

8 Toxic Community Policing: Weaponizing Moderation Tools on Twitch

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If one thing unifies all digital media platforms, it is the fact that they must, to some degree, moderate content. Moderation has become “an essential practice in the production cycle for commercial websites, social media platforms, and media properties that solicit content from users” (Roberts 2019, 33). Even if companies wish to avoid moderation or hide its practice, platforms cannot escape it for a myriad of reasons: political, economic, cultural, legal, and simply technological. To be succinct, “Platforms must moderate, while also disavowing it” (Gillespie 2018, 5).

While moderation has become more openly discussed, there is often still confusion over its actual functioning. A large contributor to this confusion is the difficulty and nature of moderation at the scale at which these platforms operate. The amount of data in the form of text, images, videos, metadata, and more is astonishing, and so is the filtering, categorizing, and regulating of that data. Yet live streaming platforms have an even more difficult task in moderating—the issue of liveness. When content is not only produced live but also meant to be *consumed* live, moderating concurrently is virtually impossible at the scale required. Consider the labor of censors of a live television broadcast multiplied by the thousands, and one can begin to see the magnitude of the task.

The most common response to these challenges of scale is utilizing community-based moderation. In this approach, community standards are published, revised, and established as a semilegal contract between user and platform to create rules and guidelines for the creation of content and interaction. Community-based moderation, then, cedes the *enforcement* of these guidelines primarily to the user base itself as a first line of defense, usually through features like flagging and reporting of suspected violations/

violators. Community-based moderation may also include channel moderation, where users are able to create their own guidelines for user-run communities on the site (e.g., Facebook pages, subreddits, and Twitch streams), albeit ones that must still adhere to sitewide rules. The result is a form of citizen-policing where platforms “take advantage of the user base by deputizing users into the moderation process” (Gillespie 2018, 77) creating a sort of “digital posse” to deal with the Wild West of cyberspace.

Yet what if the deputized user base is divided in its interpretation, application, and agreement with the community’s standards? More important, how does the identity/ideological makeup of the user base lead to uneven enforcement of community standards? An inherent flaw in the reliance on community moderation is that “flagging systems can also be gamed, weaponized to accomplish social and political ends” (Gillespie 2018, 92). In the case of Twitch, those ends are a part of a larger cultural battle over the gendered nature of gaming.

Twitch’s struggles with content moderation stem from two concurrent issues: the difficulty of scale in moderating live streaming content, which necessitates a community-flagging approach, and internal community division particularly around issues of gender and sexuality. This is evidenced in the site’s frequent changes to its community guidelines, particularly regarding sexual content and harassment. While these changes often work to better clarify standards of sexual content and even attempt to protect those who are victims of harassment on the site, the relegating of enforcement to the community itself can lead to exploitation.

For example, after Twitch updated its community guidelines in 2018, the “boob police” (D’Anastasio 2018) began harassing women on the site, with threats to report streams for supposedly breaking these updated policies. This toxic community policing sees the tools of user-based moderation—specifically flagging and reporting—being weaponized to attack and harass marginalized users rather than protect them. To be clear, not all forms of community policing are toxic; toxic community policing is uniquely thus because it takes moderation tools whose stated purpose is to protect users and instead uses them to attack and harm them. In attempting to define acceptable behaviors and limit toxic ones through community guidelines, platforms can actually create new tools for toxic engagement with unintended and ironic consequences.

With these powers of moderation often comes a lack of responsibility, or worse a perverting of these tools in an attempt to silence perceived “outsiders”—regulating performances of the self with normative understanding of what it means to be a user on the site. In terms of Twitch and its deep ties to geek/gaming culture, this often means attacking and challenging nonhegemonic forms of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality.

A closer analysis of the toxic community policing on Twitch shows clear connections between institutional policies and digital affordances surrounding content moderation and an ideology of misogyny. Specifically, this platform analysis of the content moderation of Twitch highlights how both the infrastructure of the site and its policy rhetoric work in tandem to allow toxic community policing to perpetuate.

This chapter argues that institutional moderation policies that empower users must also account for the more harmful effects of that empowerment. Clearly defining and understanding the functioning of toxic community policing can enable scholars and platforms alike to better identify, assess, and respond to this increasingly common form of digital harassment. The discussion concludes with an examination of possible pitfalls of community-based moderation and how to avoid them, while still acknowledging the hope behind this form of live streaming moderation.

