Digital hostility: contemporary crisis, disrupted belonging and self-care practices

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Abstract
Digital hostility has verifiably increased over the past decades among adult users of social media and online forums. Both an extension of, and different from, cyberbullying, digital hostility has become a framing factor in the reduction of quality of public debate at a social level and, at an individual level, has been cited as responsible for withdrawal, disconnection and negative impact on health and mental health. This paper draws on digital ethnographic and in-depth survey research to present new approaches to understanding the cause, form and impact of digital hostility among adults. Participants in the study generated valuable discussion which, when analysed from the perspective of media and cultural theory, presented three significant findings: Firstly, that digital hostility is increasingly recognised not as a behavioural problem among individual perpetrators but as a ‘crisis’ that both arises from within and disrupts digital culture. Secondly, participants discussed the impact of their own experiences of online adversity on their health and wellbeing. Analysed through critical and cultural frameworks, their experiences can be understood as being positioned as ungrievable subjects or, in extreme cases, bare life—particularly when digital hostility is experienced through cross-platform trolling and spills over into stalking. Finally, participants discussed the experience of self-care in the absence of adequate support mechanisms by platform hosts. Self-care manifested not as individualised self-protection but as mutually-supportive, using alternative platforms to share strategies and support; care was also oriented towards care for digital culture more broadly. This paper provides initial insights into the perception and understanding of digital hostility as an everyday cultural experience.

Keywords
digital hostility, self-care, digital culture, resilience, online support

Introduction
Hostility, hate speech and adversarial behaviour has been experienced in online communication since the early Internet, and practices of cyberbullying prevention and e-safety education have...
persisted for over two decades, with varying degrees of success. However, an increase in a broad range of online adversities, hate speech, cyberbullying, trolling and other toxic, adversarial behaviour has been identified since the mid-2010s and is emerging as a key issue of the 2020s (Khosravinik and Esposito, 2018). This paper argues that there is value in gathering a range of contemporary forms of digital adversity—including cyberbullying, online hate-speech Twitter pile-ons, public shaming, cross-platform trolling, doxxing (circulating private information about a person online with malicious intent) and revenge porn—under a conceptual umbrella of ‘digital hostility’.

The concept of digital hostility represents three contemporary, 2020s phenomena: (i) the ‘massification’ of online adversities in which large numbers of perpetrators participate in hostile activities; (ii) a framework for shifting the identification of online abuse away from content and towards behaviour, including behaviours which might not be apprehended by content checks (e.g. hate speech identifying bots) of the past; and (iii) a move away from perceiving online unethical acts as the work of ‘bad individuals’ and, instead, as acts which damage or toxify digital culture as an information ecology we inhabit and participate in as social actors. The diverse behaviours and forms of injurious speech comprising digital hostility vary in form and means of apprehension. A concept that brings them together highlights how collective adversities and hostile behaviours increasingly mark the contemporary digital cultural experience. It thus also warrants new approaches to supporting the victims of such adversities, and new research on the meaning, impact and support strategies generated by everyday users.

Existing remedies, whether regulatory (legislative; platform policy), interventional (moderation; artificial and machine-learned policing), and preventative (cybersafety education), tend to be stymied by three older frameworks. The first is a tendency to individualise the problem of digital hostility as one that can identify bad actors and perpetrators who can be warned, penalised or removed rather than to recognise digital hostility as emergent, cultural and formed in the practices of online communication. The second is a focus on identifying online hostility by content rather than by behaviour such as in the use of defamation laws to regulate online hostility and thereby reducing the ability to see how repeated adversarial behaviour or trolling may position some victims as ungrievable subjects, both of which are more difficult to recognise and apprehend (Thompson and Cover, 2021). Finally, older frameworks preclude a focus on strategies of mutual support and care. Public pedagogies regularly rely on everyday advice to users experiencing hostility to withdraw from online connectivity or to pivot online engagement towards smaller, closer-knit social networks (Ordoñez and Nekmat, 2019: 2500). New scholarly assessment of remedies are beginning to emerge (e.g. Marwick, 2021; Matias, 2019; Sobieraj, 2020) that move away from older bullying and cyberbullying models towards recognising the cross-over between different adversarial behaviours and, importantly, the impact such massified abuse, violence and threatening online practices has on digital culture and everyday users.

