Developing a Feminist Mentorship Praxis for Digital Aggression Research

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A researcher interested in the anonymous imageboard 4chan faces mental duress–loss of sleep, relationship difficulties, dejection–after spending time in a community that sees them as "subhuman" (Sparby 46).

A PhD candidate, working on her dissertation studying women's experiences of online harassment, experiences a flood of threats and aggression via email and Twitter while trying to recruit participants (Gelms, "Social Media").

A scholar seeking to understand the GamerGate[5] debacle finds herself reading through racist, sexist, ableist chat logs that feel "dehumanizing," as they target many of the identities she herself inhabits (Kelley and Weaver 7).[6]

These are real experiences recounted by writing studies researchers studying digital aggression. Notably, at the time of these incidents, all were also women-identified and early-career. Digital aggression, which we define as a broad range of behaviors ranging from insults to sexual harassment to threats of violence, usually meant to silence and/or intimidate its targets, has become an increasingly critical issue for internet users, and researchers have accordingly worked to understand why digital aggression happens and how we might curtail it. Yet these researchers– particularly those with (multiply) marginalized identities– often find themselves the target of the very harassment they are studying. How, then, might we support researchers as they undertake this crucial, and sometimes dangerous, work?

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5   Gamergate, which erupted in the late summer and early fall of 2014, began with an allegation of unethical video game reporting: a female game designer was (falsely) accused by an ex of sleeping with a gaming journalist in exchange for publicity for her new game. These charges quickly morphed into an all-out attack on prominent female game developers and critics, who faced violent threats and public exposure of their home addresses (also known as dox-ing).

6   We offer our thanks to these researchers, who provided permission to describe their experiences here.

We have faced this question, together and separately, as digital aggression researchers. Leigh has been researching digital aggression since she began writing her dissertation in 2014. Since then, she's explored how toxic digital publics can undermine public writing pedagogies as well as feminist research methodologies (Gruwell, "Writing"; Gruwell, "Feminist Research"). She's also experienced harassment as a researcher (Gruwell, "Feminist Research"). Cam is just starting out as a researcher of digital aggression after feeling drawn into this important research from the mass amounts of hate they witnessed others face online during the pandemic and growing up with social media. After taking Leigh's research methods class, they felt inspired to join the network of researchers like Leigh who are doing this work but didn't know where to begin or the dangers involved. As Cam began their research, we both began to wonder how to ensure a safe and productive research environment. Mentorship, we realized, was a crucial tool in this process.

In this article, we argue that the unique safety concerns and affective dimensions of digital aggression research necessitate innovative approaches to mentorship. Feminist mentorship practices specifically can provide a valuable framework for supporting digital aggression research. Because it values collaboration (Gaillet and Eble; Godbee and Novotny; VanHaitsma and Ceraso), seeks to undermine power inequities (Fishman and Lunsford; Kynard), and centers around an ethic of care (Ribero and Arellano; Sparby), we argue that feminist mentorship can be a powerful mechanism to help digital aggression researchers navigate a particularly challenging research environment.

We will begin by defining digital aggression as a threat not only to internet users, but also to digital researchers. Although there are risks to doing this research, we insist that this work is necessary to work towards safer and more equitable online spaces for everyone. We will then argue that feminist mentorship can function as a resource to help sustain and support digital researchers. Drawing on our own mentorship relationship as more experienced (Leigh) and more novice (Cam) digital aggression researchers, we will provide considerations for both mentors and mentees and address the specific difficulties that digital aggression research poses to mentorship. We'll conclude by suggesting that feminist mentorship practices in digital aggression research might offer the discipline an opportunity to reimagine research ethics altogether.

Digital Aggression and the Threat to Researchers

Digital aggression can be hard to define, and covers a range of behaviors from name calling, doxing[7], sexual harassment, and physical threats (Jane; Mantilla; Vogels). While 41% of American internet users have experienced some form of online harassment, according to a 2021

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7   "Doxing" is when a user (or users) make others' personal information (such as home address, employer, phone number, etc.) public, usually with the intent to frighten or threaten the target.

Pew report, the risks of digital aggression are especially amplified for women, people of color, queer people, and people with disabilities. These vulnerable users experience digital aggression more frequently and experience its most severe and violent forms (Gardiner et al; Lenhart et al; Vogels).

