live streamed are immediately bumped off screen. It is important to note that this added difficulty does not completely hinder conversations in more active Twitch chats. In their study of Twitch chats, Ford et al. (2017) found coherence in massive chats where participants deployed a consistent set of practices that allowed communication to continue at scale...We observed that crowdspeak relied on tacit references, in-jokes, and acquired fluency. Crowdspeak was made possible by a vibrant community of chat insiders familiar with a specific, outwardly-obscure set of symbols, commands, and modes of speech. (p. 866)

Knowing that communication practices such as emote spamming and copied messages are normalized across Twitch, the rubric for intra-chat aggression was designed to account for when such exchanges were not deemed appropriate by the streamer and their community. This can
vary and be highly contextual. For example, sometimes emote spamming is appropriate and other times it is not. A streamer may share an announcement for a new sponsorship and chat may erupt in celebratory messages and congratulatory emotes. Another time, someone may spam an emote multiple times (seemingly out of context from the rest of the chat and stream) and that message may be deleted by the streamer or moderator. The following is a common example of emote spamming removed from chat:

Example of IC1:
Viewer (nonsub):  
ammopiggers ammopiggers ammopiggers ammopiggers  
ammopiggers ammopiggers ammopiggers ammopiggers [message deleted]

A message like the one above does not seem especially malicious in nature; however, the message was deleted, implying it was unwanted by the streamer and/or channel moderators. Messages like this one may be posted persistently by a single user or several. When this occurs, chat can be “taken over” and general conversations disrupted.

The next example demonstrates messages that fall into the second category of intra-chat aggression. Messages coded as IC2 may include attention and reaction-seeking comments (this can generally be gauged by the content of the messages and their non-sequitur nature). Similar to messages coded as IC1, IC2s may be out of context from the rest of the chat’s conversations and not directed at any one individual interacting with the stream. Some of the messages under this category may be considered trolling. Trolling is meant to lure a specific emotion/reaction, to bait others to engage with the message in specific ways. (Note that ellipses indicate intervening messages).

Example of IC2:
Viewer (nonsub):  
God loves you

---

16 A viewer who is not subscribed to the channel being discussed will be referred to as a “non sub.” Channel subscribers will be marked with “sub” in the chat examples.
Viewer: … He’ll never forsake you
Viewer: … He’s always there for you

The above message was posted outside of any current conversations occurring in chat and was seemingly unprompted by anything the streamer said previously. Non-contextual messages like these may be posted in chat for the entertainment of the poster. While this example was not necessarily toxic, messages of this type certainly can be. For example, during one of the livestreams observed for this study, a viewer asked, “Do you think people should be able to call a transgender by the wrong pronouns?” The viewer’s question was out of context from the current discussion in the stream and seemed intended to agitate the streamer (this example will be discussed further in Chapter 3).

**Chat-to-Streamer Aggression**

Noted instances of chat-to-streamer aggression followed expected patterns as outlined in the rubric categories. Similar to the examples discussed for the previous rubric, chat-to-streamer aggression originates in a channel’s chat and can be disruptive to chat and the community of viewers. While the forms of aggression discussed here specifically target streamers, viewers watching and participating in chat are also exposed. Regardless of an aggressor’s intention to target the streamer, their aggression spills over into the community. And, in the case of a popular Twitch channel, tens of thousands of viewers can be witness to toxicity. While I am not currently aware of a study that addresses this spillover effect of aggression on Twitch, I am aware of the toll exposure to abusive content can have on individuals tasked with content moderation (Chen, 2014; Newton, 2019a; Newton, 2019b). The average Twitch viewer is probably not exposed to the same level of toxic, violent, and graphic content as a laborer working to moderate for a tech
company, but the exposure to content which violates Twitch’s policies and rules is worth mentioning.

Comments on streamer appearance/body were prevalent in the channels of the four streamers. The majority of the comments in the CS1 category were sexual in nature such as “take it,” “ur hot,” “DAT ASS,” “Holy gosh [streamer] your so hot,” and “show your boobs.”

Example of CS1:
Viewer (nonsub): ur hot
... 
Viewer: ur pretty

The above example demonstrates both the kind of comments recorded and the persistence that can accompany remarks that are sexual in nature. In many of the noted instances of sexually charged chat-to-streamer aggression, the offending viewer continued to post comments until the streamer, moderator, or fellow viewer replied (typically chiding the behavior). However, some comments in this category consisted of fat-shaming, gender-based comments/insults, transphobic remarks, and racism. Noted instances range from “Hello beautiful gamer girl” to “i can see it in your bones that you’re a male.” One of the difficulties with this category of aggression is behavior acceptable in one channel may be admonished in another. Comments such as “DAT ASS” may be welcome and deemed complimentary by some streamers and others will shut down such comments immediately. In cases where I was uncertain about the perception of the comments, I made notes in the stream logs and monitored future instances for the community’s and streamer’s reactions.

A number of particularly persistent comments occurred across most of the channels. CS2s tended to follow two patterns: a series of attention-seeking comments directed toward the
streamer and a series of comments seemingly meant to produce a specific reaction from the community and/or streamer.

Example of CS2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Viewer (sub):</th>
<th>I am in love with this stream…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Viewer: [streamer]</td>
<td>we had something special my first night in stream. Now you don’t want none of my nonsense.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viewer:</td>
<td>I remember when we watched you play testicle face space fallout and you laughed at my stupidity. Now you don’t even read it :(. #heartbroken</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At a glance, the behavior above may not seem aggressive. The viewer is seeking attention from the streamer, which is not unusual in Twitch streams. However, if we were to imagine this behavior in the context of a face-to-face interaction among individuals who hardly know one another, or do not know one another at all, this behavior would more easily be recognized as manipulative and fall under definitions of harassment. There is something almost desperate about the viewer’s messages and, perhaps, entitlement—to the streamer’s attention.

Initially I expected to observe a number of intrusive comments and questions directed at streamers; however, few comments in the chats were noted as CS3s. Noted instances, such as “u single,” included questions as to streamers’ relationship status and whether a streamer had undergone surgery. The general lack of intrusive comments and questions does not imply that such remarks do not happen on Twitch—it simply means they did not occur frequently in the recorded live streams.

Out of all the categories across the coding rubrics, comments regarding gameplay and the stream were noted the most in all four channels. The majority of these comments involved
backseat gaming and spoilers.

Example of CS4

Viewer1 (sub): is there a button somewhere down there?
Viewer 1: floor
Viewer 1: oh i thought it was highlighted
Viewer 2 (sub): I’m thinking right side
Viewer 3 (nonsub): seems to be a jump-up at the end, on the right

The above example was coded as both CS4 and CS3 due to the persistent nature of the comments. Based on my time on Twitch and experience playing video games, this is typical backseating behavior. Quite often the comments seem to come from a place of frustration, though tips and direction from chat are sometimes welcomed by streamers and even asked for.

Only one confirmed instance of streamsniping occurred in the recorded streams. A common form of streamsniping involves watching a streamer’s livestream to gain an advantage over the streamer in-game. However, sometimes players will watch a livestream so they can follow a streamer around in game (to harass, annoy, or to entertain the stream) or to provide them in-game items. The recorded instance of streamsniping involved a viewer posting in chat that they had been streamsniping but wanted a rematch with the streamer. The streamer expressed not being bothered by the viewer’s actions.

In-Stream Aggression

Although I have witnessed many instances of in-stream aggression before, only two instances (including the previously discussed example) were present in the data collected for this study. This may suggest in-stream aggression is not as prevalent as I had originally thought. However, it should also be noted that many of the recorded live streams involved streamers playing single-player games (this was not intentional on the part of my data collection). Based on
prior observations, the likelihood of this kind of aggression occurring increases when streamers play popular competitive and team-based online games. I noted a second instance of in-stream aggression when Jade responded to a comment made by a teammate. The comment was inaudible in the recording, but Jade responded with “Don’t tell me how to fucking play.” At the time of this exchange, Jade was playing a competitive shooting game.

Conclusion

The examples of aggression discussed in this chapter provide a baseline of common disruptive behavior occurring on Twitch. Part of what complicates this space for study is the nature of live streaming, synchronous chat, and the ways aggression can occur in such a dynamic space. It is important to understand the complexities of communication on the platform before examining the ways moderation and resistance can operate (as will be discussed in Chapter 3).

Live streaming places an individual or individuals at the center of a virtual space where viewers gather for a variety of reasons, including entertainment and social connection. The desire to connect, express, and create is not new with the Internet, and we can look back to the history of television to see an interest in “live extension, interaction, virtual presence, and communication” (Uricchio, 2004, p. 291). The liveness of broadcasts connects people and enables them to share stories, identities, and experiences with others. Similarly live streaming platforms like Twitch see even stronger bonding between streamer and audience and viewer to viewer. Central to the Twitch experience is simultaneity. Because the broadcasts are live, viewers see streamers (via webcam) and hear their voices in “real time” as well as experience a synchronous chat alongside livestreams. There is power in this simultaneity—it draws audiences in, contributes to the social dynamics of live streams, and can make viewers feel like they are
there experiencing with the streamer. In speaking of webcam usage, Ken Hillis (2009) writes that “at times these encounters induce feelings of absence and ‘wish you were here,’ yet mostly they have the opposite effect: everyone feels that they are somewhat in each other’s presence” (p. 9). Seeing the streamer, their reactions, and their interaction with the content being streamed replicates the effect of being there. However, what makes these online social encounters powerful in their ability to connect people also makes aggression that much more inescapable.

When aggression occurs on Twitch the results are near-immediate and public. If an aggressor, let us say the aggressor’s username is Bu22kil, types “@Rose [streamer] get them tittys out girl” in chat, their message will appear in chat immediately (unless the streamer or a mod has set a delay for the chat). Every viewer participating in chat or simply viewing the chat can see the message as can the streamer. Depending on the number of concurrent viewers and the activity level of the chat, the message may fly out of view quickly, requiring viewers to manually scroll back up through chat to view the message, or, if the chat is inactive, the message may linger on screen for minutes. Either way, the message is visible to both streamer and viewers. Depending on how Rose views messages of a sexual nature and her approach to moderation, the message may be addressed or ignored. Various factors may affect the decision to engage with Bu22kil or not. Of course, Rose may not even see the message (perhaps she is not paying attention to the chat or is focused on the game she is playing). In which case, Bu22kil may move on or continue to post messages seeking attention. Let us imagine Rose does see the message; she wants to respond, to admonish the behavior, but she pauses to consider the cost of such a response. If Rose is new to Twitch or her channel has only recently seen growth in viewership, she may not want to alienate her viewers, even the ones who push boundaries. Calling out
Bu22kil may upset him and other viewers. Even if Rose is not new to the platform, this may still be a concern. Sometimes it is easier to ignore inappropriate comments than to address them. What if Bu22kil persists? Perhaps he likes seeing Rose’s reactions, the discomfort on her face or the way she fidgets in her chair when someone comments on her appearance. Next he says, “@Rose ive been waiting to sub to you. you are the best wife.” Such a comment reminds us of the financial factor at play here. Rose may rely on channel subscriptions and donations for part or all of her income. Calling out the toxic and unwanted may cost streamers like Rose viewers, channel growth, and income. Observations of Twitch and studies have shown that streamers are incredibly mindful of the performative nature of their work. In their analysis of streamers and the skills they value and develop, Pellicone and Ahn (2017) found that streamers “conceive of performance across three primary domains of practice: assembling technology to produce a professional looking media artifact, acting as a builder and moderator of an online community of regular viewers, and as developing a specific attitude towards gameplay that makes them a unique and entertaining streamer” (p. 4864). Viewership and community engagement become part of the capital of their work and is inevitably tied to streamers’ success on Twitch. Building a community and fostering connections with viewers is vital for success on Twitch and putting in that effort can result in financial support. Wohn, Freeman, & McLaughlin (2018) found that viewers were motivated to provide social support to streamers in the form of emotional, instrumental, and financial means and that these forms of support “were strongly interrelated, and some participants engaged in all three” (p. 8). Viewers may donate money or subscribe to a

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17 Countless times I have watched viewers get reprimanded by streamers which resulted in fellow viewers making comments about how the streamers’ responses were mean or unnecessarily harsh. Sentiments of “that poor guy” suggest some viewers have empathy for individuals making inappropriate or unwanted comments or that they believe streamers should simply ignore transgressions or go easy on viewers.
streamer as a form of exchange (paying for entertainment), to help the streamer upgrade their streaming setup, because they like the streamer and wish to show their appreciation, and even to assist the streamer in raising money for charity. For Rose, addressing Bu22kil’s behavior may not be as simple as making a comment or giving Bu22kil a timeout or channel ban. Choosing to moderate may have social implications. And it is her choice to make. As the following chapter will show, Twitch places the burden of moderation and enforcement on streamers and their communities.

When we examine aggression on Twitch, we should seek to understand it within the full context of the platform, a context that presents many complications for the streamers who are targeted. Streamers on Twitch often face aggression, harassment, and criticism in front of a live audience. Unlike YouTube where content creators conceive of and create their content offline and then receive feedback and responses when that content is posted, Twitch streamers face audience response live, and their reactions to their audience are broadcast and on display publicly. Bu22kil could leave inappropriate messages on one of Rose’s tweets, but he may never know how she reacts to those messages. On Twitch, Bu22kil has the opportunity to see how his words impact Rose in “real time.” Streamers very presence in a live environment opens them to immediate criticism and targeting. The aggression found on Twitch may not be novel compared to the rest of the Internet, but the way it appears, operates, and complicates live streamed environments is worthy of examination.
CHAPTER 3

MODERATION ON TWITCH: STREAMER STRATEGIES, UNRULY RESPONSES, AND RESISTANCE

“Civility may well be a virtue. But it is probably not a virtue that will be of much help in deciding the political questions that ultimately matter.”
James Schmidt

“If there is no struggle there is no progress”
Frederick Douglass

“Will you shut up, man?”
Joe Biden

Introduction: Unruly Rhetoric

In analyzing moments of resistance to online aggression (from the perspective of content moderation on Twitch), this project attends to acts of *unruly rhetoric* (Alexander, Jarratt, & Welch, 2018), a term sometimes used to describe language and acts seen as disruptive, defiant, and disorderly. Unruly rhetoric can be defined as unconventional, emotional, and even messy responses, such as shaming harassers on social media or bold messages from protestors disrupting systems of authority. Mockery, humor, shame, banter, and callouts, when properly situated, are effective rhetorical tools in combating online aggression and harassment in synchronous environments like Twitch where livestreaming demands immediate and public response. *Unruly, impolite, and uncivil* are words often used in opposition to the virtuous, polite,
and ethical rhetoric discussed and favored by some scholars of rhetoric and composition.

Although much current political debate and discourse would seem to prove otherwise (see the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections), Western society maintains expectations of polite and civil discourse. Although many favor civility to disruption and argument, definitions of civility and politeness are varied, as Carter (1998) notes:

> We seem to have trouble agreeing on exactly what civility is. Some people...think of manners. Others think of proper standards of moral conduct, or a set of standards for conducting public argument. Still others think of willing participation in the institutions that enable our democracy to thrive, what has come to be known as the movement of civic renewal. (p. 13)

Impolite and rude behavior—mocking, shaming, joking, name-calling, etc.—are easy to identify and frequently viewed as unacceptable even in the face of bullying, aggression, and harassment. Our society resists more direct and aggressive forms of opposition and argument in favor of calm discourse and education. However, clinging to Victorian standards of discourse in the current social and political context can result in a climate where one side insists on politeness while the other relies on name-calling, insults, and ad hominem attacks—one side apparently “wins” by default because they are louder, more brazen, and have privileged voices. Within such a highly politicized context, can civility, calmness, and education prevail? In examining unruly rhetoric, I do not argue we should bully the bullies or harass the harassers, but rather I question if there is a need to expand our understanding of ethical rhetoric, particularly within the realm of ever-changing online discourse.

Underlying many prior approaches and theories of ethical rhetoric is the sense that rhetors have a social obligation beyond the needs of their immediate audience(s). A person’s character, virtue, and manners effect their rhetoric. In their own ways, Plato, Aristotle,
Quintilian, and Cicero tied virtue to civility, citizenship, and rhetoric, believing virtue could be taught and practiced. Plato spoke of virtue and a “process of socialization from family to school to public service in the polis” (Jarratt & Reynolds, 1994, p. 45). Similarly, Aristotle said, “Virtue of thought arises and grows mostly from teaching, and hence needs experience and time” (Nicomachean ethics, 1985, p. 33) If virtue must be practiced to be maintained, then virtue can also deteriorate over time. Richard Enos and Karen Schnakenberg (1994) explain that “Cicero’s notion of dignitas reveals his view of ethos, that the composition of rhetoric must meet not only the standards of an immediate audience but the social standards of Rome as a community and a culture” (p. 201). Through the above perspectives, we see a call to audience, society, ethics, and an expectation of citizenship (as associated with civility) when practicing rhetoric.

In “A Call for Comity,” Theresa Enos (2003) continues this tradition of rhetoric that is both civil and conscious of society, or “the greater good,” by proposing spacious rhetoric. This call for spacious rhetoric is, in part, a response to the immediacy of technology, the anonymity found in many contexts in the 21st century, and the loosening distinction between the private and public. Enos explains “how compressed time works against a spacious discourse that requires a sense of expanded time, space, and self-reflexiveness” (p. 129). She argues for more time, restraint, and respect:

Because writing stabilizes language, as opposed to the immediate and spontaneous interaction of primary (oral) rhetoric and even secondary (electronically mediated) rhetoric, we can actually create the time by freezing thoughts that invite reflection and that give us the opportunity to not only self-reflect but to reflect as a community. (p. 151) Such suspension of urgency (which requires time and space for determining an appropriate response) may be viable for more traditional written communication, but what can this mean for digital communication? Can suggestions such as Enos’ apply to synchronous and livestreamed
contexts? For the streamers discussed in this chapter, suspending urgency is neither a convenient option nor an expectation of an online culture valuing immediacy and spontaneity. In fact, the frequency of unruly rhetoric and responses on social media and platforms like Twitch may be indicative of the shrinking capacity for reflection in online discourse. Live streamers do not necessarily have the space or time to reflect and carefully ponder their responses when targeted by aggressors. And while Enos does not entirely discount uncivil response, she does say “we can work toward more constructive, and civil, ways of expressing opposition” (p. 151), which suggests constructive and civil responses are a primary goal of rhetorical spaciousness.

Whether engaging with rhetorical spaciousness, virtuous rhetoric, ethics, or civility, some of the field’s discussions have relied on the idealistic, failing to fully consider inequalities and social injustices. Insisting on civil discourse presupposes people will act in good faith, that people are on a level playing field, and that people are open to education and kindness. Again, this is not to say that civil rhetoric is useless or impossible. As Nancy Welch (2018) said, “To be sure, civility, as hospitableness to other points of view, can smooth dialogue about contentious issues between people already meeting on a place of equality and respect” (p. 111). However, “rhetorical listening” (Ratcliffe, 2005), “rhetorical friendship” (Duffy, 2017), “rhetorical spaciousness” (Enos, 2003), and “rhetorical education” through inquiry (Enoch, 2019) may be limited approaches if we extend them into the context of online hate and intolerance. As many of the examples in the following case studies will show, online aggressors do not care to meet in a place of equality and respect. And it is a privileged perspective to burden the targeted with expectations of civility when their aggressors engage in language and perspectives that dehumanize. Resistance to aggression and harassment can be passionate and messy amidst
societies and systems that have allowed and fostered injustice. This chapter analyzes and embraces the responses of streamers and their communities who push back against the idea of “if you don’t like it, leave,” highlighting the value of the disorderly and unruly. The streamers mentioned in this chapter do not tolerate the toxicity, aggression, and harassment that targets them, and, in their individual ways, they have refused to leave.

This project embraces the potential for unruly rhetoric (mockery, humor, shame, callouts, etc.) in online synchronous contexts. On Twitch, some streamers actively resist the toxic aspects of gaming culture and other forms of aggression and harassment that enter the platform through creative and unruly responses that some people may deem rude or uncivil. Yet, unruly acts in the form of mockery, shame, callouts, and jokes can be effective strategies in prompting change, establishing and reinforcing boundaries, protecting communities, and calling out sexism, racism, and homophobia, and addressing microaggressions. In Unruly Rhetorics: Protest, Persuasion, and Publics (2018), various scholars show the power of unruly response in upending the status quo. Yanira Rodríguez and Ben Kuebrich analyze the sanitized civility rhetoric employed by universities to mask injustice (“The Tone it Takes: An Eighteen-Day Sit-in at Syracuse University”); Dana L. Cloud demonstrates how civility rhetoric can infringe on women’s rights (“Feminist Body Rhetoric in the #unrulymob Texas, 2013”), and Nancy Welch explores unruly rhetoric as protest to exploitative labor conditions and how said protest was framed as uncivil by those in positions of authority (“Informed, Passionate, and Disorderly: Uncivil Rhetoric in A New Gilded Age”). The means may appear impolite or unacceptable by society and the structures that shape our perceptions of manners and politeness, but they are often necessary to
fight injustice. In that vein, this chapter analyzes the power of unruly rhetoric through acts of content moderation on Twitch.

**Moderation on Twitch**

Content moderation, now viewed as a vital component of platform management and development, is a complex task involving rules, policies, guidelines, human intervention, and an array of technical tools. However, quite often the task of moderation is placed on users, with notable platforms, such as Twitter and YouTube, adopting minimal content moderation policies, at times waiting for user backlash to enforce those policies (Conger & Alba, 2020a; Conger & Alba, 2020b; Warzel, 2019) or failing to follow policies consistently (Matsakis, 2018). One does not have to look far to find numerous examples in mainstream media demonstrating user frustration with platforms lacking consistent and transparent moderation practices.

Much of the research into online moderation has focused on forums, social media sites, and news comment sections (Gorwa et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2014; West, 2018; Delort et al., 2011; McGillicuddy, 2016; Watson et al., 2019; Duguay et al., 2018; Geiger, 2016; Crawford & Gillespie, 2016; Matias, 2019). These sources have helped to highlight the complexities of moderation such as how moderation might affect the quality of user content, user perception of moderation, the role of human moderators, moderation tools, and the limitations of algorithmic moderation. Some research has been conducted regarding moderation on Twitch, and this research has looked at polite and impolite interactions in chat (Graham, 2017), moderators and community engagement (Seering et al., 2019), shaping behavior through moderation and example setting (Seering et al., 2017), effective moderation strategies at the channel level (London et al., 2020), platform policies and community guidelines (Ruberg, 2020), and user
For the purposes of this project, moderation on Twitch will, in large part, be viewed as a necessary act of *rhetorical resistance* against toxicity, aggression, and harassment. Moderation is political—not only in the sense of misinformation circulating during election years or in the midst of a global health pandemic—but also in the sense that moderating content is a determination of the socially and culturally acceptable. Moderation involves systems of power. Moderation is an act of accountability and reinforcement. And while the task of moderation may, for the large part, be messy, it is necessary to address sexism, misogyny, racism, homophobia, and transphobia.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the policies, rules, and guidelines in place on Twitch and then shifts to a general discussion of what moderation looks like on the platform (chat rules, moderation tools, and enforcement). The chapter will then turn to four case studies of the channels analyzed for this dissertation. Each case study will offer an examination of the moderation practices and strategies employed by each streamer and their communities as well as highlight interesting and powerful moments of resistance to aggression.

**Platform Documentation**

A fundamental component of platform moderation comes in the form of the platform’s own expectations for its use. Documentation on Twitch provides guidelines for users and establishes Twitch’s expectations for appropriate content and use of the platform (including prohibited behavior and content, such as hate speech and harassment). Twitch’s “Terms of Service,” “Community Guidelines,” “Nudity, Pornography, and Other Sexual Content,” “About Account Suspensions and Chat Bans,” “How to File a User Report,” “How to Manage
Harassment in Chat,” and “List of Prohibited Games” are among the documents referenced as part of my walkthrough approach in the early phases of this project. Most of these documents are available under the “Legal” section of resources provided on Twitch.tv. Additional information, such as community updates and the introduction of new policies and features, can be found on Twitch’s blog (https://blog.twitch.tv/en/).

Twitch’s “Community Guidelines” calls on users to “participate in such a way that promotes a friendly, positive experience for our global community” (“Community Guidelines,” 2020). The guidelines are presented as part of a “living document,” subject to change at any time. The guidelines claim to be built on a “common sense philosophy and apply to all user generated content and activity on our services.” At the beginning of this document, Twitch reminds readers that user accounts may be suspended if found in violation of the platform’s conduct guidelines. The remainder of the document is organized according to categories including “Breaking the Law,” “Self-Destructive Behavior,” “Violence and Threats,” “Hateful Conduct and Harassment,” and “Nudity, Pornography, and Other Sexual Content,” among others. Twitch’s definition of hateful conduct is as follows:

Hateful conduct is any content or activity that promotes, encourages, or facilitates discrimination, denigration, objectification, harassment, or violence based on race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, disability or serious medical condition or veteran status, and is prohibited. Any hateful conduct is considered a zero-tolerance violation.

Twitch follows this definition by stating that accounts involved in hateful conduct will be subject to “a range of enforcement actions,” which may include permanent suspension from the platform. Twitch’s definition of harassment is “any content or activity that attempts to intimidate, degrade, abuse, or bully others, or creates a hostile environment for others, and is
prohibited.” Accounts participating in harassment may also be suspended indefinitely. These statements are somewhat specific in their definitions, and the potential ramifications and levels of enforcement are clearly specified. Both individual users and communities are prohibited from such conduct as abuse, bullying, and hostility. In closing the “Hateful Conduct and Harassment” section of the guidelines, Twitch states that it prohibits hateful conduct and harassment “whether the targets are on or off Twitch” and that it may act when hateful conduct or harassment targeting Twitch users occurs off the platform.

Twitch also provides a page, titled “Hateful Conduct and Harassment,” which provides additional information, such as extended definitions and examples of inappropriate conduct, the responsibility of streamers and their communities in managing hateful conduct and harassment, and how to report hateful conduct and harassment. On this page, Twitch emphasizes the roles and responsibilities of users:

Creators are role models and leaders of the communities they create or foster around them. Creators should consider the consequences of their statements and actions of their audiences; we ask that you make a good faith effort to quell any efforts from those in your community to harass others. “Hateful Conduct and Harassment,” 2020).

Users are also encouraged to clearly communicate when behavior is unwanted, to use the Twitch-provided features and tools (bans, timeouts, AutoMod, enlisting moderators), and report violations of the guidelines or terms of service to the platform. Twitch makes users aware of the various tools and functionalities available, but any action taken when facing aggression and harassment is primarily left up to users. Based on the documentation, it would appear that Twitch waits for user reports to actively moderate their platform.

**Moderation Tools, Features, and General Strategies**

Twitch offers a variety of technical tools and functionalities to assist streamers with
moderation. Streamers are not obligated to use these tools, but Twitch has developed multiple options for streamers to choose from, including enlisting the help of trusted users (moderators), blocklists for banned words and phrases, the ability to ban viewers, and more (see Figure 5 for categories of users on the platform).

![Twitch Users Diagram](image)

Figure 5. Types of Twitch Users.

Channel moderators (or mods) are Twitch users who have been selected by streamers to assist with moderation. Moderators are generally unpaid (though some of the more successful streamers provide some compensation) and have the ability to timeout or ban viewers. They can
also be given control over various commands affecting the channel. For example, if a streamer was playing *Fortnite* and then switched over to *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, the streamer could ask a moderator to change the title of the stream and the stream’s category on Twitch. Depending on how a streamer operates their channel, moderators may be the primary moderative force or they may simply be a friend of the streamer who was given the moderator title to mark their status in chat.

To better manage chat, which can sometimes move at a dizzying speed, Twitch affords streamers several ways to manipulate chat. Chats can be placed in “slow mode,” which only allows messages to be shared in the chat at several intervals. “Followers only mode” limits the chat to followers and “subscribers (sub) only mode” operates similarly.

Both moderators and streamers can ban and timeout viewers. If a viewer is banned from a channel, they will no longer be able to participate in the chat unless they are unbanned. Timeouts are a sort of temporary ban that limits the viewer’s participation. A timeout can last for a few seconds or even days. A timeout can be used as a sort of warning to a viewer that their behavior is unacceptable, and if they persist, they may receive a permanent channel ban. Both timeouts and bans are commonly used to assist with moderation on Twitch.

