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Beatrice Spallaccia

IT'S A MAN'S WORLD (WIDE WEB)

A Critical Analysis
of Online Misogyny
and Hate Speech

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GLOSSARY AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADL	Australian Defence League (anti-Muslim group)
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CMC	Computer-Mediated Communication
COE	Council of Europe
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
DDoSing	Distributed Denial-of-Service. The act of attacking a website host provider to knock the designated site offline
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
FB	Facebook
FOLDOC	Free On-Line Dictionary Of Computing
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
IBSA	Image-Based Sexual Abuse
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 porn(ography)

Impersonation	The creation of a website or social network account using a person's name with the intention to harm her
LGBTQ+	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer +
Misogynistic hate speech	Discourse that targets women specifically for their gender, with the aim to discredit, threaten, and ultimately silence them, through a marked sexual objectification
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
SNS	Social Networking Site
Trolling	Online phenomenon which should be understood as a continuum of disruptive behaviours. While in its mildest types, it can be 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
UGC	User-Generated Content
UN	United Nations
Virtual rape	Simulation of rape in virtual environments, or description of rape fantasies and sexual violation of the target

INTRODUCTION

“A compelling and (relatively) new social problem.” This is how the Australian researcher Emma Jane (2017, p. 112) refers to online misogyny and to its kaleidoscopic features. Indeed, this phenomenon characterises contemporary communication thanks to the combination of aspects that appear new with others that strike us as more familiar. On the one hand, it spreads through new online channels, like social networking sites. On the other, it reiterates violence against women, i.e., a persistent form of discrimination which comprehends “all acts of gender-based violence that result in [...] physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women” (Secretary General of the Council of Europe, 2011, p. 3). This entanglement between new and long-standing elements of social relations is exactly what makes online gendered prejudice so compelling, and its analysis on Web 2.0 particularly challenging. As recent reports have shown, today gendered harassment has become the predominant form of online abuse, and cyber misogyny is the new frontier of gender-based violence (cf. UN Women, 2015; Vox, 2016; Duggan, 2014; 2017; Amnesty International Italia, 2020). Thus, online misogyny should be understood as a new articulation of the broad phenomenon of violence against women. Nevertheless, even before the advent of Web 2.0, much institutional and scholarly research has too often neglected or dismissed the recognition of misogyny as a form of hate speech.

This book 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 qualitative 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. In doing so, I address the following main research question: *can misogynistic discourse be considered a type of hate speech?* To answer this question, I study

how misogyny manifests itself in cyberspace, investigating the relationship between the rhetoric employed in this discourse and its material consequences. To understand the scope of cyber sexism, I also try to develop a taxonomy of its effects, and to investigate the link between misogynistic discrimination and other prejudiced discourses today (e.g. racism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia) on Web 2.0.

My primary intention is to demonstrate 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. In fact, this research seeks to acknowledge the existence of misogyny online and its pervasive use to silence the voices of those women who try to affirm their legitimate participation in the digital public space. More specifically, it aims to show how Twitter and Facebook have recently become virtual fora suitable to express a violent misogynistic resentment against those who question both hegemonic patriarchal ideologies and fixed gender identities, with their active presence in a public domain. A parallel objective is to better understand the mechanisms and phenomenology of this gender-based discrimination. In this regard, my work has as an additional threefold aim: first, to provide a qualitative analysis of how prejudice against women is reproduced and reaffirmed in cyberspace, second, to study the relationship between its discursive elements and its material consequences, third, to classify the material and multilayered impact of online misogyny on women's lives also outside of the virtual domain.

To reach these objectives, I develop a comparative analysis among different geographical contexts. In fact, although my research 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, 2017, p. 112), it 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. As an Italian female researcher, at the beginning of my research I noticed that the cases which occurred in my own country had been neglected by most academic studies, and I considered it necessary to extend the study of this phenomenon to Italy, and to investigate it in the broader international context. Therefore, through a comparative analysis I try to identify any possible differences and/or similarities in the perpetuation of online misogyny among the above-mentioned geographical contexts. Such an approach differentiates my work from other studies that develop significant research on online gendered harassment but only focus on single countries (cf. Hardaker and McGlashan, 2016; Lewis *et al.*, 2017). The

focus on the Italian context distinguishes my work also from those few studies which analyse cyber sexism across several English-speaking countries (cf. Powell and Henry, 2017).

Structure of the Book

The book is divided into two main parts. Part I, *Misogynistic Hate Speech in Cyberspace*, is made up of two chapters. In Chapter 1, I review an interdisciplinary literature which ranges from philosophy and feminist theories to computer-mediated communication studies, to provide a suitable theoretical framework for my qualitative analysis and to show the need for more academic scrutiny on online misogyny as a form of hate speech. Subsequently, Chapter 2 discusses the methodology that I developed to collect data from Facebook and Twitter, and to provide a critical analysis of online misogynistic speech. As I explain in this chapter, the qualitative analysis developed in my research is driven by the main theoretical tenets of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, that is, a form of CDA which brings together the theoretical issues of critical discourse studies and feminist and queer theories. This section of the book also discusses the main characteristics of online misogynistic hate speech and presents a model which illustrates the multiple effects of this phenomenon on women's lives. As this chapter shows, my data collection resulted in a database made up of 26 cases of hate speech against women working in different fields. For constraints of space, out of these 26 cases, I select six cases (i.e., two for each country) which I consider the most relevant ones for a critical analysis of online misogyny.

I present this qualitative study in the second part of the book, that is, *Critical Analysis of Online Misogynistic Hate Speech*. Here, I analyse two case studies from the USA (Chapter 3), two from Australia (Chapter 4), and two from Italy (Chapter 5), discussing the specific rhetorical strategies used to attack the targeted women. Throughout these chapters, my analysis shows that a persistent toxic misogyny is used to vilify and silence women, and that this discourse intertwines with other forms of hate speech, especially racism, homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia. Both in the analysis of my case studies and throughout this book, 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" (2014a, p. 558) is the only way to fully understand and critically analyse the violent harassment that women experience in this virtual space.

In the final chapter, I sum up the main findings of my work which confirm the hypothesis of my research, showing how hate speech is deployed to defend a prejudiced vision of genders and to push women away from the cybersphere. Here 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.

PART I

MISOGYNISTIC HATE SPEECH IN CYBERSPACE

MISOGYNY ON A MAN'S WORLD WIDE WEB

Web 2.0, or “the participatory Web” (Blank and Reisdorf, 2012, p. 537), is the evolution of cyberspace that 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). User-generated contents (UGCs) have been travelling online from the early stages of Web 2.0, but today a significant portion of them circulates on social media. In these virtual spaces billions of users interact worldwide and establish hierarchical social relations by performing identities that can be more or less compliant with traditional orders. Often when users who belong to traditionally marginalised groups challenge these social asymmetries, they become targets of verbal harassment on social networks. Much of this abuse comes in the form of misogynistic speech, which harm women employing several different strategies which are typical of the virtual space.¹ As several reports have pointed out (cf. UN Women, 2015; Vox, 2016; Duggan, 2014; 2017; Amnesty International Italia, 2020), 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. In the following section I begin to examine online misogyny by framing it in the debate over hate speech and its definitions.

1.1 Online Misogyny as 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. In fact, it has continuously fluctuated between being considered the most complex and pervasive system of oppression (Lazar, 2007, p. 143), and a phenomenon excluded from definitions of hate speech.

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.

1.1.1 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 (Lillian, 2007, p. 731; Herz and Molnar, 2012, p. 3). While researchers have usually tried to determine the content, 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, 2012, p. 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.

Some sources recognise hate speech as an intersectional phenomenon, but do not indicate women among its targets (e.g., Oxford English Dictionary, n.d., hate speech). Moreover, many commentators have developed studies on hate speech by focusing 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, 2012, p. 5), and to indicate race, religion, nationality, and ethnicity as the defining features of targeted groups (cf. Tsesis, 2002, p. 211).

Several authors (e.g., Lillian, 2007; Titley, 2012; Weston-Scheuber, 2012) have noticed this trend of gender blindness in the definition of harmful speech. In particular, Donna Lillian (2007, p. 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 (2012, p. 16) echoes her words observing that legal definitions found in many governmental laws and recom-

mentations have tended to dismiss gender as a feature of hate speech. 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, 2012, p. 17). Therefore, the historical facts occurred across Europe in the first half of the 20th century are probably the reasons why in 1997 the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (p. 107) highlighted racist and xenophobic discourse in its definition 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.” 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, 2014a), 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, 2016, p. 149).² The focus on minorities and protected groups has lately resulted in the recognition of homo-, bi-, trans-phobia as forms of hate speech (e.g., Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, 2010). Nevertheless, while the attention towards prejudice against LGBTQ+ people has increased, misogynistic discourse is still 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 led some authors to justify the separation of misogynistic discourse from hate speech more overtly. For example, Franklyn S. Haiman (1993) studies sexist speech and hate speech separately, arguing that women, not being a minority group, have more resources available to counter discrimination (ibid, p. 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 (ibid, pp. 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, 1995; Lillian, 2007; Titley, 2012) have recognised misogyny as a form of hate speech, and, to overcome the just-explained definitional 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 (1995, p. 32): “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.” Even though this definition has been sometimes criticised as potentially too generic from a legal perspective (Downing, 1999, p. 180), I consider it particularly suitable for my research, 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 consequences of hate speech.

Therefore, applying Whillock’s definition to gender-based vilification, 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 order to study the dangers of on-line hate speech, it is then interesting to contextualise sexist hate speech in the philosophical debate over the “relationship between speech and harm” (Maitra and McGowan, 2012, p. 2) and over the mechanism through which this type of speech affects disadvantaged social groups. In the next section I discuss misogynistic discourse as a harmful speech act, and I attempt to show that it should be understood as a type of hate speech which damages women.

1.1.2 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 (2012, p. 1) argue that the recognition of the former as a fundamental principle of liberal societies does not necessarily translate into the absolute acceptance of the latter. Conversely, they maintain that, even though “a commitment to free speech involves extending to speech special protections that we don’t extend to other actions” (ibid, p. 2), the defence of freedom of expression “does not *prohibit*³ the regulation of speech. Rather, it just makes it more difficult to regulate speech” (ibid, p. 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 (ibid, p. 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, 2012, p. 6). This discussion over the sociocultural mechanism of harmful speech has developed especially in critical race theory and feminism, which have studied how racial and gender-based vilification work similarly as dominant discourses aimed at reaffirming hierarchical orders in societies (cf. Matsuda *et al.*, 1993).

The philosophical debate over the harm caused and promoted by sexualised speech has been particularly influenced by the work of Catharine MacKinnon (cf. 1983; 1987b; 1987c; 1996), who has tried to demonstrate how pornography subordinates women in society. MacKinnon's feminist investigation of "the harm theory of speech" (MacKinnon, 2012, p. vii) is grounded on the definition of pornography as "graphic sexually explicit materials that subordinate women through pictures and words" (MacKinnon, 1996, p. 22). This definition recalls the type of contents which express misogynistic vilification on the Web. More precisely, as I will show in this book, 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. (MacKinnon, 1987b, p. 176)

Even if online misogynistic discourse 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. Therefore, I suggest interpreting MacKinnon's concept of pornography as the cultural product of a broader gender discrimination that is 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 applied to misogynistic discourse, and they can facilitate the theoretical recognition of this

phenomenon as a form of hate speech. However, a main difference emerges between my work and MacKinnon's. While the theorist aimed to obtain a legal recognition of pornography as a damage to women's civil rights, my analysis focuses on the discourse used to vilify women online and it aims to recognise 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 book.

Rae Langton (1993; 2012) 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 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.

However, it must be stressed that here pornography and misogynistic discourse are not defined as speech acts in a canonical sense, that is, as instances of interaction. Following Langton (1993) and MacKinnon (1996), my interpretation of pornography and misogynistic discourse as speech acts is based on their consideration as forms of speech with a particular performative function. MacKinnon (1996, p. 22) expresses this performative function in her definition of pornography as materials that subordinate women through pictures and words. As she notes, "this definition includes the harm of what pornography says – its function as defamation or hate speech – but defines it and it alone in terms of what it does – its role as subordination, as sex discrimination, including what it does through what it says" (ibid.). According to this definition, pornography manifests itself through images and words that offer derogatory representations of women. In doing so, these materials have the performative function of reaffirming and *enacting* the subordination of women, similarly to the UGCs which express misogynistic discourse online. In this perspective, pornography and misogynistic hate speech are understood as forms of speech which act at social level, enacting gender-based discrimination and abuse. In fact, as noted by MacKinnon (1996, p. 13), "social inequality is substantially created and enforced – that is, *done* – through words and images. Social hierarchy cannot and does not exist without being embodied in meanings and expressed in communication."

In order to recognise pornography as a harmful speech act, Langton devel-

ops a “speech act model” (2012, p. 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, the philosopher recalls Austin’s explanation of the three dimensions of performatives (Langton, 1993, p. 297). 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” (ibid, p. 300). As for 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” (ibid.). 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 (ibid, p. 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, 1993, p. 302). More specifically, Langton claims that what makes pornography a perlocutionary and illocutionary act of subordination is its “systematically discriminatory nature” (ibid, p. 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 (ibid, p. 306).

To explain pornography as an illocutionary act, Langton refers to Austin’s classification of performatives between happy and unhappy utterances (cf. Austin, 1975, p. 14). In fact, in Austin’s theory, a speech act obtains illocutionary force “when it satisfies certain felicity conditions” (Langton, 1993, p. 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” (1993, p. 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” (Austin,

1975, p. 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" (1993, p. 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" (1993, p. 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* theorised by Judith Butler (e.g., 1993; 1997; 2009). 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" (2009, p. 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" (2009, p. 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” (ibid, p. 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 ascribed in patriarchal societies by laying claim to their 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 recalls 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, 1993). 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” (Butler, 2009, p. 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 (2012, p. 80) 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.

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” (1995, p. 32) which subordinates women as designated targets of gen-

dered 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, 2012, pp. 75-76), my discussion has demonstrated the common nature of misogynistic discourse and hate speech.

As mentioned, in this section of the book I discuss the similarities between pornography and misogynistic speech as subordinating speech acts because it is useful to show how online misogyny reaffirms the subalternity of women. This is strictly linked to the recognition of misogynistic discourse as a type of hate speech: it underlines how both forms of discrimination work as performative acts with the illocutionary and perlocutionary force to harm women. This has a direct methodological implication in the study of online misogyny, because it helps to recognise how sexist hate speech can subjugate and silence women, through different tactics which have a specific impact on the targets.

In this perspective, it must also be noted that online misogyny works as a peculiar type of speech. 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, 1993, p. 299).

In the following chapters of the book I study how misogynistic discourse acquires this harmful and silencing power on the Web by providing a critical discourse analysis of the 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. A definition of the most recurring tactics of online misogyny is available at the beginning of this book (cf. *Glossary and Abbreviations*), and they will be analysed more in-depth in the following chapters. However, I would like to point out here that some of these strategies target women specifically (i.e., gendered harassment, image-based sexual abuse, and virtual rape), while some others are not gen-

der-specific (i.e., impersonation, cyberbullying, cyberstalking, doxxing). It must also be noted that in most cases these strategies coexist in online hate speech to harass women as severely as possible. Some scholars (e.g., Citron, 2014a; Henry, 2015) tend to study these tactics separately in the fields of criminology and legal studies, a tendency often justified by the need to find specific legal frameworks and measures to sanction the above-mentioned online behaviours. Conversely, 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.

1.2 Policies on Hate Speech

The regulation of hate speech has long been controversial. 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 (2012, p. 6): “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 book, in the USA the principle of equality is guaranteed by the Fourteenth 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, 2007, p. 3). Even if the Australian Constitution does not specify freedom of speech or the principle of equality, Australian

governments have enacted several federal laws to tackle discrimination (e.g., the 1975 *Racial Discrimination Act*, the 1984 *Sex Discrimination Act*, and the 1992 *Disability Discrimination Act*).

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, especially in its gendered forms. Anastasia Powell and Nicola Henry (2017, p. 281) comment the generalised lack of legislation in many countries to tackle online gendered harassment as follows:

In part this is due to the strong protections of freedom of speech in liberal democratic societies and the reticence of policymakers to introduce any new laws that might impose further restrictions on these freedoms. But it is also due to failure to appreciate the harms of online abuse and harassment, and ... the impacts are often trivialised and minimised in the policies and practices of police, media, the legal profession, and other responders to the problem.

Moreover, for its very nature, online communication crosses national borders worldwide and thus complicates the decision on which state, federal, and international law should be applied to each case. Therefore, even though my analysis focuses on the harassment of 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 has 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 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.

1.2.1 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, 2007,

p. 45). 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” (2017, p. 46). 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, 1995, p. 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. 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. 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, 2014a; Volokh, 2010), the pervasiveness of free speech absolutism has often resulted in the difficulty to apply already existing rules.

A major difference among the three above-mentioned countries concerns the regulation of image-based sexual abuse (hereafter IBSA), that is, distribution of intimate or sexually explicit images without the victim’s consent. This phenomenon is also known as *revenge porn(ography)*, however I prefer using *IBSA* for two reasons. First, because “not all perpetrators are motivated by revenge” and “not all images are pornographic or serve the purpose of pornography” (Powell and Henry, 2017, p. 119). Second, this expression “better captures the nature and harms of the non-consensual creation and distribution of private sexual images”

(McGlynn and Rackley, 2016), and, “unlike ‘revenge porn,’ it captures both the broad range of practices being challenged and to convey the nature and extent of the harms suffered by victims” (ibid.). As mentioned, Italy, Australia, and the USA have recently tried to tackle this phenomenon in different ways.

To define a more structured legal framework on violence against women, in 2019 Italy passed the so-called “Red Code” bill (Legge 19 luglio 2019, n. 69), which recognises IBSA as a criminal offence, whose perpetrators face up to six years imprisonment or fines of up to €15,000 (Tidman, 2019). Legislative developments on this issue vary between and across the USA and Australia, also given the nature of their legal systems. In the USA, to date, more than 30 states have passed some form of legislation on IBSA (cf. Powell and Henry, 2017, p. 207). In the last few years, Australia³ has updated its legal framework at both federal and territorial levels. While until late 2016 “only two states had introduced specific criminal offences” (ibid, p. 204), in 2018 Australia’s Parliament passed legislation to criminalise IBSA at federal level, under the *Enhancing Online Safety (Non-consensual Sharing of Intimate Images) Bill*, according to which perpetrators can face civil penalties of up to A\$105,000 (cf. Powell *et al.*, 2019).