Drawing on digital ethnographic research, this paper discusses some of the key emerging themes raised by participants in an online anti-hostility group and across a project questionnaire who discussed their understanding and experiences of digital hostility. Three key themes emerged: (i) that digital hostility should be perceived as a widespread social and cultural crisis rather than the result of individual ‘bad actors’; (ii) that digital hostility experienced en masse and in cases of cross-platform trolling position complainants as ungrievable, disrupting healthy subjectivity; and (iii) that self-care practices are seen as important and necessary in the absence of more supportive remedies. Following a brief summary of the project, this paper analyses these themes by drawing on cultural studies perceptions of crisis, poststructuralist theories of relational belonging and Foucauldian approaches to self-care. The aim here is to present initial insights of everyday users...
on the need to apprehend digital hostility in ways not normally incorporated into the some of the
more established individualist, e-safety and anti-cyberbullying narratives of remedy.

The digital hostility project

The study, conducted during 2020 and 2021, involved 60 questionnaire participants from North
America, Australia, the United Kingdom, European Union, Singapore and Hong Kong, as well
as sustained contact with approximately 25 users of a social media support page in a form of
digital ethnography research. Questionnaire participants aged 25–65 + were recruited from social
media, with 35% working in professional (“white collar”) roles, 10% clerical roles, and 26%
retired. All had experienced digital hostility over the previous twelve months, across the following
platforms: Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Tumblr and online discussion and sharing
forums Reddit and Quora.

In all bar two cases in the questionnaire component, participants responded that there were a
minimum of 10 persons involved in each incident of online hostility, with two participants report-
ing that the number in a single incident was typically “hundreds”, indicating the tendency for
these participants to experience hostility in the form of the pile-on (Thompson and Cover,
2021). Participants answered comprehensive survey questions about their experience of digital
hostility, their perception of the causes of digital hostility and possible remedies, and their self-
care practices.

The investigator also participated in a private social media group used by thirty members of
the question-and-answer forum site, Quora (specifically, Quora users who were subject to per-
sistent online hostility for their factual, anti-racist and anti-misogynist approaches to answers
and posts related to Meghan (Markle), the Duchess of Sussex—herself subject to substantial
online hostility, doxxing, deepfake porn imaging, and online racist hate speech after marrying
into the British royal family (Clancy and Yelin, 2020). The forum Quora proved a signifi-
cant and valuable setting for the wider study for three reasons: (i) as a space devoted to discussion
of topics, it highlighted the ways in which dialogue and disagreement often became polarisation
over time; (ii) the topic basis and open access made it easier to study and identify networked
tribalisation and group ‘mob’ behaviours behind acts of digital hostility (Marwick, 2021);
and (iii) Quora’s names policy and moderation practices underwent several changes during
the study period, making it possible to track the impact of different practices in intervening
with hostility.

Engagement by this author with the private support group as both participant and researcher was
undertaken on the digital ethnographic principle of reciprocity (Pink et al., 2016). The social media
group was set up as a mutual support page for those subject to abuse on this topic to share tips,
experiences and strategies for combating hostility, seeking greater platform intervention (moder-
ation), and providing mutual care and tactics of self care. This investigator, who had initially
been invited to the group after being identified as a victim of hate speech for calling out racialised
hate and disinformation about the Duchess of Sussex, participated in the group for approximately
one year before the commencement of the study; that participation continued during the study and
online discussions included dialogue about the project and each member’s orientation towards
digital hostility. Participation by the investigator in the group yielded significant information on
the self-care and resilience strategies, as well as the wider perceptions of the nature, cause and cul-
tural formation of digital hostility which was a key daily discussion point. It did, however, lead to a
focus in this study on internet pile-ons and public shaming as the most dominant forms of digital
hostility, noting that these may not necessarily be the dominant form hostility takes on other
platforms.
Broadly, the study had three key insights: that everyday users recognise digital hostility as a significant issue in contemporary social life; that while participants recognised there were diverse ways in which hostility might be addressed, most were unhappy with extant practices to curtail online toxic behaviour and felt regulatory and interventional approaches were unclear or ineffective; and that many saw adopting their own self-care and mutual-support strategies as the solution in the absence of better input from platform hosts and legal jurisdictions. Participants in both the questionnaire and the ethnography discussed the idea of digital hostility in the language of a ‘crisis’, which will be discussed first below.

