

EXCERPTED FROM

Sexual Harrasment
Online:
Shaming and Silencing
Women in the Digital Age

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1

Gender and Sexual Norms in the Digital Age

The Internet has dramatically reshaped society and social interactions, creating opportunities for self-expression and interpersonal connections that transcend time and space. Social scientists writing in the 1990s predicted not only new ways of communicating, but a transformation in social relationships and ways of exercising power. However, even social scientists writing in the early part of the twenty-first century could not predict the social and political impact of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.¹ On average, people around the world spend 100 minutes browsing social media every day (Global Web Index, 2016).

Given the popularity of social media, it is regrettable that recent years have seen an increase in rampant online misogyny. Bloggers and journalists have documented countless examples of death and rape threats on women's blogs, Twitter accounts, and gaming accounts; the sharing of nude photographs without consent, with some altered to depict violence; and Facebook pages, websites, and forums dedicated to woman hating (Hess, 2014a; Marcotte, 2013; McAuliffe, 2014). As a warning to the reader, this book contains content that includes violent imagery and terms designed to offend. In agreement with Jane (2014), I believe the lack of attention to gender-based online abuse in the scholarly literature is due to the inclusion of words considered uncivil and offensive. I recognize the risks of

repeating abusive language and pejoratives but believe doing so is necessary to establish the problem and thoroughly examine the effects of misogynist language. This book does not name abusers as it does not want to give them another platform. However, publicizing the abuse is crucial in order to reframe debates and incite action, as we are seeing with recent high-profile rape and sexual harassment cases.

Well-known cases of online abuse involving contemporary social media sites include blogger Ariel Waldman, who received a flood of tweets² calling her³ a “cunt” and a “whore,” as well as a string of threatening tweets that revealed private information in 2007. Writer Cheryl Lindsey Seelhoff was one of the earliest recipients in 2007 of doxing⁴ and coordinated rape and death threats through Internet forums such as 4Chan. Beginning in 2014, video game developers, players, and commentators such as Zoë Quinn, Anita Sarkeesian, and Brianna Wu experienced threats of rape and murder in a harassment campaign known as Gamergate.

Recounting online threats against women writers, blogger Amanda Hess (2014a) recalls the following messages: “you are clearly retarded, i hope someone shoots then rapes you,” “i hope someone slits your throat and cums down your gob,” and “I just want to rape her with a traffic cone.” Throughout 2013, journalist and feminist activist Caroline Criado-Perez was inundated with rape threats on Twitter for campaigning for a female figure to appear on a Bank of England note; the threats included “YOU BETTER WATCH YOUR BACK. . . . IM GONNA RAPE YOUR ASS AT 8PM AND PUT THE VIDEO ALL OVER THE INTERNET.” Street harassment activist Feminista Jones has been continually threatened for her #YouOkSis Twitter campaign. “Blokés Advice,” a private Facebook group, gives advice on how to force women to have anal sex and how to bombard them with porn. Prior to going on a killing rampage in Isla Vista, California, a man participated in online discussions about wanting revenge against women who rejected him. While in no way suggesting that posting online *caused* the violence, this rampage opened people’s eyes to the websites and forums dedicated to woman hating. The *Guardian*’s analysis of its own 1.4 million blocked comments since 1999 revealed that eight out of ten were directed toward women writers. Feminist blogger and founder of Feministing.com Jessica Valenti received the most blocked comments of all *Guardian* writers (Valenti, 2016).⁵

Posting online about feminism, rape, sexual harassment, and political representation attracts the worst online abuse. Lewis’s Law

is named after journalist Helen Lewis's tweet from 2012 that "the comments on any article about feminism justify feminism" (*Geek Feminism Wiki*, n.d.). Valenti (2016) confirms this idea, finding that any online discussion about efforts to establish true gender equality sends some men into a rage. Women who speak about fields seen as men's domains, such as sports, video games, and technology, also receive high amounts of online abuse. Journalist Laura Penny and her family received rape threats after commenting publicly on economic policy. After speaking about immigration on BBC1, Professor Mary Beard was called a "cunt" and had her face superimposed onto a picture of women's genitals on the since closed website *Don't Start Me Off*. Women have been abused even when talking about topics traditionally associated with women. Shauna James Ahern was relentlessly harassed for blogging about cooking and parenting. Melania Trump, who would become First Lady, was inundated with online abuse after her speech at the 2016 US Republican National Convention, with most of the comments having nothing to do with the actual speech. Instead, tweets most often included terms like "bitch" (443), "plastic" (119), "whore" (118), "slut" (99), "bimbo" (77), "tramp" (47), "hooker" (40), "MILF" (29), "cunt" (22), and "skank" (13) (Steinblatt & Markovitz, 2016).

Online sexual abuse has become so widespread and persistent that a UN report (Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, 2015) calls for a "world-wide wake-up call," offering sobering statistics and recommendations around three areas: sensitization, safeguards, and sanctions. Groups such as the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative (CCRI) and Discourse of Online Misogyny (DOOM) campaign against online sexual abuse. Online harassment is associated with headaches, drug use, social isolation, suicidal thoughts, and diminished school performance and future employment (Poole, 2013; Sinclair et al., 2012). Over the past decade, cyberbullying has been linked to higher rates of suicidal attempts among adolescents (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010), including the sexual shaming of adolescent girls and gay males who committed suicide, such as Tyler Clementi, Megan Meier, and Rehtaeh Parsons.

