

5 “Breaking News: Streamers Don’t Wanna Do the Horizontal Tango with You”: Creative Responses to Toxicity

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In July 2019, the popular online media outlet *Polygon* published an article exploring a live streamer’s creative response to toxic comments in her chat room (henceforth referred to as “chat”). Known as PaladinAmber, Amber Wadham uses multiple cameras and ingenious overlays to parody breaking news segments in which she calls out viewers who behave inappropriately. Through these segments, Wadham offers an alternative method for dealing with toxicity and redirects the spotlight to herself (instead of the toxic user), boosting her popularity and causing clips of her live streams to go viral on other platforms. However, while these methods have furthered her success on the platform, these segments also thwart a cardinal internet rule—“Don’t feed the trolls.” By calling out individuals who engage in toxic behavior, Wadham may encourage them to keep acting toxically, as many trolls do what they do because they relish the responses (Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus 2014). This chapter explores this hypothesis, considering whether PaladinAmber’s methods of moderation, while effective in calling attention to the issue of toxicity on Twitch, may simultaneously encourage some users to behave toxically in the hopes of being publicly reprimanded by her.

Toxicity in Video Game Culture

Toxic behavior on the live streaming platform Twitch stems from its being embedded in video game culture, which typecasts gamers as young, white, cis, straight, and male (Shaw 2012). Gray and Leonard (2018) assert that video games “create a virtual and lived reality where white maleness is empowered to police and criminalize the Other. Games provide opportunities to both learn and share the language of racism and sexism, and the grammar of empire, all while perpetuating cultures of violence and

privilege” (13). Through the dominant ideologies perpetuated in gaming culture, a violent and hateful discourse has emerged to match the conduct and language seen in video games. This discourse is aimed at individuals who do not conform to the gamer stereotype. A classic example of this behavior is Gamergate, which began as a campaign for ethical video game journalism but evolved into the extreme online harassment of several women in the video game industry at the hands of a vocal group of predominantly white male gamers.

Marginalizing, ostracizing, or otherwise hostile behavior aimed at those who do not align with the gamer stereotype is known as “toxicity.” Toxicity may take the form of cyberbullying, trolling, harassment, or other forms of abuse, but it is differentiated by the effect that it has on those witnessing said behavior, as it affects everyone involved in the interaction rather than simply the individual at whom the toxic behavior is directed (Blackburn and Kwak 2014). Unfortunately, the perception of toxic behavior is subjective (Kwak and Blackburn 2015) and highly context-dependent, as behavior perceived as comedic in one space might be labeled as toxic in another depending on the audience, making it challenging to identify and regulate.

Toxic behavior is inherently tied to a sense of online unidentifiability. On Twitch, users are identifiable only by their user names. This anonymity may encourage participants to behave toxically because of a sense of online disinhibition—a lack of restraint encouraged by the online environment (Lapidot-Leffler and Barak 2012). While toxic behavior exists in other spaces, such as sporting events, the lack of face-to-face interaction in online communities allows much of this behavior to go unchecked. This has led to the generalization that live streaming communities are toxic, hostile spaces, and, thus far, there has been little evidence to contradict this conclusion.

One of the groups most targeted for their deviation from the gamer stereotype is women streamers, who regularly face sexual harassment from their viewers and male streamers (Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster 2019). Terms such as “titty streamer” and “Twitch thot” (an acronym for “that ho over there”) shame women streamers and challenge their success on the platform. Furthermore, the sexualization of women streamers contests their authority to speak about video games, rejects these streamers as legitimate gamers, and discourages their participation in gaming communities.

