The Role of Social Media Abuse in Gender-Based Violence: The Challenge of Vituperative Communication in the Age of New Technology

Susan Elizabeth Watson BSc MSc MA

PhD

University of York

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Abstract

Online abuse communicated via social networking sites has increased considerably in recent years, with a significant amount of vituperative communication targeted at women. This mixed methods study investigates the gendered online abuse received by women serving in the occupations of academia, journalism, policing, and politics. Written in the shadow of the murder of two Parliamentarians, the research considers how abuse in the online space echoes other forms of gender-based violence, drawing upon evidence gathered from 50 interviews, the analysis of three Twitter 'storms', and the review of a wide interdisciplinary corpus. This study reveals that the online abuse of women in high-profile, public facing occupations consists of seven elements: defamation, emotional harm, harassment, threat, belittlement, silencing, and criticism of appearance; and that at least one of these elements is present in every abusive encounter evidenced here. This research further demonstrates that the online abuse directed at women is misogynistic, frequently includes violent threats, and dismisses women's contributions to online discussions. The study also reveals that the abuse directed at women varies by occupation, with police officers most likely to receive abuse that denigrates their ability or appearance; politicians and journalists more likely to receive violent threats, and academics receiving abuse of all types. The expectation that women maintain an online presence frequently acts as a trigger for abuse, with other determinants an increased focus on topics that compel individuals to take a binary stance; and the malign nature of political debate. The study concludes by presenting a series of recommendations, operating at the personal, organisational, legislative, and structural level. Ultimately, this doctoral research demonstrates that online abuse is about gender and is the consequence of being a woman on the internet.

This thesis contains content that readers may find obscene and / or distressing.

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weekends with good grace, in order to get to this point. And it's for Tom, who always

believed that this thesis would be successfully completed, even when I didn't.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work, and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1.   Introduction

The online abuse of women communicated via social networking sites has increased significantly in recent years (Vera-Gray, 2017), and policy actors have been slow to respond to the immense change that has occurred as a result of the way that individuals interact in the digital space (Jane, 2017a). The emerging nature of this phenomena has created a policy vacuum, with evidence suggesting that a lag in institutional responsiveness leaves victims without adequate protection or recourse (Jane, 2017a).

One area where there is a noticeable dearth in robust investigation is in the online abuse that occurs in the public sphere, particularly of women who work in public facing occupations. The huge changes in communication brought about by the assimilation of social networking sites (SNS) into everyday life provides the means for members of the public to interact easily and directly with individuals in public facing occupations, including academics, journalists, police officers, and politicians, with numerous studies confirming the centrality of social media and other online communication mechanisms to the contemporary operation of the public sphere (e.g. Mellado and Hermida, 2021; Terren and Borge-Bravo, 2021; Shirky, 2011). However, such engagement has not been wholly positive, as this study will demonstrate. For whilst it is true that social networking sites (SNS) have provided a mechanism for the public to communicate with those working in the public sphere and has also offered feminist and other campaigning groups an effective platform from which to share, develop and publicise their aims (Micalizzi, 2021; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Weathers et al., 2016), this has come at a substantial cost, in the shape of online abuse.

The motivation for this research emanates from the author's professional background in political campaigning, gained from a decade working for a UK political party. Hearing first-hand stories from women currently holding public office, of the abuse and threats received as part of the necessary daily engagement with online platforms, triggered both a personal concern for colleagues and friends and an academic curiosity, which morphed into a quest for scholarship. This concern occurred alongside a backdrop of increased political violence, which culminated in the assassination of the Labour MP for Batley and Spen, Jo Cox in June 2016. Cox was murdered on her way to an advice session in her local constituency (Jones, 2019). The political and personal ramifications of Jo Cox's death continue to reverberate, with Parliamentarians and other public sphere representatives having to constantly consider their safety and security whenever they are in public. This fact was further demonstrated during the writing up period of this thesis, when the Conservative MP for Southend West, Sir David Amess, was murdered on 15 October 2021. Like Cox, Amess was holding a constituency advice surgery when he was killed (Peele, 2022). These two heinous acts have raised awareness of the vulnerability of our public servants, a vulnerability which frequently extends into the online domain.

However, as will be established in this research, it is not only politicians who are the target of online abuse. The author of this study is also a feminist activist, and frequent user of numerous online platforms, and as a consequence of this activity has received multiple threats of physical and sexual violence, mockery, and malevolence. Receiving abuse of this nature is therefore not an uncommon or noteworthy experience – rather, it has become part of the everyday communication exchange that occurs online. Furthermore, this abuse is increasingly difficult to escape, given the expectation from both employers and the wider public (whether overt or implicit) that those serving in public facing occupations maintain an

active social media presence. In summary then, the reasons for, and consequences of, this routinely gendered malice, are the topic of this research.

1.2. Context for the research

Whilst there is no universally agreed definition of online abuse, for the purposes of this research, the definition provided by Citron (2014: 3) is appropriate, stating that online abuse "involves the intentional infliction of substantial emotional distress accomplished by online speech". In order to obtain the greatest possible breadth in understanding of the phenomena of online abuse, this study considers abuse that occurs via a range of different mediums, as illustrated in Figure 1.1.

Twitter	Facebook	Linked In

WhatsApp	Email	Online comments in newspaper articles
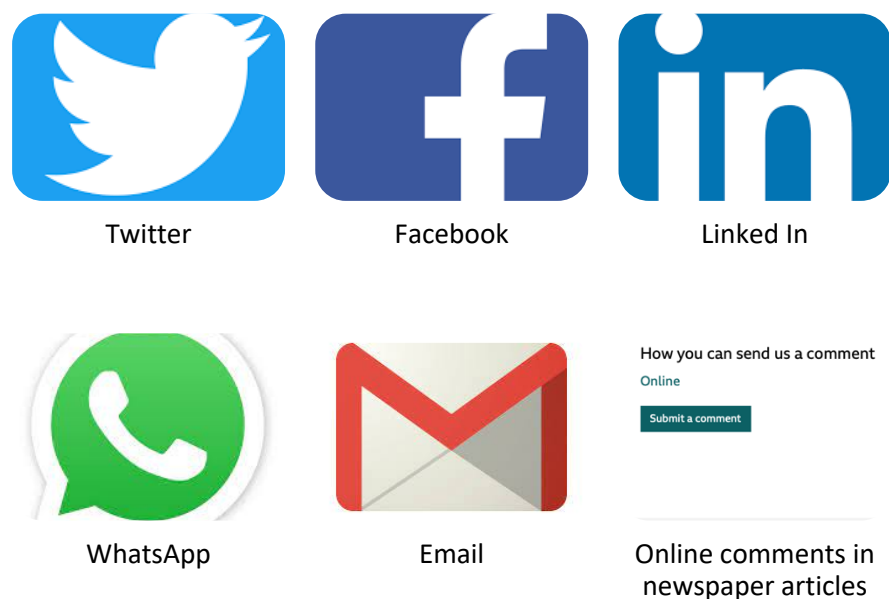
Figure 1.1: The range of computer mediated communication mechanisms being considered in this study

As well as investigating a range of computer mediated communication mechanisms, the online abuse examined in this doctoral research has also been described in various different

ways by those who have investigated it. These descriptions include cyber bullying (Wagner, 2019), cyber harassment (Citron, 2014), cyber stalking (Southworth et al., 2007), doxxing (Lee, 2020), flaming (Jane, 2015), pile-ons (Thompson and Cover, 2021), swatting (Wu, 2015), trolling (Lumsden and Morgan, 2018), and Zoom bombing (Hernandez, 2020). For simplicity, in this thesis these various terms are all assimilated into the phrase 'online abuse'. Where significant differences between the acts of abuse occur, these are discussed in the text. Furthermore, a comprehensive glossary of terms can be found at the end of this thesis.

Alongside the lack of a universal and comprehensive definition of online abuse, is a dearth of quantitative data regarding the scale of online abuse being delivered, as these figures are not routinely collected. Nevertheless, there is a growing body of research from august bodies such as the United Nations (2015), Amnesty International (2017) and the European Commission (Davidson et al., 2011), all of which has stressed the growth in the abuse disseminated online. This research has also been bolstered by high profile incidents of abuse directed at public figures, some of which have been so extreme that they have gained significant notoriety, be they the abuse directed at female gamers ('Gamergate') (Dewey, 2014), the threats directed at feminist campaigner Caroline Criado-Perez in response to her campaign to feature Jane Austen on the £10 note (Criado-Perez, 2013), or the torrent of abuse directed at women politicians (Peele, 2022; Urwin, 2013). Whilst not universally agreed upon (e.g. Gorrell et al., 2020), many believe that most of the violent and aggressive online abuse is received by women (Kargar and Rauchfleish, 2019).

The aim of this research, therefore, is to investigate the extent to which social networking sites have perpetuated a permissive climate towards gender-based violence, and to identify

and analyse the wider impact that such online abuse can have. These project aims have been operationalised as three separate but related research questions.

1.3.   Research questions

The first research question to be investigated in this study is

'How are women in public facing occupations targeted online?'

The second research question is:

'What effect does online abuse have on women's interactions with the digital world?'

The third and final research question being considered as a part of this study is

'What factors influence the reporting of abuse?'

1.4.   Methodology

This doctoral study has collected a large amount of empirical evidence to examine the causes and consequences of the online abuse experienced by women in public facing occupations. This evidence is then scrutinised in order to establish a link between online abuse and gender-based violence.

The core of the empirical evidence is drawn from 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews undertaken with women serving in four public facing occupations: academia, journalism, policing, and politics. Analysis of three Twitter 'storms' (sudden and abusive spikes in activity that occur on the social media platform) (Technopedia, 2013: 1) directed at an academic, a journalist and a politician, and gathered from a real-time Twitter data corpus amounting to some 10.4 million tweets, complements this evidence, by providing an insight into the sheer scale of online abuse occurring on a daily basis.

1.5.   Thesis structure

This thesis is presented in nine chapters.   Chapter Two provides a summative exploration of the literature underpinning this research. It is divided into four thematic areas: gender-based violence, misogyny, the experiences of women working in the public sphere, and computer mediated communication. Each of these four themes have an impact on the definition, understanding, and perpetuation of online abuse.

Integral to this investigation is the consideration of the experiences of women in both online and offline domains, before assessing how the multiplicity of theories of gender-based violence can be applied to women's experience of online abuse. The chapter concludes by outlining six elements of online abuse that are present in the literature: emotional harm, harassment, threat, belittling, silencing, and the criticism of appearance.

Chapter Three presents an analysis of the current policy landscape in England and Wales, as it relates to online abuse and gender-based violence. The chapter uses the thematic areas first presented in the literature review to further explore the response from legislators, policy makers and law enforcement to online abuse, in both contemporaneous and historical developments. Chapter Three aims to provide the most topical review of policy developments in this fast-moving area, discussing events that occurred up until March 2022.

Chapter Four introduces the methodology underpinning this study. The chapter presents the ethical issues that were addressed during the research, as well as the feminist research methodology that is the mainstay of the study; and describes how this is articulated in the way the research has been undertaken. This chapter also discusses the issue of researcher reflexivity, and why this is so important in a study of this nature.

The methodology chapter also details the practicalities of the research design, presenting

the data collection mechanisms employed in the study, and the reflexive thematic analysis

model that was subsequently adopted to analyse the resultant data. Chapter Four

concludes with a discussion of the impact of externalities, describing the disruption to the

research design of the study caused by the Covid-19 pandemic that first emerged in early

2020.

