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Misogynistic Hate Speech on Social Networks: a Critical Discourse Analysis

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*After all, the public cybersphere isn't actually public  
if half the people are being told to get the fuck out*

Emma Jane



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## **Abstract**

The present dissertation aims at recognising online misogyny as a form of hate speech, by providing a qualitative analysis of this discourse on Twitter and Facebook. While recent reports in media coverage have revealed that sexist harassment is the most pervasive social problem on Web 2.0, much scholarly research has mainly focused on other types of hate speech, (e.g., racist and xenophobic vilification), overlooking the seriousness of misogynistic verbal abuse. The multilayered impact of misogynous discourse on women's lives shows the urgent need to recognise gender-based prejudice as a form of hate speech, and to provide a more thorough and updated theorisation of this phenomenon. For this reason, the present dissertation suggests considering online misogyny as a harmful speech act which employs different tactics and discursive strategies to harass and silence women who engage in online public conversation. Following the methodology of feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, it develops an extensive qualitative study of the abuse experienced online by six women who reside in three different countries (i.e., Australia, Italy, and the USA). By analysing the discursive strategies commonly employed in user-generated contents to reaffirm hegemonic patriarchal ideologies and fixed gender identities, this dissertation also examines the entanglement between gender prejudice and other types of discrimination (i.e., racism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and ageism), and it identifies the articulation of online misogynistic hate speech through a series of tactics which harm women's lives on multiple levels. Therefore, it presents a taxonomy of these impacts through a new model that was specifically developed for the research at issue, and that will hopefully guide future research on misogynistic hate speech. In conclusion, this study argues for the development of effective educational tools to tackle sexist hate speech online, to guarantee women's digital citizenship, and to promote a more respectful conversation in cyberspace.



## Chapter 1. Introduction

“A compelling and (relatively) new social problem.” This is how the Australian scholar Emma Jane (Online Misogyny - Conclusion)<sup>1</sup> refers to misogynistic violence on cyberspace and to its kaleidoscopic features. Indeed, this peculiar phenomenon characterises contemporary online communication thanks to the combination of aspects that appear new with others that strike us as more familiar. In fact, it spreads through new online channels, but at the same time it reiterates a persistent form of discrimination, that is prejudice against women. This entanglement between new and long-standing elements of social relations is exactly what makes online gendered violence so compelling, and its analysis particularly challenging.

My thesis originates from the recognition of online misogyny as a social problem, whose pervasiveness in contemporary cybersphere urges an update in academic research on the use of the Internet to reaffirm aggressive gendered hierarchies that have long opposed women’s active and full participation in the public space. Therefore, in the attempt to respond to this pressing need, my work presents a critical discourse analysis of misogynistic hate speech on two of the most popular social networking sites, namely Twitter and Facebook, which have occupied much recent debate over the dangerous sides of Web 2.0.

Web 2.0, or “the participatory Web” (Blank and Reisdorf 537), is that evolution of cyberspace which enables users to engage in an interactive communication based on the uploading and sharing of different types of online material (i.e., written texts, images, and videos). These user-generated contents (also UGCs) have been travelling online from the early

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout my thesis, I refer to several works in their Kindle edition, for which the precise number of pages is not available. To quote these sources I follow the 8<sup>th</sup> edition of the MLA Style and I indicate the location of quotes only if the work cited is divided into stable sections, like chapters (i.e., *Ch.*) and parts (i.e., *Part*, *Conclusion*, *Introduction*).

stages of Web 2.0, but today a significant portion of them circulates on social networks. In this perspective, my thesis focuses on Twitter and Facebook as significant virtual spaces where billions of users interact worldwide and where they establish hierarchical social relations by performing gender identities that can be more or less compliant with patriarchal orders. Often when users who belong to traditionally marginalised groups challenge these social asymmetries, they become targets of verbal harassment on social networks. This abuse comes in the form of harmful speech and it employs several different strategies which are typical of the virtual space.

Although this thesis starts from the acknowledgement of the worldwide dimension of online communication and it recognises that on the Web hate speech has “scant regard for national boundaries” (Jane, *Misogyny Online - Conclusion*), my research focuses on the gendered online harassment against women who reside in three countries, namely Australia, Italy, and the USA, and it analyses how they have been abused online through several tactics (e.g., cyberstalking, image-based sexual abuse, cyberbullying, impersonation). In my thesis, I consider these different strategies as articulations of misogynistic hate speech, as they are all rooted in gender prejudice and they are all used to silence women online.

As recent reports have shown (cf. UN Women; Vox; Maeve et al.), today the online abuse of women and girls has become the predominant form of online harassment, and cyber misogyny is the new frontier of gender-based violence. Nevertheless, even before the advent of Web 2.0, much institutional and scholar research has too often neglected or dismissed the recognition of misogyny as a form of hate speech. For this reason, my thesis aims at demonstrating the hypothesis that misogynistic discourse is a type of online hate speech, in which the deep-rooted aversion to women is articulated through new ways of communication. My research, therefore, seeks to acknowledge the existence of this overt form of gender-based prejudice online and its pervasive use to silence the voices of those women – especially but not

necessarily feminists – who try to affirm their legitimate participation in the digital public space. In particular, this thesis aims at showing how Twitter and Facebook have lately become virtual fora suitable to express a violent misogynistic *ressentiment*<sup>2</sup> against those who question both hegemonic patriarchal ideologies and fixed gender identities, with their active presence in a public domain.

To show the need for more academic scrutiny on online misogyny as a form of hate speech, in Chapter 2 I review an interdisciplinary literature which ranges from philosophy and feminist theories to psychology and computer-mediated communication studies, and which is divided into three main sections. In this chapter, first I focus on the theoretical recognition of online misogyny as a form of hate speech. To do so, I identify a working definition of hate speech which facilitates a broad understanding of this ideological discrimination in relation to its sociocultural mechanism. Then, I discuss the application of Austin's speech theory to the study of how gender performativity influences speakers' identities and discursive power in patriarchal societies. This theoretical framework helps me to demonstrate that misogynistic hate speech should be understood as a harmful speech act whose perlocutionary and illocutionary dimensions lie in the ability to subordinate and silence women. Subsequently, in the second section of Chapter 2, I provide a broad overview of government laws and social network standards for the regulation of this phenomenon, highlighting how an indiscriminate protection of free speech through laissez-faire policies has translated into a practical safeguard of freedom to harass, especially online. In the third section of this chapter, I review scholarly research on online hostility in Computer-Mediated Communication (hereafter CMC) studies. Here, I note the recurrent trend of studying online hostile behaviours through terms like *flaming*

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<sup>2</sup> Following Martha Nussbaum, I intend *ressentiment* as a particular type of hostility which consists in the identification of an enemy who is depicted as the scapegoat for one's sense of weakness and inadequateness. As my thesis shows, this concept is a peculiar aspect of violence against women on social networks.

and *trolling*, even though scholars have not always agreed over the definition of these expressions. More specifically, given the playful undertone often embedded in *trolling*, I develop a new academic definition of this word which avoids any potential trivialization of cyber harassment and therefore enables me to use it in my thesis. In this part, I also sum up the main findings in the field of psychological studies in relation to online antisocial behaviours, with a specific focus on the issues of anonymity and cyber mobs, whose sociocultural elements are later discussed in the analysis of individual cases of gendered abuse. Moreover, following Jane (Misogyny Online; What Flaming; Understanding E-bile), I also provide a classification of the existing CMC studies into three waves, and I discuss the limits which result from applying their theoretical findings to a critical study of the current situation of sexist hate speech on Facebook and Twitter. I conclude Chapter 2 by identifying a new emerging trend in this field, that I define Feminist Academic Activism 2.0.

Subsequently, in Chapter 3 I explain the methodology that I developed to create my database and to critically analyse online misogynistic speech. Here, I present the criteria used for the data selection, and I point out the main difficulties faced while collecting and storing the data, due to the very nature of the content at issue. In this section and in other parts of the thesis, my argument is that the recognition of such methodological challenges does not inevitably result in a weakening of my work; conversely, I merely highlight the present limits that the hectic evolution of cyberspace poses to academic research, which should not refrain from a much-needed theorisation of this dangerous phenomenon. As I explain in Chapter 3, my data collection resulted in a database made up of 28 cases of sexist hate speech against women working in different fields (e.g., politics, journalism, blogging, online activism, gaming industry), half of whom are located in the USA, and the remaining ones in Australia and in

Italy.<sup>3</sup> These cases were identified by monitoring national and international newspapers and trends on Facebook and Twitter. In Chapter 3, I also discuss the methodological approach that I use to analyse the UGCs retrieved online. Following Michelle Lazar, I refer to this approach as feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter feminist CDA), and I discuss its main theoretical aspects, showing how the general tenets of CDA can be expanded in a gender-sensitive perspective. As mentioned, my thesis also focuses on the online harassment of Italian women. This implies that the contents analysed in those sections appear in my own translation from Italian into English. Therefore, in Chapter 3 I also discuss the validity of my approach to using these texts in translation, and I explain the translation strategy that I adopted to provide a target text which faithfully reproduces speakers' linguistic choices in misogynistic hate speech. After this clarification, I conclude Chapter 3 by identifying the main characteristics of online misogynistic hate speech, summing up how visible women usually become targets of an escalating online harassment which deploys a sexually explicit, objectifying, and violent rhetoric, and which has specific phenomenological consequences. I present such material effects in a graph which visually shows the taxonomy that I developed by adding targets' reports on their experiences to previous academic findings. This model demonstrates the multiple impact of hate speech on the targets' lives, and it will hopefully guide future research in this field of enquiry in relation to online misogyny. Considering the ubiquitous repetition of the type of rhetoric and discursive strategies used to harass women online, I purposely select six cases (i.e., two for each country) which in my opinion are the most suitable ones for a critical analysis of online misogyny. The selected cases enable me to prove the implementation of different tactics in cyber gender harassment, and to discuss through feminist CDA several issues of online misogyny, like the objectification of famous women, the discursive creation

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<sup>3</sup> The 28 cases are summed up in Appendix 3.

and reaffirmation of context-dependent gendered identities, and their intersection with other axes of social power, like race, religion, and sexual orientation. I present this qualitative study in the remainder of my thesis (i.e., Chapters 4, 5, and 6), where I retrace how different women have become targets of hate speech and how their multiplatform harassment escalated online. Most importantly, I discuss the specific rhetorical strategies through which hegemonic gendered ideologies and white supremacy are discursively sustained. My multimodal analysis of user-generated contents shows how a persistent toxic misogyny is used to vilify and silence women, and how this discourse intertwines with other forms of hate speech – especially racism, homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia – as a recurring feature of online communication. Both in the analysis of my case studies and throughout my thesis, I quote extremely graphic language to show the real nature of online misogyny, as I agree with Emma Jane that speaking of gender-based hate speech “in its unexpurgated entirety” (Back 558) is the only way to fully understand and critically analyse the violent harassment that women experience in this virtual space.

In conclusion, Chapter 7 sums up the main findings of my research which confirm the hypothesis of my thesis, showing how sexualised and derogatory discourse is deployed to defend a prejudiced vision of genders and to push women away from the cybersphere, in the attempt to reassert a fixed patriarchal ideology which still struggles to accept women’s active participation in the public sphere, both online and offline. At the close of the chapter, I argue for the development of more systematic educational strategies to tackle misogyny and all forms of hate speech, and to foster a more inclusive and respectful use of online platforms, which will hopefully result in the eventual fulfilment of the democratic potentialities of the Internet.



## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Recognising Online Misogyny as a Form of Online Hate Speech**

Hate speech on Web 2.0 has lately become one of the most debated issues in much press coverage as well as in many academic research fields. Far from being a new social phenomenon, cyber hate speech consists in the online perpetuation of historical forms of social discrimination and prejudice. Its pervasive presence both offline and online has led to the identification of several types of harmful discourse that have continuously targeted different marginalised groups. In the heated debate over what hate speech is and who its targets are, misogyny has long occupied a peculiar place. Depending on the different degrees of attention paid to gendered social orders by researchers, misogyny has continuously fluctuated between being considered the most complex and pervasive system of oppression (Lazar 143), and a phenomenon excluded from definitions of hate speech.

In my thesis, I provide some insights on the discursive mechanisms of this gendered phenomenon on the Web, to support a full recognition of online misogyny as an “entrenched prejudice against women” (Macquarie Dictionary, Misogyny), and therefore as a type of hate speech which attacks women at individual and collective levels, and which affects society as a whole, subjugating it to a cultural backwardness caused by the perpetuation of social power imbalances. Therefore, my work aims at demonstrating the hypothesis that misogynistic discourse on the Web is a type of online hate speech, in which the historical aversion to women gets articulated through new ways of communication.

As several reports have pointed out (cf. UN Women; Vox; Maeve et al.), cyber misogyny is the new frontier of gender-based violence, and this abuse of women and girls has become a predominant form of online harassment. For these reasons, I consider the acknowledgement of misogyny as hate speech a fundamental step to recognise full dignity to

the experience of many women in the cybersphere, and to tackle this phenomenon for a more equal participation of all social groups in online communication. To do so, I first attempt to identify a working definition of hate speech, which encompasses hatred against women and which can be applied to the study of its expression on the Web.

### *2.1.1 Definitions of Hate Speech*

Despite – or probably because of – the strong presence of hate speech in public debates, there is not a universally recognised definition of this phenomenon (Herz and Molnar; Lillian 731; Weber 3). While researchers have usually tried to determine the content, tone, nature, and consequences of this discourse, the main definitional challenge of this debate still lies in the identification of the social categories attacked by hate speech (Titley 15). Descriptions of this phenomenon abound in dictionaries, institutional documents, and academic research, but many sources disagree about the inclusion of gender among the categories of social identity targeted in this discrimination. Commentators have supported the separation of misogyny from other forms of hate speech (e.g., racism, antisemitism, homophobia, ableism) more or less explicitly, ranging from its absence in the definitions of this phenomenon to the overt justification of such exclusion.

Many are the examples where gender is not mentioned as an indicator of hate speech. For instance, the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “a speech or address inciting hatred or intolerance, esp[ecially] towards a particular social group on the basis of ethnicity, religious beliefs, sexuality” (Hate Speech). Therefore, even though hate speech is recognised as an intersectional phenomenon, not many sources explicitly indicate women among its targets. Rather, commentators have focused their studies on racial and xenophobic vilification. In fact, many have tended to define hate speech as a communication which predominately denigrates “members of vulnerable minorities” (Waldron 5), and to indicate race, religion, nationality, and ethnicity as the defining features of groups which may be targeted by this phenomenon

(e.g., Benesch 20; Tsesis 211; Waldron 5;). A similar attention to racism to the detriment of misogyny results from the identification of targets as members of protected groups. As Andre Oboler, CEO of the Australian Online Hate Prevention Insitution, writes “which segments of a society are considered ‘protected groups’ may vary with context,” but “vilification on the basis of race is the most well recognised form of hate speech” (8).

Several authors (e.g., Lillian; Titley; Weston-Scheuber) have noticed this trend of gender blindness in the definition of harmful speech. In particular, Donna Lillian (731) points out that scholars’ attention on whether including gender among the categories that attract hate speech has been variable and often scarce. Gavan Titley echoes her words observing that legal definitions found in many governmental laws and recommendations have tended to dismiss gender as a feature of hate speech (16). Even if this tendency is shared worldwide, it is particularly visible in European regulations, which until recently have focused mainly on “historically-generated relations of oppression and inequality . . . against people on the basis of their real or perceived background,” like the Holocaust denial (Titley 17). Therefore, the historical facts occurred across Europe in the first half of the XX century are probably the reasons why in 1997 the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe highlighted racist and xenophobic discourse in its definion of hate speech, identifying it as “all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin” (Recommendation 97.20 107). Even though the Council of Europe (hereafter CoE) has more recently declared that this reference should be understood as an open-ended definition which can be extended to other possible targets (Council of Europe, Women), several European documents still primarily concentrate on the protection of “those groups which are already vulnerable in some way, such as asylum seekers, religious minorities, or

those with disabilities” (Keen and Gorgescu 149).<sup>1</sup> The focus on minorities and protected groups has lately resulted in the recognition of homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia as forms of hate speech (e.g., Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, Recommendation 2010.5). Nevertheless, while the attention towards prejudice against LGBTQ people has increased, misogynistic discourse is still questioned, absent, or only mentioned in many discussions on hate speech, within and outside Europe.

The emphasis on minority groups as the sole targets of this phenomenon has also lead some authors to justify the separation of misogynistic discourse from hate speech more overtly. For example, Franklyn S. Haiman studies sexist speech and hate speech in two separate sections of his book *‘Speech Acts’ and the First Amendment*. He justifies this analytical perspective claiming that women are not a minority group, rather a significant proportion of population, and that therefore they have more resources available to counter gender discrimination (Haiman 50). For this reason, Haiman foresees a brighter future for the eradication of sexist speech than for the elimination of other types of hate speech (Haiman 49-50), a prediction which looks quite too optimistic considering the pervasiveness of misogynistic backlashes against women’s participation in offline and online public domains.

Conversely, some scholars (e.g., Herring, Freedom; Lillian; Titley) have recognised misogyny as a form of hate speech, and, in order to overcome the just-explained definitional

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<sup>1</sup> It must also be noted that in 2014 the CoE expressed its commitment to eradicate “sexist hate speech” (Strategy, 10), and that in 2016 it started promoting calls to action specifically designed to tackle offline and online misogyny (see Gender Equality Unit; European Youth Centre). Nevertheless, a weaker attention to gender vilification in comparison to other forms of hate speech is visible not only in the delay of this recognition but also in the minor visibility that hatred against women has on the official website of the CoE campaign *No Hate Speech Movement*. Interestingly, for example, no references to *misogyny* and *sexism* appear in the glossary of terms provided online to sustain this campaign (see No Hate Speech Movement, Glossary).

impasse, they have decided to rely on broader descriptions of this phenomenon, which, rather than focusing on the specific targets of hate speech, highlight its social origins and consequences. Therefore, to pave the way for my study of misogyny as a type of hate speech, I follow the approach of these researchers, and I refer to a definition based on the sociocultural mechanisms of hate speech, namely the one provided by Rita Whillock. According to Whillock: “hate speech seeks to move an audience by creating a symbolic code for violence. Its goals are to inflame the emotions of followers, denigrate the designated out-class, inflict permanent and irreparable harm to the opposition, and ultimately conquer” (Hate 32). Even though this definition has been sometimes criticised as potentially too generic from a legal perspective (Downing 180), I consider it particularly suitable for my analysis of the phenomenon at issue, because it focuses on the asymmetrical distribution of power among the actors involved (i.e., the *followers* of hate speech and its *designated out-class*), on the intention to harm subaltern groups, and on the phenomenological consequences of hate speech. Moreover, by avoiding any identification of targets as minority or protected groups, this definition is suitable for the analysis of gendered prejudice against women, and it facilitates a broader understanding of the ideological discrimination embedded in all forms of hate speech.

Therefore, applying Whillock’s definition to gender-based vilification, in my thesis I refer to misogynistic hate speech as that discourse which targets women specifically for their gender, with the aim to discredit, threaten, and ultimately silence them, through a marked sexual objectification. In the analysis of my case studies, I discuss how this discourse becomes particularly dangerous when it is used on the Web. Conversely, I use the remainder of this section to contextualise sexist hate speech in the philosophical debate over the “relationship between speech and harm” (Maitra and McGowan 2) and over the mechanism through which this type of speech affects disadvantaged social groups. More specifically, following Rae Langton (*Unspeakable*; *Belief*) and Judith Butler (*Excitable*; *Precarity*), I discuss misogynistic

discourse as a harmful speech act based on social gendered asymmetries, and I attempt to show that this prejudiced discourse should be understood as a type of hate speech which damages women. This discussion paves the way for a more detailed analysis of the discursive strategies and political effects of online misogyny.

### *2.1.2 Misogynistic Discourse as Harmful Speech Act*

Much contemporary philosophical debate over the relationship between speech and harm has derived from the need to find a balance in the liberty-equality conflict related to hate speech. Discussing the contested blurred line between freedom of speech and freedom to harass, Ishani Maitra and Mary McGowan claim that the recognition of the former as a fundamental principle of liberal societies does not necessarily translate into the absolute acceptance of the latter (1). Conversely, they argue that, even though “a commitment to free speech involves extending to speech special protections that we don’t extend to other actions” (Maitra and McGowan 2), the defence of freedom of expression “does not *prohibit*<sup>2</sup> the regulation of speech. Rather, it just makes it *more difficult* to regulate speech” (Maitra and McGowan 3). Therefore, they suggest addressing this legal and philosophical struggle between liberty and equality values by identifying which types of speech are harmful, how speech and harm are connected, and what kind of harm is generated by speech (Maitra and McGowan 5). Theorists have tried to answer these questions by adopting causal and constitutive approaches to understand the effects of harmful speech, and to analyse the impact of the unequal distribution of power among the actors involved in harmful speech acts (Maitra and McGowan 6). This discussion over the sociocultural mechanism of harmful speech has developed especially in critical race theory and feminism,<sup>3</sup> which have studied how racial and gender-based vilification work similarly as dominant discourses aimed at reaffirming hierarchical orders in societies.

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<sup>2</sup> Here and in all quotes of my thesis emphasis appears in original.

<sup>3</sup> See Matsuda et al. for an extensive analysis of speech and harm in critical race theory.

The philosophical debate over the harm caused and promoted by sexualised speech has been particularly influenced by the work of Catharine MacKinnon (cf. Linda; Moral; Francis), who has tried to demonstrate how pornography subordinates women in society. MacKinnon's feminist investigation of "the harm theory of speech" (MacKinnon, Forword vii) is grounded on the definition of pornography as "the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or word" (Francis 176). This definition reminds one very closely of the type of contents which express misogynistic vilification on the Web. More precisely, as the analysis of my case studies shows in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, online misogyny is conveyed through text- and image-based material which repropose a depiction of women similar to the pornographic representation defined by MacKinnon. In fact, according to her, pornography portrays women as:

sexual objects, things or commodities . . . sexual objects experiencing sexual pleasure in rape, incest, or other sexual assault . . . bruised or physically hurt . . . in postures or positions of sexual submission, servility, or display . . . penetrated by objects or animals . . . presented in scenarios of degradation, humiliation, injury, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual.

(Francis 176)

Even if online misogynistic discourse is a speech act which develops through different tactics and therefore it cannot be considered as a synonym for pornography, these quotes by MacKinnon show a strong similarity between the content she refers to and the phenomenon that I analyse in my dissertation. Therefore, I suggest interpreting MacKinnon's concept of pornography as the cultural product of a broader gender discrimination that is often expressed in online misogynistic discourse. My case here is that, given the similar nature of these two expressions of gender ideology, the studies developed to explain pornography as a harmful

speech act can be rightfully applied to misogynistic discourse, and they can facilitate the theoretical recognition of this phenomenon as a form of hate speech.<sup>4</sup> Rae Langton (*Unspeakable; Belief*) provides an extensive philosophical analysis to defend MacKinnon's hypothesis of pornography as harmful speech, and to examine the relationship between speech and harm in pornography. While MacKinnon developed her study to demand the legal treatment of pornography as a violation of women's civil rights, Langton attempts to explain the mechanism through which this speech act succeeds in subordinating and silencing women. Therefore, I refer to Langton's work to argue that, like pornography, misogynistic discourse should be read as a subordinating speech act, and therefore placed in the broader field of hate speech.

In order to recognise pornography as a harmful speech act, Langton develops a "speech act model" (*Belief* 80), which relies on J. L. Austin's theory of performative utterances as locutionary, illocutionary, or perlocutionary acts. To support the hypothesis that pornography harms women by subordinating and silencing them (Langton, *Unspeakable* 297), the philosopher recalls Austin's explanation of the three dimensions of performatives. While *locutionary* refers to the act of creating a meaningful utterance, an illocutionary act is understood as "the action performed simply *in* saying something," and therefore "it can be thought of as a *use* of the locution to perform an action" (Langton, *Unspeakable* 300). As for

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<sup>4</sup> Another main difference emerges between my work and MacKinnon's. By reporting the impacts of pornography on women's subordination, the theorist aimed at obtaining a legal recognition of this phenomenon as a damage to women's civil rights. Conversely, my analysis focuses on the discursive strategies and tactics through which women are vilified online, with the aim of recognising this phenomenon as hate speech. Even though my work inevitably poses some questions to the present state of online hate speech regulation, I do not intend to advocate specific legal measures against gendered hate speech, a complex legal issue whose study goes far beyond the scope of this dissertation.



the third concept, “a perlocutionary act is the action performed *by* saying something,” that is “an utterance considered in terms of its consequences, such as the effects it has on its hearers” (Langton, *Unspeakable* 300). As mentioned, Langton applies Austin’s speech act theory to discuss two claims which have characterised MacKinnon’s activism and scholarly research, namely that pornography both subordinates and silences women (Langton, *Unspeakable* 297). In this perspective, she suggests that pornography is permeated by gendered subordination in all its three dimensions. In her own words, pornography “can have subordination as its locutionary content, or as its perlocutionary effect,” and it can also have the illocutionary power to subordinate women (Langton, *Unspeakable* 302). More specifically, Langton claims that what makes pornography a perlocutionary and illocutionary act of subordination is its “systematically discriminatory nature” (Langton, *Unspeakable* 307). By defining pornography as a perlocutionary act, the theorist affirms that it influences hearers’ interpretation of female subalternity as natural, and of women as inferior (Langton, *Unspeakable* 306). To explain pornography as an illocutionary act, Langton refers to Austin’s classification of performatives between happy and unhappy utterances (Austin 14). In fact, in Austin’s theory, a speech act obtains illocutionary force “when it satisfies certain felicity conditions” (Langton, *Unspeakable* 301). Such felicity conditions depend on the authority of the person who performs the speech act in a given social context. In Langton’s words: “the ability to perform illocutionary acts can be viewed as a measure of authority, a measure of political power,” and “the asymmetry of the power balance is reflected in the asymmetry of [speakers’] abilities to perform certain illocutionary acts” (*Unspeakable* 316). Such power imbalance is what makes pornography – and misogynistic discourse – a harmful speech act, given the dominant social position of those who perform these speech acts. As mentioned, speakers’ authority is strictly linked to the context in which it appears. According to Austin, in fact, the fundamental felicity condition of speech acts is that “the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate

for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked” (Words 15). Even though in its most typical forms speakers’ authority comes with a formal recognition (e.g., a priest’s authority to officiate a Catholic wedding), it can also be legitimised in more implicit and informal ways when speakers comply with certain social norms and conventions which are hegemonic in a given context. As Langton puts it “what is important is whether [their speech] is authoritative in the domain that counts and whether it is authoritative for the hearers that count” (Unspeakable 312). In domains characterised by androcentric ideology, speakers’ authority gets legitimised by specific gender power asymmetries which enable their speech acts to become harmful. As Langton points out, “powerful people can generally do more, say more, and have their speech count for more than can the powerless. If you are powerful, there are more things you can do with words” (Unspeakable 299).

In this perspective, what makes speakers powerful is their position within the social context in which they perform their speech acts. Considered the gendered nature of both pornography and misogynistic hate speech, here speakers’ authority is strictly linked to the concept of *performativity of gender*, as theorised by Judith Butler (e.g., *Bodies; Excitable; Precarity*). Butler explains gender performativity as the process through which subjects emerge in relation to certain social norms. In patriarchal ideology, these norms reproduce a gendered order of society within the binary frame of heteronormative androcentrism. For this reason, Butler affirms that social norms are “one way that power operates” (Butler, *Precarity* ii). Therefore, in patriarchal societies, these norms result in the subordination of women to heteronormative masculinity, which relegates them to a subaltern position in the private and sexualised sphere. Thus, by joining Langton’s and Butler’s theories, we can understand how authority is attributed by gendered social norms in both contexts of pornography and misogynistic hate speech, and how these speech acts obtain the illocutionary power to subordinate and silence women.

The illocutionary force of online misogynistic hate speech is traceable in harassers' intention and success to silence women who try to affirm their active participation through the Internet, and especially those who report their online abuse. To explain this phenomenon as an illocutionary act I refer to another concept discussed by Judith Butler, namely the relationship between social norms and subjects' precarity. Butler observes that the conformity to social norms creates a "differential allocation of recognizability" (Precarity iii), according to which those subjects who comply with them become recognisable – thus more discursively powerful – in society. Conversely, those who attempt to violate these norms become precarious, and, therefore, "differently exposed to injury [and] violence" (Butler, Precarity ii). In my opinion, this mechanism can be applied to online misogyny to explain the silencing of women as precarious subjects. My case here is that the pre-existing asymmetrical distribution of power between women and men becomes more intense when women try to leave the subordinated position they have been historically attributed in patriarchal societies by reclaiming their active participation in the online public space. This act of subversion translates into a non-compliance with the social norms of gender ideology, and therefore it intensifies the differential allocation of recognizability between (precarious) women and (recognisable) men. This social mechanism reminds MacKinnon and Langton's analysis of pornography as an illocutionary act which silences those women who denounce how they have been vilified through sexual exploitation (see Langton, *Unspeakable*). These considerations appear to be in line with Butler's idea of precarity as generated by gender norms, when she affirms that "gender norms have everything to do with how and in what way we can appear in public space; how and in what way the public and private are distinguished, . . . how that distinction is instrumentalized in the service of sexual politics [and] who will be criminalized on the basis of public appearance" (Precarity ii).

In general terms, therefore, gender norms justify the authority of speakers who

subordinate women, both in misogynistic hate speech and pornography. Once the speakers' authority is established in these domains, their speech acts are able to harm women, both as perlocutionary and illocutionary acts. This is the mechanism which regulates all expressions of gender vilification, and which explains the relationship between speech and harm in gendered social orders. Langton summarises it in her definition of the speech act model, according to which:

“[harmful speech acts] work in Austin’s terms, as *illocutionary* acts that can e.g. subordinate certain groups, legitimate attitudes and behaviours of discrimination, advocate violence, discrimination, and hatred; they may also work as *perlocutionary* acts, that cause subordination, and produce changes in attitudes and behaviour, including violence, discrimination, and hatred” (Belief 80).

Therefore, the application of the just-described model to online misogynistic discourse shows how this phenomenon reaffirms the subalternity of women. Joining this model with Whillock’s definition of hate speech, we can understand how misogyny works as a harmful speech act “by creating a symbolic code for violence” (Hate 32) which subordinates women as designated targets of gendered violence and hatred, and which ultimately aims at silencing them. Even if the recognition of harmful speech as a perlocutionary and illocutionary act is not new (e.g., see Langton, Belief 75-76), my discussion has demonstrated the common nature of misogynistic discourse and hate speech.

Moreover, it must also be noted that online misogyny works as a peculiar type of speech act. In fact, on the Web this discourse acquires specific features which increase its perlocutionary and illocutionary dimensions, because it is performed in front of an audience which is potentially boundless, and it can therefore affect the behaviours and beliefs of a great number of people, both within the targeted group and among the rest of the population. Hence,

the perlocutionary effect of this speech should be traced in the way in which it impacts women’s lives and users’ frequent legitimisation of online gendered harassment. Similarly, misogynistic discourse has the illocutionary power of silencing women who report their experiences online. By harassing these targets in a vicious circle, in fact, users nullify women’s act of speaking out about their abuse, therefore they stop women’s speech “from counting as the action it was intended to be” (Langton, *Unspeakable* 299).

In Chapters 4, 5, and 6 I study how misogynistic discourse acquires these perlocutionary and illocutionary dimensions on the Web by providing a critical discourse analysis of the gendered hate speech used to vilify women online in six specific cases, which helps me to identify the material effects of this phenomenon on the targets and on society. These analyses show how online misogynistic discourse harms women through different tactics, that often appear together to increase vilification through a strongly sexualised rhetoric. While these strategies are discussed later in my thesis, below I provide a short description of the most recurring ones, to which the reader can refer throughout my work:

Gendered harassment	The use of text- and image-based contents to harass women online. It often involves threats of and incitements to rape, death, sexualised and violent acts.
Image-based sexual abuse	The distribution of intimate or sexually explicit images without the victim’s consent. Mostly used against female targets to slut shame them publicly. Also known as revenge pornography. <sup>5</sup>
Virtual rape	Simulation of rape in virtual environments, or description of rape fantasies and sexual violation of the target.
Impersonation	The creation of a website or social network account using a person’s name with the intention to harm her.
Cyberbullying	The act of bullying or intimidating someone online.
Cyberstalking	The act of stalking someone online, to monitor her and/or to retrieve her personal information.
Dox(x)ing	The act of conducting extensive online researches to collect an individual’s private information (e.g., real name, home address, email address, telephone number, social security number) and then to post them online to increase the harassment.

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<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 3.2.3 for my choice to indicate this tactic as *image-based sexual abuse* instead of as *revenge porn*.

As the definitions show, some of these tactics target women specifically (i.e., gendered harassment, image-based sexual abuse, and virtual rape), while some others are not gender-specific (i.e., impersonation, cyberbullying, cyberstalking, doxxing). Nevertheless, in most cases these strategies coexist in online hate speech to harass women as severely as possible. While some scholars (e.g., Citron, *Hate Crimes*; Henry, *Private Conversation*) tend to study these tactics separately in the field of legal studies,<sup>6</sup> I consider them as sub-categories of the broad phenomenon of misogynistic hate speech, because they are all motivated by the same gendered prejudice, and because they all exploit the asymmetrical distribution of power to reach the same goal. In fact, even though each sub-category has a specific practical mechanism, they are all aimed at denigrating women as a designated out-class, and at silencing them in the virtual sphere.

In the following section, I provide a brief overview of how governments and social networking sites have recently tried – and often failed – to tackle hate speech on the Web.

## **2.2 Policies on Hate Speech: Governments and Social Networking Sites**

As mentioned, the regulation of hate speech has long been controversial, and this legal challenge has evolved from a need to balance the right to freedom of speech with the right to equality and non-discrimination. This has led to the polarisation of the discourse over hate speech between two fronts, as summed up by Michael Herz and Peter Molnar: “for many, to prohibit ‘hate speech’ is to privilege equality over liberty; to protect it is to privilege liberty over equality.” This controversy is grounded in the coexistence of both civil rights in most democratic legal systems. Just to provide a few examples from the countries on which I focus my attention in this thesis, in the USA the principle of equality is guaranteed by the Fourteenth

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<sup>6</sup> This tendency is justified by the need to find specific legal measures to sanction the above-mentioned online conducts.

Amendment to the Constitution, while freedom of speech is protected under the First Amendment, an act that over the centuries has become the epitome of the fight against hate speech prohibition, first offline and later online. Similarly, the Italian Constitution recognises freedom of expression in Article 21, and the right to equality in Article 3. On the other hand, in Australia “free speech . . . has been reliant of a common law tradition and not, as in many other jurisdictions internationally, a broad and entrenched free speech protection or clearly enunciated federal statutory free speech protection in the form of a bill of rights” (Gelber 3). Even if the Australian Constitution does not specify freedom of speech or the principle of equality, several federal laws have been enacted to tackle discrimination.<sup>7</sup>

Like Australia, Italy, and the USA, many other countries have struggled to find a balance between these fundamental rights. Such legal dilemma seems even more intense when the regulation pertains to online communication, that, for its very nature, crosses state borders worldwide and thus complicates the decision on which state, federal, and international law should be applied to each case. Therefore, even though my thesis analyses the harassment of six women who reside in Australia, Italy, and in the USA, it must be stressed that these attacks cannot be circumscribed geographically, not only because some of this abuse proved to be international, but also because it would be extremely difficult to identify the harassers’ locations. Hence, an extensive review of the laws through which certain governments have attempted to punish online hate speech would not result useful for my study, as the identification of local measures does not always translate into the appropriate legal framework for each specific case. Moreover, the multifaceted nature that hate speech acquires on the Web makes it even more difficult to provide an exhaustive presentation of all the legal actions through which institutions have tried to regulate the different tactics and behaviours used in

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<sup>7</sup> E.g., see *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*, *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*, and *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, all by the Australian Government.

online harassment. Nevertheless, providing some examples can be useful to guide an overall understanding of the attitudes of policymakers towards the phenomenon of hate speech.

### *2.2.1 Government Policies*

In general terms, the above-outlined dilemma between liberty and equality values has influenced the regulation of online harassment in all its forms, leading to a “continuing *laissez-faire* approach to regulatory interventions” (Jane, *Misogyny Online*, Ch. 2). While the origin of this attitude is undeniably traceable to the historical liberty-equality conflict before the advent of Web 2.0, Emma Jane suggests that it also derives from the original conception of the Web as an intrinsically democratic virtual place, supposedly able to guarantee equal participation to everyone, and to overcome the typical social imbalances of the offline world. According to Jane, the present state of online harassment has proved this vision to be “at best, naïve; at worst, a dangerous conceit,” as “traditional constraints such as class, race, culture, gender, sex, and sexuality have all emerged as key markers of difference and inequality in terms of access to technology and engagement online” (*Misogyny Online*, Ch. 2). Nevertheless, it is still common to see commenters and commentators supporting absolutist stances that define even the most self-evident forms of discrimination as expressions of freedom of speech. This attitude seems particularly common towards cases of misogynistic harassment, where “in the interest of preserving the right of men to express themselves freely, women . . . are advised to exercise their ‘free choice’ not to listen” (Herring, *Freedom* 9). Despite these popular positions, governments worldwide have started to tackle online hate speech by attempting to regulate some forms of the phenomenon at issue in different ways.

For example, the Italian Penal Code does not have specific articles focused on the recognition of online hate speech, but through the years it has been integrated with some



regulations which have extended its pre-existing laws to the cybersphere.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, some other countries have developed more structured legal systems to punish online hate crimes. For instance, both in Australia and in the USA, state and federal laws punish cyberstalking and cyber harassment as criminal offences.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, in the USA the First Amendment has largely been used to sustain the libertarian principle of unregulated freedom of speech. Even though several exceptions have been introduced to limit the protection of some harmful speech under this Amendment (see Citron, Hate Crimes; Volokh, Speech; Volokh, History), the pervasiveness of free speech absolutism has often resulted in the difficulty to apply already existing rules.<sup>10</sup>

A major difference among the three above-mentioned countries concerns the regulation of image-based sexual abuse, usually referred to as *revenge porn* or *revenge pornography*. While no legal measures currently exist against this phenomenon in Italy, this crime is

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<sup>8</sup> E.g., in 2014 the Court of Cassation extended article 660 of Italian Penal Code on harassment in public spaces to some abusing messages posted on the public profile of a Facebook user (see Masoero).

<sup>9</sup> In particular, section 474.17 of the Australian Criminal Code recognises the act of “using a carriage service to menace, harass or cause offence” as a crime (Australian Government, Code), and recently this legal measure has been applied to some cases of online harassment (see Chapter 5.2). Similarly, in the U.S. Code, some federal laws can be used to punish several types of online abuse. More specifically, section 2261A aims at regulating stalking which occurs via “any interactive computer service or electronic communication service” (U.S. Government, 18 §2261A), and section 223 prohibits harassment via interstate communications networks (U.S. Government, 47 §223). For a more detailed review of cybercrimes regulations in the USA, see Citron (Hate Crimes).

<sup>10</sup> E.g., see the case of Anthony Elonis, an American man who posted threats against his ex-wife on Facebook quoting violent lyrics of the rapper Eminem, an act that the Supreme Court eventually considered not amounting to criminal threats and, therefore, protected under the First Amendment. For a more detailed explanation of *Elonis v. United States*, see Rushe.

recognised in 25 American states and in some states of Australia,<sup>11</sup> which is also discussing a specific federal law for revenge porn (see Flynn et al.).

One of the online phenomena that have lately attracted the attention of jurisprudence in many countries is cyberbullying. For example, in the USA this crime is punished by 23 States (see Hinduja and Patchin). In Australia, while each state and territory has different laws against bullying (see Australian Human Rights Commission), its cyber version is also interpreted as protected by section 474.17 of the federal Criminal Code (see Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions). More recently Italy has focused on the cyberbullying of minors. The Italian Parliament started to discuss a draft law on this crime in 2013, after 14-year old Carolina Picchio committed suicide for being bullied over an intimate video of her that had gone viral online (see Picchio).<sup>12</sup> After a long and controversial political debate, Italy approved the law in May 2017,<sup>13</sup> a decision which did not come without criticisms from several commentators, who defined it useless (Scorza), reactionary (Mantellini), and “the stupidest censorship law in European history” (Doctorow). These criticisms remind some of the most typical attitudes and misconceptions towards the regulation of online hate speech and harassment. In fact, Cory Efram Doctorow and Massimo Mantellini echo libertarian and absolutistic positions stressing that the measure could result in a restriction of users’ freedom of expression, while Guido

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<sup>11</sup> i.e., Victoria, New South Wales, and South Australia. To understand the difference between laws in these states see Henry (Factbox).

<sup>12</sup> Similar cases of minors who committed suicide after being bullied online have been registered in other countries. While cyberbullying attacks both female and male users, this phenomenon appears to be usually linked to sexual vilification and slut shaming when it targets women and girls, as proved by the suicides of Amanda Todd in the USA and of Rehtaeh Person in Canada. While the former was bullied after intimate images of her went viral (see Wolf), the latter was vilified after the video of her gang rape was distributed online (see Valenti, Daughter).

<sup>13</sup> Italian original text available in Senato della Repubblica.

Scorza considers the law at issue useless, in the name of already existing social network policies that users can refer to for getting harmful content removed from the Web. Even though Scorza is right on the existence of online community standards, his article does not contemplate that a major problem in combating cyber harassment is the difficulty in applying such policies.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, this ongoing debate over the regulation of hate speech in the virtual space also extends to the accountability of social networking sites (hereafter SNSs) in dealing with this problem. Several authors have stressed the ambiguous attitude of many tech giants towards online abuse and particularly their inefficiency in applying their own policies (e.g., see Ford, Fight; Jane, Misogyny Online; Laville et al.; Valenti, Companies). In the following paragraphs, I briefly discuss SNSs guidelines on online hate speech and their problematic implementation, especially in cases of harmful speech against women.

### *2.2.2 Facebook, Twitter, and Hate Speech Policies*

As mentioned, given the increasing episodes of online harassment and their reports in international press coverage, some major SNSs have developed specific policies to counter this conduct on their platforms. Because my thesis focuses on the abuse of women on Facebook and Twitter, here I present the standards of these two SNSs to highlight their problematic attitude towards the phenomenon at issue.

To allegedly guarantee their users' safety, both Twitter and Facebook prohibit the publication of hate speech content on their virtual domains. By relying on the collaboration of their communities to report such material, they explicitly declare their commitment in removing harmful content and, when necessary, by suspending the accounts of abusive users (Facebook, Standards; Twitter, Conduct). More specifically, Twitter bans the promotion of

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<sup>14</sup> See the following section on the policies of social networking sites.

violence “on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or disease,” particularly in the form of “repeated and/or or [sic] non-consensual slurs, epithets, racist and sexist tropes, or other content that degrades someone” (Twitter, Conduct). These standards extend to paid advertising products for which the company prohibits “the promotion of hate content, sensitive topics, and violence globally” (Twitter, Ad Policy) against the just-mentioned categories.

Facebook has expressed a similar attention towards hate speech and potentially harmful behaviours by developing some more articulated policies. In its *Community Standards* (Facebook, Standards), the company affirms its commitment to remove hate speech “which includes content that directly attacks people based on their: race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, sex, gender, or gender identity, or serious disabilities or diseases” (Facebook, Hate Speech). In its guidelines, the company declares that sharing graphic images “for sadistic pleasure or to celebrate or glorify violence” (Facebook, Violence) is not permitted, and that therefore this material gets removed from the platform when reported. Similarly, it states that, following carefully reviews of reports, it removes: “credible threats of physical harm to [private] individuals” (Facebook, Direct Threats) and to public figures (Facebook, Public), “content that appears to purposefully target private individuals with the intention of degrading or shaming them” (Facebook, Bullying), as well as “content that threatens or promotes sexual violence or exploitation” (Facebook, Sexual).<sup>15</sup>

The development of such detailed standards is the result of the strong criticism received by the company for its loose control over the material shared by its users, especially around issues of gender-based hate speech. In fact, in 2013 Facebook admitted its failure in addressing the harassment of women and pledged to improve the monitoring of its platforms (Levine),

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<sup>15</sup> By “sexual violence and exploitation” Facebook means a broad category of harmful sexualised acts, like rape, child sexual abuse, prostitution, and (threats to) revenge pornography (Facebook, Sexual).

after its inefficiency was denounced in an online campaign signed by more than 100 women's movement and social justice organisations (Women Action Media, Letter). A similar – but even less spontaneous – admission came from Twitter in 2015, when, in an internal memo leaked to the media, its CEO Dick Costolo confessed to his colleagues: “we suck at dealing with abuse and trolls on the platform and we've sucked at it for years. It's no secret and the rest of the world talks about it every day. We lose core user after core user by not addressing simple trolling issues that they face every day” (Costolo in Tiku and Newton). He also declared that he felt deeply ashamed for how poorly the company had dealt with harassment during his tenure, and that he would take full responsibility for this failure (Costolo in Tiku and Newton).

Despite the admissions of their representatives, Twitter and Facebook have often failed to implement the above-cited policies. They have remained virtual aggregators of harmful content, and their alleged noble intents have not yet translated into a more effective supervision over online harassment. Social media users – especially but not only women – are still attacked through rampant hate speech and aggressive behaviours which often undermine their right to equal access to the cybersphere, and frequently damage their offline private life, as I show in the following chapters of my thesis.

Some institutions and social networking sites have lately tried to work together with the aim of reaffirming their commitment against cyber abuse. In this direction, some major SNSs, including Twitter and Facebook, have agreed with the European Commission on a *Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online*.<sup>16</sup> In this document, signed in May 2016, the parties undertook to provide reciprocal support in combating cyber hate in their respective domains. In particular, according to this Code of Conduct, SNSs affirmed their full commitment to effectively apply their policies, to monitor online hateful speech, and to provide

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<sup>16</sup> Text available in European Commission.

quick feedbacks to users' reports. Even though this document intended to be a way to tackle hate speech through "a collective responsibility and pride in promoting and facilitating freedom of expression throughout the online world" (European Commission 1), it has been criticised by some commentators who have read it as an act aimed at privatising the control over the nature and the online presence of contents, and as a potential violation to users' right to free speech (Saetta).

As this last example indicates, much disagreement still exists on whether and how hate speech should be regulated on the Web. As a result, many users of disadvantaged social groups still suffer from this problematic attitude, and women remain particularly exposed to various types of harassment in the virtual domain. The brief overview that I provided in this section shows that regulations and policies are already available for institutions and social networking sites to counter the continuous abuse of women online. As the British journalist Laurie Penny notes, "just like in the real world, however, there is a chasm of difference between what is technically illegal and what is tacitly accepted when it comes to violence against women, and the fight back is less about demanding new laws than ensuring existing ones are taken seriously" (Cybersexism). Therefore, in my opinion, the first step to overcome this reluctance to apply existing regulations is a full recognition of the pervasiveness and seriousness of this phenomenon. For this reason, in the remainder of my thesis, after reviewing academic literature on cyber hostility in computer-mediated communication and behavioural studies, I discuss the features and effects of online misogynistic discourse.

### **2.3 Online Hostility in Computer-Mediated Communication Studies**

This section presents an overview of the literature published within the broad and

interdisciplinary field of computer-mediated communication studies<sup>17</sup> (hereafter CMC studies) in the last three decades, during which the Web has evolved from its initial static stage into the worldwide interconnected and participatory platforms that we currently know. First, I explain the choice of reviewing contributions on trolling and flaming as academic framing of hate speech by explaining their similarities with hate speech from a terminological and semantic perspective. Then, as many of these studies have tried to provide a psychological analysis of the phenomenon, I move on to present the main findings in behavioural studies on the antisocial use of cyberspace. After that, a specific section explains the general evolution of CMC studies on trolling by dividing their development into three main stages, first pointing out the main criticalities that emerge from this literature review, and second exposing the challenges that still need to be addressed in scholarly research for a better understanding of trolling, especially when it has misogynistic content. Finally, at the end of this chapter, I identify the latest trends in the investigation of online misogyny by suggesting that a new, mixed form of literature on this phenomenon has lately emerged and that it provides important resources for a more systematic and precise analysis of misogynistic discourse on the Web.

As mentioned, in the following sections I refer to studies on flaming and trolling as synonyms for hate speech; this decision originates from two main and interrelated considerations. First, by reviewing the interdisciplinary literature on the misuse of the Internet, I noticed that, while the expression *hate speech* is largely used in law studies when seeking to update the legal framework against this phenomenon, contributions in human sciences like linguistics, sociolinguistics, psychology, and behavioural studies have tended to refer to it with the terms *flaming* and *trolling*. Second, the studies in the above-mentioned disciplines show that both *trolling* and *flaming* are often used to indicate – among other – disruptive behaviours

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<sup>17</sup> CMC can be defined as the interaction produced by humans when they communicate via any form of networked computer (Hardaker, Trolling 215) and, more broadly, via any type of electronic device.

intended to divert civil conversation on the Internet and to attack other users in different ways, through different tactics, and on different online platforms (e.g., forums, discussion groups, chats, blogs, social networks). Thus, as their uses show similarities and overlaps – even though the employment of *trolling* is a more complex subject which I present in a separate section later in this chapter – in my thesis I consider them as synonyms for hate speech. For this reason, the literature related to them is here reviewed as the theoretical framework for hate speech.

### 2.3.1 *What's in a Name? Terminological Issues of Trolling and Flaming*

As some scholars have pointed out (Jane, *What Flaming?* 66; McCosker 204), the international debate on online harassment has been largely conducted – both in academia and in the media – through the use of the terms *trolling* and *flaming*.<sup>18</sup> In fact, along with the growing pervasiveness of Web 2.0, disruptive conducts have become more and more common online and the words *troll* and *flame* themselves have turned into catch-all terms for many different negative online behaviours.<sup>19</sup> Given the widespread use of such expressions, here I provide a deeper analysis of their etymological origin, which I consider necessary for a better understanding of their connection with online hate speech.

#### *Flaming*

The origin of the term *flaming* is quite uncertain. Nonetheless, scholars tend to follow Guy Steele et al. in tracking its origin back to early hackers' communities on the Web to describe a way of speaking “rabidly or incessantly on an uninteresting topic or with a patently ridiculous attitude” (The Hacker's Dictionary 158). Through the decades, this behaviour has attracted the

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<sup>18</sup> For clarity, following Hardaker (Trolling, 239), I distinguish between *troller/flamer* (a person sending a negative, disruptive message), *troll/flame* (the message itself) and *trolling/flaming* (the act of posting such message), even if this distinction is often absent from several definitions which are quoted in this chapter.

<sup>19</sup> See Hardaker for a similar consideration on the use of *trolling* as “a catch-all term for any number of negatively marked online behaviours” (Trolling 224).



attention of scholars working in the CMC field, who have used this term to refer to different forms of uninhibited online communication. Thus, definitions of flaming have ranged from “the expression of strong and inflammatory opinions” (Siegel et al. 161) and “expressing oneself more strongly on the computer than one would in other communication settings” (Kiesler et al. 1130), to any kind of emotional expression toward someone else which relies on the use of superlatives (Lea et al. 99). In a more recent contribution aimed at studying communication styles on the video-sharing website YouTube, Peter Moor et al. define flaming as a behaviour “displaying hostility by insulting, swearing or using otherwise offensive language” (1536). This last definition seems to be more realistically up-to-date when contextualised into the spread of online harassing discourses that we witness nowadays. It also shows how, in this meaning, *flaming* can stand as a synonym for *hate speech* as they both refer to the same broad abusive phenomenon, and thus some scholarly publications on flaming can help in tracing research on online hate speech throughout a period during which Web 2.0 transformed contemporary societies – i.e., from the late 1980s until today.

### *Trolling*

Conversely, literature making use of the word *trolling* has not yet provided a working definition for it which clearly encompasses all behaviours and discourses typically found in hate speech. In fact, tracking the origin and the development of the use of *trolling* is far more difficult than for the case of *flaming*. First, it is very hard to pinpoint when it entered the online context. According to Mattathias Schwartz, Internet users started to adopt it in the late 1980s, while the Oxford English Dictionary reports a first use of the word only in 1992 (Oxford English Dictionary, Troll n.1).

In spite of its relatively recent online appearance, the origin of this word probably dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century; from the Scandinavian myth, it originally indicated giants, dwarfs, imps and supernatural creatures in general, which inhabited caves and subterranean dwellings

(Oxford English Dictionary, Troll n.2) and haunted the Vikings (Marche). According to the just-mentioned sources this is where the online use of the word originated, while others (Herring et al. 372; Binns 549) claim that it derives from the fishing technique in which fish is baited by dragging a lure through the water.

One of the first definitions of online troll appeared in 1994 in the Free On-Line Dictionary Of Computing (henceforth FOLDOC). FOLDOC described *troll* as “an electronic mail message, Usenet posting, or other (electronic) communication which is intentionally incorrect, but not overtly controversial.” Since the 1990s trolling has increased its presence in CMC, entering both the debate on online behaviours and dictionaries. Thus nowadays, definitions of *troll* can be found in most of contemporary English dictionaries. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, in computing slang, a troll(er) is “a person who posts deliberately erroneous or antagonistic messages to a newsgroup or similar forum with the intention of eliciting a hostile or corrective response” (Oxford English Dictionary, Troll n.1). Similarly, the Macquarie Dictionary states that a troll(er) is “someone who, protected by online anonymity, posts messages in a discussion forum, chat room, etc., which are designed to disrupt the normal flow of communication by being inflammatory or puzzling” (Macquarie Dictionary, Troll).

Over the last two decades, scholars have been trying to describe the phenomenon of trolling from different perspectives, elaborating definitions that are sometimes in contrast among each other. In 1999, studying online trolling behaviour and its effects, Judith Donath pointed out that “trolling is a game about identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most of the players. The troll attempts to pass as a legitimate participant, sharing the group’s common interests and concerns” (45). Meanwhile, other researchers have attempted to give a working definition of *trolling*, describing the nature, aims, and effects of this deceptive behaviour in cyberspaces. Some scholars have stressed the annoying nature of

trolling. For instance, Susan Herring et al. define it as an act aimed at luring others into useless circular discussion and describe a troller as someone who wants to interfere with the positive exchange of ideas in a given environment (e.g., a feminist online forum), shifting the dialogue into a confusing and fruitless conversation (Herring et al. 372). Some others have depicted it as the act of posting “incendiary comments with the express purpose of provoking an argument” (Cox). In more general and inclusive terms, *trolling* has been defined as an act resulting in the intentional disruption of useful online discussions through meaningless posts enjoying the resulting disharmony and conflict (Naraine).

