

# ‘Acting like 13 year old boys?’

Exploring the discourse of online harassment and the diversity of harassers



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Submitted to the Department of Gender Studies, University of Utrecht

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree in Women's and Gender Studies

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Utrecht, the Netherlands

2016

Approved:

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# ABSTRACT

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In this thesis, I have undertaken research into the users behind online harassment. The impetus behind this was to investigate taken for granted assumptions about who harassers are, what they do online, and how they do it. To begin, I highlight the discourse of online harassment of women in scholarship and online-news media, discussing the assumptions made about who is harassing and why. I discuss the lack of consideration of multi-layered harassment and argue for more research that takes into consideration the intersectionality of harassing content, and the experiences of *all* women online. I provide an overview of online methodologies and of feminism on the internet. I then undertake an investigation into harassers behind online harassment of women, and find trends in user profiles, user behaviour, and in online communication patterns more broadly. I discuss how researching this topic affected me personally, reflecting on the impact of viewing high amounts abusive content. My findings challenged many of the assumptions initially identified, so, with that in mind, I provide a discussion of why such assumptions are problematic. I argue that such assumptions contribute to a discourse that homogenizes harassment and harassers, and overlooks broader internet-specific behaviours. I discuss common strategies for dealing with online harassment, and identify problems with them. Finally, I provide a series of points that I believe should be considered in the development of future strategies, in order to better focus interventions to tackle online harassment.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thanks to my supervisor Dr. Domitilla Oliviera, and second reader Dr. Jasmina Lukic for your help and contributions.

Thanks to the women who provided me with examples of harassment they had endured.

Thanks to the van Marlen-Verdonk family for being so welcoming, for making me feel like I have a home away from home, and for letting me write this thesis in your house.

Thanks Ali for your help with editing and for being a totally rad sister.

Thanks mum and dad for your generosity, trust, advice, love and patience. This would not have been possible, mentally or practically, without you both.

Thanks to AM for everything: for being the most caring, intelligent and fiercely feminist person I know, for helping me formulate my ideas, for challenging me, for loving me, for making me laugh, and for putting up with me talking about teenage boys for a year.

Finally, thanks to the Internet for providing me something to study, but for also providing me with all of the procrastination.

**WARNING:**

*This thesis contains hate speech relating to gender, race and sexuality, and mentions of extreme violence.*

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# Introduction

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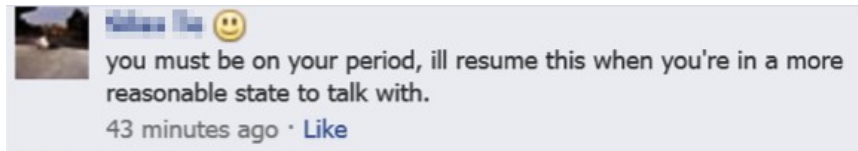


Figure. 1

Several years ago I stopped engaging in online discussions with strangers. I was tired of being involved in online debates that went in circles, and that induced anxiety while waiting for others to write their responses, unsure whether they would understand my point, or whether they would attack. I was shocked at how many people resorted to sexism, racism, body shaming and homophobia within online discussions. I also noticed becoming anxious because of the chance that someone I *didn't* know might start attacking others or me on personal details when engaging in debates. Because it happened. When a friend posted her concerns about a “bikini body” diet on a fitness Facebook page and was attacked for it, I joined the conversation in support. We were both immediately personally ridiculed and attacked. Later, in a Facebook forum, I suggested that the sexualised jokes other members were making were immature, and I was immediately attacked. I was told that the woman they were joking about was a slut, that I should get off the Internet<sup>1</sup> if I couldn't handle it, that I was spoiling the fun and being over sensitive, and finally that I must have been on my period.

I began to feel that being a woman was impacting my ability to engage with online discussions. During the 2012 Olympics, I found a Facebook group titled “Olympic Hunting”, featuring pictures of female athletes' bodies. The page was filled with comments indicating what users would do to each woman. The comments were often violent, and sometimes suggestive of rape. When I investigated some of the people behind the comments, I was shocked to find that some were young boys, and was struck by how common hate speech is on the Internet, and just how accessible such things are to young people. I began to wonder if misogyny was growing, or just more visible, and became interested in who was behind it.

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to the Internet colloquially as the online network recognisable since the beginning of increased uptake in the late 1980s, not earlier versions. I also use “online” and “Internet” interchangeably throughout this thesis.

As social media has grown in the last ten years and the line between *offline*<sup>2</sup> and online has become increasingly blurred, the Internet has opened up a whole new scope of opportunities for diversity of voices, but also made visible the opposition to that. I became increasingly interested in the “anonymous” comments made between strangers, or the comments made about people without invitation. When those people were women, those comments seemed to be more aggressive, the amount of negativity was higher, and the threats more gender specific. When the person, male or female, was not white, a different array of hate speech emerged. Sexuality and bodies were also targeted, and the bigger the online presence, the more harassment you seemed to be subjected to. This, of course, is not unlike *offline* treatment of women, but the Internet has given people the platform to send comments directly to an individual, in an instant. Without denying that the Internet has allowed for increased visibility and vocalizing of diversities, as a space it has quickly become obvious that not only are *offline* discriminations being recreated online, but also that the Internet itself has facilitated new forms of harassing behaviour.

### A growing, yet overlooked problem

Online harassment<sup>3</sup> is a growing problem. Recent studies have found that an inordinately high percentage of women online have experienced harassment, with one recent study finding the numbers may be as high as 76% of women under 30<sup>4</sup>. Citron (2009) finds that online abuse is often gendered and can be violent. For non-white people and marginalised groups the rates of harassment are higher than white people. For example 51% of African Americans overall experienced harassment online, compared to 34% of white people (Duggan, 2014). For non-white women the rates are even higher, with 53% having experienced online harassment (Citron, 2014: 14), and the abuse is multilayered (Starr, 2014). Many women who have been highly active online have been forced to remove themselves and or their work from the Internet, or have had to change their identity or their movements both on- and *offline*.

Scholars have discussed the gendered nature of online harassment, though the volume of academic research remains comparatively low to the scale of the problem, and the research is still quite broad. As Jane has found, the discourse of misogynist online harassment ‘has received scant attention in scholarly literature’ (Jane, 2014 [A]: 558), and common discourse often regards online harassment as

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this thesis I will italicise the word “offline”, to avoid confusion between this and the word “online”.

<sup>3</sup> A note on trolls: This is not a thesis about trolls. Online harassment is incorrectly labelled as trolling regularly in scholarship and by online-news sources. Trolls are a specific sub-group of Internet users and the consequent trolling is a behaviour marked by the following of certain community codes and discourse. Unless I am specifically talking about trolls, where I will use the word accordingly, in this thesis I will be referring to behaviour as harassment, and those conducting it, harassers. I will further expand on definitions in chapter one.

<sup>4</sup> [https://phoenix.symantec.com/Norton/au/online-harassment-experience-women/assets/A4\\_Norton\\_infographic\\_Online\\_Harassment\\_Against\\_Women.pdf](https://phoenix.symantec.com/Norton/au/online-harassment-experience-women/assets/A4_Norton_infographic_Online_Harassment_Against_Women.pdf)



being relatively harmless. Feminist scholarship has largely overlooked online harassment specifically, despite early interest in the potential the online world held for escaping *offline* oppressions. Scholarship can tend to downplay the impact of *offline* harassment, whilst online-news discussions of online harassment can veer towards sensationalising and homogenising both the acts and the perpetrators. Despite this, online-news sources are more often aware of the impact online harassment has on women's well-being and participation. In both scholarship and online-news there is often a confusion of terminology and a lack of focus on or investigation into who is behind the harassment.

### Violence against women: A new arena

Online harassment of women mirrors *offline* harassment of women in incentive, method, management and result. The incentive is to keep women from "ruining" or feminising the online space, which, like most technologies, has traditionally 'been made masculine' (van Zoonen, 2002: 10). This is reflected in the common phrase between users: "if you can't handle the Internet, leave". Some are concerned that that women have too much influence in online activities or behaviour, and that they are "ruining the fun", that Internet content is "harmless" and that they are "overreacting". The method is intimidation, threats, sexualised language and imagery, gender-specific ridicule, and male/male bullying tactics. Management includes suggestions that women should take better care of themselves by blocking and reporting, that they should think twice about what they say and write, that they should avoid sharing personal details, or that they should ignore the behaviour ("don't feed the trolls"). *Offline* management (for example police intervention) is sporadic, and many tell of having their online harassment overlooked by police, or misunderstood (in Starr, 2014). There remain relatively few convictions for online harassment, a fact that is also not dissimilar to the prosecution of *offline* harassers of women.

The strategies commonly suggested for dealing with online harassment, and the discourse around online harassment and harassers, reproduce *offline* discourse that homogenises women's experiences, places the responsibility on women to deal with the problem, downplays the problem exists, and fails to offer tangible solutions. Citron speculates that cyber gender harassment could become an ingrained practice (2009:376) and may be one of the 'central struggles against sexual harassment in the coming decades' (*ibid.*). This has global repercussions for women's participation online which, given the ever-expanding and evolving form of the online world, means repercussions for women's inclusion in society and discussions generally.

## Overview of my research

The focus of my research is to investigate the users who harass women<sup>5</sup> online via social networking sites (SNSs), primarily Twitter. Twitter is a ‘microblogging site’ that allows users to send short (140 character) messages to others on the network (Marwick & boyd<sup>6</sup>, 2010: 3). The incentive for my research is that investigation into online harassment remains very broad, and discussions in online-news articles and public discourse are often based on unfounded assumptions about harassers. As yet, I have been unable to find any qualitative academic studies investigating the users behind online harassment. Studies have been undertaken, for example, of trolls (e.g. Phillips, 2015), harassment of women in online gaming (e.g. Kasumovic & Kusnekoff, 2015), and the experiences of women who receive harassment (e.g. Kennedy, 2000) but not into the users themselves. By doing so, I aim to gain insight into whether assumptions made about online harassers, and harassment, are accurate, or whether they are based on assumptions that may be incorrect

In chapter one, I will discuss the framing of online harassment in scholarship and in online-news coverage. I will discuss the language used to describe online harassment and harassers, and present the assumptions made about who the harassers are. I will discuss some problems with terminology and identify some areas of oversight in the way that online harassment is framed in scholarship and online-news reporting. In chapter two I will discuss feminisms’ relationship with the Internet, including the emergence of (and then decrease in) cyberfeminism, and I will provide an overview of methodologies for Internet research. I will discuss the methodology I used, and why. In chapter three I present my research into online harassment, to explore more about who is harassing and their online experiences, and will discuss the broader trends that I noticed. In chapter 4 I will re-visit the common assumptions discussed in chapter 1 and, in light of my findings, show why these assumptions may be flawed, and problematic. I will provide an overview of some management strategies for dealing with online harassment, and discuss how these may be poorly framed and inadequately targeted.

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<sup>5</sup> In this thesis, I use the words “women” or “woman”. By this I acknowledge anyone who self-identifies as a woman, and also acknowledge that people also receive harassment online based on the perception of others that they are a woman, even if they may not identify as such.

<sup>6</sup> Deliberately lowercase

# Chapter 1

## *The Discourse of Harassment & Harassers*

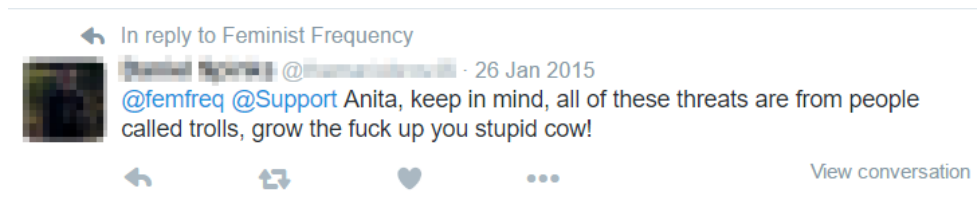


Figure. 2

### *Chapter outline*

In this chapter, I will present an overview of the discourse of online harassment and harassers in academic scholarship and in online-news articles. As scholar Emma Jane (2014 [B]: 532) articulates, misogynist<sup>7</sup> harassment – hate speech against women online - now occurs everywhere on the Internet and yet remains largely under-researched. In particular, as Fox *et al* (2015: 436) find that research into the impact of sexist content – harassment targeting online users in gender-specific ways – in social media is ‘scarce’. I will discuss the framing of online harassment in both scholarship and by online-news sources, commenting in particular on the overall tone of both, and how harassers themselves are discussed. In chapter 3 I will then comment on how such framings of online harassment are problematic, in light of my own findings.

## Part 1: History & Context

### *A Short Overview of Online Harassment*

The “online” world is still a relatively recent phenomenon (Citron, 2009: 376), as the Internet only expanded globally in the early 1990s (Zhao, 2006: 458). Since then, the Internet has been through several transitions, becoming the platform as we experience it now in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The current version of the Internet as it is known today is sometimes referred to as ‘Web 2.0’, a concept first discussed by Tim O’Reilly in 2005 (O’Reilly, 2005), which references the transition to online platforms that ‘support various communication functions and technologies and that they constitute an architecture of participation and rich user experience’ (Fuchs, 2011: 137). This is commonly

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<sup>7</sup> I will discuss why describing harassment like this is problematic later in this chapter

simplified to the rise of “social software” (Fuchs, 2010: 766). This new phase of social media use has risen dramatically in the last ten years, beginning with the advent of Friendster in 2003, followed by MySpace, and then Facebook in 2004 (Digital Trends, 2014). Twitter was launched in 2006 (Twitter, 2010), around a decade after the Internet increased dramatically in uptake. Twitter differs from Facebook primarily in that users’ profiles are usually public, and users can “tweet”<sup>8</sup> to anyone, including politicians, celebrities, businesses and other users.

From early on in the development of online spaces there existed harassing behaviour, at first taking the form of ‘flaming’ (Jane, 2015: 65), in which case users would attack strangers online because they disagreed with them. The now familiar term ‘troll’ and subsequent behaviour known as “trolling” was first officially recorded in 1992 (Phillips, 2015: 15), and refers to someone ‘whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement’ (Phillips, 2015: 16). Harassing behaviour, once contained within certain areas of the Internet and undertaken by certain users (i.e. trolls), is now more widespread. In a study of Online Harassment released in 2014 (Duggan, 2014), it was found that 40% of online users surveyed had been harassed online, and 73% had witnessed someone else being harassed (2014: 2). Another study (Working to Halt Online Abuse, in Citron, 2009: 379) found that 49% of the people surveyed did not know their attackers, a point which, when coupled with the severity of much of the content of abuse, makes online harassment contrary to *offline* harassment of women, much of which is perpetrated by people known personally to them (see Watts & Zimmerman, 2002).

Harassment of women includes comments on race, bodies, appearance, sexuality, and also includes threats, gendered commentary on intellect, and comments about women not belonging online. There is no clear definition for the kind of harassment I am focussing on in this thesis. Following Emma Jane (2014 [B]), a feminist scholar in the area of online misogyny and harassment of women, I acknowledge the problems they have discussed with the framing of discussions of online harassment, and the way that academic insistence on obtaining definitions of online behavior is stifling research in a much needed area. In an attempt to be clear, however, the harassment I am focussing on is not negative feedback about something a woman has done or said, but is abusively hostile or threatening in a manner that either includes gender in its content or is gendered in incentive. By this I mean that the harassment seems abusive relative to the reason it was sent, which is often simply because the target was a woman. Although definitions for harassment of women online exist, I have refrained from using them owing to a lack of a definition that allows adequate space for the consideration of intersectional harassment. I will expand on this later in this chapter.

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<sup>8</sup> send a public message

### *Harassment of Women Online*

Jane (2014: 532) finds that ‘toxic and often markedly misogynist’ content, whilst once confined to the less accessed parts of the Internet, now ‘circulates freely’ throughout the entire online realm. Harassment of women online includes threats of acts of gendered violence, rape or death, the altering of photos of the target to show acts of gendered violence or death, sending of pornographic or violent images, ridiculing of women in gender-specific ways, and suggestions that women are not welcome. In some instances women have been “doxed”, when users gain and share personal details such as social security numbers, IP addresses, home and work addresses, and the details of others connected to them, such as family members. If the target is not white, the harassment includes racist additions to all of the above, as well as racist imagery. Online harassment is in no way limited to women and girls. Boys, men<sup>9</sup> and gender-non conforming people are also subject to harassment, the worst of which occurs based on perceptions of masculinity, sexual preferences, status and genital size (Jane, 2014 [A]: 565). In a study of Internet harassment undertaken by Pew Research Centre, statistics showed that boys and men were slightly more likely to experience online harassment, yet young adult women were experiencing the highest rates overall on social media (Duggan, 2014). Yet, whilst everyone can be a victim of online harassment, the harassment towards women online differs in content and severity (Valenti, 2007)<sup>10</sup>. The harassment women receive is very often gendered in its nature, while male Internet users tend to be ‘more often attacked for their ideas and actions’ (Filipovic, 2007: 303). When gender is included in the harassment of men and boys it often takes the form of threats towards associated women or girls, such as their mothers or daughters (Jane, 2014 [A]: 565).

Some experience incredibly high rates of abuse from just one or two people, which fits more with the definition of stalking, cyberbullying, or trolling. High profile, mass scale harassment cases tend to be characterised by a mass backlash directed towards women who are usually being vocal about an issue of women’s rights or feminism. Citron writes that ‘online harassment can quickly become a team sport’ and refers to this kind of incident as a cyber mob (Citron, 2014: 3). This in itself is not particularly shocking – angry resistance to feminism and suggestions that women are perhaps being unfairly treated/represented/sexualised has often resulted in the kind of backlash that justifies the very reason for the discussion. However, the scale of harassment sent, and the fact that it can be sent directly to the target in real time, is one of the reasons online harassment is significant to address.

<sup>9</sup> As noted in an earlier footnote regarding women, so do I also refer to those who self-identify as being male, and in particular acknowledge that there are specific online harassments directed at trans\* men.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/apr/06/gender.blogging>

### *The scale of the problem*

In 2015 a report released by the United Nations Broadband Commission found that ‘almost three quarters of women online have been exposed to some form of cyber violence’ (UN Women, 2015). Concern over the Internet as facilitating *offline* gender and race oppressions and rhetoric has existed since the emergence of online technologies. In 1999, Susan Herring, reflecting on early research into email and chat communication, argued that ‘gender-based disparity exist(ed) in both’, and at times took ‘extreme forms...including overt harassment’ (1999: 151). As Jane finds (2015: 65) evidence supports the fact that, whilst ‘hostile communication’ has always been present online, ‘e-bile<sup>11</sup> (Jane’s term for gendered online harassment) has become far more prevalent, rhetorically noxious, and gendered in nature’. In Australia, in the last five years, the amount of cases where people have been charged for ‘using a carriage service to menace, harass or offend’<sup>12</sup> has doubled (Olding, 2016 [A]).

In the last 10 years there have been a significant number of key incidents in which women have become the target of mass-scale harassment. There is not always a trigger for such attacks, though several have been in response to women raising issues of sexism or from promoting more inclusion or better representation of women. When a large-scale harassment incident occurs towards a woman online, much of the harassment is not only gender-specific but also the content can seem disproportionately aggressive relative to the issue that may have sparked the harassment. A good example of this is the case of Kathy Sierra, a technology blogger, who in 2005 removed herself from online (and moved house *offline*) after being doxxed, and receiving rape and death threats (Mantilla, 2013: 565). This was one of the first incidents to gain significant media attention. In 2008 another online blogger, Alyssa Royse, was the target of mass scale online harassment for writing an opinion piece about movie *The Dark Knight* (Citron, 2009: 382). Of 300 comments directed to Royse, only 3 did *not* mention her gender (Citron, 2009: 383). In 2013 feminist activist and journalist Caroline Criado-Perez campaigned to keep a woman on British bank notes, and was subjected to hundreds<sup>13</sup> of harassing tweets, including threats of death and rape (Mantilla, 2013: 568). Some refer to these large-scale focussed attacks as “cyber mobs” (e.g. Sarkeesian, 2012, Citron, 2014), and the process usually escalates quickly and sometimes has a corresponding hashtag. As the incident or issue gains attention, the scale of abuse continues, often fuelled by key Internet figures (in some instances trolls themselves) mobilising and encouraging their “followers” to also join in with the abuse.