Such discrimination has become normalized on Twitch, and yet this has not stopped women from streaming. To combat toxicity, women streamers

have created concrete rules regarding appropriate behavior in their communities and enlisted channel moderators—community members granted special permissions by the streamer—to ensure that their community remains a safe space. These strategies align with steps taken by Twitch, including the addition of platform moderators, updated community guidelines, and AutoMod (a machine learning tool that flags potentially toxic messages to be reviewed by a moderator) (Batchelor 2017). Such changes have led the cofounder of Twitch, Kevin Lin, to conclude that “while toxicity may seem to be particularly common within gaming circles, there are pockets of respectful and positive users that will hopefully serve as the foundation for the wider community going forward” (Batchelor 2017). Lin argues that, through careful management and moderation, live streaming communities can flourish outside the shadow of toxicity. It is these strategies that are the focus of this chapter, as they provide crucial evidence that toxicity is not inevitable; rather, it is a product of harmful ideologies that can be counteracted by streamers, users, and Twitch as a platform.

Breaking News: Combining Moderation and Entertainment

Amber Wadham (PaladinAmber) is an Australian streamer who, at the time of the *Polygon* article’s data collection, typically streamed four days a week and averaged 450 viewers. She regularly streams Just Chatting and the games *Rainbow Six Siege* and *Apex Legends*. Wadham cycles through cameras and overlays to create unique effects on her streams, some of which are depicted in figure 5.1. Her overlays provide additional entertainment, and her camera angles punctuate her points, sometimes quite literally (see example 5.1), keeping her audience engaged regardless of whether she is playing games or crucifying viewers for disobeying her rules.

To examine PaladinAmber’s methods of managing toxicity, a critical discourse analysis of two of her live streams (ten hours total) was conducted as part of a larger project analyzing the types/levels of toxicity in three women streamers’ communities and their methods of regulating this behavior. The data for this project—video data, chat logs, and field notes—were collected over two weeklong periods in June and August 2019 following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. The analysis involved transcription of the live streams utilizing conventions adapted from Jefferson (1978) and Hepburn and Bolden (2013) and a critical discursive and thematic analysis of the



Side-Facing Distance Camera (SFDC)



Breaking News Overlay (BNO)



Just Chatting Overlay (JCO)



Gaming Overlay (GO)



Front-Facing Up Close Camera (FFUCC)



Side-Facing Up Close Camera (SFUCC)

Figure 5.1

Six examples of PaladinAmber's camera angles and overlays.

data. It also highlighted toxic discourse, responses to/discussions of toxicity, and methods of moderation to conceptualize Wadham's approach to regulating toxicity and the effects that it has on her community.

Toxicity, for Wadham, is largely defined by Twitch's community guidelines, which prohibit lawbreaking, violence, threats, explicit content, hateful conduct, harassment, doxing, and malicious content (Twitch 2020). At the time of this study, toxic behavior typically involved objectification and harassment, as well as the use of all caps, which is equated with shouting.

PaladinAmber’s “breaking news” segments mostly address instances of personal and sexual harassment, and her commitment to challenging toxicity in her chat is underscored through the diverse strategies that she utilizes while streaming, including the use of active moderators, explicit rules, and chat commands. Wadham takes these methods a step further, though, by engaging in public moderation, where she confronts misbehaving viewers. Her public moderation often takes the form of “breaking news” segments, which are modeled after similar segments on mainstream television news channels and feature a custom overlay, seen in figure 5.1. This overlay has an introductory screen with an animated logo and includes scrolling text along the bottom that reads “Breaking news, garbage goblin has something very important to say; says ‘listen, come here listen’ before eating a handful of garbage and running off.” The “garbage goblin” reference is part of the persona that Wadham has developed, in which she is responsible for “taking out the trash,” with “trash” referring to toxic viewers. For example, when a user indicated they wanted to see a “breaking news” segment, PaladinAmber responded, “Oh you missed it. We took out the trash like an hour ago. Two-two trash people.” By constructing toxic users as “trash people,” Wadham underscores her position on users who behave toxically—they are equivalent to garbage that should be taken to the dumpster. PaladinAmber and her channel moderators do not hesitate to “take out the trash”—temporarily or permanently banning users who do not abide by her rules, which shows Wadham’s willingness to sanction inappropriate behavior and sacrifice the size of her audience to protect herself and her community from toxicity.