Although all the above-mentioned definitions of *trolling* unveil important aspects of this disruptive online behaviour, they are not comprehensive of all the vicious features of online hate speech on social networks. For this reason, the widespread use of this term to refer to online harassment has been highly criticized by the American feminist activists Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn, both harassed for several years by so-called online trolls.<sup>20</sup> When asked about their experiences, they both denounced the dangerous sociocultural effects of confusing hate speech with trolling, bearing in mind the playful undertone highlighted by much trolling-related literature in the media and in scholarly research (see Sarkeesian, Stop; Quinn in Jason). During the sixth annual summit *Women in the World* organized by the New York Times, Sarkeesian affirmed that in her opinion the use of the word *trolling* is highly problematic, because “it reinforces the juvenile of all this [phenomenon]” and that, along with comments like “don’t feed the trolls,” “it’s just boys being boys,” and “it’s just the Internet,” it works “to make online harassment look normal” (Stop). Similarly, Quinn stated in a recent interview: “These aren’t troll[er]s. And it’s not online bullying. . . . These are people stalking, sending death threats, trying to get the cops to raid homes. These are criminals” (Quinn in

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<sup>20</sup> See Chapter 4.1, for the analysis of Sarkeesian’s case and for more information on Quinn’s online harassment.

Jason). I want here to suggest that even though I agree with Sarkeesian and Quinn in stressing the problematic use of *trolling* with reference to online harassment, the widespread implementation of troll-related terms in contemporary journalism makes it impossible to analyse hate speech without relying on these words, and that, in order to use this word properly, a new working definition of it is necessary. As Claire Hardaker wrote in *The Guardian*:

[there is a] lack of agreement over what the word troll means. It is being used to describe everything from playground insults, sick jokes, and deliberate insensitivity right through to threats of violence, rape and murder. . . . If we are to take the meaning of trolling to include everything from the merely irritating to the clearly illegal, then this definitional issue will only become more important as more cases are prosecuted. (Young Men)

As she notes, there is a pressing need to face this definitional and conceptual issue if we want to keep using trolling-related vocabularies to refer to contemporary online abusive misbehaviours, because the increasing trend of framing online misogynistic harassment through *trolling* shows the necessity to develop an updated and more inclusive definition of this term. For this reason, I suggest here a new academic definition of trolling which makes it possible to use the word with reference to hate speech: trolling is a CMC phenomenon which can take many forms and can result in a wide range of disruptive conducts. While in its mildest types, trolling can be interpreted as an annoying mockery among online users, in its most severe forms it consists in the harassment of others, with the ultimate goal to silence and subjugate them and, therefore, to reaffirm one's supremacy.

This new definition shows that trolling should be understood as a continuum of behaviours ranging from a type of bothersome – but rather innocuous – jest to a hostile stratagem suitable for maintaining social power asymmetries through online aggressive

conducts. Moreover, it underlines the importance of considering these more serious types of trolling as a device aimed at exercising control over disadvantaged groups, especially those who have historically challenged the unequal distribution of power within society. In these cases, trollers tend to justify – sometimes unconsciously – their behaviour as a legitimate “retaliation against a community that they feel has stripped away their identity and alienated them” (Suler and Phillips 277). Furthermore, mainstream gendered discourse tends to convey to many men a feeling of entitlement in a given sphere that is perceived as an exclusively male domain (Katz, Trolls); when individuals who have been traditionally excluded from the active participation in these spaces criticise the sociocultural mechanisms that regulate such spheres, they easily become target of aggressive trolling with severe consequences in their private lives on multiple levels, as I demonstrate by developing a new taxonomy of the material effects of online misogyny in Chapter 3, and by applying it in the analysis of my case studies. For this reason, thanks to my new definition, in the remainder of my thesis, terms like *troll*, *troller*, and *trolling* are used sometimes to explain and analyse different cases of hate speech.

### 2.3.2. *Psychological Elements of Online Antisocial Behaviours*

Researchers in the field of psychology and behavioural studies have been analysing the mechanisms of online deviant behaviours since the emergence of Web 2.0. For instance, in 1998, while investigating troll-like conducts, psychology scholars John Suler and Wende Phillips, used the acronym SNERT (Snot-Nosed Eros-Ridden Teenager), an expression which encompasses the behaviours of disruptive users who abuse others by violating social norms driven by the desire to receive attention, impact, control, and power.<sup>21</sup> Once in cyberspace, these aggressive drives can easily result in hate speech, especially to the detriment of the less

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<sup>21</sup> Even though the acronym refers explicitly to teenagers, it is used to describe the behaviour of users of any age because as Suler and Phillips highlight “often they are adolescents. If they aren’t, then they are regressed adults acting like adolescents” (275).

advantaged social categories like women.

Both in psychology literature and in media coverage of hate speech, the disinhibited behaviour encouraged by CMC has often been referred to as the Gyges effect (Hardaker, Young Men; Danna; Fox; Marche) whose origins date back to the myth of the Ring of Gyges, written by Plato in 380 BC. In Book II of his *Republic*, the Greek philosopher tells the mythological story of Gyges, a man who finds a magical ring that gives him the power to be invisible. He uses this power to seduce the queen, kill the king of Lydia, and become king himself. According to Plato, all human beings – whether good or evil – would be able to perform vicious deeds if protected by any sort of invisibility and thus being unidentifiable. More than two thousand years after Plato’s work, the Gyges effect has come to indicate online anonymity and its social repercussions, becoming a synonym for the so-called online disinhibition effect, according to which people tend to say and do things online in a more open and less restrained way than offline, whether trolling or not – and sometimes whether invisible or not. Along with an attention seeking motive, there are several other reasons which, once combined, can cause this antisocial behaviour.

In a 2004 paper, Suler describes such loosening of social inhibitions through six main interrelated factors which influence people’s online conduct:

- Dissociative anonymity. This expression refers to the possibility that people can hide and alter their identity without being recognized when they act in online fora.<sup>22</sup> As Jeremy Dean states, online anonymity is “similar to going out in a costume at night with a mask on to cover the face.” This feeling of disconnection from one’s personality in the ‘real’ world can trigger online misbehaviour. According to Suler, this is one of the most

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<sup>22</sup> For clarity, in this thesis I use the two plurals of *forum* (i.e., *fora* and *forums*) with two different meanings, that is *fora* to indicate public places in general (whether virtual or not), *forums* to refer to specific online discussion websites and message boards on SNSs.

influential elements which can cause the online disinhibition effect.

- Invisibility. While face-to-face communication is characterized by cues like eye contact and facial expressions, these emotional signals are absent in CMC. Due to this perceived obscurity, users do not have to worry about how they are perceived by the addressee(s) of their posts, as they do not have the possibility to see how others react to such interaction through body language. That gives them the possibility to act in a less sympathetic and more outspoken way than they would in an offline conversation.
- Asynchronicity. Considering that on some platforms CMC can come in many asynchronous forms, this type of communication implies a lack of instant feedback that, in some cases, can lead to “a kind of emotional hit-and-run” (Dean).
- Solipsistic introjection. It is an alteration of self-boundaries. In the absence of face-to-face cues, users can shape the perception of the others according to their personal needs and expectations. In Suler’s words: “cyberspace may become a stage, and we are merely players” (323).
- Dissociative imagination. Strictly linked to solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination consists in the creation of an imaginary world where the rules of the real offline world do not apply.
- Minimization of status and authority. The perceived lack of responsibility in the online fictional world can be worsened by the impossibility to perceive other users’ social statuses, along with the impression that the online space has no controlling authority, and this can lead to an easy violation of common sense rules of decency (Suler and Phillips 280) and reciprocal respect.

According to Suler, the disinhibition effect does not necessarily result in an aggressive behaviour. Indeed, he distinguishes a *benign disinhibition* from the *toxic* one (321), which depends on a user’s personality traits and individual predispositions: while the former enables

people to share their experiences without the fear of seeing their peers judging them, the latter fosters aggressive interpersonal behaviours, such as verbal harassment and hate speech. The impact of user's personality traits on their disruptive behaviour online has been confirmed by other psychology studies; for example, Erin Buckels et al. identified a positive association between trolling and the so-called Dark Tetrad of personality, a moniker used to taxonomise socially aversive personalities into four categories, i.e. narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism (Paulhus 421). They also concluded that “cyber-trolling appears to be an Internet manifestation of everyday sadism” (Buckels et al. 97).

Another important feature that must be taken into account while describing these behaviours is the process of deindividuation which CMC can trigger. This psychological process was described for the first time in the 1990s by Martin Lea and Russell Spears who named it the SIDE model, acronym for Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects. This model stresses the importance of social identity salience and suggests that when interacting online some users tend to lose their personal identity to act more in line with the group. This can lead to a vicious mob mentality (Fox), like in the case of the misogynistic attacks received by the already mentioned Zoe Quinn who defined her harassers as an anonymous, faceless hate mob (Jason).

The concept of facelessness implies a dissonance between the real offline world, populated by faces, and the supposedly fictional online arena, a world without faces. The link between the ability to see a face and the capability to recognize shared ethical behaviours and humanity is documented also by contemporary neuroscience studies which show that face is a key aspect in the development of intersubjectivity: through facial imitation we are able to perceive – and thus understand – the feelings of other human beings and be compassionate toward them (Iacoboni). In conclusion, as Stephen Marche notes “the spirit of facelessness is coming to define the 21<sup>st</sup> [century]. Facelessness is not a trend; it is a social phase we are



entering that we have not yet figured out how to navigate.”

As this overview shows, the recognition of strong psychological features in antisocial behaviours like hate speech is basically entrenched in the differences between face-to-face communication and online interactions. For this reason, CMC studies have long debated whether disruptive conducts are to be attributed to the very nature of cyberspace or if they are basically dependant on the sociocultural contexts of users. In order to solve this dilemma, many contributions were published in this field of research, generating different theoretical positions and understanding of the phenomenon, which I present below.

### *2.3.3. Three Waves of CMC Studies on Online Hostility*

In this part of my thesis, I provide an overview of scholarly works on online hostility through flaming-related contributions, by following the categorisation of these studies developed by Emma Jane (*Misogyny Online; Understanding E-bile; What Flaming?*). Jane suggests a useful classification of flaming research into three main waves which traces the diachronic evolution of these studies, and which shows how in each stage research questions have been addressed from different perspectives and have sometimes led to opposite findings, which have later been questioned by the subsequent wave.

Following Jane, thus, the first wave of research on flaming developed between the late 1980s and 1990s, that is during the early stage of Web 2.0, characterised by the birth of the first interactive platforms such as forums and chats. In this first stage, studies were specifically aimed at understanding whether flaming is an intrinsic element of online interaction or if it depends on the social context from which it generates and in which it takes place. Therefore, this wave saw the polarization between two different views on communication occurring through the technological mediation of computer devices: according to some, in fact, CMC consisted in an efficient and rational way of acting online, while according to others it provided platforms which fostered uninhibited, irrational, and disruptive behaviours. In turn, this debate

over the nature of CMC resulted in two different, polarised understandings of flaming itself: on one side those who considered flaming as a product of the technological medium – thus triggered by its features – and those who saw flaming as influenced by its social context. In one of the most important contributions which was published at the time and is still very influential, Martin Lea et al. investigated the existence of flaming and uninhibited behaviours in CMC and their alleged relation, concluding that online hostility is “radically context-dependent, [and] a comparatively rare occurrence in CMC, but that for various reasons specific instances are observed or remembered by large numbers of people thereby contributing to the illusion of universality” (109). Therefore, they confuted the idea of flaming as a conduct influenced by certain aspects of the online communication, and they suggested that examples of flaming are “normative behaviour that takes place within a social context that is pre-defined or communicated via the medium” (99-100). As mentioned, this debate has deeply influenced most CMC literature from the 1980s onward. In order to contextualise this discussion in our contemporary societies, I suggest here that, in an era where the ubiquity of Web 2.0 grants social networks a sort of increasing monopoly in shaping interactive communication, it is important to recognise that disruptive discourses are equally influenced by the very nature of contemporary CMC (see the psychological features outlined in the previous section) and by cultural norms which have long foregone Web 2.0, like the gender asymmetries and discrimination under analysis in this thesis.

Nevertheless, such debate over the roots and essence of flaming have evolved throughout the decades as scholars have tried to frame it from different perspectives. Following the diachronic development of this research field, in fact, it can be noticed that between the end of the 1990s and the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the academic debate over flaming created a second wave during which previous research was criticised for not being able to define flaming in a functional and systematic way (Jane, *What Flaming?* 68). For this reason, studies of the

second wave sought to theorise the phenomenon through complex working definitions and theoretical models aimed at classifying user-generated content. For instance, Anna Turnage elaborated a complex semantic differential scale called the “Message Invectives Scale” (43) which takes into consideration eight elements that the previous academic research considered as features of flaming, while David Kaufer attempted to study the phenomenon systematically by dividing flames into a coding hierarchy. As he explains: “at the top level of the hierarchy, flames are classified into categories [and] categories divide[d] into phrasal dictionaries” (8). For this reason, he developed two dictionaries – i.e., “Regular flame dictionaries and . . . High-flame dictionaries” (8) – with the aim of classifying flaming phrases according to their intensity. In this study, he also points out that flaming is not a disruptive behaviour in itself, but that it is “somewhat in the eye of the beholder and the beholder’s perceptions of the speaker and the context” (5), thus introducing a relativistic idea on the interpretation of flaming, and implying a certain extent of responsibility of the receiver or a third party in reporting it. Both the concept of interpretation by different parties and the development of a complex matrix to classify flaming phrases are present in one of the most quoted contribution of the second wave of CMC studies on this phenomenon, which is *Reconceptualizing ‘Flaming’ and Other Problematic Messages* by Patrick O’Sullivan and Andrew Flanagin. Starting from the consideration that previous studies had failed to understand flaming because they provided conceptualizations “based on a single perspective external to the interactants without consideration of interactional norms,” O’Sullivan and Flanagin elaborated a classification called the “interactional norm cube” (80). This model proposes a categorization of potential antisocial behaviours on the Web according to three interpretative variables of the online content: sender’s interpretation, receiver’s interpretation, and third party’s interpretation. While this norm cube is an admirable attempt to theorise the phenomenon at issue, its strong focus on multiple intentionality makes its implementation extremely problematic. Emma Jane

provides an in-depth analysis of these issues (What Flaming? 70) dividing them into three categories – i.e., practical, epistemic, and conceptual problems – that I present here and discuss in the following paragraphs, as some of them still pose severe challenges and limits for the research on online harassment.

The main practical problems of O’Sullivan and Flanagin’s interactional norm cube consist in the difficult task of identifying the flammers and in assessing the honesty of their real intentions, along with issues of the security of targets and the fact that cyber harassment presents the same methodological challenge of any other type of violence, i.e., it is a strongly underreported phenomenon. Moreover, the norm cube presents another practical limit shared by other studies of this wave, namely the resulting undercoding of data which may or may not be considered as instances of computer-mediated harassment. Similarly, the main epistemic problem which underlies this model is that it does not consider the sender’s possible lack of understanding of the real nature and consequences of their online actions. This aspect is particularly challenging in the study of online misogyny whose sociocultural origin is often not detected as a problem itself in patriarchal societies. The fact of giving veto power over the identification of flaming to its own producers is strictly linked to the third category that Jane names “conceptual problems” (What Flaming? 71): Internet users may in fact have difficulties in identifying a specific utterance as discriminatory, especially in a setting which sees a predominant misogynistic discourse (Herring, *Cyber 212*) and where abusive language has become “the new normal” (Mantilla, *Viral - Part 1*). Moreover, a second conceptual problem lies in the difficulty of providing a clear distinction between sender, receiver, and third party in online settings. In fact, in the highly interactive communication enabled by the Internet, roles can swap easily and very quickly, as a third party can shortly become a receiver or a sender, and vice versa. For this reason, the methodological rigour followed both by O’Sullivan and Flanagin and by most research of the second wave to analyse platforms like forums and emails

renders their application extremely difficult in this continuously evolving Web whose main features (e.g., the viral diffusion of content, the intersection between different platforms and communication styles) have changed enormously in less than ten years, thus making the impact of abusive discourses much more differentiated and serious.<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly, not only these systemic solutions failed to take into consideration the rapidly evolving nature of the Web, but they also generated a major shift in the way in which abusive CMC has later been framed. On a broader level of analysis, in fact, the obsession over a methodology suitable to frame a phenomenon that for its very nature is still difficult to capture with scientific rigour<sup>24</sup> changed the way in which the academic debate on online hostility was conceived, overlooking the social, ethical, and political issues of this phenomenon. I agree with Jane in considering this as a crucial change in the flaming-related scholarly debate and in seeing its impact on the following contributions of the third wave. This third stage started in the years of the spread of social networks like Facebook (especially since 2006), and which still

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<sup>23</sup> Among the properties of communication on SNSs which pose a challenge to its academic categorisation within online messaging systems, there is the difficulty in classifying it according to the two medium variables identified by Susan Herring for computer-mediated discourses, i.e. synchronicity and one/two-way transmission (Computer 614). In fact, the hybrid nature of SNSs, combined with the continuously rapid evolution of technologies and their use within society, makes it hard to classify them according to these variables. Like e-mail services, by definition social networks provide an asynchronous one-way transmission, because they store the posts sent to a user's profile or account; but at the same time, the increasing use of laptops and mobile devices to surf the Web makes the online communication on SNSs less and less asynchronous everyday. Moreover, while e-mails work as a private exchange of messages, posts on SNSs are often public and available for the generic public to read them even before the recipient logs into the online platform. These are important features that must be taken into consideration when analysing interactions on social networks like Facebook and Twitter.

<sup>24</sup> Especially in the case of hate speech. For methodological issues in analysing abusive online user-generated content, see Chapter 3.

nowadays drives the academic research. During this period, academic contributions have tended to ignore or overlook the phenomenon at issue. Not only references to flaming are rare or absent in some works (e.g., see the *International Handbook of Internet Research* by Hunsinger et al.), but some scholars have sought to confute its very existence, claiming that “the solution [to this debate] lies not with finding a more precise definition for flaming, but for extinguishing the term ‘flaming itself,’” because “flame claims and flames are not the result of cultural norm violations but instead provide a window into how participants negotiate cultural norms into and out of existence” (Lange). We can see how, even from a different perspective from Kaufer, and O’Sullivan and Flanagan, positions similar to the one of Patricia Lange easily produce a moral relativism and sometimes translate into a celebration or defence of flaming as a liberating act against a mainstream discourse, too often perceived as a form of punctilious and pointless political correctness. These views turn out to be not only tricky but also – and especially – dangerous when applied to the study of content expressing discriminatory and harmful beliefs, for which the identification of moral criteria is essential for any kind of research, including academic research. My argument here is not that the analysis of online harassment should be conducted through a moralising attitude, nor that an overt committed political perspective should prevail over the identification of a clear methodology, but that, when studying issues with strong social resonance, researchers cannot back out of ethical considerations on this problem in fear for being perceived as not scholarly enough, not rigorous enough, or not objective enough. Conversely, as I explain in Chapter 3, I suggest that specific methodologies need to be developed and explained with reference to specific studies, and that we must always pay attention to the ethical dimension of the discourses under analysis, in order not to surrender to moral relativism which may lead to a dangerous underplaying of pervasive hate and discrimination in our societies. In particular, with reference to misogynistic discourse, the just mentioned approach has produced several limits which are shared throughout the three

waves of CMC studies, and that I discuss below.

#### 2.3.4 *Limits of CMC Studies for Hostile Discourses of the Web*

There are several limits which show a direct link between the ethical dimension of online harassment and the methodologies of many flaming-related studies. First, as both Emma Jane (Misogyny Online) and Qing Li (Gender and CMC) have noted, not many studies have been conducted on the use of the Web to attack, intimidate, and silence women in male-dominated online environments. Such recognition of the gendered dimension of online harassment seems to be present only in the works of feminist scholars (Herring, Freedom; Herring, Cyber; Herring, Johnson and DiBenedetto) or in the few studies particularly designed to analyse online gender-based discriminations (e.g., see Soukup). Conversely, most CMC literature aimed at providing overall understandings of the functioning of flaming and trolling (e.g., Turnage; Alonzo and Aiken; Spears and Lea; Thompsen and Foulger) have failed to recognise the pervasive reliance of abusive behaviours on misogynistic content. Moreover, the lack of understanding of how gender asymmetries work both online and offline is particularly visible in those studies relying on reception issues. Particularly, in exposing the strengths of their interactional norm cube, O'Sullivan and Flanagin claim that, by taking into consideration multiple points of view (i.e., a true flame is that content considered abusive by the sender, the receiver, and an alleged third party), their model is helpful in detecting not only *true* flames but also *true* cases of other types of offline abuse – like sexual harassment – and, therefore, in unmasking fake allegations of assault. In their opinion, this application can be possible because their study “confronts directly the crucial issue of the role of third-party observations and assessment in sexual harassment” (88); hence, they conclude their research paper stating that:

Applying the present framework, examples of harassment (sexual or otherwise) would parallel examples of flaming. As in true flames, true harassment would require the intent to harass on the sender's part, the

perception of harassment by the receiver, and third-party (for example co-worker, job supervisor, judge) perception of the action as harassment. Just as there can be ‘missed flames’, ‘failed flames’, and ‘inside flames’, there might be ‘missed harassment’, ‘failed harassment’, and ‘inside harassment’. The lack of intent to harass directs attention toward misalignment of norm sets, which represents various sources of miscommunication with consequences distinctive from those appropriate for actual forms of harassment. (88)

The above-quoted statement is particularly problematic for the general way in which it frames harassment, especially for the weight it gives to the intent of the sender. The veto power provided by O’Sullivan and Flanagin to the sender and to a third party not only belittles the experience of women who have been harassed in online/offline contexts, but it also relies on considering reports of sexual assaults as a *mare magnum* where cases of true violence may be lost among others of fictional or dubious nature. For this reason, the model proposed by O’Sullivan and Flanagin results once again not only problematic but basically dangerous when contextualised in patriarchal societies which have historically downplayed women’s experience in different types of gender-based harassment, first by demanding visible proof of the abuse in cases of rape,<sup>25</sup> and then by questioning their perceptions through external opinions and through attempts of discursive reconstruction of sexual consent which still nowadays sometimes risk to deny a defendant’s accountability on the base of miscommunication models

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<sup>25</sup> An example of the historical victimisation of assaulted women in trials is the requirement of utmost resistance as a necessary criterion for the crime of rape in Canada and the USA until the 1960s (Estrich 34). A similar attitude was long present in the Italian legal system whose top appeals court still in 1999 acquitted a man from the accusation of rape because the victim was wearing tight jeans (see Owen), a ruling reversed only in 2006 by the Italian Court of Cassation (Verdict n. 22049/2006).



between women and men (Ehrlich 150).

Another problem observed not only in O’Sullivan and Flanagan’s paper but also in most flaming-related CMC studies is the ubiquitous focus on the dynamics of the act of flaming, to the detriment of the analysis of the discourse used to perform it. In fact, in this broad and kaleidoscopic literature, only few contributions (see Jane, Back; Herring, Rhetorical; Vrooman), have attempted to critically study this kind of discourse and to analyse the negotiation of both individual and social identities in flaming. Interestingly, even amongst these few examples, only those overtly gender-oriented focus on the experience of targeted women. For example, Steven Vrooman recognises some forms of flaming as harassment used by men to perform their identity to the detriment of women who enter the traditionally male-dominated cyberspace, but the overall tenor of his study is the attention to the “rhetorical negotiation of [male] self and community” (65) enabled by flaming. Even though this shifted focus and the consideration of flaming as a form of “the art of invective” (51) pose some ethical and conceptual problems for the study of online misogyny, Vrooman’s attention to the use of flaming to push women away from the Internet resonate the findings of other scholarly contributions, in particular Jane (Back) and Herring (Rhetorical) who have investigated the rhetoric of online harassment coming to similar conclusions on its gendered nature.

While I present Jane’s findings in Chapter 3 and discuss them in the critical analysis of my selected case studies, it is worth noticing here that those scholarly contributions which investigated the rhetoric of online harassment came to similar conclusions on its gendered nature, even though they were conducted in different periods and thus on different kinds of online platforms. For example, Susan Herring (Rhetorical) compared gender harassment that occurred on two different online fora – a synchronous recreational Internet Relay Chat and an asynchronous semiacademic Listserv discussion group (151) – and found that, even though

“gender is expressed and oriented to differently in the two modes of CMC”<sup>26</sup> (163), when cases of online harassment occur, their rhetorical dynamics seem to follow always the same pattern – namely “(non)provocation, harassment, resistance, escalation, compliance” (164) – and are aimed at silencing female users or forcing them to modify their original active engagement in different sorts of discussions. Moreover, Herring notes that

despite the fact that academic listservs are overwhelmingly populated by highly educated adults who participate through e-mail accounts from institutions that have official policies against harassment, some men regularly browbeat women in discussion lists and intimidate them via their gender identities . . . in ways that are disturbingly reminiscent of the practices of adolescent boys. (Rhetorical 164)

The presence of abusive gender-based language in academic fora is interesting: first, it confirms that gendered harassment does not depend on an individual’s level of education or social class, but conversely that it works in a more pervasive and deeper way than any other axis of discrimination – e.g., class discrimination and social position – as explained in Chapter 3 of this thesis. Second, it reminds the paternalistic and almost jeering underplaying faced by feminist scholars when they report instances of online misogyny to some of their male colleagues, as Emma Jane exemplifies in her book *Misogyny Online*. She recounts the comment received from a male colleague after speaking about the sexist harassment and rape threats she had received during her previous work as a journalist:

Another invited speaker, a professor far more senior than myself, spoke up to explain (some might say ‘mansplain’) that the real problem was not the material I had received but my reaction to it. His public advice to me

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<sup>26</sup> The main difference noted by Herring is that female participants seem to engage more in cooperative flirtation on IRC while the main activity of women on the listserv group is discussion (Rhetorical 163).

was to suggest I develop some resilience (because apparently continuing to write a weekly column through a 14-year rape-threat-a-palooza was not resilience enough). His final words of wisdom were: ‘Toughen up, princess.’ (Ch. 4)

I decided to quote Jane’s first-hand experience because this kind of advice is very common among male commentators, both in academia and media report on misogynistic hate speech, and they result in the repetition of discourses aimed at blaming the victims. My case here is that such attitude may be directly linked to the trend observed in much academic literature which has conspicuously legitimised the intentions of flammers, and that this approach can easily translate into the overlooking of the gendered nature of flaming that I mentioned in the previous paragraphs.

A final problem potentially linked to the gendered dimension of online harassment is the discomfort that several authors have had in quoting explicit stances of aggressive flaming. Many scholars, in fact, do not provide examples of the type of texts they interpret as flames, especially when sexualised and graphic contents appear. For instance, while Lea et al. label these comments as “messages deemed in ‘bad taste’ by the authorities” (90), Kaufer talks about “XXX words not fit for family audiences” (13). The decision of censoring the data and not providing directly explicit quotes may respond to some sort of academic modesty, but it results in a major methodological issue, that is the difficulty “to divine whether scholars are even addressing the same sorts of communications” (Jane, *What Flaming?* 73). Additionally, when examples are provided, they seem to differ very much from the kind of harassment that targets many women nowadays. For example, Thompsen and Foulger recognise that extreme forms of flaming contain “profane antagonism [through which] participants engage in overtly hostile, belligerent behavior toward each other, using profanity, pompous tirades, and ‘cheap shot’ arguments in questionable taste” (229), but they support their findings by providing instances

like “Let me ask you, Dr. Ski, is your diploma from a cereal box?:-)” and “Snow Pro, you obviously don’t know crap about skiing, so why not drop the act?:-)” (243). Such utterances may disturb the exchange of ideas on a certain topic of conversation, but the absence of graphic and threatening language makes it look like an innocuous and benevolent mockery when compared to the highly violent content of much gendered online harassment, like “I’ll drink your blood out of your cunt after I rip it open” (available in Sarkeesian, Tweet 27 August 2014).

In conclusion, as an overall consideration on the literature here reviewed, I agree with Jane (What Flaming? 72) that all these problems, especially those related to the violent gendered nature of many online discourses, may have been some of the reasons why the third wave of studies on flaming in CMC shows a lack of interest towards misogynistic flaming or tends to confute the very existing of this phenomenon. Hence, below I suggest a link between these issues and a newborn trend in the contemporary interpretation of online hostility.

#### *2.3.5 A New Trend: The Birth of Feminist Academic Activism 2.0*

To complete the review of CMC literature, I present a trend that I have detected in the latest coverage of online misogyny both on SNSs and in international media. My case here is that unexpectedly the problems I pinpointed in the previous section have also had a positive consequence. In fact, I suggest that such limits and pitfalls have in some way fostered the development of a newly growing literature made up of mixed forms of contemporary contributions, which are chronologically ascribable to the third wave but which show a very different nature and scope. Since approximately 2013, many women working in different fields – especially journalism and activism – have started to produce contributions aimed at denouncing and analysing the phenomenon of sexist harassment present on Web 2.0.<sup>27</sup> More

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<sup>27</sup> Even if in 2007 the harassment of the tech blogger Kathy Sierra became famous in the USA (see Citron, *Hate Crimes - Part 1*), probably the first report of online misogynistic attack which gained international resonance worldwide is the case of the British scholar Mary Beard in 2013 (see Day).

specifically, a significant number of these contributions focuses on the discursive mechanisms of online misogyny and provides visible proof of it through first-hand experiences, data, and testimonies. It is the case of those women who have become targets of hate speech for actively inhabiting the cybersphere, and who have decided to stand up against this abuse by publicly denouncing it through different types of contributions, like books, newspaper articles, debates, web-based projects, and guidelines to explain, fight, and prevent online harassment.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, this new wave of feminist activism was very helpful for several scholars (see Citron, *Hate Crimes*; Jane, *Misogyny Online*; Mantilla, *Viral*) who are trying to steer academic attention towards online gendered hate speech. By recounting their own experiences or cases that have occurred to other women, in the last few years these researchers have attempted to explain the features of online misogyny and its implications in different scholarly fields, producing ground-breaking analyses of this pervasive phenomenon.

While this trend in academic research has lately developed and spread in several English-speaking countries like the United States, Australia and the UK, a focus on online misogynistic discourse is still consistently absent among scholars working within the Italian academia, where some contributions on antisocial use of the Web can be found in legal and

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<sup>28</sup> As for books, see Warren; Penny (*Cybersexism*); Ford (*Fight*); and Jeong. Similarly, examples of newspaper articles can be found in the production of several feminist journalists for *The Guardian*, like Jessica Valenti (e.g., *Insults*) and Laura Bates (e.g., *Online Abuse*). Among the most interesting public panels on online harassment there are: the speeches of Anita Sarkeesian at TEDxWomen (Sarkeesian, TEDxWomen) and XOXO Festival (Sarkeesian, XOXO Conference), and the conversation on cybersexism between Emma Jane, Laurie Penny, and Clementine Ford (Festival of Dangerous Ideas) during the 2015 edition of the Festival of Dangerous Ideas in Sydney. Relevant examples of web-based projects against online misogyny are Anita Sarkeesian's *Feminist Frequency*, and Women Media Center's *Speech Project*, chaired by the actress Ashley Judd and directed by the journalist Soraya Chemaly. Both these websites also provide helpful guidelines against Internet attacks (*Feminist Frequency, Speak*; *Women's Media Center, Tools*).

psychology studies (see Martoni and Palmirani; Mazzoni et al.; Mazzoni, Cannata and Baiocco), but where research focused on the discursive and gendered dimensions of hate speech is basically absent. While the reasons of this academic vacuum would need a deep analysis which goes beyond the aims of my thesis, I would argue that the lack of a systematic articulation of gender studies in Italian universities may be one of the reasons why Italian academia has not yet developed this kind of interdisciplinary research, and that perhaps for this reason contributions on the actual presence of misogynistic hate speech against Italian women come mainly from the media coverage of this phenomenon. Furthermore, as the critical analysis of my case studies demonstrates in the next chapters, while Australian and American media tend to report cases of harassment against previously unknown women, Italian newspapers usually only denounce abuse received by famous women, like the on-going online attacks to the President of the Chamber Laura Boldrini, who was the first to publicly speak up against this phenomenon in Italy back in 2014 (Davies).

Regardless of these differences among national press coverage and scholarly research, considering the trend at a broad international level, I suggest here that these mixed (auto)biographical recounts of online misogyny have generated a Feminist Academic Activism 2.0 – i.e., the cyber version of what Michelle Lazar calls “feminist analytical [academic] activism” (145) – which I explain in the next chapter, and which is essential to study the discursive strategies, sociocultural origins, and repercussions of this phenomenon. Indeed, these contributions, despite their origin in grassroots activism, have unconsciously overcome the problems of the three waves of CMC studies, and they have instinctively complied with four of the nine solutions suggested by Emma Jane (What Flaming? 80-81) to solve such academic pitfalls, in particular the need to adopt a broader definition of flaming to avoid its undercoding, to focus on new and different research questions (e.g., by investigating the consequences of online harassment), to understand the evolving nature of online platforms, and finally to quote

explicit examples of abuse. These extra-academic contributions have not lost themselves in complex working definitions, and they have provided what much scholarly literature previously failed to recognise, namely the identification of the strong gendered nature of this discourse through a primary focus on the experience of targeted women and through clear examples of online abuse. Thus, in conclusion, this last issue has overcome the problem of unspeakability of harassment on social media. It also succeeded in recognising that different abusive acts – like gendered cyberbullying and doxxing – are tactics whose common denominator is the misogynistic prejudice that persists in our societies. For this reason, these new contributions have been the most relevant references for my research and they have helped me develop a specific methodology for the creation of my database and for the critical analysis of its case studies, as the next chapter explains.





## Chapter 3. Methodology

This chapter explains the methodology that I developed for my thesis. It is divided into two main sections: in the first one I discuss the criteria that I followed to build my database, pointing out some criticalities in the collection of user-generated content, while in the second part I provide a theoretical overview of the approach I use for the qualitative analysis of my case studies.

### 3.1 Building a Database of Online Gender-Based Hate Speech

Given the intersection between the nature of hate speech and the type of platforms where it occurs, a first concern in my research was the development of a methodology suitable to create the dataset of the thesis. In this section I explain the criteria for the data selection and the main methodological challenges of my research in creating a web-based dataset.

#### 3.1.1 *Criteria for the Selection of the Data*

Reflecting on the opportunities and challenges of using user-generated content (hereafter UGC) for a critical discourse analysis, Gerlinde Mautner notes that “the size of the web creates an *embarras de richesses*, which poses a challenge in its own right” and thus “principled criteria for choosing what should go into the corpus need to be developed and applied, with sensitivity to the requirements of the project at hand” (815). For this reason, as a first step of the methodology, I chose to take into consideration cases against women who are located in three specific countries: Australia, Italy, and the United States. Several are the reasons of this choice: first of all, it was motivated by the attention given by media to the problem of hate speech in the selected countries – a rather high but differentiated coverage which results comparing the three nations, as the analysis of the case studies shows in the next chapters. Another important reason was the recent developments of academic research on online misogyny in the US (see

Mantilla, Viral; Citron, Hate Crimes) and Australia (see Jane, Misogyny Online; Henry and Powell). On the other hand, Italy was chosen to fill the lack of studies focused on the Italian context.

Then, I selected the platforms I was going to use for the collection of my data. It is widely known that the cybersphere hosts nowadays a plethora of social networks, and that the very presence of fora which enable users' active participation is the core element of Web 2.0 (Singel). In this digital landscape, I decided to focus my attention on Facebook and Twitter because of their significant spread worldwide and particularly in the selected countries. According to a 2016 report ranking the spread of the most used social networks (Kemp), Facebook is by far the most popular, with more than 1.5 billions of active users all over the world, while Twitter counts almost 320 million users. According to the same report, 41% of active users declared to have a Facebook account in both Australia and the USA, and 33% in Italy, while national percentages for Twitter are as follows: 17% in the USA, 12% in Italy and 10% in Australia.

Once the platforms were selected, I set a suitable timeframe for the collection of the data: posts were collected from January 2014 to November 2015. Given the difficulties of collecting online data (see Mautner), in order to create a coherent dataset, I decided to focus my attention on cases of hate speech against individual women reported by the victims on their online accounts and/or to national and international newspapers, and on misogynistic trends targeting women as a social group in general (groups, pages, hashtags, etc.).

Nevertheless, several methodological challenges remained as deeply entrenched in the nature of Web 2.0.

### *3.1.2 Difficulties in Collecting and Storing Data from Social Networks*

Several difficulties emerged during the collection of online data expressing misogynistic hate speech. As previously mentioned, a major problem in the analysis of web-based data is the

volume of the Web which can be considered “as both blessing and curse” because “the size of the web and thus, in linguistic terms, the number of words it contains, is notoriously difficult to estimate, and figures are invariably vague” (Mautner 815). It is therefore not only extremely difficult but basically impossible to give an overall account of all the material of the Web.

A second problem is the ephemeral and dynamic nature of UGCs. Indeed, this kind of contents can travel easily cross-platform among different social networks, blogs and websites, and they can be suddenly deleted both by users and social networking sites, especially if they are considered a violation of the platform’s policies. This is especially true for posts expressing hostility and/or hatred, because, as already discussed in Chapter 2, companies are supposedly trying to solve the problem of hate speech by removing such contents. For this reason, retrieving data which prove the existence of hate speech on the Web is particularly challenging. Furthermore, it usually depends on what the targets and/or the media want to show when exposing the harassment. The general trend that I noticed is that women targeted by online misogyny tend to show the abuse experienced “in its unexpurgated entirety” (Jane, Back 559), while many newspapers tend to report on it in more general terms.

This aspect raises another methodological challenge which resides in the storing of the data. As Gerlinde Mautner highlights, the quality of web-based data requests the researcher to convert a dynamic text into a static one to make the research replicable (Mautner 818). At present, this problem can be – at least partially – solved with the help of software for qualitative analysis of UGC like Nvivo 10 and Nvivo 11 which enable researchers to store online data like Facebook comments, tweets, and LinkedIn group discussions. Thanks to a web browser extension called Ncapture, these data can be easily downloaded as dataset in a .nvcx format, and then imported, consulted, and analysed through the Nvivo software.

Although this kind of software provides an innovative tool for those interested in the analysis of the Web, two main criticalities remain for the research here at issue. The first

problem is due to technical aspects of the software, inasmuch I noticed that the Ncapture extension is still not able to *capture* all the contents of Facebook pages which contain hundreds of comments (like profiles of politicians and other influential people); in these cases, Ncapture automatically saves the file ‘as pdf’ and not ‘as dataset,’ capturing only a few comments of the hundreds which are present online, thus creating a partial dataset. The second problem is raised by the specific lifespan of many hateful posts online. As already mentioned, sometimes such contents tend not to stay online for a long time after they are reported, especially when they express death and/or rape threats through extremely explicit and violent imagery. As a result, the almost entire database of my research is constituted by screenshots saved in image file formats like PNG and JPEG. For these reasons, I decided not to use the Nvivo software and to store the screenshots in traditional folders. This decision shows that when working with UGC expressing hate speech, it is still necessary to follow the generic advice given by Gerlinde Mautner for the storing of web-based data: “At present, the easiest (and frustratingly traditional) way out of this dilemma for the individual researcher is to ‘freeze’ at least core sections of one’s web data in paper-based or permanent electronic form (through screen shots, for example, or by saving html pages locally using the browser’s ‘save as’ facility)” (818).

Regardless of these limits, by following the above-described criteria it is still possible to create a coherent dataset for a qualitative analysis of hate speech aimed at identifying discursive strategies of a form of discrimination which has a deep impact on women’s lives and on their participation in the public cybersphere.

### *3.1.3 Results of the Data Collection: the Database*

Following the criteria identified and taking into consideration the difficulties faced while gathering the data, the database resulted in 28 cases, as shown in Appendix 3. These cases are divided as follows:

- 14 cases against women located in the USA

- seven cases against women located in Australia
- seven cases against women located in Italy

As mentioned, the table in Appendix 3 sums up the cases identified. It indicates each woman's job or profile (e.g., journalist, feminist activist, Anti-Islamophobia advocate), the period in which the online harassment started, and the main bibliographical reference for each case.<sup>1</sup> Considering that online hate speech presents recurring discursive strategies, and that an analysis of these features in all 28 cases would have resulted repetitive, I selected two cases for each country, and for each of these cases I provide a feminist Critical Discourse Analysis.<sup>2</sup> In particular, for one specific case study, I had the possibility to contact the target via e-mail, and she provided me her own database of the abusive contents that she had received online. I develop the critical analysis of her harassment in Chapter 5.2.

As the MLA Style Guide provides information only on how to cite tweets but not Facebook posts, for a more consistent classification of sources I use the following bibliographical reference system in my analysis. When the online reference to a post quoted is available, I provide it through a specific bibliographical indication which specifies the platform on which I retrieved the material (i.e., Tweet or FB post)<sup>3</sup> and its publication date. Then, for those contents that were removed from SNSs, I indicate the bibliographical references of newspaper articles where they appeared, or the screenshots of this material reposted by targets on their

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<sup>1</sup> As the table in Appendix 3 shows, I also identified a collective case of image-based sexual abuse (i.e., the *Celebrity Nude Photo Leak*), as well as the following misogynistic trending hashtags: *#YesAllWomen*, *#jadapose*, *#NonContaComeFemminicidio* (i.e., *#ItDoesntCountAsFemicide*). Even though I acknowledge that trends can travel worldwide, in the table they are classified according to the country in which they were originally discovered by media press.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 3.2, for the features of feminist Critical Discourse Analysis.

<sup>3</sup> Where FB stands for Facebook.

social network accounts. If contents were removed and they had not appeared in any other source, I only specify whether I collected them on Facebook or Twitter.

In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, for each case study I provide a table which sums up the number of UGCs that I retrieved on Facebook and Twitter, and, when useful, a breakdown of the data which shows the nature of data analysed (e.g., text- or image-based content) and the types of platforms where the abuse occurred (e.g., Twitter profiles, Facebook pages, Facebook private groups, Facebook Messenger). In addition, I also discuss the tactics used to harass these women and the effects that online harassment has had on the targets, through a model that I developed to study the material consequences of online misogynistic hate speech. This model is an important contribution that will hopefully guide future research on this phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> As Chapters 4, 5, and 6 show, my study proves how different forms of hate speech (e.g., misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and racism) are strongly present in online communication and how they are deeply intertwined in technology-facilitated harassment.

#### *3.1.4 On Translating UGCs from Italian into English*

As mentioned above, my thesis also includes the analysis of the online abuse experienced by two Italian women. Therefore, in that specific section (i.e., Chapter 6), I provide both the Italian original posts and my own translation of this material into English. Like some posts of the American and Australian case studies, the Italian source text is sometimes framed in screenshots, cartoons, memes, and image macros.<sup>5</sup> In these cases, my English translation appears right after the visual elements. The inclusion of English translations in my thesis is

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<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 3.2.3. for my taxonomy of the consequences of online misogynistic hate speech.

<sup>5</sup> An image macro is “a captioned image that consists of a picture and a witty message or a catchphrase” (Rosado). If shared online by a great number of users, it becomes a meme (Gil). Therefore, in my thesis, I use the term *meme* only for those image macros that have become very popular online, and that sometimes have been used also against other targets.

aimed at guiding the English reader in a better understanding of the content under analysis. For constraints of space and given the scope of my thesis, in Chapter 6 I do not discuss all the singular terminological choices of my translation. Nevertheless, when UGCs contain specific cultural references that would sound obscure to a non-Italian speaker, I provide a more detailed clarification of the use of certain expressions in the Italian cultural context, and I also explain the strategy that I adopt to translate them into the target text. Overall, I do not provide a mere general translation of the meaning of the UGCs that I quote, because this approach would generate a partial and non-reliable target text, and therefore it would invalidate my critical analysis of its discourse. Conversely, my translation strategy is aimed at providing in the target text all the elements of Italian original posts, with particular attention to the structure of their clauses, to their specific rhetoric, and to their tone.

More specifically, as for the structure of the sentences, I translate faithfully active and passive voices. This operation is essential to develop a valid CDA which investigates how harassers reaffirm their agency and supremacy in active sentences, and how they build female subalternity by positioning the target as the subject of passive sentences. The accurate translation of the sentence structures in the target text is also pivotal to classify posts into different categories of aggressive communication.<sup>6</sup>

Another significant aspect to consider when translating this sort of text is the reproduction of explicit content and of the specific rhetoric used in gendered verbal harassment. In this thesis, my translation approach is aimed at showing harmful speech “in its unexpurgated entirety” (Jane, Back 558). Therefore, explicit content is not censored in the target text, and it is translated with the most similar English expression that conveys the same aggressive, hypersexualised, and degrading meaning of the source text. Through a careful selection of

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<sup>6</sup> For this categorisation I follow Poggi et al. See Chapter 6.2.

terms, I attempt to recreate the discursive strategies employed by online harassers to reaffirm misogynistic and heteronormative ideologies, and to ascribe a spoiled and subaltern identity to the targets. Similarly, I also pay attention to the use of wordplays and neologisms to humiliate and deride the targeted women, and I provide more detailed explanation for some of these words in specific notes. Moreover, in the target text, I also reproduce typos and I attempt to recreate slang expressions and users' grammatical errors.

Finally, to show the aggressiveness of the Italian UGCs, I also attempt to translate the general tone of the posts at issue, by faithfully reproducing their punctuation, capitalisation, use of imperatives, exclamatory sentences, interjections, and rhetorical questions. Therefore, even though for constraints of space an extensive discussion of my translation strategy cannot be included in this thesis, the above-outlined approach enables me to develop a valid study of Italian UGCs in translation, following the tenets of feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, which joins the theoretical issues of critical discourse studies and feminist theories, as discussed below.

### **3.2 Developing a Feminist Discourse Praxis for the Content of Social Networks**

Another challenging aspect of my research was the selection of a methodological approach suitable to analyse the data not only linguistically but also in their sociocultural context. Considering that the aim of this research is to investigate online misogynistic hate speech and its consequences, and considering that social media can be interpreted as “an emerging frontier where new forms of social relations [cause] power differences and other forms of unacceptable social practices” (Albert and Salam 1), I decided to use a feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter feminist CDA) approach to study this online phenomenon. For this reason, after a brief overview of CDA, this section provides a description of the main theoretical tenets of feminist CDA, with a focus on the analysis of contents of social networks.



### 3.2.1 Brief Overview of Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (also CDA) can be defined as a “problem-oriented, interdisciplinary research movement” (Fairclough and Wodak), characterized by a critical and multimodal approach towards the study of discourse. It acknowledges the intrinsic, interrelated, and dialectical relationship between language and society which reciprocally influence and shape each other in a two-way relationship. In fact, as Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak write: “discourse is socially *constitutive* as well as socially shaped: it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people.” The social influence discourse has in naming, conceptualizing, and making meaning of the world, implies that it is also a suitable tool for representing and performing power and social inequalities, and for maintaining control over disadvantaged social groups. Thus, the aim of CDA is to make such power relationships visible through a critical analysis. Moreover, CDA questions discrimination across different axes of inequalities – such as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class – analysing the discursive mechanisms through which power and social dominance is represented in society (van Dijk, Principles), with particular attention to the public domains in which power is negotiated and expressed (e.g., mass media, the political and institutional discourse, the discourse of economics, education, the work sector). In doing so, this approach defines power in terms of control; dominant groups exercise their power in society by imposing ideologies, which usually remain hidden and, thus, hegemonic (Gramsci). According to Antonio Gramsci, hegemony is gained when dominance is presented as general consensus: in this way the dominated part of society accepts dominance, acting in the interest of the dominant one out of their free will. Thanks to hegemony, ideologies become naturalised – i.e., perceived as non-ideological common sense. In these cases, dominated members of society internalise a socially constructed illusion of orderliness, that is “the feeling [...] that things are as they should be, i.e., as one would normally expect them to

be” (Fairclough 31). For these reasons, CDA is an engaged and committed social science with an emancipatory agenda whose critique in analysing social wrongs and in proposing alternative to right them is based on values (Wodak in Kendall).

The above-mentioned core elements of CDA make this approach particularly suitable to study gender asymmetries and gender-based discrimination in societies and for the development of a feminist CDA of social media.

### *3.2.2 Main Aspects of a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis for the Web*

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis can be defined as a form of CDA which brings together the theoretical issues of critical discourse studies and feminist theories. As Michelle Lazar points out:

the aim of feminist critical discourse studies, therefore, is to show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities. (142)

As feminist CDA seeks to investigate the complex discursive workings of gender-based asymmetries in patriarchal ideological systems and their resulting material consequences, I chose this approach to analyse my database for three main reasons. First, because it defines gender as a social category which intersects other axes of social identities but which works in a more pervasive way than other systems of oppression, as it is explained below. Even though the consideration of patriarchy as an ideological structure is already embedded in CDA, it is important to add the *feminist* specificity of this approach, in order to stress the influence that feminist studies have had in recognising gender as a fundamental element of social identities. Second, the overt social emancipatory goal of the feminist CDA is in line with the critique of the misogynistic discourse under analysis in this thesis and is useful for unveiling the

phenomenological effects of gender-based discrimination and to propose alternative ways to overcome such asymmetries in societies. While these two reasons are more linked to the overtly gender-oriented perspective of feminist CDA, the third one lies in the multimodal dimension of critical discourse studies in general; such aspect, in fact, is particularly suitable for the analysis of user-generated contents of social networks, characterised by the coexistence of relatively short texts with images, videos and hyperlinks.

After outlining the reasons why I chose the feminist CDA approach, following Michelle Lazar's suggestions for a feminist discourse practice, I discuss three elements which are in my opinion at the core of feminist CDA, namely: feminist analytical activism, gender as ideological structure, and the complexity of gender and power relations.

#### *Feminist Analytical Activism*

An important feature of feminist CDA lies in the coexistence of a negative and positive critique of discourse and it has a major consequence for long-standing issues within feminist communities. With regard to this twofold aspect, feminist CDA implies a negative critique of the patriarchal social order which is then challenged through a positive critique aimed at fostering a social transformation towards a more equal society. This emancipatory agenda generates a sort of *academic activism* (Lazar 146), beneficial to overcoming a longstanding issue which has characterised feminism in some western societies in the last three decades, i.e., the polarization between academics and activists, the former associated with theory and the latter with practice. More specifically, this element is particularly valuable in the analysis of online misogyny because it enables academics to help women who have been targeted with online hate speech, by conceptualising this type of harassment – a first and necessary step to develop cultural tools to dismantle it.

#### *Gender as Ideological Structure*

From a more theoretical perspective, feminist CDA is based on the recognition of gender as an

ideological structure. To consider the concept of ideology – originally developed within Marxist theory – from a gender perspective means to acknowledge the existence of “a structure that divides people in two classes, men and women, based on a hierarchical relation of domination and subordination, respectively” (Lazar 146). In this order based on sexual difference, women are subordinated and less visible than men, through what the Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell calls the *patriarchal dividend*, that is “the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women” (Masculinities 79). An example of this pervasive androcentrism is the harassment women still face when they enter the public sphere – both in real life and online – as they leave the private space where they have been traditionally relegated. This instance shows that, despite feminist activism and theories, society has tended to maintain a gender ideology which is structural and hegemonic. This implies that the rigid and asymmetrical gendered division of society is presented as natural and taken for granted by both women and men. One of the most striking examples of the hegemonic nature of the patriarchal ideology is women’s internalisation of misogyny whose latest expression is the emergence and spread of virtual trends, like *Women Against Feminism*, aimed at rejecting feminist stances in contemporary society (Valenti, Steinem).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In my thesis, I examine the discourse strategies of online misogynistic hate speech, and I do not aim at studying quantitatively the involvement of women in this phenomenon. However, to show the mechanism of internalised misogyny, I do quote some UGCs allegedly published by female users. In doing so, I consider ‘female’ those accounts that use sufficiently credible female names and profile pictures (e.g., I do take into consideration those accounts that use sexually explicit photos of famous women as profile pictures). However, I acknowledge that, on Facebook and Twitter, it is extremely difficult to detect the gender of users with no margin of error. In fact, Twitter does not ask its users to specify their gender, conversely to Facebook. Moreover, despite Facebook policies, its users can still create fake accounts, providing false information on their gender and using the picture of someone else. This problem also concerns harassers’ sexual orientation, which I therefore do not take into consideration in my analysis. Thus, my only aim in quoting posts supposedly published from women is to analyse

The understanding of this hegemonic patriarchal ideology has been driven by the theoretical developments of feminist studies. In fact, the evolution of feminist and gender theories has resulted in the problematisation of both categories of *sex* and *gender*. In particular, the recognition of differences among women brought by the third wave of feminism has implied the identification of “the intersection of gender with other systems of power based on race/ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, age, culture, and geography” (Lazar 149). Moreover, the poststructuralist approach of LGBT and queer studies has also showed the *discursive limits of ‘sex’* (Butler, Bodies) questioning the heteronormative discourse. However, this anti-essentialist critique does not translate into the impossibility of finding common elements in the study of gender-based discriminations. On the contrary, feminist CDA critically analyses forms of oppression of women in their specific contexts, proposing a comparative rather than universalising perspective. In my research, the recognition of diversity among women is crucial when studying the harassment they experience nowadays in cyberspace, where misogyny is intertwined with other types of hate speech such as racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and ageism, like in any other form of everyday – offline – communication.