These behaviors result in real harms: targets of digital aggression report experiencing sometimes intense feelings of emotional distress and danger (Lenhart et al; Vogels). Because it can happen in any online space from comment sections to social media to professional listservs, digital aggression also undermines efforts to build more equitable, inclusive digital publics. Digital aggression often elicits silencing and exclusion, as its targets self-censor and remove themselves from unsafe platforms (Cole; Gelms, "Volatile Visibility"; Lenhart et al). Users who are most likely to experience digital aggression–women, people of color, queer people–may simply choose to not participate in these spaces. The result, then, is that digital aggression often serves as a tool to enforce patriarchal, racist, and other exclusionary visions of the internet.

No digital aggression researcher is immune from these threats, as the opening vignettes illustrate. Importantly, however, researchers' identities matter when it comes to researching and experiencing digital aggression: because we know women, queer folks, people of color, and other marginalized populations experience digital aggression more often and more severely, researchers with these identities face additional risk. As a result, note Brit Kelley and Stephanie Weaver, "some research methods and practices will not be available for some researchers with regards to some researched groups, and in some cases, the researcher may be accruing personal risk in coming forward with their research" (6). Indeed these risks are present at every stage of the research process: as researchers' experiences show (Gelms, "Social Media"; Vera-Gray), recruiting participants can invite harassment and threats. Analyzing or coding racist, sexist, and other offensive texts can also result in mental distress (Kelley and Weaver; Sparby). Researchers of digital aggression must also carefully consider where and how to publish and publicize their work. While researchers often hope their work will reach a wide audience, for researchers of digital aggression, this can lead to additional risk, as hostile readers may be able to locate their published work, which often includes institutional affiliation as well as email and mailing addresses and sometimes even social media handles (Gruwell, "Feminist Research"; Sparby).

But why do this work if there are so many dangers in doing so? Despite its risks, we feel that digital aggression research is necessary to build online spaces that are safer for everyone, especially those with marginalized identities. This kind of research doesn't just "call out" particular individuals on their bad behavior, it also identifies patterns of hate and aggression and the structures that support it. Abuse of any kind can lead to silencing of victims, and we as digital aggression researchers want victims to have a voice in both our research and in their own online spaces. Bridget Gelms ("Volatile Visibility") discusses the importance of detailing the stories of victims of online harassment, writing: " …when we…sanitize the experiences of the abused, we create a

functional cloaking mechanism, keeping the realities of what women experience online out of sight" (182). By sharing the stories of those who have been harassed and abused, we let others know they aren't alone and use real life experiences to inform our active choices about designing the kind of digital world we want to exist in. Even though we can't control what happens online, we can help shift and scaffold the digital environment we would like to exist in. In order to do so, we need to report and take note of abuse online when we see it and carefully research the patterns, beliefs, and designs that drive digital aggression.

Feminist Mentorship

The obstacles presented by digital aggression create an especially challenging research environment for novice scholars and may ultimately dissuade them from undertaking this important work. Researchers are beginning to recognize the risks that researchers and participants alike may face, and have started to generate valuable methodological approaches that are attentive to digital aggression (franzke et al.; Gelms "Social Media"; Gruwell "Feminist Research"; Sparby). Yet these difficulties are still in many ways unique and unfamiliar to those outside this research area, necessitating more systemic support structures beyond individual methodological considerations. Feminist mentorship practices, we suggest, can ensure the sustainability of digital aggression research specifically because they so often center practices that can successfully combat digital aggression, including collaboration, awareness of power inequities, and an ethic of care.

Writing studies has a robust tradition of feminist mentorship, even if we have seen little explicit evidence that it is being used to guide the work of digital aggression research. This scholarship has found that mentorship is especially critical in ensuring the success and safety of marginalized scholars (Ballif, Davis, and Mountford; Okawa; Ore, Wiser, and Cedillo; Ribero and Arellano). Mentorship, in other words, is perhaps most beneficial to those scholars most likely to be impacted by digital aggression. Indeed, this scholarship suggests that mentorship of women, BIPOC, queer folks, and others traditionally excluded from academia can work to transform the patriarchal, white supremacist foundations of the academy entirely. Instead of "shaping the scholar to the white dominant academy," these approaches recognize the necessity of "transforming the institution into a space that values minoritized ways of knowing and being in the world" (Ribero and Arellano 337). Digital aggression researchers–most especially those who are minoritized in some way–face a particular challenge: academic and digital spaces are often hostile to their presence, yet their presence is necessary to ensure diverse and equitable spaces. Feminist mentorship can help alleviate this tension, creating not just much-needed support systems for digital aggression researchers but working to undermine the structures of exclusion that render them necessary in the first place.

