

Women’s Responses to Online Harassment

KALYANI CHADHA
LINDA STEINER
JESSICA VITAK
University of Maryland, USA

ZAHRA ASHKTORAB
IBM Research, USA

Given the ubiquity of social media platforms, the online harassment of women is deservedly drawing significant attention from the media, academics, and the platforms themselves. This study uses data from in-depth interviews with 23 women university students, who were harassed/cyberbullied, to explore how young women respond to negative experiences online. Findings suggest women deploy various defensive strategies while navigating online spaces, from normalizing harassment—and taking it for granted—to self-censorship and withdrawal. Interpreting these responses through a feminist lens clarifies the implications for women’s willingness and ability to participate in public spaces and highlights an increased urgency for social media platforms to address and mitigate harassment.

Keywords: online harassment, misogyny, social media, feminism, self-censorship

Social and mobile media have reshaped the communication landscape, enabling easy, frictionless sharing of text, images, and videos to large, diverse audiences (Schrock, 2015). Yet even as these platforms have enabled the creation of new public spaces, their features and affordances have facilitated new forms of harassment (Citron, 2014; Jane, 2018). Indeed, national surveys demonstrate that harassment continues to be a significant problem within digital spaces. But although surveys indicate that both men and women in the United States face various types of harassment online, women—and especially young women—are disproportionately targeted by sexualized forms of abuse, including online stalking and harassment (Duggan, 2017; Smith & Duggan, 2017). Compared with similarly aged men, women ages 18 to 29 years are more than twice as likely to report being sexually harassed online and are more vulnerable to physical threats and sustained harassment. Such harassment is especially pervasive for women who “embody additional marginalized identities” (Hackworth, 2018, p. 52), such as those associated with race or sexuality. That is, the intersectionality identified by Crenshaw (1989, 1991)—when individuals suffer multiple types of

Kalyani Chadha: kchadha@umd.edu
Linda Steiner: lsteiner@umd.edu
Jessica Vitak: jvitak@umd.edu
Zahra Ashktorab: zashktorab@gmail.com
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marginalization arising from overlapping identities—operates in digital spaces, just as it does in the off-line world (Lenhart, Ybarra, Zickuhr, & Price-Feeney, 2016).

Unsurprisingly, more women than men report being concerned about cyberaggression and cyberhate (Lenhart et al., 2016). Recent research found that half of adult women say offensive content online is too often excused as insignificant, whereas 64% of men—and 73% of men ages 18 to 29 years—say that people take offensive content online too seriously (Duggan, 2017). Furthermore, 70% of women—and 83% of women ages 18 to 29 years—call online harassment a major problem, whereas 54% of men and 55% of young men take that position.

These categorizations, however, say little about how women define, experience, and respond to harassment. Feminist researchers urge attending to how social location and identity operate and close, “active listening” to interview subjects, letting them explain their experiences in their own words (DeVault & Gross, 2012). Endorsing this approach, we conducted in-depth interviews with women at a large public university who self-identified as having experienced a wide range of negative experiences online to investigate their responses to online harassment. The findings suggest that although the women identified various actions as “harassing” and sought to deal with these actions through a repertoire of defensive strategies, they simultaneously appeared to treat online harassment as a predictable—even inevitable—phenomenon that women cannot escape when using social media.

Theorizing the Effects of Online Harassment Through a Feminist Lens

Researchers studying the harassment of women online use multiple terms to describe related behaviors, including harassment, cyberstalking, gender trolling, and online misogyny. We use these terms interchangeably to refer to harms that render the Internet “a less equal, less safe or less inclusive space for women and girls” (Ging & Siapera, 2018, p. 516). We approach online harassment through a feminist lens. As a major feminist methodology textbook suggests, this entails challenging knowledge that excludes, putting the lives of women and other marginalized groups at the center of inquiry, adopting the position of both insider and outsider, and highlighting power (Hesse-Biber, 2012).

We thereby foreground women’s voices and concerns that dominant discourses tend to ignore or silence. As Vickery and Everbach (2018) point out, women are often accused of being “overly sensitive,” and their complaints about online harassment are frequently dismissed; online, the anonymity, the physical distance, and the fact that the attacks are not physical “lead to the misconceptions that women are merely overreacting” (p. 14). College students generally seem relatively privileged. Nonetheless, society should underestimate neither the “democratic costs” (Sobieraj, 2018) of restricting college women’s participation in the public arena nor the personal toll of online harassment, particularly at a time when they are developing a sense of themselves as independent thinkers.