Chapter Five presents the first of the analysis chapters, a systematic investigation of three

'Twitter storms', experienced by an academic, a journalist, and a politician, using the Twitter

application programming interface (API) to collect live data over a six-month period. The

corpus of over 10.4 million tweets reveals the sheer scale of online abuse experienced by

women in public facing occupations. This analysis investigates the nature and tone of these

three Twitter storms using qualitative techniques. By analysing the data in this way, it is

possible to illustrate both the magnitude and the rancorous nature of such events.

Crucially, this chapter uses the data gathered from the Twitter API to identify a seventh

element of online abuse – that of defamation.

The second of the analytical chapters, Chapter Six, moves onto explore the findings of the

semi-structured interviews undertaken with fifty women serving in the occupations of

academia, journalism, policing, and politics. Chapter Six further investigates seven

pervasive elements of online abuse identified in the data, drawing upon examples of

women's experiences gathered from the interviews. These seven elements are illustrated in

Figure 1.3.

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                                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                                    │   Emotional harm    │
                                    └─────────────────────┘
                                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                                    │     Harassment      │
                                    └─────────────────────┘
  ┌──────────────────┐             ┌─────────────────────┐
  │ Seven elements of│─────────────│       Threat        │
  │   online abuse   │             └─────────────────────┘
  └──────────────────┘             ┌─────────────────────┐
                                    │  Silencing women's  │
                                    │       voices        │
                                    └─────────────────────┘
                                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                                    │  Belittling women   │
                                    └─────────────────────┘
                                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                                    │     Criticism of    │
                                    │  appearance and     │
                                    │  other physical     │
                                    │  characteristics    │
                                    └─────────────────────┘
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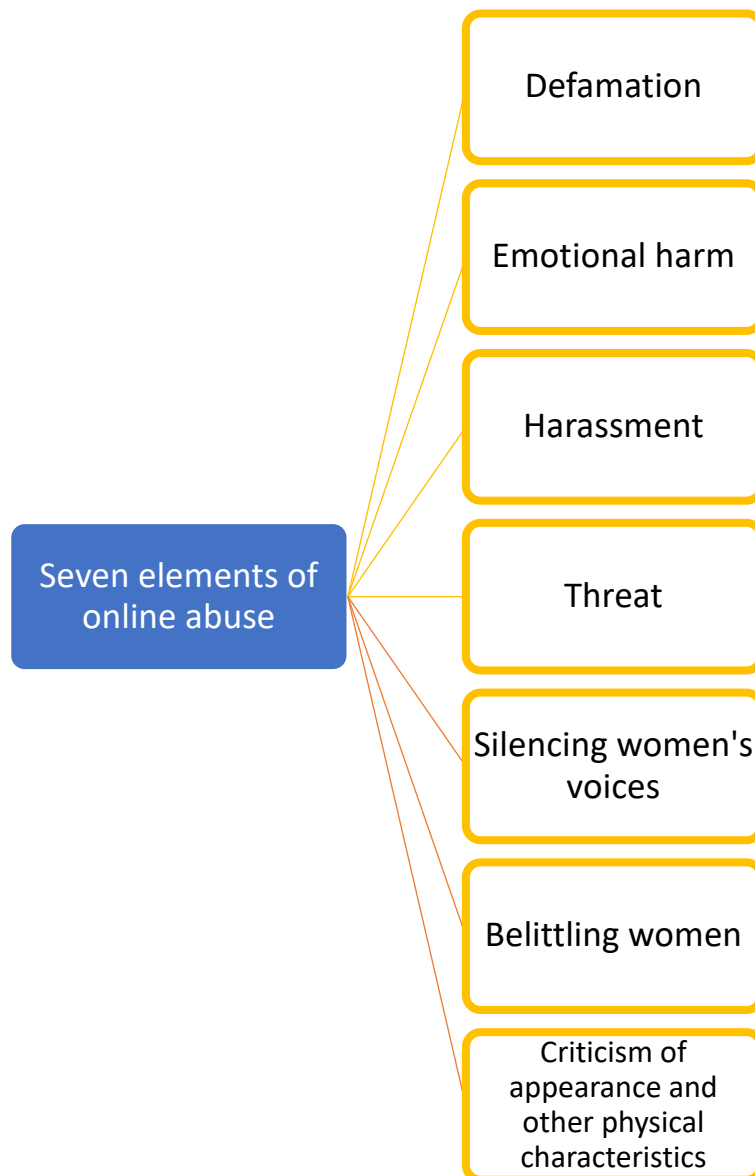
Figure 1.2: Seven elements of online abuse presented in Chapter Six

Chapter Seven presents further analysis of the study's empirical dataset, identifying and then exploring the factors that are unique to public sphere occupations, particularly in relation to online activity (Dey, 2019). These factors were central to the experiences recounted by research participants, having a specific impact on their use and relationship with online technologies, whilst also affecting the nature and severity of the online abuse that they consequently received.

Chapter Eight is the final analytical chapter of the thesis. It presents the recommendations of the fifty women who took part in the empirical data collection phase of the study, which they offered as providing possible ways of tackling online abuse. These recommendations operate at four levels. Firstly, changes that can be implemented at an individual level are outlined. Secondly, the policy changes that should be made by a woman's employing organisation, whether political parties, police forces, universities, or media organisations are presented. These are followed by proposed changes to the legislative regime in England and Wales, in the form of regulation and broader legislative change. Finally, the necessary changes to society, in the form of structural adaptations necessary to challenge misogyny, are discussed.

The final chapter of the thesis, Chapter Nine, restates the aims of this doctoral research study, before answering the research questions presented in Section 1.3. The significance and generalisability of the study's findings is discussed, along with the potential contribution that this research could make. The chapter concludes by considering the limitations of the study, and how the research could be further developed in the future.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

The purpose of this research is to examine the gendered online abuse of women working in the public sphere, and to consider how this fits within the wider domain of gender-based violence. At the core of the study is a desire to discover how the technology facilitated gendered violence that occurs in the online space mirrors the gender-based violence that is perpetrated in the physical space.

This chapter provides a summative exploration of the literature underpinning this research. It is divided into four thematic areas, each of which will be shown to have an impact on the definition, understanding, and perpetuation of online abuse.

Integral to this investigation is the consideration of the experiences of women in both online and offline domains, before considering how the multiplicity of theories of gender-based violence can be applied to women's experience of online abuse. The issue of online abuse can be considered in multiple ways, and consequently, the literature informing the topic straddles multiple disciplines. Consequently, interrogating the interdisciplinary corpus on online abuse necessitates an exploration of several different thematic perspectives. These areas are illustrated in Figure 2.1.
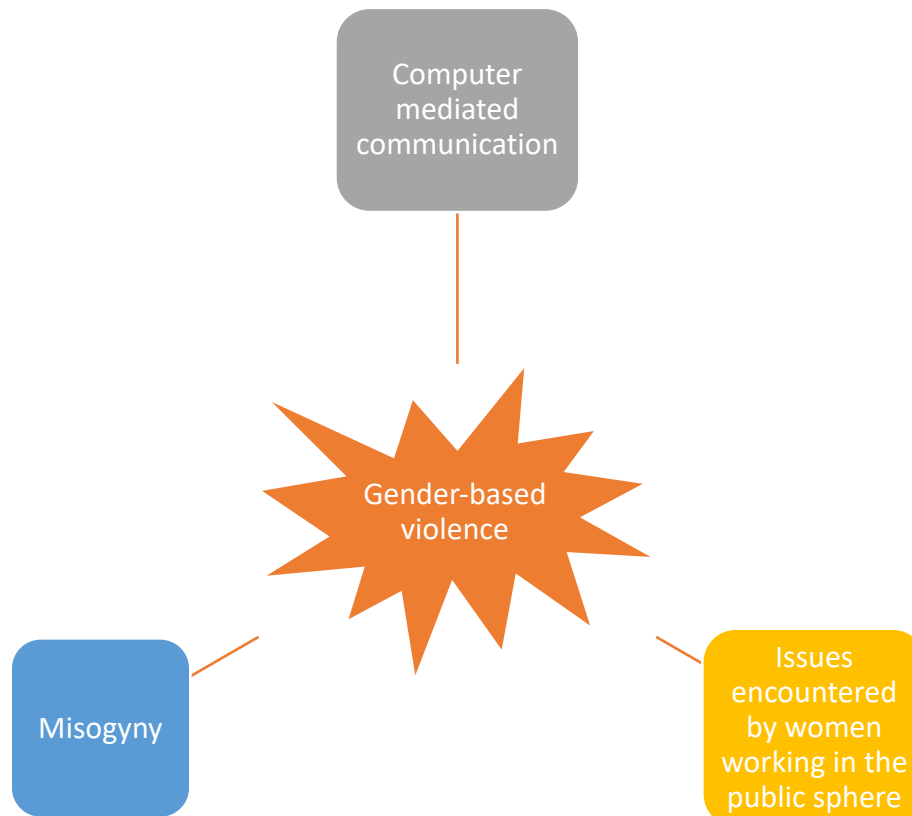
Figure 2.1: Thematic perspectives covered in the literature review

Figure 2.1. intentionally positions the issue of gender-based violence at the centre of the diagram, in order to emphasise its primacy. For, as will be evidenced throughout this research, it is the history, threat, and manifestation of gender-based violence that is influenced by, or in turn influences, the other three components. By exploring the theoretical and historical foundations of gender-based violence, it is possible to situate the investigation into online abuse in an appropriate context.

2.2.   Theories of gender-based violence

The term 'gender-based violence' is frequently adopted by both public sector bodies (such as the police, the NHS, and within educational settings), as well as private sector

organisations (e.g. World Bank, 2019), to describe a range of harmful behaviours

perpetrated against women (Morales-Campos et al., 2009). The definition is deliberately

broad in scope, in recognition of the fact that these acts of violence are carried out within a

variety of interpersonal relationships (or none), and by a range of perpetrators. These

connections may include spousal or domestic partners, but can also refer to parents,

children, and other family members and acquaintances, and are certainly wider than the

"battered wives" first described by Dobash and Dobash in 1980 (Dobash and Dobash, 1980:

15).

However, irrespective of the presence or nature of the relationship between the

perpetrator and the victim, the type of behaviours falling within the description of gender-

based violence range from the "mundane and everyday" (Brown and Walklate, 2011: 7)

through to rape and homicide.

The emergence of gender-based violence as a discrete topic for academic investigation is

relatively new, dating back some 40 years. Similarly, whilst J. S. Mill (1992) highlighted the

subjugation of women by their husbands in 1869, a cause advocated by the first-wave

feminists of the nineteenth century (Mooney, 2000), it was not until the emergence of

feminist activism in the 1970s in the UK and the USA that the true scale and nature of

gendered violence was brought to public attention (Stanko, 1988). As a response to this

campaign, the criminal justice system slowly began to prosecute perpetrators of domestic

abuse, although it took until the end of the twentieth century for the issue to be properly

recognised (Holt et al., 2018).

An early attempt at categorising the behaviours commonly found in incidents of gender-

based violence was devised by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Program (DAIP) – also

known as the Duluth model (Bohall et al., 2016) in the early 1980s. Frequently recognised

by the Power and Control Wheel (Scott, 2018) that forms an integral part of its theoretical framework, the schema was first devised in 1984 for use in a women's refuge located in Duluth, Minnesota (Pence and Paymar, 1993) as a response to the empirical evidence provided by the facility's service users (Pence and Paymar, 1993). The Power and Control Wheel (reproduced at Figure 2.2) is a diagrammatic tool which seeks to illustrate patterns of abusive behaviour carried out by men in heterosexual relationships. The Duluth model has been further developed over the subsequent 40 years, and now offers a range of practitioner based psychoeducational community-based intervention programs for men who have been identified as perpetrators of gender-based violence (DAIP, 2022).