AutoMod and the blocklist operate behind the scenes and are subject to various settings streamers can adjust. The blocklist operates as it sounds—streamers can input certain terms to prevent viewers from posting said terms in chat. Similarly, AutoMod can block inappropriate messages from publicly reaching chat. AutoMod will hold suspected aggression and harassment, leaving it up to streamers and moderators to decide whether the message should be allowed.
Channel rules are determined by the streamer and can consist of any number of restrictions or guidelines, though many streamers seem to refer to Twitch’s own guidelines as reference. The following screenshots show rules from various channels on Twitch (see Figure 6, Figure 7, Figure 8, Figure 9, Figure 10, and Figure 11).

Figure 6. “No racism, sexism, or bigotry.”

Figure 7. “Welcome! House Rules.”

Figure 8. “Golden Rule.”

Figure 9. “Don’t be a dick. Do be yourself.”

Figure 10. “OVERALL RULE: Don’t be a dick.”

Figure 11. “Backseating is allowed...”
Typically, channel rules appear as popups before a viewer can participate in chat. In the channel rules presented in the figures above, we see a variety of preferences (some more clearly communicated than others) with some common themes throughout, such as limited political talk or no political talk, respect, and the prohibiting of self-advertisement. The language of these rules reflects Western ideas of civility and expectations of politeness if, at times, in casual terms—essentially, avoid rocking the boat and you will be fine as a viewer. “Don’t be a dick,” “If you have nothing nice to say, do not say anything at all!” and “keep it civil” are familiar and common messages which favor “smoothing” over confrontation and going with the flow. These kinds of rules suggest that confrontation is more a matter of civility and social norms than recognizing that confrontation and aggression often come from places of prejudice, bias, and hate. Some of the rules, such as those listed in Figure 6, Figure 7, and Figure 11, are more direct but only Figure 11 is indicative of consequences (“you’ll be banned”).

Third party tools are also available to streamers and can be accessed through sites like streamlabs.com and nightbot.tv, both of which provide bots and other features that integrate with Twitch channels. Bots can help moderate chat as well as post periodic reminders. Streamers may create their own bots and tools or enlist the help of others, but Streamlabs and Nightbot are quite popular and easy to use if streamers want tools beyond what Twitch provides or if they simply prefer third party options.

Data Presentation

This section discusses how acts of moderation were coded for the project before presenting an analysis of data from four case studies.
Coding

Like the coding rubrics for aggression discussed in Chapter 2, rubrics were used to code moderative responses (both platform-supported moderation via tools and features and moderation outside official tools and features) occurring in the observed channels. Moderative response may take the form of a streamer addressing viewers directly, moderators reminding viewers to follow the rules, viewers calling out other viewers for inappropriate behavior, etc. These rubrics were developed based on my knowledge of platform-provided tools, moderative measures outlined in platform documents (such as the “Hateful Conduct and Harassment” page on Twitch), and my observations of various moderation strategies across Twitch. The coding rubrics presented here are based on available moderation tools, types of responses, and where the moderation originates (channel bot, streamer, moderators, or viewers). The categories in some of the rubrics are intentionally flexible so as to account for a range of moderation practices.

Figure 12 serves as an example of my process for coding aggression and moderative responses (individual rubrics and codes will be discussed further). I noted instances of aggression and response simultaneously in the coding logs as their relationship to each other is relevant and necessary for contextualizing behavior in chat. When an aggressive act occurred in chat, I recorded it as the first in what usually developed into a series of acts. For example, because I was frequently observing live streams with active chats, it was common for comments relating to backseat gaming to originate from multiple users at or around the same time. Instead of noting each message as an individual unit in the coding log, I noted the series of messages, including any acts of moderation in response to the backseating. If a different aggressive behavior occurred (and was seemingly unrelated to the previous chat exchanges), such as a sexually explicit
comment, amidst the series of backseating and moderative responses, I generally separated the behavior from the ongoing exchange and noted it in the subsequent row of the coding log.

Figure 12. Example of Codable Instances in Chat (left) and Coding Log (right).

The first rubric for moderative responses, “Moderation Via Platform Tools” (see Table 6), is a catch all for platform-provided tools such as bans or timeouts and features such as followers only chat, which can mitigate or remove aggression in a channel’s chat. Because moderation tools like AutoMod and blocklists work behind the scenes and their effects are generally invisible to the average viewer, I cannot speak to their use in the case studies presented.
The second rubric, “Streamer Response to Aggression (see Table 7), is concerned with moderative actions directly attributable to the streamer. Streamers may respond to unwanted behaviors and aggression by referring to their rules and guidelines for their channel, by trying to engage with the aggressive user/viewer to change or redirect their behavior, or by calling out the aggressive viewer. Calling out viewers may take many forms from counter-trolling to snapping back or otherwise calling out the viewer.

The third rubric, “Moderator Response to Aggression” (see Table 8), mirrors the second rubric but focuses on the actions of moderators. Like the above, moderators may direct viewers to reference channel rules, they may deflect or redirect, or they may callout viewers directly.

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1 It cannot always be known whether the streamer or a moderator has purged the unwanted message/user from the chat. At times this can be determined contextually, but quite often it cannot be known with certainty. This is why moderation via platform tools is a separate category.

2 It should be noted that I cannot know if a viewer has been timed out temporarily or permanently banned unless that information is somehow indicated in the stream.
Table 7

Streamer Response to Aggression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SR1</td>
<td>Response referencing channel</td>
<td>References are made to the channel’s rules or how the community conducts itself (ex. comments such as “we don’t do that here” and “see the rules”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rules/guidelines</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR2</td>
<td>Deflection/diffusion/redirect/</td>
<td>An attempt may be made to engage with the disruptive viewer(s) but to change topics. This may take the form of engaging with chat as a whole to redirect the topic of discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>calling in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR3</td>
<td>“Callout” response</td>
<td>The streamer may make fun of, name-call, callout, counter-troll, or otherwise directly address the disruptive viewer(s). Humor may be used in response as well. Typically, the response identifies the “problem.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8

Moderator Response to Aggression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MR1</td>
<td>Response referencing channel</td>
<td>References are made to the channel’s rules or how the community conducts itself (ex. comments such as “we don’t do that here” and “see the rules”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rules/guidelines</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MR2</td>
<td>Deflection/diffusion/redirect/</td>
<td>An attempt may be made to engage with the disruptive viewer(s) but to change topics. This may even take the form of engaging with chat as a whole to redirect the topic of discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>calling in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MR3</td>
<td>“Callout” response</td>
<td>Moderators may make fun of, name-call, call out, counter-troll, or otherwise directly address the disruptive viewer(s). Humor may be used in response as well. Typically, the response identifies the “problem.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 Here, “callout” is defined as a direct confrontation bringing attention to the aggressive/toxic/unwanted behavior that has occurred in the stream. Calling out such behavior may take the form of criticism or a challenge to explain.
The fourth and final rubric, “Viewer Response to Aggression” (see Table 9), accounts for acts of moderation general viewers are responsible for. After our work in “Finding effective moderation practices on Twitch,” it was important for me to further consider what role communities may play in moderation on Twitch (London, et al., 2020). Categories in this rubric mirror those in Table 7 and Table 8.

Table 9

Viewer Response to Aggression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VR1</td>
<td>Response referencing channel rules/guidelines; request for moderation</td>
<td>References may be made to the channel’s rules. The disruptive behavior may be addressed directly, and viewers may even call for the disruptive viewer to be timed-out or banned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VR2</td>
<td>Deflection/diffusion/redirection/calling in</td>
<td>An attempt may be made to engage with the disruptive viewer(s) but to change topics. This may even take the form of engaging with chat as a whole to redirect the topic of discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VR3</td>
<td>“Callout” response</td>
<td>Fellow viewers may make fun of, name-call, callout, counter-troll, or otherwise directly address the disruptive viewer(s). Humor may be used in response as well. Typically, the response identifies the “problem.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Case Studies

The following four case studies offer an analysis of the data collected for this project, with a focus on moderation and response to aggression. The general strategies of each streamer will be examined through examples pulled from the recorded data. The streamers, moderators, and viewers in the following examples have all been assigned pseudonyms. As a reminder,
interactions in the chat are presented unfiltered; some of the examples include sexual content and hate speech.

Case Study 1

“660 million retweets for a date”

Jade has streamed on Twitch for approximately six years and is a fulltime streamer. Her channel features a variety of games (generally a mix of newer releases), but Jade is probably best known for playing FPS (first person shooter) games. Jade’s Twitch bio and the panels beneath her channel share information relating to the channel, games played, subscriber benefits, the stream schedule, the technology Jade uses to live stream, social media links (Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Discord), and a link for donations. Jade’s Twitch channel had over half a million followers at the time of writing and her various social media accounts were followed by thousands. The social media accounts linked to on Jade’s Twitch channel were primarily professional in nature (sharing information regarding upcoming events and live streams), though, on occasion, Jade did share moments from her personal life. Jade could be very excited and welcoming on stream but also bitingly sarcastic and deadpan, mostly tending to display a more serious and focused side on stream.

During the live streams I recorded and analyzed, Jade averaged 3,158 concurrent viewers. Jade has fostered a strong community of regular viewers who find entertainment both in Jade and in the content she produces. Jade appeared primarily focused on providing quality gameplay for her viewers and engaged with the chat occasionally. Each stream, multiple viewers (general viewers and moderators) greeted one another, asked about each other’s day, and showed interest
in their fellow community members—this speaks to the closeness of a subset of the thousands of people who regularly tune in to Jade’s streams.

**Aggression and Moderation**

Moderation in Jade’s channel followed specific patterns indicative of well-communicated expectations and procedures for handling toxicity, aggression, hate speech, and other forms of unwanted behavior in the chat. Jade’s approach to moderation was layered, as it made heavy use of platform affordances (functionalities and tools), regular and active moderators, and occasional callouts (addressing disruptive and unwanted behaviors herself). Another element—community moderation—occurred throughout the streams for this case study and was part of what makes moderation on this channel unique. Expectations for conduct were communicated through channel rules, which pop-up when viewers enter the chat. These rules specify a range of prohibited behavior and content including links, spam, political and religious discussion, and hate speech (which results in a permanent ban from the channel). The rules also ask that viewers be respectful—to Jade, her moderators, and fellow viewers. The list of rules concluded with “Mods have the final say in chat.” The channel rules are direct, descriptive, and lay the foundation for how moderation functions in Jade’s channel. Based on the final line emphasizing moderator power, one would expect an active and strong moderator presence in the chat and that was the case in the streams I watched.

Acts of aggression in Jade’s stream were coded according to the IC1 (non-contextual disruptive comments/images), CS1 (comments on streamer’s appearance or comments sexual in nature), CS2 (persistent comments), CS4 (comments on gameplay), CS5 (stream-sniping), and IS3 (comments on gameplay originating outside chat) categories. Non-contextual disruptive
comments/images and self-promotion, comments on Jade’s appearance (Jade always used a webcam in the recorded streams) or that were sexual in nature, and comments on gameplay were among the most frequent acts of aggression originating in the channel chat.

Gendered and sexual harassment directed at Jade occurred throughout the recorded live streams, with questions about her relationship status, requests for dates, and comments on her appearance among the most frequent aggressive messages posted in chat. Other forms of aggression, such as persistent attention seeking also accompanied the gendered harassment. For example, a viewer entered the chat to say, “Jade r u ok! Jade r u ok! r u ok…….” The viewer did not receive a response from Jade or the chat and turned to posting “hello everyone,” “Jade <3 <3,” “good night” and “gn gn.” In this instance, the viewer received no noticeable attention and eventually left the channel but not before attempting to get a reaction from Jade and expressing their interest with hearts (“<3 <3”). Other examples were more explicit in nature, such as a viewer who expressed interest in Jade and asked about her private life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>yungsimp (nonsub):</th>
<th>ur hot</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yungsimp:</td>
<td>u single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revv__ (mod):</td>
<td>!rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>StreamElements:</td>
<td>» English only » Be respectful to Jade, the mods, &amp; other viewers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>» Hate speech will get you permabanned. » No misuse of caps,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>emotes, or spam. No links or advertising. » No political or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>religious discussion. » Please don't flirt with Jade, this isn't</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OKCupid. » Mods have the final say in chat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yungsimp:</td>
<td>y r u geiy?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

yungsimp received no attention from Jade (it is possible she never saw their messages or did and chose to ignore them, leaving moderation to the moderators) but was immediately directed to the
rules by a moderator who activated the rules command (!rules). After the rules were shared in the chat, yungsimp persisted by asking if Jade was gay (the viewer likely spelled gay as geiy to avoid any potential filter of the word via the blocklist). Instead of taking the hint or considering that Twitch is not an ideal place for picking up dates, they moved on to question Jade’s sexuality as a reason for rejection. yungsimp’s messages were deleted after this and no further comments were made. This example is a good model of how moderation typically occurred in Jade’s channel: offensive or toxic behavior occurred, moderators pulled up the channel rules for everyone in the chat to see, the aggressor was given the opportunity to see those rules and adjust their behavior, if the viewer persisted, the viewer was timed out or banned. It is a formulaic system but one that is logical and streamlined. Streamers, for a number of reasons previously discussed, may not wish to immediately timeout or ban a viewer behaving in aggressive ways. Reminding the viewer of the channel’s rules is a way to show the viewer they have violated an expectation for the community and grants them the opportunity to behave differently. They still have an opportunity to participate and to become a part of the channel’s community. This method of moderation is transparent for the community and makes use of the platform’s affordances (moderators, commands, timeouts, and bans). Referring to the channel rules—giving viewers a second chance, and then enforcing the rules as needed—was a frequent pattern.

Verbal Unruliness: Callouts as Moderative Response

Callouts are recognized as the public assigning of fault and criticism, and they sometimes originate from feelings of anger or frustration. The act of publicly calling out problematic behavior may be viewed negatively (uncivil) and as a disruptive act shattering the ideal standards of civil discourse. However, as with other unruly and messy rhetorical means (shaming, humor,
mockery, etc.), callouts may at times be necessary to enact change or to bring attention to aggressive/damaging behavior. As the following examples show, the direct calling out of aggressive behavior reinforces boundaries, reclaims space, and acts as model for community members, along with eliciting support and empathy.

While Jade relies heavily on her moderators and their use of platform-provided tools, she is occasionally a vocal moderative force in the channel (much of the “unruly” response originates from Jade). During her live streams, Jade is often a serious and focused presence when playing games (I would describe her sense of purpose and focus as one half of the channel’s entertainment factor). Jade plays certain games at a competitive level and approaches most games by learning them thoroughly—her approach to games is one aspect that appeals to viewers. Because of her intense focus, any time Jade showed frustration at being told (by viewers) what to do in game or how to play, her words hit particularly hard and, at times, the seeming suddenness of her remarks was jarring. The half a dozen or so times Jade verbally expressed frustration on stream and chastised viewers occurred after persistent comments on her gameplay and one time after she was pressed to go on a date. The persistent comments on gameplay filled the chat until Jade seemed compelled to comment. During one example of incessant backseat gaming, viewers persisted with their comments even after being warned by moderators to stop.

bayguul5 (sub):  climbing walls
gargeygle (nonsub):  is that a climbable surface?
RamRum (nonsub):  keep it open and move it
cickle_ (sub):  us the connect to the light
jnhjio321 (nonsub):  in front the wall is climbable

GhastlyGal (sub):  chat do NOT backseat pls
subsequentpas (sub):  remove the backseat from this vehicle
This example is a small but representative sample of the backseat gaming occurring throughout the stream when Jade was playing a newly released game. The behavior—telling Jade what to do and where to go in game—is rude, unwanted, persistent, and presumes Jade needs guidance. Depending on channel size, backseat gaming may come from a few voices or dozens—imagine a dozen people simultaneously shouting directions at you as you work and their “advice” piling on. Unwelcome backseat gaming can also interfere with conversations in chat, filling chat with messages adding little value to the community. In the above example, multiple viewers post messages with unsolicited advice (“is that a climbable surface?” “hold the door with it”), some of them commenting repeatedly. Most of the viewers participating in this behavior were not subscribed to the channel (nonsubscribers or nonsubs) and may not have been aware that backseat gaming is frowned upon in this space; however, these viewers persisted with their
comments after fellow viewers and moderators spoke up prohibiting the behavior. The behavior continued to the point that Jade chose to directly address chat, “Chat…with all of my love, please shut the fuck up.” Jade's response may initially seem rude or impolite, but as a rhetorical act, we can begin to see how callouts may "wake up" viewers, bringing attention to aggressive behavior while also admonishing those responsible. In this example, the callout follows multiple opportunities for viewers to conform their behaviors to the expectations of the community. On one level, the channel rules emphasize respect for Jade, her mods, and viewers. Incessant posting of unsolicited advice in the chat is disrespectful to Jade, and both her mods and community members (mostly subscribers) comment the behavior is unwanted in chat. Jade directly addressed the backseat gaming only after viewers persisted (this was an ongoing behavior during this live stream). Her callout draws attention to itself, denoting that the backseating has gone on long enough. As with other acts of unruly rhetoric often situated in contexts where voices are silenced, concerns are ignored, and the oppressed are minimized (Alexander, Jarratt, & Welch, 2018), Jade's callout follows more orderly and "reasonable" requests ignored by aggressors. Some viewers had already been timed out/had their messages deleted in the chat by mods and yet more persisted in backseating. Jade's callout cut through the "noise" of backseating in chat while affirming those who had already spoken against the behavior (mods and subs). Community members supported Jade’s initial comment and follow up (“Just actually shut up. Just Stop”). They did not perceive her remarks as rude, and chat was immediately filled with support and humored reactions. One viewer, order_86_, suggested Jade’s comment would earn her channel even more followers, implying her approach to backseating is favorable and that many viewing the stream would agree backseat gaming is an annoying and unnecessary behavior. Not only was
it repeatedly established that backseat gaming was unwanted in Jade’s channel, but it is also a widely recognized faux pas on Twitch, with many channels specifically prohibiting the behavior. Twitch even includes two tags related to backseating, “Backseat Gaming Allowed” and “No Backseat Gaming,” so streamers may indicate their preference to viewers.

Following this exchange, the backset gaming died down briefly as community members reacted favorably to Jade’s remarks. Lingering instances of backseat gaming were quickly purged from chat and community members mirrored Jade’s form of moderation; one viewer said, “did chat not hear the STFU ? or what.” The few lingering backseat comments elicited this response from Jade:

Jade: “Yeah at this point if you’re still backseating, please enjoy your eight hour ban. If you did not hear me just say shut the fuck up then...then I don’t know how to help you at that point so just, just leave. Just go watch someone else.”

At this point, based on Jade’s tone of voice, her frustration was growing. However, she focused back on the game, talking through her approach, what she had already tried, and what she was thinking for her next move. She succeeded in completing that part of the game and moved to another level. Throughout this stream, the backseat gaming continued off and on for several hours, and Jade commented several times when the unwanted behavior picked up again.

Jade: “Man, chat. You guys are so impatient. Holy shit. It doesn’t take half a second for me to get to like...a spot where I don’t notice something right away before somebody types it in chat. So calm the fuck down. I know I was like. I just. I literally walked in the room and someone’s like ‘Do the thing next to you! Blow it!’ Like, what? Holy shit. It’s so annoying. Like god forbid I look around for a second to see what else there might be. There’s so many collectibles and things that I was trying to see if there was stuff.”
Jade’s comments reflect increased frustration at the persistence of viewers telling her how to play. At this point, members from every level of the community (streamer, moderators, subscribers, and even nonsubs) had called out the backseating and yet it continued. Jade upped the level of moderation by suggesting backseat gaming would result in an eight hour ban from the channel. Verbalizing this change in moderation may not dissuade some viewers from backseating, but it makes the channels’ moderation transparent while informing mods of how to proceed. The enforcement shifted from moderator warnings (which had little effect in this situation) to temporary bans which would immediately limit the offending viewer’s participation in the channel. This change in moderation is in direct response to an increase in backseat gaming and demonstrates Jade’s flexibility in responding to unwanted behavior. One subscriber even commented, “it's even worse than usual.” Since the backseat gaming was occurring more frequently during this stream, that may explain, in part, Jade’s responses to the comments directed at her gameplay. It is understandable if Jade was feeling frustrated and even angry in this situation. She was trying to play a game her way and provide entertainment for the stream and people were essentially shouting at her for it.

In the hours I spent watching her stream, comments like “shut the fuck up” and “Just go watch someone else” were infrequent for Jade. She responded this way in response to viewers who pushed repeatedly, and her regular viewers listened to and understood her frustration. They empathized with her and attempted to dissuade aggressive comments, which adds an interesting component to this form of unruly response. Jade showing frustration and calling out the backseat gaming encouraged her community to respond further. Callouts may be valuable, in part, because they encourage participation from the community (they can function as calls for solidarity and
group-oriented action). Further evidence speaking to this is the fact that multiple community members continually voiced their support of Jade and her approach during the periods of backseat gaming (“Give her the satisfaction of figuring it out”; “like yall can play the game yourself if you’re so eager”; “And you know when they played the game it took them a while to figure it out”). So even while Jade’s responses were directed at aggressive viewers, her frustration spoke to the empathy of the community.

Community Support, Reinforcement, and Modeled Response

Another component of moderation observed in Jade’s live streams was community moderation, which we catch glimpses of in the previous examples. Community moderation involves corrective action on the part of community members (subscribers and general viewers) outside of formal moderation strategies and functionalities (such as moderators and platform-provided tools). In my experience with the platform, this kind of moderation is defined by community members banding together to address aggression on their own accord. They often call out, shame, or make fun of aggressors and sometimes call for formal moderation (“hey mods, can we get a ban?”). In some channels, community moderation has a strong presence, but in others, where streamers would prefer to handle aggression themselves or rely on moderators, community moderation is rarer as viewers may be told to “let the mods handle it.” Community moderation is at its best when it mimics the moderation strategies established by the streamer and their moderators, reinforces channel-specific rules and norms, and acts as a kind of social model for new viewers. While community moderation can be a positive and helpful addition to a channel, it does have its limitations. As demonstrated in the backseat gaming examples previously, viewers only have so much influence and power in the chat. They can tell fellow
viewers what not to do and reference channel rules, but they are powerless to directly prevent or stop toxic behavior. General Twitch users may file reports on other users but that action does not have an immediate effect on situations like backseat gaming or harassment.

One of the more interesting examples of community moderation in Jade’s channel occurred when a viewer, duck_pen90, posted in the chat seeking Jade’s attention: “Holy gosh Jade your so hot 😍😍😍.” The message is a typical example of gendered harassment targeting women streamers, but what is interesting is that the viewer (a nonsubscriber) was allowed to keep participating in chat, and what followed was both humorous and absurd. Immediately following duck_pen90’s message, another viewer, Gdavis1221 (also a nonsubscriber), typed “!rules” (!rules is a chat command) in chat, bringing up the channel rules for everyone to see. The viewer was familiar enough with the channel to know Jade’s expectations for viewer conduct and that she had a !rules command. Flirting with Jade is expressly against the rules. Several subscribers immediately posted “gross” and “dont be weird” in chat following duck_pen90’s message. duck_pen90 was not deterred and went on to ask, “Jade how many retweets to take you on a date ??” It was then that fellow viewers flooded the chat with admonishing responses:

    clutchhcrew: @duck_pen90 , you have a date with Justice
    herrybaer (sub): @duck_pen90 stop its gross
                      ...
    Gdavis1221: @duck_pen90 !rules
                      ...
    TueWed123 (sub): Yuck
    Juliet555: LUL
                      ...
    TueWed123: Super yuck
                      ...
Do people actually think saying things like that works?

Some of the viewers directly addressed their messages at duck_pen90 using @, asking them to stop and using duck_pen90’s own words against them. Other viewers simply reacted with “Yuck” and “LUL” to duck_pen90’s attempt at soliciting a date with Jade. Whether trolling for laughs or not, duck_pen90’s behavior is creepy, unwanted, and a form of harassment. And it was clear from responses in chat that fellow viewers felt uncomfortable—they brought up the channel rules, told duck_pen90 to stop, and pointed out the behavior was gross. Jade eventually saw duck_pen90’s messages and, instead of having them banned immediately, responded with her own brand of humor: “How many retweets to take me on a date? How many users are there on Twitter?” A subscriber responded, “330 million active per month,” and Jade followed up with “So like a hundred million…330 million active per month. Okay. Uh, 330 million…so 660 million retweets for a date.” Jade laughed and said, “I might be dead by the time you get that many. Because time comes for us all. So.” Chat erupted into sarcastic and humorous messages like “So there’s a chance?” “MAKE IT HAPPEN CHAT,” “I only take 1 retweet,” and “let’s get started bois!!!!!” These viewers played off Jade’s reply and further established duck_pen90’s request as absurd. Some viewers even praised Jade for how she handled the situation. However, duck_pen90 did not let any of this prevent him from saying “Do I get to smash after the date Jade ;)))))).” Again, the community’s response was immediate:

ght313: @duck_pen90 you dont learn do you
AncestralAves: so gross
...  
pogsky (sub): theyre still here?
...  
TueWed123: Wow. Just cant take a hint.
Jade: “Just can’t take a hint. Some people are incredibly stupid, unfortunately. So. It’s a sad reality.”

SolarScope (mod): this is true
small_echo_ (sub): Cant fix stupid

Viewers continued to express disgust at duck_pen90 and more obvious shaming then took place with messages like “you don’t learn do you” and “Wow. Just cant take a hint.” One subscriber even referred to duck_pen90 as stupid following a similar statement from Jade. Even if the community’s attempts to curtail duck_pen90’s behavior had little effect on their persistence, it served as an example for the viewership at large, which may be the most significant effect of community moderation. We know that silence can reinforce problematic behaviors and prejudice and that it is important to challenge oppressive systems and structures (Clair, 1998), and that is exactly what Jade’s community did here—they spoke up with a loud message that harassment had no place in the channel. They constructed messages of “You will be publicly made fun of and shamed for making ridiculous requests” as consequence for all to see. While shaming may seem impolite, shaming is also a behavior that benefits society:

Shame is civilizing. It is the governing drive of conscience; if people had no shame, the rule of law would lose much of its power, and might would often mean right. Shaming—the public attempt to impose shame on others—is an equally important driver of behavior. People strive to avoid humiliation and the loss of reputation; we steer clear of “bad” behaviors even if they would benefit us. (Rosenblatt, p. 1, 2013)

The community humiliated duck_pen90 in an attempt to shut down harassment, which also resulted in a demonstration of what can happen when behavior in chat crosses the line of what will not be tolerated. Scholarship has shown that shame can result in redirection (Dunn, 2019). In this example, duck_pen90’s messages are directed at Jade, but the community’s response
redirected negative attention to duck\_pen90, essentially ensuring duck\_pen90 would be made into an example for everyone in chat (duck\_pen90 would not leave with the loudest or most powerful voice). As the aggressor continued, the community’s responses developed into sarcastic remarks, humor, and shaming. These rhetorical moves mirror Jade’s replies to duck\_pen90 and backseat gaming (as seen in the previous section), and it seems likely that subscribers and other regular viewers mimic the responses and moderative acts of Jade and her moderators. After all, the way Jade and her moderators respond to aggression serves as a model for the rest of the community (because their moderation is visible) and community members were not timed out or otherwise punished for shaming and mocking duck\_pen90. Jade and the moderators let the situation run its course as directed by viewers. Why not mimic specific patterns of moderation when that moderation tends to work? Some viewers, such as Gdavis1221, even followed the sort of script moderators use in addressing viewers like duck\_pen90 (call upon the channel rules, give the aggressor the opportunity to self-correct, and then increase the enforcement of rules accordingly). Community moderation has the potential for reinforcing norms and expectations (as first set out by streamers and their moderators) and can act as social pressure. In conjunction with more official and controlled moderation strategies, community moderation can be a beneficial component of channels on Twitch.

**Case Study 1: Conclusion**

Moderation is a layered process on Jade’s channel, regularly making use of platform-provided tools. In the observed streams, moderators regularly pointed to channel rules when disruptions (backseat gaming, gendered harassment, etc.) occurred in chat. Jade, moderators, and community members nearly always gave aggressors a second chance, an opportunity to
recognize their fault and correct their behavior. If they did, they were allowed to participate further; if aggressors persisted in breaking channel rules, the rules were swiftly enforced. A significant factor in the effectiveness of this strategy is the moderators themselves. It is clear Jade has carefully selected individuals she can trust and has spent time cultivating a moderation team that is consistent in its enforcement and plays an active role engaging with the community beyond moderation. Moderators were often friendly, greeting regular and new viewers alike, answering questions, and generally offering assistance. These moderators are a pillar of the channel and their reliability is recognized by the community. In Jade’s channel, I have seen multiple viewers praise the moderators at various times and thank them for their helpfulness. Without these individuals, moderation would be much more difficult in a channel the size of Jade’s where chat can move rapidly.