#### *Complexity of Gender and Power Relations*

A final but still crucial element of feminist CDA is the need to take into consideration the coexistence of different outcomes of gendered asymmetries in contemporary society. In fact, gendered ideology today generates a more complex and layered discrimination, where overt forms of harassment that are nowadays condemned in public and ‘official’ discourses – e.g., physical violence, sexual harassment, and denigration of women in general – still coexist with

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the discursive mechanism of internalised misogyny. Moreover, unless otherwise stated, the gender of harassers is to be intended as ‘male’ in the analysis of my case studies. For a more detailed explanation of difficulties in assessing users’ gender on Twitter, see Hardaker (Machines).

subtler and supposedly harmless types of sexism, like canned sexist jokes or hypersexualised and retrosexist portraits of women in the advertising industry (Williamson).<sup>8</sup> Both overt and subtle forms of gender asymmetry can be better understood as a backlash against the feminist principles of questioning gender inequalities, and they are both still present and linked to each other in a discourse that is deeply rooted in the patriarchal social order. All these different forms of gender-based discrimination are intrinsic elements of late modern societies which show what Rosalind Gill calls a *postfeminist sensibility*, whose main features are, among others, “femininity as a bodily property,” “the shift from objectification to subjectification,” and “a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference” (Gill 149). This sensibility can be better understood as a sort of antitoxin developed by androcentric societies in the attempt to neutralise subversive feminist demands for gender equality, and, in so doing, to protect their own patriarchal social order. The more such order is challenged, the stronger the backlash is, and it thus results in a major shift from (retro)sexism towards violent misogyny, as the discursive strategies of gendered e-bile show. Even though the imbrication of postfeminism and online misogyny is better discussed in Chapter 6.1, it is worth noticing here that the harassment and social shaming that women receive when they make themselves visible in the cybersphere, demonstrate how the contemporary postfeminist sensibility only gives an illusion of freedom to women, who are still punished for not complying with femininity standards,

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<sup>8</sup> The term retrosexism is used by Judith Williamson to refer to products of the advertising industry which are overly sexist but which are presented in a supposedly ironic, nostalgic way in contemporary societies. Williamson herself describes it as a sort of “sexism with an alibi [which] appears at once past and present, innocent and knowing, a conscious reference to another era” – more specifically, the late 1950s, perceived by many as the “golden days before feminism, an innocent time when it was perfectly OK to think of women as domestic servants or sex objects” (Williamson).

through a rhetoric which combines retrosexist jokes like the ‘make me a sammich’<sup>9</sup> mockery and sexually explicit death and rape threats.

For all these reasons, feminist CDA is particularly suitable to study the persistence of strong asymmetrical power relations between genders in contemporary society and to reveal the specificities of misogyny 2.0, in terms of its discursive workings and its phenomenological consequences on women’s lives and on society in general.

Given this complex nature of the gender ideological asymmetries, and considered the peculiarity of online communication, below I identify four most recurrent characteristics of online misogynistic hate speech, which are relevant from a methodological point of view, and which I discuss in the analysis of my case studies in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

### *3.2.3 Main Features of Online Misogynistic Hate Speech*

In the attempt to define online misogynistic discourse, several authors have tried to classify its most recurring characteristics. Bringing together the findings of Emma Jane (Back), Karla Mantilla (Viral), Danielle Citron (Hate Crimes) and Sady Doyle (#MenCallMeThings), I identify the following intertwined features of misogynistic hate speech: visible women as targets, escalation of the attacks, sexually explicit and violent rhetoric, and phenomenological consequences of online misogyny. The first two elements explain the trigger and evolution of online gender-based harassment, while the third characteristic describes the rhetorical strategies which make it a hegemonic ideology, and the last one outlines its material effects on women’s lives. In doing so, here and in other passages I sometimes refer to online misogyny through expressions used by other researchers and activists while discussing the same issue, such as: “sexualised hate speech” (Edström 89), “cyber gender harassment” (Citron, Value 378), “gender-based hate speech” (Women Action Media, Examples), “e-bile” (Jane, Back;

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<sup>9</sup> Deliberately misspelled version of ‘make me a sandwich.’ This expression evokes the private sphere of the kitchen and it is commonly used against women who engage in public conversation on different topics.

Jane, Understanding) and “online sexist and sexual harassment” (Penny, Cybersexism).

### *Visible Women as Targets*

Sexualised e-bile is in most cases directed at women who assert their opinion in the public sphere, both offline and online. However, the abundance of cases of well-known women who have been abused online does not imply that a woman needs to be famous to be harassed on the Web. Sometimes women are attacked just for starting an online business, a webpage or a hashtag on social networks, especially – but not necessarily – related to women’s rights issues. For this reason, the writer and feminist activist Laurie Penny has compared a woman’s opinion to the mini-skirt of the Internet (Penny, Mini-Skirt). Penny uses this metaphor to denounce that having an opinion on the cybersphere makes a woman as visible as the mere fact of wearing a mini-skirt; too often both visibilities lead a woman to be harassed and victimised, whether online or in offline public places.

Women who use the Web as a platform for feminist activism, are usually blamed by the harassers for acting out a deceptive, dangerous, shady, political agenda (Doyle). They are often ridiculed as *feminazis* or *Dworkinite extremists*<sup>10</sup> (Doyle) as if feminism was an obsolete concept and a sexist movement based on hatred towards men. This feature demonstrates how women sustaining feminist causes are discredited by the abusers through the misleading attempt to depict them as intolerant and in bad faith, and that the ultimate aim of these attacks is to maintain the status quo of society as a male dominated space.

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<sup>10</sup> *Feminazi* is a blend of the terms *feminist* and *Nazi*. Even though the Merriam Webster defines a *feminazi* as “an extreme or militant feminist,” it is actually a derogatory term used to ridicule feminist activists or whoever support a feminist position, whether radical or not. Similarly, *Dworkinite extremist* is a derogatory expression addressed to someone perceived as ‘extremist’ as the American radical feminist Andrea Dworkin, best known for her criticism of pornography and anti-pornography activism along with Catharine MacKinnon.



### *Escalation of the Attacks*

Moreover, when a woman denounces the harassment, it is very likely that this will cause an escalation of the online abuse, like a snowball effect. Also by looking at the phenomenon of sexualised hate speech in a diachronic perspective, it is clear that the e-bile exposure has led to an e-bile amplification (Jane, Back 566): since women started to report their online abuse, this misogynistic discourse has leaked from niche domains (such as specific forums) into “more mainstream and public domains, [...] involving far more venomous and threatening imagery” (Jane, Back 561). Furthermore, as Sady Doyle points out, when women expose sexual harassment, they are labelled as the weaker sex, ridiculed as too sensitive and emotional bimbos.

It is also very common that gender-based harassment crosses multiple SNSs, especially after its exposure. This often causes to many targeted women a sense of being “under siege” (Criado-Perez). Additionally, this harassment is perpetuated at unusually high levels of intensity and frequency, for an unusual duration of time. Such continuous and multiple attacks are often perpetrated by groups of users, known as cyber mobs. These mobs are organised groups of users, usually – but not always – male, who gather on specific, largely unmoderated forums and message boards to put into action the harassment against women. The aim of these mobs is not to question the target’s point of view, but to discredit and ruin her and disrupt the conversation that her opinions have generated (Burrows).

As Jane (Back 559) and Mantilla (Viral - Part 1) note, such cyber mobs usually remain anonymous or quasi-anonymous thanks to the use of pseudonyms and nicknames. This veil of anonymity enables users to post any kind of insults and threats without being recognised and thus held accountable for their posts. However, not all critics agree on recognizing this direct link between anonymity and online hate speech: while the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (Objectification) sees anonymity as an incentive to cyber hate speech because it enables the

users “to create for themselves a shame-free zone in which they can inflict shame on others,” the feminist journalist Soraya Chemaly does not consider anonymity as a major inducement to online harassment. She argues that, while anonymity may encourage the abusive behaviour of some users, “it is more the symptom of an overall abusive culture” than “the cause of abuse” (Chemaly in Mantilla, *Viral* - Part 2). Chemaly (*Belong*) also notices that the debate about the role of anonymity in cyber harassment resembles the prevailing and misleading tendency in media to focus on stranger crimes when it comes to gender violence and that such narrative needs to be subverted because women are also harassed by people they know, whether online and offline. I find this consideration particularly interesting because it shows one of the many similarities between technology-facilitated abuse and more traditional, ‘offline’ forms of violence (e.g., domestic violence and date rape). Recognising such a connection is fundamental to understand the real nature and consequences of web-based hate speech, especially if the victim is not an already well-known person. It is furthermore necessary to acknowledge this link when analysing the impact of technologically driven communication in domestic violence contexts. In fact, recent academic surveys (e.g., see Henry and Powell) and institutional projects (e.g., see Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria) point out the use of digital harassment as a tool to exacerbate domestic violence, and they show that an abusive misuse of social network platforms is one of the main tactics of violence in and/or after intimate relationships, for example through cyberstalking and image-based sexual abuse.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> As already mentioned, image-based sexual abuse is usually referred to as revenge porn. Both *revenge porn* and *image-based sexual abuse* define “the distribution of intimate or sexually explicit images without the victim’s consent (Henry, *Private Conversation*). Nevertheless, following McGlynn and Rackley, Henry (Responds 72), and Dickson (45), I prefer using *image-based sexual abuse* because this expression “better captures the nature and harms of the non-consensual creation and distribution of private sexual images,” and, “unlike ‘revenge porn,’ it

Thus, the very issue of anonymity, which often tends to prevail in the discussion about online hate speech, is extremely complex and in need of deeper analysis both from legal and sociocultural perspectives. In my opinion, it is misleading to consider anonymity as the main reason of online abuse; as my database and the studies of other scholars suggest (e.g., see Jane, *Misogyny Online*; Citron, *Hate Crimes*), there are plenty of examples that show how people are not reluctant at all in abusing other users when their identity is displayed online through profile pictures and/or names. These data seem to confirm the findings of a recent sociological research in which Katja Rost et al. have demonstrated that on social network platforms non-anonymous users are more aggressive than anonymous ones, thus confuting the idea that anonymity is one of the principal reasons of online hostile behaviours (Rost et al. 18). Even though it is usually extremely difficult to understand whether or not an online picture or name expresses the real identity of someone, the general trend noticed on Facebook and Twitter is that users tend to use hostile language without feeling the need to hide themselves.<sup>12</sup> In my opinion, thus, a sole focus on anonymity is not only reductive but also counterproductive in some cases; it must also be noticed that anonymity can be a powerful tool for all those people who want to speak up against different kinds of harassment and discrimination – like homophobia, rape, domestic violence, and racism – but do not feel comfortable revealing their identity or for those who cannot expose themselves because they live under regimes which severely repress any form of dissent.

All these aspects show the kaleidoscopic nature of anonymity in relation to online hate speech, an issue which I would suggest considering a double-edge sword but not the main reason of the pervasive presence of abuse on the Web. Finally, on a deeper level of analysis, it

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captures both the broad range of practices being challenged and to convey the nature and extent of the harms suffered by victims” (McGlynn and Rackley).

<sup>12</sup> See case studies in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

is interesting to underline that all discussions pertaining to online hate speech – and thus also the one on the role of anonymity – are actually linked to the problem of finding a balance between freedom of speech and freedom to harass, especially when harmful speech relies on gender asymmetries through stereotypes and extremely graphic and violent language, as the next section shows.

### *Sexually Explicit and Violent Rhetoric*

On a linguistic level of analysis, the most typical feature of cyber gender harassment is the pervasive use of violent and sexually explicit rhetoric. In most cases, in fact, when women speak out their mind on the Web, the abusers do not contest their ideas providing rational comments which may generate a cultural exchange. Conversely, women are insulted in a way that is specific to their gender through ad hominem invectives (Jane, Back 559). They receive gender-based slurs which usually have a highly violent content expressed through extremely graphic and hypersexualised imagery.

All the testimonies provided by targeted women show this kind of vicious rhetoric, and very often the slurs result in graphic rape and death threats which can be particularly credible especially when they occur together with strategies like doxxing and may generate episodes of abuse in real life. The actress and activist Ashley Judd describes the harassment she received as follows: “I read in vivid language the various ways, humiliating and violent, in which my genitals, vaginal and anal, should be violated, shamed, exploited and dominated. Either the writer was going to do these things to me, or they were what I deserved. My intellect was insulted: I was called stupid, an idiot. My age, appearance and body were attacked” (Judd).

Judd’s words show an important aspect of e-bile: in sexist hate speech women are depicted and victimised as sexual objects. Gender-based objectification is a form of social shaming (Nussbaum) through which harassers play on misogynistic stereotypes by trying to instil in women the idea that they are not worthy of any attention that is not sexual. For this

reason, objectification is based on appearance-related judgements. Such judgments usually show what Emma Jane defines a “a combination of desire and disgust,” “a sort of *lascivious contempt*” (Back 560). In this process of objectification, a targeted woman is sexualised with terms like *slut* and *cunt* – *nigger cunt*, in the case of black women. She is then derogated for being a slut and, according to her *rape-ability* or “the degree to which she deserves to be raped” (Mantilla, Viral - Part 1), she is classified as too fat, too old, too lesbian, and/or too *fugly*.<sup>13</sup> Most of the time, even if targeted women are labelled as *unfuckable whores*, the harassers prescribe coerced sexual acts to teach them the lesson that their opinions are unwanted, useless, and that they can only exist as objects. This demonstrates that gendered hate speech shows different declinations of misogyny – such as fat shaming and ageism – and the combination with other types of hate speech, especially homophobia and racism.

The ubiquitous nature of these characteristics shows what Emma Jane defines the “quasi-algebraic quality of e-bile” (Back 565). By this expression, she means that even if women are harassed online for expressing many different opinions, the characteristics of the attacks received are always the same and they are always gender-based. For this reason, reflecting on the interchangeability of online gender harassment, and especially on the repetitive and stereotyped nature of the slurs, Sady Doyle writes: “When men are using the same insults and sentiments to shut down women [...], we know that it’s not about us; it’s about gender” (#MenCallMeThings). Moreover, as women have been traditionally marginalised because of their gender and have not had much power in the public discourse, their visibility is considered a threat to the traditional order of society and particularly to hegemonic masculinity.

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<sup>13</sup> *Fugly*: portmanteau for *fucking* and *ugly*.

### *Phenomenological Consequences of Online Misogyny*

As mentioned in the previous sections of this chapter, a critical analysis of misogynistic hate speech needs to take into consideration the phenomenological consequences of this discourse in order to show up the direct link between the verbal and virtual version of gender-based harassment and its repercussions in maintaining a patriarchal social order. To do so, one must notice the similarities between online gendered abuse and more traditional forms of offline harassment against women. The establishment of this link is essential to recognise the material impacts that online misogyny has on the lives of women in different social contexts which have long seen their subordination to hegemonic sexist ideologies.

As gendered web-based harassment started to acquire more visibility in media and academic coverage, some researchers have focused on the identification of the parallels between offline and online forms of women's abuse. One of the most recent contributions in this direction is provided by Ruth Lewis et al. in a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the harassment of feminists online, to show how online abuse should be conceived "as a form of abuse or violence against women and girls, rather than as a form of communication" (Lewis et al. 1). In their study, Lewis et al. identify a "continuum of responses" (12) from female feminists to online harassment and therefore they discuss the impacts of this phenomenon on the targets. This research is particularly valuable because it provides important insights on the use of the Internet to vilify feminists with strategies that are very similar to the ones discussed in my thesis (e.g., impersonation, incitements to abuse, sexual and physical threats). Nevertheless, by focusing on the experience of feminists, it also poses some limits to the study of gendered harassment in its entirety, which includes the abuse against those women who are not expressively engaged in feminist activism online. Even though my database shows that the discussion of feminist stances is a major trigger for abuse on the Web, it also demonstrates that the self-identification of women as feminists is not the essential cause of gender-based

harassment.<sup>14</sup> My argument here is that, even if Lewis et al. do not intend to cover all forms of online abuse against women in their research (18), the focus on the harassment of a self-selected group of women who have engaged in online feminist activism implies that many of its targets usually have a certain degree of knowledge of the online harassment against their group, and that often they have already been exposed to frequent sexist backlash to a certain extent, as affirmed by many of the women interviewed in that research (Lewis et al. 13). The recurrence of backlashes against those who express feminist stances is not new. Conversely, it has long accompanied women's movements, and as Susan Faludi writes "it's a recurring phenomenon [which] returns every time women begin to make some headway towards equality" (Backlash - Part 1). Therefore, it must be stressed that this element, along with a sound awareness of the mechanism of gendered discrimination, may sometimes help feminists in coping with the aggressiveness of online harassment in more effective ways than for non-feminist women.<sup>15</sup> Even though my argument may sound patronising towards non-feminist women, it is actually aimed at recognising more visibility to their abuse and reactions. In fact, my case here is that the impacts of this phenomenon may vary for women who do not have experience in feminist activism. In my thesis, therefore, the mere application of the findings of Lewis et al. may limit the identification of all the multifaceted implications of sexist hate speech and harassment, because it may marginalise the experience of those women who are not used to strong gendered backlash. My position is supported by the analysis provided by Lewis et al., according to which several interviewees declared that they managed to minimise the impact of their abuse by comparing their experiences to others (13), while a good percentage of the targets affirmed that this harassment made them feel more "motivated to

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<sup>14</sup> E.g., see the cyberbullying received by Mariam Veiszadeh analysed in Chapter 5.2, and the one of Tiziana Cantone discussed in Chapter 6.1.

<sup>15</sup> For clarity, with this argument I do not intend to suggest that online abuse is always less harmful for feminists.

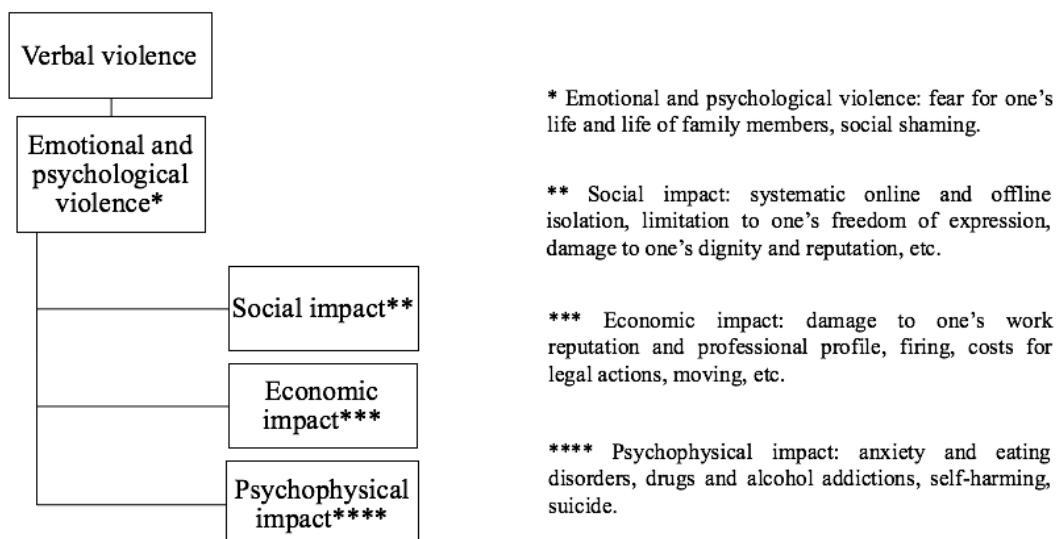
continue political engagement” (17). Therefore, even though Lewis et al. identifies some important emotional and psychological impacts of gender online abuse,<sup>16</sup> they conclude their research stating that “to address the question about whether feminists, or women, are at particular risk of abuse, further examination of online abuse in other social movements, in wider civic debate and in popular culture, would be valuable” (17).

In this perspective, here I present a model that I specifically developed to identify the multilevel impact of misogynistic hate speech on all potential female targets, regardless of their involvement in feminist activism. In preparing this model I draw upon two different graphs to compare the effects of offline and online abuse. The first graph (available in Appendix 1) is provided by the Council of Australian Governments, which included it the 2016 final report of the *Advisory Panel on Reducing Violence Against Women and their Children*. This source shows the multifaceted nature of more tradition forms of harassment against women, like domestic abuse. The second graph is the so-called *Online Abuse Wheel* (available in Appendix 2), specifically designed by the Women’s Media Center (Abuse) to illustrate a categorisation of the tactics of gendered e-bile and to present its impact in general terms. By comparing the two charts, some striking similarities can be noticed in the way in which these forms of violence damage their victims. Joining the information provided in these two resources, below I present a visual representation of the model that I developed for the analysis of the impacts of online misogynistic hate speech on women:

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<sup>16</sup> E.g., stress, fear, anxiety, depression, and amplification of post-traumatic stress disorder (14).





*Taxonomy of the Material Consequences of Online Misogyny*

As visible in the chart, some elements of my model evoke the findings of Lewis et al. in terms of the emotional and psychological effects on targets. However, it provides a more systematic and complete identification of how online misogyny can harm women in general, both feminists and non-feminists. The figure summarises a new taxonomy by joining the graphs available in Appendix 1 and 2, and it can be a useful tool for future research in investigating the impact of misogynistic hate speech, showing the link between abusive language in cybersphere and its effects on all aspects of people's lives.

In fact, this classification is particularly relevant for several reasons. Overall, my model presents online misogyny as a dangerous phenomenon with real and serious consequences. Moreover, the chart shows that misogynistic discourse of the Web impacts women's lives on two main levels: it causes immediate emotional and psychological harm – through attacks to the victim and threats to her and/or her family – which then generates more profound and long-standing consequences affecting the target's life on a social, economic and psychophysical level. It establishes a link between harassment through the Internet and offline forms of intimate violence on a twofold level: it acknowledges the interplay between offline and online abuse with reference to the tactics implemented (e.g., image-based sexual abuse, doxxing, and

cyberstalking) and it also underlines remarkable similarities between these two articulations of violence with reference to the different impact levels, showing the harm generated by abusive and graphic language. In this perspective, it confirms the emotional and psychological effects indicated by Lewis et al., but it also adds that gendered harassment can generate a severe physical impact on women's life (i.e., eating disorders, self-harming, addictions, and suicide). Moreover, it recognises the social impact of this abuse, by highlighting the potential systematic isolation and limitation of expression that women can experience, especially if they do not operate online within a group of fellow activists. My model also adds a third level of impact not mentioned by Lewis et al., namely the economic one. This includes the costs for moving in cases of doxxing, the potential layoff and damage to one's reputation and professional profile (especially after image-based sexual abuse), and general costs for legal actions against the harassers.

Thus, this model has the strength to summarise impacts of different nature but which are outcomes of the same gender-based hatred expressed in online fora, linking more visible – and thus – recognizable effects (e.g., potential layoff or suicide after online harassment) with others which are typically less evident but still directly caused by online misogyny (e.g., anxiety and eating disorders, addictions, systematic isolation, silencing, and fear). Therefore, in my thesis I apply this taxonomy as a method of analysis, because it facilitates a more systematic analysis of the selected case studies, and it helps to demonstrate the hypothesis that misogynistic hate speech on social networks is an existing phenomenon that we need to take into more serious consideration as other forms of online discrimination.

For this reason, in the next three chapters, this taxonomy is discussed along with the other above-explained recurring characteristics of sexist and sexualised harassment, and it is applied to my case studies, where I identify several specific impacts as phenomenological consequences of hegemonic misogynistic discourse via Web 2.0.

## Chapter 4. Analysis of two Case Studies from the USA

### 4.1. Case Study no. 1: Anita Sarkeesian

This section is aimed at providing a critical analysis of the misogynistic discourse against the American online activist Anita Sarkeesian, who became an international symbol of the fight against online hate speech due to the massive harassment she has experienced and publicly called out.

#### *The Dataset*

The dataset of the case at issue is made up of Twitter contents which I collected between January 2014 and November 2015. While this case of gendered and racist harassment has crossed many online platforms – e.g., Twitter, Facebook, personal blog and email account, Kickstarter, YouTube, Wikipedia, 4chan, reddit – it developed mainly on Twitter. For this reason, I decided to focus my analysis on the contents gathered on this social network. The overall number of the tweets forming my database is 313, as presented in the following table:

	Text-based	Image-based	<b>TOT</b>
Gender-based	289	13	302
Race-based	8	3	11
<b>TOT</b>	297	16	<b>313</b>

The table breaks down the 313 tweets according to the type of content they provide (i.e., written text or image) and according to the axis of discrimination to which they refer (i.e., *gender-based* referring to misogynistic, homophobic, and biphobic contents, and *race-based* referring to anti-Semitic and racist material in general). Sarkeesian herself has provided many examples of the hate speech used to harass her, therefore many contents of my database (i.e., 208 UGCs) were retrieved by monitoring her blog *feministfrequency.com* and her Twitter account *@femfreq*. The remaining part was collected by monitoring Twitter trends through hashtags (e.g., #sarkeesian, #GamerGate) and through material provided by academic studies and

newspaper articles which reported the abuse. While this section provides an overall critical analysis of the hate speech addressed to Sarkeesian, a specific part of it focuses on two subsets of data published online by the target (i.e., Sarkeesian, Examples; Sarkeesian, One Week). The analysis of these subsets of data provides some quantitative insights with reference to the terminology used and the type of harassment contained in such material.

The following paragraphs present Anita Sarkeesian and how she became the target of a cyber mob attack. I then move to analyse the tactics used against her, along with the rhetorical figures and the discursive storytelling deployed to portrait her as a dangerous enemy during the GamerGate controversy, demonstrating the development of this harassment and the imbrication of different types of hate speech, namely its gender-based and race-based articulations.

### *The Target*

Anita Sarkeesian is a Canadian-American feminist media critic, blogger, and activist of Armenian heritage. Born in Toronto to Iraqi parents, Sarkeesian now identifies as Canadian-American, as she soon moved to California, where she currently lives (Filipovic; Greenhouse; Moore). In 2009 she founded her blog *feministfrequency.com* (hereafter Feminist Frequency) to provide gender-oriented analyses of pop culture products, especially video games. Through the years, her online activity became increasingly famous and the webpage developed into a “not-for-profit educational organization that analyzes modern media’s relationship to societal issues such as gender, race, and sexuality” encouraging “viewers to critically engage with mass media” (Feminist Frequency, About). The organization is presently chaired by Sarkeesian herself and managed by a varied team of cisgender and transgender women working as video games experts, technology educators, academic researchers, writers, and artists. It is widely renowned on the Web, especially on Twitter, where its profile presently counts 727,000

followers.<sup>1</sup>

Both Sarkeesian and Feminist Frequency acquired much of this visibility a few years after the blog's opening. In fact, in May 2012 Sarkeesian decided to upload a video on the American-based website Kickstarter to crowdfund her project *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*. Through this project, she intended to produce a video series aimed at analysing five recurring sexist tropes in video games, i.e., “Damsel in Distress, The Fighting F#@k Toy, The Sexy Sidekick, The Sexy Villainess, [and] Background Decoration” (Sarkeesian, Kickstarter). At Sarkeesian's surprise, the project grabbed the attention of many users who decided to participate in its funding. While she originally set \$6000 as her funding goal, she ended up receiving pledges for more than \$158,000. Therefore, she was able to produce the video series at issue, which is at present the most well-known product of Feminist Frequency. Nevertheless, such increased visibility also sparked off massive online harassment, developed and coordinated by several gaming forums with the attempt to silence Sarkeesian and to stop her project (Sarkeesian, Backers). As she has explained on several occasions (e.g., Sarkeesian, Conference; Sarkeesian, Backers; Sarkeesian, XOXO), the very fact of not hiding her female and feminist identity online had already cost her sexist backlashes and some online vitriol, but the kind of abuse she started experimenting after her Kickstarter project was a much more intense, graphic, and pervasive form of harassment, which attacked her both for her gender and Middle Eastern heritage.

The following section presents and analyses the harassing tactics used against Sarkeesian, their discursive strategies, and the patriarchal ideology they sustain through a violent gender-based rhetoric. In doing so, considered the complexity of this case, I identify a benchmark in the chronological development of Sarkeesian's online persecution, namely the

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<sup>1</sup> This data refers to my last access to @femfreq Twitter profile on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 2017.

notorious GamerGate controversy which, since its appearance in mid 2014, has been linked to the abuse of Sarkeesian and of other female video games critics and developers. To pave the way for this investigation, in the paragraphs below I try to pinpoint the major tactics and discursive features used to harass Sarkeesian before August 2014 (i.e., before GamerGate), and I identify and discuss the main rhetorical figures deployed by GamerGaters against her, to demonstrate that misogynistic hate speech has been the ideological refrain of this ongoing abuse.

### *Turning Misogyny into a Game*

As mentioned, Sarkeesian started to receive massive and ongoing sexualised harassment online in mid 2012 because of her Kickstarter project. Simultaneously, she began to monitor and to call out the abuse she was experiencing. In fact, she provided important proof of such violence on her blog and Twitter account (e.g., Sarkeesian, Visual Misogyny; Sarkeesian, Vandalism; Sarkeesian, Silencing), as well as in public speeches and interviews (e.g., Sarkeesian, Conference; Sarkeesian, TEDxWomen). This material shows how her social network accounts were flooded by a barrage of contents which expressed a strong sexual objectification through text-based and image-based posts.

This strong sexual objectification of the target is traceable in UGCs expressing overt forms of misogyny both visually and textually. Among the most common types of visual misogyny, we find the tactics that Sarkeesian defines “weaponised pornography” (Visual Misogyny), and “rape drawing harassment” (Visual Misogyny), both used by grievers<sup>2</sup> to spam her social network profiles and email accounts. While the former material is usually created by superimposing the target’s face on pornographic images,<sup>3</sup> the latter typically consists in rape

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<sup>2</sup> Informal neologism indicating abusive gamers (see Barvinok; Greenhouse).

<sup>3</sup> For visual examples of weaponised pornography, see Sarkeesian (XOXO).

jokes in the form of drawing, like images 1 and 2 show below:



*Image 1*



*Image 2*

Both images were originally provided by Sarkeesian who decided to blur the sketches before publishing them; nevertheless, she also wrote precise descriptions of them, which I use here as reference sources to explain the scenes illustrated. Image 1 (available in Lewis) is a drawing where a female character is meant to resemble Sarkeesian “tied up with a wii<sup>4</sup> controller shoved in her mouth while being raped by Mario [Bros] from behind” (Sarkeesian, Visual Misogyny). The deployment of famous game heroes like Mario Bros is particularly common in online misogynistic material against female gamers and critics, because it is an easy recognizable and supposedly ironic way to ridicule the target through a character with whom male fans identify. Here the very subject of Sarkeesian’s critique metaphorically rebels against the woman who allegedly questions its legitimate presence, by relegating her back in the place of a passive object through a sexual act aimed at punishing her. Thus, it is clear from this example how the criticism of women’s sexist representation in much video game industry is misrepresented as an overall condemnation of the game at issue. The asymmetric positioning of the two figures – i.e., the subjugated woman and the dominating male character – visually renders the gendered asymmetry of the misogynistic ideology that the picture wants to convey.

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<sup>4</sup> Wii is a home video game console developed by Nintendo and released in several updated versions since 2006.

Similarly, image 2 (available in Lewis) pictures a woman sketched in a way that resembles Sarkeesian and who is “chained nude on her knees with 5 penises ejaculating on her face with the words ‘fuck toy’ written on her torso” (Sarkeesian, Visual Misogyny). In the right upper corner, a muscular male arm is drawn in the act of holding the female character on a chain. As Sarkeesian explains (Visual Misogyny), this visual element is used to mock the men who defended her after the abuse she received. The image is thus aimed at depicting male supporters as hypocritical men who allegedly pretend to encourage feminist stances but who act with ulterior motives, that is the sexual exploitation of the target. This element suggests that Sarkeesian’s harassers consider anyone except themselves as holders of a hidden agenda, which for the female target is the will to destroy video games and for her male supporters is a subsequent sexual gratification. Both this interpretation and the visual elements of the drawing show the subjugation of the woman, who is depicted as an object for someone else’s sexual pleasure through the derogatory expression *fuck toy*, and thus turned into a misogynistic trope (see the caption “trope 34: the feminist fucktoy”), a process that supposedly she does not realise (see the cartoon bubble “thanks for all your support, boys”). This ridiculing representation of Sarkeesian is also expressed in the caption appearing in the lowest part of the image, which refers to her critique of sexism in games (i.e., “saved the damsel in distress”). The remainder of the captions exhorts the readers to physically assault the victim (i.e., “b... back dat feminist up!”) and further ridicules the feminist stances. The latter is conveyed by the appropriation of the term *womyn* (i.e., “TROPESVSWOMYN”), a neologism used by some feminists as a linguistic tool of empowerment. In fact, some have interpreted the noun *woman* as a crisis between *womb* and *man*, and therefore as a word which has historically configured women as



a subset of men.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, considering *women* as a gender-biased linguistic tool, some feminists have tended to use the term *womyn* to reaffirm the autonomy of female identities (Womyn's Centre). Such linguistic choice is often perceived as an exaggerated form of political correctness and thus ridiculed online.<sup>6</sup> In the content at issue, it is used to deride Sarkeesian, her supporters, and their supposedly absurd activism.

A similar mixture of visual misogyny and text-based harassment was used to target Sarkeesian through the tactic of Wikipedia vandalism. In fact, the Wikipedia page of the activist was repeatedly hacked and its text manipulated to describe her as “a feminist video blogger and a cunt” (Sarkeesian, Vandalism) and as follows:



Image 3

Image 3 (available in Sarkeesian, Vandalism)<sup>7</sup> proves the strong vilification of Sarkeesian

<sup>5</sup> Some authors (e.g., Baron 33) have highlighted that this interpretation is the result of false etymologies transmitted across the centuries. For a more extensive review on the controversial derivation of *woman* from *womb* + *man*, see Bollettieri Bosinelli (51).

<sup>6</sup> See for example the Urban Dictionary page where the political implication of this linguistic choice is denied and mocked by defining *womyn* as “the feminist/lesbian spelling of ‘woman’ . . . coined by neurotic feminists for other equally neurotic feminists with the unbridled arrogant mindset that their dated, selfish, totally ‘unequal’ cause justly warrants a ridiculous, contrary-to-diction respelling of an [sic] long accepted, objective English word” (Urban Dictionary, Womyn).

<sup>7</sup> The content is still available online on the allegedly humorous site *Uncyclopedia* (Sarkeesian).

through misogynistic and racist discourse. In particular, the racist connotation is visible at the beginning of the wiki entry where the vandals rename the target “Bunitar Sarkereszian,” a fake name used to derogatorily stress her Middle Eastern heritage. In the same line, she is intentionally confused for a Jewish person. This rhetorical strategy plays on the Anti-Semitic prejudice of economic greed stereotypically associated with Jews, and it is here used to present the efforts to crowdfund her Kickstarter project as a deceptive way to steal money from Internet users.<sup>8</sup> A similar racist vilification is expressed by the slur *nigger* which shows the reliance of hate speech on biological racism<sup>9</sup> here coupled with the misogynistic insult *hooker* and the word *kitchen* to remind the relegation of women into private spaces. The content also attempts to defame Sarkeesian by hijacking the focus of her critical analysis from sexist tropes to “drugs in popular culture.” The remainder of this wiki entry is a list of allegations which seeks to belittle the abuse received by Sarkeesian (i.e., her reports are not considered legitimate but as an exaggeration for which she has “a Master’s degree in Whining”) and at sexually objectifying her, by informing the readers about her alleged skilfulness in sexual practices. With this aim, the post reveals she holds “the world record for maximum amount of sexual toys in the posterior” and a degree in “BDSM from 9gag.”<sup>10</sup> Similar overt hypersexualisation is expressed by the choice of providing a sexually explicit image – blurred by Sarkeesian herself – as the supposed daily activity of the woman. Moreover, according to this post, “Sarkereszian” goes by the pseudonym of “Jennifer Hepler,” that is the name of a video game developer, who used

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<sup>8</sup> See below the GamerGate-related section *Con Artist* for an explanation of the discursive construction of Sarkeesian as an online con artist and the effects of this intentional conspiracy theory.

<sup>9</sup> For a more in depth study of the use of biological racism to depict a person of non-Western heritage as culturally inferior see the analysis of Mariam Veiszadeh’s case in Chapter 5.

<sup>10</sup> BDSM is the acronym for Bondage, Discipline, Sadism, and Masochism, while 9gag is an online platform where many users develop and exchange sexually charged and misogynistic images (see Nix).

to work for Electronic Arts (hereafter EA), and who had been harassed online in 2012 with death threats against her and her children.<sup>11</sup> In particular, Sarkeesian/Hepler is mocked as a “tester for Mass Effect, where it has to engage in gay fisting.” This expression refers to EA’s attempt of including LGBT characters and gay romances in the industry, which many in the gaming community have strongly opposed and which have fuelled much of the hate received by Hepler and several colleagues of hers. Here, LGBT people undergo a process of hypersexualisation which resembles that usually experienced by women; in fact, their mere presence as game characters is distorted through the male heteronormative gaze which equally sexualise them and women. In addition to this homophobic discourse, the wiki entry keeps expressing misogyny by referring to Sarkeesian with the neutral pronoun *it* (e.g., “it maintains . . . it also blogs . . . it also holds . . . it stated”) to discursively deny her humanity and femininity. Interestingly, at the same time, the target’s gendered identity is used to convey a sense of inferiority by associating her to video games like *Angry Birds* and *Farmville*. This is explained by the fact that hard-core male gamers have lately tended to separate themselves from the players of games like *Angry Birds* and *Farmville* whose popularity is an alleged symbol of the contemporary decrease in quality of the video games. In this process, women are considered responsible for dumbing down the game industry,<sup>12</sup> and female players are specifically

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<sup>11</sup> Electronic Arts (also EA) is an American company which produces and develops video games. Its products have lately been considered of low quality by many gamers who voted EA as the worst American company in 2012 (Morran). After EA published the video game *Dragon Age II*, several developers were harassed online by griefers for the alleged low quality of the game. In particular, Jennifer Hepler was singled out for having mentioned her disinterest in playing gaming combats. For this reason, she received a torrent of online threats which employed graphic misogynistic discourse. For more information about the online sexualised abuse of Jennifer Hepler, see Polo.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, one of the tweets sent to Sarkeesian: “I really hope the video games don’t dumb down due to this stupid bitch @femfreq” (available in Sarkeesian, Examples).

depicted as “casual gamers” (Salter and Blodgett 403) and thus marginalised.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, it is clear from this analysis how the online harassment of women in the gaming industry evokes the general discursive features of misogynistic hate speech that I presented in the previous chapter. As lecturer Nathan Fisk notes, “online harassment, no matter the reasoning, is always about power and positioning, about putting people in their place” (Fisk in Crecente). In relation to the abuse of Jennifer Hepler, he also notes that “harassment silences and repositions content creators in ways that protect the interests of certain fan groups” (Fisk in Crecente). These considerations can rightfully be extended to the harassment of Anita Sarkeesian, whose abusers want to silence and discredit by putting her back in the gendered stereotype of a passive object through a graphic sexualised discourse.

The material analysed above only displays the milder tone of the aggressiveness through which Sarkeesian has been harassed online. Stronger violence is present in many sexist and racist slurs which inundated her social network accounts daily, along with threats to her life and to her family,<sup>14</sup> especially through violent threats, bomb threats at events she attended as a speaker, attempts to doxx her, and to hack into her email and social network accounts. She also experienced several attempts of DDoSing, an acronym which stands for “distributed denial-of-service” (Mantilla, *New Media* 565). This technique consists in attacking a website host provider to knock the designated site offline. As Sarkeesian declared, on June 2012, right after the media started to cover the harassment she was experiencing extensively, an instance of DDoSing caused her blog to temporarily go down for most of the day (*Visual Misogyny*). As

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<sup>13</sup> An example of the use of the *casual gamer* label to express misogynistic contempt against female gamers is the highly-sexualised drawing of the 4chan fictional character Vivian James, available in Anonymous (Vivian James).

<sup>14</sup> On some occasions, threats were so menacing and believable that Sarkeesian was forced to leave home. For a more detailed account of one of these episodes, see McDonald (Sarkeesian).

Karla Mantilla highlights, DDoSing is a common technique to silence women on the Web and its effects can be vaster than other harassing strategies because it “has the result, in the first instance, of crashing victims’ website and, in the second instance, of crashing thousands of other websites that just happen to be hosted by the same servers” (New Media 565). Similarly, many haters also attempted to stop Sarkeesian by flagging her YouTube account and by reporting other social network profiles belonging to her (e.g., on Kickstarter, Twitter, and Facebook) as fraud, spam, and terrorism (Sarkeesian, TEDxWomen).

While all these strategies show the strong commitment of many Internet users to block Sarkeesian’s projects aimed at raising awareness on media sexism, a visual example of the graphic misogyny used to abuse her online is found in the creation of hate sites which provided the opportunity to virtually assault her. In particular, a user created an interactive flash game called *Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian*, where players were encouraged “to beat the bitch out” (Sarkeesian, TEDxWomen).<sup>15</sup> Image 4 (available in Sarkeesian, TEDxWomen) sums up the development of this online activity:

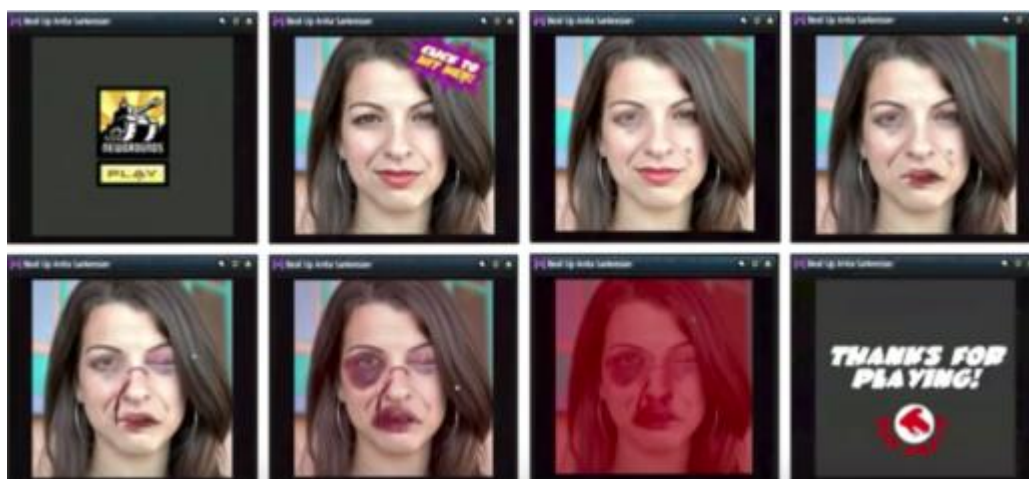


Image 4

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<sup>15</sup> The content was uploaded on the popular American entertainment website *Newsgroup*. While it was later removed from this platform, it is currently still available in a YouTube video, where the user Astrowave defines it one of his favourite games.

As the screenshot proves, by clicking on the screen a picture of Anita would become increasingly bruised and stained with blood, her smile would turn into an expression of physical suffering, her mouth and eyes would puff up with hematomas, as if she had been battered in real life. At the end, the screen would turn red, probably to symbolise the death or at least the defeat of the designated enemy. The very indication of this incitement to assault as a game, along with the final screenshot which thanks the users for playing, indicates the trivialisation of gender-based violence and the dehumanisation of Sarkeesian.<sup>16</sup> As the activist explained, “what’s even more disturbing, if that’s even possible, in this overt display of misogyny on a grand scale is that the perpetrators openly referred to this harassment campaign as a game” (Sarkeesian, TEDxWomen). Such discursive reconfiguration of harassment into a form of entertainment was not limited to the hate site at issue, but it developed through the many tactics which I listed and described above and whose rhetorical strategies I will analyse in more depth in the following sections. In this alleged game, a massive number of Internet users enjoyed the harassment of a woman who, as an expert of video games and online media, was targeted for the mere fact of criticising the sexist depiction of women in these fields. As I have highlighted in several passages of my thesis (e.g., see Chapter 2.3.2. *Psychological Elements of Online Antisocial Behaviours*), certain features of Web 2.0 enable this collective harassment to be perpetrated by an agglomeration of faceless – and sometimes (quasi)anonymous – users, turning individual abusers into cyber-mobs. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the functioning of cyber-mobs and how they discursively perpetrate hegemonic patriarchal ideologies through gender-based hate speech.

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<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, the creator of *Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian* defended #GamerGate as an anti-harassment movement (Klee). See the remainder of this analysis to understand the discursive defence of GamerGate as an allegedly legitimate debate over ethics in journalism and its actual perpetual reaffirmation of misogynistic attitudes.

### *Creating and Establishing a Cyber Mob*

As the legal scholar Danielle Citron writes, “the Internet’s ability to forge connections enables *stalking by proxy*” (Mobs). Through this facilitated mechanism, thousands of users entertain themselves and one another by collectively harassing a designated target, in a sort of “team sport, with posters trying to outdo each other” (Citron, Mobs). This is what the expression *cyber mob* indicates, capturing “both the destructive potential of online groups and the shaming dynamic at the heart of the abuse” (Citron, Mobs). While in the analysis of other cases (see Chapters 5.1 and 6.1) I provide quotes of harassers organising collective attacks against specific women on social media, here I discuss the ideological motives lying behind cyber mobs, and the enforcement of gender norms which derive from their acts.

Once again, being a media critic, Sarkeesian provides important insights into understanding this phenomenon and its sociocultural implications. Describing her misogynistic harassment, she says that sexist hate speech resembles the general structure of a social game, to the eyes of harassers (Sarkeesian, TEDxWomen). They try it as a thrilling competition to see who can offend in the most impressive way. In this game, the heroic players – the hate mob – work together to take down a villain – Sarkeesian, and potentially any woman who speaks out online – in a battlefield that is the entire cybersphere. In fact, as the American activist sums up, “members of cyber mobs typically delight in a form of cooperative competition with each other to ramp up the level of cruelty aimed at their target. . . . The underlying goal of the cyber mob action is to reinforce their position of social dominance over members of marginalised or relatively powerless groups” (Sarkeesian, Conference). In the case under analysis, Sarkeesian is repeatedly depicted as the insincere villain whose alleged diabolic master plan is to conquer the gaming field and to set new rules which are in line with her feminist – hence shady and spiteful – schemes. As in most cases of online misogynistic harassment, to prove the existence of such a feminist hidden agenda, many harassers fabricate false information by publishing

impersonation hoaxes (Sarkeesian, XOXO). This fake material is usually based on conspiracy theories which play on sexist stereotypes, and it is used both to defame the target and to undermine the value of her gender-oriented stances.<sup>17</sup> Such intentionally misleading messages usually generate on largely unmoderated platforms such as some channels of 4chan and reddit, and they are later spread on popular SNSs like Twitter and Facebook with the aim of provoking rage among a more extended public. While some further aspects of this defamation machine will be discussed in the case of Laura Boldrini where fake news have been used to whip up public opinion against her, my case here is that this strategy is used to turn the potentialities of the participatory Web into dangerous weapons not only to harass but also to potentially destroy the target and her reputation. This demonstrates how the Web is not perceived by harassers as a public space suitable for civil discussions, inclusion, and sharing of ideas, but as a battleground where the fiercest army wins. Those who send the most offensive and vicious messages are compensated through an informal reward system based on a sort of chauvinistic camaraderie 2.0. In this arena, the victory is achieved by using aggressive, misogynistic rhetoric and consists in maintaining the status quo of the society as a male dominated place. In the gendered culture of the video game industry, a peculiar form of masculinity, namely “geek masculinity” (Braithwaite 2), positions Sarkeesian in a double position of outsider – as female player and as feminist critic – and makes her the perfect enemy against which a struggle over power is collectively played to reinforce structural gender norms through a discourse aimed at normalising misogyny. Thus, considering the highly aggressive discourse used by cyber armies like the male gamers who offended Sarkeesian, their attacks assume strong performative value: they reinforce their social position of dominant group by performing the harassment of a less

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<sup>17</sup> An example of impersonation hoax is a fake tweet featured on reddit forums which pretended to inform Sarkeesian’s followers that she had used the money crowdsourced on Kickstarter to buy a pair of Gucci shoes worth \$1000 (available in Sarkeesian, XOXO).



powerful target who is kept in a marginalised and stigmatised position through rhetoric grounded on shared sexist and misogynistic prejudices.

Thanks to the cyber mob mechanism, the online hatred against Sarkeesian did not disappear quickly; conversely it became more and more intense in a period when other cases of harassment against women in the gamers' communities hit the news. In particular, 2014 proved itself to be the *annus horribilis* for the escalation of online gendered violence perpetrated by a cyber mob known as GamerGate.<sup>18</sup> The remainder of this section presents the GamerGate controversy and analyses its misogynistic attacks against Sarkeesian with a specific focus on the graphic language and the most recurrent rhetorical figures deployed in this discourse.

### *GamerGate*

As Andrea Braithwaite points out, it is impossible to provide an exhaustive account of the birth and development of GamerGate: in fact, it has continually travelled throughout social networks, unmonitored platforms, dedicated blogs and websites, where threads are often displaced or relocated and users' accounts deleted (Braithwaite 2). Nevertheless, the controversy triggered by it (i.e., the so-called GamerGate controversy) has acquired huge resonance both within and outside the gaming community, obtaining extended media coverage (e.g., see Dewey; Frank; Hern, Gamergate; Jason; Parkin; Wofford) and inspiring academic research (e.g., Sheperd et al.; Braithwaite). According to several sources (Braithwaite; Dewey; Hathaway), GamerGate made its first collective and public appearance in August 2014 against Zoe Quinn, an American developer of indie video games. In late August 2014, Quinn's ex-boyfriend, a blogger and gamer named Eron Gjoni, published a long post discussing her sex life online and shared it on different websites which he knew had previously harassed her

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<sup>18</sup> In online communication and media reports, it is also known with the related hashtag #GamerGate. I use the two expressions as synonyms, unless otherwise stated.

(Jason). In “The Zoe Post” (Jason), Gjoni also implied that Quinn had traded sex for a positive review of her latest game *Depression Quest* by a journalist of the gaming site *Kotaku* (Braithwaite 4). Even though this assumption was proved to be groundless (Totilo), Gjoni’s accusation triggered the rage of a large number of male gamers who started expressing their outrage against the supposed lack of ethics in gaming journalism which in their view was perfectly summed up by Quinn’s case. Since then, the hashtag #GamerGate has been increasingly used on social networks, and GamerGate developed into an online movement.<sup>19</sup> While the community overtly expressed its aim to fight against media ethics in reviewing video games, it actually translated into the massive harassment of several women working in the gaming field as developers and critics, like Zoe Quinn, Brianna Wu, and Anita Sarkeesian. Thus, it is legitimate to describe GamerGate as “an online movement ostensibly concerned with ethics in game journalism and with protecting the ‘gamer’ identity” (Hathaway), but which has demonstrated to be more engaged in abusing women online rather than in advocating ethical journalism, (see Wofford). For this reason, #GamerGate can better be defined as a “Web-based campaign of harassment against women who make, write about and enjoy video games, masquerading as a movement of gamers upset about a perceived lack of ethics among games journalists” (Wofford). Such misogynistic patterns in gamers’ subculture had already been registered in relation to other gender-based controversies in video games and in projects aimed at shedding some light on the problem of hate speech among players, like the Gambit

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<sup>19</sup> It is difficult to provide numbers to show the extent of the GamerGate community. As Braithwaite explains (2), figures range from 10,000 (based on the use of #GamerGate hashtag) to 400,000 participants, even though the latter seems an overestimation because it is based on the views of GamerGate related videos and thus does not take into account multiple visions by the same user.

lab study.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the language used to harass women speaking up in this industry like Sarkeesian, Wu, and Quinn proves a much more intense and vicious harassment than the just mentioned accounts.

Owing to constraints of space I cannot provide a detailed analysis of the online misogynistic hate speech directed at Quinn and Wu, but it is worth noticing here that several studies on their abuse demonstrate similarities with the case of Anita Sarkeesian, on which my analysis focuses.<sup>21</sup> These affinities prove that the above-mentioned incidents are not isolated cases, but, conversely, they show “a pattern of misogynistic gamer culture and patriarchal privilege attempting to (re)assert its position” (Consalvo). Therefore, in the following paragraphs I develop a critical discourse analysis of the rhetoric used to harass Sarkeesian after the eruption of GamerGate. By focusing on two subsets of data provided by the activist in 2014, I try to show how the discursive strategies deployed by GamerGaters against Sarkeesian resemble those which targeted her before the appearance of this movement. My intent is to prove the hypothesis that GamerGate presented itself as a community against alleged journalistic corruption but demonstrated to be just another collective attempt to reinforce structural gendered asymmetry and a prejudiced attitude against women both in the gaming industry and on the Web in general.

### *Misogyny in the GamerGate Era*

As mentioned, in this section I develop a critical analysis of the misogynistic discourse targeted against Sarkeesian by studying some UGCs retrieved in a subcorpus of data provided by the

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<sup>20</sup> For similar controversies, see Salter and Blodgett for the analysis of geek hypermasculinity in the Dickwolves incident occurred in the Penny Arcade community. For the Gambit lab project, see Tan, who documents the misogynistic hate speech used by male gamers when discussing the representation of female characters and women’s participation as game players.

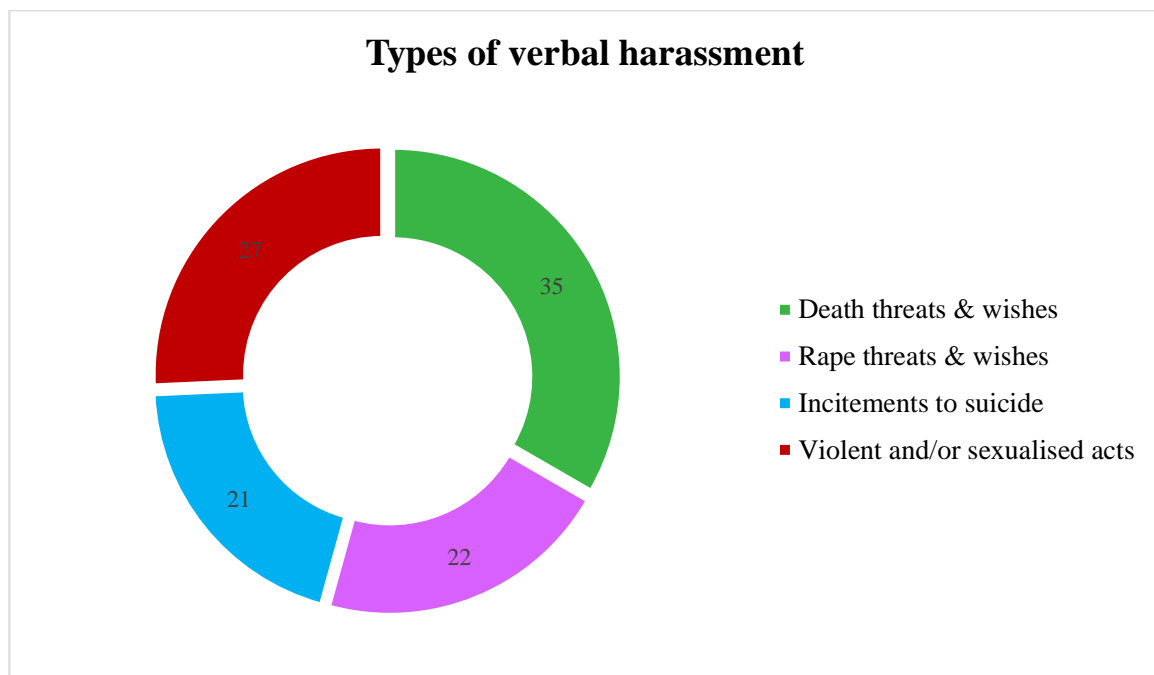
<sup>21</sup> For a fuller account of Quinn’s case, see Jason, while for Wu’s case, see Stuart.

activist herself. This source is composed by two joined subsets of tweets that are part of the overall database of my research. They were originally posted by Sarkeesian on her blog and they came in the form of two series of screenshot tweets presented in two dedicated webpages, namely: *Examples of Sexist Harassment* (hereafter Sarkeesian, Examples) published in September 2014, and *One Week of Harassment on Twitter* (hereafter Sarkeesian, One Week) published in January 2015. The former consists in a set of 47 tweets, while the latter is made up of 157 tweets, for a total number of 204 posts. Being the result of data selection, they cannot be used to assess the precise overall impact of hate speech, but I consider them an opportunity to enrich the qualitative critical analysis with some quantitative insights over the type of terminology used to harass the target, and over the kinds of strategies implemented to reduce her presence online. Therefore, the subcorpus at issue is presented through two charts which visually break down the terminology of the UCGs under analysis and the types of violent harassment.