**Digital hostility as cultural condition and social crisis**

The concept of digital hostility has value as a term for describing the collective array of contemporary practices of adversarial online behaviours and their effects on others not simply to provide an umbrella term for different actions but to describe what many participants in this study saw as a wider onslaught upon digital culture as the everyday lived experience in which digital networks, spaces and forms of social engagement are a core element in communication. Significant here is that the idea of digital hostility as cultural rather than behavioural opens the possibility of thinking about online adversarial behaviour, hostile acts towards other users and hate speech as everyday and normative experiences of communication. While there is important research on extremist sites and those message board platforms such as 4chan, 8chan and Gab (Munn, 2019) which serve as relatively exclusive echo chambers for users holding extreme political and social views (Nagle, 2017), the practice of hostility in the more popular sites of YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Reddit, as well as online news forums, generates the circumstance in which an average, everyday subject may unwittingly experience adversarial behaviours such as trolling, pile-ons or hate speech. In this context, the growth of online hostility can be understood as a cultural condition which constitutes the contemporary experience of communication and one mode of attitude or disposition towards others that takes advantage of the affordances of mass networked communication, relative anonymity, instantaneity and virality to circulate adversarial speech and images. The pile-on, which is described in more detail below, is a good example of the cultural constitution of an emergent form of behaviour or social issue—not an extension of older models of cyberbullying and other adversities, but an emergent massification of hate in which a user is harassed by a sizeable group of people brought together through networks (Marwick, 2021), and whereby the violence is not in the content or speech but in the collective pressure of the multiple and often simultaneous adverse actions.

To represent digital communication as a cultural form rather than a ‘medium’ is to acknowledge that it is constitutive of a range of practices, ways of speaking and ways of making meaning and generates multiple forms of expression, intent and styles of communication, ranging from the adversarial to “purposeful discussion” (Murthy and Sharma, 2018) as much as creative and ethical engagement (Burgess and Baym, 2020). In this sense, practices of hostility are constituted in—which is different from and not to say ‘caused by’—digital culture as much as the more ‘positive’ practices that have marked the dominant understand of digital media use since Web 1.0 and early Web 2.0 creative, social and interactive engagement (Cover, 2006). To say so is not to avoid reducing users to a uniformity as if the technological setting determines either adversity or relational belonging. Rather, it is to indicate that in the continued development of digital culture, the same practices enable both hostile speech and democratic debate. Digital culture, in that sense, can be understood as simultaneously a cultural setting worth protecting or de-toxifying and one that generates unethical and violent behaviours.
Perceiving digital communication as a cultural form marked by diverse and competing behaviours calls upon us to apprehend digital hostility’s emergence as a form of social crisis. That is, it is to apprehend digital hostility as endemic and the product of the constitutive role communication plays in practices of adversity, engagement and belonging. Study participants who participated in the online questionnaire were asked their views on the ‘causes’ of online hostility. Although a small number (15%) saw digital hostility as a problem of individuals behaving badly (“a few bad apples” as one respondent put it), more than half of the participants indicated they felt that online hostility was an ingrained problem that was creating a ‘crisis’ for future social media participation. One participant’s response provided a representative account:

The abuse and hatred I see on forums and social networks is so much a part of day to day life that I don’t see how online debate can continue. It infects every corner of cyberspace. We had all these wonderful benefits from social networks to stay connected and make a better world, but instead users turned into abusers. Facts don’t matter and extreme hate is everywhere. Hate started up when we weren’t looking … it disrupted everything we were enjoying to the point that we can hardly manage to communicate with each other at all now…. If you want to fix this, we need a total shakeup of every aspect of how we do online.