We draw on 1970s feminist work on misogyny (e.g., Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*) and other feminist perspectives that locate online harassment “as firmly grounded in the material realities of women’s everyday experiences of sexism in patriarchal society” (Megarry, 2014, p. 49). Online harassment reflects the systemic sex discrimination and gendered power relations that characterize contemporary women’s

experiences. Digital technologies, and specifically social media, amplify attacks on gender-based and sexual minorities. But such attacks are rooted within the broader context of misogyny and racism (Jane; 2018; Vickery, 2018). As Mantilla (2015) suggests, although gender-based sexualized insults may be far more virulent, aggressive, and pervasive online, they arise from the same misogyny that fuels off-line harassment. Without denying the potential for hashtag feminism and for activists to exploit digital platforms for feminist purposes, we thus continue to challenge cyberutopian beliefs that ignore complex social and political issues of inequality in the context of digital publics.

This approach also highlights the negative economic and professional consequences of harassment for women. Citron (2010) details the serious costs and injuries incurred by women who, having been targeted by cybermobs, curtail their online activities, harming their sense of agency: "They lose advertising income generated from blogs and websites. They miss opportunities to advance their professional reputations through blogging. They cannot network effectively online if they assume pseudonyms to deflect the abuse" (p. 36). Citron (2014) notes that many women choose to self-censor online, and some withdraw from social networking sites altogether. Jane (2018) regards the ways that cyberhate disrupts and derails women's work lives as forms of "economic vandalism" (p. 576). For example, women online game players are significantly more likely to withdraw from gaming after experiencing sexual harassment than those who experienced more general forms of online harassment (Fox & Tang, 2017). This curtails both their enjoyment of play and their ability to benefit from the gaming economy.

Most scholarly and public attention to online harassment has tried to identify the adverse psychological effects of different types of harassment such as low self-esteem and lack of confidence (Duggan, 2017). The feminist perspective adopted here, however, underlines how normative structures and practices aimed at limiting women's participation in public spaces (Davidoff, 2003) are simultaneously reproduced online. Indeed, evidence already exists that online harassment constrains women's expression. Veletsianos, Houlden, Hodson, and Gosse (2018) found that 41% of women ages 15 to 29 years self-censored. To avoid online harassment and trolls, women scholars self-censor and monitor their behavior (Carter Olson & LaPoe, 2018). Women journalists who have been harassed online consciously alter the way they interact with audiences; some simply refuse to engage on social media (Masullo Chen et al., 2018). Amnesty International's (2019) interviews with numerous women who use Twitter—including politicians, journalists, activists, bloggers and game developers—found that threats of violence and abuse engendered a chilling effect, driving them to censor themselves, limit their interactions online, and/or leave Twitter altogether.

In other words, despite the celebratory discourse surrounding the Internet's potential to empower marginalized groups, women online continue to be negatively affected by the same power asymmetries that characterize the off-line world. In particular, younger women experience online harassment in many forms. Our approach challenges both U.S.-based notions of free speech that protect virulently and explicitly misogynist, racist, and homophobic content occurring on major social media platforms, and academic approaches to digital rights, which typically emphasize speakers' rights to express themselves without government or institutional censorship. Instead, we focus on whether online attacks constrain the ability of ordinary women to participate in everyday online public spaces, effectively denying their speech rights.

Surprisingly, few studies have examined online harassment experiences among college-age women, the population most vulnerable to online sexual or sexualized harassment. Finn's (2004) survey of 339 university students found that approximately 10% to 15% of women reported receiving repeated threatening, insulting, or harassing e-mail or IM messages from strangers, acquaintances, and/or significant others; half received unwanted pornography. A replication study at a different university found 43.3% of women saying they had been harassed (Lindsay & Krysik, 2012). But these surveys of college students are outdated. They do not reflect the recent explosion of mobile and social media and still-changing knowledge or awareness of problems online, including difficulties managing privacy. Other studies are limited either to a single platform, a subset of harassment, or to descriptive statistics about prevalence. Moreover, few researchers asked harassment targets what solutions they would propose, if any.

Therefore, building on our survey data exploring the impact of harassment on women's sense of well-being (Vitak, Chadha, Steiner, & Ashktorab, 2017), this study uses in-depth interviews to further unpack the online experiences of "average" college-age women when navigating social technologies by exploring the following questions:

RQ1: How do young women define online harassment?

RQ2: Where do young women see or experience sexist, racist, misogynistic, and harassing behaviors?

RQ3: How do young women respond to seeing or personally experiencing online harassment?

RQ4: To what extent do young women think online harassment can be prevented, avoided, or punished?

Methodology

The research reported here extends a project that began with an online survey of undergraduate and graduate women at a large (37,000+ students, 25% from underrepresented populations) U.S. public university during the 2015–16 academic year. We e-mailed a random sample of 4,000 women about our research. Survey participants were invited to provide an e-mail address if they wanted to participate in a follow-up interview. Within two weeks, we received more than 600 survey responses; approximately 250 indicated willingness to be considered for an interview.