Some women are choosing to leave Internet platforms such as Twitter to escape abuse. Rampant abuse prompted writer Michelle Goldberg (2015) to title a *Washington Post* article "Feminist Writers Are So Besieged by Online Abuse That Some Have Begun to Retire." Actor⁶ Leslie Jones chose to temporarily disable her account

after being inundated with sexist and racist insults on Twitter upon the release of the new *Ghostbusters* movie, though she fought back against trolls⁷ in a comedy segment on *Saturday Night Live*. Comic book writer Chelsea Cain recently left Twitter after becoming the target of trolls after the cover of the final issue of her comic *Mockingbird* featured the main character wearing a shirt that read “Ask Me About My Feminist Agenda.” Valenti says if she could start over as a feminist writer, she would write under an anonymous name.

Online threats can intrude into offline lives through stalking and swatting.⁸ Valenti decided to take a break from social media after she woke up to a tweet threatening the rape and death of her five-year-old daughter; Valenti tweeted, “I should not have to fear for my kid’s safety because I write about feminism. I should not have to wade through horror to get through the day. None of us should have to” (Chasmer, 2016). Feminist video game critic Anita Sarkeesian and developers Zoë Quinn, Kathy Sierra, and Brianna Wu were forced to change their routines and eventually change addresses due to rape and death threats. A brick was thrown through Wu’s window. A Pew Research Center study (Duggan, 2014) found that women who have been harassed were twice as likely as men to find their experience “extremely” or “very” upsetting. The ubiquity of the Internet, unlike the workplace and the street, makes it hard for women to escape harassment, particularly if the Internet is their livelihood. Over time, the burden of avoiding and enduring sexual harassment and assault results in lost opportunities and less favorable outcomes for girls and women. Fear of harassment can cause women to fear entering lucrative technology fields.

Gender, Sexuality, and Social Media

The purpose of this book is to describe the contemporary use of misogynist language in online settings and to understand its relevance for contemporary gender and sexual relations. Through social listening and content analysis, this book examines the various ways in which Internet users use misogynist words on the three most popular social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.⁹ The words examined here appear the most often in stories of gender-based abuse and include “bitch,” “cunt,” “dyke,” “slut,” and “whore.”¹⁰

Certainly, sexual harassment existed before the Internet. Sexual harassment in the workplace reminded women not to compete for jobs, and sexual harassment on the streets reminded women not to travel freely. Online sexual harassment can be understood as an attempt to keep women from a major sector of the public sphere. Online misogynist terms can be likened to ambient or passive sexual harassment, in which the harassment is not directed toward a specific person, but is experienced by others and can lead to fear and a hostile environment. Social media made harassment considerably more efficient because these outlets can reach millions of people in seconds and harassers can remain anonymous. Certainly, lack of physical presence may encourage aggression by lessening empathy and emboldening otherwise unaggressive people (CASS Briefings, 2013; Morahan-Martin, 2000).

While not all online abuse centers on gender and sexuality, clear patterns emerge when abusers believe they are targeting girls and women.¹¹ Though the focus is on abuse directed toward girls and women, I will not be attributing gender of user or recipient unless a gender identity is supplied in the profile or text. Abusers often assume gender based on user name, appearance in photos, and occasionally stated gender identity. In the case of video gamers, gender is attributed based on the character and name chosen, as well as voice if the headset is used. Though the focus is on women, heteromale norms are also supported by misogynist terms (Bamberg, 2004).¹² Furthermore, this research is limited by a language that reflects and reproduces binary notions of gender. Rather, gender and sexuality are accomplished through a repeated set of practices and power relations (Butler, 1990, 1993; Connell, 1987).¹³ Sexual harassment and abuse are examples of practices that reproduce and reinforce essentialist and binary notions of gender.

Reports from the American Association of University Women (Hill & Kears, 2011) and the Pew Research Center (2014) find that women are much more likely than men to receive sexually threatening messages. Public shaming on social media took on sexual tones for women, such as developer Adria Richards and publicist Justine Sacco, but not for men, such as writer Jonah Lehrer (Ronson, 2015). Commonly used terms such as *cyberbullying*¹⁴ and *trolling* fail to highlight the gendered and sexual aspects of women's harassment. Mantilla (2015) coined the term *gendertrolling* to highlight the viciousness, aggression, and pervasiveness of trolling against women

(pp. 10–11). Barak (2005) uses the phrase *gender-based harassment in cyberspace* to include using gender-humiliating or shaming comments, sending sexually explicit messages, and sending unsolicited sexual content. Jane (2014) uses the term *e-bile* to refer to “sexualised vitriol” targeting women (p. 559). I prefer the use of *gendered online abuse* to convey the severity of online campaigns directed at people perceived as women.¹⁵

Just as the term *fag* serves as a threatening specter for men (Butler, 1990; Pascoe, 2012), women who go against traditional norms are at risk of labeling as *bitches*, *dykes*, and *sluts*. They have failed at performing gender, occupying the abject position against which all other women are judged (Butler, 1993). Terms like *dyke*, *slut*, and *whore* remain feared insults for adolescent girls and women offline as well, serving as powerful disciplinary mechanisms through social control and stigma (Attwood, 2007; Payne, 2010). Pejorative labels mark others as outsiders in the social hierarchy and, therefore, as undesirable sexual partners or even friends. All the terms studied here are united in that they depart in one way or another from hegemonic feminine heterosexuality, or what Nielson, Walden, and Kunkel (2000) call *heterogender*. Violations include being unaccommodating or outspoken (“bitch” and “cunt”), sexually unavailable or too masculine in appearance or behavior (“dyke”), and too sexual (“slut” and “whore,” though “whores” have broken additional societal rules such as engaging in commercial sex).