What this participant describes is not a crisis with a knowable set of solutions or remedies, but crisis in the cultural studies sense: indicating, on the one hand, that digital communication is not a benign channel but a practice or way of life and, on the other hand, that the prevalence of hostility is grounded in those same practices.

This participant’s invocation of the concept of ‘disruption’ is significant in helping us see an everyday user’s perspective on the framework of crisis, understood here as a break or rupture from an earlier cultural practice; a rupture of norms. This gives the concept of digital hostility a temporal and historical framework. The invocation of disruption and crisis is, of course, part of a wider set of issues and debates about twenty-first century sociality which has been marked by a range of crises, from the COVID-19 pandemic (Cover, 2021), the crisis of disinformation and fake news (Albright, 2017), the contemporary populism that marks politics in the United States, United Kingdom, parts of Europe and parts of South America (Anselmi, 2018), and the series of global financial and debt crises over the past two decades (Lazzarato, 2013). Perceiving a phenomenon, issue or change in norms, practices or behaviour as crisis is not, of course, new. However, it is only when we apprehend both the practice and the crisis as emerging from within culture—rather than an alien element affecting that practice—that we can understand it in terms of an impact that is not only something we may wish to eradicate or remedy, but that has the potential to produce new, and as yet unforeseeable, arrangements of identity, politics, economy and culture. For example, for Antonio Gramsci (1971), socio-political organic crises emerge in ways which demonstrate to the public that “uncurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves.” The advent of the contemporary form of digital hostility is, therefore, read by the study participants as a crisis because it ruptures a relationship with the recent historical past of earlier phases of the Internet. Where digital communication is recognised as a setting for positive belonging, creative interactivity, and practices of positive engagement producing collective intelligence (Rheingold, 2003), hostility represents an internal rupture that not only spoils the old pleasures and benefits, but puts at risk the normative practices of the Internet’s recent past.

A cultural studies approach does not always understand crisis or the disruption of a norm as negative, but as productive of potentially positive change, and this was recognised by at least one of the study participants:
We don’t have good ways to address trolling. Moderation isn’t working, education is too long-term, and banning people only means protests over free speech. Maybe realising how much aggression, hate, fake news and lies there is online is a chance to find new solutions that haven’t existed yet.

This is not to suggest that digital hostility is a positive phenomenon that will produce better ways to live. Rather, it is to say that, if recognised as a social issue, digital hostility may be productive of new practices of ensuring harmonious, civil and relational communication that both rescues the benefits of the past and reduces the capacity of digital hostility to do violence to users. Stuart Hall (1979) argued that, rather than being understood as a rupture that destroys the past, crises are formative. He described such productive formation in response to crises this way: “a new balance of forces, the emergence of new elements, … new political configurations and ‘philosophies’, a profound restructuring of … ideological discourses … pointing to a new result, a new sort of ‘settlement’—‘within certain limits’” (15). Although intended to explain the operations of populist power blocs, this neatly designates digital hostility as a liminal or threshold phenomenon with the capacity to produce new ways of thinking about the importance of communication and promoting the benefits of digital practices for harmonious sociality.

From a perspective that seeks to remedy digital hostility by responding to it as crisis, older cyberbullying discourses and individualist or content-focussed approaches that underpin most regulatory, legislative, and policy approaches can be understood as unhelpful, as they constrain the social capacity to apprehend digital hostility as a crisis for digital communication and thereby recognise the need to understand the cultural problems at play. The exasperation that was expressed across the participants’ social media support page during the ethnographic component of the study was indicative of the depth of the issue as a crisis difficult to resolve without a substantial shift in the practices, structures and ways of perceiving digital culture broadly. For example, one participant stated:

The only solution I see is for platform providers to take a very hard line, take no prisoners stance. However given that most are motivated by money as well as human nature being what it is I am doubtful this will happen.

