



Gender Hate Online

Understanding the New Anti-Feminism

Edited by
Debbie Ging
Eugenia Siapera

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Foreword by Soraya Chemaly

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*We dedicate this book to all women who have suffered and suffer
from digital and physical violence and its effects*

FOREWORD BY SORAYA CHEMALY

The internet and social media are seamlessly woven into our day-to-day lives. We work, play, explore study, plan, celebrate and mourn online as we do offline. This “virtual” world opens doors to information, education, markets, jobs and communities that, in the past, would have been completely inaccessible to most people, particularly girls and women.

Social media, information and communication technologies are vital tools for women. Being able to tap into the web gives women unparalleled opportunities to express themselves and engage in civic and public life. Simply by virtue that women are the people doing the expressing, however, their online participation alone represents challenges to traditions, norms and conventional obstacles to equality. Then, almost inevitably, the manosphere, fueled by threatened masculinity and framed neatly by words like “innovation”, “community”, “revolutionary” and “free speech”, intrudes to remind women that, after all, these activities are not for them.

Just as the internet has become a critical avenue for opportunities and exploration, so, too, is it a space, male-dominated, of heightened hostility to women and gender non-conforming people. Online, women encounter the same hostility, threat and abuse that they do offline when they exercise their rights and use their voices. The amplification and scope of the medium, however, creates new risks and variations on threats.

Anti-feminism online is an infinitely elastic variant on age-old resistance to women who speak out loud, engage in public life, share their thoughts, compete for jobs, make political demands and express their sexuality freely. A woman, speaking, is sufficient to garner anti-feminist attention.

First, being online expands women's social reach and exposure, taking them squarely outside of traditional roles and spaces to engage in public ways usually reserved for men. In virtually any sector you may think of—science, technology, finance, politics, sports, health care, literature, teaching—women writers, activists, scientists, gamers, economists, filmmakers and so on are making their work visible and available. They are confronting glass ceilings and navigating glass cliffs. They are sharing, with the use of catalytic hashtags, their experiences with harassment, violence and discrimination of all kinds and demanding accountability.

Second, the profusion of content that women produce, regardless of its nature, in and of itself often refutes stereotypes about gender and knowledge, gender and authority, gender and political ambition and power. It is feminist in that women are engaging out loud and with less and less of the shame that scaffolds our silencing and inequality. In some parts of the world, just being online or using a cell phone, for girls and women, is seen as a subversive transgression. All of this is happening online, in spaces that are pervasively dominated by masculine values, speech dynamics and experiences.

Third, the web enables women to find others with whom they share sentiments, political beliefs, sexual and gender identity expression and creative affinities. When women organize, engage in activism and politics, and create communities that support their goals and objectives, anti-feminist resistance can be acute. A recent study revealed that 80% of women who report engaging in feminist discourse on Twitter, for example, have experienced related harassment.¹

In the spring of 2016, the *Guardian* newspaper undertook a large-scale analysis of reader comments in order to determine what types of content, or which of its journalists, encountered the highest levels of reader hostility and harassment in comments sections. An in-depth study of more than 70 million comments on the site found that eight of the ten regular writers who received the most abuse were women (four white and four non-white); the other two were black men. Three of the top ten were gay, one was Jewish and one was Muslim. Notably, despite the fact that they make up the majority of bylines, the ten least harassed writers were men, mostly white.² Not only were the majority of targets women, often at double or

¹<https://academic.oup.com/bjc/article/57/6/1462/2623986>.

²<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/12/the-dark-side-of-guardian-comments>.

triple jeopardy, but the subjects that generated the most vicious commentary explicitly challenged male entitlements and questioned traditional masculine prerogatives: feminism and anti-rape coverage topped the list. The wage gap was close behind.

This analysis was focused on a relatively privileged elite, in the global north, media makers with access to resources and media. However, the study reflects the experiences of women online every day, evident in trends documented in multiple global studies. Reports from civil society, freedom of expression and technology equity advocates in Pakistan, Kenya, Poland, India, Australia, the Philippines, Columbia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mexico and multiple other countries reveal similar (intersectional) anti-feminist backlash.

Women who are harassed online are frequently told that the harassment they receive is “real”, that the best course of action is “don’t feed the trolls” and that men are also targeted for abuse. Studies reveal that men and women *are* targeted online in near equal numbers. However, while a large proportion of people report either being harassed online or witnessing harassment, the mechanisms of abuse differ and in substantive ways. In fact, men and women, broadly speaking, experience very different internets. Within this framework, sexual, ethnic and gender identity minority women are targeted with more frequency and for overlapping reasons tied to their identities.

Women’s abuse is more frequently sexualized and sustained. One study of online comments conducted in 2000, in the UK, revealed that 41% of women had been stalked, sexually harassed or been sent unwanted pornography.³ A 2014 survey in the US buttressed these findings, revealing that women 18–24 encounter the most vitriolic harassment at disproportionately high numbers, reporting high rates of physical threats and sustained abuse.⁴ In 2016, in Pakistan (where 40% of women report online harassment), the Digital Rights Foundation launched a national cyber harassment helpline where women can seek support in cases of harassment, “revenge” porn, cyberstalking, blackmail, defamation and more. Anti-feminism also employs socially tolerated gendered slurs, traditionally gendered shaming and normalized levels of violence against women

³ LaFortune, G. (2015). *A Qualitative Study of Anti-Feminist Discursive Strategies in Online Comment Sections*. Retrieved from YorkSpace Institutional Repository. <http://hdl.handle.net/10315/30709>.

⁴<http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/10/22/online-harassment/>.

offline. Women are also more likely to be targeted by mob campaigns that turn into trending hashtags.

Common harassment tactics include doxing (sharing private information with malice); impersonation; hateful speech; extortion and intimidation; rape, lynching and death threats; photo manipulation (memes, non-consensual pornification and deep fakes); “revenge porn”; and non-consensual distribution of sexualized images. In extreme cases, videos of rapes in progress and other forms of violence are shared across private networks for the purpose of “warning” women not to speak or protest their treatment. In others, women are sent graphic rape depictions. All of these methods leverage offline threats, such as stalking, shaming, rape and intimate partner violence, and derive power from powerful and enduring legacies of historic discrimination, safety gaps and double standards.

Anti-feminism is a global phenomenon: traditional, cheap, easily understood and networked. In recent years, media coverage of anti-feminist movements has shed light on specific communities, hashtags and activities such as men’s rights activists, incels, “pick-up artists”, “Meninism”, “the Red Pill”, #YourSlipisShowing, #gamerGate and “Men Going Their Own Way” (MGTOW), all of which reflect deeply misogynistic, anti-feminist philosophies. These overlap with global white supremacist, authoritarian and populist movements involved, it is increasingly evident, in transnationally destabilizing online propaganda campaigns. These communities, driven by aggrieved entitlement and the powerlessness that some men feel despite institutional male dominance, employ a wide range of strategies to harass and silence women online as they cross borders, language and nationality. A woman politician or writer in Pakistan, for example, might find that she is being harassed not by anti-feminists in her own locality but, for example, by those in a Midwest US state. A teenage girl in Ireland might be virally publically shamed by anti-feminist mobs whose members can come from virtually anywhere in the world.

While anonymity is implicated in anti-feminist abuse, women, online and off, are often, and in some cases, primarily, threatened and silenced by people they know: intimates, classmates, neighbours, family members or co-workers. Additionally, as activists, journalists, politicians and dissidents, they are more likely to encounter threats of surveillance, sextortion, public shaming and harassment that might come from their own governments or members of their own places of work or their protest, party or political communities.

Anodyne terms like “online harassment” and “trolling” contribute to the unhelpful tendency to trivialize what is happening to women online and to ignore what it represents in terms of degradations to free speech or the proper functioning of democracy. Catchall terms like these mask the full scope of tactics that are employed by bad actors and erase their impacts on women’s financial well-being, psychological health and civil and human rights.

Online harassment and abuse are more emotionally resonant for women. Women are, studies reveal, almost two times more likely to say that online harassment makes them worry and almost three times as likely as men to say that online harassment is frightening. When harassed, women report feeling angrier and are significantly more likely to silence themselves. Younger women, those who report the highest rates of online abuse, are the most likely to change their online behaviour and expression in an effort to avoid harassment. A 2016 study completed by the Data and Society Research Institute and the Center for Innovative Public Health Research found that 41% of women ages 15–29 self-censor, compared with 33% of their same-age male peers and 24% of all internet users older than 30.

Online harassment is not more meaningful to women because they are wilting violets but because their offline concerns are informing their risk assessment of negative online interactions. A 2018 research study conducted by Promundo, whose work focuses on masculinity and violence, revealed that one in five young men in Mexico and nearly one in three young men in the US and the UK admitted to making sexually harassing comments to girls and women in (offline) public place *during the previous month*. One in five Mexican men and one in three young men in the US and the UK confessed to sharing photographs and/or messages intended to shame, harass or embarrass someone online. In other words, Promundo concluded, harassment is “routinely carried out every day by young men in all three countries”. Online or off, women are constantly assessing risks and the threat of violence that underlie them.

Much of what is waved off as “harmless” is behaviour that is, offline, recognized as defamation, impersonation, extortion, intentional infliction of emotional harm, violations of copyright or civil rights, or, in some cases, legitimate threat. It is rarely the case, however, that the person targeted is the one deciding what a “legitimate” concern is, however. Law enforcement agencies, globally, are hopelessly ill-equipped to address online abuse, and getting authorities, or corporate entities such as social media companies, to recognize the seriousness of these harms remains exceedingly difficult.

Risk assessment is a critical aspect of confronting online anti-feminism and its effects. The question of who decides what constitutes “threat”, “abuse”, “harassment”, “danger” and “violence”, in other words, who perceives risk and what to do about it, highlights the way in which structural discrimination contributes to anti-feminism. Our most popular technologies, social media, products—as well as policies developed to regulate speech and address hostility—continue to centre men and masculinity. This can be seen in law, technology and epistemology.

Structural gender binaries continue to influence how problems are framed and solutions are envisioned. What happens to women is personal, what happens to men is political. Women’s harassment is a matter of staying safe and of personal behaviour, but men’s is conceived as a matter of free speech and autonomy. Some of this androcentrism is cultural, but some of it is a direct result of a lack of diversity in tech (where men make up, e.g., more than 90% of software engineers and receive more than 90% of venture capital). A persistently sex-segregated labour force in tech (e.g., men in sales and programming, women in safety and trust) also affects the trajectory of responses to anti-feminism online.

Globally, men continue to dominate the tech world, an imbalance that, in computing, for example, was not so extreme in the earliest days of innovation. In the US, gender and racial divides, coupled with a sex-segregated labour force, mean that white women and people of colour are scant in engineering, product development, computer programming and other key areas where product design occurs. This lack of inclusivity generates serious risk, and risk that, almost inevitably, affects the traditionally marginalized the most. Digital security expert Steven Cobb links the industry’s poor record in digital security and privacy to its homogeneity. Social science shows, for example, that in the US the people most likely to hold low outlier risk assessments are confident, white men with individualistic tendencies. In other words, a profile of people most likely to be building the products we use online. According to theorists, status, identity and social organization orientations (i.e., hierarchical vs. communal) directly affect the ways in which people perceive and assess risk. The fact that programmers overwhelmingly fit the profile of individuals with the lowest risk assessments means that security and privacy functionalities most valuable to women and other marginalized people are often missing as basic features.

Risk perception is important not only to individuals but in institutional terms. When women enter spaces—schools, offices, science labs, c-suites—those spaces become exposed, often in ways that are unrecognized, to

vulnerabilities that women are more likely to encounter. Today's most pressing political and civic concerns, for example, privacy breaches, surveillance, threats, extortion, are familiar to women, but women are not deciding how institutions assess risk and how technology companies guild products that reduce them.

Most people in the world are accessing the internet through private platforms, pseudo-public spaces, that while nominally dedicated to "free speech" often reproduce, at scale, Western, patriarchal and deeply white supremacist social norms. If what I have said is applicable to women in Western "liberal democracies", where English is the lingua franca, it is exponentially truer for women in the global south, even further removed from decision-making and product development and often isolated by language.

The anti-feminist weaponization of speech that we see online relies on a commitment to ignoring offline dynamics and the patriarchal neo-imperialism they reflect. Global social media companies have largely proven unable to address women's concerns, in their own cultures and languages, putting women at greater risk. Additionally, and perhaps even more consequentially, providing liberating online spaces and technologies to women threatens global expansion into emerging markets where women's rights are strictly curtailed. Anti-feminism, in this context, is also profitable, allowing, as it does, men's immediate access to like-minded communities that buttress, transnationally, beliefs in traditional gender norms. The internet's great potential is significantly degraded by this hostility.

Anti-feminism is a clear indicator of political instability and a profound threat to democratic principles. Today, there are 200 million fewer women than men accessing the internet. In order for women to live freely and as equals, we have to be able to speak, freely and equally. This is true both offline and online. It is also true that we are not, in fact, able to do either. To understand online anti-feminism, it is necessary to appreciate it as a powerful extension of offline gender relations marked by masculine insecurities and violence against girls and women. This collection is a valuable resource for those who realize why this matters.

New York, NY

Soraya Chemaly

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Debbie Ging and Eugenia Siapera

In recent years, the scale and intensity of anti-feminist sentiment online has become a cause for serious concern, not only among feminist activists but also for any woman expressing opinions or exerting influence in digital spaces. Women have been verbally abused, doxed, and sent rape and death threats. They have been cyberstalked, photoshopped into pornography and have had intimate images of themselves shared. Their websites have been hacked and, in many cases, their livelihoods have been sabotaged (Jane 2018). An Amnesty report published in 2017 showed that almost a quarter (23%) of the women surveyed across eight countries said they had experienced online abuse or harassment at least once, ranging from 16% in Italy to 33% in the US. Across all eight countries, just under half (46%) of women responding to the survey who had experienced online abuse or harassment said it was misogynistic or sexist in nature.

This book project grew out of a previous collection on online misogyny, published as a special issue in *Feminist Media Studies* (Ging and

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Siapera 2018). Clearly there are important distinctions to be made between misogyny and anti-feminism, the former usually understood as a more general set of attitudes and behaviours towards women; the latter implying a response to a distinct set of gender-political values that are not espoused exclusively by women. Despite this, what has become clear in our ongoing research in this area is an increasing blurring of the boundaries between misogyny and anti-feminism. As Ging's (2017) study of the new men's rights politics revealed, online anti-feminism differs from its offline predecessors precisely by virtue of its extreme misogyny and proclivity towards personalized, and often sexualized, attacks on individual women. While pre-internet anti-feminism tended to mobilize men around issues such as divorce, child custody and the feminization of education, using conventional political methods such as public demonstrations and petitions, the new anti-feminists have adopted a highly personalized style of politics that often fails to distinguish between feminists and women. This is largely due to their espousal of certain essentialist and universalizing beliefs, for example, that all women are biologically destined to seek out alpha males but will exploit beta males for money, and—paradoxically—that most Western women, often referred to as “Ameriskanks”, have been infected by feminism and must either be subdued or abandoned.

These developments, juxtaposed against an older men's rights movement that largely adhered to the “rationally based deliberative protocols of public spheres” (Papacharissi 2015), would appear to signal a new and uniquely toxic turn in gender politics. Certainly, their reliance on the affordances on social media—anonymity, echo chambers, brigading and the “disinhibition effect”—coupled with their overlapping “alt-right” sympathies, points to uncharted territory in the history of contemporary social movements. However, as Siapera argues in this collection, using the work of Silvia Federici on the witch hunts of the Middle Ages, misogyny has been used historically as a conscious political strategy to domesticate women, to control female sexuality and to break female solidarity. Indeed, Siapera puts forward a compelling argument for an urgent rethinking of misogyny not merely as a feeling, attitude or type of behaviour towards women but rather as a method or set of methods that are used—whether deliberately or subconsciously—to keep women “in their place”. This collection does not set out to collapse the distinction between misogyny and anti-feminism but rather to invite critical reflection on their mutual interplay as well as to discuss emerging practices addressing these.

FEMINISMS AND ANTI-FEMINISMS: A BRIEF HISTORY

Every large-scale, organized attempt by women to advance their status in society has been met with resistance. It is an explicit aim of this collection to move the discussion out of the confines of Western feminism and anti-feminism. However, because the feminist and anti-feminist movements originated and were most prolific in the English-speaking world, it is necessary to consider how these histories have shaped the current conjecture, as well as why they might be inadequate to understand the evolution of feminism and anti-feminism in the global south and other non-Western contexts. In the late nineteenth century, conservative anti-suffrage movements in Britain, the UK and Australia sought to oppose women's incursion into public life on the grounds that it would threaten the family unit and religious values. In Britain, the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League was founded in 1908 and, two years later, amalgamated with the Men's League for Opposing Woman Suffrage (Bush 2018) to form the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage. Early anti-suffrage posters reveal very graphically the desire to silence, restrain and punish women (Fig. 1.1). These anti-suffragists did not perceive voting as a right but rather as a duty that would be imposed on women in addition to their gender-specific domestic roles.

The 1980s witnessed a more subtle, culturally embedded set of reactions to the very significant gains made by second-wave feminism in the 1970s. According to Susan Faludi, author of the bestselling book *Backlash* (1992), this manifested itself in a range of cautionary narratives and images about the threats that sexually autonomous women posed to masculinity and the nuclear family, as well as in the emergence of the macho action hero. Films such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Nashville* and *The Marathon Man*, in which less hegemonic versions of American masculinity were tentatively explored, gave way to the iconic "American movie macho" (Neibaur 1989) of the 1980s and 1990s, exemplified in the characters played by Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis, as well as to a number of films—often starring Michael Douglas—in which white masculinity was perceived to be under threat, including *Fatal Attraction*, *Disclosure* and *Basic Instinct*. The success of these films signalled the arrival of the "white man in crisis" trope, further developed in *Falling Down*, which bemoaned the declining hegemony of the white American male due to feminism and a host of other "minority" groups.

At around the same time, panics about "masculinity in crisis" and the obsolescence of the "male species" became common in the mainstream



Fig. 1.1 (a, b) Early anti-suffrage posters

media. In the 1990s, the British press ran numerous feature articles about “The Obsolete Male”¹ and the “Redundant Male”,² and a revitalized men’s movement began to shape in both the US and the UK. In the US, the National Coalition of Free Men and various Christian and pro-male mythopoetic groups adopted a range of pro-male and anti-feminist positions. The mythopoetic tradition, made famous in the early 1990s by Robert Bly’s *Iron John* (1992), was based on Jungian psychology and was concerned more with individual male identities than with the formation of a political movement, while the Promise Keepers,³ a Christian movement founded by Bill McCartney, an opponent of women’s reproductive rights and gay liberation, encouraged men to become the masters of their homes, guided by Saint Paul’s famed domestic stricture “Wives, submit to your husbands”.

¹ *Daily Express*, February 1994.

² *Daily Mail*, March 1996.

³ <http://www.promisekeepers.org/>.

The Promise Keepers use sports stadia for their rallies, with a view to creating an environment of “godly masculinity” (Coward 2000, p. 129).

As in the US, the anti-feminist strands of the men’s movement in Britain claimed that men’s rights had been institutionally eroded by feminism. The most high-profile group within this strand was the UK Men’s Movement,⁴ which was primarily concerned with family law, child contact and maintenance arrangements, inferior social security provisions, and men’s exclusion from education, training and healthcare. Adherents to this strand argued that governments and legal systems had become biased in favour of women, and they lobbied for legal reform and a Minister for Men in British Parliament. The Manhood Project,⁵ in particular, was concerned that the decline of traditional work, as well as organizations such as the Scouts and the Armed Forces Cadet organizations denied young men traditional rites of passage. Linking this lack of masculine socialization to increasing levels of crime and delinquency, the Manhood Project called for the introduction of formal initiatives in education to ensure that young men were socially initiated into manhood. Such agendas were widely criticized for failing to acknowledge the relationship between institutionalized male violence and crime (Connell 2002; Faludi 1999). Other reactionary websites such as Angry Harry⁶ (“A feminist’s nightmare”) warned readers that “The men’s movement is coming” and deployed a populist, polemical tone that suggested an ongoing and bitter debacle with feminism.

Amongst the readings recommended by the UK Men’s Movement were Neil Lyndon’s (1992) *No More Sex War: The Failures of Feminism* and David Thomas’ (1993) *Not Guilty: In Defence of Modern Man*, both of which were described by Rosalind Coward (2000, p. 129), herself a critic of feminism’s relevance in the new millennium, as bitter personal histories: “Lyndon and Thomas both did themselves a disservice by writing such unpleasant books. Both sounded aggrieved, isolated and bitter; both adopted the discourse of the victim.” The tropes of victimhood and “aggrieved entitlement” (Kimmel 2015) that have been identified as so central to the new anti-feminism (Nagle 2016; Ging 2017) are, therefore, not entirely new. Indeed, cultural theorists such as David Savran (1998), Robert Hanke (1998) and Carroll Hamilton (2011) have noted for some time a tendency in American popular culture to posit men and masculinity

⁴<http://www.ukmm.org.uk/>.

⁵See <http://www.ukmm.org.uk/> (campaigns).

⁶<http://www.angryharry.com/>.

as victimized, a move which, they claimed, was a strategic attempt to recuperate power through the representation of its loss.

No simple “pendulum” narrative emerges here. The notion of masculinity in crisis took hold, along with the idea that feminism had achieved its goals. Postfeminism asserted a steadfast cultural grip (discussed in more detail in Ging’s contribution to this volume) and, from the 1990s onwards, lad culture in Britain and its American “slacker” equivalent provided a kind of smokescreen behind which the more serious anti-feminism described above was able to incubate. Media theorist David Gauntlett (2002) told us that the new laddism was little more than a resigned acknowledgement of feminism’s success, albeit cloaked in blokeish humour. Natasha Walter (1999) hailed feminism as an unmitigated success, dismissing ironic sexism as a manifestation of masculinity’s fragility. Yet, despite these claims, ironic sexism became increasingly post-ironic as a self-help market thrived that was heavily invested in neuroscientific and evolutionary psychological accounts of gender difference. By the late 2000s, spurred by the games industry and the proliferation of heteronormative pornography online, polarized images and discourses of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity had become commonplace. Throughout this period, feminism continued to do its work in activism and academia, albeit frequently obscured by postfeminism’s upbeat rhetoric of choice, empowerment and freedom.

With the arrival of Web 2.0, new gender-political soundings began to surface, focused mainly on women’s reproductive rights and rape culture on American campuses. SlutWalk emerged as a transnational movement of protest marches, blending elements of radical second-wave feminism with the quintessentially postfeminist trope of equating sexual objectification with power. In 2014, the Gamergate controversy erupted, heralding a new and especially toxic brand of anti-feminism to which most people appeared to have been oblivious. This new anti-feminism—the subject of the current collection—has grown in size and impact, frequently overlapping with “alt-right” agendas and bolstered by the election in 2016 of Donald Trump to the US Presidency. While it is, in some ways, an extension of the earlier men’s rights movements, it is also significantly different in a number of ways (Ging 2017). Moreover, the digital feminist responses it has elicited are not always easy to disentangle, incorporating aspects of second-, third- and fourth-wave feminism, as well as elements of postfeminism. In this sense, the history of feminism and anti-feminism stands at a uniquely complex juncture. As Rosalind Gill (2016, p. 613) has pointed



Fig. 1.2 (a, b, c, and d) Contemporary anti-feminist memes

out, “Whilst some choose to offer linear stories of progress or backlash, with their associated affects of hope or despair, for most the situation seems too complicated for such singular narratives: for every uplifting account of feminist activism, there is another of misogyny; for every feminist ‘win,’ an outpouring of hate, ranging from sexual harassment to death threats against those involved; for every instance of feminist solidarity, another of vicious trolling” (Fig. 1.2).

FEMINIST POLITICS, CRITIQUES AND TACTICS

To understand and historically contextualize both feminism and misogyny, as well as in order to think about formulating an adequate response to gender hate, we may begin with a discussion of feminist politics and critiques. Feminism is a dynamic movement propelled by both shifts in the historical experiences of women and internal debates, themselves linked to the different positions of women. It exists in a state of constant tension, both internal and external. The popular division into various feminist

waves tends to overlook internal debates, and on the whole tends to assume one central position, that of the liberal feminism associated with the experiences of white Western women. Yet, this does not do justice to the feminist contribution of both white and women of colour who belong to the working class, as well as of women in non-Western countries. The problematic of radical, socialist and anti-racist feminism tends to be obscured in canonical histories of feminist waves. This in turn may undermine both female solidarity and the formulation of comprehensive approaches to dealing with misogyny.

When Sojourner Truth, born a slave, asked in 1851 “ain’t I a woman”,⁷ echoed more than a hundred years later by bell hooks (1981), her rhetorical question encapsulated the contradictions in a feminism that ignored the experiences of black women and an anti-racism that focused only on the experiences of black men. Her question laid bare the foundations of a feminism that excludes and that constructs women of colour as inferior to white women, especially white bourgeois women, understood as fragile and in need of support and care. In doing so, she repeated but fundamentally changed the discursive gesture of Mary Wollstonecraft on the rights of women (1792), itself building upon the space opened up by the French Revolution. This historical trajectory is important to note, as it shows that even in the peak of the period of the Enlightenment, the question of the rights of women and women of colour was forcefully posed by women themselves. In this sense feminism is not and has never been a movement associated primarily with the identity politics of the 1980s and beyond. Rather, it was itself the direct outcome of the shift towards modernity, but also problematizing its notion of a kind of liberty that ignores gender, class and race. This forms part of the social critique of modernity which was in operation since at least the middle of the nineteenth century (Wagner 2012).

As one of the ideas of modernity, feminism itself proceeds via critique. Following Peter Wagner’s (2012) sociological approach to modernity, this

⁷The speech is found here: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp>. The crucial passage reads: “That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?”

creates a horizon of expectations of better futures, which historically have failed to appear; such a failure leads to crises, in turn giving rise to critiques; these critiques compel changes. These changes however may generate new problems, beginning the cycle anew. This has been so far the trajectory of feminism: the promises of better futures for women were not delivered, notwithstanding important gains, for example, the suffrage. The crises created by not only unfulfilled promises, but also by parallel shifts in the socio-historical formation, led to critiques that addressed two main issues: what might constitute a better future and what does the category of woman actually consist of. The various feminist waves may be thought of as offering different, and occasionally conflicting, answers to these issues. At the same time, there are critiques that cut across these debates and that transcend the thinking of feminist waves. To be more specific, liberal approaches to feminism, associated with, for example, Drucilla Cornell (1998), Susan Okin (1989) and Martha Nussbaum (2000), consider feminism as a question of personal freedom and autonomy, and are looking to remove patriarchal barriers to liberty. In this sense, liberal feminism considers feminism as primarily a struggle to attain the same rights as men, rights that extend, for example, to private property, the political field and the family. On the other hand, socialist feminism considers that women can never be free of oppression unless the economic system is addressed in conjunction with patriarchy; for socialist feminism, the question is not only of being equal to men, but of men and women to be equally free (Walby 1990; Cronin 2007). Radical feminism on the other hand considers patriarchy and gender divisions as more fundamental, positing that women can never be free unless gender divisions are eradicated (Echols 1989). At the same time, intersectional critiques coming from a critical race theory perspective hold that black women's experiences and the multiple subordinations they are subjected to are not taken into account by any of the previous feminist positions, thereby perpetuating the exclusion of women of colour. The fitting response to this, according to Kimberle Williams Crenshaw (1990), is to develop a politics that counters misogyny and racism simultaneously.

It is evident, therefore, that these political feminist critiques stand differently to the question of gender violence, subsuming misogyny and anti-feminism. Most liberal feminists would consider gender violence as residual, positing that it will eventually go away, as more and more women acquire positions of power, in an institutional context that supports gender equality. On the other hand, radical feminists consider gender violence as a result and symptom of the ongoing subordination of women, which

can only be eradicated through a complete deconstruction and restructuring of institutionalized gender relations. Radical feminists have considered gender violence in the form of porn or prostitution, arguing that these practices actively subordinate women and are displays of woman hating; as long as these exist, gender relations cannot be changed (Dworkin 1974, 1981). Similarly, socialist feminists consider gender violence and misogyny as a symptom of the articulation of patriarchy with capitalism. Male violence against women is a form of domination that sustains the status quo, and in this manner, it can be effectively removed only when the whole system and its constituent patterns of domination are addressed in their totality. Black and intersectional feminism focus on the specific violence suffered by women of colour and make it clear that this cannot be addressed outside of anti-racist struggles. Misogynoir is the specific version of misogyny against black women which is different in many ways to the violence suffered by white women and has to be addressed in a specifically intersectional manner, which pays attention to both racism and misogyny (Bailey and Trudy 2018). In the context of everyday life and experience, the lines separating these varieties of feminism are often blurred: arguments are shared, positions are merged, thoughts and experiences are blended. Yet it is important to note that feminism is within itself a diverse body of ideas, concepts and politics that does not lead to a singular politics or a set of clear tactics.

In this book we pay attention to this complexity, seeking to contextualize the new misogyny and anti-feminisms in terms of their socio-historical shifts, their political dimensions and multiple iterations across the world. Sylvia Walby has convincingly argued that male violence is a constitutive structure of patriarchy but its extent and significance vary historically. For example, Brownmiller (2013 [1974]) has shown a link between militarization and incidence of rape. Similarly, we view the current iterations of misogyny as a symptom of the current historical juncture, in which dissenting female voices and experiences are violently silenced. Additionally, we take issue with attempts to view anti-feminism and misogyny exclusively in linguistic terms following Butler's (1997) critique of "linguisticification" (the conflation of utterances with power per se) and seek to relocate them in the material and experiential field. In these terms misogyny and anti-feminism are not merely "offensive" nor are they just "words" but they cumulatively and forcefully violently subordinate women and seek to hinder their struggles for emancipation. As the chapters in this book show, online anti-feminisms are not cut off from other forms, from

domestic violence to female exclusion. At the same time however, it is important to note that women have effectively used new technologies to address questions of gender violence. For example, Chakraborty discusses the controversies and potentialities opened up by online lists of sexual harassers, while Kuo discusses the potential of GIFs for offering affective release and articulating feminist anger.

The different understandings and historical evolutions of feminism, anti-feminism and gender violence, the various experiences and the form of possible responses complicate discussions of misogyny and anti-feminism. What tactics are appropriate and how should women fight against the new forms of hate unleashed against them? Is online activism enough? Does this new anti-feminism require a renewal of feminist theory and praxis? It is difficult to resolve this from the top down. It is clear that we are in a critical phase, in the sense of both crisis and critique. As Wagner (2012) suggests, the crisis is itself an outcome of the failed promises for better futures; which critiques will prevail and what kinds of solutions will emerge is not clear yet. In this book, we are privileged to document a particular moment of this crisis, before critiques consolidate and while things are still fluid and undetermined. Focusing on struggles as they occur has the distinct advantage of capturing the particular flavour of the moment, even if they may suffer from the occasional myopia of the present. But the documentation of these ongoing struggles is in itself important, as it allows us to momentarily stop, take stock and reflect. It is this process that has given rise to the structure of the book.

STRUCTURING LOGICS

How might we make sense of the new anti-feminisms? We have alluded here to the main theoretical thread that runs through the book: that the current moment is a moment of crisis, whose outcomes are as yet undetermined. It is therefore crucial to think about developing effective critiques that may contribute to opening up new spaces for thought and action. The first section of the book is specifically concerned with theorizing the present moment. Debbie Ging locates this moment in the articulation of neoliberalism with postmodern cultural logics. This, she argues, contributed to and shaped the toxic masculinity that feeds into and sustains anti-feminism and misogyny. At the same time, Ging is concerned that the feminist responses may inadvertently feed into and sustain the same moment, caught up in a vicious circle of “individualism, neoliberal capitalism and the

algorithmic politics of social media". Eugenia Siapera argues that the present moment can be better understood as part of a historical process in which misogyny and anti-feminism are tools that seek to implement new forms of division of labour. Relying on the work of Silvia Federici (2004), Siapera draws a parallel between the role of misogyny and witch hunts in effecting industrial capitalism and the rise of the current misogyny in techno-capitalism. Focusing on the *longue durée*, however, must not obscure the many histories and experiences of womanhood across the world, beyond Europe and the "West". Nighat Dad and Shmyla Khan demonstrate the limits of feminist theory using the concept of consent, an idea central to both feminist politics and the recent shift towards data ethics. Understandings of consent lay bare some of the internal contradictions of liberal, individualist, genderless perspectives, which are developed on the basis of white, male perspective. The empirical focus of Dad and Khan in Pakistan makes clear the tensions in a digital private sphere which subjects women to social surveillance; Pakistani women's very ownership of personal digital devices such as smartphones is also under question, given the expectation to hand over passwords to fathers or husbands. These experiences throw into question Western views of feminist progress and demand that we develop more nuanced and complex critiques and potential solutions to varieties of misogyny that articulate forms of traditional patriarchy with techno-capitalism. Such experiences further show the paucity of perspectives of a fourth wave of feminism that discount the different ways in which women are subjected to discrimination and gender violence both within the West and in non-Western settings.

If the first part is concerned with understanding the present moment using theoretical concepts and constructs, the second part focuses on specific articulations of misogyny and anti-feminism in the online sphere. Using these as an entry point, chapters here show the disconcerting similarities of misogynist discourses across platforms, cases and cultures. Misogyny traverses not only cultures but subject positions, class and social fields. Two of the chapters here revolve around the pivotal case of Bill Cosby and his first trial. A key site of contestation is that of sexual violence, rape and rape culture. High-profile cases such as that of Cosby and more recently the Harvey Weinstein affair and the subsequent cases of high-profile men accused of harassment become important breeding grounds for the development of both new tools of oppression and new tools of emancipation. They further serve to highlight political divisions and differences, but crucially also convergences between liberal and conservative viewpoints. This is clear in

Francine Banner's chapter, which examines comments on Breitbart and the *New York Times* following the collapse of the first Cosby trial. Banner notes that, despite the political differences between readers/commenters of Breitbart and the *New York Times*, they were surprisingly united in their misogyny, notwithstanding some differences in the style in which this was expressed. There is little question that the collapse of Cosby's first trial unleashed a torrent of misogyny that spanned much further than Breitbart and the *New York Times*. While Banner examines the aftermath of the failed trial in terms of political (non) divisions, Sarah Dunne looks at the tensions between feminism and anti-racism. While she observes similar misogynistic tropes (gold-digger, whore), she notes that these are intertwined with a supposed anti-racism, given the prominence of Bill Cosby as a black American celebrity. The mobilization of the long and shameful history of false accusations against black men, associated with racist constructions of black male sexuality and connected to lynchings, formed the backdrop of the Cosby mistrial, which conspired to silence black feminists and victims of violence. In this respect, the significance of the momentum created by #MeToo, which can to some extent be credited with the success of the subsequent trial and eventual conviction of Cosby, cannot be understated. But there is still a lot of work to be done here as Kimberle Crenshaw's recent tweet shows: "So now the question is ripe. How long will we selectively deploy racial solidarity to protect abusive men while kicking our sistas to the curb? Can the sistas get 5 minutes of attention before the reflexive finger-pointing elsewhere kicks in? For once? #MuteRKelly #TimesUp" (Kimberle Crenshaw, [@sandylocks](#), 30/4/2018).

The quasi-organized networked misogyny of the men's rights activists (MRAs) is carefully examined in MacKenzie Cockerill's chapter, which exposes the connections and links forged between US and Western-based MRAs and MRA groups emerging in the context of India. Cockerill notes the many paradoxes of Indian misogyny, drawing on brahmanical patriarchy. The memes she analyses purport to speak for tradition, opposing Westernization, but the type of Westernization that they associate with feminism. Cockerill identifies the glaring contradictions depicted in memes that show "Westernized" women demanding money from their husbands or seen as "gold-diggers" in a cultural context that still demands dowry money to be paid by women to men. The pressure that Indian men face in a globalized world is released through identifying an enemy: women. This gender polarization and the separation of the world into an "us" and "them" mapping onto men and women is the common ground created

through a global misogyny manifested in internet tropes such as memes. The last chapter in this section explores the use of revenge porn as a form of gender violence, operating through shame. Rikke Amundsen contrasts the social elements of revenge porn, which can only effect gender violence because of predominant gender norms, to the legal instruments that focus on the intention of the person who shared the intimate images. Revenge porn does not have the same power over men that it has over women, and while this is immediately apparent to society, it is not recognized in the law. Women are disproportionately shamed by revenge porn because it is taken as “proof” that they are “sluts”; men on the other hand are engaged in behaviour that is seen as “natural” to them and, although revenge porn infringes their privacy, the impact is not the same. In this context, Amundsen argues that because the policy and legal context is not concerned with the broader social processes at work when women are shamed through revenge porn, the impact of any relevant legislation is minimal.

The final part of the book is concerned with women’s own efforts to address gender violence. Experiences and practices. The experience of anger is taken up by Rachel Kuo, whose chapter focuses on reaction GIFs as catalysts for the collectivization of feminist anger. The release that is afforded by these GIFs is juxtaposed to the normative expectations that women are polite, silent and self-effacing. Using reaction GIFs women reclaim and repurpose the “feminist killjoy” trope of “hysterical” angry women. While Kuo recognizes that reaction GIFs can do very little to address systemic oppression and structural inequality, the circulation of racialized and gendered GIFs can be part of a solidarity-building process that allows women to exist as community in online spaces. Such a community is also in operation in Aprita Chakraborty’s discussion of the list of sexual harassers that emerged following #MeToo. In ways that parallel Amundsen’s critique, Chakraborty discusses the problems and difficulties of “due process”. In the openings and gaps created by the failings of this, women academics who have experienced harassment put into online circulation a list of names of men they accused of harassment. This was done with a view to prioritize women’s safety, but in its circulation, it exposed another issue: that of a disagreement between feminists—that Chakraborty identifies as typically of an older generation—insisting on due process and those who point to the ineffectiveness of due process, to widespread impunity and to the rights of women to be protected from serial offenders, by knowing who to avoid. While Chakraborty recognizes both the ambiguity and the limits of this tactic, she insists on its usefulness as an interim measure for addressing the

immediate needs of women. Tanya Lokot discusses another tactic for addressing gender violence in the context of the Russian internet (RuNet). In a cultural and legal context that is becoming increasingly restrictive, Lokot traces the impact of misogyny and homophobia, which are institutionalized in recent legal measures such as the law against so-called gay propaganda. This environment makes the activism of women such as Elena Klimova even more important. Klimova, the founder of a youth support organization for gay children and their parents, responds to the hate she received by juxtaposing the beautiful and aesthetically appealing pictures of those who sent her hate messages with the contents of these messages. Lokot understands this affective juxtaposition as subversive because it lays bare the contradiction between the self-images of people who want to be seen as kind and beautiful and the ugliness of their misogyny and homophobia expressed through slurs and open threats. The same tactic of exposure and irony is employed in Laura Brightwell's chapter, which focuses on Feminist_Tinder, a now-defunct Instagram account managed by Laura Nowak, who posts screenshots of misogynist messages sent on Tinder. Brightwell situates this tactic within a postfeminist sensibility that operates through irony, while also accomplishing something that is more serious: the ability of women to navigate the complex terrain of social media and to call out aspects of these that are unacceptable to them. Brightwell locates the political value of tactics such as these in their creation of a feminist counter-public, echoing Kuo's argument on reaction GIFs. Call-out is one of the four tactics identified and interrogated in Jasmine Linabary and Bianca Batti's chapter, alongside representations of shared experience, disruption of hegemonic narratives and defiance of harassers. Linabary and Batti show the important work undertaken by these tactics, found in the public narratives of women such as Laurie Penny, Ashley Judd, Jessica Valenti and Evette Dione. However, they also demonstrate the tensions and ambiguities of these narratives and their tactics: in repeating such experiences they may reproduce trauma, they force their authors into a position of reproducing vulnerability, while also placing a huge burden on the shoulders of individual women. Linabary and Batti call attention to the surprising lack of specific calls to action, pointing to the need to move beyond narrative accounts towards some form of feminist action. Indeed, this is a common line emerging across the chapters. The time of recounting and contemplation is passing and the need to move to action is pressing. Sometimes this action can be ambiguous, as Chakraborty shows in her chapter, but even then, it has to be seen as preferable to inaction and/or as a preface for more effective action.

FINAL WORDS

There is an increasing sense of urgency in recent developments. Worrying signs are everywhere, from the murderous rage of the “incels” to the more insidious erosion of women’s reproductive rights, for example, in countries such as Italy, where over 60% of doctors will not perform abortions on the grounds of “conscientious objection” (Pustela 2018), but also evident in struggles in Poland and the US. To be sure, this is a moment of crisis. This collection is a testament to some of the many aspects of this crisis: from Pakistan, Russia and India to the UK and the US; from Breitbart to the *New York Times*, and from Twitter to Tinder and Instagram; from theorizations of misogyny and anti-feminism, to experiences of hate and to tactics of resistance, the authors of these varied contributions seek to apprehend a complex and dynamic reactionary movement against women through and within new technologies. Using multiple theoretical lenses, from critiques of postfeminism to the socialist feminism of Silvia Federici and the affective economies of Sarah Ahmed, the present volume interrogates the multiple but interconnected tentacles of misogyny and anti-feminism, in a move to open up the space that will allow feminist critique praxis to emerge.

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PART I

Theorizing the New Anti-Feminism(s)



CHAPTER 2

Online Misogyny as Witch Hunt: Primitive Accumulation in the Age of Techno-capitalism

Eugenia Siapera

INTRODUCTION

Focusing primarily on the European and “Western” context, this chapter will address the question of online misogyny and anti-feminism from a materialist perspective. To begin with, I use the term online misogyny as an umbrella term for all kinds of negative experiences that women go through online because of their gender, ranging from harassment and name calling to doxing and rape threats. I refer to anti-feminism as a position that is explicitly against gender equality. While there is a tendency to understand these phenomena in terms of the online culture wars, I want to argue here that it may be more useful to understand them in terms of their material dimensions, and especially in terms of their political function. This political function is the continued exclusion of women from accessing and controlling the means of production and from full socio-economic participation in the emerging new formation, to which I refer as

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techno-capitalism. In pursuing this argument, I will begin with a brief overview of the culture wars and the liberal consensus and gender mainstreaming that emerged at the turn of the century. I will then examine the spread, forms and potential impact of online misogyny as emerging from various academic studies and civil society reports, arguing that viewing this as part of ongoing culture wars has created an impasse: on the one hand, it underestimates the problem by locating at the level of culture and cultural values and, on the other, it fails to provide any viable solution because in doing so it would run counter to the liberal values that underpin European and other Western systems. To resolve this, I propose to understand online misogyny as a question of distribution of material resources. Relying on the work of Engels (2010 [1884]) and Federici (2004) I propose that online misogyny has a function similar to that of witch hunting in the turn from feudal to industrial capitalism, which used it in order to restructure society in a particular way. While witch hunts were used to violently and systematically coerce women to conform with the requirements of the then emerging industrial capitalism, online misogyny can be seen as seeking to prevent women from participating in building the forthcoming technological future. Any resolution of the digital violence to which women are subjected is likely to necessitate radical ways of redistributing power and resources rather than mere policy changes by social media corporations.

THE CULTURE WARS AND MISOGYNY

The term “culture wars” originates in the nineteenth-century Germany and the circumstances surrounding Otto von Bismarck’s attempt to create a culturally united German. Culture wars, or *Kulturkampf*, was a term used to refer to the ways in which Bismarck sought to repress the influence of the Catholic Church and to create a Protestant Germany (Chapman and Ciment 2015). While Bismarck failed to win these “wars”, the idea of a united culture and a struggle for cultural dominance resurfaces every time there is any attempt to claim or reclaim power. In recent years, culture as a site of struggle emerged in the 1960s, when America, and also Europe, sought to realign themselves vis-à-vis their own cultural values, based on bottom-up struggles, associated with the civil rights movements of the time. Hunter (1991) argues that the culture wars represent a polarized view point between orthodox and progressivist thinking on issues of everyday life. Such polarization extends across several domains of social life, for example, family, law and politics, with proponents advocating very

different and incompatible positions on everything. Hunter (1991) argues that divisions transcend gender, racial and class divides; for example, it is not impossible to find working-class people or women expressing very conservative positions and values vis-à-vis the family or politics. In this manner, he locates tensions at the level of culture rather than on the material plane.

Crucially, for Hunter, these wars take place in the public domain and in public discourses. Indeed, in the US, the pinnacle of the culture wars in the 1990s was reached when in 1992 Pat Buchanan, then competing for the Republican nomination, referred to the culture wars as a battle for “the soul of America” (Hartman 2015, p. 1). Putting himself forward against the then Democratic candidate Bill Clinton, Buchanan argued that voting concerned more than the Presidency: it was about “who we are” and “about what we believe” (Hartman 2015, p. 1).

Gender emerges as a particular field of conflict in these culture wars, with feminism and anti-feminism appearing as the two opposing poles. Abortion, adultery, family organization and sexuality are all key areas that triggered public debate throughout the later part of the twentieth century, with liberals and conservatives taking diametrically opposing positions. All this was played out in the courts, for example, in the Anita Hill sexual harassment case against Clarence Thomas; in popular culture, for example, in the sitcom *Murphy Brown* and the protagonist’s decision to become a single mother; and in the political field, with the Clinton-Lewinsky case and its implications for gender relations. Notwithstanding these debates, data show marked improvement in terms of gender equality, in terms of participation in employment, education and pay, though there are still considerable disparities and inequality.¹

In Europe too, the broad consensus is to move towards gender equality. The European Union (EU) understands its role in this as “promoting equal economic independence for women and men, closing the gender pay gap, advancing gender balance in decision making, ending gender-based violence and promoting gender equality beyond the EU”.² In practice, this has meant that access to abortion,³ childcare, welfare support for

¹ See the Women’s Bureau of the US Department of Labor, https://www.dol.gov/wb/stats/stats_data.htm.

² Found here: https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/justice-and-fundamental-rights/discrimination/gender-equality_en.

³ With the notable exception of Ireland.

single mothers, quotas for inclusion in politics, anti-discrimination policies in employment and other similar policies are broadly accepted and implemented across the European Union. This consensus can be associated to the emergence of a postfeminist discourse that posits that feminism as the demand for equality across all spheres is no longer relevant because equality is achieved through policies that explicitly address discrimination; since formal equality is ostensibly achieved, postfeminism understands feminism primarily as a question of individual choice and diversity over family and sexual relationships (McRobbie 2004).

It is all the more disconcerting therefore to see that what has been more or less taken for granted—that we would move progressively towards more gender equality—is now actively disputed not because of metrics that paint a different picture but because of the emergence of new domains where women are discriminated against, accompanied by the development of a regressive and reactionary gender ideology or new misogyny. Specifically, in a shift that emerges as contemporaneous with the rise of social media, we are witnessing the (re)emergence of an anti-feminism that moves beyond the traditional conservative viewpoints of family values while at the same time mobilizing them. In parallel, we encounter online a plethora of misogynistic discourses and images, coalescing on women's sexualized bodies, often attacking vocal and prominent women. Can these developments still be understood in terms of “culture wars”? To address this, we need an analysis of the current forms of misogyny and anti-feminism. As public discourse is now encountered primarily in the digital sphere, it is there that we may turn to identify the new misogyny and to study its spread, forms and impact. These can be seen as manifested in the rise of attacks against women in online environments, in the emergence of the manosphere and MRAs (men's rights activists), and in the rise of extreme-right politics and its ideological links to right-wing identity politics. The next section focuses on these manifestations of the new misogyny.

ONLINE MISOGYNY AND ANTI-FEMINISM

Misogynistic online attacks are becoming increasingly common. An EU-based survey in 2014 found that on average across the 28 EU countries, 11% of women had experienced online abuse, beginning at the age of 15, ranging from 5% in Romania to 18% in Sweden and Denmark, reflecting the higher numbers of internet users in these countries.⁴ An

⁴<http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2014/violence-against-women-eu-wide-survey-main-results-report>.

IPSOS Mori survey commissioned by Amnesty International found that 21% of women across several countries have experienced some kind of abuse, and this went up to 37% among women in ages 18–24 (Amnesty International 2017). A Pew Research study found that US women are twice as likely to report that they are targeted because of their gender, although more men reported harassment; moreover, women who were targeted were more likely to experience severe types of harassment perceived (Pew Research 2017). In a study of tweets using gender-based slurs (“slut” and “whore”), the think tank Demos harvested a dataset of 1.46 million tweets in 23 days, which they subsequently analysed using machine learning techniques. After removing the pornographic tweets, which formed the majority, 33% of the remaining tweets were aggressive and 9% constituted ironic self-identification tweets (Demos 2016).

Online misogyny further manifests itself in spectacular online events and ad hominem attacks (Jane 2014). Technology blogger Kathy Sierra was subjected to one of the first doxing attacks allegedly by “weev”⁵ in 2007 (Citron 2014). The notorious Gamergate online mob targeted Zoe Quinn and later Brianna Wu while Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist blogger writing about video games, was the target of sustained digital abuse, through doxing, doctored photographs and rape threats (Wu 2014; Chess and Shaw 2015; Massanari 2017). Caroline Criado-Perez was subjected to extreme online abuse for campaigning for the replacement of the portrait of Charles Darwin with that of Jane Austen on the British £10 note (Jane 2014). Other notable moments include the “dongle-gate”, where Adria Richards tweeted about two men making sexual comments in a tech conference; while the men were subsequently fired, the backlash that ensued against Richards and more broadly women in tech was swift (Marwick 2013). In the James Damore case, Damore, then a Google engineer, circulated a memo in which he argued that women are not good at computer science because of their biology (Ehrenkranz 2018). While Damore was fired, he has now become a “martyr” for freedom of speech and a victim of “uncontrollable feminism”, hence unleashing even more misogynistic venom—for example, in the r/JamesDamore.

⁵ “weev” or Andrew Auernheimer targeted Sierra as part of the “Gay Nigger Association of America” and was subsequently associated with several high-profile hacks, for which he ended up serving time in prison (Coleman 2014). He has subsequently revealed himself as a white nationalist and co-runs the notorious Daily Stormer website with Andrew Anglin (Lavin 2018).

Apart from women in tech, gaming and feminism, female journalists and politicians are also targeted. In her study of the *Guardian* comments, Gardiner (2018) reports that out of the ten most targeted journalists, eight were women; this finding is even more significant if we take into account that only 28% of *Guardian* writers are women. In the recent UK election in 2017, Amnesty analysed over 900,000 tweets harvested in the pre-election period; the main target of online abuse was Diane Abbott, a prominent black MP, who received 45.14% of all abusive tweets, while other black and Asian women MPs received 35% more abusive tweets than white MPs, showing the intersections between race and gender (Amnesty Global Insights 2017). This misogyny targeting prominent women associated with technology, feminism and the political sphere is important because it functions as paradigmatic misogyny: its outcome is not only to symbolically punish and silence these prominent women but also to discipline and deter all other women witnessing these attacks.

At the same time, there is a constant undercurrent of “banal” everyday misogyny, with supposedly funny or ironic comments, expressions and memes. Examples abound, from expressions such as “tits or GTFO” and “send nudes” to “make me a sammich”; memes from the “overly attached girlfriend” to “feminazis”, from the “annoying Facebook girl” to the more recent “Did you just assume my gender”; various random comments referring to “sluts”, “bitches” and “whores” but also Urban Dictionary-style definitions and abbreviations that are meant to be funny and cool but actually reproduce pernicious sexualized stereotypes of women from a (white) male point of view (see Ging 2018). It is truly impossible for any woman to navigate the Web without coming across one or another of these expressions. While all this may not be as dramatic as the spectacular (and illegal) rape threats against prominent women, they should be understood as part of the same dynamic. “Banalizing” or, in other words, mainstreaming misogyny and ridiculing attempts to call it out ultimately contributes and adds to it.

It is evident in all this that the techniques employed are various. Mantilla (2013) lists several, including mob attacks, credible threats, viciousness and attacks over a long period of time. Jane (2017, p. 33) describes the new emerging vocabulary of abuse as “rapeglash”, referring specifically to “the graphic, sexualised language, and the threatening undertones”. This is further amplified by a series of online-only techniques, including photoshopped images, memes, revenge porn and sextortion, vandalism of personal web-pages, cyberstalking, online identity theft and others (Jane 2017; Mantilla

2015). This litany of misogynistic techniques is significant because it points to the dissolution of boundaries between public and private abuse; between, for example, domestic and public violence (see also, Dragiewicz et al. 2018). They further differ in that they are generalized: while younger women are reported as the most typical targets, any woman at any time can be targeted and there are no women online who are immune. As Sady Doyle put it, when you see all these statements together, they seem to be “speaking to the *exact same woman*” (2011, quoted in Jane 2017, pp. 53–54, emphasis in the original).

This generalized misogyny using “rapeglish” and other techniques is not limited to the random musings of disgruntled men but is increasingly acquiring an ideological coherence and support in the manosphere and in men’s rights groups. The manosphere is understood by Ging (2017) as comprised of a loose confederacy of interest groups supporting men’s rights, expressing themselves through blogs, subreddits, YouTube channels, websites, Twitter feeds and so on. Ging (2017) found five categories that make up the manosphere: MRAs, “men going their own way”, pick-up artists (PUAs), traditional Christian conservatives and gamers/geek culture enthusiasts. She identified a prolific cross-fertilization among these groups, with ideas emerging in one part rapidly spreading to another, and while it may be premature to talk about a definitive ideology emerging, there are certain clear lines of common thought across this space.