Figure 2.2. Power and Control Wheel (Source: Pence and Paymar 1993: 3)

The Duluth model utilises the details of abuse provided by survivors, which was often then

presented in subsequent criminal prosecutions (Pence and Paymar, 1993), to identify and

categorise a range of different behaviours that typically occur within abusive relationships.

By articulating this information in a visual form it is possible to observe the relationship

between power, control, and physical abuse (Yakeley, 2021; Johnson, 2006; Pence and

Paymar, 1993) that is frequently wielded in the domestic sphere.

During the same period, British academic Liz Kelly (1988) devised the continuum of violence,

which provides an alternative way of considering gender-based violence. Kelly (1988: 41)

describes the continuum as recording:

> *Any physical, visual, verbal or sexual act that is experienced by the woman or girl at the time or later as a threat, invasion or assault that has the effect of hurting her or degrading her and/or takes away her ability to control intimate contact.*

In common with the Duluth model, Kelly's continuum of gender-based violence similarly

provides an empirically based schema of the range of abusive behaviours that women

encounter, as illustrated in Figure 2.3.

Threat of violence	Sexual harassment	Pressure to have sex	Sexual assault
Obscene phone calls	Coercive sex	Domestic violence	Sexual abuse
	Flashing	Rape	Incest
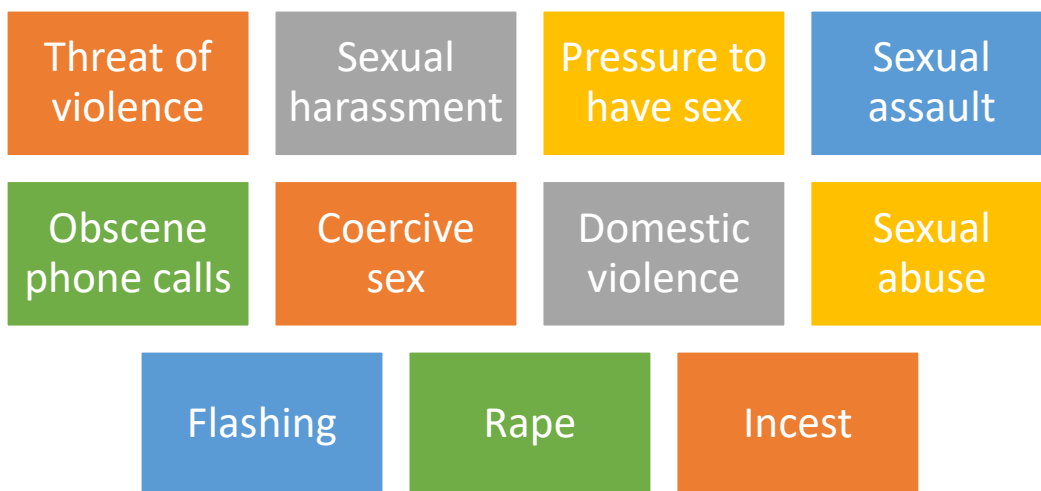
Figure 2.3: The continuum of violence (Source: Kelly, 1988)

Kelly (1988) emphasises that no hierarchy is applied to the seriousness of the different offences, and that the continuum applies purely to the prevalence of the behaviours experienced by research participants. Kelly further argues that the decision to identify offences without grading their seriousness "enables a linking of the more common, everyday abuses women experience, such as leering, catcalls, and verbal assaults, with the less common abuses such as rape and sexual assault which are officially labelled as crimes" (Kelly, 1988: 59).

Work by Stark (2009) also contributes an important theory on gender-based violence, with his work on coercive control. In a theory that has proven highly influential to the development of legislation on gender-based violence in numerous countries (Walklate and Fitz-Gibbon 2021; Stark and Hester, 2019), Stark reframes the idea of domestic violence as a purely physical act into one where gender-based violence is a "course of calculated, malevolent conduct deployed almost exclusively by men to dominate individual women by interweaving repeated physical abuse with three equally important tactics: intimidation, isolation, and control" (Stark, 2009: 5).   Stark further expands on this, by stating that "a victim's level of fear derives as much from her perception of what could happen based on past experience as from the immediate threat by the perpetrator" […] and that "the cumulative harms inflicted by male partners explain why women are so much more likely to be entrapped by abuse than men" (Stark, 2009: 94).   As well as providing a highly influential understanding of the realities of domestic abuse, Stark's work is also important as it emphasises the unequal role of male power in these relationships (Brennan and Myhill, 2022), something which is frequently replicated in societal inequalities of patriarchal power.

The inclusion of the specific offence of coercive control into domestic abuse legislation in England and Wales in 2015 is discussed further in Chapter Three.

Stark (and Hester) revisited the issue of coercive control a decade later, with their 2019 paper drawing attention to the growth in studies evidencing the repeat victimisation of many women experiencing domestic abuse, as well as adding the role of financial abuse and gaslighting to the range of behaviours defined as coercive. Stark and Hester (2019) also used this paper to widen the scope of the theory to same-sex relationships, and the coercive control of children and other family members (Stark and Hester, 2019).

In 1990, Johan Galtung published his theory of cultural violence, which he suggests creates an environment which legitimises both structural and direct violence. Cultural violence is comprised of elements including violent speech, the use of inflammatory language (whether written or spoken), and the marginalisation of certain groups (e.g. women, or those from minority ethnic communities) which come together to make physical violence appear innocuous, thereby changing the morality and permissibility of an act (Galtung, 1990). At its core, cultural violence allows certain violent behaviours to become permissible. One pertinent example of cultural violence useful for this study is the sanitation of language, where acts of physical violence are downplayed, particularly in the media. An integral part of the theory is the creation of a causal flow between cultural violence, structural violence, and actual physical violence, as illustrated in Figure 2.4.
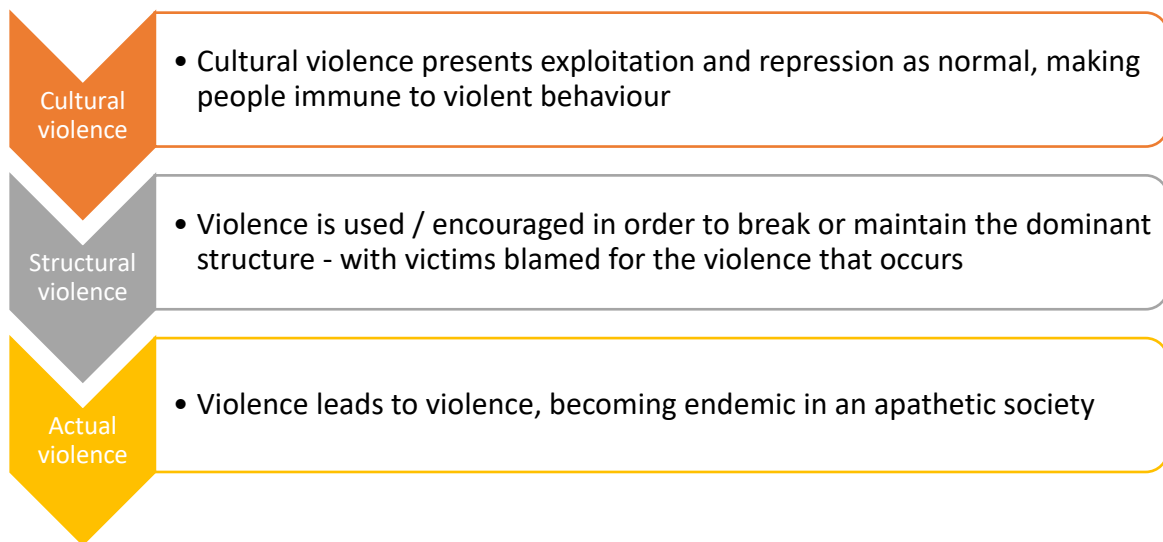
Figure 2.4: Causal flow between cultural, structural and actual violence (Adapted from Galtung, 1990)

Galtung (1990) makes specific reference to gender-based violence in this typology, emphasising that whilst (on paper) women may have longer life expectancy rates than men, the risk of violence as a result of gender specific abortion, infanticide and familial violence continually imposes structural violence in order to maintain the dominance of the patriarchal system (Gardsbane et al., 2021). Galtung's (1990) theory of cultural violence fits well within a theoretical domain that examines the wider role of patriarchy in gender-based violence. Over 40 years ago, researchers working in this field recognised that what made gender-based violence different from other acts of violence is the fact that the behaviour is a manifestation of patriarchal domination (Dobash and Dobash, 1980). This reflects the continued subordinate position of women across societies (Stanko, 1988); which most typically emerges when male power is perceived to be under threat (Dobash and Dobash, 1998).

However, whilst the four theoretical explanations for gender-based violence outlined here are undoubtedly influential, they have each received criticism. For example, the original

Duluth model has been criticised for focusing on a population that was very limited (Bohall, 2016), concentrating on a population of predominantly white and universally heterosexual couples. The model has also been questioned for lacking a robust evidence base before being rolled out in other areas (Pender, 2012). Some of the most strident censure of IDAP has come from Dutton and Corvo (2006: 457), who deem the Duluth model to be "flawed research", having been developed and adopted by those without a professional background or qualifications in either psychology or social work. Whilst it is true that the Duluth model is avowedly feminist in approach, having emerged from work undertaken by the feminist campaigning organisation that ran the refuge where it was first developed, Dutton and Corvo believe that this has resulted in the widespread adoption of a wholly negative "gender political model" (Dutton and Corvo, 2006: 457) towards talking gender-based violence. This is a heated debate that has lasted over a decade, as others, broadly supportive of the Duluth model (e.g. Gondolf, 2011), have weighed in to support the model's core elements and take issue with Dutton and Carvo's (2006) treatise.

Similarly, Kelly's description of gender-based violence as a continuum is not without its critics (DeKeseredy, 2000). In contrast, Wise and Stanley (1987) provide a clear hierarchy of offence seriousness, with murder and rape at one end of the spectrum and patronising and uncalled for insults at the other. Kelly (2011) has produced a subsequent iteration of the continuum, in recognition of a wider awareness of both abuse in homosexual relationships, and a broadening of the understanding of violence to encompass offences such as coercive control. Siddiqui (2013) has further revised the continuum, to include offences around (so-called) honour-based violence, including forced marriage, in recognition of the fact that

Kelly's original work was based wholly on the experiences of white women (Rehman et al., 2013).

2.2.1. Feminist theories of gender-based violence

Edwards (1990) emphasises that whilst the influence of both first and second wave feminism was vital to the issue of gender-based violence gaining public attention, there has always been more than one kind of feminism in operation, and each strand of feminist theory brings with it a slightly different explanation of the causes of gender-based violence. Consequently, there are widely agreed to be four 'types' of feminism: liberal feminism, radical feminism, socialist feminism, and post-modernist feminism (Jerath, 2021), although there remains significant divergence and nuance even within these different classifications (Davies, 2007).

Liberal feminism first emerged in the 18th Century (Ackerly, 2001), and is epitomised by the first wave of feminism described by Spender (1982). Associated with pioneering women such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, and Susan B. Anthony (Ackerley, 2001), liberal feminism adopts an equal opportunities approach (Davies, 2007), and first sought to highlight women's position as a disadvantaged group, seeking equality in voting, divorce laws, and access to finance and property (Ackerly, 2001). Described by some as "feminist empiricism" (Hundleby, 2011: 29), liberal feminist philosophies are largely traditional, taking a cautious approach to social change. Liberal feminism has been criticised for excluding the views of Black feminists (Ackerley, 2001), and the wider intersectional feminist experience. When used as a lens to explore gender-based violence, liberal feminism relies on the role of

institutions (and the men holding power within them) acting as agents for change (Gámez Fuentes et al., 2016).