To narrow this pool of potential interviewees, we used criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) to identify women who represented maximum diversity along two primary criteria. First, we used 11 survey items to generate an index that captured women's frequency and severity of harassment experiences (e.g., having private content shared publicly, being called offensive names). Separately, we asked survey participants, "Have you ever been harassed before through text messages, social media, e-mail, or related technologies?" Second, we employed a 12-item scale to measure how frequently women engaged in various defensive or "coping" strategies, (e.g., deleting content, defriending and blocking users). On the spreadsheet of all interested participants, we entered values for the harassment index, whether they thought they had been harassed, and their coping score. We prioritized women who scored very high on both scales as well as

those who gave seemingly contradictory responses (e.g., reported many experiences of the 11 items, yet said they had not experienced harassment).

The interview protocol was pilot tested and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. Questions include, "What types of online actions/behaviors do you think constitute harassment?"; "Can you share your own experiences with any of the harassing actions/behaviors that you mentioned? Can you give us a sense of the extent to which you are bothered by it?"; and "Have you ever felt that you are targeted because you are in a field/professional situation where you are in a minority?" Thirty women were invited in early 2017, based on the criteria above; 23 completed in-person interviews ranging from 40–60 minutes and received a \$15 gift card for participating. After immediately reviewing the data, we determined we had reached saturation and did not need additional interviews.¹ Interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 24 years, and 20 were undergraduates. Eleven women self-identified as White, four as multiracial, six as Asian, and two as Black and Latina, respectively (see the Appendix for a summary).

A paid professional transcribed the interview audiotapes. After multiple close readings, the transcripts were imported into MAXQDA, a qualitative software program that allows for systematic annotation during the coding process and easy search/retrieval of data. The two first authors began an extensive and highly iterative process of open coding whereby they inductively tagged data in the transcripts. They analyzed how participants talked about various aspects of online harassment during the interviews, comparing and making notes about their responses as well as the language used by them (Patton, 2002). This open coding suggested several subcodes. These preliminary MAXQDA subcodes were reexamined for common patterns and relationships and then regrouped in terms of themes that emerged from participants' responses. Eventually, four major themes emerged that related back to our research questions and formed the basis of our analysis. The other two authors independently checked the transcripts and analyses. Each instance of conflicting analyses was resolved through discussion.

Findings

What Young Women Consider Harassment

In defining what they considered as "harassment" in digital spaces, our respondents referenced several discrete actions and behaviors, including unsolicited contact from strangers who requested addresses, personal information, and photographs. For instance, a graduate student from India described receiving "random" messages from people who had apparently "checked [her] out" on Facebook. Similarly, a journalism major recalled getting "weird" Facebook messages from strangers as well as dating app messages from "guys who came off as aggressive."

Several women also described "harassing" online interactions with friends and acquaintances, including hostile messages and social media posts that attacked them personally. An international master's student recalled that "after things didn't work out," a man (a friend) began posting "disturbing" cartoons of

¹ This is justified by Baker and Edwards' (n.d.) detailed discussion of the question, "How many interviews is enough?"

her. Other examples of actions our respondents defined as “harassing” included posts of “unflattering” photographs or personal information without their consent, and “targeting” them via “negative comments” on a picture or post. One Asian American communications major said whenever she discussed video games online, men gamers “cussed [her] out” and claimed she did not know what she was talking about. This is consistent with findings (Consalvo, 2012) that women gamers are often targeted on the basis of gender.

Other actions respondents frequently mentioned as “harassing” included persistent requests for sexually explicit content such as nude images. Many of our participants also mentioned receiving unsolicited pictures and videos they deemed “nasty” and “ugly.” A biology major mentioned that after she and a friend casually chatted with a man on Skype, he began to message them “with really explicit, disgusting stuff,” and a plant sciences major described getting unwanted videos from a man showing him ejaculating. Indeed, several women mentioned that men sent them images of their genitalia—what one philosophy major termed “the dick pic thing”—and the women, like respondents in other studies (see Salter, 2016), did not know how to respond. As an African American sophomore put it, “I don’t know why guys think we want their ‘man pictures.’”

A few women described being targeted by men with whom they were acquainted or had previously dated, in ways consistent with literature on revenge porn (e.g., Citron, 2014). A graduate telecommunications student, for example, detailed how a former colleague who had fixed her laptop hacked into her e-mail and social media accounts and spied on her; he later “flipped” when he found her communicating with her ex-boyfriend. Women also described ex-partners who sought to “shame” them online. When an ex-boyfriend learned that one respondent was dating someone new, in a variant of revenge porn tactics, he tweeted the song lyric “ask her how my dick tastes.” Although he did not use her name, she was certain her friends knew he was referring to her:

I felt naked . . . whatever we did, that was a private thing that happened between us a year before, and so to have that displayed to everyone, and to display it in a way that was supposed to kind of make the new guy that I was with feel bad or be grossed out by me. . . . I was definitely freaking out when this was happening.