Another noted that: “Online forums should have more human moderators, not just bots. Saving money seems to be a much higher priority than maintaining the integrity of the forum.” In both these cases, while they default to additional regulation as the response to digital hostility and toxic online environments, there is an expression of doubt about their effectiveness without substantial change.

**Disrupted belonging and relational engagement**

Participants in both the questionnaire and the ethnographic components of the study reported concerns related to their sense of wellbeing as social subjects and the negative impact online abuse, trolling, pile-ons and other toxic behaviours had on their capacity to engage with others as well as their sense of self worth. As one participant (a recent retiree) noted after experiencing a hostile pile-on of “hundreds” of users:

For many weeks after I felt like crap. It really shook my confidence, and I felt unsure about posting anything ever again. But the fact I couldn’t get them to stop made me feel sub-human. Appealing to moderators and putting in reports did nothing, like I just wasn’t important and how I felt didn’t matter.
This is a significant statement, since it points to the impact on a sense of wellbeing and a sense of belonging—not just being cared about, but the wider capacity to engage in digital sociality. There is a fairly substantial literature on the psychological and self-value impact of older models of cyber-bullying (e.g. Brack and Caltabiano, 2014; Smokowski and Evans, 2019). Again much of this tends to frame both hostility and its remedy through an individualist lens. In looking for ways to address online hostility and its impact through digital cultural approaches, it is helpful to consider theoretical approaches that help us grasp online engagement as a relational and ethical practice and, thereby, see hostility as that which can undo, disrupt or obscure practices of engaging with each other through ethical and non-violent means that recognise the value of all subjectivity.

It was notable that those who expressed substantially negative feelings or reactions to digital hostility were, on the whole, those who had experienced that hostility as a pile-on of large numbers (ten or more). The Internet pile-on has become a prominent form of digital hostility, whereby very large numbers of users post comments that target an individual or small group, using language which shames, humiliates or marginalises through insult, admonishment, reprimand or de-humanisation via round-the-clock digital bombardment (Jane, 2015; Lumsden and Morgan, 2017). Uncountably large numbers of posts arguably decrease the capacity of a user to continue to navigate the space and to respond to, incorporate or manage that hostility (Marsden, 2017) and, in some cases, to manage health and wellbeing (Thompson and Cover, 2021). What has shifted from older models of cyberbullying, flame wars and other adversities is the massification of hate that actively reduces the capacity of a subject to respond—even if that did not mean being listened to (Dreher, 2009)—having the capacity to defend a position, develop a conversation, or otherwise demand recognition as a subject worthy of response or debate. In some cases the hostile speech not only represents a multitude but cannot necessarily be conceived as articulations of an individual, being the work of paid troll farms, bots and other automated programmes with no immediate subject as author of the hate speech (Golbeck, 2018).

If we consider digital platforms as a conceptually ‘spatial’ setting for the relational and collective dimensions of social practices (Third et al., 2020: 167), then it is important to acknowledge that they are experienced as sites of identity, stability and belonging as much as any ‘real life’ (physically-interactive or geographic) setting (Cover, 2016). The experience of massified hostility, adversity, beratement or hate speech, then, not only ruptures the constancy of that setting of identity and self-worth. Rather, in collectively shaming a subject, digital hostility upsets identity coherence, making its victim feel that one “does not belong within a certain space” (Probyn, 2004: 334). Feelings of shame as a manifestation of the loss of self-worth were common among the participants. One survey question asked about their primary feelings during instances of online hostility, and respondents were evenly split between feelings of “anger” and “shame”. Several respondents were clear in their written answers that they felt a sense of unworthiness, or what Judith Butler (2009) sees as “ungrievability”. For example:

Attacks on me by name accusing me (falsely) of being a stalker, a ‘pedo’, a ‘perv’; attacks on my educational credentials; invention of ‘risible’ nicknames for me in an attempt to shame and also to avoid direct use of my name that might lead to moderation taking action.