In contrast, radical feminism takes a revolutionary approach to feminist activism (Hundleby, 2011), roundly rejecting the inclusion of men in the fight for female equality (Pretorius, 2018). Radical feminists argue that it is only the dismantling of the institutions of marriage, patriarchy and labour that will "end the oppression of women, by creating awareness of and resistance not only to male-dominated or patriarchal institutions, but to the conceptual frameworks that sustain them" (Lee, 2001: 5513). This strand of feminism focuses on men's oppression of women through patriarchal institutions (Davies, 2007), and highlights what it regards as the lack of a structural response to gender-based violence (Walklate, 1995). The third (and somewhat related) strand of feminist theory is socialist feminism, which defines women as oppressed by capitalism and dominated by men (Davies, 2007). Despite the disintegration of many socialist regimes that has occurred since the emergence of socialist feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, advocates of socialist feminism continue to highlight the convergence of capitalist and gender role models, most recently demonstrated during the multiple Covid-19 lockdowns, when women were frequently left to undertake the majority of childcare and home-schooling activities, despite simultaneously juggling their own paid employment (Segalo and Fine, 2020). Socialist feminists assert that it is the iniquitous underlying structural and institutional conditions underpinning women's (and especially Black women's) experience that is the primary explanation for gender-based violence (Segalo and Fine, 2020). Adherents to this theoretical strand advocate that it is only by dismantling the existing systems that change will be achieved; or in the words of Segalo and Fine (2020: 9): "there should be a refusal of normality… there shall be no going home until there is justice".

In contrast, the more recent theoretical strand of post-modern feminism asserts that a post-modern feminist approach offers a degree of openness, plurality, diversity, and difference (Walklate, 1995) that is absent from more traditional theoretical positions. Proponents of post-modern feminism believe that this new theoretical interpretation will lead to a "socially transformative politics of emancipation and freedom from gender, race, and class exploitation" (Ebert, 1991: 887). It is further argued that post-modernist feminism has no policy agenda, and that it instead seeks to break the traditional links that exist between science, rationality and policy making (Davies, 2007). Perhaps as a consequence of this approach, there is no literature offering a post-modern feminist explanation for either the causes of, or solutions for, gender-based violence, as the theory has not devised such responses.

The recognition of gender-based violence that materialised within the academy during the latter half of the twentieth century was similarly matched by a wider campaigning collective. In the 1960s and 1970s, pioneering work was undertaken by second wave feminists based both in the USA and the UK, to secure greater awareness and responses to gender-based violence. In the United States, the campaigning work of Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan is central to the period. Friedan was an early second wave feminist activist, whose formative book, 'Feminine Mystique', highlighted the frustration felt by many women who found themselves obligated to fulfil traditional gender norms (Friedan, 1963). In 1971 (in partnership with Dorothy Pitman Hughes), Steinem launched Ms. Magazine, using it as a platform to campaign for women's rights, later coupling this work with her membership of the National Women's Political Caucus (Steinem, 2015). In the UK, notable second wave feminists of the period include Beatrix Campbell, Anna Coote, Tess Gill, and Erin Pizzey (Lewis, 2020). Campbell was one of the founders of 'Red Rag', a Marxist feminist magazine

of the period (The Barry Amiel and Norman Melburn Trust, 2021), whilst Coote and Gill won

the right for women to stand at the bar in pubs with their male colleagues, under the new

Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 (Rodrigues, 2012). Pizzey, whilst no longer a member of the

feminist movement (Bell, 2021), introduced the first women's refuge in the UK in 1971, a

ground-breaking initiative that was soon followed by the work of academics including

Dobash and Dobash (1980), to highlight the pernicious nature of domestic abuse. During

this period, many of the same campaigners were also working hard to highlight the malign

persistence of sexual harassment (David, 2016). Such campaigns were often supported by

trades unions (Dobash and Dobash, 1980), recognising that workplace sexual harassment

was all too frequent, often involving co-workers, managers, and service providers (Croall,

1995).

Whatever theoretical explanation is adopted to explain gender-based violence in the

modern context, it is clear that violence of the type described across the different models

discussed here has a profound effect on the lives of women around the world, wreaking

trauma and devastation on the physical, emotional and mental health (Garcia-Moreno and

Stöckl, 2017) of those who experience it, and as a consequence, the issue has become a key

policy area for governments worldwide, something that will be discussed throughout this

research.

It is not just in the context of intimate partnerships, or the wider private sphere that women

encounter acts of violence. The perennial presence of malign behaviour in the workplace,

which frequently includes sexual harassment and sexual abuse, represents a pernicious

combination of "patriarchal control with organisational power" (Croall, 1995: 242).

However, just as Scott (2018) identifies a crossover between the behaviour that occurs in

the domestic sphere, and that which occurs in the workplace, sexual harassment similarly

transcends the occupational environment, and should instead be recognised as

encompassing a wide range of sexually abusive behaviours that all women frequently

experience (Dobash and Dobash, 1998). Indeed, the perceived sexual availability of women

by the men around them (Spender, 1982) has been something that women have faced for

thousands of years, influencing everyday decisions in where and when to move around in

public, how to interact with others and even what to wear (Wise and Stanley, 1987). More

recently, analysis of the strategies women employ to avoid the sexual harassment that

occurs in the street has been reframed as "men's stranger intrusions on women in public

space" (Vera-Gray, 2016: 9), which better describes the spectrum of women's lived

experience, with the aim of facilitating policy solutions (Vera-Gray, 2016). Fundamentally,

this literature illustrates that sexual harassment is a public manifestation of gender-based

violence (Walklate, 1995); and whether it occurs in the workplace, an educational setting or

in the street, serves to emphasise men's power over women's sexuality (Stanko, 1990a).

2.3. Investigating social media and the public sphere

This section opens by providing a definition and description of the composition of the public

sphere. The discussion then moves on to consider the role of women in the public sphere,

along with the challenges that they commonly face. The potential consequences of the

increased interaction with the public that has arisen as a result of the centrality of social

media and other online communication mechanisms to the contemporary operation of the

public sphere (Mellado and Hermida, 2021; Terren and Borge-Bravo, 2021) is also

considered. In a wide-ranging discussion, this section also presents evidence on emotional

labour (Hochschild, 2012), and safety work (Vera-Gray, 2017), which are highlighted as key issues encountered by women in public facing occupations, particularly in relation to the management of online abuse.

Women consistently make up more than half of public sector employees in the UK (Miller, 2009), a statistic that is reflected across many OECD countries (OECD, 2015). However, whilst the inclusion of women in all levels of public service is crucial for "the achievement of both transparent and accountable government and administration and sustainable development in all areas of life" (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2016: 1), the number of women holding senior roles in public facing occupations remains low. Only 21 per cent of senior civil servants (Kaur, 2020) and 34 per cent of Members of Parliament are women (Uberoi et al., 2020). Women make up 27 per cent of the members of the House of Lords (*ibid*). In academia, only 30 per cent of Vice Chancellors are women, whilst only 20 per cent of social media CEOs and 21 per cent of national newspaper editors are female (Kaur, 2020). In policing, 15 women currently hold the position of Chief Constable in England and Wales (Hymas and Boycott-Owen, 2021). Work by Silvestri and Tong (2020) highlights the relative absence of women in leadership roles within policing across Europe, one of many studies to confirm the presence of perennial barriers blocking women's advancement to senior levels in public sphere occupations (e.g. Al-Rawi et al., 2021; Walby and Joshua, 2021; Sobande, 2020; Veletsianos et al., 2018).

Analysis of statistical data reveals that the numbers of women in positions of power in the public sphere remains in flux. For example, membership of the House of Commons elected in December 2019 has the highest level of female representation in history (Uberoi et al., 2020). However, despite this increase in representation, the number of women Cabinet

members has fallen with the election of the Johnson government (Kaur, 2020), and the level of female representation at the top of universities has declined (Brooks, 2019). Across all sectors being investigated in this research, the representation of non-white women in the public sphere is even poorer (Tariq and Syed, 2018).

A key benefit proposed for the widespread adoption of CMC technologies is the opportunity it provides to bring opinion formers and members of the public together, in ways not previously possible (Heiss et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020). It has been argued that the expansion of technology extends traditional notions of the public sphere and strengthens the concept that there is a space between society and the state where the public can organise and opinion be formed (Barker and Jane, 2016).

Public sphere theories can be traced back to the 18th century, when the concept of a platform for debate with opinion formers was initially proffered (Habermas et al., 1964). More recent definitions centre around the notion of an online public sphere that "facilitates discussion that promotes a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions" (Papacharissi, 2002: 11).
The huge changes in communication brought about by the assimilation of social networking sites (SNS) into everyday life provides the means for members of the public to interact both easily and directly with individuals in public sphere occupations, including academics, journalists, police officers, and politicians. The widespread adoption of the use of social media platforms facilitates greater political debate, offering the potential for a new form of policy making that transcends traditional boundaries (Papacharissi, 2009; McLaughlin,

2004). This represents an opportunity to reshape the public sphere, making it more responsive to grassroots concerns (Dey, 2019).

Bohman (2004) identifies the role of mutual obligation as being at the heart of these new political relationships. He suggests that the benefits of citizenship emanating from online participation can only be secured when such engagement occurs within an institutionalised public sphere backed by state institutions. However, it is arguable whether the widespread implementation of such a model is possible given the dominance of the large privately financed corporate institutions responsible for the operation of social media platforms. As outlined in relation to the freedom of speech within SNS, there is an ongoing concern that a reliance on technology to facilitate debate in the public sphere has led to an inequitable dominance by technology companies (Habermas, 2004; Castells, 2009).

More recent analysis of the presence and function of the public sphere has expressed concern that the commercialisation of the mass media and the overtly capitalist motives of social media corporations has led to the commodification of the public sphere (Gane and Beer, 2008), concentrating its ownership amongst a wealthy few (Salter, 2017).   Ultimately, all argue that there is "nothing truly public about the public sphere" (Rheingold, 2000: 379).

Initially, there were hopes that the widespread use of social media platforms would blur the separation that exists between the public and their public sphere representatives; and that this would herald the creation of a more open and responsive society (Harel et al., 2020). In reality, this has not occurred. Instead, concern has grown that the advent of SNS has increased the polarisation of public opinion (Guo et al., 2020; Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020; Newman, 2018), and contributed to a wider lack of trust in public institutions, most notably

in the political realm, but present throughout the public sphere (Dubois et al., 2020). The increased immutability of public opinion is highlighted in the work of Sunstein (2009a) on group polarisation. For whilst Sunstein's (2009a) treatise fails to consider in any detail the role of social networking sites, which, with the benefit of hindsight seems a glaring omission; it does underline the preponderance of people to adopt more extreme viewpoints or actions when gathered with others (Sunstein, 2009a). Sunstein (2009a) uses this hypothesis to explain multiple social and political changes that have occurred throughout history, including the rise of fascism in the 1930s, the growth of student radicalism in the 1960s, and the global collapse of the financial markets in 2008 (Sunstein, 2009a). Furthermore, Sunstein (2009a) proposes that social segregation, where individuals actively seek out others who share their opinions, both encourages and exacerbates group polarisation. Such a proposition has clear parallels with the activities of the users of online platforms. Sunstein (2009a) speculates that the emerging social networks forming over the internet bring with them the risk of creating "polarisation machines" (Sunstein, 2009a: 25), with people's opinions not only reaffirmed by involvement with others sharing similar views, but potentially made more extreme. Sunstein's (2009b: 12) further work on the creation of "echo chambers" identifies the tendency of people to organise themselves into self—selecting groups sharing the same opinions. Pariser (2012: 9) has devised a complementary theory, termed "filter bubbles". Pariser (2012) defines filter bubbles as being the creation of online search engines and social media algorithms, which ultimately only show users of these platforms what the algorithms believe they are most interested in. It has been argued that when combined, echo chambers and filter bubbles create social homogeneity and group polarisation (Harel et al., 2020; Edwards, 2013), and have been enablers in the rise of political populism of the sort responsible for the election of Donald

Trump in the USA and the Brexit vote in the UK (Guo, 2020; Bruns, 2019); whilst also being

linked with right wing extremism (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020) and the increase in online

abuse (Ozalp et al., 2020). Nevertheless, despite the increasing volume of literature

supporting the existence of both echo chambers and filter bubbles, there are concerns that

scholarship in this area frequently fails to appreciate the nuances that exist between

different online platforms (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020), and indeed, in the way that

different political candidates choose to conduct their presence on social networks, as these

factors may affect the way opinion leaders influence voters (Guo et al., 2020). An

alternative to the echo chamber and filter bubble hypotheses is offered by Taylor-Smith and

Smith (2019), whose study of the social formations made on Facebook, instead suggests

that defining such groupings as "boundary objects" (Taylor-Smith and Smith, 2019: 1866)

better describes the coming together of people with a wide range of views for non-polarised

discussions within an online community space.