Though ongoing sexual harassment and abuse directed toward a particular person may be more serious and emotionally distressing, analysis of social media reveals more subtle forms of misogyny occur thousands of times a day (Demos, 2016b).¹⁶ By focusing on everyday misogyny, not just the worst cases of abuse, we can observe the general online climate. Many argue that Twitter is particularly plagued by harassment.¹⁷ In a press release to the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media study (Demos, 2016a), researcher Alex Krasodomski-Jones argues that “while the digital world had built new opportunities for public debate and social interaction, it had also built new battlegrounds for the worst aspects of human behavior” (para. 8), adding that though Twitter makes its data most available to researchers, misogyny is prevalent across all social media. Demos (2016a) found that over a three-week period in the UK, more than 6,500 unique users were targeted by 10,000 explicitly aggressive and misogynistic tweets, while internationally, over 200,000 aggressive tweets using “slut” and “whore” targeted 80,000 people.

Labels such as “slut” and “whore” deny women basic human dignity, defining sexual desire as indecent and selfish for women while encouraging it for heterosexual men (Fine, 1988; Nussbaum, 1999). Society reinforces traditional gender and sexual relations by placing girls and women into categories that often reduce women to “good” or “bad,” depending on how closely they conform to heterosexual feminine norms. Gender intersects with class, race, and sexuality, resulting in “bad girls” (working-class, black and Latina, sexually active) being blamed for rape and intimate partner violence in the same way that “good guys” who are white and affluent are forgiven.

The themes of women’s worth and bodily autonomy online are not arbitrary, but are situated within larger cultural, historical, political, and social processes. Internet communications reflect structural gender and sexual inequality and a culture that normalizes misogyny. Abusers resort to attacks on women’s bodies and sexuality because women’s social worth is perceived as directly linked to their likability and desirability in a way that heterosexual men’s social worth is not. The fact that so many women are threatened with rape and death affirms the societal belief that women do not have control over their bodies. Arguing that online sexual abuse is not a problem because it is so common and ordinary or comes from only a few people suggests that we should accept the denigration of women as a common and ordinary part of our current society. Professor of law Citron (2009) writes, “the online harassment of women exemplifies twenty-first century behavior that profoundly harms women yet too often remains overlooked and even trivialized” (p. 373).

Gender and sexuality intersect with class and race-ethnicity (Armstrong et al., 2014; Hill Collins, 1990). In this book, I examine class, racial, and religious slurs accompanying misogynist terms.¹⁸ African Americans are a disproportionate share of Twitter users (Brock, 2012) and access Twitter four times more often each day than white users (Smith, 2011). Most of the public cases of online abuse refer to white, educated, middle-class women in coveted positions. Women of color,¹⁹ such as writer Malorie Blackman, activist and legal analyst Imani Gandy, actor Leslie Jones, organizer Erica Lee, political analyst Zerlina Maxwell, and anthropologist Robin Nelson, receive a torrent of racial slurs in addition to gender-related threats, though they do not receive the same kind of media attention or public support as white women. Feminista Jones regularly receives racialized and sexualized harassment, though she is more likely to be harassed by white men

when she speaks about racism and by black men when she speaks about issues specifically facing black women. Regardless of her harasser's race, the content is similar, such as calling for her to be raped and lynched (Mantilla, 2015).

Hill Collins (2004) argues that black women are already stereotyped as "jezebels," "whores," and "hoochies." Brown's (2016) study of singer Taylor Swift's fan forums reveals that unlike singer Nicki Minaj or actor Camilla Belle, Swift is a "beacon of morality because of her adherence to standards of white heteronormative propriety" (p. 401). Though Swift experienced online sexual shaming when a woman posted a photo of a sandwich on Twitter suggesting it resembled her vagina due to an active dating life, Twitter users jumped to Swift's defense, and the woman who posted the picture received a stream of hateful tweets.

This book contributes to our understanding of the ways in which gender and sexual norms are currently enforced and challenged. Social media sites serve as a public stage for the construction and performance of gender and sexuality. The need for regulatory power and the resultant negative sanction when inappropriate behavior is suspected reveals how gender and sexuality are achieved through online gender performances. Publicly performing heteromascularity by declaring desire for a "slut," or enforcing femininity by calling a woman a "slut" for displaying sexual desire, reveals a need for the constant realization of gender and sexuality.

Conversely, gender and sexual norms can also be challenged and upended. This book contributes to the existing literature on gender, sexuality, and the Internet by also considering the possibility for Internet users to transform norms surrounding female sexuality through online communications (Brickell, 2012). This book moves beyond stories of victimization to explore the potential for social change through digital technology. While one obvious function of online sexual abuse is to regulate women's behavior, the openness and reach of the Internet creates the potential to change meanings and identities. In the same way that large numbers of anonymous users can log onto sites like Reddit and Twitter to share misogynistic ideas, these platforms can create opportunities to challenge beliefs and ideas. Inductive analysis reveals use of slurs like "dyke," "slut," and "whore" beyond the expected regulatory function, including extension, reappropriation, and direct critiques that carry potential for cultural transformation.

Language and Society

Ultimately this book is about language, albeit a specific kind of language (misogynist slurs) used in a specific setting (social media). Drawing from symbolic-interactionists in sociology (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959), language enables society by forging identities, enabling communication and shared meanings for interaction, clarifying norms, and facilitating an understanding of the social world. Words themselves carry no power, but their references to ideas and objects gives them significance. As the stuff of social life, language is crucial for studying social problems (Maynard, 1988). Society and inequality are not composed solely of language; certainly, we must recognize the importance of power structures such as institutions and laws to establish norms around gender and sexualities (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978/1990; Rubin, 1992). Nevertheless, language enables much of what occurs in the larger social world, including justifying differential treatment by marking insiders and outsiders.