And:

The abuse was centred towards my ethnicity. The trolling was due to having a differing opinion and citing [sources for] the claims I made. This was not well received.
In both cases, this was a disruption of the pleasure of online engagement around which a component of their sociality had been formed and their identities expressed. Engagement that is activated through conversation, the sharing of opinions, the exploration of contrasting viewpoints, and the synthesising of collective intelligence (Poster, 2006) was, then, disrupted by hostility in a way that marked them out as subjects not worthy of participation in debate, spaces or the sites to which they had contributed. In this sense, they were positioned as subjects of shame, humiliation, marginalisation, exclusion or lost value or worthiness as a subject (McRobbie, 2020: 8). Here, shaming operates as “the withdrawal of the approving gaze of loving acceptance” (Munt, 2007: 224) which can be figured as the acceptability to participate in online discourse or social media. To be rejected, marginalised, or excluded from a sense of belonging within a zone of public debate (Kirby, 2015) is to be positioned as a subject who is ungrievable (they would not be missed if they left or were lost). It is notable, of course, that in the case of the second quotation the focus of abuse on the participant’s ethnicity points to the ways in which we must perceive digital hostility not as a wholly new phenomenon but the re-configuration of older models of violence, shaming and injurious speech that have long drawn on ad hominem attacks on identity differences to destabilise or disavow an unrelated argument (in this case an opinion and use of sources to combat disinformation).

The study participants’ claims of feeling shame, humiliation and unworthiness can be read through Butler’s (2009) understanding of the unethical practice of making a subject ‘ungrievable’, that is, framed as unworthy of recognition or unworthy of non-violent treatment or social accord. The ungrievable subject is positioned as not being of feeling worthy of being mourned (Butler, 2009: 22–23). Butler focussed on national, racial and ethnic distinctions by analysing the ways in which members of one nation will grieve for lost members that nation, for example during war, but that those who are lost from the other side are not recognised as human or worthy of such grieving (Butler, 2009: 22–23). While the loss of life in war and the offence, marginalisation or removal of a user of a digital space cannot necessarily be equated, the metaphor of ungrievability opens the possibility of seeing digital hostility in relational terms. That is, acts of digital hostility may be understood to have more than simply the effect of offence, insult or hurt but raise an ethical concern about how life (including digital social life) is valued.

The idea of being an ungrievable digital user was sometimes related in the context of the experience of being positioned as excluded from digital life—that is, if the hostility was unbearable and the only possible remedy was self-removal from a site or setting. Study participants’ sense of ungrievability if they were to be forced to leave social media sites, forums and discussions also operated at a deeper level: being made not only unworthy of non-violent treatment. The massified number of digital users does, of course, mean that the absence of one is less likely to materially change the experience of discourse. However, it is worth noting that participants in the ethnographic aspect of the study did mourn the disappearance of members, while not necessarily knowing if this was the result of death or self-exile to avoid hostility. This practice of mourning encourages us to see the experience of digital life as beyond the act of digital communication, and thereby to recognise how online hostility is not exclusively experience in a single digital setting or platform. Participants described being threatened outside the setting of digital communication, being subject to cross-platform trolling (in which a user digitally-stalks the complainant on other platforms, or engages in malicious or threatening behaviour outside the platform itself, often in the language of vendetta).

Four of the sixty participants had experienced contact outside of platforms on which they experienced hostility, including communication to employers and, in one case, to that user’s spouse. Three further respondents to the questionnaire indicated some of the ways in which hostility not only made life unbearable, but affected the ‘spaces of liveability’ outside digital platforms:
I’ve been called things like “cuntasaurus”, threatened with offline retaliation like doxing or sending letters to my employer, had members of hate spaces report me en masse or add troll comments on my answers.