In preparing these charts I followed the classification provided by Luke Malone (Breakdown), who however only focused on the tweets available in Sarkeesian, One Week. Thus, my quantitative study presents four main differences from Malone's data breakdown. First, I examine a larger amount of data by adding the 47 tweets available in Sarkeesian, Examples. Second, I count only once those terms that appear multiple times in the same message, to provide the precise number of tweets using such derogatory words. Third, I add the terminological category of homophobic slurs to prove the coexistence of different forms of gender-based hate speech – i.e., misogyny, homophobia, and biphobia – and their entanglement with racist discourse, which is also represented by a specific category of terms. Fourth, as for the types of harassment received, I decided to provide a more systematic presentation of different kinds of abuse, by grouping them into four categories, namely *death threats and wishes* (which also contain the wishes that the target gets cancer, counted separately by

Malone), *rape threats and wishes, incitements to suicide, and violent and/or sexualised acts*.<sup>22</sup>

The breakdowns resulted from these classifications are presented below.



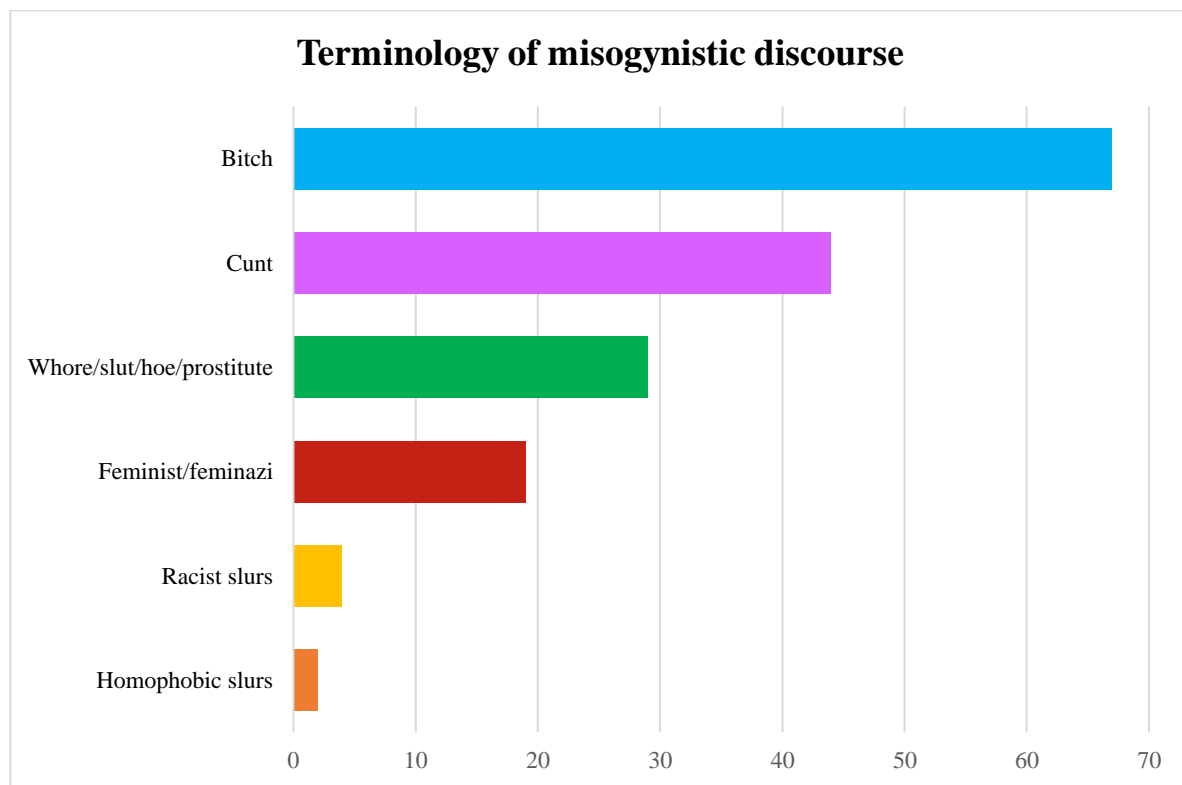
As the chart shows, more than half of these tweets (i.e., 105 over 204 tweets) fall in one of the four categories, as they express a form of harassment against the target. Transforming the number of tweets of each category into a percentage, we see that, out of these 105 UGCs, 33% contain death threats and wishes, nearly 21% rape threats and wishes, and 20% incite the target to commit suicide. Finally, nearly 26% express the performance of acts which do not fall into the category of death and rape, but which nevertheless express violent – often sexualised – actions to harass Sarkeesian (e.g., masturbation and requests to perform sexual acts).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> By definition, Twitter messaging system is short, and this feature does not provide much context for the posts shared on this platform. Therefore, assessing users' intentions can sometimes be a difficult task. For this reason, a few of the UGCs at issue were assigned to more than one category as they can be interpreted as potential expressions of different types of harassment (e.g., see below the examples "this fucking bitch needs a pounding" and "If you died I would still hatefully hatefuck your corpse though").

<sup>23</sup> Examples of each categories are quoted in a table below and discussed along with the terminology used to convey such messages.

In addition, the following chart sums up the derogatory terminology used against the target:



As mentioned, the graph refers to the demeaning words used to address Sarkeesian. These slurs were found in 164 of the 204 tweets which made up the dataset. Thus, this kind of abusive language is present in more than 80% of the tweets, as they are contained both in UGCs expressing the four categories of violent harassment, but also in most of the remaining posts which convey a general aversion against the target. The chart shows the pervasive use of disparaging terms against women and feminists,<sup>24</sup> and their coexistence with homophobic and racist slurs.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> The occurrences of such derogatory terms are as follows: *bitch* in 67 tweet, *cunt* in 44 tweets, *feminist/feminism/feminazi/misandrist* in 19 tweets.

<sup>25</sup> The homophobic terms occurred in two tweets (i.e., *bisexual slut*, *fgt* [faggot]) and racially-charged expressions in four posts (i.e., *nigger*, *paki*, *Arab bitch*).

In the following table I provide examples of the above-mentioned derogatory terms.

These examples are here divided according to the type of harassment they express:

#### Death Threats & Wishes

Example 1: *@femfreq your one dumb cunt and am going doxs you then going to your home and kill you slowly* (Sarkeesian, One Week)

Example 2: *@femfreq swear I would put this bitch 6 feet deep* (Sarkeesian, One Week)

Example 3: *@femfreq I hope every feminist has their head severed from their shoulders* (Sarkeesian, One Week)

Example 4: *@femfreq I WANT TO FUCKING STAB YOUR STUPID FUCKING UGLY SHAPED FACE YOU FEMINIST CUNT, KILL YOURSELF, NO ONE WILL CARE BITCH* (Sarkeesian, One Week)

#### Rape Threats & Wishes

Example 5: *@femfreq If I meet you for real I'd anal rape you with a huge chainsaw* (Sarkeesian, Examples)

Example 6: *@femfreq im gonna bust dem sugar walls leave an aids load in der* (Sarkeesian, One Week)

Example 7: *@femfreq You Stupid Ass Bitch I Will Fuck You In The Ass So Hard I Would Break The 9.5 Earthquake Record And Leave That Ass Jiggling ForDays* (Sarkeesian, One Week)

Example 8: *@femfreq hope you get raped by a wild pack of niggers* (Sarkeesian, One Week)

#### Incitements to Suicide

Example 9: *@femfreq kill yourself you piece of garbage. You shouldn't be able to breathe* (Sarkeesian, One Week)

Example 10: *@femfreq I Hope you fucking Kill yourself Get Ice Skates Split your throat And drink bleach* (Sarkeesian, One Week)

Example 11: *@femfreq Just kill yourself dumb whore, stop feeding the media with all this fake feminist propaganda* (Sarkeesian, One Week)

Example 12: *@femfreq you're a stupid fat cunt die pls?* (Sarkeesian, One Week)

#### Violent and/or Sexualised Acts

Example 13: *@femfreq i ll fap to this bitch* (Sarkeesian, Examples)

Example 14: *@femfreq If you died I would still hatefully hatefuck your corpse though* (Sarkeesian, Examples)

Example 15: *@femfreq How is my favorite slut doing? I take it you'll get on your knees tonight and be a good woman* (Sarkeesian, Examples)

Example 16: *@locust9 @femfreq @TimOfLegend Omg this fucking bitch needs a pounding* (Sarkeesian, Examples).

Examples 1 to 16 illustrate the type of rhetoric used to harass and threaten on Anita Sarkeesian. Regardless of the kind of harassment conveyed in these online communications, all the UGCs here quoted show the reliance on highly graphic and often sexualised language typical of hate speech. The repetition of derogatory, gender-based slurs aimed at denigrating the target (e.g., *dumb cunt* in example 1, *dumb whore* in example 11, *stupid ass bitch* in example 7, *favorite slut* in example 15) show what Emma Jane defines the “quasi-algebraic quality [of e-bile] in that proper nouns can be substituted infinitely without affecting in any way the structure of the discourse” (Back 559). Such sexually explicit rhetoric develops through a discursive net where derogatory epithets expressing different declinations of gender-based hate speech (i.e., misogyny and prejudices against LGBT people) are mingled with racism. Thus, in the data under analysis, Sarkeesian supposed sexual identity and her Middle Eastern heritage are discursively used as a proof of her outcast nature through expressions like *bisexual slut* (Sarkeesian, Examples), *paki* (Sarkeesian, One Week) and *Arab bitch* (Sarkeesian, One Week). These examples show how hate speech generates from heteronormative and white supremacism, according to which those who question patriarchal ideologies necessarily bear a non-heterosexual – thus inferior – identity (even though Sarkeesian has never declared herself bisexual), and those of non-Western heritage get equalised due to their alleged cultural inferiority (being Sarkeesian an Armenian descendent and not Pakistani).

Moreover, as stressed in the analysis of other cases, sexually explicit rhetoric is often used to “pass scathing, appearance-related judgments [through] ad hominem invectives” (Jane, Back 560). In fact, such gender-based insults tend to attack the target by depicting her through pejorative adjectives specifically referring to her alleged overweight and lack of intelligence (i.e., *stupid fat cunt* in example 12 and *dumb whore* in example 11), or her supposed physical unattractiveness (i.e., *ugly shaped face* in example 4). Such linguistic elements are used to shift the attention from the cultural significance of the target’s stances to a disparaging assessment



of her body through the ubiquitous heteronormative male gaze. The strong intent to relegate Sarkeesian to the sphere of sexuality and passive corporeality is also visible in the common way of presenting her through a set of body parts which usually become sexualised synecdoches (e.g., *cunt* in examples 12 and 4, *ass* in examples 7, or *tits* in other tweets of the dataset<sup>26</sup>). It is clear from the tweets quoted above that the physicality of the designated enemy become the battleground on which the war against her is perpetrated. For this reason, the description of violent acts on and against the body of the target becomes a sort of mantra to humiliate her and to deprive her of any form of autonomy and subjectivity. Thus, in this kind of speech, the target's body gets virtually killed slowly to increase feelings of pain (see example 1), buried "6 feet deep" (example 2), beheaded (see example 3), stabbed (see example 4), brutally anally raped (see example 7) sometimes with particularly damaging objects (e.g., "with a huge chainsaw" in example 5), and tainted with sexually transmitted diseases (like AIDS in example 6), all because the target "shouldn't be able to breathe" (example 9). In particular, coerced sex acts are prescribed as a punishment for the target to correct her behaviour (Jane, Back 560), as shown in example 16 (i.e., "this fucking bitch needs a pounding"<sup>27</sup>) and in example 8. In the latter, the expression *by a wild pack of niggers* is used to aggravate the impact of the rape wish, by relying on the racist slur *niggers* and on the prejudiced representation of

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<sup>26</sup> An example is "@femfreq kill yourself oh wait did I hurt your tits with my keyboard" (Sarkeesian, One Week). Here, in an allegedly ironic tone, the user refers to the common allegation that women who report hate speech whine because they are not tough enough, and thus online communication hurts their feelings. Such ridiculisation of the victim is here passed through Sarkeesian's sexualisation by substituting her emotions with a more sexually charged term, i.e., *tits*.

<sup>27</sup> Even though, given the lack of a context, the meaning of *pounding* in this tweet cannot be established with no margin of error, I suggest interpreting it as a description of hard sex (see the Urban Dictionary's definition of *pounding*: "fucking the shit out of your girl"), or as an act of general violence (see the Merriam Webster's definition of *to pound*: "to reduce to powder or pulp by beating").

black men as unable to control their sexual instinct, who thus are depicted as far more dangerous and sexually disruptive than white men. The extremely graphic representation of gendered violence in hate speech seems to outlive the digital defeat of the woman. In fact, this misogynistic rage gets to justify also the violation of the female dead body, as example 14 represents (i.e., “If you died I would still hatefully hatefuck your corpse though”). Here, the slang term *hatefuck* is to be understood as “an act of aggressive sex with someone if they have no respect for the person as an equal human being” (Urban Dictionary, Hatefuck), and it thus symbolises the ultimate denial of the woman’s subjectivity, represented by the sexual persecution of her corpse.

The brutality and pervasiveness of this hate speech, here presented quantitatively in the graphs and qualitatively in the critical analysis of its discourse, demonstrate that it is a discursive tool intended not only to virtually humiliate but also to scare the target in real life. Therefore, I suggest considering that these quotes are typical examples of how hate speech work as a performative harmful act, as discussed in Chapter 2.1. As Austin explains, the term performative comes from the verb to perform and “it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action – it is not normally thought of as just saying something” (6-7). Even if online posts inevitably differ from the sentences studied by Austin, the aggressiveness that such UGCs express gives them the power to virtually perform the brutal actions they describe, against a target who finds herself almost powerless when facing a collective and vicious assault. Moreover, my analysis also shows how misogynistic hate speech is able to express “the performativity of gender” (Precarity iv), through the over display of an aggressive hypermasculinity which not only characterises the gaming community but also afflicts most Internet-based communication. Such hypermasculine culture operates both at individual level – by attacking singular women online – and at structural level – by silencing women’s active participation on the Web – with the effect to reaffirm the dominant position of cisgender white

men, and to block the liberating potential of Web 2.0, by preventing the full expression of historically marginalised or less powerful social groups.

In the remainder of this section, I complete my analysis of this case by studying the discursive construction of the dichotomy between in-group and out-group identities in gaming communities. In doing so, I quote other examples of the harassment perpetrated by the cyber mob of “malestream of gamers” (Jenson and De Castell 76) against Anita Sarkeesian, to show that “GamerGaters are an instructive example of how social media operate as vectors for public discourses about gender, sexual identity, and equality, as well as safe spaces for aggressive and violent misogyny” (Braithwaite 1).

#### *Gendered Identities in #GamerGate*

To understand the articulation of gendered discourse in GamerGaters’ online posts, Braithwaite suggests a classification of three storytelling strategies of GamerGate misogynistic discourse – i.e., “the #GamerGate Crusade” (4), “Disciplining the Enemy” (5), “#GamerGate’s Real Victims” (6). Bearing in mind Braithwaite’s insightful study, I preferred focusing on GamerGaters’ discursive construction of the target’s identity. For this reason, I here identify three main rhetorical figures used to designate Sarkeesian as an outcast of the gaming community. By using expressions found in many abusive tweets, I name these discursive tropes as *the con artist*, *the attention whore*, and *the femcunt/feminazi*. These labels rely on the rhetoric used by GamerGaters to construct the mythological canon of Sarkeesian’s villainy (Sarkeesian, XOXO), in opposition to their self-established identity of real gamers which they consider menaced by the target’s alleged hidden agenda. According to abusers, such dangerous feminist propaganda justifies their self-entitlement to put the activist back in her place, thus showing what Ruth Wodak and Martin Reisigl define in general terms as the dichotomy between “positive self-representation and the negative other-presentation” (386), here respectively attached to male gamers and to the female/feminist player and critic.

By analysing a selection of tweets from the above-presented subcorpus, I will show how gamers who identify themselves as members of the GamerGate community defend their own identity and their geek masculinity by relegating the target to an outsider position. The following table quotes some examples of the three rhetorical figures that I identified and that I analyse below in the remainder of this section.

#### The Greedy Con Artist

Example 13: *@femfreq this whore is a money grubbing bimbo* (Sarkeesian, Examples)

Example 14: *@femfreq you scam people out of thousands and don't expect death threats?* (Sarkeesian, Examples)

Example 15: *Sarkeesian deserved it because she was a scam artist not because shes a woman, Quinn deserves it for similar reasons* (Sarkeesian, Examples)

Example 16: *Maybe if you were not a con-artist, Extorting money out of people with your 'Feminism' You wouldn't get harassed. Cunt* (Sarkeesian, One Week)

Example 17: *you deserve every single threat you get, what a stupid bitch, most people already understand that all you want is money. whore* (Sarkeesian, One Week)

#### The Attention Whore

Example 18: *@femfreq You lying cunt you made all this up for attention! #pathetic* (Sarkeesian, Examples)

Example 19: *@femfreq you don't get death threats. You're just an attention whore with no self esteem* (Sarkeesian, Examples)

Example 20: *@femfreq Truth: because you love being the victim. You're an attention whore who uses it to cry misogyny. You encourage it for publicity* (Sarkeesian, Examples)

Example 21: *FUCKING CUNT WHORE STOP TRYING TO PLAY VICTIM YOU'RE FUCKING STUPID!!!!* (Sarkeesian, One Week)

Example 22: *@femfreq you don't get shit because you are a woman, you get shit because you claim to be a victim, you asked for this, enjoy it* (Sarkeesian, Examples)

#### The Femcunt<sup>28</sup>/Feminazi

Example 23: *I can see a resemblance between @femfreq and the Nazi. 'Be like us or face the consequences'* (Sarkeesian, One Week)

Example 24: *Feminist? That term can only be used in real women. Stop soling what that ideology stands for ya dumb whore* (Sarkeesian, One Week)

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<sup>28</sup> From the tweet “@femfreq should be @femCUNT or @femFREAK LOL! I HATE FEMCUNTS!!!” (Sarkeesian, One Week).

Example 25: *Everyone knows, you're a liar, a con, an attention whore, a femenzi (not a feminist), a sexist pig. an all-round joke* (Sarkeesian, One Week)

Example 26: *promoting sexism against males. Stupid cunt. Men are superior can't fight #nature* (Sarkeesian, Examples)

Example 27: *How the fuck did you make this about feminism? #GamerGate is about something completely different! dumb bitch* (Sarkeesian, Examples)

### *The Con Artist*

As Anita Sarkeesian explained (Sarkeesian, XOXO), the impersonation hoaxes fabricated to vilify her are an important element to understand this harassment. While I explained the functioning of impersonation in the previous paragraphs, I want to stress here the impact that the creation of a fake identity has had in her abuse. As she noted (Sarkeesian, XOXO), impersonation hoaxes usually appear along with conspiracy theories developed to demonise her and to distort her real intention. Among the several theories that online users made up to portray her as a dangerous enemy, there is the allegation that Sarkeesian is a con artist who exploited feminism to scam people. According to many, the proof of such supposed hidden agenda was the huge and unexpected success that her Kickstarter project got on the crowdsourcing platform from people who wanted to show their support through money donations. Following this theory, Sarkeesian is not a real gamer neither a real feminist activist, but merely a grafter. Examples 13 to 17 prove how impersonation hoaxes and conspiracy theories succeeded in shaping the negative and outraged public perception of Sarkeesian as a “scam artist” (example 15). According to some others, not only she scammed her followers on Kickstarter, but she also keeps victimising herself by publishing fake tweets (e.g., “Stop trying to victimize yourself for money” (Sarkeesian, One Week). Moreover, tweets in examples 14 to 17 suggest that this supposedly real identity of Sarkeesian is what actually caused the massive harassment she experienced and denounced. Therefore, according to harassers, as she victimises herself for money, she deserves “every single threat” she gets (example 17), because she demonises the true nature of the gaming industry and, thus, puts in danger its very

legitimate existence. As Sarkeesian pointed out (XOXO), this pretentious depiction transformed her into a misinformed viral meme. Indeed, cartoons, image macros, and memes aimed at picturing her as a fraud were shared by GamerGaters and became viral. Image 5 (available in @leftygirl) is an example of this mechanism:



Image 5

As the text of this tweet says, this caricature was used by the harassers to defame Sarkeesian. It refers to the fact that in October 2014 the activist was forced to cancel a speech at Utah State University after the organisers received an anonymous message threatening a mass shooting during the event (see Holpuch). The cartoon depicts Sarkeesian caught in the act of faking a threat similar to the one she received. Moreover, without any real link to Sarkeesian non-Christian heritage, the target is pictured as a grotesque hunchbacked figure wearing a coat and showing a satisfied smile and semi diabolic eyes, along with a big hooked-nose, an image which evokes the stereotypical representation of a Jewish person. In particular, as Sara Lipton notes, the physical feature of the Jewish hooked-nose is one of the most recurrent visual *topoi*

in anti-Semitic discourse<sup>29</sup> aimed at arousing “responses of loathing and contempt” (Lipton) against Jews, and to visually label them as the moral Other. With a similar goal, the hooked-nose is here used to symbolise the alleged greediness of Sarkeesian who supposedly counterfeits her harassment, writing her own threats. As shown in other cases of my research, hate speech tends to join different types of discrimination through prejudiced discourses which victimise those who fall out of the category of the white heterosexual man. Here, anti-Semitism strongly entwines with misogyny, as the repetition of gender-biased terms and slurs shows (i.e., *whore, cunt, bimbo, bitch*).

### *The Attention Whore*

The second rhetorical figure plays on discursive strategies that are quite similar to the ones above analysed. Also in this category, Sarkeesian’s experience is denied through an aggressive language which derides her for being a “lying cunt” (example 18) and an “attention whore” (examples 19 and 20). Like in other posts, Sarkeesian is depicted as a professional victim and a fraud, but this time she is attacked for “pulling the gender card” (available in Sarkeesian, Examples) to draw attention on herself because of an alleged lack of self-esteem (example 19). In this discourse, reports of graphic misogyny are transformed into a pathetic attempt to get noticed. This reconfiguration justifies the ubiquitous victim blaming expressed in many tweets, like examples 20 and 22. The act of blaming the victim is sustained by repeating her that she encouraged the harassment (example 20) and that thus she deserves it (example 22). Such punishment (expressed also in examples 15 and 17) evokes the common justifications of real life episodes of rape as legitimate responses to the victim’s supposedly provocative clothes, and therefore it shows how any affirmation of women’s autonomous identity – whether through their apparel or their speech – is considered the very cause of the violence they experience.

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<sup>29</sup> An example in visual arts can be found in the Nazi propaganda movie *The Eternal Jew*, which “claimed to show the Jews in their ‘original state,’ ‘before they put on the mask of civilized Europeans’” (Lipton).

### *The Femcunt/Feminazi*

The last group of tweets shows another articulation of misogyny, namely harassers' attempt to dictate the real essence of feminism. In general terms, instances of misogynistic hate speech usually express an overt reaffirmation of the alleged natural supremacy of men (e.g., "men are superior can't fight #nature" in example 26) and the attachment of an inferior identity to feminists for their stances through violent utterances (e.g., "feminist are a waste of air" and "you don't deserve rights feminist need to good to jail for existing #MenistTwitter," both available in Sarkeesian, *One Week*). Nevertheless, examples 23 to 27 prove that the very fact that GamerGaters consider themselves as entitled to define feminism shows another violation of the target's identity. Here users construct a dichotomy between true feminism – a term that "can only be used in real women" (example 24) and Nazifeminism, the latter being a form of utter discrimination against men. Consequently, Sarkeesian is defined as a "sexist pig" (example 25) who wants to redefine what feminism really is ("stop soling what that ideology stands for" in example 24). As the Australian activist Clementine Ford points out, the feminazi is a typical trope used to deride and harass feminists on the Web "for having the nerve to express an opinion" (*Fight* - Ch. 1), and it is often expressed to depict them as irrational man-haters who want to reform society by aggressively imposing their prejudiced worldview to the detriment of men's freedom of speech (see the alleged resemblance between Sarkeesian and the Nazis expressed in example 23). Therefore, the comparison of feminists to dangerous censors is used to protect a derogatory discourse which expresses patriarchal ideologies, as explained in other passages of my thesis. More specifically, here Nazifeminism is a supposed dangerous ideology aimed at distorting the reality of the gaming industry and in demonising the true nature of GamerGate which, according to tweets like example 27, is something completely different from the harassment of women in the cybersphere.

The analysis of the above quoted tweets shows how these three rhetorical figures attach



a spoiled identity to Sarkeesian, who is presented as a fake feminist who feigns her own harassment to get money and attention. This shows how gamers who identify in the GamerGate community are unable to recognise themselves as perpetrators of the abuse. Conversely, their discursive strategies demonstrate how they prefer blaming the target for the harassment they have created, rather than questioning the industry that provides them a certain identity, namely geek masculinity (Braithwaite 7; Salter and Blodgett 402). Suggesting misogyny as a key element of GamerGate discourse, Braithwaite notes that “like other gender identities, geek masculinity is relational: it is understood relative to forms of femininity as well as to hegemonic masculinity” (2). For this reason, following Braithwaite, Taylor, and Salter and Blodgett, I suggest understanding geek masculinity as a gendered identity caught between traditional hegemonic masculinity (whose normative power is expressed by bodily features like physical strength and athleticism) and femininity (whose subjugated position has been socially perpetrated through gender-based violence both physically and discursively). In affirming its peculiar identities as normative to the detriment of femininity, geek masculinity has historically turned elements like the interest in technology and video games into constitutive features of its very identity. In this construction and reaffirmation of male gamers’ identity, such technology-related elements “work as important markers for inclusion and exclusion” (Taylor 111). Therefore “the ‘encroachment’ of women and girls into what was previously a male-gendered space” (Consalvo) easily generates the fear for a loss of identity that male gamers like those forming the core of GamerGate have tended to resist by excluding female active participation through a violent misogynistic harassment. The online abuse experienced by women in the gaming industry like Sarkeesian, Quinn, and Wu proves this mechanism. Many tweets of the subcorpus here under analysis show that, far from accepting a woman who questions the gender asymmetries of video games, male gamers transform such legitimate stances into a zero-sum struggle (Consalvo; Braithwaite 4) which recalls the ancient alleged battle of the sexes. In this

vision of two gendered armies facing each other, women who want to affirm their existence inside the games industry are discursively redefined as dangerous enemies who aim at denaturing – thus destroying – video games, and who therefore need to be annihilated through a digital crusade with the real and tangible effect of silencing them. Therefore, GamerGaters see themselves as the only *real* gamers and the *real* victims of female/feminist players, who are discursively represented as fake gamers and untrue connoisseurs of the products they criticise. Examples of the construction of these opposed identities are the following tweets sent to Sarkeesian: “@femfreq we are the games you stupidly delusional cunt,” “dumb bitch, your going to ruin the gaming community for millions of people we hope your happy,” “u are not a real gamer go die get out of here #GamerGate #fuckyouanita #DramaAlert,” “you are the shit stain of the gaming community, just leave the games the fuck alone,” “hey bitch, here’s a bright idea. Stayyyyyy the fuck away from gaming? Let us do us. We don’t fw<sup>30</sup> your line of work so why fw ours?” (all available in Sarkeesian, One Week).

These five messages sum up all the discursive elements analysed above in relation to the online harassment experienced by Anita Sarkeesian. They also show how harassers attempt to defend their digital bastion by creating two opposed gendered identities, where the male is presented in a ruling position and the female is discursively rejected as ruinous and morally inferior, characterised by delusional dumbness. The ultimate result of such strenuous defence of geek masculinity is the unforeseen reconfiguration of the very meaning of the term *gamers* which, given its contemporary use, ends up losing its original meaning of enthusiasts of the industry and becomes “a short-hand, catch-all term for the type of reactionary holdouts that feel so threatened by gaming’s widening horizons” (Plunkett).

The strong misogynistic content of the examples quoted in the second part of this study

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<sup>30</sup> Slang for *fuck with*.

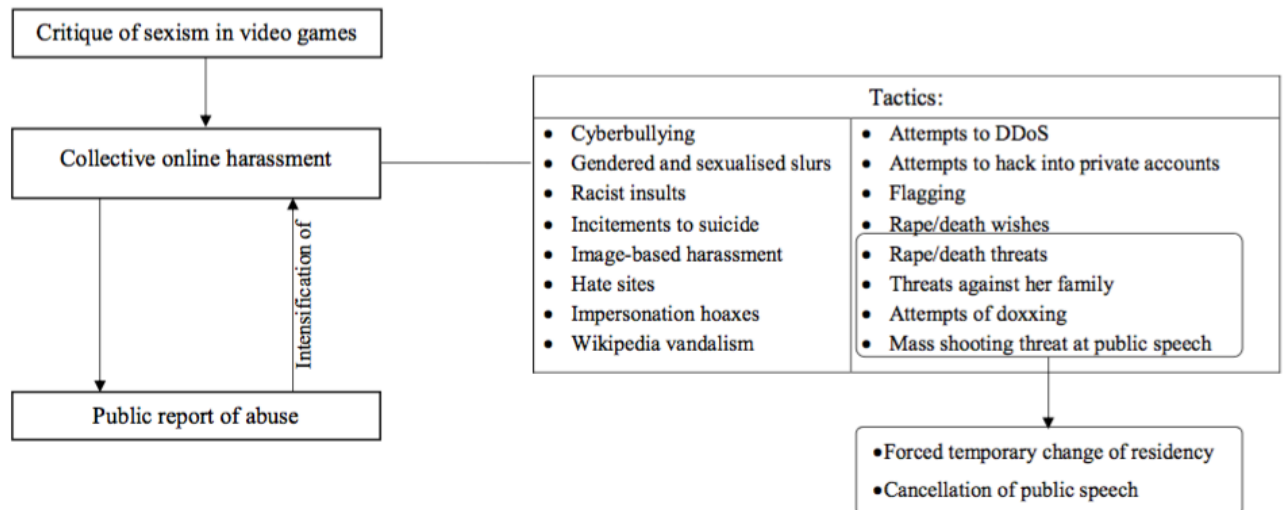
shows how GamerGaters have deployed the same rhetorical strategies that harassers used to silence the target before the eruption of the GamerGate controversy. Therefore, my analysis shows how this debate has been used by many male gamers to aggressively and stubbornly reject any critique of the industry that provided them a sense of belonging and a collective social identity, as the following quote testifies:

yes i may be an evil cis gendered 'white' male, however through out my earlier life i was the outsider, the person to, while not out right shun, just not to be interacted with. It wasnt until, for the most part, i was able to get a constant access to the internet was i able to feel like i belong anywhere. . . . Gaming/Internet has let me belong, not feel so alone and fuck these people for demonizing it and me over and over and over again.  
(CynicCorvus in reply to gekkozorz)

These words were published online by a reddit user and I consider them as a perfect summary of men's lack of confidence which generates much hate against women in technology and games industry. As the Australian academic Dan Golding wrote, "what we are seeing is the end of gamers, and the viciousness that accompanies the death of an identity. Due to . . . a move towards progressive attitudes within more traditional areas of videogame culture, the gamer identity has been broken. It has nowhere to call home." Like the reddit user confesses, gaming and the Internet provided him and many others with a sheltered alternative identity based on mutual interests and on the construction of counter narratives to traditional hegemonic masculinity which had previously relegated them in the position of social outsiders. Nevertheless, apparently such strong identification has not translated into the assimilation of a robust identity whose existence is considered in danger when other gendered identities vindicate the equal right to actively engage in the community beyond gender-based stereotypes, as the collective harassment of Anita Sarkeesian shows.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, considering the complexity of the case here analysed, it is worth summing up the development of Sarkeesian's abuse to visually represent the escalation and the many different tactics that usually typify online misogynistic harassment:



### *Escalation of Sarkeesian's Online Abuse*

As the activist mentioned in several public speeches and interviews (e.g., Sarkeesian in Katz, Subjected; Sarkeesian, Women 2015), such ongoing and collective harassment, along with the hate speech used to perpetrate it, has had significant psychological effects on her life. In fact, she has declared that she became hypervigilant in public spaces, both offline and online. Such hypervigilance has enormously affected her existence both professionally and personally, as she felt her actions and words have been constantly scrutinised through a magnifying glass to find a way to degrade her. For this reason, since the harassment started, she has always been surrounded by security when attending events, and she has become scared of being recognised in public spaces. Even though harassers have not succeeded in their intent to cut her off the Web, this analysis shows that when the abuse is perpetrated by a cyber mob, it can produce a strong social impact also on a feminist target, who is sometimes forced to limit her freedom of expression, as the cancellation of her public speech at Utah State University proves. Moreover, the abuse has impacted Sarkeesian's serene participation in online interactions. As she declared

in the short speech *What I Couldn't Say* (Sarkeesian, Women 2015), because of such hateful backlash, now she rarely feels comfortable in expressing herself on the Web, and she has started declining most invitations to podcast and web shows. Moreover, her website and social network accounts have suffered several technological malfunctions due to the harassers' implementation of strategies like DDoSing and flagging. Most importantly, what differentiates Sarkeesian from most of the targets whose cases I analyse in my thesis is that she focused more on providing a lucid and critical presentation of the situation she has experienced than on confessing the related emotional burden.<sup>31</sup> In fact, she affirmed that she did not feel free “to publicly express sadness, or rage, or exhaustion, or anxiety, or depression . . . [and neither] feelings for fear, or of how tiring it is to be constantly vigilant of [one's] physical and digital surroundings” (Sarkeesian, Women 2015). In my opinion, this is an important factor to consider when assessing the multilayered impact of online hate speech on a target's life, and it thus translates into the recognition that any taxonomy of effects on the social, psychophysical, and economic levels may be inevitably non-exhaustive. Nevertheless, as already explained in Chapter 3, the methodological limits imposed to academic research by the very nature of this online phenomenon should not dissuade scholars from studying hate speech. Such limits, in fact, once identified and declared, do not necessarily translate into non-reliable, or non-objective research; conversely, analyses of online hate speech provide important insights for a more structured and accurate understanding of this pervasive phenomenon and of how it affects the whole society in keeping gender asymmetries alive. Similarly, considered the impossibility to provide here a rigorous quantitative analysis of all UCGs related to GamerGate, in this section my argument was not to suggest that each male gamer(gater) sustains a hidden misogynist agenda. Conversely, my aim was to study one of the many articulations of

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<sup>31</sup> A similar – but less systematic – attempt to critically analyse gendered online harassment is provided by Caitlin Roper in Roper, Experience. For the analysis of Roper's abuse see, Chapter 5.2.

misogyny online, and to show how it often becomes a discursive means to defend a masculine identity whose owners feel besieged by women's participation in different circles of the cybersphere. In my analysis I also showed the performative power of hate speech which can be compared to real life forms of violence, as it often relies on rhetorical strategies which have long been used to defend offline forms of gendered harassment.

For this reason, in the following section I analyse the misogynistic discourse employed by many Twitter users to justify a case of physical domestic violence which occurred in August 2014, namely the violent assault and attempted rape perpetrated against the actress Christy Mack by her former partner.

## **4.2. Case Study no. 2: Christy Mack**

### *The Dataset*

The dataset of this case study is composed of 115 tweets that I downloaded from Twitter in August 2014, after the physical assault of Christy Mack by her former partner War Machine. As all contents are text-based and they were all retrieved on Twitter, I decided not to provide a table with a visual break down of the data for this case. In the following paragraphs I begin my study by presenting the target of the abuse at issue.

### *The Target*

Christine Mackinday, alias Christy Mack, is a 26-year old American model and former porn star. Between 2013 and 2014, Mack dated Jonathan Koppenhaver, a popular mixed-martial arts fighter (hereafter MMA fighter) and porn star, who had legally changed his name into War Machine (Jagannathan). In May 2014, after repeated physical abuse that lasted several months, Mack finally left the man, thanks to the support of domestic violence community services (Ferrara). Nevertheless, in August 2014 War Machine went to the residence of the woman, where he found her with a male companion, and, after beating and throwing the man out of the house, he physically attacked her. Mack eventually managed to leave her home, and was taken to hospital, where she arrived severely injured from the assault. A few days later, she posted a tweet (i.e., Mack, Tweet 11 August 2014) to publicly denounce the abuse, which suddenly went viral (Dockterman; McDonald, Mack; Bates, Thank). In this online source, she provides a description of her experience and four images which show the viciousness of War Machine's attack. In her digital testimony, Mack recounts how, after beating her friend, Koppenhaver started to abuse her, attempting to rape her – an assault that he failed to perpetrate only because he allegedly did not manage to get an erection – and beating her violently, leaving her with 18 broken bones around her eyes, a broken nose, several teeth missing, a severely ruptured liver, and many other injuries (Mack, Tweet 11 August 2014). I decided to mention the physical

damage reported by Mack not to indulge in their graphic descriptions, but to indicate that this overt and detailed account of domestic abuse did not stop many users from commenting it through misogynistic speech. In fact, while many Twitter commenters showed their support for Christy Mack (see comments to Mack, Tweet 11 August 2014), many others spread the hashtag #FreeWarMachine to show their outrage for Koppenhaver’s imprisonment, which occurred a few days after the man had published a series of tweets to defend himself. In the following paragraphs, I quote and analyse some of the tweets that War Machine published in the aftermath of Mack’s report, to prove the misogynistic prejudice embedded in his posts, and later to study their impact on users’ reactions. Later, I move to study some of the UGCs published with the #FreeWarMachine hashtag.

*“I’m Not a Bad Guy”*

Image 1 (War Machine, Tweet 11 August 2014-1), image 2 (War Machine, Tweet 11 August 2014-2), image 3 (War Machine, Tweet 11 August 2014-3), and image 4 (War Machine, Tweet 11 August 2014-4)<sup>32</sup> show four tweets published by Koppenhaver on the same day that Mack denounced his attack on Twitter.



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3



Image 4

<sup>32</sup> I numbered these four bibliographical references because they were all published on the same date.



These tweets show the various discursive strategies through which the man attempted to reframe the assault and its impact. To analyse these UGCs, I focus on three specific strategies, suggested by Ruth Wodak and Martin Reisigl (386), namely: *nomination strategies*, *predicational strategies*, and *perspectivation*. First, nomination strategies refer to the way in which the sender mentions and identifies the social actors involved in the situation at issue: himself (in all tweets), Christy Mack (in images 1, 2, and 3), her male companion (in image 4), and the police (in image 3). Then, all the actors are directly or indirectly attributed negative or positive traits through different predicational strategies.<sup>33</sup> In image 1, War Machine immediately depicts himself positively, by declaring “I’m not a bad guy.” This expression works as an introduction to the self-defence that he develops in the remainder of these tweets. Then, he presents Mack through a possessive adjective (i.e., *my gf*<sup>34</sup>) which shows his attitude of self-entitled ownership towards her. This linguistic element shows that he considers the woman as his property, an obsession which outlived the end of their relationship, and which demonstrates his denial of Mack’s autonomy over her own life, as indicated by the fact that he allegedly went to propose to her (in images 1 and 2). This rejection of the woman’s self-determination is expressed also in image 4, by constructing a joint identity which redefines them as a couple (i.e., “Christy and I”). This delusional consideration is sustained through discourse aimed at reframing the reason that caused the destruction of their relationship: according to the sender, in fact, the engagement was prevented only by the presence of “that man” (i.e., Mack’s male companion) and not by the ferocious abuse that he himself had long perpetrated against the woman, and that ended up in the vicious attack nearly causing her death. The very fact of referring to the other man through the demonstrative adjective *that* aims at

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<sup>33</sup> According to Wodak and Reisigl, through predicational strategies “social actors as individuals, group members, or groups are linguistically provided with predications” (386).

<sup>34</sup> Abbreviation for *girlfriend*.

presenting him as an external actor to the couple's identity, and therefore as the person who implicitly provoked both the end of their relationship and the assault of Mack.<sup>35</sup>

The remainder of the texts shows the strategies of perspectivation, that occurs when “speakers express their involvement in discourse and position their point of view in the report, description, narration, or quotation of discriminatory events” (Wodak and Reisigl 386). Here perspectivation is developed through the reframing of all actors' identities, and especially through the discursive overturn of the victim/abuser status. In fact, in these four tweets the sender attempts to discursively present himself as the real victim of the whole situation through an escalating series of rantings. He uses the first-singular person to place himself as the subject of several sentences and to provide a positive depiction of himself, first declaring his allegedly good intentions towards Mack (i.e., “I went to surprise my gf, help her set up her show and to give her an engagement ring” in image 1, “I just wanted to see your face when I surprised you with the ring” in image 2), and later expressing his frustration for a situation that he feels out of his control (i.e., “I only wish . . . I don't know [wh]y I'm so cursed” in image 4). The perceived lack of power over Mack's autonomous decisions and over the course of events generates a supposed confusion in him, as expressed by the clause “I don't know [wh]y I'm so cursed,” through which he denies any responsibility for the assault and for the end of his relationship, feigning a confused state of mind. More specifically, in images 1 and 3, he uses two different linguistic structures to turn himself into a martyr. In the former (i.e., “[I] ended up fighting for my life”), he is the subject of a sentence which explicitly presents him as the victim of an attack, and therefore he discursively refrains his violent actions as an allegedly justified reaction to the other man's aggressiveness.<sup>36</sup> Conversely, in image 3 (i.e., “The cops

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<sup>35</sup> Also see later the analysis of the clause “[I] ended up fighting for my life” (image 1).

<sup>36</sup> The falsity of this accusation is not only proved by Mack's injuries, but it was also confirmed during the subsequent trial.

will never give me fair play, never believe me”), he places himself as the direct object of the two transitive verbs *give* and *believe*. Here he indirectly rejects his active involvement in the violent event as its real perpetrator, and he discursively sustains his innocence by shifting the attention towards the alleged bias of the police which would supposedly privilege the testimony of a white woman (i.e., Mack) over the one of a black man (i.e., himself).<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, Koppenhaver defines the whole situation as “a nightmare” (image 2), “just heart breaking” (image 3), and he hopes that “one day truth will come out” (image 4). The use of the noun *truth* referred to his reconstruction of the events shows his purpose to strongly confute Mack’s allegations, which by comparison are implicitly reframed as false. At the same time, the sender never openly defines the woman a liar. Conversely, in image 2, he addresses her directly to justify his reaction by recalling his alleged romantic gesture (i.e., “I just wanted to see your face when I surprised you with the ring”) and faking a caring attention for her state (i.e., “You’re in my thoughts”), without even mentioning his involvement in her battering. In fact, it must also be noticed that the suffering of the real victim (i.e., Mack) is not only indirectly denied as analysed above, but it is not even taken into consideration by the abuser, who always focuses on his alleged intentions and on his pain instead of mentioning what he caused to the woman. More specifically, these four tweets closely recall the cycle of domestic abuse, whose first systematic explanation was developed by the psychology scholar Lenore Walker in her

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<sup>37</sup> This utterance evokes the discursive strategies which are often used by supporters of men’s rights movements to reverse the victim/perpetrator status, and to claim a similar impartiality of law enforcement agencies against men in cases of domestic violence, while in reality public authorities have long questioned women’s testimonies as unreliable (e.g., see Ehrlich; Estrich; Mantilla, Viral). This backlash is also present in the defence of Koppenhaver through the hashtag #FreeWarmachine, as discussed later in this section. Moreover, this sentence could also be interpreted as an implicit attempt by Koppenhaver to play the race card, and therefore to turn himself as a victim of police’s racism (see later for a comparison between him and O.J. Simpson).

landmark book *The Battered Woman*. In fact, images 1 to 4 virtually recreate a specific moment in the cyclical pattern of domestic violence: while the event preceding the publication of these UGCs represents the acute stage of aggressiveness, Koppenhaver's tweets – especially image 2 – symbolise an attempt at reconciliation usually known as the honeymoon phase, which completes the victimisation through “extremely loving, kind and remorseful behaviors” (WomenSafe), and which is usually followed by a repetition of the violent acts.

Therefore, as demonstrated in my analysis, these UGCs are themselves instances of a discourse based on gendered prejudice, because they show the reframing of domestic abuse through its overt denial and implicit self-justification. By reading these contents on Twitter, some users detected their misogynistic discursive mechanism and tried to unmask it by replying to War Machine's tweets.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, many others reacted by showing strong support of the man, as visible in the high number of likes that his tweets received.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, as mentioned before, the defence of Koppenhaver was also sustained through the hashtag #FreeWarMachine, which demanded his liberation. In the following section I provide a critical analysis of the discursive strategies found in some of the UGCs that used this hashtag.

### *#FreeWarMachine*

In the following table I quote 10 examples of the misogynistic discourse used to defend War Machine.<sup>40</sup> The texts are divided into two groups: in the former, I provide UGCs which

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<sup>38</sup> E.g., see the reply of Australian feminist journalist Clementine Ford to War Machine, Tweet 11 August 2014-1: “@WarMachine170 No, you are a bad guy. And when you say ‘fighting for my life’ you mean ‘almost killing a woman’” (Ford, Tweet 12 August 2014).

<sup>39</sup> 1060 likes for image 1, 408 for image 2, 776 for image 3, and 1183 for image 4.

<sup>40</sup> Examples 5, 8, 9, and 10 quote tweets which were later removed from Twitter because the accounts of the senders got suspended according to the platform's policy (see Twitter, Suspended). Even though the removal of these UGCs is a positive feedback from Twitter, it is not possible to know whether the accounts were suspended for the contents here under analysis or for publishing other tweets.

legitimise Koppenhaver's behaviour, while in the latter I show examples of the denial of his attack against Christy Mack. In my analysis, I name these subsets of data through two tweets which I consider particularly representative of the discursive strategies employed in these forms of online misogyny (i.e., "Ya Cheating Whore" and "How Can Someone 'Rape' a Porn Star?"). In studying the UGCs, I refer to Karla Mantilla's classification of the backlashes used in patriarchal societies to discredit women who expose gender-based abuse (see Viral - Part 2). To introduce the reader to my analysis, it is worth explaining here that hashtags are a peculiar tool of online conversation, usually conceived as a way to increase the visibility of a certain issue by making it viral, and to reinforce the collective identity of the supporters of a specific cause, as demonstrated in the analysis of #GamerGate against Anita Sarkeesian. Below, I seek to demonstrate how the creation of the #FreeWarMachine trend was discursively used along with misogynistic discourse to intensify the exculpation of Koppenhaver and to victimise Mack. Many of the examples that I selected mentioned the hashtag in bold characters in their original text, an element that I decided to maintain in the table, to show how this visual connotation increases the visibility of #FreeWarMachine.

*Legitimation: "Ya Cheating Whore"*

Example 1: *OMFG lmaooo Yes!! Put these prostitutes in their place. #FreeWarMachine (@MANIAC3X)*

Example 2: *@titoortiz u should to @jennajameson what @WarMachine170 did to @ChristyMack !! Teach that bitch a lesson !! #FreeWarMachine (@mOsT\_eViL\_oNe)*

Example 3: *@christymack...thats wa u get ya cheating whore #freewarmachine (@rtroke88)*

Example 4: *If I caught my bf cheating id try to beat his face in to.. Why is it so bad the other way around? #FreeWarMachine @WarMachine170 (@KorynJohn)*

Example 5: *Believe me whatever was done to @ChristyMack's nose is an improvement over the hooked beak she was sporting before #FREEWARMACHINE (Removed from Twitter)*

*Denial: “How Can Someone ‘Rape’ a Porn Star?”*

Example 6: *If OJ was acquitted, @WarMachine170 can be too! #FreeWarMachine #stillhope (@brad\_redden)*

Example 7: *CM framed him she a whore WarMachine will be out soon and you'll see #FreeWarMachine (@RickySGOD)*

Example 8: *#FreeWarMachine he didn't hit her that hard (Removed from Twitter)*

Example 9: *Could @ChristyMack share with us how can someone “rape” a porn star? Do U not pay them is that rape? #FREEWARMACHINE (Removed from Twitter)*

Example 10: *How do we know if @ChristyMack's face isn't from nigger aids? Maybe she caught Ebola from a Nigerian. Has she been tested? #FREEWARMACHINE (Removed from Twitter)*

*Legitimation: “Ya Cheating Whore”*

In the first section of the table, examples 1 to 5 aim at legitimising Mack's abuse through different discursive strategies. In example 1, a user shows his amused reaction to the event at issue and his support of the harasser through capitalised and prolonged interjections (i.e., “OMFG lmaooo<sup>41</sup> Yes!!”). These exclamations are followed by a sentence whose conative function is expressed through an imperative verb, used to exhort a potential audience to “put these prostitutes in their place.” Here the gendered insult *prostitutes* is employed to increase the vilification of Christy Mack by slut shaming her. Moreover, the sender creates a discursive shift from the singular identification of the target as an amoral being, to the plural noun *prostitutes*, to expand his hatred to all women allegedly similar to Mack. In doing so, he does not specify the addressee of the insult *prostitutes*: this strategic move results in an ambiguous definition of whom should be put in their place, i.e., whether all porn stars or all women in general. Despite this, the intention of the user is to legitimise domestic violence as a form of punishment against Mack, who results guilty of not staying in the fixed, subjugated position imposed to her by the hegemonic patriarchal ideology. Here the woman's autonomous decision

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<sup>41</sup> i.e., “Oh My Fucking God, laughing my arse off.”

to engage in the pornographic industry is delegitimised, and her self-determination becomes the reason why she deserves to be taught a lesson through physical violence.<sup>42</sup>

This very expression recurs in example 2 (i.e., @titoortiz u should [do] to @jennajameson what @WarMachine170 did to @ChristyMack !! Teach that bitch a lesson !! #FreeWarMachine”). Here another commenter links the event at issue to a similar situation, namely the former relationship between Jenna Jameson and Tito Ortiz, which mirrored the one of Mack and Koppenhaver. In fact, Jenna Jameson is a popular ex-porn actress who was victim of domestic violence by her former partner Tito Ortiz, a MMA fighter. In August 2014 the woman published a series of tweets to express her solidarity with Mack in the aftermath of her Twitter report, and to stress the importance of speaking up against gender-based violence (e.g., Jameson, Tweet 12 August 2014; Jameson, Tweet 18 August 2014). For this reason, she received some backlash aimed at ridiculing the abuse she had experienced and denounced in the past, as example 2 shows. In this UGC, a commenter employs two conative sentences to

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<sup>42</sup> Here and in the remainder of the analysis, female engagement in the porn industry is presented as a conscious act of self-determination by consenting adult women. This is a thought-out decision that I took because, for constraints of space, a study of androcentric cultural influences on women’s autonomous participation in pornography may have risked causing a shift from the analysis of the verbal abuse received by Mack as a woman, towards a discussion on her sexuality and gender awareness. Nevertheless, it must be noticed that the very issue of women’s engagement in visual products which often tend to legitimise sexual violence through their humiliation (see Whisnant) results highly problematic from a feminist perspective. Even though for constraints of space this issue cannot be analysed in detail here, it is worth noticing that the sociocultural origins and effects of pornography have been at the centre of much radical feminist literature since 1980s (e.g., Dworkin; Dworkin and MacKinnon, Hearings; Dworkin and MacKinnon, Equality; MacKinnon, Unmodified), which was based on the consideration that “a critique to pornography is to feminism what its defense is to male supremacy” (MacKinnon, Moral 321), and to which the reader can refer for a deeper understanding of the problematic interplay between women’s self-determination, humiliation, and consent in porn industry. Conversely, for the misogynistic discourse used for an overall denial of porn stars’ consent in their private sexual life, see later the analysis of example 6.

exhort Tito Ortiz to do to her “what @WarMachine170 did to @Christy Mack.” He addresses his tweet directly to Ortiz, asking for his complicity as a former abuser to intensify the vilification of both Mack and Jameson. He also mentions War Machine and the two women, probably to amplify the visibility of his message, while showing his support to Koppenhaver and directly attacking the two victims of domestic violence. Like in example 1, the employment of interjection sentences is linguistically marked by the repetition of exclamation marks, which are visually separated through spaces at the end of both clauses, probably to increase their visibility. In both sentences of example 2, the user addresses Tito Ortiz directly, in the first part of the tweet with the construction “u should [do] to” and in the second one with the imperative *teach*. In the latter, the demonstrative adjective *that* is employed to create a distance from Jameson (who is also referred to through the gender-based insult *bitch*), and thus a proximity between the sender and Ortiz, who becomes a positive symbol of domestic abuse. In fact, as in example 1, gender-based violence results legitimised as a way to systematically punish those women who step out of a fixed submissive position and who rebel against the brutality of men. It is also worth highlighting that, by commenting these controversies, many users show a good knowledge of the porn industry, therefore one would not expect them to condemn women’s participation in pornography. Nevertheless, in these instances of misogynistic hate speech, the hypersexualisation of porn actresses is discursively reframed as the reason why they need to be punished by their former partners.

Similarly, example 3 (i.e., “@christymack...thats wa u get ya cheating whore #freewarmachine”) consists in an overt celebration of the abuse, which is directly tweeted to the target. Here Mack is insulted through the epithet *cheating whore*, an expression which symbolises a double justification of War Machine’s aggressive reaction through a discursive strategy aimed at blaming the victim. First, the sender uses Mack’s alleged relationship with her male companion as the real trigger of Koppenhaver’s violence, thus exacerbating the denial



of a woman's self-determination in her private life, as already explained in the analysis of War Machine's tweets. Second, the target is vilified through a shooting-the-messenger strategy (Mantilla, Viral - Part 2), based on her sexual shaming. As Karla Mantilla notes discussing the misogynistic backlash against women who report their abuse, "one of the ways that women are particularly targeted is by maligning, insulting, and shaming them sexually" (Viral - Part 2). Here, the shaming results as being particularly strong because it is sustained through a gendered insult which clearly refers to the allegedly intrinsic amorality of an adult actress. Regardless of the implicit link to the porn industry, the use of the adjective *cheating* shows the commenter's attempt to blame the victim through sexual shaming, by relegating the justification of her abuse to the domain of sexuality.