Ging (2017) identifies references to red pill “philosophy”, reliance on crude readings of evolutionary psychology and a shift to cultural rather than political tropes as common across the manosphere, pointing to the emergence of a hybrid masculinity (cf. Bridges and Pascoe 2014). The red pill trope alludes to the popular film *The Matrix*, where the protagonist faced a choice between taking the blue pill and living a life which would be content but based on a delusion, and taking the red pill, waking up to the realities of life and hence beginning to struggle. For these groups, the red pill means realizing that feminism is in fact “misandry” and that men are brainwashed into accepting this and have to fight against their diminished power in society. Evolutionary psychology as read by these groups posits biologically determined roles and behaviours for men and women. Men are ordered on the basis of their rank, much like primates, into “alphas” and “betas”, but also “omegas” and “zetas” (Ging 2017). Women’s behaviours are determined by their reproductive capacity; they are thought to look for “alpha” males to reproduce and for “beta” males to support them. Recently, Jordan Peterson, through his lectures, videos and 2018 book *12 Rules for*

Life, emerged as a focal point, gathering and systematizing disparate ideas, such as archetypical images of masculinity as competitiveness and dominance, a conflation of Marxism with postmodernism, individualism, a critique of anti-racism and feminism as false victimizations, “political correctness” as compromising freedom of speech and so on. Looking at the prominence of Jordan Peterson as a key intellectual figure in this milieu, it is evident that the main tropes through which these ideas are articulated are cultural rather than political. The manosphere’s function is less the pursuit of common goals through collective action, as in earlier phases of men’s rights activism, but is rather moving towards connective action, the sharing of emotions and narratives among affective masculine publics (Bennett and Segerberg 2014; Papacharissi 2015; Ging 2017). On the other hand, the manosphere can be seen as preparatory for political action, at least in the form of “gender terrorism” (Ging 2018), as occasional violent eruptions, such as the Isla Vista and Toronto misogynistic attacks by so-called incels, show.

A third locus of misogyny and anti-feminism, related but distinct to the manosphere, is one that is much more explicitly political: the alt-right universe. Gender is perhaps a clear indication of the ideological confusion reigning in the alt-right, manifested in the co-existence of paradoxical positions on gender and women. On the one hand, there are traditional conservative values and references to a “natural order”, sexual abstinence and “pro-life” policies found in for example the political manifestos of the Front National (FN) in France and the AfD in Germany (Flemming et al. 2017; McRobbie 2018). On the other hand, there are hypersexualized, pornified and “rapey” references to women, exemplified in the personages of Donald Trump and his “grab them by the pussy” comments, and Gavin McInnes, the founder of Vice and subsequently of the anti-feminist group Proud Boys (Nagle 2017a). Nagle (2017b) refers to the libertarian origins of the 4chan cultures that provided the energy for the alt-right movement as separate from, and contradictory to, the traditional, back-to-the-nuclear-family values associated with the political parties of the alt-right. She predicts that this is a temporary alliance that will not hold in the long term though it has to be pointed out that the ‘mother/whore’ binary is a long lasting structuring principle for stereotypical femininity.

Another paradox in the alt-right is evident in the denunciation of Islam as inimical to gender equality and their own anti-feminism; for example, the AfD is explicitly against “working mothers, immigration, ‘free sex’, ‘gender mainstreaming’ and marriage equality legislation” yet at the same time opposing the right of Muslim women to wear a headscarf because it

is not conducive to gender equality (Flemming et al. 2017). In Marine Le Pen's 2017 Presidential bid, the only one of the 144 points of her manifesto that explicitly referenced women's rights included the following statement: "To defend the rights of women: Fight against Islamism that wants to roll back women's fundamental freedoms" (quoted in Flemming et al. 2017). The Dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid (NL) produced a leaflet denouncing violence against women in Islam, while opposing the ratification of the Istanbul Convention against violence against women. It is clear that their ostensible support for women's rights is a thinly veiled form of Islamophobia.

But for the most part the anti-feminism of the alt-right is associated with a return to a nuclear heteronormative family. In one of the most well-known anti-feminist works associated with the alt-right, *Sexual Utopia in Power*, F. Roger Devlin (2006, p. 34) opines that "Western woman has become the new 'white man's burden'" because of the demands placed on men by feminists. He criticizes sexual liberation, which he attributes to Playboy, and argues that it is against the natural order because of "hyper-gamy", that is, the biological urge in women to "mate with the best". Men should realize that sexual liberation does not mean more sex for men, but more sex with some men, leaving many with no access to sex at all. Devlin quotes Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*, positing that for women, sexual utopia is attractive men having sex with old and unattractive women, that is, mating only with the most sexually attractive men. For Devlin sexual liberation has had the effect of establishing this kind of "feminist sexual utopia". The proposed solution is therefore a return to a situation where a kind of enforced monogamy without the possibility of divorce "restores" male power.

This kind of anti-feminism is evident in most of the alt-right websites, as well as in the political manifestos of European extreme-right parties such as the Front National, AfD or Partij voor de Vrijheid (NL). The FN is in favour of "natalism", which supports childbirth and family as good for the nation, but only if undertaken by "French" families; similarly, the AfD advocates for family policy but only for "Germans", proposing that the solution to the demographic decline of Germany "is to attain a higher birth rate by the native population by stimulating family policies" (quoted in Flemming et al. 2017). These extreme-right parties seem to mobilize gender equality tropes when it suits their goals, for example, to bash Islam or to claim cultural superiority, but their main agenda is anti-feminist. This is very clear in the case of Sweden Democrats, whose position against, for example, the *niqab/veil* is dictated by the goal of establishing a "harmonious society"

where Swedes can feel at home, while they view rape by an immigrant not as a misogynistic crime but as desecration of the nation (Towns et al. 2014). The Sweden Democrats also mobilize biological determinism, claiming that any gender pay gap or gender-based differentiation in the labour market is the result of different life choices, themselves reflecting deep-seated differences between the sexes; hence, they are against any form of state intervention to address these.

These formal political positions are driven home through a plethora of websites, Facebook pages, YouTube channels and Twitter feeds, such as, for example, Red Ice, Avpixlat and Speisa, but also Richard Spencer's [AltRight.com](#), Breitbart, and Infowars. There are sites such as Metapedia and Rightpedia, supported by the infiltration into more mainstream sites such as Urban Dictionary by right-wing posters (Ging 2018). As Ging (2017) noted for the manosphere, there is a clear cross-fertilization and ideological connection among all these political movements which operate transnationally. For example, according to the website traffic monitor Alexa, 41% of [AltRight.com](#)'s traffic comes from the US, but 29% from Germany and the remaining from UK and Canada. Breitbart has a Breitbart London and a Breitbart Israel tab. Infowars has written extensively about the "failure of multiculturalism" in Sweden, which has now become the "rape capital of Europe", a lie that was repeated by Donald Trump, Fox News and Nigel Farage and propagated throughout the internet.⁶ What is important to note here is the fusion of racism and misogyny/anti-feminism, which is then mobilized to support political points. This kind of identity politics from the right, a common ideological position among these extreme-right political parties, including the Identitarian Movement⁷ per se, is focusing on preserv-

⁶In February 2017, Trump tweeted about a terrorist attack in Sweden which had never taken place. He later clarified that he was referring to a documentary featured on Fox News on "why Sweden has become the rape capital of Europe" because it had taken in "over 350,000 Syrian refugees". This was then repeated by Nigel Farage, who referred to Malmo as the rape capital of Europe and possibly of the world. None of these claims is true (Lusher 2017).

⁷The Identitarian Movement has emerged following a split from the Bloc Identitaire, when the youth part of Génération Identitaire decided to go its own way in 2012. This was followed by the establishment of several similar groups across Europe: the German Identitäre Bewegung (Identitarian Movement), the Austrian Identitäre Bewegung Österreichs, the Italian Generazione Identitaria, Generation Identity United Kingdom and Ireland, but also the US-based Identity Evropa, all with the same anti-immigration, anti-multiculturalism nationalist agenda. Their symbol is the Greek letter Lamda, alluding to the battle of Thermopylae and the letter on the Spartan shields. Their choice of the Spartan king Leonidas as a symbol points to their masculine idea—Leonidas' death in Thermopylae is seen as "the

ing an ethnically pure culture and identity. For this to be realized, women, who are responsible for both the biological and the cultural reproduction of this identity, must be brought under control. Such parties' anti-feminism is therefore oriented towards reproducing the "natural" national order. Disrupting the "natural" sex roles of men and women by way of feminism undermines national unity and coherence (Towns et al. 2014).

It is in this overall ideological context that the main manifestations of online misogyny and anti-feminism occur. Misogyny and anti-feminism are not limited to one or the other type or form but are deployed in all these forms at the same time. Moreover, even in their contradictory elements, for example, the libertarianism in the rapelish of 4chan and Reddit and the traditionalism of the alt-right, they ultimately express the same position: women's role in society is biologically determined by their reproductive functions. Hence men can be positioned towards them as either sluts and whores used for (men's) sexual gratification or as reproductive vessels ensuring the continuation of a pure white ethno-cultural identity. There is no autonomy or full humanity afforded to them, and it is in this sense that the anti-feminism of the alt-right can be collapsed into misogyny, even if it is expressed in milder and less "transgressive" terms.

Why Misogyny

We have seen how misogyny can be found in three main loci, as an apparently random and widely diffused internet trope, comprised of both spectacular attacks and banal everyday repetitions of misogynistic tropes; in the manosphere, where some of these tropes are "cooked" and spread; and in the alt-right, where misogyny acquires an overtly political dimension. The novelty of this misogyny and anti-feminism does not lie exclusively in the forms and tropes, nor in the intensity of the expressions, but also in the ubiquity, spread and accumulations over almost every part of the internet. In explaining online misogyny, Jane (2017) offers a deceptively simple account: gender cyberhate, she argues, occurs because men still hold a disproportionate share of political, economic and social power, but also

greatest test of masculinity" (Virchow 2015, p. 184). Although this relies on the film and comic series *300* rather than history books, "Leonidas" draws on a male ideal of muscular virility associated with Spartan warriors compared to the supposed degeneracy and decadence of Persian warriors. In Virchow's analysis of the German movement's online materials, gender is portrayed in the traditional tropes of heterosexual couples procreating and therefore reproducing the nation.

simply because they can. For her, misogyny is the manifestation of this power imbalance between men and women. She holds that we should not overcomplicate matters by seeking to understand the psychological motivations of trolls and online harassers. Both Jane (2017) and Massanari (2017), as well as Ging (2017), point to the role played by the design and algorithmic organization of the social media sphere as an important contributory factor in the rise and spread of misogyny. Misogyny is therefore expressed through the technological affordances of the internet that facilitate and augment hatred against women. But this hate, and its origins, still requires an explanation. Ging (2017), as well as Nagle (2017a), recognizes the role played by the advent of neoliberalism and widespread precarity, risk and loss of certainty that it has created for men, holding that some men are eager to find new certainties and anti-feminist discourses may provide this. The more virulent kinds of misogyny can be accounted for in terms of the resentment experienced by some young men—the “betas”—who perceive themselves as excluded or marginalized (Nagle 2017a). While Nagle’s position is plausible and addresses the social psychological motivations underlying some of these misogynist discourses, she still locates misogyny as part of the culture wars, and therefore as concerning primarily the “heart and soul” of our societies. But is this the case? Can this explain the extent, persistence, variety, scope, in short, the misogynist momentum that is built across all these loci? Focusing only on culture tends to ignore the tangible material circumstances and implications of this misogyny for women just when we are living through a new shift within capitalism.

Research has shown the implications of online misogyny on those targeted, for example, the trauma and mental health issues, the fear for one’s safety and the chilling effect that makes women modify their public statements and writings (Dhrodia 2018; Jane 2017; Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring 2016; Filipovic 2007). However, notwithstanding the important effects at the level of individuals targeted, it is crucial to understand the wider impact that the rise of misogyny has, and to seek to understand not only the psychological but also its material dimensions, and specifically those that concern the distribution of resources in society and access to the means of production. In locating misogyny only at the level of culture and in women’s mental health and in seeking remedies in policies that take contents down, there is a tendency on the one hand to underestimate its effects and on the other to push the limits of liberalism that forms the ideological backdrop of Western societies. In demanding

control of discourse, such pleas fall prey to both conservative and libertarian accusations of censorship, “political correctness” and mind policing, while the actual problem itself is not really addressed as misogyny emerges elsewhere or in modified forms, much like the mythical hydra. Misogyny may therefore require a further contextualization beyond the culture wars. In the next section, I will begin formulating an approach that seeks to understand the new misogyny and its material dimensions by contextualizing it terms of other instances of misogyny and gender violence, such as the witch hunt. This in turn is linked to transitional moments associated with social dislocation. Placed within the sphere of historical political and economic developments, the material aspects of misogyny and anti-feminism become apparent.

THE NEW MISOGYNY IN CONTEXT

One of the first serious attempts to understand gender relations beyond the level of culture and psychobiological determinism is found in the work of Friedrich Engels, whose historical materialist perspective used anthropological studies to locate gender as an element of relations of production. In *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (2010 [1884]), Engels made the critical argument that women’s social position drastically changes in societies that have private property. Engels relies on the anthropological works of Lewis Morgan, who identified different kinds of families, and household organization, ranging from the “primitive communistic” consanguine and punaluan families living together in large groups to the pairing and monogamous families that are closer to today’s nuclear family. For Engels the passage from the former to the latter signals the passage from a mother-right to a patriarchal family formation: “The overthrow of mother-right was the world historical defeat of the female sex. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude, she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children” (Engels 2010 [1884], p. 31). Engels’ main argument is that women’s status gradually shifted as labour began to produce surplus and that the internal organization of the household and the family depended on the division of labour outside the family. It is significant therefore to note that when relations of production began changing, family and household structures began to experience tensions.

Notwithstanding the vastly important contribution of Engels’ ideas in historically contextualizing family and the position of women as a function of

shifting relations of production, there are several unanswered questions and important aspects that are glossed over. Feminist thought has since enriched our understanding of women's position within relations of production—and specifically outlined the importance of women's so-called unproductive labour, which is concerned with social reproduction (Fortunati 1995; Federici 2004). A second and related element that has been crucial in (radical) feminist critiques has been that Marxist approaches located the exploitation of women as an after-effect of capitalism rather than recognizing that it is fundamental to it (Dalla Costa and James 1973; Mies 2014 [1986]). A dimension of this latter element concerns the violent and coercive means through which the subjugation and exploitation of women occurred and was maintained. Here, the work of Silvia Federici is instructive. Federici (2004) focused on the transformation of social and family relations in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the critical time just before capitalism. Her goal was to identify more closely the ways in which capitalism was made possible, a process which she describes using Marx's term of primitive accumulation. How did capitalism accumulate capital and force people to accept wage labour? Violence, she found, was central to it; though Marx had also outlined the violence used against people in the process of creating private property and proletarianizing former peasants, he thought that this would recede as capitalism progressed. Yet Federici shows that "violent aspects of primitive accumulation ha[ve] accompanied every phase of capitalist globalization, including the present one, demonstrating that the continuous expulsion of farmers from the land, war and plunder on a world scale, and the degradation of women are necessary conditions for the existence of capitalism in all times" (2004, pp. 12–13).

While Federici's work is wide in scope, covering the biopolitics of the female body, it is her discussion of misogynist violence, and especially of the witch hunt, that is the most relevant here. Federici understands femininity in capitalism as a specific construction that assigns to women the task of biological and social reproduction, which it then masks as a biological destiny. She shows that this construction was not the result of a benign transition or an evolution from feudal-agricultural to industrial production; rather, it was "realized with the maximum of violence and state intervention" (2004, p. 14). Federici sketches the history of women in the Middle Ages,⁸ showing that notwithstanding the many hardships they endured, women held a variety of positions, participating in religious,

⁸ I am not able here to do justice to Federici's complex and multifaceted arguments. A key point that she makes is that the fate of women in Europe (and more broadly workers) was

social and political life, were listed in no less than 200 professions, including the practice of medicine, and in general their position was more equal to that of men than in the period that followed. In the long transition to capitalism in Europe, argues Federici, the common land where peasants were subsisting on was expropriated and wage labour was forced upon them. This process put in danger the reproduction of the labour force as it caused widespread poverty, chronic hunger, starvation and mortality but also intense resistance especially by those hit harder, such as women. The shift to proletarianization required both the preservation of processes of reproducing the labour force and the disciplining of the labour force. Population growth and the control of reproduction then became a matter of state concern and required the development and implementation of wide-ranging methods by which to break women's control over reproduction and to crush any resistance. Women's destiny was to reproduce the labour force in a domestic setting through forced maternity, accomplished through practices that excluded women from almost all forms of waged labour, the devaluation of the kind of labour associated with women, such as for example housework, and the banning of prostitution.

Explicit misogyny was mobilized in order for these policies to be successful. During this period, that is, in the sixteenth to the seventeenth century, across Western Europe women were all but banned from public spaces, and femininity and masculinity were sharply distinguished, with the former associated with emotionality, weakness, lust and lack of control. From the pulpits of churches, to theatres, in books and in popular writing women were systematically attacked and denigrated, from Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* (1593) to John Ford's *'Tis a Pity She's a Whore* (1633), in which three out of the four female characters are paradigmatically killed (in Federici 2004). This was accompanied by laws and regulations that stripped women of any social power and autonomy. Women were muzzled in public as scolds and their knowledge and skills ridiculed and devalued. The witch hunt appeared as the crescendo of these tactics, degrading female identity and destroying all female practices, relations and systems of knowledge that had been the source of their power before capitalism and the condition of their resistance in the early passage to capitalism. As a result, women suffered the historic defeat alluded to by Engels, out of which a new mode and ideal of femininity emerged: a woman that is passive and obedient, always busy at work, silent and thrifty.

directly linked to the fate of the colonized and enslaved people (women and men) outside Europe. In the present context however I am focusing on Europe.

As Federici (2004, p. 102) evocatively puts it, the period of protracted misogyny and gender violence “left indelible marks in the collective female psyche and in women’s sense of possibilities”.

The witch hunt lasted for about 200 years, peaking in the years 1580–1630. During this period, hundreds of thousands of (mostly peasant) women were executed, burned at the stake and tortured in a systematic campaign of terror. In the process, it destroyed all kinds of folk knowledge and beliefs that were not compatible with capitalism, and in this way fundamentally changed social reproduction—or the kinds of knowledge and culture passed from one generation to the next. Spectacular rituals of horrific torture culminating in women burned at the stake in front of their children, especially their daughters, were paradigmatically used to discipline all women. It is important to note that one of the first tasks of the printing press was to report from the most famous witches trials using a “multi-media propaganda”, with artists depicting the witches’ “atrocious deeds” and their demise at the stake (Federici 2004, p. 168).

In this manner, the witch hunt, argues Federici, implemented a new patriarchal order in which women, their bodies and their labour became economic resources and put under the control of the state. It was used as a means by which to punish elements of subversion and social or sexual transgression. It occurred in a period of social dislocation, increasing poverty and social division, and directly contributed to the formation of a new social order: “it was in the torture chambers and on the stakes on which the witches perished that the bourgeois ideals of womanhood and domesticity were forged” (Federici 2004, p. 186). By violently repressing women, the witch hunt succeeded in repressing the entire working classes. Men who had themselves been immiserated and pauperized blamed their misfortunes on female witches and feared that any power women would acquire they would use against them. Sexual passion in men was seen as the result of women’s demonic powers and female sexuality had to be contained through controlling all forms of non-productive, non-procreative sexuality, especially that of prostitutes, older women and homosexuals. The witch hunt only stopped when the new social order was sufficiently consolidated, and women were completely subjugated and no longer feared. Yet the imagery still remains, and the stereotype of the old witch and her cronies or that of women’s mystical sexual powers re-emerge whenever women’s behaviours are seen as threatening or transgressive.

This long excursus serves to make a direct link between misogyny, the material circumstances of women’s life and the broader political and

economic context. Taking the above into account, misogyny and gender violence cannot be seen as epiphenomenal or incidental or a remnant of the past, but rather as playing an active role in determining and fixing women's position in society. Misogyny is, in other words, the methodology of female subjugation and exploitation. Its re-emergence in the current historical conjuncture must therefore be understood as symptomatic of changes in the social order, and in the political and economic domains. In the final section, I will expand upon this argument.

ONLINE MISOGYNY IN TECHNO-CAPITALISM

In Federici's account, misogyny and the witch hunt were mobilized as a means by which the female body was brought under control of the state, women were excluded from wage labour, their work devalued, and the process of class formation proceeded through a gender division. It was not until the feminist movement but also following shifts in capitalism, and during crises such as war, that women began to re-establish their social position. To observe the rise of misogyny in the present context and following the gains of the 1970s second-wave feminism signals a deeper dynamic than that of the culture wars, which view misogyny as incidental of conservative resistance to women's liberation that will progressively disappear. Indeed, neither the spread nor the volume of online misogyny we discussed above, nor yet its various spillages into, or connections with, physical violence against women suggests that it will dissipate or that it can be controlled via means of online censorship. To understand, and eventually deal with it, we must turn to the material organization of society.

In recent years, there are two established shifts within capitalism: firstly, a shift towards neoliberal governance (Harvey 2007; Crouch 2011) and, secondly, a shift towards a new mode of production revolving around technologies and informational or cognitive capitalism (Castells 2010; Moulier-Boutang 2011). On the one hand, neoliberalism has created an environment of intense competition within labour by removing any regulatory barriers in the operation of capital. On the other hand, the mode of production within capitalism has shifted, relying more on cognitive input and affective labour than on the use of manual labour⁹ while automation

⁹This is primarily the case in the US and Europe, which have outsourced manual labour to developing countries (e.g. see Chan et al. 2013). Nevertheless, the increasing use of robots and automated systems suggests a decreased need for manual labour across the world (Ford 2015).

has cost, and is estimated to cost more, jobs (Ford 2015). The globalization of capitalism and the removal of social protections is further associated with a sharpening of inequalities and increasing poverty even in affluent parts of the world (Piketty 2014).

At the same time, partly as the result of the gains of the feminist movement and partly as a result of the changing needs of capital, women have entered the labour force in large numbers. Educational gaps between genders are diminishing, allowing women to successfully compete for the same jobs as men (Hadjar et al. 2014). This has created important social dislocations as former certainties are lost and previously established social equilibria have been upended. Job precarity, lack of social welfare, increasing debt, all create a social dystopia where no one is certain about their position. It is this context of increasing risk and uncertainty, pressure and anxiety about the future that forms the backdrop of the new misogyny and anti-feminism.

In this increased social competition imposed by neoliberal informational capitalism, misogyny resurfaces as part of struggles over a new division of labour. No one can be certain of what will happen in the future. But online misogyny and digital gender violence can be seen as a modern version of the misogyny and violence unleashed against women in the transitional period between feudalism and capitalism. Of course, the scale and impact are nowhere near the same, as the genocidal witch hunt cannot be compared with the forms of misogyny we encounter in today's digital environments. Yet the sexualized violence they evoke, the focus on women's bodies, the spectacular online attacks against prominent women aimed at disciplining all women, the ritual sexual humiliation through revenge porn and videos of women raped, the reduction of women to biological organisms with a reproductive function, their general degradation and dehumanization, all point to a similar dynamic at play. A dynamic that ultimately seeks to deny full humanity to women with a view to preclude them from staking any claims in the future distribution of material resources and division of labour, and to break any resistance they may form. The specific attacks against prominent women are telling: if technology is part of our common future, if the political and public sphere is where our future will be decided, then banning or scaring women away from participating in making technology and from speaking out in the public sphere means that women are excluded from having any say in the direction of this future and from sharing it equitably. In the misogynist discourses, their role is "to make sandwiches" and

to be bound to a heterosexual nuclear family focusing on rearing children and supporting their breadwinning husbands. The sexualized discourses of sluts and whores and the violent sexual fantasies and threats are disciplining discourses threatening women who seek to exist in different ways.

This means that online misogyny is not simply a question of sexually or otherwise frustrated men venting out; rather, it involves very important stakes in the future of our societies. Online misogyny has to be seen as a form of primitive accumulation in the age of techno-capitalism, in which women's labour is stolen or denied, their knowledge and contributions ridiculed and denigrated,¹⁰ and where women's virtual bodies are banned from certain online spaces, just as women were once banned from the public sphere. Through online misogyny women are precluded from accessing the means of technological production. Their presence is only acceptable in certain online spaces, deemed inconsequential for the technological future, effectively implementing a technological gender segregation. In short, we can understand generalized online misogyny as aiming at excluding women from the technological means of production while anti-feminism aims to reassert control over social and biological reproduction by reducing women to their biological and mothering functions.¹¹

What may be an appropriate response to this? While calls to regulate the online domain are fuelling a weaponized approach to freedom of speech, while lean-in feminism and postfeminist ideas of choice are grist to the misogynist mill, we need a means by which to address this issue not in its cultural but in its material dimensions. Federici argued that primitive accumulation was not only an accumulation of bodies to form the new working class, but also "*an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class*, whereby hierarchies built upon gender, as well as 'race' and age, became constitutive of class rule and the formation of the modern

¹⁰ Gamergate is instructive here: Zoe Quinn's work on the game Depression Quest is denied value. Instead it is alleged that she bought its success through exchanging her sexuality. Any female success in the field of technology is denigrated or attributed to "political correctness" and enforced gender quotas rather than based on merit.

¹¹ The revaluation and reinvention of heterosexual marriage with children is clear in an article on "high investment parenting" in which both parents are heavily involved with and engaged in rearing their children. In this manner, children's social mobility is improved and therefore parents can recoup their investment at a later stage. This notion, pushed by the conservative think tank Brookings Institute and cross-linked in many alt-right sites, is telling of the new economic function of the nuclear family. See here for details: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2014/02/14/hip-high-investment-parenting-marriages-are-the-future/>.

proletariat” (2004, pp. 62–63, emphasis in the original). Men who were themselves subjected to the brutal new regime turned against women rather than forming an alliance with them; the misogynist propaganda against witches succeeded in alienating men from women, who feared that any power that women acquire would mean less power for them, or it could be used against them. It will take no less than a full reversal of this process, and the forging of a new alliance between men and women who have both fallen prey to the vagaries of globalized neoliberal technocapitalism, an alliance aiming to dismantle its hierarchies and develop a more equitable, fair and ecological approach to social, economic and political organizing. But this is predicated on realizing the real material stakes involved for both men and women.

As a first step, this chapter sought to redirect attention from the cultural elements of online misogyny to its material dimensions, from a focus on the present to a more historically informed understanding of the role and political functions of misogyny, and from considering solutions such as removal of problematic contents to a more comprehensive and more politically aware approach. This approach requires further refinement and a closer attention to the gender divisions already in place in technocapitalism. It further requires a co-articulation of gender and racialized divisions beyond the Western world. This can perhaps form a possible next step.

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CHAPTER 3

Bros v. Hos: Postfeminism, Anti-feminism and the Toxic Turn in Digital Gender Politics

Debbie Ging

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary Anglophone men's movement has never been a homogeneous entity, accommodating both pro- and anti-feminist sentiments, and a raft of complementary and contradictory positions on most issues (Hearn 1993). Since the 1990s, however, the anti-feminist or masculinist strands have been the most vociferous and have received most mainstream media coverage. In 2003, Haywood and Mac an Ghaill observed that the anti-feminist, anti-women and pro-male variants of the New Men's Movement in Britain had overlapped with the men's rights lobby and were "probably the form of masculinity politics that currently has the widest resonance across different societies, including Britain, Australia and the US" (2003, p. 134). The key political agenda of these groups was the recuperation of male power and privilege, allegedly usurped by feminism, as well as the personal rediscovery of the masculine self. In the early 1990s, much attention was drawn to the American mythopoetic movement, made famous by Robert Bly's highly influential bestseller *Iron John* (1992), whose adherents

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sought to rediscover their innate masculinity through drumming, symbolic initiation rites and sweat lodges. Christian movements in the US, such as the Promise Keepers, also received considerable media attention.

Most of these groups mobilized men around a number of specific issues, such as domestic violence against men, child custody, divorce and the feminization of education. They used conventional political activist methods such as petitions, posters and demonstrations and engaged in a primarily legal, rights-based rhetoric. To the extent that they relied on a shared philosophical doctrine, these groups were primarily informed by sex-role theory (Messner 1998). With the development of the internet, Usenet newsgroups such as alt.men appeared, and extant American and British groups such as MensRights.com, the National Coalition for Men and the UK Men's Movement established websites, thus increasing the movement's capacity for cross-referencing, cooperation and coalition. However, while the (Web 1.0) internet consolidated and amplified the men's rights agenda across the English-speaking world, the emergence of Web 2.0 and, more specifically, of social media marked a significant change in terms of the concerns and rhetorical tone of men's rights. Turning their attention to gaming culture, the seduction industry and evolutionary psychology, this much looser network of blogs, forums and online publics—collectively known as the manosphere—has become the dominant arena in which men's rights and issues are now discussed and perpetuated.

The significance of the migration of men's rights activism to social media cannot be underestimated. It has coincided with a seismic shift in terms of these groups' concerns, underlying philosophies, modes of "activism" and communicative formations. Indeed, their propensity for fluidity, cross-fertilization and political shapeshifting means that is no longer useful to refer to them as groups but rather as loose networks or assemblages, which "materialize and disband around connective conduits of sentiment (Papacharissi 2015)" (Ging 2017). In earlier work (*ibid.*) I have identified the five key categories of the manosphere as men's rights activists (MRAs), men going their own way (MGTOW), pick-up artists (PUAs), traditional Christian conservatives and (elements of) geek/gamer culture. Some of these categories have overlapping interests and beliefs, while others disagree on certain issues. However, they are all united by their commitment to anti-feminism, expressed through the common cultural trope of the Red Pill, a reference which derives from the scene in *The Matrix* (1998) in which Neo is given the choice of taking one of two pills. Choosing the blue pill means opting to live a life of delusion, while taking the red pill

signals a willingness to confront and accept the truth, no matter how unpleasant. The manosphere has reappropriated this motif as its central “philosophy”, whereby red-pilled men are considered to have been woken to feminism’s gynocentric and misandrist regime. A later variation, known as the Black Pill, refers to a darker strand of thinking within the movement, whereby involuntarily celibate men (or incels) fantasize about exacting revenge on women for not having sex with them and on men who are sexually successful.

The key rhetorical and communicative features of these groups are their extreme misogyny, propensity for cross-fertilization, reliance on evolutionary psychology, tendency towards personal attacks and engagement in an intensely affective form of politics (Ging 2017). They therefore differ from earlier men’s rights organizations in a number of significant ways. Firstly, pre-internet men’s rights groups espoused a logic of collective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), meaning that their activities were associated with high levels of organizational resources and the formation of collective identities. By contrast, the new MRAs rely almost exclusively on the logic of connective action, which, according to Bennett and Segerberg (2012), is based on personalized content sharing across media networks and reflects an engagement with politics as an expression of personal hopes, lifestyles and grievances. While pre-internet men’s rights groups were primarily issues-driven, relied on sex-role theory and operated in conventional political fora, the new MRAs are motivated by highly personal and individual concerns, are heavily influenced by evolutionary psychology and operate primarily in the realm of the cultural. Unsurprisingly, their association with misogyny, personal attacks on women and high-profile events such as the Oregon, Isla Vista and Toronto killings has attracted considerable attention and concern from the mainstream media, women’s rights groups and, increasingly, politicians.¹ A number of explanations have been offered for the toxicity of the behaviours exhibited by these “bad actors”. In the following, I outline and evaluate these explanations and also give a brief overview of postfeminism. I then present an analysis of the discursive and political continuities between postfeminism and digital men’s rights “politics”, arguing per Rosalind Gill (2017) that the new anti-feminism is not so much a *backlash against* as it is a *facet of* a digital gender politics

¹See, for example, Scottish MP Mhairi Black <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/snp-mp-online-abuse-mhairi-black-sexist-homophobic-women-parliament-debate-a8245646.html>.

which, while not without its merits and successes, is at risk of being constrained by logics of postfeminism and neoliberalism in ways that are deeply troubling.

THEORIZING THE RISE OF TOXIC ANTI-FEMINISM

Explanations for these new “toxic technocultures” (Massanari 2015) tend to fall into broadly socio-economic determinist, technological determinist or technosocial frameworks. Sociological explanations from gender and masculinity studies generally attribute these men’s growing antipathy towards feminism to recent shifts in the economy, whereby the post-Fordist casualization and “feminization” of the labour market and decline in the real value of wages have led to a decline in the male breadwinner role (Messner and Montez de Oca 2005). Combined with the perception that women, LGBT people and people of colour are gaining power and privilege, conceived of as a “zero sum game”, this has led some white men to develop a sense of what Michael Kimmel calls “aggrieved entitlement”. According to Kimmel, rather than acknowledging the neoliberal economic roots of their changing circumstances, the dominant response of these men has been to construct a masculinity-in-crisis narrative cast in specifically gendered and racial terms of white male disenfranchisement. This “mancection”² rhetoric, which has been widely propagated by the mainstream media, evades economic and structural analysis, encouraging men to blame their disempowerment on women, LGBT people, people of colour and identity politics more generally.

Unsurprisingly, media and internet studies scholars have paid more attention to the technological affordances of social media and the policies of online platforms (Jeong 2015). Massanari (2015), for example, has demonstrated how Reddit’s algorithmic politics—namely its karma point system and the way in which it aggregates material across subreddits—as well as its loose governance structure and hands-off policies around offensive content, facilitate anti-feminist and misogynistic activism, and work to prioritize the interests of young, white, heterosexual men. Thus, “herding” or power law effects around particular material work to create consensus, while upvoting heavily influences Reddit’s algorithm, which highlights material across subreddits that is considered popular. Similarly,

²The term “mancection” was coined by Mark Perry, an economist from the University of Michigan, and began appearing in US newspapers during the financial crisis of 2008–2009.

Nagle (2015, pp. 109–110) notes that “While 4chan/b/ doesn’t have other means of displaying approval within the community, such as ‘likes’ on Facebook or ‘upvotes’ on Reddit, users can bump the thread to keep it in rotation for longer, while uncontroversial threads will be quickly pushed out of the finite page content.” More recently, Easter (2018) points to “how digital infrastructures themselves, especially as built and represented in code, participate in misogyny”. While cognizant of the wider gender-political contexts in which misogyny circulates, these technosocial accounts also see anonymity, lack of accountability and global reach as enabling these cultures to thrive in ways and at rates that were previously not feasible.

According to Papacharissi (2015), these new circuits of “networked individualism” connect vast numbers of people, not through traditional modes of collective political agitation but rather through highly individualized narratives of suffering and common experience, forming “affective publics”. Papacharissi describes affective publics as digitally networked communities, which are discursively linked through storytelling, in the sense that their members become affectively attuned to and invested in political issues through processes of personal and emotional involvement and empathy. This constellation of technology, ideology and affect appears particularly suited to understanding the manosphere and the way in which its political “philosophies” can be seen to coalesce around increasingly personal, emotive and cultural discourses or what Andrejevic (2013) refers to as the appeal and currency of the “gut feeling” in an era of information overload. According to Nagle (2016), “this seamless convergence of women-demonizing forces is, indeed, something new under the sun, an innovative incarnation of the free-floating male grievance that, as we’ve seen, metastasizes through culture.” Papacharissi considers only movements and events that are considered favourably by the left and liberals, such as the Arab Spring movements and various iterations of Occupy. She claims, “The practices of these publics present a departure from the rationally based deliberative protocols of public spheres, and help us reimagine how we may define and understand civic discourse among networked crowds in a digital era.” It follows, therefore, that the manosphere might be best understood as an affective counterpublic since it appears to operate in similar ways but in ideological opposition to feminism and the left.

Taken together, these accounts construct a compelling explanation for the rise of online misogyny and anti-feminism. Set against a wider backdrop of white male disentitlement, it is unsurprising that the speed, anonymity, algorithmic politics, “affective potency” and “disinhibition effects”

associated with online communication have succeeded in mobilizing such significant numbers of men against feminism and women more generally. Notwithstanding the way in which these echo chambers achieve an amplified presence that is unreflective of or disproportionate to the “real” size of the community in question (Massanari 2015) or that their online and offline behaviours may differ radically (Ging 2017), the manosphere constitutes a nonetheless expansive and pervasive discursive system which, together with the broader “alt-right”, is increasingly polarizing, toxifying and depoliticizing digital gender politics. However, I want to argue here that there is an important piece missing from the explanatory vista outlined above, namely the role of postfeminism in laying down the rhetorical, epistemological and discursive logics that paved the way for the rise of the new anti-feminism.

POSTFEMINISM’S UNFORESEEN LEGACY

Postfeminism is often understood as a periodizing concept—that which comes after feminism—rather than as a set of values. However, as Gill (2017) points out, “Postfeminism is as much a neoliberal sensibility as one defined by its relationship to feminism. It may be best thought of as a distinctive kind of gendered neoliberalism.” According to Tasker and Negra, “Postfeminism broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the ‘pastness’ of feminism, whether that supposed ‘pastness’ is merely noted, mourned or celebrated” (*ibid.*). Unlike second-wave feminism, therefore, postfeminism is not a form of political activism or a coherent ideology but rather a set of—often contradictory—discursive responses to the perceived successes and failures of feminism (*ibid.*, 2009). Despite the blatant deception underpinning postfeminist “logics”—since feminism never was actually over—it has gained remarkable traction in the past ten years as a way of thinking and talking about women, female empowerment and gender relations.

Postfeminist culture is characterized by its reversal of a number of key second-wave feminist tenets, most notably its repackaging of female sexual objectification, self-enhancement and consumerism as empowering (Gill 2008) and its disinterest in queer women, working-class women or women from the global south. As I and others have argued elsewhere (Ging 2009), postfeminist culture is also deeply enmeshed in mutually synergistic alliances with neoliberal economics (Gill 2007; Gill and Scharff 2013)

and bio-essentialist accounts of gender difference, or what Maija Holmer Nadesan (2002) refers to as “brain science”. Both of these systems are appealing on the basis of their reliance on individualism; because they eschew systemic or structural analysis, they locate a plethora of social and economic problems—and their solutions—in the bodies and minds of individual women. Thus, in order to succeed in the working world, women must “lean in” more rather than tackle systemic discrimination and unequal childcare policies. In order to feel empowered, they must invest more in physical self-improvement. In order to maintain their marriages, their figures and their physical and mental health, they must consume an endless supply of self-help manuals, fitness and dieting apps, gym memberships and mindfulness classes. Not only are many of these solutions of obvious benefit to neoliberal capitalism, but they also serve to free the state from assuming its responsibilities in promoting gender equality and tackling the structural causes of sexism.

Also, in approximately the same time frame that postfeminism evolved as a cultural dominant, feminism became both institutionalized and professionalized (Messner 2016). While this had obvious pragmatic benefits, it also served to dilute the movement’s original language and grass-roots politics (Bumiller 2013). According to Messner (*ibid.*), “The rise of professionally institutionalized feminism, in short, broadened and stabilized the field of feminist action, while simultaneously thinning its political depth, threatening even to make feminist language and analysis disappear altogether.” During postfeminism’s heyday (from the early 1990s to the late 2000s), terms such as misogyny and feminist solidarity were almost entirely absent from popular discourse, and feminism itself became known as “the F word”. It was against this backdrop of feminism that had become “taken into account” only to be consistently discredited (McRobbie 2004) that Lad Culture’s revival of hard masculinity, hypersexualization of women and flouting of political correctness was made possible. The synergistic reiteration (Tasker and Negra 2007) of equality achieved was so pervasive that it became acceptable to claim that men are from Mars and women are from Venus, to view lap-dancing as liberating or to assume that women became “domestic goddesses” on the basis of empowered choices (Ging 2009). While many of these phenomena first appeared cloaked in a spirit of self-reflexive irony, it was not long before highly polarized images of hyperfemininity and hypermasculinity had become a post-ironic norm.

When we add to this the emergence of the third wave of feminism in the US in the early 1990s, the picture becomes increasingly complex. This

iteration of feminism relied heavily on the civil rights-based ethos of the second wave but was also critical of its propensity to ignore class, sexuality and ethnicity. The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, was embraced by third-wave feminism, along with sex positivity and a greater leaning towards individualism, postmodernism and post-structuralist interpretations of gender and sexuality. Inevitably, elements of second-wave feminism, third-wave feminism and postfeminism began to overlap, coexist and clash in political constellations that became increasingly difficult to disentangle. Now, neoliberal feminists, who have little concern for the world's poor or for black or queer women, are routinely accused of being "intersectional feminists" by the right and of being blind to intersectionality by the left. Deep divisions have emerged around issues such as trans rights, pornography and sex work. As Gill (2016) has noted, "For the contemporary feminist analyst, the current moment—by which I mean variously, this year, this month, and right now—must rank as one of the most bewildering in the history of sexual politics."

If contemporary gender politics is bewildering to those of us who study it, how might it appear then to those who do not and in particular to young men who have no knowledge of its complex backstories? This should in no way be interpreted as an excuse for the vile misogyny that underpins so much of contemporary anti-feminism; instead, it is meant as a means of potentially understanding how the manosphere's toxic technocultures (Massanari 2015)—which clearly care nothing about the epistemological nuances of different feminisms—can come to achieve traction in mainstream society. If we consider the relatively long gender-political void created by postfeminism, it is perhaps easier to comprehend how such extreme ideas about feminism can take root. In other words, for a certain generation of young men, a substantive knowledge gap about what feminism is/was, combined with continued exposure to postfeminism's wildly exaggerated claims about female power, has arguably created the perfect set of conditions for anti-feminist ideas to thrive. Yet in spite of this, with the exception of Messner's work, masculinity studies have paid scant attention to postfeminism's impact on men and masculinity politics. According to Rachel O'Neill (2015a) and García-Favaro and Gill (2016), there has been a reluctance of masculinities scholars to engage with postfeminism. To a large extent, therefore, this analysis is intended as a response to O'Neill's (*ibid.*) questions: "How does the social and cultural context of postfeminism impact masculine subjectivities and men's practices?" and "How are men negotiating the changing dynamics of gender and sexuality

elaborated under postfeminism?” It is also a response to Gill’s (2016, p. 625) plea for “the need to think together feminism with anti-feminism, postfeminism, and revitalized misogyny”.

TRACING THE ROOTS OF THE TOXIC TURN

Postfeminism’s most significant accomplishment has undoubtedly been its shifting of gender politics from the realm of the political to that of the cultural (Tasker and Negra 2007). This steady trajectory allowed singers, television shows and video game icons—from the Spice Girls, Lada Gaga and Beyoncé to *Sex and the City*, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Lara Croft*—to occupy key symbolic spaces in the discourse of gender politics. As “bumper-sticker” feminism strengthened its grip, material issues such as unequal pay, childcare, representation of women in politics and domestic violence gradually slipped off the agenda and the word “misogyny” disappeared from usage. The appeal of this moment is understandable, with its rhetoric of freedom, choice and “having it all” enthusiastically embraced by music, advertising, cinema, magazines and self-help literature. Elements of the sex industry were repackaged and sold as liberating and transgressive lifestyle choices (Evans and Riley 2015), from pole dancing as exercise to bestselling *Call Girl Diaries*.

This period, however, has arguably been the most damaging and counterproductive in the history of gender politics. Firstly, shifting gender politics into the realm of the cultural made it uniquely vulnerable to attack. Stripped of systemic or structural analysis, it soon becomes evident that there was little substance behind its empty rhetoric of individual empowerment. Faced with the material realities of domestic violence or the global sex industry’s exploitation of poor, migrant women, postfeminism had little to offer. In *Living Dolls*, Natasha Walter (2011) admitted that she had got it wrong; with the release of *Lemonade*, Beyoncé’s gender politics took a more serious and informed turn. There seemed to be a growing awareness that postfeminist culture had sold women a slew of myths that had little relevance to the material realities of their lives. With the arrival of Web 2.0, the cultural domain became further consolidated as gender politics’ central discursive arena. The new “networked individualism” allowed ideas to spread rapidly through sharing, reposting and hashtagging, while meme culture provided a highly accessible visual shorthand for the proliferation and contestation of political ideas.

Unsurprisingly, the new, fourth wave of digital feminism that has emerged is not part of a fully coherent ideology, rooted in a particular theory or philosophy. It borrows elements from second- and third-wave feminisms, but also appropriates aspects of the aesthetic and rhetorical tropes of postfeminism, is strongly focused on personal narratives of sexual harassment and sexual politics, and has been criticized for its individualism, lack of intersectionality (Ringrose and Lawrence 2018) and preoccupation with microaggressions (Nagle 2016). Set against the cultural context of the preceding ten years, with its exultant proclamations of female empowerment and resounding message that women “have it all”, it has become especially difficult for more structural concepts such as migrant women’s issues or systemic workplace discrimination to gain traction or sympathy. Moreover, postfeminism’s relentless proliferation of images of women as self-indulgent, narcissistic, hypersexualized, power-hungry and often violent creatures who conflate pornography with freedom and consumerism with self-worth has done a profound disservice to those feminists working at the coalface of domestic violence, rape, racism and poverty.

The ‘new luminosity’ (Gill 2016, p. 614) that feminism has acquired, therefore, is something of a double-edged sword. While the renewed focus on gender politics in public discourse is to be welcomed, the cultural hypervisibility of feminism and its often fragmented, contradictory messages have made it an easy target for the ‘alt-right’ and men’s rights activists, who have also shifted their locus of activity from the political to the cultural, and from the collective to the individual. Freed from ‘the rationally based deliberative protocols of public spheres’ (Papacharissi 2015), the tactics of MRAs are heavily influenced by the cultural and technological affordances of social media. The meme format, in particular, offers immediate affective appeal and facilitates sophisticated layers of intertextuality. However, while memes require high levels of cultural competence, they cannot accommodate fully worked out theories of gender relations. Geek and gamer anti-feminist memes tend to revel in irony, obscurity and shock value, while MRA and MGTOW memes generally lean toward more emotive articulations of male disenfranchisement. This is especially evident on [MGTOW.com](#), which frequently features confusing visual attempts at explaining misandry, hypergamy and other female transgressions. In this sense, most men’s rights memes function less as calls to political action and more as channels for the collective venting of anger (Fig. 3.1).



Fig. 3.1 (a, b) MRA memes

The disruptive creativity of the new anti-feminism extends far beyond memes, however, to include rape and death threats, non-consensual sharing of intimate images, cum tributes, hacking, doxing, cyberstalking, distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks and photoshopping targets into porn. In 2012, self-described “feminist humiliator” Benjamin Daniel debuted a game called *Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian*, while others made memes of her being raped by the game character Mario. In January 2016, Richard Dawkins shared a cartoon video featuring Canadian feminist Chanty Binx on Twitter with his 1.3 million followers. The video, entitled “Feminists Love Islamists”, was uploaded to YouTube by notorious British anti-feminist Sargon of Akkad and ended with Binx encouraging the “Islamist” to rape her. This “vernacular creativity” (Burgess 2006) has also enabled the construction of a series of monstrous archetypes of feminists and social justice warriors (Massanari and Chess 2018) such as Idiot Nerd Girl and “Big Red” (Chanty Binx). These forms of visual gaslighting effectively erase the complex histories and underlying philosophies of feminism as a social justice movement by reducing it to a series of unpleasant female typologies, a move that has been made all the more seamless by the pre-existing postfeminist penchant for female archetypes such as the domestic goddess, the lipstick lesbian, the yummy mummy and the MILF (Fig. 3.2).



Fig. 3.2 (a, b, and c) Real women reduced to MRA female archetypes Anita Sarkeesian, Idiot Nerd Girl and Chanty Binx (“Big Red”)

MEN ARE FROM MARS AND THE RISE OF EVO-PYSCH

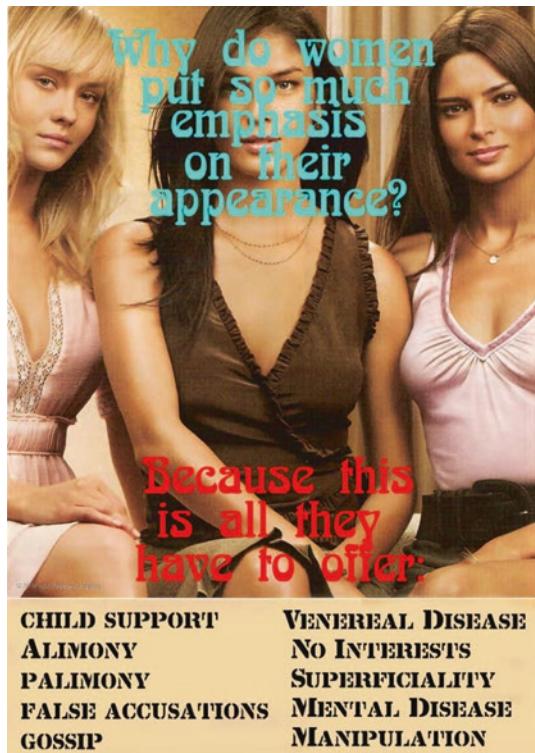
In addition to facilitating this cultural turn in gender politics, postfeminism and neoliberalism are also responsible for the revival of biological-essentialist understandings of gender. Rolling back decades of feminist and sociological work underpinned by social construction theory, the 1990s saw an explosion in pseudo-scientific self-help manuals on heterosexual gender roles and relations. Piggybacking on the success of John Gray’s bestselling *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, a slew of books and videos began telling men and women that they were hardwired with

different personality traits, skills and abilities. Supported by dubious and almost entirely discredited interpretations of genetics and neuroscience, these ideas nonetheless took hold in a political and economic system that was heavily invested in individualism, corporate interests and the accumulation of private property and averse to structural analysis, state intervention or any interrogation of patriarchy that might challenge the basic dynamics of the nuclear family unit. The widespread acceptance of this thinking in turn legitimated the extreme re-gendering of children's toys and clothing, and a return to sexist stereotypes in advertising. It also facilitated a pervasive war-of-the-sexes motif across a range of cultural fora, from advertising and music to cinema and television shows.

Against this backdrop of normalized sexism and male-female antagonism, the MRM's (Men's Rights Movement) recycling of evolutionary psychology was not so much an aberration from as an intensification of dominant thinking about gender. Their revitalized genetic determinism is less concerned, however, with the domestic division of labour or how boys and girls learn differently than it is with theories of alpha and beta masculinity, and heterosexual rituals of seduction and mate selection. A key concern of this discourse is hypergamy or the theory that women are naturally predisposed to "marry up". However, because alpha males are scarce, women will settle for beta males to support them financially, a phenomenon regularly referred to as "alpha fux beta bux". In this sense, "evolutionary psychology (evo-psych)" can be seen as a way of working through post-crisis economic anxieties, whereby the acquisition of property and a career for life are no longer options for many young men: rather than confronting the complex economic causes of their disenfranchisement, essentialist explanations allow them to rail against imaginary female caricatures that are clearly informed by the materialistic, gold-digging femmes fatales of postfeminist culture (Fig. 3.3).

Lack of sexual success with women is a core theme of the manosphere and was the primary reason given by the Oregon and Isla Vista killers for their revenge shootings. It was, however, only in the wake of the Toronto killings in 2018 that the incel (involuntary celibate) movement was picked up by the mainstream media as a serious cause for concern. This preoccupation with seduction and rejection explains why subgroup such as pick-up artists and incels are so central to the new men's rights politics. As García-Favaro and Gill (2016) point out, if it can be demonstrated that men's necessity for (hetero)sex and objectification of women is instinctual and uncontrollable, "In a powerful rhetorical move, feminists can thus be positioned as attacking the (bio)existential rights of men". Also known as

Fig. 3.3 MGTOW
meme



“game” or the “seduction community”, these groups teach straight men pick-up strategies based on “evo-psych” concepts such as men’s need to dominate and women’s natural desire to be submissive, despite their protestations to the contrary. More high-profile PUAs such as Roosh V and Julien Blanc have gained notoriety in the mainstream media, resulting in demonstrations outside Roosh V events and Blanc being denied entry into several countries, including Germany, Canada and the UK.

While the rhetoric of incels and PUAs may appear bizarre or shocking to many, it is in fact not that far removed from the logics that govern mainstream self-help manuals on heterosexual relationship management. Their lexicon of negging, “shit-testing” and sexual market value is a blend of evolutionary psychology and neoliberal economics, whereby the “work of seduction” (O’Neill 2015b) is explained through biological determinism but is firmly situated within neoliberal rationalities of investment,

market value and return on investment. According to O'Neill (2015b), the emergence of the seduction community must be understood in relation to pre-existing patterns, whereby intimacy and sexual subjectivity were already highly commodified, and represented in terms of enterprise and management across a broad range of media, including self-help texts, makeover television and lifestyle magazines; in other words, postfeminist and neoliberal logics of entrepreneurial relationship and beauty management (“Because you’re worth it”) are “immanent with contemporary formations of masculinity” (O’Neill 2015b). For O’Neill, therefore, the logic of game is not so much a *deviation* or *departure* from current social conventions as it is an *extension* or more extreme articulation of existing narratives of heterosexual relationships such as Gray’s book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* and *Fifty Shades of Gray*.

In summary, postfeminism’s key features—individualism, bio-essentialism, the commodification of intimacy, the myth of equality achieved, a renewed focus on heteronormativity and war-of-the-sexes tropes, and the turn towards a cultural politics of emotion—have both facilitated and provided justifications for the new men’s rights politics in unexpected and unprecedented ways. MRAs did not have to shift the discursive contours of populist gender politics away from material issues or to fabricate exaggerated discourses of girl power—postfeminism had already done this for them. While its hyper-empowered, narcissistic and heavily sexualized symbols of femininity were insisting that women “had it all”, a raft of “end-of-men” and masculinity-in-crisis narratives were casting white male disenfranchisement in gendered terms rather than in relation to neoliberal economic restructuring. In this sense, the affective counterpublics (Papacharissi 2015) of the manosphere are arguably best understood as reactions to postfeminism as much as they are responses to feminism, even if most MRAs are themselves incapable of distinguishing between them.

This is made all the more complex by the fact that many digital or fourth-wave feminisms, while partly inspired by the revival of second-wave radicalism, are not untouched by the individualistic sensibilities of postfeminism. Nagle’s (2017) wholesale rejection of identity politics and intersectionality has been divisive, and ignores the vital role that these frameworks and modes of activism have played in securing fundamental human rights. Certainly, concerns about the individualism and the antagonism of digital gender politics are valid, but they should not be attributed to intersectional feminism, which expressly seeks to understand oppression in structural rather than individual terms. Contrary to Nagle’s

claims, it is postfeminism—not intersectional feminism—that has recast gender politics as a matter of personal choice, and it is postfeminism that has shifted the focus to issues of personal identity, consumption and individualism, thereby de-coupling gender politics from any sort of coherent institutional analysis.