Another point of interest is Jade’s reliance on platform-provided moderation tools and functionalities, which speaks to the usefulness of those tools when applied consistently. Compared to other platforms, Twitch provides a comprehensive suite of moderation tools. Of course, this makes sense for a platform that places the primary burden for moderation on its users. It is apparent Jade sees value in those tools (chat commands, timeouts, bans, etc.) and has made them a significant part of her moderation strategy.

In addition to active moderators and platform-provided tools, Jade and her regular viewers play a role in maintaining the community and keeping order, which often involves directly addressing unwanted and otherwise toxic behavior. Jade may poke fun at aggressors and shame them, and the community often mimics her responses. Together, they have shaped a space on Twitch where aggression is unable to roam freely and is instead met by strong voices invested
in a community and its norms. Take all of these moderative elements into account, and you have a balanced system that resists aggression without immediately shutting out dissenting voices. Viewers have every opportunity to participate, but they do so knowing the channel rules and what Jade and her community will tolerate.

Case Study 2

“Well good luck and Godspeed”

Coral is a fulltime streamer whose channel had roughly 50,000+ followers at the time of my data collection. She has streamed on Twitch for six years and creates a variety of content from playthroughs of video games to hours of “Just Chatting” streams. Coral’s “About” section emphasized her passion for a variety of games along with a bit of humor, which is a fundamental part of her on-stream and social media presence. Informational panels associated with her channel included “About Me,” a description of subscriber perks, chat rules, information for tipping, contact information, and PC specs. Coral’s contact information included her social media profiles (Twitter and Instagram) and a P.O. box for fans to send her mail.

Coral averaged 230 concurrent viewers per stream. During the recorded hours, she spent much of her time engaging with her audience. She is smart and witty, often speaking extensively about her life, relationship to family, and her South Asian culture. Coral does not hide her LGBTQ+ identity and is open to discussing a wide range of topics on stream (this appears to be a significant aspect of the channel and her streamer persona). Part of the channel’s appeal is Coral’s personality and approach to live streaming—she is engaging and unafraid to call out trolling, racism, and otherwise toxic behavior, which regularly leads to entertaining moments on

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4 The “Just Chatting” category on Twitch features streamers engaging in a wide variety of conversations from formal podcasts to casual discussion.
stream. As the following analysis will show, Coral addresses aggressors through humor and shaming.

**Aggression and Moderation**

Moderation on the channel was consistently guided by Coral’s reactions to messages posted in chat. Her humorous and direct commentary often shut down unwanted behavior and spurred conversation among viewers. Coral’s moderators were active in the chat and appeared responsible for most of the time outs and bans of aggressive viewers. Moderators referenced the “mod channel” several times during one of the live streams; this is a separate place, perhaps a channel on Discord (a platform used by a number of streamers), where moderators could communicate and discuss how to handle situations that arose in the channel chat. These references indicate an underlying structure or strategy for moderation on Coral’s channel. Initially I wondered whether moderators hesitated to clear the chat of negativity as several instances of aggression lingered in the chat, but then I recognized a pattern: leaving some aggression in the chat (not for a lengthy period of time but seemingly long enough for moderators to have noticed) gave Coral the opportunity to respond to and dismantle toxicity. This could be seen as a form of intentional listening, similar to the kind of listening advocated by Ratcliffe (2005), or it could simply be that letting aggressive comments linger in chat provides Coral enough time to consider her response, or whether she will respond at all. Whether the occasional slight delay in moderator response is part of a planned approach to moderation or just by chance, I cannot say without interviews. However, Coral’s attentiveness to the chat put her in a position to regularly respond to aggression. Aggressive viewers were sometimes timed out and banned, though some were allowed to engage for longer periods than others (this may be subject
to any number of factors: the content of the aggressors’ messages, their tone, the moderators present during the stream, or even the piling on of aggression during any particular stream).

During one stream, Coral explained that she views timeouts as a message to the viewer saying, “read the room.” She also considers timeouts as a way to establish boundaries. A viewer may enter the chat and say something egregious and receive a timeout instead of a ban. If they learn from their mistake, they still have the opportunity to participate in the chat. At times, simply calling out unwelcome behavior was enough to prevent further messages from viewers:

SsnoftheWtch:   unfollow
                   ...
Coral:           “Unfollow. Well good luck and Godspeed. I like how people say that like it’s a threat. Like obviously I don’t care. It’s one of those things like, I don’t tie that much to like clout the way other people do. I’m not like, ‘Oh my gosh. Now I only have 50,000 left.’ I just, I don’t really give a shit. That’s not even like me trying to roast anybody. I just don’t care.”
                   ...
Katz4reel (sub): we didn’t even know that viewer existed until they said that I comment lol

The viewer, SsnoftheWtch, announced they would unfollow the channel, presumably because they did not approve of something Coral or her community said. This unnecessary and provocative behavior (intentionally making a statement for some reaction from the streamer) sometimes occurs on Twitch, where viewers will announce and threaten to unfollow or unsub from a streamer as punishment for some perceived transgression. Such viewers behave as if their particular presence or lack thereof is significant to streamers when, in reality, their absence will likely have no effect in channels with hundreds if not thousands of followers and subscribers. Unfollowing a Twitch channel is as easy as pressing a single button and does not require any
comment from the viewer. In her response, Coral not only called out SsnofttheWtch but the practice of announcing one’s departure from a channel more widely. With a bit of humor, “good luck and Godspeed,” Coral established her thoughts on the behavior, pointing out how it is unnecessary, and made the viewer an example for the community. Other viewers also chimed in, such as Katz4reel, to reinforce Coral’s perspective, commenting on the insignificance of a single viewer who had nothing positive to contribute to the community. This pattern of Coral commenting (sometimes with humor, sometimes firmly, and sometimes with frustration) accompanied by community response was common during the live streams. Though Coral seemed acutely aware of the potential entertainment value of her responses, her remarks were almost always direct on a rhetorical level. There was never a doubt as to what she thought and felt about the targeted messages posted in chat.

On one occasion, Coral spoke at some length about her approach to moderation when a viewer, also a Twitch streamer, seeking advice asked:

ceilingseason: Do you think we have a problem of purging someone for doing something wrong rather than just telling them it’s not cool and they learn from it and change (kind of like “cancel culture”) I just want to know

Coral read ceilingseason’s question out loud and said:

“Well the thing is I don’t necessarily think it’s like the duty of every streamer to educate each and every person that comes into the channel. That’s exhausting. Um and a lot of people put that fucking onus on you anyway. The amount of times people have told me ‘Oh, as a POC and woman of color I expect you to.’ And I’m like, why? Other people can come on Twitch and make fart jokes and have fun and I have to be the fucking paragon of diversity… The reason that I address it when it comes up, when something stupid like that comes up in chat is that first of all, Twitch chat is fast. They read it just about every fucking time. They read it and so they’re going to get the reaction that they want. In the sense that there are going to be people that are like, ‘Gosh, why would you come in and just say that. Like really, you’re just going to come in and say some racist ass shit or whatever. Like, God why do people do that? I’m sorry, Coral.’ Like it’s
already like fucked up everybody’s like vibe, right… Not only am I going to address it, we’re going to make fun of you… My approach to it is like if I can make fun of it or turn it into a comedic moment, it’s like, it’s almost like a keto. It’s like you’re taking the thing and turning it into a joke and like turning it into content… And the thing is those people are less likely to make other accounts and keep coming back, but when you ban them they just keep coming back. They just keep coming back. If you ban them and don’t say anything about it, they know that you saw it. They know that they got a rise out of you. They saw the look, the slight change on your face when you read the nasty-ass thing they wrote. And they keep coming back. Some people will come back after you roast them too but once again, then it’s just fun. Some of our greatest memes and inside jokes we have on this channel have come from trolls.”

Coral’s response highlights the complexity of moderation on Twitch and the pressures placed on live streamers (particularly BIPOC and LGBTQ+ live streamers) to manage and address aggression through education and polite dialog with aggressors. There is often an expectation of civility when engaging online, but this is a patriarchal and racist frame for responding to aggression. Civility, decorum, and manners continue to be employed as tools to silence and keep people, particularly the disenfranchised, “in their place.” This kind of oppressive behavior is especially noticeable for targeting women who are told to keep quiet and keep the peace, even when interacting with their oppressors (see the work of Ehrenreich & English, 2005). Historically, women of color have been silenced and told their speech is too angry, too uncivil (hooks, 2014). We can see an active pushing back against this expectation of politeness both in this case study as Coral reacts to aggression and in the previous case study where Jade employed callouts to address backseat gaming. Streamers do not owe anyone, not even loyal viewers, polite responses or education. It is not the burden of the targeted and oppressed to engage civilly with the aggressor. Such an expectation is a demand for intellectual and emotional labor no one is entitled to. And yet we know that “polite” responses are often privileged in discourse, as Nuru and Arendt (2019) show in their study examining the experiences of women of color in online
feminist safe spaces. Tone policing and other microaggressions are used to temper the responses of the disenfranchised and to further elevate the validity of the privileged. Chester M. Pierce, the scholar who coined the term, defined microaggressions as “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges which are ‘put-downs’” (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Wills, p. 66, 1977), and Sue and Spanierman (2020) state that “microaggressions denote some sort of interpersonal interaction involving a perpetrator and a target (marginalized group member)” (p. 7). Instead of taking on the burden of education, politeness, or patience, Coral repurposes moments of aggression into entertainment for her community. She recognizes viewers in chat are “fast,” meaning they read hateful messages shared in chat and each party (viewers, streamer, and aggressor) knows the others have seen it. Coral also knows that sympathetic reactions on the part of viewers may serve the purpose of aggressors seeking attention and response (aggressors may enjoy the reactions their words elicit). However, letting aggression sit without a response also has a negative effect on the stream and “everybody’s…vibe.” This puts live streamers in a unique and complicated position where they must decide on whether to address or ignore toxicity in the moment in front of a live audience. Coral does not view banning disruptive viewers as a productive response and instead attempts to make entertainment from the aggression through humor. The moderation on this channel is unconventional in that it operates outside typical strategies and suggestions for dealing with toxicity on Twitch: “just ban them,” “ignore the trolls,” “tell them why their behavior is inappropriate.” Coral was consistent in this approach to moderation throughout the streams, and generally had the support of her community. The above dialog was followed by responses in the chat such as “shame is effective,” “You’re definitely right though,” and “Well said.”
In the twenty observed hours, aggressive acts were coded in the IC1 (non-contextual disruptive comments/images), IC2 (confrontation/arguments among chat), CS1 (comments on streamer’s appearance or comments sexual in nature), CS2 (persistent comments), and CS4 (comments on gameplay) categories. Aggression originated in the channel’s chat, and most of the aggression and toxicity targeted Coral, though several acts of aggression occurred between viewers in the chat. Most comments targeting Coral took the form of gendered harassment (comments on her body/appearance), persistent attention-seeking, and remarks related to how Coral ran her stream (a similar behavior to backseat gaming but in relation to how the stream was conducted).

**Pushback: Humor as Moderation**

Instances of gendered harassment targeting Coral were rarely subtle and nearly always met with swift reply from Coral and her community. In one instance of harassment, a viewer commented in the chat, “man this is a dude not a Coral 100%.” The aggressive viewer followed up this message by saying, “I can see it in your bones that you’re a male.” Before the messages were removed from chat, Coral read them out loud and said:

Coral:  “Dude, aren’t we all kind of dudes...Do you want to see it in my bone? That I’m a male. Is that an invitation? Are you asking to see my bone?” *laughs*

MrSci3nce (sub):  “please enjoy this large selection of dicks you are free to eat”

Coral:  *repeats MrSci3nce’s message. “That’s so mean. What you should have done is kindly explain to that person why he was rude, asked him for an apology, and asked him to leave the channel. Hello. That’s so rude.”*

editorede (sub):  why is it a insult that someone rando thinks you look male for
female, why would anyone care if random internet guy 23567 thinks I look like a guy?

…

Coral: “No, you’re right. It is such a weird insult. Like why would you care number 8,842 dude, person thinks you look like a dude? I don’t care. Because it’s honestly been happening to me since when I had long hair. When I had short hair. When I wear makeup. When I don’t wear makeup. Like, so at this juncture I don’t really care. The people I want to find me attractive find me attractive. So I don’t really care. It doesn’t like, it doesn’t bother me. It’s funny to respond to though.”

…

VexedBrad (mod): to weird men like that, the worst insult they can muster is that someone’s not fuckable and they look like a man

In this example we see Coral’s standard approach to moderation. She called out the viewer and their behavior directly through humor and ridicule (reading their message out loud for all viewers to hear). Humor, ridicule, and laughter are interesting to consider as unruly rhetorical responses. *Uproarious*, by Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett (2019), centers on humor “as a source of empowerment, a strategy for outrage and truth telling, a counter to fear, a source of joy and friendship, a cathartic treatment against unmerited shame, and even a means of empathetic connection and alliance” (p. 2). Willett and Willett demonstrate how humor, mockery, and laughter can extend agency, expose systems of power and oppression, and even foster relationships and community through the examples of feminist comics. Coral’s use of humor as reaction to aggression operates similarly, and one example of this is the favorable response from her community—not only did they react with supportive messages, but they took part by replying to aggressors with humor throughout the live streams. However, this is not to say everyone is supportive of Coral’s approach to aggression. One of the criticisms Coral frequently talked about on stream is that some viewers think she is mean when belittling and making fun of viewers who post hateful and aggressive messages in chat. Coral’s “That’s so mean” comment in
the above chat example speaks to this. Her sarcastic reply to MrSci3nce points back to the unfair expectations and criticism directed at her—that she is rude, impatient, and should take the time to educate aggressive viewers who enter the channel. This is yet another example of politeness and civility placed on women even when women face oppression and harassment. Another silencing tactic I have witnessed across the Internet is when aggression is dismissed as trolling and/or as the harmless acts of children, which then makes it easier to sympathize with aggressors and think it harsh to shame them for their toxic behavior. This may be another element that explains why civility is expected of adults, particularly women. Of course, this outlook is absurd as we know the impact of online aggression, harassment, and bullying has very real consequences regardless of the age or maturity of the aggressor. Mockery—another variation of uncivil discourse—does not fit neatly into the narrative of civil discourse, but for Coral and her community, it is effective and even expected.

The way Coral handles editorede with humor highlights the problematic behavior for everyone tuning in to the stream and dismantles the aggressor’s approach. As Willett and Willett point out, “Laughter’s uproar exposes hypocrisy, unjustified privilege, and lies. It can be the scourge of the sociopath and the narcissist. This exposure is not always malice; sometimes it is righteous anger seeking some degree of social justice” (p. 11). Coral’s humor and laughter are an outlet for the aggression targeting her, and her replies serve as a signal for viewers that it is acceptable, perhaps preferable, to criticize viewers like editorede. VexedBrad, in a position of authority due to their role as a channel moderator, reinforced the message that editorede’s comments were low effort by referring to them as “weird” and diminishing their perspective. Similar to the above example, when another viewer asked, “is this a man or a girl,” Coral
responded quickly and with adult humor: “Well we have a policy here. If you’re going to ask me my, what my genitals are, you have to suck it regardless of what’s down there.” Other viewers, mostly channel subscribers, chimed in mocking the viewer, repeating the pattern above.

Coral’s use of humor to moderate aggression and harassment took several forms, from light joking to outright shame and mockery. The act of shaming someone publicly is certainly in opposition to many definitions of civility and politeness, especially when the shamer is a woman. In her discussion of shame and gender, Manion (2003) describes a moral vision assigned to women which “emphasizes the maintenance of relationships and obliges a person not only to respect the rights of others and to avoid harming others, but also to adopt an active benevolence that encourages self-sacrifice” (p. 36). We see in Coral’s approach to aggressors that she rejects benevolence and the burden of educating others. She turns to shaming, jokes, and mockery to disrupt the aggression targeting her and to further establish a sense of self, a self that is separate from and above the aggression targeting her. Willett and Willett speak of ridicule as a force that binds communities closer together while providing distance from those laughed at (p. 17). They also say humor can “strengthen our sense of agency and enable us to challenge abusive forms of social power” (p. 109). With mockery and humor, Coral asserts and empowers herself on stream.

Whenever streamers use their voices, bodies, and presence, they are at an advantage over aggressors in chat. When a person types a derogatory statement in chat (“I can see it in your bones that you’re a male”) their statement is all we see—their self is flattened to a single dimension in chat, a dimension of aggression. The streamer, poised in a position of (flexible) response, has the benefit of multiple avenues of expression—verbal response, typed response in chat, and official moderative response (via platform-provided tools/features)—and can create a
more expressive and dynamic presence on stream. The streamer also benefits from a visual, physical presence (when webcams are used). Streamers are in command of their space, the center of attention, and in an empowered position for addressing aggression and harassment if they so choose.

The following is another example of gendered harassment: “show your boobs,” or some variation of the demand, is a common gendered message I have witnessed many times in the channels of women on Twitch. Coral decides to engage with l0v3axcess’s message, responding with the familiar pattern of direct reference, humor, and chipping away at the ‘logic’ of the statement.

l0v3axcess: show your boobs
Coral: *repeats the above message. “You know, I like that his name is on brand with his demand though. He said love--his name is love access. He’s obviously trying to access some love. The question is why would you look for that here on Twitch and not on a site that is better suited for you. That’s the part that’s confusing to me. I mean I’m pretty sure if you go in the just chatting category you could like flip somebody a sub and they’d flash them. It’s just strange that you found like the one stream where there’s a vaguely boyish looking person playing with their phone and you thought to yourself this is the one. This is where I’m going to see tits. That honestly, the lack of logic is what I find baffling. Less so than your comment. I’m truly worried about your ability to provide for yourself if you can’t even procure a glimpse of titty for yourself. That’s the part that I find scary.”

…

zlim_dim: Why is there always a “show me your b00bs” guy on every stream ugggghhh!!

…

Monster_M00n: I know why, Coral! It’s because he still lives with dear ol’ mommy & daddy, & they put the parental locks on the internet

…

just1power: Boyish looking person with great contours and highlights
Coral: “Damn, power. Thank you.”
tf76don: ... sometimes i just want to ask to see your booms just to hear the hilarious insults.

Again, the community is supportive of Coral and her strategy of callout humor. They participate in shutting down aggression (mostly through humor and mockery) and look forward to Coral’s witty replies. From examples like this, it is apparent that the community supports this approach to moderation and that it may be part of the reason why some viewers gravitated toward Coral and her channel initially. While the humor and callouts do not appeal to everyone, and viewers have told the community as much, there is no denying the entertainment factor it brings many viewers. Such a blunt and humorous moderation strategy can be viewed as a form of empowerment for both Coral and her community. Facing toxicity head on and reshaping it is a form of reclaiming (it may strip power from aggressors) and a statement that they (Coral and her community) belong in this space. They are not obligated to tolerate aggression, and they will deal with anyone who tries to disrupt their community. It is a bold and powerful approach to the toxicity that is so common in gaming spaces and the wider Internet. And the fact that this style of moderation applies to all, even to subscribers, is quite the statement. In one noted instance, a subscriber, seemingly out of context, commented, “would you blame asian doctor incels for selling poison to dumbe hollywood thots as payback.” Coral read the comment and immediately questioned both the message’s content and the subscriber:

Coral: “What?... you know. I was going to give you the benefit of a doubt but I don’t think there’s enough hours in the days for me to educate you. You know. Like I just, I don’t think I have it in me to like try to. I’ve tried to engage with you, but I just don’t have it in me cause that’s just such a weird take on anything. And I have no
idea what it has to do with anything… I don’t understand what it contributed to the conversation. I don’t think I have the emotional wavelength to just constantly explain to you like why the stuff you say is just so out of pocket. Like you’re free to watch the stream but probably do so in silence.”

The subscriber’s message was deleted (probably the result of a time out and not a ban based on Coral’s previous comments about moderation), but allowed to participate further, as suggested by the comment, “Like you’re free to watch the stream but probably do so in silence.”

Debates and “Disorderly” Conduct

While observing Coral’s streams I noticed some instances where heated debate broke out in chat (coded as IC2) and believe it may be connected to the community’s mimicking of Coral’s vocal moderative presence on stream. In one instance, the community was discussing the meaning of the LGBTQIA acronym. It was in the midst of this conversation that a viewer, meatwares, asked “Do you think people should be able to call a transgender by the wrong pronouns?” This question was not directed at anyone in particular (it may have been intended for Coral, but meatwares did not specify this), but regular viewers immediately reacted.

dubiousboi: ‘should be able’?
…
maxrad_9 (sub): @meatwares you should ask them first what they prefer to be called
dubiousboi: costs you nothing to be respectful
BBQPark (sub): *sits back down to a pronoun conversation*
meatwares: @maxrad_9 That sounds ridiculous
…
Lowk3ythr33: I believe the word you’re looking for is respectful.
…
vrdna (sub): what
BBQPark: lol
…
maxrad_9: That’s ok, @meatwares you just have to accept the consequences of your actions

tro11tour (sub): what if you can’t pronounce the pronoun correctly?
lifebreaks (sub): @meatwares here we have a saying: sub or ban

meatwares: What if the pronoun they want to be called i ridiculous and not true to themselves

... dubiousboi: that’s not up to you to decide @meatwares

... Snowroe (sub): @meatwares how is that for you to decide?
maxrad_9: Is that your place to determine how they can be true to themselves?
prsnlprsnl (nonsub): “not true to themselves” the fuck does that mean
meatwares: @dubiousboi It is up to biology
dubiousboi: oh god
dubiousboi: biology is not gender
dinoprintz (sub): Some don’t understand common sense. And so, it’s ok, to help answer some as long as it’s answered nice and they learn. But as we have discussed before. IF they are not gonna learn, then no. don’t help. And @Coral didn’t post a sign that shows this is a learning place, so ask at your own RISK! LOL

Coral: *reads dinoprintz’s message. “Exactly, dinoprintz. That’s the thing, right. It’s like apparently the onus is on like me to somehow educate these people because I know there’s going to be somebody out there who is like, ‘Well you’re roasting him and really this is a learning moment.’ Why is that my job to fucking sit here and bang my head against the glass of this fucking idiot? Like why? Why did that fall on me?”

While Coral did participate in the discourse, she did not guide the conversation initially as in previous examples. She mostly talked about how people can say whatever they want but that they are not free from consequences. In this instance, moderators and viewers took the lead in addressing meatwares. Their approach took the form of questions (“‘should be able’?”) challenging meatwares’s perspective through reason (“costs you nothing to be respectful”), and direct confrontation (“‘not true to themselves’ the fuck does that mean”). Multiple viewers joined in to engage with meatwares and the discourse, quick to challenge though some attempted to
educate (“you should ask them first what they prefer to be called”), but it becomes apparent early on that meatwares is not seeking education. They intentionally posed a question knowing it would elicit a reaction from the chat and/or Coral. Even the phrasing of meatwares’ question is suspect: calling someone “a transgender” is a dismissive microaggression. Their behavior can be labeled as trolling but, as discussed previously, the term should not be used to lessen the potential damage caused by meatwares’ comments. meatwares chose to enter a LGBTQ+ friendly space (Coral’s streams frequently included the LGBTQIA+ tag) and intentionally questioned the legitimacy of trans people and their pronouns. The community then responded, perhaps exactly as meatwares expected or hoped, but their piled-on responses left little room for meatwares to spread much vitriol, and soon after, meatwares’ messages were deleted from chat. Viewers were especially vocal in this moment, unafraid to challenge the disruption to their space. One aspect I find interesting is that none of the viewers were chastised for their responses to meatwares. In some channels on Twitch, viewers are explicitly asked to stay out of drama, to ignore trolls, and to let moderators handle any issues. But in Coral’s channel, viewers are allowed to confront and mock aggressors; they mimic Coral’s strategies for moderation. However, these moderative responses developed, Coral’s viewers were unwilling to tolerate meatwares’ ignorant and inflammatory comments, and moderators eventually decided to cut off meatwares’ ability to participate in the chat.

**Case Study 2: Conclusion**

Humor and entertainment are defining qualities of moderation in Coral’s channel. Moderation in this space is defined more by the personality of the streamer than by platform-provided tools and functionality. And while viewers were sometimes banned or received a
timeout, these moderative actions were secondary to the callouts, humorous digs, and shaming that occurred more frequently. Coral was a strong and vocal force guiding the stream, and her community of viewers mimicked her behavior, emboldened in a space where behavior traditionally labeled as impolite is acceptable. In particular, shaming was used as a powerful moderation tool to address aggression, demonstrating positive applications for a behavior often viewed as uncivil; as Manion (2003) reminds us, “shame functions positively, warning us when we are on shaky ground, when we transgress or are in danger of transgressing our own or our culture's moral expectations” (p. 22).

Coral was transparent regarding her approach to aggressors and unwelcome content, shirking the idea that she was responsible for educating strangers on the Internet. She frequently discussed the bigotry and hatred that targeted her and her streams and explained why she handled aggression the way she did. Coral said that while she wishes “idiots” did not come into her chat, she does not have a choice—it is part of her existence on Twitch. This reflection stood out to me not only because it is true for many on the Internet but because it further elucidates moderation on the channel. Coral does not have the luxury of “ignoring the trolls” and cannot simply “grow a thicker skin.” In order to maintain order and the desired vibe of the channel Coral has built, she has had to make decisions that work for her. Because of her wit, Coral was able to successfully reshape aggression into entertainment, even making videos of the absurd comments in the chat and her reactions to them and posting those videos on Twitter (this is a practice that has become popular, notably among women streamers). Coral’s responses were funny and sometimes merciless; however, Coral also recognized that the bold reactions on her channel could potentially have negative effects if viewers feel empowered to then target aggressors via
aggressive means. One of the stories she told on stream involved a viewer using a racial slur. Some viewers in Coral’s chat tracked down the aggressive viewer, finding their Twitter handle, profile picture, and Twitch channel. Coral attempted to dissuade her chat from doxing the individual. She explicitly referred to the behavior of her viewers as harassment and actively sought to shut down the viewers’ behavior by timing out viewers who refused to stop talking about the incident. This example shows Coral’s awareness of her influence as a content creator and the responsibility she feels for the community.

This case study is significant in that it describes an unconventional strategy to moderation on Twitch. It also serves as a reminder that a “one size fits all” model for moderation is not practical. Moderation can and should be individualized to the needs of the streamer and their community. The mockery, jokes, and shame taking place in Coral’s channel may be impolite and may not fit neatly into perceptions of online civil discourse, but they remind us that no one is obligated to perform emotional and intellectual labor. We should not diminish the efforts of the disenfranchised who choose to strike back at aggressors. However, Coral brought up a potential cost of moderating in this way. When discussing moderation (as outlined at the start of this case study), Coral explained that when she addresses racism and homophobia, her viewership drops because some people disapprove of her speaking so openly about those subjects. She has even received emails from viewers expressing they will no longer watch her content because she talks about politics and other sensitive topics. This is a further reminder that moderation complicates the spaces streamers occupy. Their audiences are not always receptive to the way aggression is handled. Streamers risk appearing “mean” and “insensitive” if they argue with aggressors, shame, or name call, which may affect their viewership and livelihood on the platform.
Unfortunately, a double standard exists—streamers are expected to politely educate or simply ignore toxicity. If they react with anger or frustration and snap back, they may be subject to more criticism than the aggressor who posted hateful messages in chat. This double standard is reminiscent of expectations and behaviors explored by other scholars, such as the work of Nuru and Arendt (2019) who explored the microaggressions targeting women of color and white fragility in online feminist groups. Vocal and impassioned responses are commonly criticized in favor of politeness and civility. With streamers like Coral pushing back with inventive and entertaining moderation practices, we may begin to see such attitudes and expectations shift.

Case Study 3:

“a very big and wild family”

Ruby, a Black woman, has streamed on Twitch for four years and amassed 30,000+ followers. In her Twitch Profile, Ruby described herself as a streamer who plays a variety of games. Ruby was energetic, funny, and engaging in the observed streams. It was not difficult to see why an active online community had formed around her and her content. A schedule, rules, subscriber benefits, merchandise, donation link, chat commands, and social media links (Twitter, YouTube, and Discord) were included on Ruby’s channel page. Ruby averaged 381 concurrent viewers per stream. She often used a webcam but did stream without one several times during the streams I observed.