Men had not perpetrated all of the harassment. Indeed, many interviewees described or alluded to being harassed by women, particularly during their middle or high school years. A speech pathology student recalled a friend who posted a Facebook picture of her at a bar; the young woman refused to take it down despite repeated requests. Several others recalled getting hostile messages from women who attacked them on behalf of their friends or due to interpersonal conflict such as “fighting over the same boy,” as an Asian American woman from New Jersey ruefully recalled. In a more serious incident, a Middle Eastern woman detailed how her ex-fiancé’s mother—who disapproved of the relationship—threatened to publicize topless pictures that the student had sent her then fiancé:

She told me that she would post my topless pictures online and befriend everyone that I know, like school, work, everything . . . and just tag them with my full name, and my phone number and my address . . . so if anyone ever Googled me that would be the first thing they find.

The woman said that she eventually stopped the mother by sending her a cease and desist letter and obtaining a restraining order; nevertheless, the episode had terrified her, leaving her a "complete and total wreck." That said, interviewees did not generally describe years-ago harassment by women as terrifying.

Several interviewees described harassment more broadly in terms of not leaving someone alone. The plant sciences student described "an element of not stopping." Such interactions, the soil science junior explained, were not necessarily "sexually related," but also encompassed situations where "somebody is repeatedly messaging you or sending you things that are unwanted and they know that you don't want to be talking to them." Using almost identical language, multiple women referred to harassment in terms of "trying to constantly pursue or communicate with a person who feels uncomfortable talking to you," "knowing someone was uncomfortable with something and then doing it," "not listening to someone when they say they do not want you to contact them," doing something that bothers someone "and you keep doing the thing that bothers them," or as "persistent unwanted attention." Thus, most of our respondents defined online harassment in terms of continuous or ongoing actions. Women described harassment by men as sexualized or based on sex; none mentioned being sexually harassed by women.

Platforms and Issues Where Harassment Occurs

Few participants offered specifics when asked about the contexts where sexist actions or attacks online seemed most likely to occur. However, a handful of women underscored that political or feminist comments typically resulted in harassment. For example, a journalism major recalled how a close friend who was "very liberal got a lot of online flack" when she posted about abortion. The same woman also said that when women talked about other "politically controversial problems . . . and shared their opinion about taxes or something, people made remarks such as 'get back in the kitchen.'" Another woman—who has lived abroad and intends a career in diplomacy—observed that when women posted something political, they "tended to get more rejected or get mean comments over their post, with people more likely to say things like 'Oh what would you understand? Go do your makeup. I didn't know you would care about these issues because I always see you shopping.'" Some women said they were reluctant to express "feminist" views on issues because of the perceived "stigma" associated with the term. Underscoring this point, an English major noted, "It's become mainstream to hate feminism." A junior who had been bullied as a child said she avoided "posting on certain forums that could come off as feminist because I know that I'm gonna get so much backlash."

Participants rarely brought up physical appearance as resulting in online harassment. Rather, a few women emphasized that the very fact of being a woman seemed to provoke harassment—an observation Citron's (2014) research confirmed. Relatedly, some participants said that, compared with men—who can "embrace anything" without being "made fun of or judged"—women operated in a far more judgmentally circumscribed, but broadly hostile environment online. Therefore, even posting a picture that someone else considered "revealing" could result in a woman being labeled a slut and attacked for posting the picture. As one of our interviewees put it, "The hate comes back to the woman . . . like, 'how dare she do this.'" Confirming Salter's (2016) findings, they asserted, even when men and women posted about similar experiences, the latter were more likely to be judged more harshly. As one woman put it, while men who posted about their sexual exploits received highly positive responses, women were more likely to receive pejorative comments.

Regarding the specific sites where women are most likely to experience harassment, individual participants identified various spaces ranging from widely used social media platforms and niche audience services to anonymous forums. Nevertheless, some consensus emerged. Unsurprisingly, the most widely referenced platforms included Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Several women alluded to the public nature of social media platforms as potentially contributing to harassment. A senior journalism major correctly said, "I don't think people harass via e-mail a lot, because I think people like to do it in a public space." Others implied that these platforms' affordances—including the visibility and persistence of content, as well as anonymity of users—make women more vulnerable. A business major pointed out that social media harassment had shifted from personal messaging to people posting publicly to women's time lines.

Some, however, suggested that dating sites and online fora such as Reddit posed the greatest online threats to women. The plant sciences major suggested that dating sites like Tinder promote harassment because "there's an expectation among a lot of the men that there will be some sort of sex involved and if that isn't present, then the harassment begins." Reiterating this point, the soil sciences major said,

Dating sites are the ultimate place to get harassed . . . 'cause you are posting all sorts of pictures and personal information. . . . Reddit, certain subreddits, are definitely full of people that will harass women.

An international student majoring in government likewise referred to subreddits (Marantz, 2018), especially revenge porn subreddits, as "places online that cater to, harbor, and facilitate the harassment and intimidation of women." Interestingly, only a few mentioned message boards like 4chan, which have been widely implicated in the harassment of women (Merlan, 2015).