What is at stake in community-based moderation is a “subtle cultural privilege” (Gillespie 2018, 8) that affects and in part determines the live streaming culture itself. This is certainly true in the case of Twitch’s unique culture, built both on moderation practices and larger contexts of gaming/geek culture. As T. L. Taylor (2018) notes in her study of Twitch, “Harassment is the flip side of the positive processes of community management” (221). What happens when this empowerment and sense of ownership over the site’s cultural identity lead to an ideological battle over that very identity, with the very tools of moderation becoming weapons in the fight?

Twitch’s Trouble with Gender

Twitch has long struggled with gender on its platform, from the homogeneity of its user base, to instances of gender-based harassment and assault, and its function in the larger gendered discourses of gaming culture. Scholars have long studied the ways that gender, masculinity, femininity, and

the spectrum in between are understood within gaming culture broadly and Twitch specifically (Shaw 2012; Chess 2017; Salter and Blodgett 2017; Zolides 2021). While originally serving more of a niche role focusing on live streaming gameplay, sometimes with commentary added, the site has expanded its scope both in terms of its user base and the genres and topics of its content—yet still remains intrinsically tied to gaming culture. Gaming culture's gender problems were exemplified most notably in the emergence of Gamergate in 2014, when a form of toxic masculinity emerged with “a campaign of systematic harassment of female and minority game developers, journalists, and critics and their allies” (Massanari 2017, 330) under the guise of a vague concern over journalistic ethics. These acts of “symbolic violence” against women in gaming serve to “reinforce and maintain hidden, invisible boundaries of gendered and racialized hierarchies” (Gray, Buyukozturk, and Hill 2017, 2).

This form of maintaining gender-based boundaries occurs on Twitch in a variety of ways, but it has been most prominent and harmful in its attacks on so-called titty-streamers (Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster 2019). This form of “gendered gatekeeping” common to nerd/geek fandoms (Scott 2019, 17) specifically targets female live streamers with claims of using sexuality to grow audiences. These women are accused of generating “lower-quality,” sexual content that affects the cultural capital of Twitch, gaming and the genre of live streaming itself. Notably, the concerns over lost audiences reveal an economic component to these gender-based attacks that shows a close link between the social, cultural, and economic forms of online capital.

The debates around women's bodies on Twitch extends as far back as 2013, where women were harassed and condemned for “occupying the same space [as male streamers]” and being called “camwhores” (Hernandez 2013). These actions were legitimized in the mainstream press, including a 2017 BBC report wherein parents were “expressing alarm at how much of a screen supposedly showing in-game action is focused on a woman's body” (BBC 2017). What are at stake in these claims are the limitations of performances of femininity and sexual identity. Rhetoric around terms like “titty streamer,” exists to “limit what versions of femininity are acceptable for women video game streamers” (Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster 2019, 478).

While the rhetoric is powerful itself, it is when corporate and technological infrastructures are realigned in response to these claims that we see a different power. Twitch has acted in response to these “debates” around sexual content

over the last several years to try to better communicate and enforce community standards, while also navigating a highly motivated and tech-savvy user base that could subvert and pervert those very mechanisms. Yet “the way that Twitch defines sexual content has a direct effect on the ecosystem of live streaming more broadly” (Ruberg 2021, 2). One of the main processes through which this direct effect is enacted is toxic community policing.

The term “toxic community policing” builds on the work of Adrienne Massanari and what she terms “toxic technocultures,” defined as “toxic cultures that are enabled by and propagated through sociotechnical networks such as Reddit, 4chan, Twitter, and online gaming” (Massanari 2017, 333). What is crucial for Massanari in the formation of toxic technocultures is, as the name suggests, the interplay between the technologies upon which they exist and the underlying cultures that ferment the behavior. For Twitch, there is the combined technology of community flagging of live streaming and the larger online gaming culture where toxic masculinity thrives. In many ways, the toxic community policing on Twitch is a natural outgrowth of movements like Gamergate: a purported concern over ethical community standards hiding a more insidious campaign of harassment in order to police identity and the supposedly traditionally masculine domain of video gaming.

Twitch’s Changing Moderation Policies

As a live streaming platform, Twitch moderation utilizes several approaches. The site primarily focuses on community flagging, where users are tasked with identifying content and users that they feel violate the community guidelines; these reports are then sent for further review by workers, automated systems, or both. This is in addition to tools that exist within individual channels and communities that allow hosts to create unique rules for their own streams. Here, enforcement can take the form of warning users or banning them from participating, or affecting the methods in which they can participate (e.g., limiting chat or other interactive features). These community methods are ultimately subsumed under the larger policies and community guidelines that Twitch enforces overall, where flagging still holds an outsized impact.

