

## #Answerusyoutube: predatory influencers and cross-platform insulation

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# #Answerusyoutube: predatory influencers and cross-platform insulation

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## ABSTRACT

In the summer of 2020, dozens of high-profile influencers in videogaming entertainment were accused of sexual harassment and predatory behavior. Among them, popular gaming YouTuber Craig Thompson (username Mini Ladd) confessed on Twitter to sexting minors but resumed uploading content to his YouTube channel one month later, resulting in public outcry. Thompson's return to YouTube, as a case study, illustrates how predatory influencers can manipulate technical affordances across social media platforms to insulate themselves from accountability and maintain their revenue and audience. Drawing on data scraped from Twitter (34k tweets) and YouTube (62k comments and video network data), this article uses a mixed-methods social network analysis (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016) to map the public effort to deplatform Mini Ladd. This case study explores issues of cross-platform insulation and audience manipulation by demonstrating how a predatory influencer: 1) censored keywords in his comments to obfuscate criticism; 2) optimized YouTube's video algorithms to avoid references to his scandal; and 3) upheld harassment towards his young fanbase. Ultimately, I argue that YouTube's policies are ill-equipped to manage the networked practices of predatory influencers and that the platform's reliance on morally motivated networked harassment (Marwick, 2021) as a substitute is troubling and ineffective.

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## Introduction

In late 2020, the videogaming entertainment scene was shaken as over thirty high-profile figures on YouTube and Twitch were publicly accused of sexual assault and grooming underage fans. As the resulting public outcry reached a tipping point, platforms were forced to address how such abuse became widespread. A multiplatform campaign that began on Twitter called #TwitchBlackout and #ADayOffTwitch pressured Twitch into banning several of its partnered streamers who were found to have committed sexual abuse and harassment ("Twitch Blackout' . . . , 2020). YouTube's reaction, however, was less direct. Although YouTube has removed some predatory creators, including high-profile beauty influencer James Charles (Lorenz and Safronova 2021) from the YouTube Partner Program (which grants access to YouTube's support team and monetization services), they have generally refrained from deleting channels or banning creators outright. In

most cases, YouTube seems to rely on influencers leaving the platform of their own accord after being exposed, or “self-censuring” (Marwick 2021). YouTube has struggled to address this systemic breach of trust between creators and audiences in part because its Community Guidelines focus almost exclusively on *content*, addressing issues such as “impersonation,” “child safety,” and “hate speech” that appear in-video (“YouTube Community Guidelines n.d.”). While YouTube addresses videos that break these guidelines via channel strikes, demonetization, and channel removal, the scope of YouTube’s policies does not address the *behavior* of content creators themselves, especially when it occurs off-platform. It is here that the ambiguity of its moderation practices has the potential to endanger the safety of its users.

Among the figures exposed for predatory conduct, British YouTuber Craig Thompson—who goes by Mini Ladd on YouTube and has 6.3 million subscribers across three channels as of this writing—was accused of grooming<sup>1</sup> and soliciting explicit messages from underage fans. Thompson admitted to allegations on Twitter, writing: “I take full responsibility for the inappropriate texts and messages I sent,” going on to say that he would “work on himself,” and would “be back when the time is right” (Mini 2020a). Not even two months later, however, Thompson tweeted about completing an “emotional journey” and resumed uploading monetized video content to his YouTube channel.

Thompson’s swift return to regular uploads highlights important questions about the conditions that enable predators on YouTube. How do social media platforms acknowledge and respond to the networked behaviors of their users? As the influence of content creators is increasingly distributed across platforms (Twitter, Discord, Patreon, Twitch), we must examine how predatory influencers abuse both technical affordances of *and between* platforms. Such work extends existing cyberfeminist inquiry into the ways that harassment, hatred, and abuse are cultivated through platforms. To this end, this study performs a mixed-methods social network analysis (Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández, 2016) of Thompson’s return to YouTube and the subsequent effort to “deplatform” him and get his channel removed. I analyze how Thompson’s survivors and critics, who mobilized and campaigned against him on Twitter, struggled to enact meaningful consequences on YouTube and how Thompson weaponized insulation between these two platforms to elide accountability. I frame Thompson’s image-repair strategy of “fleeing” his other social media accounts and turning solely to his primary YouTube channel, as an example of *cross-platform insulation* and, specifically, a *platform retreat*, in which an embroiled influencer repositions themselves across social media networks to avoid accountability.

### ***Mini Ladd and the platform retreat***

In June of 2020, two victims publicly accused Thompson of sending explicit messages to and grooming them while they were minors. Following Thompson’s original confession, posted in a screenshotted note to Twitter on June 24 2020, his Twitter and YouTube accounts (“Mini Ladd” and his personal channel “Craig Thompson”) were dormant. Less than two months later, on August 12, Thompson uploaded a new video to his Mini Ladd channel titled “Minecraft But All The Mobs Are Me.” That same day, Thompson posted a notepad screenshot on his public Twitter that explained that he had returned to Ireland

to focus on “bettering [him]self,” that he had begun therapy, and that “This whole process has been an emotional journey but a necessary and eye-opening one” (Ladd Mini 2020b).