A similar assumption about Mack's betrayal of her ex-boyfriend is expressed in example 4 (i.e., "If I caught my bf<sup>43</sup> cheating id try to beat his face in to.. Why is it so bad the other way around? #FreeWarMachine @WarMachine170"). Here, a female user plainly justifies domestic violence as a rightful reaction to cheating, and denies its gendered nature. In fact, the sender uses the first-singular person to identify with the harasser: she discursively creates a potential situation in which she would react as Koppenhaver if she found her boyfriend with another person. In her attempt to defend the MMA fighter, she tries to normalise the issue of abuse in intimate relationships, by presenting it as a legitimate punishment of someone who has allegedly betrayed their partner's trust. Therefore, I suggest considering this tweet as an indirect way of blaming the victim for the violence received, reversing the culpability for this action from the abuser to the abused, who is implicitly presented as the original source of her own disgrace.

Moreover, the second part of this content is aimed at confuting the link between gender-

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<sup>43</sup> Abbreviation for *boyfriend*.

based prejudice and domestic violence. According to the commenter, the very fact that she would have the same reaction as War Machine is proof which successfully denies the gendered nature of this phenomenon. Therefore, through a rhetorical question she asks her imagined audience “why is it so bad the other way around,” meaning that a man should not be stigmatised for beating up his cheating partner. While I do not aim at denying that men can be victims of abuse too, my case here is that the user not only intends to discount the seriousness of the crime at issue, but that she also attempts to depoliticise domestic violence, reframing it as a normal and genderless phenomenon that anyone can potentially perpetrate when they see their trust betrayed by their partners. These strategic moves result in the ultimate demand to #FreeWarMachine who, according to the user, should not be punished for a crime that only showed the human side of a person hurt by someone else’s lack of honesty. This legitimisation of the violence experienced by Mack is particularly disturbing, especially because it comes from another woman who, far from condemning the physical strength, aggressiveness and disruptive violence of the attacker, does not show any sympathy to the victim and, conversely, states that she would opt for a similar behaviour. Nevertheless, it must also be stressed that my dataset contains several instances of UGCs sent by female users to support War Machine through different degrees of emotional involvement.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, example 5 (i.e., “Believe me whatever was done to @ChristyMack’s nose is an improvement over the hooked beak she was sporting before #FREEWARMACHINE”) shows another way of downplaying the harasser’s ferociousness. At the very beginning of this tweet, a user addresses his virtual audience with an imperative which has the dual function of catching other people’s attention and of introducing his thoughts as trustworthy and valid. Then, he

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<sup>44</sup> E.g., “Not condoning what War Machine did but still gotta show my support. I’m a fan of his crazy ass. #FreeWarMachine” (@sevina\_cupcake); “When I saw christymack statement I was horrified, now theres so many discrepancies in it, only time will tell the truth out #FreeWarMachine” (@LayKMariea).

refers to Mack's report by including her username directly and by mentioning the abuse indirectly through the expression "whatever was done to @ChristyMack's nose." This structure creates a double effect: on one side, it captures the attention of the target, and on the other it visually frames her name in a sentence that stresses the violation of her bodily integrity, through the image of her broken nose. Moreover, the violence that the woman endured is indirectly mentioned with the expression *whatever was done*, where the pronoun *whatever* creates a sense of haziness which implicitly questions Mack's allegations. Furthermore, this vagueness is discursively used to blur the graphic pictures provided by the actress to testify her beating. This same expression is employed to deride the victim by depicting her battered state as a positive result (i.e., an *improvement*), which ameliorates the supposed ugly physical appearance (i.e., her *hooked beak*) that she allegedly used to show off (i.e., "she was sporting before"). Here, the disparaging expression *hooked beak* is used to assess the target's body negatively, by picturing her as an unpleasant, grotesque figure, and by hinting at her resemblance with an animal through the noun *beak*. Therefore, example 5 is another instance of how misogynistic discourse was used to sustain the hashtag #FreeWarMachine, which is here written in bold capital letters, to increase its visual impact and to present it like a shout.<sup>45</sup>

*Denial: "How Can Someone 'Rape' a Porn Star?"*

In this last section, I study how misogynistic discourse has been employed to reject Mack's allegations of domestic violence by discrediting her.

Examples 6 and 7 contain strong defences of War Machine's innocence. In the former (i.e., "If OJ was acquitted, @WarMachine170 can be too! #FreeWarMachine #stillhope"), the user does not recur to hate speech, but his gendered prejudice resides in the aprioristic consideration of the man as innocent. In fact, regardless the visual proof contained in Mack's

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<sup>45</sup> A similar use of bold capital letters for the hashtag is visible in examples 9 and 10.

tweet, this commenter decides not to believe her and to team up with her assailant. To show his support, he compares Koppenhaver to O. J. Simpson, who notoriously faced a long trial for the charge of having murdered his ex-wife Nicole Brown and her friend Ronald Goldman in the 1990s. While Simpson was eventually found not guilty for the crime, this case polarised public opinion between those who considered it the most famous example of unpunished femicide in contemporary Western history, and those who read it as the symbol of American justice's doggedness against an innocent black man. Indeed, Simpson and Koppenhaver show very similar traits: they are both black athletes, and they were both accused of gendered violence. Moreover, as examples 1 to 10 prove, many in the virtual community of SNSs have attempted to defend War Machine by portraying him as a victim (whether of a woman's deceitfulness or of a prejudiced legal system), like Simpson's supporters attempted to do offline to vindicate their hero. Nevertheless, while both cases showed a dismissive attitude towards Mack and Brown, on one hand the public support of Simpson was mostly caused by his fame and his depiction as a martyr of America's racism, on the other many defended War Machine because they assumed Mack's untrustworthiness, given her recent past as a porn actress. Therefore, example 6 shows a peculiar articulation of the prejudiced gender-based hostility against the target, expressed through the hope that her harasser will finally get free. This wish is manifested with two hashtags, i.e., #FreeWarMachine and #stillhope, which reinforce the discursive reframing of Koppenhaver as an innocent man.

Similarly, in example 7 (i.e., "CM framed him she a whore WarMachine will be out soon and you'll see #FreeWarMachine"), another user strenuously defends the assailant and imagines his imminent release. This content shows a more explicit employment of the misogynistic discourse against Christy Mack, who is here labelled as a *whore* and also accused of having "framed him." Interestingly, the grammatical proximity of these last two allegations (i.e. "CM framed him" and "she [is] a whore") suggests a causality between them, which

nevertheless remains unclear as no conjunctions are present. Thus, they can be interpreted whether as *Mack is a whore [because] she framed him* or as *Mack framed him [because] she is a whore*. Regardless of the causal relation between the two clauses, this tweet results in an overt demonisation of the target, who is sexually shamed and accused of lying. In this tweet, the sender's strong belief in Mack's guilt and in Koppenhaver's innocence is presented through a series of indicative moods,<sup>46</sup> which discursively renders these opinions as factual statements.

Example 8 (i.e., “**#FreeWarMachine** he didn't hit her that hard”) shows another subtype of denial of the victim's experience, namely the accusation of exaggeration. Here, similarly to example 3, the misogynistic vilification of Christy Mack is not concealed through specific rhetorical strategies. In fact, the user does not attempt to justify the abuse nor to deny it completely, he just confutes the gravity of the episode, as if this could make it less despicable.

Finally, a specific articulation of misogyny is traceable in the last two examples of the table, namely examples 9 and 10. The former (i.e., “Could @ChristyMack share with us how can someone ‘rape’ a porn star? Do U not pay them is that rape? **#FREEWARMACHINE**”) contains two rhetorical questions which discuss the validity of Mack's allegations over her attempted rape. To analyse this tweet, I apply a performative approach, as defined by Don Kulick (140). Referring to Judith Butler's philosophical theory (see *Bodies; Trouble*), Kulick notes that “performance is something a subject does. Performativity, on the other hand, is the process through which the subject emerges” (140). From this theoretical distinction, he illustrates the peculiarity of a performative approach to language, which “interrogates the circulation of language in society —not so much who is authorized to use language, . . . as how particular uses of language, be they authorized or not, produce particular effects and particular kinds of subjects in fields or matrices of power” (140). Therefore, to apply this performative

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<sup>46</sup>In the past tense (i.e., *framed*), in the implicit present tense (i.e., *she [is] a whore*), and in the future tense (i.e., *will be out . . . you'll see*).

approach to example 9, it must be noticed that the basic assumption of this tweet consists in denying the possibility for a porn star to be sexually assaulted (i.e., “how can someone ‘rape’ a porn star?”). This concept is reaffirmed in the second part of the UGC by a rhetorical question (i.e., “Do U not pay them is that rape?”). Here the sender constructs an ideological barrier between the assault of porn actresses and other forms of rape. This dividing line develops through a prejudiced redefinition of consent. In fact, the absence of consent defines the boundaries between what is sexually acceptable and what is not (Whisnant 6). Conversely, in example 9, the consent of a porn actress is identified with the hypersexuality she performs during her job, and it is therefore presented as something which is taken for granted in any situation, both on stage and in her private life. In this view, a woman who profits from selling her body can only be raped if she does not get paid. Therefore, I suggest interpreting this tweet as an example of the commodification of consent of porn actresses: in this discursive mechanism, consent gets reframed from being a universal human right to something that can be sold and bought, i.e., a commodity.<sup>47</sup> This commodity is the performance on which the job of a porn actress is based, but it should not be equalised to her perpetual willingness to have sex with anyone. Conversely, in example 9 the porn actress is identified with her performance. My case here is that this misogynistic prejudice expresses a specific performativity, from which the subject emerges deprived of any forms of personhood and humanity, as the reframing of her sexual consent shows. Therefore, through a performative approach, this analysis shows that the rhetorical trope of a porn actress as someone who would never refuse sex translated into the denial of her self-determination in sexuality, and it causes the sexual shaming of the victim, who is therefore accused of being insincere. Differently to some above-analysed examples, in this tweet she is blamed for lying over her lack of consent, a consent which the user takes for

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<sup>47</sup> Therefore, in example 9, this commodification is expressed particularly in the second question, through which the sender rhetorically asks his audience if rape occurs when you do not pay a porn star.

granted, creating an overall dehumanisation of the target.

Finally, the same user victimises Mack through sexual shaming also in example 10 (i.e., “How do we know if @ChristyMack’s face isn’t from nigger aids? Maybe she caught Ebola from a Nigerian. Has she been tested? #FREEWARMACHINE”). Like before, he attacks Mack’s credibility, but this time he questions the very cause of her injuries. Here, to deny War Machine’s culpability, he employs a metonymy (i.e., @ChristyMack’s face, which represents her battering) to insinuate that her physical damage may be the sign of *nigger AIDS*. This expression shows the interplay between racist and misogynistic discourses, and the use of the former to reinforce the latter. First, to increase the derision of Mack’s experience, the sender resorts to the discursive strategy of perspectivation, through which domestic abuse is purposely substituted with AIDS, i.e., the epitome of sexually transmitted infections in late modern societies. Like in previous examples, the woman’s identity is denied through her identification as a mere ravenous prostitute, who allegedly catches all sorts of diseases, from AIDS to Ebola. Moreover, the target’s stigmatisation is exacerbated through the racialisation of contagious illnesses, which are discursively presented as a prerogative of black people. In fact, blackness is always mentioned as the source of infection, in the first sentence with the racist slur *nigger*, and in the second one with the expression *from a Nigerian*. Therefore, both sentences rely on a stereotypical representation of the black male which often recurs in racist discourse as a “hyper-sexed, almost animal-like, entity” (Carrington 6), also used “to police and control white femininity” (Carrington 7). The use of this racialized trope has a twofold effect: its presence places black men in binary opposition to sanitised white masculinity, and its physical and discursive proximity to white women symbolises the ultimate proof of the female promiscuous – thus contaminated – sexuality. Finally, the user closes his tweet by asking if Mack “has been tested” for the mentioned diseases. Here an examination conducted within the historically male dominated field of medicine is required as the only valid way to assess the soundness of the

woman's allegations, thus reaffirming the denial of both her verbal testimony and visual proof, also sustained through the employment of #FreeWarmachine, as in many other tweets analysed in the paragraphs of this section.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, it must be highlighted that, regardless the stubborn defence of many Twitter users, War Machine was eventually found guilty of 29 counts and convicted for the domestic violence that he had perpetrated against Christy Mack throughout their relationship, and that culminated in the violent attack denounced by the woman on Twitter.<sup>48</sup> Even though Mack stated that she decided to virtually testify the attack to raise awareness on abuse against women, Koppenhaver's legal defence tried to reframe her gesture as a strategy to get more visibility online, an allegation that the victim denied by stressing the psychological effects of fear that the prolonged abuse had caused to her, and by declaring that she would have never wanted to almost die for a few more followers (Ferrara). Yet, the attitude of War Machine's lawyer shows a disturbing similarity to the misogynistic discourse used by many Twitter commenters to exculpate Koppenhaver, and, in general terms, by online harassers to ridicule the targets of hate speech as attention seekers (e.g., see the previous analysis of Anita Sarkeesian's case).

Unlike other women attacked online, Christy Mack has never spoken about the perpetuation of her abuse through the hashtag #FreeWarMachine, and for this reason a taxonomy of the effects of online misogyny on the target cannot be included in this analysis. Nevertheless, the study that I have provided in this section shows the sociocultural impact of gendered prejudice against women who speak up about gender-based violence in patriarchal societies. In my analysis, I have shown how male harassers still nowadays benefit from the aprioristic presumption of their innocence, even when a female victim provides vivid proof of

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<sup>48</sup> For a detailed account of Koppenhaver's conviction, see Bieler.



the abuse perpetrated against her. More specifically, I analysed how the assailant attempted to deny his culpability by nullifying Mack's allegations, playing on gendered prejudices to reframe himself as the victim. Then, I showed the impact of his offline and online behaviour on the reactions of Twitter users. In particular, I demonstrated how many commenters have used a tool which is specific to social networking sites (i.e., hashtagery) to catalyse and spread verbal viciousness against Mack. While the UGCs expressing this online abuse have come in different linguistic forms (e.g., direct insults, indirect invectives, rhetorical questions), they all share a strong intention to silence the target by denying or condoning her abuse. These misogynistic backlashes were mostly aimed at depicting her as not reliable, not trustworthy, and subhuman, especially by using sexual shaming as a discursive strategy to vilify and annihilate her. For this specific case, I have explained how women working in the porn industry become dehumanised through the commodification of their consent in rape allegations. Finally, I have also shown how misogyny and racist discourses often intertwine with one another, and I have discussed how white femininity and women's sexual self-determination is still policed through historical colonial stereotypes of black men, and of their supposedly contaminated and contaminating bodies.

In the following section of my thesis, I investigate how hate speech intertwines misogyny with a specific form of racism, namely Islamophobia, by analysing the case of the Australian Muslim advocate, Mariam Veiszadeh.



## Chapter 5. Analysis of Two Case Studies from Australia

### 5.1 Case Study no. 3: Mariam Veiszadeh

The following section consists of a critical analysis of the racist and misogynistic hate speech experienced by the Australian Muslim advocate Mariam Veiszadeh starting from October 2014. As in most cases, the harassment is ongoing, but I limited my data collection to the timeframe previously selected (the end of November 2015).

#### *The Dataset*

The dataset of this case study is composed of 43 posts that I downloaded from the target's Facebook and Twitter accounts and from other profiles taking part in her abuse. The table below contains a breakdown of the data:

	Public	Private	<b>TOT</b>
Facebook	4	14	18
Twitter	25	0	25
<b>TOT</b>	29	14	<b>43</b>

In this table, *public* refers to Twitter profiles and Facebook pages, while *private* to messages sent directly to the target via Facebook Messenger. The data were collected between October 2014 and November 2015, that is the period during which the target received a massive cyber harassment from Australian-based social network accounts and also from non-Australian users. Few posts published after November 2015 are also quoted to prove the persistence of Veiszadeh's online abuse.

The presence of different types of UGCs – i.e., visual contents like memes or image macros, and the written texts of tweets, Facebook posts, and pictures' captions – facilitates a multimodal analysis of the misogynistic and racist discourses against Mariam Veiszadeh, while the cross-platform escalation of the hate speech against her shows how these multiple attacks impacted the target's life on several levels.

The next section consists of a brief description of Mariam Veiszadeh and of the reason

why she became the target of a growing and international form of hate speech, namely her online activism against anti-Muslim sentiment within Australian contemporary society.

### *Becoming a Target*

Born in Afghanistan in 1984, Mariam Veiszadeh fled her homeland with her family during the Soviet-Afghan War when she was four. After temporarily living in India, the Czech Republic, and Germany, she arrived in Australia with her family and was granted asylum under the Refugee and Humanitarian Programme of the country (Welcome to Australia, Veiszadeh). In the following years, Mariam became a successful corporate lawyer working for a prominent Australian legal company (Price). During her studies, she also started to engage in anti-Islamophobia activism. The aftermath of the September 11 attacks can be considered the symbolic beginning of her activist commitment; in fact, those international terroristic incidents impacted the lives of many Muslims living in Western societies who abruptly experienced a peak in the ideological mistrust against them and their religion. From that moment on, Veiszadeh's commitment in raising awareness on the growing religion-based attacks and discriminations against Muslims in Australia translated into an increasing visibility for her, especially online. In fact, she has skilfully managed to use the Web as a suitable space for tackling religion-based hatred through a direct engagement with Internet users, and for this reason she has become a very influential personality on social networks, especially on Twitter. Moreover, in September 2014, she launched the online project *Islamophobia Register Australia*, a portal where Muslim and non-Muslim people can report Islamophobic incidents and behaviours they have experienced or witnessed both offline and online (Islamophobia Register Australia). The register at issue is new in its kind for the Australian context, and since its launch it has collected important data and results, showing how Islamophobia tends to

follow similar patterns in Australia and in other Western countries, like the USA and the UK.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Mariam also became one of the official ambassadors of *Welcome to Australia*, a national non-profit organization committed to encouraging a culture of inclusion and to promoting the values of compassion, open mindedness, and equality (Welcome to Australia, About). Moreover, Veiszadeh has actively joined some feminist campaigns such as the Women's March in Sydney, speaking up on the pressing need to question the twine between different axes of social oppression through intersectional feminism (e.g., see Veiszadeh, Women's March). Despite this incessant commitment against different forms of discrimination, her growing visibility has met different reactions in Australia: while many Muslims and non-Muslims have supported her work for a more inclusive society, many others have strongly criticised her, especially online.

The event that caused a conspicuous increase in the aversion to Mariam Veiszadeh as a Muslim advocate occurred in October 2014 where she tweeted the photo of a product she considered bigoted (available in Veiszadeh, Tweet 13 October 2014), here shown in image 1:



*Image 1*

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<sup>1</sup> Moreover, according to Veiszadeh, an average of 5.4 incidents per week were reported to this online register from September 2014 to September 2015 (Veiszadeh, Monash 3).

The picture refers to an item sold in one of the major Australian supermarkets, Woolworths, in its stores of the Queensland city of Cairns. As the screenshot shows, according to Veiszadeh, the singlet carried an offensive message because of the caption appearing below the Australian flag which read “If you don’t love it, leave,” a slogan which indeed seems to hint at the xenophobic discourse usually addressed to migrants to make them leave a country if they don’t adhere to its culture – here symbolized by the Australian flag.<sup>2</sup>

The public reaction to Veiszadeh’s tweet was not unanimous; in fact, she also received negative and violent reactions from some Twitter users. As she recalls, in the aftermath of the post at issue she got “some stock-standard vitriol” (Veiszadeh, *Virtual World*) which reminded her of the kind of Islamophobic abuse she had been receiving for years as a Muslim woman. But such vitriolic attacks strongly escalated about three months after her tweet, when the anti-Muslim group *Australian Defence League* (hereafter ADL) singled her out as a hypocrite on its Facebook page, with the following post:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> An example of the xenophobic nature of this kind of utterances is the maiden speech given by the leader of One Nation party, Pauline Hanson, to the Australian Senate in September 2016 (video available in Remeikis). In this occasion, Hanson addressed Muslim migrants by saying: “if you are not prepared to become Australian and give this country your undivided loyalty, obey our laws, respect our culture and way of life, then I suggest you go back where you came from.” The racism expressed by this utterance (see for example the dichotomised construction between the addressee – *you / your* – and the nationalistic identity, discursively created by the repeated use of the possessive determiner *our*) becomes even more evident when contextualised in the remainder of Hanson’s speech, where the politician stressed the alleged hypermasculine and misogynistic nature of Muslim culture (see note 8 of this chapter) and its supposed incompatibility with Australian values (see note 13 of this chapter).

<sup>3</sup> The text of the image is better visible in the comment of a Twitter user (@BasimaFaysal) which however does not show the ADL as the author of the post.



Image 2

Image 2 consists of the screenshot of ADL’s Facebook content. Here, the group coupled a Twitter post previously published by the advocate (whose text reads “Everyone is entitled to dress as they please”) with Veiszadeh’s tweet at issue, with a substantial change. While its text remained the same as in image 1 (i.e., “Pls RT @woolworths I’m outraged that #WOOLWORTHS are allegedly selling these bigoted singlets at their Carnes stores”), the picture of the singlet appears cropped. As the caption on the top of the screenshot suggests (i.e., “Hypocrisy Much?”), these tweets were used by ADL to fabricate the alleged hypocrisy of Veiszadeh, who supposedly pretends to defend everyone’s right to dress as they want but who actually criticises the singlet by defining it bigoted. In fact, even though the post was later removed, and this is the reason why it is available only in low-quality images like the one provided by the Australian newspaper *Brisbane Times* (see Stephens), it is still visible in image 2 how the ADL twisted Mariam’s original intention by cropping the singlet’s photo, and thus turning it into an attack to the Australian flag itself, instead of a denounce of the singlet’s bigoted message. While the group had long been associated with racist and xenophobic stances and acts, like the self-declared “first wog<sup>4</sup> bashing day” known as the Cronulla riots

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<sup>4</sup>Wog is itself a derogatory term of Australian and New Zealand slangs which originally indicated Italian, Greek, Lebanese, Yugoslavian, and Maltese postwar migrants (Clark). It later came to indicate more generally “a person of Mediterranean or Middle Eastern extraction, or of similar complexion and appearance” (Macquarie Dictionary, Wog).

(Cerminara),<sup>5</sup> in this case ADL's attack against Veiszadeh consisted in an intentional distortion of her post. In fact, the material published by the ADL conveyed a message that was completely different from the advocate's original intention, namely a gratuitous attack to the Australian flag. As a flag is the symbolic essence of a nation's traditional identity, this altered image promptly caused a vast amount of outraged responses, especially among the most nationalistic fringes of Australian population, in particular after the singlet was removed from sale. As a result, ADL's post succeeded in creating a violent collective attack towards Veiszadeh that deployed a barrage of misogynist, racist, and Islamophobic slurs to abuse her, whose discursive strategies are analysed below.

*"Hate Begets Hate"*

As Veiszadeh has noted, ADL's Facebook post "opened the floodgates to a torrent of online abuse" showing how "hate, well and truly, begets hate" (Veiszadeh, Virtual World). The advocate thus became the target of a vast amount of abusive messages which came in many different shapes and forms. First, she experienced several attempts of impersonation when fake Twitter and Facebook accounts were opened in her name, each using the same photo of her real profiles (Veiszadeh, Virtual World). As I have discussed in the case of Anita Sarkeesian, impersonation is a tactic frequently used by online harassers because it enables them to spread fake information ideologically opposed to the target's activist stances, and thus it easily helps the abusers to depict their victim as an hypocritical and contradictory person whose shady

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<sup>5</sup> The expression *Cronulla riots* indicates the violent race riots occurred in December 2005 during which more than 5000 white Australians gathered at the Sydney beach of Cronulla, hunting down and beating anyone with Middle Eastern appearance. This triggered a seemingly violent reaction from men of Middle Eastern heritage who perpetrated similar random acts against anyone who looked Caucasian. Cronulla riots were the most violent peak of a series of ethnic-based tensions, and it is nowadays considered one of the darkest days in Australia's recent history (Lieu).



agenda gets supposedly unmasked by juxtaposing her declared intents (i.e., the material she actually posts herself) and her allegedly real agenda (i.e., the posts published in her name on fake profiles).

Second, a great deal of violent and offensive contents was sent to Veiszadeh's social network accounts both privately and publicly, and flooded her with Islamophobic and misogynistic slurs which often expressed rape and death threats. Instances of these graphic and abusive contents are the following posts directly sent to her via Facebook Messenger (example 1 and 2) and Twitter (example 3, 4, and 5):

Example 1: *wouldnt be surprised if you are dead within the week u gruby cunt* (Veiszadeh, Tweet 3 January 2015)

Example 2: *you should go eat some bacon an then neck your self you moslem goat rooting freedom hating daughter of dirty whore hahahahah* (Veiszadeh, Tweet 10 January 2017)

Example 3: *you Muslim whore. Nobody invited you to Australia. Leave now before we behead your mother and bury you all with pigs* (ABC News, Advocate)

Example 4: *No one is threatening you, you dirty bitch, go back to where you came from, where women dont have the rights you abuse here* (ABC News, Advocate)

Example 5: *Mariam should be taken to the vets and desexed so that herDNA doesn't breed into future life forms* (Veiszadeh, Tweet 4 July 2015)

The five examples quoted above show how the target is vilified through misogynistic and Islamophobic discourses. Sexist hate speech is visible in the repeated use of gender-based sexualised slurs (i.e., *whore, bitch, cunt*), extended also to the target's mother (i.e., *daughter of dirty whore*), and always associated with the concept of dirtiness (i.e., *gruby cunt, dirty*). Analysing these examples from a critical discourse perspective, it is important to notice here that the sexualisation of these gender-based insults is often conveyed through disparaging terms referring to women's genitalia (i.e., *cunt*) as Karla Mantilla notes with reference to sexist hate speech in general (Viral - Part 2). In example 1, the word *cunt* works as a synecdoche (i.e., a word semantically related to the female genitalia is used to indicate a woman) which carries a disparaging meaning: this rhetorical trope, in fact, is turned into a slur not only because it

relegates the female target to the sexual sphere but also because it is associated with the above-mentioned sense of dirt (*gruby*). In addition, terms referring to the semantic sphere of the world of animals (i.e., *goat*, *pigs*) are used as discursive tools to dehumanise the victim. In particular, example 5 shows the implicit comparison of Veiszadeh to an animal which needs to “be taken to the vets and desexed.” Here, the use of the term *vets* (instead of *doctor*) and of the verb *to desex* which specifically refers to the act of spaying or castrating an animal (Macquarie Dictionary, Desex) also proves the intention to relegate the target to the sphere of bestial sexuality, an attribute which according to the user must be taken away from her to prevent her DNA proliferation. In the same tweet, the autonomy and subjectivity of the woman is denied with the use of the passive forms of the verbs *to take* (i.e., “should be taken to”) and *to desex* (i.e., “desexed”). This tweet expresses a strong misogynistic view of women by reducing them to their biological and reproductive function. Moreover, it also refers to a discursive strategy which, according to the author Randa Abdel-Fatta, is one of the most recurrent prejudices among anti-Muslim extremist groups in Australia and similar Western countries, namely the consideration of “pregnant Muslim women being engaged in ‘womb jihad’ by taking over Australia demographically” (Abdel-Fattah). In fact, through gendered symbols such as the womb and the female sexual organs, the pregnancy of Muslim women is reconfigured as a sort of weapon of mass destruction which enables an allegedly inferior ethnic group to overrule Western societies quantitatively and spread its supposedly savage values.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, the process of sterilisation to alter the Muslim female body and annihilate her reproductive ability represents the ultimate emblem of a cultural war won through the violation of women’s bodies.

Thus, as mentioned, the above-analysed misogynistic hate speech is strictly entangled

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<sup>6</sup> This assumption seems particularly common in popular discourses of Western societies which have witnessed a progressive drop in fertility rates among white families in the present historical moment, as shown in reports like United Nations’ *World Fertility Patterns 2015*, and discussed by Nira Yuval-Davis in her book *Gender & Nation*.

with Islamophobic discourse. In the posts under analysis, this aggressiveness is expressed through the predominant use of certain verb forms aimed at conveying categorical orders – like the imperatives “leave,” “go back,” and “neck your self” (i.e., Australian slang for *hang yourself*) –, or violent acts to the detriment of the target, like the above-analysed passive form “taken to the vets and desexed” in example 5. Similarly, when verbs appear in active forms, they express overt violence against the target and her family (i.e., “before we behead your mother and bury you all” in example 3) or marked hostility (“nobody invited you” in example 3).

Therefore, the sentences under analysis show how the few 140 characters provided by Twitter are sufficient for many users to deliver hateful discourse, based not only on misogyny but also on Islamophobic and xenophobic ideologies. Interestingly, example 3 (i.e., “you Muslim whore. Nobody invited you to Australia. Leave now before we behead your mother and bury you all with pigs”) shows a discursive similarity with the caption of Woolworths singlet originally reported by Veiszadeh, but here xenophobia is much more pronounced and graphic because of the cultural reference to the practice of victims’ beheading perpetrated by jihadist militant groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS.<sup>7</sup> In addition, an instance suitable for the critical analysis of Islamophobic discourse is provided in example 2 by the term *moslem*. As many have noted (see Chen; Baker et al. 77), this word is not a neutral synonym for *Muslim*, because

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<sup>7</sup> Here and in other passages of my thesis, I use the acronym ISIS to indicate the jihadist group *al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-Iraq wa-al-Sham*, which presently controls vast areas of Iraqi and Syrian territories. Among the different names used in Anglo-Saxon media press and politics to refer to this radicalised group (i.e., IS, ISIL, Daesh, Da’ish), I chose the acronym ISIS to recognise only its current geographic specificity (see Beauchamp; Tharoor), and to avoid conveying ideological assumptions of any sort. For a more detailed explanation on the different etymologies and uses of the above-listed terms, see the article *Naming an Enemy*, by Gabriel Said Reynolds.

its different etymology confers it a strong ideological meaning. As Yii-Ann Christine Chen explains “a Muslim in Arabic means ‘one who gives himself [or herself] to God’, and is by definition, someone who adheres to Islam,” conversely the English pronunciation of *Moslem* reminds the Arabic word for *oppressor*, *mawzlem* (Baker et al. 78). Even though in the aftermath of 9/11 terrorist attacks, Muslim communities based in Western countries have tried to raise awareness on the different meanings of these terms, the use of *Moslem* has not disappeared in Anglo-Saxon societies, and it is still employed particularly by right-leaning newspapers (Baker 324), thus resulting in the discursive repetition of it as “a term of abuse” (Elliot). The use of *moslem* spelling as a social practice is evident in example 2, where the expression “moslem goat rooting freedom hating” sums up the derogatory employment of the term, which is associated with the Islamophobic view of all Muslims as religious fundamentalists against the supposedly Western value of free speech (also see example 4 “where women dont have the rights you abuse here”).

Similarly, religion-based insults and attacks against Veiszadeh also came in visual forms, like the ones below:



Image 3



Image 4

To develop a more systematic critical analysis of its discourse, image 3 (available in Veiszadeh, Tweet 21 February 2015) can be divided into two parts, both aimed at conveying three

intertwined types of hate speech, namely sexist, Islamophobic, and xenophobic discourses. The lower part of the screenshot consists of a photo of Mariam and the cartoon image of an Arab man along with a sentence attributed to Ayatollah Khomeini. The caption's reference to the act of having sex "with animals such as sheeps, cows, camels and so on" suggests an assumed bestiality of Islam. Moreover, its proximity with Veiszadeh's face also seems to hint at a comparison of the woman to the animals listed, thus reminding the sexualised discourse that characterises misogynistic hate speech. The upper part of image 1 includes the text of the tweet: here the target is addressed directly and defined as "anti-white scum" for whom human rights equal to the denial of freedom of speech, similarly to the tweet in example 2. As noted in the analysis of Sarkeesian's case, the depiction of activists who report online verbal harassment as oppressors of Internet users' freedom of speech is the most common discourse to shield hate speech on the Web. While pretending to defend the right to freedom of speech, such positions actually safeguard the right to harass unconditionally through the perpetuation of hegemonic ideologies such as patriarchy and white supremacy. Here, the defence of hate speech as a form of free opinions comes with the discursive overturn between the discriminated targets and the prejudiced harassers, thus presenting anti-Muslims as oppressed by the political correctness of supposed anti-white oppressors. Such a mechanism shows the discursive reconfiguration of anti-racism (which originates as a way to question discrimination for a more inclusive, open-minded society) as an aggressive anti-white ideology, intentionally mistaken for the radicalised dogma of terrorist groups.

Image 4 (available in ABC News, Attacked), instead, shows a modified picture where the target's face is photoshopped over the bleeding and injured body of a woman wearing a black chador in a stony ground. The image is particularly derogatory for two main reasons. First, it shows a fundamental cultural ignorance about the several practices through which many Muslim women from different Islamic countries cover some parts of their bodies. More

specifically, like many Muslim women of Afghan heritage, Veiszadeh usually appears in public wearing a hijab (i.e., a headscarf which covers the woman's hair and neck), but the creator of the image chose to frame her face in a chador, i.e., a full-length closed cloak used by Iranian women which hides the woman's whole body except for the face (Vyver). Even though the woman's body is not visible in the picture, we can infer what is represented here is a chador because the garment also covers the subject's shoulders, contrary to the hijab. Thus, image 4 demonstrate how in anti-Muslim discourse, countries with predominant Islamic faith gets equalised and then their specificities confounded. In addition to this cultural confusion, the picture clearly refers to the crime of stoning to death, an act perpetrated by fundamentalist Islamic groups like the Talibans against women over accusations of adultery. While death by stoning is an undeniable violation of human rights which afflicts several Middle East regions controlled by Islamic fundamentalists, the visual elements of image 4 tend to reaffirm the popular assumption according to which gender-based violence is a typical trait of Muslim men, and that Islam is the main source of brutal abuse against women and girls in late modern societies. Such racist and ideological assumptions usually coexist with xenophobic discourse in hate speech, like the above-quoted example 4 shows (i.e., "go back to where you came from, where women dont have the rights you abuse here"), and are sometimes also affirmed in political speeches of Western conservative parties.<sup>8</sup> While the high rates of domestic violence and the very existence of misogynistic hate speech in contemporary Western societies demonstrate that gendered abuse is far from being a prerogative of Muslim communities, such interpretation of Islam as the sole violent religion against women is one of the major Orientalist stereotypes developed to depict Muslims as ignorant savages in opposition to the allegedly

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<sup>8</sup> As for the Australian context, see Pauline Hanson's anti-Muslim manifesto, already mentioned in note 2 of this chapter, where the One Nation leader also stresses the alleged antisocial behaviour of Muslims and their "hyper-masculine and misogynistic culture" (Remeikis).

educated and civilised Western world. As Ramon Grosfoguel notes, the supposed Islamic violent patriarchy is one of the arguments which sustain Islamophobic discourse as a form of cultural racism (16). While the mechanisms of racialisation to the detriment of Muslims are better analysed in the following paragraphs, it is worth noticing here that this process has historically resulted in “a clash of patriarchies” (Grosfoguel 17), where white supremacists vilify an allegedly inferior religious group on the basis of its innate violence against women, but at the same time deploy a rabid discourse which unveils their own misogynistic views, here exemplified by the definition of Veiszadeh as an “ugly bitch,” a “disgusting Moslem Pig,” and a “sandnigger whore” (Veiszadeh, Tweet 26 February 2015). Such discourse thus demonstrates the persistence of an entrenched misogyny in Western societies, as well as the attempt to focus on the gendered prejudices of other cultures as a strategy to avoid facing the discriminations and the power asymmetries of one’s own social system.

This entanglement of power hierarchies also becomes visible if analysed along with the massive escalation of abuse Mariam Veiszadeh experienced both from Australian and non-Australian groups. In fact, soon after she reported the attacks of ADL’s followers, she became the target of a much more intense and widespread international cyberbullying campaign, which started from this country and extended abroad, landing in the USA, because of the involvement of another racist anti-Muslim group: the American *Daily Stormer*.

*“As Hateful and Vilifying as You Possibly Can”*

*Daily Stormer* is a self-described group of American Republicans (Daily Stormer), which operates through a website hosting “a neo-Nazi mixture of message boards and sarcastic commentary” (Wines and Saul). Started in 2013, the *Daily Stormer* website can be defined as a sort of digital road map to contemporary hate speech, expressed in posts which are categorised into several groups ranging from debates over crimes perpetrated by Afro-Americans and LGBTQ people (see Striker, Blacks; Striker, Lesbian), the “Jewish problem,”

and the “race war.” Proofs of the just-mentioned categories are shown in its homepage, where the glorification of Nazism is also conveyed through two supposedly funny pictures of Adolf Hitler, as visible in image 5 below.

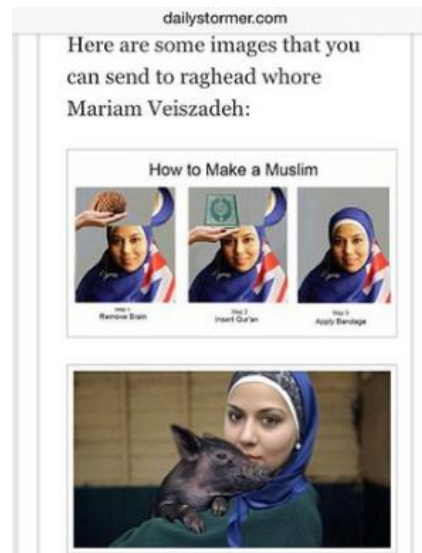


*Image 5*

Following the overwhelming abuse perpetrated by the ADL, the Daily Stormer decided to intervene on its website publishing an incendiary post aimed at blaming Veiszadeh as an oppressor of freedom of speech, and saying that such violation of right “should be responded to with the most ridiculous conceivable hateful speech” (quote available in Whiteman). In this webpage, which was later removed from the Web, they demanded their allegedly more than 5000 followers to form a “troll army,” and to attack Veiszadeh on Twitter being “as nasty, hurtful, hateful, offensive, insulting and ‘vilifying’ as possible” (Whiteman). Along with the stated purpose to silence her and to make her quit Twitter (Veiszadeh, Global Attack), they also provided their followers with a series of doctored pictures that they could use to harass Veiszadeh on her Twitter account. The following paragraphs show three of these contents in images 6, 7, and 8, and they analyse how hate speech is there articulated through misogyny and cultural racism.

Image 6 (available in Stewart) is a visual proof of the attempt to create a cyber mob attack against Veiszadeh.





*Image 6*

The image is a screenshot taken by the target herself before the webpage at issue was removed, and it shows how the editors of the site incited their followers and directed them in harassing the advocate. Here they specifically provide the discursive weapons to perpetrate the online abuse (see also images 7 and 8). These pictures are important proof of the interplay between different types of hate speech which play on multiple axes of social inequalities, namely gender and the racialisation of Islam. As Khyati Joshi explains, in Western societies racialisation of religions like Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism, is a process through which “certain phenotypical features associated with an ethnic group and attached to race in popular discourse become associated with the religion or religions practiced by the ethnic group” (Joshi 216). In this process, phenotypical characteristics – like the colour of skin or religious practices like wearing the veil – become the essence of a certain religious faith and acquire a racial meaning (Joshi 216). Even though such racialisation has multiple outcomes<sup>9</sup> (Joshi 217), its ultimate effect is the portrait of whiteness and Christianity as the normative identity, and non-Christians as the

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<sup>9</sup> In Joshi’s study of the racialisation of the three above-mentioned religions, the general outcomes of this process are the exoticization of Hinduism, the vilification of Sikhism, and the demonisation of Islam (217), the last one analysed in the remainder of this section.

epitome of inferior others in Western societies. While an historical reconstruction of the mechanism of Muslims' racialisation is a complex and layered phenomenon which goes beyond the scope of this thesis, my case here is that the critical analysis of Islamophobic hate speech helps to show its sociocultural effects and its hidden connection with misogynistic discourse in contemporary Western societies like the Australian culture. For this reason, I suggest that images 6, 7, and 8 show how the most prominent religious markers associated with Islam – namely the hijab, the Quran, and the forbidden consumption of pork – are represented as discursive tools to dehumanise Muslims and vilify their religion.

In particular, to provide a systematic critical analysis of the visual and written elements which compose image 6, the screenshot can be divided into three subparts: the first one consists in a portion of text in which the Daily Stormer overtly declares the intentions of its publication (i.e., to incite their followers to abuse Veiszadeh), while the second and third parts provide pictures which, according to the webpage authors, should be tweeted to the target.

In the first part, the text describes Veiszadeh as a “raghead whore,” an expression that I suggest considering the linguistic quintessence of the entanglement between misogynistic and Islamophobic discourses. The term *whore* is a typical example of gendered hate speech which addresses any woman through standardised and sexualised insults. In fact, as Karla Mantilla explains and as I have highlighted in several passages of my thesis, the distinctive element of misogynistic hate speech is to attack women in several ways which are always specific to their gender (Viral - Part 2). More precisely, words like *whore*, *slut*, and *cunt* serve the purpose to hypersexualise women; interestingly, the content here under analysis shows that such hypersexualisation does not depend on the way a woman shows herself, dresses, and behaves, meaning that it is not necessary for a woman to flaunt behaviours, attitudes, or dressing styles which are allegedly considered provocative, and thus unquestioned sources of danger, according to the patriarchal hegemonic ideology. As image 6 proves, no matter what her outfit

is, a woman is always shamed for being a prostitute, even if she appears in a discrete outfit, like the hijab. Furthermore, in the screenshot under analysis, the term *raghead* increases the discursive power of the insult by referring precisely to the hijab. The derogatory nature of this word is already present in its etymology: *raghead*, in fact, comes from the English noun *rag*, meaning “a comparatively worthless fragment of cloth, especially one resulting from tearing or wear” (Macquarie Dictionary, Rag). Such negative connotation is reaffirmed in the term *raghead*, which according to the Macquarie Dictionary is as a colloquial, derogatory, and racist expression used to indicate “a person of Middle-Eastern descent, from the dress practice of wearing a cloth covering on the head” (Macquarie Dictionary, Raghead). Similarly, under the entry *rag*, the Oxford English Dictionary considers it an offensive slang term that designates “a person who wears a head cloth or turban; a native or inhabitant of a country where such items are customarily worn, *esp.[ecially]* a Middle Eastern person” (Oxford English Dictionary, Rag). While, as the vocabulary entries explain, *raghead* does not imply a gendered nature, the term seems to acquire a stronger derogatory shade when the gender of the person is specified as female, here conveyed by the above-analysed slur *whore*. My case here is not only that the gender-specific insult has the effect of increasing the verbal abuse in place, but also that this expression shows how a religious element becomes a cultural marker which symbolises the racialisation of Islam through the specific gender element. In fact, even though for many Muslim women who live in Western societies wearing the hijab has lost its original meaning of gender segregation and the garment itself has become for them a new symbol of Muslim modernity which differentiates them from Western identities (Salih 129), the Islamic veil is still perceived by many in contemporary Western world as the emblem of the oppression of women as exclusively perpetrated by Muslim men. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, such an Orientalist stereotype becomes a suitable discursive device to deny gendered violence as a global phenomenon and to depict Muslims as the Others who oppress

human freedom in the name of their religious-biased precepts.

The depiction of Islamic people as uncultured and acritical followers of an allegedly violent theocracy is also visible in the second part of image 6, that is at the centre of the screenshot. Here the authors show “How to Make a Muslim” in a sequence of three illustrated steps portraying Veiszadeh: first, “remove the brain,” second “insert Qur’an,” third “apply bandage.”<sup>10</sup> The image is particularly interesting for a critical analysis because it summarises the functioning of Islamophobic discourse and the racialisation of Muslims. In fact, the antithesis between *brain* and *Qur’an* which supposedly exclude one another (one has to be removed for the other to be inserted) discursively reproduces the binary opposition between educated intelligence and uneducated indoctrination, that in this supremacist discourse belong respectively to white people and Muslims. Moreover, the last frame suggests finishing the job by applying a *bandage*, a word which downplays the symbolic importance of the hijab in Muslim identity, and substitutes the Muslim faith with a “perceived Muslimness”<sup>11</sup> (Meer and Modood 38) that can be reproduced almost surgically given its predictable – and thus duplicable – essence. These visual and verbal elements prove how Muslims’ racialisation eventually translates into a derogatory essentialism which “reduces people to one aspect of their identity and thereby presents a homogeneous, undifferentiated, and static view of an ethnoreligious community . . . [which is] rendered theologically, morally, and socially illegitimate” (Joshi 212).

Similarly, in the lowest section of image 6, the third part of this screenshot shows a photomontaged picture of Veiszadeh holding a pig in her arms. This visual element refers to the prohibition for Islamic people to eat pork, stated in several passages of the Quran (see

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<sup>10</sup> For a higher quality screenshot of image 6 see Veiszadeh, Tweet 24 February 2015.

<sup>11</sup> The expression “perceived Muslimness” is used by Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood to refer to the alleged inferior essence of Muslims.

Quran ch. 2, v. 173). Such restriction is often used in Islamophobic hate speech to ridicule Muslims, like in the above-quoted tweet of example 3 (i.e., “bury you all with pigs”) and also in image 7 below (available in Stewart). Here this cultural reference is rendered visually by turning Veiszadeh’s nose into a pig’s snout, as the following image shows:



*Image 7*

The reference to pig/pork visible in image 7 not only alludes to a vilification of Islam through an allegedly humorous picture, but it also tries to convey a sense of dirtiness, greed, and squalor, stereotypically associated with the living conditions of the animal and here applied to the advocate. Moreover, the very use of this specific picture of Veiszadeh consists in a deliberate distortion of its original symbolic meaning. In fact, the photo at issue had been previously used by Mariam Veiszadeh to indicate her sense of belonging and respect for Australia (here symbolised by the use of the Australian flag as a headscarf), and to promote a consensus position on Muslims in the country (see Price). The text attached to the image confirms the strong Islamophobic message of the Daily Stormer post. Here, through the rhetorical act of impersonation, Veiszadeh’s intent is explained in a three steps process: phase one consists in “DESTROYING Free Speech,” phase 2 in “implementing Sharia Law,” and phase three “involves KILLING infidels of the host people.” Thus, this text expresses an ideological confusion between Islam and the Sharia law, where the latter is ideologically misinterpreted as a commandment to subjugate non-Muslim infidels, and it also results in the

discursive construction of Muslims as brainwashed religious warriors whose sole aim is to terrorise “infidels of the host people.”<sup>12</sup> This proves the racist connotation of Islam, which ends up being associated with an enemy status in late modern Western societies (Joshi 223). In this Islamophobic vision, Muslims are depicted as enemies of those values which are supposed prerogatives of non-Muslims, such as freedom of speech and secularism. For their unwillingness to subjugate to this Islamic violent theocracy, the “host people” are allegedly considered as “infidels” and thus only deserve to be killed. This strong Islamophobic discourse is sustained in the text through the deployment of the verbs *to destroy* and *to kill* which bear a violent semantic meaning; moreover, these verbs become the most visible elements in the text through capitalisation, which according to netiquette is the graphic representation of the act of shouting during an online interaction and a strategy “to make words look ‘louder’” (Robb). In this same text, the violence associated with Muslims is discursively antithetical to the allegedly pacific Western values, symbolised by the expressions *free speech* and *host people*, the latter implying a sense of hospitality, compassion, and benevolence. The juxtaposition of this caption to Mariam’s photo, thus, has the effect of hijacking the previously-mentioned peaceful message that the advocate had originally intended for it.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> As Qasim Rashid notes, “Shariah forbids that it be imposed on any unwilling person . . . [and it] may only be applied if people willingly apply it to themselves – never through forced government implementation.” He also highlights that countries that oppress other people claiming to follow the Shariah law “have ignored the fundamental tenet of justice inherent in Shariah Law, and have instead used Shariah as an excuse to gain power and sanction religious extremism” (Rashid).

<sup>13</sup> As Veiszadeh has noted (Veiszadeh in Stewart), this sort of Islamophobic allegations can be traced not only in online vitriolic communications, but also in the public speeches of several Western politicians. As for Australia, an example is the already-mentioned anti-Muslim manifesto of Pauline Hanson, who forewarned both the Senate and the Australian population of the alleged dangers “of being swamped by Muslims, who bear a culture and ideology that is incompatible with our own.” She also expressed her prejudiced vision of Muslims by saying:

Similarly, image 8 (available in Stewart) is an example of the denigration of Islamic religion and it also shows how such vilification is intertwined with misogynistic hate speech:



*Image 8*

Here the intent to pillory Veiszadeh's religion is represented through a photoshopped picture of the activist burning the Quran. In the lower part of the image, a caption describes Mariam as a "fat, ugly, hairy sandnigger." As Karla Mantilla notes describing the general features of gendertrolling (Viral - Part 2), these insults are typically addressed to women in gendered online hate speech by assessing them only in relation to their alleged physical appearance. This discourse is used to relegate women in the sexual sphere as passive objects in need to be evaluated through a heteronormative male gaze, which usually defines them as sexually unattractive, in the attempt to make them internalise the feeling that they are not worthy of any attention but the sexual one. Moreover, here biological racism is expressed by stressing the target's skin colour and other supposed physical characteristics, through the derogatory noun *sandnigger* and the adjective *hairy*. While the former is an overt insult used to indicate "a person of Middle Eastern descent due to the various desert regions there, usually meant in

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"Islam sees itself as a theocracy, Islam does not believe in democracy, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, or freedom of assembly. It does not separate religion and politics. It is partly a religion, but much more than that. It has a political agenda that goes far outside the realm of religion. It regulates Muslim's social and domestic life, their legal system and politics, their total life" (video available in Remeikis).

a disparaging and demeaning way” (Urban Dictionary, *Sandnigger*), the latter assumes a similar offensive nature when compared to the hegemonic representation of women’s bodies as flawless, smooth, and thus hairless. As Meer and Modood note in their study on Muslim racialisation in contemporary Britain, biological racism is the ideological basis on which the complex phenomenon of cultural racism is built. More specifically, in fact, “cultural racism builds on biological racism a further discourse, which evokes cultural differences from an alleged British, ‘civilised’ norm to vilify, marginalise or demand cultural assimilation from groups who also suffer from biological racism” (Meer and Modood 39). The use of disparaging terms like the noun *sandnigger* in image 8 and the adjective *anti-white* in image 3 shows how the above-quoted observation can be extended from the British context to other Western countries like Australia, where the use of biological phenotypes are used to evoke a cultural inferiority.

Thus, the concepts of biological and cultural racism, the resulting Islamophobia and the similarly disparaging sexualised misogyny are the ideological ground on which Mariam Veiszadeh was targeted through a pervasive hate speech which crossed multiple platforms and countries. However, the above-analysed images were not the only means through which misogynist and white supremacist groups like the ADL and the Daily Stormer encouraged the massive cyber mob attack against her, as the following section explains.

#### *From Online to Offline Harassment*

As the advocate recalled, these harassers also tried to cyberstalk and doxx her on several occasions, publishing online her personal details “prompting abuse phone calls, SMS, mail, emails and social media vitriol” (Veiszadeh, Virtual World). The result of this multifaceted online abuse was that hate speech also leaked into more traditional forms of harassment, like stalking in real life. In particular, on one occasion, some haters also succeeded in tracking down her alleged home address and sent her a package which looked suspicious, and which was later



discovered to contain bacon, thanks to the intervention of the local Bomb Squad. Regardless of the actual non-dangerous nature of the parcel and the fact that the activist did no longer live in the targeted apartment, the event must still be considered alarming, because it shows how online verbal harassment can easily degenerate into episodes of offline abuse. In this case, the delivery of the allegedly ironic package to Veiszadeh's previous residence proved to her that some of her personal information was online against her will, and that such information was potentially available for anyone to harass or even attack her physically. After this event, Veiszadeh decided to report the abuse and death threats she had been receiving through Twitter and Facebook to the local police, and law enforcement provided a car patrolling her house overnight, to prevent any potential physical harm (Veiszadeh, Virtual World). In the same period of this offline harassment, the online abuse which targeted Mariam kept increasing, and UCGs like those analysed in the previous sections continued to circulate on the Web spreading back to Australia, where other racist and anti-Muslims online groups revitalised a nationalistic attack against her.

#### *The "Unwilling Sacrificial Lamb" of Australian Islamophobia*

In Australia, two groups were particularly active in the online campaign against Veiszadeh, namely *Reclaim Australia* and *Restore Australia*. While the former created and posted online many images similar to those analysed in the above paragraphs of this section, the latter used its Facebook page to publish the link to Mariam's profile and to exhort its followers to harass her through the following sentence: "Just been leaving a few FUN BOMBS on this bitch's page. Feel free to join in and tell her what you think of her racist crap."<sup>14</sup> As the activist stated, after the groups vilified her through these kind of messages and incited their followers to harass her online, she suddenly became "the islamophobe's favourite poster child" (Veiszadeh,

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<sup>14</sup> A screenshot of the original post is available in Online Hate Prevention Institute.