This is not to say that digital campaigns are insignificant or ineffective. On the contrary, the recent #MeToo and #TimesUp campaigns have undoubtedly done an important job in lifting the lid on the staggering extent of sexual harassment. Similarly, initiatives such as TrollBusters, Crash Override Network, Speak Up and Stay Safe(r), HeartMob, Tactical Technology and Take Back The Tech are vital sites of resistance to online misogyny. Even humorous initiatives such as #Manwhohasitall serve as a constant reminder of the persistence of sexism and what Gill (2017) refers to as the postfeminist burden on women to adopt a “particular kind of upbeat and resilient selfhood—to be ‘gleaming’ and ‘dazzling’ no matter how they may actually feel”. However, as Jodi Dean (2007) has insisted, awareness of injustice does not automatically bring about the end of that injustice, and there are limitations to what can be achieved within the parameters of “communicative capitalism”. According to Dean (2007, pp. 226–227), “expanded and intensified communicativity has neither enhanced opportunities for the articulation of political struggles nor enlivened radical democratic practices, although it has exacerbated left fragmentation, amplified the voices of right-wing extremists, and delivered ever more eyeballs to corporate advertisers.” Moreover, as both Jane (2016) and Ringrose and Lawrence (2018) have pointed out, “digilantist” campaigns against microaggressions such as manspreading and mansplaining not only have ethical limitations but, when disassociated from joined-up contextual frameworks, run the risk of further polarizing feminist and anti-feminist factions in antagonistic and ultimately futile flame wars. Finally, given the various forms of terrorism that online anti-feminism has produced, it is important to take seriously the dangers posed to researchers and activists whose visibility leaves them uniquely vulnerable to the “alt-right” gaze (Massanari 2018) (Fig. 3.4).

WHITHER DIGITAL GENDER POLITICS?

It is important to point out that the concerns raised in this chapter are not premised on the assumption that *all* gender politics take place online or that digital feminisms and anti-feminisms are always relevant to gender



Fig. 3.4 “Alt-right”/manosphere meme

politics globally. On the contrary, there is a danger of overplaying the significance of these culture wars, given they are largely restricted to a technologically privileged subsection the Anglophone world, and may have little significance or impact within the gender-political contexts of Fiji or Peru, for example. That said, international reports indicate that online misogyny is a growing problem for women everywhere, posing a serious threat to their freedom of expression and, in many cases, their ability to earn a living, a phenomenon to which Jane (2018) refers as economic vandalism. It is also clear that the alt-right have an increasingly influential online presence, operating in mainstream political spaces and proliferating into popular cultural platforms such as Urban Dictionary (Ging 2018), where toxic misogyny is rife. Those of us concerned about the future of feminism and gender politics must therefore acknowledge the scale and complexity of the joint structures that enable this gender-political toxicity to flourish, and figure out ways of dismantling, transforming or circumventing them.

This means taking into account not only overt manifestations of anti-feminism itself or the sociological and psychological motivations behind those driving it but also the technological infrastructures that support it,

the corporate cultures in which these infrastructures originate and the broader economic context of neoliberal capitalism. The recent Google memo leaked by James Damore is the latest in a series of “flashpoint” events (Gamergate, “Donglegate”) which demonstrate that evo-psych and anti-equality thinking are by no means restricted to the world of basement-dwelling incels and dank memes. As Marwick (2013), Massanari (2015) and Easter (2018) have pointed out, the social values and economic priorities of tech communities are encoded into the platforms they produce, prioritizing the interests of straight, white males. For Massanari (2015), “Disentangling the community’s norms from the ways those norms are shaped by the platform and administrative policies becomes difficult in a space such as Reddit, as they are co-constitutive of one another.” Moreover, although tech companies tend to have impressive corporate social policies and genuinely engaged community managers, their ever-growing state-like powers mean they are increasingly answerable to nobody. The leaked Facebook training documents in 2017³ indicate that its content reviewer policies are, at best, arbitrary, while its commitment to universal solutions for culturally specific manifestations of hate speech suggests an unashamedly Western-centric approach to regulating political communication.

Related to this, it is vital to bear in mind that these companies have a vested interest in digital conflict. Hate online triggers interaction and traffic, which translates into economic revenue for platforms. However, hate can also drive users away, so the key motivation for social media companies is to keep as many people as possible engaged (Siapera and Viejo-Otero 2015) by maximizing the “stickiness” of debates. This is perhaps the key dilemma for digital feminism which seeks to engage with men’s rights activists in “born digital” socio-cultural controversies (Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández 2016). As Paasonen (2015) argues, social media companies rely heavily on flame wars and users’ affective and immaterial labour to intensify “affective stickiness” and thus increase profits. What is at stake for feminism, then, when so much of its creative, activist output is also functioning to provide free content, which ultimately makes social media corporations richer?

It is also important to ask whether the unique nature and dynamics of online political communication, shaped and constrained as they currently are by the specific technological affordances of different platforms, can provide us with a coherent and productive means of doing politics. Of particular

³<https://www.propublica.org/article/facebook-hate-speech-censorship-internal-documents-algorithms>.

concern is the disinhibition effect associated with non-face-to-face communication. According to Meredith Patterson, “Studies have shown that voice and body language move those [body language and tone] messages up to higher emotional processing cortices in our brains, while text-only communications go straight to our amygdala. The amygdala is our fight-or-flight centre, so, if some tweet somewhere doesn’t sit well with us, our brains think we’re being chased by cheetahs and respond accordingly.”⁴ Intensified affect and the extreme polarization of debate suggest that the emotional and cognitive limits of text and image-based communication may even be counterproductive to gender-political progress.

CONCLUSION

This chapter illustrates how the gender-political rhetorics of both digital feminism and anti-feminism have been variously shaped by the mutually synergistic dynamics of neoliberal capitalism, postfeminism and the technological affordances of social media. While I suggest that sentiment, economics and technology are reshaping online gender-political subjectivities in polarizing and potentially regressive directions, the analysis is not entirely without hope. The women’s marches in the US in 2017, the demonstrations in Spain in May 2018 against a non-guilty gang rape verdict and the 2018 on-street political activism in Ireland around the Repeal the 8th campaign, all suggest that connective and collective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012) can be engaged in mutually productive interplay. Indeed, the range of creative initiatives undertaken by the Irish Repeal movement serve as excellent examples of both Paulo Gerbaudo’s (2012) and Jeffrey Juris’ (2012) analyses of the political uses of social media to reappropriate public space (NicGhabhann 2018). Meanwhile, although the impact of the MRM is real, and its vitriol spills over into occasional acts of terrorism, this “movement” is incoherent and unconnected and, perhaps most importantly, tends not to mobilise publicly in the way that feminist marches and protests do.

To conclude, the key cultural and economic shifts that have worked to depoliticize feminism in the past decade—neoliberal economics, the dominance of postfeminist culture, the technological affordances of social media and the rise of a new men’s rights movement—have partly succeeded but they have also partly failed. Although, as Gill (2017) rightly asserts, both

⁴ “Is social media doing social harm?: **Meredith L Patterson** and **Deanna Zandt** go head to head”. *New Internationalist*. 1 November 2015.

neoliberalism and postfeminism have become virtually hegemonic, there are moments of collective radical anger where we can perceive a tangible rupturing of postfeminism’s “mood economy” (Silva 2013, cited in Gill 2017). These would appear to be most effective when connective, digital activism and collective on-the-ground activism work in tandem, as in the case of the Irish Repeal movement, which relies heavily on digitally mediated storytelling (see *In her Shoes—Women of the Eighth, Men for Repeal*) but has also mobilized hundreds of thousands of people to march in the streets, to participate in carnivalesque demonstrations and to occupy public space (*Speaking of Imelda, the Amnesty suitcase protest*).⁵

Given that contemporary men’s rights politics are underpinned by such intensely personal concerns, rooted in narratives of sexual rejection and pseudo-scientific explanations of the sexual marketplace, they should be a lot easier to depoliticize and displace than decades of robust feminist theory and activism. This becomes all the more difficult, however, at a time in which “alt-right” ideas are becoming increasingly “respectabilized”, in which mainstream politicians espouse many of the values of MRAs and “in which ‘alternative facts’ and ‘fake news’ complicate any straightforward recourse to ‘reality’ and thus make ‘speaking truth to power’ a problematic endeavour” (Gill 2017). Feminist activism thus faces a number of substantial challenges, not least of which is the urgent need to continue to subject gender to materialist analyses and to develop activist responses accordingly. In addition to dismantling the toxic politics of the manosphere, we must also continue to interrogate and dismantle the subtle but pervasive logics of postfeminism that have helped to make this toxicity possible.

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⁵The suitcase has become a powerful protest image—both on- and offline—highlighting the fact that Irish women must travel to access abortions. For example, in December 2016, the London Irish Abortion Rights Campaign (London Irish ARC) launched an online campaign asking people travelling home to Ireland for Christmas to tweet their support for Repeal with a picture of their suitcase (NicGhabhann 2018).

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CHAPTER 4

Mera Internet, Meri Marzi: Alternative Imaginings of Consent in Pakistani Online Spaces

Nighat Dad and Shmyla Khan

INTRODUCTION

In this thousand years of silence, the camera is invented and pictures are made of you while these things are being done. You hear the camera clicking or whirring as you are being hurt, keeping time to the rhythm of your pain. You always know that the pictures are out there somewhere, sold or traded or shown around or just kept in a drawer. In them, what was done to you is immortal. He has them; someone, anyone, has seen you there, that way. This is unbearable. What he felt as he watched you as he used you is always being done again and lived again and felt again through the pictures your violation his arousal, your torture his pleasure. Watching you was how he got off doing it; with the pictures he can watch you and get off any time (Mackinnon 1996, pp. 3–4).

Translates as “My Internet, My Choice”.

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Consent is not an abstract or juridical category that can be accessed to determine legal, social and ethical questions. Consent is a lived experience and a relational negotiation. It underpins our interactions on a daily basis—often times without an explicit articulation of it. Consent is a lived reality in online spaces as much as it is offline. In our image-based and textual conversations, consent is constantly constructed, employed and disrupted. We continuously consent to a litany of actions: conversations, pictures being shared, terms and conditions on social media websites all enabled and mediated through technology and commercialized platforms.

This chapter seeks to focus on the construction of consent for Pakistani women as they navigate fraught digital spaces. The chapter will interrogate existing discourse around online consent from the perspective of feminist theory and the lived experiences of Pakistani women. The authors aim to critique the present framing of consent as inadequate to account for the experience of Pakistani women. The research methodology has been through secondary sources consisting of academic literature as well as interviews with Pakistani women through the cyber harassment helpline team at Digital Rights Foundation.

Women's digital consent is compromised even before they own a device or make an online account; their ability to define that consent is constrained and regulated through social mechanisms that dictate *which* device they will own (if at all), *how* they will use it and *who* they will communicate with. Women routinely report having to share their passwords with their partners and family members. The conception of digital spaces for women is not seen as truly theirs, rather as potential sites for transgressions from gender norms and thus in need of regulations. Women's devices are constantly monitored by their family. It is the experience of several Pakistani women that the digital space is not private or theirs. Our discussion of consent must be informed by their reality. The digital gender gap in Pakistan is yawning and means women are less likely to access information and communication technologies. The gap is such that “men are twice as likely as women to own a mobile phone in Pakistan” (Measuring the Information Society Report 2016). In 2015, only 64% of women owned mobile phones, while 81% of Pakistani males owned cellular devices (Measuring the Information Society Report 2016).

Even when women do get access to digital technologies, their experience is marked by violence and harassment. Women's experience of the internet and digital technologies is fundamentally different from that of

men. This experience is further undercut by notions such as age, gender, level of knowledge, cultural sensibilities, race, sexual orientation, abilities and class. Thus, what does consent look like in a society where consent and ability to access technologies are undercut by structural and familial restrictions? How much consent is being exercised when information is being shared over the internet?

FEMINIST THEORY AND DATA PROTECTION

Digital rights and privacy debates have sought to problematize the concept of consent and the existing models that exist to capture user consent. In the same vein, feminist literature is replete with discussions regarding consent, especially with reference to sexual violence but also with reference to sexual activity and female pleasure. These understandings have posited consent with several prefixes, “affirmative consent”, “enthusiastic consent”, “free consent”, “willing consent” (O’Sullivan and Allgeier 1998, p. 243).

Eoin Carolan has argued that “online activity is an area in which the traditional legal approach to consent has proved particularly problematic” (Carolan 2016, p. 463). This critique is centred on the ability, or lack thereof, of the average internet user to “fully understand the nature or scope of the activities to which they have consented” (Carolan 2016, p. 463). The aforementioned approach to data protection centres on the belief that consent and the ability to dispense that consent is complicated by the capitalist data structure under which the user is giving consent. This formulation maps onto feminist approaches to consent and their understanding of the larger capitalist patriarchal structures that women are subject to.

Taken together, certain feminist approaches to privacy and online data protection privilege the “personal interpretations of online information exchange” as opposed to the corporate, juridical conception that currently dominates the discourse (Wittkower 2016). Although the conclusion that Wittkower comes to is a model based on individual and relational consent, there is an acknowledgement that the current discourse on privacy and data protection can be enhanced from a feminist perspective. The phenomenological approach employed by Wittkower obscures some of the structural strains on concepts such as consent, however serves as a useful starting point for our discussion.

Consent is also complicated within the context of digital transformations given the rapid changes that these spaces go through. Online

platforms have grown at an exponential rate and have dramatically changed through those very growth. Users who signed up to social media platforms in their early iterations did not anticipate that the consent that they granted would be in the hands of digital company of the colossal size of Facebook or Google. The transformative nature of the digital world throws up unanticipated situations which complicate consent as a permanent or stable phenomenon. This begs the question: if the digital platform changes its nature and scope, is the original consent granted by the user applicable any longer? Is consent of internet users an ethically and viable concept in the face of rapid digital transformations?

Model of online consent within data protection discourse has shifted over time, from the “presumed consent” model to “informed consent” and is currently migrating to the “active consent” framework in light of the European General Data Protection Regulation (Carolan 2016). Even within feminist theory, there has been a shift from the “force model” to a consent-based model to determine sexual assault. Furthermore, even within the consent model, the focus has shifted from ascertaining evidence of non-consent to affirmative signs of consent (Beres 2007, p. 102).

In light of this discussion, the concept of consent as something that can be negotiated, altered and withdrawn over time posits a unique affinity to feminist legal theory. The construction of consent, to be understood as a relational act rather than in the past sense, something that was not given but actively negotiated in the present can be extrapolated from the vast body of work done in feminist theory. The authors hold that an interdisciplinary conversation between data protection policy literature and feminist theory will produce not only a nuanced understanding of consent in online spaces but will help situate the non-male subject at the centre of these era-defining policy debates.

Feminist methodology privileges the lived experience of women as the starting point of theorizing. As a basis for this approach, the authors have developed two models of online consent for Pakistani women based on experiences and their own articulations of online consent. The women that we have spoken to bracket off individual and collective consent based on their understanding of private and public spaces of the internet. Individual consent regulates private spaces and interpersonal interactions, whereas collective consent governs semi-public and public spaces of the internet. The second half of this chapter will be interrogating these categories as useful models for understanding online consent.

A FEMINIST FRAMING OF NON-CONSENSUAL USE OF SEXUALLY EXPLICIT CONTENT

[S]ociety recognizes that one cannot assume that an individual who consents to sexual contact in one context also consents to sexual contact in other contexts. Similarly, individuals who consent to having private images of their body shared between doctors do not necessarily consent to the doctor displaying those images on the doctor's website or distributing them to the patient's employer. Thus, the law should not assume that individuals who agree to being viewed sexually in one private context also agree to being viewed sexually in other public contexts. (Burris 2014, pp. 2334–2335)

In the two categorizations of consent posited here, the first is individual consent that maps onto the private conceptualization of consent, that is, the ability of an individual to give consent in private interactions. This is most commonly framed in interactions with sexual partners but should be expanded to the ability to give consent in interpersonal relationships. When grafted onto the online realm, this typology relates to the consent given in one-on-one conversations and in private spaces on the internet.

Non-consensual content on the internet varies from leaked textual exchanges to videos of sexual assault and rape (this is not to imply that these actions exist on a scale, with one privileged over the other). It is often posited that consent, the concept underlying the “objectionability” of certain content, is the element that differentiates a criminal charge from a depiction of sexual expression. However, it is the contention of the authors that consent is too nebulous a concept to hinge these determinations on, and so complex is the concept that it is never as simple as the aforementioned example paints it to be.

A fluid framing of consent accounts for the flow of information between the public and private digital realm where consent can take different forms given the nature of the space. Individual consent in the private space allows for exchange of information and content that has limited purpose based on the consent of owner. This casts the content shared as having a set owner who is in a position to define the consent as limited to the private realm. Feminist theory and the experience of women, however, complicate this neat understanding.

Non-consensual use of sexually explicit materials, colloquially and inaccurately known as revenge porn, complicates and disrupts the neat categories of individualised and collective/communal consent in online spaces.

Donohue accurately points out that most framings of non-consensual sexually explicit images are within the confines of personal relationships and betrayal. She posits that however the damage is more than betrayal and a ruined love affair; “subjects of Non-Consensual Pornography suffer lasting consequences for their sense of privacy, safety, reputation, and control” (Donohue 2017, p. 252). These issues are the by-product of a conceptualization of individualized consent and responsibilities, which obscures the fact that these images are “perpetuated and consumed by a culture that not only tolerates, but demands, the commodification, humiliation, and subjugation of women” (Donohue 2017, p. 253). The focus on the individual does not account for the larger, structure-based harm that occurs in these cases. This framing of the non-consenting subject in a larger structure is crucial in understanding consent in the digital age. The question of consent cannot be divorced from its consequences and larger culture that informs that consent to begin with.

Furthermore the private, fragmented framing of consent erects a commonly held difficulty in discussing non-consensual use of pornographic content, where “lawmakers and the public are distracted by the notion that at some point in time the victim might have consented to certain actions, particularly sexual actions” (Donohue 2017, p. 278). If individual consent and interactions that inform it are bracketed off from the public and the structural realities that permeant consent in that space, then the private realm thinks of individuals within that space as completely devoid of context; however as discussed above, the lived reality of women even in the private space is chequered with the looming threat of violence and disclosure. The libertarian concept of freely given individual consent does not map onto the reality of women and their relationship with technology.

Interestingly, in the Pakistani experience distinctions have been made between public and private or individual and collective consent. Section 24 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (2016) delinks the capturing of images/videos from their distribution, implying that consensual sharing of images in private will not be treated as a determining factor in the non-consensual distribution of content through digital means. This however has not prevented law enforcement officers and judges from shaming women for sharing sexually explicit images in private, further underlying the chasm between legal texts and the lived experience of women in the criminal justice system.

Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, Section 24 (1): A person commits the offence of cyber stalking who, with the intent to coerce or intimidate or harass any person, uses information system, information system network, the internet, website, electronic mail or any other similar means of communication to: ... (d) take a photograph or make a video of any person and displays or distributes it without his consent in a manner that harms a person.

The female individual is subject to repeated intrusions onto their private digital space with the implicit threat of sexualized online violence. In our interviews with women that anxiety of being having the private digital space intruded upon was omnipresent. In fact women's digital indemnities were routinely subjected to social surveillance and scrutiny even within the private realm. Women's devices are never really theirs to begin with, subject to multiple checks by the male patriarch. This is not to imply that women are at the mercy of the male gaze; several women have developed innovative solutions to ensure that parts of their digital identity remain beyond even the most intrusive of intrusions. Nevertheless, despite the everyday resistance posited by most women, the threat of the private not really being private persists.

In the most public of these outings and piercing of the private, non-consensual distribution of sexually explicit material renders real the consequences of individual consent. Non-consensual use of private sexually explicit material "is not just its unwanted intrusion on people's sex lives. It is a systemic, marketable attack on a person's body and sexual identity; specifically, most commonly, women's bodies and sexual identities" (Donohue 2017, p. 257). Thus when women are giving consent to sharing of information in private, they are being weighed down by the reality of these bodily intrusions. Such an intrusion, as per Wittkower:

[D]oes not just allow third parties to be privy to a prior private moment (personal information transfer), but that the circulation of the image also re-creates the sex act in new and ever more numerous contexts, with new and ever more numerous non-consensual voyeuristic participants. The sext—an image intended to be a telepresent sex act between consenting partners—becomes no longer consensual when later unilaterally shared with third parties. Sexual assault, not property rights violation, is the right paradigm in which to think about unilaterally forced non-consensual performance of sex acts, even when they are telepresent rather than face-to-face. (Wittkower 2016)

Speaking from the Pakistani experience, it should be pointed out that there is a privileging of image-based content in online crimes of non-consent. Through the cases we have dealt with, even text conversations can also be framed as sexually explicit. Donohue takes an expansive definition of the concept of sexually explicit and reads it to include images “beyond nude images” and links it to “sexualized statements used without consent” (Donohue, p. 255). However, this expansive definition is not reflected in how the law and social media companies view this content.

Technologies have also shaped the notions of consent and privacy for children and young adults. Kath Albury and Kate Crawford have pointed out that, in the Australian context, there is a divide between practices of the youth and the sweeping laws on the issue of “sexting”. They argue that given the range of “sexting experiences, motivations and contexts, and to argue that the application of child pornography laws to sexting is excessive and inappropriate, and fails to recognize the sexual agency and developing ethics of young people” (Albury and Crawford, p. 464). This points to a larger trend of heavy-handed and paternalistic approaches taken by the law towards issues of online consent, especially when regulating content that intersects with discourse of modesty and morality in the public imagination. Parallels can be drawn to the Pakistani context where the female subject is infantilized by the law as incapable of consensual sexual expression. Section 21 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act does not mention consent when criminalizing online sexually explicit content. While the section does centre on individualized harm, thus saving it from becoming an online pornography law, it does speak to an erasure of sexual expression outside of the bounds of a violation.

The internet is not only the site of non-consensual sexually explicit material, but it also has the potential to host sexually explicit and pornographic material that is consensual at an individual level. This opens up a possibility of consent in online spaces, not purely as a violation, but to allow for expression of sexual attitudes. Internet-based applications allow for consensual exchange of material between individuals, which remains under the domain of individual consent until and unless the private enters the public realm through the violence of online harassment or a security breach. This opens up the question of whether online expressions of sexual activity can be sexually expressive as opposed to exploitative (Magnet 2007, p. 578). In her study of the for-profit feminist website, Suicide Girls, Magnet found that pornographic images were shared by women in an effort to construct a feminist, subversive space for female sexual expression:

“the site explicitly attempts to interrupt the male gaze through the subversion of the standard photographic practices utilized by more traditional forms of pornography” (Magnet 2007, p. 580). Pakistan too has spaces of resistance and sexual expression on the internet where the male gaze is subverted and female sexual agency is asserted, which ranges from open discussions of female pleasure to sharing of selfies. Gender non-conforming groups and members of the local LGBT community have also found avenues of expression online.

Magnet posits that these online spaces hold the potential for sexual expression independent of the body (Magnet 2007, p. 582). The potential seems tempting for “post-corporeal” sexual expression, freed from the rigid norms of patriarchal sexuality. These triumphant notions of the internet as liberating space, disconnected from the gender politics of the “real world”, are however deeply flawed. Magnet herself concedes that identities mediated by technologies are still grounded in the lived realities in which the bodies exist (Magnet 2007, p. 585). Identity markers such as gender, class, race and ability still exist in these seemingly disembodied online spaces. In Pakistan, the same social constraints that exist in the offline and private domain govern these public and semi-public online spaces of sexual expression. Women are routinely harassed and shamed for their online expression. The tragic honour killing of Qandeel Baloch in 2016 is an example of online sexual expression resulting in violent consequences.

PROBLEMATIZING COLLECTIVE CONSENT

In theorizing the concept of “collective consent”, it has been described as the consent experienced in the public sphere where the individual does not have the power to define the consent. Consent and privacy are experienced as a collective based on external decisions, and at times predetermined decisions, of what constitutes consent in those spaces. Based on interviews with Pakistani women complaining of harassment, there is a rudimentary knowledge of the permissions and consent given to social media companies and platforms when we visit and participate in them. However, this consent is not given much thought perhaps due to the lack of relationship with the service and platform provider, and importantly given the lack of tangible exchange of information given the presence of trackers and data collection in the digital space.

This not to suggest, however, that Pakistani women are not concerned with privacy issues in online spaces. In fact, a majority of women that we

have spoken to demonstrate a heightened understanding of the value of the information that they consent to being shared. This awareness is heightened when they enter relatively less private, public or semi-public spaces of the internet. Research has found that the use of technologies and the choices made in relation to them are highly gendered. Emrys Schoemaker posited that women are much more likely to use private communications such as WhatsApp than men (Schoemaker 2015). Constructs of privacy and consent that underpin physical spaces are grafted onto online and digital spaces as women make the distinction between Facebook and WhatsApp based on the “publicness” of the platform in question. Schoemaker terms it as “digital purdah” as a nod of the physical cloth used by women to cover their heads and bodies.

Traditional concepts of gender norms and consent manifest themselves in interesting and unanticipated ways through women-only online communities constructed through WhatsApp chat groups and Facebook pages. The culture of these pages and the administrative tools employed by the administrators of these pages draws on traditional concepts to ensure privacy of conversations, spaces for participants and, occasionally, moral policing of gender norms. These groups can range from a dozen members to online communities of nearly 50,000 members. The ecosystem of these communities hinges on exclusivity of membership, not only based on gender but also through a recommendation-based model to gauge the level of trustworthiness. Membership often requires an existing member to “vouch” for them. It has been documented that while online spaces are used as a means of social support and services by women, these avenues present the risk of being used as tools of victimization as well. In their research on women seeking human services online, Finn and Banach (2000, p. 786) posit that harms towards women can include issues of consent, that is, “loss of privacy”, “exposure to disinhibited or hyperpersonal communication” and “online harassment or stalking”.

The model of membership is built around an imagining of “safe space” that speaks to a collective consent of the community. Members are barred from taking screenshots of conversations and sharing them beyond the confines of the group. Despite the fact that there are thousands of members, these expectations of intimacy of conversations demonstrate a grafting of the individual consent model onto a group dynamic. Community administrators not only feel that these rules are necessary to safeguard the identities of the women but insist that the model is a workable one despite technological impossibility of preventing screenshots. There is an

understanding that the individualized model of consent is the most favourable to women and should be replicated in the semi-public community space.

Consent plays an operative role in the phenomenon of anonymous posts, especially when members want to discuss sensitive subjects regarding sexual activity, relationships and health. Anonymous posts appear on these groups on a near regular basis, posted by either the group administrator or other members, inviting advice and comments. It is understood that the original author withholds consent to reveal their identity, and it is a rule regularly adhered to through practice, administrative discretion and moral policing.

Membership to these groups is also curated on the basis of activity as a marker for authenticity and investment in the group itself. There is frequent culling of groups to suss out “lurkers” who are seen on suspiciously as potential screenshooters and less likely to respect privacy.

Given the cultural context, women and gender non-conforming individuals in digital spaces maintain a precarious balance between participation in online platforms and expression of their identity, while at the same time maintain their privacy. In conversations with women the need to maintain a separate online identity from their professional or family life compels them to avoid using their real name or pictures. Toeing the line between expression and safety, women sometimes put up picture of their hands, feet or eyes, while masking the totality of their identity. A complex range of justifications underlies every decision to reveal information regarding themselves. The tactics employed by women also vary from the extremely guarded to the causally careless. Several women use avatars of celebrities or pictures of landscapes to guard their identities. Some women are meticulous in their construction of an online identity separate from their offline realities. One woman we spoke to was using a selfie of herself as her Twitter profile picture but felt that the Snapchat filter sufficiently guarded her identity. Other women were not afraid to use their picture or a version of their name believing that their family members will not bother to look for them. It is important to note that these conceptions of consent and privacy operate in public forums, not private conversations.

These gendered behaviours and tactics converge when there a violation of consent or privacy. Several cases of online harassment involve screenshots of public posts or pictures being posted on misogynistic pages inviting ridicule and threats framed by the culture and followers of the particular page. These depictions of public online posts are seen as viola-

tions of privacy by the women experiencing them. Women experiencing this form of harassment do not articulate it as bullying, but first and foremost as an issue of consent—“*I did not consent to my post being used in this way*”.

Violations of consent are not always motivated by malice; traditional media or news websites using tweets and public Facebook posts in their articles as markers of public opinion or reactions are increasingly becoming a common journalistic practice. These posts are often used without informing or obtaining consent of the authors, perhaps because their postings are taken to be part of public discourse. However, the change in context of the post can create a dissonance between the expectations of privacy of the author and the circulation of it given the intervention of the publisher. For many women this change in context can mean the difference between safety and harassment—relative anonymity and privacy violation. Speaking to aggrieved women, there is an expectation of consent even in public forums tied to reasonable expectations of the audience of their content.

These examples illustrate the complex ways in which Pakistani women understand consent in public and semi-public forums. They participate in these spaces with the heightened awareness of the consequences of abuse and construct their own expectations of behaviour and regulation to negotiate a space hostile to their presence and opinions. When these expectations are violated, there is cognitive dissonance between their understanding of consent and privacy versus the community guidelines of these spaces and constructions by the law. Social media platforms and moderators often express confusion when asked to intervene: *consciously public posts can be used in a variety of ways without the need to ask for consent from the author*. The implication is that when women enter online public spaces, they are fair game, and they ought to know better. There is disconnect between the consent of the “collective” and that of the individual woman entering, participating and constructing that space.

This disconnect speaks to a disparity of power in terms of who gets to frame when and how consent is given online spaces. Women enter these spaces with a set template of consent and privacy, ever tailoring their behaviour and practice within that predefined structure. Policy conversations regarding community norms and consent of digital authors happen behind closed doors of corporate giants. Pakistani women are passive agents to decisions taken halfway across the world; their conceptions of privacy in the digital public are rendered irrelevant. Technology and digital platforms are constantly interpreted and constructed in the cultures where

they operate; however, the current framing of rules of governance only captures a one-sided construction.

Consent is often circumvented by the very technologies created and designed for women. Women-friendly applications such as street safety applications, dating applications/websites targeted towards women and period-trackers are marketed to women supposedly for their own good. In Pakistan, transport and ride-sharing applications are used overwhelmingly by women. However, these technologies have repeatedly been found to be violating women's trust and collecting intimate data without either explicit permission or lack of transparency. Information regarding women's health and social activities is regularly sold to advertisers to generate money. Not only is permission not taken to collect women's personal information, there is a power disparity between the developers of these tools and the women forced to use them for their safety and convenience. Women placing their trust in these tools are in turn subjected to surveillance and treated as products.

CONCLUSION

If I have agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose. That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean that it is impossible. (Butler 2004, p. 3)

The failure of current consent models has not only failed women, rather individual users of the internet at large. Apocalyptic declarations of the death of privacy in the digital age speak to a larger failure of consent models applied to internet design and policy-making. There is a tension between the prescriptive and legal categories that practitioners construct to capture and understand online consent. Traditional feminist theory provides a critique of complacent categories designed to describe women's consent in online spaces which does not map onto the lived experience of women in these spaces. The neat dichotomies of private-public, of individual and collective consent, do not hold if one accounts for women's violent and violative experiences in online spaces. Furthermore, experiences of South Asian women, particularly Pakistani women, do not map onto predetermined categories of consent violations within dominant discourse, which is in turn reified in community guidelines, laws and policies.

There is a serious need to rethink consent as the determining concept in online spaces; alternative approaches suggested have hinged on

non-corporate models and harms-based approaches (the efficacy of these approaches is, however, beyond the scope of this text). Questions of consent, both online and offline, are rife with intersectional issues of gender and power relations. Within legal and normative frameworks, consent becomes an unstable concept to determine responsibility, agency and power. However, these difficulties do not make consent an impossible goal; as Judith Butler posits in the aforementioned quote, “that my agency is riven with paradox does not mean that it is impossible” (Butler 2004, p. 3). This chapter was an effort in understanding the paradoxes that complicate consent in online spaces.

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PART II

Manifestations of Online Misogyny: Case Studies of Different Platforms and Cultural Contexts



CHAPTER 5

Convergence on Common Ground: MRAs, Memes and Transcultural Contexts of Digital Misogyny

MacKenzie Cockerill

INTRODUCTION

A global culture of misogyny is growing and flourishing thanks to the internet and its unprecedented potential for connecting people and their ideas. In order to understand the discourse communities at work and effectively address this digital culture of misogyny, we need to directly engage with and examine the internet. Connecting culture and patriarchy as the background that informs and motivates these discourse communities can directly aid in the development of a global theory of online misogyny. This research into discourse communities online suggests a theory of online misogyny on a global scale by connecting different expressions of misogyny through similar cultural resources. Examining where these attitudes originate and how they find form in digital spaces helps to build familiarity with how oppression functions online, and awareness and analysis of digital communities focused on perpetuating patriarchal ideology is vital to preventing future instances of misogynistic violence.

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Understanding how patriarchy and violent misogyny operate in online communities is important because these attitudes, though expressed through digital means, have devastating real-world consequences. On 23 May 2014, in Isla Vista, CA, Elliot Rodger killed six people and injured 14 others before taking his own life. Before his murderous act, Rodger posted a misogynistic, ranting “manifesto” video to YouTube. Titled “Elliot Rodger’s Retribution”, the video shows Rodger in his car describing the “existence of loneliness, rejection, and unfulfilled desires” he was forced to “endure” as women gave their “affection, sex, and love to other men”.¹ At 22, Rodger saw his virginity as a curse, as evidence of a society that did not cater to his needs. In the disturbing video, Rodger rails against the women who did not pay him attention—he blames women for his unhappiness as he describes a sense of entitlement so deep that he expected women to flock to him through no effort on his part. When they did not, he sought to punish them.

Rodger was an active member of the now-defunct [PUAHate.com](#) community, which was originally founded to discredit the pick-up artist (PUA) community but devolved into a digital space for frustrated men to congregate and share their hateful theories about women.² He posted the text of his manifesto to PUAHate, and his violent rhetoric would not have been out of place in the forum—the moderators certainly did not flag it, and the result was that Rodger’s rage and frustration went unchecked until he found release in a violent, murderous rampage. Rodger killed those people as a way of exercising an ideological belief about male entitlement and masculinity prescribed to him by patriarchy, which is not an exclusively Western system.

The global nature of misogyny as influenced by patriarchy is reflected online in men’s rights activism communities, where global patterns of violent discourse emerge despite political, geographical and cultural boundaries. Men’s rights activism (henceforth MRA) surfaced online around 2010 as a reaction to feminism and has since spread and fragmented worldwide on the internet. Some MRA community members are truly concerned with calling due attention to men’s issues like depression, suicide rates, domestic violence and homelessness, but the majority of the discourse found within these communities tends instead towards violent misogyny.

¹ Rodger, Elliot. “Elliot Rodger’s Retribution.” *KRON4*. YouTube. May 24, 2014. 6:56. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zExDivIW4FM>.

² “PUAHate.” *Reddit*. <https://www.reddit.com/r/puahate/>.

MRA communities use memes like advertisements or propaganda, presenting their worldview with polarizing language intended to catch the attention of men who already see themselves as put-upon and disadvantaged. A meme is a cultural element that is repeated, shared, parodied and copied. On the internet memes generally take the form of images with overlaid text—though they appear in a variety of forms that are constantly evolving and changing, image memes online are generally readily recognizable as such, and their highly shareable format is an inherent part of defining them as memes. MRA memes across the globe reflect misogynistic attitudes and ideology, and this points to a growing social movement that transcends cultural and geographical differences by mobilizing resources and ideology online.

The MRA community in India parallels this method of using memes as a vehicle for its peculiar brand of activism: Indian MRA Facebook pages and websites are full of cryptic and bizarre memes intended to make their ideology more accessible to a wider audience. Whether use of this medium was directly learned and copied from Western MRA communities or fostered organically through everyday use of the internet is unclear, but what is clear is that MRAs around the world share a knack for summarizing the worst aspects of their ideology through memes filled with stolen stock images, bad clip art, misspellings and histrionics.

MRAs in the West and India express similar priorities in their memes—generalizing and controlling women, promoting violence, justifying rape—and their memes appear in nearly identical digital spaces across their communities. The sheer abundance of these memes is evidence of a digital culture openly concerned with promoting and perpetuating misogyny. It is a self-sustaining cycle: a violently misogynistic meme attracts people who agree with its message, and their participation in the community generates more violent content to fit their tastes. Such content comes to characterize the community, and when said content is shared, it appeals again to increasing numbers of like-minded misogynists. This has troubling implications for the future of men's rights activism as a developing reactionary social movement. This research aims to show where and how patriarchy and the misogyny it informs are endemic in a global, hyper-mediated world, and I argue that projects like this one should be among the first of many, as further research into digital communities that create misogynistic resources is essential to an in-depth understanding of cyber misogyny.

FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Scholarship on MRAs up to this point classifies the global community as forming rather than formed—it is becoming, it is developing, but it is too early to consider MRAs “a social movement, or a group in alliance with a political party”.³ The memes that MRAs publish and share attract men who agree with their misogynistic messages, and as more men join MRA communities, they shift the conversation. These men “do not come to men’s organizations as practiced campaigners with a set of ready ideas by which to sway public opinion, but evolve these ideas through group interactions”.⁴ Community organization is essential for MRAs, as online communities are where they congregate to discuss and distribute their ideology. Memes are a convenient and succinct way of starting a conversation and recruiting like-minded men.

This research is an exploration of the importance of social media and memes for the organization and articulation of men’s rights activism, and a salient theory for analysing unconventional means of political, social and cultural engagement is resource mobilization theory. Developed during the 1970s, resource mobilization theory defines a social movement as a set of preferences for social change.⁵ Eltantawy and Wiest, in their 2011 reconsideration of resource mobilization theory, note that cyberactivism changes the landscape of collective action.⁶ Digital technology is an important resource for social movements, as it offers means of mass communication that were previously restricted by political, geographical and cultural boundaries. Eltantawy and Wiest state that increased use of social media in social movements presents a unique opportunity to re-examine the

³ Chapman, Jean. “Victims of Violence in Indian Families: Where Misogyny and Misandry Meet.” Paper presented at the Conference on “50 Years of Sexism: What Next?”, County Durham, UK, March 2015.

⁴ Chowdhury, Romit, “Family, Femininity, Feminism: ‘Structures of Feeling’ in the Articulation of Men’s Rights.” In *Women, Gender and Everyday Social Transformation in India*, ed. Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Anne Waldrop (London: Anthem Press, 2014b), 191.

⁵ Edwards, Bob, and Patrick F. Gillham. “Resource Mobilization Theory.” In *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, edited by David A. Snow, Donatella della Porta, Bert Klandermans, and Doug McAdam (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2013): 1.

⁶ Eltantawy, Nahed, and Julie B. Wiest. “Social Media in the Egyptian Revolution: Reconsidering Resource Mobilization Theory.” *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2001): 1207.

usefulness of resource mobilization theory in a contemporary context.⁷ Because resource mobilization theory recognizes the importance of influences outside the social movement under examination and regards social media as a transformative resource for social movements, it can aid in understanding social movements in terms of their influential context and resources.⁸ Social media is an instrumental resource for social change through collective action, and it offers immense potential for communicating messages and ideology to massive, global audiences. Resource mobilization theory recognizes the significant role that social media takes and considers the powerful influence of social, political, cultural and historical context for social movements. Eltantawy and Wiest clarify that while resource mobilization theory may be considered past its prime, research on social media in social movements is still in its infancy and the combination of the two updates the theory for contemporary use.⁹ In keeping with this spirit of revitalizing an established theory through new applications, resource mobilization theory is the framework underpinning my collection and analysis of MRA memes as self-produced cultural resources that are aggregated through the social-organizational resource of social networks in the cultural context of global misogyny.

This theoretical framework informs the methodology used in organizing this research. My research interest in reactionary communities on the internet developed into a more specific interest in men's rights activism as a developing social movement. This interest, shaped by resource mobilization theory, guided my research into this particular area of enquiry. I searched for and gathered information about the nature of men's rights activism communities, particularly their origin and development; the social, cultural and historical contexts that produce MRA activity online; the contemporary context of MRA discourse in various cultures; the global locations of MRA discourse and the digital resources available to them; and the sources to provide cultural context, both historical and contemporary, for global MRA communities. Recognizing the Indian cultural setting for MRAs as disparate from the Western cultural setting for MRAs, I searched for similarities and differences in self-produced cultural resources from MRA communities, particularly resources that facilitate the recruitment and socialization of new adherents to men's rights activism. This

⁷ Ibid., 1209.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 1219.

search led me to memes as a widely available but not universally known resource of reactionary discourse communities and their social organizations. Western MRA memes are aggregated on MRA organizations' corresponding account pages on social networks like Facebook and Tumblr.¹⁰ These pages provide digital spaces that are more casual and social, where users feel a greater sense of freedom to explore and express their ideology, and this sense of freedom produces cultural resources like memes.

Corresponding online MRA communities in India, like [MensRightsIndia.net](#), [MensRightsAssociation.org](#) and [Masculinist-India.com](#), have their own pages on Facebook and Tumblr, and they are similarly filled with memes.¹¹ Memes are self-produced within MRA communities as an internal resource that is a means of obtaining both internal and external support from adherents and constituents of MRA groups.

By including particular examples of memes within this text, I aim to both inform a history and help to develop a theory of global misogyny. These particular examples are microcosmic representations of the larger trends at play in these online communities, and they serve as a selective overview of the sort of content that one can expect to find in these groups. Resource mobilization theory emphasizes the political, cultural and historical contexts of social movements, and context for memes as a manifestation of collective ideology is found in cultural studies of the patriarchal systems at work in both Western and Indian culture in order to illustrate precisely how something as microcosmic as a meme still has potential to represent and disseminate misogynistic rhetoric.

The main sources for the memes featured within this text are American MRA site [AVoiceForMen.com](#) and Indian sites [Masculinist-India](#) and [MensRightsAssociation.org](#). Masculinist-India has unfortunately made their main site, hosted on Blogspot, and their Facebook group page private. Steps have already been taken in some of these communities to hide their tracks and shield their ideology from the public—only if you are invited or approved by a moderator can you see and participate in the conversation on their sites. This impulse to privatize their content marks a shift from aiming for mainstream appeal to fostering and developing ideology within an insular digital echo chamber of pre-approved members.

¹⁰ “A Voice For Men.” *Facebook Page*. <https://www.facebook.com/A-Voice-for-Men-102001393188684/>.

¹¹ “Men’s Rights Association.” *Facebook Page*. <https://www.facebook.com/mensrightsassociation/>; “Masculinist-India.” *Tumblr blog*. <https://masculinist-india.tumblr.com/>.

Transient as the internet is, there are always tracks to follow; Googling “Masculinist-India memes” turns up dozens of results with the Masculinist-India watermark, and their Tumblr is still live as an archive of their most popular meme content. The most readily available and most illustrative examples of MRA meme content are included in this chapter in an effort to break off, share and preserve a piece of this constantly evolving discourse community.

A BRIEF BACKGROUND ON PATRIARCHY, MISOGYNY AND CULTURE

Patriarchy is a system of oppression at work in both Western and Indian geo-cultural areas. Misogyny, or the generalized hatred of all women, is a function of patriarchy. Motivated by feelings of resentment, anger and a sense of power lost or stolen, misogyny supports open violence against women. Patriarchy supports and justifies misogyny and violence in a myriad of ways across the world, and recognition of the subtle differences in cultural manifestations of patriarchal oppression is vital to understanding how misogyny transcends culture and operates on a global scale.

Characterized by dominance, control, and an obsession with an idealized tradition, patriarchy is maintained through violence against anyone deemed “lesser” or “other”. As Romit Chowdhury states, “patriarchal societies, far from prohibiting men from being violent, legitimise and even demand expressions of violence from men ... to put it differently, patriarchy maintains itself, in part, by making male sexual violence socially rewarding.”¹² Although Chowdhury is here writing in reference to Indian patriarchy, the same rings true in American society, where men convicted of rape are defended and women who are victims of rape are shamed, rebuffed and rebuked.¹³ It is through a system of patriarchy that sexual and physical violence are rewarded with social capital and legal immunity, and such violence happens when a sense of entitlement goes unfulfilled.

Men in patriarchal societies experience entitlement in different forms: “masculinity, for most men—even middle-class, upper-caste, Hindu,

¹² Chowdhury, Romit. “Male Sexual Violence: Thoughts on Engagement.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, no. 49 (2013): 15.

¹³ Levin, Sam. “Stanford Sexual Assault: Woman Who Blamed Victim for Drinking Apologizes.” *The Guardian*. June 8, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/usnews/2016/jun/08/stanford-sexual-assault-brock-turner-court-letter-apology>.

'heterosexual' men—does not feel like power. Rather masculinity is experienced as an entitlement to power."¹⁴ This sense of entitlement to power results in violence when that entitlement is perceived to be unfulfilled, and this can be triggered by something as simple and seemingly innocuous as the appearance of a woman, as Chowdhury explains via Michael Kimmel's 2005 *Gender of Desire* essays: "feminine sexuality is experienced by many 'heterosexual' men as an invasion, something which arouses such intense feelings of sexual longing which make them feel out of control and hence, powerless and vulnerable."¹⁵ Sexism teaches men to feel a certain sense of entitlement to women's bodies, and when women exist in the world but do not exist explicitly *for* men, this sense of entitlement can result in violence.

Men who are taught to conflate sex and control feel powerless when confronted with feelings of sexual longing, and in order to regain power and control, they practise dominance in the form of sexual and physical violence against women. Chowdhury notes, "the motivation for men to be sexually violent has to be understood as a mix of these feelings of male powerlessness and the sense of entitlement to women's bodies that men have ... this combination—of powerlessness and entitlement, vulnerability and the social mandate to be in control—is the structure of feeling which underpins male sexual violence."¹⁶ And this is not just true in India; patriarchy operates in a nearly identical fashion in the West. As bell hooks states, "patriarchy requires male dominance by any means necessary, hence it supports, promotes, and condones sexist violence."¹⁷ Women are essential to the perpetuation of patriarchy across the globe, as their complicity allows patriarchy to continue operating in its violent, dominating fashion.

Patriarchy prioritizes misogyny and prescribes paradoxical roles for women as part of these priorities. In India, one such paradoxical role is that of the traditional Indian woman who also earns an income. Jean Chapman notes that women are vital to the success of what she describes as a system of brahmanical patriarchy (patriarchy promoted by upper-caste priests or Brahmins, who insist on endogamy as an aspect of the caste

¹⁴ See note 12.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ hooks, bell. *Understanding Patriarchy*. Louisville: No Borders Collective/LAFF, 2010. <http://imaginenoborders.org/zines/#UnderstandingPatriarchy>.

system).¹⁸ Women's acceptance of their prescribed roles directly perpetuates patriarchy in India: "the underpinning of this acceptance is *pativrata* or wifely duties ... *pativrata* is the total devotion of a wife to her husband, her lord: a woman's career is her husband."¹⁹ In teaching a woman that she will live an honourable and fulfilling life solely through total devotion to her husband, brahmanical patriarchy lays the foundation for systemic oppression disguised as cultural tradition.

Many Indian men feel that Westernization has spoiled Indian women and ruined their sense of duty to a traditional family unit. MRA communities frame recent legislation intended to protect married women from domestic abuse as an attack on the Indian family, Indian culture and traditional Indian values. Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code, passed in 1983 and intended to prevent dowry harassment and abuse in the marital home, is problematic for Indian MRAs.²⁰ The law, which provides for arrest of the husband in the case of a wife's complaint of harassment or assault, is seen as an invasion of privacy in a space traditionally controlled by Indian men. His wife lives in his home, in his domain of power in which he is free to do and act as he chooses with impunity.

Dowry is integral to the traditional system of marriage within endogamous castes in India. Dowry harassment and death is a disturbing practice in India in which a wife is verbally abused, beaten, burned, maimed and sometimes killed for failing to provide sufficient dowry to her husband and his family.²¹ Any legislation intended to minimize or prevent such harassment is duly seen as an open attack on tradition: "the concern for men's rights is raised because it is felt that ... multiplying legal provisions with respect to the conjugal relation criminalises particular forms of men's behaviour in the home with the ultimate goal of breaking the 'Indian family.'"²² Indian MRAs re-frame their efforts against 498A, which handles individual complaints on a case-by-case basis, as a moral project to save the Indian family unit and, thus, the nation from the ruinous influence of Westernization. They claim that Indian women misuse 498A as a

¹⁸ Chapman, Jean. "Violence Against Women in Democratic India: Let's Talk Misogyny." Paper presented at the Society for Socialist Studies Conference, Ontario, Canada, May 2014: 5.

¹⁹ Ibid., 6.

²⁰ "498A." *Indian Penal Code*. <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/538436/>.

²¹ See note 19.

²² Chowdhury, Romit. "Conditions of Emergence: The Formation of Men's Rights Groups in Contemporary India." *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 21, no. 1 (2014a): 40.

quick and easy way to get rid of their husbands, attempting to “posit individual cases of misuse as a social problem and not simple stray incidents”.²³ This tendency towards generalization and vilification of all women is itself misogynistic, but its implications and the digital discourse it produces are misogyny made manifest.

MRA MEMES AND TRANSCULTURAL MISOGYNY

Figure 5.1 is an Indian MRA meme from Masculinist-India. Consisting of stock photos, clip art and two bold fonts, this meme is an eye-catching example of the sort of collaged style of many MRA memes. The images are simple and illustrative of the point: Indian men feel that “your husband or boyfriend should not be your source of income. It is [a] relationship, not a job opportunity” (Fig. 5.1). This statement directly contradicts the traditional ideology of *pativrata* described by Chapman, in which a wife’s career is her husband. In this sense, a relationship is, for a woman, indeed a job opportunity: her husband’s happiness is her job, and this job is assigned to her as part of brahmanical patriarchy in India.²⁴ This contradictory representation of Indian MRA priorities typifies their obsession with using Westernization as a scapegoat. Chowdhury, in his collection and analysis of interviews with self-proclaimed Indian MRAs, provides “the following observation by Leon Richie, a 42-year-old management consultant: ‘Western culture has made women competitive. Now they feel they can do everything that men can do, have careers. But women must take care of the family and this is not a punishment to them, it is natural. This system has been disturbed because law and western culture has entered the home’”.²⁵ Apparently Indian men want a wife who earns an income and does not depend on him for money, but they also want a traditional Indian wife who is happy to fulfil her “natural” duty to stay at home and ensure that her husband’s happiness is her only focus. For all that Indian MRAs are obsessed with preserving traditions that are important to upholding Indian culture, they seem to be more obsessed with money and whether or not their wife is earning an income. The stock

²³ Chowdhury, Romit. “Family, Femininity, Feminism: ‘Structures of Feeling’ in the Articulation of Men’s Rights.” In *Women, Gender and Everyday Social Transformation in India*, edited by Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Anne Waldrop (London: Anthem Press, 2014b): 197.

²⁴ See note 19.

²⁵ See note 23, 196.



Fig. 5.1 Masculinist-India meme

image of a woman yelling is purposefully selected and included to communicate the idea that Westernization has turned Indian women into nags who demand money from their husbands. However hyperbolic this claim may be, it is apparently unacceptable in a society where dowry, a system in which the husband's family demands material goods from the wife and her family as part of a marriage arrangement, is still practised despite being outlawed in the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961.²⁶

This contradiction is glaring, and Westernization is used as a smoke-screen for the feelings of resentment, anger and hate that Indian MRAs feel towards Indian women. They feel that the system is unfair, that the freedom they have to pursue an education and a career in a field that interests them is a burden, that women should be doing their fair share of the work and earning their fair share of the money. This is all well and good, but it is a facile misrepresentation of the situation Indian women are in, and their situation is directly tied to cultural traditions in India. Indian MRAs seem to lack a specific understanding of how some traditions stand

²⁶See note 3, 8.

in the way of equality, but rather than attempting to address the pitfalls of continued adherence to strict traditions, they prefer to shift the blame and the burden for change onto women. There is no sense of working together for change in MRA memes; there is only a sense of “us versus them”, wherein one gender group emerges victorious, and Indian MRA memes are devoted to ensuring that their group secures this arbitrary and imagined victory.

Theoretical resistance to Westernization is selective within Indian MRA communities. They speak out openly against Westernization when it comes to Indian women and the traditional family home, but Indian MRA memes show threads of connection to Western MRA memes. Figure 5.2 features a meme from the A Voice For Men (AVFM) Facebook page in a classic format that parodies the generic motivational posters often found in classrooms and offices. HYPERGAMY is the motivational theme, the image is of two heterosexual lovers on the beach—the man thinking of love and the woman thinking only of money, their thoughts represented

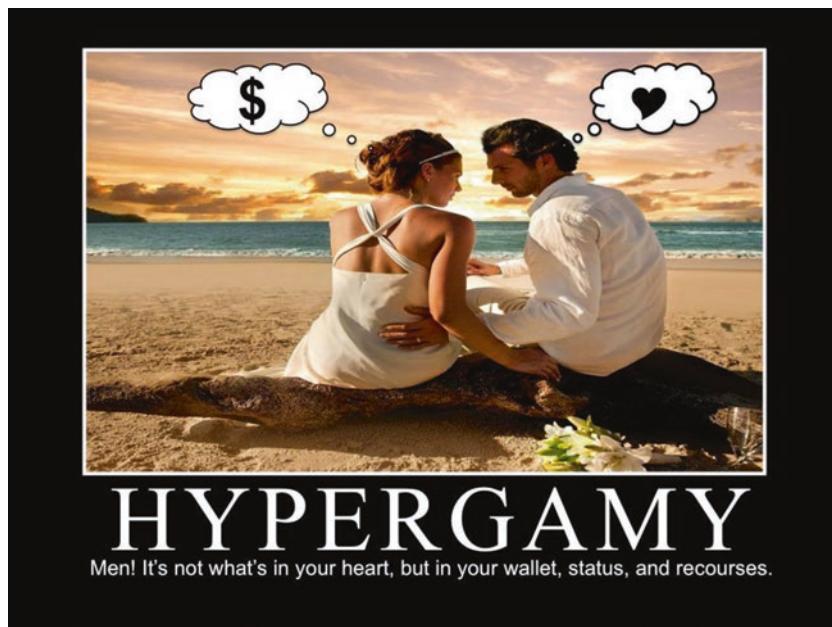


Fig. 5.2 American MRA meme

with literal thought bubbles containing a love heart and a dollar sign—the caption “men! It’s not what’s in your heart, but in your wallet, status, and recourses” (I assume they meant “resources”) (Fig. 5.2). This plays on the generalization that women are obsessed with money and constantly demanding it, that money is all men are good for in a woman’s eyes, that they are completely devoid or incapable of love. Such generalizations humanize men as sensitive and loving and dehumanize women as manipulative and money-hungry. This dehumanization of women is clear misogyny, as it allows men to project their anger and frustration onto a generalized construct of women, blurring the line between real-life women and a stereotype. It is superficial and not grounded in reality, and yet this concept is popular enough among MRAs to be one of the main themes in their memes and overall discourse; the idea that women think of men as “free ATM machines” is prevalent in both Western and Indian men’s rights activism communities, and that precise phrasing appears suspiciously often in both American and Indian MRA sites.²⁷ Indian MRAs welcome Westernization in their rhetoric against women but decry Westernization in their family structure and legislation—anything that promotes women’s autonomy and helps women advocate for themselves is vilified, and anything that reinforces generalizations of women is accepted and shared.