Toxic community policing emerges specifically from the flagging/reporting system. Twitch and other large platforms rely on this form of moderation

so heavily due to the sheer scale of moderation required; indeed, the best way to handle an enormous amount of content is to utilize the platform's equally enormous resource: its user base. This system is not reliant *solely* on users, however, as platforms like Twitch utilize “ghost work,” where sites help enforce content policies using “people and software working together to deliver seemingly automated services” (Gray and Suri 2019, ix). At stake is the frequent invisibility of this labor, which can involve underpaid, exploitative conditions where humans are required to assess and judge a flagged piece of content quickly.

Reliance on reporting by users can be especially problematic when one considers the voluntary and specious nature of flagging itself. Due to being voluntary, “users who deputize themselves to flag content are those most motivated to do so. This raises questions about the nature of that motivation” (Gillespie 2018, 129). While those motivations may include things such as concern for public/platform health, cultural sensitivities, and more, they can also be guided by the types of ideological battles discussed previously over the very identity of the platform itself. In the case of Twitch, this is precisely how toxic community policing emerges: deputized users manipulate the tools of moderation—specifically flagging and reporting—in order to harass and overwhelm the Twitch response team (and the ghost work it relies upon) in the hope of weeding out what they perceive as unwelcome identities and content from the site. Toxic community policing, therefore, contributes to the exploitation of this already overtaxed and invisible workforce operating at the second level of the process. The goal is to overwhelm an already overwhelmed system to, ideally, discourage or remove people from the platform entirely.

One of the more publicized and robust changes to Twitch's community guidelines regarding sexual content came in 2018. An official announcement on the Twitch Blog on February 8 specifically emphasized the need for updates around issues of harassment, hateful conduct, and sexual content, with most space spent on the issue of sexual content, specifically attire and clothing. As the post states, “Attire in gaming streams, most at-home streams, and all profile/channel imagery should be appropriate for a public street, mall, or restaurant” (Twitch 2018). Like many community guidelines, this type of language is broad and open to interpretation—and thus exploitation by the community enforcing them.

The guidelines themselves go into more detail, noting public spaces as the standard for attire, and thus what constitutes inappropriate sexual content. But this language ignores the specific context of most live streaming, as most are performed within one's private home. For instance, cosplaying can be seen as appropriate to the context of playing a video game or attending a fan convention, but the attire within the game may not be appropriate in generalized "public spaces." Suffice it to say, appealing to a broad sense of a public appropriateness is how Twitch reinforces a hegemonic ideological system, and more important, it provides enough open-endedness for community users to enforce the guidelines broadly, and even maliciously.

Turning to the actual community guidelines (from December 9, 2020), there are some key updates that, while providing better representation of a variety of identities and forms of masculinity/femininity, still contain some elements of gendering that can lead to toxic community policing. The sections are divided into three main components showing the areas of most concern to Twitch's moderation: harassment, sexual content, and music. Music primarily concerns itself with issues of intellectual property as a way to protect the liability of Twitch with regard to copyright holders. The result is a more legal, boilerplate discussion of policies that is also easier to enforce via automated screening rather than community flagging.

Harassment, on the other hand, has had the most updates in recent years (with a new, large-scale update in January 2021) due in part to the types of gendered assaults mentioned previously. Yet it is not coincidental that updates to the sexual content policies are frequently met with new forms of harassment, which then must be considered. What ultimately occurs is a process of constant updates and reframings—never fully formed but always in process—to address new dynamics introduced by the community in response to the previous changes.

Moderation Posses

After the February 2018 updates to the community guidelines mentioned previously, reports came out of a "self-appointed anti-boob police" (D'Anastasio 2018) traversing the site's live streams in an effort to seek out and punish perceived "outsiders." Ultimately, streamers were either reported for sexual content (based predominantly on things like attire, camera angles, or

rhetoric) or they were threatened with being reported. More important, the beginning of this activity immediately following the guideline updates shows a correlation between the events, emphasizing how the empowerment of a group to enforce guidelines gave agency to those seeking to police identity first and foremost.

The groups performing this toxic community policing can perhaps best be described as “posses”—civilian law enforcement deputized by a higher authority to police the citizenry. In this case, the platform itself acts as a higher authority and the community guidelines become a system in which power is transferred, and, ideally, rules are dictated for how best to administer this “justice” for the sake of platform health and safety. But just like the posses of the Wild West, these groups are liable to misappropriation of these law enforcement powers for the purposes of harassment and ideological domination.