During the interview conducted with Ruby on May 18, 2020, I asked how she would describe her Twitch channel and community of viewers. Ruby used words like fun, vocal, wild, and not safe for work to describe her community: “we’re a family, a very big and wild family.” When I watched Ruby’s live streams, I saw a playful, engaging, and lively community where
mature content was part of the norm but rarely disrespectful or at the expense of someone else. In addition to the words and phrases used above to describe her community, Ruby also mentioned creating an inclusive space: “I try to make it my business to learn more and more about people and learn how I can make my space as inclusive as possible and how I can make people feel comfortable.” I found this interesting because Ruby’s channel was obviously full of regular viewers who understood the expectations of the channel and how far they could engage in mature content and themes without violating Ruby’s expectations for the community. I think that outsiders to mature communities and discourses sometimes falsely assume a community engaging in mature content equates to an “anything goes” attitude, but that was not the case with Ruby’s channel. In fact, when asked about moderation, Ruby said:

I have a set list of rules in my stream chat and I have a set list of rules on my Discord chat, and I feel like we don't have a lot of issues with the community. Issues will always arise. I feel like we don't have a lot of issues because, I guess thinking back in retrospect, I feel like I do a pretty good idea of letting people know off the bat what type of person I am and the shit I don't tolerate. I feel like I do a decent job with that, so I don't have as many issues as a community my size would have…People tend to get a feel for what's okay and what's not okay and the type of language and things that's not okay. And I think that minimizes on like inter-community fighting and inter-community issues.

Ruby’s viewers very quickly learn who she is, what her channel is about, and the kinds of behaviors that are acceptable—this is a result of her straightforward approach to community. Several times during the interview, Ruby referred to herself and other streamers as community managers, which suggested that Ruby views streaming as being much more involved than just sitting at a PC and streaming games to randoms on the Internet. Ruby has built a space for her viewers to participate in a community. She engages with viewers while streaming and has created a space on Discord (a platform for online communication and community building) for
her community of viewers to interact outside the stream. Ruby and her moderators manage those spaces and have created rules to help guide and shape the community.

**Aggression and Moderation**

As far as channel rules and moderation, Ruby demonstrated transparency in the hours I watched her channel. From channel rules to announcing moderation changes to the stream, Ruby communicated clearly and frequently with her community. Channel rules emphasized respect and zero tolerance for hate; in particular, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and sexism were called out specifically in the rules. Channel rules were clearly labeled beneath the channel and were also available as a popup the first time a viewer entered the chat. Spam was also prohibited but backseat gaming—frowned upon in many gaming channels—was not listed here. When backseat gaming occurred, I noted and coded it, checking for any response from Ruby, her moderators, or the community. Backseat gaming occurred somewhat frequently, but Ruby never deterred the behavior in the twenty recorded hours. But, as a later example will show, Ruby’s moderators did address the behavior occasionally and asked people to desist. This may indicate the channel has some unspoken rules (rules that may reflect “common sense” or courtesy).

Overall, it appeared Ruby’s moderators took care of moderation, though I noticed very few timeouts or bans in the chat. Only a handful of messages were deleted (several instances of backseat gaming and an exchange where a viewer claimed Ruby was sexist).

While observing Ruby’s channel, I coded acts of aggression primarily in the CS1 (comments on streamer’s appearance or comments sexual in nature), CS2 (persistent comments), and CS4 (comments on gameplay) categories. All of the coded messages (such as comments on
Ruby’s appearance and body, persistent attention seeking, and remarks on how Ruby was playing the game) originated in the chat and were directed at Ruby.

The day I began recording Ruby’s streams happened to be a day when her channel was featured on the front page of Twitch. Channels are often featured on the platform’s homepage in a rotating queue. Typically, featured channels are participating in various events or sponsorships and receive increased attention from viewers. Being featured on the front page is beneficial to streamers and their channels as it advertises their streams and makes their content visible to a wider audience. On the day I started recording, Ruby’s stream maintained roughly 1,500 viewers throughout, hundreds above her average concurrent viewer count. When the stream began, Ruby spoke to her community and moderators about how the day’s stream would work saying, “Follower mode. Moderators, ready?” This transparency continued as the community began posting playful messages asking questions such as whether or not Ruby would take shots of alcohol during the stream. The question was asked jokingly but is interesting because it shows the community testing what would be acceptable during that particular stream—community members acknowledged the channel’s front page status meant changes in the channel’s dynamics for a time. Ruby replied, “No shots?! It’s front page! I can’t take shots on front page. What’s wrong with you?” Ruby’s playful side, along with the community’s banter, continued as the stream went on.

lav4 (mod): Front page Means keep the heathenry to a minimum
Ruby: “Keep it to a minimum. Like, we not saying be family friendly, but I don’t want you all in here talking about…all that crazy shit ya’ll talk about on a regular basis.”

lav4: Y’all basically act like you’re in front of company at church and
we will be enforcing it.

... 

Bryr_ (mod): Y’all asses going on for real timeout tonight if y’all act up.

... 

Shockus: Keep it clean y’all.

Participants in the chat, many who appeared to be regulars (based on their familiarity with Ruby and the moderators), took the messages from Ruby and her moderators well, joking about what they could get away with and what it meant to behave in a channel where mature topics are regularly discussed playfully. An example of the playful but more adult comments often made in this channel can be seen in the following. The messages posted in the chat were in response to Ruby standing up and facing away from her webcam to grab something off stream.

Bryr_ (mod): DAT ASS
KCarl: i come in to just…butt!!! PREFECT
Bryr_: A beautiful ass

Ruby did not visibly react or respond to their comments. In fact, such remarks occurred somewhat frequently throughout the recorded streams and seemed to be a recurring part of the community discourse.

The front page stream served as an example of Ruby’s style of moderation in the context of increased viewership. Throughout the stream, Ruby and her moderators engaged with viewers, discussing the game, reacting to the game’s narrative, commenting on random things, etc. The stream was placed in followers only mode for at least part of the stream, which limited the ability to post in the chat to followers of the stream. This Twitch-provided tool can be set to “Any followers,” “10 minutes,” “30 minutes,” etc. and is a measure streamers use to manage their
chats or to encourage new viewers to follow. Throughout the stream, I noted some backseat gaming, but the behavior did not result in any noticeable timeouts or bans. Viewers generally seemed excited (“Looking for new dope streams to follow, glad I found you! You seem super chill!”) and little outside of backseat gaming and spoilers was observed. At one point a viewer asked, “are spoilers allowed?” and a subscriber to the channel replied, “nah, just help if she asks.” Small moments like this demonstrated the community’s desire to assist on occasion, minimizing some work for Ruby and her moderators. The most heated exchange I noted was when the backseat gaming increased and several moderators responded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>opticai (mod):</td>
<td>Leave her to make her own fucked up choices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cloudcount:</td>
<td>divert power… [deleted]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apaws (mod):</td>
<td>Please no spoiler for the story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10_aalpy:</td>
<td>let her do it herself lads lmao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apaws:</td>
<td>She will make her own choice you don’t have to tell her what will happen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the front page stream was relaxed and acts of aggression were minimal. Expectations for the community’s behavior were established at the start and the community responded favorably, knowing that being on Twitch’s front page brought increased attention to Ruby and her channel.

**Persistent Attention-Seeking and Silence as Response**

While the first two case studies present and analyze moments of unruliness and discuss the ways callouts and humor can serve as moderation, this study recognizes quieter forms of moderation and their usefulness to live streamers. In the field of rhetoric, silence and rhetorical listening have been discussed as means to reach understanding: Krista Ratcliffe (2005) speaks of rhetorical listening as a “stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to
any person, text, or culture” (p. 17). Listening is presented as a rhetorical option for understanding various perspectives instead of shutting ourselves off from different opinions and beliefs, and there is certainly value to such an approach given the rhetorical situation. To attempt to understand is an ethical consideration. However, I would like to present silence and listening in another light. At times, silence and listening provides space for people to reflect and consider the positions of others, but silence can serve as its own response. In Western culture, speech is privileged as power while “that seeming obverse, silence, signals nothingness” (Glenn, 2004, p. 3). Of course, Glenn shows the power of silence:

> Containing everything in itself, silence is meaningful, even if it is invisible. It can mean powerlessness or emptiness—but not always. Because it fills out the space in which it appears, it can be equated with a kind of emptiness, but that is not the same as absence. (p. 4)

In the extended example presented in this section, silence, though it may appear powerless or empty, functions as response to the noise created by a persistent aggressor begging for verbal acknowledgement. Ruby’s silence wore out an aggressor and slowly deterred his behavior.

Early on in watching Ruby’s streams, I noticed a particular behavior I have seen in other channels but had been previously unable to fully capture and track—persistent comments over the course of several streams from a single user. Even before this project, I was curious about viewers who seem particularly fixated on gaining the streamer’s attention and acknowledgment. How did this behavior play out? What did it look like? And would it be perceived as harassment? Persistent comments can take many forms but the most frequent kind I have witnessed play out something like this:
EmBrac3: @streamer heyyy!!
EmBrac3: @streamer just tuning in. How are you, beautiful?
EmBrac3: your so pretty
EmBrac3: <3 <3 <3
EmBrac3: How long have you been streaming?
EmBrac3: @streamer how long have you been live
Embrac3: ignoring??
Embrac3: 😞 😞 😞 😞
Embrac3: @streamer I think your beautiful 😊
Embrac3: hey why are you ignoring me
Embrac3: …
Embrac3: FeelsBadMan⁵

The above is a fictional example modeling the persistence of viewers I have witnessed before in the channels of conventionally attractive women using webcams on Twitch (though this behavior is certainly not limited to women streamers). The model demonstrates the attention-seeking behavior and manipulation that can occur. A viewer may join the chat with an innocuous message like “heyyy!!” before commenting on the streamer’s physical appearance or alluding to their attraction. If the viewer receives a response from the streamer, they may continue posting messages of increasing intensity, but such behavior can continue regardless of the streamer’s acknowledgment, as with the model above. If the viewer feels ignored, they may just move on from the channel. However, I have observed the slighted viewer become increasingly hostile in their frustration, turning to name calling or worse. A number of factors might influence how exchanges like this could go, including the speed of the chat (perhaps the streamer missed the

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⁵ FeelsBadMan is both a term and emote used to express sadness, disappointment, or sympathy.
viewer’s messages), the viewer’s familiarity with the channel norms, whether or not the streamer recognizes the viewer, and whether the streamer tends to respond to such comments.

During the first recorded stream (the stream featured on the front page of Twitch), a viewer new to the channel, IceDubz, joined the chat with the message “It’s 11:00 and I’m just watching you. What’s this game about?” IceDubz’s first comment is innocuous, and from there he continued to participate in the chat for nearly two hours, posting every 1-9 minutes. He began commenting on the game being played, and his first few messages seemed to be intentionally shocking or attempts at humorous commentary. IceDubz repeatedly commented on how characters in the game had “testical faces” (comments criticizing the graphical appearance and design of the characters). Another viewer responded to IceDubz with “lmao” but otherwise he received little reaction from chat. He then directed his attention to Ruby:

IceDubz: Hey I really like YOUR face and hair.
   ...
IceDubz: She [referencing Ruby] said “ma tittage”
   ...
SugarBear: Thank you for following IceDubz :)
   ...
IceDubz: You might get my twitch prime next month for saying tittage. That’s hilarious.

IceDubz began by complimenting Ruby’s appearance before moving on to repeating some of her words he claimed to have found humorous. Soon IceDubz followed the channel, which was acknowledged in the chat by a channel bot, SugarBear (this is a common practice on Twitch, particularly in small to medium channels). The next statement IceDubz made mentioned “twitch

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6 In the chat examples discussed previously, I used they/them pronouns when referring to individual viewers. Here, he/him pronouns are used because the viewer referred to himself with those pronouns.
prime.” If a Twitch user links their Amazon account, they will have access to various benefits, including one “free” subscription a month. IceDubz may have mentioned the subscription for innocuous reasons, but sometimes viewers will try to manipulate streamers into saying or doing things in order to win or earn a subscription. This kind of attitude implies that streamers are beholden to viewers and their whims. IceDubz continued to comment on the game being played, and Ruby briefly acknowledged some of his comments. At one point, IceDubz said, “I decided we are friends. Congrats :))” and “Anyone who has cool hair and claps cheeks is the homie.” Eventually, he announced that he would be lurking in the chat: “Well, I’m prolly gonna fall asleep watching/listening. You’re chill AF and I like your hair. Keep doing ya thing.” Before this announcement, the content of IceDubz’s messages switched back and forth between commenting on the game and complimenting Ruby or referring to something she said to the stream. IceDubz did not lurk for long, and soon said the following:

IceDubz: Can I just comment on Twitch, as a platform, and how refreshing it is to see a woman who is gaming and just being herself rather than sitting in a tank top giggling and cooing at her chat.

CarMe1: preach.

IceDubz: I can’t do it tonight, but you will get sub/donation from me.

Ruby: “You said giggling and a tank top. I mean I have my sexy days too. I’m…you caught me on a frumpy day. But I have my sexy days too…”

IceDubz: I’m not talking about how you dress. I’m talking about how you act. There are so very few female streamers who aren’t valley-girling it up tryna get money from virgins.

This exchange is interesting as it fits into the rhetoric of a specific kind of Twitch viewer and gamer—the, typically male, gamer who complains about the roles of women, and the types
of women, who participate in games and gaming spaces. Platforms like Twitch, Twitter, and Reddit are host to many such people who believe most women gamers are not actually gamers. Instead, women in the hobby are regularly stereotyped and viewed as casual gamers or outright fakes seeking to entrap men with their physical attractiveness. On Twitch, some viewers and gamers refer to women as “thots” (“that hoe over there”), among other names. Thots are believed to be shallow, unintelligent, fake, motivated by validation from men, and interested in stealing from men, usually virgins who are seen as naïve and easy targets. Twitch thots are seen as using their bodies and sexual tension to gain donations/tips from male viewers. If a woman looks nice on stream, her presentation may be viewed as a performance, a deception, a trap. Of course, on the flip side, if a woman is not conventionally attractive or does not wear makeup or revealing clothing on stream, she may face comments like “is @streamer a boy or a girl?” Women on Twitch face sexism and unrealistic expectations daily, and, perhaps in most cases, will be criticized no matter what they do, how they behave, and how they physically present themselves. According to IceDubz’s comparison, Ruby stands out from most women streamers on Twitch because of her behavior and appearance on stream: “There are so very few female streamers who aren’t valley-girling it up tryna get money from virgins.” What IceDubz was doing though was making a judgment call on which women streamers are genuine and which are “cooing” at their chats. IceDubz’s words reveal some underlying sexism and his expectations for women online. He had decided Ruby was a woman streamer deserving of attention and that he would eventually reward that streamer with a “sub/donation.”

Next, perhaps in an attempt to identify with Ruby’s remarks that she has her sexy days on stream, IceDubz said, “Girl I’m in my boxers right now. Sexy til I die.” Based on this comment
and IceDubz’s complimenting of Ruby throughout the stream, it becomes evident that IceDubz had landed in a stream where he believed he would receive attention from the streamer. It is not enough for IceDubz to be acknowledged by Ruby once or twice; he craved frequent validation. Near the end of IceDubz’s participation in that evening’s stream, IceDubz turned to complimenting both Ruby’s community and Ruby and was rewarded for his involvement in the stream:

IceDubz: This may be my new favorite night stream.
IceDubz: Best chat
... IceDubz: Have a great night!
IceDubz: Nice to have met you!
... IceDubz: Can’t wait to see that fabulous hair again!
... [Notification] spacesmurf gifted a Tier 1 sub to IceDubz! They have given 60 Gift Subs in the channel!
SugarBear: IceDubz just subscribed PogChamp
... IceDubz: D’awwww!
... IceDubz: Thanks spacesmurf!!!
... spacesmurf: You’re welcome!!!
IceDubz: Thanks space!!
... IceDubz: See ya’ll soon!

Immediately after his compliments and announcing he would be leaving the stream, IceDubz was gifted a subscription to the channel by a current subscriber, spacesmurf, and frequent gifter of subs. Gifting subs is one way viewers can help “spread the love” and support their favorite streamers. Now as a subscriber, IceDubz had access to channel emotes and was more
recognizable as a member of the community. IceDubz did not know he would be gifted a sub to Ruby’s channel, but spacesmurf obviously thought IceDubz’s stream-long engagement in the chat made him worthy of it. Any viewer can gift a sub, and this gift should not be viewed as either validation that IceDubz’s behavior was viewed as appropriate or not by either Ruby or her community at large. In truth, without extensive interviews, we cannot know how streamers or their communities view such behavior at scale on Twitch. However, that does not prevent this project from considering such examples and examining the potentially toxic nature of persistent attention-seeking behavior.

After his initial appearance during the front page stream, IceDubz participated in at least three consecutive streams. All three times, IceDubz announced his arrival and/or immediately sought Ruby’s attention.

IceDubz: Yo I feel asleep hard in the stream last night.
…
IceDubz: You for all that view time Ruby <3
…
IceDubz: You missed my first message. I fell asleep last night during the stream
…
IceDubz: Ya, I woke up at like, 3 AM and my phone was on that stream you hosted.
…
IceDubz: Didn’t even get to check out ur pretty hairs…

Take the reference to the previous night’s stream, thanking Ruby for her time, and complimenting her hair together and IceDubz’s behavior begins to look manipulative. He was initially given attention by both Ruby and her community the night before and now expects the same level of attention here. IceDubz pointed out that Ruby missed one of his messages and
seems slighted when, a little later, Ruby did not notice or had chosen not to comment on IceDubz’s messages. IceDubz recognized the lack of response to his comments in the chat and said, “Ruby, we had something special my first night in stream. Now you don’t want none of my nonsense” and “I remember when we watched you play [game] and you laughed at my stupidity. Now you don’t even read it :( #heartbroken.” It may help to remember that all of this is occurring amidst other conversations in the chat and emote spamming. IceDubz is a username in a wall of other usernames. In addition to the regular activity in the chat, Ruby realized during this stream that her channel had just hit a milestone and shared that milestone with the chat, which erupted in celebratory messages and emotes. It was then that IceDubz said, “That makes sense. Now I know why you too good to read my nonsense.” He was implying here that Ruby’s success was a reason for why she did not have time for him during that stream, and the fact that IceDubz continually brought up the lack of Ruby’s attention demonstrates the effect silence can have on aggressors specifically seeking attention. Ruby is in a position of power where she could admonish IceDubz in a similar fashion to Jade’s callouts or Coral’s humor-based ridicule, but she takes neither of those approaches and instead ignores IceDubz.

A short time later, IceDubz asked the chat, “Am I like the only dude who watches the stream?” and another viewer pipes in to say, “hi… @IceDubz I’m a guy.” IceDubz goes on to say, “I was wondering… Ruby been ignoring me all night.” He seemed unable to accept that he might not be getting as much attention this stream for any number of reasons including that Ruby is busy playing a game while live streaming and participating in other conversations occurring in chat. His messages may simply have gone overlooked because of the frequency of messages that day. Of course, another reason may have been that Ruby did not want to give IceDubz attention
or did not find his messages engaging enough for comment. Regardless of the reason, he continued feeling neglected and was vocal about it, including when another viewer expressed similar sentiments:

SeanWonton: Can somebody ask Ruby is she mad at me? Since she been ignoring me all night.
IceDubz: She ignored me all night to start too, Sean.

Throughout the stream, IceDubz made multiple and varying attempts to gain Ruby’s attention—compliments, references to the previous stream, expressions of disappointment or sadness, and even sexual comments: “So Ruby, you said you dress sexy some nights. There’s a whole lot of shoulder showing right now and 1986 me is having a lot of trouble controlling his urges. Is this one of those nights?” Ruby’s attention was infrequent, but IceDubz stuck around regardless and began engaging with fellow users before eventually signing off for the night. The next stream went similarly in that he commented on Ruby’s behavior, seemingly to get her attention, but his participation in the chat was brief. In the recorded streams, IceDubz appeared in the chat during another stream but his participation was again relatively minor compared to the first stream he engaged with. IceDubz’s participation changed over the course of the streams depending on the attention he was receiving, and his words reflect the attitude of an individual who believes streamers owe attention to their viewers.

This kind of persistent attention-seeking behavior may not immediately seem as sinister or toxic as a viewer coming into chat and calling someone a “whore” or countless viewers banding together in a week’s long harassment campaign, but this behavior is manipulative, sexist, and threatening. It may help to imagine persistent attention-seeking behavior, like the
examples above, occurring face-to-face (it is true pseudonyms and anonymity are part of the problem here, but imagining similar behavior in face-to-face contexts highlights the manipulative nature of the behavior). Take a moment to imagine you are an artist performing publicly and an individual approaches you. They begin by complimenting your appearance, which may be innocuous enough. But they linger and persist in drawing your attention. Their comments turn into questions and they begin to dig at your personal life. “Are you single?” “Maybe we could go out on a date.” “What would I have to do to get you to go on a date?” Maybe you rebuff them gently or with humor, but they persist. You leave the venue for the day. But the next day you perform the same person is there. They demand your attention each time you are in public. Always there, constantly vying for your response. This kind of behavior is creepy, manipulative, gendered, and can be overwhelming. I am not aware of any Twitch-specific studies focused on this behavior, but I have witnessed it multiple times over the years, usually in women-led channels on Twitch. At a minimum, persistent attention-seeking behavior is badgering but can quickly develop into emotional manipulation and threatening behavior. While I have not spoken to streamers about their experiences with this kind of behavior and how to manage it, I can imagine streamers feeling conflicted. If they give viewers attention, they can potentially boost their viewership and strengthen their communities. If they ignore viewers, they risk looking rude and stunting their channel’s growth. But there will always be a risk in engaging with viewers on Twitch. There is no way of knowing the person, or their intentions, behind the username in chat.

Case Study 3: Conclusion

In general, aggressive acts (hateful words and behavior, harassment, threats of violence, etc.) did not occur frequently in the recorded hours of Ruby’s streams. Moderators sometimes
asked viewers to stop backseat gaming, and a few times Ruby responded directly to viewers who were either rude or misinterpreted something said on stream. One conclusion that could be drawn from the relative lack of aggressive behavior in the recorded streams is that Ruby has put in a lot of work into her community. As discussed in the interview, Ruby believes in being transparent and forward with her viewers—they know what to expect from Ruby, and they know what she expects from them. Running a channel in this way for years has built a strong and active community that goes beyond watching video games being played. Ruby, her moderators, and regular viewers have created a community that extends beyond Twitch to YouTube, Twitter, and Discord. Ruby is at the center of that community, and her consistently playful, engaging, and transparent character appeals to thousands of viewers. While entertaining and capable of maintaining order in a channel where mature content is normal and encouraged, Ruby was also impressive in her ability to foster a space where important conversations took place. She and her community often spoke of representation (in games and beyond), of Black experiences (such as racial inequity in healthcare), and issues pertaining to women (health, clothing, proper bra sizing, etc.). Ruby has the respect of the community as a capable and knowledgeable voice on the platform, and because of this important conversations occur.

In closing, this case study shows the results of a channel run with consistency and transparency. It serves as an example of a mature channel on Twitch that has not devolved into toxicity and that is due in large part to Ruby and her management style. Her communication with the community is clear and they respect her for it. Their family is “big and wild” but also loving, patient, and supportive.
Case Study 4:

“I have final say always”

The final case study focuses on a trans streamer, Amber, who has been active on the platform for approximately six years. While streaming, Amber appeared somewhat reserved though open to sharing the occasional anecdote from her personal life and willing to engage with everyone, even viewers who entered the chat with hostility. Amber’s channel was the smallest of the channels observed in terms of channel followers (15,000+) and average concurrent viewers per stream (an average of 70 concurrent viewers). Amber’s Twitch profile was brief and emphasized her trans identity and interest in games. She played a mix of newer and older games and occasionally streamed in the Talk Shows & Podcasts category. Panels beneath her bio provided chat rules (asking viewers to listen to the moderators, avoid backseat gaming, and to generally be respectful), a schedule for the stream, links to various social media accounts associated with Amber, and links for supporting Amber through donations.

In the hours I spent observing Amber’s channel, I saw a small but tight-knit community, supportive of Amber and the content she shared on Twitch, whether Amber chatted about her hobbies or played new video game releases. While Amber appeared to mostly focus on gameplay during her streams, she engaged with viewers who posed questions in chat or who otherwise started up conversations. It was clear many of the viewers frequenting the chat were familiar with Amber and some were long-time supporters. It was also apparent, based on comments in chat, that some of Amber’s viewers appreciated her openness as a trans streamer and found her channel a safe space online: “hey id just like to say thank you for going strong streaming after all
this time. As another trans women its very inspiring seeing another still going strong streaming after all this time especially on a platform like twitch that can be quite toxic sometimes.”

Aggression and Moderation

Moderation on Amber’s channel can be characterized as somewhat inconsistent (at least, from an outside perspective), with certain offenses addressed more readily than others and particular rules enforced more regularly. For example, backseat gaming is expressly against the rules (as specified in the channel rules panel beneath the stream: “Please don’t backseat game”) but the rule prohibiting said behavior was rarely enforced. Comments like “seems like you gotta parry those twice to stagger them,” “it kinda felt like you were going the wrong direction,” and “you gotta climb up and then grab and push” regularly went unaddressed by Amber and her moderators. Amber seemed more likely to enforce the “Be respectful” rule which is followed up with “slurs and offensive language are not tolerated.”

All of the coded aggression fell under the CS1 (comments on streamer’s appearance or comments sexual in nature), CS3 (intrusive comments/questions), CS4 (comments on gameplay), and CS5 (stream-sniping) categories. Noted instances of aggression and harassment originated from chat and targeted the streamer, Amber. While the majority of comments included backseat gaming, some of the instances coded as CS1 were particularly hateful and aggressive, as demonstrated in the examples that follow.

Ready to Converse: Openness, Space, and Challenging Discourse

The streamers discussed in the case studies allowed viewers space (via chat) to interact and converse, but their responses to aggression and harassment occurring in chat range from the bold (Jade) and the humorous (Coral) to intentionally quieter moments (Ruby). Jade and Coral
acted with consistency to shut down aggression in chat, but neither of them necessarily demonstrated a willingness to have conversations with their aggressors or to change their minds/educate (not that they should be expected to give aggressors such emotional or mental labor). Out of the four, Amber seemed most willing to engage one-on-one with aggressors. Perhaps this is due to the smaller size of her channel, or maybe it comes down to her personal approach to moderation. I cannot say with any certainty; however, the following example demonstrates Amber’s willingness to engage with viewers even when those viewers used chat to harass her.

uYgSywtf8c: YOUR CHIN AND BROW NEED SERIOUS WORK IF YOU WANT TO PASS AND NOT JUST LOOK LIKE SOME WANNABE CLOWN

... Amber: “Your full capital letter rant does not deter me…I imagine you have such a username because you get banned so often and can’t be bothered to actually come up with something to call yourself.”

... YoungS0l: wtf

... Amber: “Seeing as they have nothing to follow it up with, I guess I’ll just get rid of this message. We don’t have to read it constantly. I was just kind of hoping for like a little bit of banter I could destroy.”

Commenting on Amber’s physical appearance like uYgSywtf8c does is obviously transphobic, disgusting, and against the channel rule of “Be respectful: slurs and offensive language are not tolerated.” This was the first and only message the viewer posted in the chat that stream, and it essentially came out of nowhere. One of the reasons I pulled this example for the case study is because Amber let the insulting message sit in the chat for approximately two minutes. She noticed the message right away, commented calmly, and waited for the viewer to respond.
This—waiting for a reply—shows a willingness to engage with all viewers, even if they are trolls or harassers. What is noticeable about this example is that Amber was not only ready to address the viewer and their message, but left a space open (the chat) for that viewer to continue to speak as opposed to immediately purging the message from chat or banning the viewer, as other streamers might have. She chose to stay in relative proximity to the aggression by allowing it space in chat. Throughout the hours I observed Amber and her community, I saw that this willingness to engage was a core part of Amber’s streamer persona. Whether fielding questions about her hobbies or allowing a harasser the ability to further participate in chat, Amber was open to interaction. To further demonstrate this openness, in another stream, a viewer asked Amber “Did you get FFS?” (FFS stands for facial feminization surgery.) While this could certainly have been perceived as a rude question, Amber engaged with the viewer and their question. The viewer went on to compliment Amber, multiple other viewers told Amber how cute she looked, and the exchange led to Amber pulling up some old pictures on stream to share with the community.

The example above struck me because of the many instances of similar behavior I have seen before on Twitch. A user posts something offensive in the chat (typically their first message all stream) and it is either ignored (perhaps because the streamer does not notice due to chat moving quickly) or the comment is purged from chat by moderators or the streamer. Sometimes, the aggressive message may be commented on but quite often such messages are deleted without further attention brought to the viewer. In Amber’s case, she leaves her space—the channel and its chat—open for dialogue and “a little bit of banter.” She made mention of hoping to “destroy” the potential banter with the viewer, which is a hint of unruliness. Any viewer who pays attention
to the channel’s rules will note that Amber has “final say always.” Twitch encourages and expects streamers to take control of their channels and to manage content being broadcast, which includes messages in chat. Amber is under no obligation to engage with anyone in the chat but chooses to. This could be for entertainment value, nurturing the community, a genuine interest on her part in regards to her viewers, and it could also be to educate. The possible reasons are endless, but the fact that she chose to leave a virtual space open for uYgSywtf8c says a lot about how Amber appears to approach her community on Twitch.