Thompson’s return to uploading engendered rage online, as hashtags including #mini-laddisoverparty, #cancelminiladd, and #getminiladdoffyoutube, circulated across Twitter. Much of this ire was directed at YouTube’s social media accounts. As Thompson’s survivors and the gaming community called for his deplatforming, a reckoning seemed imminent. After all, Thompson admitted to grooming minors on Twitter, but here he was making *Minecraft* content on YouTube—a popular genre with youth. Yet the official response from YouTube to one survivor rang hollow:

Thank you for reaching out – if you think the channel violates our Community Guidelines, you can directly report it here ... (@TeamYouTube, Sept. 2020). [Tweet date and user handle redacted for privacy]

YouTube’s reaction typifies the problems of cross-platform insulation: users accused of misconduct or abuse on one platform can take refuge elsewhere, benefitting from myopic moderating practices. In this case, YouTube’s content-only approach to moderation meant a self-confessed child predator was welcome to continue making content oriented towards a young audience. By May of 2021, Thompson had uploaded 21 new videos to his Mini Ladd channel—each averaging around 300k views. On September 4 2020, Thompson uploaded a 5-minute video titled “clearing the air” in which he claimed to “address everything” (Mini 2020e) in the infamous form of the YouTube apology video (Sandlin and Gracyalhy 2018). True to the genre, Thompson spent much of the video “debunking rumors” and circumnavigating accusations, only referencing the scandal tangentially as the “situation with the other two people, that I said on Twitter ...” (Mini 2020e). In the months that followed, Thompson’s critics continued to pressure YouTube’s social accounts with hashtag campaigns, petitions, and callouts while “drama Youtubers” sent their fans to flood Thompson’s comment sections.

These sustained demands for accountability raise questions about YouTube’s claim that its role in moderation begins and ends with the content uploaded to its site. Although Thompson did eventually issue a more direct apology on YouTube at the end of December, this drawn-out battle for accountability reveals dangerous ways that YouTube insulates predatory influencers.

### **Literature review**

Thompson’s scandal is an example of what social media scholar Alice Marwick terms “morally motivated networked harassment” (MMNH), in which a community member accuses a target of violating moral norms, “triggering moral outrage throughout the networked audience” (Marwick 2021, 2). In this case, victims identified Thompson as a target and communities on Twitter and YouTube mobilized against him with the hope of removing him from a position of power which he might continue to abuse. While Marwick is primarily concerned with how marginalized people experience harassment across “attack vectors,” I build on this framework to argue that public figures like Thompson—who maintain financial, social, and, as I will demonstrate, technical power—can resist the censoring effects of MMNH. This study complicates the MMNH model by demonstrating how platform affordances and cross-platform insulation shape MMNH’s

toxic dynamics: protecting predators while exacerbating the harassment of marginalized users.

Thompson's platform retreat serves a dual role; although he publicly confessed on Twitter (and can claim the issue is "resolved"), he maintained his revenue-earning audience on YouTube. Simultaneously, YouTube, championing an ethos of "free speech," relies on its defensive role as a platform to "seek protection for facilitating user expression, yet also seek limited liability for what those users say" (Gillespie 2010, 347). Tarleton Gillespie notes that the term *platform* has been "carefully massaged" by social media companies to maintain distance from content and users (Gillespie 2010, 359). Platforms themselves are actors in shaping public discourse, and their role in the production of media is contentious. YouTube's response to public outcry on Twitter demonstrates this. The linchpin in "if you think *the channel* violates our Community Guidelines . . ." performs this same rhetorical distancing, enabled by YouTube's focus on content rather than people (@TeamYouTube, Sept. 2020, emphasis added). While such handwashing is common of all social media platforms, this study suggests that YouTube's creator tools and moderation policies can actually empower predatory influencers.

Such rhetorical separation of content and behavior occurs across social media. For example, porn studies scholars have noted how cross-platform insulation allows social media sites to wash their hands of accountability if they are not actively *hosting* problematic, abusive, or illegal content. Winter and Salter (2019) found that popular code-hosting site GitHub—which maintains anti-pornography and anti-harassment policies—brushed off users' concerns about public repositories that linked to and discussed pornographic deepfakes because the deepfakes themselves weren't hosted on GitHub. Similarly, YouTube distances itself from Thompson's behavior by clarifying that it is not responsible for anything that happens off-video, even when Thompson publicly admitted to predatory behavior.

The work of social media scholars who focus on platforms and harassment is crucial in considering how Twitter and YouTube's affordances are being used and abused. As Marwick and Caplan's (2018) study of networked harassment notes, white, male users often "adopt a defensible position as the suffering victim, turning feminist (or queer, or anti-racist) activism on its head and re-framing it as oppressive." This research sees predatory influencers as enmeshed in toxic technoculture (Massanari 2017) and further clarifies how the followers of drama YouTubers were deployed against Thompson and his fans. The mobilization of drama YouTube fans against Thompson likewise extends scholarship on "response videos" as a model of harassment. Scholars have noted that modes of harassment known as "dogpiling," "raiding," and "brigading" are established practices baked into the affordances of YouTube and that this model has proved lucrative as "YouTube drama" drives views (Lewis, Marwick and Partin 2020; Burgess and Green 2013).

The exposure of predatory influencers on YouTube and Twitch from 2020–2021 is a recent milestone in a long history of cyberfeminist campaigns to expose predators and the systems that protect them (Loney-Howes, Mendes, Romero, Fileborn and Puente 2021; Clark-Parsons 2021). The same systems that demonetize queer content (Caplan and Gillespie 2020) and produce male-dominated, sexist spaces (Döring and Mohseni 2019) on YouTube are also at work in protecting abusers. Thompson's channel is a case study in the complicated relationship between predatory influencers and their platforms, inviting new implications regarding the inter-platform dynamics of moderation and

demanding new attention to how not only platform affordances, but also *inter*-platform relationships, protect predators. To this end, this case study involves a dual analysis across Twitter and YouTube, examining how a confessed child predator manipulated the very tools intended to promote child safety to insulate himself and maintain power over his young audience.

## Materials and methods

### *Twitter data*

To examine the Twitter discourse regarding Thompson's return, I collected historic tweets with the `snsrape` python scraper (Just Another Archivist 2020) using the query "miniladd" from 6/1/2020–3/31/2021, resulting in a population of 34,316 tweets. I used Orange data mining tools, AntConc, and Python notebooks to explore these samples quantitatively (Demšar, Curk, Erjavec, Gorup, Hočevar, Milutinovič, Možina et al. 2013). This study used activity over time, sentiment analysis, concordances, and topic modelling reports to quickly gather information about the larger trends of the discourse. Building from Brock's (2018; Brock 2020) model for critical technoculture discourse analysis (CTDA) and following my previous work in studying online hate networks (Heslep and Berge 2021), I put this data into conversation with texts from Thompson, survivors, YouTube, and other creators.