The link between the guidelines and these actions can be seen in the language and methods used by these posses. A streamer who was subject to this harassment, She Snaps, described a common occurrence by saying, “They’ll make comments on my camera angle and say, ‘Good thing it’s not too high—I’d have to report you’” (D’Anastasio 2018). These types of comments make direct reference to the guidelines, legitimizing the actions of the toxic community police by referencing a higher authority. It is in this perversion of a document meant to protect that toxic community policing can be seen at its most insidious. One of the ways that harassment is often hidden and dismissed in all forms is by arguing that it was done with some authority or permission granted from a higher power; in doing so, the harasser avoids liability while also shutting off more direct forms of recrimination.

The case of Quqco garnered mainstream media attention and exemplifies the process, purpose, and priorities of toxic community policing. Quqco is an art streamer who live streams the drawing of her anime/manga-inspired works while also wearing and discussing cosplay. In September 2019, Quqco’s account was suspended for three days after a deluge of reports were received on a stream of her drawing while wearing cosplay of the character Chun-Li from *Street Fighter*. The stated reason for the suspension reflected the language in the community guidelines, citing “sharing or engaging in sexually suggestive content or activities” (Espiritu 2019).

What is important about Quqco’s story as it relates to toxic community policing is how the process was, according to her defense, mass-orchestrated by followers of the subreddit */r/livestreamfail*. As she put it to NBC News,

“Very recently, I’ve been on—there’s a subreddit called ‘LiveStreamFails.’ Unfortunately, I caught the attention of that subreddit, which has a lot of angry men” (Rosenblatt 2019). Quqco specifically references the gender and tone of those on these sites, emphasizing the gendered toxicity that plays into these mass-reporting actions.

The subreddit, interestingly enough, has since updated its own moderation policies (section 1.5) to include restrictions against what it calls “witch-hunting,” which it describes as “large-scale action against a particular person or group of people, e.g., calling for people to mass report a Twitch channel” (Reddit 2022). It is difficult to know precisely how such a statement entered into these guidelines, but it is significant that this specific action is provided and fits with the type of action that Quqco alleges led to her suspension.

These actions go beyond just the suspension of accounts or bullying women off the site, as they often lead to future negative impacts on personal and professional lives. For example, Quqco had her booth removed from TwitchCon that year, a key fan convention that helps streamers grow their audiences and make direct money from selling merchandise. Cases like these remind us that the actions of a few, via toxic community policing, go beyond the virtual platform; they affect the livelihoods and economic viability of the site and its users, engendering a dominant/oppressed dynamic for those in and out of the perceived “normative” framework of the site.

When events like this happen and get mainstream publicity, Twitch has responded in both official and unofficial capacities. Official company channels generally state that Twitch does not comment on individual cases of suspension or other moderation decisions, a practice that is fairly standard in the industry. Yet unofficially, former Twitch employees have also come to the company’s defense, like a former head of influencer marketing, Jason Maestas. Following the news surrounding Quqco, Maestas took to Twitter to downplay the efficacy of “brigading” (mass-reporting), saying, “Every reported incident is reviewed by humans, notably for reality (did it actually happen) and context. 1 or 1000 reports doesn’t sway a decision” (Maestas 2019). This defense does not clarify anything as to the details of the Quqco story, nor does it address the issue of mass reporting itself. Rather, it side-steps the issue to respond to a related but different claim about the impact of multiple reports versus one. In the end, more reporting leads to more moderation, and as seen in the example of She Snaps, even the *threat* of reporting is enough to be harassment.

Diving into data regarding the accountability and enforcement surrounding community-based reports of all kinds reveals troubling numbers. Near the end of 2020, Twitch released its first-ever global Transparency Report. In it, the company reiterates the difficulties of content moderation on a live streaming platform, noting, “The vast majority of the content that appears on Twitch is gone the moment it’s created and seen . . . Content moderation solutions that work for uploaded, video-based services do not work, or work differently, on Twitch” (Twitch Transparency Report 2020).

Perhaps the most striking revelation from the data is in how different types of reports are enforced or not, and at different rates. Showing an increase in total user reports across a variety of categories, the numbers show that “less than 15% of all reports led to enforcement” (Sinclair 2021). Going further, reports of “Hateful Conduct, Sexual Harassment, and Harassment” account for the second-highest category (after “Viewbotting, Spam, and Other Community Violations”), and yet only about 2 percent result in any action (at minimum, a warning). On the other hand, reports of “Adult Nudity, Pornography, and Sexual Conduct” come in fourth position, with roughly 2.5 percent resulting in action (Sinclair 2021).