One of the online phenomena that has lately attracted the attention of jurisprudence in many countries is cyberbullying. For example, in the USA this crime is punished by 23 States (cf. Hinduja and Patchin, 2016). In Australia, while each state and territory has different laws against bullying, its cyber version is interpreted as protected by section 474.17 of the federal Criminal Code (cf. Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions, n.d.). Italy has lately 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, 2016).⁴ After a long and controversial political debate, Italy approved the law in May 2017, a decision which did not come without criticisms from several commentators, who defined it useless (Scorza, 2016), reactionary (Mantellini, 2016), and “the stupidest censorship law in European history” (Doctorow, 2016). These criticisms reflect 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 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 enforcing such policies.

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., Valenti, 2014b; Laville *et al.*, 2016; Jane, 2017). In the following paragraphs, I briefly discuss SNSs guidelines on online hate speech and their problematic enforcement, especially in cases of harmful speech against women.

1.2.2 Facebook, Twitter, and Community Standards

Given the increasing episodes of online harassment and their reports in international press coverage, some major SNSs have developed specific policies to counter this behaviour on their platforms. Because my research 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 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, 2020a; Twitter, 2020a). More specifically, Twitter bans the promotion of violence "on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, caste, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or serious disease," particularly in the form of "repeated and/or non-consensual slurs, epithets, racist and sexist tropes, or other content that degrades someone" (Twitter, 2020a). These standards extend to paid advertising products for which the company prohibits the promotion of hateful and adult sexual content, among others (Twitter, 2020b).

Facebook has expressed a similar attention towards hate speech and potentially harmful behaviours by developing some more articulated policies. Through a set of Community Standards, the company attempts to address and regulate violence and criminal behaviour, safety, objectionable content, integrity and authenticity, intellectual property, and content-related requests (Facebook, 2020a). In particular, it provides a definition of hate speech as "a direct attack on people based on what we call protected characteristics — race, ethnicity, na-

tional origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, caste, sex, gender, gender identity, and serious disease or disability” (Facebook, 2020b). The company thus affirms its commitment to remove not only hate speech, but also violent and graphic content, adult nudity and sexual activity, sexual solicitation, cruel and insensitive material (ibid.), as well as bullying and harassment directed at private individuals and public figures (Facebook, 2020c).

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. Back in 2013 Facebook admitted its failure in addressing the harassment of women and pledged to improve the monitoring of its platforms (Levine, 2013), after its inefficiency was denounced in an online campaign signed by more than 100 women’s movement and social justice organisations (Women Action Media, 2013). A similar – but even less spontaneous – admission came from Twitter in 2015, when, in an internal memo leaked to the media, its then 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, 2015). 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 (ibid.).

Despite the admissions of their representatives, Twitter and Facebook have often failed to enforce 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.

Some institutions and SNSs 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*. In this document, signed in May 2016, the parties undertook to provide reciprocal support in combating cyber hate in their respective domains. In particular, SNSs affirmed their full commitment to effectively apply their policies, to monitor online hateful speech, and to provide 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, 2016, p. 1), it has been criticised by some commentators who have read it as a potential violation of users’ right to free speech (Saetta, 2016).

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 from 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 SNSs to counter the continuous abuse of women online. As the British journalist Laurie Penny (2013, n.p.) 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.” Therefore, the first step to overcome this reluctance to apply existing regulations is a full recognition of the pervasiveness and seriousness of this phenomenon. To do so, before analysing case studies of hate speech through a victim-centred approach, I discuss how cyber hostility has been analysed by computer-mediated communication studies.

1.3 Online Hostility in Computer-Mediated Communication Studies

Over the last 30 years, the Web has evolved significantly, from its initial static stage into the worldwide interconnected and participatory platforms that we currently know. During these three decades, research on cyber hostility has been conducted from different perspectives within the broad and interdisciplinary field of computer-mediated communication studies (hereafter CMC studies), mostly by employing the terms *hate speech*, *trolling*, and *flaming*. 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 including linguistics, sociolinguistics, psychology, and behavioural studies have tended to refer to it with the terms *flaming* and *trolling*. Moreover, the studies in the above-mentioned disciplines show that both *trolling* and *flaming* are often used to indicate – among others – disruptive behaviours 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, dis-

cussion groups, chats, blogs, social networks). Thus, several CMC studies on flaming and trolling are here reviewed in relation to hate speech, with the exceptions explained below.

1.3.1 What's in a Name? Trolling, flaming, hate speech

As some scholars have pointed out (cf. McCosker, 2014, p. 204; Jane, 2015, p. 66), 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*. In fact, along with the growing pervasiveness of Web 2.0, disruptive behaviours 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 (cf. Hardaker, 2010, p. 224). 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.* (1983, p. 158) 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." Through the decades, this behaviour has attracted the attention of scholars working in the CMC field, who have used the 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.*, 1986, p. 161) and "expressing oneself more strongly on the computer than one would in other communication settings" (Kiesler *et al.*, 1984, p. 1130), to any kind of emotional expression toward someone else which relies on the use of superlatives (Lea *et al.*, 1992, p. 99). In a more recent contribution, Peter Moor *et al.* define flaming as a behaviour "displaying hostility by insulting, swearing or using otherwise offensive language" (2010, p. 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

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 (2008), Internet users started to adopt it in the late 1980s, while the Oxford English Dictionary (hereafter OED) reports a first use of the word only in 1992 (OED, n.d., Troll n. 1). In spite of its relatively recent online appearance, the origin of this word probably dates back to the 17th century; from the Scandinavian myth, it originally indicated giants, dwarfs, imps and supernatural creatures in general, which inhabited caves and subterranean dwellings (OED, n.d., Troll n. 2) and haunted the Vikings (Marche, 2015). According to the just-mentioned sources this is where the online use of the word originated, while others (Herring *et al.*, 2002, p. 372; Binns, 2012, p. 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 (also known as FOLDOC), which describes it as “an electronic mail message, Usenet posting, or other (electronic) communication which is intentionally incorrect, but not overtly controversial” (1994). 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 OED (n.d., Troll n.1), 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.” Similarly, the Macquarie Dictionary (n.d., Troll) 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.”

Over the last two decades, scholars have been trying to describe the phenomenon of trolling from different perspectives, elaborating definitions that are sometimes in conflict with each other. Studying online trolling behaviour and its effects, Judith Donath (1999, p. 45) points out that “trolling is a game about identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most of the players.” Meanwhile, other researchers have attempted to give a working definition of *trolling*, describing the nature, aims, and effects of this behaviour in cyberspace. Some scholars have stressed the annoying nature of trolling. For

instance, Susan Herring *et al.* (2002, p. 372) 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, shifting the dialogue into a confusing and fruitless conversation. Some others have depicted it as the act of posting “incendiary comments with the express purpose of provoking an argument” (Cox, 2006). In more general 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, 2007).

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 networking sites. For this reason, the widespread use of this term to refer to online harassment has been highly criticized by the American feminist activists Anita Sarkesiaan and Zoe Quinn, both harassed for several years by so-called online trolls. 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 (cf. Sarkeesian, 2015a; Quinn in Jason, 2014).

Even if I agree with Sarkeesian and Quinn in stressing the problematic use of *trolling* with reference to contemporary online harassment, the widespread employment of troll-related terms in today’s journalism makes it impossible to analyse hate speech without relying on these words. Therefore, to use the term *trolling* properly, a new working definition of it is necessary. As Claire Hardaker (2013) 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.

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 definition of trolling which makes it possible to use the word with reference to hate speech: trolling is a CMC phenomenon which should be understood as a continuum of disruptive behaviours. 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 can take many forms and can result in a wide range of disruptive conducts, ranging from a type of bothersome but innocuous jest to a hostile stratagem suitable for maintaining social power asymmetries through online aggressive behaviours. My definition also underlines the importance of considering more serious types of trolling as a device aimed to exercise control over disadvantaged groups, especially those who have historically challenged the unequal distribution of power within society. Therefore, thanks to my new definition, in the remainder of the book, troll-related expressions are used sometimes to study the features of hate speech and gendered cyber hostility.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the terms *trolling* and *flaming* have been used in CMC research to investigate the presence of aggressive behaviours and hateful discourse on Web 2.0. In fact, these CMC studies have long debated whether online hostility is to be attributed to the very nature of cyberspace or if it is basically dependant on the sociocultural contexts of users. To solve this dilemma, many contributions have been published in this field of research, generating different theoretical positions and understanding of the phenomenon. Below I provide an overview of CMC literature on online hostility, following the classification of these studies provided by the Australian scholar Emma Jane (2014b; 2015; 2017).

1.3.2 Evolution of CMC Studies on Online Hostility

Reviewing the diachronic evolution of CMC research on cyber hostility, Jane (2015) divides this literature into three main waves. Her classification 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.

According to Jane (2015, p. 67), the first wave developed between late 1980s and 1990s, that is, in the early stage of Web 2.0. During this decade, scholars often referred to online harassment as *flaming*, and investigated it in terms of "technological determinism" (ibid.). In fact, they attempted to understand whether digital hostility is an intrinsic element of online interaction or if it

depends on the social context from which it generates. Therefore, this wave saw the polarization between two different views on the nature of CMC: while some interpreted it as an efficient and rational way of acting online, according to others the Web provided platforms which fostered uninhibited, irrational, and disruptive behaviours. In turn, this debate resulted in two different, polarised understandings of online hostility itself: on the one hand, those who considered online harassment as a product of the technological medium, and thus triggered by its features, on the other, those who saw it as influenced by its social context. This debate over the roots and essence of online hostility has deeply influenced most CMC literature from the 1980s onward, although researchers have later tried to solve this dilemma in different ways.

During the second wave of this literature, which developed between the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, previous research was criticised for not being able to define cyber hostility in a functional and systematic way (Jane, 2015, pp. 68-69). Studies published in this period sought to theorise the phenomenon at issue through complex definitions and theoretical models (cf. the *Interactional Norm Cube* in O'Sullivan and Flanagin, 2003; the *Message Invectives Scale* in Turnage, 2008). Although most of these studies were admirable attempts to theorise online hostility, their methodological efforts translated into rigid classifications of UGC which ended up overlooking the social, ethical, and political aspects of this phenomenon. As Jane (2015) notes, this attitude changed the way in which the academic debate on online hostility was conceived, and influenced the following contributions of the third wave.

This last wave started approximately in 2006 with the advent of SNSs like Facebook, and is still ongoing. During this phase, academic contributions have rejected the complex definitions developed by previous studies, and have tended to overlook most cyber hostility or to foster a sense of moral relativism towards it. In fact, on the one hand, references to hostile behaviours and flaming acts are absent in some works of this phase (e.g., see the *International Handbook of Internet Research* by Hunsinger *et al.*). On the other, some scholars have sought to confute the very existence of cyber harassment, 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, 2006).

We can see how similar positions can easily produce a moral relativism and sometimes translate into a defence of hostile behaviours as liberating acts against a mainstream discourse, too often perceived as a form of punctilious and point-

less political correctness. These views, in fact, 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. My argument here is not that the analysis of online harassment should be conducted through a moralising attitude, nor that an overtly committed political perspective should prevail over the identification of a clear methodology. Conversely, I argue 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. As I explain in the following chapter, 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.

First, as Emma Jane (2017) and Qing Li (2005) note, 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, 1995; 2002; Powell and Henry 2017; Segrave and Vitis 2017) or in the few studies particularly designed to analyse online gender-based discriminations (e.g., see Soukup, 1999). Conversely, most CMC literature that aimed at providing overall understandings of the functioning of flaming and trolling (e.g., Spears and Lea, 1992; Turnage, 2008) have failed to recognise the pervasive reliance of abusive behaviours on misogynistic content and how gender asymmetries work online.

Second, only few contributions have attempted to critically study the discourse used in online hostility by focusing on the experience of targeted women (cf. Herring, 1999; Jane 2014a; 2017). While their findings are presented in next chapter, it is worth noticing here that those scholarly contributions which investigated the rhetoric of online gendered harassment came to similar conclusions, even though they were conducted in different periods and thus on different kinds of online platforms. For example, Susan Herring (1999) compared gender harassment that occurred on two different online fora and found that, even though “gender is expressed and oriented to differently in the two modes of CMC” (ibid, p. 163), when cases of online harassment occur, their rhetorical

dynamics seem to follow always the same pattern – namely “(non)provocation, harassment, resistance, escalation, compliance” (ibid, p. 164) – and are aimed to silence female users or forcing them to modify their original active engagement in different sorts of discussions.

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 messages. Many scholars, in fact, do not provide examples of the type of texts they interpret as harassment, 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” (1992, p. 90), Kaufer talks about “XXX words not fit for family audiences” (2000, p. 13). The decision of censoring the data and not providing 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, 2015, p. 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 (1996, p. 229) 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,” but they support their findings by providing instances like “Snow Pro, you obviously don’t know crap about skiing, so why not drop the act?:-)” (ibid, p. 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” (in Sarkeesian, 2014a).

In conclusion, as an overall consideration on the literature here reviewed, I agree with Jane (2015, p. 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 existence of this phenomenon. Hence, below I suggest a link between these issues and a newborn trend in the contemporary interpretation of online gendered hostility.

1.3.3 Feminist Academic Activism 2.0

To complete this overview, I present a trend that I have detected in the recent 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 the limits and pitfalls of previous research 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. These contributions started to appear in recent years, in particular after the first report of online misogynistic attack which gained international resonance in 2013, i.e., the cyber harassment of the British scholar Mary Beard (cf. Day, 2013). Although less renowned cases of cyber misogyny had been reported before (cf. Citron 2014a), since approximately 2013 many women working in fields like journalism and activism have started to produce contributions to denounce and analyse the phenomenon of sexist harassment on Web 2.0. Since then, many of these contributions have focused on the discursive mechanisms of online misogyny and have provided 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, and web-based projects (cf. Bates 2013; Penny, 2013; Sarkeesian, 2014c; Jeong, 2015). This new form of feminist activism has been very helpful for several scholars who are trying to steer academic attention towards online gendered hate speech (e.g., Citron, 2014a; Mantilla, 2015; Jane, 2017; Powell and Henry, 2019). 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 developed and spread in several English-speaking countries like the United States, Australia, and the UK, a focus on online misogynistic discourse is still basically absent among scholars working within the Italian academia. Here some contributions on antisocial use of the Web can be found in legal and psychology fields (see Martoni and Palmirani, 2015; Mazzoni, Cannata and Baiocco, 2017), but a focus on the discursive and gendered dimensions of online hostility has been developed only in very few studies (i.e., Verza, 2017; 2019). While the reasons of this academic vacuum would need a deep analysis which goes beyond the aims of this book, I would argue that the lack of a systematic articulation of gender studies in Italian universities (cf. Baccolini, 2016) 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 misogynistic hate speech against Italian women come mainly from the media. 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 former President of the Chamber of Deputies Laura Boldrini.

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 (2007, p. 145) calls “feminist analytical [academic] activism” – which is essential to study the discursive strategies, sociocultural origins, and repercussions of this phenomenon, as I explain in the following chapter. Despite their origin in grassroots activism, these contributions have unconsciously overcome the limits of the three waves of CMC studies discussed before. In fact, 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. Moreover, by giving clear examples of misogynistic discourse, they have overcome the problem of unspeakability of gendered harassment on social media. These studies have 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.

1.3.4 Conclusion

The literature review discussed in this chapter reflects the multidisciplinary perspective that I adopted in my research. In fact, as I demonstrated by briefly reviewing works published over the last 30 years, a study of online misogynistic hate speech gives rise to several theoretical issues that must be addressed through an interdisciplinary approach. As I aim to provide a contribution in the field of cultural and gender studies, my research qualitatively analyses the discursive mechanisms of misogynistic hate speech, by investigating how concepts like hegemony, power, ideology, and identities are expressed and negotiated through

language in the cybersphere. As explained in this chapter, I rely on the concept of performativity of gender developed in the tradition of queer theory to understand the relationship between traditional gender norms and online misogynistic hate speech, in terms of its origins, discursive strategies, and effects.

Moreover, by framing it in the speech act theory, I also discussed how online misogyny can be interpreted as a harmful speech act which both represents and reaffirms the subordination of women in society, through a series of tactics which impact the targets in multiple ways. In this perspective, I explained that a research on cyber misogyny must bring to the foreground the experiences of women who have been abused online, an approach that can be found in the emerging trend of feminist academic activism 2.0, whose contributions have helped me to develop a methodology suitable to investigate the relationship between the features of misogynistic speech and the harm that it generates. For this reason, in the following chapter I explain in more details the methodology of my research, I point out the main characteristics of online misogynistic discourse, and I present a taxonomy which attempts to classify the multilayered impact of this type of hate speech on its targets.

EXPLORING GENDERED HATE SPEECH ONLINE

This chapter explains the methodology that I developed for my research. It is divided into two main sections: in the first one, I discuss the criteria that I followed to build a coherent database that is suitable for the qualitative analysis of online misogynistic discourse. In the second one, I provide a theoretical overview of the approach I use for the analysis of my case studies.

2.1 Building a Database of Online Gender-Based Hate Speech

2.1.1 Collection of the Data

Reflecting on the use of UGC in discourse analysis, Gerlinde Mautner (2005, p. 815) 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.” For this reason, I set some methodological criteria that helped me to collect data and to build my database.

As a first step of this methodology, I chose to take into consideration cases of hate speech against women who are located in three specific countries: Australia, Italy, and the United States. Several are the reasons of this choice. First, 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 (cf. Citron, 2014a; Mantilla, 2015) and Australia (cf. Jane, 2017; Segrave and Vitis, 2017; Powell and Henry, 2017; 2019). 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 a plethora of SNSs, and that

the very presence of fora which enable users' participation is the core element of Web 2.0 (Singel, 2005). 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 2019 report (Kemp, 2019), Facebook is by far the most popular social network, with more than 2,270 million users all over the world, while Twitter counts almost 326 million users. According to the same report, 81% of active Internet users have a Facebook account in Italy, 80% in the USA, and 79% in Australia. National percentages for Twitter are as follows: 42% in the USA, 32% in Italy and 26% in Australia.

The selection of the platforms is also strictly connected with the kind of research that I wanted to develop. In fact, my concern here is to provide a qualitative analysis of the content of misogynistic discourse, not to investigate its frequencies online. As mentioned above, 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, 2005, p. 815). It is therefore not only extremely difficult but basically impossible to give an overall account of all the material of Web 2.0. This is particularly true for contents published and shared on SNSs like Facebook whose specific privacy settings do not enable researchers to access a vast part of the data posted there. Of course, this does not mean that conducting quantitative analysis online is impossible. In fact, some scholars have recently produced relevant contributions on disruptive online communication, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches (cf. Hardaker and McGlashan, 2016; Altoaimy, 2018). However, their researches are focused only on a specific SNS, that is, Twitter. While several methods and software exist to mine tweets, it is extremely difficult to use these tools to collect a coherent set of Facebook data, given the privacy settings of this platform. This gives rise to a major methodological issue for a research which investigate hate speech on both Twitter and Facebook, and for this reason a quantitative analysis has not been included in my study. I acknowledge that this methodological issue could have been overcome by limiting my analysis to Twitter data. However, this would have affected the mapping of misogynistic hate speech in the selected countries, given the wide spread of Facebook in them, and therefore it would have reduced the scope of my comparative approach, an aspect which differentiate my work from other research on online misogyny.