Positioning herself as a garbage goblin contrasts with the seriousness of the segments themselves, in which Wadham often chastises misbehaving viewers. Example 5.1 models Wadham’s “breaking news” segments. Through this example, one can see the sequencing of these segments and how PaladinAmber incorporates overlays and camera angles to create an entertaining yet effective display of public moderation. In example 5.1, Wadham responds to a user who made a condescending comment about her cameras, which she reads aloud in lines 1–2. During this excerpt, PaladinAmber (PA) is playing a game with fellow streamer Maz (M), who expresses his appreciation for these segments as Wadham prepares to launch into her well-structured section. The example underscores how these segments function as subversive humor, simultaneously entertaining viewers while critiquing one user’s behavior.

Example 5.1

Stream 1 (02:55:45)

PA: ((in gaming overlay)) ((reads utterance in chat)) “You must feel like you’re special and unique with those extra cameras.” Okay.

M: Aww.

PA: Alright, it’s okay, are you ready? This is what we all come here for. Are you ready? ((switches to BNO))

M: My favorite bit.

PA: ((whispered)) It’s the bit. It’s the bit.

PA: Good afternoon and welcome in, Calm, that’s right, listen that- ((switches to FFUCC)) This just in. ((switches to SFUCC)) Stop being a ((switches back to FFUCC)) C U N Tuesday. ((switches back to BNO)) Umm, listen, I’m quirky as fuck ((switches to FFUCC)) without the camera angles, ((switches to SFUCC)) it’s pretty dang clear, ((switches back to FFUCC)) there just a little bit mwah quality chef’s-kiss production. ((switches to BNO)) So if you don’t like it, and you want to watch standard gameplay, ((switches to FFUCC)) do your- do- ((switches to SFUCC)) do yourself a favor. ((switches to SFDC)) Stop making it unpleasant ((switches to SFUCC)) for everyone else. ((switches to FFUCC)) Go. Be free, my friend. Go see- ((switches to BNO)) go and see all of the other content creators out there. There’s plenty to choose from. ((switches to FFUCC)) Just don’t come back ((switches to SFUCC)) here anymore. ((switches to BNO)) Alright, guys, back to you. ((switches back to GO))

Example 5.1 highlights the structure of PaladinAmber’s “breaking news” segments: welcome (line 8), discussion of “news” (lines 9–20) and sign-off (line 21). Prior to the news segment, however, lines 1–7 show the stimulus for the segment. In lines 1–2, PaladinAmber reads AnythingButCalm’s message aloud. Upon recognizing the message is ill-mannered, Wadham prepares herself for the segment, and Maz remarks “My favorite bit” in line 6, leading Wadham to whisper-chant “It’s the bit.” By calling the segment a “bit,” a reference to a section of a stand-up comedian’s routine, both Maz and Wadham acknowledge the ways in which these moments function as subversive humor, directing attention to the hegemonic assumptions at play when users act toxically and transforming such assumptions into a source of laughter (Vitis and Gilmour 2017, 344). The subversive humor also allows PaladinAmber to construct public moderation like her “breaking news” segments as entertainment on her channel, embedding such moments into her character as a streamer.

The subversive humor of these segments succeeds because Wadham's style of comedy functions as critique and constructs her as someone capable of managing misbehavior. For example, in line 10, Wadham tells the user to stop acting like a "C U N Tuesday." This phrase has comedic value, as Wadham spells out the slur but turns the last letter into an acceptable word, subverting viewers' expectations while simultaneously criticizing AnythingButCalm's behavior. Her refusal to say "cunt" is offset by her use of "fuck" in line 10, when she describes herself as "quirky as fuck." She embraces the "special" and "unique" components of the user's claim while arguing that it is her character—not the cameras—that makes her unique. The balance that she strikes, in both her use and nonuse of vulgarity and her rejection of AnythingButCalm's statement, works to construct PaladinAmber as a confident streamer who is invested in her community's well-being and capable of responding to misbehaving viewers in ways that allow her to entertain her viewers while reinforcing her community's expectations.