### *YouTube data*

I collected comments and video network data for seven Mini Ladd videos (uploaded on: December 8 2020, April 8 2020, April 9 2020, December 9 2020, 9/17/2020, January 10 2020, and 12/28/2020) using YouTube Data Tools, resulting in a population of 62,911 comments ("YouTube Data Tools n.d."). In June of 2021, as this manuscript was initially being prepared, Thompson removed or unlisted over twenty videos that had been posted since the scandal broke—with the exception of "My Apology" (12/28/20) and "Clearing the Air" (9/4/20). As a result, many of the videos analyzed in this sample are no longer publicly available. Collected comments were analyzed using Orange data mining tools and AntConc. Video network data was visualized in Gephi (Bastian, Heymann and Jacomy 2009).

### *Ethical framework*

The impetus of this study lies in its feminist orientation to excavating the sociotechnical power structures that protect predatory influencers. The first step of cyberfeminist research is examining systems of power (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020) and this case study demonstrates the difficulty in mapping abuses of power that extend across platforms.

In the interest of minimizing harm in this work, I approach this study's methodology with two considerations:

- (1) *Protecting vulnerable parties*: I do not name Thompson's victims, and references to their tweets are summarized to reduce searchability. This is not ideal, as I do not

wish to be reductive in my account of their activism, but both have already experienced harassment for coming forward—and I wish to avoid exacerbating that harm with attention from this study.

- (2) *Holding predators accountable*: I do not extend these same considerations to Thompson or other public figures accused of abuse. This is for two reasons: a) their celebrity gives them power that the victims do not have to protect themselves; and b) as I will demonstrate, their ability to avoid accountability is foundational to the proliferation of abuse.

I have left textual samples from the corpus summarized and anonymized, with a few exceptions: 1) celebrities and drama YouTubers whose identities are already in the public spotlight and 2) account handles that perform structural community functions and are not personal accounts.

## Results

### *The Twitter conversation: profile*

The conversation surrounding Thompson in the Twitter sample had two immediately visible components: 1) crucial, structural actors driving the discourse and 2) a clear emphasis on deplatforming Thompson. Among the sample of 34,316 tweets:

- “YouTube” was mentioned 4,769 times (often tagging the @YouTube handle directly). “@teamyoutube” was used 647 times.
- “platform” was used 1,121 times (as in, “get MiniLadd off your platform” and “#deplatformpredators”).

Numerous Change.org petitions to ban Mini Ladd from YouTube circulated on Twitter, with hyperlinks to them appearing in the corpus 660 times. Additionally, numerous hashtags emerged targeting Thompson:

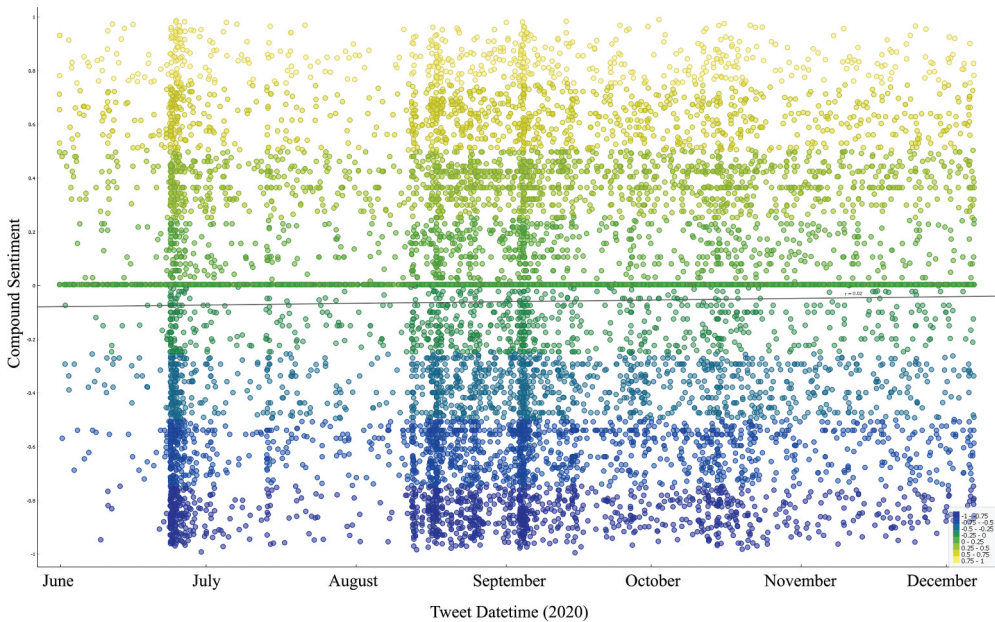
- “#getminiladdoffyoutube” ( $n=248$ )
- “#miniladdisoverparty” ( $n=193$ )
- “#cancelminiladd” ( $n=56$ ).

Other hashtags emerged directed at YouTube, including:

- “#AnswerUsYouTube” ( $n=64$ )
- “#AnswerUsPedoTube” ( $n=28$ )

While many of these hashtags were circulated by regular users, others were tweeted by accounts entirely dedicated to exposing Mini Ladd, even tweeting out every day: “Day X of retweeting ... until @YouTube does something.”<sup>2</sup> These accounts cross-posted accusations about other predatory influencers on YouTube. @BanMiniLadd2020 retweeted videos by drama YouTubers and recruited members for a Discord server dedicated to getting Thompson banned.