A second point worthy of note is that only one viewer commented on the transphobic message above. “wtf” was posted in chat by one of Amber’s subscribers, but no one else—either moderator or general viewer—spoke up to chastise uYgSywtf8c’s behavior. I was surprised by this considering Amber’s channel is smaller, and sometimes smaller channels can have strong and cohesive communities. However, a lack of response in the chat might be explained by the community’s expectations of Amber. It could be that regular viewers of the channel are used to Amber dealing with aggressive comments. Perhaps she prefers to deal with aggressors on her own and has expressed as much in the past. It is difficult to say because viewing twenty hours over the course of a handful of streams provides limited snapshots of a community that has been developing for six years. Another explanation could be that there were fewer regular viewers tuned in that stream than usual. Newer viewers would not be as familiar with Amber’s moderation style or to the ins and outs of the community.

In contrast to the first example of aggression in the channel, the following demonstrates how quick Amber sometimes is to shut down aggressive content in the chat.
St0pboy: hottest eboy on twitch @Amber

...

St0pboy: I want you to fuck me in my pussy @Amber

...

Amber: “Such weird comments.”

The initial comment, “hottest eboy on twitch,” is intentional in its misgendering of Amber. The viewer was trying to elicit some response and made sure it was clearly directed at Amber with the “@” symbol. When the viewer did not get the reaction they were looking for, they escalated the aggression by writing a sexually explicit message in chat. (As an aside, I have noticed an obsession, on the part of aggressors, with genitals and sex in transphobic comments on Twitch, particularly if the target of that rhetoric is a trans woman.) The messages were promptly deleted from the chat and Amber sighed before saying “Such weird comments.” Unlike the previous example, Amber did not leave a virtual opening for the viewer to continue. I cannot account for this other than perhaps Amber was not in the mood to engage that day or saw no point in banter. Amber did not linger on the comments, and instead moved quickly to discussing the game she was playing. And, just as before, no viewers intervened or even commented on the transphobic remarks targeting Amber. This may be another indication of why Amber’s community does not always comment when toxicity occurs in the chat. Amber’s regular viewers may be modeling her dismissiveness of the comments and find that not giving aggressive viewers attention is best.

The remainder of the coded examples showed multiple instances of backseat gaming, which often went unaddressed by Amber and her moderators. Beyond the backseat gaming and the examples already discussed, very little occurred in Amber’s streams that was coded as aggression. This surprised me for a few reasons, as I was expecting to find many more instances of aggression across the twenty recorded hours. I was surprised because I have seen smaller
channels on Twitch, especially those with LGBTQ+ friendly communities, fall under attack countless times. And from my own experience streaming on the platform, it seems that smaller communities find themselves in the crosshairs because of the perception that they are easy targets. Smaller channels can become quickly overwhelmed if even a handful of users enter the chat and begin spamming nonsensical messages or posting hateful content. If the streamer has no moderators or has not faced such an attack before, they can become overwhelmed. But in Amber’s channel, few instances were recorded, and she faced aggression with both openness and active moderation. This may be attributed to her particular style of moderation and the small supportive community that has formed around her channel.

**Case Study 4: Conclusion**

Months after collecting and analyzing the data for this case study, I noticed Amber’s channel featured on the front page of Twitch one day. Due to the front page exposure, she had 10,000+ concurrent viewers. I was curious about the impact this boost in viewership would have on moderation in Amber’s channel and observed the chat for roughly two hours, taking notes on any acts of aggression in the more robust chat and any acts of moderation that followed. During that time, I noted transphobic messages (“Can I get a gender check in aisle 3”; “them breast aren’t real doe”; “he has a pp”), misgendering, and increased moderation. Backseat gaming, spamming, name-calling, and other aggressive acts occurred during this stream, followed by swift moderation. This example is important because it shows how contextual moderation can, and probably should, be. Amber’s occasional approach of openness and engaging with aggressors might not work as well on a larger scale with 10,000 people watching. At the least, Amber would have to be more selective about which viewers she chose to engage with due to the speed of the
chat and number of people demanding her attention. With her focus on the game she was streaming, it became apparent that Amber was not serving as a moderator for the chat (though she may have moderated at various points in the stream), but some of her moderators were present and dealing with inappropriate messages. It was noticeable that both the moderators and regular viewers were more active in addressing and calling out unwanted behavior. Viewers called on moderators to ban other viewers (“mods, just time them out for some months”; “huge props to the mods getting these trash people out of here with their shitty comments”), moderators tried to educate (“Amber is trans, female pronouns please), and viewers showed support for Amber in the face of constant aggression (“@Amber i hope all those negative people dont affect you that much <3 their behavior reveals a lot about their miserable lives :); “Im here to Spam Support!!!! lol”). With the drastic increase in concurrent viewers, the community showed up to support Amber and to discourage the aggressors. In this stream, the community did play a role in addressing hostility, unlike in the previous streams I had observed. In some ways, this may have been when their support was most needed.

Amber’s willingness to occasionally engage with aggressors instead of immediately banning or timing them out is probably the most significant take-away from this case study. While individually engaging with hostile messages does not scale up well in the context of large channels, it may be an effective strategy for smaller channels. It takes a streamer as confident as Amber to address hostility, even if it is to banter with and “destroy” the source of that aggression. This approach (instead of immediately banning a viewer) leaves room for viewers to alter their behavior or to reconsider their level of participation. The approach also shows that Amber is at the front of channel management (“I have final say always”). She has enlisted
moderators, and they are helpful (as seen in the stream featured on the front page), but Amber appears to be primarily responsible for monitoring the chat (in larger channels, moderators tend to do much of the work). It could be she prefers running her channel that way.

Overall, this case study demonstrates that smaller channels can have different experiences with aggression and harassment. While smaller channels can easily be flooded with toxicity, they can also invent or promote unique strategies for managing aggression (strategies that may not scale up to larger communities/audiences). This case study also shows the inconsistencies that can occur in regards to moderation on Twitch. Rules may be present, but rules without enforcement mean little. Backseat gaming is prohibited but occurred frequently across the recorded streams and received little comment from Amber or her moderators. It appears that unless behavior in the chat breaks the rule of “Be respectful,” it is likely to go unmoderated. This may be an instance of “pick your battles” playing out online. Amber’s word is final, but she will likely give you a chance to participate and even explain yourself.

Conclusion: Moderation and Resistance

This project is concerned with moderation as rhetorical resistance—the actions, methods, and strategies used to disrupt acts of online aggression (violence, harassment, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, etc.), inspired by such work as Unruly Rhetorics: Protest, Persuasion, and Publics. Focusing on moderation, I examined four Twitch channels and their communities to understand and highlight a range of moderative responses to aggression. From the four case studies, we see a variety of moderation practices on Twitch. Jade (case study 1) relies heavily on platform-provided tools and a team of moderators who are the primary force behind rule enforcement. Jade and her community can be outspoken, directly calling out, making fun of,
shaming aggressors. Coral (case study 2) leads the moderation on her channel, reshaping aggression into moments of entertainment for viewers. Shame and humor are staples of her online persona, qualities mimicked by her moderators and community. Moderation on Ruby’s channel (case study 3) is clearly communicated and transparent, with explicit rules defining acceptable and unacceptable behavior in the channel. Adult content is allowed and encouraged on the channel, but moderators and community members hold the line of what is appropriate and what is not. Amber (case study 4) is the primary moderative force on her channel; she promotes dialog but holds firm to her rule of respect. Moderators are present in the channel but do not typically enforce channel rules unless the stream is flooded with viewers. Each of the streamers have developed a style of moderation (some consisting of mockery, humor, shame, and callouts) tailored to their needs and communities. Their moderation may at times appear uncivil and impolite, but the methods they use serve to effectively combat aggression while establishing acceptable behavior in their communities and encouraging others to act against aggression.

The streamers highlighted in the case studies were targets of aggression, gendered harassment, and toxicity common to gaming spaces. Their subjection to gendered harassment, in particular, was uncomfortable to watch, as it sexualized and denigrated the streamers. Even more uncomfortable were the few instances where comments like “I want you to fuck me in my pussy” were made with no response from viewers, leaving the streamer virtually alone in facing toxic messages. As uncomfortable as it was to view harassing comments after the fact (see Figure 13), it pales in comparison to facing harassment in the moment and with others watching. In my relatively brief time live streaming on Twitch, I experienced aggression a handful of times.
Viewers came into the chat while my partner and I were talking about books and made sexually explicit remarks about us as a couple, a random viewer joined the chat to comment on my partner’s weight, and several viewers intentionally misgendered me in succession, as if working together to do so. Each time, I hid any facial reaction and immediately banned the viewers without further acknowledgment, but I did feel annoyance and anger that these viewers invaded our space to spread hate. What must it feel like to face these comments and worse nearly every day? Some streamers may say the aggression rolls right off, but others are affected by the constant toxicity. Across social media, I have heard and read numerous accounts from streamers who felt anxious after being harassed, who streamed less often because of aggression, and who held back on what they streamed and their entertaining performances to avoid unwanted attention from trolls and aggressors. Anyone following enough Twitch streamers on Twitter
knows that many LGBTQ+, BIPOC, and women streamers have shared stories of aggression and how it challenges them. It is important for digital rhetoric scholars to consider these experiences, what informs moderation, and to examine the strategies and responses streamers have invented and adapted to resist the toxicity flung their way in order for us all to better disrupt inappropriate and damaging online behaviors.

While the four streamers’ moderation strategies differed, there were similarities in their approaches, which makes sense since they are operating on the same platform, participating in the same broad Twitch culture, and dealing with the same platform affordances and restrictions. All of the streamers used platform-provided tools and functionalities (timeouts, bans, channel rules, and moderators) as part of their overall moderation strategies. However, the featured streamers integrated those tools to varying degrees. For example, Jade relied heavily on moderators who in turn were quick to remind viewers of channel rules. If viewers persisted in breaking those rules, they received a timeout or ban. In contrast, Amber’s moderators did not visibly assist with managing chat during the majority of the recorded streams. I wondered if Amber preferred this, as she never called for her moderators to assist when she was targeted by aggression. In the case of smaller channels like Amber’s, streamer-led moderation is easier to achieve because fewer viewers are watching the channel and participating in chat. It can be easier to balance moderation and gameplay in a channel with 70 viewers (not all of whom are active in chat) than it is in a channel with thousands of people watching. It is simply not as feasible for streamers like Jade, Coral, and Ruby to monitor chat, provide entertainment, and attend to the other demands of streaming all at once. Moderators can help to fill the gaps, welcome new viewers, cultivate the community, and enforce channel rules. Jade’s and Coral’s
moderators were active each stream and, more so in Jade’s channel, their moderative actions followed consistent patterns. It is as though Jade’s moderators follow a script for addressing the various behaviors in chat (they reminded viewers of the channel rules, waited for viewer response, and then enforced the rules with a timeout or ban if the viewers persisted). This approach to moderation quickly establishes a model for viewers in the channel—they can see that moderators treat everyone essentially the same and provide opportunities for viewers to correct their behavior. Moderation in Jade’s channel seems fair and designed to not alienate or push away viewers. The platform-provided moderation tools do work and assist streamers, but they are mostly designed to address moderation after aggression has taken place, which is a limitation of many moderative tools. Tools like AutoMod and the banned words list do block certain words and phrases from entering the chat, but both operate behind the scenes, and I cannot speak to their use by these streamers.

Employing channel rules, bans, timeouts, and the assistance of moderators can lead to effective moderation when used consistently, but all of the streamers developed additional methods. And a key takeaway from the case studies is the use of what may be labeled as *impolite* and *uncivil* responses from streamers. These responses generally consist of calling out, shaming, name calling, and making fun of aggressors and can be characterized as unruly and messy rhetoric. Defining terms like *impolite* and *uncivil* is itself a messy endeavor as it depends on one’s experiences. One person may consider talking about politics and religion over dinner to be rude when another person enjoys regularly engaging in dialog about those topics. A relative of mine may see a post expressing a differing political view on Facebook or Instagram and deem that uncivil. However, disagreement does not equate to incivility or impoliteness. I also do not
intend to pass judgment on the reactions of the streamers in the case studies or to suggest their responses are uncouth. I see value and power in addressing online aggression through unconventional means. It may seem rude to tell viewers in chat to “shut the fuck up” or to make a comment like “I don’t think there’s enough hours in the days for me to educate you,” but we should interrogate this inclination to view language from a lens of polite and impolite. It is not the burden of streamers, or anyone on the Internet, to educate the ignorant or kindly and patiently dissuade aggressors. Insisting people respond with kindness and education assumes that, on some level, aggressors act in good faith, that they will be willing to receive education and will be enlightened if they are simply told about or shown a different perspective. Aggressors intentionally target streamers and their communities. The targeted should not be expected to take on the emotional and intellectual burden of educating the people who invalidate their existence. Such a view places the onus on the targeted and makes higher demands on their behavior than aggressors. When hate has been able to fester online for so long, the resistance is likely to be loud, messy, and unruly.

One of the reasons Jade and Coral stand apart from Amber and Ruby is because of their vocal moderation, which is sometimes humorous and other times searing. Jade did not respond directly to aggressors as often as Coral did, but she did express frustration at backseat gaming, telling viewers to stop or leave the channel. In one instance, she used humor in response to a viewer asking an inappropriate question. She was flexible with how she addressed aggression, adapting to individual instances as they arose. Coral’s on-stream persona embodied a bold playfulness, with viewers referring to her as sassy and humorous. She regularly took absurd, ignorant, and hateful comments and repurposed them into entertainment for her viewers. But
while she often engaged in jokes and counter-trolling, Coral could also be serious, talking to her chat about the effect of aggression and challenging the notion that she was expected to be patient and kind when targeted.

An argument can be made that responding to aggressors with callouts, shaming, and humor encourages toxic behavior. Perhaps that is true in some communities and spaces, but I would not characterize either Jade’s or Coral’s communities as toxic. Jade’s channel is welcoming and lively, and Coral’s is playful and frequently engages in respectful discussion of important topics. In fact, it is not uncommon to see viewers, new and old, comment on how nice and welcoming Jade’s community is. Based on reactions in chat (both through words and emote use), the majority of viewers reacted to Jade’s callouts favorably. Jade’s and Coral’s viewers were more vocal in calling out aggressive behaviors than viewers in Ruby’s and Amber’s chats. Viewers do mimic the responses to aggression they witness in the channels, and overall their mimicking seemed helpful in addressing aggressors. Some viewers in Coral’s channel could be more confrontational when challenging ignorance (as in the case of the viewer who asked about intentionally using the wrong pronouns in reference to a trans person), but their behavior matched the sometimes abrasive nature of Coral’s responses. These viewers were not asked to back off or avoid confrontation, suggesting Coral and her moderators did not disprove of their messages. If Jade and Coral did not cultivate their communities by holding all of its members to the same expectations, perhaps toxicity could grow in these spaces, but that does not appear to have happened. How callouts, shaming, and mockery were used is what mattered in these communities.
In rhetoric and composition, much scholarship has called for civil discourse, though the particular interpretation of “civil discourse” varies. Scholars have written of ethics, empathy, and understanding. Bone, Griffin, and Scholz (2008) presented “invitational rhetoric and civility” as “a means to create ethical exchanges in difficult situations” (p. 434). They argue that invitational rhetoric leads to understanding, respect, and dialogue (p. 436) and that an invitational approach is “a move toward civility” (p. 456). While the authors acknowledge that manners have historically been used as tools to silence and oppress, they suggest invitational rhetoric and civility are essential to democracy. Such a call for civility in service of democracy reminds me of the “disciplining rhetorics” discussed by Cloud (2018): “disciplining rhetorics are deployed when women (whose affect is suspect), queer persons, persons of color and other minorities (whose standpoints are suspect), and activist groups (whose bodies are feared but whose demands are suspect) rise up to challenge hegemonic power” (p. 27). Civility, manners, and the greater good are suspect when deployed as ideals void of the realities of social inequity. In contrast, Lozano-Reich and Cloud (2009) argue for a “confrontational approach.” They rightly “contend that the suitability of the invitational paradigm presupposes conditions of economic, political, and social equality among interlocutors”; “Furthermore, the appeal to civility is a form of gender discipline; thus we advocate theorizing the uncivil tongue” (p. 220). Lozano-Reich and Cloud look to grassroots movements and protests—uncivil tactics—as activities resulting in actual political and social change as opposed to keeping the peace for civility’s sake. Their work also points to equality “as the necessary prerequisite (not outcome) for a productive invitational, civil discourse” (p. 224). Without the prerequisite of equality, civility cannot be in service to democracy; otherwise, civility is a mask for injustice. Lozano-Reich’s and Cloud’s
acknowledgment of the “uncivil tongue” and the power of uncivil acts is similar to discussions throughout *Unruly Rhetorics: Protest, Persuasion, and Publics* (2018). Rodríguez and Kuebrich (2018) argue “for the importance, and at times necessity, of unruliness (in word and through bodies) to expose the very real divisions and inequality in our society” (p. 163). Calls for civility do little in the moment for the disenfranchised facing aggression and harassment live on platforms like Twitch, nor does such a call actively dismantle systems of prejudice. The unruly, disorderly, and the rude are valid expressions for the streamers and communities studied here.

When we remain silent in the face of ignorance and hate, we run the risk of our silence appearing as support. The same applies to online aggression. When streamers are expected (by Twitch) to cultivate and monitor the communities that form around their content, they are obligated to respond to aggression in some way. Some streamers never ban or timeout viewers; some put their chats into subscriber only mode to cut down on toxicity; and some keep their chats open to all but with rules in place and expectations of enforcement. The messy and unruly rhetoric observed in these case studies was often emotional, humorous, disorderly, and in the proverbial faces of the aggressors. Their methods differed, but Ruby and Amber were also successful in handling the aggression that entered their chats. One takeaway is that moderation can and should be an individualized process, one that is adapted as needed given the context. As Welch (2018) said, “A tactic that reads and works well in one set of circumstances may not work in another” (p. 305). I cannot assume that these streamers or their communities have experienced less aggression or harassment because of their moderation strategies, but, considering the approaches and methods highlighted in the case studies, their efforts to call out toxicity does strip power from aggressors while empowering and strengthening these online communities. What I
can say with confidence is that calls for civility do little to serve live streamers. Individuals
cannot be expected to educate the masses, to be the “better” person, and to sit in silence amidst a
barrage of hate. Embracing the uncivil (callouts, shame, banter, mockery, humor, etc.) may be
one of the most empowering options for resisting online aggression and hate.
CHAPTER 4

CIRCULATION AND A CASE OF CROSS-PLATFORM AGGRESSION

Introduction: Circulation and Distribution

Sharing content on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook is an incredibly simple task. With a few clicks or a tap, sharing the news story that made you chuckle or reposting that meme that struck a little too close to home is easy. Liking. Upvoting. Retweeting. Sharing. Contributing to the circulation of content has become a norm of online behavior, so normal that perhaps most do not stop to think about the implications of redistributing content and the effects that circulation may have on others. In particular, the circulation and rewriting of content within the context of harassment campaigns has not yet been thoroughly researched in the field of digital rhetoric and is the topic of this chapter.

Scholars within the fields of rhetoric and composition have discussed “circulation” and “rhetorical velocity” for some time now. Ridolfo and Devoss (2009) define “rhetorical velocity” as “the strategic theorizing for how a text might be recomposed (and why it might be recomposed) by third parties” and as “a term that describes an understanding of how the speed at which information composed to be recomposed travels—that is, it refers to the understanding and rapidity at which information is crafted, delivered, distributed, recomposed, redelivered,
redistributed, etc., across physical and virtual networks and spaces.” In the context of online environments, texts are in motion, circulating among and across communities and edited and reimagined along the way. As a rhetorical concept, “circulation” has been significant to the field of rhetoric for some time, “from antiquity through the twenty-first century” (Gries, 2018, p. 3). Circulation has helped shape new scholarship, theory, and practice in rhetoric (Brooke, 2009; Eyman, 2015; Gries, 2015; Porter, 2009; Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009) and is largely a concept open for further exploration and inquiry as Gries calls for in Circulation, Writing & Rhetoric.

In their article, “Confronting Digital Aggression with an Ethics of Circulation,” Dieterle, Edwards, and Martin (2020) argue for viewing circulation and redistribution as writing practice: “situating circulation practices as writing practices, as a kind of authorship, ascribes a certain amount of accountability and consequentiality to circulating content” (p. 199). This acknowledgment of circulation as writing practice and the call for accountability and ethical authorship is vital if we—both the general public and scholars of digital rhetoric—hope to advance ethical exchanges in online spaces and combat the toxicity, aggression, and harassment that so frequently targets, disciplines, and limits disenfranchised people. The ease by which content can be shared online has perhaps contributed to situations where platform users do not consider the ethical implications of circulating and repurposing and the networks by which they circulate content.

At the end of their article, Dieterle, Edwards, and Martin (2020) pose a series of questions for consideration including “What are the ideological and political assumptions attached to the circulation of content?” and “What role do platform policies, architectures, and data practices play in amplifying and/or diminishing aggressive content?” (p. 209). In
considering those questions and others, I discuss throughout this chapter a harassment campaign targeting a trans streamer in the spring of 2020. In the case study presented here, I do not attempt to offer definitive answers for combating online harassment, rather I present the case study as an example that shows a need to think of circulation within the context of cross-platform harassment. Chapter 3 looked at moderative responses (official forms of moderation supplied by the platform and inventive moderation from streamers such as callouts, shaming, and joking) on Twitch to better understand the responses of live streamers and their communities, but when considering the complexity of moderation on Twitch and other platforms, we should also consider that aggression occurring on one platform can easily shift to other online spaces. With content crossing platforms, circulating, and gaining velocity, new topics of discourse take hold and can dominate the narrative of actual events (what occurred, how it occurred, parties involved, etc.). I believe how a narrative comes to be matters, as does its persistent circulation. In the case of live streaming, cross-platform aggression becomes more immediate and inescapable, as streamers and their communities may find themselves inundated with insults, threats, and hate in front of a live audience. This chapter considers cross-platform aggression—aggression moving across platforms, circulating through networks (often with ease) and the changing stories that develop out of circulating content. As with Chapter 3, examples throughout this chapter are uncensored and include transphobic comments, hate speech, and violence.

Twitch Streamers, Social Media, and Cross-Platform Aggression

Cross-platform aggression and its effects are not well addressed in scholarship concerning Twitch. Regardless, it should be an area of study for rhetoric scholars and a concern of individuals wishing to participate on the platform. On YouTube channels dedicated to
discussing the ins and outs of live streaming and on subreddits like r/Twitch, a common piece of advice given to new streamers is “use social media.” Discoverability is a frequent topic of discussion involving growth on Twitch (the platform is designed to favor already successful streams bringing in the most viewers, making channel growth for new streamers difficult). Social media is often cast as the best means to be discovered, with many focusing on building a presence on Twitter and YouTube to promote and bring viewers back to new Twitch channels. Streamers, like so many Internet users, are connected to various social media accounts, often using the same or similar handles/usernames across accounts and platforms. Tapping into the power of social media is a sound strategy for streamers, but any use of the Internet has its risks, and having multiple accounts can mean multiple vectors for receiving harassment. For example, during one of the recorded streams discussed in Chapter 3, Coral spoke about feeling anxious because of a Tweet that had gained significant attention.

If I’m a little anxiety-ridden today it’s because there’s...this is gonna be kinda sad, but I’m going to tell you anyway. Uhm, I got a lot of engagement on a Tweet yesterday. And it brought in a lot of followers. And every time I get attention like that, it always turns negative. So I always get anxiety. And I know that’s weird. That’s how much the Internet has broken me. Anytime I get tons of attention, it’s always followed by a slew of negativity. Like right after it. Last time a tweet got that much attention, I had the white supremacists attack me on Twitter. Not even joking.

Here we see Coral emphasizing the very real effects of anxiety and the potential for being targeted by aggressors when speaking on the Internet. The benefit to creating and sharing content is that Coral can receive positive attention and gain followers, which supports her streaming career, but the risk of negative attention is always present and something she worries about. The concern of facing harassment is not limited to Twitter—it could easily cross over into the stream. Coral continued:
So I always get anxiety any time one of my Tweets or anything like that blows up because the Internet conditioned me to be like, sigh there’s going to be a negative backlash or people are going to be looking at me with a microscope like, ‘How dare she get this amount of attention. Like I have to find something to hate on her for.’ And part of me is like you know what, I have a lot of open and honest conversations about controversial topics on the stream. And I don’t really play it safe with my humor. I’m very sarcastic, very deadpan in my delivery. But you know what? I guess I’ll be okay because if I’m ever wrong, I’m willing to admit it. And I think that’s the difference.”

Just by way of speaking publicly, Coral is a target of aggression. While clearly aware of the risks in creating content online, Coral recognizes the importance of the content and conversations she shares with her community. People may look at her critically, despise the fact that a woman of color has a public platform, and seek out any possible way to discredit her, but the ability to have honest dialog and engage with sensitive or controversial topics is worth it to Coral. Of course, this does not mean facing aggression and harassment is welcome or easy for streamers.

On Twitch, streamers are encouraged to link social media accounts to their channels, to fill out a bio section describing their channels and themselves, and to share content created on Twitch to other platforms. Social elements are baked into Twitch, and many streamers use Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to announce when they’re going live to stream, to share more about their lives, and to stay connected with their fans and fellow streamers. Being active on social media quickly became an expectation and standard for live streamers, and this has placed them in a position to potentially be targeted on multiple fronts.

At times, the very tools created by platforms to benefit their users are turned against users when online abuse goes unchecked. This chapter examines a case of cross-platform aggression targeting a trans Twitch streamer in which a particular platform affordance, Clips, played a significant role in shaping a vicious narrative that continues to persist. My examination of this harassment campaign will focus on aggressors’ repurposing of a platform affordance to circulate
misinformation and fuel transphobic attacks by limiting a streamer’s control over her own content. When faced with her own content being taken out of context and circulated for harassment, this streamer shifted her content in an attempt to reclaim some semblance of order in the online spaces she inhabited. In order to do this, she often stopped what she was doing on stream (shifting to a new game or ceasing to play at all) and changed the course or subject of conversation to mitigate harassment. Essentially, her ability to participate online as she normally would was limited as a result of aggressors’ actions and circulation of content.

Context for Harassment Campaign

The Announcement: Twitch Safety Advisory Council

In the spring and early summer of 2020, the darker sides of gaming were undeniable as allegations of misconduct, sexual abuse, and other toxic behavior made headlines. Live streaming went through a movement similar to 2017’s #MeToo (Lorenz & Browning, 2020; Schreier, 2020a; Kastrenakes, 2020; Liao, 2020; Schreier, 2020b;), one of the top game publishers, Ubisoft, came under scrutiny for employee misconduct, leading to several executives stepping down (Hussain, 2020), and a well-known voice actor, Laura Bailey, was the target of harassment as angry “fans” reacted to the much anticipated The Last of Us Part 2 (Tassi, 2020). It was a time when the extent of gaming’s toxicity was inescapable, though one event in particular caught my attention.

On May 14, 2020, a series of events occurred that reified the significance of the many issues and concerns this dissertation seeks to explore. During that week I was drafting my dissertation and preparing for my interview with Ruby. While taking a break, I turned to Twitter
as I often do to keep in touch with video game-related news. It was there I saw Twitch’s
announcement regarding the creation of the Twitch Safety Advisory Council:

Keeping our community safe and healthy is a top priority for Twitch. Today, we’re
excited to announce the formation of the Twitch Safety Advisory Council, which will
support the growth of our community moving forward. (“Introducing,” 2020)

Twitch stated that council members would “inform and guide decisions made at Twitch by
contributing their experience, expertise, and belief in Twitch’s mission of empowering
communities to create together.” In the announcement, published via Twitch’s blog and shared to
Twitter, Twitch shared the names of council members consisting of live streamers
(CohhCarnage, Cupahnoodle, FerociouslySteph, and Zizaran) and outside experts (Alex Holmes,
Emma Llansó, Dr. Sameer Hinduja, and T. L. Taylor). Council members were described as
advisors (not employed by Twitch) who would assist with “drafting new policies and policy
updates,” “developing products and features to improve safety and moderation,” “promoting
healthy streaming and work-life balance habits,” “protecting the interests of marginalized
groups,” and “identifying emerging trends that could impact the Twitch experience.” Twitch’s
announcement demonstrated some awareness on their part of the toxicity on the platform and a
need for user-input.