These MRA communities, however geographically and culturally disparate they may be, overlap in their representations and generalizations of women, and the tendency to frame personal issues as societal problems while minimizing the entire population of women down to a hive mind speaks to a global misogyny that undervalues, misrepresents and actively works against women.

Rape and domestic violence are hot-button issues for online MRAs. Figure 5.3 is an Indian MRA meme found on the Men’s Rights Association Facebook page, and it states that “men are raped and women can rape, its [*sic*] time we lift the veil over this important truth and realize the dire need for EQUALITY among men and women” (Fig. 5.3). Though simple, this meme’s logic is sound and it speaks the truth that rape is not a one-sided issue, and that men who are victims of rape deserve to be recognized just as much as women who are victims of rape. The patriarchal attitude that men can’t be physically overpowered by a woman and therefore cannot be raped is poisonous. It is a generalization that directly harms men and affects their ability to advocate for themselves on these issues.

²⁷ See note 22, 31.

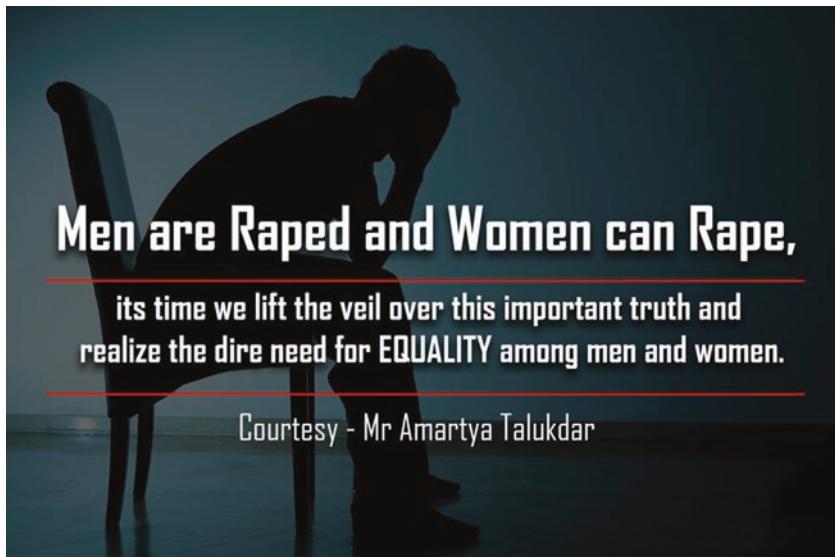


Fig. 5.3 Indian MRA meme

A closer look at other memes on a similar topic, however, suggests that MRAs are not solely advocating for men when they create these memes. The meme in Fig. 5.4 illustrates a troubling issue that Indian MRAs seem to have with consent: “if a man has sex on the pretext of marriage and doesn’t marry”, the meme reads, “it amounts to rape” (Fig. 5.4). Again, this is a logically sound and factual statement: engaging in intercourse on the pretext of marriage means that consent was given for those precise circumstances. If after intercourse, the conditional consent of which included marriage, the man refuses to marry, then yes—that sexual encounter was rape, because the conditions of consent were violated. That MRAs see this as a slight against men is another clear indicator of misogyny in online MRA communities. The implication of this meme is that the woman whose conditional consent was violated is somehow wronging the man who promised to marry her in order to have sex with her, not the other way around. This reflects a deep sense of entitlement not only to sex with women, but to immunity from the consequences of violating consent. It appears that MRAs feel they should be able to lie to women in order to get their consent to sex, then face no repercussions for violating



Fig. 5.4 Indian MRA meme

the conditions of consent (whatever they may be in each case). According to this meme, MRAs feel they should be able to rape women and get away with it, and that anything less than the ability to assault women with no repercussions is an infringement on their rights as men.

MRAs often see gender relations as a power struggle—one side is always trying to dominate the other. Figure 5.5 depicts a meme titled “Win for the Masculinists” from Masculinist-India. It includes a screencap of a news article titled “Forced intercourse in marriage not rape”, a grotesque image of two bloody fingers held up in a peace sign and bottom text that reads “if a wife can’t emotionally and sexually satisfy her husband, what is she good for? Would you ever marry a women [sic] like her?” (Fig. 5.5). Crude, simplistic, graphic and violently misogynistic, this meme also directly contradicts MRA discourse that demands recognition for men who are victims of rape and domestic abuse. If, for example, a man is raped by his wife, that man has no legal recourse due to the precedent set by the case mentioned in the screencapped article. This case is not a “win for the

'Forced intercourse in marriage not rape'

New Delhi, May 11, 2014, Agencies:



A Delhi court has acquitted a man accused of raping his wife, stating that forced intercourse with a woman does not amount to rape if she is married to the accused.

"The parties being husband and wife, the sexual intercourse between the two does not come within the ambit of the offence of rape, even if the same was against the will and consent of the victim," additional sessions judge Virender Bhat said while acquitting Vikash, who was charged with raping his wife.

Win for the Masculinists



If a wife can't emotionally and sexually satisfy her husband, what is she good for? Would you ever marry a women like her?

Fig. 5.5 Masculinist-India meme

masculinists" at all—in fact, it is a step backwards for equality and for the legitimacy of MRA groups, as celebrating an article condoning marital rape alongside an image of bloody fingers portrays MRAs as violence-oriented and misogynistic and does nothing to promote MRA ideology. The bottom text says it all: "if a wife can't emotionally and sexually satisfy her husband, what is she good for?" According to the makers of this meme and everyone who liked and shared it, women are nothing more than sex objects and emotional punching bags to be used, manipulated and controlled by men. If Indian MRAs truly cared about equality and recognized that women can rape men just as men can rape women, they would balk at this article and its contents. As it is, however, they see any woman who pursues legal action against her spouse as evil, and when she is rebuffed in court and unsuccessful in her lawsuit, MRAs celebrate her defeat. They are



Today, he would be called a rapist.



Fig. 5.6 A Voice For Men (Western MRA) meme

all for the legal system “interfering” in the marital home when a woman is being proven wrong.

Figure 5.6 is a simple, straightforward Western MRA meme, once again from the meme makers at A Voice For Men. Alfred Eisenstaedt’s iconic photograph from Times Square on 14 August 1945 is depicted, with the caption “today, he would be called a rapist” (Fig. 5.6). This is extreme rhetoric, but it is not entirely inaccurate if the historical context of the photograph is considered. George Mendonsa, the sailor in the photo, forcibly grabbed and kissed Greta Friedman, the dental assistant in the photo, for no reason other than he thought she was a nurse.²⁸ She did not consent to the kiss, and so this photo that appeared in *Life* magazine and

²⁸ Gajanan, Mahita. “The Story Behind the Iconic WWII Kissing Photo.” *TIME Online*. September 13, 2016. <http://time.com/4486812/wwii-kiss-photo-vj-day/>.

has been romanticized as a moment of excitement and romance frozen in time is really photographic evidence of a man putting his hands and lips where they were not wanted. It is not rape, but it is certainly assault. The fact that this image is recognizable enough to be described as iconic is itself an issue, as Greta Friedman's consent was never important to anyone—what was and is still considered important about this photo is that the sailor is happy to see the end of the war, and he expressed that happiness by forcing a woman into a kiss. The AVFM meme makers either do not know this history or do not care, and they consider Mendonsa's actions in the photo to be harmless and excusable. “He’s not assaulting her, he’s just excited”—the idea that this woman’s consent or lack thereof can be ignored in the face of this man’s inability to control his physical impulses is itself evidence of misogyny, and the greater concept that the meme makers are trying to illustrate with this meme is that women need to stop taking consent and their autonomy so seriously, that men who grab them and violate them are not intending to do them harm; they are just expressing themselves, and “boys will be boys”. The fundamental inability to understand that this attitude is itself a violation of women’s autonomy, that women do not exist as outlets for men’s expression, is a basic aspect of misogyny in culture, and it rings true on the global internet.

Men’s rights activists, both in India and in the West, display a need for control. This need for control is usually directed at women and how they present themselves, and in MRA communities this is expressed as a community-wide pining for an idealized, traditional past. As Fig. 5.7, another Western meme—this one hailing from a Men Going Their Own Way²⁹ Facebook group page—illustrates with a visually assaultive collage of images and text, MRA and MRA-adjacent men begrudge women their recently expanded rights and freedoms to dress and act however they like to the extent that women’s freedom is taken as an attack on men and their sensibilities. There are multiple layers of meaning contained within this meme, but the message is summarized at the bottom: “‘feminism’ allowed

²⁹ “Men Going Their Own Way.” *A Voice For Men Reference Wiki*. [http://reference.avoiceformen.com/wiki/Men_Going_Their_Own_Way_\(MGTOW\)](http://reference.avoiceformen.com/wiki/Men_Going_Their_Own_Way_(MGTOW)). Men Going Their Own Way, or MGTOW, is an MRA-adjacent community that renounces all contact with women, sees men and women as incompatible due to the freedom women have gained in contemporary society and supports men living a women-free lifestyle. The existence of this corner community is itself an interesting by-product of the “men and tradition” versus “women and feminism” way of thinking, as the suggested solution is to separate entirely rather than address systems of patriarchy that pit men and women against one another.

Women's Studies They Didn't Teach You at the University (Part 1)



So “Feminism” allowed women “to be themselves,” and that, boys and girls, is the problem.

Fig. 5.7 Western MGTOW meme

women ‘to be themselves,’ and that, boys and girls, is the problem” (Fig. 5.7). Clearly the men who created and shared this meme pine for the days before feminism, when women were “effeminate and likeable or bizarre and alienated”—women who did not fit the mould were cast out, according to the meme makers, who cite no historical examples to back up their generalized claims. Homophobia abounds, as this meme claims that “men would have to be gay” to be attracted to women these days, and then devolves into slut-shaming by categorizing all women who are not butch and mannish as “diseased, braindead sluts”. This meme certainly does not leave much room for flexibility for women, as even more “traditional” women “are so materialistic it’s sickening ... or are WAY too fake confident to the point it just comes off as obnoxious and really annoying”. It would seem that no matter what women do, the men behind this meme will never be happy. After all, as the meme makers see it, the problem is that feminism “allowed women ‘to be themselves’”. As this meme makes clear, the men who cluster into men’s rights activism and MRA-adjacent

communities do not like women very much at all, for when women are “allowed to be themselves”, when they aren’t focused on outwardly presenting themselves to be as pleasing as possible to men, they prioritize other things besides physical appearance and this is somehow a slight against men. The fact that feminist activism has resulted in some measure of self-determination for women and that is a major problem, if not *the* problem, for men today is clear evidence of the misogyny growing and spreading within these digital communities. MRAs decry women’s autonomy as an attack on men because it demonstrates a loss of control that men previously had over how women present themselves, and any loss of control is understood by men to mean a loss of or gap in their masculinity.

Indian men struggle similarly with this perceived loss of control over women’s bodies and how women dress. Figure 5.8 is yet another Masculinist-India meme, littered with mismatched clip art of a very scantily clad representation of Disney’s Pocahontas, a photo of a dozen women in jeans and black bikini tops, and clip art of a tiny judge with a tiny law book and an enormous gavel. The meme’s text reads, “My Life My Way. I am even free to walk naked. Even if I am Married too. ‘Not allowing wife



Fig. 5.8 Masculinist-India meme

to wear jeans amounts to cruelty”—Court rules” (Fig. 5.8). According to the MRAs behind this meme, not allowing men to control what women wear amounts to cruelty. The inclusion of the line “even if I am married” is telling: Indian husbands expect their wives, as pieces of their property, to be fully and constantly under their control to the extent that men think it is unfair that women can choose what to wear. Even the phrasing of the “court rules” is suspect: “not *allowing* wife to wear jeans amounts to cruelty.” The implication here is that a woman would have to consult her husband on her denim choices, to seek his permission to be “allowed” to do something as innocuous as wearing jeans. In wanting to control how women dress, MRAs demonstrate the anxiety and fear of feeling vulnerable and powerless in the face of feminine sexuality—if women can walk around scantily clad or wearing jeans and dare to look appealing to men without openly offering sex, men might feel frustrated that their sexual longing goes unfulfilled and such unfulfilled entitlement can, again, result in violence.

Misogynistic memes like this one reveal and call attention to men’s sense of entitlement to power and control over women’s bodies and expression, and this sense of entitlement is not specific to one culture or geographical area. It is present in all patriarchal societies, as misogyny works as a function of patriarchy to generalize women into a collectivized, constructed enemy for put-upon, frustrated men to openly hate.

The memes presented here illustrate the wide range of issues in MRA communities, from money talk to rape and violence to deviance from tradition and resistance to control. Conspicuously absent from these memes are concerns about men themselves—men who are depressed or suicidal, men who are homeless, men who are victims of domestic and/or sexual violence and don’t feel comfortable coming forward. Rather than focus on advocating for men, as the name of their movement suggests they might, men’s rights activists focus their efforts on illustrating and spreading their intense hatred for women.

CONCLUSION

MRA communities online are still growing, formulating their ideology, developing their rhetoric and fostering their theories and worldviews with image memes that succinctly represent their ideas and are easy to share. These memes and the various forms they take are present in MRA communities around the world, and the undercurrent of misogyny that

connects memes from the West to India and beyond is a necessary consideration when attempting to develop a theory of global misogyny online. A better understanding of this digital culture of misogyny, illustrated in my examples, can help feminist scholars better respond to the challenges of a globally mediated misogyny which is propagated and spread through digital cultures. One of these cultures is memes: though their priorities may be skewed, their rhetoric sometimes confusing and their graphic design skills sorely lacking, MRAs work hard to summarize the aims of their activism in internet-friendly memes that travel faster and are easier to digest than a long blog post or forum thread. The existence and proliferation of these memes reflects the true priorities of MRA communities across the globe, and those priorities fall less on the side of advocating for men and more on the side of vilifying and outwardly hating women.

The close look at Indian and Western MRAs offered here is not intended to be read as representative of all of the communities that are adjacent to MRA ideology and activity. The internet is a massive network connecting billions of people, and it is impossible to study and analyse and archive all of it. This collection of memes and the analysis thereof is intended to illustrate how misogyny operates in a variety of ways across cultures, and how social media is a transformative tool for social movement organization and articulation. Western MRAs and Indian MRAs have unique struggles thanks to disparate cultural backgrounds, and yet the ideology and terminology in their self-produced memes is often parallel or identical, speaking to their usefulness as cultural resources that are becoming more widely known online. The cultural separation between these communities suggests a global movement broken up and separated into unique parts, but the similarities that run among the crafted visual representations of their ideology suggest an overarching environment of misogyny in digital spaces.

Changing this misogynistic environment does not begin or end with memes, but collecting and analysing MRA memes is one way of taking the temperature of this developing social movement. MRA communities use these cultural resources to recruit new adherents, socialize them into the digital discourse and disseminate their ideology. As they currently stand, MRA communities in India and the West are more concerned with vilifying, generalizing and expressing their hatred for women than they are with actively working towards dismantling patriarchy and making lasting changes to society that would benefit both men and women. Paying attention to these communities, no matter how twisted and violent their ideology may be, is vital to tracking and understanding the global culture of misogyny that exists online.

Events like the Isla Vista massacre bring MRA and MRA-adjacent communities into the mainstream for at least one 24-hour news cycle, and their hateful ideology does not translate well. In the harsh light of the real world, the rampant misogyny of these communities feels irrational, invented and surreal. It is not. The online misogyny that transcends culture and connects men's rights activists across the world is real, and it is strong. This ideology spreads online like wildfire, and its speed is augmented by succinct visualizations like memes. Close research into connective pockets of discourse like memes as part of MRA ideology sheds light on the cultural resources digital social movements prefer to create and share, and engaging with these cultural resources informs academic understanding of the systems at work in any given digital community. We need to understand how digital cultures develop both in the West and across the globe—and how these digital cultures interact with one another—in order to offer a more targeted critique and devise strategies to counteract global misogyny and the culture of violence it supports. This research represents just one area of enquiry, but it serves as a starting point for further and more detailed research into specific digital sites of misogyny. Let us begin.

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CHAPTER 6

Black or Feminist: The Intersections of Misogyny, Race and Anti-feminist Rhetoric Pertaining to the Bill Cosby Allegations

Sarah Anne Dunne

After defendant testified that he obtained seven prescriptions for Quaaludes, the following testimony was elicited:

Q. You gave them to other people?

A. Yes. (*Constand v. Cosby*, 5).

Q. When you got the Quaaludes, was it in your mind that you were going to use these Quaaludes for young women that you wanted to have sex with?

A. Yes. (*Constand v. Cosby*, 6).

There is a notably complex intersection between sex and race which informs and obfuscates contemporary understandings of rape culture and which further affects the allegations of rape and sexual assault levelled against Bill Cosby. While rumours regarding the African-American comic's sexual indiscretions and alleged acts of rape have circulated since the early 2000s, it is only in the last three years that they have gained traction serious enough to affect Cosby's celebrity status.

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Indeed, Cosby's well-cultivated and extensive career as a wholesome father figure both on and off screen earned him the title of "America's Dad" for black and white families alike; his philanthropy and sponsorship down the years accrued with this carefully crafted image, cementing his supposed innocence for the masses. Despite accusations as early as 2005 and Cosby's own testimony, as seen in the quote above from his deposition, it took another African-American comic's own stand-up routine to completely alter public perception of Cosby's clean image on a mass scale. In October 2014, Hannibal Buress' gained a name as an unofficial whistle-blower declaring "you rape people, Bill Cosby" (eye sight). Buress' condemnation of Cosby—whether or not intended as humorous—gained international attention, marring Cosby's once irrefutable position and remaking him as a controversial figure (Littleton and Johnson).

Just as online networks have been crucial in transforming public perception of Cosby, so too have they continued to define and alter mass understandings of the case and of Cosby as a celebrity figure. Digital conversations which debate and speculate on the facts of the case frequently devolve into virulent misogyny and victim-blaming that confirms rape culture as a systemic tool for the oppression of women. Discussions of alleged rapes and sexual assaults—and, indeed, all women's issues and feminist avocations—often reiterate extreme misogynistic language, graphically sexist content and manifestations of rape culture which regularly denigrate victims while defending the perpetrators (Jane, p. 20). Historical allusions to race and anti-feminist discourse are further utilized in defence of Cosby. Online debates defending Cosby frequently allude to his race—along with his vast wealth, enviable success and clean celebrity image—as the real root of these allegations. Theories that a white hierarchy fabricated the claims to disparage Cosby's image and maintain racial superiority are reinforced by the rape myth of the black rapist and its historical usage to punish black male success (Knight et al. 2001, p. 184). Meanwhile, anti-feminist discourse is employed to limit association with an anti-rape movement that has historically upheld the image of the black man as rapist and undermined black oppression. The aim of this work is to analyse how these intersections of race and sex are informed by a contemporary and historic understanding of rape culture specifically in relation to the Bill Cosby case as it is discussed on the social networking platform Twitter.

RACE AND RAPE CULTURE

As of December 2015, over 50 women had accused Cosby of varied acts of sexual assault, from drugging and molestation to oral penetration and vaginal rape. Despite these numbers and Cosby's own testimony in 2005 (*Constand v. Cosby*) there remains a notable community of defenders actively contending the charges on Twitter. Indeed, following Burress' sketch, decades of silence about the accusations against Cosby were broken and digital networks became inundated with comments both contesting and affirming the charges. Such networks, Twitter particularly, are reputed for their misogynistic content, graphic threats and anti-feminist discourse (Jane, p. 96; Mantilla, p. 563); yet there simultaneously remains a community of feminist users who frequently collude to challenge forms of misogyny and gender-based violence through hashtag campaigns, pedagogy and satirical content (Drüeke and Zobl 2016, p. 36). The use of digital networks to both reaffirm and subvert contemporary social inequalities and injustice is well documented (Megarry, p. 49). Social media may offer key tools for mobilization and networking through "searchable" hashtags as positives for feminist advocacy (Drüeke and Zobl 2016, pp. 36–37); however, such affordances are similarly beneficial to the misogynists, the anti-feminists and the Cosby defenders. Tweets which reaffirm manifestations of rape culture, whether through denigration of the victim or defence of the accused, are equally responsible for the development of alternative politics stances such as the anti-feminism witnessed the alt-right—or alt-light as it is sometimes known (Nagle, p. 18). These political factions are largely informed by an anti-feminist ideology which deplores political correctness and trigger warnings, and may be responsible for the renewed acceptable of misogyny, racism and xenophobia beyond social media forums (Nagle, pp. 18–19). While feminist communities have emerged from the digital rubble, social networking sites remain environments where social discriminations and injustices have continued to be championed and sanctioned: "Women have never been equal in the online public sphere and it appears that social media forums remain firmly grounded in the material realities of women's everyday experiences of sexism of patriarchal society" (Megarry, p. 49). Thus, to analyse the misogyny and anti-feminist rhetoric prevalent in relation to the Cosby accusations, it is first important to understand how manifestations of misogyny, humiliations and violence (emotional, physical or sexual) inform a systemic rape culture.

The term rape culture does not only describe a society driven by the act of rape as a tool of control and oppression; rather, it is definitive of a society which normalizes and trivializes acts of violence and aggression against women: “Implicitly while rape is the extreme act, it could be seen as existing on a continuum with more subtle forms of coercion from an unwanted kiss to unwanted sexual intercourse submitted to as the result of continual verbal pressure” (Gavy, p. 61). This continuum encompasses minor actions which normalize and trivialize acts of violence against women to the very act of rape itself. Definitions of rape culture first emerged during the second-wave feminist movement with the recognition that acts of rape and sexual violence were neither rare nor private matters; the anti-rape movement born out of this realization challenged the normalization of violence against women and theorized this violence as more than acts of uncontrollable lust or desire. Certainly, one of the first detailed studies characterized rape as a tool of control and oppression, as “nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear” (Brownmiller, p. 15). Second-wave investigations of rape culture, however, largely failed to recognize or represent the structures of power and oppression in which black women were positioned. A largely white and middle-class movement failed to account for the obstacles which faced black women and which differed from their own, especially in relation to rape culture. Existing in tandem with the broader feminist movement at the time, the anti-rape faction similarly reaffirmed (unintentionally or not) racist ideologies and issues of race and class (Siegel, p. 161). Consequently, early investigations into rape culture failed to pay homage to the mass institutionalized rape of black women during slavery or consider these issues through an intersectional lens. Indeed, the institutionalization of rape as a mechanism of control and reproduction to benefit labour and capital affected countless black women during the Slave era. As both male and female slaves were recognised as chattel and personal property, legally the act of rape could not be committed against them: “Rape meant, by definition, rape of a white women for no such crime as rape of a black woman existed at law” (hooks, p. 57). According to bell hooks the historical impact of this “institutionalized crime” should not be—though continued to be—undermined, contending that it not only crushed black women’s sexual integrity, “but that it led to a devaluation of black womanhood that permeated the psyches of all

Americans and shaped the social status of all black women once slavery ended" (p. 77). Justifications of these acts were rooted in the still prevalent myth of the black race as hypersexual; within this discourse black women were (and continue to be defined as) promiscuous and thus the instigators of sexual acts (hooks, p. 77; Davis, p. 176). The sexual exploitation of black women was further condoned and justified under these auspices during the Reconstruction era in the US, twinned with its masculine counterpart: the myth of the black rapist.

Rape culture is both maintained and manifested through the production of rape myths; indeed, these myths are referred to as the "building blocks" of a rape culture (Gavey 2013, p. 11; Anderson and Doherty 2007, p. 7). At their most basic, rape myths define what constitutes a true or "real" act of rape but which are stereotypical rather than representative of the reality of rape. In relation to the Cosby allegations, many rape myths are utilized in his defence but none so significant and disruptive as the myth of the black rapist. This figure exists concurrently with that of the black woman as promiscuous, similarly representing and essentializing black people as hypersexual beings, both ideologies which justify the continued exploitation and policing of black bodies in our culture. Fear of black men's potential usurpation of the racial hierarchy and destruction of chaste white womanhood justified the subjugation of black men under the auspices of slavery (Collins 2004, p. 64). With emancipation and reconstruction this fear coalesced into paranoia and violence under the guise of protecting white womanhood, ultimately culminating in the mass lynching of black men. Through the method and threat of lynching, the white population could maintain control of the newly emancipated slave populations and further ensure a continued white dominance over the black race. As Patton and Snyder-Yuly note, white mobs feared an ironic turn of events whereby black men would utilize the same mechanisms of control and oppression which they had previously employed:

Since slavery, White men used sex with Black women as a way to humiliate Black men by demonstrating their lack of social power and ability to protect their women. [...] Klansmen, conscious of their tradition of using women as a tool for power, soon realized that Black men could also do this. Their fear of a subordinate using this technique to gain power helped to create the idea of the Black rapist. (p. 863)

While justified under the guise of rape and sexual violence against chaste, white womanhood, the act of lynching was often retaliation for economic wealth, status and the assumption of a position equal to that of the white man (Knight et al. 2001, p. 184; Collins 2004, p. 219).

THE COSBY CASE

There are evident historical connections which affect public perception of the Cosby allegations. Cosby's success and his race coalesce to alter opinions of the case just as they historically have; it has been recorded that those most at risk of lynching during the Reconstruction era were not rapists nor criminals in any literal sense but black men whose financial and economic success offended white communities (Knight et al. 2001, p. 184). Furthermore, it is contended that black success and celebrity may result in prejudiced prosecution: "In an attempt to put Black celebrities back in their 'rightful place' [...], White male jurors may unwittingly treat these defendants extra punitively" (Knight et al. 2001, p. 184). Interestingly, Cosby's status as a famous African-American man conversely worked to protect his image throughout the earlier allegations. Cosby's lengthy tenure as doting father and husband, Dr. Huxtable, and the autobiographical details interlaid in this role meant that Cosby for many viewers and fans was not only an actor, he *was* Dr. Huxtable. Stellar branding and sponsorship, which was largely family based and child-friendly, established a lasting image of Cosby that the early allegations could not mar; moreover, an overwhelming press response to the early allegations was seen to largely grant Cosby a pass as a direct result of his celebrity status, becoming, in essence, Cosby's "enablers" (Carr). While there remains a division in opinions of his guilt, evidently muted responses to the 2005 allegations no longer apply.

Attempting to theorize the new interest in the case, one of Cosby's own accusers, Tamara Greene, noted the importance of social networking sites and online media as essential: "In 2005, Cosby still had control over the media. In 2015, we have social media. We can't be disappeared. It's online and can never go away" (Malone). Greene's statement homes in on the recognition that digital networks have established a new awareness of rape culture and anti-rape consciousness in that—akin to the consciousness-raising meetings of second-wave feminists—they make visible manifestations of rape culture and its normality (Jane, p. 26): "while the internet

did not invent sexism, it *is* amplifying it in unprecedented ways" (Jane, p. 3). Certainly, the proliferation of misogyny on digital networks has become a well-established fact in academic studies (Jane 2017; Mantilla 2013; Megarry 2014), but what is perhaps most disconcertingly embedded in this content is the use of graphic threats of violence and rape. Online misogyny is thus implicitly interwoven with rape culture, as Jane states: "Gendered cyberhate can be seen as being both a manifestation of and contributing factor to what is known as 'rape culture'" (p. 65). In testing this understanding of gendered cyberhate, the remainder of this chapter will analyse a selection of tweets relating to the Cosby case, thereby gauging how contemporary discussions of a high-profile rape case online rely on manifestations of rape culture to continue the implicit control of female populations.

Between 28 January and 21 February 2016 data was collected in cooperation with University College Dublin's Insight Centre for Data Analytics from the microblogging platform Twitter. The corpus was collected based on the use of the celebrity's name and totalled 247,430 tweets in all. Cosby, who had been officially charged in the state of Pennsylvania in December 2015, was due for a court appearance and a second deposition hearing during the period of data collection. A random sample of 72,288 tweets from the original dataset were anonymised and coded through content and discourse analysis via software tool Microsoft Excel. This included a selection of tweets which were identified as non-applicable to the analysis—those which were out of context with this case study and those which were not in English; a total number of 27,492 tweets were marked as non-applicable. To thematically code the remaining data, the corpus was divided into four key headings: news items and headlines, feminist responses to the case, manifestations of rape culture and the reiteration of rape myths. Within these four primary codes, sub-themes and common motifs were further noted, including misogynistic language, discourses of race and the significance of celebrity status. News items included retweets of headlines from online newspapers and magazines; this set ultimately produced 34,136 tweets which did not receive further analysis. Beyond this section, two interrelated thematic sets, rape culture and rape myths, totalled 4598 and 1771 tweets respectively. The final set, labelled feminist response, totalled 4291 tweets and represents a range of tweets which expressed a notable feminist reaction through victim support, pedagogy and an invocation for justice (Fig. 6.1).

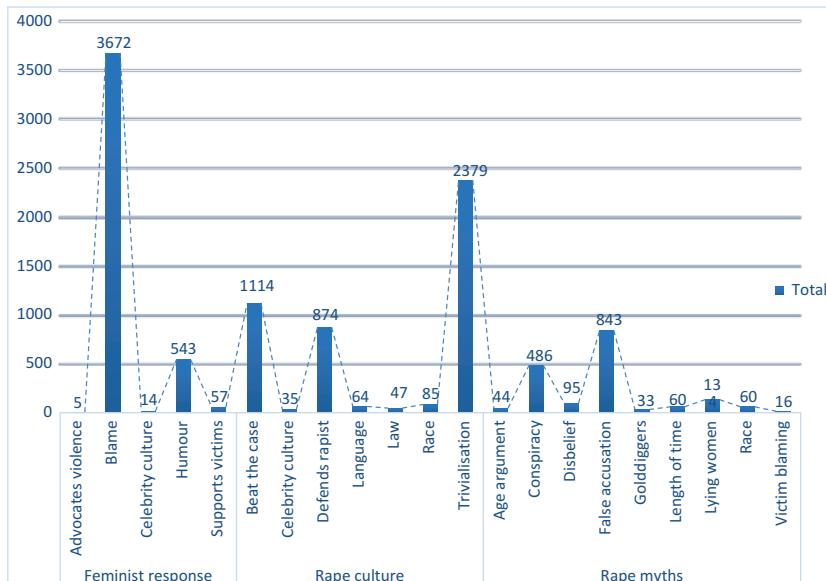


Fig. 6.1 Breakdown of themes and interrelated sub-themes

OF GOLD-DIGGERS AND LIARS

There is evidence that rape myths are applied to Cosby's victims to disqualify their position as "real rape" victims. This is often achieved through the use of rape myths, which actively inform what constitutes a "real" act of rape. Unfortunately, the image frequently correlated to real rape—a weapon, a chaste and sober woman, and a pathological stranger or alternatively a black man—comprises only a small percentage of rapes which occur (Estrich, p. 1092). Accusations of rape which do not fit into this narrow definition are often met with public doubt, placing victims in a position of untrustworthiness and blame: "Disbelief of a woman who said she had been raped had been built into male logic since the days when men first allowed a limited concept of criminal rape into their law" (Brownmiller, p. 228). "Disbelief" itself is a theme used in relation to Cosby's victims, representing 95 out of the 1771 tweets marked as rape myths. Yet, disbelief also acts as the foundation for most of rape myths, including the assumption that women commonly fabricate rape claims—the "lying women" theme comprises 134 tweets—along with the indictment that these fabrications are for monetary gain—"gold-digger"

makes up 33 of the tweets—meanwhile the timeframe between the victim's confession and the events—coded as “length of time”—are cited as proof of Cosby's assumed set-up:

'How y'all just gone assume Bill Cosby guilty because a bunch of washed up, gold digging, broke bitches say he is?' [sic] 4 February 2016 07:15
 '50+ women looking for a payday. Prayers for Bill Cosby' 3 February 2016 17:52
 'BILL COSBY INDICTED. It's a Damn shame that officials allows WHITE PRIVILEGED WOMEN to bring charges 2 blk men 20 yrs later.' [sic] 10 February 2016 00:13

The basis of disbelief is further referenced in relation to Cosby's own racial legacy as proof of his innocence. This selection of data frequently denoted Cosby's identity as a dark-skinned, successful African-American celebrity as the root of the allegations. In these discussions, the term “legacy” was often employed to assume the wrongful destruction of Cosby's reputation:

'So cases are getting thrown out against Bill Cosby, media has gone quiet. Job done they've destroyed the man's legacy' 28 January 2016, 20:24
 '@aurosan You know some blacks are actually innocent of crimes you racist! BILL COSBY INNOCENT' 2 February 2016 16:16
 '@cthagod Smfh you think Bill Cosby a black man rapped 1000 white woman & got away with it?? Character assassination Bruh!' [sic] 16 February 2016 08:29

These tweets evidently challenged the allegations through inference to Cosby's celebrity and race, once again reaffirming the common rape myth that many rape claims are “false accusations”. The universal concern that women can and will fabricate an act of rape, thereby ruining the life of a potentially innocent man, is still very much a prominent myth which protects the patriarchal prerogative, but it is even more of a concern when race becomes implicated.

IS CLIFF HUXTABLE A RAPIST?

The myth of the black rapist and its intersecting history play a notable role in relation to the data analysed. This myth, as noted above, has specific roots in the history of slavery and the subsequent Jim Crow era. The mass

lynching of black men which occurred during the so-called Emancipation was falsely attributed to the threat they posed to white women, a threat further supported by the assumption that black men and women were hypersexual beings (Collins 2004, p. 103): “Since slavery, the black body has been menacingly sexualized; while the black male has been cast as sexually rapacious and a threat to white woman, black women have been presented as promiscuous” (Moorti, p. 76). These fictions continue to obfuscate contemporary discussions of rape and race, effectively representing all black men as rapists and all black women as “unrapeable”. This and the historical position of white women as instigators of this wrongful lynching of black men are implicitly represented through the data:

‘But I’m supposed to believe bill Cosby got away wit rape of white women ... #illwait? [sic] 3 February 2016 03:11

‘Bill Cosby is only guilty of cheating on his wife. As a Black man, if Bill had raped any of those white women 40 yrs ago, we would know’ [sic] 12 February 2016 11:27

‘Bill Cosby will continue to win. Those white women are big liars!’ 18 February 2016 12:58

The intersection of race and rape culture is further referenced in direct relation to the history of lynching and the discourse of racism attached to it; indeed, 16 tweets directly utilize the term “lynch” or “lynching”. While embedding other myths—disbelief and fabrication of claims—these tweets explicitly reference a past problematically rooted in racist ideology which created the myth of the black rapist and which supported mob justice through the act of lynching:

‘Are your hands on the Rope Lynching Bill Cosby’ 28 February 2016 20:57
 ‘@megacka #BillCosby has never admitted guilt. Stop your lying.
 #LynchMobbing black men isn’t any nicer in America than it was 400 years ago’ 02 February 2016 14:19

‘@PAVEinfo Sure you’re not some kind of #RACIST hate group out to #Lynch a black man You’d think so to look at your posts about #BillCosby’ 16 February 2016 06:09

This data, through its allusion to the historical lynching of black men, further implies Cosby’s own character assassination as owing to white supremacy and racist logic rather than any criminal act. Another 1114 tweets contended that no criminal act had taken place, as Cosby had “beat

the case". These tweets misinterpret the inner workings of the justice system to assume Cosby's innocence, firstly, by wrongfully insisting that he would have certainly faced an official conviction by now—despite a majority of the allegations breaching the statute of limitations—and, secondly, in reference to a defamation lawsuit being dropped in early February 2016. This data, while heralding Cosby as innocent, simultaneously berates the news and celebrity-based media's failure to report on the dismissal, noting Cosby's racial identity as the root of this supposed censorship of information:

'Funny how Bill Cosby was found innocent and the media has not said a fucking word about it #WhiteAmerica' [sic] 04 February 2016 06:02
 'Bill Cosby beat his case by the way, I know you didn't know so I'm letting you know, white America is so sick they couldn't slander us' 3 February 2016 00:36

These tweets imply that an institutionally racist media corporation and its complying society continue to support the character assassination of black men and women. Meanwhile, 874 of the tweets—"defends rapist"—further act in defence of Cosby and often in relation to his racial heritage. This selection of data frequently relies on Cosby's enormous celebrity and success within mainstream media as a form of protection, with noted reference to Cosby's long-standing position as Dr. Huxtable. Many of these tweets once again lament the loss of such a significant and established figure, often with reference to its importance to the larger African-American community itself:

'#Bill Cosby If I as his lawyer I'd have him dressed in Cosby sweaters every day. Nobody's putting Cliff Huxtable in jail.' 11 February 2016 22:37
 'Bill Cosby, done so many amazing things and was about to do something amazing for the black community but society only remembers false rape' 18 February 2016 21:58
 '16. Bill Cosby didn't do it, once again white America is trying to tear down a black icon' 07 February 2016 21:14
 'Ex-Illuminati Member Confirms Bill Cosby FRAMED Fake Rape Allegations Stop Him Buying NBC' 29 February 2016

As the last tweet depicts, there was frequent reference to an assumedly extensive attempt to frame Cosby with these allegations. These tweets not only reiterate the "lying women" trope but highlight an insidious ideology whereby black character assassination is utilized to reaffirm white

hegemonic structures. Around 486 tweets, marked as “conspiracy theory”, reaffirmed Cosby’s potential frame-up by a white hierarchy and a racist public. This selection further implied that Cosby’s entrapment not only affected one successful black man but the entire black community which he was assumed to have supported:

‘@Louiseestelle Problem???? ... Bill Cosby is being Framed by Racist Whites ... Fuck White People’ 19 February 2016 08:04

‘@kanyewest yessss he is innocent! Bill Cosby wanted to buy NBC that’s why all them girls got paid to lie on him #Poor Cosby’ 02 February 2016 12:17

‘At one point Bill Cosby was about to purchase NBC. Understand that Black Power will be prevented at all costs’ 09 February 2016 23:31

The implication that the allegations arose out of a continued desire to limit black men’s economic success and social standing is implicit throughout these conspiracies. As Megarry further contends: “Within patriarchal political systems inequality is distributed hierarchically between sex groups, and socially constructed ideas of behaviours associated with masculinity are privileged over those associated with femininity” (p. 48). While this statement can be seen to attest to the victim-blaming mentalities utilized against victims in the Cosby case, it similarly demonstrates how Cosby’s position as an African-American man affects assumptions of guilt relating to the allegations. As hooks further notes:

As far back as slavery, white people established a social hierarchy based on race and sex that ranked white men first, white women second, though sometimes equal to black men, who are ranked third and black women last. What this means in terms of the sexual politics of rape is that if one white woman is raped by a black man, it is seen as more important, more significant if thousands of black women are raped by one white man. (p. 78)

African-American communities, under the auspices of the Black Lives Matter movement and the mantra “Stay Woke”, express noted concern over the continuation of these racist practices into the present day. This fear of repetition, thus, affects social and cultural understandings of black criminality and, in this specific case, assumptions of Cosby’s own innocence.

BLACK OR FEMINIST

Concurrent with the proliferation of misogynistic content and manifestations of rape culture online is an interrelated anti-feminist discourse established by various alt-right groups, online trolls and men's rights activists (Nagle, p. 18). While online networks have long been theorized as environments both beneficial and detrimental to social justice issues, there is a notable difference in the trolling behaviours of anonymous groups out for the "lulz" and the political factions and unofficial online mobs which form the current anti-feminist backlash. Despite the often intolerant and abusive content amassed by these groups, there is considerable acceptance of this discourse online, which emerges largely due to the libertarian values associated with the internet, as noted:

The relative anonymity of the internet releases some of the inhibitions of a civil society, resulting in flaming, harassment and hate speech online [...] These practices, while clearly problematic are nonetheless widespread and often tolerated, due in part to the pervasiveness on the Internet of civil libertarian values that consider abusive speech a manifestation of individual freedom of expression. (Herring et al. 2002, pp. 371–372)

Significantly and problematically, the purposeful spread of anti-feminist discourse and argument on both popular feminist discussion forums and broader community-based networks can ultimately account for not only the disruptions but eventual desertion of feminist spaces (Herring et al. 2002, p. 373; Jane, p. 4). Further, it has been noted that anti-feminist statements comprise notably offensive and abusive content as a form of "degradation" and "bashing" specifically applied for the "renunciation of a 'dogmatically' perceived feminism" which threatens gendered hierarchies and perceived male dominance (Drüke and Zobl, p. 46; Megarry, p. 49). The reiteration of anti-feminist ideology online attempts to diminish and demean what remains a growing feminist consciousness which has emerged via digital networks (Keller et al. 2016, p. 1).

Anti-feminist discourse manifests to diminish accusations of rape and reaffirm women's position of subservience in the gendered hierarchy, both of which play a significant role in relation to the Cosby allegations. However, the anti-feminist discourse reiterated in relation to the Cosby case and within black communities further reassesses the historical failures of second-wave feminists and the Women's Liberation Movement to

incorporate beyond their white, middle-class majority and form a meaningful, intersectional politics. Women of colour instead developed their own organizations or joined in the Black Civil Rights movement, which often comprised along the axis of race and ethnicity rather than gender (Siegel, p. 36). For women of colour there was more at stake than white feminists' failure to assess their own racism; moreover, black women specifically faced the charge of disloyalty to their race should they support white women instead of their black brothers. A tendency to negate victim's experiences and narratives thus became more acceptable than supporting the racial stereotype of black promiscuity or, worse, reaffirming the racist myth of the black rapist; for Collins, this often meant choosing between race and gender (2004, p. 216): “Taking sides against the self” requires that certain elements of Black women’s sexuality can be examined, namely, those that do not challenge a race discourse that historically has privileged the experiences of African-American men” (Collins 2002, p. 124). Discourses of loyalty and belonging, alongside the threat of isolation from the community, encouraged black victims to maintain silence rather than reaffirm racist ideology (Collins 2004, pp. 226–227).

In March 2015, one of Cosby’s accusers, Jewel Allison, reaffirmed how the oppositional axis of race versus gender accompanied by the history of black lynching and mass oppression encouraged her silence: “Historic images of black men being vilified en masse as sexually violent sent chills through my body. Telling *my* story wouldn’t only help bring down Cosby; I feared it would undermine the entire African American community” (Allison). Silence became a form of protection from potential intercommunity backlash and isolation: “When sexual violation occurs within their families or by any member of ‘their’ community, black women may confront the profound injury of being psychically severed from the only source of trustworthy community available to them” (West, p. 59). The choice between individual victimization versus the systemic oppression of an entire race compels black victims to maintain their silence and, therefore, reiterates manifestations symptomatic of rape culture, which similarly encourages internalized victim-blaming, guilt and self-doubt, thus reinforcing an intra-racial patriarchal hegemony which positioned black men as dominant figures over their women: “Stated differently, Black women’s suffering under racism would be eliminated by encouraging versions of Black masculinity whereby Black men had the same powers that White men had long enjoyed” (Collins 2004, p. 217). Therefore, responses from within the black community which supported Cosby’s victims were established as treacherous

and duplicitous behaviours by individuals currying white favour or falling victim to the stereotypes and falsehoods enforced by the racial hegemony.

In this regard, race was referenced in relation to the case 145 times between both the rape culture and rape myths sets, though it was further commented upon in another 379 tweets. Many of these tweets incorporated themes of white supremacy, false allegations and black loyalty, directly or indirectly, as a way of reaffirming Cosby's innocence. In reference to the history of false allegations levelled at black men, 20 of the tweets employed the term "white women" to refute their claims:

'Bill Cosby was trying to buy NBC and make more jobs available to African-Americans. Then these white women accused him of rape' 29 January 2016 05:43

'@cthagod Deep down almost all Black ppl defend Bill Cosby, Especially since it's white woman that are accusing him, and we know how race plays' [sic] 9 February 2016 18:46

'If bill Cosby accusers would have been all black women, the maybe I would have believed them' 03 February 2016 01:08

The tragic history of false allegations and subsequent lynching of black men is implicitly referenced here, with specific attention paid to white women's position as the instigators of this myth. Indeed, the complex relationship between the falsehood of the black rapist, black hypersexuality and white womanhood is continuously implicated: "African American men were simultaneously accused of having a natural sexual desire for White women that grew in part from their now untamed buck status as sexual animals, and in part from ideas about White womanhood as beautiful, the most desirable and irresistible women" (Collins 2004, p. 64). The dichotomy of white purity in contrast to black hypersexuality reaffirmed the need for mass lynching (Collins 2004, p. 64), which, as Patton and Snyder-Yuly note, was often justified through the fabrication of rape myths by white communities (p. 866): "Because of the racist and sexist framing of media 'reports' in the United States, every time a Black man is accused of raping or attacking a white woman (whether true or not) historical patriarchal white supremacist stereotypes and myths are reinforced" (p. 867). It is these very myths and stereotypes which are challenged in the following selection of tweets which imply Cosby's set-up by that same white hierarchy:

'I can't even believe Black folks stood by and allowed all these slanderous lies strip Bill Cosby of his Legacy. Sad' 4 February 2016 01:58

'Y'all still out here coonin calling Bill Cosby a rapist?' [sic] 11 February 2016 22:57

'Bill Cosby must be looking at you niggas like ... what a shame! You coons need to go back to the plantations you ain't free mentally anyway' 1 February 2016 13:00

The use of the term “coon” to derisively mock those African Americans who supported Cosby’s accusers occurred five times in the dataset. The term originates with the minstrel and blackface performances of the early to mid-twentieth century; in this context, it refers to the black men and women who are assumed to perform their racial identity in a manner beneficial to the white hierarchy and supremacy. Hence, the final tweet’s assertion that these African-Americans remain “slaves” to the established system. These tweets, furthermore, reinterpret a need for racial loyalty and black solidarity in the face of white supremacy, as the following further depict:

'So when are we showing remorse for believe that nonsense about Bill Cosby? We were played and we turned on our own' 02 February 2016 08:23

'@newsone @rolandsmartin @tvonetv We, as the black community have not turned out backs on Bill Cosby. There are only a select few blacks' 10 February 2016 09:17

'@missjillscott speaking ill of bill cosby since when do blk ppl let the media destroy our heroes.. a buncha old prostitutes #fuckthemhoes' [sic] 9 February 2016 23:30

'I honestly dont give a flying fuck if bill cosby is innocent or not. What i do know is he was going to do something positive for us.' [sic] 13 February 2016 01:10

Again, these tweets tend to incorporate the history of mass lynching and false allegations as a means of maintaining racial hegemony which favours white men first and white women second. It further references a contemporary need for black solidarity to combat the reputational sabotage of black idols and role models. Several tweets integrate the history of slavery and racism as significant markers of the continued attempts to reputationally damage Cosby’s career:

'@thecoreyholcomb: Black folks who post shit about Bill Cosby being a rapist but won't post shit about the people who enslaved us' 29 January 2016 03:01

'I am so tired of the mess with Bill Cosby, where was the courts when the white men were raping and abusing all of our black women' 4 February 2016 10:09

The historical reliance on black communal solidarity cannot be undermined here, as Collins notes: "The shared economic, political, and cultural reality brought about by racism and the absence of a powerful mass media that marketed images of Black deviancy for entertainment encouraged solidarity across differences of gender" (2004, p. 253). This solidarity, however, often came at the expense of the women from within the community, who are directly encouraged to support their black male kin at the cost of their own (potential) victimization:

'Black people (women in particular) were so easy to turn on Bill Cosby lol'
3 February 2016 16:53

'I couldn't believe how many black women joined in on the slander of Bill Cosby when the white women and men tried tearing down his legacy' 4 February 2016

There is concern, however, that black solidarity and community as defined in these terms may negate the existence of black victims and cost them their very agency. As Collins significantly notes: black male leaders have historically failed to support rape victims on a whole, instead aiming for the assumedly "greater good" of protecting the African-American community from further slander and negation (2004, p. 226). To publicly announce the existence of a black rapist to the very establishment which created and supported its myth down through history is to reinforce the image of black hypersexuality and, by association, the need for racial hierarchy and oppression.

REACTIVE FEMINISM; FEMINIST REACTIONS

There is a notable growing feminist response to the reiteration of misogynistic dogma and manifestations of rape culture emerging online and which includes black and other women of colour who actively disavow the dynamics of race versus sex. The movement of black resistance and protest

into online networks—as seen in the Black Lives Matter campaign—incorporates a challenge not only to widespread racial injustices but also to the gender-based violence from both within and beyond Black communities (Rapp et al. 2010, p. 255). A significant selection of the data analysed, 4291 tweets, challenged the reiteration of rape myths and victim-blaming; 122 of these tweets referenced the issue of race, some from an insider perspective as a potential “traitor” of their own community:

I HIGH KEY want to lock him (Bill Cosby) up. Be mad at me, hate me, call me a traitor. Idc, Idc, Idc' 4 February 2016 11:23

'I just got told "why are u worried about Bill Cosby like he personally did something to u, I thought you liked black guys" ... THE FUCK??" 4 February 2016 11:52

'If only black men supported black women as much as they support Bill Cosby ☺ btw his felony charges weren't dismissed' 5 February 2016 08:07

These tweets not only reiterate the failure of black men to support their victimized sisters' struggles for justice but also recognize the historical nuances which effectively silence not only black victims but even victims' supporters. Furthermore, this small selection highlights the manner in which black and intersectional feminists coalesce to challenge the norms of rape culture and the problematic polarization of sex and race in their community: “Race and gender constituted separate rather than intersecting forms of oppression that could not be equally important. One was primary whereas the other was secondary” (Collins 2004, p. 216). In contesting the “catch-22” (Rapp et al. 2010, p. 247) in which black women are historically and politically positioned, this digital community actively challenges the very intersections of rape culture and race which protect Cosby while vilifying his victims as detailed. Through both digital and real-world protest, feminist and intersectional communities and movements are continuing to challenge the complex intersections which seemingly present the ultimatum, black or feminist?

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CHAPTER 7

Cruel Intentions and Social Conventions: Locating the Shame in Revenge Porn

Rikke Amundsen

I felt so low from this experience that one day I was driving home from work, thinking if I were to just swerve right now, it would all be finished and I wouldn't have to deal with all this shame anymore. I wouldn't have to feel anything.—Lauren Evans (2016)

The fact that there are individuals who are cruelly distributing intimate pictures of their former partners without their consent is almost beyond belief. We want those who fall victim to this type of disgusting behaviour to know that we are on their side and will do everything we can to bring offenders to justice.—Chris Grayling (GOV.UK 2014)

These two quotes illustrate different accounts of the act of digitally sharing private sexual images without the consent of a person depicted in the material. As I will discuss, this act—colloquially known as “revenge porn”—predominantly harms women (Henry and Powell 2016, p. 413; McGlynn et al. 2017, pp. 4–5). The first quote is from a blog post by Lauren Evans (2016). In this post, Evans (2016) describes her experience

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of falling victim to revenge porn and the shame that she felt in consequence of it. The second quote is by Chris Grayling, who acted as Justice Secretary for the United Kingdom (UK) from 2012 until 2015. As Justice Secretary, Grayling was one of the driving forces behind the criminalization of revenge porn in England and Wales under the 2015 *Criminal Justice and Courts Act* (CJC Act). Together, the quotes by Evans (2016) and Grayling (GOV.UK 2014) reflect the focus of this chapter, which is on (a) revenge porn as an act of shaming women and (b) the ability of the CJC Act to address the conditions that make it possible for revenge porn to operate as such.

The aim of this chapter is twofold. I set out to explore, first, the conditions that enable revenge porn to perform the shaming of women, and, second, the law's ability to capture these conditions. In doing so, special attention is paid to the inherent sociability in individual experiences of shame, as well as the performative elements of revenge porn. I will argue that revenge porn is a form of online shaming that feeds off and into social norms and expectations with regard to primarily female gender, and particularly with regard to images depicting women's bodies and sexuality. However, in approaching revenge porn through the implementation of a law that is simply focused on the cruel or not-cruel intentions of the perpetrator, UK policy makers have drafted an institutional response to the problem of revenge porn that ignores the social element in revenge porn as an act of gendered shaming. In terms of its ability to address the enabling conditions of revenge as an act of shaming women, the CJC Act hence falls short. Owing to this, UK policy makers would benefit from addressing revenge porn differently.

This chapter is divided into five sections. In the first section, I explore the phenomenon of revenge porn and the law that criminalizes it in England and Wales. This section also engages with complex questions regarding the use of the term "revenge porn", and the emphasis one should (or should not) place on the role of gender in trying to understand this form of online shaming. Next, I introduce my theoretical framework and argue for the need to examine revenge porn not just in its actualization, but also by scrutinizing its conditions for success as an act of shaming women. In the third section, I explain what my speech act approach to revenge porn and the law contains. Then, I apply speech act theory to examine both revenge porn and the law. I conclude by calling for further research that pursues the question of what the focus on intentions in the CJC Act might tell us about the attitudes of UK policy makers towards this kind of gendered online shaming.