**Figure 1.** Sentiment analysis of Tweets referencing “Mini Ladd” (June–December, 2020).

The focus of the conversation shifted heavily over time (Figure 1). In the earliest data collected (visible between June and July 2020), discourse was focused around supporting survivors who had come forward. The first significant burst of activity in the final weeks of June is representative of reactions to the survivors’ initial statements and Thompson’s confession, consisting largely of an outpouring of support for survivors and disdain for Thompson.

The conversation died down until mid-August when Thompson resumed uploading. Each subsequent video release from Thompson was accompanied by another spike in Twitter activity (visible in the concentrated, vertical groupings between August and October), as the community demanded action from YouTube. After November, although the Twitter conversation dwindled, there remained a persistent discussion largely sustained by structural actors (bots, ban-groups, hashtags) and cross-postings, as Thompson was brought up in conversations about other predatory influencers.

### ***The YouTube conversation: profile***

The discourse in the comment section of Thompson’s videos was far less structured, and aggressively divided between critics and fans. Generally, Thompson’s video comments were characterized by three key elements: 1) prominent support from still-loyal fans; 2) a shift towards criticism that corresponded with how long the video had been uploaded; and 3) rampant toxicity by critics directed towards Thompson’s fans. Despite Thompson’s embroiled position on Twitter, his return to YouTube garnered support in the comments of his new videos, marked by excitement and gratitude. Among the 62,911 comments in the YouTube sample:

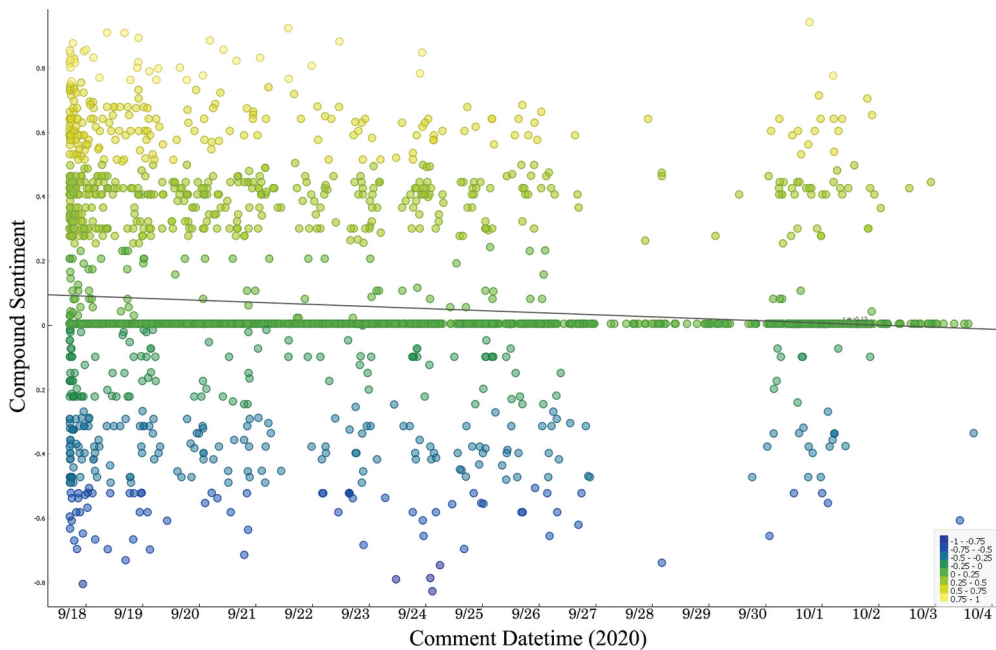


- The word “back” ( $n=1997$ ) was among the most common words and was generally used to express joy at Thompson’s return. Relatedly, “glad” ( $n=626$ ) was commonly used in variations of “glad you’re back.”
- Other tokens were associated with expressions of support, such as “love” ( $n=868$ ) [“love you mini,” “we love to see it”].

The reaction remained contentious, especially as those aware of Thompson’s scandal, including users from Twitter, made their way to YouTube. Thompson’s return video (“Minecraft But All The Mobs Are Me”) had 35k likes and 37k dislikes at the time of collection, and this split was semantically reflected in the comments:

- The word *good* ( $n=1516$ ) was used both to support Thompson (“good one sir,” “good to see your doing ok craig”) and with hostility (“good luck surviving next year,” “he’s trying to keep what good image he has left”).
- *Forgiveness* ( $n=3524$ ) was sometimes used in support of Thompson (“Forgiveness and second chance found”) but instead appeared most often as a copy-pasted phrase, “Forgiveness not found.”

This shift towards criticism was largely associated with the timing of the comments. Early comments (likely left by subscribers with notifications enabled) were more positive than those posted even a few hours after the upload. A sentiment analysis scatterplot from a now-deleted video, “I Found A SECRET In KIM JONG UNS HOUSE In Flight Simulator!” illuminates this (Figure 2). While sentiment analysis grants limited insight into the total



**Figure 2.** Sentiment analysis of Thompson’s “I found a SECRET in KIM JONG UNS HOUSE in flight simulator! (North Korea).” Video uploaded September 17, 2020.

discourse, there was a clear trend towards negative comments (violet and blue) as more critics joined the conversation over time (regression =  $-0.13$ ). Additionally, “highly negative” comments began a short time after initial, positive comments.