Traditionally, academic mentorship has centered around a hierarchical master-apprentice

paradigm. Feminist mentorship, in contrast, seeks to undermine this authoritative model by encouraging more collaborative approaches (Gaillet and Eble; Fishman and Lunsford; and Ryan). Several researchers argue for the importance of seeking mentorship from peers, such as Pamela VanHaitsma and Steph Ceraso's "horizontal mentorship" or Ana Milena Ribero and Sonia C. Arellano's "comadrismo." Beth Godbee and Julia C. Novotny describe the collaborative spirit that drives feminist mentorship as one that "privileges relational aspects [and emphasizes] mutuality" (179). These approaches are particularly well-suited for supporting digital aggression researchers, as scholars have emphasized the need for "[digital aggression] researchers to create community and belonging with others" (Sparby 54). Feminist mentorship seeks to develop mutually beneficial partnerships, working to create the "community and belonging" Derek Sparby argues is necessary to sustain digital aggression researchers.

This emphasis on collaboration is not a naive one, however; it is rooted in an acute and constant awareness of power inequities. While many feminist mentorship relationships may emerge between peers (Morris, Rule, and LaVecchia; VanHaitsma and Ceraso), mentorship between differently situated scholars–such as a more experienced and more novice scholar–still presents important learning opportunities for all involved. Given the power inequities that mark many mentorship relationships (even among peers in an academic hierarchy), feminist mentorship seeks to explore these differences as important opportunities to learn from one another and identify shared values and beliefs (Madden and Tarabochia; Okawa). As Kathryn Gindlesparger and Holly Ryan note, "dialogues about conflict and tension in feminist mentoring relationships" can serve as "productive sites of transformation rather than ones of shame or guilt" (67). Because digital aggression researchers often find themselves researching spaces or communities that are hostile to them (Gelms "Social Media"; Gruwell, "Feminist Research"), feminist mentorship's constant interrogation and negotiation of power can equip researchers with the necessary analytic tools to construct ethical and responsible relationships with those they study while also remaining vigilant to potential risks.

It is this attention to both power and collaboration that gives feminist mentorship its keen interest in care. Feminist theorists have long advocated a politics centered on an ethic of care, which sees political transformation and justice as an interpersonal project (Gilligan; Noddings). Care is a means of achieving solidarity under what bell hooks calls the "white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal class structure" (18). In feminist mentorship, then, this ethic of care demands "support for both the personal and the professional" (Gindlesparger and Ryan 62), even as such support can entail significant (often institutionally unrecognized or supported) emotional labor (Madden and Tarabochia; Ore, Weiser, and Cedillo). Care is perhaps especially crucial for digital aggression researchers, given the risks this work presents to both their professional and personal lives. To counter these effects, Sparby presents a "feminist ethic of self-care,"4 which offers several important strategies to protect physical safety and emotional wellbeing. We suggest, however, that feminist mentorship can also cultivate the ethic of care necessary to safeguard digital aggres-

sion researchers.

Feminist Mentorship in Practice: Supporting Digital Aggression Research

Feminist mentorship practices, we have shown, are particularly well-suited to support the messy, often dangerous work of digital aggression research. But what might this look like in practice? What, for example, should mentors know about how best to preserve the physical and emotional welfare of mentees? What kind of support might mentees request from their advisors, and how might they ask for it? What is the role of institutions in supporting these kinds of mentorship structures? How can mentors and mentees best attune themselves to the inequities that fuel digital aggression? Mentorship relationships emerge from the experiences and identities of each individual; each mentorship configuration is therefore unique and specific. Here, we present heuristic guidelines for digital aggression research rooted in our own experiences not because we believe these considerations to be universal or definitive, but in hopes they can serve as a model to support others who want to do this work within their own mentoring relationships.

Cam

While I had grown up on social media and been witnessing digital aggression myself since I was a pre-teen, I was wildly unsure of where to start my research once the opportunity was presented to me. I had no idea that research like this existed, and I was constantly doubting my abilities and methods as a novice researcher. I was also concerned, as I was somewhat aware of the dangers of this research, but unsure of the realities of the situation. While I was often thinking about the safety of the users of the various sites I was studying (Twitter, Instagram, and LMSs/other educational platforms), and was often thinking about ways to keep future participants safe, I was hardly factoring myself into the safety equation.