After selecting the platforms for my analysis, I set a suitable timeframe for the collection of the data: posts were collected from January 2014 to November

2015. 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.).

As a final step, after collecting the data, I coded the material paying attention to the tactics used to harass each target (e.g., impersonation, virtual rape, death threats), the type of data retrieved (written text and/or image), along with the linguistic elements and rhetoric used to express misogyny and other forms of hate speech (e.g., derogatory and graphic rhetoric, stereotypes, ad hominem invectives, modality of verbs, use of interjections). This process helped me to select the case studies on which I decided to focus my analysis of misogynistic hate speech in the three countries. Therefore, the above-described criteria enabled me to create a coherent dataset, which, although cannot be considered exhaustive of all instances of misogynistic hate speech on the Web, is suitable to analyse the content of this discourse.

2.1.2 Results of the Data Collection: the Database

Following the criteria identified for the data collection, the database resulted in 26 cases. These cases are divided as follows:

- 11 cases of women located in the USA (i.e., feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian; journalists Amanda Hess, Suey Park, Ashley Krischer, and Jessica Valenti; adult actress Christy Mack; video game developers Zoe Quinn and Brianna Wu; video game journalist Jenn Frank; actress Ashley Judd; and the singer Madonna)
- seven cases of women located in Australia, (i.e., journalist and feminist activist Clementine Ford; anti-Islamophobia advocate Mariam Veiszadeh; blogger Elinor Lloyd-Phillips; journalist Alanah Pearce; feminist activists Caitlin Roper and Hayley Mowat; Tinder user and feminist activist Paloma Brierley Newton)
- eight cases of women located in Italy, (i.e., politicians Laura Boldrini, Paola Taverna and Alessandra Moretti; journalists Francesca Barra and Giulia Innocenzi; aid workers Greta Remelli and Vanessa Marzullo; blogger and journalist Selvaggia Lucarelli).

I also identified a collective case of IBSA in the USA (i.e., the *Celebrity Nude Photo Leak*), as well as the misogynistic trending hashtags *#YesAllWomen* and *#jadapose* in the USA, and *#NonContaComeFemminicidio* in Italy (i.e., *#ItDoesntCountAsFemicide*). Considering that online hate speech presents recur-

ring discursive strategies, and that an analysis of these features in all 26 cases would have resulted repetitive, for each country I selected two cases which I considered the most relevant ones in relation to their national/international resonance, the type of data retrieved, the harassing tactics employed, the presence of other forms of hate speech and their use to sustain misogyny. Table 2.1 below indicates the names of the selected targets, and the number of UGCs retrieved for each case:

Table 2.1 Cases selected for the analysis.

	Case study	N° of tweets	N° of FB contents*	TOT n° of UGCs
USA	Anita Sarkeesian	313	0	313
	Christy Mack	115	0	115
AUS	Mariam Veiszadeh	25	18	43
	Caitlin Roper	142	41	183
IT	Selvaggia Lucarelli	7	307	314
	Laura Boldrini	25	104	129
	TOT UGCs	627	470	1097

* FB = Facebook

For each of these cases I provide a feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, whose main features are explained later in this chapter. Moreover, in each case study I 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 available later in this chapter, and it is an important contribution that will hopefully guide future research on this phenomenon. As the analysis will 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.

2.1.3 On Translating UGCs from Italian into English

As mentioned above, my research also includes the analysis of the abuse experienced by two Italian women. Therefore, in that section 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.¹ In these cases, my English translation appears right after the visual elements. English translations aim to guide the English-speaking reader in a better understanding of the content under analysis. For constraints of space and given the scope of my book, I do not discuss all 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 (cf. Poggi *et al.*, 2015).

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 book, my translation approach is aimed at showing harmful speech “in its unexpurgated entirety” (Jane, 2014a, p. 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 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. This 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.

2.2 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, 2013, p. 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.

2.2.1 Brief Overview of Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (also CDA) can be defined as a “problem-oriented, interdisciplinary research movement” (Fairclough and Wodak, 2011, n.p.), 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 (2011, n.p.) 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, 1993), 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. According to Antonio Gramsci (1971), 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, that is, 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, 2010, p. 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 alternatives to right them is based on values like equity and inclusiveness (Wodak in Kendall, 2007).

Since its birth in the early 1990s, the CDA paradigm has developed into various forms and approaches. While some of these approaches imply a more detailed study of the linguistic elements of discourse, some others apply a broader linguistic operationalisation (Wodak and Meyer, 2009, p. 22). Among the many contributions of CDA, the theoretical model which has mainly inspired my work is the three-dimensional framework developed by Norman Fairclough (cf. Fairclough, 1992). This framework indicates three dimensions for the study of discourse, which are: the analysis of the linguistic elements of the text (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, and text structure), the analysis of the discursive practices of the text (i.e., production, distribution, and circulation of the text), and the analysis of discourse as a social practice (i.e., social and cultural effects of discourse).

It must also be noted that the several approaches and theoretical frameworks developed within CDA continuously speak to each other and influence the way in which scholars apply them to analyse discourse. In my research, I join the general tenets of Fairclough’s framework with some linguistic tools traditionally used in the Discourse-Historical Approach (cf. Wodak and Reisigl, 2001). This implies an analysis of discursive strategies such as nomination, predication, argumentation, mitigation/intensification, and perspectivation, explained in the following chapters. At the same time, to investigate the effects of misogynistic hate speech from a gender perspective, I join CDA with core concepts of

feminist and queer studies, as theorised in a specific approach to the study of discourse, that is, feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, whose main theoretical features are explained in the following section.

2.2.2 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 (2007, p. 142) 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.

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 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 book 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. This approach, also called *multimodal discourse analysis*, comes from Michael Halliday's social semiotic approach to language, and it explores the creation of meaning through the integration of language with other semiotic resources, like images, videos, music, sound, but also action and gesture.

Following Michelle Lazar's suggestions for a feminist discourse practice, below 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, 2007, p. 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, 2007, p. 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” (2005, p. 79). An example of this pervasive androcentrism is the harassment women still face when they enter the public sphere 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. This internalisation of patriarchal values

can be found in online contents that are generated by female users and that express sexist prejudice. Even if my research does not analyse quantitatively women's involvement in misogynistic hate speech, I do quote some UGCs allegedly published by female users, to study the discursive mechanism of internalised misogyny. Although it is difficult to detect the gender of users on SNSs with no margin of error (cf. Hardaker, 2016), in my study I consider 'female' those accounts that use sufficiently credible female names and profile pictures (e.g., I do not take into consideration those accounts that use sexually explicit photos of famous women as profile pictures). Conversely, the gender of harassers is to be intended as 'male' in the analysis of my case studies, unless otherwise stated.

It is important to stress that the understanding of hegemonic patriarchal ideology has been driven by the theoretical developments of feminist studies. In fact, the evolution of feminist and gender theories has fostered 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, 2007, p. 149). Moreover, the poststructuralist approach of LGBT and queer studies has also showed "the discursive limits of 'sex'" (Butler, 1993), 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 to study the harassment they experience in cyberspace, where misogyny is intertwined with other types of hate speech such as racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and ageism.

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 and sexual harassment – still coexist with subtler and supposedly harmless types of sexism, like canned sexist jokes and hypersexualised portraits of women. 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, 2007, p. 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 5.1, 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, through a rhetoric which combines sexist jokes 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 the following chapters.

2.2.3 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 (2014a), Karla Mantilla (2015), Danielle Citron (2014a) and Sady Doyle (2011), I identify the following intertwined features of misogynistic hate speech: visible women as targets, escalation of the attacks and cyber mobs, 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, 2015, p. 89), "cyber gender harassment" (Citron, 2009, p. 378), "e-bile" (Jane, 2014a; 2014b), "online sexist and sexual harassment" (Penny, 2013) and "technology-facilitated sexual violence" (Powell and Henry, 2019).

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. Moreover, 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, 2011). They are often ridiculed as *feminazis* or *Dworkinite extremists*² (ibid.), 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 shows that the ultimate aim of these attacks is to maintain the status quo of society as a male dominated space.

Escalation of the Attacks

When a woman denounces cyber harassment, it is very likely that this will cause an escalation of the online abuse, like a snowball effect. 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, 2014a, p. 566). In fact, 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" (ibid, p. 561). Furthermore, as Sady Doyle (2011) 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, 2013). 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.

Cyber Mobs, Anonymity, Facelessness

Cyber 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 her and disrupt the conversation that her opinions have generated (Burrows, 2016). As Jane (2014a, p. 559) and Mantilla (2015, n.p.) note, 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.

Researchers have been analysing the role of anonymity in online hostility since the emergence of Web 2.0, often linking it to the so-called “Gyges effect” (Hardaker, 2013; Fox, 2014; Marche, 2015). The origins of this expression 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.

Another important feature that must be taken into account when studying online hostility and cyber mobs is the process of deindividuation which may be triggered by CMC. This process was first described by Martin Lea and Russell Spears (1991), who underline that in online conversation 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, 2014), like in the case of the misogynistic attacks received by the already-mentioned activist Zoe Quinn who defined her harassers as an anonymous, faceless hate mob (Jason, 2014). 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, 2009). As Stephen Marche (2015) notes “the spirit of facelessness is coming to define the 21st [century]. Facelessness is not a trend; it is a social phase we are entering that we have not yet figured out how to navigate.”

However, not all critics agree on recognizing the direct link between facelessness, anonymity, and online hate speech. While the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2010, n.p.) 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, 2015, p. 205). Chemaly (2015) 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 and institutional projects (e.g., see Woodlock, 2014) 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 IBSA.

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 (cf. Citron, 2014a; Jane, 2017), 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.* (2016) demonstrate that on SNSs 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. 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. 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.

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 their mind on the Web, the abusers do not contest their ideas providing rational comments which may generate a cultural exchange. To the contrary, women are insulted in a way that is specific to their gender through ad hominem invectives (Jane, 2014a, p. 559). They receive gender-based slurs which usually have a highly violent content expressed through extremely graphic and hypersexualised imagery.

Moreover, sexist slurs come with graphic rape and death threats which can generate episodes of abuse in real life especially when they occur together with strategies like doxxing, that is, the act of conducting extensive online researches to collect someone's private information and post them online to increase the harassment. The actress and activist Ashley Judd (2015) 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'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, 2010, n.p.) 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*” (2014a, p. 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, 2015, p. 205), she is classified as too fat, too old, too lesbian, and/or too *fugly* (portmanteau for *fucking* and *ugly*). 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” (2014a, p. 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 (2011) 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”. 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.

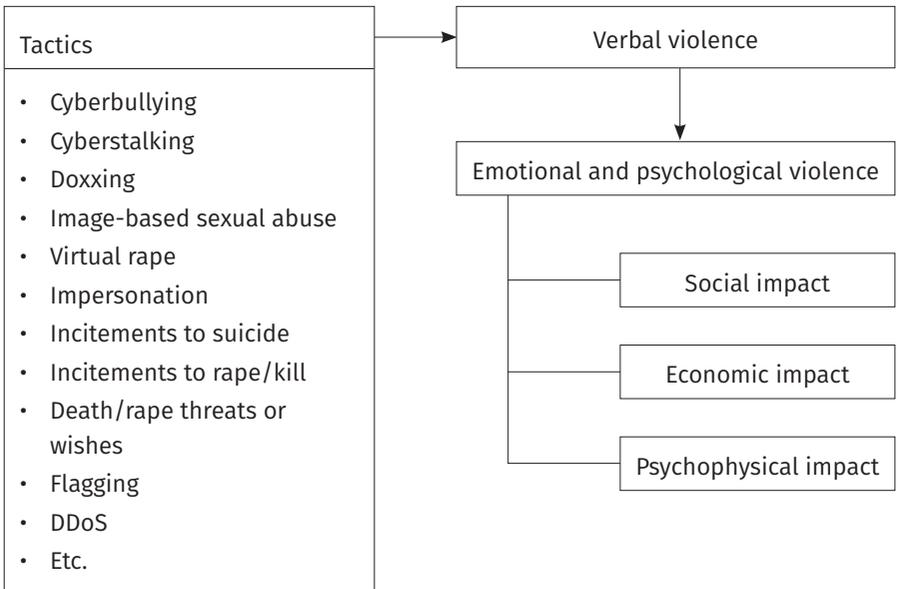
Material Consequences of Online Misogyny

As mentioned before, a critical analysis of misogynistic hate speech needs to take into consideration the material 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. Thus, it is important to stress 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. To do so, in my research I provide a model which explains the phenomenology of misogynistic hate speech in terms of its tactics and material effects. In my opinion, a study of the phenomenology

of cyber sexist hate speech is essential to understand how misogyny works at social level and what its magnitude is in contemporary society. For this reason, my book not only analyses misogynistic discourse, but also investigates how this kind of hate speech gets articulated online through several tactics, and the relationship between these strategies of harassment and the types of harm cause by their employment on SNSs.

Before analysing this relationship in the following chapters with reference to the selected case studies, here I present a model that I developed to identify the multilevel impact of misogynistic hate speech on female targets. In preparing this model I draw upon two different graphs to compare the effects of offline and online abuse. The first is a graph provided by the Council of Australian Governments (2016, p. 14). This source shows the multifaceted nature of a more traditional form of harassment against women, that is, domestic violence. The second graph is the so-called *Online Abuse Wheel*, designed by the Women’s Media Center [n.d.] to illustrate a categorisation of the tactics of gendered e-bile and to present its impact in general terms. From the comparison of the two charts it emerges that both these forms of violence impact women’s lives in a multilayered and similar way. Joining the information of these two resources, in table 2.2 below I provide a visual representation of the model that I developed for the analysis of the impacts of online misogynistic hate speech on women.

Table 2.2 Phenomenological Model of Online Misogyny.



The table summarises the main strategies that harassers often combine to increase the attack against women on the Web and that have a multilayered impact on the targets' lives. In this model, the multiple effects of online misogyny are to be intended as follows:

- Emotional and psychological violence: fear for one's life and life of family members, as well as social shaming
- Social impact: systematic online and offline isolation, limitation to one's freedom of expression, damage to one's dignity and reputation, etc.
- Economic impact: damage to one's work reputation and professional profile, firing, costs for legal actions, moving, etc.
- Psychophysical impact: anxiety and eating disorders, drugs and alcohol addictions, self-harming, suicide.

This model is particularly relevant for several reasons. Overall, it presents online misogyny as a complex and dangerous phenomenon with real and serious consequences. Moreover, the chart establishes a direct connection between harassing strategies and their consequences, showing 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 also 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., IBSA, 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.

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 research 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 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.

The investigation of the link between multiple gender-specific tactics and their severe impact on women's lives justifies the theoretical and methodological

frameworks selected for this research. In particular, this explains why I framed misogynistic discourse in the speech act model to understand the performative value of online hate speech in silencing women, why I pointed out the limits of previous CMC studies in relation to cyber misogyny, and why I selected a feminist CDA approach to analyse the linguistic features and discursive mechanisms of this speech, along with its phenomenology.

In the next three chapters, the phenomenological model outlined in this section 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 the consequences of hegemonic misogynistic discourse via Web 2.0.

PART II

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ONLINE MISOGYNISTIC HATE SPEECH

GAMIFICATION OF CYBER MISOGYNY IN THE USA

3.1 Anita Sarkeesian

This section provides a critical analysis of the misogynistic discourse against the American online activist Anita Sarkeesian, who has become 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, collected between January 2014 and November 2015. In fact, 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 SNS. The overall number of the tweets forming my database is 313, out of which I selected 46 UGCs for my critical analysis. Sarkeesian herself has provided many examples of the hate speech used against her, therefore many contents of my database 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, 2014b; 2015b). The analysis of these subsets of data provides some quantitative insights with reference to 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 portray 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 soon after she was born she moved to California, where she currently lives (Moore, 2012; Greenhouse, 2013; Filipovic, 2015). 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, n.d.). 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 708,300 followers (last accessed in May 2020).

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 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, 2012a). To Sarkeesian’s surprise, the project grabbed the attention of many users who decided to participate in its funding. While she originally set \$6,000 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, 2012b). As she has explained on several occasions (e.g., Sarkeesian, 2012b; 2013; 2014c), 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 experiencing 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, considering the complexity of this case, I identify a benchmark in the chronological development of Sarkeesian's online persecution, namely the 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, 2012c; 2012d; 2012e), as well as in public speeches and interviews (e.g., Sarkeesian, 2012f; 2013). 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” (2012c), and “rape drawing harassment” (ibid.), both used by grievers (i.e., abusive gamers) 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, the latter typically consists in rape jokes in the form of drawing, like images 3.1 and 3.2 show:

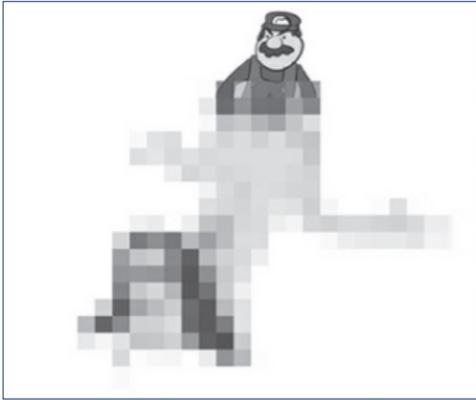


Image 3.1

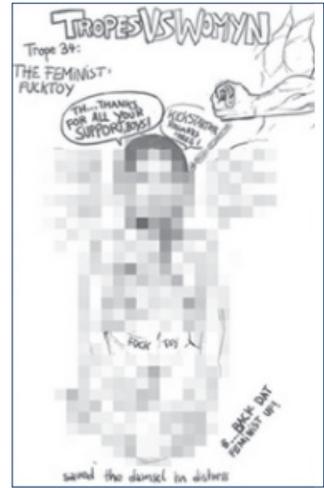


Image 3.2

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. They are two examples of what Powell and Henry (2017, p. 166) classify as “image-based sexual harassment [which] includes the creation and circulation of photos or videos that have been manipulated to depict the victim in a sexually compromising and/or degrading way.” Image 3.1 (in Lewis, 2012) is a drawing where a female character is meant to resemble Sarkeesian “tied up with a wii controller shoved in her mouth while being raped by Mario [Bros] from behind” (Sarkeesian, 2012c). 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 easily 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 for criticising the game industry. 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.