The most striking characteristic of the YouTube sample was the animosity directed at Thompson’s young fanbase. As much as the comment section was flooded with support for Thompson, it was likewise saturated with scathing comments directed at supportive fans. This was largely marked by the word *fetus* ( $n=707$ ) as an emergent insult for Thompson’s fans:

- “you are an actual fetus”
- “stfu fetus, before he sends you much love”
- “<—— found the fetus”
- “go back in your fetus cave”
- “fetus, do you want his mini ladd too?”
- “you’re delusional you fetus”
- “anti fetus assemble”

## Discussion

The discursive patterns of the YouTube and Twitter samples were worlds apart, but actively shaped one another. While the Twitter sample was pointed, organized, and furious with YouTube, the YouTube comments constituted a mixture of loyal support and bitter attacks on Thompson’s fans. By comparing these two samples, I demonstrate three ways Thompson insulated himself while creating new targets for extant vitriol:

- (1) Thompson moderated his YouTube comments, shielding himself from coherent criticism. These filters were likely shaped by knowledge of Twitter discourse.
- (2) Thompson optimized YouTube’s uploading pipeline and metadata to prevent algorithmic pairing of his videos with references to his behavior.
- (3) Drama YouTubers, attempting to signal-boost survivors and expose Thompson, counterproductively weaponized their fanbases to create further harassment.

It was not the characteristics of these platforms alone, but the way they interacted with each other, that enabled Thompson’s retreat. Below, I explore each of these outcomes in detail.

### ***Thompson moderated his YouTube comments, shielding himself from coherent criticism***

A crucial component of the YouTube dataset was language that was *missing*. Discrepancies in the conversation became suspicious as many of the prominent keywords in the Twitter sample were absent from the YouTube dataset. While in some cases this may have been indicative of the discursive patterns of each platform, further analysis suggested that these absences were evidence of Thompson censoring his comment section using YouTube Studio’s moderation tools.

Despite their prominence in the Twitter data set (34,316 tweets), the following words appeared *zero times* in the 62,911 comment YouTube sample (*n* represents instances in the Twitter population):

- “keemstar”<sup>3</sup> (*n* = 1892)
- “pedo” (*n* = 1823)
- “pedophile” (*n* = 1451)
- “girls” (*n* = 1217)
- “minor” (*n* = 323) and “minors” (*n* = 1039)<sup>4</sup>
- “children” (*n* = 395) and “child” (*n* = 490)
- “kid” (*n* = 164) and “kids” (*n* = 552)
- “underage” (*n* = 589)
- “sexual” (*n* = 423)
- “#getminladdioffyoutube” (*n* = 333)
- variations of “grooming” (1041), including “groom” (*n* = 105), “groomed” (*n* = 193), “groomer” (*n* = 236), and “grooming” (*n* = 507)

These absences were complicated by my discovery that misspellings and variations of these words *did* appear. For example, while “child” never appeared in the YouTube sample, two instances of “child’s” did. Similarly, “children” was absent from the concordance but references to “r/children” appeared. In both cases, variations with additional characters added to the root were present. This was echoed in other examples which included possessives and unspaced sentences (Table 1).

The absence of these tokens was made additionally suspicious through other contexts. For example, the word “predator” (*n*=557 on Twitter) appeared 304 times in the YouTube data (including several posts that were simply the word “predator” written out to the character limit with no spaces). However, this was complicated by two anomalies:

- All of the instances of “predator” were in comments from a single video in October and no other videos.
- References to “r/predator” did appear elsewhere.
- The word “predatorr” [sic] appeared repeatedly, with one user even commenting: “Don’t you have anything better to do then misspell predator” [sic]? to which another user then replied: “Gotta do it so when he makes it so Predator gets removed from chat it won’t” [sic].

Perhaps the single best example of this comes with the keyword “pedo”-one of the most prominent tokens in the Twitter sample (*n*=1823). While the word “pedo” alone was

**Table 1.** Variations of tokens in YouTube sample.

Tokens Absent in YouTube Sample	Variations Appearing in YouTube Sample
“Keemstar”	“Keemstar’s video”
underage	“underage’s dms”
kid	“kiddies”
“minors” and conjugations of “groom”	“MiniLaddSolicitedNudesFromMinorsBy-ThreateningToCommitSuicide” and “MiniLaddIsAPredatorThatGroomsMinorsAnd-ActedCreepyTowards13YearOldsAtCamp17”

absent from the YouTube sample, extensive variations that concatenated “pedo” or used leetspeak (obfuscated spelling) did appear, including:

- “p—ed0”
- “pediladd”
- “p doe”
- “p do phile”
- “p 3 d 0 p h 1 l e”
- “p \* do phile”
- “pedo~~~~”
- “p e d o p h i l e”
- “p—e - d - 0”

These variations were so common that they indicated a larger, collective effort on the part of commenters to avoid blocked words and gain visibility in the comment section. While there was not one consistent approach (as there was with “predatorr”), the act of posting misspellings and obscured extensions of “pedo” became a memetic practice in the YouTube sample.

D’Ignazio and Klein (2020) note that “exploring and analyzing what is missing from a dataset is a powerful way to gain insight into the cooking process” (159). In this case, the YouTube sample data was “cooked” from the beginning. Given the comparative results of missing terms and variations in the YouTube population, it is safe to make three conjectures about Thompson’s position on YouTube:

- (a) Thompson was moderating (with the purpose of censoring) his comments.
- (b) Thompson was likely basing his filter settings on discourse from other platforms (including Twitter) given that he limited hashtags and common expressions.
- (c) Thompson’s critics on YouTube were aware of these filters and adapted their approaches to try and circumnavigate them.

YouTube Studio offers creators the ability to set “Blocked Words” that automatically hold comments for a 60-day review period (“Learn about Comment Settings [n.d.-b](#)”). These comments must be manually approved by someone with access to that channel’s Studio before they are posted. Because Thompson’s comment section was purged of many specific terms related to his scandal, the coherence of outrage against him was greatly dissolved. Ironically, the safety tools YouTube provides to help grow and protect communities are being used to insulate predatory influencers.