Trottier and Fuchs (2014) argue that above all, social media is used for communicating and establishing connections. Digital traces left in the form of posts, hashtags, and tweets play an important role in expressing the self, forming identities, sharing information, building communities, and engaging in contemporary social issues. This research is situated within sociology and critical social media studies by analyzing online content in relation to power structures and gender relations. We must consider the way in which larger social and political forces (for instance, a presidential election) and certain mediums (Twitter's 140-character limit) constrain expression. Language on social media is shaped by software, institutional policies, and structural forces such as commerce and law. Sassen (2002) writes, "Power, contestation, inequality, hierarchy, inscribe electronic space and shape the production of software" (p. 366).

Posting anonymously, tagging people without their consent, writing and reading quickly, and the dominance of a few forums can also make social media more conducive to abusive practices. The fact that great debate and concern exist over the influence of social media is important to note. A study by the Pew Research Center finds that 44 percent of US adults "often" or "sometimes" obtain their news on social media (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). These statistics raise concerns that phony news stories and suppression of certain news stories could influence views and behaviors such as voting. Even with

attempts to lessen fake news, research finds people tend to believe and share what they read online (Levin, 2017). In forthcoming research, searches for “rape” on Twitter revealed most tweets reported false accusations and gang rapes committed by immigrant men, leading to a severely distorted view of rape.

The normative and evaluative power of language is seen in the use of pejorative slurs²⁰ (Ashwell, 2016; Tirrell, 2012). Misogynist language, like classist, racist, heterosexist, ableist, or ageist language, mirrors power relations in society. The study of slurs yields information about attitudes and larger social inequality. Words for women often define women in relation to men (consider “Mrs.” and “Miss,” which denote women’s relationship to men, while all men can be called “Mr.”). Objects or forces that are small and graceful like kittens or owned or controlled by men such as boats are called “she,” while powerful controlling forces such as God or tigers are referred to as “he” (Richardson, 2004).

Despite claims that language cannot harm us, terms that dehumanize make it easier to inflict harm (Kleinman, Ezzell, & Frost, 2009; Tirrell, 2012). Racial epithets, for instance, stereotype entire groups of people and justify continued oppression. As a colonial project, Europeans renamed and humiliated Africans and outlawed their language (hooks, 1997). According to Camp (2013), slurs are “rhetorically powerful because they signal allegiance to a perspective: an integrated, intuitive way of cognizing members of the targeted group” (p. 335). The purpose of slurs is to denigrate, attach stigma, and establish differences between “them” and “us.” Calling women “bitches” and “sluts” both reflects and perpetuates a continued belief in women and men’s essential differences, women’s inferiority to men, and women’s lack of ownership over their bodies. Observing what makes someone receive the label of “slut” on the Internet warns others to avoid the same behaviors. Language on social media influences behavior even when the social media users lack authority or power because social media can be public and long-lasting. Misogynist slurs are important for constructing masculinity as well, similar to the use of “fag” (Pascoe, 2012). Noted by Pascoe, oversimplifying femininities and masculinities must be avoided by recognizing the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and class. Furthermore, recognizing the relationship between culture and structure, discourse not only reflects patriarchal social structures, but is important for producing and reproducing power

structures. Misogynist slurs establish and cement norms around gender and sexuality, reinforcing essential differences and hierarchies. The question remains whether online discourses can transform a misogynist culture and society.

Recognizing that language is not fixed and meanings can change is important. Meaning is created within specific contexts. For instance, slurs are used affectionately or jokingly among people within a racial group or among friends. Almost everyone understands *slut* to be a derogatory slur, but the word is more acceptable in art (as in *Slut: The Musical*) and in commentary (as in *Slut-Walks*²¹). *Slut* can also have different meanings when used to admonish someone for sexual activity and used to admonish someone for “slut-shaming.” Therefore, interpreting tweets within a larger context of a conversation is important. In addition to analyzing misogynist terms such as “bitch” and “slut,” I include terms that have been reclaimed or represent resistance to oppression, such as “queer” and “slut-shaming.”

Methods

This project uses digital trace data from Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to examine contemporary misogyny and social change around gender and sexuality. Social Media Management Software (SMMS) includes a feature that allows the collection of data from social media platforms using a process known as “social listening.” Much like traditional content analysis, data containing the keywords “bitch,” “cunt,” “dyke,” “slut,” and “whore” are gathered from Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. These data are then examined for themes using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. This research makes several methodological contributions to the literature on gender and sexuality. Apart from research by boyd (2014) and the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media (Demos, 2016b), most Twitter studies focus on political events. A digital divide exists among researchers who have resources and computational skills to analyze “big data” (boyd & Crawford, 2011; Bruns & Burgess, 2012; Manovich, 2011). Researchers lacking resources in fields such as humanities and social sciences can offer methodological training, sociological understandings of technology, and a concern for social justice to the analysis of big data.

The past decade has also seen abundant research on cyberbullying among adolescents (e.g., boyd, 2014; Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2013; Kofoed & Ringrose, 2012; Ringrose & Renold, 2010). I depart from previous research by including public interactions among people of all ages in this book. Public misogyny sends a warning to all women, regardless of age, to remain in line with feminine and heterosexual norms. Though Tanenbaum (2000) interviews women between the ages of 14 and 66, the book focuses overwhelmingly on high school students and women between the ages of 18 and 24. Although Tanenbaum's updated 2015 book includes the Internet, only a few cases of online sexual shaming are discussed. Furthermore, only one respondent indicates any kind of resistance to sexual shaming, whereas significant resistance is found among social media users.