Furthermore, Wadham uses camera angles to emphasize her claims and reduce online disinhibition. By returning to the "breaking news" overlay in line 13, Wadham shows that she is finished addressing her first point—I am unique without the camera angles—and is shifting to her next point—the user's punishment. Using overlays and camera changes, she stresses that, if the user wants more traditional content, they can leave. Each camera change follows a phrase, punctuating her claims and underscoring their seriousness. The camera changes also allow the viewer to get a close-up view of Wadham's face. These camera angles give the viewer the impression that Wadham is making eye contact with them. This illusion is important because, as Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) argue, lack of eye contact contributes to toxic online disinhibition. By zooming in on her eyes while admonishing AnythingButCalm's behavior, Wadham encourages viewers to pay attention and reduces any sense of invisibility or anonymity, which could reduce the likelihood of the user reoffending (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2012).

Finally, in the closing lines of the segment, Wadham prescribes a punishment, which adds a tangible consequence to her public critique. By stating "Just don't come back here anymore" in line 18, Wadham implies that the user is permanently banned from her channel, although her statement could also potentially equate to "you're not welcome here." Wadham then ends the segment by returning to the "breaking news overlay" one last time to sign off. This is solidified by her return to the gaming overlay, at which point Maz and Wadham continue playing their game.

Through multiple camera angles/overlays and subversive humor, PaladinAmber's "breaking news" segments function simultaneously as entertainment and resistance. She creates a sequence in which she addresses what has been said, responds to the utterance, and reprimands the user who posted it. These segments, therefore, can be understood as critical witnessing (Vitis and Gilmour 2017), in that they capture the offense (the toxic utterance) and allow the audience to bear witness to Wadham's interpretation and response. The "breaking news" segments gain "validity by providing testimony and evidence that allows the audience to bear witness to both OSH [online sexual harassments] defined and interpreted from a woman's perspective and the pervasiveness of this harassment" (Vitis and Gilmour 2017, 342). Her segments can also be seen as transgressive, much like fellow streamer Kaceytron, who is known, among other things, for her "incisive critique of the Twitch community" (Consalvo 2019, 98). Wadham publicly critiques a style of behavior accepted by Twitch users as part of the status quo and engages in an open discussion regarding its inappropriateness and her unwillingness to tolerate toxicity more broadly. That PaladinAmber has been able to dedicate an entire segment of her live streams to responding to toxicity speaks not only to the pervasiveness of this behavior, but also to how eager viewers are to witness her responses.

Trolling for Entertainment

PaladinAmber recognizes that public moderation functions as entertainment for her community, and she enjoys these segments, labeling them comedic "bits." However, because these moments have been publicized by news outlets and on Wadham's Twitter feed, where she frequently posts clips, there is some concern that this publicity could attract trolls—individuals who engage in "deceptive, destructive, or disruptive [behavior . . .] with no apparent instrumental purpose. [. . . T]rolls operate as agents of chaos on the Internet, exploiting 'hot-button issues' to make users appear overly emotional or foolish" (Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus 2014). While similar to cyberbullying, trolling is unique in that there appears to be no end goal for the behavior beyond disruption. Because Wadham's segments are dynamic, face-threatening, and entertaining, they align with the types of behavior that trolls seek to incite. Evidence of this trolling desire can be seen in example 5.2, which features utterances from PaladinAmber's chat.

Example 5.2

Stream 1

(00:22:09) Misery: So I have seen a lot of your fun stuff on Twitter. First time viewing. Is it weird I want someone to say something stupid so you can hit em with that \$19.95?

[. . .]

(03:46:46) goodygood: um hey roast me

[. . .]

(03:47:26) rollinrollin: my first time hear I was tempted to say something horrific in hopes of being the target of a tweet. but i decided id rather stay and not be doooosh

Stream 2

(00:37:24) guardian: I came to be a fuckhead

[. . .]

(04:28:35) spicy123: I aspire to be roasted by amber

[. . .]