Feminist critiques of the public sphere assert that claims of equality of opportunity cannot

be viewed as valid until there is an end to the discrimination endemic across the public

sphere (Carver and Chambers, 2011). Other work in this area has sought to highlight the

role of feminists in expanding the public sphere to include women more fully, as evidenced

by the Suffragists of the first wave feminist movement, and the campaigns against sexual

harassment led by second wave feminists in the 1970s (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020).

Just as the internet was hailed as offering the opportunity "for the sharing of multiple views

and public opinions" (Harel et al., 2020: 2), it was similarly posited that the growth in online

platforms would provide a mechanism to advance women's equality, with the internet

"hailed as a place where offline prejudices and abuse could be negated and destroyed"

(Poland, 2016: 159). As this Chapter has already highlighted, the reality is rather less egalitarian, with research confirming the online perpetuation of traditional (offline) gendered differences in political engagement. Men remain more politically active online than women, a difference resulting from an enduring gendered inequality in economic, educational, and technical resources (Ahmed and Madrid-Morales, 2021), that the internet has failed to overcome. Whilst it is true that social networking sites (SNS) have offered feminist and other campaigning groups an effective platform from which to share, develop and publicise their aims (Micalizzi, 2021; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Weathers et al., 2016), this has come at a substantial cost, in the shape of online abuse. When considering the impact of online abuse on women's involvement in the public sphere, there is evidence that the barrage of abuse is causing women to withdraw entirely from the public arena (Yelin and Clancy, 2021; Watson, 2019; Lewis et al., 2017), thus precipitating the opposite of what was intended. Furthermore, there is also the potential for online abuse to affect women's very equity and citizenship (Jane, 2017a), as the online abuse received by women in the public sphere causes them to eschew a career in public facing occupations altogether (e.g. Thomas et al., 2021).

When evaluating the impact of SNS on women working in the public sphere, there are a multiplicity of issues to consider. The changes in working style and access, facilitated by the removal of barriers traditionally present between the public and those employed in public facing occupations, has led to other pressures on women holding such roles. These issues are considered using the lenses provided by the key theories of emotional labour and safety work, which will be considered in forthcoming sections.

The theory of emotional labour first emerged in the 1970s, in relation to analysis of women's experiences of employment, particularly in the service industries. However, there are several key messages that can be taken from the concept and applied to the use of SNS, particularly in relation to the use of online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which have become an integral part of communication with the public in numerous occupations (Williams et al., 2019).

The theory of emotional labour describes the process that occurs when the "trained management of feeling" becomes an intrinsic part of an individual's employment, with "women…more likely to be presented with the task of mastering anger and aggression in the service of 'being nice'" (Hochschild, 2012: 24). Whilst Hochschild's original study (1983) investigated the feelings and experiences of women working in the airline industry, the theory provides an important insight into the multiplicity of emotional support tasks that are continually demanded of women in the course of their employment (Fessler, 2018), and the "emotion regulation that occurs within work contexts" (Zammuner and Galli, 2005: 251). Research exploring the link between emotional labour and social media, has highlighted how the use of Twitter "means that boundaries become blurred, and discussions can cross between the professional and the personal with no clear distinction between the two" (Bridgen, 2011: 3), with the line between 'work' and 'non-work' increasingly indistinct (Smith Maguire, 2008).

Research by Wajcman et al. (2008), detailing how women often use technology to break down barriers between work and family life makes a similar link with emotional labour. This study suggests that whilst women are largely successful in maintaining the multiple necessary boundaries between the roles of caregiver and employee, the presence of technology, such as mobile phones, means that employees are always 'on duty' and that the

separation between work and leisure time is increasingly amorphous. The huge changes in work patterns, necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Akande et al., 2020), the full implications of which still remain unclear (Smyth, 2020); brings this into ever sharper focus. The numerous enforced lockdowns experienced in many countries across the world has necessitated large numbers of employees work from home, using a variety of online tools. This unexpected change in employment practise is likely to have hastened the process by which the internet becomes further ingrained in daily life (Wessels, 2010), as the delineation between online and corporeal activity disintegrates (Harris and Vitis, 2020). This emphasises the view, both in the technology sector and elsewhere, that "you don't do things on the internet – you just do things" (Patel, 2014: 1), and that the completion of tasks using technology cannot logically be separated from other activities.

The growth in computer mediated communication precipitated change in how people worked, even before the rapid restructure of working patterns necessitated by Covid-19. The phenomenon of 'peer production' provides a useful illustration of such a change (Mandiberg, 2012). Peer production is the term used to describe the co-creation of technical innovation, journalistic content, and political activism online (Kreiss et al., 2011). The system has been applauded for operating outside traditional power relationships (O'Neil, 2014), providing some credence to the libertarian ideals that believe that the internet should continue to be organised outside of traditional rules or regulation (Wessels, 2010).

However, work by Kreiss et al. (2011) has shown that the new occupational patterns associated with the growth in peer production has negatively blurred the boundaries between work and home that traditional bureaucracies create for employees, adding to the

emotional labour demands within these occupations and methods of workplace

organisation.

It is not just within the shift to online working that emotional labour is a factor. When

women in public facing occupations become the target of online abuse, this further

exacerbates the weight of emotional labour that must be managed (Lewis et al., 2017).

In their study of women academics, Veletsianos et al. (2018) showed how female scholars

often face an expectation from university management that they actively engage in the

online space. However, in common with employees in other public facing occupations

(Todd, 2017), this frequently leaves them open to abuse:

> *I said something about women in science (I am a chemist). I got a barrage of*
> *abuse targeting both me and my daughter (not my sons, whose photos are also*
> *on my feed - they were never mentioned) - it was mostly variations of 'fuck off*
> *back to the kitchen'. It went on for months and every time it started up again*
> *men would encourage others to join in.* (Lewis et al., 2017: 1471).

The need to navigate and manage online vitriol and threats necessitates a new form of

emotional labour, where energy must frequently be invested, during a typical working day,

to protect, respond or ignore (often multiple) instances of abuse (Kerr and Lee, 2021;

Veletsianos et al., 2018). Indeed, the very act of 'coping' with online abuse and harassment

requires recipients to manage their emotions, in order to lessen its potential to cause harm

(Lewis et al., 2017):

> *It's something I experience quite often, and just for being a feminist. On an almost*
> *daily basis I have to deal with messages from men, many of which contain pictures or*
> *content that's sexual and unwanted. It upsets me greatly, but I've gotten used to it*
> *and I can't afford to let it upset me* (Lewis et al., 2017: 1474).

The different strategies that women in the public sphere engage in to navigate a way

through the online abuse they receive is a manifestation of a range of measures that

women employ to protect themselves in the public space. Coming under the term 'safety work' (Vera-Gray, 2017), this description details the activities that women employ daily to protect themselves from the risk of sexual harassment, sexual assault, or rape. Such measures enacted in the offline world may include avoiding public transport after dark, taking a different route home from work, or wearing sunglasses or headphones to avoid attracting attention (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020), all taken in a bid to evade the persistent threat of habitual gendered violence (Stanko, 1990b). Whilst some have claimed that such strategies serve only to increase women's fear of crime (e.g. Ferraro, 1996), it has been argued that rather than presenting a futile overreaction, such safety work actively protects women from victimisation (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). Kelly (2013) defines the online space as one conducive to abuse, citing a lack of regulation, the reduced status of women online, and a large pool of potential targets, echoing the finding that as activity on SNS has grown, so too has the incidence of online abuse (Jane, 2017a). The expansion of abuse from the corporeal public sphere into the online environment has provided a new location for abuse (Iudici and Girolimetto, 2020), which is causing women to employ similar safety work measures to protect themselves. What is striking is that, just as the explanations of gender-based violence and sexual harassment from the 1970s and 1980s echo experiences of the treatment and reporting of online abuse in the present day; there are also clear parallels between women's experiences of sexual harassment in public spaces in the 1970s and 1980s and the sexual harassment that women currently encounter when interacting online (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020).

By adopting the definition of sexual harassment as a "spatial expression of patriarchy" (Valentine, 1989: 309), it is possible to view the online space as a hostile environment that women are overwhelmingly likely to find "cold and threatening" (Christopherson, 2007:

3052). This is deliberate – the intention of those who engage in acts of online abuse is to actively reinforce women's exclusion from the public sphere (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). Furthermore, Vera-Gray (2017) suggests that for those researching the issue of online abuse, including women academics and journalists, the emotional labour invested in such investigations is doubled, as "not only is there work to be done in managing the research subject (and our own position in relation to it), but we have to conduct both work to manage our responses to our own experiences and histories of men's violence, as well as safety work, that is the work of managing one's own safety in relation to men's practices" (Vera-Gray, 2017: 73).

2.4.   Theories of online abuse

Whilst obviously not as prolific as theories on gender-based violence that occurs in the physical space, there has been a growth in the theoretical explanations for the abuse that occurs in the digital realm. Over the last decade, there has been a significant increase in the number of academic studies considering the phenomenon of online abuse (e.g. Jane, 2015; Salter, 2017; Dragiewicz 2018). However, the corpus has not developed in a timely or linear fashion. The first scholarly investigations into the nature of technological communication emerged in the 1980s, straddling the disciplines of social psychology, culture, and commerce (Jane, 2015). This early assemblage often determined that abuse in online communication was insignificant, infrequent, or a source of entertainment (Jane 2015).

Much of the early research into online abuse was defined as 'computer mediated communication' (CMC). Computer-mediated communication is the term most commonly

used to describe the various methods that are employed to communicate using different technologies, and the social processes that underpin them (Kiesler et al., 1985). It is deliberately equivocal, perhaps reflecting that since it emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century (Thompsen, 1993), the theories, behaviour, and technologies it describes have evolved beyond all recognition. Despite – or perhaps because of – the perpetual development of new communication platforms, CMC continues to shape methods of interaction, and the behaviour that underpins it (Herring, 2004).

The first academic investigations into the theoretical underpinnings of CMC emerged in the 1980s, straddling a range of disciplines (Orton-Johnson and Prior, 2013), including social psychology, information technology and commerce (Jane, 2015).   Broader research in this area can be traced back to the 1960s, when a significant shift occurred in the use of and attitude towards computers, as they became tools for communication, rather than simple numerical calculation machines (Abbate, 2000).