The Centre for the Analysis of Social Media (Demos, 2016b) conducted a systematic study of the terms "slut" and "whore" on Twitter. That study complements this research because of the different methodological approaches taken. The researchers relied primarily on a computer algorithm to code tweets, which allowed them to analyze millions of tweets. However, they coded data into only three themes, "aggressive," "self-identification," and "other." The inductive approach used here did not require identifying themes prior to analysis. Though regulation of women's behavior was expected, the flexible method allowed for new themes to emerge from the data. Human coding revealed a much wider range of themes beyond aggression and self-identification, such as positive self-identification and rejection of the label. This richness of coding permits examination of the power of online content to transform meanings around heteronormative female sexuality.

A computer algorithm may not be able to capture the nuances of meaning, especially given the 140-character limit. Mistakes in coding could be avoided; for example, Hom (2008: 429) offers the example, "Racists believe that Chinese people are chinks," which would likely be coded negatively by a computer. Often sentiment could only be discerned by examining emoji, data in links, photos, videos, and entire conversations. My research also includes more terms, examining silencing ("bitch" and "cunt") as well as sexual shaming ("dyke," "slut," and "whore") as major aspects of a misogynistic climate on social media.

Social media researchers argue that more transparency and consistency across studies is needed (Bruns & Burgess, 2012; Driscoll &

Walker, 2014). Appendix A provides more detailed information on the methodology, including the sampling method, coding schemes, ethical issues, and limitations. Considering the significance of the medium under investigation, some of the problems identified by boyd and Crawford (2011), Driscoll and Walker (2014), and Rogers (2013) can be avoided by treating social media as a site of research in and of itself, with all its problems and messiness. It is the multiple meanings that emerge around interactions on social media that are of interest. By analyzing the content of tweets, Instagram hashtags, and Facebook groups and pages, we can learn how shaming and silencing terms are used on social media.

Theoretical Framing

This book is framed within sociological and feminist approaches. Eschewing explanations that focus on the personalities of the abusers, online misogyny is interpreted as grounded in the fabric of society. Many imagine online abusers are all socially isolated men who believe women are taunting them. However, criminal investigations into Internet users who have sent death and rape threats reveal a range of personality types, ages, and genders, including adults and teenagers with rich social lives, accompanied by a range of reasons, including anger and revenge, entertainment, and opportunity due to the perception of anonymity. In a 2012 interview on the show *Anderson Cooper 360°*, the man known as the website Reddit's "biggest troll" claimed he was playing to an audience of college-aged men and that Reddit encouraged his behavior by offering prizes to people who drew traffic to their site (CNN, 2017). Writer Lindy West (2015) met her online harasser in person, and he expressed deep remorse and admitted to feeling bored and angry after the loss of a relationship. According to a survey by the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers, teachers are increasingly recipients of online abuse, and more than half of that abuse comes from the parents of their students (Laville, 2016). It is also important to recognize that interactions with public websites are group activities. Though people may be posting alone at home, they are choosing to participate in a social community by sending their message to any number of potential viewers.

Leaning toward what has been called a "sex positive" feminist perspective, this book recognizes that sexual freedom is an important

part of women's freedom (Califia, 1994; Queen, 1997; Willis, 1992), while also recognizing that power relations are complex. Women should be free to engage in public discourse and erotic activity without stigma, though I take seriously critiques of views of women's sexual agency offered by what has been referred to as "choice" feminism. Sociological theories recognize that agency is most available to those with the most structural power (Archer, 1995; Giddens, 1984), such as white, middle-class, heterosexual, cis-gender women. Critiques of neoliberal views of agency argue that girls' sexuality continues to be confined through commercialism and displays of agency (Bay-Cheng, 2015a, 2015b). Contemporary media are criticized for hiding a "tidal wave of invidious insurgent patriarchy . . . beneath the celebrations of female freedom" (McRobbie, 2008: 539). Additionally, a narrow focus on sexual agency and pleasure can alienate women who choose not to have sex (Hills, 2015; Zakaria, 2015). Remembering the distinction between rights and capabilities and the interconnected relationship between structure and agency is important.

Avoiding moral panics is crucial, particularly with respect to adolescent sexuality, remembering that social media has not increased the amount of bullying among adolescents and far more physical assaults occur outside the context of the Internet (boyd, 2014). Concerns over "sexting" tend to focus only on regulating and surveilling girls, reproducing the sexual double standard of girls as innocent and needing protection from aggressive male sexuality (Ringrose et al., 2013; Tolman, 2012). Though genuinely interested in helping women, Tanenbaum's (2015) advice for ending slut-shaming online includes advising women to avoid consuming alcohol, sending semi-naked photos, posting sexy selfies, and dressing in a "sexually provocative²² manner unless [they] want to be looked at sexually and can handle being reduced to a sexual object" (p. 340). None of the recommendations in the appendixes "Creative Solutions to Eliminate 'Slut'" and "The Slut-Shaming Self-Defense Toolkit" includes recommendations for boys and men or schools. Ringrose et al. (2013) ask what it would mean to live in a world where adolescent girls could take, post, or send images of their breasts without risking sexual shaming.

In this book, I take as a given that gender inequality exists and is connected to other forms of inequality such as ableism, classism, racism, and heterosexism. Social inequality is multidimensional, supported by cultural, relational, institutional, and structural forces

around labor, property rights, and reproduction. At the cultural level, gender inequality is supported by misogyny, which is defined here as hatred and mistrust of women. Misogyny maintains that women are inherently inferior, untrustworthy, or worse, evil. Justifications for gender differences in autonomy and trustworthiness are widespread and persistent, stretching from ancient myths, plays, and poems to philosophical writings, contemporary sociobiological and evolutionary psychology research, to contemporary political discourses around sexual assault and reproductive rights (Millet, 1970; Pomeroy, 1995).²³ Theriault (2014) points out that misogynist sentiments are everywhere, ranging from online pick-up artists (PUA) to the constant stream of violence against women by men. In the 1970s, Germaine Greer (1971) wrote that women had very little idea of how much men hated them and, in fact, internalized this hatred.²⁴ It should be noted that women are as likely as men to use terms like “slut” about other women (Demos, 2016b).