Similarly, image 3.2 (in Lewis, 2012) 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” (Sarkee-

sian, 2012c). In the right upper corner, a muscular male arm is drawn in the act of holding the female character on a chain. As Sarkeesian (2012c) explains, 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., "TROPEVSWSWOMYN"), a neologism used by some feminists as a linguistic tool of empowerment. In fact, some have interpreted the noun *woman* as a cross between *womb* and *man*, and therefore as a word which has historically configured women as a subset of men. 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, n.d.). Such linguistic choice is often perceived as an exaggerated form of political correctness and thus ridiculed online. An example of this is the definition of *womyn* provided by the Urban Dictionary (2011) 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." In the content at issue, *womyn* 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, 2012d) and as follows:

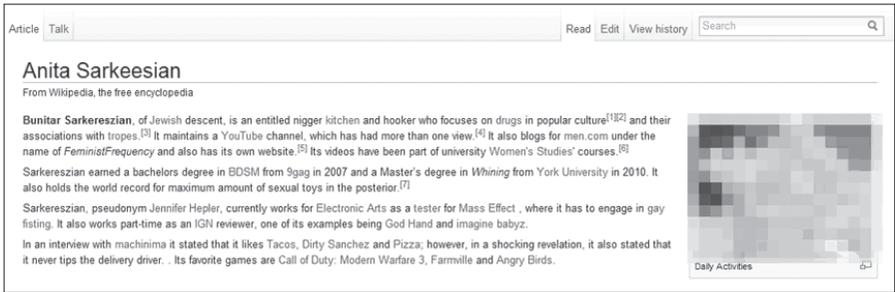


Image 3.3

Image 3.3 (in Sarkeesian, 2012d) proves the strong vilification of Sarkeesian through misogynistic and racist discourse.¹ 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. A similar racist vilification is expressed by the slur *nigger* which shows the reliance of hate speech on biological racism 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.” Here the acronym BDSM refers to erotic practices and combines the abbreviations B/D (Bondage and Discipline), D/s (Dominance and submission), and S/M (Sadism and Masochism), while 9gag is the name of an online platform where many users develop and exchange sexually charged and misogynistic images.

A 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 to work for Electronic Arts (hereafter EA), and who had been harassed

online in 2012 with death threats against her and her children.² 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, and female players are specifically depicted as “casual gamers” (Salter and Blodgett, 2012, p. 403) and thus marginalised.

It is thus clear from this analysis how the online harassment of women in the gaming industry evokes the general discursive features of misogynistic hate speech. 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, 2013). 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, 2013). 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 end of the range of the aggressiveness through which Sarkeesian has been harassed online. Stronger violence is present in many sexist and racist slurs which have inundated her social network accounts daily, along with threats to her life and to her family, especially through violent threats, bomb threats at events she attended as a speaker, attempts to dox her, as well as several attempts of DDoSing. As Sarkeesian (2012c) declared, on June 2012, right after the media started to cover the har-

assment she was experiencing, an instance of DDoSing caused her blog to temporarily go down for most of the day. As 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” (2013, p. 565). Similarly, many haters also attempted to stop Sarkeesian by flagging her YouTube account and by reporting other social network profiles belonging to her as fraud, spam, and terrorism (Sarkeesian, 2012f).

While all these strategies show the strong commitment of many 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, 2012f). Image 3.4 (in Sarkeesian, 2012f) sums up the development of this online activity.

As the screenshot proves, by clicking on the screen a picture of Sarkeesian 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.



Image 3.4

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, 2012f). 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 before in this book, 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.

Creating and Establishing a Cyber Mob

As the legal scholar Danielle Citron writes, “the Internet’s ability to forge connections enables *stalking by proxy*” (2014b). 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, 2014b). 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” (ibid.). While in the following chapters 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, 2012f). 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 po-

sition of social dominance over members of marginalised or relatively powerless groups” (Sarkeesian, 2013). 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, 2014c). Impersonation consists in the creation of a website or social network account using a person’s name with the intention to harm her. 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. An example of this 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 \$1,000 (cf. Sarkeesian, 2014c). Such intentionally misleading messages usually germinate 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 argument 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, 2016, p. 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 domi-

nant group by performing the harassment of a less 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; instead 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. In online communication and media reports, it is also known with the related hashtag #GamerGate. Here I use the two expressions as synonyms, unless otherwise stated. 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 (2016, p. 2) 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 re-located and users' accounts deleted. 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 (cf. Dewey, 2014; Frank, 2014; Hern, 2014; Jason, 2014; Parkin, 2014; Wofford, 2014) and inspiring academic research (cf. Shepherd *et al.*, 2015; Braithwaite, 2016).

According to several sources (Dewey, 2014; Hathaway, 2014; Braithwaite, 2016), 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 (Jason, 2014). In "The Zoe Post" (*ibid.*), 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, 2016, p. 4). Even though this assumption was proved to be groundless, 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 per-

factly 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.³

According to #Gamergate participants, the alleged corruption in game journalism is a result of the close relationships that reviewers have maintained with game developers (Hathaway, 2014). However, while the community has 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, 2014), but which has demonstrated to be more engaged in abusing women online rather than in advocating ethical journalism (see Wofford, 2014). 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, 2014). 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 (cf. Tan, 2011; Salter and Blodgett, 2012). 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 previous accounts.

Owing to constraints of space I cannot provide a detailed analysis of the online misogynistic hate speech directed at Quinn (cf. Jason, 2014) and Wu (cf. Stuart, 2014), but it is worth noting here that several studies on the abuse directed at them demonstrate similarities with the case of Anita Sarkeesian, on which my analysis focuses. 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, 2012). 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 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.

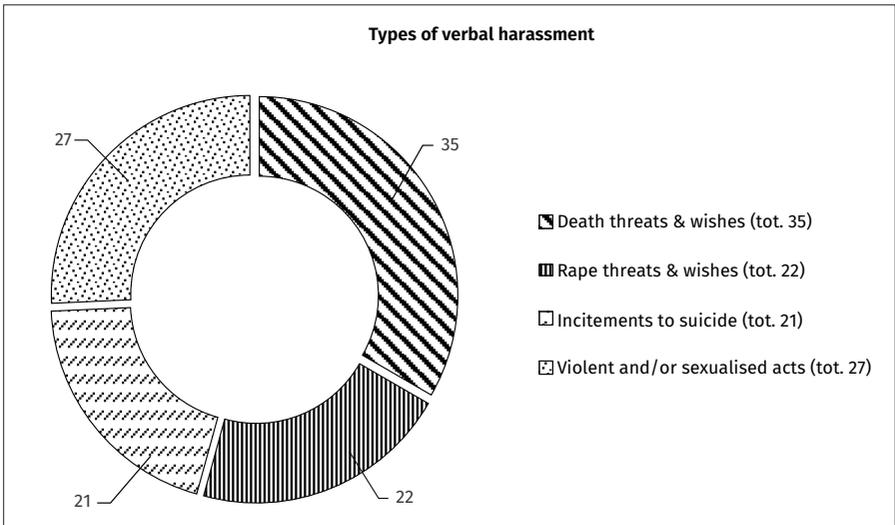
Misogyny in the GamerGate Era

In this section I analyse the misogynistic discourse targeted against Sarkeesian by studying some UGCs retrieved in a subcorpus of data provided by the activist herself. This source is composed of 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, 2014b) published in September 2014, and *One Week of Harassment on Twitter* (hereafter Sarkeesian, 2015b) 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 analysis with some quantitative insights over the abuse directed at Sarkeesian. Therefore, this subcorpus is presented through a chart which visually breaks down the most recurring types of strategies used to harass the target.

In preparing this chart I followed the classification provided by Luke Malone (2015), who however only focused on the tweets available in Sarkeesian (2015b). Thus, my quantitative study presents two main differences from Malone's data breakdown. First, I consider a larger amount of data by adding the 47 tweets available in Sarkeesian (2014b). Second, as for the types of harassment received, I 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*. The breakdown resulted from this classification are presented in table 3.1.

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

Table 3.1 Strategies of verbal harassment against Sarkeesian.



sexualised – actions to harass Sarkeesian (e.g., masturbation and requests to perform sexual acts).

It must also be noted that almost 80% of all the tweets contain instances of abusive language. In fact, misogynistic, racist, and homophobic slurs appear in 164 of the 204 tweets which make up the dataset, through terms such as *bitch*, *cunt*, *feminazi*, *bisexual slut*, *fgt* [faggot], *nigger*, *paki*, *Arab bitch*. In table 3.2 below I provide examples of verbal abuse against the target. These examples are here divided according to the type of harassment they express:

Table 3.2 Verbal abuse against Sarkeesian.

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, 2015b)
Example 2: @femfreq swear I would put this bitch 6 feet deep (ibid.)
Example 3: @femfreq I hope every feminist has their head severed from their shoulders (ibid.)
Example 4: @femfreq I WANT TO FUCKING STAB YOUR STUPID FUCKING UGLY SHAPED FACE YOU FEMINIST CUNT, KILL YOURSELF, NO ONE WILL CARE BITCH (ibid.)

Rape Threats & Wishes
Example 5: <i>@femfreq If I meet you for real I'd anal rape you with a huge chainsaw</i> (Sarkeesian, 2014b)
Example 6: <i>@femfreq im gonna bust dem sugar walls leave an aids load in der</i> (Sarkeesian, 2015b)
Example 7: <i>@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</i> (ibid.)
Example 8: <i>@femfreq hope you get raped by a wild pack of niggers</i> (ibid.)
Incitements to Suicide
Example 9: <i>@femfreq kill yourself you piece of garbage. You shouldn't be able to breathe</i> (Sarkeesian, 2015b)
Example 10: <i>@femfreq I Hope you fucking Kill yourself Get Ice Skates Split your throat And drink bleach</i> (ibid.)
Example 11: <i>@femfreq Just kill yourself dumb whore, stop feeding the media with all this fake feminist propaganda</i> (ibid.)
Example 12: <i>@femfreq you're a stupid fat cunt die pls?</i> (ibid.)
Violent and/or Sexualised Acts
Example 13: <i>@femfreq i ll fap to this bitch</i> (Sarkeesian, 2014b)
Example 14: <i>@femfreq If you died I would still hatefully hatefuck your corpse though</i> (ibid.)
Example 15: <i>@femfreq How is my favorite slut doing? I take it you'll get on your knees tonight and be a good woman</i> (ibid.)
Example 16: <i>@locust9 @femfreq @TimOfLegend Omg this fucking bitch needs a pounding</i> (ibid.).

Examples 1 to 16 illustrate the type of rhetoric used to harass and threaten 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” (2014a, p. 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 prejudice against LGBT people) are mingled with racism. Thus, in the data under analysis, the supposed sexual identity of Sarkeesian and her Middle Eastern heritage are discursively used as a proof of her outcast nature through expressions like *bisexual slut* (Sarkeesian, 2014b), *paki* (Sarkeesian, 2015b) and *Arab bitch* (ibid.). These examples show how hate speech generates from heteronormative and white supremacy, 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, sexually explicit rhetoric is often used to “pass scathing, appearance-related judgments [through] ad hominem invectives” (Jane, 2014a, p. 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 feminist 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. This means that words semantically related to the female genitalia are used to indicate a woman (e.g., *ass* in examples 7, and *cunt* in examples 4 and 12).

It is clear from the tweets quoted above that the physicality of the designated enemy becomes 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, 2014a, p. 560), as shown in example 16 (i.e., “this fucking bitch needs

a pounding”⁴) 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 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 does not stop at 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, 2013), and it thus symbolises the ultimate denial of the woman’s subjectivity, represented by the sexual persecution of her corpse.

The extremely brutal nature of this pervasive form of targeted hate speech suggests that it is a discursive tool intended not only to humiliate online but also to scare the target in real life. Therefore, I suggest considering that these quotes are typical examples of how hate speech works as a performative harmful act, as discussed before. 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” (1975, pp. 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.

My analysis also shows how misogynistic hate speech is able to express “the performativity of gender” (Butler, 2009, p. 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 participation 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 gamers 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, 2016, p. 1).

Gendered Identities in #GamerGate

To understand the articulation of gendered discourse in GamerGaters’ online posts, I here identify three main rhetorical figures used to reconstruct Sarkeesian’s identity and to designate her 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 feminazifemcunt*. These labels rely on the rhetoric used by GamerGaters to create the mythological canon of Sarkeesian’s villainy (Sarkeesian, 2014c), in opposition to their self-established identity of real gamers which they consider threatened 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” (2001, p. 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. Table 3.3 below quotes some examples of the three rhetorical figures that I identified and that I analyse in the remainder of this section.

Table 3.3 GamerGaters against Sarkeesian.

The Greedy Con Artist
Example 13: <i>@femfreq this whore is a money grubbing bimbo</i> (Sarkeesian, 2014b)
Example 14: <i>@femfreq you scam people out of thousands and don't expect death threats?</i> (ibid.)
Example 15: <i>Sarkeesian deserved it because she was a scam artist not because shes a woman, Quinn deserves it for similar reasons</i> (ibid.)
Example 16: <i>Maybe if you were not a con-artist, Extorting money out of people with your 'Feminism' You wouldn't get harassed. Cunt</i> (Sarkeesian, 2015b)
Example 17: <i>you deserve every single threat you get, what a stupid bitch, most people already understand that all you want is money. whore</i> (ibid.)

The Attention Whore

Example 18: *@femfreq You lying cunt you made all this up for attention! #pathetic* (Sarkeesian, 2014b)

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

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* (ibid.)

Example 21: *FUCKING CUNT WHORE STOP TRYING TO PLAY VICTIM YOU'RE FUCKING STUPID!!!!* (Sarkeesian, 2015b)

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, 2014b)

The Feminazi/Femcunt⁵

Example 23: *I can see a resemblance between @femfreq and the Nazi. 'Be like us or face the consequences'* (Sarkeesian, 2015b)

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

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

Example 26: *promoting sexism against males. Stupid cunt. Men are superior can't fight #nature* (Sarkeesian, 2014b)

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

The Con Artist

As Anita Sarkeesian (2014c) notes, 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, 2014c), 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 neither a real gamer nor a real feminist activist, but merely a grafter. Examples 13 to 17 illustrate 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 has also kept victimising herself by publishing fake tweets (e.g., “Stop trying to victimize yourself for money” (Sarkeesian, 2015b)). 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 gaming industry and, thus, puts in danger its very legitimate existence. As Sarkeesian (2014c) pointed out, 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 3.5 (in @leftygirl, 2014) is an example of this mechanism:



Image 3.5

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, 2014). The cartoon depicts Sarkeesian caught in the act of faking a threat similar to the one she received. Moreover, without any direct link to Sarkeesian's non-Christian heritage, the target is pictured as a grotesque hunchbacked figure wearing a coat and showing a satisfied smile and semi diabolical 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 aimed at arousing "responses of loathing and contempt" (Lipton, 2014) 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). As 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, 2014b) to draw attention to 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 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.

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, 2015b). 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" (2016, n.p.), 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 this book. More specifically, here Nazifeminism is a supposed dangerous ideology aimed at demonising the gaming industry and distorting the true nature of GamerGate.

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, 2016, p. 7; Salter and Blodgett, 2012, p. 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" (2016, p. 2). For this reason, following Braithwaite (2016), Taylor (2012), and

Salter and Blodgett (2012), 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 identity 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 reaffirmation of male gamers' identity, such technology-related elements "work as important markers for inclusion and exclusion" (Taylor, 2012, p. 111). Therefore "the 'encroachment' of women and girls into what was previously a male-gendered space" (Consalvo, 2012) 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, 2012; Braithwaite, 2016, p. 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 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 [fuck with] your line of work so why fw ours?" (all available in Sarkeesian, 2015b).

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 op-

posed 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, 2014).

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

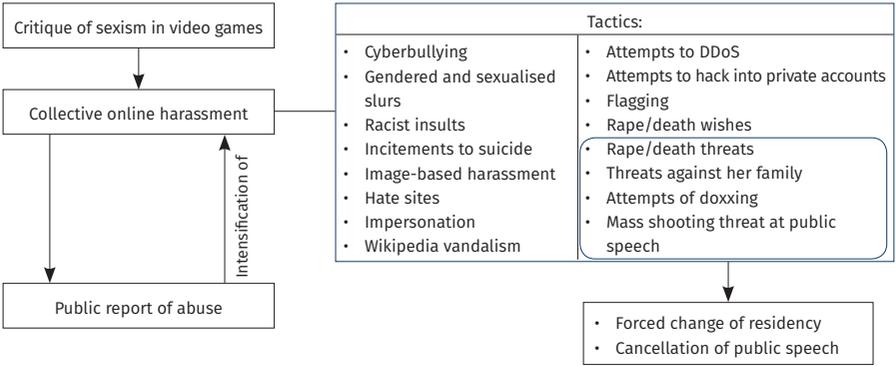
yes i may be an evil cis gendered ‘white’ male, however through out my earlier life i was the outsider, the person to, while not out right shun, just not to be interacted with. It wasnt until, for the most part, i was able to get a constant access to the internet was i able to feel like i belong anywhere. [...] 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 gekkozor, 2015)

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 (2014) 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 to the position of social outsiders. Nevertheless, such a strong identification has not translated into the development of a robust identity, and therefore male gamers feel in danger when women vindicate the equal right to exist in the community, as the collective harassment of Anita Sarkeesian shows.

Conclusion

Considered the complexity of the case here analysed, in table 3.4 below I sum up the development of Sarkeesian’s abuse to visually represent the escalation and the many different tactics that usually typify online misogynistic harassment.

Table 3.4 Escalation of Sarkeesian’s Online Abuse.



As the activist mentioned in several public speeches and interviews (e.g., Sarkeesian in Katz, 2015b; Sarkeesian, 2015c), 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 speech *What I Couldn’t Say* (Sarkeesian, 2015c), 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 this book is that she has focused more on providing a lucid and critical presentation of the situation she has experienced than on confessing the related emotional burden. In fact, she affirmed that she did not feel free "to publicly express sadness, or rage, or exhaustion, or anxiety, or depression [...] [nor] feelings of fear, or of how tiring it is to be constantly vigilant of [one's] physical and digital surroundings" (Sarkeesian, 2015c). 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, 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. On the contrary, 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.

Moreover, it must also be noticed that, considering the impossibility to provide here a rigorous quantitative analysis of all UGCs related to GamerGate, in this section my argument was not to suggest that each male gamer(gater) sustains a hidden misogynist agenda. My aim was to study one of the many articulations of 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 enact offline forms of gendered harassment.