Early analysis of online behaviour focused on bulletin boards and similar forums (Kiesler et al., 1985). These first CMC networks used very rudimentary hardware to bring people together from across the globe (Naughton, 1999). These virtual communities were hugely innovative at the time, providing the opportunity for strangers to meet and connect with one another using text-based communication (Edosomwan et al., 2011), a prototype that social networking sites have subsequently emulated and extended (Edwards, 2017).

2.4.1. Computer-mediated communication and libertarianism

Those responsible for the technologies underpinning the early internet were often driven by a desire to build a communications network free from bureaucratic and hierarchical

constraints (Wessels, 2010). There was a belief that the advent of such ground-breaking new communication platforms should herald a revitalisation in ideas of freedom of speech and democracy, enabling everyone to participate (Taylor-Smith and Smith, 2019; Balkin, 2004), with some going as far as to advocate complete anarchy online, with no constraints on behaviour (Herring et al., 2002). This philosophy was neatly summed up by technology journalist John Perry Barlow (1996: 6), who asserted that:

> *We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth. We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.*

Barlow was one of several members of the Californian technological community who had previously been involved in the 1960s counter-cultural movement (Turner, 2010); as the social changes precipitated by activists in this era also influenced technical innovation (Wessels, 2010). The libertarian pronouncements of Barlow and others in relation to the internet made during the 1990s echo the tenets of libertarian movements throughout history. These libertarian ideals (Naughton, 1999) coalesced with a rise in the popularity of conservative Republicanism in the USA (Turner, 2010) towards the end of the twentieth century, which echoed the call that the internet should remain free from government control and other forms of state intervention (Chenou, 2014).

Libertarians on both the right and the left of politics have repeatedly sought to harness the internet to further their beliefs (Smith and Graham, 2019; Nagle, 2017). Supporters of neo-liberalism have used the online space particularly effectively, evolving from small groupings to become part of mainstream online activity as a distinct movement – the Alternative Right, or Alt-Right (Massanari, 2018). The Alt-Right have become particularly prominent

since the election of Donald Trump in 2016 (Nagle, 2017), using the discussion-based

websites 4chan and 8chan to reach over seven million users (Bernstein et al., 2011). The

reach of the Alt -Right has since spread further, to websites such as Reddit and Facebook

(Massanari, 2018). In contrast with the somewhat niche readership of 4chan and 8chan, in

2019, Reddit had some 48 million monthly users in the USA (Statista, 2020a), with Facebook

exceeding this with approximately 2.6 billion users worldwide during the same period

(Statista, 2020b).

The amorphous groupings that typify the Alt-Right are difficult to define using traditional

political methods. Alt-Right supporters hold widely differing views, whose pronouncements

tend to centre on issues of race, sexuality, and gender (Wendling, 2018). Others have

asserted that the Alt-Right, rather than being a neo-Liberal grouping, are "a polished,

technologically adept strand of the far-right" (Koulouris, 2018: 750), a sentiment shared by

Gallacher et al. (2021).

Whilst the Alt-Right are probably the most well-known of the various online libertarian

political movements, there are also libertarian groups that emanate from the left of the

political spectrum (Beltramini, 2020; Fuchs, 2020), as well as looser political groupings, often

focused on single-issue campaigns (Lance Bennett and Toft, 2009).

The literature demonstrates that libertarian perspectives have remained dominant

throughout the development of CMC, with advocates from opposing ends of the political

spectrum proclaiming that the internet offers "democratic, placeless cyberspaces… in which

a worldwide repository of alternative propositions could be found" (Evans, 2013: 82).

The most recent literature on the role of libertarian theories on the development of CMC

has taken a slightly more sceptical view regarding its influence. Work by Mainwaring (2020)

suggests that rather than CMC successfully promulgating the influence of libertarian

ideologies within nation states, the internet instead centralises authority amongst state actors. This suggests that rather than the familiar imagery of the internet as a 'Wild West', where criminality and insurrection abound, there is instead a sophisticated system of control over many aspects of CMC (Herrera, 2016), controlled by the actions of a complex mix of governments, transnational organisations, and private corporations (Puschmann, 2019; Papacharissi, 2009).

Despite these disagreements, it appears that a continued emphasis on the primacy of online libertarianism has contributed to a growth in racist and misogynist behaviour within CMC (Coleman, 2012). In many instances a commitment to libertarian principles has sanctioned the widespread use of abusive, hurtful, and vicious speech directed at users of the internet, undertaken under the guise of freedom of expression (Herring et al., 2002), an activity commonly termed 'flaming'.

2.4.2. 'Flaming' in computer-mediated communication

The preponderance of libertarian beliefs within CMC has had a particular impact when applied to the behaviour of individuals online (Jane, 2014a). This is most evident when it comes to 'flaming' – a term that emerged at the end of the 20th Century (e.g. Gurak, 1995; Loader, 1997) to describe "hostile and aggressive interactions via text-based computer mediated communication" (O'Sullivan and Flanagin, 2003: 69).

The earliest CMC literature asserts that abuse in online communication is insignificant and harmless (Suler and Phillips, 1998). Research from this period advocates that instances of 'flaming' serve to build group identity, are infrequent, or are a source of entertainment

(Jane, 2015). In the 1980s, uninhibited behaviour in online communities was commonly viewed as an expression of the computer subculture (Lea and Spears, 1992), with 'flaming' described as little more than an adolescent pastime. More dominant is the belief held by many (Trottier and Fuchs, 2015; Wessels, 2010) that 'flaming' is integral to notions of freedom of speech (Rossini, 2021; O'Neill, 2011).

The dominance of libertarian theories that permit and even encourage 'flaming' (Herring et al., 2002) has led to a situation where the issue of online abuse is all too frequently ignored (Jane, 2014a). For whilst the issue of 'flaming' was once confined to the activities of fringe social movements such as 'Anonymous', who have as their aim "to enable the free flow of ideas and communication without fear of third-party interception, monitoring, intimidation or coercion" (Trottier and Fuchs, 2015: 90); this is no longer the case. There is evidence that the Anonymous collective of individuals frequently – and randomly – targets individuals for abuse and harassment (Trottier and Fuchs, 2015), much of it misogynistic (Jane, 2017a).

The random nature of this kind of abuse is important, as it has been suggested that for many individuals engaged in trolling, "flamers or bullies may not see their 'victims' as people but lines of text" (Tagg, 2015: 86). An alternative explanation for the rise in online abuse of those in the political sphere is made by Rossini (2021), who seeks to differentiate between personalised abuse and a growth in 'incivility' directed at the political elite, claiming that the latter is a justifiable consequence of the decline in the public's trust of politicians. Nevertheless, as will be demonstrated in future chapters, those who find themselves the target of online abuse frequently feel personally selected for such opprobrium, whatever their public profile.

The motivations underpinning the decision to engage in 'flaming' in CMC are labyrinthine, and subsequently subject to numerous interpretations across multiple academic disciplines.

The psychological explanation for behaviour in CMC rests predominantly on two theories: the equalisation hypothesis (Dubrovsky, et al., 1991) and the social identity model of deinviduation effects (SIDE), which emerged a decade later (Postmes et al., 2002).

The equalisation hypothesis is a predominantly positive one. It asserts that the absence of social cues, characteristic of CMC, removes stereotypes (Connolly, 2016) and reduces differences in social status (Dubrovsky et al., 1991), making communication more equal. It is believed that the absence of visual cues, along with the advantages presented by anonymity and asynchronous communication offered by the internet can have positive benefits. These benefits include giving more power to members of traditionally marginalised groups, freeing people from their traditional social roles (Christopherson, 2007).

However, there is another psychological theory used to explain online behaviour, which draws an opposing conclusion.

The social identity model of deinviduation effects (SIDE) model suggests that three fundamental features of CMC, namely that communication is asynchronous (Kirwan, 2016); can be undertaken anonymously (Christopherson, 2007); and has an absence of visual and auditory cues (Connolly, 2016) creates "online toxic disinhibition" (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012: 435), where behavioural reservations are lowered or disappear entirely (Kiesler et al., 1984). Early investigations into these three traits led to the assertion that CMC encourages negative behaviours and incites actions that would not be judged as acceptable in the corporeal environment.   Several studies undertaken to investigate online behaviour from a psychological perspective have found that anti-social behaviour and negative social norms are more prevalent among anonymous online participants (e.g. Moore et al., 2012; Christopherson, 2007; Postmes et al., 2002). Evidence provided by the SIDE theory suggests

that social networking sites (SNS) can encourage anti-social behaviour and perpetuate negative social norms (Christopherson, 2007). A text-matching study undertaken by Moore et al. (2012) found that anonymity in online forums was more closely linked with negative posts, establishing a link between anonymity and cyberbullying.

However, research on the impact of asynchronous communication on negative behaviour in CMC is very mixed (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012). Whilst early research on internet activity made a link between the asynchronous nature of CMC and flaming; and the scope of the internet to reach many people for little cost (Mantilla, 2015), subsequent studies have found that negative and threatening behaviour is more common in the traditional communication exchanges that preceded the introduction of the internet (Fox Hamilton, 2016).

Whatever the social psychological explanations offered for such behaviour, it is agreed that there has been a significant increase in online abuse over the last fifteen years. The growth in popularity of social networking sites since the early 2000s, has seen 'flaming' behaviour escalate exponentially (Sohn et al., 2019). In addition, it has changed from being a discrete online activity, to a more generalised verbal violence that targets the individuals' personal or occupational life (Jane, 2015; Rohlinger and Vaccaro, 2021). Recent research has indicated a link between the hostility that is frequently a hallmark of online engagement between politically opposing groups, and an increase in physical violence when these two sides meet in the offline space (Gallacher et al., 2021). As the scholarship on online abuse increases, it is moving away from an evidence base that was initially drawn from the North American and European domains, allowing the experiences of women from the global south to become more prominent. Research from South America (Pérez-Arredondo and Graells-Garrido, 2021), India (Chetty et al. 2020), Taiwan (Pain and Chen, 2019), the Sub-Saharan

African countries of Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, (Ahmed and Madrid-Morales, 2021); and Jamaica (Thakur, 2018) confirms the growth in online abuse against women in the public sphere, and the link with physical violence that such abuse can provoke. This endorses the earlier work of Jane (2015: 65), which states that "hostility online… increasingly [involves] threats and/or acts of violence in off-line domains". Furthermore, there is evidence that the problem of 'flaming' – more commonly now described as 'online abuse' or 'hate speech', has also become increasingly vituperative (Founta et al., 2019), frequently containing misogynistic condemnation, threats, and descriptions of sexual violence.

A detailed exploration of the literature in this area reveals many examples of threats and abuse, emanating from an array of different settings. Research investigating the reporting of online abuse in the UK and US media (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017) provided this example:

> *Kenneth called Kat a "dumb c***" and made a reference to Black culture "tearing things down." In one post, he makes a public rape threat, telling Kat: "I'd throw you on the bed and ravage you and you'd f****** love it." In another … after claiming that he didn't make a rape accusation, he writes: "It's alright. You'll get yours. Remember I'm a conservative, I like my guns* (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017: 933).

Whilst a journalist speaking back in 2015 stated that:

> *It's a good week...if I only get 15-20 emails from people telling me how much they think I should die, or how much they hope I get raped, or how much they hope my cat dies, or I lose my job or fall in a hole, or get shot by police or any number of things people seem to think it's urgently important to tell me in their quest to get me to shut up. We are not talking about disagreements, about calls for intersectionality, about differing approaches, about political variance, about lively debate and discussion that sometimes turns acrimonious and damaging. We are talking about sustained campaigns of hate from people who believe that we are inhuman and should be silenced* (Mantilla, 2015: 75).