Some argue that misogyny is fought in subtler or softer forms today (Rivers and Barnett, 2015). One could also argue that contemporary attacks on women’s rights are not so subtle, including restrictions on women’s reproductive rights and severe mishandling of sexual assault and harassment cases. Though acceptance of physical violence against women is declining among women and men (UN Statistics Division, 2015), more men are meeting online on men’s rights and revenge porn websites to advance the long-standing belief that men deserve to control women (Marcotte, 2013). Arguments that men’s era of dominance has ended (Rosin, 2012) stoke fears that men are losing status and power, resulting in a backlash (Faludi, 1991, 2011). Some characterize the 2016 US presidential election as a widening chasm over awareness and concern for gender inequality. It does not seem to matter that, overall, men continue to occupy positions of authority in the political structure, workplace, and home, and the dominant culture reflects a bias toward men’s accomplishments and traits associated with masculinity. In a *New York Times* opinion piece, “The Men Feminists Left Behind,” Filipovic (2016) argues that the election period revealed that Trump embodied “masculine power reclaimed,” offering “dislocated White men convenient scapegoats—Mexicans, Muslims, trade policies, political correctness—and promises to return those men to their rightful place in society” (para. 10). I would add women to this list, for in addition to xenophobia, misogynist language became a major part of the public discourse during the 2016 US presidential election.

Analytical Framework and Chapter Outline

Analysis of online misogynist slurs reveals two distinct but related types. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 address misogynist slurs that are designed to shame women who deviate from traditional sexual norms, or *sexual shaming*.²⁵ Tweets, posts, and hashtags include the terms “slut” and “whore” and center on women’s sexual behavior and bodies. The question here is how people construct narratives around female sexuality. Women’s reputations have been used to keep women in line. A sexual double standard still exists in the United States, in that women are shamed for heterosexual sexual desire and activity. Sexual shaming reinforces hegemonic heterofemininity at the level of the interaction, reminding girls and women to manage others’ impressions of them. “Dyke” is included in this category, as it is typically used to enforce heteronormative standards of sexuality, though it may also be used to silence women. Sexual shaming affects lesbians as much as their heterosexual peers. Lesbians are by definition labeled “bad girls,” and therefore must distance themselves from sexual agency and desire (Payne, 2010).²⁶

Chapters 5 and 6 address the second type of misogynist slurs, what I call *silencing slurs*. These involve tweets, posts, and hashtags designed to silence women’s voices and participation in the public sphere, and they include the terms “bitch” and “cunt.” Like sexual shaming terms, these terms remind women when they are deviating from expectations for femininity, such as holding strong opinions. These terms reflect the idea that women should be seen and not heard, particularly in “men’s-only” spaces (which to some means preventing women from participation in all parts of the Internet). Beard (2014), Nussbaum (2010), and Spender (1991) find a long history of silencing women in public discourses through attempts to dehumanize and discredit.

Each chapter provides a phenomenology of each slur by describing the various online uses, including such themes as promiscuity,²⁷ friendly terms of endearment, and positive self-identification. Some chapters will include variations on the slur, such as “slut-shaming” in Chapter 2 and “hoe” in Chapter 3, and comparisons to other terms such as “queer” in Chapter 4. The influence of external cultural events will be examined. Additionally, terms intersect and include norms around class and race-ethnicity.

Each chapter follows the same overall analytical structure, organizing the various uses of slurs into three broad categories that emerged

from an analysis of themes: regulation, extension, and dissent. Regulation is perhaps the most expected use: misogynist language used to encourage women to behave in ways consistent with gender and sexual norms, such as having few sexual partners, remaining faithful, dressing modestly, and behaving in an accommodating manner.

Inductive analysis reveals a second major function, extension, in which slurs are used in alternative ways. For instance, despite a sexual double standard, the term “slut” might be used to refer to men with many sexual partners or as a friendly term for a friend. “Whore” might reference someone who wants a lot of something, as in “attention whore.” Other examples include “bitch” as an intensifier as in “I’m back, bitch” or something difficult as in “This test is a bitch.” “Bitch” is often used as a replacement for woman or girlfriend. Here we see opportunity for transformation of language, though the word is used because of its derogatory content (a test is a “bitch” because a “bitch” is bad or annoying).

The third use is dissent, which includes rejection of the label, positive self-identification, direct critiques of the use of misogynist slurs, and information about online and offline collective action, which I am defining as organized acts carried out by groups to achieve social and political goals. This category holds the most transformative potential. However, even when users exhibit agency by denying that they are sluts, it is often because they have had sex with only one person, reinforcing the original meaning of having many sexual partners. Positive self-identification or reappropriation can remove some of the negative content but often depends on the original meaning being desirable as an identity. Direct critiques, education, and organization possibly hold the most transformative potential.

In Chapter 7, I examine whether slurs were used most often to regulate women’s behavior or provide alternative meanings and critiques. I will compare uses across the misogynistic terms under examination and look at how fluctuations in use and sentiment vary alongside external social and political events. Why are some words such as “dyke” used in a positive way (reappropriation), while others such as “cunt” are not to the same extent? Why do some external events such as the 2016 US presidential election figure so prominently in online uses of these misogynist slurs? How do uses of slurs also demonstrate heterosexism, classism, and racism? Because rape threats figure so prominently in online abuse of women, I will briefly discuss their use on Twitter, and a full analysis is forthcoming. Like the other slurs, threats of rape serve to dehumanize and

silence women through fear. Online activist Mercedes argues that calling for men to lose their jobs is the biggest degradation for men while rape is the biggest degradation for women (Ronson, 2015).