Monash), “the unwilling sacrificial lamb (halal of course) of the anti-Islamic movement and the epitomic symbol of the Australian Muslim” (Veiszadeh, Virtual World). Once again, among the growing barrage of misogynist and racist comments sent to her via Twitter and Facebook, she also received several credible death threats which targeted her and her family, like the one represented in image 9 (available in Stewart):



*Image 9*

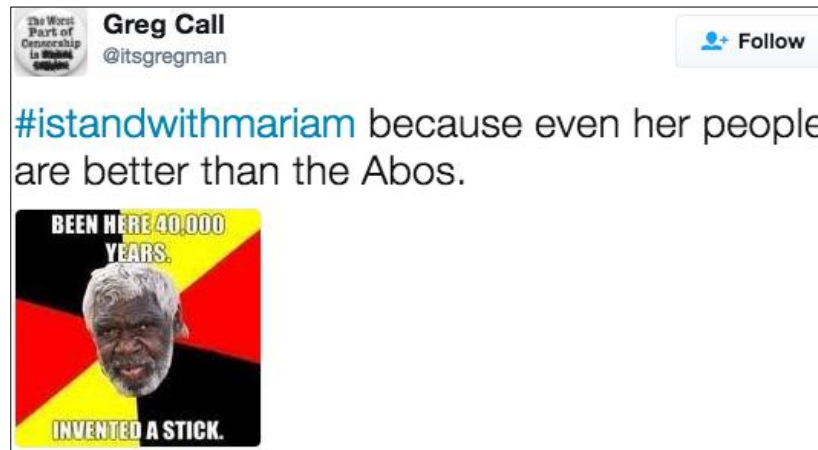
The image represents a content sent privately to Veiszadeh on Facebook Messenger by a woman allegedly supporting the *Reclaim Australia* movement. In this message, the user menaces to slit the advocate’s throat (clearly referring to the slaughtering method of cutting animals’ throats to prepare halal meat for human consumption according to Islam), and to increase the punishment she supposedly deserved by killing her family too. Here, stalking and death threats appear with other insulting expressions which defame Veiszadeh’s family members through false information and which depict both them and Mariam as inhumane, bestial, and evil beings (i.e., “your uncle which is now your husband slash grand fucker.. Born in hell like the devils you are”). After receiving this message, Veiszadeh decided to press charges against the Facebook user. The woman was eventually found guilty and charged with using a carriage service to menace, harass, and offend under s.474.17 of the Commonwealth Criminal Code (Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions), and fined A\$ 1000. While on similar occasions Veiszadeh called out some of her online antagonists by naming and shaming them (e.g., see Veiszadeh, Tweet 10 January 2017), in this case she decided not to

publish the harasser's identity for the sake of her children. In fact, as the woman's Facebook account contained public pictures of her children, the advocate said that she did not want to expose the kids to public scrutiny (Veiszadeh, Virtual World), thus demonstrating not only her will to stand up against online hate speech but also her refusal to foster potentially similar harassment against innocent people, unlike other targets of e-bile, like Selvaggi Lucarelli (see Chapter 6.1 Case Study no. 5: Selvaggia Lucarelli). Nevertheless, she spoke up publicly about this episode, hoping it would serve as a warning to abusers about the accountability of their online misbehaviour, deterring further cyberbullying.

Unfortunately, this action did not have the result expected. During this peak of social media abuse, a friend of Mariam's started the hashtag #IStandWithMariam for users who wanted to stand up against Islamophobia and to show their support for the Australian advocate. While many have welcomed it as an intelligent and civil way to tackle online hate speech on Twitter and Facebook, the hashtag was also used by others to foster misogynistic and racist discourse and to keep harassing Veiszadeh, depicting the activist as a "so called refugee" (e.g., see @MamasShade) who enjoys playing the victim card (e.g., see @HazaMime; @NakBaNaNas). The following images represent this exploitation of the hashtag at issue:



Image 10



*Image 11*

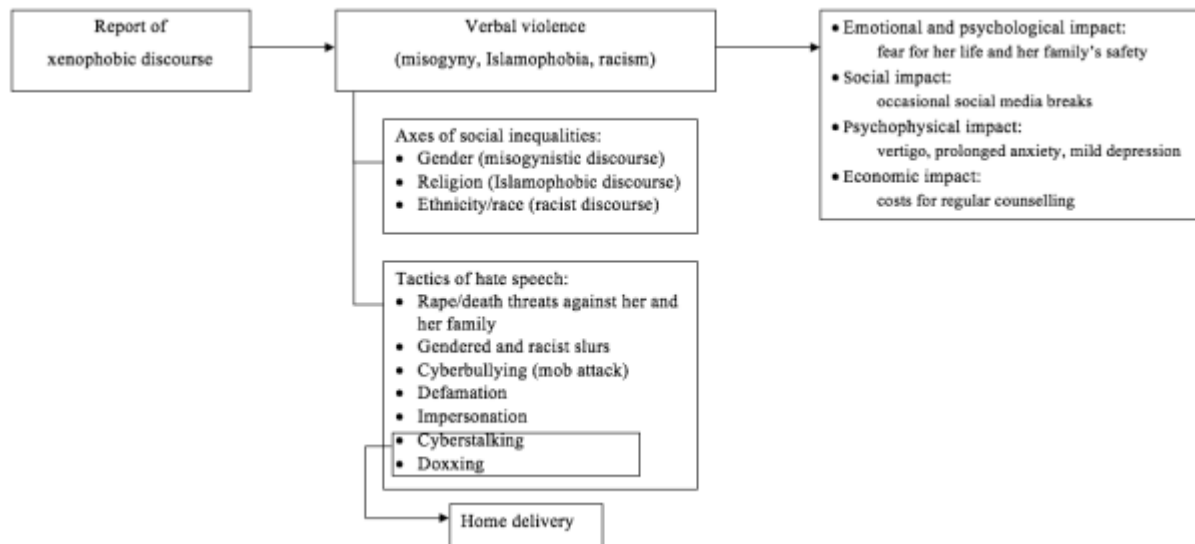
Images 10 (available in @itsgreg, Tweet 11 March 2015 - 1) and 11 (available in @itsgreg, Tweet 11 March 2015 - 2) were posted from the same Twitter account using the above-mentioned hashtag, and they are both made up of a short written text and a related picture which is used to increase the racist impact of the tweet. In image 10, the author pretends to support Mariam's cause in the text of the tweet, writing "because she wakes people up to the reality around us." However, the subsequent meme hijacks the original meaning of the hashtag by comparing the images of an Aboriginal woman and of a white girl, both assessed through the heteronormative male gaze. In the caption, the very meaning of racism is ideologically reframed as the capability to understand that the two women do not belong to the same species; as the picture on the right hints at a supposed superiority of white female beauty by showing a sexually attractive Caucasian woman in a sensual position which is opposed to the alleged inferiority of the Aboriginal woman, it is clear how the tweet seeks to mock racism – still present in contemporary Australia against Aboriginal people – and to reaffirm the supremacy of white men, whose hegemonic position is here legitimised by the alleged superiority of their women's physical appearance.

An analogous supremacist discourse is expressed in image 11 where the hashtag #IStandWithMariam is similarly exploited to attack both Muslims and Aboriginals. Here, the Australian Aboriginal flag serves as the background of a meme which represents the face of an

Aboriginal man along with the caption “BEEN HERE 40,000 YEARS, INVENTED A STICK.” From these visual and textual elements, it is clear that the UGC at issue expresses two forms of cultural racism: Aboriginals are denigrated as an uneducated, useless, and unproductive ethnic group that inhabited Australia for thousands of years without providing any actual improvement to this region. Given this supposed savage primitiveness, they are placed at the lowest step of the social pyramid, even lower than Muslims, who in turn are inferior to white Australians. Linguistically, the hierarchy between the last two groups is expressed through the adverb *even* to convey the message that, although Muslims are an inferior species, they are not as low as Aboriginals. Similarly, the disparaging depiction of Aboriginal people is provided by the noun *Abos*, that is the derogatory term used in Australian slang to refer to them. As a final remark, we can see how both visual images and written texts of images 10 and 11 result in an appropriation of the online hashtag that originated as a non-discriminatory tool and that was eventually used to express the intertwine of misogyny and cultural racism against Muslims and Aboriginal people in heteronormative white supremacist discourse. This hegemonic ideology works on multiple axes of social inequality: in fact, it entitles itself to assess on one hand the values of different ethnic groups according to the sexual attractiveness of their women, and on the other hand to rate the worth of non-whites. The ultimate effect of this discourse is the simultaneous denial of Westerners’ responsibilities in the historical suppression of Aboriginals, and in the contemporary xenophobic vilification of Muslims.

#### *Effects On the Target's Life*

The multifaceted hate speech analysed in all the above paragraphs has affected the online and offline life of Mariam Veiszadeh on several levels. The multiple effects of misogyny, Islamophobia, and racism experienced by the target in the cybersphere are visually summed up in the following diagram, along with the tactics through which such hatred was delivered:



*Effect of Hate Speech on the Target*

As the advocate has stated on several occasions (see Dumas; Stephens; Thackray), the vitriolic attacks and threats she received had a profound emotional and psychological effect on her: she started fearing for her life and for her family's safety, a fact which affected her physical and mental health causing her vertigo (Stephens), mild depression, and prolonged anxiety which resulted in several physical illnesses (Thackray). At times, she has also tried to reduce the psychological impact of this abuse by taking social media breaks, occasionally deleting Facebook and Twitter apps from her phone, and hiding them in less accessible mobile folders (Dumas). These actions show how the harassment impacted Veizadeh's active participation in online communication. Moreover, she decided to get regular counselling to cope with the overwhelming bullying and international abuse she was targeted with (Dumas), a fact which proves the economic impact of online harassment on its victims (i.e., costs for psychological support in the case at issue).

Even though the advocate has kept receiving similar types of online abuse (e.g., see Veizadeh, Tweet 20 December 2016), this constant harassment has not had the desired effect of silencing her. For this reason, she was appointed Daily Life 2016 Woman of the Year, an important symbolic acknowledgment of her non-stop work to raise awareness on Islamophobia

and to make Australian society a more inclusive and respectful environment, both online and offline.

### *Conclusion*

The critical analysis of hate speech against Mariam Veiszadeh that I have developed in this section has highlighted several important issues of online harassment. In relation to the escalation of this phenomenon, I have demonstrated how the advocate became the target of a massive and international hate campaign coordinated by different nationalistic groups which succeeded in creating a cyber mob that harassed her both online and offline through several tactics. I also hinted at the reaction of the target, who not only found the strength not to be silenced by cyber attacks, but who also refused to increase the level of online animosity. In fact, she has always called out her antagonists with a non-aggressive rhetoric in online posts (e.g., see Veiszadeh, Tweet 26 February 2015), public speeches and interviews (see Veiszadeh, Monash; Veiszadeh in Stewart), and she decided not to name a harasser when this action would have potentially affected innocent people. For this reason, among the cases analysed in my thesis, I consider Veiszadeh's reaction as one of the most powerful counter narratives to stand out against the pervasive violence of online hate speech.

Moreover, the multimodal analysis of abusive UGCs underlined the discursive strategies implemented in online hate speech to sustain and reaffirm different social power asymmetries related to gender, religion, and ethnicity, showing how not only women, but also Muslims and Aboriginal people are still the punchline of such demeaning discourse. Thus, in my study, I have also provided practical examples of the entanglement between misogynist and Islamophobic ideologies, and I have shown how the latter should be considered as a form of cultural racism against Muslim people who undergo a process of ethnicisation and racialisation resulting in derogatory essentialism. This aspect is particularly relevant not only for my analysis but also to understand the general mechanism of hate speech, where different types of

discriminations work to reinforce each other. Moreover, the similarities between gendered prejudice and Islamophobia show the common nature of these two discourses as harmful speech, and therefore it proves that misogyny should be considered a form of hate speech as much as racism. My analysis also demonstrates how, in this racialized essentialism, the target is attached to a spoiled identity through discourse which simultaneously influences and is influenced by the prejudiced representation of Muslims as the dangerous Other. Moreover, I have analysed the gender component in the construction of such Otherness demonstrating how this mechanism is based on a clash of patriarchies: in fact, white supremacists tend to blame Islam as the sole oppressor of women's freedom and self-determination, and at the same time they demonstrate the patriarchal ideology of their own culture through derogatory discourse which victimises women through gender-specific slurs and opposes their full active participation in online communication.

These attempts to intimidate women who actively engage in public online fora characterise all the cases of online hate speech contained in my database, and they respond to the will to silence women who uses the Internet to question different forms of power imbalances in patriarchal societies. The following section shows another example of misogynistic discourse, by providing a critical analysis of the sexualised hate speech which targeted the Australian activist Caitlin Roper of the organisation *Collective Shout*, through the tactic of impersonation.



## 5.2 Case Study no.4: Caitlin Roper

### *The Dataset*

The dataset of this case study is composed of 183 UGCs that the target shared with me during a private online conversation (Roper, Private Conversation).<sup>15</sup> The database provided by Roper was an important source for my research. In fact, it contains a quite extensive set of data that the activist collected on Twitter and Facebook between the beginning of October 2014 and the end of May 2015, and indexed in six different categories, according to the type of harassment they expressed, as represented in the table below:

Type of abuse	Platform		TOT
	Twitter	Facebook	
Unwelcome sexual comments	17	0	17
Insults to physical appearance	4	16	20
Sexist slurs	32	19	51
Encouragements to suicide	14	2	16
Threats of rape/death/violence	59	4	63
Impersonation	16	0	16
<b>TOT</b>			<b>183</b>

As the table summarises, the online abuse of Caitlin Roper employed tactics that I analysed or mentioned in the previous case studies. These strategies include: impersonation, encouragements to suicide, insults to physical appearance, unwelcome sexual comments, sexist slurs, threats of rape, death, and violent acts in general.<sup>16</sup> In the attempt to shed some light on online misogyny from a different angle, I use this case to discuss impersonation as a tactic to attack women online and I point out how this strategy, for its very nature, may cause particularly serious consequences for the target's reputation and in her private offline life. Below, I start presenting Roper, her organisation, and the abuse she experienced.

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<sup>15</sup> Some of these UGCs also appeared in several newspaper articles and are therefore retrievable online. When online references are available, I indicate them in brackets.

<sup>16</sup> It must be noted that, even if the target created a specific category for sexist slurs, they also appear disseminated in all the other types of abuse, along with homophobic and transphobic hate speech.

*The Target(s): Collective Shout, Collective Abuse*

Caitlin Roper is an Australian feminist activist who also works as a journalist for several international newspapers (e.g., The Huffington Post, the Guardian, Wired). Along with other Australian women, she manages *Collective Shout*, a feminist organisation founded in December 2009 by a group of women from different educational and political backgrounds, who wanted to provide “a collective shout against the pornification of culture” (Collective Shout, About). Through the years, this initially small association has grown into a wide grassroots movement which has promoted several campaigns, demanding a more respectful representation of both women and men in the media and in the advertising industry. As the organisation operates mostly online through its website, its social network accounts, and petition sites like change.org, its activists have been repeatedly targeted by many who have tried to stop their advocacy efforts through several tactics of online harassment.

Among the activists who have been attacked in the most severe episodes of online abuse, there are Caitlin Roper, Coralie Alison, and Talitha Stone. They all have experienced several waves of online attacks that employed gender-based hate speech. In particular, the most extensive harassment occurred between 2013 and 2015, when Roper, Alison, and Stone were attacked by the fans of the American rapper Tyler the Creator for criticising of the singer’s misogynistic lyrics and actions. More specifically, in 2015, the activists got his Australian tour cancelled, by writing a letter to the Immigration Minister Peter Dutton, in which they sustained that Tyler had long promoted and glamorised violence against women in his music and during his concerts,<sup>17</sup> and therefore they obtained the denial of his visa (Collective Shout, Letter; Liszewski). This success of Collective Shout fuelled the campaign of gendered hatred against Roper, Alison, and Stone, both on Twitter and Facebook (see Roper, Ignores; Bowden). During

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<sup>17</sup> In particular, he verbally harassed Talitha Stone during a concert in Sydney in 2013 (see Bowden).

this aggressive backlash, Stone was doxxed (see Roper, Pimped), and Alison received a barrage of rape and death threats, often combined with extremely graphic pictures of female bodies being impaled, slaughtered, and disfigured (Alison, Private Conversation).<sup>18</sup>

A similar online rage targeted their colleague Caitlin Roper, first in October 2014 when she shared a petition against the reinstatement of the Welsh footballer Ched Evans at Sheffield United club after the man was convicted for the rape of a 19-year old girl (Roper, Pimped),<sup>19</sup> and second when her organisation supported an online campaign demanding Australian supermarkets to stop selling the videogame *Grand Theft Auto V* (hereafter GTA V), which they considered an incitement to virtually abuse and kill women as a form of entertainment.<sup>20</sup> Both campaigns went viral and received respectively more than 170,600 and 40,000 supporters.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, they costed Roper an increase in the abuse she was already experiencing online, through sexualised insults, incitements to suicide, and rape and death threats. More specifically, her online harassment also contemplated two episodes of impersonation, between 2014 and 2015. Below I provide some examples of the impersonation used against Caitlin Roper on Twitter, and I later analyse it in relation to specific discursive strategies.

#### *Impersonation: From “Rape Loving Little Girl” to “Trannies” Hater*

The impersonation experienced by Caitlin Roper shows some peculiar aspects that I analyse

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<sup>18</sup> Like Caitlin Roper, Coralie Alison shared with me a database of the abusive messages she had received online. Her dataset contains 169 UGCs retrieved on Twitter and Facebook. This material was very important for a better understanding of the cyber harassment directed at her and at the whole organisation, and they provided me a context for the analysis of this section. Therefore, I sincerely thank Caitlin and Coralie for their help, even though I could not include a critical analysis of both cases in my thesis for constraints of space.

<sup>19</sup> The petition is available in Hatchet.

<sup>20</sup> The petition is available in Nicole Survivor.

<sup>21</sup> As a result, GTA V was removed from Target and Kmart Australian stores, but Evans was later reinstated at Sheffield United.

here for a more comprehensive understanding not only of this strategy, but also of the insidious nature of gender-based hate speech in general. As the target reported (Roper, Experience; Roper, Pimped), she suffered two episodes of impersonation, one in October 2014 and the other in May 2015. These attacks were based on the employment of two different types of gendered hate speech, namely misogyny and transphobia. The table below quotes 10 tweets which were published on the two fake accounts specifically created to impersonate the target.

#### *Misogyny: “A Rape Loving Little Whore”*

Example 1: @pornrationale @caitlin\_roper Hey! I thought about this and he was right! I do need a man to fuck me as I beg him for cum :) my confession (Roper, Private Conversation)

Example 2: @caitlin\_roper @steventaylor007 Steven it's me Caitlin you were right, I did research and found out I'm a whore and deserve to be fucked :) (Roper, Private Conversation)

Example 3: @AlisonGymble82 @caitlin\_roper hey Alison! I just wanted to tell you I'm really a fuckgirl who loves male attention on here :) okay? Love u! (Roper, Private Conversation)

Example 4: @diamond\_castle9 @caitlin\_roper Hey!! It's me Caitlin – just wanted to let you know Im a rape loving little whore :) and that's the truth :) (Roper, Private Conversation)

Example 5: @Adam\_M\_Ali @caitlin\_roper you're so right! Feminists like me spread our legs but then cry rape :) we are little sluts you know ;) fuck me? (Roper, Private Conversation)

#### *Transphobia: “Trannies” Hater*

Example 6: Trannies vaginas are surgical mockeries of real vaginas, and they'll never menstruate or give birth (Smith)

Example 7: Trannies, everyone is laughing at you. You will never be able to change your chromosomes. End your miserable existence & kill yourself now (Payton)

Example 8: Trannies, getting surgery won't change your gender. It will only turn you into a deformed freak. End your miserable existence. Kill yourself (Roper, Private Conversation)

Example 9: Trannies are living a delusion. You can help them escape their delusions by beating them senseless. Go out & start beating trannies now (Payton)

Example 10: Trannies are worthless subhuman cockroaches that need to be rounded up & slaughtered like cattle. Go out & start killing trannies right now (Roper, Private Conversation)

*Misogyny: “A Rape Loving Little Whore”*

Examples 1 to 5 prove the use of misogynistic discourse in the impersonation of Caitlin Roper occurred in October 2014, while the activist was using her real social network accounts to promote the above-mentioned campaign against the reinstatement of Ched Evans at his former football club. The quoted texts appeared on a fake account created by a user that the target would later identify as a male commenter called Nader (Ringo). The bio note of this profile read as follows:<sup>22</sup>



*Image 1*

Image 1 shows how the impersonator attempted to steal the target’s identity by using her name and by creating a Twitter username (i.e., @caitlin\_\_roper) very similar to her original one (i.e., @caitlin\_roper), to which he simply added a second underscore between her name and surname, making the account particularly credible at first sight.<sup>23</sup> In this content, Roper allegedly invites men to follow her online, and describes sex acts that she would supposedly perform (i.e., “Im the biggest slut in australia boys come follow me #anal #camgirl #sluttygirlproblems #pussy #whore #fuckmeat #cum”). Furthermore, in this false profile, her reference website was changed from collectiveshout.org into a pornographic site (i.e.,

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<sup>22</sup> Screenshot provided by the target in Roper, Private Conversation. A similar version of it appears in Roper, Experience.

<sup>23</sup> The creation of a slightly different username is motivated by the fact that usernames work as individual identifiers of Twitter accounts. Therefore, while a name (e.g., Caitlin Roper) can be used for multiple profiles, usernames cannot be repeated.

pornmd.com). This initial description already demonstrates how the troller intended to vilify the target through sexual shaming. As I discussed in the case of Anita Sarkeesian, online impersonation aims at undermining the credibility of feminists by spreading false information which usually exacerbates a pre-existing gendered harassment. While Sarkeesian was impersonated to sustain conspiracy theories about the alleged hidden agenda of her cyber activism, the tweets here reported show a much more sexualised persecution of Roper. In fact, while some impersonators pretended to be Sarkeesian by publishing fake quotes regarding her stances and her use of the money that she had crowdsourced, this episode of Roper's impersonation is clearly based on her hypersexualisation. Moreover, as visible in the quotes, in this case the harasser tries to increase the impact and visibility of the tweets by mentioning several Twitter users, chosen almost randomly, as well as the real account of the activist, which appears repeated in all tweets. The texts of these examples show how the impersonator reframes the typical discursive strategies of online gendered harassment as confessions written by the woman to publicly declaim her supposed agenda.

The first element to analyse in the study of these posts is the overall tone of these messages. While most online hate speech employs an overtly aggressive and threatening style, examples 1 to 5 carry a general sense of friendliness, courtesy, and frivolousness. In fact, each tweet contains at least one emoticon,<sup>24</sup> that is “a typographic display of a facial representation, used to convey emotion in a text only medium” (Hern, Emoticons). More specifically, these UGCs show a benevolent disposition towards the audience and the addressees through the repetition of smiling and winking emoticons, which in online conversation are normally intended as expressions of happiness, satisfaction, mutual understanding, or even as a sign of flirtation. Therefore, I suggest interpreting the use of these visual elements as a strategy to

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<sup>24</sup> Repeated twice in examples 4 and 5.

soften the tone of the texts, and to hide their strong sexualised meaning.

Moreover, to increase this sense of cheerfulness, interjections and exclamation marks are disseminated throughout the UGCs. In particular, interjections are used to attract the attention of the addressees (i.e., “Hey!” in examples 1 and 4, “hey Alison!” in example 3), while exclamation marks attempt to establish an emotional proximity between the writer of the posts and their recipients (e.g., “Love u!” in example 3). With a similar aim, in examples 2 and 4 the clause “it’s me Caitlin” tends to reaffirm the identity of the sender, even though this alleged self-identification sounds quite awkward in online communication, where users’ identities are normally guaranteed by their Twitter handles.

Furthermore, exclamatory sentences are used to introduce the sexual vilification of the target which appears as a supposed admission of guilt. In particular, in example 1 and 5, Roper allegedly confesses some afterthoughts, which bring her to agree with male users about some issues that she clarifies later (i.e., “I thought about this and he was right!” in example 1, and “@Adam\_M\_Ali . . . you’re so right!” in example 5). The same structure recurs in example 2 with no exclamations (i.e., “@steventaylor007 Steven it’s me Caitlin you were right”). In these quotes, the male pronoun *he* (example 1) and the addressees’ usernames (*@steventaylor007* in example 2 and *@Adam\_M\_Ali* in example 5) work as discursive devices used to attribute a sense of emotional instability to the target, which allegedly induces her to conform to a male viewpoint, and to reframe her identity according to hegemonic misogynistic beliefs. Therefore, these apparently innocuous clauses place the target in a submissive position to the allegedly true – and thus ideologically dominant – visions of the men here mentioned. They also introduce the discursive reframing of the target, from a supporter of feminist stances to a supposedly confused person who ends up internalising a male misogynistic gaze.

The remaining sentences of examples 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 prove this seeming internalisation of misogyny and the target’s alleged obedience to what online harassers have long been telling

her. In example 1 she seems to confess “I do need a man to fuck me as I beg him for cum :).” This sentence reproduces the hypersexualised objectification of feminists in misogynistic discourse, through which many haters fantasize on women’s sexual performances or prescribe sexual acts to vilify and silence them. More specifically, the clause “as I beg him for cum” seems to hint not only at the sexual domination of female targets but also at some graphic instances of rape wishes. The structure of this last sentence shows that impersonation relies on the use of the first-singular person to attribute false statements to the target. Therefore, example 1 demonstrates how the impersonator creates a discursive reframing of Roper as a subject who accepts her hypersexualisation cheerfully.

Similarly, in example 2 (i.e., “I did research and found out I’m a whore and deserve to be fucked :)”), the first-singular person is used to feign the target’s self-identification with a promiscuous woman who craves sex. Here the sexualisation of the target is intensified by the employment of the disparaging term *whore*, and by the expression “deserve to be fucked,” where Roper’s alleged request for sex evokes harassers’ incitements to rape women as a form of punishment for their active engagement in online conversation.

The fake self-representation of Roper through derogatory expressions also recurs in examples 3, 4, and 5. Example 3 (i.e., “I just wanted to tell you I’m really a fuckgirl who loves male attention on here :)”) comes in the form of a confession made to another woman, allegedly a friend of Roper’s. Here the activist, after describing herself as a *fuckgirl*, seems to admit that she exploits social media to attract male attention, a statement that alludes to the accusations of being *attention whores* often directed at feminists in cyber harassment. As I discussed in the case of Sarkeesian, these allegations usually aim at denying women’s experiences, at ridiculing them, and at undervaluing their feminist stances. However, while Sarkeesian was accused of faking her own abuse to get attention – and, according to some, more money – here Roper’s impersonator attempts to humiliate her through a marked and ubiquitous sexualisation.



Finally, in examples 4 and 5 the troller attempts to deride the target by slut shaming her and by belittling rape. In example 4 (i.e., “just wanted to let you know Im a rape loving little whore :) and that’s the truth :)”), Roper seems to confess not only a secret sexual promiscuity defining herself a *little whore*, but also that she enjoys rape. Even though such statement may be read as a clue to the fake nature of the tweet, these types of messages may not only jeopardise the effectiveness of the target’s advocacy, but they may also endanger her safety in real life, as I discuss later in this analysis. Similarly, in example 5 (i.e., “Feminists like me spread our legs but then cry rape :) we are little sluts you know ;) fuck me?”), the troller extends sexual vilification from Roper to all feminists, here depicted as promiscuous and insincere women who are only interested in exploiting men for their own sexual pleasure, and in accusing them of sexual assault. In particular, the noun *feminists* is the subject of an active verb which hints at the willingness to take part in a sexual intercourse (i.e., “spread our legs”), but it is later juxtaposed with *rape*, an abuse which is inflicted on the victim and which violates her spontaneous and active involvement. The use of the verb *cry* completes the depiction of rape accusations as false and calumnious allegations, thus blurring the line between consensual sex and rape.

Therefore, this analysis proves that impersonation can also be used as a tactic to sustain misogynistic discourse online by vilifying the target, her experience, and her feminist stances. Moreover, the recurrence of expressions like “you are/were right” shows that this type of impersonation can only work if the target has already experienced online harassment, to which the just-mentioned clauses refer. Through this strategy, the impersonator pretends to speak on behalf of the woman, and he reframes her experience of abuse as something that she secretly wanted, deserved, or asked for. Furthermore, this type of impersonation relies on specific discursive strategies through which the target seems to accept the harassers’ misogynistic ideology, and to incite the audience to sexually abuse her, by using gendered

insults against herself. My case here is that, by reversing the structure of the most typical forms of sexualised harassment – i.e., direct or indirect insults, threats, and wishes of rape – the abuser turns the target into a subject that plainly debases herself by employing the same discourse she used to tackle with her online activism.

*Transphobia: “Trannies’” Hater*

Examples 6 to 10 refer to the Twitter impersonation of Caitlin Roper occurred in May 2015. Like in the previous case, a troller created a username that attempted to imitate her real Twitter handle (i.e., @caitlin\_roper), this time by repeating the final letter of her surname (i.e., @caitlin\_roperr). This account was then used to promote a blatant transphobia on behalf of the activist, who was therefore depicted as a transphobic person without her own knowledge.

More specifically, example 6 (“Trannies vaginas are surgical mockeries of real vaginas, and they’ll never be able to menstruate or give birth”) shows how transphobia and misogyny interplay in trans-misogyny.<sup>25</sup> Here, the sender establishes a gendered binary opposition between a supposed real female identity and a fake one, which is attributed to male-to-female (hereafter MtF) transgender people. This antithesis is expressed by the definition of “trannies vaginas as surgical mockeries of real vaginas.” Here, transgender women are vilified through a direct insult to the third person, which occurs when the sender addresses a potential audience while assigning to the target an insulting adjective or noun as a third person (Poggi et al. 260). In this UGC, verbal abuse is primarily conveyed through the transphobic slur *trannies* and through the negative term *mockeries*, used to depict post-operative transgender women as a surgically manipulated, grotesque, and miserable copy of *real* women. Therefore, this first clause aims at establishing an ideological hierarchy between a seemingly real femininity and a

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<sup>25</sup> Trans-misogyny can be defined as a “the negative attitudes, expressed through cultural hate, individual and state violence, and discrimination directed toward trans women . . . and gender non-conforming people on the feminine end of the gender spectrum” (Kacere).

supposedly fake womanliness. Here and in the following part of the tweet, the alleged inferiority of a MtF transgender person is presented as a factual statement through the employment of the two indicatives *are* and *will menstruate/give birth* respectively in the first and second sentences, where the future tense is used to impose a predetermined identity on transgender women. More specifically, by stating that “they’ll never be able to menstruate or give birth,” the sender attempts to justify this gendered hierarchy by adducing biological reasons. Thus, the impersonator employs this biological determinism to legitimise transphobic language and the subalternity of MtF transgender people to cisgender women.

Moreover, example 6 also shows that transphobia is strongly intertwined with misogyny. This quote, in fact, demonstrates how transphobic discourse often relies on a prejudiced representation of both cisgender and transgender women, by repositing a stereotyped femininity anchored in its biological definition. Like in many other instances of sexist hate speech, women are identified with their genitalia (i.e., *vagina*), but while genital-related terms are usually employed as synecdoches in much misogynistic discourse, the noun *vagina* is here used to discursively build the dichotomy between *real* women and their supposed *mockeries*, by adducing nature and biology as the only ground on which female identity develops. Therefore, even if the tweet pretends to defend cisgender women as bearers of an allegedly superior natural femininity, in this text their gender identity derives exclusively from their capability to give birth, and this ability to procreate is reframed as the only gatekeeper to real womanliness (i.e., the *real vaginas*).

Conversely, in examples 7 and 8 the sender purports to be Roper by reproaching transgender people directly. More specifically, example 7 (i.e., “Trannies, everyone is laughing at you. You will never change your chromosomes. End your miserable existence & kill yourself now”) begins with a direct insult to the second-person plural. Here and in the remainder of the tweets, the impersonator targets both MtF and female-to-male (hereafter FtM) transgender

people,<sup>26</sup> repeatedly addressing them as *trannies*, a slur that, for its recurrences, works as the epitome of transphobic discourse.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, in example 7, the sender stages an episode of (cyber)bullying (i.e., “Trannies, everyone is laughing at you”), to increase the virtual vilification of transgender people. Subsequently, after recurring to biological elements (i.e., *chromosomes*) to deny them any possibility to fully express their gender identity, the harasser closes his tweet with two imperatives (i.e., *end* and *kill yourself*), through which he ultimately orders transgender people to commit suicide, as the only way to end their “miserable existence.”

A similar structure is used in example 8 to express a marked transphobic prejudice (i.e., “Trannies, getting surgery won’t change your gender. It will only turn you into a deformed freak. End your miserable existence. Kill yourself”). Like in the previous quote, the impersonator addresses transgender people as *trannies*, and he uses this slur to claim that they will never be able to change their gender surgically. Surgery is then defined as an operation that will only turn the patient into a *deformed freak*, a derogatory expression which reminds the “surgical mockeries of real vaginas” contained in example 6, and which is therefore used to amplify the denigration and derision of transgender people’s identity. Like in the previous example, the targets of this tweet are ultimately ordered to kill themselves, an incitement that often recurs in the cyber harassment of those belonging to historically marginalised social groups, like non-cisgender people and women.

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<sup>26</sup> The slur *trannies* is predominantly but not exclusively used to harass transgender women. As examples 7, 8, 9, and 10 do not contain other expressions hinting at trans-misogyny, I interpreted this term as referred to both MtF and FtM transgender people.

<sup>27</sup> Even if the term *tranny* probably originated within queer communities with a positive and playful connotation, it has gradually evolved into an insulting expression against transgender people (Williams). Its use in these UGCs proves its negative and derogatory connotation in much contemporary popular culture.

Finally, the last two tweets express transphobia in the form of aggressive instigation, a feature which differentiates Roper’s case from the one of Sarkeesian, where impersonation was not used to instigate the audience, either against her or against other potential targets. Conversely, here, the impersonator creates a growing tension in the texts to persuade his imaginary audience to abuse transgender people. In example 9 (i.e., “Trannies are living a delusion. You can help them escape their delusions by beating them senseless. Go out & start beating trannies now”), transgender people are defined as delusional beings that the sender suggests punishing through violent actions. Similarly, in example 10 (i.e., “Trannies are worthless subhuman cockroaches that need to be rounded up & slaughtered like cattle. Go out & start killing trannies right now”), the tweet develops through a series of insults aimed at dehumanising transgender people by denying their personhood (i.e., *worthless subhuman*) and by comparing them to obnoxious proliferating insects (i.e., *cockroaches*) and animals suitable for slaughtering (i.e., *cattle*). Because of this alleged bestial identity, the sender prescribes brutal actions against them as a form of punishment and annihilation (i.e., they “need to be rounded up & slaughtered”). Finally, the discursive climax is reached both in examples 9 and 10 when the troller addresses directly his imaginary army of followers and orders them to physically persecute the targets by hunting and killing them. This last UGC, as well as examples 6, 7, 8, and 9, appeared online as a promoted tweet, represented below in image 2 (Roper, Private Conversation):



Image 2

Promoted tweets are “ordinary tweets purchased by advertisers who want to reach a wide group of users or to spark engagement from their existing followers” (Twitter, Promoted). Like other social network companies, in fact, Twitter gives its users the possibility to sponsor specific contents to increase their online visibility. This implies that, even if Twitter policies on the prohibition of hate content extend to paid sponsored products, as I explained in Chapter 2.2, these posts appeared online and they were read by a great number of users, many of whom reported these UGCs to Twitter expressing their outrage for such overly demeaning material.<sup>28</sup> Someone even singled the target out for these transphobic messages,<sup>29</sup> a misunderstanding that was later cleared by Roper herself in a tweet, when she discovered this second episode of impersonation (Roper, Tweet 20 May 2015). Thanks to the reports of many users, Twitter promptly closed the fake account @Caitlin\_Roperr 15 minutes after these contents were published, without the need for Roper to prove the violation of her identity.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, through a newspaper article which reported the incident (Roper in Ringo), she was later able to track down the origin of this impersonation on a 4chan unmoderated forum, where an anonymous user happily claimed responsibility for this harassment (Smith), and he identified the target of this abuse as Roper. After defining her a “feminazi of the highest caliber” (Roper, Private Conversation) and a “member of multiple militant feminazi groups” (Roper, Private Conversation), he also bragged about the impersonation as follows: “in my

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<sup>28</sup> E.g., “Umm, @twitter, why on earth are you allowing this promoted tweet into my timeline?” (@ClirTomHayes); “Hey, @twitter, what the HELL is that promoted tweet? How on earth did that just appear on my TL?” (@youngvulgarian).

<sup>29</sup> E.g., “@Caitlin\_Roperr is being disrespectful, rude, and posting graphic images. pleaaaaseee report this trash.” (@tenebraetempest).

<sup>30</sup> Conversely, in the first case of impersonation she succeeded in closing the fake account only after proving her real identity with a scanned copy of her driver’s licence (Roper, Experience).

trolling, I used the name and the image of Caitlin Roper, an Ausfailian<sup>31</sup> feminazi who is involved in all sorts of censorship campaigns. She was the one who started the campaign to get GTA V banned from Ausfailia” (Anonymous 4chan). He ends his post by providing the link to Roper’s real Twitter account and by inciting other 4chan users “to harass this feminazi whore for ‘promoting transphobia’” (Anonymous 4chan). For this reason, Roper traced her harassment back to GamerGate, and she pointed out that this impersonation should be intended as a punitive backlash for her criticism of the videogame industry and especially for Collective Shout’s campaign against Grand Theft Auto V (Roper in Ringo). This element also shows a direct connection to the case of Anita Sarkeesian, and it proves the employment of multiple and cross-platform strategies to abuse women who use social networks to express their feminist stances and to fight sexism and misogyny, especially in a sphere that is still perceived as an exclusively male domain, like the game industry.

Below, I conclude this case study by discussing the expected, material, and potential impacts of this form of cyber harassment.

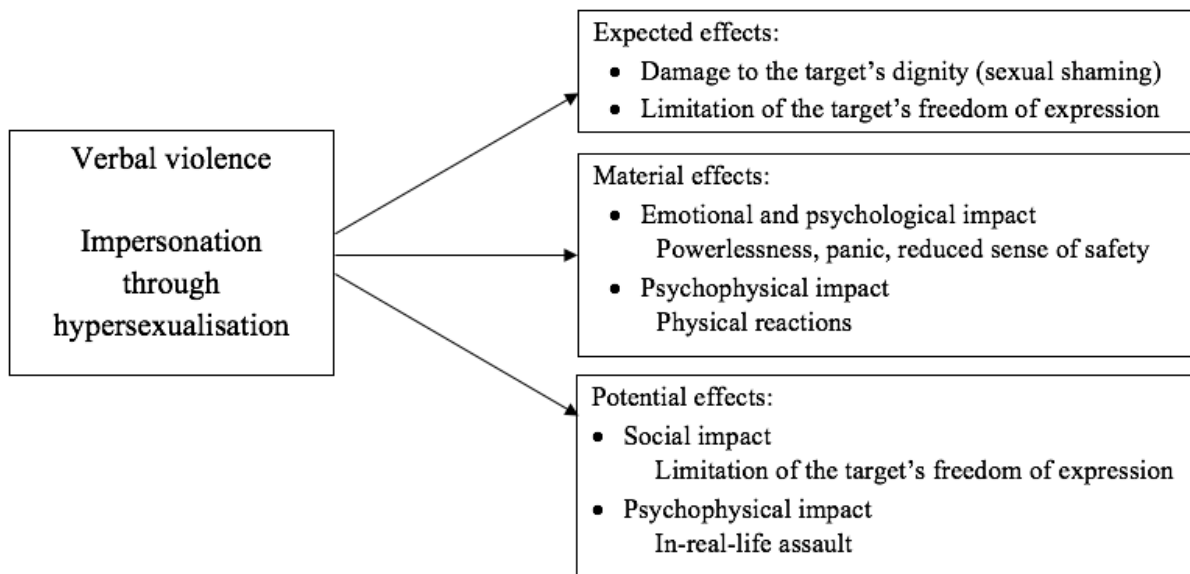
#### *Expected, Material, and Potential Effects of Impersonation*

In this last section of my analysis, I present the multiple impacts of impersonation by discussing the outcomes expected by the trollers, the material impacts that the harassment had on the target, and the potential effects that this form of online violence could have generated at individual and collective levels. As the two episodes of impersonation were based on the employment of two different types of hate speech, I present their effects separately.

The following diagram refers to the impersonation of Roper through hypersexualised misogyny, and it visually summarises its effects.

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<sup>31</sup> Here and later in the quote, *Ausfrailian* and *Ausfailia* are slang terms which originated on 4chan and which are used to refer respectively to the inhabitants and to the country of Australia in a jeering tone, not necessarily with a derogatory meaning.



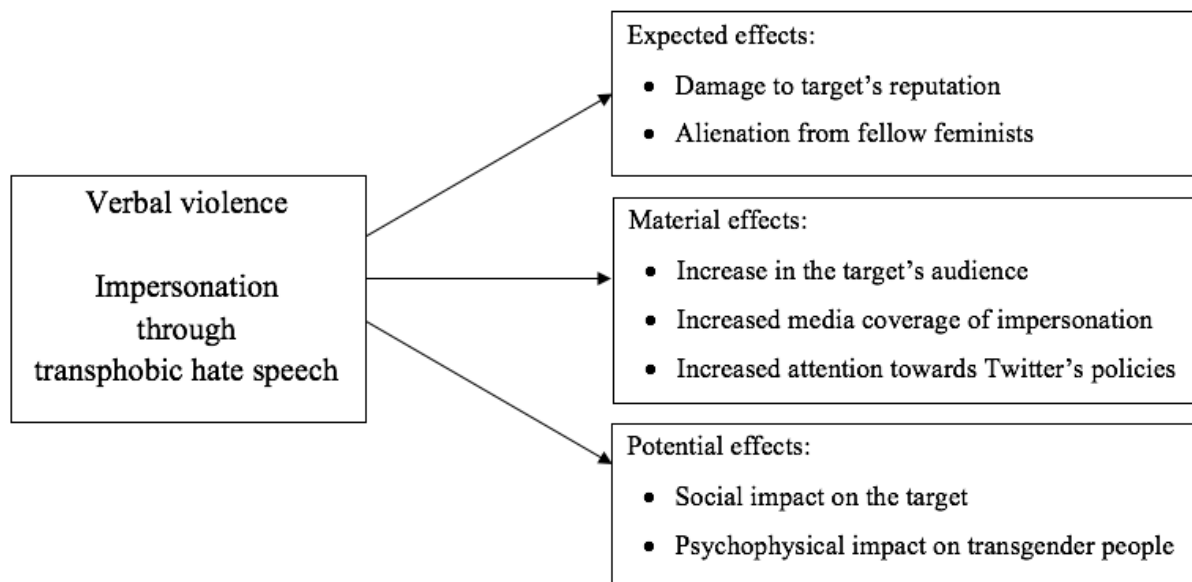
*Impact of the First Episode of Impersonation*

As mentioned in the analysis of examples 1 to 5, the harasser posted these tweets to cause a public vilification of the target through sexual shaming. As discussed, to increase this effect and to amplify the visibility of these UGCs, the impersonator mentioned Roper’s real profile and the accounts of other users. Roper defined the emotional toll of this abuse as follows: “I was gripped with panic . . . as I watched tweets going out in my name soliciting some men I knew, and others I didn’t” (Roper, Pimped). Moreover, this episode reduced her sense of safety and security (Roper, Pimped). The powerlessness she experienced during the harassment also had a psychophysical impact on her (i.e., “my hands shook and I felt physically ill as I watched tweets from ‘myself’ offering to perform sex acts for strange men on the internet, powerless to stop it” (Roper, Experience). These emotional, psychological, and physical effects were also amplified by the reaction of the police when the woman reported her experience. In fact, on several occasions (e.g., Roper, Experience; Roper, Pimped) she pointed out that law enforcement did not understand the mechanism of social networks, neither their importance for her job, suggesting her to quit Twitter, or to use “a more plain picture in [her] profile” (Roper, Pimped). These responses not only indicate the typical reaction of blaming the victim for her own abuse, but they also overlook the potential dangerous effects of this peculiar form of cyber



harassment. In fact, as sexualised impersonation aims at directing unwanted sexual attention towards the target, it can easily leak from online to offline domains. In the last decade, this tactic has proved to be very dangerous for women on several occasions, especially when coupled with doxxing, and it sometimes turned online harassment into episodes of “rape and real-world stalking” (Citron, *Hate Crimes - Introduction*),<sup>32</sup> an impact that Roper escaped probably because her private information did not leak online.

Similarly, graph 2 shows the multiple impact of the second episode of impersonation experienced by the Australian activist.



*Impact of the Second Episode of Impersonation*

The graph shows how transphobic hate speech became a discursive strategy to punish the target for her feminist activism through vilification and discredit. Here, the sender expected an immediate damage to the target’s reputation by singling her out as an alleged supporter of

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<sup>32</sup> E.g., Citron (*Hate Crimes - Introduction*) reports the case of an American woman who was raped in her home by a stranger, after her ex-partner had impersonated her on the advertisement website Craigslist, posting her pictures and address, and claiming to enjoy humiliation, physical and sexual abuse from a “real aggressive man with no concerns for women well being” (Brian).

transphobia. More specifically, the false attribution of transphobic beliefs to the target sought to cause two main social effects, namely to silence the target and to alienate her from fellow feminists, by portraying her as a TERF, i.e., a trans-exclusionary radical feminist.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, this discursive reframing of Roper's feminist identity aimed at derailing her advocacy efforts towards a discriminatory stance against transgenderism, an ideological position for which some radical feminists have been intensively criticised by transgender activists and supporters.<sup>34</sup>

As mentioned, the prompt response of many Twitter users led to the quick suspension of the fake account, and it prevented a further escalation of abuse against Roper. Consequently, this episode of harassment was reported by several newspapers (e.g., Gibbs; Sanghani; Ringo; Smith), leading to an increase of media attention towards the phenomenon of impersonation and towards Twitter's methods for screening promoted contents on its platform (see Elledge). As an additional effect, Roper declared that, despite the troller's effort to discredit her work, the impersonation eventually impacted her activism in a positive way, causing an increase in the audience of her platforms.

Nevertheless, as the journalist Allegra Ringo wrote, this episode also provided the harasser "an outlet for [his] own pent-up aggression toward trans people." Therefore, even though the troller failed to isolate and silence Roper online, the gendered hatred expressed in these tweets could have impacted transgender people, both as readers and as targets of potential transphobic attacks triggered by these UGCs.

### *Conclusion*

This analysis provides another example of the abuse that many activists experience online.

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<sup>33</sup> For a more detailed discussion on the use of *TERF* as an insult, see Cameron, Slur.

<sup>34</sup> E.g., see the online petition to stop a lecture of Germaine Greer at Cardiff University, after she declared that in her opinion sex reassignment surgery does not make a MtF transgender person a woman (see Greer in Wark). For a better understanding of transphobic discrimination within some radical feminist communities, see Jones.

More specifically, it confirms the findings already discussed in the case of Anita Sarkeesian, that is the attempt to silence feminists through several tactics, here visually summarised in the table at the beginning of this analysis. To provide a different insight on online misogyny, I decided to focus this study on impersonation, which in the case of Roper was repeated twice in time. By developing a critical analysis of five quotes for each impersonation, I demonstrated how the harassers used two forms of gender-based hate speech (i.e., misogyny and transphobia) to discredit, vilify, and silence the target on Twitter. Therefore, I concluded this case analysis by presenting a taxonomy of the expected, material, and potential results of this type of online abuse.

As I have discussed, impersonation is only one of the many ways through which women are persecuted and vilified online. In the following section I move to the analysis of the misogynistic discourse used against two famous Italian women who are particularly active on social networks, namely the pundit Selvaggia Lucarelli and the politician Laura Boldrini.



## Chapter 6. Analysis of Two Case Studies from Italy

### 6.1 Case Study no. 5: Selvaggia Lucarelli

The following sections present a critical analysis of the misogynistic hate speech received by the Italian social commentator, pundit, and blogger Selvaggia Lucarelli. The study refers to the ongoing and increasing cyber harassment towards the target on Facebook and Twitter from April 2015 until March 2017.<sup>1</sup>

#### *The Dataset*

The dataset of this case study is made up of 314 posts taken from Facebook and Twitter, as summarised in the following table:

	Public	Semi-public	Private	<b>TOT</b>
Image-based	4	23	0	27
Text-based	30	245	6	281
Group/page	4	2	0	6
<b>TOT</b>	38	270	6	<b>314</b>

The data are here classified according to the posts' content (i.e., *image-based*, *text-based*, *group/page*) and the nature of the channels where they appeared: *public* refers to the comments posted on Facebook pages and on Lucarelli's profiles, *semi-public* to those appearing on closed/secret Facebook groups, and *private* to messages sent via Facebook Messenger.

The case at issue is particularly complex for two main reasons: first, because it includes not only the digital harassment experienced by Lucarelli, but also other cases of online gendered abuse that she denounced on social networks, as I explain in the following sections. As the number of reports reaching public attention in Italy has been smaller than those in the USA and Australia, I considered this an important occasion to demonstrate the multifaceted articulation of cyber misogyny. Second, because, both the target's and the harassers'

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<sup>1</sup> See below for the reasons why I extended the timeframe for Lucarelli's case.

behaviours show some peculiarities which are useful to understand the escalation of hate speech online. For these reasons, I decided to keep monitoring the articulation of this case after November 2015, that is beyond the timeframe previously selected for my research. Nevertheless, I think this choice does not undermine the overall results of my thesis, not only because this case is quite unique in Italy, but also because a significant part of the material at issue was already present online several months before Lucarelli reported it. By including these posts in my database, I demonstrate the pervasiveness of online gender-based harassment and its many different forms on social networks within the Italian context.

In the following paragraphs, I present how the social commentator became the target of a cross-platform misogynistic hate speech. Then, I move on to analyse the type of rhetoric expressed in the posts of the dataset by identifying their discursive strategies and the tactics used against Lucarelli and other women. Finally, I focus on how users have employed different online spaces provided by social networks (especially public profiles and semi-public groups) to organise a collective mob attack against the target in order to have a much greater impact on her private life and public reputation, to push away any kind of digital surveillance from these online fora, and to keep them a suitable place for the circulation of hate speech.

First, below I present the ambivalent public reactions to Selvaggia Lucarelli, and the online hate which has progressively targeted her.

*Selvaggia Lucarelli: the “Differently [Post]Feminist” Opinion Maker*

Selvaggia Lucarelli has been a quite controversial public figure in Italian society. While many have linked her fame to the exploitation of gossip regarding other celebrities (see Messina; Scarpa), she asserts that she started her career as an actress in Italian theatres between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of 2000s (Lucarelli, Ricchi). She then became increasingly

famous thanks to her blog *Stanza Selvaggia*,<sup>2</sup> where she has been writing on different topics, such as travels, trends in Italian contemporary lifestyle, and media. At the same time, she began working as a journalist and publishing online articles which comment TV events and politics, trends in fashion, and more lately the dangerous aspects of social networking sites. Thanks to her blog and social network accounts, she has gained public attention as an opinion maker and she is currently a well-known radio presenter and a regular guest on several Italian talk shows and entertainment TV programs.

Nevertheless, her increasing fame has met with different reactions among the Italian public, which seems to polarize between strong support and explicit hate. This is visible especially when people comment on Lucarelli's opinions on feminism and gender-sensitive issues. In particular, even though she has sometimes described herself as a supporter of feminism, she has often expressed a rather controversial vision of it. For example, back in September 2013 she published a post on her Facebook profile (Lucarelli, FB post 29 September 2013) expressing her doubts on contemporary feminism, which are summed up in the post's opening sentences: "Yes to feminism, but only when it's clear and honest. No to the beatification of women."<sup>3</sup> In the remainder of the post, she sarcastically and strongly criticises several aspects of Italian contemporary feminism, like the condemnation of the stereotyped and heterosexist representation of families in commercials and the hypersexualisation of women in

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<sup>2</sup> *Stanza Selvaggia* literally means *Wild Room*. It is an ironic expression through which Lucarelli links her name Selvaggia to her sharp writing style which sometimes causes wild reactions among the public. She has also used this expression for her Twitter and YouTube accounts.

<sup>3</sup> In the source text: "femminismo sì, ma lucido e onesto. La beatificazione della donna no" (Lucarelli, Fb post 29 September 2013).

Italian TV shows.<sup>4</sup> As she explains in the following lines of the post, in her opinion contemporary feminism lacks a sound self-criticism of women's own faults in maintaining gender stereotypes and in slowing down the fulfilment of equality between women and men. She concludes wondering whether traditional feminist stances have easily translated into a fruitless demonization of men and into a dangerous sanctification of the female gender which has failed to question women's responsibilities in the maintenance of sexist and misogynistic discriminations in our society. These passages of the post show how her position reflects a very common attitude towards feminism which is defined by Rosalind Gill as the "postfeminist sensibility" (148), characterised by "the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas" (161). As Jenny Coleman notes, such muddle of opposing understandings of gender relations makes postfeminism a "slippery beast" (7) very difficult to frame from a theoretical perspective. I consider Lucarelli's post a good example of the complex nature of postfeminist discourse, which takes feminism into consideration ("yes to feminism") but at the same time rejects it ("but only when it's clear and honest. No to the beatification of women"), on the ground of misinterpretations of feminism itself – i.e., in the text at issue, the confusion between the defence of women's rights and an alleged sanctification of women. These misconceptions of feminist stances are particularly popular in contemporary societies, as shown by the reactions of many Facebook users to this post. In fact, many shared Lucarelli's point of view and saluted her as one of the few public women able to unmask the real biased and self-righteous nature of traditional feminism: 4600 users liked the post, more than 1700 shared it and many of the 519 comments congratulated Lucarelli on her intelligence, honesty, and

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<sup>4</sup> One of the most famous public disapprovals of the Italian advertising industry is a speech by the President of the Chamber Laura Boldrini a few days before Lucarelli's post (Boldrini, Pubblicità), while the most popular analysis of sexism in Italian TV shows is the documentary *Il corpo delle donne* (i.e., *Women's Bodies*), by the media critic Lorella Zanardo.



analytical skills.<sup>5</sup> While only a few note the inaccurate use of the term *feminism* and the deceptive confusion with the beatification of women, some posts confirm Lucarelli's misinterpretation of feminism.<sup>6</sup>

Even though in this case users' comments do not include sexist and sexualised hate speech, they prove the enthusiasm expressed by many to support Lucarelli as a sort of modern heroine against the much-hated radical feminism, which is commonly understood as something "harsh, punitive, and inauthentic" (Gill 161-162), a concept often used in misogynistic discourse to attack feminist activists as man-haters and defenders of a shady political agenda. My case here is that this strong support for the social commentator was mostly based on the unifying intolerance against more traditional forms of feminism, and that much of this encouragement got easily lost as soon as she started focusing on contemporary forms of misogyny, thus affirming a sounder gender-oriented perspective to the detriment of her previous postfeminist positions. Therefore, I suggest that the focus on the postfeminist nature of this post serves the analysis at issue because it is extensively shared nowadays both in Italy and in other Western societies, working as a divide in the achievement of public approval.<sup>7</sup> As the study of Lucarelli's case demonstrates, such postfeminist ideas granted her the support of many people, who cheerfully welcomed her opinionated style against radical feminism.

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<sup>5</sup> In particular, different users defined her "differently feminist" ("diversamente femminista"), "a refined thinker" ("fine pensatrice"), "an intelligent and modern woman" ("donna intelligente e moderna"), and described her viewpoints on contemporary feminism as "a shrewd critical analysis" ("acuta analisi critica") permeated by "truth and womanliness" ("verità e donnità"). All comments available in Lucarelli, Fb post 29 September 2013.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., "I can't stand Feminism or Chauvinism" ("Non sopporto il Femminismo e il Maschilismo"). Comment available in Lucarelli, Fb post 29 September 2013.