Jane (2014b: 535), in a study highlighting the sheer vitriol and conspicuous violence of many instances of online abuse provides this example, sent to the former Australian children's advocate, Julie Gale:

> *Shut the fuck up you fucking ugly OLD wowser cunt. You need a good stiff cock shoved down your throat if you ask me. What's the matter? Were you the ugly fat flat chested girl at school? Why don't you shut you fucking cunt mouth? ... I'm going to a brothel tonight, and I'll be selecting the whore who most looks your age* (Jane, 2014b: 535).

2.4.3. Theories of misogyny

The theoretical models advocated for the explanation of online abuse often reference misogyny as a contributing factor (e.g. Jane, 2017a; Salter, 2017; Mantilla, 2015). Before analysing a selection of these models in greater detail, it is worth attempting to define what misogyny actually *means* in the modern context, as otherwise it risks becoming a term that is widely promulgated without a clear understanding of what it signifies. Manne (2018: 47) defines misogyny as "a systematic facet of social power relations", arising when women attempt to gain power and authority "in a man's world… a patriarchy" (Manne, 2018: 34). Whilst theoretically useful, Manne's definition risks overlooking the sheer hostility of much modern misogyny. Banet-Weiser (2018) locates the hatred of women at the forefront of her definition of misogyny, whilst adding that "popular misogyny is the instrumentalization of women as objects, where women are a means to an end: a systematic devaluing and dehumanizing of women" (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 2).

The systematic devaluing of women typified by misogyny is a common thread running through the interdisciplinary literature that makes up this chapter. As such, it underpins and influences all aspects of this thesis, and is central to the analysis and findings that follow.

Theories of misogyny have a long history (Beard, 2017). The exclusion and subjugation of women both in the public and domestic sphere has arguably impacted upon the effective development of many facets of social and occupational life (Power, 2006). Even the most cursory of investigations will reveal how men have been endeavouring to silence women throughout history, using whatever technology is available, creating what Gilmore (2009: 3) has defined as the "male malady." Further analysis of the literature reveals that contemporary misogyny is frequently comprised of four interrelated elements: silencing (e.g. Salter, 2017; Herring et al., 2002); belittling of knowledge and opinions (e.g. Camp, 2018); criticism of appearance (e.g. Backe et al., 2018); and threats of physical and sexual violence (e.g. Todd, 2017). Each of these elements will be considered in turn.

2.4.3.1.   Silencing

The act of silencing women has long been integral to misogyny, as demonstrated in Homer's Odyssey, when Telemachus tells Penelope that "speech will be the business of men, all men, and me most of all; for mine is the power in this household" (Beard, 2017: 4). The reality remains that women are frequently silenced, with their opinions ignored or appropriated by men (Spender, 1982). Whatever period is examined, the fact remains the same – women's voices are routinely silenced, and this silencing enables and perpetuates the power of misogyny (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This position is often upheld by the media, who refused to cover many activities of the first wave of feminist activism in the 19th century, including the initial campaigns for women's suffrage (Spender, 1982); and who remain complicit in the silencing of women's voices, as evidenced by the treatment of the former Prime Minister of Australia, Julia Gillard (Worth et al., 2016). Gillard famously spoke out about the sexism and

misogyny she had received from the Leader of the Opposition, Tony Abbott, at a speech given in the Australian Parliament in 2012 (Appleby, 2015). Whilst the speech was welcomed by many women politicians, who felt that Gillard was articulating the sexism that they too had experienced (Cooper, 2019a), an examination of press coverage following the speech has discovered that Gillard's accusations of sexism were "dismissed, minimised and undermined" (Worth et al., 2016: 52); whilst "silence [was] privileged over speaking up against sexism" (*ibid.*). Gillard is not the only female politician in recent times to have her voice silenced: in a now famous exchange that took place in 2017, United States Senator Elizabeth Warren was ordered to be silent by the (then) Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell. When she attempted to continue her speech, McConnell overruled her, stating that "she was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless she persisted" (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 182).

When considering the act of silencing within the online space, there is clear evidence of online abuse attempting to silence women (Lewis et al., 2018; Barlow and Awan, 2016), confirming it as both an aim and function of wider misogyny (Carson, 2018). Silencing may also prove to be the consequence of online abuse, for example, when law enforcement agencies advise women to withdraw from online activity for their own safety, which is also seen by some as an example of a wider institutionalised misogyny (Yardley, 2021a). The act of silencing women in this way, necessitating their retreat from SNS (Bliss, 2019) has potentially huge economic consequences for the women involved, as CMC is now so firmly embedded in social and economic participation (Henry and Powell, 2015), something that became particularly apparent following the Covid-19 pandemic and related shifts in patterns of working. The cost of such silencing is so substantial that Jane (2018: 576) has termed it an act of "economic vandalism."

2.4.3.2.   Belittling

Another way in which misogyny seeks to undermine women is to question or belittle their skills, knowledge, and experience (Farrell et al., 2019). Chapman (2014) posits that this behaviour is central to both misogyny and gender-based violence. In the domestic sphere, belittling is often used as part of a wider system of shaming (Camp, 2018). In the public sphere, women frequently have their authority undermined in a deliberate attempt to halt their activity (Phillips, 2019).   To return to Gillard, it is clear that she was subject to prolonged criticism, which "undermined her legitimacy and succeeded in generating such widespread doubt about her ability to govern that she was unceremoniously dumped by her party" (Summers, 2016: 10).

There is evidence that misogynists have habitually employed techniques designed to belittle and undermine women's professional competence, in an attempt to remove them as potential competition in the public sphere (Mantilla, 2015), whilst also perpetuating their economic dominance (Spender, 1982). As Spender (1982: 95) explains: "we have 300 years of evidence that men *do* discredit and bury women's work on the basis of their sex." (italics in original).

2.4.3.3.   Focus on appearance

Misogynistic abuse frequently focuses on women's appearance. In the corporeal realm, this is often articulated as a dimension of coercive control, where an abuser will use criticism of clothing or body shape as a means of asserting their malign intent (McCauley et al., 2018). Research undertaken into police culture has identified a focus on appearance as being integral to the negative perceptions of gender (Brown et al., 2019), a finding that echoes

work from some two decades earlier, which highlighted that some 60 per cent of women

police officers had received comments from male officers that criticised their appearance

(Brown, 1998). In the political realm, there was a considerable discussion about Hillary

Clinton's appearance (particularly in relation to her age) both before and during the

Presidential campaign of 2016 (Jennings and Coker, 2019; Hayes et al., 2014). It is likely that

such coverage was exacerbated by her Republican opponent engaging in the negative

portrayal of women as "fat", "dogs", and "pigs" (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 173). This emphasises

once again how media coverage can amplify misogynistic behaviour occurring in the public

sphere.

2.4.3.4.   Threat

The threat of physical and sexual violence is a perpetual presence within misogyny (Ging et

al., 2020). Anthropological studies record the widespread use of gang rape for minor

transgressions across many countries, (Gilmore, 2009) and threats of violence are a

common feature in warfare (Krook, 2020), as well as religious, historical, and fictional works

(Gilmore, 2009). However, despite its constancy, violent misogyny is often perceived as a

private matter (Tomkinson et al., 2020). This echoes attitudes towards gender-based

violence discussed earlier in the chapter, which highlighted that spousal violence was

frequently ignored by the police and social policy agencies for much of the 20th Century

(Radford and Stanko, 1991). There is some evidence that the rise in violent offending by

followers of misogynistic men's groups (Wright et al., 2020) including the so-called

'involuntarily celibate' or Incel movement (Banet-Weiser, 2018) has increased public

awareness of the threat implicit in misogyny, making action from criminal justice agencies

more likely (Tomkinson et al., 2020). The multiple shooting that took place in 2014 in Isla

Vista, California, when Elliot Rodger murdered six people and injured 14 others (Manne, 2018), emphasised how the violent misogyny exhibited by Incels poses a threat to both men and women (Tomkinson et al., 2020). Rodgers' killing of four men and two women (Manne, 2018), corroborated evidence linking the propensity to engage in gender-based violence, with wider acts of violence and terrorism (Johnston and True, 2019). In the UK (at the time of writing), there is evidence that the mass shooting carried out in Plymouth in August 2021 was at least in part motivated by an adherence to Incel doctrine (Townsend, 2021). Meanwhile, research by Smith (2019) found that the men responsible for terrorist attacks in London and Manchester each had histories of gender-based violence. Whilst such acts are thankfully rare, and present the most extreme examples of misogynistic threat, they do illustrate how contemporary misogyny emanates from "a much more antagonistic politics of sexual entitlement, disenfranchisement and revenge." (Ging et al., 2020: 852). This behaviour is frequently intertwined with activity on social networking sites (SNS) (Ging, 2019) and involvement in online abuse (Wright et al., 2020).

Consequently, the literature on online abuse frequently contains examples of threats made via electronic communication, some of which have already been quoted in this study. However, as Tulip Siddiq, the Labour MP for Hampstead and Kilburn in London explained, the fear that online threats could manifest physically is constantly felt, most recently in the wake of the murder of Sir David Amess MP in October 2021:

> It's constant on Facebook and Twitter. I only report it when it's extreme. It distracts from my casework - I could be helping a woman who has become homeless rather than spending energy reporting abuse. But now I'll be vigilant once again (Urwin, 2021: 12).

Reminders of the presence of online threats are important, as they provide evidence to policymakers of the extent of abuse and allow them to formulate regulatory and legal

responses (Husnain et al., 2021), something that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter

Three. Publicising threats online can also provide succour to victims who have experienced

similar online encounters, as they find comfort in the knowledge that they are not alone.

This was demonstrated in the '#BeenRapedNeverReported' hashtag campaign of 2014,

where women shared their experiences of sexual assault with others on Twitter (Teotonio,

2014), as one woman explained:

> *I got an overwhelming awesome response the night I posted … There was one … all she said was, 'we stand with you, friend.' And that one made me cry. I'll admit it, that one made me cry. And then there was one that told me I was incredibly strong and brave for doing what I did…. there was six or seven comments like that. Which, for me, was overwhelming because I didn't really think that anyone would say these things, you know, it was just I was helping the hashtag understand why things weren't being reported. And I didn't really expect any response at all. And next thing you know, I got likes and favourites and comments, and I was just, like, oh, my gosh, what is going on here?* (Mendes et al., 2018: 238)

This brief review of the underlying features of misogyny illustrates how prejudice against

women is not unique to the internet. Indeed, Mantilla (2015: 132) asserts that online abuse

is "a reflection and embodiment of long-standing cultural patterns of misogyny."

However, both academic and journalistic investigations in this area (e.g. Jones et al., 2019;

Jane, 2017a; Cranston, 2015) have highlighted that the additional communication

mechanisms offered by SNS have both normalised and amplified sexism and threats of

violence towards women (Vera-Gray, 2017), leading to a disproportionate amount of

gender-based abuse directed at women active in the online space (Ging and Siapera, 2018).

In addition to explorations of the nature of misogyny, most recently in the online space,

there has also been an attempt by the academy to theorise more broader aspects of online

abuse. Whilst obviously not as prolific or enduring as theories exploring the gender-based

violence that occurs in the physical space, which is summarised in Section 2.2, there has

nonetheless been a growth in the theoretical explanations for the abuse that occurs in the

digital space.

The first of these theoretical explanations is 'e-bile', which was introduced by Jane in 2014.

This theory provides one of the first detailed attempts to define the nature of online abuse:

> *The term e-bile…describes the extravagant invective, the sexualized threats of violence, and the recreational nastiness that have come to constitute a dominant tenor of internet discourse. My case is that a new descriptor is required in order to gather under one heading a variety of denunciatory forms that share characteristic, signal features and so demand a broad field of inquiry—one that is able to gather ostensibly variegated speech acts into a specific yet widely conceived theoretical reflection* (Jane, 2014a: 531).