<sup>11</sup> Jane defines e-bile as ‘extravagant invective, the sexualized threats of violence, and the *recreational nastiness*’ (emphasis in quote) (Jane, 2014 [B]: 532)

<sup>12</sup> The code of law under which people can be prosecuted for online harassment in Australia

<sup>13</sup> For example, at the height of her harassment, Criado-Perez was receiving 50 rape threats per hour (Baker-Whitelaw, 2013)

### *Why is this worth studying?*

Online harassment of women has resulted in targeted women cancelling public speaking events, taking their content *offline*, removing themselves from online spaces, moving house, requiring security, and in some instances limitations on their freedom of movement. This is not to mention the detrimental effects to targeted women's mental and physical health. The United Nations Broadband Commission argues that, without being addressed cyber VAWG (violence against women and girls) could impact women's uptake of broadband (UN Women, 2015). Many of those on the receiving end of harassment have commented on the speed of the escalation and the severity of the attacks. Speaking in an interview with WNYC's 'On the Media' radio show, BuzzFeed's Gabby Dunn said 'If I tweet about something that a guy doesn't agree with, instead of being like "I kindly disagree" the next @ reply is like "you should get raped to death" (Haggerty, 2014). Jill Filipovic, at the centre of a harassment case that received much media attention in 2005 (Filipovic, 2007), highlighted the difference between harassment levelled at men compared to women: "The people who were posting comments about me were speculating as to how many abortions I've had, and they talked about 'hate-fucking' me...I don't think a man would get that; the harassment of women is far more sexualised - men may be told that they're idiots, but they aren't called 'whores'" (Valenti, 2007).

Despite the severity of the content and threats, online harassment is rarely taken seriously. It is sporadically dealt with, and only occasionally has *offline* consequences. Online commentator Derrick Clifton regularly received racially motivated harassment online and, in reference to the low rate of *offline* conviction for online harassment, wrote 'If anyone in real life ever told me that I need to be killed, followed by a racial epithet, the police *might* take it seriously' (Clifton, 2015) (emphasis in quote). The recurring themes in the discourse around online harassment are that it is not as serious as those being harassed make it out to be, and that people are not warranted in taking issue with it. Online feminist blogger Mikki Kendall, who has herself faced extreme gendered and racialized online abuse, wrote about online harassment: 'It's not the first threat, or the first insult. It's not even the fifteenth...it's the realization that even with all the evidence in the world, people will still insist that A) You deserve it, B) That it is no big deal, or C) That you must be making it up' (Kendall, 2015). At the same time, more than ever before, online harassment – particularly gender specific content – is regularly being spoken about in the public and media discourse. Responses to online harassment from those targeted have, in the last couple of years, garnered huge response from the public and media, and campaigns about certain incidents have had significant results. Surprisingly, academic research into online harassment remains low.

## Part 2: Discourse of Online Harassment of Women

In scholarship and online-news articles there has been a tendency to both sensationalise and understate the impact of harassment and the effect it has on women's experience of being online. In this section, I provide an overview of the dominant discourse around online harassment, both within academic scholarship and online-news reporting.

Discussions of online behaviour began with flaming, trolling and, more recently, online harassment of women. Jane (2014 [B]) has undertaken a review of the literature around flaming, compartmentalising it into 3 waves. The first, in the 1980s and 1990s, involved debate as to whether online antagonism was similar or different to *offline*. The second wave - in the early 1990s - attempted to clearly categorise online antagonistic behaviour, and standardise the tools for recognising it, while the third wave – or contemporary scholarship – seems to either understate the importance of antagonistic behaviour studies, or overlook them altogether (Jane, 2014 [B]: 537-538). This is also true of feminist scholarship. Jane argues that, while plenty of academic writing has been released on various types of cyber harassment, nothing has been written on what she considers a new phase of online harassment – ‘the contemporary proliferation of hyperbolic and sexualised invective’ (2014 [a]: 537). Even those studying the more specific harassment existed online prior to Web 2.0 – e.g. trolling – have argued that research is still limited (Buckles *et al*, 2014: 97).

For a long time, harassment online has been considered as the occasional, rather than the norm. Citron (2014: 11-12) noticed that, within academia and within the public, many thought that ‘too much was being made of what they call unusual cases’. Jane (2015) found that, owing to ‘a number of conceptual, methodological, and epistemological challenges’ (2015: 65), the last 30 years of scholarship has meant ‘hostile communication on the Internet’ (*ibid.*) has been ‘typically underplayed, overlooked, ignored, or otherwise marginalised its prevalence and serious ethical and material ramifications’ (*ibid.*). For example, Gabriella Coleman, in her chapter ‘Phreaks, Hackers, and Trolls’ (2012) suggests that scholars compare trolls to “tricksters”, and consider how parts of their behaviour may be ‘political tactic’ (Coleman summarising Duncombe, 2012: 115). Manivannan (2013: 113) even suggest that ‘appreciating misogynistic discourse as part of a broader strategy of regenerative subcultural practice is radical but necessary to understanding (certain Internet forums) on (their) own terms’. Jane (2015: 72) summarises this as ‘the presentation in scholarly literature of flaming as a good – or at least an ethically neutral – thing’.

The academic discussions of trolling or harassing behaviour are caught between attempting to find the political motivations of trolls (e.g. Coleman, 2012 & Wilson *et al*, 2013) attempting to re-define the definition of trolling to describe more specific online harassment behaviour (e.g. Mantilla, 2013).



Scholarship tends to focus on those on the receiving end of harassment, or discusses the wider implications of harassment, or “trolling” as a behaviour (e.g. Cheng et al, 2015), in particular discussing whether trolling may or may not be abusive, and focussing on whether there are ‘lessons to be drawn from their spectacular antics’ (Coleman, 2012: 115). As Jane argues (2014 [A]), academic scholarship around flaming, for example, is often concerned with finding the new and unusual, rather than the obvious. In this case, the result is that much of the academic work on trolling finds it to be a subversive practice grounded in humour and mischief, occasionally hurtful, but mainly a key part of Internet practice.

It has been suggested that academic scholarship has posited itself against media, and that discussion of online harassment is therefore deliberately oppositional. What occurs online is discussed very differently in the media and within academic scholarship. Jane (2014 [A]) has conducted a summary of harassment cases reported in the media, and argues that although sometimes sensationalist, mass media *has* reported on the transition from isolated behaviour of trolling to the common abuse now present online, which has been so far overlooked within scholarship. Comparatively to scholarship, media reporting of online harassment is more up to date on Internet trends, and the discourse considers online harassment to be more of a concern than does the dominant discourse of academic scholarship. This in itself is not surprising, much of the online reporting on this topic has either been written by women who have been on the receiving end of such harassment themselves (e.g. Valenti, 2007, Oluo, 2016, Ford, 2012, West, 2015, Price, 2016), or is written by others who are more aware of the broader context of publishing content online, such as male online journalists.

### Part 3: How are Online Harassers Talked About?

Within the bulk of academic research, media and quantitative studies about online harassment, there is relatively little discussion of *who* is behind such behaviour. Most reporting and research focuses on those on the receiving end of harassment. This may seem unsurprising, given that the Internet allows users to be anonymous or to falsify their identity. Indeed this is a regularly given reason by academics, though increasingly users have more of their *offline* “real” identity in their online presence. Kennedy (in Reader, 2012: 498) notes that, though perhaps appearing anonymous, a person’s identity online remains related to their *offline* persona. In addition to this, many scholars (and media) also assume anonymity where it is perhaps not accurate nor a reflection of contemporary Internet trends. Indeed, it is common in both media and scholarship to refer to anonymity as being a key reason behind the high rates of online harassment, abuse and trolling, and for harassers to be referred to as being “anonymous” when they harass. Filipovic, herself a victim of

online harassment from peers, refers to the ‘broader established pattern on the Internet of usually anonymous commenters harassing and sexually demeaning women’ (2007: 298).

Within broad discussions of harassing behaviour online, there are some reoccurring problems with terminology. As Hardaker finds, ‘trolling has become a catch-all term for any number of negatively marked online behaviours’ (2010: 224). In actuality, trolling is built on a long history of sub-cultural resistance and pranks in the online realm. Trolls in their purest form have historically undertaken behaviour to upset and destabilise (see Hardaker 2010 for a discussion of trolling terminology). Trolls traditionally follow specific trolling “codes” involving the use of specific discourse, memes and interactions (see Phillips, 2015). Kirman et al (in Cheng et al, 2015: 2) describe trolls as ‘creatures who take pleasure in upsetting others’. Hardaker (2010: 237) proposes a working definition of trolls as being ‘a CMC (Computer mediated communication) user who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement’.

Yet, trolling remains a complex definition and, as Coleman argues, ‘trolls have transformed what were more occasional and sporadic acts...into a full-blown set of cultural norms and set of linguistic practices’ (Coleman, 2012: 109-110). Because trolling “codes” have become ‘so established and documented...many others can, and have, followed in their footsteps’ (Coleman, 2012: 110). Because the extent of trolling activities now extends beyond the traditional definition of trolling, Coleman (2012) has therefore attempted to create subcategories of trolls to better and more specifically describe certain behaviours. Others, too, have attempted to come up with adequate definitions for the array of behaviours akin to trolling online. Yet trolling is a loaded term, and with it come visualisations that are “othering” in effect. This in turn may contribute to a continued focus on victims and the overlooking of, or lack of repercussion for harassers. I will expand on this in chapter 4, after presenting my findings.

### *“Anonymous trolling men”*

Despite usually failing to investigate, or even when assumed anonymous, media and scholarship generally refer to harassers as being men. This in itself is relatively accurate since as one study found, 60% of online harassment cases were characterised as having a female target and a male attacker (in Citron, 2009: 379). Yet sometimes reporting can assume several things consecutively which tends to homogenise the act and the harasser (a point I will expand on in chapter three). In online-news, it is common for online harassment to be referred to as trolling, and for harassers to be broadly labelled as trolls, anonymous and men. As Phillips finds (2015: 2), various forms of online

harassment, such as cyberbullying, antagonistic behaviour and general online aggression, are ‘sometimes described as trolling’. Kathy Sierra, herself at the centre of one of the first widely reported online harassment cases in 2007 that resulted in her removing herself from online completely, wrote in her online blog that ‘the majority of “trolls”<sup>14</sup> are middle class white men’ (Sierra, 2014). Caroline Criado-Perez, herself a victim of targeted harassment online, referred to her abuse as ‘a nest of men who co-ordinate attacks on women’ (in Mantilla, 2013: 568). Online-news reporting of online harassment often combines several of the aforementioned descriptors, often forming a perception of harassers as being sub-human, or creature like, especially when the terminology of troll is included. In 2012 the Daily Telegraph, a tabloid newspaper in Australia, launched a ‘Stop The Trolls’ campaign, ‘aimed at stopping the vile and abusive trolls on Twitter, facelessly and mercilessly attacking’ (Jones & Byrnes, 2012). The campaign intention was ‘to stand up to the faceless bullies and to urge Twitter to unmask them and turn them in to authorities so they can be prosecuted’ (Jones & Byrnes, 2012).

Reporting on gaming figure Alanah Pearce’s tactics for dealing with online harassment, ABC news referred to her harassers as trolls but the act as harassment (Coghill *et al*, 2016). The article itself was highlighting the fact that some school-aged boys send rape threats, and referred to the boys as trolls. An incident involving racist and gendered abuse towards Aboriginal politician Nova Peris earlier this year was described as the act of a troll by one media sources (e.g. Killalea, 2016) but most other online-news sources dropped “troll” and described the incident with the harassers name<sup>15</sup> (e.g., Mitchell, 2016 and Taylor, 2016). Similarly, 23-year-old Zane Alchin, charged for the harassment of women online earlier this year, has been referred to in the media by his name (e.g. Kembrey, 2016) but sometimes also as a troll (e.g. Sullivan, 2016 [B]).

In the incident involving Nova Peris, it is worth noting that, despite sexist language being used, media reporting focussed almost entirely on the incident as being a racist attack. Similarly, when actor and singer Zendaya was included in a tweet suggesting the rape of her and 3 other black women, media reported on the misogynistic content, and failed to comment on the obvious racialized content (e.g. Sullivan, 2016 [A], Bruculieri, 2016, and Cutler, 2016). This is an example of what I consider a lack of intersectional perspectives in the discussions of online harassment. I will expand on this further later in this chapter.

In summary, the points worth making are that 1) there is a lack of research into online harassment of women, 2) there are many un-founded assumptions made about harassers, 3) the terminology used

<sup>14</sup> n.b. Sierra is referring to harassers – troll is not necessarily an accurate description here

<sup>15</sup> which was easily available as the comment had been made on Facebook

to discuss online harassment is regularly confused, and 4) the discussions overlook multi-layered harassment.

## Part 4: Lack of an Intersectional perspective

Intersectionality is a term that was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, to highlight how specific intersections between categories of difference such as gender, race and class shape peoples' subject positions and experiences in particular ways. Crenshaw shows for example that the intersectional experience of Black women 'is greater than the sum of racism and sexism' (1989: 140). As a result, different women's experiences of discrimination cannot and should not be conflated. In the case of online harassment of women, an intersectional perspective would explicitly acknowledge and address the fact that the experiences of harassment as well as the *content* of the harassment they receive will differ between and amongst women as a result of their particular (perceived) subject positions along lines of race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, ability, etc. So far, there has not been an in-depth analysis of the online experiences of non-white women, and the recognition, for example, that women of colour are experiencing particular racist and gendered forms of online abuse is largely overlooked. Women who disproportionately receive (multi-layered) harassment are women of colour, LGBT women (Clark, 2015), those who identify as feminists (Filipovic, 2007: 300) and women with a high public profile generally. Women, gender and sexuality studies scholar Tanisha C. Ford expands on this idea, arguing that particularly black feminists are at risk of harassment when they speak out online, because they are articulating issues that implicate others in systems of power (in Starr, 2014). There is a need for the exploration and acknowledgment of multi-layered harassment.

Current terminology used to describe online harassment of women, however, significantly lacks an intersectional perspective. For example, in the many attempts to define gender specific harassment there have been none that adequately consider intersectional harassment in their terminology. Danielle Keats Citron calls online harassment of women 'cyber gender harassment' (2009), which she notes can include threats or suggestions of sexual violence or rape, release of personal details, altered photographs of women, or hacks to bring down particular websites or online presences (2009: 374). Citron believes the elements of cyber gender harassment are; the victims are female; particular women are targeted, and the abuse is focussed on gender in 'sexually threatening and degrading ways' (2009: 378). Jessica Megarry refers to the 'aggressive harassment of women online' as 'online sexual harassment' (2014: 47). Karla Mantilla (2013) refers to specifically misogynistic abuse as 'gendertrolling'. Mantilla argues that 'gendertrolling' is undertaken for more than just

“lulz<sup>16</sup>”, and is an actual reflection of beliefs held by the harassers (2013: 564). In Mantilla’s opinion gendertrolling has several key indicators; the scale is large, insults are based on gender and involve a language of hate, include actual (and often *offline*) threats, occur over a sustained time frame, and finally, is usually in response to a woman raising an issue relating to sexism. Citron (2009: 374-375) states that ‘cyber harassment is a uniquely gendered phenomenon – the majority of targeted individuals are women, and the abuse of female victims invokes gender in threatening and demeaning terms’.

Some scholars have acknowledged the lack of consideration of other discriminations in this field of literature. Jane (2014 [A]: 567) for example acknowledges this, stating in her article ‘Back to the Kitchen, Cunt: speaking the unspeakable about online misogyny’ that she acknowledges ‘other types of online invective...which trade in racist or offensive cultural or religious stereotypes’. ‘[H]owever’, she adds, ‘I will be focussing primarily on gendered e-bile’ (*ibid.*). Fox (2015), in a study of anonymity in sexist content, did not reference the impact or inclusion of racist content within the study, yet noted at the end of the report that ‘future research should probe the intersectionality of sexism and race on SNSs (social networking sites)’ (2015: 441). Mantilla’s definition ‘gendertrolling’, however, implies a focus on one-dimensional harassment, and her recently published book ‘Gendertrolling: misogyny adapts to new media’ (2015) pays scant attention to multilayered harassment. In a review of this publication on website *feministcurrent* sociologist Katherine Cross neatly summarises her concern with the term, writing: ‘ultimately, “Gendertrolling,” as a concept in and of itself, is faulty: The phenomenon we are dealing with is neither trolling, nor is it always about gender in the straightforward way Mantilla describes’ (Cross, 2015). Citron, in her book ‘Hate Crimes in Cyberspace’ (2014), includes mentions of racism online, but nothing of the gendered nature of racist harassment, and vice versa. In fact, Citron even suggests ‘there is no clear proof that race is determinative’ (2014: 14), and cites a study that found that ‘84% of cyber harassment victims were white women’ (*ibid.*). Statements like that do not take into account that women of colour and ‘transgender people face disproportionate levels of harassment online’ (Haimson, 2016) and that such harassment is often particularly racialized and transphobic in content.

The terminology of online harassment against women as just discussed reflects either a general lack of awareness of intersectionality within online harassment scholarship, or a conscious decision to *only* focus on the gendered dimension of harassment targeted at women. By not including a discussion of race and other important identity categories, the terminology about online harassment itself currently implies that women are a homogenous group that experiences gendered harassment

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<sup>16</sup> Online terminology referring to trolling behaviour with the intent of creating amusement for the perpetrator

homogenously. “Women” in this case are implicitly defined as white, straight and cis-gender. In effect, what is missing from discussion and terminology is the inclusion of, and dedicated research into the intersectional experience of trans\* women (and men) and women of colour. Cross emphasises the importance of a multi-layered understanding of both the content and the receivers of online harassment:

*‘The racism and transphobia of abuse directed at these women is not mere flavoring of the abuse, but rather its very content, and that remains thoroughly unanalyzed. It is not so easy, after all, to say where abuse of a Black trans woman becomes specifically “gender trolling” as opposed to “racetrolling” or “transtrolling.” They’re inseparable, and that’s rather the point, from the perspective of the abuser: Every part of you is available to them for attack.’*

*Cross, 2015*

Whilst it is positive that some scholars acknowledge other dimensions of harassment, however rare, I would suggest it is imperative to explore harassment of women without separation of the categories, as there is regular overlap of all. For this reason, and owing to the lack of an existing intersectional definition, I will be using the terminology of ‘online harassment of women’, or ‘harassment of women online’ because other definitions do not adequately cover the multi-layered harassment experienced by some women. I will further address the problems with whiteness and cyber feminism in chapter two.

In summarising, from investigating harassment discourse in both scholarship and online news articles, several issues with the framing of harassment and harassers can be identified. Broad assumptions about harassers are made regularly, usually based on scant investigation. There is a conflation of terminology that confuses and homogenises harassing behaviour and trolling. The discourse around harassment and harassers tends to both simplify the content included in harassment - by overlooking multi-layering of abuse – and homogenise the perpetrators, broadly describing them as “trolls” and “men”. Within scholarship there has been a failure to undertake intersectional research and analyses, and the terminology used perpetuates a false sense of homogeneity of women’s experiences of online harassment.

The academic and online-news framings influence and have important repercussions for how management strategies are developed and targeted. Framings of harassment also feed into wider discourse of violence against women, and ultimately have impact on the women who experience harassment.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the issue of online harassment of women, and given my reasons for choosing to use terminology that allows room to discuss *all* harassment that affects women, rather than only gender-specific harassment. I have shown the way that online harassment of women is dominantly framed in scholarship and online-news: that there is a tendency to homogenise harassment and its receivers, confuse terminology, and overlook investigating harassers. I have also discussed the common assumptions about harassment and harassers perpetuated in online-news and scholarship, which are that harassers are trolls; are men; and are anonymous. With these assumptions in mind, I will now present the methodology I have used for investigating online harassment further.

# Chapter 2

## *Feminist Internet methodologies*



Figure. 3

In this chapter I will provide an overview of feminist arguments about and approaches to the Internet and, with these in mind, discuss the contemporary online space from a feminist perspective. I will discuss existing theories, methodologies and approaches for researching online dynamics and communication, and the issues of concern with certain methodological requirements and the research I wanted to undertake. I will talk about why no one existing online methodology was possible to apply to my research, and discuss the elements of my methodology that I have included to create a feminist online methodology, and why.

### Part 1: Past to Present: Feminist perspectives of the Internet

The emergence of new information & communication technologies (NICTs) and the Internet brought with them both excitement and concern for feminist scholars and thinkers. Towards the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s, many early Internet feminist scholars (e.g. Turkle 1995; Stone, 1995 in Chun, 2002; Hayles 1999) became intrigued with the potential that online space held for users to expand themselves beyond the materiality of the *offline* world, and to express themselves in a manner different to their *offline* selves. Of particular scholarly interest was the potential for the online realm to allow for gender play, or even for users to transcend gender altogether. Hui Kyong Chun (2002: 245) referred to this as 'virtual passing', and wrote that the Internet was freeing in its opportunities allowing users to occupy "space" in a manner of their choosing. Other feminist



scholars were more sceptical of NICTs. They believed that both the (masculine) military involvement in the development of NICTs, and also the historical male dominated nature of technology generally meant it was unlikely that new technologies could be 'socially relevant' or offer any 'liberating potential' (van Zoonen paraphrasing others, 1992: 11).