Most women referred to harassment experiences using words such as "upset," "bothered," "disturbed," and "confused." And despite the prevalence of online harassment (Duggan, 2017; Lenhart et al., 2016), some interviewees expressed surprise at being targeted. One freshman said of a man who had been messaging her persistently, "I figured he would go away. But the videos were what really surprised me. I didn't expect him to go all out." Another freshman—who otherwise enjoyed using social media—described feeling hurt at being attacked by people she knew "because they were my friends. They're not supposed to be the ones judging me."

An international graduate student detailed how being stalked online by a former coworker made her feel "exposed": "It's a big thing when you find out that you have no privacy . . . it's something that scares you." A public health major similarly explained that she felt violated after an ex-boyfriend posted details about their relationship: "It felt like invasion of privacy, and it felt like . . . a betrayal-type thing." But even as many women articulated varying levels of distress and admitted the difficulty of remaining calm when "someone won't leave you alone or is saying horrible things about you," only one woman explicitly characterized her reaction to online harassment as "angry." A journalism student stated, "It's really easy to overreact or to reply in anger and let it spiral outa control really quickly." Overall, the level of anger—both personal and political—about online harassment appeared muted.

Women's Responses to Online Harassment

Paralleling the muted expressions of anger, the defensive measures women adopted also seemed aimed at avoiding confrontation. Many respondents described dealing with harassment by trying to "brush" or "shrug" it off and "keep going." This is not to say they regarded such harassment as unproblematic. Rather, the majority seemed disinclined to take on their harassers or report them. This stance would arguably seem to be reflected in the strategies that the women typically employed vis-à-vis behaviors that they considered harassing, notably ignoring the harassment.

When women did act, they primarily drew from a repertoire of defensive and self-monitoring responses such as avoiding posting images or comments likely to evoke negative responses. Several women mentioned being "careful" or "more mindful" about not posting "anything that's controversial" or that could provoke "arguments." Others said they did not post things that were "inappropriate," typically citing as examples "revealing" photographs. Many of our respondents reported that, along with friends and family members, they had also engaged in "impression management": They took down content that could draw criticism.

Some of these actions were undoubtedly prompted by worries about how future employers or family members might perceive the content. But women acknowledged that the reactions they (or others) actually received had prompted this kind of impression management. Indeed, several participants recounted cases of other women who removed photographs from their own Facebook pages after being called "attention sluts" or "attention whores" for posting pictures. Some participants also mentioned having noticed people removing posts about celebrities and political issues after drawing backlash. An Asian American undergraduate, for instance, recalled people posting long opinions on issues, saying, "Then it escalates where there's 50 comments and eventually the post is deleted just because the person feels that there is too much going on. . . . People get too worked up."

Beyond these more passive impression management strategies, multiple respondents recounted performing defensive actions such as blocking and deleting individuals who "bothered" them online or withdrawing unilaterally from platforms. An Asian graduate student described her reaction to a former coworker who hacked into her social media accounts and virtually stalked her: "I just vanished from everywhere. I got off Facebook. . . . I got off Instagram. I completely stopped my Snapchat." Another graduate student said that she was so "scared" that she refused to join social media. Moreover, some participants pointed out that the prospect of harassment led them and other women to actively avoid certain online spaces. A government major said fear of harassment makes women "more passive": "I know a lot of women still go on [the online meme site] 9GAG but less." She explained why she had deleted her own account: "I don't wanna get sucked into whatever weird void of hatefulness that it'll inevitably go into." Another woman said,

I've tried to stay away from pages on Facebook where I know there's a lot of men who, like, if I or any other woman was to comment with a disagreement to the prevailing opinion on a post, then we would be attacked. There are a lot of communities for young boys and men to circle jerk themselves and talk about how stupid women are.

Respondents acknowledged other chilling effects of online harassment, although they rarely treated these effects as structural or hinging on gender politics. For example, several said they avoided voicing their opinions during "contentious discussions online" or posting "things that would cause a fuss." A science major explained why feminism was on the list of topics she avoided: "While I totally would identify as a feminist, it's . . . difficult for me to . . . just say that, because I know that a lot of people have negative opinions regarding feminism." An Asian master's student detailed why she silenced herself online, after backlash against political opinions that she had expressed: "I wanted to post about the issue and give my comments, but I'm not gonna do that. . . . I'm not going to put myself through all of that again." Her stance was corroborated by a multiracial junior who—even as she acknowledged that both men and women were attacked online—insisted, "Women are a lot more conscious of what they say because they can't get away with as much."

Several women agreed both that online harassment leads to self-censorship and that women tend to ignore harassing behavior since they suspect that reacting is unlikely to help. A graduate student said she had not officially complained because she "did not want to take that additional trouble." A life sciences junior observed that women often feel that responding was "not worth it." Meanwhile a junior majoring in government said that although she had initially tried to "fight back" against harassers in her gamer community, she gave up because fighting "is not really productive." Only a handful of respondents said they had confronted their harassers directly or reported someone to social media platforms or the police.