The precision of Thompson’s filters show a clear awareness of the Twitter discourse; although Thompson was minimally active on Twitter since his “mental health” post (and as of June 2021, has deleted all of his tweets), he referenced the “stuff that’s come up on Twitter” in his faux-apology video (Mini 2020e). Likewise, the absence of any hashtags that originated on Twitter (#CancelMiniLadd, #MiniLaddIsOverParty, #GetMiniLaddOffYouTube) corroborates this—and raises additional barriers to Twitter activism reaching YouTube’s spaces. The filtering of “Keemstar” and “diesel patches” (drama YouTubers who called out Thompson) shows that he was able to use these moderation tools to cut off references to other influencers targeting him. But Thompson’s system wasn’t perfect—as what is likely

a missed filter setting on one of his October videos resulted in 131 comments using “predator” to slip through. In each case, Thompson anticipated and stemmed context collapse—he knew hostile audiences would find his videos and tried to limit their participation through filtering. As the dislike bars on his videos attested (before they were removed across YouTube shortly after the time of collection), hostile audiences were present but stifled.

Because of this practice, messages by Thompson’s critics became covert and strange: translated into netspeak or smashed together to avoid being blocked. Although the adaptation could be seen as clever workaround, it shows how their message became stealthy at the cost of cohesion. Whereas the conversations on Twitter surrounding Thompson were organized by hashtags, keywords, and links to survivors’ accounts, the narrative on YouTube was fragmented, erased, and partialized; it was nearly impossible for Thompson’s critics to guide a coherent conversation against him on a platform where he possessed so much technical and semantic control.

But while Thompson used filters to insulate himself from criticism, he did *not* use them to protect his still-loyal fans. Because critics arriving at Thompson’s videos were often met with feeds of positive comments left by early visitors, and because drama YouTubers often identified Thompson’s fans as valid targets, much of the morally motivated outrage was redirected onto his supporters. Thompson’s filters actively cultivated harassment towards his young fanbase: they did not prevent words like “fetus” or “embryo.” Instead, Thompson utilized his fans as another layer of protection—a harassment meatshield—for the outrage that couldn’t target him directly.

### ***Thompson optimized YouTube’s uploading pipeline and metadata to prevent algorithmic pairing of his content with videos referencing his behavior***

A network analysis of Thompson’s uploads provided additional insights into how the discourse on YouTube was shaped. By examining video network data and the metadata of his uploads, I determined that Thomson was optimizing YouTube’s uploading pipeline to distance content referencing the scandal from his regular content, resulting in several effects:

- (a) Thompson’s “apology” was linked most directly with his regular gaming and meme content.
- (b) Thompson was able to manipulate this distance by altering the metadata of his videos.
- (c) Videos by survivors were siphoned off into YouTube drama pipelines and scattered across a network of clickbait, enhancing YouTube’s revenue.

While most of Thompson’s videos posted since his return were heavily tagged, with all-caps titles and dramatic thumbnails aimed at his young audience, those referencing the scandal were minimalistic in their titles and metadata (Table 2). Additionally, while Thompson often made use of the “family” and “friendly” tags to mark his content as safe for child-viewers, these tags are omitted from his “clearing the air” and “My Apology” videos. Thompson’s apology video, in fact, has no inputted tags at all—the keywords are those autogenerated by YouTube in the absence of manually inputted tags.





connections across branches (represented by colored lines). The dichotomy of the network is of particular importance, and each branch can be loosely characterized by its generic grouping:

- **Purple** (bottom branch): gaming videos (including Thompson's)
- **Green** (right branch): "YouTube drama" (in which Thompson's scandal is intermixed)
- **Orange** (left branch): gaming clickbait (largely unrelated to the scandal)
- **Blue** (top branch): viral clickbait (many of the most popular clips on YouTube at the time)
- **Teal** (top-left branch): Mini Ladd drama (including reactions to his apologies, but also much unrelated drama)

Because Thompson's content is primarily related to memes and gaming, his "clearing the air" video was algorithmically pipelined into further gaming content. In other words, users that came to his "clearing the air" video who frequent gaming videos already would have received recommendations for more videos on the "gaming" branch and were less likely to be exposed to the accounts of survivors. Thompson exacerbated this by setting the keywords of his apology videos to be distinct from his regular uploads.

On the other hand, videos by survivors were scattered across the network and were not linked with coherency. Any user following the recommendation algorithms of YouTube would have to pick their way through a minefield of unrelated clickbait to put together a coherent narrative of Thompson's abuse. The green and teal branches of the network analysis algorithmically placed two videos by one of Thompson's survivors with drama content, which both hurts the legitimacy of her accounts and shows that YouTube's algorithm steers users into established drama pipelines. In other words, YouTube grants both predatory influencers and survivors a platform—but algorithmically siloes their content into different spaces with varying reach, and profits off the distance.

### ***Drama YouTubers, attempting to signal-boost survivors and expose Thompson, ended up counterproductively weaponizing their fanbases to create further harassment***

Much ire towards Thompson on YouTube came in the form of brigading as drama YouTubers deployed their fanbases against him, following the pattern of MMNH (Marwick 2021). Drama YouTuber "diesel patches," for example, uploaded several videos on Thompson's scandal, and diesel's followers at one point flooded into the comments of one of a survivor's video to express their "support" with such comments as:

- "here from daddy diesel"
- "diesel patches army where y'all at?"
- "I'm here from Daddy Diesel, [sic] this girl earns a sub"

The arrival of diesel's followers and their loud presence in the comment section of survivors' videos is indicative of the way they—like many fans of reaction videos—were deployed by an "amplifier" (Marwick 2021). In this case, the vocality of diesel's fanbase became a refrain in Thompson's comment section as they systematically targeted him and



his videos. Not only did diesel coin the term “fetuses” and “embryos” to describe Thompson’s fanbase, but his fans organized joke-account raids on Thompson’s videos. In one case, an account called “FBI” that posted jokes on diesel patches’ page later commented on a targeted Mini Ladd video (Figure 4) and conspired with another account called “MI5” to organize a raid on Mini Ladd’s comment section (Figure 5).