One branch of online feminism that emerged in the 1990s was Cyberfeminism (Paasonen, 2011: 336), coined in part by Australian arts collective VNS Matrix in 1991, cultural theorist Sadie Plant, and media artist Nancy Patterson (Paasonen, 2011: 338). The term refers to 'the work of feminists interested in theorizing, critiquing, and exploiting the Internet, cyberspace, and new-media technologies in general' (Consalvo, 2012). It remained a somewhat contested term (Paasonen, 2011: 336) until its fade from common use as a term in the 2000s. Cyberfeminism was a reaction to feminist theory that tended to consider technology as a masculine realm. VNS Matrix, whose work included 'Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 'believed the web could be a space for fluid creative experimentation, a place to transform and create in collaboration with a global community of like-minded artists' (Evans, 2014), but were also taking issue with the male-dominated technology industry. Cyberfeminism was initially interested with the potential that technology held for expression and identities not reduced to gender (van Zoonen, 2002, 5). Cyberfeminists have traditionally taken a somewhat utopian view of the Internet: early scholars such as Sadie Plant and Sherry Turkle considered the Internet to have certain relevance for women, whilst Dale Spender saw the Internet as having inherently feminine attributes (in van Zoonen, 2002: 9).

Discussions took place about the perceived masculinity or possible femininity of the Internet (and technology) (van Zoonen, 2002: 6). Some believed the Internet was inherently masculine and therefore problematic: 'It was uncritical and overwhelmingly male-dominated...It was a masculinist space, coded as such, and the gatekeepers of the code (cultural and logos) maintained control of the productions of technology' (Barratt in Evans, 2014). By the late 1980s feminist scholars were also writing about concerns with the impact of computer technology on women's lives and the risks that new technologies upheld male privilege (Hocks, 1999: 107). In 1996 Hall wrote that 'rather than neutralizing gender, the electronic medium encourages its intensification' (1996:167). Braidotti (2003: 255) made predictions of the impacts of cyberspace, namely that 'this new technological frontier (would) intensify the gender-gap and increase the polarisation between the sexes'. As a result of the online reproduction of *offline* social categories, some have argued that the Internet not only reproduces oppressions but also contributes to them. For example, Hocks (1999: 112) noted that certain aspects of online activities 'can actually heighten the level of conflict between different perspectives'.

In summary, two stances of feminist attitude towards online technologies were present in the 1990s, identified by Zoonen (1992: 12) as being “adaption-to” and “rejection-of”. The former could be characterised as ‘inspired by the utopian imaginings of (Donna) Haraway’s cyborg feminism’ (Hall, 1996: 167), and the latter concerned ‘by the reality of male harassment on the Internet’ (*ibid.*). Perhaps owing to this dichotomy, by the late 1990s, some began to comment on the drop in interest and research into gender and the online world. Whilst there were several feminist studies undertaken during this period into online harassment of women, and the ‘persistence of sexism on the Internet’ (Hocks, 1999: 107-108), feminist interest of this field broadly began to decrease. In 1999 Professor Ellen Balka reflected on positive views of the Internet, asking: ‘I wonder where all the feminist information technology critics have gone...we’ve been seduced by the potential of the World Wide Web’ (in van Zoonen, 2002: 9). Susan Herring wrote, also in 1999, that as the amount of women using the Internet increased, ‘public concern over gender inequity in cyberspace...tended to decrease’ (Herring, 1999: 151). With these initial hopes and concerns in mind, I will turn now to the reality of contemporary online space, to discuss the ways in which both the positive and negative elements are evident on the Internet today.

## Part 2: Contemporary Internet: a feminist space?

It could be argued that both the optimism and the caution from feminist scholars have been realised. On the one hand, while feminist scholarly interest in the field was dropping, feminist activists were beginning to actively using the Internet for feminist causes. This continued to increase exponentially. In 1999 Hocks wrote (1999:109) that ‘feminist Web sites and grl sites have proliferated on the Internet over the past several years’. On the other hand, increased visibility has also brought increased public pushback. Leander & McKim (2003: 217) argue that, as a “place”, the online realm has become ‘just as sexist, classist (and) homophobic’ as *offline* spaces.

Recently, there has been an ‘explosion’ (Martin & Valenti, n.d.: 3) of feminist activists, bloggers, movements, (*ibid.*) journalists and commentators. More publically, visibility of online feminism has also risen suddenly (Martin, 2013: 9). The resources available online, and the possibility of connecting with others with similar interests and experiences (Marwick, 2013 [A]: 362) has meant that, whilst the Internet may not be the identity-less utopia some feminist scholars envisaged, it *has* allowed for new opportunities in self-expression and exploration of identity. Despite these positive increases of usage and visibility there has been a raising and intensification of *offline* discriminations. Rosi Braidotti, whilst distancing herself from both positive and negative stances about the Internet

(2003:256) argued that computer technology was actually increasing ‘the gender gap’ (2003:252).

Alice Marwick eloquently summarised this sentiment with the following:

*The Internet has not liberated people from the structural oppression of difference, and structural sexism, racism, heterosexism and so forth are just as prevalent online as they are in face-to-face contexts. The fantasy of the Internet as disembodied playground is just that, a fantasy (Marwick, 2013 [A]: 362).*

The research that I will present in Chapter 3 confirms the presence of all the recreation of oppressions highlighted by Braidotti and Marwick. What can also not be overlooked is the correlation between the rise of SNSs and publicly occurring harassment present in the new age of the Internet (Web 2.0). In the early 1990s it was more possible to create and keep certain online spaces closed or exclusive (such as specific forums or chatrooms for, say, LGBTIQ online users), and users ‘had the luxury of ignoring topics or people that (didn’t) interest them’ (Hocks, 1999: 112). Now, however, with the rise of the “comment section”, the public visibility of accounts on SNSs, and the very nature of social media that encourages communication among strangers, having an impenetrable space online is almost impossible. Hocks summarises the features of the Internet that are ‘amplified by electronic discussion forums’. These are ‘rapid publishing, flaming, mixing performances of public and private discourses, blurring of writers and audience, and exploiting the possibility of identity and anonymity’ (Hocks, 1999:112). Although Hocks is discussing the negative impacts of these, some of those listed are also characteristics of the *positive* developments of the Internet that have been harnessed to tackle issues such as discrimination and oppressions. Indeed, the “catch 22” of a global network that leaves users susceptible to harassment and discrimination, is that it also allows for reaction to, and mobilisation against such oppressions, on a scale and at a speed rarely, if at all, experienced previously.

What early feminist Internet scholars could perhaps not have predicted was how these gaps and polarisations would be brought to public discourse by those very people affected, using the very realm that has made such issues so glaringly obvious. Online, people are utilising the realm for activism, for the rapid dissemination of information, for raising awareness instantly to sexist and racist content, and are also writing about these processes, sharing these online too. As Martin and Valenti write, ‘the Internet has transformed not just the lives of individual feminist activists, but of activist movements as a whole’ (n.d.: 1). The online movements emerging in the last five years, particularly relating to feminism, race and bodies are not only interesting in terms of the way they’re being undertaken, but also the way in which people have the opportunity to push-back or speak back to oppressions. Whole movements are being started with hashtags by women and marginalised

groups globally. #MenCallMeThings, #YesAllWomen, #BlackLivesMatter and #SOSBlakAustralia are all examples of 'hashtag activism' that are addressing and responding to racism and sexism, utilising the online realm for awareness raising and mobilising against *offline* and online oppressions. Within these movements important discussions and writings are emerging from online feminist and anti-racist commentators, and from people within traditionally marginalised communities more broadly. Oppressions may be being intensified online, but the opportunity to speak back to them instantly, and to have such responses shared globally, is a powerful and revolutionary phenomenon.

One of the ways the Internet has been revolutionary is in collapsing the hierarchy of voices. In early writings about the Internet George Landow considered electronic forums to be the place of a new academic discourse (in Hocks, 1999: 112). Such forums, argued Landow, were a 'democratic space where participants from undergraduate students to published writers operate on equal ground' (Hocks summarising Landow, 1999: 112). As Martin & Valenti write, (n.d.: 6) 'hundreds of thousands of people who needed a platform to express themselves...found it on the Internet'. This has been particularly true of feminist and anti-racist online movements. Feminist resistance to online sexism, racism and male domination of space has, as predicted by Hocks in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, been successful in challenging and obtaining power in online spaces (1999: 112). As Celeste Liddle argues, social media in particular has been 'very important to the feminist movement...Feminists grabbed and ran with social media because it was a space that white dudes did not own (in Dixon-Smith: 2016). Opinion is reflected in statistics, for example, a study of blogs (Sysmosis Inc, 2010) found that, of 100 million blogs, 50.9% were managed by women. Traditionally, *offline* public space has been male, and private space female (Scruton & Watson, 1998: 136) and the inclusion and acceptance of women into such public spaces is a notoriously slow process. To see this level of women's participation in a very new public space is therefore considerably noteworthy. At the same time, this could also be one of the reasons for high rates of online harassment of women. Bemiller and Schneider (2010: 470) discussed the way that harassment could be related to women's participation in a new public sphere. Referencing sexist jokes in particular, they said 'the use of humour to joke about women's place in the private sphere demonstrates a backlash against women's independence and increased social power in the public sphere' (Bemiller & Schneider, 2010: 470). Legal and feminist scholar Jill Filipovic has also written that she believes online harassment involves 'sexually demeaning women in an effort to intimidate them out of public participation' (2007: 298).

The Internet, contrary to other previous public spaces, has allowed people to form communities without the limitations of geography. Because of this, women and feminists have been able to

disseminate their opinions quickly and on a mass scale. Online feminists are not only mobilising and raising awareness of feminisms globally, but are also critiquing the online world in areas where feminist scholarship is not. Online feminists are using the Internet to advance feminist issues, but also to address online-specific issues. White cyber feminists have been challenged on the way that this new era of feminism (online) is reproducing the failures of past feminisms, by ignoring the voices and experiences of non-white women. The #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen campaign, for example, was a direct action against the fact that white online feminists had continually contributed to, and been complicit in, the silencing of black women online. The hashtag, created by online (black) feminist Mikki Kendall, became instantly popular. A panel was organised to discuss the issue, and online (white) feminist Jill Filipovic was invited to speak, not Kendall (NPR, 2013). There was immediate online backlash, and Kendall tweeted her anger over the hypocrisy. The panel was amended, and Kendall joined (*ibid*). Although this is a reflection of ongoing issues with supporting white feminists as a priority over the experiences of black feminists, so too is this a reflection of the way that the online world allows for the rapid spread of campaigns to address such issues<sup>17</sup>.

### Part 3: Identifying a gap

Of the academic studies undertaken into online harassment broadly, many focus on a textual, discourse analysis of online commentary, or quantitative studies of harassing discourse. Kina, Clavio, Vincent & Shaw (2011) conducted a study of online message boards, with specific focus on homophobia and the presentation of masculinity. Phillips (2015) conducted analysis of online comments in 4chan, a sub realm of the Internet notorious for offensive and extreme interaction. Jane (2014) also conducted a textual analysis of an online message board, focussing on gendered threats and misogyny. Buckles et al (2014) conducted a study Internet commenting styles, while others have undertaken quantitative studies into what constitutes as harassment, and what users consider harassment to be online (e.g. Biber et al, 2002). In 2015 Kasumovik and Kuznekoff conducted an investigation into the presence of women in online gaming. Chen et al (2002) conducted a 'virtual ethnography' (Hine in Chen et al, 2002) into gender identity in an online Chinese dating game. Non-ethnographic studies into gender-specific harassment tend to include reference to key incidents of harassment towards women that have occurred in the last 10 years (e.g. Mantilla, 2013, Citron, 2009, & Filipovic, 2007).

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<sup>17</sup> This is not to say that Internet technology and SNSs are assisting with this process. The Association for Progressive Communications Women's Rights Program found that Facebook and Twitter were failing to adequately address online violence against women (Association for Progressive Communications, 2014), and Facebook in particular is regularly critiqued for contributing to racism and sexism by failing to remove misogynist and racist content when reported. Facebook has also made outright racist decisions when it comes to which content it allows.

Many feminist online studies, and qualitative studies of the Internet more broadly, have focused on the way women *use* the Internet (see Gajjala 2002 for an overview of feminist online studies), and more still have acknowledged the perpetuation of *offline* oppressions online (e.g. Braidotti, 2003). However, there seem to be few contemporary feminist academics focussing on the treatment of women online, which may be related to early feminist debates about the potential for technology and feminist space more generally' (van Zoonen, 1992: 11.). This lack is reflected in Emma Jane's call to action for specific online harassment<sup>18</sup> to be 'conceptualized broadly as an emergent field' (2014: 542), owing to its 'potential to cause larger harm' (ibid). Moreover, as Kasumovic and Kuznekoff find (2015: 1), current research contains 'almost no insight into what triggers (harassing) behaviour and the individuals that initiate it'. For these reasons, my research intent was to gain an insight into online harassers themselves, in order to better understand the incentive behind the harassment of women online. To do this I decided to investigate users who had sent harassment to women online through Twitter<sup>19</sup>, and see whether there were any trends in the types of users sending harassment: their gender, age, and other behaviours they took part in online. I will outline my actual methods and research process in detail in Chapter 3, but will now discuss some of online methodologies for undertaking observational research online, and the lack of existing methodologies related to the nature of my research.

## Part 4: My Research Methodology

Methodologies suggested for Internet use focus predominantly on either how to undertake quantitative research, or how to conduct an online ethnography. Although there are several research methodologies for online qualitative research, until relatively recently scholarly research on social networking sites (SNSs) in particular was largely avoided due to the widely considered 'unscholarly nature' of the sites' content (Mukherjee, 2012: 57). Because the Internet is continually being developed (Hooley *et al.*, 2011: 11), and changes rapidly (Hooley *et al.*, 2011: 12), methodologies for undertaking Internet research quickly become out-dated. In addition to this, as Grant Blank argues, qualitative analysis of the Internet remains low partly because of the sheer volume of data, and partly because there is a lack of techniques for analysis (Blank *et al.*, 2008: 548). In effect, qualitative analyses have not been able to keep up with the rate at which online data is being produced (Blank *et al.*, 2008: 546). In the following part I will expand on existing qualitative methodologies for studies of the Internet, comment on the problems with applying these

<sup>18</sup> Jane specifies 'ad hominem invective, extravagant misogyny and hyperbolic threats of (often sexualised) violence' (2014: 542), which she refers to as 'e-bile'.

<sup>19</sup> Twitter is a microblogging social networking site

methodologies to my research, and end with a discussion of the feminist online methodology that shapes my research.

### Existing qualitative online methodologies

Existing qualitative online methods tend to focus on using new technologies whilst adhering to conventional ethnographic methodologies. In the early 1990s Internet and Society scholar Christine Hine developed a method she called 'virtual ethnography' (1994) and conducted interviews of people online within a MOO (multi-user dungeon, Object Oriented) environment. In attempting to apply conventional ethnographic methods, Hine noted that 'finding the field' in virtual ethnography may be impossible, and that ascertaining what was human and not human becomes increasingly difficult, due to the potential for user deception (1994: 15). Perhaps for these reasons, most online ethnographies have been undertaken in 'bounded' spaces such as chat rooms, online gaming networks, or forums, because they are most similar to the conventional ideas of a field site (Marwick, 2013 [B]: 115).

Twitter, however, reflects a new era of sites post-Web2.0 that are not bounded (Marwick & boyd, 2010: 2) but which still offer new opportunities for research (Postil & Pink, 2012: 2). Some qualitative studies have been undertaken, (e.g. Cheong & Lee in Hine, 2011) but most research undertaken on Twitter has been primarily quantitative (Marwick, 2013 [B], 118). Scholars Alice Marwick and danah boyd conducted a qualitative study on Twitter, asking users about their imaginations of their audience (2012: 4). They asked users directly about their perceptions, and observed their behaviour on Twitter (*ibid.*).

In summary, many of the studies of the Internet or SNSs tend to be either quantitative, or digital ethnographies *with* participant involvement. Because my research was intended to be qualitative, observational and unobtrusive, the methodologies used for such studies presented some problems when attempting to apply them to my research, which I will expand upon now.

### Problems with existing online methodologies for this project

Because I was planning to undertake online research without active participant involvement, many of the existing methodologies were difficult to adopt. In fact, there was no singular methodology that could be applied without altering. What posed a particular problem for applying these methodologies to my research was the way they specifically stressed the need for researcher transparency. Though some scholars argue that observational research on the Internet can be unobtrusive (Bordia in Hewson *et al.*, 2002: 46), the ethics of non-participant observation online has long been a cause of debate (Sanders, 2005: 71). In addition, when unobtrusive methods are used,

issues are raised about how much (accurate) insight can be gained from such methods. Hewson *et al.*, for example, consider anonymous observational research as being useful for ‘linguistic observation studies’ (2002: 46) and for observing participants during exercises (2002: 47), but not for gaining insight into user profiles. While ‘Netnography’ is ‘based primarily on the observation of textual discourse’ (Kozinets, 2002: 7) – and therefore seemed like a useful methodology for my research – Kozinets (2002) also proposes that within this methodology researchers should be fully transparent. The alternative to this would not provide concrete results, and would be ethically questionable. This shows that dominant discourse considers researcher transparency and participant consent to be the more ethical and academically sound option in qualitative online research (e.g. Reader, 2014).

In my research however, there was no practical need for me to announce my presence as a researcher to achieve concrete results, since I was relying on publically accessible content and not conducting interviews or surveys. In fact, I would argue that within research like mine researcher transparency does not necessarily ensure more concrete results, because there is a high probability that announcing the research intentions will result in online users either not wanting to be involved or lead to existing content being deleted if users knew what I was investigating. On top of that, approaching harassers would involve highlighting the fact that they could be found in the first place. The result could be that they become more thorough in covering their tracks, thus making it harder to find information about their online behaviour and their *offline* identities in the future.

Although it can definitely be argued that researcher transparency and participant consent is the more ethical research path, the nature of some online research makes this both difficult and dangerous. As a woman undertaking research into online harassment specifically, revealing identity comes with the very real possibility of being harassed. This point was articulated by Spender (in Sanders 2005: 71), who acknowledged that revealing your identity whilst undertaking research online can be undesirable given the ‘male-dominated, aggressive and anonymous’ (*ibid.*) nature of the Internet. Whilst I do not think this fully navigates the ethical issue, I do think it is important to recognise the shortcomings of fully transparent research in certain areas. As my own research will show, even when crosschecking findings as much as possible, it is impossible to make conclusive assumptions about user identity online. This is the reality of conducting online research, whether transparent or not: there will always be a level of uncertainty with regard to anonymity and deception by online users.

Given the nature of the online content that I am investigating, and the age of many of the harassers, I would argue that – without claiming to assure complete accuracy – staying anonymous as a



researcher provides *more* accurate results than if I disclosed my presence and identity as a researcher. I therefore consider there to be a benefit in undertaking anonymous observational research to gain insight into user profiles. In the next section I will expand on my own anonymous observational methodology and how it is feminist.

### **My feminist online methodology**

In the previous section I have argued that there is merit in and should be space for investigative online research that is anonymous and partly speculative. As a result of the considerations before, I made a deliberate decision to remain anonymous, and to keep my research observational rather than participatory. In this section I will explain how this and additional elements are part of my own feminist online methodology. According to Ramazanoglu & Holland (2002: 15) the concept of feminist methodology came into being ‘as a way of characterizing existing methods of producing knowledge as masculinist, and of challenging existing understandings of gendered social life’. Feminist scholars challenged the way that ‘supposedly scientific knowledge of social life’ ‘claimed to be politically neutral, or gender-neutral, while in practice promoting, reproducing or ignoring men’s appropriation of science and reason’ (Clegg 1975 and Stanley & Wise, 1993 in Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002: 15). What makes a methodology specifically “feminist” is not straightforward, because feminists draw from different theories, epistemologies, experiences, ethical and political positions, etc. As a result they make different choices regarding the ‘key characteristics of methodology’ (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002: 15). The mere fact that I am a woman that studies harassment of women online, for example, does not make my research methodology feminist.

What *does* make a particular methodology distinctively feminist according to Ramazanoglu and Holland is if ‘they are framed by feminist theory, and aim to produce knowledge that will be useful for effective transformation of gendered injustice and subordination’ (2002: 147). The aim of my research is to contribute to furthering research and knowledge production of online harassment, with the intention of providing more insight in those harassing and broader trends of Internet behaviour that could be contributing to a culture of abuse online. By doing so, I hope to provide information that can be used to better target strategies for addressing and preventing online harassment and creating awareness about the diversity of experiences with online harassment. For this reason, my methodology is grounded in intersectional theory, focuses on making the invisible visible and is deliberately done anonymously.