The strong performative power of misogynistic hate speech is particularly visible when this discourse is used to sustain more traditional forms of gendered abuse, such as domestic violence. In fact, as mentioned in previous chapters, the Web sometimes becomes a site where unknown users harass female targets who have already been abused by their partners or ex partners, thus exacerbating the violence experienced. To show this mechanism, 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.

3.2 Christy Mack

This section provides a critical analysis of the online abuse experienced by the former adult film star Christy Mack, and studies the intersections between cyber misogyny and domestic violence.

The Dataset

The dataset of this case study is composed of 115 text-based tweets, out of which I selected 14 contents for my critical analysis. The data were retrieved on Twitter in August 2014, after the physical assault of Christy Mack by her former partner War Machine.

The Target

Christine Mackinday, alias Christy Mack, is a 28-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, 2017). 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, 2017). 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, 2014) to publicly denounce the abuse, which suddenly went viral (Dockterman, 2014; McDonald, 2014b; Bates, 2014). 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, 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 tweet comments to Mack, 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 demonstrate 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 3.6 (War Machine, 2014a), image 3.7 (War Machine, 2014b), image 3.8 (War Machine, 2014c), and image 3.9 (War Machine, 2014d) show four tweets published by Koppenhaver on the same day that Mack denounced on Twitter his attack.

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 (2001, p. 386), namely: *nomination strategies*, *predicational strategies*, and *perspectivation*. First, nomination strategies refer to the way in which the sender mentions



Image 3.6



Image 3.7



Image 3.8



Image 3.9

and identifies the social actors involved in the situation at issue: himself (in all tweets), Christy Mack (in images 3.6, 3.7, and 3.8), her male companion (in image 3.9), and the police (in image 3.8). Then, all the actors are directly or indirectly attributed negative or positive traits through different predicational strategies, i.e., strategies through which “social actors as individuals, group members, or groups are linguistically provided with predications” (2001, p. 386). In image 3.6, 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* [girlfriend]) 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 3.6 and 3.7). This rejection of the woman’s self-determination is expressed also in image 3.9, by constructing a joint identity which redefines them as a couple (i.e., “Christy & 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 presenting him as an external actor to the couple’s identity, that is, the person who implicitly provoked the end of their relationship and the one who attacked him and Mack.

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, 2001, p. 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-person singular 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 3.6, “I just wanted to see your face when I surprised

you with the ring” in image 3.7), 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 3.9).

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 3.6 and 3.8, 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 reframes his violent actions as an allegedly justified reaction to the other man’s aggressiveness.⁶ Conversely, in image 3.8 (i.e., “The cops 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). 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 prejudice 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 Estrich, 1987; Mantilla, 2015).

Therefore, Koppenhaver defines the whole situation as “a nightmare” (image 3.7), “just heart breaking” (image 3.8), and he hopes that “one day truth will come out” (image 3.9). 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 3.7, 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 spe-

cifically, these four tweets closely recall the cycle of domestic abuse, whose first systematic explanation was developed by the psychology scholar Lenore Walker in her landmark book *The Battered Woman* (1979). In fact, images 3.6 to 3.9 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 3.7 – symbolise an attempt at reconciliation usually known as the honeymoon phase, which completes the victimisation through “extremely loving, kind and remorseful behaviors” (WomenSafe, n.d.), 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. For example, Australian feminist journalist Clementine Ford (2014) tweeted “@WarMachine170 No, you are a bad guy. And when you say ‘fighting for my life’ you mean ‘almost killing a woman.’” Nevertheless, many others reacted by showing strong support of the man, as visible in the high number of likes that his tweets received. 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 table 3.5 below I quote 10 examples of the misogynistic discourse used to defend War Machine. The texts are divided into two groups: in the former, I provide UGCs which 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 the classification provided by Karla Mantilla (2015, p. 159) of the backlashes used in patriarchal societies to discredit women who expose gender-based abuse. 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 table 3.5, to show how this visual connotation increases the visibility of #FreeWarMachine.⁷

Table 3.5 Users' participation in Mack's online abuse.

Legitimation: "Ya Cheating Whore"
Example 1: <i>OMFG lmaooo Yes!! Put these prostitutes in their place. #FreeWarMachine (@MANIAC3X, 2014)</i>
Example 2: <i>@titoortiz u should to @jennajameson what @WarMachine170 did to @ChristyMack !! Teach that bitch a lesson !! #FreeWarMachine (@mOsT_eViL_oNe, 2014)</i>
Example 3: <i>@christymack...thats wa u get ya cheating whore #freewarmachine (@rtroke88, 2014)</i>
Example 4: <i>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, 2014)</i>
Example 5: <i>Believe me whatever was done to @ChristyMack's nose is an improvement over the hooked beak she was sporting before #FREEWARMACHINE (Removed from Twitter)</i>
Denial: "How Can Someone 'Rape' a Porn Star?"
Example 6: <i>If OJ was acquitted, @WarMachine170 can be too! #FreeWarMachine #stillhope (@brad_redden, 2014)</i>
Example 7: <i>CM framed him she a whore WarMachine will be out soon and you'll see #FreeWarMachine (@RickySGOD, 2014)</i>
Example 8: <i>#FreeWarMachine he didn't hit her that hard (Removed from Twitter)</i>
Example 9: <i>Could @ChristyMack share with us how can someone "rape" a porn star? Do U not pay them is that rape? #FREEWARMACHINE (Removed from Twitter)</i>
Example 10: <i>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)</i>

Legitimation: “Ya Cheating Whore”

In the first section of the table, examples 1 to 5 attempts to legitimise 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 Yes!!”). These exclamations are followed by a sentence that exhorts 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 so doing, he does not specify the addressee of the insult *prostitutes*: this strategic move results in an ambiguous definition of which women 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 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.

In this analysis I present female engagement in the porn industry 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, women’s engagement in visual products which often tend to legitimise sexual violence through their humiliation (see Whisnant, 2016) results problematic from a feminist perspective. Even though for constraints of space I cannot analyse this issue in detail here, it is worth noting that the sociocultural origins and effects of pornography have been at the centre of much radical feminist literature since 1980s (cf. Dworkin, 1980; MacKinnon, 1987a; Dworkin and MacKinnon, 1988; 1997), which was based on the consideration that “a critique to pornography is to feminism what its defense is to male supremacy” (MacKinnon, 1983, p. 321).

In example 2 (i.e., “@titoortiz u should [do] to @jennajameson what @WarMachine170 did to @ChristyMack !! Teach that bitch a lesson !! #FreeWar-Machine”), 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 out against gender-based violence (e.g., Jameson, 2014a; 2014b). 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 exhorts 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 becomes 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, 2015, p. 160), 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" (ibid, p. 161). 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 [boyfriend] 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-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 want to deny 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 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 that War Machine should be freed, because he should not be punished for a crime which only shows the human side of a person hurt by his girlfriend's supposed lack of honesty. This

legitimation 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.

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 #**FREE-WARMACHINE**”) 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 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, 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 a less-than-human creature 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.

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! #**FreeWar-Machine** #stillhope”), the user does not resort to hate speech, but his gendered prejudice resides in the a priori consideration of the man as innocent. In fact,

regardless of visual proof contained in Mack's 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 express 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 indicatives (e.g., *framed, will be out*) which discursively render 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 ex-

aggeration. 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 @Christy-Mack 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 (2003, p. 140). Referring to Judith Butler’s philosophical theory (see 1990; 1993), Kulick notes that “performance is something a subject does. Performativity, on the other hand, is the process through which the subject emerges” (Kulick, 2003, p. 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” (ibid.). To apply this performative 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, 2016, p. 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. Here content stops being a universal human right and becomes something that can be sold and bought, that is, a commodity. 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, and the commodification of her consent is

expressed by the second question, through which the sender rhetorically asks his audience if rape occurs when you do not pay a porn star. 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 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? #FREEWARMA-CHINE”). 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, 2002, p. 6), also used “to police and control white femininity” (ibid, p. 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 aforementioned diseases. Here an examination conducted within the historically male dominated field of medi-

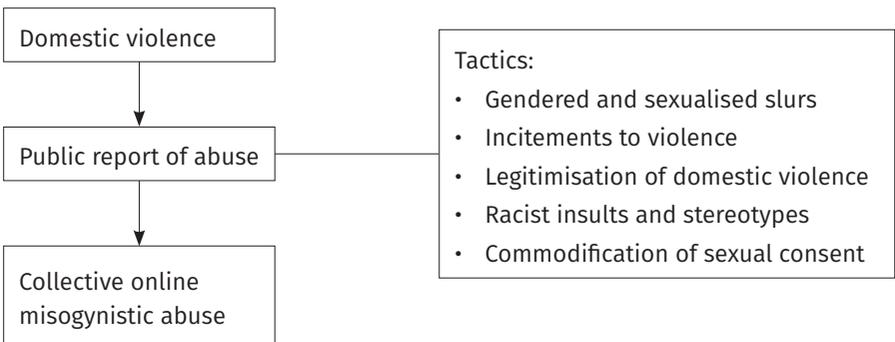
cine is required as the only valid way to assess the soundness of the woman's allegations, thus reaffirming the denial of both her verbal testimony and visual proof, also sustained through the employment of #FreeWarmachine, as in many other tweets analysed in the paragraphs of this section.

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 (Bieler, 2017). 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, 2017). 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. However, a visual summary of the main elements identified in the online harassment of Mack can be useful to understand its evolution and core features, as shown below in table 3.6:

Table 3.6 Core features of Mack's Online Abuse.



The study that I have developed 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 a priori presumption of their innocence, even when a female victim provides vivid proof of 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 are still policed through historical colonial stereotypes of black men, and of their supposedly contaminated and contaminating bodies.

In the following chapter the focus of my analysis shifts from the USA to Australia, to examine some more features of online misogyny and their implications. Although misogynistic hate speech repeats itself with similar discursive elements in different geographical contexts, the two Australian cases selected for this research enable me to add interesting insights on the phenomenon here at issue. In the first section, I investigate how gendered hate speech intertwines with a specific form of racism, namely Islamophobia, by analysing the case of Mariam Veiszadeh, an Australian Muslim attorney, writer, and anti-racism activist. In the second section, I discuss the online harassment of Caitlin Roper, an Australian feminist activist, whose abuse shows the strategic use of impersonation hoaxes and transmisogynistic discourse.

ISLAMOPHOBIA AND TRANS-MISOGYNY IN AUSTRALIA

4.1 Mariam Veiszadeh

This section consists of a critical analysis of the racist and misogynistic hate speech experienced by the Australian Muslim activist Mariam Veiszadeh starting from October 2014.

The Dataset

The dataset of this case study is composed of 43 posts (25 tweets and 18 Facebook contents), out of which I selected 14 UGCs for my critical analysis. I downloaded these data from the target's Facebook and Twitter accounts and from profiles of other users taking part in her abuse. 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. A 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. In the following years, Veiszadeh became a successful corporate lawyer working for a prominent Australian legal company (Price, 2012). During her studies, she also started to engage in anti-Islamophobia activism. The aftermath of the September 11 attacks is the symbolic beginning of her activist commitment. In fact, those instances of international terrorism 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 SNSs, 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. 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. According to Veiszadeh (2016a, p. 3), an average of 4.4 incidents per week were reported to this register from September 2014 to September 2015. At the same time, the activist 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. 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 nexus between different axes of social oppression through intersectional feminism (e.g., see Veiszadeh, 2017b).

Despite this incessant commitment against 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 occurred in October 2014 when she tweeted the photo of a product she considered bigoted (in Veiszadeh, 2014), shown in image 4.1:



Image 4.1

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.” This slogan has been used also by conservative politicians like the leader of One Nation party, Pauline Hanson, and it recalls the xenophobic discourse addressed to migrants to make them leave a country if they don’t adhere to its culture – here symbolized by the Australian flag.

The public reaction to Veiszadeh’s tweet was not unanimous, and she also received negative comments from some Twitter users. As she recalls, in the aftermath of the post at issue she got “some stock-standard vitriol” (Veiszadeh, 2015a) which reminded her of the kind of Islamophobic abuse she had been receiving for years as a Muslim woman. But such vitriolic attacks turned into a collective form of harassment when she was attacked online by the anti-Muslim group *Australian Defence League* (hereafter ADL). ADL had long been associated with xenophobic and racist acts, like the 2005 Cronulla riots, during which more than 5,000 white Australians gathered at the Sydney beach of Cronulla, hunting down and beating anyone with Middle Eastern appearance (cf. Cerminara, 2014). 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, 2015). In 2014, about three months after Veiszadeh's tweet, ADL used its Facebook page to single the activist out as a hypocrite, by manipulating her original post. The doctored image travelled across different SNSs, and is visible below in a screenshot taken from Twitter.



Image 4.2

Image 4.2 (in @BasimaFaysal) consists of a repost of the image originally produced by ADL on Facebook. Here, ADL coupled a Twitter post previously published by the activist (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 4.1 (i.e., “Pls RT @woolworths I’m outraged that #WOOLWORTHS are allegedly selling these bigoted singlets at their Cairns 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 for this reason no sufficiently high-quality screenshot of the original FB post can be provided here), image 4.2 shows that ADL twisted Veiszadeh's intention by cropping the singlet's photo, and thus turning it into an attack on the Australian flag itself, instead of a denunciation of the singlet's bigoted message. Therefore, the material published by ADL conveyed a message that was completely different from the activist's original intention, that is, 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 (2015a) notes, ADL's Facebook post "opened the floodgates to a torrent of online abuse" showing how "hate, well and truly, begets hate." The activist 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, 2015a). As 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 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 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 grubby cunt*
(Veiszadeh, 2015e)

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, 2017a)

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, 2015a)

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, 2015a)

Example 5: *Mariam should be taken to the vets and desexed so that her-DNA doesn't breed into future life forms* (sbs.com.au, 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., *grubby 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 (2015, p. 41).

In example 1, the word *cunt* works as a synecdoche 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 (*grubby*). 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, n.d., 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-Fattah, is one of the most recurrent prejudices among anti-Muslim extremist groups in Australia and other Western countries, namely the consideration of "pregnant Muslim women being engaged in 'womb jihad' by taking over Australia demographically" (Abdel-Fattah, 2014). 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. 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 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 [later extended to 280 characters] 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.¹

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, 2002; Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEnergy, 2013, p. 77), this word is not a neutral synonym for *Muslim*, because its different etymology confers it a strong ideological meaning. As Yii-Ann Christine Chen (2002) 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, Gabrielatos, and McEnergy, 2013, p. 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, 2010, p. 324), thus resulting in the discursive repetition of it as “a term of abuse” (Elliot, 2005). 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, as shown below in image 4.3 (in Veiszadeh, 2015b):



Image 4.3

To develop a more systematic critical analysis of its discourse, this image can be divided into two parts, both aimed to convey three intertwined types of hate speech, namely sexist, Islamophobic, and xenophobic discourses. The lower part of the screenshot consists of a photo of Veiszadeh 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 4.3 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 as an aggressive anti-white ideology, intentionally mistaken for the radicalised dogma of terrorist groups.

Another example of the intersection between misogyny and anti-Muslim prejudice is represented below in image 4.4 (in ABC News, 2015b).



Image 4.4

This screenshot shows a modified picture where the target's face is photo-shopped 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 strong 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, 2014). 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 4.4 demonstrates 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 Taliban against women over accusations of adultery. While death by lapidation is an undeniable violation of human rights which afflicts several Middle East regions controlled by Islamic fundamentalists, the visual elements of image 4.4 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 tweet quoted above in example 4 (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. An example of this is provided by the words of the Australian politician Pauline Hanson who has often defined Muslim culture as hyper-masculine and misogynistic (cf. Remeikis, 2016).

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, the 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 educated and civilised Western world. As Ramon Grosfoguel (2012, p.16) notes, the supposed Islamic violent patriarchy is one of the arguments which sustain Islamophobic discourse as a form of cultural racism. While the mechanisms of racialisation to the detriment of Muslims are analysed in greater detail in the following paragraphs, it is worth noticing here that this process has historically resulted in "a clash of patriarchies" (ibid, p. 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, 2015d). 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, n.d.), which operates through a website hosting neo-Nazi content disguised as sarcastic commentary (cf. Wines and Saul, 2015). 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, 2017a; 2017b), 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 4.5 below.



Image 4.5

Following the overwhelming abuse perpetrated by 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, 2015). In this webpage, which was later removed from the Web, they demanded their allegedly more than 5,000 followers to form a “troll army,” and to attack Veiszadeh on Twitter being “as nasty, hurtful, hateful, offensive, insulting and ‘vilifying’ as possible” (ibid.). Along with the stated purpose to silence her and to make her quit Twitter (Veiszadeh in Stewart, 2015), website’s managers 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 4.6, 4.7, and 4.8, and they analyse how hate speech is there articulated through misogyny and cultural racism.

Image 4.6 (available in Stewart, 2015) is a visual proof of the attempt to create a cyber mob attack against Veiszadeh.

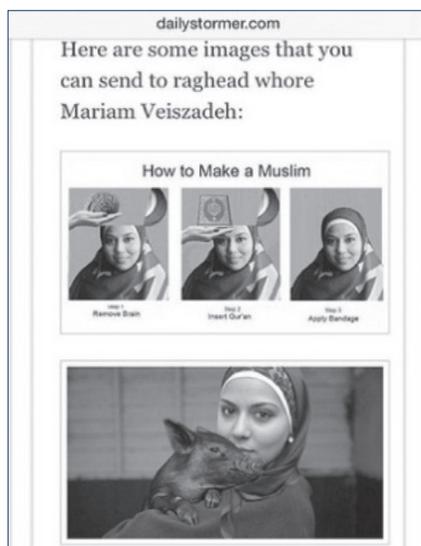


Image 4.6

The image is a screenshot taken by the target herself before the webpage 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 4.7 and 4.8). 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” (2006, p. 216). In this process, phenotypical characteristics such as the colour of the skin, or religious practices such as wearing the veil, become the essence of a certain religious faith and acquire a racial meaning (ibid.).

Even though such racialisation has multiple outcomes (Joshi, 2006, p. 217), its ultimate effect is the portrayal of whiteness and Christianity as the normative identity, and non-Christians as the 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 book, 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 4.6, 4.7, and 4.8 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 4.6, 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 I have highlighted in several passages of this book, the distinctive element of misogynistic hate speech is to attack women in several ways which are always specific to their gender. 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 4.6 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, n.d., 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, n.d., Raghead). While, as the vocabulary entry explains, *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, 2008, p. 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 4.6, 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.”² 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. Here the Muslim faith is trivialised and redefined as something 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, 2006, p. 212).