In the final chapter, I explore whether varied uses of misogynist slurs, such as extension and reappropriation, can cause ruptures in meanings, draining slurs of their pejorative power. In addition to regulatory uses, I find high numbers of slurs used in alternative ways, such as “bitch” as an intensifier to make statements unrelated to gender or sexuality more forceful, or “cunt” to refer to men on rival football and rugby teams in the UK. However, these words are deeply embedded in power relations and structural inequality. We might ask whether “bitch” is truly a “neutral” counterpart when used to refer to one’s girlfriend, even if used in a complimentary way as in “my bitch looks good.” “Whore” is extended to phrases like “attention whore,” but still refers to disproportionate desires, and a test can be a “bitch” because it is difficult. Can positive identification with slurs like “slut” and “whore” thoroughly transform their meanings, as my data show with “dyke” and as we have already seen with “queer”? Tanenbaum (2015) believes it is impossible to reclaim words like “slut” or “whore.” Positive identification may remove some of the power of the stigma, like we have seen with “nigga,” but it does not necessarily change the meaning for people who hold negative opinions or disrupt the good girl/bad girl distinction in the same way that directly admonishing sexual shaming or providing education can.

Debates around the reclaiming of derogatory slurs raise larger questions about the relationship between culture, in the form of online language, and structural gender and sexual inequality. Can supplying new meanings around misogynist terms, for instance reappropriating “bitch” and “slut” to signify women who are powerful or unashamed to pursue their own sexual pleasure, reverberate back to the social structure by supplying new meanings around women’s sexuality? For hooks (1997), there is potential liberation in reclaiming speech by creating counterhegemonic speech and worldviews. Others argue that language cannot transform social relations without a complete shift in patriarchal social norms and structural relations (Ashwell, 2016; Butler, 1990). Furthermore, whether social media can be a site of social change has incited debate. Misogyny may be heightened on sites like Twitter due to software choices, anonymity, distance, low threat of punishment, lack of autonomy from state and economic power, and a broad audience. Furthermore, online interac-

tions mirror power relations offline, with educated, white, English-speaking, and male users more likely dominating discussions through abuse, excessive posting, and dictation of the agenda and style of dialogue (Dahlberg, 2001).

However, Internet scholars argue that we cannot rely solely on dystopian views (DiMaggio et al., 2001; Nyboe, 2004). Social media networks create potential for change never seen before (Shirky, 2008). Social media has been described as a catalyst for social movements such as Black Lives Matter (Eligon, 2015; Ware, 2016), Occupy Wall Street (Penney & Dadas, 2013), and the Arab Spring revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa (Howard & Hussain, 2013). Social media users can react quickly, demonstrated by the creation of #MuslimID after Trump called for a database of all Muslims. Facebook users checked into Standing Rock, a gathering of tribes and allies to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline, thus making it harder for law enforcement to use the social media site to identify who was there. Social media can publicize issues the media are ignoring. Sassen (2002) argues that cyberspace can be a more effective site for social struggles than the political system because it allows engagement by previously excluded people and action that bypasses formal systems. Skeptics argue weak ties are compelling people to action (Gladwell, 2010) or point to the ineffectiveness of changing one's profile picture or creating a hashtag, using pejorative terms such as *slacktivism* and *clicktivism* to describe low-effort political activities that have little effect, such as changing a profile picture to express solidarity. Doubt exists that social media transforms people because individuals self-select into groups that match their values and interests.

The Internet also offers opportunities for increased participation of women, and a wealth of feminist work is happening in the form of blogs, magazines, advice for avoiding abuse, and online campaigns such as #metoo, #SayHerName, #hollabackgirl, and #ShoutYourAbortion. "Slut-shaming" has entered the public vernacular, suggesting the possibility for increased awareness around female sexuality. As historical constructs that continually need accomplishing, sexuality and gender are constantly open to transformation. Can social media users create alternative narratives around female sexuality by redefining, reappropriating, and critiquing misogynist slurs? The Internet is complex, having contradictory effects on power and creating spaces for oppression and empowerment (Morahan-Martin, 2000; Spender, 1995). Avoiding determinist theories means the Internet neither solely

regulates nor transforms social meanings (boyd, 2014; Cavanagh, 2007). Trottier and Fuchs (2014) argue that social media neither causes nor is entirely unimportant for social movements.

Finally, I examine individual, institutional, and legal attempts to lessen online misogyny and abuse. Institutional and legal attempts to block users or ban certain words are met with concerns over censorship, free speech, and a free Internet. “Techno-libertarians” hold absolutist views on the First Amendment, focusing on the expansion of online voices and the democratization of authority, with power to create a society in which everyone can express themselves freely. However, some users are choosing to leave social media sites such as Twitter because of the abuse. Examining the ideas of political philosophers such as John Stuart Mill raises the question of whose right to engage in human affairs free of coercion takes precedence. Butler (1997) and Foucault (1978/1990) oppose censorship because it tends to have the opposite effect than intended, and they object to the state having the power to determine appropriate speech and behavior. Many victims of severe abuse complain that their cases are mishandled by social media websites and law enforcement (Citron, 2014). I explore efforts to increase awareness of the injury caused by misogynist slurs and whether this awareness can create new norms around gender and sexuality without institutional or legal intervention.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this study, social media includes sites that allow social networking, microblogging, and the sharing of photos, video, and other content. Facebook, the largest of the top three social media platforms, was launched in 2004; Twitter, in 2006; and Instagram, in 2010.