### **Intersectional perspective**

As I have shown before, other studies of and terminology about online harassment of women have focused one-dimensionally on the gendered aspect of online harassment. This has what

Ramazanoglu & Holland (2002: 147) call ‘the effect of excluding, silencing or marginalizing significant divisions between women’. As also already referred to earlier, Crenshaw (1989) developed the concept of intersectionality to challenge the way that understandings of discrimination based on race and discrimination based on gender denied the particular nature and experiences of discrimination against Black women. Taking this awareness into account, my research methodology is explicitly intersectional by analysing the layering of harassment towards women, and considering racism and other discriminations in language online more broadly. After reading much existing literature about online harassment of women, it became apparent that much of it lacked an intersectional analysis of online harassment. Online harassment of women is predominantly framed with an understanding of harassment as being homogenously experienced by all women. Existing terminology also described harassment as being *either* based on gender or something else. Within my methodology, I therefore made a deliberate choice to refrain from terminology that implied harassment as being only gendered (instead I use ‘harassment of women online’). It was also imperative that my research explore not only the presence of racism and other discriminations within harassment itself, but also the multilayered harassment experienced by certain women online, an issue that has been raised by many black and non-white online feminists (e.g. Oluo, 2016, Kendall, 2015, Jones, 2016, and Nakamura, 1995).

### *Making the invisible visible*

After researching the discourse of harassment, and also reading many online studies of harassment, I was concerned at the invisibility of harassers, and the way that the discourse around online harassment often recreated the discourse of *offline* harassment of women. Following on from ideas of ‘the invisible vagina’, and the lack of visibility of women in public discourse I am attempting to make visible the invisible, though not in the manner the author intended. In my research, I am aiming to address the ongoing invisibility of harassers, because this not only limits the opportunity for intervention, but it also keeps the onus on women (and others attacked online) to deal with online harassment, whilst perpetrators are faced with almost no repercussions for their actions. In doing this, my research aim is in line with how Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002: 147) describe what constitutes one of the key goals of feminist social research, namely to ‘give insights into gendered social existence that would otherwise not exist’.

## “Anonymity”

The last element of my methodology is the deliberate decision to be an anonymous<sup>20</sup> researcher. As mentioned before, the issues with revealing presence the issues with revealing presence and intention online is that it can change the behaviour of those being observed, and could also ‘provoke hostility’ (Sanders, 2005: 71). I therefore chose to remain anonymous, and did not communicate with any users, a method which is informally referred to as being a ‘lurker’, where one watches online behaviour ‘without revealing (their) presence or intentions’ (Sanders, 2005: 71). Phillips, in her 2015 study of Internet forums, also undertook ‘lurking’ research to follow trolls as they undertook trolling behaviour on Facebook (2015: 72). Phillips wrote that Facebook has since introduced methods to ban trolling behaviours, which make it therefore ‘not be possible to recreate this study’ (Phillips, 2015: 72). Even on Twitter, where such measures are not as thorough, I found ‘lurking’ to be particularly difficult, and many profiles of harassers who had harassed high profile women had been suspended. Yet, despite this, lurking was still possible, but did involve meticulous advanced search techniques and extensive cross checking (a process I will further outline in the following chapter), which was very time consuming. Still, I believe, this kind of research can be very valuable in gaining insight into both user profiles, and into a plethora of online and *offline* behavioural and linguistic patterns. This element of my methodology is also similar to a method that Ed Pollock, in his research of white supremacists online, called a ‘covert, invisible, non-participatory observation’ (2009: 2).

A second dimension of anonymity concerns the users I investigated. It is important to note that it is not my intention to “expose” individual harassers, but rather to investigate behavioural and profile patterns that will help further develop strategies that prevent and address online harassment. Feminist ethnography would argue it is imperative to speak with, not about, and to speak to, not for those you are studying (Gajjala, 2002). Gajjala (2002: 184) acknowledges that this becomes a problem when researching online text because ‘categories such as public/private, audience/author, producer/consumer, and text/human subject’ are blurred. Although I deliberately chose to not speak *with* harassers, I also don’t attempt to speak *for* them. For this reason, and given the key ethical factory in conventional ethnography that the research process ‘should not harm those in the setting’ (Hine, 1994: 9), I have chosen to keep harassers’ details anonymous. Although it is impossible to keep users’ identities truly anonymous, because their tweets are publically accessible, the data is held on public networks and they can still be found by, for example, searching the words included in

<sup>20</sup> Of course, as I will discuss later, 100% anonymity online is almost impossible. As I found with the users I researched, finding information about someone is not very difficult. By remaining anonymous I mean I did not announce that I was undertaking research to the people whose accounts I was investigating.

their tweets, this is the best way I can be ethically sensitive. This is important not only to overcome the potential of harm to users, but also because it became apparent that many of them were not legally adults.

In summary, my research methodology combines elements of textual analysis and observation, applied by “lurking” online. It aligns most closely to what Hine refers to as a ‘qualitative exploration of responses to cultural phenomena’ (2011: 2), with ‘unobtrusive methods using Internet-derived data make use of what people have already said and done’ (*ibid.*). By remaining anonymous I sought to undertake research that was 1) safe, and 2) didn’t run the risk of data being deleted if those I was researching knew what I was doing. To overcome ethical dilemmas with this, I kept users’ details anonymous, but also note the fact that the data I am researching was publically available online, and therefore less of an ethical concern. Ironically, whilst keeping both my identity and the identity of those I researched anonymous, the intent of my research overall is actually to make visible the invisible, and to shine a light on who is harassing, and to gain an insight into their online behaviour more generally. In addition to this, I have sought to make my methodology and my research intersectional, by acknowledging the overlooking of intersectional harassment, and by including discussions about the multilayered nature of harassment within my findings.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided an overview of feminist views of the Internet, and discussed the way that the Internet is now being used in particularly feminist ways. I have noted that many are using the Internet to mobilise around and highlight certain oppressions, in part because the Internet itself actually contributes to and increases *offline* discriminations. I have explained several key online research methodologies, and highlighted the problems with undertaking Internet research. I have discussed why certain ethnographic methods did not align with my research intention, and explained which I therefore chose to change. Lastly, I have discussed the methodological components important to consider in establishing my own online feminist research. In the next chapter I will elaborate on the methods I have used, and present my findings.

# Chapter 3

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## *Focusing the lens on harassers*



Figure. 4

## Part 1: Overview of Research

In this chapter I present the findings from my research into the users behind harassment of women online and into online behaviour more broadly. I will discuss the process I conducted to undertake my research, expanding on my methodology discussed in chapter 2. I will then discuss my findings from my main case study, and expand on this with my broader findings of the users<sup>21</sup> behind other harassment of women online, commenting on the trends and insights that emerged. I will highlight some findings that were unexpected, and discuss how this process affected me as a researcher. Later, in Chapter 4 I will provide a discussion of some of those findings that relate directly to assumptions I outlined in Chapter 1.

### Focus & limitations

The focus of my research is online harassment towards women who have been subjected to severe abusive tweets and messages. My focus does not include stalking, cyberbullying or revenge porn, although I acknowledge much online harassment does include blurred lines between all of these. Rather, I am researching the off-hand online abuse that is subjected to women and that includes hate speech that is gendered or discriminatory. This kind of harassment often occurs when a woman speaks out about an issue specific to women or feminism, but also occurs to women with high

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<sup>21</sup> The harassers I mention in this chapter have had their names and twitter handles removed

profiles online. I am focussing on abuse occurring in English, and on cases that gained attention in primarily English-speaking countries. Being Australian myself, I have also highlighted several Australian cases, as I was acutely aware of them as they occurred. The other reason for doing so is that there have been several instances of online gender harassment resulting in *offline* repercussions in Australia and, as a result there has been a consistent discussion of online gender harassment from Australian commentators, bloggers and the media.

### Data sets

To gain an insight into whether there are broad trends among online harassers, I chose two incidents<sup>22</sup> in which individual women had received mass-scale harassment (i.e. hundreds of tweets or more), and for which I was able to gain a large amount of data. The first, and my main case study, was harassment of feminist gaming critic Anita Sarkeesian<sup>23</sup>, who has been involved for many years in highlighting sexism in video and online games. Sarkeesian had documented her harassment, tweet by tweet, in a Tumblr post released in 2015 called 'One week of harassment on twitter' (Sarkeesian, 2015). My reasons for choosing this incident was because the harassment she received was severe, was on a large scale, and because I could access screenshots<sup>24</sup> of every harassing tweet in a one-week period. Because the harassment towards Anita Sarkeesian related to her stance on sexism within the gaming world, I chose to also analyse harassment directed at women outside of the gaming circle<sup>25</sup>: an incident of mass-scale harassment directed at feminist campaigner Coralie Alison, from Australian feminist group Collective Shout. I contacted Alison directly, having known that she had received a large volume of harassment in 2015 when she successfully campaigned to have American rapper Tyler the Creator banned from entering Australia due to sexism in his lyrics. This case received attention in Australia, and I was able to gain access to hundreds of screenshots from Alison herself.

I used these two incidents to investigate broad profile trends amongst harassers. To investigate broader themes that I noticed, for example response harassment (harassment sent in return to harassers), racism, and abusive language on the Internet more generally, I also refer to other individual incidents outside of these two case studies. Common themes in all of the harassment of

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<sup>22</sup> I also contacted 5 more women who had been recipients of online harassment, and received some screenshots of harassment from two, but did not receive a response from the others. Unfortunately the two I did not receive a response from were both women of colour, which means my primary case studies are severely lacking diversity.

<sup>23</sup> Sarkeesian has been receiving harassment online for many years. This is just a selection of tweets from one week that she chose to release.

<sup>24</sup> A screenshot is to capture an image of something on your computer screen

<sup>25</sup> Sarkeesian's work is linked to Gamergate, a notorious movement within the online gaming community, and which is known for inherent sexism.

women were threats of rape, death, violent abuse, misogynistic and sexist taunts, and ridicule. Whilst Alison and Sarkeesian received harassment in response to their critique of someone or something related to sexism, the amount and severity of abuse that was directed at them and other women<sup>26</sup> was the impetus for me investigating who might be behind such abuse, and what might be influencing their online behaviour.

## Part 2: Research Process

Initially I identified the most severe tweets from Sarkeesian's harassment, those including threats of rape or violence or gender-specific hate, and then searched for the relevant twitter account of the user. From early in this process, I began to notice information to suggest that users were often boys or young men, with many seemingly under the age of 18, so I broadened my research to investigate all of the harasser profiles included in 'One Week of Harassment on Twitter'. The initial focus of my research became to gain an overall idea of the rough age of harassers. I wanted to investigate this because of the persistent assumptions made in online news articles that harassers are adult men. To find otherwise, or even to find that a percentage are young, would mean that harassers are potentially more diverse than is realised. This is important because the strategies for dealing with online harassment, as I will discuss more in chapter 4, tend to homogenise harassers as being men, and may therefore be overlooking the need for interventions that are targeted more accurately, for example based on age.

Gaining insight into harassers was an evolving process<sup>27</sup>, made difficult by the fact that many accounts had been suspended.<sup>28</sup> Once I had learnt several different ways of searching, I had a more streamlined data collection process<sup>29</sup>. I would first search the account handle<sup>30</sup>, and look for information about them or their associated accounts. When I was able to find an active account, I began looking through their profile and tweets to find out information about them. At times they were using their real names, included photos of themselves on their account/s, provided links to

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<sup>27</sup> My search process evolved as I learned more methods, which meant I had to re-visit accounts I had initially managed to find nothing about, as my newly learned methods would now allow me further insight

<sup>28</sup> This is in part due to high amount of attention around mass-scale harassment cases generally, which leads to increased "reporting" (reporting accounts to twitter for harassment) from bystanders.

<sup>29</sup> I documented this process by taking screen shots when I found evidence to support particular findings, and so show how I got there. I kept records, using spreadsheets, of all the users, their linked accounts, and other defining features

<sup>30</sup> The online address of a twitter user. Eg: @worldnews

their other accounts (such as YouTube and Facebook), and tweeted freely about hobbies<sup>31</sup> and aspects of their lives such as their parents, school, political views and friends. I looked at their “media” for pictures or videos of the person behind the account, and, if I did find photos or videos, I would then crosscheck these to with others to establish the likelihood of those being actual visual representations of the person<sup>32</sup>. In only a few instances was I confident these were actual representations of the user. It is common, for example, for online users to use fake pictures and pretend they are pictures of themselves.

I learnt several methods of finding information that initially appeared to have been deleted. In the images below, you can see an example of this. The first image is a screenshot of the original tweet from the handle (a) from Sarkeesian’s blog post.



Figure. 5

In this instance I first searched tweets that had been sent from @user1 to @femfreq (Anita Sarkeesian’s twitter handle). There was no result. I then searched the text of the tweet in full, which gave me the result in the second image. The date and time stamp on both are the same, the account names are similar, and the wording is identical. In this case, the user has changed their account name and handle, most likely to avoid being suspended. This process meant that I now knew the new account of the person who sent the harassment, and could therefore continue to investigate them. It was also possible to find users’ new accounts by looking at the tweets that other users had sent to them<sup>33</sup>, and by reading conversations<sup>34</sup> (tweets between 2 or more users in a thread).

<sup>31</sup> It took several weeks to become familiar with certain terminology and references, particularly related to online gaming. I would recommend researching into the topic related to the field before undertaking the research, to become familiar with the lingo and references

<sup>32</sup> This is definitely not a foolproof method. There were very few occasions I could confidently use media to identify a user

<sup>33</sup> If an account has been suspended or deleted, the tweets “from” the account no longer appear, but those sent “to” the account still exist, and it was sometimes possible to gain an overall picture of the user through this process.

<sup>34</sup> Finding new accounts is possible by viewing a conversation in which one user uses the original suspended twitter handle, and then the user replies in which their new twitter handle is visible. This then requires cross checking, in order to make sure that the new account is actually linked to the original account. This can be established by searching for reference to the old account in tweets from the new account, or sometimes users keep the same profile picture. Often, their twitter name was a gaming reference, which they also use for other accounts, such as YouTube. Sometimes their new account had



Once I had found each account, I then used Twitter’s ‘advanced search’ function to search for key words tweeted both to and from the harassers account. The keyword search included 25 words that I would search each account by – both to and from, to give an overview of each user. These were chosen to give an indication of age, where possible, and included words such as “school”, “college”, “class”, “birthday”, “mom”, “job” etc. Sometimes this resulted in no concrete insight, but in other instances I was able to find their exact age. Sometimes I was able to make an assumption but not able to gain adequate proof. For example, if a user tweeted many times about school and class and their parents, but not their actual age, I could assume they were still in school, but not how old they were<sup>35</sup>. Here are some screenshots of examples I found that indicate a user’s age range.

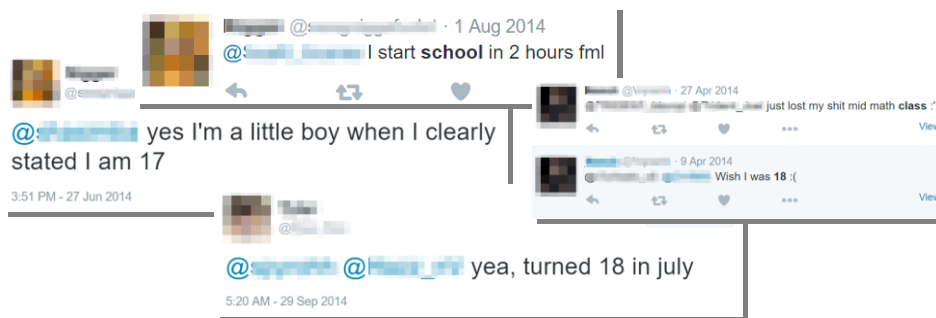


Figure. 6

Important to note is that this process went further than just observing what was in front of me in the form of tweets and user profiles. This process presents more of an ethical “grey area” because, although I was still only looking at publically accessible data, I was searching extensively into user accounts beyond what was immediately visible. The ethical dilemma with this kind of research is that one can assume that certain findings about users are things they would not be expecting someone to look for. Therefore, this process could be seen as gaining insight into user behaviour and profiles based partly on their assumption no one was looking for them<sup>36</sup>.

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a very different name to their previous account, and yet would provide a link to their old, for example a statement saying “\_\_\_\_’s new twitter account”, or “RIP \_\_\_\_”, or would link to another account with a name similar to their previous twitter handle.

<sup>35</sup> Again, this required cross checking, and accumulating multiple references to one thing in order to make an assumption. For example, I would look for multiple and specific references to school, or would find supporting evidence such as complaints they were not old enough to do something, or were frustrated about homework etc. I also documented this process, and created a file for every user, with screenshots of all information relating to them.

<sup>36</sup> This can also raise questions about what to do when you come across incriminating information, which I will expand on in my personal reflections at the end of this chapter.

Throughout all variations of this data accumulation, I looked for examples of users engaging in regular harassment outside that which they had sent to Anita Sarkeesian, and what kinds of harassment this was, and what kind of communication they had with others more broadly. I will now expand on my findings.

## Part 3: Findings from Anita Sarkeesian Case Study

### Statistics

There were 157 harassing<sup>37</sup> tweets from 146 users mentioned in 'One Week of Harassment on Twitter' (some users tweeted more than once). The findings specific to this series of users were:

- A high amount of harassers were young boys or men under 25
- Many seemed to “hero worship” key Internet figures
- Some showed signs of loneliness and depression
- Very few showed a noticeable commitment to anti-feminism and some even tweeted about causes that are feminist in nature
- There was a culture of abusive language more broadly

Of the 146 twitter users who sent harassment I was able to find the accounts of 101 users, and unable to find anything about 42 accounts. This was either because they were suspended, inactive, protected, or they were almost empty. There were 4 women who tweeted harassment, and the rest appeared to all be men.

Of the 101 users:

- 41 of those users were actively using twitter<sup>38</sup> but had no indication of their age.
- 40 users were under the age of 25. I was able to find information of their actual age in tweets, in conversations with others, or in information from their other accounts.
  - 28 of these users were 18 years old or younger at the time their tweets were sent.
- A further 15 users indicated they were in school (middle or high school) at the time their tweets were sent, but did not indicate their age
- 10 had enough information to be able to conclude that they were significantly older than 25

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<sup>37</sup> It is important to mention that there was much variation in the extremities of the tweets, from inflammatory to incredibly violent and misogynist. For the sake of this these I chose to investigate them all instead of identifying those that seemed more harassing. This is partly because Sarkeesian released these tweets as a series, of which she classified them all as harassment. For this reason, and for ease of research, I chose to therefore also consider all of them as being harassing.

<sup>38</sup> By this I mean they had tweeted recently, and in 2016.

Of the 157 tweets only 44 tweets did *not* include anything specific about gender. Many of these 44 tweets still included death threats or violent language, but the content wasn't gender specific in wording, themes or gender-specific violence. There were 16 particularly very violent tweets, 9 of which threatened or included mention of rape. 2 tweets included racism, 1 of which was also gendered in content.

### ***Themes included in harassment***

There were several recurring themes in harassment directed at Sarkeesian.

The themes included in the harassment (many involving cross-over) were;

***Attacks on Sarkeesian's intelligence:*** "listen up you dumb hoe. Go f\*\*k yourself and your sh\*\*ty sense. Dumb bitch doesn't know anything. Kys<sup>39</sup>"

***Sexual harassment:*** "oi f\*\*k you mother f\*\*ker sl\*t bitch female ass hoe sl\*t f\*\*k you show me your tits"

***Requests for her to die or commit suicide:*** "hi aneta (sic), when are you going to f\*\*king kill yourself you annoying f\*\*kign (sic) c\*\*t"

***Complaints that she was ruining things:*** "dumb bitch, your (sic) going to ruin the gaming community for millions of people we hope your (sic) happy"

***Racial slurs:*** "uh boohoo stop crying you selfish faking bitch and get over it who would rape you your (sic) f\*\*king ugly you Arab bitch"

***Suggestions that Sarkeesian has no right to comment:*** "hey bitch, here's a bright idea. Stayyyyyy (sic) the f\*\*k away from gaming? Let us do us. We don't fw<sup>40</sup> your line of work so why fw ours?"