Similarly, in the lowest section of image 4.6, 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 Quran ch. 2, v. 173). Such restriction is often used in Islamophobic hate speech to ridicule and offend Muslims, like in the above-quoted tweet of example 3 (i.e., “bury you all with pigs”) and also in image 4.7 below (in Stewart, 2015). Here this cultural reference is rendered visually by turning Veiszadeh's nose into a pig's snout, as the following image shows:



Image 4.7

The reference to pig/pork visible in image 4.7 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 activist. 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. 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." 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. It also results in the discursive construction of Muslims as brainwashed religious warriors whose sole aim is to terrorise "infidels of the host people."

Moreover, image 4.7 shows the racist connotation of Islam, which ends up being associated with an enemy status in late modern Western societies (Joshi, 2006, p. 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 must 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 (i.e., Internet etiquette) is the graphic representation of the act of shouting during an online interaction and a strategy "to make words look 'louder'" (Robb, 2014). 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 Veiszadeh's photo, thus, has the effect of hijacking the peaceful message that the advocate had originally intended for it. This Islamophobic allegation can also be found in the rhetoric used by some Western politicians, like the already-mentioned Pauline Hanson, according to whom "Islam does not believe in democracy, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, or freedom of assembly" (in Remeikis, 2016).

Similarly, in image 4.8 (in Stewart, 2015) the denigration of Islamic religion intertwines with misogynistic hate speech:



Image 4.8

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 Veiszadeh as a "fat, ugly, hairy sandnigger." As Karla Mantilla (2015, p. 11) notes describing the general features of gendertrolling, 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 a disparaging and demeaning way" (Urban Dictionary, 2003), 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 (2012) 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, 2012, p. 39). The use of disparaging terms like the noun *sandnigger* in image 4.8 and the adjective *anti-white* in image 4.3 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 dox her on several occasions, publishing online her personal details “prompting abuse phone calls, SMS, mail, emails and social media vitriol” (Veiszadeh, 2015a). 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 no longer lived in the targeted apartment, the event must still be considered alarming, because it shows how online verbal harassment can easily shift 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, 2015a). In the same period of this offline harassment, the

online abuse which targeted Veiszadeh kept increasing, and UGCs 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 Veiszadeh’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” (available in Online Hate Prevention Institute, 2015). 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, 2016a), “the unwilling sacrificial lamb (halal of course) of the anti-Islamic movement and the epitomic symbol of the Australian Muslim” (Veiszadeh, 2015a). 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 4.9 (in Stewart, 2015):



Image 4.9

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 threatens 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 the activist 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, n.d.), 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, 2017a), 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, 2015a), 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. 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 Veiszadeh's started the hashtag #IStandWith-Mariam 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. Images 4.10 and 4.11 represent the exploitation of this hashtag.

Images 4.10 (in @itsgregman, 2015a) and 4.11 (in @itsgregman, 2015b) 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 4.10, the author pretends to support Veiszadeh'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 heteronor-

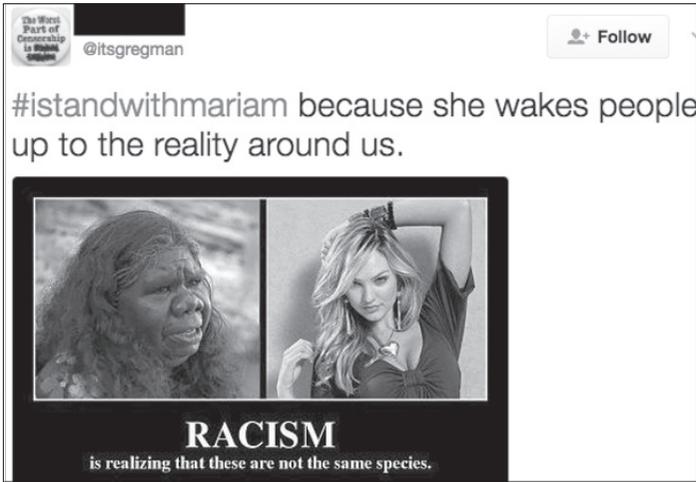


Image 4.10



Image 4.11

native 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 (white) 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 4.11 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.

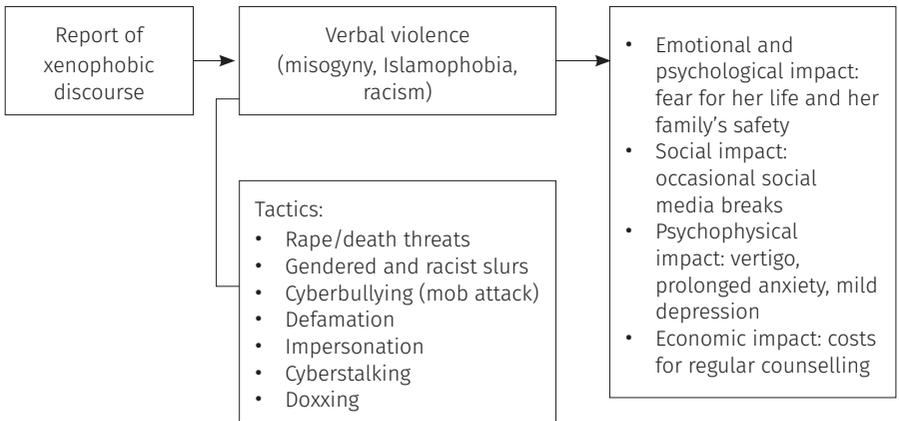
As a final remark, we can see how both visual images and written texts of images 4.10 and 4.11 result in an appropriation of the online hashtag that originated as a non-discriminatory tool and that was eventually used to express the intertwining of misogyny and cultural racism against Muslims and Aboriginal 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 and ongoing subjugation of Aboriginals, and in the contemporary xenophobic vilification of Muslims.

Effects On the Target’s Life

The multifaceted hate speech analysed in 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 table 4.1, along with the tactics through which such hatred was delivered.

As the advocate has stated on several occasions (see Stephens, 2015; Thackray, 2015; Dumas, 2016), the vitriolic attacks and threats she received had a profound emotional and psychological effect on her. She started fear-

Table 4.1 Effects of Hate Speech on Veiszadeh.



ing for her life and for her family’s safety, a fact which affected her physical and mental health causing her vertigo (Stephens, 2015), mild depression, and prolonged anxiety which resulted in several physical illnesses (Thackray, 2015). 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, 2016). 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 (ibid.), 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 Veiszadeh, 2016b), 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 multiplatform 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, 2015d), public speeches and interviews (see Veiszadeh, 2016a; Veiszadeh in Stewart, 2015), 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 research, I consider Veiszadeh's reaction as one of the most powerful counter narratives to 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 punching bag 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 construe 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.

4.2 Caitlin Roper

This section is dedicated to the analysis of the online attacks received between 2014 and 2015 by another Australian woman, Caitlin Roper, that I had the opportunity to contact by e-mail. As mentioned before, I chose to analyse this case because the harassment against the target included two episodes of impersonation, which are well documented in the dataset provided by Roper herself. As this section will show, impersonation hoaxes enable online abusers to harass women in a specific way and have a strong impact on the target's credibility.

The Dataset

The dataset of this case study is composed of 183 UGCs (142 tweets and 12 Facebook contents) that the target shared with me during a private online conversation (Roper, 2015c). 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, i.e., unwelcome sexual comments, insults to physical appearance, sexist slurs, encouragements to suicide, threats of rape/death/violence, impersonation. Thus, the online abuse of Caitlin Roper employed tactics that I analysed or mentioned in the previous case studies. In the attempt to shed some light on online misogyny from a different angle, I purposely selected those UGCs which were used to impersonate the target. In fact, 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.

The Target(s): Collective Shout, Collective Abuse

Caitlin Roper is an Australian feminist activist who also works as a journalist for several international newspapers such as The Huffington Post, the Guardian, and 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, 2015b). 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 various 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 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, in which they sustained that Tyler had long promoted and glamorised violence against women in his music and during his concerts, and therefore they obtained the denial of his visa (Collective Shout, 2015a; Liszewski, 2015). This success of Collective Shout fuelled the campaign of gendered hatred against Roper, Alison, and Stone, both on Twitter and Facebook (cf. Roper, 2015b; Bowden, 2015). During this aggressive backlash, Stone was doxxed (cf. Roper, 2014), 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, 2015).

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, 2014), 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. Both campaigns went viral and received respectively more than 170,600 and 40,000 supporters. As a result, GTA V was removed from Target and Kmart Australian stores, but Evans was later reinstated at Sheffield United. Nevertheless, they also cost 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 included 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 Whore” to “Trannies” Hater

The impersonation experienced by Caitlin Roper shows some peculiar aspects that I analyse 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, 2014; 2015a), 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. Table 4.2 below quotes 10 tweets which were published on the two fake accounts specifically created to impersonate the target.

Table 4.2 Impersonation of Roper on Twitter.

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, 2015c)
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 :) (ibid.)
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! (ibid.)
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 :) (ibid.)
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? (ibid.)

Transphobia: “Trannies” Hater

Example 6: *Trannies vaginas are surgical mockeries of real vaginas, and they'll never menstruate or give birth* (Smith, 2015)

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, 2015)

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, 2015c)

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, 2015)

Example 10: *Trannies are worthless subhuman cockroaches that need to be rounded up & slaughtered like cattle. Go out & start killing trannies right now* (Roper, 2015c)

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, 2015). The bio note of this profile reads as follows:



Image 4.12

Image 4.12 (in Roper, 2015a; 2015c) 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 just added a second underscore between her name and surname, making the account particularly credible at first sight. 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., 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 is used to undermine 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 use of the money that she had crowdsourced, this episode of Roper's impersonation is clearly based on her hypersexualisation. Moreover, 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, that is "a typographic display of a facial representation, used to convey emotion in a text only medium" (Hern, 2015). 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 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 tweets. 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 calling into question 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 troll 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 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. 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, 2014). In this tweet, 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 in the third person, which occurs when the sender addresses a potential audience while assigning to the target an insulting adjective or noun in the third person (Poggi *et al.*, 2015,

p. 260). In this content, 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 to establish an ideological hierarchy between a seemingly real femininity and a 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 pre-determined 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.

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 in 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,³ repeatedly addressing them as *trannies*, a slur that, for its recurrences, works as the epitome of transphobic discourse.⁴ 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.

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 acts. 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 to dehumanise 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 content, as well as examples 6-9, appeared online as a promoted tweet, represented in image 4.13 (Roper, 2015c):



Image 4.13

The image above contains a promoted tweet. Promoted tweets are “ordinary Tweets purchased by advertisers who want to reach a wider group of users or spark engagement from their existing followers” (Twitter, 2020c). 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, 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. Someone even singled the target out for these transphobic messages, a misunderstanding that was later cleared by Roper herself in a tweet, when she discovered this second episode of impersonation (Roper, 2015d). Thanks to the reports of many users, Twitter promptly closed the fake account 15 minutes after these tweets were published. Therefore, in this case Roper did not have to prove the violation of her identity, while in the first instance of impersonation she had to provide Twitter with a scanned copy of her driver’s licence to block the fake account (Roper, 2015a).

Moreover, through a newspaper article which reported the incident (Roper in Ringo, 2015), 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, 2015), and he identified the target of this abuse as Roper. After defining her a “feminazi of the highest caliber” (Roper, 2015c) and a “member of multiple militant feminazi groups” (ibid.), he also bragged about the impersonation as follows: “in my trolling, I used the name and the image of Caitlin Roper, an Ausfailian⁵ 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, 2015).

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’” (ibid.). Roper thus traced her harassment back to GamerGate, and she pointed out that this impersonation should be understood 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, 2015). 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.

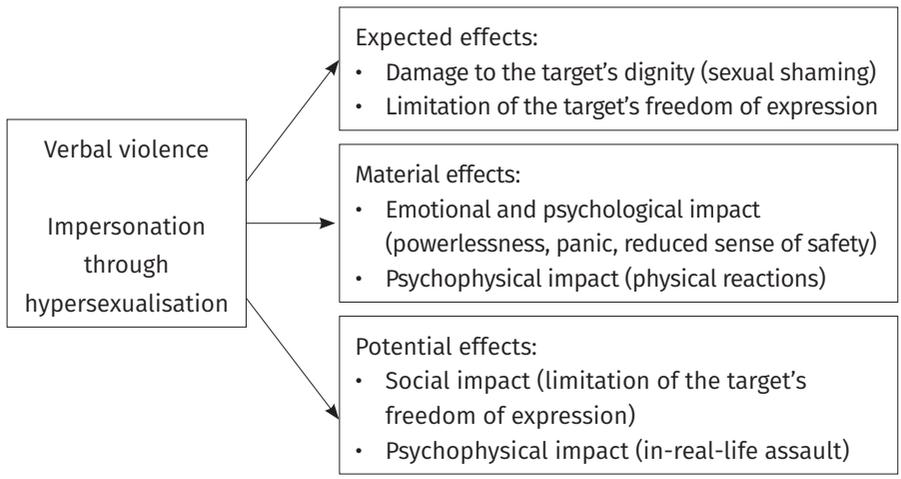
Below, I conclude this case study by discussing the expected, material, and potential impacts of this form of cyber harassment.

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 trolls, 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.

Table 4.3 below refers to the impersonation of Roper through hypersexualised misogyny, and it visually summarises its effects.

Table 4.3 Impact of the First Episode of Impersonation.

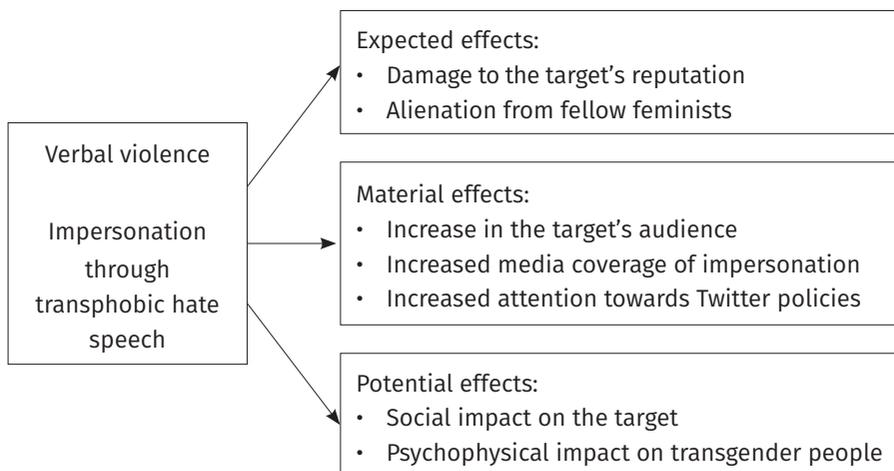


As mentioned in the analysis of examples 1 to 5, the harasser posted these tweets to cause a public vilification of the target through sexual shaming. As discussed, to increase this effect and to amplify the visibility of these UGCs, the impersonator mentioned Roper's real profile and the accounts of 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, 2014). Moreover, this episode reduced her sense of safety and security (ibid.). 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, 2015a).

These emotional, psychological, and physical effects were also amplified by the reaction of the police when she reported her experience. In fact, on several occasions (e.g., Roper, 2014; 2015a) 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, 2014). 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, 2014a, n.p.), an impact that Roper escaped probably because her private information did not leak online.⁶

Similarly, table 4.4 below shows the multiple impact of the second episode of impersonation experienced by the Australian activist. 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 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. 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.⁷

Table 4.4 Impact of the Second Episode of Impersonation.



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. Subsequently, this episode of harassment was reported by several newspapers (e.g., Gibbs, 2015; Sanghani 2015; Ringo, 2015; Smith, 2015), 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, 2015). 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. The case of Caitlin Roper confirms the attempt to silence feminists through several tactics, as discussed in the case of Anita Sarkeesian. 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. 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. I concluded this case analysis by presenting a taxonomy of the expected, material, and potential results of this type of online abuse.

Impersonation is only one of the many ways through which women are vilified online. In fact, in online misogyny different strategies are used to express a strong feeling of resentment, that is, 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. Resentment is particularly venomous when the target is a famous woman who uses the Web to express her ideas. For this reason, in the following section I move to the analysis of the misogynistic discourse used against two famous Italian women who are particularly active on SNSs, namely the pundit Selvaggia Lucarelli and the politician Laura Boldrini.

MISOGYNISTIC RESENTMENT AGAINST FAMOUS ITALIAN WOMEN

5.1 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 increasing cyber harassment towards the target on Facebook and Twitter from April 2015 until March 2017.

The Dataset

The dataset of this case study is made up of 314 posts (7 tweets and 307 Facebook contents), some of which were retrieved from public, semi-public, and private or secret Facebook groups. The case at issue is particularly complex for two main reasons. The first is that it includes not only the digital harassment experienced by Lucarelli, but also other cases of online gendered abuse that she denounced on SNSs. As the number of reports reaching public attention in Italy has been smaller than those in the USA and Australia, I consider this an important occasion to demonstrate the multifaceted articulation of cyber misogyny.

The second reason for the complexity of this case is that both the target's and the harassers' 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. By including these posts in my database, I demonstrate the pervasiveness of online gender-based harassment and its many different forms on SNSs 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.

The “Differently [Post]Feminist” Opinion Maker

Selvaggia Lucarelli is a quite controversial public figure in Italy. While many have linked her fame to the exploitation of gossip regarding other celebrities (see Scarpa, 2016), she asserts that she started her career as an actress in Italian theatres between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of 2000s. She then became increasingly famous thanks to her blog *Stanza Selvaggia* (i.e., *Wild/Untamed Room*), an ironic expression through which Lucarelli links her name Selvaggia to her sharp writing style which sometimes causes wild reactions among the public. On her blog 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 on TV events and politics, trends in fashion, and more lately the dangerous sides of SNSs. 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, 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 woman” (“femminismo sì, ma lucido e onesto. La beatificazione della donna no”). 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 (cf. Boldrini, 2013a) and the hypersexualisation of women in Italian TV shows (cf. Zanardo, 2009). 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" (2007, p. 148), characterised by "the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas" (ibid, p. 161). As Jenny Coleman notes, such muddle of opposing understandings of gender relations makes postfeminism a "slippery beast" (2009, p. 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: 4500 users liked the post, more than 1700 shared it and many of the 507 comments congratulated Lucarelli on her intelligence, honesty, and analytical skills permeated by "truth and womanliness" ("verità e donnità"). 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.