(04:33:00) noenvy: I’m here to get roasted

The users in this example express a desire to witness and, in some cases, be the subject of Wadham’s public moderation. Misery, in lines 1–4, indicates that they came to PaladinAmber’s channel because of the publicity surrounding her “breaking news” segments, which Misery calls “fun stuff.” The user then questions whether it is “weird” to want someone to misbehave just so that they can witness Wadham’s response. Specifically, the user phrases it as “hit em with that \$19.95,” which is a reference to another style of public moderation that Wadham uses, in which she parodies television advertisements while chastising a misbehaving user. Similarly, rollinrollin (lines 8–9) expresses this same sense of being torn between misbehaving for the sake of entertainment and behaving appropriately out of respect for PaladinAmber. Both Misery’s and rollinrollin’s comments show how users might be tempted to post inappropriate messages in Wadham’s chat to incite her, but, as rollinrollin points out in the second half of their utterance, doing so would make them a “dooosh” (douche) and they would rather “stay.” In other words, rollinrollin recognizes that, while an inappropriate comment might provide short-term satisfaction, such behavior

might also result in removal from the community. In addition, rollinrollin emphasizes that such behavior would be characteristic of a douche—a jerk or idiot. Other users in example 5.2 are less insightful. While not actually misbehaving, at least in these examples, these users indicate that they want to be the subject of Wadham’s public moderation, meaning that they would first have to behave egregiously enough for her to do so.

PaladinAmber is aware of this desire and addresses one of the user’s comments: “Also spicy123, um you aspired to be roasted by me? Don’t aspire to be roasted by me. You wanna know why? Those who get roasted by me are literal pieces of garbage, and you don’t want that.” Returning to the analogy of herself as a garbage goblin responsible for disposing of trash people, Wadham tells spicy123 that being roasted means that the users are “literal pieces of garbage” (i.e., toxic people). Like rollinrollin, Wadham explains that, regardless of any short-term benefits that may come from misbehaving in her chat, users should not seek public moderation because, according to her logic, being the subject of public moderation requires foul behavior, and foul behavior would make them bad people. However, her censure of such behavior and her construction of users who act toxically as “garbage” do not appear to be fully effective, as users in example 5.3 point out that trolling behavior has become common in her chat due to the publicity.

These users recognize that PaladinAmber’s public moderation may be an incentive for trolls, who seek public, emotional responses to their behavior. While the publicity has increased interest in Wadham’s streams, it has

Example 5.3

Stream 1

(00:01:51) mistermiyaki: Oh boy, who’s ready for comments trying to provoke Amber into responding?

[. . .]

(00:04:24) captncrunch: I feel like people now come in here just to say the things they have seen on twitter

Stream 2

(01:21:51) finalcountdown: I can’t tell if the comments are genuine thirst or bait to get the news treatment

also attracted the attention of trolls, who will undoubtedly see her public moderation as further incentive for their behavior. As *mistermiyaki* points out, such comments are clearly attempts to “provoke” Wadham. According to this logic, then, Wadham would be “feeding the trolls” or “giving them what they want” by engaging in public moderation. Similarly, *captncrunch* correlates the posting of clips of Wadham’s public moderation on Twitter to the increase in trolling behavior, recognizing that the publicity surrounding *PaladinAmber* will inevitably draw the attention of other trolls.

Thus, it appears that Wadham and some of her viewers are aware that public moderation is risky because it may encourage the very behavior that Wadham seeks to eliminate. Despite this risk, however, Wadham stands by her behavior. In example 5.4, she emphasizes that there is value in drawing attention to toxic behavior and making it visible beyond the platform.

Wadham emphasizes in this example that people will troll or act toxically regardless of the measures that people put into place. She recognizes that such behavior is inevitable, given the platform, users, and social climate. However, she agrees with the user who says that “calling out shitty behavior”—i.e., public moderation—is not “stooping to their level.” Wadham argues that her behavior does not equate to toxicity, perhaps because she sees public moderation as a response to such behavior and motivated by a desire to curb toxicity more broadly. Although another user questions whether Wadham’s public moderation is counterproductive, Wadham firmly disagrees, arguing that “speaking up about it” and “reporting” this behavior are productive. She addresses this point in an interview with Grayson

Example 5.4

Stream 2 (01:00:02)

PA: ((in gaming overlay)) ((reads utterance in chat)) “Calling out shitty behavior is not stooping to their level.” No, it is not. And no- don’t let anyone ever say- tell you that is cause listen let me tell you [. . .] People need to learn, and here’s the thing, right? So many people ask me this. ((reads utterance in chat)) “Don’t you think it’s counterproductive what you do?” Absolutely not. You want to know why? Cause people are going to fucking do it anyway, and I would rather speak up about it and be like hey, this is really shitty and if you don’t stop, I’m going to literally report you.