***Body/looks-based insults:*** "you're a stupid fat c\*\*t die pls<sup>41</sup>?"

***Suggestion that she was overreacting:***

***Anti-feminism:*** "'harassing' will continue and accelerate. We're not going to stop until no one will openly admit to being feminist"

***Sexism/Misogyny:*** "Shut the f\*\*k up you f\*\*king c\*\*t and make me a sandwich"

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<sup>39</sup> Kys is an acronym for "kill yourself"

<sup>40</sup> fw is an acronym for "f\*\*k with"

<sup>41</sup> pls is short for "please"

**The issue isn't important:** *"well try sorting issues like Saudi Arabias (sic) REAL patriarchy instead of telling me how to sit on public transport you silly c\*\*t!"*

**Needs sex:** *"so, can't take some criticism, call them liars despite the burden of proofs we have on you? C'mon bitch. You need some good fucking"*

**Not a proper feminist:** *"feminist? That term can only be used in (sic) real women. Stop soiling what that ideology really stands for ya dumb whore"*

**Sexual violence:** *"I don't advocate violence against women at all but with this bitch I'll make an exception"*

**Threats of Rape:** *"It's a normal (sic). Stop being such a pussy or I'll rape you"*

### **General Findings about the users behind harassment**

Many harassers were gamers, by which I mean they tweeted predominantly about gaming, and followed other gamers on twitter, and often made their own videos about games. The game most tweeted about was overwhelmingly Call of Duty (COD)<sup>42</sup>. Very few were users with large amounts of "followers": most had fewer than 500, and many had less than 100. Few had regular "likes" or "shares" of their tweets. Regular harassment in general conversation was common, and many had experienced harassment themselves, from other users. Only several showed evidence of being sending a significant amount of harassment to others and fewer to be actual trolls<sup>43</sup>. Of those who were involved in regular harassing behaviour, they appeared to do so regardless of the gender of the person they were attacking. I saw a higher volume of harassment between young men and boys themselves, including in general conversation with each other. This included racial and homophobic slurs, negative comments based on appearance, insults about intelligence or status, photos of pornographic nature or offensive memes, or tweets about someone's family members. The harassment itself was just as abusive when directed at men, yet was gendered differently than when directed towards women. When a gendered element existed in harassment towards men, it was either to attack their perceived lack of masculinity, or was along the lines of what someone was "doing" or threatened to do with another person's mother or sister. These themes were also present in *responses to* harassers, from those defending the woman who had been attacked, a point I will expand on later in this chapter. Only a couple of users sent very abusive tweets to women specifically, and from their profiles it seemed they were more committed to anti-women and anti-

<sup>42</sup> a very popular fighting-style game set in various war settings

<sup>43</sup> By this I mean there were very few who undertook certain trolling practices, such as the use of specific memes, language or imagery common to trolling behaviour.

feminist politics. Yet, when the person attacked *was* a woman the content was more likely to include gendered violence and rhetoric. Several users regularly tweeted about feelings of depression and anxiety, and some tweeted they had a desire to end their life, and several indicated they had problems with mental or physical disabilities.

## User profiles

Below are some examples of user profiles I was able to form from investigating:

### USER 1:



Figure. 7

This user tweeted to Sarkeesian 3 times, which included suggestions of rape, requests for Sarkeesian to kill herself, arguing for increased sexualisation of women in gaming, and a racist slur. To find out more about this user I first searched the original account, which had been suspended. By searching through tweets I was able to find two other accounts of theirs, one with a slight change to the harassing account name, and another with a different name, but which included their original user name in their profile description. This user was 18 at the time they sent these tweets, and their online presence included interactions (re-tweets or likes) with Keemstar<sup>44</sup>, who is a prominent online gaming figure. I found evidence of them being involved in the regular harassment of others, including sending pornographic images to a female user.

### USER 2:

This user was 18 at the time he sent this tweet (below left). His twitter handle includes part of his real name. He has 1234 “followers”. When another user replied to this tweet, asking “*what the f\*\*k*



*is the matter with you?”*, he replied “*she’s a spoiled fascist little girl that can only think **for**<sup>45</sup> herself*”. Included on their twitter account were many photos, predominantly of him posing with other people at cosplay or anime events.

Figure. 8

<sup>44</sup> Keemstar is a man in his 30s, who creates YouTube videos. He is a strong opponent of Sarkeesian’s criticisms of sexism in gaming.

<sup>45</sup> Emphasis added by me to highlight the irony of mistakenly using “think for herself” instead of “thinks of herself”

The photo in his profile picture was of him. He tweeted almost obsessively to various other twitter users in related to his passions (gaming, cosplay, anime) asking repeatedly for autographs, “follows”<sup>46</sup> or “shoutouts”.

To the right is a series of tweets he sent to various people, indicative of this. (*The name highlighted is a popular internet and gaming personality, and who has spoken out aggressively against Anita Sarkeesian on YouTube.*) In his profile information he included his age (which I cross checked with information found in other tweets), the year he was born, the state he lives in, and information about a disease he has, including the information that it is ‘NOT CONTAGIOUS’. He was not involved in any other harassing that I could find. There was some objectification of women in his tweets, and some anime porn, but predominantly he tweeted about movies, anime and manga.

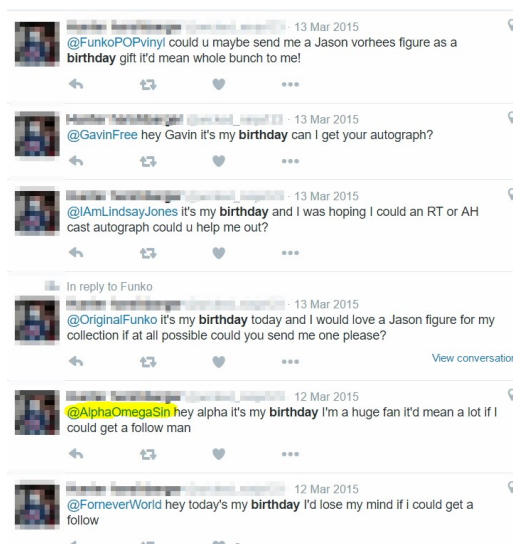


Figure. 9

### USER 3:

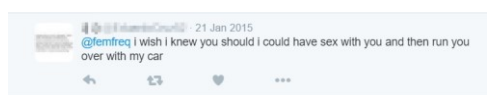


Figure. 10

This user tweeted Sarkeesian 3 times. The second tweet said “*u are not a real gamer go die get out of here #GamerGate #fuckyouanita #DramaAlert @KEEMSTARx*”.

Tagging Keemstar means that he is able to see the tweet.

Many users did this in the hope of being re-tweeted, or having more people visit their account because of it. He tweeted mostly about video games, and had just under 400 followers. He had been harasses himself, with a lot of homophobic content. There were a few examples of him harassing others, though I didn’t find anything similar to that which he sent to Sarkeesian. Several tweets

<sup>46</sup> A follow is when someone becomes your twitter “friend”. Gaining a “follow” is particularly sought after from online heroes.

indicated he was school aged, including that he was a “freshman<sup>47</sup>” though not enough to confidently assume.

Below (left) is harassment he sent to an infamous young online personality, and right is some harassment sent to him.



Figure. 13



Figure. 11

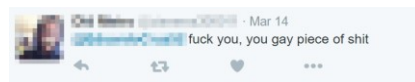


Figure. 12

This user shared a tweet (right) that shows the only causes of rapists. He had written “*This is the most honest thing I’ve ever seen*”.



Figure. 14

#### USER 4:

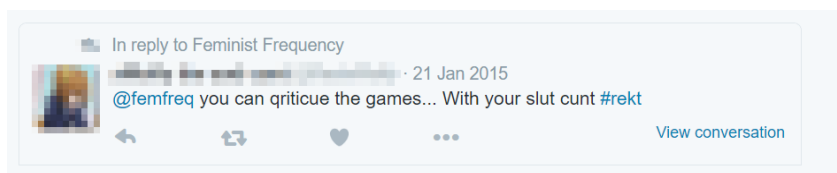


Figure. 15

I was unable to find this user’s age. He tweets regularly and has 14 followers. He tweets a lot of sexualized pictures of anime (cartoon) characters. His YouTube account was linked to his twitter account. The description read: ‘*I’m just a guy with crippling depression, and my content is*

<sup>47</sup> First year of highschool in the USA

cancer.<sup>48</sup> *The like to dislike ratio tells you enough about my content*. I found several tweets also referencing depression, suicide and self-harm. One picture included what appeared to be his arm holding a razor blade, with cuts in his skin. His tweets were rarely “liked”. Another said “*Someone, go #Orlando<sup>49</sup> on me. I don’t want to live, my life is pain*”. By including the hashtag in front of the word ‘Orlando’ this means that his tweet will appear when anyone searches that word. This implies they were hoping to be noticed. There were several tweets about his parents, and several about feminism, but nothing violent. I found one tweet (below) of an anti-semitic nature.

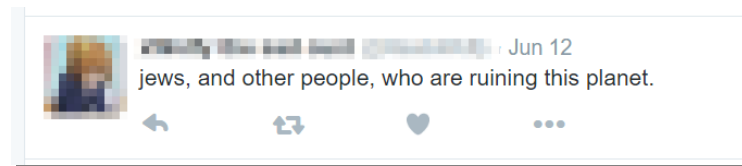


Figure. 16

Some of my findings, it could be argued, are not that surprising. For example, the fact that the majority of Sarkeesian’s harassers were gamers is reflective of the fact that she was highlighting an issue related to the gaming scene. Because of this, it could also be argued that is why there is a high amount of young boys appearing in the data. In order to establish whether these were reflective of any broader patterns, I analyzed harassment sent to other women online, which I will now expand on.

## Part 4: Broader Trends & Insights

I conducted the same process already outlined for harassing tweets sent to Coralie Alison and several other incidents that gained media attention. There were some trends I noticed whilst investigating Sarkeesian’s harassment that were replicated in other incidents. I will refer to these incidents, and Case study 1 throughout the remainder of this chapter, using different incidents to highlight different themes.

My findings of users more broadly were:

- The amount of harassment from boys and young men (under 25) was high
- The presence of abusive discourse was high generally, especially in communication with their friends and other people they had an online relationship with

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<sup>48</sup> Cancer is internet lingo for “terrible”

<sup>49</sup> References the Orlando night club shootings from earlier in 2016.



- The correlation between anti-women harassment and users who were gamers was high
- Many seemed to want the attention of other users
- Harassment back to harassers was not unusual, and sometimes contained gendered abuse even when the response was to harassment due to a particularly feminist incident.

I will now discuss some of these in more detail.

### *Young men & boys*

There was more broadly a notable amount of boys and young men amongst the harassment I researched outside of Case study 1. Regardless of the percentage of harassers that are boys or young men, what is important to mention is that the severity of tweets that do come from that demographic can be very violent and sexist. Of the harassment sent to Coralie Alison I chose to investigate the severity of threats from those users who were young men and boys. Below are a selection of tweets from those under the age of 18, and their age:

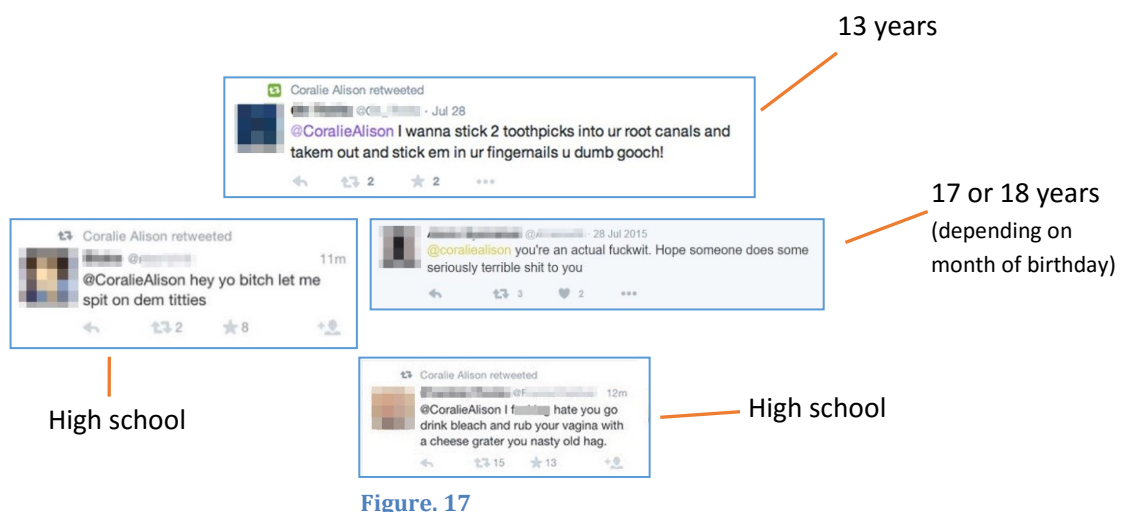


Figure. 17

When the harasser was found to be a young boy, and when their tweet was violent, there was usually a correlation between these and regular harassment of others, including the use of racist and homophobic slurs, and sexism. What is interesting is that young boys sent equal if not more harassment to other boys and men, including people that seemed to be their friends online. This harassment also included regular death threats or requests, threats of sexual violence, and even incitement for rape. Young boys were also casually harassed regularly online, also by their



Figure. 18

friends, primarily based on appearance, sexuality, taunted for being a virgin, or suggestions about what one was doing to another's female family members (see above). Harassment of young men by older men often was themed about the younger persons' masculinity or penis size.

I found further evidence of harassment of women from boys and young men elsewhere. I received some screenshots from a woman who experienced harassment via Facebook following the organization of a 'wage-gap bake sale'<sup>50</sup>. The harassment was gendered, and mainly anti-feminist. Of the harassment I was sent, all but one of the harassers had used their primary Facebook account to harass, on which I was able to find photos of them and information about their lives, such as schools attended, hobbies, political views and partners. 3 out of the 5 that I investigated were under the age of 25, and were most likely even younger, as their accounts included mentions and photos of school. One was an adult under 30, and one was a self-proclaimed troll. In July 2016, an incident of online abuse towards a woman made headlines across the world when, referencing the movie 'The Purge' in which laws are temporarily suspended, a Twitter user tweeted the following tweet<sup>51</sup>:



Figure. 19

One of the women referenced in the tweet, actor and singer Zendaya, saw the tweet and responded by sharing the tweet and the profile of the person who had sent it. Upon investigating (using the

<sup>50</sup> For Feminist Week at an Australian university, the student union's women's officer organised a bake sale that charged people based on their gender and other factors. White middle class men, for example, were charged more - based on the income wage gap between men and women.

<sup>51</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/zendaya-twitter-rape\\_us\\_577940dde4b0a629c1aa6600](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/zendaya-twitter-rape_us_577940dde4b0a629c1aa6600)

previously outlined process) I was able to find the user's other twitter account, his Instagram and Facebook accounts, his real name, age, and even his family members. The person was a 17-year-old boy, who tweeted regularly about online gaming. He had 2 twitter accounts, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> (the one he did not send the tweet with) had 92 followers, and was last used in December 2015. In that account, I found tweets with themes of casual (not violent) objectification, such as commenting on women's bodies. When I searched the most used words used there were some, such as "gay", "ni\*\*a" and "bitch" that I could not find in his tweets, suggesting they could have been deleted. Aside from this his tweets were predominantly about gaming and sport. The correlation between harassment and gaming was undeniable. In every incident I studied, there was a high percentage of harassers who also happened to be keen online gamers. I will now expand upon this further.

### **Gamers**

From analysing tweets from other women harassed online I noticed trends of gamers, even when the target of the harassment wasn't involved in gaming. For example, in the harassment directed to Coralie Alison, many of the harassers also regularly tweeted about online gaming including tweeting to gaming figures, linking to videos they had made of themselves playing games, and tweeting about what games they were currently playing. The harasser behind the tweet to Zendaya inciting rape, as just mentioned, was an online gamer. The most common game tweeted about was the Call of Duty franchise (COD). This is a console (Xbox & PlayStation) and personal computer (PC) game that involves online communication so that users can speak to each other while they play. The game is played in teams, and many young people are paid to play the game professionally. Within this game, and others, harassment of users is high generally, but the harassment of women is specifically gendered. Michael Kasumovic and Jeffrey Kuznekoff conducted a study into sexism in online gaming, and found that 'lower-skilled players were more hostile towards a female-voiced teammate' (2015). Their study of 'inter-sexual competition' suggested that males with the most to lose (i.e. those lowest on the social hierarchy) were most hostile to female-sounding players, but were submissive to male-sounding players (Kasumovic & Kuznekoff, 2015).

This may be useful in further investigating the rates of harassment more generally (i.e. not specifically in gaming). The findings from Kasumovic & Kuznekoff could also be tested with other harassment. My untested hypothesis is that there could be a correlation with those who harass others more generally on the Internet, and their fear of what Kasumovic and Kuznekoff call 'hierarchical reorganization' (2015). High rates of harassment, or extreme harassment, could also have something to do with harassers being harassed *themselves*. Again we can use the realm of online gaming to highlight this, as the rates of harassment of men in online gaming is also high.

Statistics released by Pew Research Centre (Duggan, 2014) that found that, of the harassment to men and boys, the most overall occurred whilst they were gaming online. This fact was actually highlighted by several of Anita Sarkeesian's harassers. One, for example, tweeted: *"Stop. You do not understand about gaming, death threats are made daily as well as rape threats. Guess what? It's not only women!"* Another tweeted: *"threats are a part of gaming, always has (sic) been"*, whilst another said *"Threats ARE an accepted part of gaming, except in non-c\*\*t lingo it's called \*trash talk\*\*"* (profanity censored by me). Clearly several users feel that the threats in gaming and online are not specific to women.

My findings are also suggestive that many of the people who harassed Anita Sarkeesian, for example, were often involved in both the sending and receiving harassment to and from other users, in general conversations.

### General themes in language & communication

In collecting the data on gendered harassment online, it was impossible to overlook the fact that negative language is an archetype of the Internet more generally. I found examples of abusive language occurring from diverse ages, genders, and backgrounds, regardless of any factors that may be touted as playing a role in harassing discourse. Throughout all Internet communication there are specific trends in language different to *offline* communication, and there are also trends in aggression – and how quickly people become aggressive towards others is certainly an online phenomenon. In the research I have conducted, I not only gained insight into certain types of users who undertake certain types of harassment, but also into the way that harassers are themselves harassed, and also how people calling out harassment have sometimes become harassers in response.

Another important point to make is that there are trends in online language itself, including certain phrases and words that have become common lingo. For example, it is very common to find the expressions "kill yourself" and "get cancer" online, often in a manner that is merely oppositional to another person. Indeed these are so commonly used they now appear to hold a meaning akin to telling someone to "get lost". The image (right) is a series of tweets from one of Alison's harassers to the gaming company Xbox's

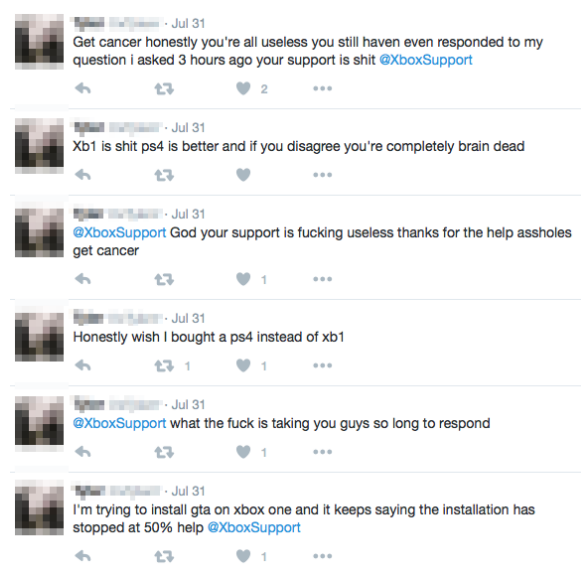
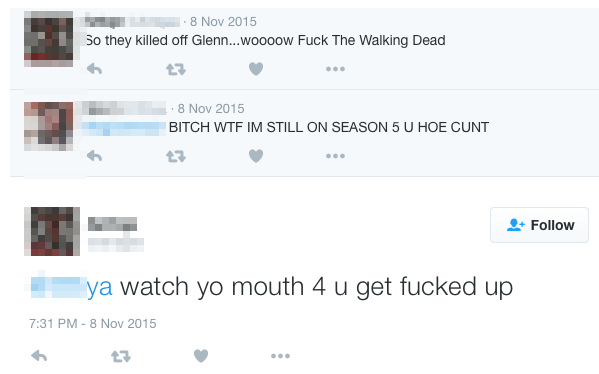


Figure. 20

twitter account. The user appears to be furious at the lack of speed in answering his question, and abuses the company by telling them to “get cancer”, referring to them as “brain dead”, “assholes”, and “useless”. This particular user was a school aged boy, who also aggressively tweeted others. This example in particular highlights another trend I noticed, which was a lack of inhibition when it came to tweeting discontent directly to other users. I came across examples of abusive harassment to a wide variety of targets, including companies and even from users to their online friends. There is also a broad trend of rapid escalation of discontent online. For example, below is a screenshot of the kinds of rapid escalation that I came across while researching harassers. In the conversation below, a user tweets about a television show, including details about the plot. Another tweets in return: *“BITCH WTF<sup>52</sup> IM STILL ON SEASON 5 U HOE C\*\*T”*.



**Figure. 21**

These extreme responses to relatively banal issues are very indicative of the broader trends of abusive language on the Internet. Aside from the harassment I’ve discussed already, I identified several other types of harassment. These were; harassment in *response* to harassers after they posted abusive comments; harassing and abusive language in general day-to-day dialogues amongst online users who had a relationship to each other; and harassment back and forth between users when discussing topics (i.e. not one person targeting another specifically).

### **Cycles of harassment**

Perhaps the most interesting finding from the research I conducted was the regularity of harassing and abusive communication present in general online. Regardless of which side of the situation users were situated on, harassment existed. In addition to this, there can be very violent responses to very violent tweets. Whilst they are meant to be oppositional to the sentiment of the original tweet, they often recreate the violence itself.