Once I began fielding my questions to Leigh and seeking out her advice, and unknowingly to me, beginning a mentoring relationship that aligns with the history of feminist researchers in our field, I began to realize how precarious doing this research really was. As we continued to work together throughout my Master's program, we both began to see a somewhat untrodden path in terms of mentorship for digital aggression researchers. The experiences that I had with Leigh have informed my guidelines that follow.

- **Be realistic about the potential dangers (physical, mental, and emotional) of digital aggression work.** The first thing that Leigh met me with in our mentoring relationship was honesty. Before I even began the work on turning an in-class proposal related to digital aggression on Twitter into a workable research study, she asked me to attend a CFSHRC panel in which she and other digital aggression researchers detailed their experiences doing this work. The panelists, including Leigh, Bridget Gelms, Vyshali

Manivannan, and Derek Sparby, spoke to the negative and unsafe aspects that might come with doing this work, including being harassed, stalked, and mocked online for researching, calling out, and analyzing the abusive behavior of others online. The dangers that one faces in doing this work are embodied in a physical, mental, and emotional sense. As Sparby notes, this kind of work requires researchers to think ahead, several steps ahead, at all times, in order to avoid harassment or abuse for our work, which still might not prevent abuse from happening.

- **Emphasize the safety of the researcher before they begin drafting their research methods/projects.** A researcher's methods of data collection will greatly impact how the researcher should approach their safety methods, as Leigh advised me when I began my project. As I was attempting to solicit participants through my own, personal social media accounts, Leigh advised me to lock down and delete any private information about myself that might give away anything relating to my location or other highly sensitive information and privatize accounts that I wasn't attempting to solicit participants through. Safety doesn't just relate to data, however. As Sparby writes (54), digital aggression researchers need to keep in mind their own mental health and take breaks, if possible, when researching content that is mentally and emotionally taxing. Of course, not all researchers will have the privilege to fully retreat (for example, those whose identities make them a constant target for digital aggression or those who have little agency within productivity-centered institutional timelines), but creating boundaries around this kind of research is essential to ensure both physical and mental well-being.

- **Real-life examples are the most helpful in priming researchers for what to expect.** The panel that Leigh had me attend gave painfully realistic expectations of what can happen when one researches harmful online practices. Reading articles and keeping up to date on research in this growing subfield, it is easy to see that most doing digital aggression research take this work very personally and very seriously, often detailing their personal experiences and the effect of their positionalities on the research they do. The examples of this work (mostly done by marginalized people) have greatly impacted me and given me valuable lessons that I will move forward with when doing this work. While qualitative or narrative evidence is not always as respected in our field as quantitative evidence, to me, the stories of the researchers that came before me are extremely helpful and impact the steps I am taking into doing my own research.

- **Mentees cannot be adequately mentored through one-size-fits-all methods.** As every mentor and mentee are different, it is safe to say that all mentorship relationships are personal and specific. Other kinds of mentees who differ from me might have different concerns. As a white, queer person, I understand that I hold a place of privilege as well as precarity online. Other mentees, particularly those who are women of color or

queer people of color, might have different needs due to the rates at which people of color are more readily harassed in online spaces.

Leigh

Despite my experiences with digital aggression–both as a researcher and a target– I felt unprepared to support Cam's own research in this area. As Cam described their proposed project, I felt excited, because I knew how important this work would be in describing and curtailing harassment of queer women on Twitter. Yet, I also had concerns about Cam's safety and well-being. Cam had taken a research methods class with me, which included significant attention to digital methodology, but little of this scholarship is attuned to the risks of digital aggression. As Cam began their project then, I found myself drawing on both my experiences of digital aggression as well as my knowledge of feminist mentorship practices to begin to define the values that drove our work together. The guidelines I've outlined here have grown out of our relationship.