THE REVENGE PORN PHENOMENON AND THE LAW

The focus of this chapter is restricted to considering the regulation of revenge porn affecting adult women aged 18 and over, based in England and Wales. When referring to the non-consensual dissemination of private sexual images, I use the term “revenge porn”. I am aware, however, that revenge porn is a contested term, mainly because of its association with the concepts of “revenge” and “porn”. Indeed, the linking of the non-consensual sharing of private sexual images with either of these two phenomena can be wrongful (Henry and Powell 2016, pp. 400–401; McGlynn et al. 2017, p. 14). First, the motivation to disseminate private sexual images, without the consent of the person depicted in the image, need not be “revenge”. Certainly, whilst the perpetrator of revenge porn often is an ex-lover or ex-partner who shares the private sexual material as a means to harm or punish their former lover or partner, that is not always the case (McGlynn et al. 2017, p. 2). Other people are also known to disseminate private sexual images non-consensually, like, for example, current lovers and partners, friends or hackers (Cook 2014; Ridley 2015; Sanghani 2015). Furthermore, a range of incentives other than revenge might motivate someone to share private sexual images non-consensually, like financial gain, to joke, for sexual gratification, as blackmail or coercion, or to enhance one’s social status (Henry and Powell 2016, p. 400). As such, the use of the term “revenge” to describe this form of online abuse is a misnomer (Henry and Powell 2016, pp. 400–401). So too is the use of the term “porn”. As traditionally understood, pornography is defined by its explicitness, as well as by the idea that it is created for no other purpose than to arouse the audience (McNair 2002, p. 40). The images shared as revenge porn, however, are not necessarily explicit, and they might have been created for a range of reasons other than simply to cause arousal. For instance, private sexual images might be created simply for the person in the image himself/herself, or to be shared as an expression of love and/or intimacy to someone whom they are romantically and/or sexually involved with (Henry and Powell 2016, p. 401). Moreover, whilst the images disseminated as revenge porn were usually acquired through the practice of “sexting”—which involves the (mostly) consensual sharing of nude or semi-nude sexual images (Lenhart 2009)—it is important to remember that some of the images used as revenge porn might also be obtained through coercion, peer pressure or hacking (Henry and Powell 2016, pp. 399–400). That all being said, because of its widespread use in media and academic discourse,

I follow Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell (2016, p. 401) in continuing to use the term “revenge porn”. When referring to “revenge porn”, I thus operate with a broad definition, by which I mean

the non-consensual distribution of sexually explicit or intimate images of another person without their consent, regardless of specific perpetrator motivations or incentives, the interface or device, or the actual content of the material (e.g. whether sexually explicit or intimate images. (Henry and Powell 2016, p. 413) (Italics in original)

Crucially, this definition of revenge porn is *not* limited to acts of non-consensual dissemination conducted with a malicious intention. As we will discuss, it is my contention that such a limited understanding of the phenomenon—as seen in the CJC Act—renders us less able to grasp the fact that the shaming that can occur because of revenge porn is primarily socially enabled.

There is little statistics on revenge porn, its victims, perpetrators and the prevalence of this form of abuse in the UK. Still, the Revenge Porn Helpline received over 400 contacts between February and April 2016 (Laville and Halliday 2016). These contacts were UK residents requiring help following a case or threats of revenge porn, and about 80% of these contacts were women (Laville and Halliday 2016). Certainly, the little statistics that do exist on revenge porn in the UK and internationally generally suggest that it mainly harms women (Citron and Franks 2014, p. 2; McGlynn et al. 2017, p. 3). Nevertheless, it is important to note that most of the existing statistics on revenge porn and its victims are both limited and simplistic (Stroud 2014, pp. 178–179). In fact, the widespread reliance on poor statistical surveys within academic research on revenge porn and gender has led researchers such as Scott R. Stroud (2014, p. 179) to suggest that the research statements made in this work inevitably are the result of “*a priori* critical or ideological commitments” concerned with sexism and misogyny (italics in original). Rather than looking towards misogyny and sexism to understand revenge porn, Stroud (2014, pp. 179–180) argues that we should consider the possibility that there might be other factors—like the ability to act anonymously online—that operate as key enabling factors of revenge porn, and not social understandings of female gender.

I consider Stroud’s (2014) claim a highly important contribution to the debate on revenge porn and gender, and I fully support his call for more sophisticated surveys and statistics on revenge porn. That being said, I disagree with his dismissal of the turn to explanations based on misogyny,

and particularly his claim that this turn might be the result of “*a priori* ideological commitments” (Stroud 2014, p. 179) (italics in original). True, men and boys are also victims of revenge porn, and men’s experiences of revenge porn might be under-reported because of normative expectations with regard to masculinity and the male gender (Henry and Powell 2016, p. 413). However, a simple Google search for “revenge porn” confirms that the majority of links provided to sites containing such material are links to sites with revenge porn material that is mainly depicting women (Ridley 2015). Moreover, research on online abuse and bullying more generally confirm that more women fall victim to online harassment than men (Citron 2014; Gumbus and Meglich 2013). Certainly, anonymity and other digital affordances are likely to play an important part in enabling revenge porn, but that does not rule out the possibility that social attitudes towards female gender and sexuality play an equally significant—not to say the most significant—role as revenge porn’s enabling force and explanation. In highlighting the adverse impact of online harassment and abuse on people from already marginalized parts of society—whether that be because of their gender, sexuality, ethnicity or religion (Henry and Powell 2016, p. 399)—I am not dismissing the fact that men might be the victims of this too, nor am I trying to promote my “ideological commitments” (Stroud 2014, p. 179). Rather, my focus on social attitudes towards female gender and sexuality in analysing acts like revenge porn is a reflection of my desire to understand *how* and *why* such acts affect certain gendered groups more than others. This is why the primary focus in this chapter is on the role of gender in revenge porn and, more specifically, on the fact that the majority of those adults who fall victim to this are women.

To those who fall victim to revenge porn the experience can be emotionally devastating. Shame is amongst the most common feelings shared by its victims (Bates 2017, p. 23; Citron and Franks 2014, pp. 364, 389). As argued by Samantha Bates (2017, pp. 26, 39), women’s emotional responses to revenge porn are strikingly similar to their responses to sexual assault, which also include feelings of stigma and humiliation. For many victims of revenge porn, this feeling of shame can be overpowering. As such, they go into hiding and develop severe mental health issues such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety. Some victims become suicidal, and some of these commit suicide (Bates 2017, pp. 31–33; Citron 2014, pp. 10–11; The Guardian Staff and Agencies 2016). Many victims lose their jobs and/or struggle to find new ones because employers do not

want to be associated with people whose private sexual images are publicly available online (Citron 2014, pp. 7–9). Victims can also lose contact with friends and family because of the shame associated with them as victims of this form of abuse, or by failing to stay in touch via, for example, email and social media, because they have gone offline to avoid further abuse (Citron 2014, pp. 102–103). Revenge porn, that is, is a form of online shaming that can have especially harmful consequences for its victims.

The first website created for the sole purpose of sharing private sexual images, without the consent of the person(s) depicted in them, was set up in 2010 (Simpson 2014). Since then, the prevalence of revenge porn has rocketed in line with the rapid development of technology and social media, as revenge porn is most commonly shared online through the use of social media platforms and text messaging, and on websites dedicated to this type of material (Citron 2014, p. 5; Stroud 2014, p. 168). In the UK, revenge porn is steadily rising. There is little statistical evidence indicating how common it has become, but 1160 incidents were reported to 31 of the 43 police forces in England and Wales between April and December 2015 (Sherlock 2016). The number of actual revenge porn cases in the UK, reported and unreported, is thus thought to be much higher. As such, revenge porn as a form of online shaming of women in particular has hailed the attention of the public as well as of women's rights groups, the media and politicians (Laville and Halliday 2016; Lib Dem Lords 2014; Women's Aid 2015). Thus, following a successful campaign initiated by the Liberal Democrat party in 2014, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat government at the time decided to criminalize revenge porn. On 13 April 2015, revenge porn—legally defined as “[d]isclosing private sexual photographs and films with intent to cause distress”—was officially criminalized in England and Wales under Sections 33, 34 and 35 of the CJC Act. Since the law came into force, a person found guilty of committing this offence can be punished with up to two years in prison and a fine (*Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015*). The law entails two key conditions for a case to be classified as bona fide revenge porn:

- 33 (1) It is an offence for a person to disclose a private sexual photograph or film if the disclosure is made
 - (a) without the consent of an individual who appears in the photograph or film, and
 - (b) with the intention of causing that individual distress. (*Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015*)

The two conditions that have to be satisfied for someone to be found guilty under this legislation are thus that (1) an individual in the photograph or film should not have consented to the dissemination and (2) the person disseminating the photograph or film ought to have had *intent to cause distress* in disseminating the material. According to Section 33 (8) it has to be *proved* that the offender had this malicious intention:

33 (8) A person charged with an offence under this section is not to be taken to have disclosed a photograph or film with the intention of causing distress merely because that was a natural and probable consequence of the disclosure. (*Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015*)

This definition of intent is more narrow than what is usual in UK legislation, where the more common approach is to conclude that intention existed when “there is either evidence of a specific intention, or where, from actions or events, it is clear that something is intended because outcome is a natural and probable outcome of an act” (Harris 2015). Indeed, the focus on *proven* malicious intent creates an obstacle for the prosecutors in such cases, as they have to establish evidence of the mental state of the person responsible for the initial non-consensual dissemination. Clearly, it is those who explicitly operate with the mental purpose of shaming the person in the private sexual image or film that this law sets out to address. However, as will be made clear in the next section, revenge porn as an act of shaming is a more complex phenomenon than what the CJC Act allows for.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Until this date, little research has explored revenge porn and the laws that aim to regulate it. This is perhaps not all that surprising, considering the fact that the phenomenon is still so new. Nevertheless, some excellent research has already been published on this topic and the most prominent amongst this is, arguably, the work by Danielle Keats Citron (2009, 2014; Citron and Franks 2014). Citron (2014, pp. 24–25) has written extensively on the criminalization of revenge porn with a particular focus on US laws and regulations, as she argues for legal reforms and a “cyber civil rights legal agenda” to ensure that all forms of online abuse of women can be properly addressed within the US legal system. Likewise, Henry and Powell (2014, 2015a, b, 2016) have written comprehensively on the legal

and non-legal regulation of revenge porn in Australia and beyond. As such, their research is focused on how revenge porn can be challenged both through the improvement of new and existing legislation and the implementation of non-legal initiatives such as education (2014, 2015a, b). Still, up until recently, little research has been conducted on revenge porn in Europe and, more specifically, in the UK. A notable exception in this regard is the work by Clare McGlynn and Erika Rackley (2015; McGlynn et al. 2017), who have published some of the most thorough legal analyses and critiques of the new laws on revenge porn both in the UK and in the world more generally. In an article written with Ruth Houghton, they critique the new laws on revenge porn for being “largely ad hoc” and focusing “on the paradigmatic case of the vengeful ex-partner” (McGlynn et al. 2017, p. 2). They argue that the new revenge porn legislation in England and Wales is failing to address the range of different ways in which private sexual images can be shared non-consensually (McGlynn et al. 2017, p. 2). As the focus of the CJC Act is on those with a direct intention to cause distress, they state that it fails to cover the many manners in which revenge porn might be distributed (McGlynn et al. 2017, p. 6). Indeed, the narrow understanding of revenge porn inherent in the existing legislation renders it incapable of capturing the complexity of revenge porn.

The existing research on revenge porn and the law—as mentioned above—is highly useful as a means to assess current legislation. Still, it does not provide an account of *how* revenge porn can be such a successful tool for shaming women in the first place. Such an account is necessary, however, because we need to understand how revenge porn is enabled to operate as it does in order to be able to fully address it in all its complexity, legally or otherwise. Granted that the goal in using the law to approach revenge porn is to strike it at its very core, and to let the victims know that the government is “on their side” (GOV.UK 2014), an understanding of revenge porn’s conditions for success as an act of shaming women is required. In this chapter, I set out to provide such an understanding by focusing on precisely these conditions. As will be clear from the next section, the goal in this chapter is to show how—through the use of speech act theory—we can come to better comprehend how certain acts of online shaming such as revenge porn gain their performative potential. Having developed such an understanding, we can also come to scrutinize the CJC Act’s ability to achieve its goals with regard to striking down on revenge porn more closely. That is, once we know the conditions for revenge

porn's success as an act of shaming women, we can also assess the law's ability to prevent people from drawing on these conditions as a means to shame women by non-consensually sharing their private sexual images and films.

SPEECH ACT THEORY AS AN APPROACH TO REVENGE PORN

To develop an improved understanding of the conditions that make it possible for revenge porn to operate efficiently as an act of shaming women, I apply theories and ideas that enable me to explore the interplay between the individual and the social, intentions and conventions, in the phenomenon that is revenge porn. That is, I examine revenge porn as a speech act and view it in relation to the social conventions that enable its performative potential. In this chapter, revenge porn is therefore referred to as a form of speech, meaning verbal as well as visual utterances and expressions. This understanding of speech thus goes beyond an ordinary understanding of speech as articulate sounds. The approach that I take to revenge porn and the law in this chapter consists of a combination of speech act theory with a specific perception of shame, understood as an emotion that is both feeding off and into sociability (Ahmed 2004, 2014; Langton 2009, 2011).

As a means to comprehend the performative elements of revenge porn as speech, I use Rae Langton's (2009, 2011) presentation of speech act theory. This means that revenge porn is scrutinized as a performative utterance and examined in relation to the conditions that enable it to perform the shaming of women. The main concern in this chapter is the speech acts that revenge porn *constitutes* in being expressed. As such, I am neither going to look at the depictions of private sexual images, nor the effects that might occur in consequence of them being shared non-consensually. Using the terms provided by speech act theory, this means that revenge porn is scrutinized as an illocutionary speech act, not as a locution or as a perlocutionary speech act. A locution is the content and/or the descriptive aspect of the private sexual image (Langton 2009, pp. 27, 33). The locution in revenge porn material is therefore the actual sexual content, which usually consists of a representation of a person who is either naked or semi-naked (Lenhart 2009). A perlocutionary speech act is a speech act that, *by* being expressed, causes an effect (Langton 2009, pp. 27, 32–33). An example of revenge porn as a perlocutionary speech act is when it, by being expressed, causes—as an effect—the feeling of

shame in the victim. An illocutionary speech act is an act that constitutes another act, that *is* another act, in its very expression (Langton 2009, pp. 27–28, 32–33). For instance, revenge porn is an illocutionary speech act when, in being expressed, it constitutes an act of shaming.

In focusing on revenge porn as an illocutionary speech act of shaming, I set out to achieve two aims. First—as will be discussed in the next paragraph—I will explore the social conditions that enable the shaming by revenge porn. Second, in focusing on revenge porn as an illocutionary speech act, I shall also explain its perlocutionary effects. Indeed, illocutions can explain perlocutionary effects (Langton 2011, pp. 39–40). For example, my shaming you in circulating your private sexual images can explain the feeling of shame that you experience as a consequence of the non-consensual dissemination. Therefore, in exploring the socially enabled act of shaming that revenge porn constitutes, one can also explain how the perlocutionary effect of shame can be instilled in the victims.

In order to analyse revenge porn as an illocutionary speech act of shaming, one must also gain a comprehension of the key social and cultural elements that play a part in regulating how revenge porn is socially made sense of. Social and cultural elements contribute to the regulation of what a speaker can do with an expression, because the illocutionary potential of any speech act depends on the ability of the speaker to ensure that they can get an uptake in the audience (Langton 2009, p. 33). In other words, for a speaker to succeed in performing a certain intended illocutionary speech act, they depend on performing it to an audience that recognizes the speech act as they intended. Whether a speaker is able to perform the exact illocutionary speech act that they wanted to depends on how it is interpreted by the audience. If the audience fails to recognize the speech act that the speaker wanted to perform, then the speaker might still be performing a speech act, just not the one that they wished to (Langton 2009, p. 33). Crucially, uptake in the audience determines what illocutionary speech acts do, and this is regulated by the key conventions in the social and cultural context in which the speech act is carried out (Langton 2009, p. 33). That is, illocutionary speech acts are highly conventional, as conventions enable some interpretations of speech acts and disable others (Ahmed 2014, pp. 93–94; Langton 2009, p. 33). Here, I focus particularly on the social conventions that enable the audience to recognize revenge porn of women as an illocutionary speech act of shaming. I pay attention to the role played by the emotion of shame in revenge porn, because, as is with illocutionary speech acts, shame is informed by social

knowledge (Ahmed 2014, p. 37). Shame is both enabled and regulated by social conventions: it is informed by our sense-making of social conventions and instilled in the subject when they feel that they have failed to live up to certain ideals as set by culture and society (Ahmed 2014, pp. 106–107). As argued by Sara Ahmed (2014, p. 107), shame can be “experienced as *the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence*” (italics in original). Shame is an inherently social emotion: it comes into being through the intimate relationship between selves, others and objects (Ahmed 2004, pp. 28–30). Shame is a form of responsiveness to our surroundings that occurs at the crossroads between the affective and the mediated, the social and the personal (Ahmed 2004, 2014). A woman subjected to revenge porn, that is, feels shame because she has already developed the understanding that society expects certain things of her and, further, that being depicted in revenge porn material prevents her from living up to those expectations. Next, in turning to the performative aspect of revenge porn as an illocutionary speech act, I am going to explore these social elements in revenge porn and our responses to it in more depth.

APPROACHING REVENGE PORN AND THE LAW

Revenge porn is a form of shaming that includes the non-consensual twisting of speech to make the speech in question take on another meaning (Langton 2009, p. 59). That is to say, revenge porn involves taking an image or film intended for one private context and placing it in another public context and, in doing so, changing how this image is made sense of socially. By and of itself, revenge porn effectively illustrates how the very same locution can take on starkly different meanings depending on the context in which it operates and hence the predominant conventions that inform how the audience consumes it (Langton 2009, pp. 32, 34). Whilst the locution of the private sexual image itself remains unaltered, the meanings associated with it changes drastically as it is moved from a private to a public context. Simply by it being shared with people for whom it was not intended, a private sexual image—perhaps originally intended as an expression of love, intimacy and/or desire—could come to operate as an expression of shame. It is not simply the intentions of the person responsible for the initial non-consensual dissemination that enable this meaning-transformation, but, more importantly, the predominant conventions in the context of display and consumption. Certainly, a private sexual image, shared non-consensually in public, can only operate as an act of shaming if it can secure an uptake

as such, regardless of the intentions of the speaker (Langton 2009, p. 33). The success of revenge porn as an act of shaming is therefore dependent on the audience's ability to recognize it as shaming (Ahmed 2014, p. 94). The feeling of shame instilled in the victim in effect of the non-consensual distribution is also socially enabled, both by the illocutionary speech act of shaming that precedes the feeling of shame in the victim and by the victim's pre-existing understanding of social norms and conventions with regard to depictions of female bodies and sexuality (Langton 2009, p. 32).

With revenge porn, the majority of its female victims experience feelings of shame as a consequence (Bates 2017, p. 23; Citron and Franks 2014, pp. 364–365). This kind of emotional response indicates that both the audience and the victim recognizes her private sexual images in public as a violation of their expectations as to how women should be represented in public (Ahmed 2014, pp. 106–107). That is, social perceptions of female bodies and sexuality provide the necessary conventional context for such images to secure an uptake as shaming once distributed non-consensually in public, and thus create the effect of shame in the victim. As such, it appears that revenge porn is one of many forms of online shaming that feeds off and into existing social attitudes towards women as inferior sexual beings: already existing ideas about women's bodies and sexuality in the domain of speech about sex enable revenge porn to operate as a speech act of shaming. It is not the cruel intentions of the person who distributes the image non-consensually that primarily determine its ability to cause shame in the victim, but dominant social conventions that render the audience more likely to interpret the private sexual image or film as an act of shaming. The intention of the person responsible is of little consequence in this situation: the audience will recognize their speech act as shaming anyway (Langton 2009, pp. 33–34). Revenge porn is more about wider social expectations related to gender, sexuality and power, all intertwined.

Sexual double standards with regard to depictions of female or male bodies and sexuality highlight the extent to which social conventions determine the conditions for revenge porn's success as an act of shaming. How we as a society feel about representations of women's bodies and sexuality as compared to men's is evidently different, as it is women's private sexual images that are distributed most prolifically as a form of shaming, not men's. There are, of course, sexual depictions of female bodies distributed online that do not constitute revenge porn and that do not

constitute or cause shaming or shame. Private sexual photographs and films depicting women do not always harm and humiliate the women in question (Hasinoff 2015, p. 4). There might also be cases in which revenge porn fails to operate as an act of shaming, where women do it to men and where, in another context, it comes to mean something different. However, private sexual images and films depicting women and circulated non-consensually in public are most commonly associated with shame, whilst similar depictions of men can take on a much broader range of meanings, often with positive connotations (Ringrose et al. 2012; Ringrose and Harvey 2015, pp. 212–213). As argued by Michael Salter (2015, p. 2728) when paraphrasing a male research participant: “publicised male nudity can mean ‘whatever’, but publicised female nudity means ‘slut.’” Whilst intentions might play a part in informing this type of online shaming, it is conventions—how we are socially and culturally predisposed to interpret certain imagery in certain ways—that enable it. A law that is inherently focused on the cruel intentions of the perpetrator of revenge porn will therefore inevitably fail to address the gendered social conditions that make it possible for revenge porn to operate in the way that it does. Indeed, policy makers have left unspoken the gender inequalities that revenge porn is feeding off and into. This exclusion of a social and gender perspective from the law is problematic, because—as evidenced by the unequal distribution of gender amongst the victims—revenge porn is not situated in a social context in which representations of female and male bodies and sexuality are considered equal to begin with (Salter 2015). If one considers revenge porn as an isolated event, detached from understandings of potential structural constraints, one is rendered incapable of addressing the underlying social conditions that enable revenge porn to work so well as a form of shaming of women from the outset. In failing to address the extent to which revenge porn is an inherently social form of abuse, the CJC Act is rendered incapable of targeting the real issues at stake with revenge porn.

The initial act of sharing a private sexual image non-consensually as revenge porn might certainly be traced back to one responsible individual. Still, the shaming that occurs through this non-consensual sharing is not simply the deed of the person who carried out the original non-consensual dissemination. It is pre-existing societal attitudes and perceptions that enable this shaming and, in doing so, lay the necessary social foundation for this act of shaming to be able to occur in the first place. This point is

effectively illustrated by cases of non-consensual public distribution of private sexual images in which the person responsible for the initial dissemination did not have a malicious intention in doing so, but where the distribution constituted shaming and caused immense shame in the victim anyway. These cases are not illegal under the CJC Act, however, because one cannot establish and prove the perpetrator's intention to cause distress. In drafting a gender-neutral institutional approach to revenge porn that effectively locates the responsibility of the harms caused to women by revenge porn within an individual driven by cruel intentions, policy makers in the UK are effectively downplaying the gendered societal and cultural elements of revenge porn. The CJC Act might certainly work as a means to punish some blatantly malicious individuals, but as a means to strike revenge porn at its socially driven and gendered core, it is essentially redundant.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have explored the conditions that make it possible for revenge porn to operate as an act of shaming women and the ability of the CJC Act to target these conditions. The key argument that I have put forward is as follows: the issue at the very centre of revenge porn is gender or, to be more specific, gendered social conventions. Revenge porn is first and foremost a type of online shaming enabled by social conventions, not malicious intentions. Through the employment of speech act theory, I showed that the success of revenge porn as an illocutionary speech act of shaming women depends on its ability to be recognized as shaming by the audience. As such, it is gendered social attitudes towards depictions of female sexuality and bodies that are the core conditions for revenge porn's success as an act of shaming. The intentions of the person who shared the image non-consensually in public—malicious or not—play only a small part in this type of online shaming. Thus, in its strict focus on the cruel intentions of the perpetrator, the CJC Act fails to address how gendered social elements are situated at the very core of revenge porn. Locating the blame for the revenge porn in a single individual with a particular intent is—at best—misguided.

To properly address the concerns raised and harm caused in and of revenge porn through the use of legal measures, we need an institutional approach to revenge porn that manages to capture the inherent complexity of revenge porn as a means to contextualize revenge porn socially.

Certainly, in order to avoid criminalizing people who did not know that the person in the image did not consent to its further distribution, it is crucial to take intent into consideration. Revenge porn legislation should only apply when the person responsible for the non-consensual dissemination knew, or should have known, that the person in the image did not consent to the public dissemination of the image (Flynn et al. 2016). However, whether or not they were malicious in doing so should not be our primary concern. Rather, our focus should be on whether the perpetrator knowingly or unknowingly acted without the victim's consent (Henry and Powell 2015a, p. 115). Shifting the focus of the law to primarily be on consent would improve it, as it places the onus on the real issue at stake in revenge porn as well as in other forms of gender violence and abuse: namely the disregard for women's right to decide over the uses of their own bodies. As it stands, the CJC Act is based on the understanding that whether or not revenge porn has occurred can be established by looking to the intentions of the alleged perpetrator, rather than on whether or not they knowingly acted without consent. This law is drafted in such a way that those who think that a woman's right to consent to their distribution of her private sexual images and films is secondary to their right to share them as they wish—as long as they have no cruel intentions in doing so—are protected from prosecution.

Until UK policy makers have drafted new revenge porn legislation or another form for institutional approach to revenge porn with a firm focus on consent, future research within this field might want to further explore UK policy makers' insistence on locating the responsibility for revenge porn squarely within one intentionally cruel individual. Why is the law drafted as such, and who benefits from this focus on malicious intentions? It certainly is not the victims of revenge porn and, more generally, women who benefit from this. As it stands, it appears that this law has been written from the perspective of the person responsible for the initial non-consensual distribution.

When Evans (2016) found out that she was the victim of revenge porn, it was not the cruel intentions of the perpetrator—an ex-partner—that caused her the most upset. What really hurt her was the ways in which those around her responded to her story: "The things that pained me the most were the lack of control and the lack of sympathy" (Evans 2016). Not only does the CJC Act fail to act as a legal tool to strike revenge porn at its gendered core. It also fails to act as the expression of sympathy and support that the victims of revenge porn—like Evans—are so sorely in need of.

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CHAPTER 8

“Hell Hath No Fury”: Gendered Reactions to the Cosby Mistrial Across Liberal and Conservative News Media Sites

Francine Banner and Nicholas Paron

INTRODUCTION

From 2014 to 2018 what had been a stream of rumours, allegations and civil suits against Bill Cosby grew into a torrent, as, ultimately, more than 50 women described instances in which they had been drugged and sexually assaulted by the comedian (Kim et al. 2017). By summer 2017, Cosby was a defendant in ten civil suits for sexual assault and defamation (Pierson 2017). To date, Cosby’s sole conviction has been for the indecent assault of Andrea Constand in 2004 (Roig-Franzia 2017).

On 17 June 2017, a mistrial was announced in the first Cosby trial (Pierson 2017). This chapter analyses comments on the Cosby mistrial across three news media sites to explore how gendered stereotypes and rape myths are activated and deployed across liberal and conservative spectrums. For the research project, 2568 comments on the mistrial were collected from two politically liberal sites—the *New York Times* and the *Huffington Post*—and one conservative site, Breitbart.com. The comments

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were analysed using Atlas TI software, engaging emergent coding to explore how gendered stereotypes and rape mythologies are engaged on sites of varied political affiliations. The chapter also briefly compares and contrasts comments on the mistrial to those on Cosby's subsequent conviction, making some suggestions as to how the #MeToo social movement may be influencing gendered opinions.

The significance of Cosby's criminal trials cannot be overstated. In an era in which fewer than 5% of all criminal cases go to trial, it is increasingly rare for victims to get their day in court or for defendants to have the opportunity to fully exercise their constitutional rights in a public forum (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2017). When it comes to sexual assault, significant under-reporting and evidentiary challenges render prosecutions less likely than in other criminal cases (Corrigan 2013, p. 82).

The timing of the mistrial was particularly important. The event took place in the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election, widely described as a "referendum on gender" (Burleigh 2016). During the election, sexual assault was front and centre, as both candidates accused the other of, at worst, engaging in—or, at best, sanctioning—gender-based violence. A key moment occurred when a tape emerged featuring candidate Trump admitting that, as a celebrity, women would "let" him "do anything", even "grab 'em by the pussy" (Mathis-Lilley 2016).

In the aftermath of an election steeped in sexist rhetoric, unsurprisingly, many link Hillary Clinton's loss to gendered factors rooted in long-standing distrust of assertive women and fear of loss of masculine power (Beinart 2016; Bordo 2017). Bordo (2017), for example, describes how the media edited Clinton "into a cartoon" encompassing "potent archetypal resonance", "a caricature forged out of the stew of unexamined sexism, unprincipled partisanship, irresponsible politics" (Bordo 2017, p. 30).

As Bordo's comments highlight, Election 2016 not only exposed fault lines across the US in regard to gender roles, the contest ushered in a new role for social media¹ in exploiting and exacerbating these politicized points of view (Benkler et al. 2017). Researchers identify the "media bubble", the ability of liberal and conservative voters to seek out like-minded commenters rather than conversing across political borders, as a determinative factor in the contest (Benkler et al. 2017). While Clinton voters

¹This chapter adopts a broad definition of social media, "web-based communication tools that enable people to interact with each other by both sharing and consuming information" (Nations 2017).

tended to cluster around sites associated with traditionally liberal print news media, such as the *New York Times* and the *Huffington Post* (Benkler et al. 2017), Trump voters flocked to newer, online-only outlets, such as Breitbart.com, which offered “alternative” points of view (Benkler et al. 2017). Clinton’s campaign blamed her loss on the “Breitbart effect”, damaging and often misogynist narratives promoted within a “standalone ecosystem” (Logan 2017).

That Donald Trump received nearly 63 million votes despite possibly having admitted to committing sexual assault suggests there is a significant gap between sexual violence that is punished “on the books” and the public’s opinion about what conduct, in reality, should be criminal. Closely examining online comments on the Cosby case is a way to explore not only this space that exists between law on the books and the social realities of sexual assault, but also how beliefs, ideas and opinions about sexual assault are being shared, challenged and reinforced in differing—and polarized—political contexts.

Section “[Rape Mythologies and the Cosby Case](#)” describes the criminal case against Bill Cosby and situates the case in the context of historical and contemporary rape mythologies. In particular, the section explores why, despite significant legal change, sexual assault remains under-reported and under-prosecuted. Section ““[Real Rape](#)”—Or “[Reprehensible Lechery](#)?”” begins to explore the unique power of rape myths on social media, comparing and contrasting commenters’ views regarding what acts do and should constitute “real rape” in today’s society. Section “[Victim-Blaming Narratives: “Sharks in the Water”](#)” delves more deeply into these myths, exploring the ways in which victim-blaming is expressed on social media sites. Section “[False Claims: “If You Cash the Check, It’s Not Rape”](#)” examines a third myth across social media, that of “false” rape claims. Ultimately, the chapter situates discussions of the Cosby trial and mistrial in contemporary political and social context, arguing that, although liberal and conservative points of view may be expressed in distinct ways, both conservative and liberal social media sites reflect harmful gendered stereotypes and deep-seated misogynist assumptions about the crime of sexual assault, accusers and perpetrators.

A glaring omission in this chapter, which focuses on the volume’s topic, gendered hate, is the discussion of how race factors into online opinions about the Cosby case. As Berger (1977) describes, “rape for a long time marked the fatal crossroads where racial discrimination and capital punishment encountered each other most dramatically” (4). Contemporary

sexual assault law is marred by a profoundly discriminatory history in which African-American men were subject to extra-legal and legal execution, often based on unfounded allegations that they harassed or otherwise sexually violated white women. Online comments on the Cosby case, which involves a white, female accuser and an African-American male defendant, reflect both knowledge of this tragic history and apprehensions about race and racism in the contemporary US criminal justice system. They also reflect an historic and harmful tendency to focus on claims of white accusers while ignoring the presence of African-American alleged victims. So as to do them justice, the complex intersections of gender and race in the Cosby trial are explored by the author in a larger book project, which is currently in progress.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the allegations in the Cosby criminal case.

RAPE MYTHOLOGIES AND THE COSBY CASE

Thirty-year-old Andrea Constand met Bill Cosby in the context of her job as Director of Operations for a large university. In 2004, while visiting Cosby's Pennsylvania home, Constand complained of a headache. In response, the comedian gave her three blue pills. Constand reports that she took the pills, then "fad[ed] in and out of consciousness", waking up "with her sweater bunched up around her and her bra undone" (Philly). Constand claims she was assaulted, while the celebrity counters that the pair had consensual sex. After the incident, Constand kept in contact with Cosby, calling him more than 50 times (Dale and Sisak 2017).

Andrea Constand's narrative sits at the fulcrum of sexual assault law, describing a case of what is commonly known as acquaintance rape and, dismissively, "date rape". The incident almost certainly would not have been prosecuted under the common law of rape, yet it reflects the reality of many sexual assaults. Only a quarter of sexual assaults are committed by persons unknown to their victims (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2017, p. 2). For the vast majority of survivors, sexual assault does not result in physical injury.² Nor is it unusual for victims to delay in reporting an incident to law enforcement or never to report at all (National Institute of Justice Research Report 2000, p. 2).

²According to the Centers for Disease Control, approximately 70% of women and more than 80% of men who report having been raped state that they did not experience physical injury as a result of the crime (Centers for Disease Control 2012).

Today's sexual assault laws “on the books” better reflect the on-the-ground realities of sexual violence than did previous rape statutes. The majority of state laws have removed or minimized force requirements, foregrounding non-consent as the decisive element in proving sexual assault (Berger 1977, p. 11). “Rape shield” laws limit character evidence to discourage jurors from problematically conflating assessments of victims' character with evaluation of their truthfulness (Berger 1977, p. 22). Across US states, the definitions of sexual assault have been expanded, providing gradated offences that penalize a range of conduct, from offensive touching outside the clothes to sodomy and penetration (Brenner 2013, pp. 511–512).

Despite reforms, however, research reveals persistent, troubling gaps between the public's understanding of what constitutes sexual assault and the legal and social realties of the crime. Although reporting rates have improved, rapes continue to be under-reported based on factors including psychological trauma, stigma and shame (Clay-Warner and Burt 2005). Recent studies find that victims are often unwilling to report sexual assaults based on having been intoxicated at the time of the crime, and that survivors are not likely to report a rape if they are not a “traditional” victim (Capers 2013, p. 826). There is also little incentive for crime victims to report if they feel that nothing will be done (Corrigan 2013, p. 5).

Feminist scholars attribute the reluctance to report sexual assault to the intractable presence of rape myths, “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (Seybold 2012; Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994, p. 134; Estrich 1987). These powerful myths profoundly impact sexual assault law at all stages, from fostering an environment in which such assaults occur (Belknap 2010, p. 1338) to reporting (Belknap 2010, p. 1338) to the ability to prosecute and convict offenders (Bublick 2006, p. 58; Franiuk et al. 2008, p. 19). Rape myths are “pernicious” not only because they are premised on long-standing, stereotypical assumptions about how survivors can and should behave, but because these beliefs continually are reinforced as they are shared time and time again (Payne et al. 1995, p. 30; Brenner 2013, p. 531).

As the chapter will describe, rape mythologies regularly are engaged on social media, environments in which sexism and misogyny thrive. As other chapters in this volume attest, the virtual world has in fact proven to be a vicious place to be a woman (Megarry 2014; Cole 2015; Jane 2014). Graphic, misogynist and threatening comments pervade nearly all online

environments, particularly those in which women attempt to speak out (Jane 2014; Megarry 2014). Although some categorize such discourse as apolitical or illegitimate, in the context of discussions of sexual assault, terms such as slut, whore or gold-digger serve a far more insidious role, maintaining and perpetuating assumptions about women's status, power and access to resources.

In society at large, rape myths are prevalent because their dissemination "helps people 'fit in and identify' with social and cultural groups" (Payne et al. 1995, p. 30). Today, internet comment sites are primary places in which "social meanings are generated, circulated, contested and reconstructed" (Megarry 2014, p. 48). Those visiting such sites seek to exclude perceived interlopers, connect with like-minded others and reaffirm their own, superior social and moral standing. Due to limitations, such as character and word constraints, online connections are established quickly, often via engagement of coded language and metaphor. This reliance on "shorthand" means that, ironically, as Ridgeway (2011) observes, "when people at sites of social change come together to construct some ... new type of relationship ... the cultural beliefs about gender that are activated in the background are more traditional than the innovative circumstances they confront" (p. 159). Engaging well-known and common-sense rape mythologies provides a way for commenters to establish social connection and reaffirm social status.

In connection with the project, more than 2000 comments were coded on Atlas TI. Given the gendered societal divisions exposed by Election 2016, the initial hypothesis was that support for Cosby and for accusers would break down along party lines, with comments on liberal sites standing by accusers and those on conservative sites favouring the accused. However, this research in fact suggests that, when it comes to discussion of sexual assault, the liberal/conservative divide is not as profound as anticipated.

Comments from the mistrial across all three sites reviewed were strongly divided as to opinions about Cosby's guilt. On Breitbart, 36% (666 comments) pronounced Cosby guilty, while nearly 60% favoured a not guilty verdict in the case. On the *New York Times* site, there was an equally divided but opposite result, with just over 60% (318 comments) announcing Cosby's guilt and 36% proclaiming the celebrity should not have been criminally charged. Perhaps surprisingly, the *Huffington Post*, often described as a left-leaning site, featured the most sharply divided opinion section, with just over 40% pro-prosecution comments and just over 50%

pro-defence. Further, as discussed below, rape myths and gendered assumptions are alive and well across the political spectrum.

Three rape myths commonly expressed across news media sites are explored in the following sections. First, the chapter explores the assumption that, unless an incident fits into the traditional “stranger jumping out of the bushes” narrative, a “real rape” has not occurred (Estrich 1987, p. 8). Second, the chapter examines victim-blaming, discussing the ways in which narratives of victims’ personal responsibility and complicity pervade discussions of sexual assault. Lastly, the chapter explores the persistent belief that accusers frequently make false rape claims.

The exploration begins by examining the idea of “real rape”.

“REAL RAPE”—OR “REPREHENSIBLE LECHERY”?

For this project, pro-defence and pro-prosecution comments were coded for themes suggesting that commenters might be comparing the facts in Cosby’s situation to some mythical idea of “real rape”, as identified by Susan Estrich and others. Codes applied included the presence or absence of physical injury, perpetrator’s use of a weapon or force, the circumstances of the alleged assault (such as location, presence of drugs or alcohol) and the accuser’s relationship to the alleged perpetrator (stranger, acquaintance, friend, boyfriend). Although posters on Breitbart and the *Huffington Post* tend to use more inflammatory and vitriolic language than do those on the site of the *New York Times*, across conservative and liberal sites, perceptions of and anxieties about what constitutes sexual assault today tend to be remarkably similar. Disturbingly, approximately 5% of comments on *each* site—liberal and conservative—contrast what occurred in Constand’s situation with the mythical idea of real—that is, violent, stranger—rape.

First and foremost, many doubt the veracity of sexual assault accusations unless they are accompanied by physical evidence of trauma. On Breitbart, a poster remarks that Cosby clearly is not guilty because “[w]ith real rape there is evidence: rape is brutal, sadistic, and medical care is sought.” A *Huffington Post* reader asks, “Was there ... a rape kit? A police investigation after the incident???” On the *New York Times* site, a poster notes that “[w]omen who get tipsy sometimes have sex with a guy whom they never would if sober. That is, sadly, far from unusual.” Another Breitbart commenter opines that Cosby is guilty but nonetheless does not support prosecution: “I am convinced he did it, but we have to put it into

context. He did not go grab innocents off the street, rape them and leave them bloody (or dead) in an alley.”

Although, as discussed below, there is no shortage of hateful, misogynist language across comment sites, many genuinely appear to be struggling with what should and does constitute criminal versus immoral behaviour. A Breitbart reader observes that they are in favour of convicting Cosby but only of a lesser—and non-existent—charge of “date rape”. A *New York Times* poster similarly queries, “Is there a difference between ‘sexual assault’ and rape? Why don’t they call it rape, if that’s what is being suggested?” On the *Times* site, too, one person writes, “Improper behavior should never go to trial as a criminal case”, while another describes Constand’s allegations as merely “bad decisions”. Another *New York Times* reader notes that Cosby is guilty, but only of “manipulation and morally reprehensible lechery”.

A trend among comments is that they employ a rhetorical strategy of condescension, minimizing the harm resulting from non-aggravated assault—as Constand allegedly experienced—by contrasting the incident to other, more “serious” harms. While a *Times* reader believes Cosby technically is guilty, they nonetheless observe, “He’s not a Nazi war criminal!” A fellow commenter agrees, “Spend the money on going after the true criminals: the illegal aliens, the gang members, the violent felons and the terrorists!” Some relate Constand’s claims to personal experience, “I got patted on my butt by a Female Manager in front of her entire team at a major corporation during the 1990s I didn’t SUE! I took it as a complement and skedaddled!” Another Breitbart reader emphasizes that “[s]pending millions on a 15 year old fondling case is dumb.”

These comments highlight the “contradictory place” that rape holds in American society. As Brenner (2013) observes, “On one hand, rape has generally been understood as an abhorrent crime. However, on the other, sexual violence in many other forms has tended to be tolerated if not outright legally condoned” (p. 507). There is continuing tendency to view romantic pursuit as the province of “normal” men and assault as something committed by sexual psychopaths (Brenner 2013, pp. 508–509).

The importance of theoretical concepts such as patriarchy and rape culture is that they normalize and de-mythologize sexual assault by providing a framework that situates acts often dismissed as minor or insignificant—street harassment, workplace harassment, pussy grabbing—in the context of oppressions, such as violent, stranger rape. The idea of rape culture is not to claim a false equivalence of all gender-based aggressions but to convey that, in encouraging or dismissing everyday sexist behaviours, an

institution tacitly may be supporting commission of more severe offences. This conception of a spectrum of violence is lost among online comments, which categorize Cosby's trial more as a harmful diversion than as a positive vehicle for bringing attention to gender-based violence. As one Breitbart post notes, “There are rapes and acts of violence that are routinely ignored because ... we have to focus on this *charade*. Doing so is far more destructive to women's issues than anything Bill Cosby has ever done....”

In addition to dismantling the narrative that rape only is committed by “bad” people—“criminals”, “strangers”—and only happens to “good”, virginal victims, the women's movement faces a Sisyphean battle in disentangling assessments of sexual assault survivors' character from evaluation of their veracity. For centuries, the law has entrenched assumptions that women are more fickle, easily led and likely to lie than male counterparts (Pearson 1997, pp. 20–21; Berger 1977). While men's behaviour is most closely attributed to logic and reason, women are often deemed highly emotional, super corporeal (Pearson 1997, pp. 20–21). Traditional rape laws and evidentiary rules were founded on assumptions that tied chastity to truthfulness (Capers 2013, p. 831).

In the following section, the chapter explores the ways in which public expectations of sexual assault victims' behaviour are mired in these gendered assumptions. Like in a physical courtroom, in the court of public opinion, what are couched as neutral, fact-based comments often turn out to be premised on brutal assessments of character.

VICTIM-BLAMING NARRATIVES: “SHARKS IN THE WATER”

Procedurally speaking, the women's movement has made strides in advocating for revising evidentiary rules to shift focus on to actions of perpetrator and away from interrogating character of victims. On the ground, however, legislative and procedural change competes with powerful, socially constructed mythologies that too often weigh perpetrators' accountability based on what victims did or did not do before and after an alleged crime took place. Although individuals might intellectually understand that the perpetration of crimes and reaction of crime victims are unpredictable and multifaceted, as Chamallas describes, the public prefers “one-cause explanations” (2010, p. 125). If a bad thing happens to us, we tend to blame situational factors, while, if it happens to someone else, we search for explanations based on character (Chamallas 2010, p. 125). By attributing occurrences of sexual assault to dispositional or character-based

rationales, we maintain the illusory and self-protective belief that “good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people” (Franiuk et al. 2008, p. 3).

Spanning conservative and liberal sites is the belief that it is not external circumstances but a flaw in moral character that placed Constand and other accusers in a bad situation. That Constand delayed in reporting the alleged assault to police was a factor for 4% of commenters on the *New York Times*, 5% on Breitbart and 7% on the *Huffington Post*. That she went alone to the hotel room of a famous, married man factored into the assessments of 2% of *Huffington Post* commenters, 3% of those commenting on the *New York Times* and 5% of commenters on Breitbart.

Comments commonly start out with qualifying language, such as “I’m not saying the woman is to blame, but ...” however, it is clear the needle has not moved very from where it was 30 years ago. Rather than questioning how Constand looked or dressed, as they might have in previous years, however, today’s critiques are more likely to be cloaked in the seemingly neutral language of personal responsibility.

Unlike in tort law, criminal law generally eschews the idea of contributory negligence.³ However, online suggestions of accusers’ complicity abound. A typical Breitbart comment notes, for example, “[I]f I walk alone drunk on the South Side of Chicago at 0200 with a huge chain and a rolex, I shouldn’t be surprised if I get robbed.” Another offers, “If the beach has signs that say ‘no swimming—sharks in the water’ are you at fault for getting eaten? YES. Sharks are animals there are people who are animals. If you foolishly give them the opportunity ... then yes, it is your own fault.” Similarly, a fellow poster writes, “We all know he’s guilty. But how guilty?” A *New York Times* reader, too, refers to Constand as an “accomplice”, explaining, “I do believe she was a victim of a crime but I also believe she helped render a ‘hung jury’ verdict.” In many commenters’ perspectives, Constand was assaulted; however, her perpetrator should not be sanctioned, since the victim was “complicit” in her own assault.

Posts across liberal and conservative sites offer strikingly similar ideas about victim responsibility. A *Times* commenter explains that, regardless of whether sex was consensual, prosecution is a waste of time because

³ Cynthia Lee argues, however, that concepts of contributory negligence have historically influenced the development of laws surrounding the crime of voluntary manslaughter (Lee 2007, p. 4).

“[t]hey were all adults and had come willingly to his hotel room (and one to his home when she knew his wife was away)”. A *Huffington Post* reader observes that Constand “endangered her own well being by taking drugs or alcohol from a celebrity that impressed her”. A Breitbart commenter advises, “If you’re a stupid, trendy woman who eats a strange pill offered by a man, you only have yourself to blame.” A commenter who self-identifies as a woman provides a guide for others who may be put in Constand’s shoes: “Speaking as a woman: (1) don’t go to hotel rooms with strangers—it implies something [and] (2) don’t do drugs/booze with strangers—you’re exposing yourself all kinds of bad things.”

Like the comment above, many readers—including both men and women, those in support of prosecution and those against—engage discourse that is condescending or paternalistic. Accusers routinely are dismissed as “stupid”, “young”, “foolish” and “trendy”. Complaints against Cosby are characterized as “gossip” or “rumour”, characterizations most often used to diminish the value of female speech (Beard 2017). Reminiscent of gendered assumptions that haunted advice to schoolgirls of the 1950s, the *New York Times* post with the highest number of reader recommendations (139) cautions: “Women of all ages. Do not let them get away with it. Report them the first time and make as much noise as necessary to get punitive action towards them by whoever is in charge. This must stop and women must stop putting up with it. *Boys will only be boys* if we let them get away with it.” Another *Times* poster offers some “lessons for women to take home from the trial”, including: “Be aware that there may be consequences and debts you may owe a rich and powerful older married man who offers to ‘help’ you, a young and beautiful woman with your career” After all, “Hollywood is a dangerous place. Look at all of the dead stars. Dead kids. Victimized kids, young women and young men are the norm. You have to know what you’re getting into. If you’re naïve, you’re going to get burned”

At the time of the alleged assault, Andrea Constand was 30 years old. She met Cosby in a professional capacity, and there is no evidence she had Hollywood aspirations. Nonetheless, in comment after comment, she, like other accusers, is imagined as a young, naïve victim who fell prey to the nefarious “casting couch”. A *New York Times* commenter goes so far as to advise that, perhaps, women should not be allowed to engage in the world unaccompanied, suggesting that they should travel with “[c]haperones ... to protect [them] from poor judgement and ... celebrity idolization”.

Reflecting the essentialist view associating women with emotion and caregiving rather than logical, political agency, many commenters believe that women should come forward to report sexual assaults not only for their own good but also for the good of others. A *Times* commenter explains—or perhaps, more accurately, mansplains—why victims must speak up promptly,

As painful as it might be to testify, the victim has that social responsibility. Otherwise, the victim may share some responsibility for the suffering of the subsequent victim. Almost like quarantining the Ebola victim to protect others.

A Breitbart commenter closely ties reporting crime to the police to maturity, “Either women are responsible adults or they are fearful children, has to be one or the other.”

These comments highlight that the legal term “victim” brings with it particular expectations. Historically, the idea of victimhood is rooted in sacrifice, the “noble connotation” of martyrdom (Bumiller 1992, pp. 62, 72). As Brenner (2013) describes, “the victim/perpetrator framework” is premised on assumptions, including that all victims are passive and that all sexual assaults are traumatizing (2013, p. 505). The ability to access the legal system is often dependent upon the presence of an ideal victim who “follows though, leaves the batterer, cooperates with prosecuting the case, and does not provoke violence, [or] take drugs or drink” (Seybold 2012, p. 353). Even the cultural shift towards the term “survivor” carries with it expectations that “plac[e] the burden of healing on the individual, while comfortably erasing the systems and structures that make surviving hard, harder for some than for others” (Sehgal 2016).

In the case of sexual assault, where survivors are—often mistakenly—presumed to be female, the expectations placed on crime victims more generally are exacerbated by the operation of deeply embedded gendered norms. Perceptions of women’s behaviours traditionally have been influenced by the essentialist view that women inherently are passive, less agentically competent, and more altruistic and caregiving than male counterparts (Gilligan 1982, p. 74). Psychological and biological assumptions that placed women on a sexual and moral pedestal historically have operated to “place responsibility for controlling sexual behavior on women”, making it worse for accusers, whose actions are characterized as outside the feminine norm (Brenner 2013, p. 565). A post by one Breitbart reader emphasizes the reasons for the historical exclusion of women from the political sphere, urging,

For the sake of their own mental health, the women should not pursue legal remedies. They should pursue healing through societal remedies; writing, speaking and counseling other victims. By helping other victims, they will find closure.

What is called the “dark figure of crime” in criminological terms is testament to the fact that numerous victims of robbery, battery or property damage fail to report to police that they have experienced harm. Yet these victims rarely receive public censure. Comparisons of rape victims to Ebola survivors who *must* come forward for public health reasons and opposite conclusions that, for “their own mental health”, “women should not pursue legal remedies”, each draw on long-standing, gendered assumptions that have served to exclude women from the public, political sphere or to circumscribe the ways in which women permissibly may speak. After experiencing sexual assault, victims, and particularly female victims, are doubly constrained. On the one hand, the law—and the public—expects them to exhibit a logical agentic competence. Survivors must speak up and speak out; they must report the crime immediately. On the other hand, the ways in which victims are expected to speak are closely dictated.

While the narratives described above suggest that many commenters dismiss accusers who do not report their crimes immediately as “yammer[ing]”, “stupid” or childish non-agents, an equally strong set of comments condemns accusers as the opposite, arguing that Constand and others have expressed too much personal agency in a situation where they should have embraced a traumatized and passive victimhood. It is these narratives that are addressed in the next section.

FALSE CLAIMS: “IF YOU CASH THE CHECK, IT’S NOT RAPE”

Legal commentators in the 1950s and 1960s warned of “the evil of putting an innocent man’s liberty at the mercy of an unscrupulous and revengeful mistress” (Berger 1977, p. 21).⁴ Judges advised prosecutors to “continually be on guard for the charge of sex offenses brought by the spurned female that has as its underlying basis a desire for revenge, or a

⁴ Berger 1977, p. 21, citing Ploscowe, Sex Offenses: The American Legal Context, 25 LAW & CONTEMP. PROB. 217, 223 (1960).

blackmail or shake-down scheme” (Berger 1977, p. 21).⁵ Magazines warned of “gold-diggers” out to get “a healthy stipend for future escapades and extravagances” (Sanday 1996, p. 149). Of all of the rape mythologies being shared, reinvigorated and reinvented across the internet today, perhaps none is more persistent than this one, the idea that false rape claims routinely are being deployed by “coven[s]” of women to achieve wealth and fame, threaten innocent men and erode due process.

Although they are sometimes differently expressed, anxieties about false claims are common across all news media sites reviewed, conservative and liberal. Five per cent of comments on the *New York Times* and 9% of commenters on each of Breitbart and the *Huffington Post* believe that false claims are easy to make and that Cosby’s accusers are lying. In law, of course, there is no such thing as a “false” claim (Weiser 2017, p. 49; Franiuk et al. 2008, p. 19). There are many reasons why legitimate criminal complaints may be unsubstantiated, or may not be pursued by victims or law enforcement. The description of such claims as “false” rather than unfounded or unsupported is discursively significant, shifting focus from assessing the weight of evidence to interrogating of the accuser’s motivations. Rather than an earnest victim who simply could not meet the required burden of proof, a person who files a false claim has lied, and, by extension, a filer of false claims is a liar.

Many “common-sense” social understandings coalesce to support assumptions that false claims are prevalent in contemporary society. First, we live in the era of the Insta-Model. The media regularly feature “stars” who have achieved notoriety via publicizing sex tapes, divorces, pregnancy, addiction, overeating and a host of other behaviours that were once—rightly or wrongly—deemed shameful or private. This idea that a person may profit from making one’s private acts public likely impacts public assessments of rape claims, which long have been plagued by myths conflating accusers’ chastity with their veracity. In a world in which ordinary people regularly become famous for divorce, pregnancy, weight loss and sex, it is all too easy for commenters to believe that accusers—particularly female accusers—strategically are using their bodies for personal gain.

Second, thanks to the tort reform lobby, over the past several years, the public has come to consider civil trials more as opportunities for personal “payoffs” than vehicles for compensating injury or vindicating rights (Daniels and Martin 2000, pp. 453, 454). In addition to the criminal legal

⁵ Id.

reforms effected in sexual assault law in recent years, civil suits for torts relating to such crimes also have risen (Lininger 2008, p. 1560). Civil suits are attractive to claimants not only because they may receive financial compensation for injury, but also because non-unanimous jury requirements and lower standards of proof make it easier to achieve justice in the civil versus the criminal system (Lininger 2008, p. 1561). Although the majority of sexual assault cases today do not result in lawsuits, highly publicized million-dollar recoveries by plaintiffs in suits against institutions such as religious organizations, universities and the US government may have led to entrenchment of ideas that sexual assault can lead to large payouts and personal gains.

Perhaps the most recognizable controlling image used to describe sexual assault claimants today is that of the “gold-digger”. The power of this particular label is that it draws *both* on stereotypical characterizations of women as lazy, greedy consumers and on apprehensions about manipulative, aggressive women plotting and planning to take down male counterparts. Breitbart is replete with comments about “gold diggers and ambulance chasers trying to get rich” and “gold digger[s] coming up snake eyes”. A reader, for example, characterizes that “[w]aiting for 50 years to then be allowed to claim ‘Rape’ is insanely predatorial.” Others refer to the allegations against the comedian as a “witch hunt” and “moral panic” akin to the “Salem witch trials” A *Huffington Post* commenter graphically describes how “[t]his hoe is merely a gold-digger looking for a bigger pay day. When Dr. Cosby wouldn’t pay up, the bitch weaponized her womanhood and cried rape. Its a very old hustle”.