And:

I could not sleep one night after being threatened with legal action after making one minorly incorrect statement (I think-the person is devious). The person is capable of it. Despite an apology (I could not work out if I had made an error so right thing to do). I’ve had a friend stalked by the same person and anonymous spiteful letters sent to friends supporting Meghan.

One user in the ethnographic component, a researcher, had his employers contacted by a perpetrator after fact-checking the perpetrator’s post and pointing to errors. The intent of the contact with employers was to use false information to destroy that user’s livelihood. In this sense, the participants identified the extreme forms of digital hostility—cross-platform trolling or when it spills over into non-digital forms such as stalking and scurrilous letters to employers and families—as acts that attempt to destroy ‘liveable life’ for the complainants by the intent to disrupt livelihood, marriages, relationships and employment security. Although feeling positioned as ungrievable was an extreme reaction, it is notable that study participants were concerned enough about the impact of hostility on the self-worth and liveability of themselves and others that their language opened the opportunity to read hostility in this way.

**Strategies of care**

Finally, I would like to turn to the strategies of care that were sought from, and expressed by, the study participants as part of the response to digital hostility as crisis and the impact of that crisis on the perception and self-perception of the victims of adversarial online behaviours as ungrievable subjects. Although sixteen of the sixty questionnaire respondents indicated that they felt their experiences of hostility, hate speech or trolling were “not very stressful (I brush it off quickly)”, the remaining three quarters identified it as “extremely stressful (can’t function for a few hours)” or “mostly stressful (disrupts my day)”. The Facebook (private) page that was analysed as part of a digital ethnography was set up by a group of Quora users in 2020 to, in part, provide support to help address the stress that online abuse and racist hate speech related to the Duchess of Sussex had been causing members of the group. The page description notes:

We are a small and supportive group of people who have been calling out the bullying of Meghan—HRH The Duchess of Sussex—on Quora. We welcome positive posts and shares, and offer members support and advice if they are experiencing attacks and victimisation on Quora.

While the experience of online hostility has been identified as a stressor that, in some cases, has been implicated in suicidality (Thompson and Cover, 2021), more research is needed to understand the practices of support and self-care among those who experience digital hostility, and the obligations of platforms and jurisdictions to provide appropriate support and care to users harmed by hostile digital assailants. The existence of this community-implemented informal support page indicates a clear motivation among everyday users to find greater support in face of the perception of digital hostility as crisis and the way in which it positions users as ungrievable subjects.

Survey participants answered questions relating to their self-care practices, coping strategies and assessment of their self-resilience. It is not the purpose of this paper to report the results in detail here, although it is helpful to note that in responding to a list of coping strategies, 49% of
respondents stated that they had been “doing this a lot” or “doing this a medium amount” when asked if they seek or rely on emotional support from others; and 44% stated they “try to get help from others”. These are indicative of self-care rather than formal support practices, and show a tendency among users to understand care and support through community frameworks of belonging and reciprocity rather than through either platform responsibility or neoliberal transactional approaches to the individualised purchase of care as commodity.

Participants from the Quora set who were active users of the private social media support group regularly used that group both to discuss self care strategies and to seek mutual support from others. A representative request for help from August 2021 reads:

I have been involved in a fairly long running discussion/argument with [adversarial Quora user’s name redacted]. She has an extremely strong ability to pick nits and never concedes … I have no fingernails left above the quick and a constantly upset stomach. I have to ask for help from anyone who cares to do so in answering her directly. I have to delay getting back to her until my latest real life challenges are once again under control.

Here, the participant simultaneously describes a self-care strategy (reducing exposure to a hostile or adversarial user on the forum) and a request for mutual support from other users. Nine users indicated within 12 h of the post that they would take up the discussion, which centred on correcting misinformation about the Duchess of Sussex on Quora, and reiterating factual information on the adversarial user’s replies to posts made by the complainant.