<sup>52</sup> WTF is an acronym for “what the f\*\*k”

### Response harassment

Harassment in response to harassers was relatively common and, though rarely as abusive as the original harassment, was still significantly negative. Return harassment followed some of the themes of harassment more generally, including attacks on appearance, threats of violence, attacks on intelligence, ordering people to leave, and requesting people kill themselves or asking them to die. Other themes common in return harassment were attacks on status (for example ridiculing someone for being lonely or sad or depressed), attacks on bodies (particularly fat shaming and negative comments on appearance), ridiculing based on perceived virginity, attacks on lack of masculinity, racism & homophobia, suggestions of mental illness, suggestions of having been sexually abused, suggestions of incest, and ridiculing of family members. The exchange below was between a user who threatened Anita Sarkeesian with rape, and someone who came to her defence.



Figure. 22

Obviously the original tweet is incredibly abusive, and a horrific threat. The response, in support of Sarkeesian, and probably against the violence promoted in the original tweet, uses tactics of de-masculinisation ("dickless moron"), suggests the attacker has no life, and ridicules them by implying virginity. Whilst not a violent tweet, nor a threat, this response is using sexuality to dehumanise and degrade, and reinforces ideas of masculinity based on sexual experience and sexual organs. Whilst the intention of the response is to show solidarity with Sarkeesian, the content is problematic.

Below are two tweets sent to one of Sarkeesian's harassers. The first is a suggestion of sexual violence, and the second ("don't you have your dad's dick to suck") is ridicule with themes of incest, homosexuality and sexual abuse.



Figure. 23

I found several tweets a violent or harassing nature that had been sent by supporters of the harassed women in response to *her* harassers. Some responses were sent by women. For example (below right), a woman has sent a tweet to someone who harassed Sarkeesian. Although one can assume it was sent to be ironic, it is still threatening, and was

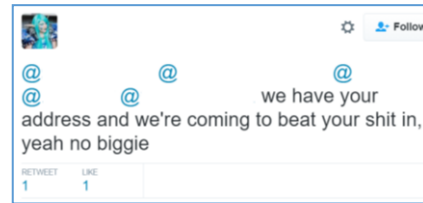


Figure. 24

also “liked” by the person who was the recipient of the original harassment. Another, sent by a woman who highlighted extreme sexism and misogyny from a men’s dating program, tweeted “If that mother f\*\*ker pushed my head on his dick while yelling pikachu at me, I’d break out a taser and f\*\*king go “pikachu” on his dick”.

Perhaps the most ironic display of this double standard was in a tweet (below) sent to one of Sarkeesian’s harassers. The first image is the original harassment, and the second the response.



Figure. 25

I also found many examples of “masculinity” being attacked in response harassment. Below, three men have responded to 3 of Coralie Alison’s harassers. They are defending Alison, and calling out the harassers for promoting violence to women. Included in all are ridicules based on genitals.



Figure. 26

This seemed to me particularly interesting, as the reason Sarkeesian was being harassed was over her highlighting issues of gender inequality, and the persistent stereotyping of women as figures in

gaming. These examples of attacks on masculinity, and suggestions that masculinity is linked to penis size, is quite ironic, given that Sarkeesian has herself discussed the problem with “toxic masculinity” which would include the perpetuation of ideas that manhood and genital size are linked. Even more surprising than this was evidence of sexism against women being used in retaliation to men who had been sexist or misogynist in their harassment, a point I will expand upon shortly.

### *Discrimination in response harassment*

For responses to harassers to be angry in tone was not uncommon, but most interestingly, I noted instances of sexism against women in comments sent in *response* to people who had originally



Figure. 27

tweeted sexist or misogynist harassment. The exchange

shown (left) occurred between a harasser in the same incident (in this instance the harasser does happen to fit the description of a troll), and someone in support of the woman being harassed. This response of solidarity is not only harassing in tone, but it also infers that the harasser is the result of inbreeding, hypothetically slut shames their mother, attacks the harasser by insulting a female figure in their life (a

common type of gendered harassment to men), and suggests their mother do another person’s laundry in. Again, this tweet

was “liked” by the person on the receiving end of the original harassment.

I also noted other examples of people who came to the defence of a person or community and yet, when pressed by someone in opposition, resorted to similar negative stereotypes and language they were defending in the first place. Reading comments under a video about non-binary gender expression, I noticed an exchange between two Facebook users. The first (a) was very much opposed to the idea of diverse gender expression, while the second (b) wanted to show that gender diversity exists. (A) wrote: “*you are a man or a woman*” and “*there is no inbetween*”. (B) responded: “*gender and sex are different...intersex people exist. Sorry. Try again*”. (A) wrote: “*It means they are retarded and ruining the fucken world*”. (B) commented: “*the only person with a mental disability here is you, darling*”. The conversation continues, and becomes more heated. Interestingly, and somewhat ironically, (B) (who was in support of gender diverse identities) begins to insult (A)’s appearance, using homophobic slurs. (B) refers to (A) as “*butch*”, “*dykey*”, “*ugly*”, “*bitch*” and a “*cunt*”. The fact that, within a discussion about gender diversity and expression, someone in support of such diversity would turn to homophobic and sexist terminology to aggravate potentially provides an interesting insight into the aggressive nature of Internet communication generally.



### *Sexism and misogyny online more generally*

This was further highlighted in a series of screen shots of harassment directed towards trans-exclusionary radical feminists<sup>53</sup> (TERFs). TERFs hold trans-phobic and trans-misogynist views, for example, that trans\* women are not women, and should therefore not be allowed into women's only spaces, nor should they be able to speak about women's issues. Other feminists and trans\* communities strongly oppose their opinions. The tweets, collected and published on a blog called 'Terf is a Slur' (2016), included many threats and aggressive opposition to TERFs and transphobic people. Of course, transphobia is inherently violent and online harassment of transgender people online can be very violent. This is to highlight the irony of violence and misogyny being used in opposition to violence and trans\*misogyny.

Most interesting amongst these tweets was the use of sexism and violence, including suggestions of graphic violent sexual acts. The incentive for most, no doubt, was to show allegiance with trans\* people, particularly trans\* women, in opposition to the violence and transmisogyny of TERFs and TERF politics. It is reasonable to assume that some were aware of the gender politics around the issues, and some could have even been more aware of things like sexism and misogyny than the average Internet user. They certainly are aware of the violence subjected to trans people, thus being the reason they tweeted in the first place. Yet regardless of the fact that their motivation was to oppose violence against trans\* people, the harassment sent was blatantly violent.

As with other harassment I have looked at many of the themes of harassment were the same:

### *Calling for, or suggestions of violence to the target*



Figure. 29a



Figure. 29b

<sup>53</sup> Analysing this particular set of tweets is in no way meant to defend the views of TERFs.

## Sexualised acts as harassment

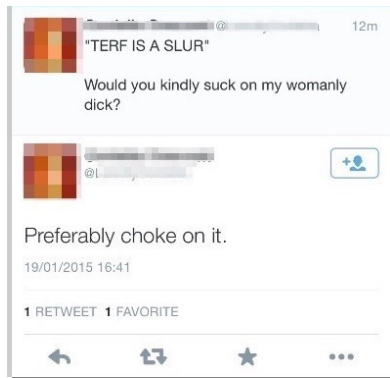


Figure. 30



Figure. 31



Figure. 29

## Suggestions of death



Figure. 31



Figure. 31

## Violent sexualised rhetoric



Figure. 35

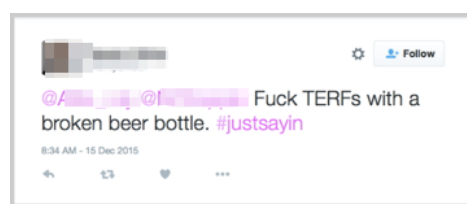


Figure. 37

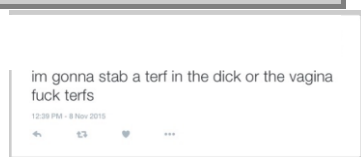


Figure. 32

Also included, which was not so visible in other harassment was anti-lesbian rhetoric (below).



Figure. 34a



Figure. 34b

Interestingly, specific harassment against feminists in general was not present, so it may be possible that some who were tweeting either aligned with feminism, or were feminists themselves. Many of these were sent from women or female identifying people. One user (figure 40) shared a picture of a weapon to suggest they would take violent actions to counter the 'transmisogyny and violence against trans ladys' (sic). The point worth making is that, regardless of the issue, and whether the person may oppose violence or would never actually act on such violence, there is a tendency for online dialogue to be punctuated with abusive rhetoric.

The point to make here is not that angry responses to TERFs are necessarily surprising, but rather to highlight the fact that many responses include the very content that fuels people to respond in the first place. Violent tweets are sometimes responded to with violence, sexist tweets are sometimes responded to with sexism.



Figure. 35

Tweets in support of women ridiculed online often include the ridiculing of the harasser, sometimes in a manner it would seem contradicts the ethos or thinking of the supporters – e.g. attacking masculinity when the original issue at hand was one of gender, or including misogyny as a threat against an ideology that originally offended based on (trans)misogyny.

## Racism

The majority of racism I noticed was directed at black people. I noticed that racism was included in



Figure 40

harassment in several different ways. First, of course, racism was used against people of a particular (or perceived) race or ethnicity (figure 41). Race was also used when ordinary conversations start to become heated. Figure 40 is part of a conversation between a

user, and another person, and their conversation involves

them antagonising each other. Although the racist included slur is very common online, a highly problematic fact in and of itself, the person's profile picture featured a black man, so it could be assumed that this was a racial slur based on appearance, used to further antagonise.



Figure. 41

Race was also used in combination with sexism and misogyny. In figure 42, the male user “jokes” that they “own” an Asian woman who could be used as “wank material”. A particularly extreme use of racism was in its inclusion in threats. In the violent threat below (figure 43), the user has included an offensive

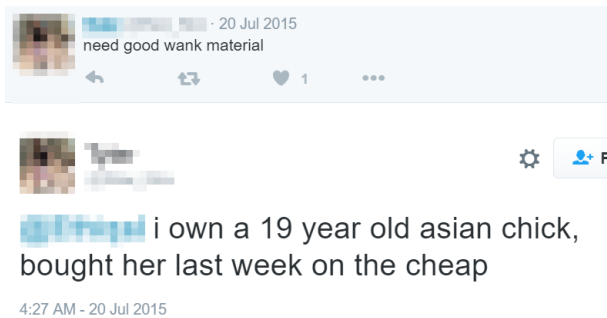


Figure. 42

racist connotation and the incitement of rape. Their intent has been to escalate the threat of rape further.

Racism and sexism were commonly used together when the target was a non-white woman. I came



Figure. 43

across a conversation (fig 44) involving a user I was investigating who had harassed Anita Sarkeesian, and who was heavily involved in regular harassment of others. Their harassment begins with sexism (suggesting the other user – who they assume is a woman – make them sandwiches) and when the other responds with a retort, the user replies with “my ass goes where it wants and also I don't like n\*\*\*\*ers”.



Figure. 44

violence and racism. These examples seem completely extreme by comparison to what they're responding to.

Perhaps the most surprising use of racism was used in response to harassment, by users defending women who had been attacked. This is similar to the way sexism was used casually, in response to sexism.

As I've already shown in an earlier image (figure 26), one harasser sent *'I hope every feminist has their head*

*severed from their shoulders'*, to Anita Sarkeesian. Below is the response from a defender of Sarkeesian. This user attacks the intelligence of the harasser with a highly offensive racist response, not related to the harasser, but by applying the violence of their tweet in suggestion that he would be more suited to living somewhere else, based on his violent tendencies.



Figure. 45

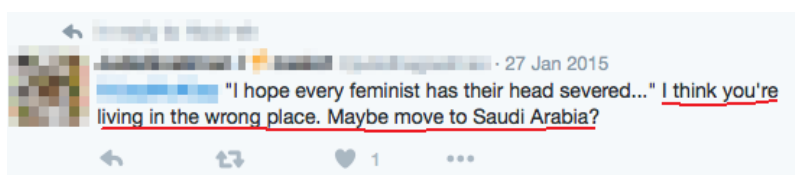


Figure. 36

### Other discrimination

Also worth noting is the presence of racist, sexist, homophobic and transphobic slurs generally on the Internet. Even when not directed specifically someone, it is very common for content to include

racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia. Whilst this is true, there is no denying that the language of the Internet is also racist, homophobic and transphobic. It is very common to see slurs within harassment to specific people. What is also very common, and perhaps indicative of the broader tone of online communication, was the presence of (particularly) racist and homophobic slurs amongst everyday (non-harassing) communication amongst users, particularly young boys. Very often young boys referred to each other with racist and homophobic terminology, even when the conversations seemed relatively genial.

This may be to do with the nature of social media, the design of which is to have things you post validated by others through likes, shares, retweets, and comments. This idea of needing to be noticed, or validated with SNSs' "liking" and "sharing" functions, leads me to the next finding, related to hero worship and attention seeking.

### *Hero Worship & the desire to be noticed*

Kathy Sierra, writing from her own experience of high volumes of online harassment, believes that women receive the most harassment when their online visibility reaches a level 'at which others are seen to be listening, "following", "liking", "favouriting", retweeting....the point at which her readers have..."drunk the koolaid"<sup>54</sup>' (Sierra, 2014). Although this may be true for some harassers, particularly trolls or those who hold a particular political stance (e.g. anti-feminism), I would argue that what is missing from this analysis are those harassers that don't care so much about the issue in particular. As I found in my research, there were very few who seemed committed to or concerned with the actual ideas being discussed (such as being committed to opposing discussions of sexism in gaming). Committed trolls are certainly present in most large-scale harassment incidents, and may even spur on others to join the harassment, but a significant proportion of those who deliver harassment to women appear to be just along for the ride. What they often *were* committed to, however, were their heroes, and the desire to be noticed by them.

From young gamers in particular, I noticed recurring themes of hero worship, generally towards successful online gamers or men with high numbers of followers. Without going into too much gamer-specific lingo, there are several key online gaming and YouTube figures and teams (groups of professional or semi-professional gamers) who many young or unprofessional gamers look up to or aspire to be. Some of these, such as the infamous Keemstar, have spoken out against feminism or specific women in videos or tweets. Sometimes these same figures also hold sexist and misogynistic views more generally. In the cases of Sarkeesian and Allison, it can be speculated that the

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<sup>54</sup> this is an expression meaning blind faith in something being said by another, usually someone you regard highly

harassment was fuelled by the fact that people with big followings spoke out against the women involved. In Sarkeesian's case, and as she has noted (figure. 47), when popular YouTube gamers or online figures make videos about her she received increased levels of harassment. In this sense, it is those users who have ironically "drunk the Koolaid" of those they hold in high regard. Not to mention those who see a trend and follow it, perhaps in the hope of being noticed, "liked", "retweeted", or "followed", or perhaps simply because their friends are doing it. This point is somewhat articulated by journalist Jess Zimmerman, who argues that 'Men (especially men who



Figure. 37

roam certain corners of the Internet) put their heroes...on pedestals so high, the people lining up to drink can't even see into the cups they're being handed' (2014).

From studying the way that, in particular, young boys tweet their heroes, I believe certain

harassment is undertaken not because users are confident they can get away with it, but actually precisely because they hope to be noticed.

Particularly in the case of the harassment levelled at Anita Sarkeesian, I found that some of the attacks seemed to be so extreme in the hope of being noticed, followed, and retweeted,

by other users and key figures in the online

world. And, more broadly, particularly in the

case of young boys, the desire to be noticed is very visible in their tweets (e.g figure. 48 & 49).

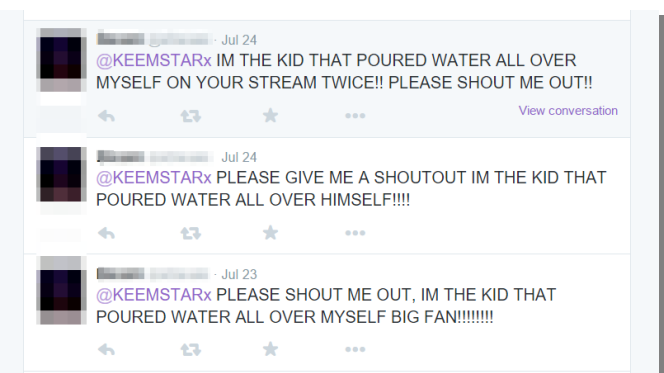


Figure. 38



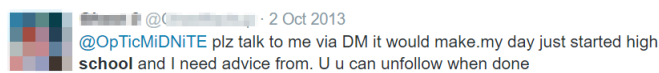


Figure. 49

One young user I investigated had created several videos in which he had filmed himself sharing his admiration for and dedication to Keemstar. Others regularly,

and sometimes incessantly, tweeted their heroes with requests for them to give them a “shoutout”, or to “notice” them<sup>55</sup>. Other people showed their allegiance to certain Internet figures by supporting their political views. One user tweeted to Sarkeesian: *“get a goddamn f\*\*king life c\*\*t!! trash my youtube friends like @AlphaOmegaSin shame on you bitch!!”*, whilst another tweeted *“call me out along with alphaomegasin I am going to knock some sense into your brain bitch”*. One user, no older than 15, sent a tweet to Sarkeesian that included suggesting she “drink bleach”, in which he “tagged” Keemstar. It can be assumed that he Keemstar would be impressed, and that he would be noticed and “liked”.

This desire to be noticed may be one reason why users are often not very anonymous. I became aware of just how many users freely post harassment and were easily identifiable from their online social media accounts, including posting videos of themselves in the hope of being noticed, or allowed to join particular online groups.

### Hardly anonymous

Many are not taking steps to remain anonymous at all. Many are young and still in school. In the case of Twitter, when the profile is public, it can be seen by anyone, with or without a twitter account. Yet, in actuality, tweets are read by very few people, given the sheer amounts that are sent every day (Marwick & boyd, 2010: 4). This leads into another finding I noticed. Most of the users who tweeted harassment to Anita Sarkeesian, had very few followers, and their tweets were “liked” by others only occasionally. Most commonly, the day-to-day tweets written by users had no “likes”, or sometimes one or two. The series of tweets (figure. 50) shows just how deliberately un-



Figure. 50

<sup>55</sup> The worship often extends to the use of ironic homoerotic language, such as calling these figures “daddy”. I regularly came across tweets to these figures along the lines of “notice me daddy”, “re-tweet me daddy”, or the remarkably popular “fist me daddy”



anonymous some young users are, and also how they seem to want to be noticed. None of these tweets have any “likes”, which was common of many users, but which rarely seemed to stop them tweeting. I found one young user who had several accounts, and posted regular updates about himself, including tweeting “goodnight” to his followers almost every night, without anyone responding or liking. When coupled with the fact that many often tweeted well-known figures asking them to “follow” their account, or “notice me” or professing their love for them, indicates that one of the fundamental reasons for tweeting is to be noticed. Unsurprisingly, when someone tweets severe harassment to a high profile woman or incident online, they inevitably *do* get noticed.



Figure 51

In the recent incident involving actress and singer Zendaya, the tweet in question gained attention rapidly, and had more than 100 likes and re-shares before Zendaya noticed it. Once she did, and after tweeting her disgust, the tweet escalated in gaining

negative press but also extra attention from others who agreed with its sentiment. Shortly after, the person again tweeted, showing their excitement at being noticed by Zendaya (this tweet was also widely liked and re-tweeted) and later another tweet (left) exclaiming “*I would just like to thank @Zendaya for helping me out on my road to 12k...it’s lit*<sup>56</sup>”. By this they mean they now have 12,000 followers.

This relates closely to the issue of anonymity, which is both commonly touted as the reason online harassment occurs, and as being an excuse for not investigating harassers further. I found this to be incorrect whilst investigating harassers. In the case of Zendaya and the tweet inciting rape, the harasser was referred to as either a “man” or with no suggestion of their profile during the online-news reporting of the incident. Even now, several months later, there is nothing online suggesting that anyone has established who this person was, except for one tweet that references the incident and includes their real first in a veiled “I know who you are” taunt. Some twitter users, including Zendaya herself who referenced them as a “young man”, seemed to have a better instinct as to the person’s actual profile. In this incident, I was able to find the person’s real name, age, location, secondary twitter account, Instagram account, Facebook page and details about his family members within 2 hours.

<sup>56</sup> Expression meaning “something great is happening”

## Part 5: Impact of online research

Undertaking this research was a long, methodical, and often frustrating process. It involved much trial and error, and many things had to be checked and re-checked, especially as I became more practiced at using advanced search techniques on twitter. Finding and collecting information about users could take hours, during which time I watched more homemade videos about online games than I care to count. The abusive rhetoric I documented was common, but rarely shocking, and the impact of reading rape threats and violent suggestions became disturbingly un-disturbing. I read racial and homophobic slurs over and over, more than I saw gendered slurs, because the racial and homophobic slurs are used very regularly in general conversation between boys online. I scrolled through many pornographic images, and became familiar with current online terminology, memes, gifs and pictures regularly shared online. I also became very familiar with gaming short-hand, gaming figures, and gaming references.