2. *Tweet* is the term for a post to the social media site Twitter.

3. When gender identity is not available, I will be using the singular *they/them/their* instead of the pronouns *he/him/his* and *she/her/hers*.

4. *Doxing* refers to the exposing of someone’s personal information (name, phone number, address, Social Security number, familial relationships, or financial history) to encourage harassment from others.

5. Of the eight most targeted women, four identified as white, four identified as black, and one identified as lesbian. The two men out of the ten most harassed writers both identified as black men, one of them also as gay, showing intersections between gender, race, and sexuality (Gardiner et al., 2016).

6. *Actor* will be used regardless of gender identity because it originally referred to all theatrical performers and only later were performers distinguished by gender (Oxford English Dictionary, 2017). In this book, I recog-

nize the assumption of male superiority when generics such as *he* or *man* are used for all people and prefer nongendered words such as *Latinx* to reduce gender bias in language.

7. *Trolling* is defined as making online comments or engaging in behaviors such as disruption with the purpose to upset or enrage others, often for amusement (Mantilla, 2015).

8. *Swatting* means making a false report to the police so that they send a SWAT team to a person's home.

9. As of the end of 2016, Facebook was the most popular social networking site with 1.79 billion regular users, measured as monthly active users (MAU). Instagram, a photo- and video-sharing app, had 600 million MAU. Microblogging site Twitter had 317 million MAU (*Statistica*, 2017). Most of the data will come from Twitter for reasons related to availability of data. Abuse of women has been found on other Internet sites not discussed here, including Reddit, Tumblr, and YouTube (Poole, 2013; Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016).

10. Variations on "whore," including "ho" and "hoe" and the more recent "THOT" (an acronym for "that hoe over there") are included in searches as well, although searches for "ho" and "hoe" return any words with these strings of letters. Though not analyzed fully here, "queer" and "rape" are also included as search terms.

11. Though life stages are socially constructed, the literature tends to distinguish between girls (under 18) and women (18 and over). Adolescent girls are often defined as 12–18 years of age. For simplicity of writing, I may refer to girls and women as *women* unless age is relevant.

12. I will also note when online abuse is directed toward men as well as trans* and queer identities.

13. For further reading, see Kimmel (2000); Lorber (1994); Messner (1999); and West and Zimmerman (1987).

14. I tend to use the term *online*, though *cyber* can be used interchangeably and is preferred by others studying this topic. *Cyberbullying* is defined as "when someone repeatedly makes fun of another person online or repeatedly picks on another person through e-mail or text message or when someone posts something online about another person that they don't like" (Hinduja & Patchin, 2012, p. 2).

15. In this book, I may refer to gendered online abuse simply as *online abuse* or *abuse*.

16. For incredibly thorough examinations of more extreme forms of online abuse, see Citron (2014), Jane (2014), and Mantilla (2015).

17. Humphreys, Gill, Krishnamurthy, and Newbury (2013) argue that systematic analysis of even short everyday writing reveals information about the larger cultural climate, though I am unable to generalize about the frequency of misogyny because Twitter users are not representative of the general population. Instead, I am analyzing the qualitative content, and I will discuss if counts fluctuate relative to external events such as presidential debates.

18. While this research did not directly track racist and homophobic speech, groups such as the Southern Poverty Law Center have been tracking

all forms of hate crimes and harassment in the *New York Times* (2017) editorial “This Week in Hate.” Since the 2016 US presidential election, much of the incidents reported include death threats and photos with racial, Islamophobic, and anti-Semitic slurs uploaded to social media.

19. For the purposes of this paper, and in recognition of the social construction of race and ethnicity and the failure of language to capture diverse experiences of groups, *people of color* will be used to refer to people not of European descent. *Black* will be used to refer to people of African descent but who may have diverse ethnic identities such as Caribbean. Some authors use *African American* to describe the identities of native-born blacks in the United States, and I will defer to their word choice.

20. I am defining terms such as *bitch* and *slut* as slurs because they derogate, debase, and disparage a class of people, though I do not think all terms or all uses of each term can be replaced with a neutral counterpart (Anderson & Lepore, 2013). Resisting semantic and pragmatic perspectives, I argue that words are defined as slurs simply because they are prohibited and display disrespect.

21. SlutWalks are protest marches and rallies first organized in 2011 in Toronto in response to victim blaming and slut-shaming as integral parts of a culture in which rape is widespread and normalized.

22. The term *provocative* implies clothing can inherently provoke or incite responses, supporting victim blaming in cases of sexual harassment and violence. I will use *revealing*, though also problematic, to describe data where references to women’s clothing are blamed for calling them a “slut” or a “whore,” for example.

23. Essentialist psychological theories that focus on fear of women as the basis of misogyny are not as successful at explaining agency and social change, and theories such as womb envy fail to explain misogyny among women.

24. It is important to note that not all women support or identify with other women, particularly across race and class lines. Exit polls for the 2016 US presidential election, though not perfect, revealed slightly more white women voted for Donald Trump than for Hillary Clinton, leading some to deduce they would rather support a candidate who expressed misogyny than a woman for president.

25. I prefer the term *sexual shaming* to the more commonly used *slut-shaming* because women are shamed for any kind of sexual behavior, including refusing sex and experiencing sexual violence.

26. Though I track “queer” to relate to the use of “dyke” in Chapter 4, I am unable to analyze discourses specifically addressing other identities under the LGBTQIA umbrella (which includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and questioning, intersex, and asexual) in this book, though conducting this research is important in the future.

27. I recognize that the concept of *promiscuity* is problematic because it upholds a good girl/bad girl dichotomy by determining an appropriate number of sexual partners for women, but I am using the term because it is the enforced norm.