<sup>7</sup> See for example the recent declarations of Kellyanne Conway, the current White House counsellor to US President Donald Trump, who claimed that she would not define herself a feminist in a classical sense (i.e., radical feminist) because the term itself "seems to be very anti-male" (Wagner).

Conversely, as she moved towards ideas which challenge the hegemonic patriarchal ideology, she became the target of a massive misogynistic abuse on SNSs, as I discuss below.

### *Raising Awareness on Online Misogynistic Abuse*

As mentioned, Selvaggia Lucarelli started to denounce instances of misogynous harassment on social networks in mid 2015, when she began talking about the mechanisms of the Web and its potential negative effects in TV interviews (Lucarelli, Ignorare) and in social network posts aimed at showing the misogyny which often targets women online (Lucarelli, Tweet 2 July 2015). In particular, she started posting on her Facebook and Twitter accounts several screenshots which expressed gendered attacks against herself on different social networks' channels. In these sources, she reported comments which described her as "A HUGE SLUT WHO HAS NO REASON TO EXIST" ("LA LUCARELLI È UNA GRANDISSIMA BAGASCIA SENZA MOTIVO DI ESISTERE" in Lucarelli, FB post 3 October 2016), and which included possible ways to torture and kill her, like "I will unscrew her skull and I'll shit in her throat" ("Le svito il cranio e le cago in gola" in Lucarelli, FB post 3 October 2016). Her screenshots also denounced some online spaces that had been created to attack and discredit her by comparing her to a sex object, like the Facebook page *Selvaggia Lucarelli erotic doll for ISIS (Selvaggia Lucarelli pupazzo erotico per l'ISIS)*, aimed at depicting her as an object for the sexual pleasure of the fundamentalist military group ISIS, particularly renowned for its use of violence and rape against women as a war weapon.

These UGCs evoke the discourse of other messages directly sent to the target in other occasions and characterised by a marked hypersexualisation. In this material, Lucarelli was often described as a despicable person, like "a nobody, relevant only for her boobs" ("una nullità, escluse le tette" in Lucarelli, Tweet 23 July 2015), a "fucking whoooooore" ("putanaaaaaa di merda" in Lucarelli, Tweet 9 March 2015), and as someone who "clearly gained popularity giving blowjobs" ("popolarità palesemente comprata a suon di pompini" in

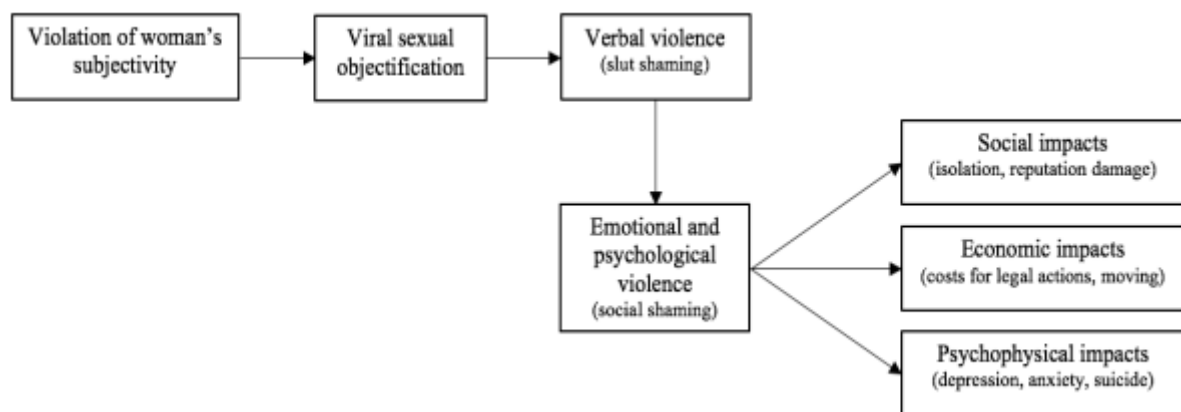
Lucarelli, Tweet 31 March 2016). While reporting this material, the social commentator started to speak up against several structural problems of social networks, like Facebook's lack of control over its users' behaviours and its inefficiency in applying policies against hate speech, an issue which had already caused severe consequences on women's lives (Lucarelli, FB post 7 November 2016). In Italy, the most well-known example of these problems is the suicide of Tiziana Cantone, a woman who killed herself in 2016 after becoming the victim of a massive image-based sexual abuse (see Nelson; J. Reynolds). As Cantone's case was attracting a significant media coverage both in Italy and abroad, Selvaggia Lucarelli decided to use it as a way to raise awareness on gendered cyber harassment.

#### *Misogyny in Image-Based Sexual Abuse*

Indeed, the tragic death of Tiziana Cantone is sadly important to understand both the effects of this form of online misogyny, and its link to the escalation of abuse experienced by Selvaggia Lucarelli. The suicide of Cantone was the ultimate consequence of the harassment and bullying the woman had to face in the last years of her life after some intimate videos of her became incredibly popular in the Italian virtual environment, turning her into a sort of YouTube celebrity against her will. Unfortunately, people's confusion between her uninhibited behaviour and the desire to go viral (J. Reynolds) caused the spread of the videos which reached almost a million views. Her images became so popular that some of the words she pronounced in the video (i.e., "Stai facendo il video? Bravo" meaning "You're filming? Bravo") were turned into a derisive catchphrase and even got printed on items such as t-shirts and smartphone cases. After a draining legal struggle, the woman won case to have the videos removed from search engines and social networks, but they kept reappearing and circulating online, causing a sense of isolation, loneliness, emotional distress, anxiety, and depression in the victim (Bufi and Sarzanini). In the attempt to overcome such humiliation and to gain back some privacy, Tiziana Cantone tried to change her name and moved to another Italian region. As this

widespread taunting kept persecuting her, after being ordered to pay €20,000 for the costs of removing the images from the Web, she hanged herself with a scarf, finding in suicide the only solution to end this abuse.

Cantone’s case demonstrates the seriousness of image-based sexual abuse, which, like any other forms of online misogyny, generates from strong gendered discrimination. In cases like hers, vicious gender-based prejudices are the ideological ground on which harassers keep abusing a targeted woman, affecting her life in several ways. The causality between these multiple effects shows how online misogyny works, as it is summed up in the following chart that I developed by applying my general taxonomy of the effects of online misogyny to the case of Cantone:



*Development and Effects of Cantone’s Image-Based Sexual Abuse*

The application of my taxonomy to the case of Tiziana Cantone shows the multiple levels on which misogynistic hate speech affected the life of this target. In fact, not only she saw her reputation damaged and became isolated both online and offline, but she also had to face severe economic consequences, as explained above. Moreover, online abuse also had a strong psychophysical impact on the target, causing her several psychological problems and eventually her suicide. As the image shows, misogyny is the leitmotiv linking the origin of this harassment and its different outcomes. Such forms of violence are usually sustained through a misogynistic discourse which outlives the victim. In fact, as it often happens for this form of

harassment, the victim's suicide did not put an end to the violence she experienced. In the case at issue, for example, contents expressing a strong denigration kept appearing online after Cantone's suicide, like the following one:



*Image 1*

This screenshot was published on a Facebook group and its caption reads “FOUR THINGS THAT ARE GOOD EVEN WHEN THEY ARE COLD.”<sup>8</sup> This UGC brings back the strong sexist objectification of Cantone, by comparing her picture to images of food and by stating that they are both enjoyable even when they are cold, with a clear reference to the woman's dead body.

As mentioned, in the aftermath of Cantone's death, Selvaggia Lucarelli denounced the insensitive violence of this sort of comments against the young woman, including the one posted by a male user, Antonio Leaf Foglia, on his public Facebook profile. This content appears below in a repost of Lucarelli (available in Lucarelli, FB post 14 September 2016):

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<sup>8</sup> Image originally appeared on the Facebook group #InTrashWeTrust, but later removed.



Image 2

The abusive comment of Antonio Leaf Foglia expressed a strong misogynistic prejudice and perpetuated the vilification of Cantone after her death, by stating: “did you like being a whore? Now you have nothing else left than hanging from a scarf... you’re filming?!?!? Brava..... hahahahhah I hope that starting tomorrow all women like her will end in the same way!!! All hanging from a scarf!!! 🌐” The text of this post, thus, shows not only a strong lack of sorrow and sympathy for the tragic end of Cantone, but also a sense of satisfaction for her suicide and the wish that many other women will end up in a similar way. Here, the violent misogynistic meaning is expressed through a derisive tone which in the first two sentences tries to create a jeering rhyme (i.e., the two infinite forms *guardare* and *penzolare* in the source text) aimed at ascribing Cantone’s death to the alleged enjoyment she felt in being publicly watched during sex. The same tone is conveyed by the repetition of exclamation marks and by the final winking emoji. Foglia’s post also revokes the above-quoted phrase of Cantone’s video by applying it to the woman’s suicide,<sup>9</sup> and it ends with the commenter’s wish that all women like her will

<sup>9</sup> As mentioned, Cantone’s popular sentence was “You’re filming? Bravo” (“Stai facendo il video? Bravo”). Here it is metaphorically readdressed to the victim through the emphatic and mocking sentence “you’re filming?!?!? Brava” (“stai facendo il video?!?!? Brava”).

eventually kill themselves, i.e., “all hanging from a scarf.” These discursive strategies show a strong misogynistic view which is clear from the comparison of any victim of this kind of abuse to an attention-seeking *whore* who purposely uses sex to gain public attention, and thus only deserves to get killed by her own lust.

For this reason, Selvaggia Lucarelli decided to publicly shame Foglia for his post. As image 2 shows, she reposted his message by addressing him directly with the following sentences: “Dear Antonio Leaf Foglia, as you are enjoying the death of a girl (actually, a whore as you repeatedly define her in your comments), and as you are a musician at the Salerno Symphony Orchestra I guess you won’t mind some popularity, so there you go. I give you a day as ‘Tiziana Cantone’. See for yourself what it feels to be treated like shit and like everyone’s joke on the Web for a day. Are you posting? Bravo! PS I hope Tiziana’s family will report him.”<sup>10</sup> As my translation shows, in this post the pundit not only decided to defend Tiziana’s legacy, but she also took the opportunity to condemn the act of slut-shaming women and of using online platforms to victimise them, because, as she wrote in a following post, “on the Web everything remains” (“sul web tutto resta” in Lucarelli, FB post 14 September 2016).

But Lucarelli did not limit her report activity to the case at issue: in fact, she also started to denounce those social network fora on which many women were targeted through highly graphic and hypersexualised discourse. In particular, she focused her attention on some closed Facebook groups (i.e., *Cagne in Calore*, *Sesso Droga e Pastorizia*, and *Pastorizia Never Dies*) aimed at sharing images of women without their knowledge with the intent to slut shame them. As Lucarelli revealed, on these groups thousands of users posted images and videos of women they knew – sometimes their own partners – and freely discussed their physical appearance, assessing their degree of *sluttiness*, and providing graphic descriptions of rape fantasies, and

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<sup>10</sup> Here Lucarelli addresses Foglia with Cantone’s notorious sentence, and “stai facendo il video? Bravo!” (“are you filming? Bravo!”) becomes “stai facendo il post? Bravo!” (“are you posting? Bravo!”).

instances of virtual rape.

Sometimes the groups were also used to spread links to the so-called *Bibbia 3.0* (i.e., Bible 3.0), a user-generated online database of sexually explicit material in which many women – especially young girls below the age of consent – and their personal information were exposed unknowingly to a potentially infinite audience (Drogo). Far from being an Italian phenomenon, this form of collective image-based sexual abuse seems to be a global trend and it has lately gained international media coverage in many Western countries.<sup>11</sup> What differentiates the Italian context is the existence of secret Facebook groups where men also share images of women and girls unknowingly depicted in their everyday life, like eating at the restaurant, walking down the street, or doing their shopping, which the harassers publish online with the targets' personal information, asking for support in commenting the women's *rape-ability* or in abusing them. Even if these types of photos are not always sexually explicit, this material is usually commented with sexist slurs, insults, rape threats, and slut shaming, thus demonstrating how this graphic, explicitly misogynistic language can have a more pornographic and violent effect than images themselves.

All the different facets of this phenomenon show many features of misogynistic ideologies, practices, and discourse in online communication (i.e., the objectification of women through a denial of their privacy, autonomy, self-determination, freedom over their bodies and sexuality, along with a marked hypersexualisation, and the repercussions on women's real live). In Italy this pervasive trend was discovered thanks to the reports of several journalists

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<sup>11</sup> Among the most famous cases of collective image-based sexual abuse on Facebook, there are the secret groups *Blokes Advice* and *Babylone 2.0*. The former was active in Australia and counted more than 200,000 users (Carlton) while the latter was a Belgian Facebook group of 52,000 users (Sclaunich, Segreto). They were both used to share the intimate images of women who were doxxed and publicly slut shamed with misogynistic insults without their knowledge.



and bloggers (see Drogo; Di Fazio; Sclaunich, Gruppi; Il Maschio Beta), and gained increasing attention among social network users also thanks to the work of Selvaggia Lucarelli. While many have supported the social commentator for speaking out on the circulation of such material, this strategy also exponentially fuelled digital forms of misogynistic harassment against her. As Lucarelli stated, she had tried many times to report both these groups and the digital hate against herself to Facebook, and the company had always informed her that they did not violate any of its Community Standards (FB post 27 September 2016; FB post 7 November 2016). For this reason, she decided to intervene by publicly shaming the authors of these comments, as she did with the man who insulted Cantone.

As she explained in a post published in the aftermath of Cantone's death (Lucarelli, FB post 15 September 2016), while many blame her for pillorying the haters, she considers this a legitimate and necessary action for two reasons. First, because the lack of action from the corporation has translated into a defence of the harassers to the detriment of female targets, second because SNSs' attitude makes it possible for users to remain unpunished and to create cyber mobs who enjoy bombing targets' online accounts with daily slurs, insults, rape threats, death wishes, and misogynistic memes, and thus ruining someone's life, like the case of Tiziana Cantone shows. For these reasons, she chose a rough tactic with no compassion for the harassers (Lucarelli, FB post 15 September 2016) by publicly exposing them, to make them experience the real consequences of brutality 2.0 and to teach them the weight of online accountability. The decision to take the law into their own hands is one of the ways through which many targets of hate speech have been trying to tackle online abuse; as this tactic alludes to the self-entitled job of a vigilante, it is usually referred to as digilantism (Jane, Digilantism 287). Lucarelli's digilante response to online misogyny has translated into two main results: on the one hand, she showed the real nature of this harassment and Facebook's problems in applying its own policies on hate speech. On the other, it has raised doubts about the ethics of

such behaviour. In the following sections I examine these two issues, first by analysing the content of the above-mentioned Italian groups and the escalating hate against Lucarelli, and finally by explaining the problematic aspects and potential pitfalls of digilantism.

#### *Facebook Pages and Closed Groups as Aggregators of Misogyny*

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Lucarelli's vigilantism had the effect of unmasking the real nature of much hate which nowadays circulate on social networks, in particular on Facebook secret and closed groups. According to Facebook privacy settings, the material of these fora is only visible to their members. Moreover, people cannot join these groups without the approval of someone who is already a member of them, and the name of secret groups appears only to their members in Facebook search engine (Facebook, Settings). Probably thanks to these settings, many of these groups were turned into aggregators of UGCs characterised by gender-based hate speech, without being detected.

In the case at issue, the groups reported by Selvaggia Lucarelli (i.e., *Sesso Droga e Pastorizia*, *Pastorizia Never Dies*, *Welcome to Favelas*, *Cagne in Calore*, *Il Canile 2*) show the pervasiveness and the brutality of misogynistic discourse in text- and image-based contents which humiliate women on the base of gender stereotypes and discrimination. Such texts usually express not only misogyny, but a mixture of homophobic, transphobic, and racist speech, which discursively reaffirm each other through violent linguistic expressions and graphic images.

Because of the strict rules to access these types of groups, Lucarelli's public reports on her Facebook and Twitter accounts were an important source of material. Considering the great number of contents posted on these platforms, I decided to divide the material at issue into four subgroups that exemplify different shades of gendered hatred, namely: generalised gender-based violence against women, paedophilia targeting young girls, image-based sexual abuse, and misogyny against famous women. Even though the subgroups show some similarities in

their misogynistic messages and the meaning of their contents often overlaps, I consider this classification useful to provide a more systematic analysis.

The subset of UGCs expressing gender-based violence against women includes almost entirely memes and image macros where the connection between images and written text is used to recreate a tone which many users consider expression of black humour but which are proofs of the misogynistic discourse present on these fora. They often joke on rape and domestic violence, as the following images demonstrate:



Image 3



Image4

These two posts appeared on the Facebook closed group *Pastorizia Never Dies* and they exemplify the use of this kind of platforms to share contents which degrade women. Image 3 (available in Lucarelli, Tweet 22 March 2017)<sup>12</sup> portrays a woman who is naked and tied up

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<sup>12</sup> Here and below (i.e., images 5, 9, and 13) I provide references taken from Twitter, because Lucarelli published these images on both Facebook and Twitter. However, the upper parts of the screenshots demonstrate that these images were originally published on the Facebook group *Pastorizia Never Dies*.

for refusing an allegedly kind request of anal sex,<sup>13</sup> a picture which seems to legitimise rape and sustain victim blaming discourse. In image 4 (available in Lucarelli, FB post 8 March 2017) male strength is associated to the action of beating several women (i.e., “IF YOU HIT A WOMAN... YOU ARE NOT STRONG... TO BE STRONG YOU NEED TO BEAT AT LEAST 3 OF THEM”) by recreating assonance with the typical slogans of antiviolence campaigns aimed at distinguishing masculinity from the perpetration of physical violence. Similarly, the image below jokes on domestic violence:



Image 5

In image 5 (available in Lucarelli, Tweet 25 November 2016), a caption informs the readers that “THERE ARE TWO TYPES OF WOMEN: THOSE WHO MAKE FOOD FOR YOU WHEN YOU’RE BACK FROM WORK, AND THE ABSENT-MINDED WHO KEEP FALLING DOWN THE STAIRS.” The presence of a girl with bruised eyes seems for refer to the second category of women, and it thus consists in a visual justification of domestic violence against women who do not respect a typical *topos* of misogynistic ideology (i.e., that women’s

<sup>13</sup> I.e., “WHEN YOU KINDLY ASK HER TO HAVE ANAL SEX AND SHE REPLIES ‘NO.’”

place is in the private sphere of the household). As the screenshot shows, image 5 received 4500 likes, thus demonstrating that once shared online this image became very popular. For this reason the image at issue can be considered a meme.<sup>14</sup> It must also be noticed that sometimes female users become accomplices to this mechanism by publishing materials which play on violent sexist stereotypes to gain general approval in an environment permeated by patriarchal and misogynistic beliefs which they have internalised. The following screenshots show how such internalisation of misogyny works:



Image 6



Image 7

Images 6 and 7 (both available in Lucarelli, FB post 8 March 2017) were posted from accounts that appear to belong to women, as they use credible female names and profile pictures. While the former states that “ALL WOMEN ARE SLUTS” (“LE DONNE SONO TUTTE TROIE”), the latter shows the picture of a woman bleeding and probably unconscious. Near this photo, a supposedly ironic text plays on the double meaning of *festa* (i.e., *celebration*) and *fare la festa* (i.e., *to abuse or to kill someone*). Therefore, the caption seems to imply that a traditional Italian

<sup>14</sup> See Chapter 3 for the difference between memes and image macros.

man celebrates his woman everyday by hitting her (“WHEN YOU FIND OUT THAT TODAY IS WOMEN’S DAY, BUT YOU ARE CALABRIAN AND YOU CELEBRATE – i.e., hit – YOUR WOMAN EVERY DAY OF THE YEAR BEFORE AND AFTER MEALS”). As these examples demonstrate, such contents tend to connect wordplays based on overt misogynistic beliefs and violent or sexualised pictures to cause alleged ironic reactions and thus reaffirm the same gender power asymmetries through which many women are daily abused. Moreover, these portrayals of female bodies always show all the aspects that characterise the objectification of women according to the feminist philosophers Martha Nussbaum (Objectification) and Rae Langton (Sexual Solipsism), namely: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, denial of subjectivity, reduction to body, reduction to appearance, and silencing.

A similar objectification of women is visible in those contents referring to the sexual abuse of minors. In these contents, the human personhood of children and young girls is denied especially through the ideological assumption of violability, which occurs when “the objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into” (Nussbaum), as shown below in images 8 and 9:



*Image 8*



*Image 9*

Both pictures display a multimodal blend of paedophilia and misogynistic hate speech in their textual and visual elements. The text of image 8 (available in Lucarelli, FB post 17 February

2017 - 1) expresses an alleged humorous joke on the violation of young girls' sexual organs (i.e., "when they are so small, that you can replace their pelvis with just one tunnel between their arse and cunt"). Similarly, in image 9 (available in Lucarelli, Tweet 28 February 2017) the caption reads "THE AMAZING FEELING YOU HAVE WHEN YOU ARE 35 AND SHE IS 14 YEAR OLD." The post also shows a cartoon frame where the superhero Hulk impersonates a 35 year old man performing a sexual act on a small truck which represents a 14 year old girl. Here the female body is overtly objectified by replacing a young woman with an object. Moreover, the positioning of the two figures – i.e., the dominant position of the male character penetrating the truck/girl – increases the violence of the act, expressed also through the caption of this meme that employs a satisfied tone to communicate the feeling of excitement and pleasure an adult man allegedly has while abusing a minor. From a CDA perspective, this picture appears as the archetype of misogynistic discourse 2.0: it uses a seemingly innocuous medium (i.e., the cartoon) to convey a violent meaning (i.e., the abuse of a child), which is usually justified as a legitimate expression of alleged black humour, therefore with no social and political relevance. This ideological misconception results in the depoliticisation of rape speech, and it responds to one of the humour ideologies identified by Elise Kramer, according to which many Internet users defend rape humour claiming that "laughing at a joke about X is not the same thing as laughing at X, because the narrated event is dislocatable from the narrating event" (Kramer 153).

Regardless of the reliance on humour, a similar objectification of women also appears in some contents that Selvaggia Lucarelli provided to show how closed groups often become suitable spaces to shame women through the tactics of image-based sexual abuse and doxxing. These UGCs usually appear in the form of Facebook written posts in the just-mentioned platforms. In one of these messages, for instance, a man explains to other users that his ex-partner got pregnant from a black man, and this utterance generates a rapid sequence of

comments in which fellow users – mostly but not exclusively men – eagerly ask for the woman’s name and similar personal information. They comment the event with posts like the following ones (both available in Lucarelli, FB post 19 January 2017): “Take a deep breath and give her name to your brothers, they will take care of everything” (“Respira profondo e dai il nome ai tuoi fratelli che ci pensano loro”), or “if you dox her here she is ruined ahahah (do it)” [“Se dai il contatto qui è rovinata ahahah (Fallo)”]. Moreover, many of the posts at issue contain a mingle of misogynistic and racist slurs.<sup>15</sup> This act of shaming and doxxing women is often required in some groups’ rules in order not to be banned, like in the regulation of one of the closed groups reported by Lucarelli (FB post 16 January 2017) users are required to always provide the girls’ names, in order not to be banned from the forum.

Whether this mechanism directly translated into physical harassment or not, it shows strong gendered hatred which is evident also in the fourth category of sexist hate speech that I identified on these platforms, namely misogyny against famous women. Once again, here, Lucarelli provides important examples of this type of material by screenshotting some posts originally published by Raffaele Sollecito, the Italian man accused and then absolved of the murder of Meredith Kercher, along with the American woman Amanda Knox, who at that time was his girlfriend.<sup>16</sup> Despite the fact that the killing of Kercher had a huge resonance both in Italy and abroad, these posts show how Sollecito and other users joke on Kercher’s death and

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<sup>15</sup> E.g., “give us the name of dis filthy whore” (“Dacce il nome de sta lurida puttana”), “she smells like a nigger too, and she will create a shitty male/female caramel!” (“Puzza di negro anche lei, ed è pronta una merda maschio/femmina caramello!”), and “better to make her disappear before she gives birth to another nigger” (“Meglio farla sparire prima che nasca un altro negro”). All comments available in Lucarelli, FB post 19 January 2017).

<sup>16</sup> In 2007, Knox and Sollecito were accused of the murder of Meredith Kercher, Knox’s English flatmate. They both spent almost four years in Italian prison. After a long trial, the Italian Court of Cassation declared them innocent and found the Ivorian Rudy Guede guilty of the murder of Kercher.



on the crime of femicide. These UGCs resonate with the intertwine of misogynistic and racist hate speech presented in an alleged humorous tone, like in images 10:



Image 10

This screenshot (available in Lucarelli, FB post 19 January 2017) presents two posts where the girl's murder is derided. In the first one, a comment contains an image macro where a picture of Kercher appears with the caption “QUANDO LEI NON RISPONDE AI MESSAGGI E ALLORA LE MANDI UN SOLLECITO.” Here, the post plays on the double meaning of the word *SOLLECITO*, which can be understood either as a proper noun (i.e., the surname of the Italian man) or as a common noun which means *reminder*. The use of capital letters makes it impossible to understand whether *SOLLECITO* is to be understood as a proper of common noun. Hence, the sentence is to be interpreted as the simultaneous expression of “WHEN SHE DOESN'T REPLY TO YOUR TEXTS AND YOU SEND HER A SOLLECITO” and “WHEN SHE DOESN'T REPLY TO YOUR TEXTS AND YOU SEND HER A REMINDER.” My case here is that the person of Sollecito is charged with a linguistic and cultural specific feature which derives from the etymology of his surname and from the previous legal allegations

against him. Therefore, he is here presented simultaneously as an intimidating reminder (that a boy can deploy to force a girl to answer his texts) and as a hit man (that a boy can hire to kill the woman at issue). In the same screenshot, another user comments “MEREDITH, MEREDITH IS DEAD, MEREDITH IS DEAD, AND SHE CAN’T FUCK ANY LONGER (WITH NIGGERS),”<sup>17</sup> with reference to the man who was eventually charged for her killing, the Ivorian Rudy Guede. This allusion not only shows the use of a racist slur but it also belittles the tragedy of Kercher’s murder as an event preventing her to have sex with black men, and in so doing, it implies an alleged sexual promiscuity of the victim. The derogatory nature of racist and misogynistic discourses is also visible in other posts, like the two screenshots below (both available in Lucarelli, FB post 19 January 2017):



*Image 11*

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<sup>17</sup> Source text in the screenshot (i.e., “MEREDITH, MEREDITH È MORTA, È MORTA MEREDITH, NON TROMBA PIÙ (COI N&GRI).”



Image 12

In image 11, Knox appears with a sign reading “IT WAS THE NIGGER” (“È STATO IL NEGRO”), a content that Sollecito himself appreciated,<sup>18</sup> and that another user commented by discussing the allegedly experienced sexual performances of Knox.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in image 12, pictures of Guede, Knox, and Sollecito appear with the writings “THE NIGGER IN PRISON” (“IL NEGRO DENTRO”) and “THE WHITES OUT FREE!” (“I BIANCHI FUORI!”). Once again, the use of the racist slur *nigger* (i.e., *negro*) is used to reaffirm a white supremacist ideology which justifies the strenuous defence of Sollecito and Know and the racist demonisation of Guede.

It is worth mentioning here that, when Lucarelli publicly reposted these contents, Sollecito defended himself in an interview by saying that there was nothing serious nor violent

<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, Sollecito decided to express his amusement through three racially-charged emojis (i.e., three black thumbs up) which clearly refer to Guede and which thus intentionally reaffirm these users’ racist prejudice.

<sup>19</sup> I.e., “By the way Knox must have been extremely good in ‘anal to mouth’” (“Comunque la Knox doveva essere una che faceva ‘anal to mouth’ con una professionalità imbarazzante”).

in these Facebook posts, and that they were just irreverent and cheerful contents (Sclaunich, Sollecito). While Sollecito's self-defence confirms his careless attitude towards Meredith's death, the images above analysed, prove the strong objectification which characterises the sexist hate speech of many UGCs. This phenomenon does not seem to diminish when it is publicly denounced. Conversely, when a woman decides to speak out about such derogatory discourse, she usually experiences an amplification of the harassment. The same escalation of abuse was experienced by Lucarelli after reporting the different types of misogynistic speech that I have analysed in the previous paragraphs. Therefore, the following section of this study explains the creation of a massive online abuse which targeted the social commentator.

#### *Mob Attacks Vs. Lucarelli*

As mentioned, after denouncing the above-analysed material through her Facebook and Twitter accounts, Lucarelli registered a strong increase in the misogynistic attacks against her from a well-organised mob of cybernauts who virtually inhabited the groups she had reported. In particular, as she affirmed in some Facebook posts (FB post 27 September 2016; FB post 9 March 2017), she became the target of a widespread gendered hatred intended to victimise her after her firm disapproval of *Sesso Droga e Pastorizia*, a Facebook page which counted more than one and a half million users and which Lucarelli defined an aggregator of public shaming, misogyny, cyberbullying, image-based sexual abuse, and obscenity (Turrini). Indeed, the group already hosted some contents expressing a strong adversity towards her through graphic misogynistic rhetoric. In these materials, which circulated on the above-mentioned page and on similar groups, many users expressed their rape fantasies and discussed whether Lucarelli deserved to be raped and killed or whether she was too despicable even to deserve their sexual attention. Many contents came in the form of pictures of the target with derogatory captions, like the following images show:



Image 13



Image 14

While image 13 (available in Lucarelli, Tweet 10 March 2017) mentions the possibility and wish to rape her (i.e., “IF RAPE WOULD BE LEGAL JUST FOR ONE DAY”),<sup>20</sup> picture 14 (available in Lucarelli, Tweet 29 September 2016) contains an image macro that seeks to downplay Lucarelli’s journalistic aspiration by playing on the assonance of the words *Bocconi* (i.e., a prestigious Italian private university) and *bocchini* (i.e., Italian for *blowjobs*), and thus comparing her to a prostitute (“WHEN AS A CHILD YOU WANTED TO BECOME A JOURNALIST AND YOU WERE ALREADY CONSIDERING WHICH UNIVERSITY YOU WOULD ATTEND BUT YOU CONFUSED BOCCONI WITH BLOWJOBS”).

In the same period these posts were published, Lucarelli was harassed online through several tactics: her Wikipedia page was hacked and vandalised, her Facebook profile and Messenger were flooded with hypersexualised misogynistic slurs, rape and death threats, and a Facebook poll was created to assess the best way to kill her (Lucarelli, FB post 17 January 2017 - 2). Moreover, many haters extended most of this vicious attack to Lucarelli’s young son Leon, by publishing links to his social media profiles (see image 15 below), pictures and image

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<sup>20</sup> Here I intentionally used the conditional to translate the same grammatical error present in the source text (i.e., *SAREBBE*).



macros expressing gender-based insults and name-calling directed both at him and his mother:



Image 15



Image 16



Image 17

The verbal harassment shown in these three screenshots (all available in Lucarelli, FB post 17 January 2017 - 2) ranges from the use of name-calls like *SLUT/ HISTERICAL LITTLE TART* (*PUTTANA/PUTTANELLA ISTERICA* in images 15 and 16) and the rhetorical question “male, woman or dog?” (“maschio, donna o cane?” in image 17), that compares the young boy to an

animal and to a woman, allegedly because of his long hair. Thus, images 15, 16, and 17 expose the overlap of different types of gendered prejudice (i.e., misogyny, transphobia, and homophobia) which target someone who attempts to question gender-based stereotypes, i.e., in this case a woman who speaks out publicly on abuse and a boy who chooses a haircut typically associated with a stereotyped female style. The images also demonstrate that this kind of derogatory discourse is considered the most suitable and effective way to denigrate and humiliate anyone, regardless of the person's gender identity, sexual orientation, and age.

Along with the above-discussed instances of hate speech, Lucarelli also reported the graphic and derogatory language expressed in these images. After months of unsuccessful attempts from the pundit, *Sesso Droga e Pastorizia* was eventually shut down in March 2017. The social commentator saluted with satisfaction the news but noted that the misogyny which previously circulated on this forum leaked into other Facebook pages and groups, resulting in the creation of a wider cybermob which discussed the best way to make her pay for interfering with their original digital meeting place. Once again, she provided several screenshots which demonstrate how users attempted to organise a mob attack against her. In the material she posted many users – mainly but not exclusively men – discussed the best way to attack and abuse her, sometimes with death wishes and threats.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> E.g., “can I ask a friend of mine to mess up with her computer?” (“E se chiedessi ad un amico di farle dei casini tramite pc?”), “IF YOU COULD SLIT SOMEONE’S THROAT RIGHT NOW, WHO WHOULD THAT BE? AND WHY WOULD YOU CHOOSE SELVAGGIA LUCARELLI?” (“SE POTESSI SGOZZARE QUALCUNO ALL’ISTANTE, CHI SAREBBE? E PERCHÈ PROPRIO SELVAGGIA LUCARELLI?”), “we are 200,000 users here,5 euros each and let’s hire a killer” (“Siamo 200.000 qua dentro,5€ a testa e assoldiamo un killer”), “Does anyone know where she lives so we can go and pay her a visit?” (“Qualcuno che sa dove abita che gli facciamo una visita?”), “When she dies (let’s hope from a tumour in 3 months) I will go and piss over the grave of this delusional moron” [“Quando morirà (speriamo in un tumore da 3 mesi di vita e via) gli andrò a pisciare sulla tomba a sta povera mentecatta”], and “dis ugly slut.. please someone break her clitoris so she can’t

This collective practise is known in Internet slang as *gorestorm*, *shitstorm*, or *online firestorm*, and it consists in a massive deployment of verbally aggressive and graphic crowd-sourced anger which can cross multiple online platforms and is usually directed at famous figures, like politicians and media celebrities. As Katja Rost et al. note: “in online firestorms, large amounts of critique, insulting comments, and swearwords against a person, organization, or group may be formed by, and propagated via, thousands or millions of people within hours . . . attacking everywhere at anytime with the potential for an unlimited audience” (2). The massive abuse received by Selvaggia Lucarelli is a perfect example of the functioning of cyber firestorms and it shows how “the dominant group is asked to take delight in the discomfort of the excluded and stigmatised [through] gender-based objectification” (Nussbaum). The pundit’s screenshots also show that the organisation of this joined virtual assault resulted in a great amount of threats and insults against her on public, semi-public, and private spaces.

#### *Impacts and Reactions: the Issue of Digilantism*

Like for other women targeted by misogynistic hate speech, these attacks have had an impact on the life of Lucarelli. On several occasions (see Lucarelli, FB post 7 November 2016; Lucarelli, Impatto), she has recounted the emotional and psychological distress caused by this extended and intense digital harassment, and the feeling of powerlessness in witnessing Facebook’s lack of interest in fixing the rampant phenomenon of hate speech and abuse on its platforms. Nevertheless, as my analysis shows, the attacks she has been receiving did not silence her. Even though many of her detractors read her response as a way to increase her fame by exploiting the much-debated issue of online hate speech, it is undeniable that Lucarelli uncovered several forms of antisocial online behaviours rooted in misogynistic beliefs by providing instances of the real nature of online cyber harassment and by exposing herself to a

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get off and hopefully she ends up killing herself” (“Sta cagna infame.. Che qualcuno gli rompa il clitoride così sta puttana non gode più e magari gli viene voglia di ammazzasse”). All available in Lucarelli, FB post 9 March 2017.



growing abuse. As explained, she has tried to react to such harassment by engaging in what Emma Jane defines “do-it-yourself (DIY), ‘digilante’ tactics” which involves strategies like “‘calling out’ and/or attempting to ‘name and shame’ antagonists” (Jane, *Digilantism* 287). In this case, the social commentator employed a digilante strategy not only by publishing the names of online harassers. In fact, she has also called them personally on the phone during her radio program and ridiculed them through informal and quite hostile language. Many of these conversations (e.g., Lucarelli, Alice; Lucarelli, Emanuele; Lucarelli, Candidato Sindaco) show that digital abusers tend to be less aggressive and more submissive when confronted on the phone. For this reason, she has mockingly named them *leoni da tastiera* (i.e., *keyboard warriors*). In a sort of Dantesque *contrappasso*, Lucarelli’s DIY tactics have sometimes had a major impact on the professional lives of these keyboard warriors, as some of them lost their jobs (see Vacca; Tuttocampo). Lucarelli defends her strategy saying that it is not motivated by a vindictive spirit, but that she considers it the best way to make haters understand that their words have material consequences in a society where there is no distinction between real and virtual spheres, and where virtual *is* real (Lucarelli, *Ignorare*). For this reason, her actions can be interpreted as a way to raise awareness on the moral and social weight of an online communication which exploits new forms of technology to reaffirm persistent patriarchal ideologies.

Indeed, the verbal aggressiveness of hate speech and the related scarce attention from institutions and social networking sites understandably bring many women to employ similar digilante strategies. However, as Emma Jane states (*Digilantism* 292), such reactions remain ethically questionable for the results they may have; in fact, as Lucarelli’s case shows, they usually fail to be a deterrent to harass the targets and they often translate into an escalation of the misogynistic discourse. Moreover, they also risk fostering the proliferation of a culture of vengeance and the related interpersonal brutality which already plagues the participatory Web.

Nevertheless, it must also be noticed that the reason why several women have engaged in these ethically questionable strategies must not be traced in their will to abuse the harassers, but instead in the lack of commitment that social networking sites have repeatedly shown in most cases of digital harassment reported in recent years. For this reason, even if I do not defend Lucarelli's use of a hostile language which often reminds the milder tones of online abuse, I think her case demonstrates the urgent need for Facebook and Twitter to pay greater attention to online gendered abuse. Moreover, it also shows the urgent need to develop effective education policies to raise awareness on the causality between the online harmful discourse and its serious repercussions on everyday life, exemplified – among others – by the suicide of Tiziana Cantone.

### *Conclusion*

My critical analysis of the digital abuse experienced and reported by Selvaggia Lucarelli illustrates several ways in which gender-based discriminations operate in contemporary societies, both online and offline. First, it demonstrates the imbrication of online misogyny and contemporary postfeminist sensibility by establishing a link between postfeminist ideas and the intolerance against radical feminism. It also shows how the expression of postfeminist stances grants women a temporary support in a patriarchal culture, thus providing only an illusion of freedom to them. As Lucarelli's case shows, when a woman moves towards a deeper criticism of misogynistic ideology, she inevitably becomes the target of graphic and long-lasting sexualised harassment. Second, the additional analysis of other cases provided by the pundit confirms the presence of a pervasive and multifaceted aggressive rhetoric which demonstrates the outliving of strong misogynistic beliefs and gendered discriminations used in cyberspace to silence women. More specifically, the similarities between the discursive strategies employed to harass Lucarelli and the tactics used to abuse other women prove the “quasi-algebraic nature” (Jane, Back 559) of online misogyny, which invariably shows the

same gendered characteristics identified in the other cases so far analysed, namely: the obsession for women's sexuality, their consequent reduction to a silent body that can be violated by anyone as a solution to women's active participation in society, the denial of women's autonomy over their own lives, and the denial of their subjectivity especially in relation to sexuality. As shown, such denials are often perpetrated through image-based sexual abuse, doxxing, and digital stalking, three tactics that have potentially destructive consequences at social, psychological, and physical levels on women's lives.

In conclusion, the material that Selvaggia Lucarelli provided was here essential to demonstrate the intensification of gendered e-bile as a strategy to interrupt the questioning of societal gender asymmetries on the cybersphere. As this case study shows, women still understandably find themselves in an ideological impasse when they become targets of online hate speech: on the one hand, the misogynistic harassment they receive risks blocking their active participation in online communication and may result in an apparent unmotivated disappearance from cyberspace if their attack is not publicly denounced. Conversely, if they decide to report it to authorities or to social networking sites, they are usually recommended to ignore the verbal abuse or to quit social networks or to be more modest online, as other cases of my research demonstrate. These pieces of advice seem to be based on the popular logic *If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen*; but such recommendations are particularly counterproductive in contemporary society, because in our Internet-suffused environment women already are in the kitchen, willingly or not, as the proliferation of online image-based sexual abuse demonstrates. The peak of this impasse is reached when, after not receiving an adequate support from authorities and SNSs, women try to denounce publicly their abusers and they end up receiving a more intense and long-lasting harassment.

In the next section, I discuss the last case study of my thesis, which refers to the online abuse of another Italian famous woman, namely the President of the Chamber Laura Boldrini.



## 6.2 Case Study no. 6: Laura Boldrini

The following section focuses on the prolonged misogynistic hate speech addressed to the president of the Italian Chamber of Deputies,<sup>22</sup> Laura Boldrini, since January 2014 to the present.<sup>23</sup> At the beginning of this analysis it is important to underline that, while some celebrities like Selvaggia Lucarelli manage their own social media profiles, the accounts of public figures in governments like Boldrini are often curated by members of staff who help them to update followers on the activity and statements of the politicians and who are in charge of filtering the contents published on these online spaces, as I discuss below.<sup>24</sup>

### *The Dataset*

The dataset of this case study is composed of 129 screenshots that I downloaded from several Facebook and Twitter pages. The following table shows the breakdown of these data, according to the social networks on which they were retrieved.

	No. of posts
Facebook	104
Twitter	25
<b>TOT</b>	<b>129</b>

This dataset may seem scarce if compared to others like the ones of Sarkeesian and Lucarelli, especially if one considers that Boldrini's online harassment has been widely covered by national and international media (e.g., Amé and Salonia, Scomode; Amé and Salonia, Offese; Rubino; Davies). To interpret these differences, I suggest that in this case the number of misogynistic posts is inversely proportional to the visibility of the target. In fact, it must be

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<sup>22</sup> I.e., the lower house of Italian Parliament. Its president is the third-highest ranking office in the Italian political system.

<sup>23</sup> See below for the reasons why I kept collecting some UGCs after November 2015.

<sup>24</sup> On Boldrini's Twitter account, the posts published by her staff are indicated by adding the symbol (*s*) at the end of these tweets.

underlined that, both for her public role and for the very existence of a marked gendered hostility against her on the Web, Boldrini's social network accounts are moderated by her staff who follow precise rules in order to guarantee respectful and civil discussion on these online fora. More specifically, her staff pre-emptively moderates or promptly deletes posts containing sexually explicit material, obscenity, threats, and insults, and UGCs promoting or perpetuating discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, race, language, religion, nationality, and physical disability (Boldrini, Policy). A similar measure has been adopted by many newspapers, which have tried to contrast the presence of online hate speech by employing specific algorithms or human moderators to filter users' comments (Pinotti and Nardi; Burrows).<sup>25</sup> My case here is that, when analysing hate speech against a very influential person like Laura Boldrini, retrieving data may be particularly problematic because many instances of verbal harassment probably are quickly removed both from the target's online accounts and from newspaper articles aimed at denouncing the abuse. While this is a positive effort to render the Web a cleaner environment, I suggest that researchers must always bear in mind it as a potential methodological problem to prove the pervasive existence of online hate speech, because such digital attempts to sanitise social networks do not correspond to a milder presence of demeaning discourse online. For this reason, most of the contents that I study in the following paragraphs are not currently available online, and my analysis refers to posts that I archived in my database in the form of screenshots.

Moreover, the table above does not classify the data according to their public or private nature, because no instances of posts privately sent to the target were provided by Boldrini, by her team, or by dedicated newspaper articles. Similarly, considering that the database is almost entirely composed of written texts, I do not provide a breakdown of data according to their

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<sup>25</sup> For a fuller account on the psychological effects of moderating abusive UGCs see the article by Marc Burrows, former moderator at *The Guardian*.

content, conversely to other cases. Nevertheless, one of the few visual examples of milder hostility against Boldrini is studied in this analysis to show the multimodal representation of gender prejudice.

To document the ongoing sexist and sexualised harassment against Boldrini, I also collected an additional set of 75 UGCs which appeared online between December 2015 and April 2017. As this period falls out of the chronological frame identified for the data collection of my research, I did not include these UGCs in the database summarised in the table above, but I use them as additional sources to show users' reaction to fake news, as I explain later in my analysis. These additional examples also help to show how gendered online abuse, especially when targeting women who debate feminist issues, should be understood as “a course of behaviour rather than [as] a set of individual acts” (Lewis et al.16).

Below, I chronologically contextualise the outburst of the online harassment against Boldrini, and then I move to analyse some examples of this collective cyber abuse.

### *The Target*

As mentioned, Laura Boldrini is the incumbent president of the Chamber of Deputies, an office that she has held since March 2013, a few months after she had entered the Parliament as a member of the democratic socialist party *Sinistra Ecologia Libertà*,<sup>26</sup> known as SEL. She had previously worked for many years in several branches of the United Nations, and she had travelled worldwide to intercede in humanitarian crises in different countries, like the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Mozambique, Angola, and Rwanda (Boldrini, Biografia). In particular, from 1998 to 2012, she served as a spokesperson for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (also known as UNHCR). She maintained her attention for social causes alive also after her election as president of the Chamber. In fact, in her maiden speech,

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<sup>26</sup> I.e., *Left Ecology Freedom*.

she declared her commitment to defend the most disadvantaged fringes of society, and to give full dignity to everyone's rights in Italy and abroad (Boldrini, Presidente). In a context of international economic crisis which had caused many Italians to lose their jobs, Boldrini pledged to make the Chamber "the home of good politics" (Boldrini, Tweet 16 March 2013), and she firmly stressed the pressing need to tackle the issue of gender-based violence (Boldrini, Presidente). Right after these initial declarations, the public feedback to Boldrini's investment seemed quite enthusiastic. In fact, many saluted her first tweet as president (i.e., Boldrini, Tweet 16 March 2013) with satisfaction, defining her as a woman with international substance whose continuous attention for the rights of discriminated people would have been a good opportunity for Italian politics to gain back the trust of its citizens (comments available in retweets of Boldrini, Tweet 16 March 2013).

The first event that caused a shift in Boldrini's public consideration towards a harsh negative opinion occurred at the end of January 2014, when the members of the Chamber were asked to vote to turn into law the so-called *Decreto Imu-Bankitalia*.<sup>27</sup> Considered the repeated attempts of the political party *Movimento 5 Stelle*<sup>28</sup> (hereafter M5S) to slow down the debate through a strong and prolonged filibuster which was impeding the approval of this draft law on time, Boldrini decided to apply a legal technique known as *ghigliottina* (literally *guillotine*), to accelerate the Chamber functioning and to finally put the draft law to the vote. Even though she declared that she decided to apply such measure after having guaranteed all the required examination phases (Boldrini, Ghigliottina), her decision ended up causing a violent reaction, both in the offline space of the Chamber (see Repubblica.it, Ghigliottina) and in the virtual platforms of the Web. In such a nervous political atmosphere, the founder and president of

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<sup>27</sup> A draft law aimed at cutting the IMU tax and at regulating the governance of the Bank of Italy, also known as Bankitalia in journalistic jargon.

<sup>28</sup> I.e., *Five Star Movement*.



M5S, Beppe Grillo, strongly criticised Boldrini's decision on his blog, fuelling wild reactions among his followers on social media, as I explain below.

### *A Virtual Space for Venting Out*

While Grillo had long used his blog to express his strong political views, in this case he defined Boldrini's decision as an abuse of power which allegedly generated the death of democracy (Grillo, #Boldriniacasa). A few days after this political turmoil, he also published a post on his blog and social network pages (i.e., Grillo, FB post 31 January 2014), aimed at mocking Boldrini through a supposedly satirical video. This video is entitled *In viaggio con Lady Ghigliottina* (i.e., *On the road with Lady Guillotine*, available in Repubblica.it, Anti Boldrini), and it shows a M5S activist in his car, driving around a carton silhouette of Boldrini who is depicted with a frowning facial expression, and pretending to discuss the recent political events with her in a jeering tone.<sup>29</sup> Grillo reposted the video with a caption which simultaneously expressed his amusement (i.e., "it's fantastic!"),<sup>30</sup> and asked to his followers: "cosa succederebbe se ti trovassi la Boldrini in macchina? (i.e., "what would happen if you found Boldrini in your car?").<sup>31</sup> His post suddenly raised a wild response among the public. In fact,

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<sup>29</sup> In this content, Boldrini is implicitly compared to a dictator through audio-visual elements: in fact, her silhouette wears a red t-shirt with the acronym CCCP referring to the Soviet Union, while the musical background of this imaginary conversation is *Faccetta Nera*, i.e., the popular marching song of the Italian fascist regime.

<sup>30</sup> In the source text "belin, è fantastico!" (Grillo, FB post 31 January 2014). *Belin* is a word of the Genoese dialect, often used by Grillo who was born in Genoa. While it literally means *penis*, it is mostly used as an exclamation, to convey a sense of surprise, like *wow*.

<sup>31</sup> It should be noticed here that in the source text the presence of the definite article *la* (i.e., *the*) before the woman's surname derives from a use of the Italian language which results gender-biased (see also examples 18 and 20 in the following table), because the equivalent male article is not used for men's surnames (Accademia della Crusca). This linguistic bias was already noticed in 1987 by Alma Sabatini in her well-known study *Sexism in the Italian Language*, where she suggested to avoid this grammatical dissymmetry by omitting the definite

many users commented the video expressing strong gendered hatred against Boldrini, showing how Web 2.0 can quickly turn into a virtual domain where anyone feels free to vent out their own frustration.

In the following pages, I provide a critical analysis of the misogynistic discourse used in these UGCs to verbally abuse Boldrini. In my analysis, I also refer to the empirical study developed by Isabella Poggi et al. to explain online aggressive communication through some UGCs against Boldrini.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, I focus my attention on different examples of contents against Boldrini, of which I provide my own classification according to their discursive strategies. In fact, while the above-mentioned study is useful to understand some aspects on aggressive online communication, it does not consist in a critical discourse analysis, thus it does not investigate the axes of power on which hate speech develops.

Considering the repetitive nature of misogynistic discourse, to provide a more systematic analysis, I identified three recurring discursive tactics used against the target, namely: general insults and death incitements, the rhetorical figure of the prostitute, and the prescription of coerced sexual acts. In the following table, I present these categories by quoting seven emblematic examples for each of them, first in their original version then in my own translation. All the UGCs here quoted were published as comments to the post of Beppe Grillo mentioned before (i.e., Grillo, FB post 31 January 2014) and to its repost on the official Facebook page of M5S (i.e., M5S FB post 31 January 2014). As most of these comments were removed from the Web when the sexualised harassment of Boldrini hit Italian news, they are currently not retrievable online, therefore I decided not to specify whether they were posted on

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article before both women's and men's surnames (Sabatini 106), a recommendation that many Italian speakers still tend not to follow, often considering it as an example of excessive political correctness.

<sup>32</sup> These researchers refer to different UGCs from the ones that I analyse in my research, unless otherwise indicated (i.e., example 14 in the following table).

Grillo's profile or on the page of M5S.

#### General Insults and Death Wishes

*Example 1: Boldrini sei una GRAN PUTTANA*

*Boldrini you are a HUGE WHORE*

*Example 2: Mi scuso con le donne.. ZOCCOLA VAI FUORI DALLE PALLE!!*

*I apologise to women.. SLUT GET THE FUCK OUT!!*

*Example 3: brutta troia, lesbica vacci a succhiare il pisello a la checca del tuo padrone vecchia zozzona*

*Ugly whore, dyke suck the dick to that faggot of your master<sup>33</sup> you old swine*

*Example 4: Boldracca*

*(for the translation of this term, see its critical analysis in the following paragraphs)*

*Example 5: troia frigida che non vede un cazzo dal 68'*

*frigid slut who hasn't seen a dick since 68'*

*Example 6: Grande troia da due soldi, impiccatela insieme a napolitano, figli di puttana,!!!!*

*huge cheap slut, hang her along with napolitano,<sup>34</sup> motherfuckers,!!!!*

*Example 7: sono stanco di insultarla giuro, le auguro solo di crepare male.*

*I'm tired of insulting her I swear, I just wish her a terrible death.*

#### Boldrini as a Prostitute

*Example 8: la puttana non ha orario*

*the whore works 24/7*

*Example 9: Il presidente della Camera da letto della prostituzione politica*

*The president of the bedChamber of political prostitution*

*Example 10: Gran bella gnocca.....Ma lo sa che lo stesso lavoro che fa, potrebbe farlo al porto??*

*Tacchi a spillo e mini gonna e vaiiii fuori dalle ball*

*Nice piece of arse.....does she know she could do the same job at the harbour?? High heels and mini skirt and get the fuuuck out*

*Example 11: Sicuramente dimostra più attitudine ad un'attività serale sul raccordo anulare, a €50,00 la botta, che a fare la presidente del Parlamento. . .*

*She definetely shows more predisposition for a night activity on the raccordo anulare freeway,<sup>35</sup> €50 for each fuck, than as the president of the Parliament. . .*

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<sup>33</sup> *Master* is referred to Nichi Vendola, who was the president of Boldrini's political party and who is openly gay.

<sup>34</sup> Giorgio Napolitano, who at the time was the president of Italy.

<sup>35</sup> Examples 11, 13 and 14 contain specific references to two Italian metropolitan areas which are known as symbols of prostitution: "grande raccordo anulare" (also G.R.A.) near Rome, and "Melegnano" near Milan.

*Example 12: la scarikerei sulla tangenziale x il turno di notte..*

*I d drop her on the freeway 4 the night shift..*

*Example 13: La porterei a battere sulla Melegnano e a fine turno se ha incassato poco la gonfio di botte!!*

*I would bring her to sell herself on the Melegnano street and when her shift is over I beat the shit out of her if she hasn't earned enough!!*

*Example 14: la lascerei al G.R.A a battere, non sa fare altro*

*I would leave her on the G.R.A. freeway to sell herself, that's all she knows how to do<sup>36</sup>*

#### Coerced Sexual Acts

*Example 15: In verità un giretto su di lei lo farei ha ha*

*Actually I would go for a ride on her ha ha*

*Example 16: porto a letto mi insegna i compiti*

*I take (her) to my bed (so) she teaches me the homework*

*Example 17: la abbandono in autostrada legata a 90° al guard rail*

*I leave her on the highway tied up at 90 degrees to the crash rail*

*Example 18: La Boldrini Buona a pecorina*

*Boldrini Good for doggy style*

*Example 19: Che le rimarrebbero solo due scopate...*

*That she has only two shags left...*

*Example 20: cos farei con la Boldrini? Alla Laura niente , mentre mi tromberei la di lei figlia se è gnocca.*

*What would I do with Boldrini? Nothing to Laura , while I would fuck her daughter if she is hot.*

*Example 21: la porti in un campo rom e la fai trombare con il capo villaggio*

*you bring her to a gipsy camp and you make her fuck with the head of the tribe*

Examples 1 to 21 are only few instances of the violent sexualised hate speech through which many Facebook users responded to Grillo's post. They show the derogatory nature of online misogyny through a plethora of gender-based insults and gender-related assumptions, that I analyse below in relation to the three above-mentioned categories.