In sum, actual enforcement against claims of sexual conduct as well as harassment are minimal, and yet it appears that Twitch does take action against sexual conduct at a slightly higher rate than harassment, perhaps signaling an emphasis in priorities. It is possible to see these numbers in Twitch’s Transparency Report as a defense against the problems of toxic community policing—namely, lower enforcement might in fact mean that the company does *not* frequently act on what could be malicious uses of community reporting, like toxic community policing. However, as examples like She Snaps, Quqco, and numerous others show, whether one is actually suspended or banned is often irrelevant to the goals of these actions. Merely the threat of punishment gives undue power to those in a toxic community that seek to regulate women’s bodies and performances of gender on the platform, and the community guidelines and reporting features can serve as tools of that power.

Perhaps in response to these incidents and data, harassment via mass-reporting was specifically admonished within the community guidelines as of December 9, 2020, stating, “Harassment has many manifestations, including stalking, personal attacks, promotion of physical harm, hostile raids, and *malicious false report brigading*” (Twitch 2020, emphasis added).

Yet it is unclear how “false report brigading” is defined or identified, nor the specific mechanisms of enforcement in use.

A newer “Hateful Conduct and Harassment” policy went into effect on January 22, 2021, in an attempt to specify even further the process for reporting, identifying, and punishing for harassment on the site, but there are still wide gaps in clarity, particularly around this style of toxic community policing. Much of this new policy goes into describing forms of harassment, noting the most severe cases surround issues of targeted harassment based on protected characteristics like race, ethnicity, sex, gender, and others.

Yet these updates do not make any mention of “harassment via moderation tools” or types of toxic community policing. Indeed, there is actually *less* reference to such action, due to the removal of a section on “malicious false reporting,” seemingly downplaying the issue. What is clear is a lack of attention and direct rhetoric toward this type of behavior, something that this chapter argues is inevitably tied up in any form of community-based reporting moderation. Live streaming platforms are stuck with the issue of moderation at immense scale, so a reliance on community-based moderation is understandable. Yet all communities must deal with certain toxic elements (some more than others), and these flagging systems must account for this inevitable reality. While there is no immediately obvious solution, it is clear that toxic community policing must be at least recognized and identified for what it is and when it happens so that attention may be paid by platform companies, their workers, their users, and the larger legal apparatus under which they all operate.

Detoxifying Community Moderation

Toxic community policing can become part of content moderation on digital platforms that relies predominantly on a large scale of user-generated content. Community-based moderation is often promoted as a democratizing force (in theory) and can be easily marketed as such in policies that emphasize the value of user communities. In other words, these approaches to moderation are not only about answering an issue of scale, but appealing to the user base on a cultural and ideological level.

Platforms and the companies that operate them are in a bind both technologically and culturally; they must rely on communities to help moderate themselves due to the problems of scale, but the cultural and ideological

divisions within those communities create opportunities for exploitation. In the example of Twitch, we see a “toxic technoculture” (Massanari 2017, 333) become empowered via community-based moderation and can thus participate in toxic community policing, where the very tools meant to benefit the community are used to harass, oppress, and stifle those outside the perceived dominant framework.

Moderation must occur, and community-based moderation is unlikely to go away as an option. Rather than eliminate the entire endeavor due to toxic community policing, platforms, users, and academics must turn to more cultural and structural forms of change rather than new technologies like artificial intelligence or advanced flagging. Similar to the ways that traditional law enforcement is regulated, digital media companies may start looking at creating internal affairs agencies for their user base, organizations within companies meant to oversee community flagging and reporting irregularities. There must also be harsher penalties and enforcement for this inappropriate use of flagging, as suspensions are not enough. Since toxic community policing frequently relies on coordination among users across platforms, so must companies synchronize their efforts to allow better regulation across platforms. Unified ethical and regulatory standards for moderation across digital media, especially live streaming, would go a long way toward curbing this perversion of moderation.

So long as toxic cultures exist, and so long as communities are relied upon to moderate content, toxic community policing will inevitably occur. But with a better understanding of how and why it functions, how affordances are manipulated, and the similarities across digital platforms, the companies responsible for running these sites can begin to address the problem. Like with any complicated issue, all solutions come with new problems. But identifying the harmful action and acknowledging it constitutes a powerful first step.

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Live Streaming Culture

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