Responsibility for Preventing or Punishing Online Harassment

A pervasive sense among our respondents seemed to be that harassment was "a common occurrence" and isn't "big enough" to justify going to the police. "It's just a part of normal life," an international graduate student said. Some women said although they discussed receiving lewd messages/images with friends, they tended to joke about it and then move on. One undergraduate suggested that younger people—possibly because they are so accustomed to experiencing or witnessing harassment online—tended to be "more lenient," such that even when something was unacceptable, they were more inclined to tolerate it and "let stuff slide or say that it's not a big deal and let it pass."

In fact, one student said that people seemed to view harassment as inevitable on certain platforms, especially dating apps. She added, "It's like, oh, well, you're on Tinder. What did you expect? Of course, he's gonna send you dick pics. If you're gonna have Tinder, you'd better accept it." Likewise, the soil science major said she not only expected "random messages from strangers on Facebook," but also "weird, explicit messages on OkCupid and Tinder." Having acknowledged that women's accounts received negative comments, another interviewee simultaneously wondered why women ever established these accounts.

Others more broadly described the Internet as a place where harassment is not only likely, but "the new normal." Agreeing that online harassment was "messed up," one woman added that, to her, it was "how the Internet is supposed to be." A philosophy major said, "I just think going into the Internet, we should understand that anything is gonna happen and anything will happen."

Thus, while many interviewees expressed distress at experiencing or witnessing harassment, they also seemed resigned to it. Reflecting this general stance, one woman commented that she was "initially offended" when men sent her unsolicited messages and nude photographs. Having eventually "gotten used to it," she added,

It's a problem, obviously, but what do you do about it? I used to think I really need to fix this, and this can't be going on, but there's so many people in this world, who all do you stop. . . . You want it to stop and not let it happen to you, but then you get used to it.

Likewise, an avid gamer said that regardless of efforts to stem online abuse, someone would always say, "I'm just gonna do whatever I want and say whatever I want on the Internet.' . . . We accept that's what going to happen no matter what we do." An Asian American junior agreed, saying online harassment left her "numb" because she had "become used to it." Not only did our interviewees testify to what one explicitly termed the "normalization" of abuse online, but some suspected that authorities were "unlikely to take it seriously," especially compared with instances of off-line harassment.

Having apparently adopted the First Amendment understanding of free speech that is conventional in the United States, our interviewees neither regarded themselves as enjoying much personal agency nor could they imagine effective structural or cultural solutions. More than half of them broadly agreed that platforms and moderators needed "more ground rules" to ensure "people aren't like saying hurtful things that could really hurt people"—as a junior majoring in government put it—and to take more responsibility for what gets posted. Nevertheless, many women expressed reservations about any policing of online spaces and stood up for freedom of speech. A humanities junior who described herself as "very 1984-ish," asserted, "You can't police human nature. . . . I'm a little nervous about this sort of thing. . . . If we police all free speech, it wouldn't be free speech." Another junior said, "If people want to have very frank discussions on certain forums and say whatever they want, no matter how fucked up it is, they should be able to." Meanwhile, the government major called for "balance," since "you can't nerf the Internet."

And although eight respondents agreed that educating people might ameliorate online harassment, almost as many were either unsure as to what specific steps could be taken or downright skeptical that anything would be effective. Responding to the question of what could be done, a public health major said, "I honestly don't really know at this point." She had seen the omnipresent posters on walls saying, "If you see something, say something" or "If this is happening, don't just stand there. Call it out." She sighed, "But then no one really does that. So, I don't really know where to go from there." One sophomore said, "Some of this is inevitable, normalized. No one tries to stop this from going on or takes it to authorities. Peers don't stand up to defend even their friends—that just doesn't happen. . . . We're never going to see some sort of collective action."

The Middle Eastern immigrant who had experienced significant online harassment argued that trying to educate people was potentially counterproductive. After struggling a bit to explain her worries, she said,

It's weird, because the more education you have toward it, there's always a backlash. The more you try put in people's mind that women are equal to men, the more there's a backlash . . . [with] people saying "there's your equality" and posting videos of women getting beat.

Moreover, many respondents contended that online attacks are less threatening than those off-line, a perception that might explain their tendency to normalize the former. For instance, a STEM field major called off-line harassment more “tangible”; online harassment seemed “less legitimate” to complain about. Relatedly, several respondents argued that online harassment was easier to deal with than off-line attacks. A master’s student averred, “In person is worse because there’s a threat of something actually happening, whereas online a lot of them are empty sort of things.” An African American sophomore explained why responding to online harassment is much easier: “Because it’s as easy as blocking someone and kinda like moving on. . . . You can . . . choose to not have that person continue to bother you.” Preventing someone from “in-person” harassment is impossible, she said. Similarly, another commented that online harassment was upsetting, “but a lot of time it’s not a serious threat.” One junior said, “Off-line definitely bothers me more. Even if I get doxed on the Internet, I can just shut my computer. But in real life, I do get really concerned.” Getting physically stalked, she added, “really creeps me out.”