When I first read 'one week of harassment on twitter' I was shocked and horrified. However, after reading more and more profanities on social media, the impact of the original tweets also became dulled. I was truly affected only a handful of times. First, when I came across a photo of an unconscious woman who appeared to have been sexually assaulted, and who was surrounded by beer bottles, with a sign attached to her body inviting people to further assault her. Upon realising what the image showed, I quickly scrolled past, but then returned to investigate it further so I could report it online. Upon investigation I found this was a document image that circulated the Internet. The second time I was truly shocked was investigating tweets from Coralie Alison. One user had sent 3 images, each showing women who had been violently killed. I had to view the images to copy the users twitter handle in order to investigate them. The images were so shocking I had to cover them while reading the name. The level of shock that came from the visual representation of violence is perhaps indicative of interaction online generally. Whereas words became somehow less impactful, being faced with an image was a big shock, and a sudden reminder of the violence suggested in the written threats.

What this also raised as a researcher, was what to do when you come across certain information, or incriminating evidence. As I mentioned earlier in the case of the harassing tweet sent to Zendaya, I managed to find the person who sent the tweet. Online-news articles never reported on who had sent the tweet – though, I think there can't have been much effort to find them – and the users' account was simply de-activated. On the one hand, the tweet was incredibly harmful and abusive, and it could be argued that having their account suspended is not an adequate response. Yet, as I

found, this person was also under the age of 18, and therefore reporting this information is both an ethical and legal issue.

The words and threats did actually start to become just words, especially as I became more and more exposed to the kind of general Internet rhetoric that is so common now. My inner dialogue after a day of twitter investigation was often similar to the people I was researching for a while after I stopped. Slurs would pop into my head when things annoyed me, even small things. The use of words I ordinarily find highly offensive and would never use lingered in my head, and became somewhat normalised for a while afterwards. I wouldn't like to assume overexposure to such things makes one more inclined to use them, but it did make me wonder about the high volume of such words online, and the sheer ease at which people seemed to use them on strangers and in relatively trivial circumstances.

## *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I have presented the findings of my research investigating the users behind harassment. Within this process I became aware of broader behavioural and linguistic trends within communication and interactions on the Internet. I have discussed the way that this research impacted me, and the way that my personal experience led me to hypothesise that a person exposed to consistent abusive rhetoric online becomes somewhat desensitised. Many of these challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions made in discussions about online harassment in scholarship, by online-news sources, and in public discourse more generally. I have presented these, and will now turn to my discussion connecting my findings with the assumptions outlined in chapter 1.

# Chapter 4

## *Assumptions, strategies & future directions*

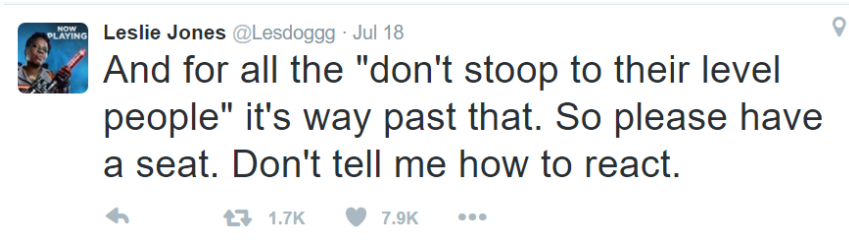


Figure.52: actor Leslie Jones tweeting about her harassment

In this chapter I will provide an in-depth discussion about how my findings challenge some taken for granted assumptions in the discourse of online harassment that I discussed in Chapter 1. To summarize my previous argument, the way that online harassment is currently framed and discussed in scholarship and media is based on **broad and often incorrect assumptions**, that **homogenise harassment and harassers**, and **overlook broader Internet-specific behaviours**. This fails to acknowledge diversity of harassers, and the way that abusive discourse occurs online more generally. These are important to acknowledge because the current discourse assumes a homogeneity of harassers, which in turn limits the opportunities for targeted interventions. I will argue that management strategies **reproduce the discourse of offline violence against women**, and **rely on strategies that fail to educate or address harassers**. I will discuss the importance of better understanding the diversity of users behind such harassment, and the broader context of Internet language, in order to identify specific areas in which to address online harassment.

### Part 1: Problems with dominant discourse of online harassment

As I have shown in chapter 1, often either broad assumptions are made about who is undertaking harassing behaviour online, or harassers' identities are not discussed at all. It is widely assumed that harassers are men, of an adult age, and often referred to as trolls. Whilst this is sometimes true, more often than not this is assumed rather than investigated. As I have shown in my research presented in chapter 3, there is a diversity of harassers and a generalized culture of abusive rhetoric online that is currently being overlooked within scholarship and in online-news reporting. I will now discuss common assumptions, in light of my research, and explain why they are problematic.

## *Broad and often incorrect assumptions about harassers*

### *“Harassers are adults”*

Many of the harassers I investigated were found to be young men and boys, with a significant amount under the age of 18. This finding may be as yet broadly overlooked in scholarship and management strategies, but it is a fact that has been highlighted by several online figures who themselves have been recipients of abuse. When asked in an interview on current affairs television program ‘The Project’ about the rate of abuse received from “school boys”, Australian feminist blogger and journalist Clementine Ford replied “sadly it’s actually not that unusual...often times I do find that it’s young boys...particularly boys around the age of 14 and 15 who feel like it’s ok to say these (harassing) things” (in Levy, 2015). Australian online gaming identity and reviewer Alanah Pearce made headlines in 2014 when, after realising many of her harassers were young boys, she decided to contact their mothers and share with them the threats sent to her by their sons. Pearce (Charalanahzard, 2014) tweeted her findings, saying “sometimes young boys on Facebook send me rape threats, so I’ve started telling their mothers”. Former model and Australian television personality Charlotte Dawson, who took her own life after being the target of sustained Internet harassment, also discovered that some of her worst “trolls” were young men, 1 who was 20 and 1 (J1MZ07, 2012).

Yet, online-news reporting continues to make broad assumptions about who harassers are. Whilst undertaking my research, I was able to see evidence of this in real time. In the case of Zendaya and the tweet inciting rape (which occurred towards the end of writing this) most online news articles referred the harasser as being a “man” (e.g. Otterson: 2016, Sullivan: 2016, Cutler, 2016), without any investigation of the person. Upon investigation, I was able to find that the person who had harassed Zendaya was 17 years old, a point reflective of a broader finding of my research. The insistence on referring to harassers as “men” reinforces the idea that there is only one kind of harasser and, whilst a large number of harassers certainly *are* men, assuming homogeneity only maintains the focus on harassers of an age where conviction (although unlikely) is possible. Most of the people who have been charged with online harassment related offenses, many of whom I have discussed throughout this thesis, have all been over the age of 23. Prosecution is a highly unlikely, nor sensible, outcome for those under the legal age who harass online. Yet, given the significant amounts of harassment from those too young to be prosecuted, this would indicate a need for more diverse strategies to address the issue of online harassment in more targeted and innovative ways.

### *“Harassers are male”*

Following on from this, contrary to the common discourse I have outlined throughout this thesis, some online harassers of women are not actually male. As mentioned in Chapter 3, whilst there

were only a handful of women harassers in the harassment directed to Anita Sarkeesian, more broadly I found plenty of examples of harassing behaviour from women. Whilst less often violent and misogynist, there were still examples of this in harassment from women. Journalist Laurie Penny said recently, in a panel discussing Cybersexism, that “lately I’ve found that some of the worst (threats) have been coming from women, and they’re usually adopting the terminology and the style of threats that I’m getting from men”. She hypothesised that she feels it may be a “symptom of them not wanting to “rock the boat”, because a lot of these women then get a lot of respect from the guys...” (Penny in Sydney Opera House Talks & Ideas, 2015). This is perhaps referencing an incident when, in 2015, British personality Katie Hopkins tweeted to Penny: “Burn her passport, bulk buy her lube & make her a woman of ISIS”, after Penny indicated (on twitter) that she did not have a problem with the vandalising of a war memorial (Battersby, 2015).

The overlooking of women-as-harassers in the discourse of online harassment is significant, not because the bulk of harassers are women – they are not – but because the nature of the harassment that sometimes occurs indicates there may be some significant broader trends of abusive language online (as well as, of course, a reflection of inherent sexism generally). This also is reason to research, for example, the phenomenon of both rapid escalation and the sudden inclusion of overly abusive rhetoric in many seemingly average conversations between online users. Discussions about online harassment need to consider broader trends of communication online because it seems that there are specifics about the nature of being online (a point I will expand on later) that may be contributing to a culture of harassment. Moreover, future plans for addressing online harassment should consider such trends in both design and implementation, in order to better target and deliver such strategies.

### *“Harassers are Anonymous”*

Scholars have expressed concern about anonymity of users online and what this does to their behaviour (Fox *et al*, 2015: 437) Marwick (2013 [A]) identifies two reasons why users are not as anonymous as commonly thought. Firstly, people choose for their online identity to be similar to their *offline*. Secondly, social media has led us to stick with one identity – usually that which uses our actual name etc. Cross (2015) writes that anonymity is used as a simplistic argument as to why harassment occurs, and that anonymity is ‘hardly the whole story’ (2015). As Cross argues (2015:10), ‘Facebook is filled with millions of people, most of whom use their legal names and photos when they post things that may be considered antisocial, aggressive, prejudicial, or even harassing’. Some committed trolls and IT savvy users go the extra lengths to create different identities, but on the whole the average user is relatively trackable, as I found to be the case whilst undertaking research. Online black feminist writer Feministia Jones has noticed a similar trend, and writes that ‘what I

experience the majority of the time comes from people who make little effort to mask their true identities behind fake pictures and bogus profiles' (Jones, 2016). As scholar Emma Jane states, online harassment has "become normalised to the extent (that) people seem quite happy to do it under their own names now" (Jane in ABC News, 2016). Moreover, Kennedy (in Reader, 2012: 498) argues that, even when a user *appears* anonymous, a person's anonymous online identity is still an extension of their *offline* self. As I found in my research, it is rare to not be able to find anything about a person. In fact, at least with the case of much harassment directed at Sarkeesian, there was minimal attempts to cover identity before and after users' sent abuse. In fact, more than ever, most Internet users' online profile uses their real names and involves real reporting of their lives. A report just released supports these findings, and found that in actuality users who sent the most abusive comments 'during mass public attacks were more likely to be the name-identified ones than the anonymous ones' (Coren, 2016).

### *Homogenising of harassment & terminology*

Online harassment and any kind of online abuse is commonly referred to as trolling particularly in online-news reporting and blogs, as I showed in chapter 1. This may seem insignificant, but I would argue that confusing this terminology is problematic, and not insignificant to the overall undervaluing of, and poor response to, online harassment. Firstly, using "trolling" to describe harassment is incorrect. As Starr argues (2014), trolls tend to say things like, "You suck" or "Your work is trash" a few times before moving on...Harassers, on the other hand, use violent threats and consistently engage users dozens of times, even when they are asked to stop'. This is not to say that there are not "trolls" who also send violent threats, but traditionally trolling does not refer to violent abuse. Secondly, conflating online harassment with trolling can result in an assumption that the behaviour is that of someone committed to causing unrest on the Internet, and not the casual behaviour of "ordinary people". The definition of trolling, does not adequately cover the array of abuse that occurs online. Nor does it properly describe the behaviour of most online harassers, as I discussed in chapter 3. In a linguistic sense, the word troll conjures up images of a creature or monster. In a recently published journal dedicated to online harassment, Whelan (2013: 45), writes that media like to have us think that 'trolls...are 'defiled selves', dysfunctional social miscreants, simultaneously hiding pathetically behind their keyboards and omnipotent in their capacity to wound their social betters'. The mythical troll-under-the-bridge imagery is attested to in visualisations of Internet trolls, sometimes referencing their perceived location, in which online trolls are described as solitary, disgusting, basement dwelling losers (see figure. 48).



Figure. 53: Clockwise from top left: ‘the hard knock life of an Internet troll’ (GetSatisfaction, 2011), ‘Anatomy of an Internet troll’ (artist unknown), troll image (artist unknown), ‘Anatomy of a forum troll’ (Hearn, 2010).

Whether or not this broad categorization makes harassing behaviour easier to digest for those being harassed is unclear, but it seems that imagining trolls as being non- or sub-human is perceived to assist in the process of shutting them down. Labelling online harassers as trolls seems to create an “us and them” dichotomy that some may use to create solidarity online. Sara Ahmed’s discussion of “aliens” and “strangers” is a useful way of thinking about the relationships between users online. Ahmed asks ‘how can we tell the difference between a human being and an alien who passes as human?’ (2000: 2). She continues, arguing that if we could be ‘hospitable to aliens’...this ‘might...allow us to become human’ (ibid). There is a tendency to frame online debate with “strangers” in terms of who is “good” or “bad”. It is common in online discussions to shut down seemingly annoying contributors by rendering them “just a troll”, and encouraging others not to “feed the troll” (a strategy I will critique in Part 2 of this chapter). By calling perpetrators trolls, the sentiment becomes, “they’re just a troll”, and therefore “not human”, which implies that all abuse comes from a particular kind of online user, and not just the “average person”.



This closely mirrors the framing of *offline* harassers of women. It is common for “stranger abuse” to be ‘sensationalized’ while more commonly occurring violence from men is ‘obscured’ (Berns, 2001: 266). In the same manner, the discourse of online harassment posits the harassers as being creatures of the online world, not the people you work with, or your children. This sentiment is at odds with my findings, and at odds with those charged with online harassment, who have been of mixed ages, genders, and professions. Feministia Jones (2016), referencing her own harassment, articulates that, in actuality, ‘harassers are people I could pass by on the train any given day or bump into while shopping; they are as “normal” as one could imagine *offline*’.

To be clear, there is not necessarily a problem with the term ‘troll’ when being applied to the kind of behaviour that constituted as actual trolling (although I have outlined why ‘troll’ as a euphemism could be limiting). Yet, when *any* kind of harassment is labelled trolling, we are making invisible both the specificities of the content (e.g. racism, sexism, body-shaming) and we are also making the perpetrators invisible. We are refraining from identifying the specific oppressions and behaviours contained in the act of harassment, and simplifying it with loaded terminology, that frames it as an online problem coming from a certain type of online user (troll/other/alien/stranger). This in turn means we are often failing to connect certain types of online harassment (e.g. misogynist, or racist, or racist + misogynist) with *offline* trends. Although some have tried to differentiate between types of trolls (e.g. Coleman, 2012), I would argue that the terminology is far too loaded to be usefully attached to any further definitions. Where some have tried to reference certain types of behaviour specifically, for example referring to a harasser as a ‘misogynist troll’ (Bruculieri, 2016) I would argue this also overlooks multilayered harassment: in this case ignoring that the harassment in case was also racialized.

Describing harassment with such terminology also implies that the content of the harassment is broadly similar: it places violent threats of rape with racist imagery and harassment for political views, rather than highlighting the specificities and intersections of each. Unsurprisingly, reporting on harassment directed at non-white people is often over-simplified and referred to as “racist”, whilst overlooking the gendered and other elements. In the Australian context, convictions of online abuse have all been for abuse directed towards women, and in several cases some of the most extreme abuse has been directed towards non-white women. In September 2015 a 38-year-old woman was convicted for the online abuse sent to Mariam Veiszadeh, who is an Australian lawyer and Islamophobia activist, and a Muslim woman (Olding, 2016 [A]). The harasser sent Veiszadeh a Facebook message threatening to kill her and her family (*ibid*). In July of this year, a 64-year-old man

was charged for posting an abusive racist and sexist comment (below) on former Aboriginal senator and previous prominent athlete Nova Peris' Facebook page (ABC News, 2016).

Many women of colour have written about their experience of receiving harassment that is both gendered and racialized, with specifically racist threats (see Starr, 2014). More specifically, some have written about the way that white women's experiences online seem to matter more than the experiences of non-white women online, just as they do *offline*. In 2013 Mikki Kendall started the hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen after several white feminists repeatedly ignored and passively contributed to the online harassment of black feminists<sup>57</sup> (Loza, 2014, page unavailable). Other white feminists have also been criticized for highlighting and being supportive of online abuse of white women, but then remaining silent on the issue of online harassment of non-white women (Baker-Whitelaw, 2013). Related to this is the ways in which racism is used thoughtlessly in *response* to harassment based on gender. The fact that, for example, racism is sometimes included in tweets sent to defend someone being attacked in a sexist fashion, highlights bigger problems with abusive discourse online.

### *Overlooking broader trends in online behaviour*

There is evidence to support that there may be something specific about the online realm that provides a climate for encouraging abusive behaviour, particularly the behaviour of people who undertake severe sustained harassment or trolling. Suler (2004) notes that some users tell themselves that their behaviours online “‘aren’t me at all” (2004: 322). The man arrested for the harassment of Caroline Criado-Perez admitted his tweets were “terrible” and said that “it (was) not who I am” (Smith, 2015). Similarly, when blogger Lindy West confronted the man who masqueraded as her deceased father, she found him both remorseful, and ‘shockingly self-aware’ (West, 2015). Her harasser told her ‘I don’t know why or even when I started trolling you. It wasn’t because of your stance on rape jokes. I don’t find them funny either’ (*ibid*). As Suler notes (2004: 322), in online interactions people ‘don’t have to worry about how others look or sound in response to what they say. Seeing a frown, a shaking head, a sigh, a bored expression, and many other subtle and not so subtle signs of disapproval or indifference can inhibit what people are willing to express’. Some studies have been undertaken that indicate that levels of ‘uninhibited verbal behaviour’ online (Joinson, 2011: 79) and show that hostility and aggression occur at much higher rates in discussions using text than discussions face to face (Joinson, 2011: 80).

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<sup>57</sup> By white male feminist Hugo Schwyzer

Goffman (1956) noted that the physical presence of others is a key component in influencing personal behaviour, and moderating the appropriateness of that behaviour, and claimed that people perform their identity dependent on social settings and social “rules”. Individuals give out and receive clues from others’ behaviour and presentation of self, and have perceptions of what is true and what to expect based on prior interactions (Goffman 1956). Biber *et al* (2002: 33) note the way that the online realm is often perceived as a place where ‘traditional rules of behaviour do not seem to apply’. Some psychologists have referred to this as ‘online disinhibition effect’ (Dean, 2010), by which ‘people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn’t ordinarily say and do in the face-to-face world’ (Suler, 2004: 321). Following on from this, scholar Alice Marwick writes of the ‘imagined audience’ online, arguing that ‘audience changes in networked environments’ and that ‘participants have a sense of audience in every (online) mediated conversation’ (2010: 2). In addition to this, research suggests that the antisocial usage of the Internet correlates with high Internet use (Andreassen *et al* in Buckles *et al*, 2014: 1), which could suggest there is an element of desensitization occurring. As I found in my research, being online also seems to influence peoples’ ability to rationally respond, or to recognise when their response also becomes harassment, sometimes even in the theme of the harassment they’re responding to (i.e. sexism in response to sexist harassers).

Amanda Braithwaite (2014:75), reflecting on anti feminist and misogynist themes within online gaming, states ‘We can better understand the roles that digital communities and activities play in the politics of the everyday when we acknowledge that these communities and activities are the everyday’. Whilst I agree that online communication is an extension of *offline* trends, I think there is more to behaviour online than mere amplification of what occurs *offline*. From the research undertaken, I think the way online status is gained is through the recognition of others in a manner different to *offline*. This is not merely a reaction to women being online, or to feminism, this is a learnt behaviour of young boys who understand that the more violent and shocking your comments are the more likely it is to be noticed by a) your peers, b) someone of a high profile, or c) your hero. What’s different about online is that users believe their heroes are within reach online, and in actuality they often are, which is different to how things used to be prior to the Internet.

Understanding broad trends of online behaviour, such as the desire to be “noticed” and hero worship, is important in understanding the way that being online impacts communication, which is important in identifying what elements might be fuelling certain abusive tendencies. Understanding these things, in turn, will assist in better targeting interventions. I will now turn to discussing the strategies commonly suggested for addressing and managing online harassment.

## Part 2: Common Strategies and Problems

In the second part of this chapter I will discuss the management strategies suggested for dealing with online harassment. With consideration of the fact that my findings show that violent and abusive content comes from a diversity of users, including a substantial portion under the age of 18, I will argue that current suggestions of response are based only on the assumptions I outlined in Part 1: that harassers are adult men who engage in anonymous trolling.