From my observations on May 14th, I saw that initial response to Twitch’s announcement
was mixed. One of the complaints lodged against Twitch was that top-down enforcement of
policies and guidelines was uneven (with popular streamers benefiting from favoritism among
Twitch’s staff). Based on responses to the initial tweet on the 14th, some people were hopeful the
council would enact positive change for the platform, some dismissed the council as nonsense
and as an SJW\(^1\) move, and others expressed cautious but hopeful sentiments. Beyond what was stated in Twitch’s announcement, their motivations for creating the council can only be speculated. Those at Twitch may care about receiving input from and supporting Twitch users, but it is possible Twitch decided to create the council as a public and performative move (to show off their support for the safety, inclusion, and wellness of their users).

In Twitch’s blog announcement, brief descriptions accompanied the names and pictures of each council member. Twitch did not directly explain how or why council members were selected, though some descriptions were more detailed than others and suggested what council members had to offer. Since Twitch’s announcement, they have said little about the council, and if the council has directly influenced any platform decisions or policies, their input has not been shared publicly. Based on several streams I watched, led by or including council members, it appears that council members are not allowed to reveal much of anything about their roles on the council or their influence.

**FerociouslySteph, the Council, and Voice Chat**

One of the advisors on Twitch’s Safety Advisory Council is FerociouslySteph (Steph), who has streamed on the platform for approximately six years. Steph is a partnered streamer who plays a variety of videogames. In her channel’s “About” section, she describes herself as an “Adorably ferocious trans-girl Twitch Broadcaster with ambitions of softness. Fulltime twitch streamer. Making a microcosm of a better world, and you're welcome in it! ^_^ ❤️.” Her channel had approximately 23,000+ followers at the time of writing. Steph is a cheerful,

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\(^1\) SJW stands for Social Justice Warrior, a term used to describe an individual who promotes progressive views. SJW is typically used as an insult.
welcoming, and inclusive streamer who usually averages 50-70 viewers per stream. She often speaks of authenticity, being true to yourself and creating the spaces and communities you would like to see in the world. At TwitchCon 2017, Steph was a guest speaker during a segment titled “Twitch Yearly,” which highlighted favorite moments, great communities, and people of significance on Twitch that year. During her time on stage, Steph spoke about moderation, community building, and communication on Twitch:

Part of building a positive space is moderation. Moderation allows us to shape our communities. It doesn't just mean being trigger happy with the ban button. In my community, moderation always or almost always involves giving second chances. Often times my mods and I hope to show the power of the values that I believe in. That it is okay to be positive. That it's not a joke to be trans. That authenticity is something to be celebrated. And quirks are something to be proud of . . . My community could not exist on Twitch without the moderation tools Twitch.tv has. (“Twitch.tv,” 2017)

Steph went on to say that Twitch provides the opportunity for her voice to be heard by people all around the world. Twitch connects broadcasters with audiences in unique ways through the chat. But she also spoke of being harassed daily on Twitch and how valuable good people and moderators are to online communities. Steph praised moderators and Twitch-provided moderation tools, attributing the continued existence of her channel’s community to these platform affordances. From moments like this one from TwitchCon 2017 and from hours spent viewing her channel, I have observed Steph to be welcoming yet fierce in protecting herself and her community.

In Twitch’s blog post concerning the Safety Advisory Council, Steph was described as follows:

Steph has been a full time streamer since her debut playing competitive collegiate Heroes of the Storm in 2016. She was one of the first transgender streamers to ever be partnered on Twitch, and the first to bring a transgender pride flag emote to the platform. Her fight for inclusivity includes creating a competitive team composed entirely of marginalized
gamers, and vehemently opposing non inclusive mechanics such as voice chat. (“Introducing,” 2020)

Considering the size of Steph’s channel on an oversaturated platform, it seems likely many people who became aware of the Safety Advisory Council during the week of May 14th heard of Steph for the first time. Steph’s bio is transparent in outlining parts of her identity, what she has contributed to the platform, and the gaming issues she is passionate about—these details are significant to the following discussion of harassment.

The same day Twitch introduced the new council, Steph replied to Twitch’s announcement on Twitter, expressing her excitement for the council and an understanding of people’s cynicism as to the council’s purpose and effectiveness. A few hours later, Steph posted a Tweet linking to a thread from 2018, describing her views on voice chat in video games (at the time, I assumed Steph tweeted out this content to clarify her interest in voice chat and why it should matter to gamers). Central to her argument was the idea that voice chat in video games reveals certain characteristics of players’ identities, such as being a woman, thus making those players vulnerable to in-game harassment and placing them at a disadvantage in competitive play, a point well-documented (Gray, 2011a; Gray, 2011b; Gray, 2013). An example of this would be a woman playing an online game and participating in the game’s voice chat; fellow players know she is a woman based on her voice and begin to harass her for being a woman in a perceived male space (just because they can or because they derive some pleasure from trolling or harassing women). Or imagine a trans man joining a server and being misgendered and targeted for not “passing” as male. Steph did not advocate for the total removal of voice chat in gaming and further clarified: “Not saying you can’t use voice chat with your friends or your
premade. It hurts randoms in pick up matches.” Her point here is that some gamers will act aggressively in-game towards people they view as outsiders, such as women and BIPOC, which can be especially damaging in competitive games. If you are targeted for your perceived gender, race, or sexuality or if your teammates outright ignore you because of how they perceive your identity, your ability to participate and succeed in-game is affected. This toxic behavior may prevent marginalized gamers from participating in competitive and team-based games; it may even drive some people away from gaming entirely. What Steph wanted to see in gaming was more inclusive in-game features—ones that would allow all gamers to fully participate and not be targeted for their identity.

Following Steph’s tweets was an onslaught of aggression and harassment that spread across platforms and persisted for weeks. The targeting of Steph was rooted in transphobia, fear, and hateful rhetoric. For days, comments from hundreds of unique Twitter accounts piled onto Steph’s tweets. But the aggression did not stop there. Aggressors followed Steph to Twitch, ready to troll and harass as soon as her channel went live. The aggression was persistent and malicious, with people digging through past posts and content, looking for anything to discredit her. This harassment was not unique, especially in light of #Gamergate and other online harassment campaigns, but it demonstrated the ease with which content live streamed on Twitch could be clipped, published, shared, and manipulated by aggressors seeking to vilify perceived threats in gaming.

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2 A premade is a pre-arranged group of players.

3 Randoms are players who are not part of pre-arranged groups.
Clip, Publish, Share

In the case of the harassment targeting Steph, a particular platform affordance, Clips, played a significant role in allowing for the circulation of aggression. Clips has been an affordance of the platform since 2016 and allows “Twitch viewers to quickly share the most uniquely-Twitch moments from broadcasts while enabling Broadcasters to grow their channels through social sharing!” (“How to Use Clips,” 2020). When watching a live stream or VOD (Video On Demand), viewers with registered Twitch accounts can click on the Clips icon in the bottom right corner of the video player. Clicking the icon brings viewers to a new tab displaying a brief segment of the stream or VOD, a slider selection tool to refine which moment within the video segment is highlighted in the clip, and a box to input a title. A note below the slider and title section indicates that titled clips attract more views and encourages viewers by stating, “help [streamer] get discovered by adding a title.” Once a viewer has selected the desired segment and titled the clip, they may publish the clip, which generates automatically under the “Videos” tab on the channel where the content was clipped. If the viewer wishes to share the clip beyond Twitch, they may click on the embedded social media options (Twitter, Facebook, or Reddit) or manually paste the link associated with the clip elsewhere (see Figure 14). Sharing Clips, much like sharing content elsewhere on social media, is easy and does not necessarily generate much reflection for the average Twitch user. But Clips should be considered through an ethical lens, as the affordance can be used for both mundane and aggressive purposes. In this dissertation, I consider the creation and sharing of Clips as a kind of writing practice in the vein of Dieterle, Edwards, and Martin (2020) who speak of “circulatory writing practices includ[ing] activities such as sharing, signal boosting, amplifying, redistributing, and forwarding, among others” (p.
200). If we view the circulation of clips as a kind of writing practice, we can see how “sharing” content brings with it ethical considerations of whether content should be circulated and where. In this case, the circulation of content allowed aggressors to take Steph’s content out of context and for completely different purposes.

Figure 14. Screenshot Showing the Post-Publication View of Twitch’s Clips Feature.

Twitch’s language concerning Clips frames the feature as a useful tool to help streamers broaden their reach/audience and encourages the social incentivizing of content sharing among viewers. Clips include the usernames of the viewers who create them and the number of views is tracked.

When you share a Clip with your friends, they can jump right in and join you in the live stream. If the stream has already wrapped up, they can follow the streamer or keep
watching the recorded broadcast right where the Clip left off. Your Twitch ID is at the top of every Clip you make, so you’ll always get credit for being the first to spot something great. (“Announcing Clips, 2016”)

Clips are meant to capture the “amazing,” incredible,” and “unbelievable moments from Twitch streams” (“Announcing Clips”); they “never expire” and “are usually special moments” (“How to Use Clips,” 2020). They are regularly used by viewers to highlight the humorous, the entertaining, even the embarrassing moments that sometimes occur on live streams. Clips are spread widely by both viewers and streamers to various platforms like Twitter, where clipped content provides streamers with additional reach and content to entertain current followers and interest potential viewers.

In terms of managing clips, Twitch places the burden on streamers and viewers to moderate any problematic content (this is essentially the approach Twitch takes to moderation across the platform). On the “How to Use Clips” page, Twitch provides information for how streamers can remove clips (either individually or all clips from a livestream or VOD) and includes a section addressing clip abuse. Streamers may block a viewer from creating clips for 24 hours or permanently. Streamers may even disable the clip feature from their channels. Viewers may also address clip abuse by reporting clips directly to Twitch. The possible abuse of clips is briefly mentioned and occurs at the bottom of the “How to Use Clips” page.

Words like “amazing,” “incredible,” and “best moments” characterize Clips as a beneficial feature to assist streamers with channel growth. However, in terms of intentionally designed affordances, platform creators’ expectations of use are not always reflected in the actions of users. Clips are intended to entertain audiences and assist streamers, but they also enable the sharing of content for less positive intentions. Viewers can use Clips to shame, mock,
and fuel heated discourse, all while taking snippets of content out of context. Clips have the potential to circulate widely in a short span of time, gaining velocity and bringing attention to the behavior/moment captured and the Twitch channel featured. This abuse of the feature played a role in the harassment targeting Steph.

**Sites of Aggression and Harassment**

On May 14, 2020, a clip titled “Deer” circulated across Twitter, Reddit, and 4chan. The clipped content was from a VOD on FerociouslySteph’s channel and depicted Steph receiving head scratches from her partner. The thirty-seven second clip was created by “chrisbee42” (this appears to be a general viewer account, though the user has streamed infrequently). This clip was circulating within the context of Twitch’s newly announced Safety Advisory Council and amidst conversations of inclusive game mechanics. The “Deer” clip would circulate widely, receiving more than 1 million views, inspiring similar clips of the same content, and serving as ‘evidence’ for aggressors to circulate in their campaign against Steph, including on r/LivestreamFails where posts like “twitch staff btw” received more than 25,000 upvotes.

Aggressors used Twitch’s Clips feature to spread out of context video content widely and with ease. Reddit, Twitter, YouTube, and 4chan were central hubs where aggression grew, fueling harassment that circled back to Steph and her community on Twitch (aggressive messages/content targeting Steph also appeared on other social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, but aggression did not seem to gain as much traction on these platforms). Reddit, Twitter, and YouTube were among the most popular social networks in 2020, with millions of users active each month (Clemont, 2020). These platforms also host various gaming communities, communities which play a role in gaming culture. Gaming discourse on
Twitter is on the rise (Hutchinson, 2020), popular gaming subreddits have hundreds of thousands to millions of members (e.g. r/gaming, r/PS5, r/xboxone, r/NintendoSwitch, and r/pcgaming), and gaming content (let’s plays, reaction videos, reviews, etc.) has been a significant factor in YouTube’s success for years, with people watching “more than 50 billion hours of gaming videos” in 2018 (Takahashi, 2018). This is all to say that aggression spreading across these platforms is not surprising. Sharing information, creating content, and communicating with others is relatively easy on each of these platforms. Aggressors created Tweets contributing to the discourse surrounding Steph and the council and circulated Twitch clips, such as the ones titled “Deer” and “Only cis white males are against banning voice chat apparently.” Similarly, users on Reddit created posts and piled on in the comments. On YouTube, established content creators with substantial following and smaller YouTubers alike created and posted videos critical of Steph, her inclusion on the council, and her behavior. Depending on the popularity and audience reach of these social media posters and creators, their content circulated widely. Some videos on YouTube have hundreds of thousands of views (e.g. “Asmongold CONCERNED About FerociouslySteph & New Twitch Safety Council Drama” and “Twitter VS Twitch Safety Council Deer (FerociouslySteph) 🦌”), Tweets have hundreds of comments, and popular posts on Reddit received thousands of upvotes and comments.

Tracing cross-platform aggression as it occurs can be challenging as it involves monitoring multiple online spaces at once, as aggression travels along virtual pathways where users mimic and adapt aggression along the way. Similarly, tracking cross-platform aggression months after the fact has its challenges. The discussion of events in this chapter reflect my efforts to capture aggression and harassment during and shortly after it occurred (May 14, 2020 through
early June) and more recent data collection and analysis (as I went back, revisiting old threads and posts online and found content new to me). In looking at Reddit, Twitter, and Twitch (with some references to 4chan), I will consider the circulation of aggression and harassment across platforms and how circulation of content can shift narratives. Aggressors weaponized platform affordances, such as Twitch’s Clips feature, in an effort to circulate a false account of events to discredit a trans woman. In my experience with online discourse, there is often a discrepancy between what actually happened/what was said and what becomes accepted as the dominant "story" of what happened. There is a transformation of narrative that can take place when content is circulated beyond its initial context, and that is exactly what aggressors did on a wide scale as they directed hate toward Steph and her Twitch community. I believe this exploration of events occurring between May and June of 2020 will demonstrate some of the ethical concerns Dieterle, Edwards, and Martin (2020) consider in their discussion of circulation, ethics, and digital aggression and serve as a necessary call for further research into cross-platform aggression and the ethical considerations of circulating online content.

When focusing on Twitter, I will discuss Tweets which received significant engagement (from comments and likes). I will take a similar approach to Reddit posts and threads but within a popular subreddit featuring mainly Twitch-related content, r/LivestreamFail. r/LivestreamFail is a subreddit dedicated to “Livestream wins, fails, and everything in between” (LivestreamFail, 2020). Content on this subreddit tends to highlight “fails” (this could include moments of embarrassment, roasts, and outrageous comments made on stream); however, the subreddit also shares an impressive display of gaming skill, humorous interactions, and all manner of entertaining content. Posts involving drama between streamers tend to attract a great deal of
attention as do posts that focus on spectacle and the outrageous. r/LivestreamFail was created in 2015, has 1 million members, and mostly features content clipped from Twitch.

Platform Affordance and Manipulation: Inventing a Narrative

Timeline of Events

The harassment campaign targeting Steph is complicated by shifting narratives, a multitude of voices, and the entangled mass of threads resulting from cross-platform aggression. I have created an outline to highlight some of the key moments on May 14th and 15th to help describe the chain of events. Of course it is impossible to accurately track the circulation and recirculation of images and messages, but a timeline of events (see Table 10) can help illustrate how rapidly events occurred during the harassment campaign (such a timeline also assisted my own understanding of events as I analyzed textual data). For example, news of Twitch’s new council was widely distributed by multiple media outlets throughout May 14, 2020, and word spread quickly across Twitter, Reddit, and Twitch. After the initial announcement, Steph tweeted about her inclusion on the council, and by late afternoon, aggressors had already begun targeting her on stream. The creation of posts on the popular subreddit r/LivestreamFail exacerbated the situation and brought even more attention to the inclusion of a trans streamer on the Safety Advisory Council.

Following Twitch’s announcement of the Safety and Advisory Council, criticism of both the council and FerociouslySteph was near-immediate. People upset at Twitch believed that the platform was pandering to liberals and SJWs or thought the council was just for show and would not result in any actual change. News of the Twitch council spread quickly across social media
and was reported on by a number of media/news outlets (such as *The Verge*, *Kotaku*, and *gamesindustry.biz*). The initial anger directed at Steph was seemingly founded on her status as a “small streamer” on Twitch, her identity as a trans streamer (people questioned why a small streamer deserved a place on the council when other popular streamers could have been chosen) and came to the conclusion that her marginalized identity was the only reason, and her opinions on non-inclusive game mechanics. Contributing to this initial wave of response were streamers

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4 Contextual clues from Steph’s stream on May 14th (such as a viewer commenting “HEAD PATS…CUTE DEER”) suggest people were aware of the clip and its content at the time. Steph’s Tweet at 10:56 PM also confirms clips were made and shared on the 14th.

5 The corresponding VOD (video on demand) is no longer available on Twitch. The start time of the stream is based on information available on twitchtracker.com.
and other content creators who reacted to Twitch’s council announcement on May 14th. These reactions, especially from popular content creators, amplified attention to the council, bringing all the council members to a wide audience. Steph, with her bio stating her opposition to “non inclusive mechanics such as voice chat,” was then targeted.

Shortly after the council was announced, Steph tweeted about her involvement on the council, referring to it as an “honor” and asking for people to share their concerns and perspectives regarding the platform. Later that day, she also reiterated her opinion on voice chat in video games and shared a thread from 2018 discussing the anti-inclusive nature of voice chat. Negative comments poured in on both Tweets, with people claiming Steph was making “widesweeping statements” (one comment making such a claim received 2,400 likes) about gamers and perpetuating “fake gamer girl bullshit” (the implication being she was not a “real” gamer and therefore her experiences were not valid). Others set out to discredit her perspective as a gamer by claiming that Steph clearly lacked experience with competitive games. And others still jumped in to excuse the behavior of gamers, essentially dismissing the severity of online aggression as forgivable adolescent behavior, as seen in the following Tweet (see Figure 15).

Figure 15. Tweet Dismissing Toxicity as Product of Youth.
Later that day, Steph streamed on Twitch for nearly three and a half hours, during which she spoke with viewers about voice chat and its potential negative effects on marginalized gamers. Steph streamed on Twitch the previous day to an average of 84 viewers; the average on May 14th was 1,019 concurrent viewers, with over 7,000 unique views (see Figure 16). The spike in viewership during this livestream speaks to the attention brought to Steph due to her involvement with the council and her perspective on voice chat. Her channel would not normally receive this level of attention outside of some special event. The stream on May 14th was the source of several clips which were circulated across platforms like Twitter and Reddit, receiving thousands of views. For example, one clip titled, “Twitch staff advocating for voice chat removal from games for giving unfair advantage,” received 300,000 views and was shared to r/LivestreamFail. Throughout this stream on the 14th, Steph received dismissive and hateful comments from many viewers participating in chat.

![TwitchTracker Stream Summary](image)

Figure 16. TwitchTracker Stream Summary.
After the stream, Steph tweeted twice: once to update her community on how she was doing after the day’s events and again to speak about being authentic to one’s self. This second tweet appears to be in reference to the infamous “Deer” clip, and similar iterations of the same content featured in that clip, and people’s resulting reactions. The following day, due to clipped content from Steph’s streams and the reactions of various content creators (and ensuing conversations) to Steph’s Tweets and on-stream discussion and Twitch’s announcement, even more people were aware of the Twitch council and the controversy that followed. The morning of May 15th, Steph tweeted about being harassed, and Newsweek published an article reporting on the Safety and Advisory Council as well as Steph’s experiences with online harassment. These two items provided even more content for aggressors to respond to, and further content critical of Steph and Twitch was created on Twitter, Reddit, and 4chan. By then, it was difficult to escape discourse concerned with Steph in online gaming communities. Content questioning, mocking, and seeking to dehumanize Steph appeared across the aforementioned platforms in addition to Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. On May 14, 2020, much of the discourse concerning Steph involved disagreement over voice chat, inclusive game mechanics, and the relevance and severity of harassment and aggression in gaming. This rapidly changed, and by May 15, 2020, the circulation of clips capturing out of context moments from Steph’s live streams altered much of the discourse to direct criticism of Steph—her role as a streamer, her ability to serve on Twitch’s council, and even her health and wellness. Aggressors launched an ad hominem attack, turning away from facts, logic, and reason to criticizing Steph’s character.

Initial Aggression and Harassment

Early on, Steph was bombarded with comments questioning her knowledge of gaming
and her place on Twitch’s council. If you are confused about the ensuing backlash, you could be forgiven for not understanding why Steph’s opinions regarding game mechanics were deemed controversial by a vocal minority of gamers. Gamers can be incredibly fickle, opinionated, and quick to react. For example, some gamers were upset that a female character in *The Last of Us Part II* was muscular (Hernandez, 2020); some gamers sent threats to the voice actress of that same character because of the character’s actions in the game (Tassi, 2020); some gamers proclaimed they would no longer support Sony products because Sony introduced a free and optional BLM theme to the PS4 (see Figure 17); and some gamers were upset about the alterations to Jill Valentine’s costume in the *Resident Evil 3* remake because her miniskirt was altered to a skort (Barker, 2020).

The issues and topics gamers sometimes obsess over do not always follow logical paths. Some gamers reveal their bias and toxicity when they perceive threats to the products, spaces,
and communities they feel ownership over. Calls to “keep politics out of my games” are frequent, as is rejecting the efforts of game developers to diversify the characters, stories, and topics featured in video games. While some people may dismiss these vocal protests as originating from adolescents (and therefore not to be taken as anything other than harmless trolling), these incidents speak to deep-seated toxicity in certain segments of gaming culture. Even if most gamer backlash originated from teenagers, the damage done by the vocal minority should not be dismissed so readily. Gaming culture can be brutal and unwelcoming and has increasing connections to Alt-right groups (Brown, 2018; Condis, 2019). The general hate, transphobic remarks, and death threats lodged at Steph are not something to ignore or take lightly.

Much of the early discourse on May 14, 2020 questioned Steph’s perspective and comments on voice chat in video games. Some of the comments attacked Steph on some level, whether making fun of her ability as a gamer or doubting her experiences, but much of the blatant transphobia occurred later. Instead of immediately attacking Steph on a personal level, aggressors focused on the necessity of voice chat and its benefits to gamers. However, many mischaracterized her argument. Steph’s argument, which she shared on Twitter and during several live streams, is centered on the idea that a person’s “linguistic profile,” as she says, reveals aspects of a person’s identity (gender, race, age, etc.), which others may then target due to bias. In particular, people with female-sounding voices are disproportionately targeted by aggressors. As Steph said in a later discussion with Dr. K from HealthyGamerGG, “Some voices are less respected and the person with that voice can’t really control that” (HealthyGamerGG, 2020). In competitive play, voice chat is a vital component of communicating with one’s
teammates. Toxic teammates may turn the tool (voice chat) against gamers who do not sound like them. This is particularly damaging when people play in pick-up matches (typically a spontaneous match of random players) to rank up and climb the game’s competitive ladder. Verbal abuse may lead players to not speak as much, stop using voice chat, or stop playing entirely—harming their ability to fully participate in game and compete competitively. In place of voice chat, Steph advocated for more inclusive communication tools and systems less prone to reflect player bias such as pings and pre-fabricated voice lines. Pings allow players to visually mark points of interest (locations, weapons or other items, and areas where opposing players may be) for their teammates with the click of a button. This kind of non-verbal shorthand does not require players to reveal any of their identity markers, ideally keeping player focus on the game.

Many people on Twitter took to defending voice chat, pointing out that it provides a competitive advantage—the exact point Steph was making—but failing to acknowledge the nuance of Steph’s argument. Statements like the one in Figure 18 sought to undermine Steph’s argument by claiming she lacked knowledge of games and prove the relevance of voice chat, which was not something Steph denied. Voice chat provides a communication advantage for players in competitive games. So then it must also be true that muting voice chat or otherwise not engaging with one’s teammates is a disadvantage. How are gamers who are targeted and harassed via voice chat expected to maintain the competitive advantage afforded by voice chat if they mute the feature and limit their participation? Muting voice chat was exactly what some recommended (see Figure 19). Leaving voice chat or muting does nothing to address issues of sexism, racism, and homophobia in gaming. Suggesting that players mute or leave places a burden on the targeted, gives aggressors a pass, and neglects issues of toxicity in gaming.
This distancing from player responsibility continued as others claimed that game publishers are ultimately responsible for preventing toxicity in games. There is a lot to be said about the roles video game developers and publishers play in influencing gaming culture, but that is not the focus here. Putting all responsibility for toxicity in gaming on publishers is another rhetorical move that enables individual gamers to shirk responsibility. Other common threads in the discourse included statements denying that marginalized gamers are targeted and downplaying the severity of the problem, with people claiming that they do not treat others differently based on gender or race or that they have not been targeted for their identity, so it must not be a wide-spread issue. Of course, anecdotal rebuttals only go so far. At the basis of many people’s arguments was the denial that a problem existed or that the problem was worth caring about. Some did not dismiss harassment as an important issue but rather disagreed with Steph’s proposed solutions. However, the “loudest” voices—the most persistent and dismissive—
presented arguments that denied the severity of online aggression and harassment in gaming and dismissed her call for a solution. Even though many voices simply disagreed with Steph’s proposed solutions, it was within the context of this public and vocal disagreement that harassment formed.

These kinds of responses persisted when Steph went live on Twitch later on May 14th. Steph started the stream intending to play a game, but the stream quickly shifted to Steph addressing people’s questions and comments in the chat. Her stream was host to thousands of additional viewers, viewers who gathered for spectacle, drama, dialogue, and argument. Many of these first-time viewers questioned Steph’s perspective on voice chat, argued that the issue did not matter, and undermined the experiences of marginalized gamers targeted for aspects of their identity. The negative reactions can be characterized as typical gamer behavior, as documented by many following #Gamergate (Golding, 2015; Sarkeesian & Cross, 2015; Condis, 2018; Paul, 2018). Attempts to erase women and other marginalized people from gaming occur repeatedly, and when the marginalized push back and share their voices, a toxic subculture of gamers surges forward once again to defend gaming.

As with the comments posted in response to Steph’s Tweets, comments in the chat shirked responsibility, insisting that a toxicity problem in gaming did not exist or that it was not as bad as women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ people said. The irony of some of these comments is that they embodied the behavior they claimed did not exist in gaming. Many comments during this stream were unsupportive, hostile, and persistent (see Figure 20), more so than the initial responses on Twitter. This may be due to the nature of synchronous chat. Viewers have the ability to post messages for streamers and fellow viewers live and there is the potential for
immediate response from streamers. Because the space is synchronous and responses immediate, viewers can quickly assess the positions and attitudes of fellow viewers. This may speak to the affective nature of harassment and aggression in synchronous contexts. In the case of Steph’s stream, viewers seemed emboldened by the multitude of trolls and aggressive voices telling Steph “Toxicity is a struggle for everyone in games,” and “Getting your feelings hurt by people in voice chat is weak af.” During this stream, aggressors started to make fun of Steph (ex. making “jokes” about her voice), with some making transphobic remarks (ex. misgendering Steph and mocking her body). People were dismissive and suggested that if gamers cannot handle toxicity they should just leave. Comments during this stream, while many of them harsh and aggressive, would pale in comparison to the remarks targeting Steph after content from her channel was clipped and circulated.