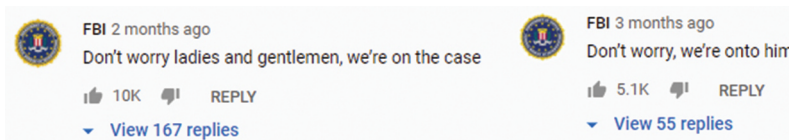
The reaction video genre is a staple of YouTube and has been linked to “blueprint[s] of harassment,” as Lewis, Marwick, and Partin (2020) have noted. These authors found that this connection was exacerbated by YouTube’s moderation services, which are built at the content-level “rather than the relationship between videos and audience behavior” (Lewis, Marwick, and Partin 2020, 1). As they write:

Response videos amplify harassment by highlighting a specific target, creating a moral justification for harassment, and providing a blueprint for how members of the networked audience should interact with the target. (Lewis, Marwick, and Partin 2020, 26)

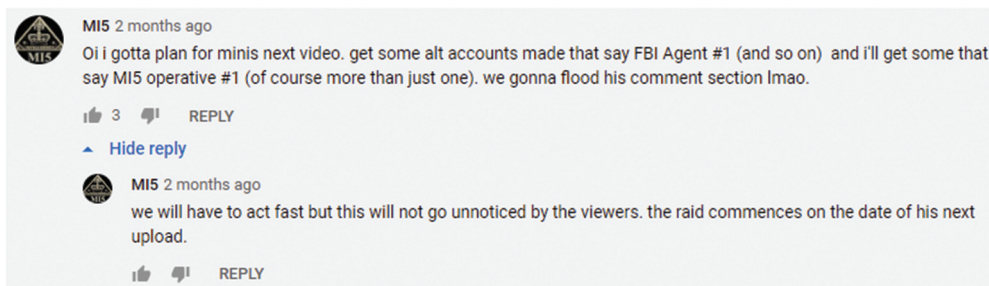
While predators should be held accountable, the model by which Thompson’s critics mobilized against him is rooted problematically in the toxic structures of YouTube at large. Marwick notes that MMNH is largely driven by audience sentiments of group identity. In this case, the fanbases of these YouTube figures were clear about their motivations. For example, although the “diesel army” claimed to be in a survivor’s comments to express support, they admitted that support for diesel patches took priority over support for the victim, as one user’s comment illustrates:

here from daddy diesel  
plus btw sending support?

YouTube drama audiences actively engaged in many harassment tactics identified by scholars: raiding comment sections, making jokes, and forming alt-accounts—only this



**Figure 4.** (Left) Caption from an account called “FBI” on a diesel patches video (diesel patches, 2020). (Right) the same account, posting on a Mini Ladd video referenced by diesel patches (Ladd Mini 2020c).



**Figure 5.** A public discussion post from an account called “MI5,” collaborating with “FBI” to perform a raid on Mini Ladd’s comment section (“FBI - YouTube” n.d.-a).

time their focus was directed towards a predatory influencer (Lewis, Marwick, and Partin 2020; Massanari 2017). They demonstrated a self-awareness of this, as one fan wrote: “Funny how us diesel patches fans are pretty much the literal scum of the earth . . . but even we are better than fucking craig.” Their impact on the comment section was significant—many of Thompson’s videos were filled with memetic references to his scandal in the “most liked” comments (Mini 2020d). While these jokes came to dominate Thompson’s comment sections and thwarted his efforts to avoid context collapse, this resulted in oblique and darkly humorous references to Thompson’s scandal becoming the loudest voices in the room, typically devoid of any context and filled with problematic jokes about child molestation (Figure 6).

The arrival of the “diesel army” and other brigading groups enacted a misinformed allyship, unintentionally furthering Thompson’s carefully constructed narrative that he was the real victim. The primary focuses of the Twitter discourse—deplatforming Thompson and supporting survivors—were removed and only a mercenary, crude, unorganized antagonism remained. Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles (2020) have discussed how cyberactivism can be “adopted and put to use by individuals neither particularly invested or informed about a pressing political project” (175). In the same way, these YouTubers served as amplifiers for MMNH—directing large audiences of morally outraged, uninformed and contextually removed users to Thompson’s comment section. Due to cross-platform insulation, which prevented direct attacks on Thompson, these publics from drama YouTube chose new targets in the comment section. Despite their purported intentions in holding a predator accountable, figures like diesel patches only succeeded in doing what YouTube has, algorithmically and commercially, been designed to do: drive clicks based on “drama.”

### “That’s Mini Ladd”?

On December 28 2020, Thompson uploaded “My Apology.” Though the video contains many of the backpedaling, couching, and image-repair tactics associated with the “YouTube apology” (Sandlin and Gracyalny 2018), Thompson finally confessed, *on YouTube*, to the accusations against him. YouTube did not acknowledge the video or Thompson’s behavior in any official capacity despite the video trending on YouTube’s front page. Ironically, Thompson was indefinitely banned *on Twitch* in February of 2021 following his YouTube confession (“Mini Ladd Banned by Twitch . . .” Mini 2021).

Thompson continued to upload regular content until June of 2021, when a YouTube drama channel called The Right Opinion (TRO) published a 2-hour, polished exposé titled “The Manipulation Of Mini Ladd—A History Of Lies.” With nearly 6 million views as of this writing, this video documented Thompson’s scandals—going back to his early YouTube career up through his apology. Although this video problematically merged Thompson’s personal drama with accounts of his predatory behavior, it brought cohesion to disparate accounts: a timeline of events into one place. Where viewers previously had to piece together the story themselves, now it was readily available in one edited documentary. Following the release of TRO’s video, Thompson removed dozens of his videos that were made following his apology and ceased uploading to his channel again.