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, 2007, pp. 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 works as a divide in the achievement of public approval. The confusion between feminism and misandry is so common in Western societies that it has been expressed also by some female politicians, like the current counsellor to US President Donald Trump, Kellyanne Conway, who does not define herself a feminist because the term itself “seems to be very anti-male” (in Wagner, 2017). In the case of Lucarelli, as my study demonstrates, postfeminist ideas granted her the support of many people, who cheerfully welcomed her opinionated style against radical feminism. 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 SNSs in mid 2015, when she began talking about the mechanisms of the Web and its potential negative effects in TV interviews (Lucarelli, 2015a) and in social network posts aimed at showing the misogyny which often targets women online (Lucarelli, 2015b). 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, 2016a), 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, 2016a). 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, reputed to use 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 nullity, relevant only for her boobs” (“una nullità, escluse le tette” in Lucarelli, 2015c), a “fucking whoooooore” (“puttanaaaaa di merda” in Lucarelli, 2015d), and as someone who “clearly gained popularity giving blowjobs” (“popolarità palesemente comprata a suon di pompini” in Lucarelli, 2016b). While reporting this material, the social commentator started to speak up against several structural

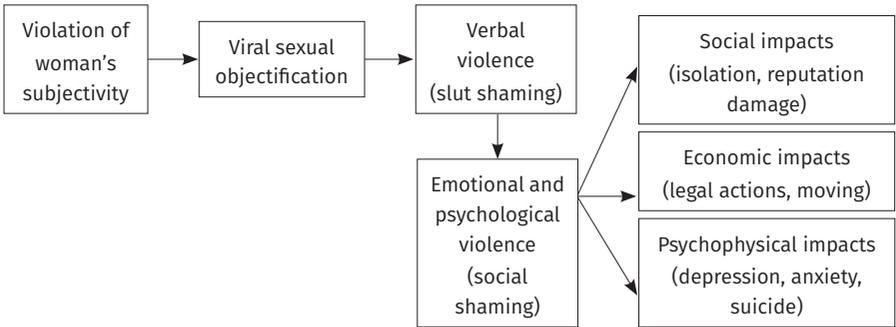
problems of social networks, like Facebook's lack of control over its users' behaviours and its inefficiency in applying policies against hate speech, an issue which had already caused severe consequences on women's lives (Lucarelli, 2016c). In Italy, the most well-known example of these problems is the suicide of Tiziana Cantone, a woman who killed herself in 2016 after becoming the victim of a massive IBSA (see Nelson, 2016; J. Reynolds, 2017). 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 and Image-Based Sexual Abuse

Indeed, the tragic death of Tiziana Cantone is sadly important to understand both the effects of IBSA, and its link to the escalation of harassment experienced by Selvaggia Lucarelli. The suicide of Cantone was the ultimate consequence of the abuse 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, 2017) 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 "Are you 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, 2016). 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 IBSA, which, like any other forms of online misogyny, generates from strong gendered discrimination. In cases like hers, vicious gender-based prejudice is 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 table 5.1, developed by applying my phenomenological model to Cantone's case.

Table 5.1 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 abuse, the victim's suicide did not put an end to the violence she experienced. In the case at issue contents expressing a strong denigration kept appearing online after Cantone's suicide. An example of this trend is shown below in image 5.1.



Image 5.1

This screenshot was published on the Facebook group #InTrashWeTrust and its caption reads “FOUR THINGS THAT ARE GOOD EVEN WHEN THEY ARE COLD.” 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 on his public Facebook profile. This content appears below in image 5.2, in a repost of Lucarelli (available in Lucarelli, 2016d).

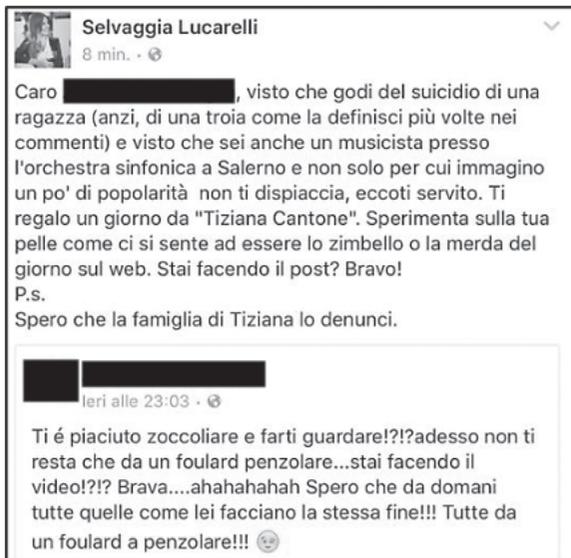


Image 5.2

The abusive comment of this male user 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... are you 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 infinitive verbs *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. The abusive post also revokes the above-quoted phrase of Cantone's video by applying it to the woman's suicide, and it ends with the commenter's wish that all women like her will 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 the man for his post. As image 5.2 shows, she reposted his message by addressing him directly with the following sentences: "Dear [name of harasser], 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 press charges against him." As my translation shows, in this post the pundit not only decided to defend Cantone'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, 2016d).

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* [*Bitches on Heat*], *Sesso Droga e Pastorizia* [*Sex Drugs and Pastoralism*], and *Pastorizia Never Dies* [*Pastoralism 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 instances of virtual rape.

Sometimes the groups were also used to spread links to the so-called *Bibbia 3.0* (*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, 2016). More recently, newspapers have reported the spread of IBSA on the instant messaging service Telegram (cf. Forloni, 2019; Fontana, 2020), where more than 2 million users slut shame women – often minors – across 29 groups in Italy (cf. Angius, 2020). Far from being an Italian phenomenon, this form of collective IBSA seems to be a global trend and it has lately gained international media coverage in many Western countries.¹ What seems to differentiate 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 life. In Italy this pervasive trend was discovered thanks to the reports of several journalists and bloggers (see Drogo, 2016; Di Fazio, 2017; Sclaunich, 2017b), 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 (Lucarelli, 2016c; 2016e). 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, 2016f), while many blamed her for pillorying the haters, she consid-

ers 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, 2016f) and publicly exposed 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, 2016, p. 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.

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 SNSs, 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. 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 [The Dog Pound 2]*) show the pervasiveness and the brutality of misogynistic discourse in text- and image-based contents which humiliate women on the basis 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, IBSA, 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 5.3



Image 5.4

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 5.3 (in Lucarelli, 2017a) portrays a woman who is naked and tied up for refusing an allegedly kind request of anal sex, a picture which seems to legitimise rape and sustain victim blaming discourse. In image 5.4 (in Lucarelli, 2017b) 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 5.5

In image 5.5 (in Lucarelli, 2016g), 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 to 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 place is in the private sphere of the household). As the screenshot shows, image 5.5 received 4,500 likes, thus demonstrating that once shared online this image became very popular, and, thus, a meme. 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 screenshots in images 5.6 and 5.7 below show how such internalisation of misogyny works.

Images 5.6 and 5.7 (both in Lucarelli, 2017b) 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 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



Image 5.6



Image 5.7

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 (2010) and Rae Langton (2009), 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, 2010, n.p.). An example of this is shown in image 5.8 below.



Image 5.8

The caption reads “THE AMAZING FEELING YOU HAVE WHEN YOU ARE 35 AND SHE IS 14 YEARS OLD.” The image (in Lucarelli, 2017d) displays a multimodal blend of paedophilia and misogynistic hate speech in its textual and visual elements. In fact, it 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, 2011, p. 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 IBSA 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, 2017e): “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 (e.g., “give us the name of dis filthy whore” [“Dacce il nome de sta lurida puttana”], and “better to make her disappear before she gives birth to another nigger” [“Meglio farla sparire prima che nasca un altro negro”]). 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 (2017f) 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.

In 2007, Sollecito and his then-girlfriend, the American Amanda Knox, were accused of the murder of an English young woman, Meredith Kercher. They both spent almost four years in Italian prison, but after a long trial the Italian Court of Cassation declared them innocent and found the Ivorian Rudy Guede guilty of Kercher's murder. 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 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 image 5.9:



Image 5.9

This screenshot (in Lucarelli, 2017e) 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 or 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!)” (i.e., “MEREDITH, MEREDITH È MORTA, È MORTA MEREDITH, NON TROMBA PIÙ [COI N&GRI!]”), 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 in Lucarelli, 2017e):



Image 5.10



Image 5.11

In image 5.10, Knox appears with a sign reading “IT WAS THE NIGGER” (“È STATO IL NEGRO”), a content that Sollecito himself appreciated.² Another user commented it by discussing the allegedly experienced sexual performances of Knox: “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”). Similarly, in image 5.11, 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 Knox 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 in these Facebook posts, and that they were just irreverent and cheerful contents (Sclaunich, 2017c). 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 shades of online misogyny that I have analysed in the previous paragraphs. Therefore, the following section 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 had joined the groups she reported. In particular, as she affirmed in some Facebook posts (2016e; 2017g), she became the target of a widespread gendered hatred intended to victimise her after her firm disapproval of *Sesso Droga e Pastorizia*. This was a Facebook page which counted more than one and a half million users and which Lucarelli defined an aggregator of public shaming, misogyny, cyberbullying, IBSA, and obscenity (Turrini, 2017). 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, as shown in images 5.12 and 5.13 below.



Image 5.12



Image 5.13

While image 5.12 (in Lucarelli, 2017h) mentions the possibility and wish to rape her (i.e., “IF RAPE [sic] WOULD BE LEGAL JUST FOR ONE DAY”), image 5.13 (in Lucarelli, 2016h) 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, 2017i). Moreover, many haters extended most of this vicious attack to Lucarelli’s young son Leon, by publishing links to his social media profiles, pictures and image macros expressing gender-based insults and name-calling directed both at him and his mother (cf. Lucarelli, 2017i).

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 discussed the best way to attack her (e.g., “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?”] in Lucarelli, 2017g) and also wished for her death (e.g., “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”], *ibid.*).

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.* (2016, p. 2) 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.” 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, 2010, n.p.). 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, 2016c; Lucarelli, 2017m), 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.

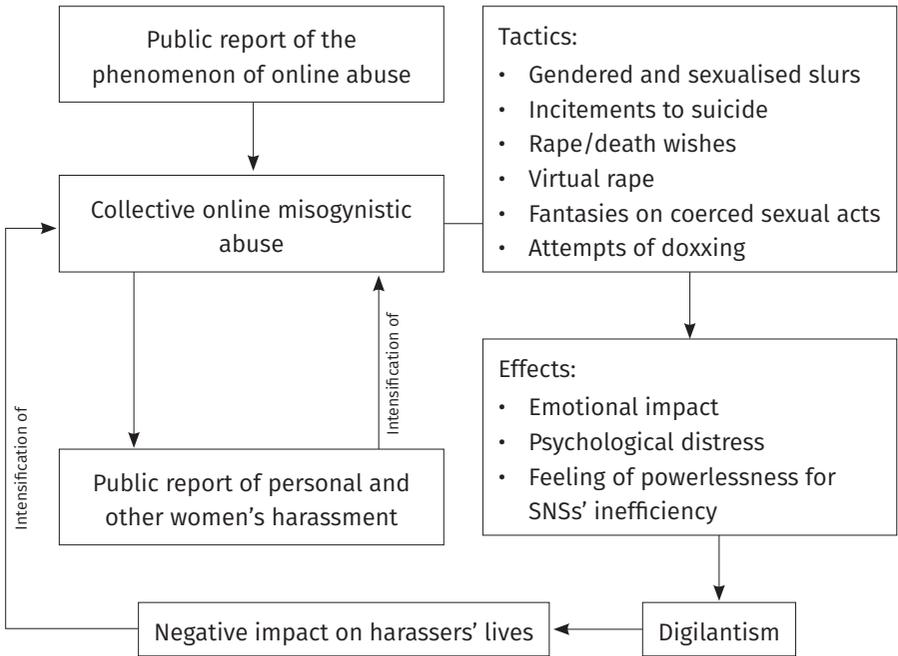
Even though many of her detractors read her response as a way to increase her fame by exploiting the much-debated issue of online hate speech, it is undeniable that Lucarelli uncovered several forms of antisocial online behaviours rooted in misogynistic beliefs by providing instances of the real nature of online cyber harassment and by exposing herself to a 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, 2016, p. 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, 2015e; 2017n; 2017p) 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 lions*).

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, 2016; Tuttocampo, 2017). Even if this reaction has in some ways increased the general online hatred against her, 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, 2015a). 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.

To facilitate the reader’s understanding of the evolution of such a complex case, table 5.2 summarises the development of Lucarelli’s online harassment, along with the main tactics used to abuse her and their effects.

Table 5.2 Evolution of Lucarelli’s Online Abuse.



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 (2016, p. 292), such reactions remain ethically questionable for the results they may have. In fact, as Lucarelli’s case shows, they usually end up working as an-eye-for-an-eye principle, failing to be a deterrent to harass the targets and often translating into “a sort of digital retaliation” (cf. Spallaccia, 2019, p. 165). Indeed, they also risk fostering the proliferation of a culture of vengeance and the related inter-

personal 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 recalls 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 by Selvaggia Lucarelli illustrates several ways in which gender-based discriminations operate in contemporary societies, both online and offline. First, my analysis reflects on the blindness of postfeminist views to structural changes brought about by first and second wave feminism. Moreover, it demonstrates the imbrication of online misogyny and contemporary postfeminist sensibility by establishing a link between postfeminist ideas and the intolerance against radical feminism.

My study also shows how the expression of postfeminist stances grants women an illusory 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 endurance 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" of online misogyny (Jane, 2014a, p. 559), 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 IBSA, doxxing, and digi-

tal 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*. 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 IBSA 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. This reminds a similarity between online harassment and more traditional forms of abuse, like domestic violence. In fact, still nowadays too many women who report their abusers do not find an adequate support from the judicial system and social services, and thus experience an intensification of the abuse.

In the next section, I discuss the last case study of my research, which refers to the online abuse of another famous Italian woman, that is, the former President of the Chamber of Deputies Laura Boldrini.

5.2 Laura Boldrini

The following section focuses on the prolonged misogynistic hate speech addressed to Laura Boldrini, former president of the *Camera dei Deputati* (i.e., Italian Chamber of Deputies, also referred to as the Chamber). 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 government 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.

The Dataset

The dataset of this case study is composed of 129 screenshots, out of which 25 were retrieved from Twitter and 104 from Facebook. 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., Rubino, 2014; Davies, 2014; Amé and Salonia, 2017). 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 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, n.d.). 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, 2015; Burrows, 2016). 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 it in mind 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.

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

To date, Laura Boldrini is a Member of Parliament and part of *Partito Democratico* (i.e., *Democratic Party*). She held the office of President of the Chamber of Deputies between March 2013 and March 2018, a few months after entering the Parliament as a member of the democratic socialist party *Sinistra Ecologia Libertà* (i.e., *Left Ecology Freedom*) also 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. 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).

Boldrini maintained her attention for social causes alive also after her election as president of the Chamber. In fact, in her opening speech, 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, 2013b). 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, 2013c), and she firmly stressed the pressing need to tackle the issue of gender-based violence (Boldrini, 2013b). Right after these initial declarations, the public feedback to Boldrini's intentions seemed quite enthusiastic. In fact, many saluted her first tweet as president (i.e., Boldrini, 2013c) 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, 2013c).

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*.³ Considered the repeated attempts of the political party *Movimento 5 Stelle* (i.e., Five Star Movement, 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, 2014a), her decision ended up causing a violent reaction, both in the offline space of the Chamber (see Repubblica.it, 2014a) and in the virtual platforms of the Web. In such a nervous political atmosphere, the founder of

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, 2014a), 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*, in Repubblica.it, 2014b), 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. 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. Interestingly, this representation of Boldrini recalls the feminazi trope often used to attack feminist activists.

Grillo reposted the video with a caption which simultaneously expressed his amusement (i.e., "it's fantastic!"),⁴ 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?"). It should be noticed here that the use of the article *la* (i.e., *the*) before the woman's surname in the source text is a gender linguistic bias often found in Italian, where the equivalent male article is not used for men's surnames (cf. Accademia della Crusca, 2003).⁵ His post suddenly raised a wild response among the public. In fact, 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. Moreover, a few days after the publication of Grillo's post, the aversion to Boldrini also translated into a more 'traditional'-offline act of intimidation. In fact, on the 5th of February 2014, an envelope addressed to Boldrini was intercepted in a post office near Milan: it contained a bullet and a letter where the President and her family were threatened through sentences like "We will come and get you" and "We will throw acid on you" (cf. Alivernini, 2019, pp. 43-44).⁶ These threats seem particularly alarming in a country like Italy that has witness a spate of copycat acid crimes against women (cf. Nadeau, 2013).

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.* (2015) to explain online aggressive communication through some UGCs against Boldrini.⁷ 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 Poggi *et al.*'s 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. Below in table 5.3, 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, 2014a) and to its repost on the official Facebook page of M5S (i.e., M5S, 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 Grillo's profile or on the page of M5S.

Table 5.3 Hate Speech against Boldrini.

General Insults and Death Wishes
<p>Example 1: <i>Boldrini sei una GRAN PUTTANA</i> <i>Boldrini you are a HUGE WHORE</i></p>
<p>Example 2: <i>Mi scuso con le donne.. ZOCCOLA VAI FUORI DALLE PALLE!!</i> <i>I apologise to women.. SLUT GET THE FUCK OUT!!</i></p>
<p>Example 3: <i>brutta troia, lesbica vacca a succhiare il pisello a la checca del tuo padrone vecchia zozzona</i> <i>Ugly whore, dyke suck the dick of that faggot your master you old swine</i> <i>[master refers to Nichi Vendola, then-president of Boldrini's party and openly gay]</i></p>
<p>Example 4: <i>Boldracca</i> <i>(for the translation of this term, see its critical analysis in the following paragraphs)</i></p>

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 [Giorgio Napolitano, then-president of Italy], 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 a terrible death upon her.

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 vaaaa fuori dalle ball*
Nice piece of ass.....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 near Rome and known symbol of prostitution], €50 for each fuck, than as the president of the Parliament. . .

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 [near Milan, symbol of prostitution] 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. [Grande Raccordo Anulare freeway] to sell herself, that's all she knows how to do

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...*

May she only have 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 gypsy 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.

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 (2015, p. 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, that is, they are used to induce the receiver to behave in a certain way.

In these examples, the senders also 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 woman’ 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 your master you old swine”), Boldrini is ordered to perform oral sex on a man, namely the openly gay 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. In example 3 this sexualised derogatory rhetoric goes further by expressing 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 sense⁸ 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 singular (i.e., *lei*). Given this peculiarity of the Ital-

ian 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 as 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” (2015, p. 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 cross between Boldrini’s surname and the slur *baldracca*, one of the many 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. Through this supposed *nomen omen*, Boldrini is scorned in an alleged jeering tone, as if her prostitute nature were 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. Moreover, this content 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 West-

ern 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.