Across both the survey and ethnographic components, participants in this study understood practices of care through the terminology of mutuality and reciprocity, whereby vulnerability and harm were understood as experienced widely rather than only individually, and that digital hostility had the potential to harm others. This fits with the practice of care-of-the-self-through-care-of-others, an ethical practice utilised in much formal and informal support by survivors of sexual assault and other abuse and in anti-violence education (Carmody, 2003). Moira Carmody’s ‘mutual care’ in generating, for example, work on sexual ethics was grounded in Michel Foucault’s model of ‘care of the self’. In his histories of the practices of subjectivity, Foucault identified the care of the self as an early philosophical formulation found in early Greek, Hellenistic and Roman philosophy and Christian spirituality (Foucault, 2005: 11). In the practice of caring for the self, it is through care for others, other people and the community that one achieves the goal of mastery of the self and the realisation of care (127). Care is framed in the terms of mutuality, whereby in seeking to care for others, one gains the capacity to care for and support the self; the twin aims of care are seen, then, as always part of an ethical social relationship (164). Although dislodged in later European culture by rationalist, liberal-individualist, and later neoliberal approaches that perceive support as either an individual right or a transactional commodity, the ancient model of the care of the self as articulated by Foucault provides a model for assessing community-based support and resilience frameworks as alternatives to mainstream care practice (Fisher and Buckner, 2018). The deployment of Foucauldian models of mutual care have enabled an ethics of community building grounded in negotiated mutuality, reflexivity and social relationality.

An element that comes out of mutual care approaches, then, is that both care for the self and care for others is an ethical orientation towards care for the social environment itself. Where the support group participants approached their self-care more through mutual support rather than individualised approaches, this was an alignment of care towards the benefit of digital culture itself: that one engages in self-care and the care of others by way of sharing tips and strategies for reporting incidents of online abuse, tactics for dealing with particularly difficult trolls and cross-jurisdictional legal advice for cross-platform trolling. What is notable is that self-care in this case is directed
towards the care of digital culture—including the platforms, forums online engagement practices—by ensuring that care is oriented towards contributing to the ‘work’ of de-polluting, fact-checking and otherwise protecting digital culture. This, then, is to see digital culture itself as precarious and at risk from the hostility that has grown within.

Conclusion

While digital hostility is increasingly perceived as part of the wider backdrop of contemporary populism, incivility, tribalisation and polarised public debate (Cover, 2020), it is significant for the substantial impact on health, mental health and wellbeing of those who are victimised or made subject to persistent rates of hostility, particularly the pile-on and online shaming practices. There is increasing recognition of a correlation between online hostility and the experience of negative mental health issues (e.g. Gorman, 2019; Lewis, Rowe and Wiper, 2017: 1475), shifting the frame of hostility from being a matter of unpleasantness or incivility to one of serious health policy. In several high-profile and extreme cases, an instance of online hostility has been implicated in suicidality, including several completed suicides (Thompson and Cover, 2021). However, much public and scholarly discourse, intervention initiatives and educational responses to digital hostility are constrained by dominant approaches that equate it primarily with cyberbullying, or that rely on approaches that are now two decades old. In other words, there are grounds for substantial conceptual, intellectual and evidence-based shifts in how we think about, address and respond to digital hostility as a widespread social and cultural phenomenon that arguably is toxifying the online environment.

In recognising the importance of apprehending digital hostility and developing new mechanisms of response for social health and the health of online communication practices, this paper has drawn on aspects of a study that sought to understand how everyday users conceive hostility, cope with experiencing it and develop options for responding to it. Users in the questionnaire and digital ethnography components were all persons who had experienced hostility themselves, and the ethnography participants were active in combating it and mutually-supporting others who experienced it. As a body of participants, they conceived of digital hostility as a social and cultural issue and framed it in the language of crisis (for digital culture itself). They provided a way of speaking about the experience of digital hostility that could be read through discourses of ungrievability and bare life as extreme forms of marginalisation, violence and wounding, and they described their practices of self-care as oriented towards the care of others and the care of the digital environment itself.

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Note

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