- **Help researchers understand the risks at every stage, from data collection to publication and beyond.** I was worried about how I could be honest and transparent about the challenges of this work without dampening a novice researcher's excitement. I determined that being honest with Cam would enable them to best assess the potential risks they faced. I shared articles from digital aggression researchers about how to recruit participants safely and we discussed the future of the project. I asked Cam to consider how and where to share their work: do you want to publish in an Open Access space, or share your work on social media? Indeed, some researchers of digital aggression have intentionally chosen to publish their work behind paywalls (Sparby 56), but even this measure doesn't always protect researchers. While there are good reasons for choosing these kinds of options, they also carry additional risk. This transparency helped Cam make informed decisions about how to continue with their research.

- **Point to protective practices and resources.** As they began their work, I encouraged Cam to audit their digital identity to ensure it is as private and secure as necessary (Sparby 56-7). It was important for me to highlight the many community supports available to Cam, which is why I worked to introduce them to other digital aggression researchers and shared valuable resources for targets of digital aggression such as [Crash Override](#) and [Speak Up and Stay Safe(r)](#)in case Cam did encounter difficulties we could not address together. Finally, we discussed the possibility of seeking institutional resources as needed, such as a VPN for additional privacy or even alerting campus authorities and/or local police should any aggression escalate to credible threats (Sparby 60).

- **Recognize how power inequities may shape your experience.** I am a straight, cis

white woman who has recently gained tenure at an R1 school: I know I possess a great deal of power (at least in the academy). I was quite aware of how unequally positioned Cam and I were, and I wondered how I could help them conceptualize and navigate potential risks while we inhabit different identity positions. I knew my experiences as a user and researcher of Twitter, for example, were very different from theirs. It was thus critical to acknowledge our differences and use them as a starting point for conversations about research plans. As our positionalities have changed over time, our relationship too has evolved, and this dynamic reflection helps us better understand each other and the different approaches we may take to digital aggression research.

- **Build a flexible, rhetorical approach to research.** While internet researchers have long argued for the value of a rhetorical approach to research (McKee and Porter), I knew, from both my own and others' experiences, that digital aggression research often requires a flexibility beyond that of most research scenes. The unique circumstances of digital aggression research mean that methods may change (Gelms, "Social Media"), a researcher may need to step back for frequent breaks, or may need additional time to locate an appropriate publication venue (Sparby 55-6). While it is undoubtedly difficult to account for the messiness of digital aggression research, I still sought to help Cam develop a research plan that understood the kind of flexibility digital aggression demands and encouraged them to consider contingencies and anticipate possible delays.

Our ongoing mentoring relationship has provided an important location for reflection on our ever-evolving scholarly identities. Cam feels that they have gained a stronger sense of self as a feminist researcher and are more aware of the importance of safety for all involved in the research process, including the researcher. Leigh, on the other hand, has more fully realized the transformative power of mentorship, which can foster new methodological approaches that work to create more inclusive digital spaces as well as diversify disciplinary knowledge-making practices. Together, we hope our experiences can prompt other researchers to explore the possibilities that mentorship presents for supporting not just digital aggression researchers but all researchers who navigate inequitable or hostile research scenes.

Toward Sustainable Research Mentorship

Many questions remain about digital aggression research, especially regarding mentorship structures and their relationship to research ethics. The reality is that such research introduces unprecedented challenges to mentorship practices broadly across our field. This work can actively harm researchers' mental, emotional, or physical health and, as a result, mentorship centered around digital aggression research is precarious, forcing hard questions of individuals, the mentorship relationship, and the discipline as a whole. Digital aggression research, then, calls us to critically and carefully scrutinize the important, if often unexamined, ways that methodolo-

gies inform individual mentorship relationships and practices. We argue that feminist mentorship offers valuable principles to support digital aggression researchers, as its emphasis on collaboration, interrogation of power relationships, and interest in self-care helps researchers navigate digital research environments marked by exclusion, hostility, and danger. The guiding principles and suggestions we have offered here are meant to encourage other researchers to enter this increasingly important research area.

Yet we hope our work here does not end with digital aggression researchers. While this work is in some respects uniquely dangerous, especially for marginalized researchers, we believe that nearly all meaningful research is risky in one way or another. We thus conclude by encouraging the field to reflect on its mentorship practices. Mentorship can not only alleviate the various difficulties and harms that individual researchers may face, but it can also reframe research ethics altogether, as it calls attention to how thoroughly questions of identity and power are woven into our research. Feminist mentorship is but one means to this end, and we remain optimistic about mentorship's potential to support the kind of transformative research that will build not just a more equitable internet, but a more equitable world.

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