Discussion

Online communities and social media platforms offer many benefits, but they also have become breeding grounds for an assortment of sexist and misogynist behaviors. Importantly, the harassment behaviors evident today differ from off-line and pre-social media-era harassment, given the affordances of these networked spaces, including—but not limited to—the visibility and persistence of content, the anonymity/pseudonymity of users, the spreadability of content, and the multimodality of smartphones (Bangasser-Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2017; Schrock, 2015). The harassment of university students that previously occurred at a single setting or site (a summer job, school, or bar) is now broadcast, retweeted, and shared across multiple networks in mere minutes by anonymous users spread across the world. Our interviews confirm prior academic findings, journalistic reports, and our own survey data (Vitak et al., 2017) that negative and harassing experiences—ranging from annoying to threatening and illegal—remain a persistent problem online and are regarded as such.

At the same time, these young women signaled resignation. The vast majority suggested that harassment was inevitable for any woman online. For these women—who have grown up in the era of social media and “networked publics” (boyd, 2014)—public disclosures of personal information have always been an important part of online interaction. So, too, have experiences that the literature would describe as harassing. With the prevalence of cyberbullying, many of these women recalled having harassing experiences tied to technology from an early age.

As a result, these college women, who have seen their peers and others being targeted online simply for being women (Citron, 2014), normalize online harassment and adopt a series of self-censoring strategies. While our findings regarding self-censorship corroborate other studies (e.g., Pitcan, Marwick, & boyd, 2018), the finding that women accept online harassment as “normal” represents an important and empirically novel finding. It parallels the cynicism and “resigned pragmatism” that Hargittai and Marwick (2016) observed in young people who care about privacy and sometimes protect it yet recognize “their privacy may be violated at any minute and that there is little that they can do about it” (p. 3752).

Furthermore, our participants focused almost exclusively on the role of gender in harassment. They ignored how other identity dimensions like race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation might exacerbate negative experiences. As noted above, work on intersectionality (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) has highlighted how multiple dynamics of marginalization can intersect to create new—and worse—experiences. For example, gamers who are women of color experience harassment based on their identities as women gamers and inferences made about their race (Gray, 2012). Our participants did not suggest that race/ethnicity or sexuality were dispositive regarding their negative online experiences. Our survey, however, found that sexual orientation correlated with the frequency and severity of harassment experiences, albeit not race (Vitak et al., 2017), and other evidence suggests that women of color and noncisgender women face particular exclusion and marginalization online (Madden, Janoske, Winkler, & Edgar, 2018). An Amnesty International (2019) report found that minority women were 34% more likely to get mentioned in abusive tweets. Researchers should continue to explore how intersecting identities affect women's experiences with harassment, how different groups of women respond to those experiences, and the degree to which their coping mechanisms and forms of resistance are effective.

Our research highlights online harassment's clear "chilling effect" on targets' free speech/expression rights—and, arguably, free assembly—given how social media constitute places where people can gather to play, gossip, and socialize with real and/or virtual friends, share advice, and discuss emotional or material needs and problems. Teens and women may have originally been attracted to social media because of the sense they would be safer and less vulnerable to sexual predators than on the street, not realizing their privacy could be violated, their identity exposed (Clemmitt, 2006), and their enjoyment of platform affordances compromised.

What we found is not merely the problem of context collapse—the way distinct audiences converge on social media into a single homogeneous group (boyd, 2014). It is also the changes in the nature of relationships, as witnessed in problems with former friends and ex-partners. A study of 26 privacy-conscious but highly engaged Facebook users (Vitak, Blasiola, Patil, & Litt, 2015) found they used both social strategies and technical or platform-based strategies to minimize context collapse and to protect personal information from public circulation. Yet relationships for people this age are highly volatile and dynamic. As a result, this population is vulnerable to harassment (as well as to problems that are not specifically sexual or gendered).

"Technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment" (Powell & Henry, 2017, p. 308) essentially constitute mechanisms of social control and regulation that inhibit the exercise of digital citizenship. Indeed, trolling and other forms of online misogyny not only disrupt normal interactions but may also be specifically intended to oust targets from participation in public fora. Advising women online to avoid engaging with harassers essentially tells women to self-censor (Lumsden & Morgan, 2018). Going off-line arguably creates a vicious cycle: Women who are not online will not develop advanced technology skills, and therefore will not get technology jobs, and thus cannot help improve or reform the online environment. Discouraging women from the tech industry helps men control high-status, high-paying jobs.