Although she was a 30-year-old business professional at the time of the alleged attack against her, across news media sites, assessments abound that Constand is one of many accusers “crying rape” to achieve Hollywood-style fame. A Breitbart reader describes how “real rape” compares to a new crime category:

This is ‘Feminist rape’. She willingly went with him, willingly took the drugs, willingly went along with all of it. A year later she realized he wasn’t gonna make her a star, so she decided it was rape, and now, thirteen years later, everyone is just supposed to take her word for it.

Across all three news media sites is the idea that accusers are self-interested, vengeful and manipulative “groupies”, “gold-diggers” or “hoes” who in “crying” sexual assault are attempting to use their bodies to achieve

public recognition and financial gain. A typical comment bemoans how “washed-up women” are now branding “dating behaviour” as “rape” and “misogyny”. Another Breitbart poster asks, “Wonder when the rockstar groupie lawsuits will start?”. And a fellow commenter notes, “This isn’t a rape trial it’s a class action gold digger lawsuit.” Several comments refer to Constand’s allegations as a “retirement plan”.

While the term gold-digger does not appear on the *New York Times* site, the term “groupie” appears several times, reflecting a similar, pervasive idea that claiming rape is a way to achieve both notoriety and financial security. One *Times* commenter notes that “[t]his whole thing is worth millions to Ms. Constand”, while another chimes in, “[L]et’s face it, if Mr. Cosby were not a wealthy, influential man no beautiful, young women would have been involved with an old geezer.” Another commenter characterizes, “[w]hen you are a groupie you know what to expect. All these accusers are just that and nothing more”

Terms such as gold-digger, slut, or groupie are not merely derogatory. They imply that accusers have plotted and planned, strategically using sex to achieve particular social and financial goals. For many, accusers’ pursuit of civil suits is perceived to bring sexual assault perilously close to prostitution. On the *New York Times* site, a reader notes, “These women wanted something from Cosby and were willing to trade their bodies for it.” A Breitbart reader queries, “Who is more honest, the woman who charges up front for sex, or the woman looking for a pay day for sex years later?” Another critiques “women...[who] use their crotch as a commodity”. “Sorry girls!!! You cash the check, you become a PROSTITUTE, and the rape thingy goes out the window!!!” Another reader puts it just as plainly, “Any whore will cry rape for a shot at the ghetto lottery.”

Rather than “good” victims who are acting in the public interest by engaging the criminal justice system, in bringing civil suits and accepting financial compensation, the engagement of terms such as “prostitute” and “whore” signals that accusers have stepped well outside the category of the deserving victim. These “controlling images” reinforce negative assumptions about accusers’ sexuality and socio-economic status (Hill Collins 2000, p. 69; Armstrong et al. 2014, p. 102). In the context of discussions of sexual assault, terms such as gold-digger, whore, prostitute and slut are not merely dismissive but serve to label accusers as legal and social outcasts.

Comments situating accusers into particular categories based on status are common across the internet, where gendered frames operate to discipline and exclude assertive women (Cole 2015; Megarry 2014; Ridgeway 2011). Calling Constand just a “groupie”, for example, draws on “common-sense” ideas to at once connect with others with similar views and put women in their place. These terms serve a dual purpose, excluding women from the virtual public sphere and affirming that they should be shut out from the legal sphere as well.

The gold-digger trope, identified as a “very old hustle” or a “shake-down”, not only implies that women rampantly are filing “false” rape claims in order to exploit men, but situates their actions into a long history labelling women as a group intrinsically greedy and vengeful. A Breitbart reader attributes accusers’ claims to vengeance, invoking a well-known phrase, “[H]ell has no fury like a woman scorned.” Comments alleging that women are “weaponizing” their sexuality by making false accusations effect a role reversal in which the alleged perpetrator becomes the victim. In more than 100 comments on Breitbart, Attorney Gloria Allred is perceived as a ringleader, leading “[s]acrificial lambs to the feminazi alter [sic]”. Typical posts on the site ask questions such as “What kind of sick predator uses her law license to round up false accusers, degrade them by making them play the role of ‘victims’ all so that she can cash in at a 40% contingency fee plus expenses ...?” and label her “a serial victim maker”.

Like the personal responsibility narratives discussed in Section “[Victim-Blaming Narratives: “Sharks in the Water”](#)”, these descriptions are rooted in assumptions that “real” victims will behave in an idealized, one-dimensional way. Seeking justice for society is seen as incompatible with receiving personal compensation, just as going alone to the hotel room of a married man is inconsistent with a report of being raped.

THE #METOO EFFECT

In fall 2017, a seismic change occurred when, in response to accusations of sexual assault against producer Harvey Weinstein, actress Alyssa Milano, borrowing a phrase from activist Tarana Burke, tweeted #MeToo. In just one week, the status was tweeted more than half-a-million times (France 2018). Although the judge and jurors involved in Cosby’s retrial took pains to explain how the social media movement was being excluded from the courtroom, it was clear that the environment in which Cosby was

being retried was different from the post-election aftermath in which the mistrial occurred (Bowley and Haag 2018).

After Cosby's conviction in his second trial for the indecent assault of Andrea Constand, a vital, outstanding question is the impact of the #MeToo social movement on public opinion about law. While this chapter focuses on the mistrial, the authors are working on a future publication that will explore differences in comments regarding the conviction versus those on the mistrial and examine whether the liberal/conservative media divide is being expanded or contracted in the #MeToo era. Although our research is in nascent stages, a brief review of comments across conservative and liberal sites indicates that many commenters seem to be more thoughtful about issues surrounding sexual assault. A *New York Times* reader writes, for example, "The old tricks of smearing the accusers didn't work this time. Thank goodness." On the other hand, for many Breitbart commenters, the shift in Cosby's status from defendant to felon initially appears to have made little difference in opinions about the events that took place between the celebrity and Andrea Constand. Comment after comment across the conservative site continue to emphasize Constand's personal choice in taking pills offered by the comedian, the lack of physical evidence in the case and the "money grab" evidenced by the civil suits that have been filed.

This initial review of comments suggests that, while the #MeToo movement has begun to give victims a platform in the public sphere, #MeToo is not a panacea. In fact, comments suggest that, for some, the presence of #MeToo has caused a doubling-down on gendered victim-blaming. As one *New York Times* commenter writes after Cosby's conviction, "Hell hath no fury like the #MeToo movement."

CONCLUSION

After the mistrial was declared, Bill Cosby's spokesperson publicly announced, "Mr. Cosby's power is back!" (Manchester 2017). The statement suggested the affirmation of Cosby's individual rights, but it also symbolized something greater. High-profile criminal trials are "docu-dramas" that invite and encourage the public to consider, engage and debate issues of social concern (Harris 1996, p. 225). As the only one of Cosby's accusers to testify in a courtroom, for survivors, Andres Constand's testimony was representative of a "collective truth" (Sterling 2017). For those sceptical of Cosby's guilt, the trial was a litmus test for the veracity of every

rape accusation. In the shadow of Election 2016, for some, the mistrial also may have signalled a vindication of a masculine status quo perceived as under threat by aggressive and assertive women.

Given the politically divided election and its aftermath, one might hypothesize that discussions about gender and sexual assault would differ across liberal and conservative sites. And there are, in fact, some significant differences. Commenters on perhaps the most polarized sites, Breitbart and the *Huffington Post*, for example, more often tended to deploy “controlling images”, using graphic terms such as slut, gold-digger or whore as shorthand ways to denigrate the social and legal status of accusers. On the *New York Times* site, the language used was more polite; however, sexist comments were no less common, couched in discussions of personal responsibility. An initial review of comments after the guilty verdict suggests that, despite advancements made by the #MeToo social movement, neither rape mythologies nor victim-blaming behaviours have subsided in the online environment.

Feminist scholars identify that rape mythologies continue to thrive, fuelled by historical assumptions and contemporary gendered roles and expectations; however, few have investigated social media’s role in perpetuating and enhancing these myths, and even fewer have explored how the myths are differently deployed across political spectra. Perhaps the most important conclusion of this chapter is that gendered rape myths know no boundaries. Comments on all sites suggested very little cross-pollination of ideas, yet, very similar conceptions of “real rape”, ideal victimhood and rampant false claims prevail. The persistence in defining the outcome of the election to conservative versus liberal media may have obscured that fault lines regarding sexual assault are deeper, more problematic and more complex than previously appreciated.

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PART III

Responses/Resistance/Experiences



CHAPTER 9

Animating Feminist Anger: Economies of Race and Gender in Reaction GIFs

Rachel Kuo

Focusing on reaction GIFs, this chapter attends to the possibilities of expressing feminist anger—how anger can be represented, communicated and circulated online. This chapter examines the racial and gendered politics of using GIFs for self-expression through feminist reaction GIFs. What does the GIF's format offer and foreclose in terms of animating feminist anger? I analyse feminist reaction GIFs through online affective economies of anger and circulations of digital raced and gendered bodies. The invention of race as technology shapes what bodies “can do” (Chun 2012; Ahmed 2006), including what people can do with their feelings. While reaction GIFs can function as performative gestures and rhetorical devices that animate feminist anger, attention must also be given to the question, which bodies animate anger and whose bodies circulate within the digital visual economy? This analysis of feminist reaction GIFs foregrounds feminist theorist Sara Ahmed’s figure of the “feminist killjoy” to locate how feminist reaction GIFs animate anger. I also discuss the process

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of meme-ification and the political economy of race and gender in digital visual culture, and end with an analysis of the form and aesthetics of “feminist killjoy” and “white male tear” GIFs.

A quick search for images tagged as “feminist” on the database Giphy reveals a mix of looped quotes by celebrities and politicians on what feminism is (and is not), pop culture references depicting women in “power” and also anti-feminist images that either depict violence against women or deride feminists as “ugly” or “hysterical”. The multiple significations of “feminist” in this database reveal the pervasiveness of misogyny in digital culture. The daily, repetitive affects produced by everyday experiences of online and offline racism and misogyny sink into the body, held in until it can physically hurt. *You’re disgusting, fat, ugly, stupid, miserable.* Loop. *You’re just pretending to be a victim.* Loop. *You can do anything ... Grab them by the pussy ... You can do anything*¹ Loop.

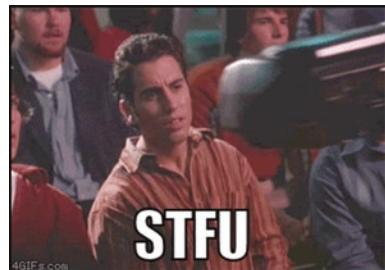
Audre Lorde’s speech “The Uses of Anger” (1981) describes how the painful processes of translating anger can collectively serve the interests of systemic change by producing collectivities across different experiences. Feminist anger becomes an arsenal useful against the oppressions that bring anger into being. If articulated with precision, anger can produce insights into power in order to recognize differences and generate change towards racial justice. Anger mobilizes political subjectivities by producing affective frames that shape politics. Sustaining focused anger can be laborious and tiresome. Sometimes, anger gets switched on and then off. It can be held in and later displaced. Anger can isolate. Anger breaks and bursts. Sara Ahmed calls this moments of snap (2017)—feminist anger breaks apart the comfort, preservation and protection of masculinity and whiteness.

While playful and humorous, GIFs can be used to animate feminist anger. They seem to animate what your body cannot—when you have to keep smiling, stay quiet or just make your own body smaller and smaller. In a meeting, a man keeps interrupting you, talking over you, and he can’t hear anything you have to say—**SHUT UP, SHUT UP, SHUT UP**—underneath the table you text an animated image to your friend across the table (see Fig. 9.1).

GIFs can perform ALL CAPS, **BOLD** anger that’s been held in, waiting to be released, waiting to be spilled over. They’re a moment of relief for the tightly coiled body. Yet GIFs also compress anger into shorthand, transforming anger into something else. Like what Harry Potter’s “riddi-

¹ Quote of Donald Trump recorded in 2005 and released in 2016. One month after the quote’s release, Trump was elected the 45th president of the US.

Fig. 9.1 STFU (shut the fuck up) GIF, extracted from *Mean Girls* (2004) scene when boombox hits character Jason in the mouth



kulus” spell does to the bogart, turning a creature of nightmares into something absurd and silly, the GIF turns the “STFU” (shut the fuck up) moment into one that is also “LOL”.

Focusing on reaction GIFs, this chapter attends to the possibilities of expressing feminist anger—how anger can be represented, communicated and circulated online. I contextualize feminist reaction GIFs within the constraints of ways women, specifically women of colour, can mobilize capacities for self-expression as well as navigate the racial and gendered politics of GIF use given the form of GIFs. What does the GIF’s format offer and foreclose in terms of animating feminist anger? I analyse feminist reaction GIFs through online affective economies of anger and circulations of digital raced and gendered bodies. The invention of race as technology shapes what bodies “can do” (Chun 2012; Ahmed 2006), including what people can do with their feelings. While reaction GIFs can function as performative gestures and rhetorical devices that animate feminist anger, attention must also be given to the question, which bodies animate anger and whose bodies circulate within the digital visual economy? In this analysis of feminist reaction GIFs, I open with Sara Ahmed’s figure of the “feminist killjoy” and locate how feminist reaction GIFs animate anger. Next, I discuss the process of meme-ification and the political economy of race and gender in digital visual culture. Finally, I end with a closer analysis of the form and aesthetics of “feminist killjoy” and “white male tear” GIFs.

FEMINIST KILLJOYS AND AFFECTIVE ECONOMIES OF ANGER

Sara Ahmed (2010a) theorizes the feminist killjoy as a wilful subject—and the naming of sexism, racism and other forms of systemic oppression is itself a wilful act. The feminist killjoy activates the notion that feminism hurts

men and others who benefit from systems of oppression. When feminists point out sexism or racism, they “kill joy” by bringing up an uncomfortable and unhappy topic and also by exposing fractures, costs and erasures of perceived peace and unity. In the US, the inalienable rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” place a high value on “happiness”, yet the feminist killjoy is estranged and alienated from happiness. Ahmed (2010) writes:

We can understand the negativity of the figure of the feminist killjoy much better if we read her through the lens of the history of happiness, which is at once the history of associations. Feminists, by declaring themselves feminists, are already read as destroying something that is thought of by others not only as being good but as the cause of happiness. The feminist killjoy refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness. In the thick sociality of everyday spaces, feminists are thus attributed as the origin of bad feeling. (Ahmed 2010a, 582)

The Toast’s Managing Editor Nicole Soojung Chung (2016) describes a moment at a party where a white woman says to her: “Do people ever tell you that you look just like everyone on that show [*Fresh Off the Boat*]?” *Fresh Off the Boat* is one of the only shows on network television centred around a Chinese American family—Nicole is also East Asian; the question evokes the common racial assumption that all Asians “look the same”. Mortified and caught in a moment wondering whether she should address the implicit racism behind the question, she has this realization: “*I am the only one who can make sure that everybody keeps having a good time.*”

The feminist killjoy is a raced and gendered figure, and her attempts to point out systemic flaws render her abominably unfeminine. There is often a social pressure for women and people of colour to “keep the peace” and make sure everyone else is “having a nice time” (Chung 2016). However, if racism and other intersections of oppression are brought up, people occupying positions that benefit from these oppressive intersections perceive these criticisms and interventions as intrusions. Rather than addressing these systemic injustices head on, the general social response sides with beneficiaries of privilege and protect the agent perpetrating oppression. To maintain peace, the social response focuses on defusing the moment of racial tension, as if it were a blip—a glitch in an otherwise functioning system. The burden falls on the marginalized to maintain the joy of everyone else, at the expense of their own joy. Happiness forbids discomfort. The minoritized subject must hold in their own discomfort in order to

maintain the happiness of the group. The plausible deniability of sexism, racism, classism and other forms of -isms “scaffolds a structure of interaction wherein critics ... are always-already in the wrong: oppressive or unreasonable, a source of bad feeling and interactional trouble” (Ahmed 2010a in Calder-Dawe 2015).

Because cis het eropatriarchy and white supremacy operate in a way that obscures, erases and naturalizes their very existence, those who point out their existence are perceived as creating racism and sexism, rather than observing or describing the already existing problems. The person who brings up these problems becomes the cause of unhappiness, rather than the oppressive system itself or the person who perpetuates oppressive ideologies (Ahmed 2010a). Protecting the perpetrator’s feelings becomes the social priority, enforcing norms of politeness, which also reveals group attachments to the ongoing practice of sexism and racism:

In appearing to threaten men, this figure protects male privilege by making women’s challenges to sexism appear vindictive and unfounded. This funnels attention away from sexism and gendered power and towards sites of masculine injury and the harms allegedly inflicted by feminism. (Calder-Dawe 2015, 100)

All of this is to say that working against systems of oppression can feel frustrating, thankless, lonely and futile. And yet. One can still find spaces of pleasure in this work. The feminist killjoy, as a persona, is a neologism made from the ideology that “feminists kill joy.” This identity of “feminist killjoy” is taken up by both critics and opponents of feminism as well as by feminists themselves. As performance is bound to identity, embodied performances construct identity categories in addition to reproducing existing social roles (Butler 1990 in Silvio 2010, 242). Feminists have wilfully and playfully embraced the “killjoy” persona through different embodiments and performances in response to both silent and outspoken critics of feminism, which acts as a process of re-signification. The next section examines how anger becomes animated and translated through the GIF as format.

ANIMATING ANGER THROUGH FEMINIST REACTION GIFS

GIFs are multi-modal linguistic forms that combine moving image, text and speech in a digital image in order to create a particular meaning—remixing any components shifts the ways the GIF can be understood and

used (Luu 2015a, b). As a medium, GIFs can be used by “speakers” to creatively and playfully convey gesture—they substitute the embodiment of the speaker. The GIF operates out of substitution and it works emotively—there’s no “right” word or simple emoticon for what one wants to say, so one selects a GIF instead. Within the feminist digital counterpublic,² animated reaction GIFs can cathartically offer aesthetic and affective pleasure as a way to redistribute and circulate anger and other “ugly feelings” (Ngai 2005).

Gestures enact different forms of ideological and institutional powers, and they also capture the world beyond the verbal. While gesture registers that which can’t be expressed in words, GIFs attempt to encode gesture into speech and text. The “insistent, ceaseless repetition” (Beckett 2016) of GIFs extends a straightforward message—*fuck you, I don’t care, deal with it* (see Fig. 9.2). Feminist reaction GIFs coexist within a “language community” that comes to define “microspaces of interaction” linked to networks of digital feminist publics (Agha 2015, 318).

Carrie Noland (2009) defines gestures as “learned techniques of the body” and the means by which “cultural conditioning is simultaneously embodied and put to the test” (2). In addition to acting as a “nonverbal form of speech and as a projection of bodily movement”, feminist reaction GIFs as digital gestures “produce affective and political forms of corporeality” (Rodriguez 2014). Here, Juana Maria Rodriguez’s method of queer gestures (2014) and Octavia Calder-Dawe’s (2015) description of interactional sexism as choreographed dance are useful for understanding how reaction GIFs work as performative re-significations. Discussion of gesture tends to linger on the residual and the suggestive. However, GIFs are substantively material and crystallize a moment. What makes them gestural is that they make up a future of possibilities (Rodriguez 2014).

Fig. 9.2 “Fuck you”
GIF with Margaret Cho



²I draw on Catherine Squires’ (2002) and Nancy Fraser’s (1990) idea of “counterpublics”, where members of marginalized groups circulate “counterdiscourses” that create different interpretations and representations of identities and interests.

Erving Goffman (1981) writes that changes in footing can be expressed in the management, production or reception of an utterance. Over the course of “speaking”, a participant constantly changes footing. However, in many cases, and here I specifically address the case of interactions that address racism and sexism, the footing is often uneven between “speaker” and “listener”—there are multiple layers of power dynamics in this type of talk. Because it interrupts good social feeling, the feminist killjoy’s speech is often perceived as “subordinate communication” that must be concealed. The metaphor of choreographed dance becomes useful in different applications where women negotiate interactions with other forms of oppression. “Talk” is interplay, full of “twists and turns”, yet there are “routinized sequences of these shiftings”—there is “dance in talk” (Goffman 1976, 310). Interactions with oppression as dance offer a helpful way to think about the “footing” that often takes place in these interactions. The lens of feminist practice through such interactive moments as choreographed dance opens up different formulations of moves and countermoves. GIFs offer a way to tap into feminist feelings and begin untangling ourselves from “footwork that does not serve us” (Calder-Dawe 2015, 104). When “killjoy” identity is imposed, the killjoy plays a key role in holding sexism in place by discouraging women from articulating feelings and effects of oppression:

The killjoy brings the choreography of sexism into conversation with another set of ingrained moves, affects and attachments: the conventions of polite, nurturing femininity many young women acquire (and some resist) over a lifetime’s worth of interactions. (Calder-Dawe 2015, 101)

In order to be heard and legitimated and also not dismissed as a “killjoy”, the possibilities of responses tend to be limited to registers that are calm and polite. However, feminist reaction GIFs function as a strategic defensive and offensive mechanism by reclaiming the killjoy figure and widening possibilities for responses (see Fig. 9.3).

Reclaiming the feminist killjoy subject can change the footing of sexist and racist interaction. The GIFs help the user articulate what is often difficult to do in person. “Queer gestures include the endless sequence of partial moves, interrupted starts, and disheartening breakdowns that occur when we dare to move beyond the possible” (Rodriguez 2014, 8).

GIFs are one way users can exercise agency digitally outside of the imposed “killjoy” identity—“agency is the power to alter those acquired

Fig. 9.3 “I may seem calm, but it’s a calm anger” GIF with Jessica Huang (actress Constance Wu) *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015) Episode 8, Season 2



behaviors and beliefs for purposes that may be reactive (resistant) or collaborative (innovative) in kind” (Noland 2009, 9). Protected by the screen and affirmed by the digital embodiments of one’s community, users can use GIFs as tools to move beyond the often limited spaces of resistance. Reaction GIFs are able to “speak” and “do” on behalf of the feminist principal. “Culture is embodied and challenged through corporeal performance” (Noland 2009, 2). Feminist reaction GIFs are an “extra” step users can add to their repertoire. Individual performative acts acquire meaning through social forms of “codification and iteration” (Rodriguez 2014). Not only do feminist reaction GIFs work as an “extra” step users can add to their repertoire, but they function as ways to index a group of users.

Animated GIFs allow a “possible mode of performative world making” through which feminists can use them to negotiate a relationship between self and world (Silvio 2010, 434). GIFs as gesture also offer an archive of social behaviours, creating a “socially legible and highly codified form of kinetic communication” (Rodriguez 2014, 6). However, in thinking about GIFs as practices of feminist resistance, one must also be attentive to the gendered, raced and classed nature of these images, as well as to other social identity markers (see note 2). If GIFs are a proxy for the self, they also reveal a complex and fraught world of semiotic ideologies (Manning 2009 in Silvio 2010).

Once common gestures are stripped from the original source material and turned into GIFs, these GIFs formulate a lexicon of gestural possibilities. Out of these possibilities, users can create repertoires of enregistered

expressions—remixed, “troped” and “normed”, reaction GIFs can cross different repertoire boundaries at different times. Gestures, particularly expressive and excessive gestures, are also gendered and raced—they also depend on previous codes of signification to generate meaning, which means that different forms of embodiments impact how a gesture is understood and read. The next section highlights the racialized and gendered conditions of GIF production and their operation within the digital visual economy.

WHOSE ANGER? CIRCULATING RACED AND GENDERED BODIES ONLINE

Teri Silvio (2010) discusses animation as embodied performance and the potential of animation as a “structuring trope” in digital media (422). Like the use of emoticons, users deploy GIFs to take up conventional poses to “make the gesture an embodied remediation of what is already a conventionalized icon of embodied affect” (Silvio 2010). Because GIFs are types of animation, and often re-animations of animations, their “life” comes from the reuse and re-creation and their “power” comes from the anonymous crowd (Silvio 2010). GIFs sequence together multiple images to form an animation that loops infinitely, but each animation is really just a snapshot of barely seconds of action. GIFs are simultaneously stripped from their original context while also being reinserted into a different context, producing a chain of reinterpretation. On its own and without context, a GIF produces a generic affect rather than pointing to the individual identity of whatever is represented by the image. If animation is broadly the “projection of qualities perceived as human—outside of the self and into the sensory environment”, GIFs are one type of medium that can work as substitution of the individual human body (Silvio 2010, 427).

Gestures are indexical of the world around us and depend on codes of signification, and in this way, gestures are tied to identities like race and gender. Even the act of identifying as a “woman of colour” is itself a political and social gesture. Juana Maria Rodriguez’s (2014) methodological and theoretical approach of “queer gestures” analyses the interplay between performance, law, embodiment and power. She describes gestures as “the inscription of social and cultural laws, transforming our individual movements into an archive of received social behaviors and norms that reveal how memory and feeling are enacted and transformed through bodily practices” (2014, 5). Unlike the “performance of self in everyday

life” where only one body can inhabit one role, GIFs work more similar to puppetry, where one puppeteer moves different characters (Silvio 2010). The animation of anger in GIFs, while offering release, sociality and humour, becomes an abbreviated solution. By becoming shorthand for anger, GIFs can limit the emotional range of anger and also become an “uncanny mimic” for emotion (Jackson 2016b). In this way, race and gender become significant in limiting or enabling the animation of anger. Whose anger is represented and whose body becomes animated?

Anger moves between signs (GIFs) and bodies (both user and bodies within GIFs), and emotions as a claim also depend on relations of power—processes of “being emotional”, of being “angry” characterize some bodies and not others, and also “make and shape” bodies as forms of action (Ahmed 2004). For example, “misandry” GIFs address ways feminism, which works to dismantle systemic patriarchy and build gender equity, has been oversimplified and accused by misogynists and anti-feminists that feminism is only just about “hating men” (hooks 2000). Rather than reject that description, some feminists embrace “misandry” by sharing GIFs that capture popular media images of women attacking men, such as: Black Widow (*The Avengers*) knocking men out of the way as she moves through the hallway, Hermione Granger punching Draco Malfoy (*Harry Potter*) in the face or Arya Stark hitting Joffrey Baratheon with a stick (*Game of Thrones*). However, the bodies used in these GIFs rely upon a “prototypical whiteness” (Browne 2015)—the white, feminine body becomes afforded the capacity to represent and enact anger.³ In addition to a “repertoire” of expression, when used as forms of digital self-expression, GIFs expose (and also demand) a limited repertoire of bodily representation. As GIFs, and memes more generally, usually draw from moments within popular culture and culture popularized, representations are also tied to commercial and mainstream media industries.

GIFs provoke feelings of “relatability” through “sameness” and identification—they are a “poor image” (Steyerl 2009 in Dean 2016):

The poor image is a subject or object whose definition exceeds her body, whose instantiation is contingent on her history, and on the “shared history” of all other subjects/objects like her, even when in the hands of oth-

³In 2015, Mikki Kendall started #RaceSwapExp, where women of colour and white men “swapped” profile images, which demonstrated the virulent online misogyny enacted against black women online.

ers...Like the poor image, the meme finds its home only in this circulation—its true content is the many bumps and bruises that have occurred along the way. It is a copy without an original—a copy of a copy of a copy, and so forth. For better or worse, a meme asks instead to be considered as its total sum presence in circulation. (Dean 2016)

In emphasizing the collective circulation of memes—the fungible circulation of representations—rather than content, Dean argues for the entwining of blackness and memes. In terms of GIFs, consumption, circulation and production are intertwined for the purposes of pleasure even in moments of anger. The use of reaction GIFs for animating feminist anger, as a mixture (and remixture) of play, humour and anger, then suggests that the question of whose body is used and animated to distribute anger becomes a question of feminist politics as well. The work of the loop abstracts away context, distilling snippets and fragments saturated with affect. Depending on the moment that GIFs extract away from, GIFs can reproduce trauma, suffering and vulnerability (Torres 2016). The conditions for circulation of GIFs can turn race and racialization into a product—in calling for a “social media image ethics”, Lisa Nakamura suggests attending to the genealogy and distribution of memetic culture (2014). “Gendered” and “raced” gestures get appropriated as GIFs, and digital embodiments of marginalized identities, particularly queer people of colour and women of colour, can be sites of devaluation, commodification and oppression when taken up by other bodies.

As Laur Jackson writes, “No digital behavior exists in a deracialized vacuum” (2017). Specifically discussing the overrepresentation of black people, vernacular and expression in GIFs and meme culture, Jackson argues that non-black uses of reaction GIFs puppeteer and playact through the black image and “disproportionately distribute” animatedness (2014, 2016a, b). Because GIFs as form isolate a specific moment and repeat it over and over, they also take on an exaggerated quality of expression. As affect becomes recognizable in moments of mechanical reproduction, Ngai’s description of “animatedness” as racialized other-ness demands attention to understanding how GIFs technologize the racial body (see also Fig. 9.4).⁴

⁴See also Minh-Ha T. Pham (2011) “Blog Ambition: Fashion, Feelings, and the Political Economy of the Digital Raced Body,” *Camera Obscura*, 26(1): 1–37, on how race and the political economy of the body frame consumption and circulation of fashion objects and images.



Fig. 9.4 “Angry” GIF of Beyoncé throwing phone, from the music video “Telephone” (2009)

The “affective meanings of animatedness ... of ‘being moved’ ... become twisted into the image of the overemotional racialized subject” (Ngai 2005, 91). On loop, the animation of anger becomes hyperbolic—a spectacle. To be animated is to be moved and the animation of racialized subjects often represents caricatured features and movements. The racial other is both animated by being manipulated, controlled and automated—and simultaneously too animated via an exaggerated expressiveness.

Digital reproductions of race turn claims towards racial identity into “types” optimized for further reproduction and circulation. Nakamura describes the etymology of “stereotype” as an example of machine language, a “mechanical device that could reproduce images relatively cheaply, quickly, and in mass quantities” (2001). Stereotypes, also ideas about people, “shape figures as recognizable social personae that circulate along identifiable trajectories across space and time” (Reyes 2016). Given Wendy Chun’s notion of “race as technology”, both processual and visual, as animations, GIFs *do* race, executing racialized performance in a continuous loop. GIFs enframe, store and transmit race as affective traits. The last section closely examines the form and aesthetics of “feminist killjoy” and “white male tear” GIFs as two ways of animating anger through different raced and gendered forms.

I'M A FEMINIST KILLJOY AND WHITE MALE TEARS ARE DELICIOUS!

The feminist figure, particularly feminists of colour, has been portrayed by a range of publics as angry, insubordinate and ungrateful (Ahmed 2010b; Tomlinson 2010). These justified feelings of anger become inoculated when feminist responses to issues of oppression are pressured to be harmless, pleasant and simple. (Mis)recognition as killjoy binds feminists to a choreography of niceness, harmful mores for “dampening” of feminist feeling, rather than its representations of feminism as threatening (Calder-Dawes 2015). As an internet meme, the visualization of “feminist killjoy” often juxtaposes rage, anger and fury with the cute, innocent and “girly”. On tumblr, blogs are dedicated to the misandrist activities of cute animals, such as “Misandry Bunny” or “Kittens and Misandry” (see Fig. 9.5a and b).

GIFs of the feminist killjoy also tend to combine the text with images of angry little girls (see Fig. 9.6a and b). Through reification, the image of little girls, combined with the emotion of anger, works to dismantle qualic recursivities of angry versus nice, hostile versus approachable. The angry little girls, often white, invert notions of feminized politeness by combining qualities of anger with qualities of cuteness. Additionally, this inversion



Fig. 9.5 (a) Misandry bunny is proud to be called a feminist killjoy. (b) Misandry kitten responds to “Men’s Rights Activism”



Fig. 9.6 (a) “Feminist killjoy” GIF with a little girl in pink glittery top crushing a soda can. (b) “Fuck that sexist shit” GIF with a little girl in princess costume holding her middle finger up

plays upon the idea of being “in on the joke”, although the joke in this case is one’s awareness of how systemic power dynamics function.

One feminist reaction GIF in particular is the image sequence of an animated little girl in a monster costume (left, bottom) with overlaid text “FEMINIST KILLJOY” in capital letters. The costuming of the little girl is reminiscent of Ahmed’s description of feminists as “affect aliens” (see Fig. 9.7).

Some might know that this GIF references the character Boo from the movie *Monsters, Inc.* Boo is a two-year-old human who enters a world of monsters that are all terrified of small children—the GIF is stripped from the scene near the end of the movie after Boo overcomes her own fear of the monster Randall and then also remixed by addition of the text. The character Boo is no way really a “feminist killjoy”, so the “feminist killjoy” is “willed” into being by the user. In this way, the GIF also works as a declarative performance: “*I am a feminist killjoy.*”

This particular GIF was listed in Bust’s “20 Feminist GIFs That Totally Speak the Truth” as the GIF you need “when you just need to shut someone down” (2015) and Buzzfeed’s “33 Feminist GIFs You Need in Your Life”. Authors have curated a lexicon of metapragmatic GIFs intended for “when you just need to shut someone down” or when someone “says ‘you’re a feminist’ like it’s a bad thing”. As a reaction, the “feminist killjoy” GIF is meant to embody hostility towards an opponent. In this image, even without sound, the image of her mouth opening in an “O”, alongside her scrunched facial expression, suggests that she is shouting, “ROAR!”, a subtle cross-reference to a feminist mantra from US pop

Fig. 9.7 “Feminist killjoy” GIF with Boo from *Monsters, Inc.* (2013)



culture, “I am woman, hear me roar”.⁵ The gesture of her tentacled arms raising up over and over again imply also aggression.

Boo exemplifies the “visual rhetoric of cuteness” (Pham 2015); she simultaneously embodies anger and frustration while also using the quality of cuteness. Sianne Ngai describes this as an aesthetic response to the “diminutive, the weak, and the subordinate” that also has the capacity to “provoke ugly or aggressive feelings, as well as the expected tender or maternal ones” (2012, 53)—and also cuteness as commodity. As a signifier, cuteness is semantically flexible and also “accommodates” (Lukacs 2011). Cuteness names an encounter with perceived difference in the power of the subject and the object; as cuteness plays a role in the commodification of social difference and also represents a kind of passive, compliant helplessness,⁶ cuteness also follows a racially gendered logic that aestheticizes “stereotypes” of racialized femininity. Feminist killjoy GIFs demonstrate a reversal of cuteness into its opposite. Ngai suggests that attention to violence is always implicit in a relationship to cute objects—that there is “phantasmic investment in the narrative of a cute object’s revenge” (2012, 86). In this way, Boo as “feminist killjoy” can “totally speak the truth” through an aesthetic form that renders feminist critique palatable and “comfortable”.

By juxtaposing the phrase “feminist killjoy” with Boo, this GIF insinuates at how absurd it is when people react anxiously or fearfully to feminism’s critiques of social injustice as well as points towards the misrepresentation of feminists as aggressive monsters. GIFs offer aesthetic and affective pleasure even while “killing joy”; feminist reaction GIFs circulate in what Ahmed calls affective economies:

⁵ “I am woman, hear me roar” is the opening lyric from singer Helen Redding’s 1975 single “I Am Woman.” Redding never intended the song to become historicized as a feminist proclamation, yet the lyrics were made significant beyond the creator’s original intention.

⁶ Ibid., 60, 65.

Affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs (=the accumulation of affective value). Signs increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more signs circulate, the more affective they become. (Ahmed 2004, 45)

Within affective economies, the intensity of attachment of subject and object—in this case “feminism” and “anger”—mediates a relationship between psychic and social and between individual and collective; emotions align people with communities and align bodily space in digital space. Reaction GIFs embrace the function and state of anger through the proliferative production of snarkily humorous images and text—the “angry feminist” as an unhappy subject circulates through GIFs—“happy objects” aligned with affective communities that invest in such “objects” (Ahmed 2004). While feminist anger tells an unhappy narrative, the form of the GIF translates this anger into a “happy object” (Ahmed 2010a). GIFs convert bad feelings, like anger, into happy commodity-objects. As Ahmed writes, “Happiness puts us into intimate contact with things—we attend to those things we find delightful.” Through their circulation, GIFs as happy objects accumulate affective value. The GIF both animates feminist anger while also rendering it into an object for consumption and circulation within affective economies.

Conceptions of feminism as harmless and moderate are a deceptive ruse—the act of demanding change should not be confused as acts of goodness and kindness. Yet when feminism doesn’t present itself as mewling politeness, there is often moral, social and political backlash. As Joan Russ wrote in her 1972 article for the *Village Voice*:

That bad things are done to you is bad enough; worse is the double-think that follows ... to condemn misandry is to have higher standards of conduct for women than for men. It is to be so frightened of feminism per se that not a taint of ordinary human corruption can be allowed into it. It is to accept the idea of oppression only on the condition that the real, ugly effects of oppression be denied. (Russ 1972)

Similar to the “Your Tears Are Delicious” meme, where one celebrates the defeat of someone else by revelling in their misery, the “white male tears” meme embraces the symbolic defeat of patriarchy, although the dismantling of the structure has not yet happened. “Drinking” the tears is an act that embodies and emboldens feminist strength as one constantly labours in resistance of patriarchy. “White male tears” GIFs are then an

“ironic embrace” of misandry or the “man-hating” label that affixes feminism (Hess 2014). *Medium* editor Jess Zimmerman writes, “It’s inhabiting the most exaggerated, implausible distortion of your position, in order to show that it’s ridiculous.” This GIF can be used at the end of a narrative or dialogue where someone cries “reverse sexism” or “not all men”. As a gesture of resistance, these GIFs may be circulated amongst feminist counterpublics refusing to apologize for their resistance against oppression as a “sorry not sorry” type of response (see Fig. 9.8a, b, and c).

As indexical replicas, these GIFs typically depict celebrities from popular movies or television shows crying or expressing sadness and loop together snapshots that dramatize the moment by isolating the image from its original context. The looping hyper-dramatizes the performance of sadness, rendering the performance inauthentic or disingenuous. Rather than mocking legitimate social issues that impact men at various intersections of masculinity or mocking men for showing emotion, these GIFs are typically used to comment specifically on men’s defensiveness and backlash on feminist demands and observations. When used, the GIF animates feminist mimicry of this defensiveness.

In writing about male weeping as performative and constative speech acts, Boaz Hagin suggests that “we should look for ends, not causes. Tears



Fig. 9.8 “Male tears” GIFs (from left, right, then centre) with (a) Jon Hamm, (b) David Tennant as the Tenth Doctor in *Doctor Who* and (c) Zac Efron in *Charlie St. Cloud* (2010)

do not just communicate an inner state; they also attempt to do something to change the world and the weeper” (2008, 110). Applied to “white male tears” GIFs, the exaggerated crying creates a subject that is himself hyperbolic. Tears perform symbolic work—they are often perceived as corporeal, material manifestations of grief and suffering. However, crying is also gendered—it is frequently perceived as “perverse, feminizing enjoyment of temporary weakness” (Hagin 2008, 119). For women, tears tend to render our subjectivity as flawed in that we are perceived as excessively emotional. “White male tears” GIFs parody the ways women’s tears have been dismissed as “overreactions”. Particularly useful in moments where oppression is revealed, thus causing the unhappiness of others, these users take up these GIFs to embrace the “feminist killjoy” persona through celebrating the symbolic unhappiness of others, specifically the unhappiness of those who are iconizations of white supremacy and patriarchy. The “white men” depicted in these GIFs resemble the subjects whose joy has been killed through revelations of social injustice.

CONCLUSION

“Gendered and racialized frameworks feed into politicized understandings” (Kim 2014) of radical, intersectional feminism that create discomfort, anger and “moral panic” amongst gatekeepers that are often out of proportion (Thompson 1998 in Kim 2014). Feminists that refuse to accept unjust societal conditions that include violence, harassment, silencing and other daily tactics of marginalization are depicted by different publics, from mainstream media to anti-feminist counterpublics, as disruptive and full of rage (Kim 2014). We must be attentive to the potential and limits of feminist reaction GIFs. We cannot confuse this type of play with the extinguishing of real oppression—as a strategy, GIFs poke fun at oppressive interactions, but may also “underplay the seriousness” of systemic inequity (Calder-Dawe 2015).

Yet the significance of GIF use is that digital platforms and objects can create and provide shared space for feminists to flourish in community together. In these spaces of being among others, there is fun and joy in disruption. Reaction GIFs offer one way to share feminist feelings and imagine manoeuvres against oppression. Future work on this topic may consider a discourse analysis of the specific moments of interaction where GIFs are deployed by different users. Situating these GIFs in as they are

selected and used in combination will allow a further understanding of how reaction GIFs work as modes of resistance.

Feminist reaction GIFs enact Ahmed's (2010) closing quote in her essay "Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)": "There is solidarity in recognizing our alienation from happiness, even if we do not inhabit the same place (and we do not). There can be joy in killing joy. Kill joy, we can and we do. Be willful, we will and we are."

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CHAPTER 10

Politics of #LoSha: Using Naming and Shaming as a Feminist Tool on Facebook

Arpita Chakraborty

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the new feminist intervention in India against sexual harassment (SH) through the online weapon of anonymously listing sexual offenders. The publication of the list on Facebook—known as the List of Shame (or #LoSha)—was inspired by the #MeToo campaign following the Hollywood Weinstein affair and was composed through a collection of first-hand survivor narratives. A list of 70 names of alleged academic sexual offenders was first shared by a lawyer based in the US, Raya Sarkar, and became viral on Facebook. This chapter will look at how this campaign used naming as a risk-taking tool to directly point at the lack of effective institutional frameworks within academic spaces. In doing so, it successfully used the online space of Facebook to create a feminist debate around the issue of SH transcending geographical and hierarchical barriers and to raise questions regarding the viability of the established feminist recourses against SH.

Subramanian (2015) had already pointed out a difference in the mode of activism of younger generation feminists in India from their predecessors,

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but #LoSha divided the feminist academic space down the middle. The more experienced feminists rejected it as a public trial or witch hunt—in a reversal to the feminist understanding of witch hunt by the likes of Silvia Federici (see Siapera in this volume)—whose lack of evidence could be a threat to the larger feminist objectives of fairness. An intense backlash to this position came from another school of feminists who upheld the list as a radical and necessary protest against the dependence on institutional procedures which were time-consuming, cumbersome and non-existent in most places. #LoSha thus gave rise to an intense public debate on SH in academia for the first time in India, to be entirely held on the internet. What makes this case unique is the internal discursive debate it created within Indian feminism about radical interpretations of the feminist politics of risk-taking and its implications.

Using the methodological tool of situated critique (Bannerji 1995), in this chapter I will utilize my own experience of participating in the list as well as in the larger feminist debate to discuss the politics of risk-taking and solidarity and the implications of list-activism. In doing so, the list has established the role of cyberfeminism (Daniels 2009) in India and surfaced a new intersectional autocritique of the academia based on caste, class and gender. Though questions regarding the method remain, the use of Facebook, Twitter and Google documents for providing survivors an anonymous voice promises new boundaries of empowerment and fear.

The second section of the chapter discusses the temporal occurrence of #LoSha in Indian digital spaces. The third section discusses the aftermath of the list, especially the ensuing debate within feminist circles about “finger-tip activists” and the cyber activism of new feminists. This debate was also marked by the *Savarna-Avarna*¹ debate discussing the privilege endowed by the caste system on certain sections and the implications of #LoSha on Dalit students entering academic spaces of privilege without the cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984, 1989, 1991) that upper-caste students and faculties enjoy. The fourth section is devoted to the debate on #LoSha from a Dalit feminist standpoint and explores these privileges in detail. The fifth section of this chapter discusses this debate and how it has unmasked new feminist practices and critiques through use of digital spaces, leading to a shift in the movement around sexual harassment.

¹Savarna refers to those belonging to the upper castes in the hierarchical caste system practised in India. Avarna refers to those in the population who are considered outside the caste system, such as the Dalits and untouchables.

#MeToo in Indian Academia

Riding on the wave of Twitter and social media, the #MeToo movement (Verso Report 2018) arrived in India from the world of Hollywoods and Weinsteins in late 2017. Women soon started sharing their tales of harassment and what soon became apparent was the pervasive nature of such experiences among Indian women. Soon, the movement entered Indian academic sphere when Professor Christine Fair published a list of her sexual harassers in academia over the years on Facebook with the tag #him-too—prominent Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty featured in her post (Fair 2017). Fair’s post created a debate within Indian academics, and soon many were sharing their experiences, though the perpetrators remained unnamed.

Two days later, a student of University of California, Davis (UC-Davis)—Raya Sarkar—published a list of sexual harassers in Indian academia as a Facebook post. The list, which she called the list of shame, was sourced from first-hand accounts of survivors who wished to remain anonymous, and soon she was receiving more and more accounts of such experiences. Her post became viral, shared more than a thousand times among students and academicians and activists in India, garnering further media attention but few responses from the accused. The hashtags #thelist and #LoSha were soon circulating on Facebook and Twitter, and debates on the rampant nature of sexual harassment in Indian academic spaces and impunity enjoyed by cis-hetero academic men have continued since then.

By the end of November 2017, 72 names of Indian male academicians were featured on the list (Chadha 2017), including one accused student from the University of Oxford. The public discussion generated from this list continued for months, and at least one of those named, Professor Lawrence Liang of Ambedkar University Delhi, was found guilty by the Sexual Harassment Committee of that university after the survivor filed a complaint (Mandhani 2018). Liang is now reported to have approached the Delhi High Court. However, the critical achievement of #LoSha has been the long-standing debate it has triggered within the Indian academic space about the issue of sexual harassment. Till April 2018, when this chapter is being written, the discourse around #LoSha continues to unfurl. It is with this recognition that I will focus on some aspects of the debate in the coming sections.

“FEMINIST CIVIL WAR” OR A LONG DUE DEBATE?

I will focus principally on the debate which ensued among feminists in cyberspace by this act. The first organized response from Indian feminists to the list came the same day the list was published, from a group of senior feminists situated in Delhi. It was published in the blog *Kafila*² (Menon 2017) and read as follows:

As feminists, we have been part of a long struggle to make visible sexual harassment at the workplace, and have worked with the movement to put in place systems of transparent and just procedures of accountability. We are dismayed by the initiative on Facebook, in which men are being listed and named as sexual harassers with no context or explanation. One or two names of men who have been already found guilty of sexual harassment by due process, are placed on par with unsubstantiated accusations. It worries us that anybody can be named anonymously, with lack of answerability. Where there are genuine complaints, there are institutions and procedures, which we should utilize. We too know the process is harsh and often tilted against the complainant. We remain committed to strengthening these processes. At the same time, abiding by the principles of natural justice, we remain committed to due process, which is fair and just. This manner of naming can delegitimize the long struggle against sexual harassment, and make our task as feminists more difficult. We appeal to those who are behind this initiative to withdraw it, and if they wish to pursue complaints, to follow due process, and to be assured that they will be supported by the larger feminist community in their fight for justice.

The claim of this statement, signed by 12 feminists on behalf of the whole movement created a debate within the Indian feminist movement that went on for weeks. This was followed by sustained debates and heated discussions mostly on cyberspaces like Facebook, Twitter and blogs like *Kafila*. The debate, even described as a “war” (Ghosh 2017) by some, was seen as between two age-divided feminist groups—one made of experienced older generation of feminists who were in favour of following the due processes available for redressal, and the other group of young

²One of the accused sexual harassers in the list, who was subsequently found guilty by his university committee, was a founding member of this blog, though no mention was made of it in the statement. In ensuing debates in the comments section, questions were raised about this absence of any declaration of association. For more, see Menon (2017) comments section.

feminists with no historical memory who were attempting to “name and shame” those perpetrators who have been successful in escaping the nets of “due process”.³ I agree with Gopal (2018) that this is a “falsely polarized battle”—for one, feminists like V. Geetha and Mary John have stood behind the list, pointing out the despair due to failure of institutional processes which could have led to the students towards a move like this. Second, bearing in mind the complex geographical and political diversity of the Indian women’s movement, it is a fallacy to consider a statement issued by 12 intellectuals as representative of the entire movement. This also points towards the marginalization of rural and Dalit feminists and indicates a form of hierarchy biased towards urban, upper-class feminist obfuscation of multiple voices within the movement.⁴

Srila Roy (2017) has also pointed out that this generational reading of the feminist struggle and the angst about the erasure of feminist struggles of previous generations brings along “an assumption that feminist knowledge and practice is one, singular thing that can be reproduced, intact, over successive generations. It is therefore consistent and unchanging”.

The construct of a singular victim is also a fallacy of theorizing sexual violation from a position that is almost narcissistic in its approach to marginalization. Until now, the presence of a victim⁵ in the form of a surviving body has been necessary as evidence on which the discourse of sexual violence has been based. The visible body of the victim, her narrative, her dress are the voyeuristic pleasures on which cases of sexual violence come to light. Violence and voyeurism are the twin pillars of sexual violence in academia.⁶ If a survivor files a complaint, the details of her plight are the basis of her

³For an overall summation of the two sides of the spectrum of this debate, see Roy (2017), Chadha (2017) and others in the EPW Engage article series, “Power and Relationships in Academia”.

⁴For a elaborated foray into the history of the Indian women’s movement, please see documented history, *The History of Doing* by Radha Kumar (1989), *Women’s Studies in India: A Reader* edited by Mary E. John (2008) and *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women’s Movement in India* by Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah (1992).

⁵I use the term “victim” here to point at the pleasurable narrations of incidents of sexual violence which imposes the victim role on the survivor, and the portrayal of media of the survivors in that light.

⁶Even though the Sexual Harassment Guidelines 2013 ensures anonymity to the complainants, this is hardly the case in reality. My access to and participation in the student communities of Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi University and Ambedkar University Delhi in Delhi has always revealed to me the identity of the complainants, as it did to many others. This affects

public trial—was she drunk? What was she wearing? What time of the day did it happen? What was she doing with him at that time? Only socially acceptable answers to these questions will lead her to be accepted as a survivor.

It is this aspect of the process surrounding incidents of sexual violence that #LoSha has subverted. There is no visible victim; there is no visible body. What exactly was the intention behind the publication of such a list? In an email interview (28 April 2018), Sarkar states:

My intention was not to make people aware of how grave the problem of sexual harassment in academia is because every woman in academia already knows its gravity. I created the list to make students wary of creeps in academia, a tool to navigate through the rape culture. The onus should never be on women; however, if women do benefit from knowing who the creeps to avoid are then I'm glad if my list were of help. It also brought closure to the women who suffered through trauma in silence. I did not expect the list to go viral or create a furore, neither did I expect a barrage of sexual harassment apologia from many feminist figures. I did expect the list to be criticised because it was impulsively created however I did not expect 'progressive' people to de-legitimise it using the rhetoric of rape apologists.

As a graduate student in India, I had participated in the 2012 protests and the descriptions of "what was done to the female body" played a crucial role in mobilizing the sustained protest against a brutal rape case. Protest is important and necessary; however, what I am pointing to here is the prerequisite of a violated body in order to raise the compassion necessary for such a protest. Would the anonymous survivors of #LoSha have garnered more support if they revealed their identity and the grotesque-ness of the violation done to them? These questions bear in mind when I engage with one of the foremost critiques of the publication of the list: the undisclosed identity of the complainant.

I recognize and agree, it is important to mention here, with the critique that different degrees of sexual violence must not be equated. #LoSha had taken this critique in its stead and the Facebook list published by Sarkar was soon followed by a Google document which listed the alleged harassers but also, in some cases, when the harassment took place and the nature of the incident. Some of the names, however, remained without details. This was done in order to maintain anonymity of the survivors in these

sexual harassment survivors' decision to approach the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) and is contingent on whether they are ready to face the implications of identity revelation.

cases. And it is the importance of this anonymity that is at the heart of the politics around the list. Sarkar ([2018](#)) also considers the critique very valid:

There were various degrees of violence such as molestation, rape, cajoling, sexually coloured remarks, and even attempts to pimp women out to professor's friends that I essentialised into one category of sexual harassment. I understand that doing so does minimise many forms of violence to an extent, as does the law. However when a professor comments on their student's breasts, their behaviour it is still sexual misconduct and not something we should normalise in society just because someone did not get raped and mutilated in the process- grading sexual violence minimises the gravity of sexual misconduct. When sexual violence is graded on terms not set by survivors, it further normalises various behaviours that perpetuate rape culture.

Normalization of violence through gradation is a much-needed conversation in the context of sexual violence. To what extent must the violated body be visible for the violence to be punishable? Here we are reminded of the raging national solidarity during the 2012 protests after the brutal rape of Jyoti Singh ([Shandilya 2015](#); [Lodhia 2015](#)), or the rape of eight-year-old Asifa ([Independent 2018](#)), and numerous other cases where not the act of sexual violation but rather the degree of brutality became the rallying point of solidarity. What does it say about the politics of solidarity on the basis of which broader societal aspirations of change are manifested? This introspection is long due in the feminist movement both globally and within the specific context of Indian academia. To focus on the crime without an available body on which the crimes were committed, to move the focus from the survivor to the alleged perpetrators is an important step in raising these questions. And in my opinion, this more than anything is the contribution of the list.

CLASS AND IMPUNITY IN FEMINIST ACADEMIA

The impunity enjoyed by sexual harassers in academic spaces is due to a variety of reasons. Social, cultural and symbolic capital ([Bourdieu 1986](#)) accessible to academics makes it difficult to hold them accountable even in the most verifiable cases. However, the necessity of evidence is in itself a huge barrier to justice in cases of sexual harassment. Survivors are not believable, as Menon ([2017](#)) points out:

Why not just accept the word of the complainant? Because we all know there are complex motivations behind complaints of this nature, especially among students themselves. We are aware that sometimes such complaints, for instance, are the easy way out in rivalry among student organizations, or may be motivated by caste hierarchies or other considerations. Each instance must be investigated thoroughly through transparent procedures.

What then do young women—many of whom are first-generation university goers—do to ensure that they are not exposed to the traumatic experience of sexual harassment? If feminists continue debating on the complex motivations which can lead students to make such complaints, then where exactly can students find a space more sensible with their lived reality?

One has to take cognizance of the fact that the debate, still ongoing, is about the effectivity of institutional processes in cases of sexual harassment. Steering the debate towards why such incidences do happen in the first place is difficult. Feminists both for and against the list accept that sexual harassment in Indian academia is a lived reality. Clearly, due process has not proved to be deterrent enough to stop such incidences. In this failure lies the crux of the despair felt by students who support ventures like #LoSha. These are all young men or women with feminist politics, people who clearly share the same ideology and have grown up reading and admiring the people against whom they are lashing out now. The Indian feminist movement within academia has been hierarchical—it has traditionally been feminist faculties who have formulated strategies and processes. Admittedly, students have been made a part of the process, but the processes were themselves formulated by a generation who are not currently exposed to the predatory sexual culture of academia to the extent students are.