### *Ignore, Block, Report*

The strategies suggested in media discourse, online safety manuals, reports, or from public commentators for dealing with online harassment predominantly follow the same lines: ignore it, block the user, and report the harassment<sup>58</sup>. The targeted abuse occurring online is starting to be recognised as being a serious global issue, and many international bodies, companies and groups have released reports into the issues and suggestions for management strategies. In 2015 The British government launched a website to assist online users in dealing with online abuse (Gentleman, 2015), which advises users to 'report', 'complain' and 'campaign' (Galop.org.uk, no date). The Australian version of this is a website that only includes suggestions for women in dealing with cyberstalking (collect evidence and contact the police) or trolling<sup>59</sup> (eSafety Women, 2016). In the case of trolling, it is suggested that women 'ignore comments'<sup>60</sup>, 'block the troll', and 'report the troll' (*ibid*). Included is an extra piece of advice: 'It is unlikely you will ever win against a troll....publicly retaliating against them just fuels their need for attention' (*ibid*). The Daily Telegraph (2012), in their strategy to 'Stop the Trolls'<sup>61</sup> suggested that people 'report', 'record' and 'block', but also to ignore "trolls" because that is 'their worst nightmare' (*ibid*). Online virus software company Norton commissioned a study into the experiences of Australian women and included recommendations for how to deal with online harassment. These were to 'review your online presence' and check privacy levels, 'recognise the problem' and don't respond to the perpetrator, and 'report it to the relevant authorities', requesting for them to remove or block the abuse or harasser (in personal communication from Morar Consulting, 2016). Online activist group Heartmob provides a platform for users to get support if being harassed online. The process for users is to 'describe your harassment, create a help request, get support' (Heartmob, 2016). Another common

<sup>58</sup> The only strategy I came across that suggested further action beyond the 'ignore, block, report' mantra was in UNESCO's report 'Countering Hate Speech Online' (Gagliardon *et al.* 2015). The report included recommendations for broader strategies to deal with online harassment, which were sensitization, safeguards, and sanctions (Gagliardon *et al.*, 2015).

<sup>59</sup> defined as 'when a user anonymously abuses or harasses others online for "fun"' (eSafety Women, 2016)

<sup>60</sup> Encouraging users not to engage with harassers is colloquially referred to as "don't feed the trolls" (in Jane, 2014: 560), which means to not respond in case one provides harassers with more ammunition.

<sup>61</sup> By trolls I understand them to mean they are also referring to 'internet bullies' (The Daily Telegraph, 2012) and harassers more generally.

suggested strategy was to review your online presence, and to not reveal too much about oneself online, or change privacy settings. This is reinforced by law enforcement. Jane notes that "It was suggested by police that women stop using social networking sites (such as Facebook) for a period of time, or even that they 'change their profile picture to "something less attractive"' (in Olding [A], 2016). One lecturer in Psychology said, "Once people start to put how depressed they are or how ugly they feel online, then that will attract the trolls" (Sharman in Coghill *et al.*, 2016).

There are several problems with ignore/report/block approaches, one being that many are impractical and another being that they don't necessarily work. Some of those who have been attacked online disagree with the idea that ignoring harassment makes it stop. As prominent feminist writer Feministia Jones (2016) wrote, suggestions for women to ignore it 'is much easier said by those who don't regularly experience abuse'. Many of those on the receiving end of harassment have found this strategy to be, as Jane puts it 'resoundingly ineffective' (2014 [A]: 560). Online writer Lindy West, who has been repeatedly harassed online, argues that, instead of ignoring trolls, we should 'feed them until they explode' (2015). West writes:

*As soon as we acknowledge them, they win. But if we never acknowledge them, they also win, plus discourse shuts down...So what are we going to do? Well... I know what I'm going to do. Whatever I fucking feel like doing. I'm sick of being told that I'm navigating my own abuse wrong.*

*(West, 2015)*

The "ignore it" argument, aside from stopping the conversation and letting harassers "win", is also based on an understanding of the online world as being separate to the *offline* world. Ellison (in Marwick, 2013 [B]: page unavailable) shows that actually the online is used often as a communication tool with people we know in the *offline* world, while Marwick (*ibid.*) articulates that, with smartphones, being online is a normal part of life not separate to *offline* lives. Secondly, *offline* and online, this approach requires the harassed to remain calm, not speak out, and ultimately relinquish control over the situation. These are all factors that ultimately reinforce the idea that these incidents are the exception to the rule, and not the norm. Online, just as *offline*, bullying and harassment of women is not an exception to an otherwise peaceful world. Bullying and harassment of women are a symptom of a much larger problem. Asking women (or anyone harassed online) to "ignore it" with the expectation that it will "go away" is reinforcing the idea that these are isolated anomalies.

Suggestions to report the harassment implies that websites and *offline* law enforcement are both equipped to deal with online harassment and that they also take it seriously. Yet this suggestion is not backed up with actual response (Sweeney, 2014). An Australian police commissioner said that those who experience abuse online "can and should expect the complaint to be taken seriously" (Worboys in Olding, 2016 [A]). Similarly, in the USA, a spokesperson for the FBI has said that victims of online harassment should contact police or the FBI themselves. In general, only those who repeatedly harass are charged (for example in the case of Caroline Criado Perez) or whose harassment gains a lot of public attention (for example in the case of Nova Peris). For others, reporting harassment can even be ridiculed (in Olding [A], 2016). In addition to this, reporting harassment to authorities or site managers can involve having to sort through abuse in order to provide evidence, after which it is unlikely to be acted upon by police (Hess, 2014). For example, I could not find any records of anyone being charged with any harassment relating to either Anita Sarkeesian or Coralie Alison, although it is reported that the FBI were investigating some threats sent to Sarkeesian in 2014 (Crecente, 2014). In an upcoming study by scholar Emma Jane into the victims of online harassment, it was found that none of the 50 women who were interviewed were satisfied with the response from police when they reported their abuse (Jane in Olding, 2016 [A]). This is reflective of a global issue, with the United Nations Broadband Commission finding that law enforcement globally was failing to act on cyber violence against women and girls, with 'only 26 percent of law enforcement agencies in the 86 countries surveyed (were) taking appropriate action' (UN Women, 2015).

These commonly wheeled out suggestions are not only simplistic and broad, but they also frame online harassment in a way mirrors *offline* harassment of and violence against women. For example, suggesting that women change their privacy settings, change what photos they share of themselves, and reducing their online presence is not only impractical for women that use the Internet for work, or to share their writing and ideas but, moreover, this is expecting women to change the way *they* behave online. As Ford articulated, "...advice (is) often given... particularly to young girls about what not to do online to "prevent" bad things happening to them", rather than addressing the root of the problem. This is a familiar line of suggestion given to women and girls about how to "avoid" being attacked *offline*.

In the instances where online harassers of women *have* being charged, familiar lines of defence have been used that also mirror that of *offline* defence of men who abuse women. Some arguments made in court and by harassers themselves are; that the harasser didn't understand the technology (The Guardian, 2014); that the harassment was not a reflection of their personality (Smith, 2015); that the

harasser was unhappy with themselves (in West, 2015); or that alcohol was involved (Kembrey, 2016). The severity of the harassment itself is also often downplayed. Recently, in defence of a 25-year-old man who sent 55 harassing messages to women online (including threats of rape), it was argued that the man had suffered from the publicity and media interest in the case (in Chalmers, 2015). The man's lawyer said 'the irony is he's become a far greater victim of the crime' (*ibid.*). The harasser in this case, and in others (see Olding, 2016 [B], and Olding, 2016 [A]), received a suspended sentence for his crime (Kembrey, 2016), avoiding jail time and any further repercussions.

Sierra highlights that a continued lack of repercussion for harassers online reinforces the idea that 'if no legal action happens then it wasn't actually "real" harassment' (2014). Perhaps because there is an expectation that online harassment won't be taken seriously, some women have begun to take action online themselves. A strategy that has grown in the last few years is the "naming and shaming" approach that has been adopted by several online commentators and recipients of abuse. An Australian campaign was started to name and shame harassers of women in response to abuse sent to Clementine Ford (McCafferty, 2015). The campaign, using the hashtag #EndViolenceAgainstWomen is used to highlight harassers online, by retweeting and reporting their abuse. When this occurs online-news articles like to celebrate such examples. This is reflected in various headlines and commentary about women's responses to "trolls" or harassment. When Alanah Pearce contacted the mothers of the boys who sent her rape threats, journalist for the Huffington Post online (Badahur, 2014) reported that 'Pearce's actions are admirable for bringing more attention to the issue of online harassment — and hopefully the boys who've threatened her will change the way they treat women on the Internet<sup>62</sup>'. After Aboriginal politician Nova Peris responded to her harasser on facebook, as I mentioned in chapter 1, an online news headline read: 'Nova Peris owns racist troll who posted shocking Facebook tirade' (Killalea, 2016). The article reported that 'instead of getting mad, Ms Peris got even' (*ibid.*). Headlines responding to Zendaya raising awareness of the rape threat on twitter read that she 'Masterfully shut down this Twitter troll's rape 'joke'' (Bruculieri, 2016), whilst another reported 'Zendaya blasts Twitter troll who promoted rape' (Cutler, 2016).

It is important to recognise the problem with celebrating and endorsing "naming and shaming". Reports of women "naming and shaming" tend to frame such actions as being 'admirable' (Badahur, 2014) and as exercising restraint (Killalea, 2016). One online journalist went so far as to celebrate Zendaya's responses to trolls as being exercised with 'grace and style' (St Jean, 2016). This discourse

not only suggests to women that naming and shaming works<sup>63</sup>, but also that women can respond to harassment without getting angry. Moreover, expecting and supporting women to name and shame takes the responsibility away from the harassers, the website managers, and law enforcement. Also, Jane argues (2016: 7) “‘calling out’ attackers on a case-by-case basis is unlikely to solve the larger e-bile problem’. In saying this, naming and shaming does raise awareness, and has had offline repercussions where other tactics have not. A man was fired from his work, for example, after being named and shamed online for harassing feminist online writer Clementine Ford. Ford contacted the man’s work place, which she was able to find in his Facebook profile, and notified them of his behaviour. The workplace responded immediately, firing him from his position there. This kind of response, and the speed with which it occurred, is a unique feature of naming and shaming. Ford recognises it is not an ideal tactic but says that little else works. “The reason why I (name and shame)”, she said “is that I don’t really see any appropriate mechanisms, particularly on Facebook, to really deal with these kinds of things” (in Levy, 2015).

Many feel it is the responsibility for websites to implement better methods for filtering and responding to harassment. SNSs have repeatedly come under fire for failing to take certain online harassment seriously. Discussions around how to deal with online harassment on SNS’s continually return to the defence of free speech (Dougherty & Isaac: 2016). Recently, in May of this year, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Microsoft signed the European Union’s code of conduct to tackle online hate speech (Hern, 2016). The initiatives proposed require the SNSs to increase their filters for profanities, and better their systems for users to report abuse. Yet even with increased strategies for blocking and filtering online abuse, the sheer volume of abuse remains a problem. There are 310 million users on Twitter per month (Statt, 2016) and the site only introduced a “report tweet” function in 2013 after a campaign from women being continually harassed (Elks, 2013). This function has been since updated, most recently in April 2016, yet it is unclear whether this will fix ongoing problems of slow processing times and often failure to act at all (Alexander, 2016). According to a spokesperson for Facebook, ‘more than 1 million complaints each week from users who believe content on the site violates its community standard’ (Starr, 2014). This means that assessing individual reports of harassment will always be a slow process, and that many not be dealt with. Reporting the behaviour doesn’t mean it will be removed, or the user blocked and, even if user accounts are suspended this rarely happens immediately, and of course does not necessarily reduce the harassment. Moreover, reporting harassers means the responsibility remains with women who

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<sup>63</sup> In the case of Zendaya the person who sent the harassment was thrilled at the attention of being “named and shamed”. In addition to this, while naming and shaming may stop individual harassers, it does not mean that other harassment will reduce or cease.



are harassed. Legal analyst Imani Gandy, herself consistently racially harassed online, expressed frustration at repeatedly reporting harassers without any lasting results. Gandy argued (in Starr, 2016) ‘why should I (have to) feel responsible? It’s not my responsibility; it’s Twitter’s’.

## Future Directions

Broadly, within the reports and strategies I read, there was a lack of discussion about potential points to begin tackling the cause of the problem, with most focusing on how to deal with harassment *after* it occurs. Scholar Emma Jane said recently, that it is also important to better understand the reasons *why* people harass (Jane in Olding, 2016 [A]). In addition to this, feminist writer Mikki Kendall has said that ‘what we’re not doing is talking about actual solutions’ (Kendall 2015).

It is important to think about diversifying strategies of intervention to address demographics that fall outside of the assumed “adult male troll” category. Most strategies are focused on response, which includes pushing for legal interventions. Yet, as I have shown, there are problems of harassment from within particular demographic groups for which these kind of strategies are completely useless. In the case of harassers who are under 18, for example, it is imperative strategies are instead focused on, or at least being paired with, *offline* education programs and awareness raising initiatives that address (for example) young boys and misogynist communication with women. Within the reports and strategies I read, I only found one that noted diversity of online harassers and suggested that they might be young (eSafety Women, 2016)<sup>64</sup>. Except in the case of cyberbullying and online safety (focused on how young people protect themselves from others), there is no education levelled at young people and school children about how *their* behaviour might be abusive. Clementine Ford, speaking in a recent panel on Cybersexism, said:

*‘it astonishes me...that we don’t have more educational structures that deal with misogyny and that address the issue of misogyny with school children... ..there certainly doesn’t seem to be any kind of curriculum based approach to how misogyny intersects with online space’*

*(Ford in Sydney Opera House Talks & Ideas, 2015)*

<sup>64</sup> On the Australian Government’s eSafety website, which fails to offer much useful information or advice, there was a definition of trolling that noted diversity, stating: ‘trolls are often younger people who are not yet mature enough to understand the harm they are doing’ (eSafety Women, 2016).

As well as education, more innovative strategies could also be developed. To do this requires consideration of other internet behaviours such as the high level of abusive rhetoric generally, the influence of hero worship, and the impact of that “being online” has on communication patterns. Also overlooked is the consideration of growing up in an Internet culture and the ways in which high exposure Internet discourse and online communication can influence young people’s behaviour. Strategies could, for example, be developed for addressing specific online communities, to raise awareness of the impact of online harassment in a context that is accessible and relatable. Any strategy should also take into consideration the high likelihood that many of those who are harassing online are being harassed themselves, or are involved in “trash talk” generally.

Response should not stem from harassment, but rather awareness should be being built into other parts of the online (and *offline*) world, such as gaming, online support groups, or online fan clubs. There is also a need for strategies that recognise that sometimes the cause and impetus for harassment can come from being isolated or within a minority, which can make online users more open to both being harassed and harassing others. As I have shown in my research in chapter 3, abusive dialogue is common on the Internet generally: amongst users who know each other, to businesses and companies, even from within in communities that would be assumed to know better. Strategies need to recognise the wider culture of online abuse whilst addressing specific areas such as harassment of women online.

As well, Instead of insisting on definitions to describe specific harassment against women, and instead of researching harassment by separating categories, discussions and research need to recognise the intersectionality of content, but also of the way that doing so makes invisible certain women. I am suggesting that the content of specific harassment and the bigger problem it relates to should be both articulated and included in broader discussions. Whilst this does not adding a catchy term to the discourse, analysing discussing specific content and experiences instead gives validity and visibility to the victims, acknowledges the multi-layered nature of abuse, and gives a focal point for then targeting strategies for intervention.

In summarising, I will present a series of points that I believe should both be considered, that should and inform, future strategies for addressing online harassment. These are:

- Continue research into, and acknowledgment of, the diversity of harassers, in order to identify specific groups towards which specific strategies/education could be targeted
- Discuss harassment specifically and intersectionality to avoid the homogenisation and simplification of kinds of harassment

- Consider broader patterns of language and behaviour online in order to better understand the specificities of the online realm that may be influencing the level and severity of harassment
- Refrain from recreating the problematic discourse of *offline* harassment of (and violence against) women by developing strategies that don't place responsibility on women<sup>65</sup> to manage their own harassment
- Focus strategies on prevention rather than response to increase the chance of

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the broad and often incorrect assumptions made about harassers and acts of harassment online, including discourse that continually frames harassers as adult men, and as trolls. I have discussed that these assumptions are often wrong or misplaced, that they simplify the dialogue about harassment, and I have shown that my findings actually indicate a greater diversity of harassers, and of harassing behaviour online. I have argued that certain assumptions are and problematic, because they “other” harassers, and homogenise harassment. I have also discussed my findings of abusive behaviour online more generally, and stressed the need for more consideration of these in strategies for managing online harassment. I have provided an overview of some strategies for dealing with online harassment arguing that, because they are based on the aforementioned assumptions they therefore fail to address diversity of harassers and their targets, fail to suggest tangible strategies, and also recreate the discourse of *offline* violence against women. I have shown that approaches to dealing with online harassment don't consider broader problems with misogyny and racism within particular demographic groups, and overlook the importance and potential of combined online-*offline* strategies. So too are strategies overlooking the way that broader patterns of behaviour online may be influencing the rate and severity of harassment. Finally, I provided a series of points that I consider to be important for creating more targeted and innovative strategies for addressing online harassment.

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<sup>65</sup> Or others who may be attacked

# Conclusion

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This thesis was an investigation into common assumptions made about online harassment, in an attempt to shed light on the kinds of people who harass, and the kinds of behaviours that seem to be specific to communicating on the internet. In doing so, I aimed to identify that certain assumptions were either incorrect or too broad, and show that they contribute to a discourse that makes interventions addressing online harassment difficult. This research project was informed by a feminist methodology based on intersectionality, making the invisible visible whilst remaining anonymous as a researcher to be able to do unobtrusive research, keep myself safe from harassment and to ensure that valuable data was not deleted. Whilst acknowledging that this is an ethical “grey area” – since I took advantage of the fact that most people I was investigating would not have assumed I was looking for them – this kind of “lurking” research presents researchers with publically recorded examples of all kinds of discourse, behaviour and those behind it. My research was an opportunity to view language patterns online, and also gain insight into what may be influencing certain behavioural trends. For feminist researchers, online or not, the information available on the internet could allow insight into the extent of misogynist and/or racist language in a way that has not previously been so publicly accessible and so quickly (in real time) generated.

Three weeks before submitting this thesis, Ghostbusters’ actor Leslie Jones considered removing her online presence due to sustained racist and sexist harassment. Two weeks ago online feminist and author Jessica Valenti *did* quit social media after receiving rape threats directed towards her five year old daughter (Triple J Hack, 2016). Online harassment of women is undoubtedly a regularly occurring, serious issue that is currently not being adequately addressed. As I have discussed in this thesis, failure to act occurs in part because of a continued framing of harassment and harassers in ways that fail to break down and investigate the behaviour. By continuing to use terminology like “(gender)trolling” the problem is framed as one that is perpetrated by “strangers”, something that is unique about being online, and that is directed at and experienced by all women homogenously. It is imperative that future research into online harassment of women includes discussions of the fact that, as with *offline* harassment and violence against women, the content and impact of harassment is varied according to race, gender identity, class, sexuality and so on. Furthermore, broad assumptions about harassers mean targeted strategies currently do not exist. Online harassment is framed as some kind of Internet “virus”, rather than a reflection of broader age-old discriminations. Perpetrators of online harassment are not strange men living in basements, it is being perpetrated by everyone, the same way that *offline* abuse is. What is different is that being online makes it

possible for everyone, including young people, to see millions of unfiltered examples of all the ways one can harass another. It is necessary that we move away from discussing this issue as though it is an online “virus”, and towards understanding it as a symptom of *offline* discriminations. Framing it as such, it becomes possible to think of potential inroads to addressing this issue in more innovative and targeted ways.

The point of this research is not to suggest that gendered harassment of women online is *predominantly* perpetrated by boys and young men under 25. Nor is it to suggest that the abuse that does come from these groups of people is less serious when they *are* young. The main point that should be drawn from this is that there is diversity amongst harassers, and that this fact is being overlooked in discussions of online abuse across all platforms. I would argue, however, that my findings *are* an impetus for *offline* strategies targeted towards young (school aged) people. Much harassment seems to be perpetrated by young people who are swept up in the desire to be noticed, who may lack awareness of what their content does to women, and who may just be following the example of their heroes.

As I have shown, recognising online behavioural and language trends is important to then create strategies that consider, for example, that many harassers are also being harassed, or at the very least witnessing constant abusive rhetoric. This includes the acknowledgement that there *are* specificities about the online realm, and about online communication, that contribute to a culture of abuse online. The Internet itself is not the problem, but it is facilitating an environment that fuels harassing behaviour. Its global and unbounded nature means that everyone is able to see and learn behaviour that users can become desensitized to, and which some then reapply in horrifically violent and threatening ways. The solution is not heavy moderation of content, as many online users rely on anonymity to be able to share their work and fight oppressions. Rather, strategies need to avoid separating online and *offline*, and recognise that harassment is done not only by faceless adults and full time trolls, but often by young people and the kind of people we may live or work with. Much as sexual violence is mostly perpetrated by people we know, so too is online harassment occurring from the “common” person more so than a type of person we would be unlikely to cross paths with. Online solutions cannot be separate to *offline* behaviour, as the two are closely linked, nor can they be effective without simultaneous *offline* strategies. It is imperative to begin to think about online harassment in ways that avoid assumptions, consider intersectional content and impacts, and acknowledge broader patterns of behaviour online. By doing so it becomes possible to view online harassment as something that can be intervened upon in strategic and innovative ways, rather than considering it as being an insurmountable problem.

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