Figure 20. Selection of Comments in Chat During FerociouslySteph’s May 14, 2020 Stream.
Aggression and Harassment: Clips and Post-Clips

While some people responded negatively to Steph’s initial tweets on May 14th, the vast majority of aggressive comments were posted on the days that followed, after clips from Steph’s streams circulated widely. Multiple clips from the stream on May 14, 2020 gained traction, receiving thousands of views (one clip was viewed more than a million times). Clips may be sufficient for capturing brief entertaining moments (as Twitch intends them to be used), but they are a poor tool for capturing the nuance of any layered discussion, much less a discussion about voice chat and marginalized gamers. During and following Steph’s stream on the 14th, people created clips of what sounded outrageous and controversial and circulated them across Reddit and Twitter, shaping those clips in ways that created a new narrative of events—Steph was cast as power-hungry, mentally ill, and out of touch with gaming and reality. For example, part of Steph’s discussion of voice chat involved the privilege of cis white male-sounding voices. Unsurprisingly, gamers took the discussion of privilege as an attack on all white males. A clip titled “Only cis white males are against banning voice chat apparently” received 190,000+ views and was shared to r/LivestreamFail in a post titled “Ferociouslysteph (Member of the Twitch council) thinks only White Cis Males are against banning voice chat.” Some of the discussion resulting from the clip focused on insinuating or outright calling Steph mentally ill (“God it feels great being fucking normal,” “this demented person,” “I'm not even close to normal but people like this make me feel normal”), perceived hate for white males (“What's with these people and their hate for white cis males, lmao,”) and the supposed self-victimization of marginalized people (“They form their entire identity around being a victim. They'll even feel victimized for groups that aren't present.”). Little of the discourse in the thread engaged with the actual issues
Steph was discussing during her stream that day. Instead aggressors made comment after comment disparaging Steph, using the ad hominem fallacy to target her instead of engaging with the issues Steph sought to address. They clipped moments that could be circulated elsewhere for clout. As a result of their persistence and the content they circulated, aggressors successfully shifted the discourse into a specific narrative that served their purpose of discrediting and making a mockery out of Steph. What began as public disagreements over voice chat and inclusion slipped into a frenzied pile on attacking a streamer. Clips allowed aggressors to share brief moments out of context and without further explanation, enabling the spread of misinformation and the shaping of a streamer as an unstable individual out to target gamers and the products they enjoy. And this narrative persisted. In “Slow Circulation,” Bradshaw (2018) discusses “rhetorical persistence” as an under-studied element of circulation that may explain how certain texts like fake media take hold. This persistence is a kind of repetitive brute force used to make something—an argument, an idea, etc.—stick. He argues that

rhetorical persistence is important to successful circulation, it raises questions that speed and reach alone cannot answer. In particular, at the same time that we are asking how things move, we should also be asking how and why things stay. That is: how is it that some rhetorics persist even after further rhetorical interventions (e.g., recomposition, public deliberation, and even fact checking)? (p. 481)

Not only did the speed and reach of clips like “Deer” drive the harassment but so too did the lingering clips, Tweets, and messages created by aggressors. And despite obvious distinctions between what Steph said and what others claimed she said (and who Steph is and what aggressors claimed her to be), messages of reason and support were overshadowed by aggression. Dozens upon dozens of posts related to Steph were made on r/LivestreamFail, some of them receiving thousands of upvotes and linking to clips of her channel. People turned back to
Twitter to flood Steph’s mentions with transphobia and other forms of aggression and harassment (see Figure 21). In the following days, people also used Twitch’s clip feature to capture moments of other streamers (some of them among the most popular on Twitch) reacting to or calling out Steph. Remarks from these individuals seemed to further influence others to share their “hot takes” and oppose Steph’s criticisms of voice chat.

![Transphobic Meme Directed at Ferociously Steph on Twitter.](image)

The harassment continued as people scrutinized Steph’s Twitter account and Twitch channel VODs, looking for more content to turn against her and circulate. Aggressors went as far as to comment on tweets from years earlier, including a tweet from 2018 where Steph updated her followers after undergoing a gender affirming surgery. Comments included, “Mutilation at its finest,” “Thank God there won’t be offspring!” and suggestions of suicide. On Twitch, clips were created to highlight comments and behavior from months before. The “Deer” clip had already circulated, but at this point further clips were made of the same or similar content. Clips
showed Steph as a “soft forest creature” receiving head scratches from her partner. People started referring to Steph as “deer” and “deer girl” as a result of these clips and because Steph wore decorative antlers during her most recent live streams. Soon people were accusing Steph of believing she was a deer because she identified as a furry⁶. These claims continued to be made even after she addressed the accusation on stream, clearly stating she did not believe she was a deer.

Because the “Deer” clip gained rhetorical velocity (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009), Steph and her streams became the subject of multiple memes. Phillips and Milner (2017) describe memes as “evolving tapestries of self-referential texts collectively created, circulated, and transformed by participants online” (p. 30). Aggressors created and circulated memes of Steph, calling for a hunting season to “shoot” the “deer girl.” This is yet another example of aggressors grabbing onto whatever helped their narrative. Following the wide-spread circulation of these clips, numerous accounts on Twitter replied to Steph’s earlier tweets with “jokes” about killing deer (“I identify as a lion and could care less about deer feelings. I’m special too. King of the Jungle baby. Why shouldn't I just eat you for sport?”), pictures of dead deer, and videos of deer being hit by cars. For days, aggressors waited for Steph to go live on Twitch to begin bombarding her with questions about her genitals and to argue about voice chat. On 4chan, the harassment consisted heavily of transphobic messages: “Trannies are The physical manifestation of insecurity and low self esteem. You just know this faggot wants to ban voice chat because his

⁶ A furry is a member of a subculture and fandom concerned with anthropomorphic animal characters displaying human characteristics and personalities. The furry fandom is often represented negatively across media as misconceptions persist such as “Furries think they are animals,” “Being a furry is a fetish,” and “Furries are delusional and dysfunctional.” For scholarship, see the work of Roberts, Plante, Gerbasi, and Reysen (2015), Satinsky & Green (2016), and Plante, Reysen, Roberts, and Gerbasi (2017).
shitty tranny voice sounds like a fag trying to pretend to be a woman and failing at it”; “Another mentally ill power hungry freak”; “Here’s your token tranny creature making decisions on the largest vidya streaming platform, bro”; “this is why I don’t care when you trannies get the shit kicked out of you.” On stream, Steph spoke of being frustrated, tired, and of being doxed and receiving death threats. Across Twitch, Reddit, Twitter, and 4chan (see Figure 22) people took to misgendering and making unsubstantiated claims because one person shared an opinion about video games.

Figure 22. Comment from 4chan.

The rhetoric of aggression and harassment followed several themes and patterns. Throughout the comments, people claimed trans individuals were mentally ill. Critique of voice chat was shaped as a reflection of limited knowledge and experience (“real gamers” versus casual). Everything Steph said was instantly discredited because she was “deer girl” (someone so “absurd” could have nothing beneficial to say about gaming). She had nothing of value to offer the Twitch council because her channel community was deemed too small (and thus, unsuccessful). In turn, people characterized the hate targeting Steph as the frustrations of those who knew she was not fit, not professional enough, to serve on Twitch’s council. And for some, perhaps many, everything about her was fair to attack for the sake of being “right” and winning an argument. Misinformation ran rampant through the harassment, and one example in particular
encapsulates this willingness to disseminate inaccurate information. The “Twitch staff advocating for voice chat removal from games for giving unfair advantage” clip mentioned earlier refers to Steph as Twitch staff, implying she is employed by Twitch and represents their views as a platform. Early on, some tried to frame their disgust of Steph as a concern for Twitch’s future and gaming culture. They failed to note that Twitch’s council announcement labeled council members as “advisors” and never referred to members as Twitch staff. It also makes little sense that Steph, a streamer, would have influence over game developers—the ones with actual power over game mechanics like voice chat. Steph took time to clarify her opinion on voice chat and discuss the issue with people multiple times over the course of the following weeks and months. She took to Twitter and paused what she was doing on stream to engage with viewers on Twitch. Her attempts on Twitter were met with comments such as “You made your audience an enemy...I mean what did you think would happen? I'm sorry, but this is 100% your fault.” Blame was quickly laid on Steph and excuses made for people posting transphobic, violent, and dismissive comments.

Instead of constructing good-faith arguments (where people engage with the facts and issues in a respectful manner as opposed to attacking individuals), people assigned blame and pummeled a streamer with threats, violent images, and persistent questions. They chose to escalate their abuse based, in part, on out of context clips. The events described here are parts of a harassment campaign, the effect of which can be seen months later. It takes effort to edit and post images and videos depicting maimed and dead animals, guns, and other threats of violence. Typing threats and asking wildly inappropriate questions about a person’s body within minutes of a streamer going live shows that these individuals waited for the opportunity to harass. This
toxic behavior did not stop after a few days; it persisted. And in one instance, an individual posted a video on Twitter that cut off what Steph was saying to paint her as labeling all gamers as white supremacists. The video had thousands of views and showed Steph saying “gamers are actually white supremacists.” This video does not reflect her full statement (“I think a lot of you gamers are actually white supremacists”) nor does it convey the situation under which the statement was made (she was streaming at the time and under constant harassment from chat).

Across the Internet, people described Steph as stupid, out of control, mentally ill, a white hater, crazy, and power hungry. The level of vitriol and manipulation is incredibly telling of a subculture eager to silence dissenting voices.

The harm caused by such a harassment campaign should be apparent—not only was Steph targeted with horribly transphobic and violent content but others, including her Twitch community, were also exposed to that content. What purpose did circulating clips, memes, and posts serve? Looking to the “Deer” clip may help to illuminate the purpose of aggressors. Prior to the clips’ circulation, an angry mob was already forming—Steph was discussed as a person capable of taking away voice chat from gamers and influencing other game mechanics. She was a supposed threat to gamers who valued those mechanics/features and a threat to gaming in general because of her views regarding inclusion and diversity. Clipping content that could be twisted to make Steph look like a “freak” and expose her for being a furry allowed aggressors to further distance themselves from the fake gamer girl they saw Steph to be (if they viewed her to be a woman at all). The “Deer” clip established a series of relationships. When “chrisbee42” created the “Deer” clip, they created a relationship between themself and Steph, between themself and Steph’s Twitch community, between themself and aggressors. “chrisbee42” sought
out content from a previous stream that could be considered damning for Steph in a moment when she was already facing a barrage of hate. The clip also served as clout and established “chrisbee42” on a particular “side” of the discourse. After all, when creating a clip, the user’s “Twitch ID is at the top of every Clip [they] make, so [they will] always get credit for being the first to spot something great” (“Announcing Clips, 2016”). Similarly, those aggressors who circulated “Deer” and similar clips created relationships between the parties involved. The circulation of these clips also sent messages about who constituted as a “gamer,” who was allowed to have a voice in gaming spaces, and the seriousness by which discussions of inclusion would be considered. The act of circulating such content in the midst of a harassment campaign is also an exercise of power, an act which promoted further targeting of Steph (the “Deer” clip was viewed more than a million times and surely influenced others to clip similar moments in Steph’s live streams for clout). Aggressors sought to publicly mock, shame, and silence Steph, and the cycle of harassment persisted. Circulating and recirculating clips drew a line between aggressors and Steph (and others who did not fit neatly into stereotyped expectations of “gamers”).

Twitch’s Clips feature is meant to assist streamers in spreading their content to ever widening audiences. But the harassment campaign shows what can happen when the feature is used to mock, discredit, and dehumanize. Because of the clips made of Steph’s streams, her content, voice, and interaction with her community was taken out of context and reshaped according to the purposes of others with ill intent. Clips, limited in length, are easily digestible bits of content. While the idea behind Clips is to provide entertainment and support channel growth, the affordance requires streamers to give up some control over their content. Streamers
have the ability to look through all the clips made from their streams, and they can even delete them, but moderating clips takes time (especially during a harassment campaign where numerous clips could be made in a short span of time) and can only be done after a clip has already been published (unless the streamer disables clips for their channel). While it is true that anyone can record a stream or take a screenshot on their own using any number of tools outside of Twitch’s affordances, the feature makes the process of capturing live streamed moments easy. The affordance’s ease of access, quick shareability, and the drama surrounding Steph and the Safety Advisory Council ensured that clips would make excellent click bait for clout-chasers. Because of Clips, content on YouTube, Twitter, Reddit, and 4chan received millions of views. A single platform affordance drove a harassment campaign overnight, ensuring that Steph would be depicted as mentally ill, a freak, and “all that is wrong” with the SJWs who have “infiltrated” gaming.

Fighting the Torrent

FerociouslySteph’s Resistance and Response

With the growing backlash against the Safety Advisory Council and increasingly vitriolic harassment targeting Steph, Steph could have chosen to take a break from social media and from live streaming. However, instead of being silenced, she used her Twitter account and Twitch channel to offer clarity on her position and defend herself against persistent mischaracterization. Both the aggression/harassment and Steph’s responses continued in the days, weeks, and even months that followed May 14, 2020. From the beginning, Steph demonstrated a willingness to engage in dialogue, even with her aggressors7. This willingness to speak ‘with aggressors fits

7 Some individuals (aggressors, prominent streamers, and journalists) have claimed FerociouslySteph was essentially “poking the bear” with her comments or that her arguments were poorly worded—I am not here to
within her moderation approach of “giving second chances” (“Twitch.tv,” 2017). Although she took the time to reiterate her points and take questions from viewers, the aggression and harassment persisted. And each stream provided further content for aggressors to clip and use out of context.

During the stream on May 14th titled “Stressy day! Perfect for a short hike~,” Steph and her regular community of viewers were met with a flood of new engagement on the channel in the form of thousands of additional viewers and their comments in chat. The drastic increase of viewers quickly became overwhelming; Steph commented, “We’re going to need more mods” and multiple viewers commented on the speed and density of chat; one community member said “chat is moving so fast I am starting ot [sic] have issues reading it.” The increase in messages meant more work for everyone—Steph, moderators, and viewers—attempting to actively read and monitor the chat. Originally, Steph intended to play A Short Hike, but it became evident from the start of the stream that the majority of viewers were tuned in to the channel to question, debate, and berate Steph. When it appeared people in chat were more interested in continuing the voice chat conversation, Steph said, “I’m just going to do my best to answer questions in chat right now. It looks like we probably won’t get to A Short Hike.” She chose to shift the focus of the stream rather than push ahead with planned gameplay or end the stream when it was obvious most viewers were not interested in the game. This willingness to engage is similar to the openness discussed in Chapter 3’s case studies where Amber’s chat was open for everyone but where Amber was prepared to banter and otherwise engage with viewers even if they sought to discuss the design or effectiveness of her arguments (such discussion at the time did little more than put onus on the targeted rather than aggressors). It should go without saying that Steph would likely have been hounded by aggressors regardless of the shape of her arguments because she represents a marginalized voice speaking about gaming.
harass her. Both streamers interacted with aggressors, sometimes challenging or berating them, but their behavior was more agonistic than antagonistic. Steph took time to relate the day’s earlier events to the chat, including mentioning how another streamer publicly disagreed with her and seemed more interested in winning an argument than engaging on the issue of voice chat and inclusivity. She explained her stance on voice chat throughout the stream, explaining:

I’m not saying people can’t use voice chat in their pre-mades and in their competitive lobbies. I’m saying I want, I want the pro super awesome marginalized gamer to be able to reach the top of the competitive ladder and prove themselves without having to deal with sexism. Without having to deal with the discrimination that holds them back that makes it harder for them to succeed.

Explanations like the one above were immediately met with questions and mockery. Questions like “do you think disabling voice chat will result in anything positive?” and “Why not ban the harassers rather than banning all voice chat?” were posed. While some of the questions seemed to legitimately question Steph and her opinions, some were masking deep bias and an unwillingness to engage in constructive discussion. Questions like “is that a dude?” were transphobic; comments like “just don’t be shit at the game and we gucci” reflected the “get good” attitude of gamers⁸, and remarks like “So are you saying I should be able win an Olympic sport despite being over weight ? Should the best in the world be stunted because they’re better??” demonstrated a lack of understanding of the topic and the nuance of Steph’s argument.

Initially, Steph behaved in a manner that closely follows the “be civil and take the time to educate others” mantra for online discourse. That approach did not and could not have worked in this context because she was addressing aggressors in the midst of a harassment campaign. An approach of politeness and education is dependent on good faith efforts of all parties involved (or

⁸ “Get good” or “get gud” is used to mock and heckle new players.
an insistence that the targeted sacrifice their wellbeing and sanity at all costs to remain the
“better person”). Steph adjusted the content of her stream, was open to questions, actively read
and engaged with chat, and explained her perspective. None of that ended the harassment in chat
or made her harassers any kinder. As the stream went on, Steph became visibly frustrated. She
spoke of being distracted by messages in chat and called out the increasing transphobia several
times. New viewers, some of whom referenced coming over from /LivestreamFails, were
unrelenting in their comments and unwilling to have a conversation. Did Steph owe harassers her
personal time and the energy required to educate? She kept her channel and chat open,
continuing to talk to aggressors and her community for over three hours on May 14th and nearly
another three on May 15th. Each time she streamed in May, Steph was met with the same
questions and dismissive comments belittling her experiences and the experiences of many
marginalized gamers (see Figure 23). Politeness, calmness, and education cannot always mitigate
aggression and harassment. Politeness cannot stop waves of harassment and certainly not
harassment spreading across multiple platforms. And even current moderation tools on the
platform are limited in their usefulness within the context of a harassment campaign. In addition
to a consideration of polite engagement and use of platform-provided moderation tools, I think it
is also worth mentioning that unruly rhetoric would probably not have served Steph well either.
Any sarcastic, biting, or mocking comments would have provided aggressors with more content
to clip and circulate. When examining the effectiveness and usefulness of unruly responses,
scholars might consider time and place/space in addition to ethics. Without higher-level platform
intervention, Steph could only be expected to manage the influx of viewers so well.
During these streams, Steph moderated the chat but did not stifle people’s voices simply for disagreeing with her. Comments that were transphobic, hateful, and disruptive were deleted from chat and the users either timed out or banned. Moderators were present during these streams, but it is doubtful they were prepared for the significant influx of viewers and comments initially. Steph’s earlier comment of “We’re going to need more mods” may suggest she did not anticipate the extent of harassment following her to Twitch from Reddit, Twitter, and other people’s streams. It could also suggest she did not have enough mods available at that time. Many of the moderation tools provided by Twitch address aggression and harassment after it has occurred. Due to the surge in viewership, the workload for both Steph and her moderators
increased. On Twitch, moderation does not follow a top down model where the platform is the main step in moderating content. Instead, live streamers are responsible for their individual channels and their communities. In Steph’s situation, she and her mods were vastly outnumbered. Chat tools like followers-only mode and a chat delay would help with the speed of chat and who could participate, but limiting voices did not seem to fit with Steph’s approach to moderation. Her rules encourage kindness and respect while discouraging spam and the use of specific emotes. She does not blatantly discourage talking about politics, religion, or controversial topics in the channel rules, and in the streams I watched before the harassment campaign, Steph appeared to be open to discussing a wide range of topics while regularly engaging with viewers. Shutting down discourse in chat is not a regular or defining element of the stream. In fact, while her willingness to engage in dialogue did little to persuade most aggressors, some people wrote in the chat about listening and discovering they actually agreed with her, finding that she was not “crazy” like others had said elsewhere on social media.

Regardless of anyone’s perception of Steph, Steph was in a complex situation during the streams on May 14th and 15th. Not only was she streaming live but also dealing with a harassment campaign primarily fueled by her own repurposed and recirculated content in the form of clips. Both days, her channel was host to thousands of new people, many of whom sought to argue and capture more clips for clickbait. In the midst of transphobic, argumentative, and dismissive remarks, Steph continued to engage with viewers instead of being silenced. She spoke of the physical and mental effects of the harassment while continuing to push back against messages like “just mute voice chat.” Despite the hours Steph put into defending herself and her argument against aggressors, she could not prevent harassers from using her words and
frustration against her. I cannot say that her resistance to the onslaught was pointless because I do believe there is value in standing against online aggression and harassment—that is a major goal of this project. However, a cross-platform harassment campaign targeting an individual streamer is different from the daily acts of aggression faced by many on Twitch. Issues of circulation—scale, time, and speed—factor in the effectiveness and limitations of unruly rhetoric as resistance. As mentioned previously, if Steph had put energy into mocking and name calling her aggressors, they would have been given even more fodder for their campaign. There is also the question of how a person could sustain calling out and roasting their aggressors when thousands of new people are visiting their channel and hundreds of messages are flowing through chat. When Coral or Jade verbally called out aggression, they were dealing with smaller waves of unwanted behavior—they were not dealing with a rising tide. Similarly, Amber’s approach of openness and not immediately banning people works best on a smaller scale. And Ruby’s channel, built on a strong sense of community and transparent rule-setting and moderation, works for her, but would it hold strong in the midst of a harassment campaign? Steph’s community did attempt to assist her, posting supportive messages, calling out transphobia, and attempting to engage with aggressors. But their numbers were so few in comparison to the new viewers that their messages were often only visible in chat for seconds.

Conclusion

Several parallels can be drawn between the harassment campaign recounted in this chapter and #Gamergate. #Gamergate, a harassment campaign targeting games journalists and critics, was organized around a hashtag, and its messages hid sexist intentions behind the notion that games journalism lacked ethics. Similarly, the online aggression targeting Steph was assisted
by a platform affordance—the Clips feature on Twitch—and consisted of many transphobic and hateful messages masked by cries for a more professional member of the Safety Advisory Council. Little has changed in gaming culture and gaming-adjacent spaces since #Gamergate. Adrienne Massanari (2015) called for an understanding of “the ways in which toxic technocultures develop, are sustained, and exploit platform design” (p. 342). Answering that call is as vital today as it was immediately following #Gamergate. The outcry resulting from a trans individual participating in public discourse about gaming speaks to the divides among players and the urgency with which we should consider the elements that construct “gamer” culture.

Platform affordances play a significant role in the shaping of content produced, repurposed, and circulated online. Those who create, maintain, and manage platforms need to fully consider and monitor the use of the tools they construct. Many of the messages across Twitter, Twitch, and Reddit violated the policies of those platforms. Twitch clips allowed aggressors specific points of attack and out of context content to circulate. These clips aided in building up the narrative that Steph was incapable of professionally functioning on the council, that she was mentally unstable, and was out to ruin games. Clips allowed people to deflect attention from their own malicious behavior by directing attention to drama, controversy, and clickbait. And by connecting clipped content to discussions of the council, aggressors drew boundaries through their discourse between who belonged in gaming and who did not. The harassment may have been leaderless (in that it was not led by a few individuals), but clips gave aggressors content to organize around to share their hateful views and loudly profess anxiety over perceived threats to their spaces and access to various features in gaming.
Steph’s options for fighting back against the clips were limited. At the time, streamers only had the option to disable the Clips feature on their channel (in August of 2020, Twitch added the ability for streamers to put the feature into Followers-only or Subscriber-only mode). Disabling Clips limits the streamer and their community from sharing “Best of Moments” and other bits of content, limiting that channel’s outreach to current and new audiences. If a streamer turns off Clips, they are missing out on opportunities to share their voice/content and disabling an avenue for their community to capture and share entertaining moments with others. Clips are a popular affordance on the platform and a useful tool to support channel growth. Steph could have limited the feature or disabled it once viewers began clipping her content for purposes of harassment, but she appeared to leave Clips enabled, though she seemed to delete the majority of her channel’s clips sometime after May 2020. I cannot say why Steph did not disable the feature during the harassment campaign. It may be that, during such a stressful and anxiety-inducing time, she did not consider it or want to deal with sifting through clips. Or perhaps she did not think clipped content would be weaponized against her. Beyond enabling, disabling, and limiting Clips to followers and/or subscribers, streamers’ only other option for managing clips is to moderate them. Streamers may delete clips, which removes them from their channel, but they cannot prevent viewers from going back through channel VODs to clip the same content again without disabling the feature.

While the harassment campaign targeting Steph was ongoing, Twitch made minimal efforts to address the situation, at least publicly. Emmett Shear, CEO of Twitch, Tweeted on May 19th linking to an update about the council on the platform’s blog. In the post, titled “A Note from Emmett about the Safety Advisory Council,” Shear clarified the purpose of the
council—“to advise, offer perspective, and participate in discussion with...internal teams” (“A Note,” 2020). He emphasized that council members are simply advisors and not employed by Twitch. The statement also distanced itself from council members opinions and views:

> We made an intentional choice to recruit advisors with strong independent opinions and the courage to challenge our thinking. Our goal is to hear a wide range of points of view informed by truly different people within Twitch and outside Twitch. Because a position on the council is not a test of ideology or an endorsement by Twitch on a specific viewpoint, we expect that members of the council will sometimes have very different viewpoints from each other, from Twitch staff members, or from the official Twitch policy...While we value their opinions and their right to share them, they are independent actors who will have opinions that aren’t shared either by Twitch, Twitch employees, or even by other members of the council.

Shear also briefly acknowledged the harassment targeting Steph without mentioning her name:

> Harassment directed at council members or anyone at or on Twitch only underscores the importance of the council. We do not condone bullying or harassment of any kind and will continue to take action against accounts who engage in that behavior.

While a statement from Twitch’s CEO is a welcome gesture, it follows a pattern of corporate behavior where companies acknowledge concerns when it is convenient for them to do so or they are pressured into a response. Twitch has gotten better at making public statements and acknowledging social issues, but their words rarely appear to be more than virtue signaling (those behind the platform appeared to do nothing concrete that would address the harassment campaign against Steph). Should Twitch have anticipated issues pertaining to their newly announced council? Absolutely. But Twitch, like many tech companies, has a problem with transparency and accountability. As covered in Brendan Sinclair’s (2020) extensive article for gamesindustry.biz, the platform has been shaped by “a culture of indifference” from the beginning. Allegations of sexual abuse, racism, sexism, and harassment have been lodged against the company, with one person interviewed for Sinclair’s article saying “‘It was a boys’ club,’”
and “‘There was a definite bias, a definite sense that females and males were different, and females weren't given the same opportunities. They were prey.’” Beyond the cultural and systemic issues revealed in the article, Sinclair also spoke about the platform’s approach to moderation. In short, they did not have a plan. From the beginning of Twitch, moderation was an afterthought, with the company relying on volunteer moderators and only taking moderation more seriously once bigger companies, such as Sony and Microsoft, took an interest in integrating Twitch into their consoles. According to one employee quoted in the article, “‘Both Xbox and PlayStation were very concerned” about the platform’s approach to moderation. Because of this concern, Twitch then hired some of their volunteer moderators to form a moderation team. This look into the platform’s culture and history of moderation is, unfortunately, not surprising. Twitch’s actions throughout the years, what they have chosen to speak about, and when to remain silent was telling of a company with inconsistent practices, hands off moderation, and internal abuse. I worry that the council is little more than a performance (empty rhetoric) on Twitch’s part, a statement that Twitch cares about the opinions of their users and will consider their feedback. They have called for the community to hold them accountable before, and little visibly changed. At the time of writing, neither Shear nor Twitch’s media accounts appear to have mentioned the Safety and Advisory Council again publicly.

There is no single answer for how to deal with cross-platform aggression. Cross-platform aggression moves rapidly and can change direction at any time, shifting narratives and manipulating reality. This is what occurred when people on the Internet decided to target Steph. Should companies take responsibility for the content produced on their platforms? Should moderation primarily be the burden of content creators and their communities? While the
moderation tools Twitch provides its streamers are valuable, useful, and impressive compared to other platforms, moderation should not end with users. Perhaps it should not begin with users either. Ultimately, individuals can only do so much when structural change is needed, such as updated laws and ethical technology and affordances. Individual well-meaning behavior can quickly fall apart if institutions do nothing. Online platforms have shirked responsibility long enough. Moderation is inescapable given the constant toxicity found across the Internet, and concerns of platform use, the potential for affordance abuse, and issues of moderation should be an integral part of platform design. However, platforms like Twitch were not designed with moderation as a key component. The moderation tools and functionalities—even Twitch’s own moderators on staff—were added after the fact. Given this context, what can we do? What is our role as digital citizens?

Part of the answer can be found in Steph’s community and the actions taken by streamers like Amber, Coral, Jade, and Ruby. During the harassment campaign, Steph’s community held firm, moving beyond their role of audience to rhetors resisting hate. Amidst the near-constant hate posted in chat were messages of support. Community members expressed their love and concern for Steph and, at times, attempted to defend her and ward off the masses of new viewers. As viewers, they were limited in how they could function in chat. They could not directly moderate the space, but their cheerful voices and heart-filled emotes split the text walls of hate. These viewers spoke up and spoke out at a time when their voices were needed. There was a risk in this though. Community members and general viewers were exposed to the hateful and disgusting messages posted in chat and could have had that hate redirected at them, but they also resisted the aggression and responded. General viewers were at an advantage—their anonymity
protected them, whereas Steph’s public-facing persona meant she was in a more vulnerable position. They could speak from behind the relative safety of keyboards and monitors, and while their ability to moderate was limited by the affordances of chat, there was still power in their participation. Participation and how we choose to participate is going to be key in fighting online toxicity as the case studies in Chapter 3 show. Coral and Jade participate in ways that directly call-out and shame their aggressors, repurposing hate for entertainment while modeling acceptable and unacceptable behavior in their online spaces. Amber keeps the proverbial front door initially open to viewers, providing a place for discussion until viewers have crossed over lines of respect. Through clearly communicated expectations and a carefully cultivated community, Ruby is able to maintain order while hosting mature content and conversations. The ways these streamers and their communities resist and persist may not always be civil, they are quite often messy, but they have had to adapt in order to succeed in online spaces. And they are making their unruly rhetoric and unconventional moderation tactics work.