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<sup>36</sup> Translation based on the one provided by Poggi et al. for the same Facebook comment, i.e., "I would leave her on the motorway to sell herself, That's all she knows how to do" (Poggi et al. 257).

### *General Insults and Death Wishes*

The first set of data (i.e., examples 1 to 7) shows how Boldrini is insulted through a series of gendered demeaning expressions. In examples 1 to 3, they come in the form of direct insults, which are the most common types of slurs, as Poggi et al. note studying similar instances of online aggressive communication (259). They address the target directly, as it is visible in the use of the second person for possessive adjectives (i.e., *your* in example 3) and verbs (i.e., *you are/GET/SUCK* in examples 1, 2, and 3). These linguistic elements mark the conative function of the contents under analysis, used to order an action directly to the receiver. Moreover, in these examples, the senders choose an identity to which the target has to conform (i.e., the prostitute). In fact, in example 1, a user purposely denies Boldrini's political importance and affirms her alleged sexual amorality and promiscuity, by ascribing her an identity which has a strong sociocultural prejudice, i.e. a "HUGE WHORE." As I discuss later, the depiction of Boldrini as a prostitute is the most recurrent rhetorical figure in her online abuse, and for this reason I decided to study its discursive mechanisms in a distinct category. Nevertheless, as the table shows, this gendered trope is reasserted in most of the UGCs that I selected, like examples 2 and 3, where specific orders are addressed to the target through an aggressive and sexualised rhetoric. In the former (i.e., example 2 "I apologise to women.. SLUT GET THE FUCK OUT!"), Boldrini is prescribed to disappear. Here "GET THE FUCK OUT" expresses the order to leave the public scene, and it may be interpreted as the command to disappear from politics or from the virtual domain. Moreover, in the opening section of this comment, the user writes a sort of self-exculpation for using a misogynistic insult (i.e., *slut*) in front of potential female readers (i.e., "I apologise to women"). Therefore, he attempts to absolve himself from possible allegations of being gender-biased, a prejudice that his rhetoric actually shows right after. In doing so, and to avoid facing his own misogynistic values, he discursively places Boldrini out of the category of women (in fact he apologises to women but obviously not to

the target), thus depicting her as an unwomanly enemy who allegedly deserves to be insulted through a misogynistic rhetoric. Similarly, in example 3 (i.e., “Ugly whore, dyke suck the dick to that faggot of your master you old swine”), Boldrini is ordered to perform oral sex on a man, namely the leader of her party. The prescription of sexual acts as a discursive strategy to humiliate and silence women online is a typical feature of cyber misogyny, as I pointed out in many passages of my thesis. Nevertheless, in example 3 this sexualised derogatory rhetoric expresses a dual gender-based discrimination. In fact, the user addresses Boldrini by deploying demeaning expressions as vocatives (i.e., *ugly whore* and *old swine*) which sums up several characteristics of misogynistic discourse – i.e., the disparaging assessment of the target according to her supposed unattractiveness, a sexual hyperactivity, sexist ageism, and the order of a sexual act. In addition, misogyny is here coupled with homophobic discourse, sustained by the epithet *lesbica* (i.e., *dyke*) intended in a demeaning sense<sup>37</sup> and the homophobic expression *checca* (i.e., *faggot*), with reference to the sexual orientation of Nichi Vendola. While both expressions are deployed to increase the sense of contempt against both Boldrini and Vendola through a prejudiced vision of women and homosexuals, the female identity is mostly discriminated, because it is always subjected to the male supremacy, even when the man is queer.

Examples 2 and 3 also contain the use of the second person to address Boldrini, a linguistic element which is discursively significant in the Italian context. In fact, the Italian polite form to address someone the speaker does not know personally is the third-person

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<sup>37</sup> For this reason, I decided to translate it with the English word *dyke* instead of a more neutral *lesbian*. Here the lesbian identity does not refer to Boldrini’s real sexual orientation, and it is used merely to increase her vilification. As previously pointed out in section 3.2.3 of my thesis, the accusation of a presumed queerness is a recurring element of online misogynistic e-bile, especially when the target expresses feminist stances (see also Doyle, #MenCallMeThings; Ford, Fight; Jane, Misogyny Online).

singular (i.e., *lei*). Given this peculiarity of the Italian language, I suggest reading the very fact of addressing Boldrini through the second-person singular as a way to discursively deny her authority. Even though the absence of polite forms in hate speech is not surprising and informality is a recurring element of online interaction, my case here is that this way of directly addressing a high-profile politician through an informal expression has multiple effects, namely: getting closer to the target, increasing the performative power of the insult, and intensifying the conative function of the entire text of the messages. These results are also obtained through the employment of capital letters for slurs and orders (i.e., see example 1 “HUGE WHORE” and example 2 “SLUT GET THE FUUCK OUT”), to indicate the act of shouting.

The remainder of the comments quoted in the first section of the table are general insults which express similar forms of marked misogyny, through different rhetorical strategies. Examples 4, 5, and 6 are instances of what Poggi et al. define direct insults to a third person, where “the insulting adjective or noun is assigned to the target as a third person, as if referring to her while addressing the audience” (260). These posts perpetuate the relegation of the target to the sexual sphere through derogatory terms. Example 4 is composed by a sole word (i.e. “Boldracca”), which appears in many other UGCs of my database to harass and ridicule Laura Boldrini. It is the linguistic result of a crasis between Boldrini’s surname and the slur *baldracca*, one of the several Italian words meaning *whore*. *Boldracca* is a neologism fabricated by Boldrini’s detractors, and it has extensively been used in Italian offensive slang against her on the Web.<sup>38</sup> Through this supposed *nomen omen*,<sup>39</sup> Boldrini is scorned in an

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<sup>38</sup> E.g., see comments at Libero, FB post 7 May 2017.

<sup>39</sup> *Nomen [est] omen* is a Latin locution whose literal meaning is that someone’s name is a prediction of their own destiny. It is often used to indicate that an essential feature of someone is reflected in their own name. I used this

alleged jeering tone, as if her prostitute nature was embedded in her own name. This supposed prostitute identity – which is by far the most recurring insult in online gendered e-bile – is repeated in examples 5 and 6. In the former (i.e., “frigid slut who hasn’t seen a dick since 68”), not only the alleged ‘sluttiness’ of the target is affirmed, but she is also ridiculed as frigid and sexually inactive. Therefore, this post shows a quite evident contradiction in terms, because Boldrini’s supposed sexual hyperactivity and amorality – which a reader would infer from the term *slut* – is asserted and then suddenly denied twice, by associating a sense of frigidity to the target who allegedly has not received any sexual attention for several decades.<sup>40</sup> In example 6 (i.e., “huge cheap slut, hang her along with napolitano, motherfuckers,!!!”) the target’s supposed ‘sluttiness’ is made even more despicable by the adjective *cheap*, hinting at her supposed sexual ravenousness or physical unattractiveness, which cannot guarantee her big incomes when selling herself. The post also expresses an overt incitement to kill Boldrini and former president Giorgio Napolitano by hanging. This quote shows the nature of aggressive instigations as communicative acts “by which the sender incites the audience to do something bad to the target” (Poggi et al. 261). As mentioned in other passages of my thesis, violent incitements are typical elements of online hate speech, along with rape/death threats and wishes, as it is also proved by example 7 (i.e., “I’m tired of insulting her I swear, I just wish her

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expression here because in my opinion it sums up the contemporary understanding and common use of *Boldracca* to ridicule Boldrini.

<sup>40</sup> Moreover, this post reaffirms the ubiquity of the male heteronormative gaze which not only assesses Boldrini as an ugly – thus unfuckable – person, but which also discursively equalises sexual attention and men’s genitalia through the term *dick* used as a synecdoche. Furthermore, the temporal reference to 1968 may hint at the cultural revolutions occurred at the end of the 1960s, when women’s liberation movements spread in many Western societies and more disinhibited sexual behaviours became common among young people. In this perspective, Boldrini is probably compared to a second wave feminist who was able to gain sexual attention only in a very libertine environment.



a terrible death”), where a user confesses his exhaustion from insulting Boldrini and wishes her a tragic end. The very use of the verb *to wish* (i.e., *augurare*) expresses a strong desire for something to happen. In fact, as Poggi et al. note in studying a post of similar nature,<sup>41</sup> these are optative communicative acts where “the propositional content is some punishment or revenge against the target . . . a true curse” (262).

### *Boldrini as a Prostitute*

Examples 8 to 14 demonstrate the use of the prostitute trope as a rhetorical figure to harass Boldrini. They contain a language which is similar to the one analysed above, but which also shows some peculiarities. Example 8 (i.e., “the whore works 24/7”) links the first category of general insults to the second one. In fact, it sums up elements of both groups: while it relies on the prostitute rhetorical figure, it also reminds the structure of example 5, as its misogynistic content is expressed by a gendered slur, here placed at the beginning of the sentence (i.e., *whore*). As in example 5, moreover, Boldrini’s name is not even mentioned, and the insult is directed at her as a third person while addressing the audience. No matter who the audience is for this comment, once again the target’s identity is denied twice: she does not even deserve to be named, and the demeaning expression *whore* is an allegedly sufficient indicator of her despicability. Similarly, in example 9 (i.e., “The<sup>42</sup> president of the bedChamber of political prostitution”), Boldrini’s name is to be inferred. Here the target is presented as the epitome of

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<sup>41</sup> i.e., “spero che un giorno quando creperete tutti . . . boldrini . . . napolitano ect ect quello che state facendo un giorno ne dovrete rispondere a qualcuno e non ci sara movimento politico o inciuci a cui potrete,” which Poggi et al. translate as follows: “I hope that someday when you all kick the bucket . . . boldrini . . . napolitano and so on and so forth what you are doing someday you will have to answer for to someone and there will be no political movement or bargain you will be able to [resort to]” (262).

<sup>42</sup> In the source text, *the* is used in its male form (i.e., *il*), probably to go against Boldrini’s legitimate demands for a non-sexist language (see [repubblica.it](http://repubblica.it), Deputata).

“political prostitution.” In this message, the relegation of the target to the sexual sphere is implicitly conveyed through the expression “the president of the bedChamber.” Here the sender plays on the double meaning of the Italian noun *camera* (i.e., *Chamber [of Deputies]*, if written with the capital letter, and *bedroom*, if written in lowercase), by maintaining the capital letter and by adding *da letto*, which means *bed*, and therefore joining the two meanings of *camera*. Hence, this quote attacks Boldrini by belittling the domain she is entitled to chair, a space which undergoes a semantic redefinition, from the political – thus public – sphere to the sexual – thus private – one.

The remainder of the UGCs of this category reaffirms the employment of the prostitute trope as a synonym for the target. In example 10 (i.e., “Nice piece of arse.....does she know she could do the same job at the harbour?? High heels and mini skirt and get the fuck out”), a man uses a synecdoche to indicate Boldrini (i.e., *arse*, in the source text *gnocca*, an informal term which literally means *vagina*). The target is once again assessed through the ubiquitous heteronormative male gaze, but this time she is described as good-looking. Nevertheless, this is not to be intended as a compliment: in fact, the man indirectly suggests her she should use her beauty to keep selling herself, in a notoriously rough environment (i.e., the harbour), rather than to politics. The structure of this utterance reminds the category that Poggi et al. name “insults through pragmatic indirectness” (260), where “the insulting meaning . . . must be inferred by making reference to rhetorical devices like reticence, insinuation, rhetorical question, or irony” (260). In fact, in the content at issue, the insinuation that Boldrini has sold herself to politics is discursively built through the ironic rhetorical question “does she know she could do the same job at the harbour??” even if the remainder of the post overcomes any pragmatic indirectness by prescribing an outfit often associated with prostitutes (i.e., high heels and mini skirt). A similar insinuation is expressed in example 11 (i.e., “She definitely shows more predisposition for a night activity on the raccordo anulare freeway, €50 for each fuck,

than as the president of the Parliament”), where a user affirms that she is more credible as a cheap prostitute on a busy freeway than as a political representative. This humiliating sexualisation of Boldrini and the resulting denial of her authority as a high-profile public figure is reaffirmed in examples 12, 13, and 14. Here three different men virtually identify with a pimp who enslaves the target. In these utterances, they express their desire<sup>43</sup> to turn Boldrini into a street prostitute, allegedly because “that’s all she knows how to do” (example 14). Inspired by Grillo’s phrase (i.e., “what would happen if you found Boldrini in your car?”), they use the misogynistic trope of a man driving a woman around in his car and eventually forcing her to do something against her will (i.e., “to sell herself” in example 13), during a period of the day which allegedly makes prostitution even more dangerous (i.e., “4 the night shift” in example 12). In these three examples, transitive verbs are used to present the man as the active subject of the sentence, and the target as an object, thus lacking any form of agency. This grammatical structure reflects the discursive asymmetry between the dominant male actor and the subjected woman, where the target’s impossibility to control the car<sup>44</sup> results in her subjugation to prostitution. Moreover, it is worth noticing that, in example 13 (“I would bring her to sell herself on the Melegnano street and when her shift is over I beat the shit out of her if she hasn’t earned enough!!”), male supremacy is discursively reasserted through another form of gendered abuse, as the user blatantly and satisfactorily declaims that he will violently beat Boldrini “if she hasn’t earned enough money,” like a pimp would do in real life.

A similar objectification of the target is visible in the third category of my analysis, namely those quotes expressing coerced sexual acts against Boldrini, as explained in the next section.

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<sup>43</sup> The senders’ collective desire is expressed by the conditionals *I d drop* (*scarikerei*) in example 12, *I would bring* (*porterei*) in example 13, and *I would leave* (*lascerei*) in example 14.

<sup>44</sup> An object which often symbolises hegemonic virility in sexist ideology.

### *Coerced Sexual Acts*

Like in the quotes above analysed, the grammatical structure of examples 15, 16, 17, 18, and 20 shows that these UGCs are direct answers to Grillo's post. In fact, the leader of M5S builds his utterance on a speculative conditional (i.e., "what would happen if you found . . .") which invites the audience to imagine an event. Consequently, the commenters use a similar grammatical structure to express what they would do in that situation. What follows is a list of rape fantasies where the target is sexually objectified and discursively violated by different users and in several ways, as examples 15 to 21 show. First, in example 15 (i.e., "Actually I would go for a ride on her ha ha") a man simulates his embarrassment in confessing that he would consider having sex with Boldrini. This sentence not only reaffirms the sexual objectification of the target but also the insignificance of her consent. Through the preposition *on*, he implicitly compares Boldrini to an object (i.e., a car) which is at the mercy of the male subject. Similarly, the remainder of the posts expresses coerced sexual acts that the users ideally perform against the will of the target. In example 16 (i.e., "I take (her) to my bed (so) she teaches me the homework"), the use of the verb at the present indicative tense (i.e., *I take*) makes this action more likely to happen in the commenter's imagination. Also, in the final part of the content, the sender plays on a trope quite common in pornographic imagery, that is a sexually skilful woman dressed up as a sexy teacher. Therefore, the clause "she teaches me the homework" simultaneously conveys an overt sexualisation of Boldrini and the denial of the authority of women teachers. A similar use of the indicative tense is present in example 17 (i.e., "I leave her on the highway tied up at 90 degrees to the crash rail"). In this comment, the desire to turn the target into a prostitute is discursively created by the expressions *highway* and *crash rail*, which pertain to the semantic field of the road, here linked to street prostitution. While this semantic field is present in other Facebook comments analysed above (e.g., examples 12, 13, and 14), here the expression "tied up at 90 degrees" turns out to be a more violent denial

of the target's subjectivity and autonomy. In this sentence, the female body is implicitly portrayed as a trophy that the commenter succeeds in subjugating and that he purposely decides to expose to other men's sexual greediness for a further physical violation. In this example and in the following one, the mention of a specific sexual position ("90 degrees" in example 17, "doggy style" in example 18) seems to be the very essence of the strong sexualisation of the target in a posture which, according to the harassers, denies her sexual autonomy.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, example 19 (i.e., "That she has only two shags left") shifts the attention from the political conversation to the sexual domain. Here this discursive move is conveyed through a quite overt menace, which can be interpreted simultaneously as a rape and death threat. The fact that Boldrini "has only two shags left" can be seen as the utterance preceding a sexual violence which eventually brings to the physical annihilation of the target. On a similar tone, example 20 (i.e., "What would I do with Boldrini? Nothing to Laura , while I would fuck her daughter if she is hot") proves how online misogynistic discourse easily extends from the target to other women which are emotionally close to her. Once again, here the focus of the discourse shifts from the public political sphere to the private life of the target, which the harasser investigates with a morbid curiosity (i.e., by collecting information on Boldrini's family). Finally, in example 21 (i.e., "you bring her to a gipsy camp and you make her fuck with the head of the tribe"), a coerced sexual act is presented as a punishment to humiliate and silence the target, combining misogynistic and racist discourses. The overt aggressive misogyny of this post is visible in the use of two transitive verbs (i.e., "you bring her . . . and you make her fuck") to tell a hypothetical audience to force the target into a sexual act. More specifically, this violence gets allegedly increased by the location and the actors involved in the imagined

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<sup>45</sup> In fact, users do not even contemplate a woman's autonomy in choosing a sexual position, which is here dictated to the target, whether through a violent act – i.e., *tied up* in example 17 – or through an insinuation aimed at denying her political relevance – i.e., "Boldrini Good for doggy style" in example 18.

event, i.e., the *gypsy camp* and *the head of the tribe*. Here the commenter relies on the common racist assumption of the aggressiveness of Romani people, and of the promiscuity which allegedly reigns in their camps. Despite the ideological contempt embedded in this ethnic prejudice, the *head of the tribe* is discursively presented as the person designated to humiliate the target through an aggressive sexual domination, because of his supposed savage and bestial nature (also traceable in the use of the term *villaggio*, i.e., *tribe*). Moreover, it must be noticed that the allegedly natural violence of Romani people is so widely taken for granted in racist discourse that the user does not even need to express it clearly. He just needs to mention *a gypsy camp* and *the head of the tribe* to recall a vivid image of aggressiveness. Here, the male commenter delegates a Romani man to punish the target through a sexual act that he is expected to accept happily because of his supposed violent nature. Moreover, in this post, the prescription of a coerced act evokes humans' active involvement in arranging the mating of animals, and this implicit proximity of the actors to the sphere of bestiality results in the denial of the personhood of both the female victim and of the designated male perpetrator. In conclusion, it is worth noticing that this post received two comments which read as follows: "and what if she enjoys it?" / "I will fuck her" (both available in Rubino). While the original post deploys two complementary strategies typically found in racist discourse,<sup>46</sup> the just-quoted comments show how the Italian men subsequently compete in the violation of the target, to reaffirm their sexual supremacy to the detriment of her autonomy and integrity.

Therefore, my analysis of examples 1 to 21 shows how the discursive process of the target's sexualisation strongly relies on her objectification. In the following section, following Martha Nussbaum (Objectification), I discuss the objectification of famous women in misogynistic discourse through the philosophical concept of *ressentiment*.

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<sup>46</sup> Namely "the negative representation of the own group, and the negative representation of the Others" (van Dijk, Principles 263), here respectively assigned to Italian men and to Romani people.

### *Sexual Objectification as a Form of Gendered Ressentiment*

The objectification of famous women is exemplified by the two Italian cases analysed in my thesis, i.e., Laura Boldrini and Selvaggia Lucarelli. As Nussbaum notes, in this type of objectification “(some) men treat women they don’t even know as bearers of a spoiled identity, as mere tools of their fantasy, violating their autonomy and hijacking their subjectivity” (Objectification). While the denial of subjectivity and autonomy are at the core of any type of objectification, when it targets a high-profile woman, gender-based stereotypes and prejudices usually articulate on the idea of *ressentiment* (Nussbaum, Objectification). The French term *ressentiment* (i.e., resentment) has been used in philosophy to indicate a particular type of hostility consisting in the identification of an enemy who is depicted as a scapegoat for one’s sense of weakness and inadequateness. While Nietzsche (25) used this concept to study the creation of Christian morality and its related set of values, Nussbaum applies it to the sexualised objectification of famous women, particularly on the Internet. As she highlights, in a society dominated by the obsession for success, visibility is an undeniable source of social power which may generate a sense of envy and inadequateness in those who lack it. This imbalance in social power generates “the hatred of the powerful” (Nussbaum), which becomes particularly strong if those who hold such influence belong to a category historically perceived as inferior and less worthy, like women in patriarchal societies. Therefore, the sense of powerlessness triggered by the lack of fame – and the whole set of values which comes with it, like visibility and economic prestige – becomes even more intense if the powerful person belongs to a social group which has been traditionally relegated to the sexual sphere in an inferior position. I agree with Nussbaum in considering the public sexualised objectification of famous women on the Web as a sort of “slave revolt,” through which ordinary people turn their own feeling of weakness into a sense of power to the detriment of the opposite category. Moreover, when the target is a parliamentarian, such resentment may be aggravated by the

consideration of political representatives as the very source of different social problems, like the contemporary financial crisis. In this perspective, many users tend to justify the use of hate speech as a way to express their frustration against someone that they perceive as a symbol of political greediness and that has allegedly failed to defend citizens' interests.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, while both female and male politicians are constantly attacked on social networks, women seem to be the exclusive targets of those derogatory discourses which rely on sexual objectification.<sup>48</sup> Thus, gender-based *ressentiment* aims at bringing high-profile women down by disgracing them, and this goal is achieved through the reframing of two core concepts of their identity, namely fame and sexuality. In online misogyny, in fact, fame gets reshaped as a source of disaster and as an amplifier of humiliation. This process of reconfiguration is directly linked to the sphere of sexuality, because it succeeds only if the powerful is vulnerable in some way. And women's vulnerability – whether they are poor or rich – resides in their gender identity, which makes them suitable targets of sexual objectification. In this reframing of social power, the objectifier does not create a new set of values, because pre-existing gender asymmetries are the ideological ground on which such reconfiguration can succeed within patriarchal environments. This mechanism is particularly visible in the sexualised harassment

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<sup>47</sup> See for example a tweet sent to Boldrini where a female user justifies her online harassment by saying “the Italian population has been raped by this corrupted political system for more than 20 years” (“è da più di 20 anni che il popolo italiano è stuprato dalla politica corrotta,” comment available in Boldrini, Tweet 2 February 2014).

<sup>48</sup> For instance, the incumbent president of Italy, Sergio Mattarella, has been verbally harassed on SNSs for denouncing the hostility of Web 2.0. Nevertheless, the online abuse of Mattarella was expressed through ageist slurs and general derogatory terms (e.g., *mummia* (*mummy*), *fascista* (*fascist*), and *mafioso* (*Mafioso*), available in comments to Ansa, FB post 27 March 2017), but never with sexualised insults. However, it must be noticed that also men are sometimes harassed online through a gendered demeaning discourse, but this is usually aimed at undermining their virility by referring to “deviations from normative ideals of masculinity such as sex with family members, joblessness and a special type of micro-penile disorder” (Jane, Back 565).

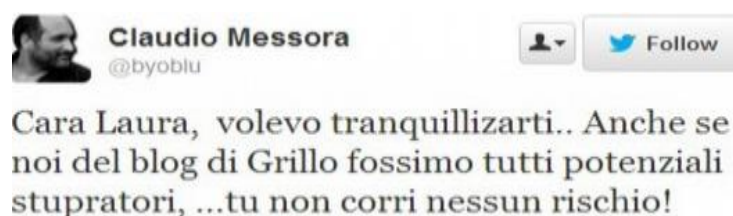


of Laura Boldrini, which has been discursively sustained through the reduction of the target to a sex slave or trophy. Moreover, as my analysis shows, this sexual objectification is often justified as a deserved punishment for Boldrini's alleged political inadequateness. As Teun van Dijk has noted, "the reproduction of dominance in contemporary societies often requires justification or legitimation . . . or denial [of dominance]" (Principles 263). Below, I present another way through which Boldrini's online abuse was condoned by several users, namely the derision and denial of this phenomenon after the target reported it.

### *Online Harassers as "Potential Rapists"*

Between the end of January 2014 and the beginning of the following month, the online harassment of Laura Boldrini hit Italian news, and several politicians and journalists expressed their support to the president of the Chamber (see Rubino). On this occasion, Boldrini pointed out that the abuse against her had a specific gendered and sexist nature (Boldrini, Tweet 7 February 2014), and that users who posted misogynistic remarks were only interested in sexually offending her as a woman, and thus they behaved almost like "potential rapists" (video available in Fulloni). These statements seemingly offended many of her detractors. Here I focus on two instances of online communication which followed the just-mentioned declarations of the president of the Chamber.

The first example is a tweet published by the head of the communication staff of M5S, Claudio Messori, in the aftermath of Boldrini's statements, below in image 1:



*Image 1*

The post read: "Dear Laura, I just wanted to reassure you.. even if we followers of Grillo's blog were all potential rapists, ...you are not at risk!" (Huffingtonpost.it, Messori). Even

though it was suddenly deleted right after it got reported, a screenshot of this content is still retrievable on several online newspaper articles (e.g., Huffingtonpost.it, MESSORA). I decided to focus on this tweet not only because it became a symbol of the harassment against Boldrini, but also because it shows the discursive strategies often used in misogynistic hate speech against women who stand up against gendered online abuse. In analysing MESSORA's tweet, I refer to some of the discursive strategies identified by Ruth Wodak and Martin Reisigl (386), namely *referential strategies*, *perspectivation*, and *intensifying/mitigating strategies*, and I apply them to this UGC, to show how language is systematically used in this UGC "to achieve a certain social, political, psychological, or linguistic aim" (386).

In image 1, first the sender identifies two different actors, namely Grillo's followers and the target. Through referential strategies he creates a collective, in-group identity (expressed by "we followers of Grillo's blog" and the Italian verbs inflected at the first-person plural), and the target's individual one (i.e., *you* directed at Boldrini in the second-person singular), who therefore is discursively presented as an outsider. Then the tweet presents a perspectivation of Boldrini's harassment. Her abuse is not publicly condemned, as one would expect from a political movement accused of orchestrating such vicious attack. Conversely, it is not even mentioned in the content, and this absence results in the discursive reframing of the event as a negligible fact. Therefore, the focus of the discourse is shifted towards Boldrini's allegedly ridiculous definition of her harassers as almost potential rapists. To deny this allegation, MESSORA deploys a strategy which seemingly mitigates the event, but which actually intensifies the demeaning ideology that caused it. In fact, the clause "even if we . . . were all potential rapists" indirectly aims at confuting this allegation, depicting it as an impossible situation. This illusory mitigation is also conveyed in the initial part of the tweet which simulates a heartfelt proximity to the target (i.e., "Dear Laura, I just wanted to reassure you"). Conversely, the closing sentence of this UGC discursively intensifies the gender-biased vision

of the sender on Boldrini and on the situation at issue. By mocking Boldrini as an impossible victim of rape because of her alleged physical ugliness, the user reframes rape as an act triggered by female beauty. Therefore, my analysis shows how Messora employs a commonly condoned derogatory discourse – i.e., a rape joke – to ridicule Boldrini by denying her rape-ability.

Given the political role of its sender, this tweet is a particularly serious example of the sociocultural dangers embedded in gendered hate speech. Nevertheless, similar instances aimed at deriding the target and at denying her experience can also be found in contents posted by ordinary users, like the one represented below in image 2:



*Image 2*

This image is available in @AntoPentas and I retrieved it on Twitter by monitoring the hashtag #Boldrini in the aftermath of the politician's declarations. The cartoon picture posted in this tweet was probably created through the application Bitstrip, particularly popular on social networks because it enables users to create personalised cartoons which resemble themselves and their friends. In this comic strip, the user pictures himself with a policewoman who holds

him bent on the hood of a car, probably before handcuffing him, while exclaiming “You are under arrest for having made obscene comments against Boldrini! Potential rapist!” The boy simply replies: “but I just wrote ‘Laura, what a disappointment’ ... also, I signed petitions for gender quotas...” (@AntoPentas). Even though image 2 does not employ an overt misogynistic language, in my opinion it is a suitable example to understand the denial of the target’s abuse by depicting her as an intolerant woman who pulls the gender card to silence oppositions and criticisms. Here the roles of the abuser and the victim are overturned both visually and textually. In the visual elements, Boldrini’s condemnation of her abuse is reshaped as an institutional repression achieved through the employment of a law enforcement agent that uses violence against a defenceless citizen. Such aggressiveness is intentionally represented by a female figure, whose frowning facial expression and hostile attitude (i.e., the act of shouting, symbolised by the zigzagged line of the speech bubble) increase the violence of the act. Conversely, the boy is depicted as harmless, in a subjugated position, with a suffering expression, and his words are framed in a plain speech balloon. In his justification, he suggests that the messages which Boldrini intended as obscene insults were just peaceful and legitimate criticisms over her political activity. The boy also denies any accusation of sexism, by declaring he is a supporter of feminist causes in politics – in fact he has signed petitions for the gender quotas.

As mentioned before, I decided to study this tweet to show how even milder and alleged satirical contents can express a denial of the very existence of online misogyny and the experience of the female target, by depicting any request for a more civilised conversation on the Web as a form of censorship against freedom of speech, as analysed in other passages of my thesis (e.g., the case of Anita Sarkeesian). Therefore, I suggest interpreting this image as an implicit cultural defence mechanism in the “shooting-the-messenger-type” (Mantilla, *Viral - Part 2*), i.e. a discursive device aimed at presenting the victim as unreliable and not

trustworthy. As Karla Mantilla notes, these pushbacks are often used to systematically silence women who call out their abuse, both offline and online, and “they are all varied expressions of misogyny that have adapted to the culture and technological advances of the times” (Viral – Part 2), as analysed in the case of Christy Mack. In particular, the analysis developed in this last section shows that attempts to discredit women’s experiences do not necessarily deploy an overtly misogynistic discourse.

As shown by these UGCs, the denial of online abuse often exploits gender asymmetries to hide an agenda aimed at discrediting the political prestige of the target, by turning her into a spiteful enemy, an issue that Boldrini explained during the event *Parole O\_Stili*.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, my study is not aimed at demonstrating the use of misogyny as the prerogative of a specific political party. For this reason, I conclude my analysis by discussing another phenomenon which often triggers hate speech, namely the construction of fake news.

#### *Fake News and Hate Speech*

As already mentioned, the misogynistic attacks against Laura Boldrini started in January 2014 and they are still ongoing. For this reason, I kept monitoring Boldrini’s online harassment beyond the temporal framework that I had selected for my data collection. Even though an analysis of other UGCs would result repetitive, it is worth noticing that much online conversation regarding Boldrini has kept showing different shades of negative backlash against her. Whether these UGCs express a mocking sexism or an overt misogyny, they show a feature which characterises gender hegemonic ideologies in many different social domains, namely “the pervasiveness of tacit androcentrism [of which] not only men but also women are

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<sup>49</sup> *Parole O\_Stili* started in February 2017 with a two-day conference in the city of Trieste, where experts and celebrities explained the phenomenon of hate speech. Since then, it has gained an increasing visibility within Italian society, and it has turned into a cycle of events that have taken place in schools and other public spaces to raise awareness on cyber hostility and to educate for a more respectful use of the Web.

complicit through their habitual, differential participation in their particular communities of practice” (Lazar 147). To reaffirm such fundamental androcentrism, users have kept harassing Boldrini through scathing opinions on her alleged ugliness,<sup>50</sup> gendered insults,<sup>51</sup> rape wishes,<sup>52</sup> and similar sexualised discourses. These sorts of comments especially abound when she discusses women’s rights or when she expresses feminist stances.<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, this online harassment is not an isolated case in the political field. As shown in a 2016 survey conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, gendered abuse of parliamentarians is a global phenomenon, in both online and offline domains, and SNSs seem to be a “new arena for violence against women, including women in politics (6).”<sup>54</sup>

In fact, while female politicians have long been harassed through offline forms of sexism and misogyny, the cybersphere often provides new means to silence them and to push them away from the political arena. Among the newest tactics used to reach this goal, there is the fabrication and spread of fake news on the Web. While false information has long been a

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<sup>50</sup> E.g., “@lauraboldrini you are disgusting cover yourself with a veil like your Muslim friends do” (“@lauraboldrini ma copriti che fai ribrezzo, con un lenzuolo come fanno i tuoi amici musulmani”) in @randagio1963 in response to Boldrini, Tweet 20 February 2014.

<sup>51</sup> E.g., “@lauraboldrini whore whore whore where #whore where “#death to #Boldrini” (“@lauraboldrini troia troia troia #troia troia #amorte la #Boldrini”) in @pietrosoriano76.

<sup>52</sup> E.g., “I WISH THEY RAPED YOU, UGLY IDIOT SLUT” (“MAGARI TI STUPRASSERO, BRUTTA BALDRACCA IMBECILLE”) in @PeterOxx in response to Boldrini, Tweet 18 October 2015.

<sup>53</sup> An example is the tweet published in April 2017 where Boldrini wrote that the Internet can also be a new frontier for violence against women, and addressed girls to fight back against this discrimination (Boldrini, Tweet 28 April 2017). Until 23 May 2017, the tweet received 38 comments, out of which only one expressed full support and gratitude for this statement.

<sup>54</sup> Such vicious trend is confirmed in the three countries on which my thesis focuses, as demonstrated by the cases of Hillary Clinton in the USA and of Julia Gillard in Australia. For a fuller account of these cases of online abuse see Hunt et al.

powerful weapon against politicians, in contemporary societies the online defamation of high-profile figures can have much more severe impacts, because it is often very difficult to trace information sources and because news tends to travel quickly on the Web. Fake news is usually created and spread on websites and social network accounts with the ultimate goal to earn money from them.<sup>55</sup> To reach this aim, its inventors usually rely on specific discursive strategies to exploit people's resentment against politicians for their alleged incapacity and corruption. Therefore, these allegations often exacerbate aggressive behaviours against specific targets, because they implicitly foment the dissatisfaction of many citizens who see social networks as suitable channels to vent out their negative emotions and therefore decide to virtually assail high-profile figures through a barrage of insults and threats. This mechanism shows the link between fake news and the articulation of hate speech against famous personalities. As Boldrini explained in a recent interview (*Parole O\_Stili*), even though hate speech and misinformation are two different phenomena, they are strictly connected, because fake news is often created to foment hatred, by ascribing to a high-profile person a false information or a statement that she has never pronounced.<sup>56</sup> While this kind of cyber misrepresentation attacks all genders, when the target is a woman, it increases online misogynistic abuse. An example of this mechanism is a viral fake news on Boldrini's sister, according to which the woman has received a €10,000 pension since she was 35. Even if Boldrini's sister had died several years before and she had never received such money (Boldrini, FB post 14 April 2017), this false information generated a strong indignation among many users who defined both women as disgusting sluts and parasites who deserved to get killed (comments available in Puente). Similarly, other types of fake news on Boldrini have

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<sup>55</sup> For an in-depth explanation of the mechanism of fake news in Italy, see Le Iene.

<sup>56</sup> See for example the reframing of Boldrini's definition of rape on a fake news website aimed at depicting the politician as a defender of sexual crimes perpetrated by migrants (*Gazzetta della Sera*).

been published on online fora and in all cases they have triggered sexualised slurs, rape threats, and death wishes, aimed at harassing and vilifying her (e.g., see comments at *Liberio Giornale*, FB post 5 December 2016; *Liberio Giornale*, FB post 10 April 2017).

Therefore, my case here is that the proliferation of hate speech is sometimes directly linked to the viral distribution of fake news, and that these phenomena survive through a mutual relationship: a successful fake news is a misinformation aimed at defaming a public figure that the general public already perceives as controversial and that has already been attacked by online aggressiveness. As a result, fake news succeeds in fuelling cyber hostility by agitating users' emotions, and therefore it increases the level of animosity on the Web. Moreover, if the target of fake news is a visible woman, misinformation results in an overt misogynistic discourse which expresses patriarchal hegemonic ideologies through a graphic gendered violence.<sup>57</sup>

It must also be noticed that the success of fake news on the Web seems also linked to an increasing functional illiteracy among many Internet users, who can read contents but show scarce analytical skills, and this lack of critical thinking makes them unable to question the validity of such information.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, I suggest considering users' hypocritical reaction to fake news as an unconscious prejudiced attitude which implicitly justifies the massive employment of discriminatory discourse, as the misogynistic and racist hate speech used to

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<sup>57</sup> To counter the phenomenon of fake news, Laura Boldrini has promoted a public awareness campaign called *Basta Bufale* (i.e., *Stop Fake News*). The campaign is a "call for the right to an honest information" (*Basta Bufale*), and it has received a wide support among several Italian celebrities who became its testimonials.

<sup>58</sup> E.g., see the above-mentioned fake news on Boldrini's sister. As visible in Boldrini, FB post 14 April 2017, the content also attributed to the woman a fake photo, namely a picture of the superhero Jessica Jones impersonated by the actress Krysten Ritter in the Netflix series *Marvel's Jessica Jones*. Despite the popularity of this show in Italy, many users did not question the validity of this news.



harass Laura Boldrini.

### *Conclusion*

During her mandate as president of the Chamber, Laura Boldrini has had the merit of fostering a debate on hate speech in Italy and of increasing the political focus on gendered violence, both online and offline. She declared on several occasions (e.g., Preziosi; Boldrini, *Parole O\_Stili*) that politics should not refrain from affirming a feminist perspective and from raising awareness on the potential pitfalls of the contemporary participatory Web, a stance that is particularly rare and innovative in the Italian political environment. Even if Boldrini is not an activist, she expressed this feminist commitment by personally reporting cases of online misogyny against herself (e.g., Boldrini, FB post 25 November 2016) and against women in general (e.g., Boldrini, FB post 19 January 2017), sometimes naming the harassers. In doing so, even if she has never used an aggressive language to show the importance of online accountability, her reports have sometimes caused backlashes against the harassers.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, these reactions show how online abuse can be a vicious circle which fuels itself regardless of the profile of the target, and they do not undermine the validity of Boldrini's engagement, who succeeded in shedding some light on the issue of gendered online harassment in Italy, where such conversation arrived with a delay of several years compared to other Western countries.<sup>60</sup>

It must also be noted that Boldrini has not intended to turn the condemnation of online harassment into a personalist issue (Boldrini, *Parole O\_Stili*). This is probably the reason why

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<sup>59</sup> See for example the strong backlash received by a woman who had previously insulted Boldrini on Facebook (Nadotti).

<sup>60</sup> E.g., media attention started to cover cases of online misogyny in 2007 in the USA (see the case of the software programmer Kathy Sierra in Valenti, *Paradise*), in 2012 in Australia (see the case of former Prime Minister Julia Gillard in Summers), and in 2013 in UK (see the case of the scholar Mary Beard in Day).

she has preferred focusing on the overall effects of online misogyny on society rather than recounting the impacts of this abuse on her life. For this reason, I cannot include a taxonomy of effects on the target for this specific case. Nevertheless, my analysis of the gendered hatred received by the president of the Chamber pointed out several important issues of this phenomenon.

First, I have presented the existence of moderating policies for social media contents as a commendable attempt to guarantee a respectful and civil conversation on cyber fora, but I also highlighted how they may cause a methodological difficulty for the study of hate speech, i.e., the collection of data. Second, to show the discursive features of the cyber misogyny against Boldrini, I have focused my analysis on some examples of gendered hatred that I retrieved in a specific moment of a cyber mob campaign against the target. Following the tenets of CDA (see van Dijk, Introduction), I have provided a two-fold analysis of these UGCs, through a linguistic study of the data, which enabled me to investigate the concepts of gender asymmetries, inequality, power, and patriarchal dominance at a macro level in misogynistic discourse. Third, I have shown how the social resentment against a powerful woman easily emerged through an aggressive and graphic discourse based on gendered prejudice and sustained through the sexual objectification of the target, as a form of punishment to shame and silence her in the public sphere. Finally, I have pointed out the hidden link between two elements that have lately characterised online communication, namely fake news and hate speech, and discussed how the former easily intensifies the latter.

Thus, this case study confirms the findings discussed in the previous chapters of my dissertation. Like the other analyses, it shows that online misogyny should be understood as a new articulation of the broad phenomenon of violence against women which is nowadays

recognised by institutions in official documents like the Istanbul Convention.<sup>61</sup> The common nature of online and offline misogyny, which I have proved throughout my thesis, suggests that such institutions should extend their commitment to tackle more traditional forms of violence also to online gendered hate speech, providing resources and developing systematic educational strategies to contrast this phenomenon on the Web, as I discuss in the Conclusion below.

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<sup>61</sup> The Istanbul Convention defines violence against women as “a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (Secretary General of the Council of Europe 3). The features and effects of gendered abuse on the Web that I identified in my study show that this definition should be rightfully extended to online misogyny.



## Chapter 7. Conclusion

The critical analysis of a complex phenomenon like online misogynistic hate speech cannot leave aside the discussion of potential solutions – or at least directions – for countering this social problem. At the same time, given the seriousness and complexity of gendered discrimination in cyberspace, one may easily end up providing remedies which sound at best unrealistic and clichéd, at worst simplistic and, therefore, useless – if not dangerous. Nevertheless, the similarities between online misogyny and more traditional offline forms of gendered violence demonstrate that urgent action must be taken if we really want to guarantee women the right to freedom of speech online.

The analysis that I have developed in the previous chapters shows that misogynistic discourse should be understood as a form of hate speech, because it harms women in several ways and on multiple levels. As I discussed at the beginning of my thesis, to tackle hate speech online we do not need more regulations. Like in many cases of offline gender violence, a major problem with countering online misogyny lies in the reluctance of policymakers to apply pre-existing measures. Twitter and Facebook have already developed policies to limit and discourage this phenomenon on their platforms. Similarly, most Western governments already have the legal tools to punish many forms of online harassment, as well as a sound jurisprudence to regulate offline physical violence against women. Nevertheless, they all have failed to systematically apply such rules, and consequently the burden of dealing with abuse has fallen disproportionately on the targets of hate speech. This attitude has fostered the spread of different types of vigilantism, some of which has turned out to be quite problematic. But mostly, a lack of determination to tackle online misogyny has translated into the intensification of harassment itself. As a result, today women are not only still stalked, harassed, raped, and killed in real life, but they also keep receiving a similar abuse in cyberspace. In fact, an

increasing number of women are exposed to an escalation of online violence, which may come in different forms, such as cyber stalking, cyber harassment, virtual rape, and image-based sexual abuse. This scarce attention to online misogynistic hate speech has so far exposed women to an increasing vilification, as I have showed in some case studies, in particular the one of Selvaggia Lucarelli, who, after reporting misogynistic abuse against other women, was targeted by a cyber mob on Facebook closed groups.

In my thesis, by comparing the experiences of women who live in countries with different socio-cultural norms, I have shown how this phenomenon is the expression of a shared culture of hierarchical gendered social orders. I have also demonstrated how many harassers are united by the desire to vilify women in the most ferocious and dehumanising way possible, sometimes shielded by online anonymity and more often protected by the complicity of policymakers. As I have demonstrated in the case study of Anita Sarkeesian, these users perform and interpret gender harassment as a competition where they perpetuate patriarchal hierarchies and supremacist ideologies from a social dominant position. As demonstrated in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, this “‘gamification’ of abuse” (Jane, *Misogyny Online* - Ch. 1) has multiple repercussions on society. First, its verbal aggressiveness has immediate emotional and psychological effects on individual targets, making them fear for their own life and safety, just like more typical forms of offline gender violence. Then, it impacts female users at social, economic, and psychophysical levels, with the aim of isolating them online and offline, of damaging their dignity and reputation, and of limiting their freedom of expression. Targets’ public exposure to such harmful and unpunished hostility also risks triggering a cascade effect on society as a whole. It can discourage other women from actively engaging online, and encourage more users to take part in misogynistic abuse. Moreover, the interplay between misogyny and other forms of discrimination, like racism, transphobia, and homophobia, demonstrates how society loses important opportunities of cultural development whenever

certain users are silenced online, because of their perceived otherness. Therefore, the massive employment of harmful speech on Web 2.0 turns out to be a major barrier to make cybersphere a democratic public arena where everyone has equal right to exist.

However, the initial question of this last chapter on how to tackle online misogyny is still unanswered. Where do we go from here? How can such a complex and (relatively) new social problem be addressed? And how can we guarantee women's digital citizenship? In my opinion, this debate should not focus merely on the implementation of existing policies to punish cyber harassers, but it should also extend to the development of effective educational strategies to prevent this form of violence. In fact, the pervasiveness of gendered harassment online shows the urgent need to raise awareness on both the existence of this problem and on its material impacts. Educational tools must aim at explaining that hypersexualised misogynistic discourse cannot be the master key to all platforms of virtual space, and consequently that online harassment is not the price that women have to pay any time they enter the public sphere.

From this perspective, the efforts of those who report cyber abuse through their online activism are undeniably valuable. Nevertheless, the development of counter-narratives against hate speech cannot be exclusively delegated to the very targets of this aggressiveness. As I have shown in my analysis, women who speak out about their experiences too often end up facing an escalation of their own harassment. Moreover, discursive power asymmetries can silence women, undermining the effectiveness of their counter-narratives. Therefore, the very ability of hate speech to silence women shows the necessity "to offer institutional support for counter-speech, instead of depending on the courage and perseverance of isolated individuals to effectively challenge harmful speech" (Maitra and McGowan 10). For this reason, I argue that the only way for institutions to tackle misogyny online is to provide both symbolic support and material resources to those who engage in the cultural struggle against hate speech. Some

examples of good practices in this direction have started to appear, like the *No Hate Speech Movement* funded by the Council of Europe and the Italian project *Parole O\_Stili*, financially supported by several local bodies. Even though they both face hate speech more broadly, and even if the European movement has neglected misogyny in some aspects of its campaign, these are significant efforts to educate younger generations on a respectful use of the Internet.

Nevertheless, more systematic institutional support is needed to counter the phenomenon here at issue, also in higher education systems. The birth of what I defined “feminist academic activism 2.0” in countries like Australia and the USA shows the importance of providing a more structured theorisation of this type of harmful discourse. As mentioned, such attention is still very scarce in Italian academia, and therefore most information on online misogynistic harassment in this country is provided by media coverage. Moreover, Italian newspaper articles have mainly reported on the online abuse of public figures, like Laura Boldrini and Selvaggia Lucarelli. Conversely, both in Australia and in the USA the gendered harassment of private individual users has informed both press coverage and some academic research.<sup>1</sup> Australian and American scholarly contributions on online misogyny<sup>2</sup> have been an essential resource for me when I analysed this phenomenon in a country like Italy whose scarce attention to gender studies still poses critical limits to the update of research in this field. Therefore, while this early stage of feminist academic activism 2.0 has paved the way for a more structured theorisation of online misogyny, further research is needed to examine the reiteration of gender inequalities in cyberspace more extensively. My case here is that scholarly research on online misogyny is a pivotal educational tool against cyber harassment, because it can help society to recognise and counter the existence of systems of dominance on social networks. More specifically, Critical Discourse Analysis can be particularly useful to promote

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<sup>1</sup> In particular, see Henry and Powell.

<sup>2</sup> See the extensive production of scholars like Emma Jane, Nicola Henry, Anastasia Powell, and Danielle Citron.



social awareness on this phenomenon, because it studies the dialectical relationship between language and society with an emancipatory agenda. Moreover, this methodology not only makes power relationships visible, but it also provides a positive critique of social asymmetries by proposing alternatives on how to right such imbalances. Therefore, while the support of governments can send an important moral message about their firm condemnation of this problem, academic research can be very useful in promoting an educational agenda, because it provides much needed cultural resources to make users more aware of their behaviours online, more able to detect discrimination, and more prone to engage in public conversation without recurring to misogynistic prejudice to push women away from the public sphere. For a society in which public debate has already extended from the traditional offline arena to new channels of communication, such collective awareness and political engagement cannot be delayed any longer. And the defence of everyone's right to freely express their identities and opinions online is a vital means to the eventual fulfilment of the democratic potentialities of the Web as a suitable space for a respectful public conversation. Because, after all, as Emma Jane (Misogyny Online - Conclusion) sums up, "the public cybersphere isn't actually public if half the people are being told to get the fuck out."



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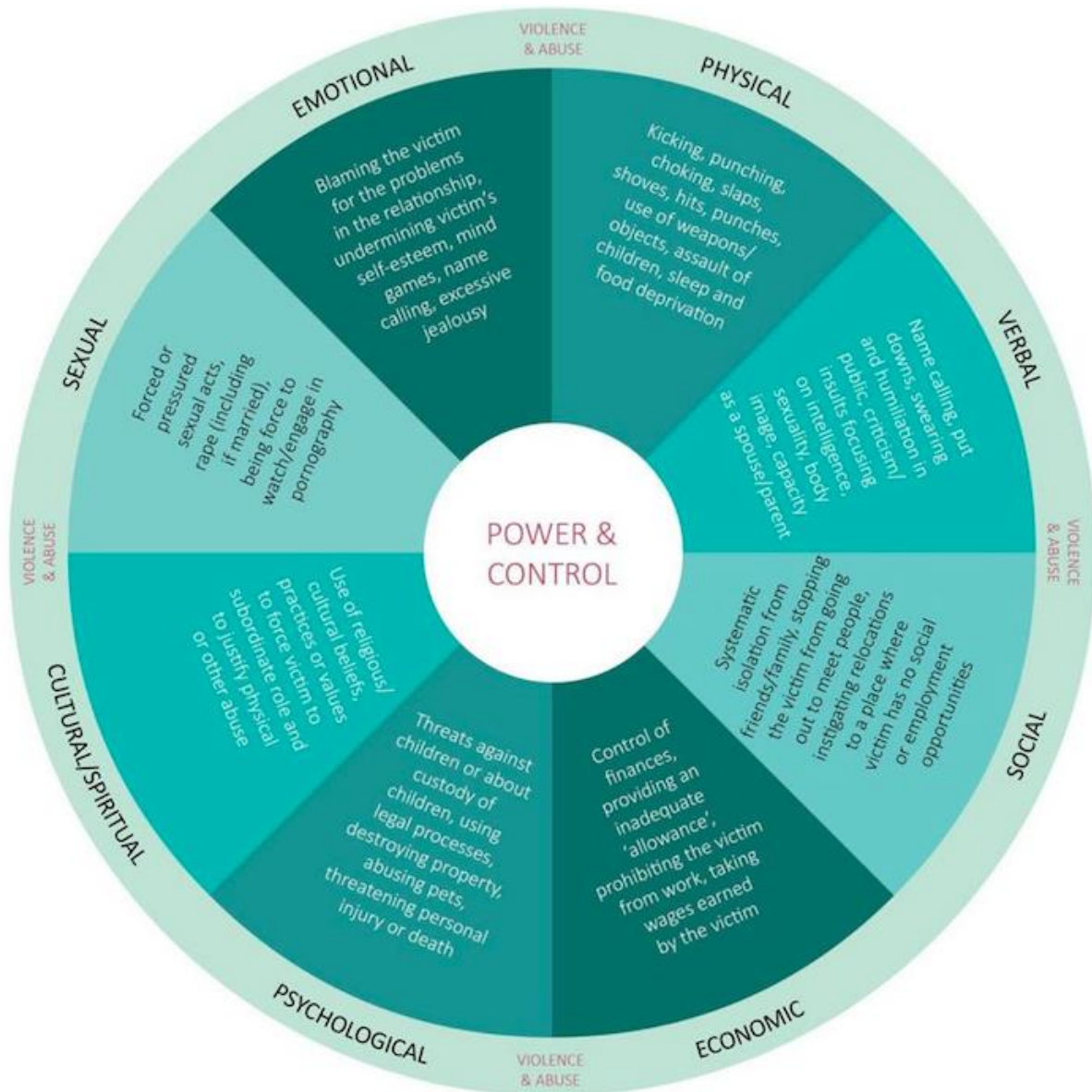
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## Appendix

### Appendix 1. Controlling Behaviours and Indicators of Domestic Violence

(Council of Australian Governments 14)



Appendix 2. The Online Abuse Wheel

(Women's Media Center, Abuse)



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Appendix 3. The Database

Name of the Target	Beginning Period of Abuse	Main Reference in Works Cited
<b>American cases (TOT: 14 cases)</b>		
Anita Sarkeesian (blogger, media and video games critic, feminist activist)	January 2014	See Chapter 4.1
Amanda Hess (journalist)	January 2014	(Hess)
Suey Park (journalist and activist)	April 2014	(Cross)
#YesAllWomen (trending hashtag)	May 2014	(Weiss)
Ashley Krischer (online journalist and activist)	June 2014	(Krischer)
#jadapose (trending hashtag)	July 2014	(Collman and Warren)
Christy Mack (model and former porn actress)	August 2014	See Chapter 4.2
Jessica Valenti (feminist journalist)	August 2014	(Aran)
Celebrity Nude Photo Leak (hacking into female celebrities' accounts)	August 2014	(Roy)
Zoe Quinn (video game developer)	August 2014	See Chapter 4.1
Brianna Wu (video game developer)	October 2014	(Stuart)
Jenn Frank (video game journalist)	October 2014	(Frank)
Madonna (singer)	February 2015	(Bidisha)
Ashley Judd (actress)	March 2015	(Judd)
<b>Australian cases (TOT: 7 cases)</b>		
Clementine Ford (journalist and feminist activist)	January 2014	(Ford, Fight)
Mariam Veiszadeh (anti-Islamophobia advocate)	October 2014	See Chapter 5.1
Alanah Pearce (journalist)	November 2014	(True)
Caitlin Roper (activist)	November 2014	See Chapter 5.2
Olivia Melville and Paloma Brierley Newton (Tinder users, feminist activist)	August 2015	(Chalmers)
Hayley Mowat (PhD student and feminist activist)	September 2015	(Green)
Elinor Lloyd-Phillips (Blogger on vintage underwear)	January 2014	(Laville et al.)
<b>Italian cases (TOT: 7 cases)</b>		
Laura Boldrini (politician)	January 2014	See Chapter 6.2

Paola Taverna and Alessandra Moretti (politicians)	February 2014	(La Stampa Staff)
#NonContaComeFemminicidio (trending hashtag)	March 2014	(Il Ricciocorno Schiattoso)
Francesca Barra (journalist)	June 2014	(Barra)
Greta Remelli and Vanessa Marzullo (aid workers)	March 2015	(Berizzi)
Selvaggia Lucarelli (blogger, pundit)	April 2015	See Chapter 6.1
Giulia Innocenzi (journalist)	August 15	(Cosimi)