This is an important difference to dwell on. While both sides have been interested in addressing the issue of sexual harassment, students want to not only put a halt to it but also call out the hierarchical policy formation in which they have a negligible say. Institutional processes are in place to bring an offender to justice, but what can stop them from committing the offence? Heterosexual, upper-caste cis-men enjoy a form of impunity that has remained unchallenged for long. #LoSha's naming and shaming confronts it by striking the social capital on which their impunity is based. It is not frivolous but a creative political tool which strikes at the heart of the enemy—of what they treasure the most.

V. Geetha (*Indian Express* 2017) addressed the concern about shaming:

We need to also be less anxious about ‘naming and shaming’. In those routine and horrible instances of sexual harassment and violence that unfold in innumerable villages and towns, of a day, perpetrators are known, but are seldom shamed. In fact they revel in their authority to sexually hurt those they deem subordinate. Yet, for those who fight their impunity, it has been important to speak, name and hold accountable those who have caused such suffering—to point to the utter wrongness of what is often taken for granted. So the question is not what naming in the university can achieve—it might or might not achieve legal redress, but it is the barest acknowledgement that those who take their authority for granted, be shown up for what they are, privileged, entitled, unmindful persons, who draw on their intellectual power to control young minds and bodies.

#LoSha took the instrument of hearsay and Chinese whispers—one that has been used by women for ages to create a defensive barrier against sexual predators—into a wider network. The whispers were taken beyond the limits of immediacy and shared with a wider network of students, incoming students and wider participants in the academia, thanks to the internet.

CASTE AND FEMINIST CHALLENGES OF #LOSHA

There is a huge body of literature on the access of marginalized communities to cyberspace and the potential of transformation promised by such access.⁷ The initial transformative potential of the internet has been scrutinized after observations such as this one by Sollee (2017):

...people from marginalized groups face the highest levels of harassment online. Black and Latinx people are more likely to be harassed online than white people; every ten seconds someone calls a woman a “slut” or a “whore” on Twitter; 25 percent of women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four have reported being sexually harassed online; and 26 percent of women in that age group have been stalked online, too. (p. 138)

A South Asian perspective of how this marginalization plays out is gained from Radhika Gajjala’s (2013) *Cyberculture and the Subaltern*. Despite this, women have not given up on the transformative abilities of the internet.

⁷See, for example, Fernandez et al. (2003), Kolko et al. (2000) for a feminist and race critique of political potential of cyberspaces.

As Maari Zwick Maitreyi pointed out at the round-table discussion of the International Feminist Journal of Politics Conference at University of San Francisco on April 3 2018, the accessibility of internet—despite all its issues related to security and uneven exposure—has for the first time given a space to young Dalit feminists. From their positions of marginalized subjectivities discussed by others, they now have their own voices heard across spaces which have been traditionally Savarna and upper class. Academia is only one such space. The role of cyberspace in building solidarity, resistance as well as experimenting with newer forms of identity formations have been investigated in some detail by Gajjala in her forthcoming book ([2019](#)).

Before venturing further into the caste-related critique of #LoSha, I would like to turn the readers' attention to some of the statistics on violence faced by Dalit women. According to the UN Special Rapporteur's report on violence against Dalit women published in 2013 (United Nations [2013](#)),

Dalit women's experience of violence across four Indian states shows that the majority of Dalit women report having faced one or more incidents of verbal abuse (62.4%), physical assault (54.8%), sexual harassment and assault (46.8%), domestic violence (43.0%) and rape (23.2%). In less than 1% of cases were the perpetrators convicted by the courts. In 17.4% of instances of violence, police obstructed the women from attaining justice. In 26.5% of instances of violence, the perpetrators and their supporters, and/or the community at large, prevented the women from obtaining justice. In 40.2% of instances of violence, the women did not attempt to obtain legal or community remedies for the violence primarily out of fear of the perpetrators or social dishonour if (sexual) violence was revealed, or ignorance of the law, or the belief that they would not get justice.

The Diplomat ([2016](#)) reports that according to the National Crime Records Bureau, “crime against Dalits—ranging from rape, murder, beatings, and violence related to land matters—increased by 29 percent from 2012 to 2014. In 2014, 47,064 cases of crimes against Dalits were registered, up from 39,408 in 2013 and 33,655 in 2012.” The suicides of Dalit students such as Rohith Vemula are too often a result of institutional discrimination and vilification (Chandra [2016](#)). This then is the broader context in which Dalit women aspire to receive education. This is also the broader societal context under which the other participants of academia come into the educational “field”, to use the Bourdieusian term. To expect the experience of Dalit women to be radically oppositional to this broader societal context of violence is not only elusive but also positively oppressive.

A campaign against sexual harassment cannot but mark the hierarchical structure on which survivors find their experiences placed. In the Indian academic space, the trajectories of sexual experiences are much safer for heterosexual cis-men than it is for homosexual or trans men or women. In this hierarchy, Dalit women often find themselves in the most vulnerable position—the target of predatory behaviour of both upper-caste and Dalit men. Lying at the intersection of caste-based and gender-based discriminations, they bear the brunt of the ugliest face of the intellectual elites. In fact, teachers with Dalit identities are often marginalized by both students and teachers alike as “quota” teachers. The humiliation faced at the hands of upper-caste academics does not take long to turn sexual in nature. The choices left in front of Dalit women are to either leave the chance of education they had achieved for themselves after a long struggle, or bear the brunt of unwanted sexual advances. Menon’s (2017) comment in the previous section already proves what awaits a Dalit woman in case she takes the step of filing a complaint—aspersions on her motivations are quick to come.

Drishadwati Bargi (2017) Dalit critique of Indian academic spaces has been able to powerfully dissect casteist practices in Indian academia. She argues that Dalit bodies can never be casteless, while Savarna bodies are seen as Savarna only in the presence of a Dalit body. The Savarna body can, thus, enjoy the possibility of anonymity, but a Dalit body remains always marked. This notion of being a labelled presence within academia influences not only experiences within the class of humiliation, aggression or sexual violence but makes academia a closely monitored segregated space. In the case of a Dalit sexual harassment survivor, her caste identity continues to label her. Hence, Bargi (2017) points out the importance of consideration of caste in a struggle against sexual harassment:

Making caste irrelevant is doubly injurious in any such discussion of harassment in university spaces. It not only accepts the logic of exclusion but also puts the onus of bearing the caste on the DBA person. One of the major achievements of the list is that it removes this veil and privilege of anonymity that Savarna men have enjoyed as public intellectuals, scholars, revolutionaries and critics.

CYBERSPACE AND THE NEW FEMINIST PRACTICES

To forget that #LoSha comes with a history of transnational history of feminist digital movements is to ignore the alternative feminist practices of the new generation of “finger-tip feminists” (Menon 2017). #Losha comes with its

own historical trajectory, memories of battles fought in the field of internet that is different but no less political in its repercussions. #LoSha came in the wake of the #MeToo movement, but it was forerun by campaigns like #Blacklivesmatter where black women took the lead and made their voices visible. Black Twitter has perhaps transformed digital space in the last two years that we will comprehend only in waves—it has made the margins of possibility bigger.⁸ So did campaigns like #Whyloiter, the Pink Chaddi campaign and Girls in Dhabas⁹ in India. The utility of Twitter and Facebook as political tools became evident in the specific habitus (Bourdieu 1989) of young, first-generation female students who have access to cyberspace. #LoSha is a test of that very same potential. And its success lies in the debate that it was able to generate in the ensuing months, as the squeamish reaction of established patriarchal academicians clearly displays.¹⁰ Use of social media has been at the centre of the debate generated by #LoSha. Who is a real activist? Can cyber activism be counted as “real” feminism?

And, most importantly, can resorting to naming on social media be seen as symptomatic of the complete breakdown of the moral fabric of feminist activism or as a last resort for those facing years of harassment in a space where procedural challenges have remained largely ineffective and confined to urban areas? After all, public trial is not unprecedented in Indian feminist spheres. Even while the debate about #LoSha was raging, feminist activists such as Ayesha Kidwai were holding a *Jan Sunwai* (public trial) of the Jawaharlal Nehru University’s vice-chancellor against his various repressive activities, with the support of students from the university. Why then, does one public trial gain more legitimacy than others? Is it again because even as feminists, we continue to expect the visible violated bodies as evidence?

The transnational nature of academic relationships and harassment often puts perpetrators beyond the purview of traditional sources of justice through due process. I interviewed one of the complainants of #LoSha whose assaulter is based in another country. It is incredulous to expect her to “keep faith” because there is no systemic redressal even available to her! Is

⁸ The #MeToo campaign was also started by black activist Tarana Burke.

⁹ Girls in Dhabas is a primary example of our cultural contextual familiarity transcending limitations of borders online. An online campaign started in Pakistan demanding women’s access to public spaces (dhaba literally means a roadside food stall) and it had soon gained popularity in India as well.

¹⁰ See in particular Shiv Visvanathan’s (2018) essay and Priyamvada Gopal’s (2018) rebuttal to it.

she expected to travel to another country and file a complaint at the accused's university? And yet, his impunity remains unquestioned, but the credibility of her voice is not. With globalization and neoliberalization, migration and mobility has become a regular aspect of academic life. Both students and teachers live their academic life, access archives and sources, teach, research and imbibe multiple spaces and positions—often in multiple countries. These mobilities grant possibilities of intellectual growth, but at the same time they are operating in an academic world which has not accepted its implications.

For a student living in India sexually harassed by a student of Oxford, what due process is available, she asked (interview on 22 February 2018). A student from a university in Delhi was sexually harassed by a visiting professor from another country for a short period of time. Both the cases point out the limitations in effectively bringing the accused to justice, and either no redressal mechanisms are available, or their social and political capital ensure that the harassed do not even approach any procedural mechanism (Shukla and Kundu 2017). Students in India often travel across states to attend a university of repute. This migration leads to separation from emotional and social structures of support, further adding to their vulnerabilities. Understanding the socio-political vulnerabilities of students in India needs to take into account all these factors—and only then will the burden of the institutional process added to the trauma of sexual harassment be visible. This brings us also to the effect of casteist discriminations in Indian academia and its role in the impunity of sexual harassers.

However, the transnational nature of the creation of the list, the “sharing” of it and the use of spaces of power at specific academic pockets across the world is perhaps the transformative potential that we are yet to fully explore. Sarkar is a student of UC-Davis and she is also not an Indian citizen and this gave her the space to circumnavigate social and legal implications of this action. It would not have been possible for a student participant in the Indian academic space—for legal, social and career reasons. Support for Sarkar’s list poured in from academics all over the world—as also for those accused in the list—but this showed that the debate was not confined within national boundaries anymore. Digital feminism was only mirroring the lived reality of transnational spaces through which academic life courses through in today’s world.

The #list was often equated with witch hunting, blackening of faces, or Khap Panchayats, the Stalinist gulags and a host of other repressive anti-feminist practices (see for example, Visvanathan 2018). Witch hunting has already been discussed in some detail by Siapera (2019) in this volume.

Suffice it to say that all of these are hypermasculine, violent, repressive patriarchal structures which have been used since the Middle Ages to control and violate women. Uncounted women have been burned, raped and violated. To equate this with a list on social media whose primary aim was to prevent students from facing such violations seem counter-feminist and ignorant of the historical and sociological relevance of such practices. Shukla and Kundu (2017) point at the classist and casteist bias of regular revelation of the identity of accused coming from lower class and lower caste spaces by feminists. Is it more the identity of the accused, rather than the form of accusation, that is the issue of concern here?

CONCLUSION

While thinking about the long struggle of those who are being criticized, we have to also think about the risks that we as students are taking. There are high stakes—careers that might be affected, job opportunities, reference letters, articles to be published—are we also acknowledging how much is at stake in a space like academia for us to mark ourselves publicly as critical of these people? What are the measures available to a first-generation, Dalit student whom due process fails? As Gopal (2018) crucially points out:

In addition to drawing attention to multiple *institutional* failures on the question of sexual harassment, what the admittedly desperate act of the LoSHA sought was to draw attention to an endemic *culture* of harassment, predation and abuse in academia. If due process is vital for changing institutions, what mechanisms can be deployed to change cultures?

Around 27.5 million women in India are affected by sexual violence, but only 1% of victims report it to police (Raj and McDougal 2014). This endemic culture remains unaddressed by legal recourse for harassment already committed. The cultural, symbolic and intellectual capital in possession of an academic puts them in a position of privilege that remains unquestioned despite long histories of sexual abuse. Class position and upper-class privilege further consolidate this social impunity. This very privilege has been brought into question by the online publication of the list. I do not imagine it as a replacement of the legal and institutional procedures—rather it was seeking to question the privilege of the “normative” heterosexual men in Indian academia. Nishant Shah (2017) and Gita Chadha (2017) has located the importance of the list as a “new site of

protest”, and it is indeed one which protests not only an event of sexual harassment but the cultural impunity enjoyed by harassers as a form of symbolic violence that has been silencing its survivors.

This chapter raises more questions than finding answers. It seeks to reveal the fissures in the Indian women’s movement—class privileges of activists themselves, socio-economic capital often coming in the protection of the accused from feminist quarters and the urgent need to discard the hierarchy of real feminism versus cyberfeminism, of age and experience versus lived reality of sexual exploitation. These questions are also raised in a creative academic engagement with digital activists from South Asia by Gajjala in her forthcoming book (2019). In her conversation with Sarkar and Ayesha Vemuri (Chap. 7), Radhika Gajjala has pointed at the possibility of the digital becoming a safe space, as it indeed did during the days of #LoSha where survivors could interact and share their experiences with each other without the fear of repercussions. The role of social media as a safe space in the context of sexual harassment needs to be examined further. However, Gajjala’s (2019) effort to bring diverse digital voices into a conversation leads the way towards a new practice of feminist activism.

Academic training does not include even a basic degree of gender awareness in Indian academia, unless you are specifically taking courses like gender studies. Hence, the utopian dream of “*bhadralok*” academics whose intellectual training has offset their patriarchal upbringing and heteromasculine performativity is laughable. Can a list like #LoSha be a permanent solution towards eradicating the epidemic of sexual harassment? No. Can it replace institutional processes of justice-seeking in such cases? Also no. However, it points out the complete loss of credibility of institutional processes in Indian academic spaces currently and has pointed out the need to redefine and restructure such processes to make offenders truly accountable. It has revealed a hierarchy within the feminism activist ranks that has to be addressed. And it has proved once again, that “finger-tip” feminism has a role to play in Indian women’s movement in the days to come. I conclude with the words of Nivedita Menon (1995), whose feminist works led me to the path of feminist academics, and I still agree with her erstwhile self:

At this historical moment, feminism must reconsider its engagement with the language of rights and the law. The experience of the last decade not only raises questions about the capacity of the law to act as a transformative instrument, but more fundamentally it points to the possibility that functioning in a manner compatible with legal discourse can radically refract from the ethical and emancipatory impulse of feminism itself.

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CHAPTER 11

Affective Resistance Against Online Misogyny and Homophobia on the RuNet

Tetyana Lokot

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I discuss the expressions of online misogyny and homophobia on the Russian internet (RuNet) and the emergent forms of resistance against these expressions of hate online. Gendered hate on the RuNet emerges in an overall climate of ignorance, fear and distrust towards “difference” in Russian society. On the one hand, such a climate is underpinned by legal regulations that restrict personal freedom, limited and often inaccurate media coverage of gender and sexuality issues, and conservative social and religious norms. On the other, expressions of abuse and intolerance are pervasive on the internet because it is a comparatively free space for expression in Russia—though this freedom is quickly shrinking. I argue that, in an environment where free speech is selectively restricted and where the application of legal sanctions and protections is often arbitrary, personalized expressions of affect and emotion in digital networks can act as forms of feminist resistance against the normalization of misogynistic and homophobic rhetoric online. In the chapter, I briefly

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discuss the Russian internet freedom and censorship context with a focus on gender and sexuality, provide an overview of the situation around the normalization of misogyny and homophobia on the Russian internet, as well as activist responses to these, and examine a Russia-specific case to support my argument.

INTERNET FREEDOM AND CENSORSHIP IN RUSSIA

In modern Russia, where the federal mainstream media are largely run or co-opted by the state, the internet remains a comparatively free space for expression (Oates 2013), though this freedom is increasingly contested by the government as it aspires to control all spheres of mediated social life. The Russian state, therefore, employs a system of “information controls” (Deibert et al. 2010) to police online debates and activity and to mitigate the imagined threats to its authority that a free internet and a burgeoning civil society might pose. The “information controls” include various practices, policies and regulations that circumscribe access to information of social, political or civic import, as well as to means of expression and debate online. Along with purely technical features used to deny access or monitor user activity, such as filtering, digital surveillance and use of malware and phishing, the “information controls” in Russia also include more amorphous measures, such as “laws, social understandings of ‘inappropriate’ content, media licensing, content removal, defamation policies, slander laws, secretive sharing of data between public and private bodies, or strategic lawsuit actions” (Citizen Lab 2015). These norms and regulations are often deliberately vague and arbitrarily applied, resulting in an overall climate of uncertainty and even fear about what is and is not permissible online and what repercussions inadmissible behaviour might bring. The Russian state regulators encourage this nebulous understanding and propagate certain normative ideas in order to normalize censorship and the silencing of “inappropriate” speech. This is achieved through framing the internet as space that is inherently dangerous and risky and through presenting content circulated online (that many users see as an alternative to state-controlled mass media) as “unreliable” and “biased” (Ognyanova 2015).

This climate of normative uncertainty, coupled with systematic development of regulatory policies and technical solutions to curtail dissent on the Russian internet, while preserving a modicum of free expression, has led to the emergence of what scholars term “networked authoritarianism”

(MacKinnon 2011; Maréchal 2017). This is a regime in which the state is able to leverage technical practices and normative pressure to police online expression and dissuade explicit resistance without necessarily using crude methods such as mass blocking or filtering.

Censorship as a tool of selectively silencing voices in the Russian digital sphere is closely tied to this notion of normalizing bans on “questionable” speech, however, the definitions of what kinds of content and expression are considered offensive are amorphous, even given the proliferation of relevant legislative acts. In Russia, norms criminalizing “incitement of hatred” are rolled into a broader set of legal measures aimed at combating extremism, and that necessarily dilutes these anti-hate measures and paints them in a political light. The anti-extremist legislation enshrined in the Criminal Code has been used by the Russian state to prosecute calls for political extremist activity, terrorist activity and xenophobic attacks, but also to bring charges against individuals expressing criticism of the authorities and their politics online (Yudina 2018). Prosecution of speech under these laws has especially focused on online activity in recent years: the SOVA Centre reports that, in 2017, 205 out of 213 conviction verdicts for “extremist statements” (96%) were handed out for materials posted on the internet (Yudina 2018). At the same time, these anti-hate speech measures offer little protection to certain categories of individuals, and they are rarely, if ever, used to combat misogynistic or homophobic rhetoric online.

NORMALIZATION OF HATE AND SILENCING MARGINALIZED VOICES

Alongside the “anti-extremist” censorship measures that in theory aim to combat hateful rhetoric but rarely apply to gender or sexuality issues, Russia had introduced a number of laws specifically aimed at silencing certain kinds of speech considered unacceptable. These include the 2011 Law on Protection of Children from Negative and Harmful Information that instils a ban on “information that might cause fear, anger, or panic; justify violence and unlawful behavior” and bars child pornography, the “promotion” of alcohol or drug consumption, self-harm and suicide (President of Russia 2011). These amendments were preceded by several similar laws adopted at the regional level in ten Russian regions. The federal law has been amended several times since 2011, most notably in 2012

to establish a blacklist for websites with offensive content and in 2013 when an amendment added the “propaganda of nontraditional sexual relationships” as a category of harmful content under the law. This latest amendment, often referred to as the “gay propaganda” law, was met with a squall of criticism from human rights groups and LGBTQI+ activists who argue that the legal norm fosters intolerance and makes some of the more vulnerable members of Russian society even more marginalized.

According to the amendments, “promoting nontraditional sexual relations to minors” is considered to be:

spreading information aimed at instilling in minors nontraditional sexual arrangements, the attractiveness of nontraditional sexual relations and/or a distorted view that society places an equal value on traditional and nontraditional sexual relations or propagating information on nontraditional sexual relations making them appear interesting. (*Rossiyskaya Gazeta* 2013)

In practice, the law makes the vaguely worded “propaganda of nontraditional sexual relationships to minors” a criminal offence and institutes fines of up to €130 for individuals and €26,000 for organizations. The law also stipulates that if the “propaganda” is carried out online or via media outlets, the fines are higher. This has led to multiple cases of LGBTQI+ activists being fined for their public work: for instance, activists Nikolay Alekseyev and Yaroslav Yevtushenko were the first to be convicted and fined in 2013 after protesting the new law near a children’s library in Arkhangelsk; Aleksandr Suturin, editor-in-chief of the regional Russian newspaper *Molodoy Dalnevostochnik*, was fined €1175 in 2014 after publishing a story about a schoolteacher who had allegedly been fired for being gay; and Elena Klimova, the founder of LGBTQI+ youth support organization and website Deti-404, was convicted in 2015 and fined €680 for her online activity (Sheerin 2017).

Though the “gay propaganda” law is central to the normalization of hateful speech and silencing of vulnerable communities in Russia, other measures have also contributed to the worsening climate. In 2014, Russian and foreign same-sex couples were banned from adopting children (Anishchuk 2013); in 2015, transgender individuals were banned from driving (Walker 2015). In the same year, two deputies from the Communist Party introduced a draft law which, if passed, would ban public expressions of “non-traditional sexuality” and would effectively outlaw “coming out” (Human Rights Watch 2015). Additionally, in 2017, Russia decrimi-

nalized certain kinds of domestic violence, downgrading them from criminal to administrative offences and reducing protections for vulnerable women and minors (Manuilova 2017). Such measures are indicative of what Kondakov (2014) terms as heteronormative citizenship as they are aimed at silencing and excluding certain subjects—such as LGBTQI+ individuals—from political discourse and public social practices. The mainstream heteronormativity is compounded by what Riabov and Riabova (2014) refer to as the “remasculinization” of Russian society, a collective identity politics that uses gendered discourse to create an attractive, but predominantly masculine (and heteronormative), national image of Russia. Turbine also notes the trend towards the decimation of women’s rights in Russia, evident in attempts to limit women’s autonomy and their reproductive rights together with an overall disregard for gendered violence, resulting in what is effectively “state-sanctioned misogyny” (Turbine 2017).

Cumulatively, these legal norms—often vague, unhelpful or overtly discriminatory—contribute to a growing atmosphere of permissiveness for homophobic voices and misogynistic rhetoric. This is also often remediated and amplified by mainstream media: Persson’s study of Russian media coverage of the “gay propaganda law” finds that state-controlled mainstream media outlets construct hegemonic narratives representing non-heterosexual subjects as threatening to the cohesiveness and survival of the nation (Persson 2015), with only a few independent or opposition media voices contesting these ideas of belonging and normativity. In a study of the lingual choices in Russian media coverage of LGBTQI+ and sexuality issues, Pronkina also finds that the media discourse around these themes is complex and contradictory, mixing elements of stigmatization and victimization of the LGBTQI+ community as a “social minority” (Pronkina 2016, p. 83). Temkina and Zdravomyslova (2014) note the growing hostility towards feminism in post-Soviet Russian political and social spheres and suspicion from all sides of the political spectrum that feminists would derail the patriarchal order, promote multiple sexualities and question gender roles. Feminists and women’s rights activists have also been singled out in public discourse: Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill has branded feminism as “very dangerous” as it “proclaims the pseudo-freedom of women” (Elder 2013).

The influence of these public discourses, both legal/political and mediated, on public opinion cannot be discounted. According to a 2015 survey by state-run polling agency VTsIOM, 80% of Russian citizens were against

gay marriage (compared to 59% in 2005); 20% of respondents said LGBTQI+ people are “dangerous” and therefore must be “isolated from society” (up from 12% in 2004); 41% believed that people with “non-traditional sexual preferences” should be persecuted by the authorities in order to “exterminate the phenomenon” (Litvinova 2015). Human rights activists have also reported that the number of homophobic attacks in Russia has increased since 2013. A 2014 report by Human Rights Watch, based on interviews with Russian LGBTQI+ activists and individuals, documents multiple instances of harassment, intimidation, violent attacks and “doxxing” by anti-gay activists and vigilante groups (Human Rights Watch 2014). Many of these attacks are documented, with videos deliberately posted online by vigilante groups, but the acts remain unpunished.

Wilkinson finds that the Russian authorities attempt to cloak their repressive regulations under the mantle of “traditional values”, thus making homophobia and misogyny central to an “increasingly nationalist and populist regime” of “moral sovereignty” (Wilkinson 2014, p. 365), contrary to international human rights standards. Coupled with arbitrary application of censorship in the online sphere and impunity for harassment and violence, these norms and measures turn the Russian internet into an increasingly uncomfortable space for vulnerable voices and limit free expression for marginalized groups, while normalizing expressions of homophobia and misogyny.

ACTIVIST RESPONSES TO HOMOPHOBIA AND MISOGYNY ONLINE

The emergence of legislative regulations perpetuating inequality under the guise of preoccupation with morality and family values while offering little protection to vulnerable minority groups, as well as the dominant media discourse that assists in silencing marginalized voices and normalizing homophobia and misogyny, poses significant challenges for LGBTQI+ and women’s rights activists in Russia. In Johnson and Saarinen’s study of gender regime change in Russia, they contend that authoritarian governments tend to close political opportunities for contentious activity and to contest the framing of activists’ claims (Johnson and Saarinen 2013), narrowing the space for feminist and civil liberties activists’ efforts and their voices. While they have developed several strategies for challenging exclusion and marginalization in the public arena, the atmosphere of violence

and hateful rhetoric also have an impact on their everyday lives. Tatiana Vinnichenko, a teacher and chairperson of the Russian LGBT Network, told IFEX in a 2017 interview that the surge in anti-LGBTQI+ sentiment had affected her own life and work. Vinnichenko said she regularly receives threats and insults online and it makes her feel that her sexual orientation and her activist work have made her “an outcast in society” (Sheerin 2017). Vinnichenko’s feelings mirror those of many other civil liberties activists in Russia and reflect the high personal cost of their activism. Despite awareness of the populist nature of the homophobic and misogynist norms and the political reasoning behind their promotion, LGBTQI+ individuals in Russia often exhibit self-blame, victimization trauma and moral suffering (Soboleva and Bakhmetjev 2015). In this regard, it is important to consider how resistance against homophobia and misogyny can be understood not only on the strategic level of movements, organizations or communities, but also on an individual and personal level. Especially on the Russian internet, where free expression is precarious, personalized human rights discourses of individuals have the potential to break through the silences around certain issues imposed by the legal and normative activity of those in power. I argue that, along with broader strategies of national and transnational action employed by Russian LGBTQI+, feminist and civil liberties activists to resist homophobic and misogynistic hate, personalized, affective micro-activism also emerges as a key online tactic of resistance to the normalization of hate and the silencing of marginalized voices.

Drawing on European cases, Wilkinson (2014) delineates several common modes of interaction between LGBTQI+ activist groups and the local political and social environment. These strategies include “morality politics” (reaching out to the broader public), “incremental change” (building internal coalitions to engage with governments) and “high-profile politics” (transnational action to bring about change). Russian civil liberties activism in recent decades has focused on using a rights-based and identity-based discourse (Kondakov 2013) to advocate for equality, tolerance and adherence to basic international human rights norms. To this end, they have engaged in a significant amount of “high-profile politics”, including public events and international court appeals, hoping to nudge the authorities towards international rights norms. Though faced with increasing resistance and pressure, including state-sanctioned violence and repressions, these efforts have remained the most visible and newsworthy from an international perspective.

While many civil liberties activists and members of the LGBTQI+ community see rights claims, visibility and recognition as conducive to social change (Stella 2007), on a domestic level, where homophobia and misogyny are often seen as shorthand for traditional values (Wilkinson 2014), activists have found themselves engaging in “morality politics” to weaken popular support for anti-gay legislation, contest the state’s patriarchal and masculinized interpretation of traditional values, and generate a more tolerant attitude towards minorities and vulnerable groups. These efforts to engage with the public often seek to contest the demonized imaginaries of LGBTQI+ individuals and feminist activists propagated by state officials, conservative players and representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church. Instead, the strategy is to “rehumanize” public perceptions of the LGBTQI+ community through personal engagement, public “coming out” of prominent individuals such as journalists and celebrities, or public figures speaking out as allies (Wilkinson 2014). This personalization also extends to select independent media efforts to combat homophobia by publishing personal stories of gay, lesbian and queer individuals (Leonova 2013) and allowing them to discuss their experiences in the context of Russian social realities. Additionally, activists draw attention to individual cases of anti-LGBTQI+ violence through affordances of digital technology, data gathering and visualization, by creating media databases, interactive maps and detailed reports of attacks and incidents of harassment (e.g., Kondakov 2017; Sexuality Lab 2017).

There have also been prominent public campaigns against sexual assault and domestic violence in Russia, building on feminist themes and aiming to combat pervasive misogyny. One of the largest spontaneous online campaigns was #ЯНеБоюсьСказать, or #IAmNotAfraidToSayIt, a 2016 campaign started by a Ukrainian activist named Nastya Melnychenko that encouraged thousands of women in Ukraine and Russia to share stories of assault and harassment on the Cyrillic segment of the Web (Lokot 2018). A more recent campaign emerged on Russian social media in January 2018 around a news report about a student raping and killing his ex-girlfriend, allegedly out of jealousy. Several media reports accused the victim of “provocative behaviour” and “driving” the ex-boyfriend to his actions “with her indifference” (Meduza 2018), as well as digging up selfies she had posted online, including some in her underwear. In response, a Belarusian Instagram blogger wrote a post condemning the criticisms of the victim with the hashtag #этонеповодубить (#thisisnotareasontokill) and invited her followers to share their own reflections, as well as frank

photos of themselves. The post gained over 3000 likes and the hashtag went viral, with thousands of women and men protesting against victim-blaming, gender violence and shaming (Meduza 2018). Disclosures about sexual assault and gender-based violence remain widely viewed as shameful or taboo in the Russian public eye, and these highly intimate and personal online narratives contributed to raising awareness about the normalization of misogyny and exposing the silences around victims of violence. They also attempted to contest patriarchal and traditionalist ideas about sexuality, gender roles and power in Russia.

FEMINIST ACTIVISM, PERSONALIZATION AND AFFECT

This individualized approach to “morality politics”, at least in part, I argue, draws on the history of feminist activism, its tradition of merging the personal and political causes and a recognition of politics permeating everyday actions (see Collins 1998; hooks 1989). Shaw (2012) finds that subjectivity and discursive focus lie at the centre of feminist activist action, as they merge “mundane” concerns with discursive outcomes that are clearly political in nature. While this trend of “personal as political” predates digital platforms, modern feminist scholars argue that networked feminist activism embraces the affective and technocultural aspects of social media when addressing issues such as sexual violence and rape culture (Rentschler 2014). Thrift (2014) finds that feminists use online networks to disrupt dominant discourses and construct memetic counter-narratives to contest the status quo. Rodino-Colocino (2014) argues that feminist hashtag events (e.g., #yesallwomen, #MeToo or #IAmNotAfraidToSayIt), a particular emergent format of online activism, show how digital feminist resistance can succeed in connecting debates around specific events to broader discussions of rights and liberties. While there have been persistent attempts to depoliticize feminist movements by underscoring their personal nature, Young (1997) contends that personalized use of networked media nevertheless provides opportunities for action to feminist activists. Especially in societies where certain voices are excluded from the public deliberation process, personal expression on networked online platforms plays an important role in routinizing political and rights-based engagement and in offering spaces for alternative voices.

Feminist scholars stress that the individual-level narratives shared through online networks are important as they help capture people’s attention to engage them in political discourse as well as creating a per-

sonal connection, often through appealing to feelings or emotions. Clark (2016) argues that narrative form and dramatic, affective performance are central to the practice of feminist resistance. An evocative personal expression can build on the capacity of feelings and affect to resonate and be intensified through digital circulation and repetition (Karatzogianni and Kuntsman 2012) and can focus the attention of social media users on cases of prejudiced or hateful behaviour online, especially if it also resonates with their personal experiences. Acts of feminist and civic resistance can become meme events (Rentschler and Thrift 2015; Thrift 2014) that amplify everyday acts of homophobia and misogyny and make them eventful and political. These affective expressions of resistance, built on common networked practices, can raise awareness of and further politicize problematic manifestations of hate online.

The affective and discursive components of online speech and activist practices are important elements of the personalization of gender and sexuality politics in Russia. They speak to the everyday, embodied political and rights issues of marginalized and silenced individuals. Examining them can show what activist expression and digital resistance may look like when they deal with issues concerning bodies, personal safety, and emotional trauma in the broader context of normalized hate, harassment, homophobia and misogyny. The case of Deti-404's founder Elena Klimova examined in this chapter presents a compelling illustration of personalized, affective resistance through digital, textual and visual means and elucidates how subjective narrative tactics and the use of affect and juxtaposition might serve to achieve a discursive shift, questioning the consequences of exclusion and silencing for marginalized voices in an atmosphere where homophobic and misogynistic hate speech are seen as the norm.

BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE AND WHAT THEY SAY TO ME

Klimova is the founder of Deti-404 (Children-404), a support network for LGBTQI+ youth in Russia. Her group offers psychological and community support to LGBTQI+ teenagers and children, including those who face violence and harassment because of their sexuality. Deti-404 operates predominantly online and has pages on Facebook and Russia's most popular social network VK, apart from a standalone website (Luhn 2015). The organization's name is a play on the "404 Error: page not found" warning displayed on the Web when a page cannot be located or does not exist. As the group's original VK page suggests, "every 20th fam-

ily in Russia is bringing up an LGBT child—these are the children-404, invisible to society” (Deti-404.LGBT youth 2013). For its activity online, the group has faced multiple complaints from conservative lawmakers and private individuals accusing the community of “propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations” and several lawsuits, some of which were dismissed (Human Rights Watch 2014). Klimova as the online administrator of Deti-404’s pages was eventually found guilty of violating the propaganda law in 2015 and fined €680 for her online work (Sheerin 2017). Authorities have also threatened to blacklist the group’s VK social media page but have so far refrained from doing so. Regardless, the organization now runs several groups on VK (two of them, including the original one, contain archives from 2013 to 2015 and 2015 to 2016, respectively). While the organization has faced vitriol from lawmakers, teachers and parents, it remains one of the few safe online spaces for Russian LGBTQI+ youth to discuss their issues and find support. The VK page, for instance, publishes almost daily anonymized posts where teenagers share their stories and describe their struggles, harassment, violence and the emotional trauma they deal with because of their sexuality.

Klimova herself has faced mounting public criticism since creating the online community in 2013. Because of her work and growing public profile, she has public pages on most social networks, where she receives multiple online comments from other social media users. These often deal with her work with Deti-404 but also with her own sexuality and LGBTQI+ identity. In April 2015, Klimova published a photo album on her VK page called “Beautiful People and What They Say to Me” (Klimova 2015). In the album she combined the profile pictures of social media users with the threatening, often profanity-laced messages they had sent her when commenting on her page. The photos depict Russian social media users in their everyday lives but are juxtaposed with their hate-filled, obscene comments. When Klimova initially published the album in April 2015, it contained only 29 images (Rothrock 2015), but has since grown to over 500 photos (as of April 2018). The album is public and has open comments, where Klimova’s readers engage with the images she posts, their protagonists and their words. As an ongoing project, the online photo repository emerges as a living act of affective resistance to hateful speech online, as it seeks to contest the traditional definitions of what is “normal” and raises awareness of the power of words and discourse in digital networks.

The images selected by Klimova for her album are taken from the public profile pages of the users who leave hateful comments on her page.

They depict people in situations that are casual and intimate, typical of the kinds of mundane visuals people usually share on social media: posing with their pets or their children, pictured while sightseeing or out in the woods, at an outdoor concert or in wedding garb. The individuals in the photos are often smiling, sometimes serious. Some of the images are edited or enhanced, and others deliberately poorly lit or overprocessed—the usual range of selfies and profile photos. The text Klimova pastes over the images, however, is vicious and obscene, rife with swearwords, violent threats, homophobic and misogynist themes, and that creates a jarring juxtaposition between these people’s identities as private individuals and public homophobes. Klimova disguises the last names of the users, so they remain half-anonymous, existing before our eyes only in their utterances and their visible selves captured in their own photos, the two often clashing in shocking disparity.

“Go and fucking kill yourself before they come for you!!!” writes a smiling woman hugging a bouquet of roses in her profile picture (Fig. 11.1). “People like you should be locked up.” “I hate this shit. Gunning you down, you little bitch, is just the beginning of what you deserve”, posts a man pictured alongside a baby goat. A meticulously made-up young woman is portrayed alongside her comment, “Hey, cunt, if you don’t reply to me again, they’ll be looking for you and your little homos for a long time...” (Fig. 11.2). “I’ll be one of the first to set fire to the stake you’re going to burn on. You’ve even got the eyes of a druggie, you vomit-stained piece of shit”, writes a man from a photo with a smiling wife and kid on a tourist boat (Fig. 11.3). The images in the album go on and on, juxtaposing mundane, private lives of social media users with their public expressions of homophobia and misogyny in Klimova’s comments. Neither the images nor the comments are anonymous or “friends-only” in reality—but they are never presented in such intimate proximity as when Klimova’s intervention layers them one over the other. This new juxtaposition allows Klimova to ask the viewer to think about the identity of the “haters” and about how their “normality” can coexist with their “extraordinary” hateful, homophobic rhetoric when their words are aimed at someone like her.

Klimova chooses not to comment on the abuse herself, at least verbally, apart from assigning the title of the album. Instead, she lets the combination of images and words speak for her. In this respect, she seems to allow the affect—of hate and of surprise at its context—to speak on her behalf.



Fig. 11.1 Anonymous woman with bouquet. Courtesy image, Elena Klimova, VK

In some way, these affective expressions allow her to resist the discourse of silence on LGBTQI+ issues in Russia which Kondakov (2013) posits exists alongside the articulated discourse (tolerated by the majority). The silent discourse circumscribes what is left unsaid but also asks who can have the power to “not say” things. By choosing to speak through contextualizing the (hateful) discourse of others, Klimova at once points to the outrageousness of what is tolerated as public speech and underscores the fact that her own voice is being silenced in this situation as the subject of homophobic and misogynist hate speech.

Kuntsman (2008) discusses hate speech as a powerful force and refers to it in terms such as “words that wound” (Lawrence III et al. 1993, p. 5) or linguistic injury (after Butler 1997) stressing the vulnerability of the subjects of hateful speech and the real injury enacted or created by the hateful rhetoric, be it homophobic or racial. In her own research on

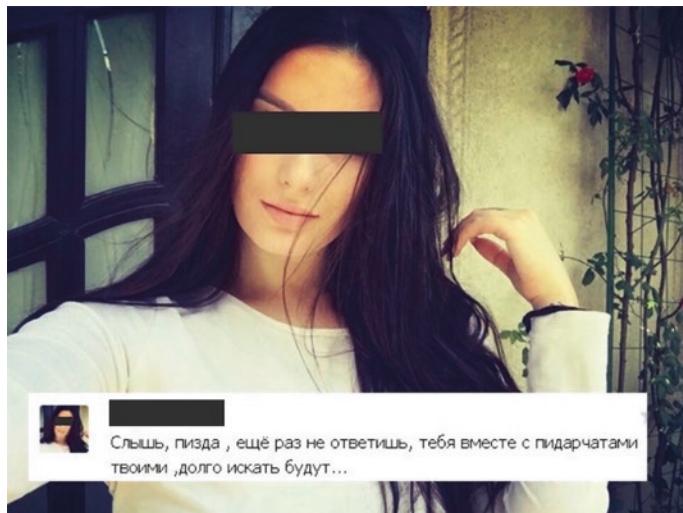


Fig. 11.2 Anonymous woman. Courtesy image, Elena Klimova, VK

homophobic expression among Russian Israelis, Kuntsman also refers to hate speech as a kind of “affective sociality” (2008, p. 280) in that it is able to structure the “feeling of a reality we come to experience” (Kuntsman 2008, p. 266) as a combination of the lived and felt experience of social life that is always both external to the subject and subjectively internal. Klimova’s collection of hateful homophobic utterances acts as such a conduit of affective sociality, presenting on one level the confusing “structures of feeling” around the juxtaposition of people’s performed daily lives and their expressions of hate online and, on another level, her own “structure of feeling”—how she lives and feels, bombarded with hateful and obscene messages from seemingly “beautiful” people on social media. In this way, Klimova’s intervention echoes the advice of Butler who suggests that there is a need to loosen the link between act and injury to “open up a possibility for a counter-speech” (Butler 1997, p. 15). The shocking comments, displayed on a background of smiling faces and sunlit landscapes, emerge at once as more shocking and less powerful. They are shocking because they are set against the “normality” of human existence and “traditional values”, yet they also make us question how humane and tolerant these “traditional values” and mundane humanity are if they allow for such hate to be expressed. The comments are also seen as less powerful in that



Fig. 11.3 Anonymous man with family on boat. Courtesy image, Elena Klimova, VK

Klimova is able to subvert the haters' own words and to show how violent and threatening they are in themselves and how hate speech works to exclude certain subjects from the “normality” of enjoying the pleasures of everyday life depicted in the images. By arranging the online performances of strangers on their own profile pages and on her own page, Klimova orchestrates an engaging affective performance (Clark 2016) of her own. She presents it as an ongoing narrative of hateful speech and offers the juxtaposition of seemingly average individuals and their words that aim to wound as a dramatic comment on the realities of LGBTQI+ individuals in Russia. Klimova asks the viewer to consider who is included and excluded from “normal life”, who gets to define what is “normal” and whose values matter, who gets to speak and whose voices are silenced. The digital repository is constantly updated, signifying that the contestation of identities and the stream of hate speech are ongoing. Whose smiling face and obscene threats will be added to the gallery next?

CONCLUSIONS

In essence, Klimova's collection of images reads as a powerful act of personalized, affective resistance to the normalization of homophobic and misogynistic hate speech. It presents a dramatic snapshot of the lived reality of LGBTQI+ individuals on the Russian internet and the abuse and hate they face. It is all the more riveting as the snapshot is constructed entirely out of the performances of those who produce the hateful speech: the only framing added by the subject of the abuse is the juxtaposition of people's private identities and public homophobia. Such digital resistance emerges in an environment of selective online censorship and repression of "undesirable" voices and identities, underpinned by legal restrictions on individual freedom and incendiary media coverage of gender and sexuality issues, as well as conservative social and religious norms. Klimova's activist tactic demonstrates the ringing silences around certain issues and the active attempts to prevent certain communities from speaking for fear of "propagating" their way of life. It also shines the light on the very traditional values and norms promoted by the "moral sovereignty" approach of the current Russian regime, questioning their humanity and highlighting their exclusionist and intolerant nature. Along with other spontaneous acts of dissent on the Russian internet, based on personal narratives and building on emotional or affective connections, Klimova's "Beautiful People and What They Say to Me" is a compelling example of the potential of networked feminist resistance to combat homophobic and misogynist hate speech in repressive environments and to reignite the discussion around identity politics and sexual citizenship by putting it into a highly affective and personal, yet striking context.

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CHAPTER 12

Feminist Tinder: Young Women Talk Back to Harassment Online

Laura Brightwell

The Instagram account “@feminist_tinder” posts screenshots of abusive messages men send to women on Tinder. Tinder is a dating app that facilitates messaging between individuals in the same geographic area if they have both “liked” each other’s profiles. Despite the requisite to sign up through a Facebook profile, which is meant to protect user’s safety, women on the platform are still deluged with sexually explicit messages, threats and abuse. Feminist Tinder exposes the hidden forms of harassment women experience in online spaces by moving them into the discursive field. These images are posted with captions and searchable hashtags, and other Instagram users can comment on them. The project was started by Laura Nowak, a Canadian woman in her early 20s, who found that she received a lot of abusive messages in response to her short Tinder bio, which read “hello i [sic] am a feminist” (personal communication, ca. 2015). It soon expanded to include submissions from other women of the abusive messages they receive on Tinder and their responses to these messages. The screenshots include anything from hostile threats and unsolicited sexts to generally antagonistic or derisive comments. Feminist Tinder

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posts these excerpts, often adding a description that derides the sexist content, expresses support for the original receiver's response to the message or includes hashtags that speak to site-specific in-jokes. The account is public and other Instagram users can add their comments, which are then displayed underneath the original image. These comments often include other feminists' appreciation of the image posted, as well as comments from users who disagree with the explicitly feminist content.

One of the first posts on Feminist Tinder is a message sent from a Tinder user in response to the wording of Nowak's bio (see Fig. 12.1). The initial message reads “[w]orst bio possible: good luck” to which Nowak responds “hello I am a feminist” is actually the best possible bio for people that don't have time for misogynists, because men who don't respect women are really good at outing themselves. Like you just did” (Nowak 2015d). Nowak then took a screenshot of this conversation and posted it on the Feminist Tinder Instagram account with the caption “pro tip: putting ‘feminist’ in your online dating bio is a really good misogynist filter” (Nowak 2015d). Here, Feminist Tinder uses the parameters of Instagram in order to speak back to the harassment that women experience on Tinder. By transposing a private message from the dating app



Fig. 12.1 “[P]ro tip.” Screenshot (Nowak 2015d)

onto the public Instagram account, Nowak reveals the harassment she experiences online and renders it discursive. This deployment of social media to initiate feminist conversation is characteristic of young women's political engagement online. In her exploration of online do-it-yourself (DIY) culture, Anita Harris (2008) finds that the "end function" of feminist blogs "is often simply to exist as a space for expression and debate" (p. 486). Excluded from "conventional politics and formal political institutions" by virtue of their age and gender, young women turn to online blogging and social media communities in order to engage in new kinds of politics (Harris 2008, p. 485). Harris' understanding of feminist online participation complicates the critique that online activism is not "real activism". She asserts that online spaces are a valid space for feminist activism, particularly for young women who are overwhelmingly interpellated as consumers, rather than producers, of culture (Harris 2008, p. 486). Harris (2008) argues that this is a different form of citizenship and public engagement, one that is not oriented towards consumption, but rather towards participatory feminist community (p. 492).

Harris gives us a new lens through which to view the types of online engagement Feminist Tinder is enacting and facilitating. Here, Feminist Tinder is using the technological affordances offered by Instagram—in particular, the caption function as well as the basic function of posting images—in order to elicit and communicate with a certain feminist public. The name of the account positions it as a feminist response to Tinder, and the Instagram bio repeats Nowak's Tinder bio "hello i [*sic*] am a feminist". It is notable that Feminist Tinder's Instagram bio does not state what this account does. The account relies on the contextual information conveyed by the account name, images and comments to position it in a particular feminist conversation. This suggests that the account anticipates an audience of young feminist women who will contribute to this conversation.

Feminist Tinder can be understood as an intentionally dialogic project that speaks to a form of online digital citizenship. Henry Jenkins' (1992) concept of "participatory culture" is key to understanding the kinds of expressions that occur in alternative media. In his theory of fandom, Jenkins rejects stereotypes of TV show fans "as cultural dupes, social misfits and mindless consumers" and emphasizes instead fans' roles as "active producers and manipulators of meaning" (1992, p. 23). Jenkins' theory of participatory culture allows Keller (2012) to argue against the stereotype of the female media viewer "as a passive receptor of culture" (p. 434).

Keller (2012) argues that the internet is “a space of opportunity, public engagement, and feminist activism for girls [that] allows us to productively rethink of girls as active agents, cultural producers, and citizens rather than passive victims and cultural dupes in the online world” (p. 440). By applying Jenkins’ theory to DIY online communities in general, Keller develops a theory of digital feminist citizenship that allots agency to young women often excluded from participation in mainstream, non-digital cultures.

Keller (2012) emphasizes the discursive nature of feminist blogs written by young women and situates this emphasis on participation within a tradition of feminist activism (p. 430). She argues that feminist blogs engage “with media criticism and critical thinking skills”, which have historically been “two important components of feminist activism” (Keller 2012, p. 439). Although they are not blogs, I think it is safe to extend Keller’s analysis to public social media forums such as Instagram and Twitter. By sharing the misogynist messages women receive on Tinder, Feminist Tinder both exposes the level of harassment experienced by young feminists online and allows that experience to be discussed within a feminist community. This act of transposing excerpts of sexist harassment on Tinder to another platform speaks to the participatory nature of online feminist culture. By posting these screencaps, Feminist Tinder contributes to a wider feminist project of making the private harassment experienced by many women on dating apps visible. This project can be situated within a trend of similar online projects that are oriented towards raising awareness of the misogyny women experience daily, both in online and offline spaces. Similar projects include Everyday Sexism (<https://everydaysexism.com>), which documents contributor’s accounts of sexist harassment, the Tumblr blog *I Believe You | It’s Not Your Fault* (<http://ibelieveyouitsnotyourfault.tumblr.com/>) and the Instagram account “Instagranniepants”, on which account owner Anna Gensler posts unflattering caricatures of men who harass on OKCupid and Tinder (<https://www.instagram.com/instagranniepants/>).

Feminist Tinder’s act of exposing private harassment is a form of what Keller (2012) calls “talking back” to online misogyny (p. 439). In a culture that often does not value the voices of young women, the internet can be a “positive space” that allows girls “to ‘talk back’ and find [their] voice” (Keller 2012, p. 439). Nowak not only talks back to the person who messages her on Tinder, but she also uses Instagram to make this conversation public and adds comments that solicit the engagement of a wider feminist

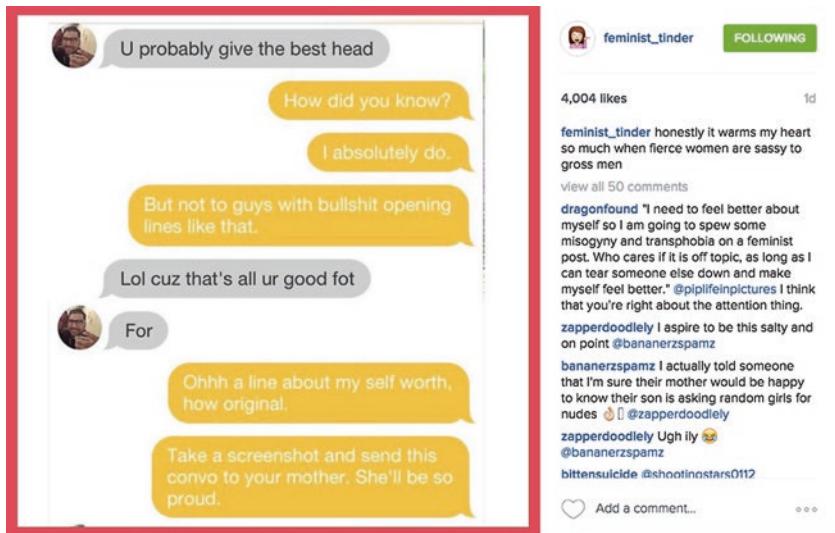


Fig. 12.2 “[H]onestly it warms my heart.” Screenshot (Nowak 2016b)

public. The captions of images posted on Feminist Tinder highlight the extent to which the account values participation in the form of viewers’ content submission. It expresses appreciation for these submissions by adding captions like “honestly it warms my heart so much when fierce women are sassy to gross men” (see Fig. 12.2; Nowak 2016b). In another post, the Instagram user who submitted the image is tagged: “@kacilynneart is perfection” (Nowak 2016d). By publicly acknowledging and giving feedback to the women who submit content, Feminist Tinder encourages future submission of content. It also provides young women with an opportunity to discuss the misogyny present in much of social media. The feedback and inclusion of other submissions marks Feminist Tinder as a collective product. For Harris (2008), this “construction of new participatory communities” is a hallmark of feminist digital cultural production (p. 482). Feminist Tinder recognizes other feminists as cultural producers and solicits this engagement, encouraging active participation in the project among other young women.

Feminist Tinder uses the technological affordances of social media to make the act of talking back to trolls visible, an act that has wider political implications for young women’s participation online. For danah boyd

(2010), “social network sites [are] a genre” of what she calls “networked publics” (p. 39). Networked publics are both “the space constructed through networked technologies” and “the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice” (boyd 2010, p. 39). These networked publics are shaped by the architecture of the social media platform. Each platform’s unique architecture “introduces distinct affordances that shape how people engage with these environments”, allowing “new dynamics” to emerge and shaping participation (boyd 2010, p. 39). The act of making conversations public and posting them on Instagram intends to engage a specific, feminist public. The adaptability of social media platforms to this collaborative production of content may speak to the reasons many young feminists find social media an exciting and productive place to express their political views. Both Harris and Keller argue that young women’s production of digital media forms a claim to citizenship. Keller (2015) elaborates on Harris’ position, arguing that in the performance of a “public *political* identity” feminist bloggers depart from the traditional postfeminist subjectivities allotted to young women (p. 157, emphasis in original). Keller (2015) calls this “performance of ‘vocal politics’ within public space” a form of cultural citizenship (p. 154). Keller’s claim to cultural citizenship implies that young women’s online political participation has effects that are felt beyond the digital realm. Although Keller does not state where the effects of this claim to a public citizenship might be felt, boyd suggests that it is in the networked publics that social media can elicit that these claims to political agency are concretized and felt.

The kinds of discourses Feminist Tinder can engage in are shaped by the affordances of Instagram. Social media’s affordances always “guide and structure” the use individuals make of it (Morrison 2014, p. 117). These technological affordances facilitate certain kinds of online expression by imposing character limits, encouraging searchable content and constantly refreshing the posts in a user’s “feed”. In the case of Instagram, users can individualize accounts at a number of levels. Public information that characterizes individual accounts includes a username (mandatory), a short biography (optional) and a link to an external website (optional). Users post content in the form of images they upload to the app on their phone and can write a short description of the image that can include hashtags. Users can also filter, rotate and crop their images. Images can be browsed by other Instagram users unless the account is set to private.

Those without an Instagram account can view other people's accounts in their internet browsers, but not in the app.