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.*, 2015, p. 261). As mentioned before in this book, 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 a terrible death upon her”), 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, these are optative communicative acts (i.e., indicating a wish) where “the propositional content is some punishment or revenge against the target [...] a true curse” (2015, p. 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., “The⁹ president of the bedChamber of political prostitution”), Boldrini’s name is to be inferred. Here the target is presented as the epitome of “political prostitution.” In this message, the relegation of the tar-

get to the sexual sphere is 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 *bed-room*, 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 ass....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., *ass*, 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 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.* (2015, p. 260) name “insults through pragmatic indirectness,” where “the insulting meaning [...] must be inferred by making reference to rhetorical devices like reticence, insinuation, rhetorical question, or irony” (*ibid.*). 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 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 – an object which often symbolises hegemonic virility – 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 self-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.

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 bodily and sexual autonomy.¹⁰

Similarly, example 19 (i.e., “May she only have 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 about 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 who 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 gypsy 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 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 Romany 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 Romany 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 Romany 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 ("and what if she enjoys it?" / "I will fuck her," both in Rubino, 2014) which confirm the intersection between misogyny and racism. In fact, on the one hand, the original post deploys two complementary strategies typically found in racist discourse, i.e., "the positive representation of the own group, and the negative representation of the Others" (van Dijk, 1993, p. 263), here respectively assigned to Italian men and to Romany people. On the other, the two subsequent comments show how the Italian men compete in the violation of the target, to reaffirm their sexual supremacy to the detriment of her autonomy and integrity.

In sum, 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 (2010), I discuss the objectification of famous women in misogynistic discourse through the philosophical concept of *ressentiment*.

Sexual Objectification as a Form of Gendered Resentment

The objectification of famous women is exemplified by the two Italian cases analysed in this Chapter. As Nussbaum (2010, n.p.) 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." 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* (ibid.).

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 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, 2010, n.p.), 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. An example of this is a tweet sent to Boldrini where a female user justifies her online harassment by using rape symbolism ("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"] in Boldrini, 2014b). 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.¹¹ 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, 2014a, p. 565).

Thus, gender-based *ressentiment* aims to bring 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 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]" (1993, p. 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, 2014). On this occasion, Boldrini pointed out that the abuse against her had a specific gendered and sexist nature (Boldrini, 2014c), 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, 2014). 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.

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. The post read: "Cara Laura, volevo tranquillizzarti.. Anche se noi del blog di Grillo fossimo tutti potenziali stupratori, ...tu non corri nessun rischio!" ("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!"). Although 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, 2014). 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 Messorà's tweet, I refer to some of the discursive strategies identified by Ruth Wodak and Martin Reisigl (2001, p. 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" (ibid.).

In this tweet, 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, Messorà 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 Messorà 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. Although lacking in the kind of political influence or visibility of comments posted by Messorà, 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 in image 5.14:

@AntoPentas

Ragazzi basta tutti!!! Qui si rischia di brutto!!
 #Boldrini #boldrinidimettiti
pic.twitter.com/Ic81u5aXhf

View translation

Reply Retweet Favorite More



Image 5.14

This image is available in @AntoPentas (2014) 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..."

Although the image 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 criticisms. This representation also recalls the trope of the nazifeminist,

analysed in previous chapters. 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 this book (e.g., the case of Anita Sarkeesian). Therefore, I suggest interpreting this image as an example of blame-the-victim defence mechanism, i.e. a discursive device aimed at presenting the victim as unreliable and not trustworthy. 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” (Mantilla, 2015, p. 159), 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 despicable enemy. Boldrini explained this issue during an event of *Parole O_Stili*, which is an annual conference organised since 2017 to raise awareness on cyber hostility and to promote a more respectful use of the Web. Nevertheless, my study does not aim to demonstrate 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

The misogynistic attacks against Laura Boldrini started in January 2014 and are still ongoing. 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 complicit through their habitual, differential participation in their particular communities of practice” (Lazar, 2007, p. 147). To reaffirm such fundamental androcentrism, users have kept harassing Boldrini through scathing opinions on her alleged ugliness, gendered insults, rape wishes, and similar sexualised discourses (e.g., see comments to Boldrini, 2014d and Boldrini, 2015). These sorts of comments abound especially when she discusses women’s rights or when she expresses feminist stances (cf. Boldrini 2017a). Unfortunately, the online harassment endured by Boldrini 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” (2016, p. 6). Such vicious trend is confirmed in the three countries on which my research focuses (cf. Hunt *et al.*, 2016 for online hate speech against Hillary Clinton in the USA and Julia Gillard in Australia).

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 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. 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 behav-

ious against specific targets, because they implicitly foment the dissatisfaction of many citizens who see SNSs 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 (2017b) explains, even though hate speech and misinformation are two different phenomena, they are tightly 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.¹² 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 though Boldrini's sister had died several years before and she never received such money (Boldrini, 2017c), 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, 2017).¹³

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.

It must also be noticed that the success of online fake news 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 (cf. Baldasty, 2018). An example of this is provided by the above-mentioned fake news on Boldrini's sister. In fact, the article referred to the woman by using 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 the show in Italy, many users did not question the validity of this news. 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 harass Laura Boldrini.

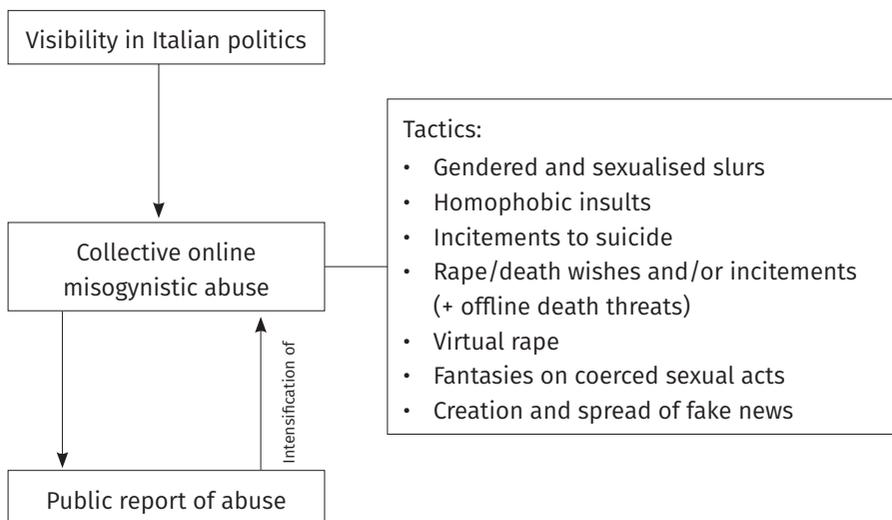
Conclusion

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. In the hope of being an example for all people abused online, especially the youngest one, in mid 2017 she started to press charges against her online harassers (cf. Alivernini, 2019, pp. 117-126). Moreover, to counter the phenomenon of fake news Boldrini has promoted a public awareness campaign called *Basta Bufale* (i.e., *Stop Fake News*), which has received a wide support among several Italian celebrities.

On several occasions she has declared that politics should not refrain from affirming a feminist perspective and from raising awareness on the potential pitfalls of the contemporary participatory Web (e.g., Preziosi, 2017; Boldrini, 2017b), 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, 2016) and against women in general (e.g., Boldrini, 2017d), sometimes naming the harassers (Alivernini, 2019, pp. 111-116). In doing so, even if she has never used an aggressive language to show the importance of online accountability, her reports have sometimes caused aggressive backlashes against the harassers (cf. Nadotti, 2016). 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, which 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.¹⁴

It must also be noted that Boldrini has not intended to turn the condemnation of online harassment into a personal issue (Boldrini, 2017b). This is probably the reason why 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, a summary of the tactics and rhetorical strategies used to harass Boldrini can be useful to understand the extent of the abuse she has experienced, as shown below in table 5.4.

Table 5.4 Features of Boldrini's Online Abuse.



At the beginning of this analysis, I 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, 2011), 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 this book. In fact, it shows that online misogyny should be understood

as a new articulation of violence against women which is recognised as a violation of human rights by institutions in official documents like the Istanbul Convention. The common nature of online and offline misogyny 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 counteract this phenomenon on the Web, as I discuss in the Conclusion of this book.

CONCLUSION

Online misogynistic hate speech is a complex and multifaceted type of discrimination that travels across the Web to reaffirm traditional gendered dominance. In this book, I have shown the reader how gender-based prejudice gets articulated online to harass women and ultimately silence them. The analysis that I have developed in the previous chapters confirms the hypothesis of my research, i.e., that misogynistic discourse should be understood as a form of hate speech, because it creates a symbolic code for violence and it harms women in several ways.

To understand how misogyny manifests itself in cyberspace, I have developed a feminist critical discourse analysis of selected cases, investigating how power, control, and social dominance are enacted in the virtual space in relation to hierarchical gender asymmetries. In doing so, I have tried to unveil how gender works online as an ideological structure which simultaneously creates and reaffirms a rigid and asymmetrical gendered division of society. This analysis has also considered the relationship between misogynistic discrimination and other prejudiced discourses. In this perspective, through a comparative analysis of the six case studies, I have demonstrated that discourses based on racist, xenophobic, homophobic, and transphobic beliefs are employed to reaffirm women's subjugation and to exacerbate sexist hate speech on SNSs with no substantial differences among the three geographical contexts. The comparative analysis has also enabled me to show that women working in different fields have been abused online in very similar ways, in terms of the tactics and rhetoric used in their harassment, and that this vilification has produced similar serious effects on the targets' lives.

To investigate this impact, I have developed the *Phenomenological Model of Online Misogyny* that establishes a direct link between the strategies and the outcomes of online misogyny. The model also presents a taxonomy of these effects, and it shows that cyber misogynistic discourse impacts women's lives on multiple levels. The identification of the multilevel impact of this phenomenon has helped me to prove my initial hypothesis.

In this book, I have also developed a new definition of *trolling*, which is understood as a continuum of behaviours ranging from a bothersome but rather innocuous jest to a hostile stratagem suitable for maintaining social power asymmetries through online aggressive behaviours. This definition has enabled me to frame online hate speech into previous research on trolling, which has been a major influence in the study of disruptive behaviours on the Web.

By reviewing a broad literature which ranges from philosophy and feminist theories, to computer-mediated communication studies, I have investigated misogynistic hate speech from a multidisciplinary perspective, with a methodology which joins the tenets of Critical Discourse Analysis with the performative approach of feminist and queer theories. This has allowed me to study the performativity of gender in relation to online misogynistic hate speech, with reference to the discursive strategies found in the multimodal resources of my datasets. In doing so, I have developed a comparative analysis of cyber misogyny, an approach which has been often overlooked by previous research and which is important to understand that online gender-based abuse repeats itself with recurring features in different cultural contexts.

However, two main limitations remain. First, given my focus on both Twitter and Facebook, I have not included a quantitative analysis of online misogyny in my research. While this could have offered an additional insight on cyber gendered harassment, the absence of a quantitative study is linked to the specificity of Facebook privacy settings. This was a thought-out decision I took because it would have been almost impossible to gather Facebook contents into a relevant corpus for the quantitative analysis. Second, I recognise that some effects of online harassment may have been missed in the study of the case studies. This is a problem that researchers typically face when they analyse the complex phenomenon of gender-based violence, given the frequent reluctance of victims to report the consequences of their abuse (cf. Jane in Festival of Dangerous Ideas, 2015). However, this limitation has not prevented me from developing a reliable analysis of online misogyny, and it should not refrain researchers from engaging in much-needed studies of this dangerous phenomenon.

These considerations lead me to a final remark on the possible solutions to misogynistic hate speech. In fact, the critical analysis of such a complex phenomenon cannot leave aside the discussion of potential strategies, or at least directions, to counter 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 similar-

ities 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.

As I have discussed at the beginning of my book, 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. As discussed in the cases of Lucarelli, Veiszadeh, and Boldrini, this attitude has fostered the spread of different types of vigilantism, some of which have turned out to be quite ethically questionable and problematic, because they have often increased the level of online animosity and intensified collective abuse on SNSs. 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. 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.

In my research, 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 discussed in the case of Laura Boldrini, this abuse is often motivated by a deep-rooted resentment against women. Moreover, as I have demonstrated in the case study of Anita Sarkeesian, many users perform and interpret gender harassment as a competition where they perpetuate patriarchal hierarchies and supremacist ideologies from a social dominant position. As summed up in my phenomenological model of online misogyny, this “‘gamification’ of abuse” (Jane, 2017, p. 84) has multiple repercussions on society. First, its verbal aggressiveness has immediate emotional and psychological effects on individual tar-

gets, 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 to explain 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, 2012, p. 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, *BRICKS – Building Respect on the Internet by Combating Hate Speech* funded by the Fundamental Rights and Citizenship Programme of the European Union, and the Italian project *Parole O_Stili*, financially supported by several local bodies. By facing the complex phenomenon of hate speech, 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 have 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. 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 (cf. Powell and Henry, 2019). Contributions on online misogyny of Australian and American scholars like Emma Jane, Nicola Henry, Anastasia Powell, and Danielle Citron, have been an essential resource for me when analysing 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 social awareness on this phenomenon, because it studies the dialectical relationship between language and society with an emancipatory agenda. This approach 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. 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. Only by promoting everyone's digital citizenship, cyberspace will stop being a man's world (wide web) and will turn into a public space for collective engagement. Because, after all, as Emma Jane (2017, p. 117) sums up, "the public cybersphere isn't actually public if half the people are being told to get the fuck out."

Notes

Chapter 1. Misogyny on a Man's World Wide Web

¹ I acknowledge that to identify a clear-cut distinction between virtual and non-virtual domains is not only difficult but also highly problematic, especially given the increasing presence of Internet-connected devices such as smartphones and computers in contemporary culture. In fact, I believe it should be recognised that the line between online and offline reality is blurred and continuously evolving, and that these domains have become more and more deeply intertwined. However, here I refer to online communication occurring in digital spaces in order to demonstrate that some elements of the cybersphere have a major influence on how harassment can leak from the virtual space into offline daily life, as shown in the analyses presented in this book.

² It must also be noted that in 2014 the COE expressed its commitment to eradicate sexist hate speech (Council of Europe, 2014b, p. 10), and that in 2016 it started promoting calls to action specifically designed to tackle offline and online misogyny (see Gender Equality Unit, 2016). Nevertheless, a weaker attention to gender vilification in comparison to other forms of hate speech is visible in the delay of this recognition.

³ Here and throughout the book, emphasis appears in original texts.

⁴ 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, 2012), the latter was vilified after the video of her gang rape was distributed online (see Valenti, 2014a).

Chapter 2. Exploring Gendered Hate Speech Online

¹ An image macro is “a captioned image that consists of a picture and a witty message or a catchphrase” (Rosado, 2013). If shared online by a great number of users, it becomes a meme (Gil, 2017). Therefore, 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.

² *Feminazi* is a blend of the terms *feminist* and *Nazi*. Even though the Merriam Webster defines a *feminazi* as “an extreme or militant feminist” (n.d., *feminazi*), 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.

Chapter 3. Gamification of Cyber Misogyny in the USA

¹ The content is still available online on the allegedly humorous site *Uncyclopedia* (2016).

² 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, 2012). 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 (2012).

³ It is difficult to provide numbers to show the extent of the GamerGate community. As Braithwaite (2016, p. 2) explains, 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.

⁴ 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 definition of *pounding* by the Urban Dictionary (2004): “fucking the shit out of your girl”), or as an act of general violence (see the definition of *to pound* by the Merriam Webster [n.d.]: “to reduce to powder or pulp by beating”).

⁵ From the tweet “@femfreq should be @femCUNT or @femFREAK LOL! I HATE FEMCUNTS!!” (Sarkeesian, 2015b).

⁶ The falsity of this accusation is not only proved by Mack’s injuries, but it was also confirmed during the subsequent trial.

⁷ 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. 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.

Chapter 4. Islamophobia and Trans-Misogyny in Australia

¹ Here and in other passages, 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, 2014; Tharoor, 2014), 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 (2016).

² For a higher quality screenshot of image 4.6 see Veiszadeh, 2015c.

³ 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.

⁴ 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, 2014). Its use in these UGCs proves its negative and derogatory connotation in much contemporary popular culture.

⁵ 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.

⁶ E.g., Citron (2014a, n.p.) 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, 2010).

⁷ 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, 2015). For a better understanding of transphobic discrimination within some radical feminist communities, see Jones (2016).

Chapter 5. Misogynistic Resentment against Famous Italian Women

¹ Among the most famous cases of collective image-based sexual abuse on Facebook, there are the secret groups *Blokes Advice* and *Baby-*

lone 2.0. The former was active in Australia and counted more than 200,000 users (Carlton, 2016) while the latter was a Belgian Facebook group of 52,000 users (Sclaunich, 2017a). They were both used to share the intimate images of women who were doxxed and publicly slut shamed with misogynistic insults without their knowledge.

² 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.

³ *Decreto Imu-Bankitalia* was draft law aimed at cutting the IMU tax (i.e., the annual council tax on property) and at regulating the governance of the Bank of Italy, also known as Bankitalia in journalistic jargon.

⁴ In the source text “belin, è fantastico!” (Grillo, 2014a). *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*.

⁵ 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 article before both women's and men's surnames (Sabatini, 1987, p. 106), a recommendation that many Italian speakers still tend not to follow, often considering it as an example of excessive political correctness.

⁶ Journalist and Boldrini's close collaborator Flavio Alivernini recounts that few months later the president got another threatening letter which included a particularly disturbing passage: “Don't worry, we are not going to harm you, but your loved ones. Harming you would imply too many risks, but you'll suffer much more this way” (Italian texts in Alivernini, 2019, p. 44).

⁷ 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).

⁸ For this reason, I decided to translate it with the English word *dylke* 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, 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, 2011; Ford, 2016; Jane, 2017).

⁹ 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, 2015).

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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., *mum-mia* [*mummy*], *fascista* [*fascist*], and *mafioso* [*Mafioso*]), available in comments to Ansa, 2017), but never with sexualised insults.

¹² 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*, 2016).

¹³ A more recent fake news about Boldrini appeared in 2018 on the website *Dagospia*. According to this source, Boldrini had allegedly occupied a seat reserved to a traveler with disabilities on an Alitalia flight. The (fake) news was also reposted by newspapers *Libero*, *Il Giornale*, and *Il Tempo*, going viral online and thus fueling hatred against the politician (cf. Alivernini, 2019, pp. 95-100).

¹⁴ 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, 2007), in 2012 in Australia (see the case of former Prime Minister Julia Gillard in Summers, 2012), and in 2013 in UK (see the case of the scholar Mary Beard in Day, 2013).

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