The harassment campaign targeting Steph was deplorable. Studying the events, recording the aggression, and presenting it here was uncomfortable and trying at times. What held my focus throughout this chapter and Chapter 3 were the glints of hope in the communities I was studying. I do not want people to view the targeted merely as victims. These are strong people who face acts of aggression and microaggression constantly as they work, play, and create online. They have to use their voices to resist the aggression and harassment so common on Twitch, and they do so in inspiring ways. At TwitchCon 2017, Steph ended her guest segment by saying

Twitch.tv is one of a kind in human history. For the first time ever, we have instant two way communication between broadcaster and audience globally. Twitch.tv encompasses
the entire world. That is unheard of. In past, communities were confined to local gatherings of humans in villages, towns, and cities. But now my voice reaches globally when I speak. Because of this, I think the Internet and communities like Twitch will be the birthplace of new society. I want to challenge influencers and broadcasters to imagine their perfect mini universe for their communities and bring that into existence because these small worlds we create are the backbones of new global connection and I challenge you to find out who you are, to find your true squishy self and let it be, let it shine, let it speak. Together moderators, broadcasters, and viewers can shape our culture into a happier one. And to those who meet hatred with hearts and go out of their way to make their content creators smile, I could not be here without you. You inspire me every day, and I fight for you.

Steph is right. Because of technology and platforms like Twitch, we are connected in incredible ways. So many voices can now be heard, and we can project those voices even further than before. The challenge is to shape the spaces we want to see, to take part and recognize our potential influence. Of course, this call for shaping online communities is nothing new. In The Virtual Community, Rheingold (1993) said, “we need to look closely at new technologies and ask how they can help build stronger, more humane communities—and ask how they might be obstacles to that goal.” Of course, the Internet of the 1990s was different in many ways, though some of the same issues persist. And while Rheingold’s vision for the future was centered, in part, on the familiar call for civility, I agree with the sentiment that “What happens next is largely up to us” (“Chapter Ten,” 1993). It is too easy to feel overwhelmed and powerless next to aggressors, institutions, and corporations. And too easy to think our words and actions do not have an impact. But we have voices to protest, and our resistance has an impact. We might do better to stand up like Steph’s community and model the unruly rhetoric of streamers like Coral and Jade.
I believe this dissertation shows a need to consider unruly rhetoric as an approach for resisting online aggression and harassment. Although my study is limited in scope to five case studies, it demonstrated the function of messier rhetorics when response is perhaps needed but civility and respect are not necessarily fitting, given the context of aggression and harassment in synchronous environments. Streamers are in a unique position on platforms like Twitch where aggressive messages occur during live streams and where everyone—streamers and viewers—is exposed to the aggressive content posted in chat. While the platform provides many tools for moderation, such as blocklists, bans, and timeouts, it is up to streamers to implement those tools, and those tools are not always sufficient, especially in the instance of a harassment campaign like the one discussed in Chapter 4.

I began this dissertation hoping to answer several questions, including “How might live streamers on Twitch respond to/resist aggression through platform-provided tools?” Chapter 3 discussed the various moderation tools Twitch provides its streamers, including channel rule notifications in chat, block lists, time-outs and bans for viewers, and AutoMod. Streamers also have access to third party tools, such as bots that can help regulate chat and post reminders to
viewers. Twitch’s documentation (guidelines) puts the onus for moderation on streamers and their communities. So while Twitch provides various moderation tools to streamers, those behind the platform have taken a step back from responsibly and ethically managing online aggression and harassment. Because moderation is primarily the burden of streamers, a variety of approaches and strategies are found on the platform, some of which are inconsistent. Within this online context, aggression, toxicity, and hate is abundant.

A second guiding question for my research was “What moderation strategies are being used and to what effect?” Each streamer discussed in this dissertation made use of platform-provided moderation tools. For example, Jade’s approach to moderation can be described as layered. She and her moderators regularly address aggressive behavior via references to the channel’s rules followed by enforcement of those rules through time-outs and bans. Each of the streamers crafted rules for their communities, used time-outs and bans with varying frequency, and generally had active moderators present during live streams. However, the streamers’ approaches and strategies for moderation did not end with platform-provided tools and moderators. In the channels of women, POC, and LGBTQIA+ people, aggression and harassment is frequent, and, because of this, some streamers have adopted unconventional strategies for moderation. To summarize, unruly moderative responses to aggression followed some similar patterns (see Table 1) throughout the case studies. The pattern can be defined by four stages: agitation, assessment, moderative action, and follow-up actions. Typically, an aggressive message would be posted in chat by an outsider to the channel’s community. That message would break the rules or norms established by the streamer. The streamer would make an assessment for how to respond, which may include not responding. This stage is not
necessarily a visible process and can include a range of factors including the content and severity of the message, the timing of the message (a singular instance or as part of a persistent string of

Table 11
Unruly Response Patterns as Observed in Case Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Progression of Unruly Moderation</strong></th>
<th><strong>Description of Progression</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agitation/Disruption Originating from Chat</td>
<td>Message/behavior originating from outside party (typically a viewer) may directly break channel rules or community norms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of Aggression and Possible Moderative Response&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Streamer makes an assessment for response. This may be based on any number of factors including origin of message (general viewer or familiar username), content of aggressive message, timing and context of message (whether the message is a “one off” or is part of a series of messages building and persisting in chat), streamer tolerance, reaction of community, whether moderators have already addressed the aggressive viewer, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderative Action Employed by Streamer</td>
<td>A. Streamer may employ “structured” moderation tools first (such as referring to the channel rules or temporarily timing out the viewer as a warning). If the aggressive behavior persists, the streamer then moderates through unruly response (jokes, roasts, mockery, shame, callouts, etc.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B. Streamer may immediately moderate aggressive behavior through unruly response (jokes, roasts, mockery, shame, callouts, etc.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up Actions by Streamer, Moderators, and/or Viewers</td>
<td>After the streamer moderates via unruly response, channel moderators and/or community members may be spurred to act with similar unruliness. The streamer may continue using unruly moderation techniques based on community response (this pattern seemed to follow humorous and otherwise entertaining unruliness).</td>
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<sup>1</sup> This category is based entirely on observations of the four case studies discussed in Chapter 3. Further analysis of broader samples and even interviews with streamers would be enlightening of this part of the process.
aggressive messages), the purpose of the day's stream, the channel's audience, whether moderators have already addressed the message, etc. If moderation occurs, the streamer may make use of platform-provided moderation tools, which could involve referencing the channel's rules as a warning, temporarily timing out the viewer, or banning the viewer from the channel. If the behavior persists, the streamer might then change tactics by implementing an unruly response. This could include joking, roasting, mocking, or otherwise calling out the viewer publicly. Alternatively, the streamer's first response might be an unruly one, bypassing platform-provided moderation options. After the streamer's unruly response, moderators and/or viewers may also participate by mimicking the streamer's response.

As the case studies showed, moderation is individualized and dependent on the streamer and their goals. Amber has created a space of openness and listening, where aggressors are given second chances but where time-outs and bans are still used as enforcement for aggressors refusing to change their behavior. Jade relies on a moderation team that consistently enforces her expectations for the community, but she employs directed callouts toward viewers who persist in breaking the channel’s rules. Her responses sometimes reveal frustration and other emotions in these moments, and her community of loyal viewers rally to support Jade and condemn aggressors. Ruby, while hosting a playful and bold community, maintains her channel through careful cultivation of a community well aware of her boundaries and rules. Serious and adult conversations occur somewhat frequently on the channel without devolving into arguments or insensitive discourse because of Ruby’s style of management. Coral turns the words of aggressors into entertainment for her community through humor and quick wit. She flips power away from aggressors who target her with racism and sexism and manages to make examples out
of them all while creating content for viewers. Shaming, mocking, roasting, and joking (among other strategies) were employed to enforce rules and directly call out hate. These unconventional moderation strategies served to resist hate, establish and reinforce boundaries, protect communities, and bolster the agency of streamers targeted by aggressors. Each streamer approached moderation differently and demonstrated that, while certain strategies and tactics of content moderation may be similar, it is largely an individualized practice in the channels observed. Streamers may have similar goals for managing their communities, but their strategies (general approaches) and tactics (particular actions, such as making use of platform-provided moderation tools and/or unruly responses) may vary greatly.

The humorous and searing responses of Coral and the frustrated callouts of Jade were especially unruly and reminiscent of the powerful examples of unruly rhetoric discussed throughout *Unruly Rhetorics: Protest, Persuasion, and Publics*. Unruly rhetoric can be strategic, designed to interrupt and expose systems of power, political debate, and the silencing of the disenfranchised. As part of the collection, scholars discuss resistance of and through bodies (Cloud, D. L., 2018; Anderson, J. R., 2018), the ways civility has been employed to silence the unruly (Welch, N., 2018; Mahoney, K., 2018; Rodríguez, Y. & Kuebrich, B., 2018), and resistance that is creative and playful (Martin, L. T. & Licona, A. C., 2018). What their examples, and those presented in this dissertation, show is that rhetorical resistance can be playful, inventive, spontaneous, and messy, and such unruliness is necessary, and often tied to the political (unruly rhetoric tends to originate in contexts fraught with inequality and disagreement).
Of course unruly rhetoric may be challenging for some to accept and employ because of Western ideals of civility and politeness. The idea that civility is tied to civilization, citizenship, and the “greater good” can be traced back to the likes of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. For example, Enos and Schnakenberg (1994) describe Cicero’s approach to dignitas as reflective of a concern for society, culture, and community (p. 201). Notions of citizenship, virtue, and rhetoric that serves the public is seen within more contemporary voices in rhetoric and composition as well. For example, Enos (2003) discusses spacious rhetoric as a way to slow down communication that will result in reflective and community-focused writing (p. 151). And Enoch (2019) speaks of inquiry-based writing where “students learn to hesitate, think, reflect, and listen before forming their positions” (p. 111-112). These approaches hinge on rhetors having the time and space to reach a common place of equality and respect. While the ideas of these scholars have great value, they are challenging to employ effectively in online discourse where trolls, aggressors, and haters are more concerned with dehumanizing their targets than meeting in a place of respect. And too often, the loudest calls for politeness and civility online come from privileged individuals avoiding accountability or unbothered by systems of oppression. Tone policing and other microaggressions are often masked behind civility, as the work of Nuru and Arendt (2019) show. The vocal and passionate resistance of women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ people clashes with expectations of “polite discourse,” while exposing such discourse for what it is—the policing of marginalized voices and bodies. But calls for civility are not always so blatant as to demand the silencing of unruly voices. Calls for understanding may be more subtle but are similarly problematic in that they require those targeted to take on the burden of educating
aggressors. Expecting the targeted to kindly address their aggressors and to educate them is a demand of time, energy, and emotion.

While Western society persists in calling for civility, such calls often function to silence the voices, experiences, and expressions of the disenfranchised. In a perfect world, civility and respect may well be ideals to aim for, but we live in a world fraught with inequity. In order to better understand unruly responses, more scholarship is needed.

Considerations for Researchers

When faced with aggression and hate, unruly responses can be powerful and effective, particularly for those frequently targeted by aggressors. In Chapter 3, I mentioned the potential of unruly rhetoric in online synchronous environments, but the topic of this dissertation is incredibly relevant beyond spaces like Twitch. In this current political moment, “fake news” has taken root, science is readily dismissed (even during a global pandemic), and threats against Black and Asian bodies are a daily occurrence. I write this in a year when dozens upon dozens of anti-trans bills have been introduced in state legislation, bills that threaten lives like my own. It would be a grave understatement to say, “tensions are high,” and yet many Americans continue to dismiss confrontation in favor of “the greater good,” in favor of “politeness” and silence while condemning dissent, protest, and other forms of unruly expression. In this climate, academics should consider, both on the individual level and institutional, the kinds of responses available and how unruliness may empower those targeted by oppressive forces. What follows are some considerations for studying and engaging with unruly rhetoric.

Understanding the Unruly

Scholars should view unruly and messy rhetorics as essential responses to failure—the
failure to listen, the failure of society, the failure of those in power, the failure of humans. In contexts where kindness (i.e. civility, education, and calls for understanding) is used to dismiss people’s concerns and reinforce oppressive systems, unruliness is bound to occur. While I do not find it useful to determine any particular model of best practices or approaches, I will note that the unruly rhetoric discussed in Chapter 3 involved similar characteristics and patterns that may apply to contexts beyond Twitch (see Table 12).

Table 12

Characteristics of Unruly Rhetoric:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inventive</strong></td>
<td>Streamers had to work within the affordances and constraints of the platform. The moderation tools provided by the platform were limited, and so unruly moderation responses were invented to compliment platform affordances or to operate outside of the affordances entirely. Individual responses included playful banter, jokes, callouts, mockery, and shame.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual</strong></td>
<td>Unruly moderation reflected the goals, moderation strategies, tolerance, and personalities of individual streamers. Unruly responses were often full of the streamers’ flair/character/personality. For example, Coral’s approach to moderation was often based in comedy and entertainment while Jade’s approach reflected a more deadpan delivery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Situational</strong></td>
<td>Elements such as, but not limited to, platform affordances and constraints, audience, purpose of stream, time, and streamer were all factors influencing responses and may determine a response’s effectiveness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the case studies discussed in Chapter 3, unruly rhetoric could be characterized as inventive, individual, and situational. Each streamer was operating on the same platform, Twitch, facing constraints that limit the range of moderative responses. Streamers like Coral, Jade, Ruby, and Amber invented their own ways of responding to aggression, sometimes complimenting platform-provided moderation tools and sometimes working beyond or outside of those same tools. Jokes, banter, and mockery are examples of the kinds of unruly responses not officially aided or endorsed by any of Twitch’s moderation tools or features. Unruly responses were individual and unique to the streamer employing them. For example, a joking comment from Jade was different, both in tone and delivery, from a joke Coral delivered in response to aggression. Unruly responses were also situational, employed in contexts effected by aggressors and their messages, audience, time, purpose of stream, etc.

Unruly rhetoric may be at its most effective when it is not prescribed and is invented out of situations requiring immediate response (situations that provide little space or time to reflect). After all, as Welch (2018) reminds us, “[a] tactic that reads and works well in one set of circumstances may not work in another” (p. 305). However, it is still worth asking questions such as “What will an unruly response achieve?” “Who will the response reach?” “Will the response be recirculated?” and “Where might responses be circulated and to what effect?” These questions may seem at odds with the synchronous environments (that bring with them a sense of urgency) discussed throughout this dissertation, but streamers like Coral are clearly aware of the impact of their moderation decisions, even in moments where they banter with aggressors. Whatever the response and wherever it may occur, unruliness must be understood within its
given context. Otherwise, the unruly response would be stripped of the unique circumstances that elicit it.

**Civility and Resistance**

Interrogating terms like *civility* and *politeness* should be one of the first considerations of researchers looking to examining unruly rhetoric and forms of resistance. Throughout the dissertation process, I have had many conversations with people (academic and otherwise) about my work and the striking effectiveness of the unruly on Twitch and other platforms. And despite carefully contextualizing how the unruly can serve to expose inequity and forms of aggression, I have been met with responses such as “Well, couldn’t they [the streamer] have considered this [kinder, more polite, non-expletive-filled] response?” So many people are deeply uncomfortable with the breaking of civility, and this needs to be critically questioned and examined if we are to embrace the unruly as a necessary rhetorical response in contexts where kindness and politeness fail us. *Control, silence,* and *civility* simply do not work in the world we are living in; we need to reconsider the value of emotional and raw reactions, which are often messy and confrontational. We need to grapple with any discomfort, pull it apart, and ask ourselves what that reaction is really masking (e.g. unrealistic ideals, tone-policing, a fear of conflict, sexism, racism, etc.). Our initial reactions may be to bristle at expletives and anger, but understanding the contexts of such utterances may further our understanding of the public pain, frustration, and sadness of those targeted.

**Sites/Instances of Unruliness**

Resistance and unruliness can readily be found across the Internet. For scholars interested in examining unruly and messy rhetorics on social media platforms, I suggest turning to sites like
TikTok, Twitch, and Reddit because of their popularity, communities, and variety of content. TikTok, in particular, is host to frequent (and sometimes unexpected) messy encounters. The platform quickly found popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic and is known for a slew of entertaining content. But it is also a place where young people have called out and dismissed older generations, where the disenfranchised have spoken and found community, and where people from all backgrounds have challenged their peers’ political, social, and religious perspectives and beliefs. Beyond newer platforms like TikTok, scholars might also consider reengaging with platforms like Reddit through a lens of unruliness. Subreddits like r/AmItheAsshole come to mind as they have developed their own standards for civility while also inviting content that is intentionally uncivil, charged, and sometimes upsetting. Most platforms that engage wide audiences are likely to find disagreement, clashing ideals, and messy rhetorical expressions. Unruliness is not limited to any particular area of the Internet, and with further awareness of unruly rhetorical practices, we are likely to recognize resistance more widely.

**Platform Moderation**

The unruliness discussed in Chapter 3 centers on live streamers who have implemented creative strategies for moderating online aggression. Their strategies sometimes compliment the moderation tools already in place on Twitch, but some of the strategies work beyond the tools provided by the platform. For example, a streamer could implement a bot or block list to restrict certain terms from being posted in chat (this would be a preventive measure). But no matter how many terms or spelling variations (e.g. cock, c0cl, kok) are entered into the block list, aggressors can always find ways to slip past. In such a case, the streamer might give the aggressor a spoken
warning, the moderators might write a warning in the chat or call up the channel rules, or the
streamer (or their mods) may manually time-out or ban the aggressor. As with many platforms,
moderative action must take place after the preventative measure(s) has failed. To take this
further, those behind Twitch lay the responsibility for moderation on streamers and their
communities. It is within this context where we see unruly moderation taking place.

The unruliness of callouts, jokes, and mockery are in response to limited technological
systems and the powers at be that have allowed continued abuse and aggression on Twitch. I
believe unruly rhetoric can be an effective moderative response on platforms like Twitch because
it is often unexpected, shocking in its ability to clap back at aggressors and strip their power.
Unruly moderative responses sometimes flip the script on aggressors, especially when streamers
use rhetorical maneuvers, such as shame and mockery, to callout aggression. We might expect
mockery and jokes to be the rhetorical devices of the aggressor, but they can also be used for
purposes of resistance when in the hands of community leaders and content creators. And when
that unruly moderation is full of the streamer’s style and wit, it becomes powerful entertainment
for the communities that witness it, encouraging them to react similarly to trolls and haters.
Unruly rhetoric boldly challenges, questions, and calls out hateful and dehumanizing messages,
and its effectiveness and impact as content moderation deserves further study.

Participation

Finally, I believe digital rhetoricians should consider using their knowledge and privilege
to support unruly efforts and, perhaps, participate in said unruliness. I agree with scholars like
Condis (2020) who “suggest[s] that academics practice writing in modes other than those we are
used to. We need to create our own memes and make our own games…” (p. 153). It is not
enough to study the resistance of others—we might consider taking part in the resistance. If uncomfortable with personally employing messy rhetorics, the least we can do is actively support unruliness by liking, sharing, and talking about the messy rhetorics that challenge us. Whether we frequent social media like Twitter or watch live streams on Twitch, we have an obligation to react to hate. As with implementing unruly rhetoric, how we choose to respond will differ based on the context we are operating in, our goals, and our audience. And who responds and when will also depend on the situation—I certainly do not want to suggest that everyone should respond 100% of the time (not all of us have the privilege to respond while maintaining personal safety). In fact, responding 100% of the time would not be effective, as the harassment campaign discussed in Chapter 4 showed. As much as I believe it is important to consider when to respond, we might be just as critical of the instances and moments where a lack of public response would be best. At times, offering valid criticism of toxicity and hateful discourse may serve to amplify those messages and could potentially open the targeted up to further harassment. But if we choose to respond to messages that aim to dehumanize, we might consider the power of the messy, unruly, and disruptive.

Model for First-Year Composition

In speaking of the work presented in *Unruly Rhetorics*, Alexander and Jarratt (2018) state that “any attempt to formalize or regularize the unruly as we present it would do an injustice to the spontaneity, creativity, and local specificity of such outbreaks. Indeed, the idea of teaching unruliness seems like the opposite of unruly” (p. 21). To teach or train people in unruliness is to rob unruly rhetoric of its immediacy, which is a significant factor in its power and effectiveness. But in the collection’s “Afterword,” Welch (2018) asks “What responsibilities do we bear in
rhetorical teaching to introduce students to a fuller range of choices and a contextually sensitive, politically efficacious ethics of decision-making about them?” (p. 303). While I agree with Alexander and Jarratt that unruly responses should not necessarily be taught, or otherwise formalized, I believe there is value for scholars, students, and the average digital citizen to examine instances of resistance and unruliness in response to oppression and aggression. How to equip students with additional rhetorical options and to engage them in conversations of resistance and unruliness is what I attempt to address here, though my attempt is nowhere near comprehensive.

Within the context of First-Year Composition classes, I can envision an approach (see Table 13) to discussing and engaging with resistance that centers on social media platforms, though other sites and contexts would be just as rich for analysis (such as protests and news coverage). Many instructors and students are already familiar with performing rhetorical and visual analysis of a variety of texts, and expanding current conversations, approaches, and assignments to include messages of resistance appearing on social media seems manageable. Working with online resistance would also include careful consideration of platforms and their affordances and constraints.

I would begin with the goal of understanding standards for communication in online environments. First, we would cover digital rhetoric and discuss online aggression, and then I would survey my classes about their social media use (what platforms they frequent), and then discuss norms for communication on those platforms in order to understand expectations for discourse and what platform affordances and restrictions impact said discourse. For example, I have talked with students before about the differences between posting content on Twitter versus
Table 13

Overview: Rhetorical Resistance Unit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Pedagogic Goals</strong></th>
<th><strong>In-class Discussion and Activities</strong></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gain understanding of communication in dynamic online contexts</td>
<td>Discuss online writing and digital aggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Analyze conventions for online discourse (highlight differences between platforms and communities)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyze digital forms of resistance</td>
<td>Discuss societal expectations of discourse and civility, including the use of “politeness” as a rhetorical move to silence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discuss how rhetors resist calls for civility and break societal expectations when practicing unruly and messy rhetorics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Analyze examples (such as “OK boomer” TikTok videos, Pussyhats, and BLM protest signs) to define, understand, and categorize resistant and unruly responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice digital text production in the context of social media platforms</td>
<td>Reflect on and discuss students’ own experiences with systems of oppression (direct and/or witnessed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examine strategies and tactics for responding to oppression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Compose digital messages appropriate for student-selected social media platform(s)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reddit, which allowed us to examine content restrictions, the ways users interact with content (liking, retweeting, up voting or down voting, etc.), and the enforcement of platform policies.

Once the class had a foundation for understanding platform affordances, constraints, and expectations for discourse on social media, we could begin to more deeply interrogate what informs societal expectations for communication, civility, and politeness. This would lead us to the discussion of “civility” as a rhetorical means to silence and restrict and how calls for manners, education, and understanding are often used against the disenfranchised. From there, we would be equipped to critically analyze instances of resistance and unconventional response.
I would start with an easy to understand example of unruly rhetoric, such as the catchphrase/meme “OK boomer.” “OK boomer” has origins on 4chan but became popular in 2019 due to TikTok (Romano, 2019). The phrase, used by millennials and Gen Z, is intentionally dismissive and aims to mock and tersely indicate frustration at baby boomers. Because of the meme’s popularity and wide-spread appeal, I think it makes for an ideal instance to explore with students (the premise is relatable, numerous texts developed around the concept of “OK boomer” are available, and it is a good example for talking about how quickly jokes and memes rise to popular levels before becoming outdated).

Moving from the “OK boomer” example, I would consider taking a deeper look at unruly rhetoric on a specific platform. TikTok (due to its popularity, the briefness of content, and the platform’s affordances) seems an ideal candidate. On TikTok, a video-sharing social platform, users can view and create short-form videos on practically any topic. Videos usually range from 15 seconds to one minute, and some of the most popular content includes dancing, lip-syncing songs, comedy, memes, educational content, political and social commentary, venting, and confessions. Users can duet another TikTok video, which allows them to record a response to a video, placing the response and the other video side-by-side. Sometimes this feature is used to challenge, poke fun at, or mock the content in the original video. Users may also use the Stitch feature, which allows users to clip portions of existing videos into their own videos (this provides users with more ways to interact with content on TikTok). While the Stitch feature is sometimes used to give credit to a stitched video, the feature has also been used to challenge, shame, and callout others. Whether taking advantage of a particular affordance to challenge problematic behavior or making a video to vent about the patriarchy, many users on TikTok have adopted
various approaches to address aggression, callout toxicity, and fight oppression. Pot’s (2021) video, “Welcome to KP’s page,” features screenshots of viewer comments admonishing her use of expletives in her videos. The comments are essentially calling for “politeness,” and suggest that the use of “verbal sewage” reflects poorly on Pot’s character and intelligence. Pot’s dismisses these remarks through sarcasm and humor. Savannah (2021) used her account to call out racism. In “Hey Jonathan,” she shows a brief video clip of a white man harassing a black man in order to further expose Jonathan’s racist behavior. Savannah calls out the behavior and shows screenshots of Jonathan’s social media profiles, presumably to expose him. Lee’s (2021) video, “Education is Elevation,” begins with a clip from another TikTok video that attempts to shame Lee for a criminal record. After the brief clip, Lee’s video switches to him acknowledging his past and sharing an inspirational message that highlights the power of education to change lives. In “what are men,” James (2021) questions and mocks stereotypical male behavior. In using mockery and humor, they expose toxic masculinity and the gender binary. These texts offer just a sample of the kinds of messy and resistant responses found on TikTok. And I believe the prevalence of such content on TikTok speaks to some unique factors that would result in rich analysis and moments of discovery for students.

Regardless of the texts or platforms instructors could select, similar questions could be asked when exploring instances of resistance. When analyzing texts that push back against oppression, students could be encouraged to consider the following questions:

a) Who is the primary rhetor/speaker/creator?

b) What is the message of the text?

c) How is the message presented?
d) What is the context for the message?

Exploring such questions would lead to discussions of motivation, intent, organization, language, and rhetorical elements (including the modes of persuasion, humor, shock, jokes, etc.). And when considering the platforms from which these kinds of texts originate, students might consider the following:

a) Why does the resistance occur on this platform?

b) Is any of the unruliness unique to the platform?

c) What are some differences between unruly rhetoric on this platform as opposed to platforms like Twitter or Reddit?

Finally, once students have an understanding of online discourse in response to aggression and experience assessing unruly rhetoric and the conditions which elicit such responses, they might then practice composing texts in response to aggression/harassment/oppression. Students would have the opportunity to reflect on the acts and behaviors that have served to silence or diminish them, their communities, and the world at large. They would then compose messages (posts, videos, memes, etc.), using strategies appropriate for their selected medium and platform. Their messages would not necessarily need to employ strategies like mockery or shaming, but this would be an opportunity to explore and practice “a fuller range of choices” (Welch, 2018, p. 303). As stated at the start, I do not attempt to present a comprehensive lesson plan or unit, but this is my attempt to begin exploring ways to engage with aggression and resistance in the classroom through online platforms, communities, and discourse.

Future Research

Further scholarship is needed to understand unruly rhetoric and the ways unruliness may
be implemented as content moderation on platforms like Twitch and across social media. Internet communication/interactions are often messy, and we, as digital citizens, should have more transparent conversations about strategies and tactics for addressing online aggression and harassment. The examples and analysis offered in this dissertation are far from comprehensive.

Across Twitch, currently the most popular live streaming platform, acts of resistance stand against hate every day, and these moments deserve attention. The communities and interactions there provide many opportunities for furthering our understanding of content moderation—moderation as resistance and community building. Both rhetoric/composition researchers and teachers should consider engaging with questions such as the following if we are to address online aggression.

- How are mockery, shame, jokes, banter, and callouts used on other platforms and in various online communities?
- Looking beyond the strategies discussed in this dissertation, what other unruly responses/strategies are used? How are they used? And to what effect?
- How best can aggressive comments in synchronous chats (like on Twitch) be interrupted and resisted?
- How else can unruly rhetoric (as moderation) be used to resist aggression, disinformation, and dissemination of harmful content.

Questions, like the ones above, may help academics to further understand the complexities and significance of unruly and messy rhetorical responses as moderation across the Internet. Throughout this project, I have sought to explore resistance to the hate and toxicity that is so prevalent across the Internet. And that exploration has left me hopeful. I see power in the
fierce, bold, and messy responses of women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ streamers on Twitch. But it is not enough as an academic to point out the powerful rhetoric. I—we—must listen, advocate, and participate if we are to play a part in creating more equitable spaces online and off. Our reactions and interactions with aggression may at times be unruly or unconventional, and we may mess up, but our reactions matter not only to the immediate situations that elicit them but to those who find themselves targeted for simply existing.
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