Morrison (2014) notes the ways in which social media platforms coax the user to engage in specific interactions with the interface (p. 121). For example, although there appears to be no character limit to the length of usernames, bio or captions allowed by Instagram, the small text box allocated to each suggests that these should be short. I would also add that the conventions of username, bio and description length are set by the use of similar conventions across other social media platforms. The technological affordances of Instagram shape the discourse that circulates around Feminist Tinder. Feminist Tinder negotiates these affordances in order to elicit its desired audience. Feminist Tinder is keenly aware of the digital parameters of Instagram, creating searchable hashtags such as “#fundoublestandard” and inside jokes such as “Nice Guy™” that play with the paratexts of online communication to convey a feminist message and engage a young, pro-feminist user (Nowak 2015a, ca. 2016a). Guided by length conventions, Feminist Tinder relies on short, witty speech acts to convey its message and engage its audience. In response to the message “[w]hy are you on Tinder if you’re a feminist?” Nowak quips “[w]hy are you suggesting that casual sex and respect for women are mutually exclusive?” (Nowak 2016g). In this witty riposte, Nowak speaks back to this hostile text and conveys an anti-slut-shaming message in very few words (see Fig. 12.3). Nowak then posts this exchange on Instagram for public viewing. Other Instagram users can then “like” the post to express appreciation for or agreement with its message, as well as comment on the post. It is notable that this post is one of the few that has no caption. Nowak relies on the popularity of her page and the post’s situation within an existing feminist conversation to contextualize the image.

Feminist Tinder uses site-specific hashtags to publicize and disseminate its message. Hashtags are modes of address employed by people on social media in order to contribute to particular conversations. By adding a hashtag to their text or image, a user can signal that their content contributes to a pre-existing discourse. Hashtags, however, do not have to be pre-existing. Many users create their own hashtags, often in an attempt to start a new conversation, or in order to make a joke. One hashtag particular to Feminist Tinder is “#fundoublestandard” (Nowak 2015a). It is employed on posts to reference the sexual double standard young women are subjected to online. In one text, a Tinder user says he loses respect for people that have oral sex with him on the first date. He continues, “hey if



Fig. 12.3 “Why are you on tinder.” Screenshot (Nowak 2016g)

they wanna suck my dick who am i to complain[.] ... Hard to take them seriously after tho [sic]” (Nowak 2015a). Nowak responds to his hypocritical messages with the sardonic comment “[o]oh that’s a fun double standard [sic]” (Nowak 2015a). Nowak captions the submission on Instagram with the exhortation to viewers to “comment [their] favourite #fundoublestandard in the comments [sic]” (Nowak 2015a). Here, Nowak invents a hashtag and encourages other Instagram users to respond to it. The #fundoublestandard hashtag then becomes a kind of in-joke, a non-viral hashtag that is nevertheless used on Feminist Tinder when a Tinder user or commenter on Instagram expresses a hypocritical viewpoint about casual sex.

Nowak’s exhortation to other users to respond to the hashtag and share their experiences is a form of what Warner (2002) calls poetic world-making (p. 81). For Warner (2002), all public discourse is poetic, by which he means that “all discourse or performance addressed to a public” must imagine the public that it attempts to engage and in doing so evoke that public (p. 81). “Public discourse says not only ‘[l]et a public exist,’ but also ‘[l]et it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way’” (Warner 2002, p. 82). Feminist Tinder’s use of the comment function,

hashtags and site-specific in-jokes carries the world-making properties of public discourse. It imagines a particular, feminist audience and attempts to evoke that audience using distinct speech modes that both navigate and are limited by Instagram's technological affordances.

Feminist Tinder asks readers to interact with the account and with each other. The resulting list of comments on each post is a response to this public discourse. The feminist audience that coheres around Feminist Tinder can be seen as a kind of counterpublic. Distinct to a public, a counterpublic combines "critiques of the dominant public's exclusions or ideological limitations" with the world-making properties of public discourse (Warner 2002, p. 81). It also encourages critique of the dominant culture. For Jacqueline Ryan Vickery, this coherence around shared language is a central component of young women's blogging communities:

[V]irtual communities develop around a shared cultural text, experience, discourse, and identity, all of which create a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging becomes a vital component of community, and this belonging comes from shared discursive practices and constructs as defined by the community. (Vickery 2010, p. 185)

Although it would be a stretch to call the activity that occurs around the Feminist Tinder account a community, it does generate some of the effects of community. By sharing images of the harassment women experience on Tinder, Feminist Tinder shows the breadth of online misogyny and reinforces that young women who experience this are not alone. The ability to poke fun at and respond to harassment by reading the witty replies in the original messages as well as Nowak's snarky captions provides a cathartic, shared experience for young women who bear the brunt of online misogyny (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016, p. 171). The #fundoublestandard hashtag functions not only as a critique of hegemonic culture but also as a signifier around which the viewers of Feminist Tinder can rally and cohere. By adding their own experiences of the sexual double standard and using the hashtag, users can participate in and affirm their belonging to this feminist counterpublic.

Sara Ahmed's (2004) theory of "affective economies" also helps us to understand how the reiteration of speech acts works to evoke a feminist counterpublic (p. 121). Ahmed seeks to understand how emotions acquire affective value. For Ahmed (2004), "emotions work as a form of capital" (p. 120). The affect generated by emotions "does not reside positively in

the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation” (Ahmed 2004, p. 120). The more a sign circulates, the more it appears to “contain” a certain affect, and the more its value increases (Ahmed 2004, p. 120). According to this theory, it is only through circulation that the affective experience of that emotion is generated. Ahmed understands emotions as inherently social phenomena. Similarly, a newly created hashtag has little meaning in itself. It is only through its discursive reference to a pre-existing discourse and its circulation via social media that a hashtag accumulates value. As more and more social media users employ the hashtag, its circulation and significance increase. As the hashtag becomes “stuck” to its meaning, its value increases, and more social media users employ the hashtag, thereby spreading it even further. Feminist Tinder’s deployment of hashtags therefore creates an affective relationship among viewers of the Instagram account. By asking users to share the #fundoublestandard hashtag, Nowak solicits interaction with the account. This collective participation in the conversation via use and sharing of the hashtag gives the impression of a communal discourse that individual users can contribute to. I posit that the creation of site-specific hashtags like #fundoublestandard and their affirmation via circulation elicit an affective experience of feminist community in the sympathetic visitor to the account.

Wit is another key feature of Feminist Tinder. Despite its potentially depressing subject matter, Feminist Tinder is undeniably funny. It is hard to pin down where Feminist Tinder’s humour comes from. It may be the cumulative effect of reading the ridiculous messages sent by male Tinder users, which include such gems as “[y]ou’re too ugly to have that attitude. Go make me some bacon” (Nowak 2015d) and “[u] probably give the best head ... because that’s all ur good fo[r] [sic]” (Nowak 2016b). The humour can also be found in the witty responses of the female Tinder users, the captions Nowak adds and the use of the female Information Desk Person emoji as the account profile picture, which many people use to convey a shrug or “whatever” meaning. These components combine to make the experience of reading the account light-hearted and pleasurable, at least for the feminist reader who is inclined to agree with its message. I put this playful response to online misogyny in dialogue with Ahmed’s account of the feminist killjoy. According to Ahmed (2010), the feminist is seen as killing joy because she refuses to share the happiness assumed to be present in objects and institutions that are seen to constitute a societal good (Ahmed 2010, p. 65). Ahmed (2010) suggests that the feminist exposes “the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under

public signs of joy”, such as institutions like the family (p. 65). The collective affirmation of happiness is disrupted by the feminist who refuses to share the happy feeling. However, Feminist Tinder offers a vision of the feminist killjoy who uses humour to transform that which is making her miserable into an object that generates positive affect. By speaking back to, framing and sharing these messages via Instagram, their hurtful intention is transformed into entertainment for the feminist reader. Although Ahmed’s (2010) anecdote of the feminist who kills the joy of the family at the dinner table paints a lonesome picture of the feminist killjoy (p. 65), I wonder how theorizing the circulation of affect within feminist counter-publics—small enclaves of space in which feminist discourse is not only tolerated but supported—transforms the experience of being a feminist killjoy into a social experience. The act of sharing these messages online interrupts the dissemination of the unhappiness and transforms their harmful affect into humour by reframing them in a feminist context. Feminist Tinder is, in a sense, a joyful project. It generates positive affect among feminist readers of the account, who respond to the posts by either “liking” them, commenting to share or elaborate on the joke or even submitting their own screenshots of themselves shutting down sexist messages. These playful interactions with Feminist Tinder suggest that a feminist collective consciousness can be constituted by positive, as opposed to negative, affects. This vision of the feminist killjoy is not so different to Ahmed’s (2010) theory of “feminist consciousness as a form of unhappiness” (p. 53). Although the feminist discourse that circulates around Feminist Tinder is pleasurable, feminist consciousness is generated here by the pleasure of killing the sexist message.

This negotiation and transformation of potentially harmful affects suggests that the generation of complex and ambivalent emotions is key to collective identifications. Rosalind Gill (2007) argues that ironic engagements with objects are key to a postfeminist sensibility (p. 159). In contemporary media culture, now that feminism has fully entered the cultural realm, postfeminism is characterized by an entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas (Gill 2007, p. 161). Feminist Tinder might be said to play with a postfeminist sensibility. Here, young feminists deploy complex affects in order to combat sexism, misogyny and online harassment. That which feminists are unhappy about—online misogyny—is exposed while being treated with positive affect in order to encourage the feminist message to go viral. For both Gill and Keller, this kind of approach is characteristic of online projects by young feminist women. It is a form of what

Keller (2012) calls playful activism, which mixes a serious message with comedic elements in order to facilitate the dissemination of a feminist message (p. 440). Feminist Tinder is an example of the ways in which young women skilfully navigate social media in order to talk back to and parody the abuse they receive online. This generational performance of a postfeminist sensibility ironically encourages the dissemination of a radical feminist message.

The accessible format of social media accounts makes them open to unimagined, unknown and potentially hostile readers. Feminist Tinder orients itself towards a feminist counterpublic. It attempts to solicit the attention of that counterpublic through performative, humorous speech acts and the use of hashtags. However, the public settings of Instagram leave the account open to publics who are either unknown to or unanticipated by Feminist Tinder. Warner problematizes the idea that a media text will always reach its intended audience. For Warner (2002), the public, or actual readership, of a text is ultimately unknowable (p. 53). Although media may be received by the public for whom it was intended, it may also be received by public(s) for whom it was not intended (Warner 2002, p. 54). Warner (2002) therefore characterizes the public of a given text as, in part, “*a relation among strangers*” (emphasis in original) (p. 55). Although Feminist Tinder addresses a feminist counterpublic, the account is constantly infiltrated by those unimagined or unwanted by the account owner. Just as the screenshot function on cell phones allows Feminist Tinder to transpose private messages into a public format for a use that was not intended by the men sending the original messages, so do the affordances of public social media accounts leave Feminist Tinder vulnerable to viewers and Instagram users hostile to its explicit feminist message. The comments section of each image is filled with comments from Instagram users who disagree with the explicit feminist content and often try to derail conversations by making intentionally provocative comments. In response to a post captioned “feminism didn’t make you a misogynist, feminism helped people recognize [it] in you”, the commenter “mitchelleesss” writes, “[t]hat doesn’t make any sense. You VOLUNTARILY joined tinder, everyone knows what tinder is purely used for. You’re not going to find Mensa level [conversation] on it [*sic*]” (see Fig. 12.4; Nowak 2015c). Another Instagram user “nick.palatine” responds to Nowak’s request to post stories about the sexual double standard with “#fundoublestandard women being able to hit men and men can’t hit women [*sic*]” (see Fig. 12.5; Nowak 2015a). These viewers are refusing the message

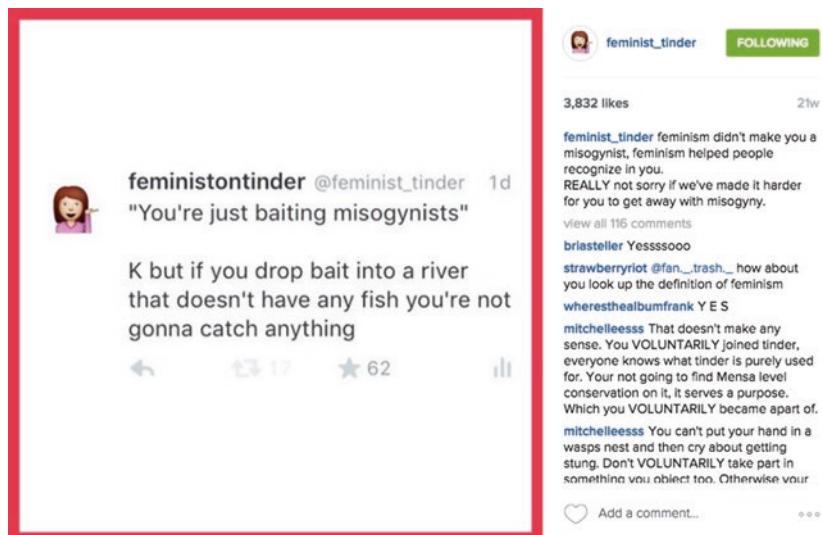


Fig. 12.4 “[F]eminism didn’t make you a misogynist.” Screenshot (Nowak 2015c)



Fig. 12.5 “[C]omment your ‘favourite’ #fundoublestandard.” Screenshot (Nowak 2015a)

that Feminist Tinder is attempting to convey. Through their comments, they are positioning themselves as both outside to and hostile towards this feminist community. While comments like these are shut down by other Instagram users, it is worth noting that even this explicitly feminist account will be read by viewers who disagree with its feminist message. The account is always open to viewing by a public radically different to that it is trying to invite.

Feminist Tinder is aware that it is open to being read by hostile publics and attempts to mitigate this intrusion by making long-running in-jokes about the kinds of unwanted viewers that tend to interact with the account. Pam is a fictional Instagram user invented by Nowak who espouses a kind of feminism that is contrary to the values of Feminist Tinder. Nowak defines Pam as a “woman who ‘supports feminism and everything’ as long as it doesn’t upset, challenge or otherwise bother privileged white men” (see Fig. 12.6; Nowak 2016f). Nowak writes, “Pam gives men the benefit of the doubt but is quick to call women rude for having opinions. ... Pam doesn’t understand the power of structure of privilege and influence. Pam hates cats. Don’t be a Pam” (Nowak 2016f). By characterizing feminists who try to derail her posts in this way, Nowak is trying to both discourage

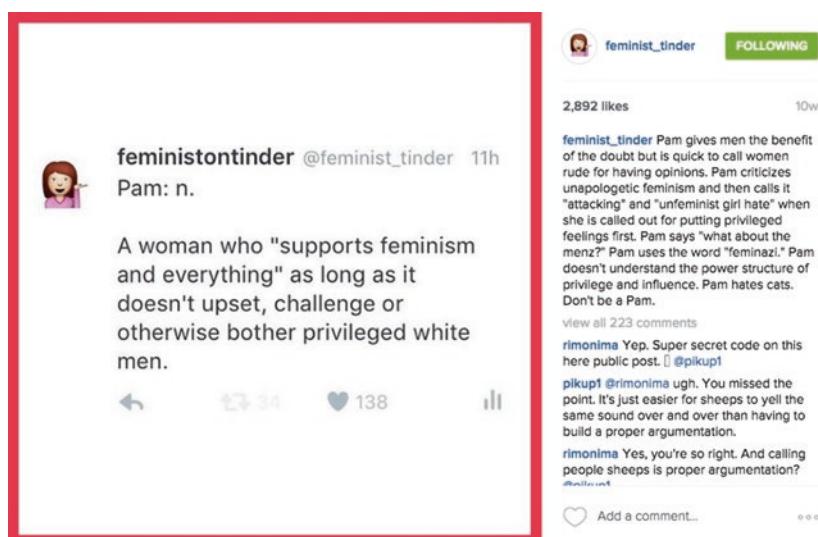


Fig. 12.6 “Pam gives men the benefit of the doubt.” Screenshot (Nowak 2016f)

and talk back to this kind of criticism. By using humour (“Pam hates cats”), she entertains at the same time as making her point. Pam is a long-running joke on Feminist Tinder and crops up sporadically in various posts. The account sometimes pretends to trademark Pam by writing “Pam™”, further marking Pam as a joke belonging to Feminist Tinder (Nowak 2016a). This in-joke also tells viewers of Feminist Tinder what kind of feminist politics is and is not allowed. This example of poetic world-making attempts to delimit Feminist Tinder’s online community via a specific mode of address.

In-jokes such as “Pam” highlight the ways in which digital paratexts can brand websites, blogs and social media accounts. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2014) define paratexts as “material of several sorts, which supplement[] and mediate[] a written text” (p. 85). In a digital environment, paratexts can include “the visual features of the formal template, blog commentaries, hyperlinks, [...] ‘I-like-this’ options and other algorithmically generated matter that mediates acts of self-presentation” (Smith and Watson, pp. 85–86). Smith and Watson argue that paratexts “have various effects: they solicit specific audiences, they produce a certain ‘look’ that brands a narrative for consumption; and they seek to influence reading publics” (Smith and Watson 2014, p. 85). Paratexts are crucial to the construction of a person’s online image. They can be used to brand the aesthetic or content of a digital text and thereby make it easily recognizable to the reader. In this light, the Pam in-joke espoused on Feminist Tinder can be seen as an earnest attempt to solicit a certain audience that nevertheless uses parody to make its point. It is a knowing nod to the need to brand oneself online.

Feminist Tinder is one example of young women identifying and navigating digital paratexts in order to brand and promote their own content. Keller (2015) notes that young women’s “visibility within the public sphere via digital media is often determined by their ability to ‘self-brand’” (pp. 151–152). Feminist Tinder both develops its own brand of sorts via the use of hashtags and in-jokes and plays with this branding to humorous effect. In one tweet, which Nowak screenshots and posts on Instagram, she writes, “a man is genuinely mansplaining to me that putting the copyright symbol at the end of tweets isn’t patent um Nice Try© but I know the Law™ [sic]” (Nowak ca. 2015b). In this post, Nowak acknowledges that her use of the copyright and trademark symbol is more ironic than a serious attempt to protect these phrases, and makes fun of a man who is not in on the joke. Perhaps we can place these paratexts alongside Keller’s concept of playful activism to read them as a form of playful branding.

Feminist Tinder both ironizes the need to self-brand and makes an earnest attempt to monetize its own brand by creating a successful line of merchandise. Feminist Tinder sells mugs, pins, stickers and t-shirts printed with the hashtag “#fundoublestandard” on Big Cartel, an online store for small businesses (<http://feministtinder.bigcartel.com/products>). Clicking through the link in the Instagram bio leads the user to an external website with branded t-shirts, stickers, mugs, pins and even “1-on-1 feminist education [*sic*]” with Nowak herself for CA\$75 per hour (Nowak ca. 2016e). This humorous offer both acknowledges the amount of unpaid labour Nowak conducts in order to facilitate the account and makes a serious attempt to capitalize on it. Here, the successful feminist blogger has not only branded her content via the distribution and repetition of hashtags and in-jokes, she has also created merchandise that fans of the account can buy. Buying merchandise allows fans of the blog to get a piece of the blog to take home and provides Nowak with a small source of revenue. This successful commodification is a feature of feminist blogs in a postfeminist age. The characteristic blend of irony and earnestness is key to an online postfeminist sensibility.

Since I first wrote this chapter, Nowak has taken down the Feminist Tinder Instagram account. She tweeted from her Twitter account that she removed the Instagram account because it was “emotionally exhausting and unpaid work” (Nowak 2016c). This fact speaks to the temporal nature of social media, as well as the unsustainability of doing unpaid activism on a long-term basis, especially in an online environment where women disproportionately experience targeted harassment. Nowak’s use of her Feminist Tinder brand across platforms speaks to her skilful navigation of multiple platforms. Her Feminist Tinder posts can still be found on her Tumblr (<http://feministontinder.tumblr.com/>) as well as in her Twitter archive (https://twitter.com/feminist_tinder/).

This chapter asks what are the affective modes of expression that young women deploy to combat sexism, misogyny and online harassment. It asks to what extent does Feminist Tinder’s claim to a digital, feminist citizenship succeed or fail. The Instagram account can be seen as an example of young feminists using digital platforms to elicit a feminist community and conversation that they do not see in “real” life. Social media offers young women a space to speak back against a dominant culture and traditional understanding of politics that excludes and silences them. However, social media does not offer a space for feminist community free from harassment or disagreement. The open nature of social media accounts like Feminist

Tinder leads to a diversity of interactions and a concatenation of feminist and anti-feminist voices that often clash. Faced with this variety of voices, feminists skilfully navigate the affordances of online platforms to carve out a space for the kind of feminist conversations they want to see happening. These affordances in turn shape feminist discourse online. The use of hashtags and in-jokes provide a language around which other feminists can cohere and join in the conversation. Although this conversation is not always taken up and can be contradicted, sites such as Feminist Tinder still provide a focal point for strong feminist voices online and encourage the further dissemination of feminist politics among young women. The combination of ironic, witty expressions with earnest content is characteristic of a postfeminist sensibility; however, this sensibility is deployed here to communicate an explicitly feminist message. The political effects of feminist blogs and social media accounts like Feminist Tinder are hard to quantify. This digital feminist activism can be recognized as a valid form of activism, but it takes the form of expression and debate online, rather than the traditional understanding of activism as outcome-oriented political action (Harris 2008, p. 486). However, it is through theorizing the readership of accounts like these as a form of feminist counterpublic that an understanding of this trend's political effectiveness can be found. Accounts like Feminist Tinder go some way to reclaiming digital space for young women whose experiences of harassment can discourage them from using social media platforms. They allow young women to talk back to online harassment and express anti-patriarchal values. By participating in this performative feminist citizenship, young women carve a space for feminist discourse and counter misogyny online.

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CHAPTER 13

“Should I Even Be Writing This?”: Public Narratives and Resistance to Online Harassment

Jasmine R. Linabary and Bianca Batti

The proliferation of digital technologies has, concurrently, resulted in the proliferation of online misogyny and the harassment of women in digital spaces (Citron 2014; Jane 2014a, b), requiring further attention from scholars across fields. This harassment often serves to dominate, silence and/or erase marginalized voices, especially the voices of differently situated women. However, some women have responded to this harassment by talking back through sharing their personal narratives—that is, through the public telling of their experiences with online harassment to enact resistance against those who perpetrate acts of harassment in digital spaces. In this chapter, we identify the strategies these women use to resist online harassment and to claim digital space through their personal narratives. Through our analysis, we identify the potentials and limitations of public narratives as a means of resistance.

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In this chapter, we first outline the literature related to online harassment and narrative as a form of resistance. Second, we detail our methods and offer reflections on our experiences related to online harassment and ethical considerations related to writing about such harassment. Third, we describe four key rhetorical strategies the women in our sample used in their personal narratives of online harassment to enact resistance. Lastly, we discuss the implications of this study for both scholarship and practice.

ONLINE HARASSMENT

Online harassment involves a variety of communicative behaviours ranging from name calling to exposing private information (e.g., “doxxing”), threats of violence and cyberstalking (Citron 2014). Being a woman, person of colour and/or sexual minority online has been seen to lead to disproportionately more severe online harassment and to being more affected by harassment (Lenhart et al. 2016), with women of colour experiencing perhaps more harassment than any other group (Reyns 2010). Women often experience harassment that is specifically gendered and often sexualized, such as gendered and sexual insults (e.g., bitch, slut, cunt), misogynistic comments about their physical appearance or gender roles, and rape threats. This harassment is rarely just gendered but also “compounded with racism, homophobia, ableism, and all other forms of hate” (Shaw 2014, p. 273). Such harassment has existed prior to the internet but is seen to be enabled by the affordances of the technology and the social norms and values of the internet writ large (Linabary 2015; Shaw 2014), as well as of particular online spaces (e.g., Corple 2016; Massanari 2017). While online harassment has been persistent since the early days of the internet (Dibbell 1993; Herring 1999, 2002), scholars have noted the ways in which it has escalated and grown more virulent in the past several years (Jane 2014a, b; Lenhart et al. 2016; Nakamura 2015). This harassment has had a range of psychological and professional impacts for the targets of harassment and is seen to contribute to a “chilling effect” on women’s voices online (Jane 2014a).

While scholars have made strides towards understanding online harassment, less attention has been paid to efforts to combat these forms of harassment. Some scholars have begun to look at resistance efforts, such as attempts to organize collectively outside of particularly hostile online spaces (Gray 2013), develop technological strategies like block bots on Twitter (Geiger 2016) or engage in “digilante” call-out tactics through

websites, blogs or hashtags (Jane 2016; Shaw 2016). While there is unlikely to be a single solution or resistance strategy to address the pervasiveness of online harassment (Geiger 2016), greater understandings of the potentials of particular resistance strategies can contribute to combating online harassment.

NARRATIVE AS RESISTANCE

In this chapter, we focus on personal narratives as a form of resistance to online harassment. The sharing of personal narrative as an act of resistance is not a new strategy, but it is a strategy that has been used repeatedly, especially by feminist activists and scholars. Feminist activists, operating under the mantra that “the personal is political”, have traditionally relied heavily on the public and private sharing of experience. Examples include feminist consciousness-raising groups in the 1970s and advocacy efforts such as Take Back the Night.

Within academic spaces, feminist scholars and standpoint theorists have specifically argued for the epistemic value of situated, embodied knowledges (Collins 2000; Haraway 1988; Harding 1991) and have highlighted the ways the evidence of experience can be used to bring about social change (Code 1995; Lafrance and McKenzie-Mohr 2014; Scott 1991). Indeed, the evidence provided through personal narratives can work to enact solidarity-based feminist praxis (Mohanty 2003). Such feminist solidarity, then, functions as a disruptive force that works to engage in “discursive resistance” (Lafrance and McKenzie-Mohr 2014, p. 11), claim space (Anzaldúa 2012) and seek change.

In the context of digital spaces, those who experience harassment are able to share their narratives in ways that reach larger audiences in order to work towards such goals; however, this resistant act ironically opens them up to further or escalated harassment. Yet, in spite of this, women continue to “counter-story” their digital lives (Lafrance and McKenzie-Mohr 2014, p. 1) in order to seek change and “achieve epistemic empowerment” (Foss and Foss 1994, p. 43).

METHODS

To further understand narratives as a form of resistance, we analysed a collection of 30 public narratives written by women who have been harassed online. The criteria for selection of narratives included that the author had

to identify as a woman and talk about first-person experiences with online harassment. While some authors have written multiple accounts of their harassment, we selected only one published text from each author. These accounts—which took the form of articles and blogs—varied in length from 2 to 20 typed pages. Though all authors identified as women, they varied in terms of their race, class and professions, among other identities and experiences.

Procedures

To identify narratives, we began by searching for public stories in news outlets and popular blogs related to online harassment. We also used a snowball sampling technique, as many articles would reference and link to others' experiences with harassment, as will be discussed later in this chapter. While online harassment has existed since the beginnings of the internet (e.g., Dibbell 1993; Herring 1999, 2002), we began with UK journalist and blogger Laurie Penny's (2011) "A woman's opinion is the mini-skirt of the internet", which marked a turning point in discussions of women's experiences with harassment online. We collected articles that were published within five years of Penny's initial article. As we continued to collect articles, we noticed that most of the popularized public narratives of online harassment were written by white women (as will be discussed later in our findings), so we intentionally sought out the writing of women of colour.

Analysis

After collecting this sample of public narratives, we engaged in an inductive thematic analysis of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006), using an iterative open-coding process. Both authors conducted an initial read of the collected texts, identifying codes and broader themes. A second round of analysis focused specifically on the rhetorical strategies of resistance enacted in each text. Between each round of analysis, we engaged in collective discussions and thematic mapping sessions to refine and collapse themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). Themes were then reviewed and further refined with subsequent readings of the texts, using a constant comparative method (Lindlof and Taylor 2011).

REFLEXIVITY

Given the nature of online harassment, we felt it important to reflexively examine our own narratives of online harassment and to discuss the ethical implications of reproducing public narratives of harassment. In doing so, we join the conversation of other scholars who have noted concerns about experiences with harassment in relation to their scholarship (e.g., Barlow and Awan 2016; Chess and Shaw 2015). Self-reflexivity, as part of “a politics of location” (Lykke 2010, p. 4) that enables us to “name where we are and are not” (Haraway 1988 p. 582), allows for the interrogation of knowledge production because it “implies that the landscape must always be understood as seen from a non-innocent somewhere” (Lykke 2010, p. 4). We seek to make ourselves accountable for our location in digital communities in order to acknowledge the “non-innocent somewhere” from which we discuss experiences with and resistance to online harassment.

That said, we also recognize that, while research on online harassment “might help create more awareness, it also opens scholars up to the very harassment they are studying” (Chess and Shaw 2015, p. 218). As a feminist game studies scholar who also writes feminist analyses of video games and gaming culture for the blog *Not Your Mama’s Gamer*, Bianca has encountered troubling comments about herself made by others online. For example, after being included in a list of “women critiquing games now” (Kleppek 2015), Bianca found herself being discussed in a pro-GamerGate subreddit, a discussion in which anonymous commenters worked together to locate Bianca’s information (e.g., doxx), including where she lived, what university she attended and what classes she was taking; while these commenters’ efforts ended almost as quickly as they began, they have raised concerns regarding the potential threats that may occur as Bianca continues to discuss her feminist game studies research in online spaces. While Jasmine, as a feminist communication researcher, has not yet experienced harassment online, as someone who studies it she regularly anticipates its inevitability, recognizing the ways it shapes sometimes consciously and other times subconsciously how she interacts online. While our research on online harassment causes us to be concerned about opening ourselves up to harassment, we also recognize as white women within US higher education our levels of vulnerability, our experiences related to harassment and our access to resources are likely different than some of the women writers in our sample. Additionally, we find ourselves interrogating how multiple authors might be at risk as a result of our

research—not just ourselves as the authors, but also the other authors who have written chapters for this book, as well as the authors we cite within this chapter. As such, when considering our ethical responsibilities as researchers, we wonder—how might we create an equitable relationship with the authors we cite, and how might we hold ourselves accountable as researchers?

Ultimately, we treat the women we cite here as authors (not as participants), and we consider their stories to be public narratives because most of these stories are published in news outlets and popular blogs. We also treat these women as authors because doing so is intended to give each woman writer agency, power and a voice, in order to contribute ourselves to the consciousness-raising and mobilization efforts that their stories invoke. However, we worry that our analysis might be interpreted as reproducing the vulnerability about which these women write, and we also worry about the ways we interpret the internet as being a public space; because some of the stories we include in our sample are located on personal blogs, we are concerned about the blurriness of online spaces and wonder if certain online spaces are more public than others. Unfortunately, we do not have any satisfying answers to this complex web of ethical tensions and concerns, but we believe it is important to reflexively address them. As such, we continue to grapple with the ethical implications of writing about online harassment and with demonstrating care as we do so.

STRATEGIES FOR NARRATIVE RESISTANCE

In our analysis, we identify four primary rhetorical strategies these women use within their public narratives to enact resistance: (1) calling out, (2) representing shared experience, (3) disrupting the hegemonic narrative and (4) defying the harassers. We note that these strategies are not necessarily mutually exclusive but are overlapping and often used simultaneously within the same accounts. In the following sections, we describe each strategy, drawing on these narratives, and consider its potentials and limitations.

Calling Out

In 2011, *Guardian* columnist Laurie Penny wrote, “An opinion, it seems, is the short skirt of the internet. Having one and flaunting it is somehow asking an amorphous mass of almost-entirely male keyboard-bashers to tell you how they’d like to rape, kill and urinate on you.” Penny’s article

calls direct attention to the tenor of harassment she receives as a writer. Further, in her post, she includes specific examples of the harassment she has received, making both the language and the experiences visible. A primary strategy of the women writers we sampled involved calling out both (1) harassment and/or (2) institutions. In doing so, they shed light on harassment as it is enacted and attempt to hold those involved accountable.

First, many of these women, like Penny, included specific examples of their harassment, often directly quoting or providing screenshots of the harassment they have experienced (e.g., Bates 2013; Dione 2016; Filipovic 2014; Sarkeesian 2015; Segall 2016). This involved cataloguing the gendered insults and threats and general “creepiness” these women have received in response to their writing or work. While at times this can be seen as a form of what Jane (2016) refers to as feminist digilantism—attempting to name and shame the harassers—the specific examples were often invoked to call attention to the hostile and at times violent nature of the harassment and provide credible evidence, appealing to both empathy and logic. For example, Anita Sarkeesian (2015) collated and shared a week’s worth of the harassment she received on Twitter because “sometimes it can be difficult to effectively communicate just how bad this sustained intimidation campaign really is”. Similarly, Laurie Segall (2016) illustrated with specific quoted examples the harassment she received based on her different appearances in media in one day, responding to each and arguing that these types of comments are “gross”, “annoying” and “normal”. Comedian and columnist Lindy West (2013) used screenshots of comments she received in response to “trying to explain rape culture”. She presents approximately 30 screenshots as a “tiny fraction” of what she received and argues that these provide evidence of “what silencing looks like”. By drawing on specific examples and screenshots of the harassment, these women use their personal experiences with harassment as a way of establishing their credibility as judges of the cultural phenomenon of online harassment. That is, many women use the stories of their experiences to show that they have a deep understanding of online harassment because it has happened to them. These strategies, ultimately, work to demonstrate the irrefutability of the dangers women face daily in online spaces and to show the epistemic value of lived experience in order to raise consciousness about the gendered violence women face on the internet.

Second, some women also used their narratives to call out specific institutions, such as social network companies, the police and traditional

media. Twitter was a frequent target (e.g., Dewey 2014; DiCaro 2016; DiResta 2016; Gandy 2014). For example, Renee DiResta (2016) called out Twitter for sending her personal information to people who were cyberstalking her, including embedded copies of the email exchanges with Twitter in her post. She argues:

But the point of this point isn't that some assholes are mean on the Internet. It's to call attention to where things went wrong at Twitter, because that's my concern: how Twitter's reporting flow pushes users towards copyright because it's incompetent at managing harassment, and how Twitter must take stronger steps to prevent personal identifying info situations from happening to other users.

She is not alone in using her narrative to call out a culture of harassment on Twitter and the company's failure to adequately respond to that harassment. Multiple accounts disparaged Twitter, referring to it as "one of the highest profile—and most mainstream—social networks for harassment" (Dewey 2014) and a "hate amplifier" and "the troll's best weapon for attacking you" (Sierra 2014). Imani Gandy (2014) discussed the shift in her perspective of Twitter, based on her anticipation of the racist and sexist slurs she receives through the platform. She documented through links the ways she began tweeting her serial harasser's comments directly to Twitter's CEO and Twitter Support because, as she stated, "as anyone who has bothered to report an abusive tweet knows, the 'Report Abusive User' form is about as effective as your average YouTube commenter at a spelling bee."

Authors also have used their narratives to call out the failure of police to adequately respond to online harassment (e.g., Reynolds 2016; Watson 2013). Reynolds (2016) described being told by a police officer after receiving death threats that her case would be closed and that she should "expect" receiving comments like this as a feminist writer online. Similarly, Watson (2013) described repeated attempts to report rape and death threats to the police locally to her and locally to her harasser and to the FBI, coming up short in all instances. After her struggles to get anyone to take action, she ended up hiring a private detective. She wrote, "I don't go to the cops because the cops don't care."

Additionally, women of colour in particular have called out the overwhelming whiteness of conversations around online harassment through the media, particularly in whose expertise is drawn on in "anti-harassment"

efforts. Izzy I. (2015) argues that the work of black feminists especially has been erased from conversations around online harassment, despite being more frequent recipients of harassment and playing key roles in exposing harassment through efforts like #yourslipisshowing. She writes:

White women are given movie and book deals as a result of being seen as the face of anti-harassment, opportunities to start anti-harassment organizations, and invitations to major tech companies as experts. Meanwhile, Black women who fight against both the anti-Black racism and sexism found in organized harassment, are still not given those similar opportunities.

In these ways, calling out is used as a strategy not just to resist harassment but also to disrupt the normalization of particular bodies as the target of harassment.

While calling out has been mobilized within these narratives to bring attention to and provide “proof” of the nature of online harassment and hold institutions accountable, this strategy of documenting and drawing on specific examples of one’s harassment does require the authors to both reproduce and amplify their trauma. Gandy (2014) notes that she knew forwarding her harassers’ tweets would “likely escalate” the harassment, which it did. Additionally, some of the women discussed being exhausted by having to continuously provide evidence of their harassment and having to argue about why it is a problem. As Jessica Valenti (2016) wrote, “And though I’ve been on the receiving end of abusive comments for as long as I’ve been writing online—more than 12 years—I’m exhausted at not feeling like a part of the community I contribute to.” She went on to express being “tired” of having to encounter rape threats on social media in response to her articles and of having to constantly explain why the comments she receives are problematic and inherently sexist. In these ways, the constant “barrage” of harassment and having to reproduce it can both escalate harassment and require those who experience harassment to constantly relive threats on their bodies and lives.

Representing Shared Experience

In 2014, Amanda Hess wrote about her experiences with online harassment, reproducing, like many of the authors discussed in the previous section, several tweets she received from a user called “headlessfemalepig”:

“I am 36 years old, I did 12 years for ‘manslaughter’, I killed a woman, like you, who decided to make fun of guys cocks.” And then: “Happy to say we live in the same state. Im looking you up, and when I find you, im going to rape you and remove your head.” There was more, but the final tweet summed it up: “You are going to die and I am the one who is going to kill you. I promise you this.”

In describing her experience with online harassment, Hess emphasizes that her experience is the norm for most women online: “None of this makes me exceptional. It just makes me a woman with an Internet connection.” Hess shares her story in order to shed light on “what women face online every day” and to stress the seriousness of such harassment. Hess, like many of the women whose stories we have sampled, makes use of her individual, personal story of harassment in order to represent the collective experience of women online.

Laurie Penny (2011), in her personal story of online harassment, works to highlight the ubiquity of this experience: “You come to expect it, as a woman writer, particularly if you’re political. You come to expect the vitriol, the insults, the death threats.” Anne Thériault (2015), in her individual story of harassment, explains, “I wish I would tell you that this comment was some kind of anomaly, but of course it wasn’t. Rape threats, death threats, and general threats of violence populate my inbox, Twitter mentions, and blog comments.” Similarly, Anna Gunn (2013) argues that her experiences with online harassment are not unique but rather “a kind of Rorschach test for society, a measure of our attitudes toward gender”. By drawing attention to the pervasiveness of women’s experiences with online harassment, these women work not simply to write off such experiences as the norm but, rather, to demonstrate that “[w]hat makes these incidents even worse is just how common they are, not only for me, but for any woman who speaks out or takes up space, especially on the internet” (Thériault 2015). In doing so, these writers often not only shared their story but then also highlighted, quoted, and linked to the stories of other women who had experienced online harassment (e.g., Friedman 2013; Hess 2014). Thus, many women in our sample write about their individual stories of online harassment in order to represent the larger network of experiences that women face online; such stories are used as a strategy for speaking out about the commonality of such experiences and for seeking change for women in digital spaces.

These consciousness-raising strategies also work to create and claim space for women online. Kathy Sierra (2014) calls for solidarity work in her personal narrative of online harassment, arguing, “[I]f we don’t take care of one another, nobody else will.” In doing so, Sierra highlights the need for “more options for online spaces ... where women—or anyone—does not feel an undercurrent of fear watching her follower count increase”. Sierra’s calls demonstrate the strategic use of individual stories to enact solidarity work and to create space for women online.

However, there are some limitations to these strategies. Izzy I. (2015), a writer targeted by #GamerGate because she is “a visible Muslim woman of color who spoke out against their mob”, uses her experiences with online harassment to interrogate whose stories come to count in anti-harassment discourse and to demonstrate the ways women of colour are often erased and excluded from such discussions:

One of the problems we face in the digital world is that even in anti-harassment discourses, we are socialized to see whiteness as the overwhelming norm and default. Harassment against women online is a serious issue that needs to be tackled, especially considering how #GamerGate continued to have huge, horrible impact in the year 2015. However, we should not avoid scrutiny in dismantling how our anti-harassment conversations and understandings are still imbued with whiteness.

Izzy I. makes use of her personal narrative to demonstrate the limitations and tensions in anti-harassment strategies—specifically, the strategy of using one’s individual story to represent a collective experience. Such a representation can potentially work in a homogenizing, universalizing way that ignores the experiences of women of colour in this network of digital oppression. The contributions of women like Izzy I. challenge not just online harassment but epistemic hierarchies within anti-harassment discourse as well by interrogating the ways white privilege can work to homogenize solidarity work and exclude marginalized groups from anti-harassment activism.

Disrupting the Hegemonic Narrative

Brianna Wu, like many of the women in our sample (e.g. Day 2014; Quinn 2016; Sinders 2015), describes her harassment from #GamerGate: “I lead a development studio that makes games. Sometimes, I write about issues

in the games industry that relate to the equality of women. My reward is that I regularly have men threatening to rape and commit acts of violence against me.” Wu writes about her personal story of online harassment in order to counter the ways women’s experiences of oppression are often “shouted down, or ignored”. Wu’s efforts to challenge the erasure of women’s lived experiences represent a twofold strategy that occurs across the public narratives we sampled—the strategy of telling stories of online harassment in order to both challenge hegemonic narratives of the internet and challenge hegemonic narratives of online harassment.

The first of these strategies is that of challenging hegemonic narratives of the internet. For example, many women challenge the construction of the internet as a non-serious space or as a space that is not the “real” world. Ashley Judd ([2015](#)), for example, unpacks the responses she often receives when challenging online harassment: “The themes are predictable: I brought it on myself. I deserved it. I’m whiny. I’m no fun. I can’t take a joke. There are more serious issues in the world. The Internet space isn’t real, and doesn’t deserve validity and attention as a place where people are abused and suffer. Grow thicker skin, sweetheart. I’m famous. It’s part of my job description.” Judd challenges these hegemonic narratives by highlighting the seriousness of the threats she receives online and by connecting these responses to the typical responses to violence women face in physical spaces: “The themes embedded in this particular incident reflect the universal ways we talk about girls and women. When they are violated, we ask, why was she wearing that? What was she doing in that neighborhood?” Judd’s efforts to unsettle the hegemonic narrative of the internet as not being the real world demonstrate the ways many women work to prove that “[o]nline violence reflects a very real world of the offline torture of women around the world” ([Norton 2013](#)).

Another hegemonic narrative of the internet that these authors challenge is the idea that physical and digital spaces are completely separate, which therefore constructs internet spaces as incorporeal, lower-stakes environments than physical spaces. Jill Filipovic ([2014](#)) dismantles this digital/physical divide when she writes about her experience with online harassment while in law school. Filipovic says she knows “how quickly the lines between the ‘real’ and the virtual can blur” because many of those harassing her online “had details about what [she] wore to class and what [she] said”. In sharing her experience, Filipovic blurs the boundaries between physical and digital spaces, showing that these boundaries do not exist—because the people harassing her online are also people she encounters in physical spaces every day.

The second mode of challenging hegemonic narratives is the specific effort to unsettle hegemonic narratives of online harassment (e.g., DiCaro 2016; Hess 2014; Mayberry 2013; Sinders 2015; Valenti 2016). The authors especially work to challenge the ways people think women should *respond* to online harassment (as we saw in Judd’s commentary). Women are often directed to not feed the trolls, to grow a thicker skin or to simply ignore the deluge of harassment, violence and threats that they face in online spaces. Indeed, Wu (2014) explains of her experience as a woman in the gaming industry, “Women in the industry are told by men what is valid for us to feel ... We’re told it doesn’t matter, to grow a thicker skin, and that men go through the same thing.” Wu challenges these hegemonic narratives of online harassment: “Growing a thicker skin isn’t the answer, nor is it a proper response.”

Women are also often told to deal with online harassment by simply staying off the internet. Many of the women writers in our sample stress the inefficacy of this concept: “[F]or many women, steering clear of the Internet isn’t an option. We use our devices to find supportive communities, make a living, and construct safety nets” (Hess 2014). In dismantling the unrealistic, exclusionary argument that women should counter online harassment by removing themselves from the internet, these authors demonstrate another way they seek to challenge hegemonic narratives of online harassment.

Women of colour further complicate these challenges to hegemonic narratives by identifying the ways intersections of online existence and identity can amplify harassment. Evette Dione (2016) uses her personal narrative to push back against hegemonic narratives of the internet by revealing the ways these hegemonic narratives are especially oppressive for women of colour, and her interrogation of these hegemonic narratives acknowledges the limitations and tensions women face when writing about their experiences online. Indeed, women’s personal narratives can sometimes work to actually play into the hegemonic narratives they seek to dismantle, reifying these norms instead (e.g. Friedman 2013; Sinders 2015). For example, Dione explains, “[B]y being a vocal Black woman on the internet, I am constantly performing vulnerability. At any given time, my opinions can lead to harm.” Dione exemplifies the ways many women who write about their experiences with online harassment grapple with this tension—with the ways their efforts might amplify the harassment they receive and reify their vulnerability in the face of such attacks.

Defying the Harassers

In 2016, Dione expounded her experience of her tweets about Muhammad Ali going viral and the vitriol she received in response as a black woman:

Their hatred, crouched in tales about American exceptionalism and color-blindness, is designed to shut me up, shutter me, force me to stop speaking publicly about racism, sexism, homophobia, and all of the ways Black women are crushingly oppressed. Their cruelty, reflected in their digs at me rather than an engagement with what I said, is supposed to quiet me.

In this account, Dione articulates the ways online harassment is used as a tool to silence, particularly marginalized voices. Yet, later on in her account she states, “Silencing me keeps trolls from reconciling with how they’re complicit in a system that discriminates against marginalized folks. Too bad it didn’t work—and never will.” This statement represents the fourth strategy women in the sample used—making direct statements of defiance to reclaim power within the context of online harassment (e.g., Day 2014; Dione 2016; Jones 2016; Judd 2015; Schaefer 2015). Women, like Dione, expressed defiance and resilience despite continued harassment. This strategy often involved describing the purpose of online harassment as a means to silence women and then responding to that by saying that they will not be silenced. As Feminista Jones (2016) stated, “I am still here and I have no intention of shutting up.” The act of writing these public narratives in and of themselves can also be seen as a form of defiance, as a move to reclaim and take up (digital) space.

While most of these statements were focused on individual defiance, occasionally authors invoked a collective effort to combat the chilling effects of online harassment. As Judd (2015) wrote:

I am handing it back over to those of you who are unafraid to speak out against abuse like I have faced, and those of you who are righteous allies and intervening bystanders. You’re on it. Keep at it—on the Internet, at home, at work and in your hearts, where the courage to tackle this may fundamentally lie. We have much to discuss, and much action to take. Join me.

Similarly, Felicia Day (2014) drew on her own experience of remaining silent out of fear, but now urging others to persist: “So I write this to urge any person, male or female, who now has the impulse to do what I did, to walk away from something they loved before, to NOT.”

While such statements represent individual and collective defiance of attempts to silence marginalized voices by taking up space, the harassment does take an emotional toll. Many writers also expressed discouragement and exhaustion as a result of enduring sustained online harassment and abuse. Sierra (2014), in fact, wrote her account about “why the trolls will always win”. Her experiences led her to walk away from Twitter and what she described as a “big cognitive resource leak”. Others expressed frustration about even having to write these stories—“I am frankly furious that I even have to tell this story; it isn’t what I want to be talking about, or working on” (DiResta 2016). Some hint that over time the harassment does change how they write and interact online. As Jenny Leong (2016) wrote:

Diverse voices are at an additional risk of being silenced, through fear of sexist or racist reprisals. After being on the receiving end, I can confirm that it does make you think twice about what you put out publicly. You try not to self-censor, you try not to behave differently, but it’s almost impossible not to (should I even be writing this now, will it just bring on more abuse?).

In these ways, the emotional labour of defying abuse may take a toll over time, as women experience continued online harassment. Several authors also acknowledged that although they continue to speak out, the abuse has a chilling effect for others, calling into question what stories may not have been written out of fear of harassment.

IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, we have explored the use of public narratives as a strategy for resistance in response to online harassment. To conclude, we interrogate the implications of public narratives as a strategy for (re)claiming agency and (re)gaining power for women who resist online harassment, offer practical implications for ways that public narratives can become transformative tools for more inclusive constructions of online community, and discuss limitations of this study and future directions for research.

In light of the stories in our sample, we find that women use their public narratives of online harassment as a mode of resistance but also as a way to seek change. This utility speaks, in part, to Peter Brooks’ (1984) argument that we make meaning in our lives through narrative by “recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several

stories not yet completed” (p. 3). But women’s public narratives—their “recounting and reassessing” of their experiences—serve an even more active purpose of *resistance*; women’s public narratives of online harassment demonstrate the ways women’s stories are a performative act of resistance. Their stories are both individual and collective means of “counter-storying” in order to “disrupt hegemonic framings of social realities” (Lafrance and McKenzie-Mohr 2014, p. 6). As such, we find that the narratives in our sample work to “expose harmful or limiting master narratives, incorporate the complexities of our lives more adeptly, broaden our sense of options, and repair damaged identities” (p. 8), because women’s counter-stories “work in the service of social justice” (p. 8) by raising consciousness about women’s online harassment. Women use these public narratives of online harassment to counter the ways that hegemonically masculine spaces silence women and tell them they do not belong by making room and claiming space (Anzaldúa 2012) online for themselves and for others.

We also find that women use their public narratives of online harassment as a mode of evidence, which converses with feminist epistemology’s discussion of lived experience as a credible form of evidence that raises questions “about what it is to be *believable*” (Code 1995, p. 300) and that “interrogates the processes of [its] creation … and opens new ways for thinking about change” (Scott 1991, p. 280). In short, the evidence of experience has the “power to motivate us to demand social change irrespective of whether our own experience confirms or coincides with it” (Oksala 2013, p. 396), and such evidence is oriented towards a practice of “consciousness-raising” (p. 398) as well as “a politics of solidarity” (p. 396). This politics of solidarity especially manifests in the ways women use their public narratives of online harassment to construct a *network of experience*. We find that women locate their own stories in the web of women’s public narratives of online harassment in order to highlight the collective nature of women’s lives online, to assert the credibility of the evidence of their lived experience (in that theirs is only one story in a network of stories) and to disrupt the hegemonic masculinity of the internet by using this network of experience as a way of claiming space for women online.

Yet, we find that this study further complicates our understandings of public narrative as a form of resistance. Our analysis reveals the ways this form of resistance, as enacted by the differently situated women in our sample, reproduces trauma, has the potential to essentialize women’s

experiences of online harassment and reify hegemonic narratives, and takes an emotional toll. These reveal the contradictions women navigate when they decide to write their experience into existence—facing tensions between voice/silence, individual/collective, difference/sameness and disrupting/reproducing power relations. Over time, these contradictions can produce double binds (Putnam et al. 2016), as women feel trapped in a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” scenario of remaining silent versus speaking out about their harassment. More specifically, our analysis reveals the ways women, in the creation and sharing of public narratives, are required to constantly *reproduce vulnerability*—to amplify their harassment and in doing so heighten their risk for continued and/or escalated harassment. In doing so, the burden is placed on the individual, who puts her own body at risk in order to raise the consciousness of the masses. The title of this chapter, “Should I even be writing this?”, exemplifies this contradiction, in that the strategy of sharing one’s experiences through public narratives places authors and us, as academics writing about online harassment, at risk. This calls into question the extent of the risk we are all in a position to accept and who is most vulnerable. We find hope in the defiant statements of the women in our sample and their expressions of resilience despite the persistent harassment they have endured, while recognizing that not everyone is in the position to be able to speak out and that doing so can come at a cost.

Practical Implications

We also identify several practical implications of this study. First, this study identifies four rhetorical strategies of resistance in public narratives. While not the only rhetorical moves these authors made, these strategies—calling out, representing shared experience, disrupting hegemonic narratives and defying their harassers—represent useful tools for those who seek to combat online harassment. We encourage those who consider public narratives as a means of resistance to be reflexive in adopting and adapting these strategies, keeping in mind their limitations and the tensions they (re)produce. Second, this study also brings attention to the need for multiple voices within discourses about online harassment. In particular, those who are in the position to do so should create openings for voices that are often erased and/or silenced in discussions about online harassment. Most of the high-profile attention to online harassment has been centred around white women situated in the US and the UK. More attention is needed in particular to the

experiences of women of colour and those in the global south, whose positions within multiple axes of oppression make them especially vulnerable to heightened and more severe forms of harassment. Not all experiences of online harassment are the same and these diverse voices are necessary to more deeply understanding and responding to this phenomenon. Third, those who consider sharing their personal narratives as a form of resistance should explore ways to move beyond the individual and beyond consciousness-raising for institutional change. In considering the rhetorical strategies utilized by the women whose narratives we analysed, we were surprised not to see more tangible calls to action. While online harassment is problematized and made visible, in the absence of such a move, readers are left paralysed without any clear recourse to seek change.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations. First and foremost, we acknowledge that our sample of texts is likely incomplete. We may have missed important accounts of online harassment that are thus not represented here. Additionally, the time frame in which we collected these narratives ended prior to the 2016 US election. The post-election environment has seen a rise in online and offline harassment, particularly of marginalized groups (Miller and Werner-Winslow 2016; Williams 2016). Thus, we recognize the changing political climate may have produced additional strategies or made others obsolete. Still, the rise in online harassment makes strategies for resistance even more important as a site of study. Third, we recognize that there are no easy solutions to how to study and how to demonstrate care for authors and participants (including ourselves), given the threat of online harassment. We believe additional conversation is needed regarding these ethical responsibilities and hope future research will further interrogate the ethical tensions that occur when researching online harassment.

Future research should examine other modes of resistance to online harassment as well as identify additional narrative strategies. While this study focused on narrative strategies in the context of publicly posted online articles or blog posts, future research should examine the potentials and limitations of narrative in different formats and across different platforms. For example, narratives shared in the context of a hashtag on Twitter may make similar or different rhetorical moves. Such research can guide collective efforts to combat online harassment. Additionally, we

encourage researchers to seek out instances where institutional change took place related to online harassment and to use such instances as case studies to understand what modes of resistance are most effective.

To be sure, conversations around effective modes of resistance are vital because they allow us to interrogate, as we have worked to do here, the ways women resist and combat online harassment, the ways women claim space in the digital world and the ways women use their public narratives to seek collective change.

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