Thompson’s confession and his re-vanishing are ultimately mixed results; while some users on Twitter celebrated Thompson’s second disappearance from the platform, others



**Figure 6.** The most-liked comments from one of Thompson's October videos (usernames blurred).

expressed frustration that YouTube did not remove his channel. Twitter data indicates that sustained pressure from activists over time was unlikely to be what pushed Thompson off YouTube a second time—activity on Twitter, in fact, waned considerably as December approached. Instead, it was the networked practices of harassment—the brigading of his comment section, mass dislikes, and harassment of his fans—that likely drove Thompson to acknowledge the scandal on YouTube.

Thompson's second departure reemphasizes the complex questions of predatory figures on social media platforms. The faltering of Thompson's cross-platform

insulation did not come from networked activism or effective moderation but the toxic ecology of YouTube, which procedurally encourages MMNH. In alignment with MMNH, the amplifiers responsible—Keemstar, diesel patches, and TRO—rely on their white, cismasculine ethos as drama YouTubers to situate themselves as moral judges. TRO even notes that his concern is not with Thompson’s behavior, but with his *character*, calling Thompson “the epitome of moral desertion under fire” (The Right Opinion 2021). There are two key problems here. Firstly, drama YouTubers fail to address larger issues of behavior and user safety; as TRO states at the conclusion of his video: “I’ll leave the internet to decide what they want to do with him.” Secondly, none of these figures have power within the ecology of YouTube beyond directing toxic mobs. While the ceaseless brigading of Thompson’s videos was a momentarily effective strategy, it also resulted in harassment of additional targets, including the young fans Thompson was manipulating and even survivors.

More importantly, these figures are responding to a kairotic moment of drama and are unable to create long-term change. In November of 2021, as I prepared this manuscript for submission, Thompson resumed uploading to YouTube once again—completing a second retreat-and-return cycle. The video in which he announces his return evokes a chilling *déjà vu*: he shouts out his therapist and talks about how he’s taken time to “focus on me” (Mini 2021). Most surprising was my subsequent discovery that Thompson had never actually left the platform, but was quietly uploading content to his *second* channel, Craig Thompson, during his absence.

## Conclusion

Cross-platform insulation obscures, mutes, and divides demands for accountability. For feminist researchers and activists trying to bring accountability to predatory influencers, it is not enough to look at one video, one channel, or even one platform to understand how these abuses of power unfold. Instead, this case study has shown the difficulty in mapping one struggle for accountability that unfolded not through hashtags and petitions, but outrage videos, leetspeek, second channels, filtered comments, video metadata, and organized raids. We require further understanding of how discourse, social justice, and harassment are shaped by the gaps between platforms. The overcomplexity here is precisely the point: Thompson did not have to defend himself from allegations, but merely insulate himself using the very tools meant to protect users on YouTube.

Morally motivated networked harassment is an ineffective substitute for policies and platform action. While raiders succeeded in shaming Thompson off the platform temporarily, their focus on publicly rebuking his moral character does not address larger questions about accountability. As we have seen, the real question here lies not in Thompson’s character, but in YouTube’s. While YouTube focuses on *content* that breaks its community guidelines, this approach fails to account for the networked practices of its creators. As Gillespie reminds us, platforms such as YouTube seek to inhabit the middle, “rewarded for facilitating expression but not liable for its excesses . . . ” (Gillespie 2010, 356). This is a carefully massaged, calibrated image of neutrality—one in which the onus of safety falls on users, parents, legislators, and—in this case—drama YouTubers and angry publics rather than the platform. For YouTube,

whether Thompson's videos are being brigaded by a toxic technoculture or engaged by an oblivious audience matters little, so long as the collision of these audiences drives clicks.

As this case study illustrates, the platform dynamics of YouTube have made it a harbor for predatory influencers. Not only does Thompson's content remain monetized by YouTube, but YouTube has profited—and continues to profit—off Thompson's abuse. By allowing both predatory behavior and toxic backlash a space on its platform, YouTube weaponizes its audiences against each other and monetizes their conflict at the expense of accountability and safety. Yet other community-driven platforms have begun implementing off-site misconduct policies to their community guidelines. For example, in my previous research on community platform Discord, we found that white supremacist groups used third-party site Disboard to connect Discord servers into recruitment networks (Heslep and Berge 2021). In the time since that study, Discord developed its policies and approaches to hateful conduct to account for off-platform behavior including grooming, harassment, and affiliation with hate groups (Badalich 2022). While platforms like Discord and Twitch have set a precedent for addressing off-platform behavior, YouTube has shown that its policies regarding predatory influencers are inadequate. Even where YouTube *has* acted, as with James Charles, their decision to demonetize but not remove channels keeps drama pipelines—and revenue—flowing with new reaction videos. At the same time, there is nothing stopping other disgraced YouTubers from performing this same reappearing act. In absence of meaningful moderation practices, these retreat-and-returns will undoubtedly remain a recursive pattern.

Continued critical attention to the networked behaviors of predatory influencers can inform future policies—both community guidelines and legal frameworks—that can effectively protect young users. The affordances that Thompson used to insulate himself, redirect harassment onto his fanbase, and avoid accountability were disturbingly effective, enabled by both YouTube's policies and affordances, and well as the insular distance between YouTube and Twitter. If YouTube wants to meaningfully address the issue of predatory influencers on its platform, it must address the networked behavior of its creators in its policies.

## Notes

1. The term "grooming" is often associated with legal discourse regarding sexual meetups and explicit messaging and should be qualified. In this study, I use "grooming" to refer to the practice of cultivating any kind of inappropriate sexual relationship (including digitally) with minors and underage fans.
2. Wording changed to reduce searchability of user's personal account.
3. The name of a prominent drama YouTuber who publicly targeted Thompson.
4. There was a single reply to a comment in the YouTube sample that contained the word *minors* posted within seconds of video publication.

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## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, PB, upon reasonable request.

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