Picking up on a societal preference to defer to First Amendment protections of offensive speech, our participants were quick to privilege harassers' free speech over their own expressive rights. Yet feminist scholars critique absolutist interpretations of the First Amendment. Cyberbullying and online defamation,

name calling, and abuse from predators and trolling mobs discourage speech and deter participation in public arenas. As a result, "low-value speech" suppresses political (high-value) speech. Citron (2014) attributes the trivialization of online sexual harassment to the long history in policing, law, and regulation of dismissing women's complaints as part of daily life. She argues that cyber civil rights can be protected in constitutional ways that would promote valuable speech more than inhibit it.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Directions

These research findings raise an important but underdiscussed side effect of online harassment. Most of our respondents have figured out—by experimentation, through a whisper network, or education—where the worst online places are and how to avoid them. Some of them are easily avoided—others less so. Either way, online spaces should be open to women, both as a matter of principle and fairness and to maximize use of the affordances of technology. Women should not be pushed out of online spaces that contribute to their sense of self, develop their critical faculties, boost their careers, or simply give them pleasure. Constraints, even self-imposed ones, on women's ability—both individually and collectively—to participate in public spaces ought to be broadly but rigorously foregrounded. Indeed, this is not a "moralizing" or "patronizing" response (Gagliardone, 2019). Our point is not that such behavior is morally unacceptable. Our suggestion is instead motivated by concern for how the self-censoring by and resultant silencing of targets constrains public debate and conversation.

One limitation of this project is that the survey and interviews were conducted before the tsunami of stories about sexual harassment that followed the October 2017 reports on sexual molestation of Hollywood celebrities, and the #MeToo and Time's Up movements. Our participants might have been more vociferous and less willing to normalize harassment if they were interviewed now, although given their degree of cynicism and the apparent willingness of at least some percentage of United States voters to overlook sexist comments by the president, particularly toward women of color, it is unclear whether interviewees would be more hopeful about change.

Scholars still know little about the value attached to hate speech by those who engage in it (Gagliardone, 2019). Certainly, it cannot be wished away. Moreover, legal structures are ill-equipped to handle trolling and doxing, although many states have laws banning certain forms of cyberstalking and revenge porn. That said, just as strategies for dealing with various forms of extreme speech should be responsive to the type of speech, they should be responsive to targets' needs. Amnesty International (2019) singled out Twitter for failing in its responsibility "to respect women's rights online by inadequately investigating and responding to reports of violence and abuse in a transparent manner"; this suggests that Twitter could effectively tackle violence and abuse on the platform. However, the advice that PEN America (2019) gives journalists, to launch countercampaigns and confront trolls, is probably wholly inappropriate for university students.

Neither additional platform tools and reporting features nor laws alone will end online harassment; these cannot address the underlying problems that lead to harassment. Instead, we should work to change the culture that sustains the injurious comments and bullying behaviors that target even young people. Such change demands a fundamental restructuring of economics, political, and social relations. The issue is

not simply how to make online spaces safer for women, but how to ameliorate the conditions that make these spaces unsafe in the first place. To doubt that online interventions will "fix" the problem or to acknowledge the complexity of interventions is not to say nothing can or should be done. Notwithstanding our respondents' cynicism (or desperation), solutions must remain the goal. We urge research on men harassers in hopes that this will generate interventions that avoid overt censorship. Researchers might consider, for example, whether the intense public shaming that has bolstered the MeToo movement might likewise dis-incentivize those who would engage in misogynist behaviors and educate harassers about supportive, nonsexist interactions (see, e.g., Blackwell, Dimond, Schoenebeck, & Lampe, 2017). Meanwhile, proactive guidance for young women that acknowledges race and sexuality and that educates women about their legal and expressive (and human) rights may help them deal with harassment without engaging in self-censorship.

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Appendix

Table A1. Demographic Information for Interview Participants (N = 23).

Age	Year in school	Race	Sexual orientation	Experienced online harassment? ^a
21	Junior	Multiracial	Bisexual	Yes
18	Freshman	Asian	Heterosexual	No answer
20	Junior	Multiracial	Heterosexual	Yes
18	Freshman	White	Pansexual	Yes
19	Junior	Asian	Bisexual	Yes
18	Freshman	White	Bisexual	Yes
19	Sophomore	White	Lesbian	Yes
18	Freshman	Latina	Heterosexual	Yes
18	Freshman	White	Heterosexual	Yes
22	Junior	White	Heterosexual	Yes
21	Senior	White	Heterosexual	Yes
22	Master's student	White	Heterosexual	No
20	Junior	White	Heterosexual	Yes
19	Sophomore	Black	Heterosexual	Yes
18	Freshman	White	Heterosexual	Yes
24	Master's student	Asian	Heterosexual	Yes
18	Freshman	Asian	Heterosexual	Yes
20	Junior	Multiracial	Heterosexual	No
19	Sophomore	White	Heterosexual	Yes
24	Master's student	Asian	Heterosexual	No
21	Junior	Asian	Other	Yes
18	Freshman	White	Heterosexual	Yes
20	Junior	Multiracial	Heterosexual	Yes

^a Survey participants were provided a definition of online harassment, then asked, "Have you ever been harassed before through text messages, social media, e-mail, or related technologies?" They were separately asked about 14 types of experiences that may constitute harassment.