(2019), where she asserts that public moderation may encourage people to question their behavior and eventually change it:

If you've ever done something stupid, and somebody said to you, "Hey, that was really stupid," it truly makes you question [. . .] And whether or not they questioned it right there and then, eventually if enough people start saying, "Hey, this behavior is really stupid; you should probably consider changing that or just logging off," it starts to sit there with that person, and then hopefully that change comes. [. . .] if one out of 10 people really learn that lesson of "It's the internet, but also your actions have repercussions," then my job is done as a comedic entertainer.

PaladinAmber sees public moderation as productive because it may encourage users to reflect on their behavior. It forces users to recognize that their behavior is unacceptable and gives them the opportunity to reform, or at least consider the repercussions of, that behavior. Wadham recognizes that not every user will reform their behavior in response to her actions and such change may take time; however, even if only "one out of 10 people" change, Wadham argues that would be reward enough. By consistently addressing toxic behavior publicly, Wadham hopes her sentiments will resonate with users who may otherwise be oblivious to the impact of their behavior. By incorporating public moderation into her streams, Wadham seeks to change the public sentiment on toxicity more broadly, as users will come away from her stream with an understanding that their "actions have repercussions," a perspective that may not have been obvious if they only engage with streamers and communities that ignore or encourage toxic behavior. Thus, although public moderation may encourage some users to act toxically, such concerns are counterbalanced in Wadham's mind by the visibility that public moderation brings to toxic behavior and its consequences.

Conclusion

This chapter explored an individual streamer's creative responses to toxicity, showing how public moderation can be used to enforce community norms, entertain viewers, and bring visibility to the issue of toxicity. Through her public moderation, PaladinAmber asserts her authority as a streamer, pushing back against users whose online disinhibition encourages them to troll, harass, or otherwise antagonize streamers and their communities. For Wadham, public moderation is both punishment and entertainment. Users who misbehave in her chat may become the subject of one of her segments,

calling attention to their inappropriate behavior and making them the focus of her comedic skits. Wadham argues that this form of moderation may encourage users to reflect on their behavior, thus hopefully inspiring them to behave more appropriately in the future. However, the publicity surrounding these segments has also attracted the attention of trolls, who may see PaladinAmber’s responses to toxicity as irresistible temptation—public moderation may feel like a reward for them. Thus, although public moderation may draw attention to the issue of toxicity on Twitch and the experiences of streamers and communities affected by toxicity, streamers who engage in public moderation may face further trolling or toxic behavior consequently. Although Wadham makes it clear that she is willing to accept this trade-off, other streamers may not.

Although this response to toxicity is not without its consequences, it is vital to underscore the value of PaladinAmber’s actions. Wadham is potentially altering the behavior of users who interact with her streams and drawing attention to the issue of toxicity more broadly, even if this attention has repercussions. Numerous articles were written about Wadham’s segments, and clips from her streams gained significant attention on Twitter. Her work is a reminder that toxicity is painfully common on Twitch, but also that not all communities are responding passively to this issue. There are many streamers and users who are fighting for more inclusive spaces on Twitch and for changes to the platform itself. By consistently engaging with users who act toxically, Wadham reminds users that toxicity is not a forgone conclusion in all Twitch communities. Streamers like PaladinAmber have positioned themselves as agents of change through their informed and creative responses to this behavior, thereby changing the narrative about toxicity on Twitch from a discussion of harm to a tale of resistance.

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Live Streaming Culture

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