As Jane (2014a) explains in this passage, what makes online abuse conspicuous is its violent

invective that is imbued with misogyny. By adopting this theoretical explanation for online

abuse, it is possible to broaden the academic understanding of abuse, and develop the

evidence base of both its occurrence and possible solutions to ameliorate its harm. Integral

to the theory is a recognition that for many years, the seriousness of online abuse, and the

damaging nature of this type of communication on both individuals and institutions has

been downplayed and / or ignored (Jane, 2014a).   Jane (2014a) is reluctant to provide an

overly rigid definition of online abuse, believing that to do so risks excluding important

facets of this emergent discourse. Instead, she provides a "loose framing" (Jane, 2014a: 540)

of the likely elements of e-bile, as illustrated in Figure 2.5.

Overt misogyny	Sexualised and violent threats	Vitriolic	Extravagant invective (including obscenities)

Recreational nastiness (e.g. highlighting appearance)	Victim blaming	Belittling of women's knowledge / achievements

Figure 2.5: Visual representation of the key elements of e-bile (Source: Jane, 2014a)

Another theory that has been devised to define online abuse is gendertrolling (Mantilla, 2015). Mantilla (2015) uses this theory to differentiate between the misogynistic abuse that is promulgated online, and other forms of technological communication. In doing so, she asserts that gendertrolling is "a new kind of virulent, more threatening online phenomenon" (Mantilla, 2013: 564), further arguing that this manner of invective is "specifically and dramatically more destructive to its victims" (Mantilla, 2013: 564). The theory of gendertrolling is comprised of seven key elements, as illustrated in Figure 2.6.

Abuse attempts to silence: precipitated by women voicing an opinion	Involves gendered and sexualised insults designed to belittle / demean	Make sexualised and violent threats	Use multiple online platforms

Occur at high levels of intensity / frequency	Perpetuated for a long duration	Can involve multiple attackers
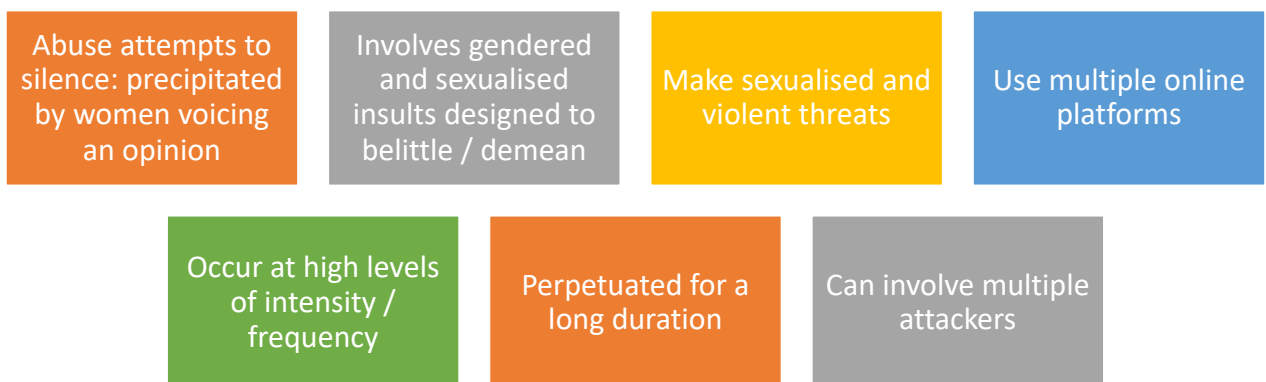
Figure 2.6: Common features of gendertrolling (Source: Mantilla, 2015)

Mantilla's typology (2015) has echoes of the different strands of misogyny discussed in Section 2.4.3.   Jane (2009) has similarly highlighted the frequent attempt to silence women in the online space, emphasising that the perpetrators of online abuse "directly implicate their targets' self-determination and ability to participate in political and social discourse" (Citron, 2009: 406). Furthermore, Citron (2009: 415) provides a reminder that "any silencing of speech prevents us from better understanding the world in which we live", which should act as a catalyst for policy makers in this area, something discussed further in Chapter Three. In a more recent study, McCarthy (2021) draws parallels between the belittling that is synonymous with sexual harassment in the physical space, and the attempts to delegitimise professional women online, confirming that online abuse shares many similarities with this enduring gendered persecution, as first highlighted in the Duluth model (Pence and Paymar, 1993).

The third theory of online abuse being considered is the continuum of image-based sexual abuse, devised by McGlynn et al. (2017). This theory adds the visual dimension of online abuse, using as a catalyst the increase in legislation implemented by governments across the globe to tackle the issue of so-called 'revenge porn'.   Drawing on Kelly's continuum of violence (1988), the continuum of image-based sexual abuse (McGlynn et al., 2017) includes a range of behaviours that it is argued should all be viewed as types of sexual violence. When gathered together, these behaviours are much broader than the offence of revenge porn (commonly understood to mean "the dissemination of nude, intimate and sexualized images of individuals (overwhelmingly female), without the consent and against the wishes of those pictured" (Yar and Drew, 2019: 579)) that is a familiar part of everyday discourse. Instead, this continuum aims to bring together a "range of gendered, sexualised forms of

abuse which have common characteristics" (McGlynn et al., 2017: 25). Whilst some broad examples of image-based sexual abuse are provided (see Figure 2.7), McGlynn et al. (2017) seek to go further than simply providing a definitive list of injurious activities, instead seeking to future-proof the continuum by providing a theoretical definition for image-based sexual abuse. This definition is: "the abuse experienced predominantly by women arising from the non-consensual creation and / or distribution of private sexual images" (McGlynn et al., 2017: 26).

Threat to distribute private sexual images online	Online distribution of stolen (hacked) private sexual images	Non-consensual creation of private sexual images
Taking of private sexual images in public (e.g. upskirting)	Sexualised extortion	Filming of sexual assault and rape
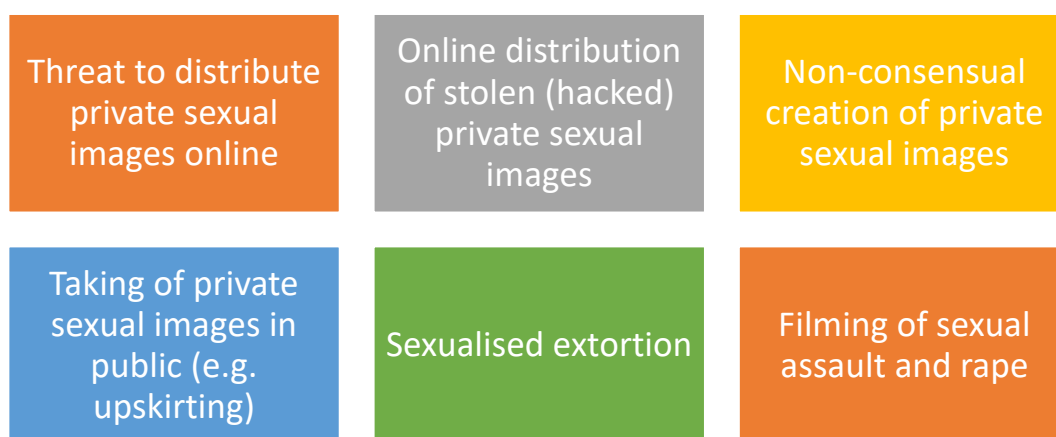
Figure 2.7: Behaviours that form the continuum of image-based sexual abuse (Source: McGlynn et al., 2017)

The advantage of such an approach is that it allows for behaviours to be added (or removed) as technology develops and new types of offensive behaviours emerge, and in this way holds the potential for policy and legislation in this area to keep pace with future technological innovation, something which is incredibly challenging in this area of social policy. At a conceptual level, the theoretical continuum "illuminates the abusive nature of the practices and the commonalities between seemingly disparate phenomena" (McGlynn, et al., 2017: 28), whilst confirming that *all* such behaviours involve gendered harassment

and abuse (Citron, 2014), and lead victims to equate their experiences as being "akin to sexual assault" (Wittes et al., 2016: 4).

The final theoretical exploration of online abuse detailed here considers the abuse faced by women from different demographic groups, and the way that different identities intersect. In a wide ranging examination of gender inequality in the digital sphere, Galpin (2022) uses the theory of intersectionality to consider how women who are already marginalised due to existing demographic characteristics become the target for online abuse. As a consequence, Galpin (2022) defines online abuse in two ways. Central to the first of these classifications is the recognition of "participatory inequality" (Galpin, 2022: 164), which highlights the way that women who already face discrimination in the offline space find their marginalisation perpetuated, and indeed, exacerbated in the online space. This is often done by men employing techniques to silence the contributions made by such women (Galpin, 2022). Galpin then goes further, identifying the actions and policies of social media companies themselves as contributing to this discrimination, by determining whose voice is heard in the online space, and as a consequence "reinforcing capitalist structures" (Galpin, 2022: 167). The second strand of Galpin's theory examines the role of "subaltern counter-publics" (Galpin, 2022: 164), which she proposes as an explanation for the ways in which online platforms can create "spaces of resistance" (Galpin, 2022: 164) for feminist activists. However, Galpin also highlights the way that marginalised women are frequently excluded from these campaigning settings, due to the actions of white, middle-class feminists, whose needs and identities are often more highly valued than those of black and transgender women, thereby creating an alternative locus for discrimination. Galpin concludes by asserting that the intersectional identities of *all* women must be included in any analysis of

online abuse, in order to acquire a true understanding of the phenomenon. Galpin's theory of gender inequality in the digital sphere echoes a number of themes that are explored as part of this literature review, including critiques of the public sphere, the role of filter bubbles and echo chambers in perpetuating online abuse, and misogyny. Including this study as part of this discussion therefore creates a synergy between these various strands, whilst also illuminating an important aspect of the issue of online abuse as it affects marginalised groups.

2.5.   Bringing together theories of gender-based violence and online abuse

Examining the literature on gender-based violence, along with the scholarship on online abuse, as has been done in the chapter, has enabled the identification of a number of areas of overlap between the two domains. Highlighting these synergies as part of this study is pivotal to understanding how online abuse represents another form of gender-based violence.

The discussion of the different theoretical explanations of online abuse began with an examination of Jane's theory of e-bile (2014a), which emphasises the need to record and report the obscene nature of online abuse in order to communicate the extent of the harm it can cause. When compared with Galtung's theory of cultural violence (1990), there is a connection between the two theories, as Galtung's work (1990: 295) asserts that the "sanitation of language" is a fundamental aspect of cultural violence, as it downplays the seriousness of numerous episodes of structural violence. By positioning these two theories

together, it is possible to gain a clearer understanding of the use of language as an integral facet of the perpetuation of violence.

Nevertheless, despite the similarities between Jane (2014a) and Galtung (1990) and the professed need to communicate the unexpurgated nature of online abuse in order to recognise its seriousness, Galpin (2022) takes issue with some aspects of this. For whilst agreeing with the need to recognise the true nature of online abuse, including its use of violent invective and threatening obscenities, Galpin stresses that the academic understanding of online abuse must go further, and assess the impact that receiving such communication has on individual women and society as a whole.

The theory of technology facilitated sexual violence and harassment, devised by Henry and Powell (2015) brings together many of the points raised by both literature on gender-based violence (e.g. Pence and Paymar, 1993; Kelly, 1988) and more recent scholarship on online abuse (e.g. McGlynn et al., 2017; Mantilla, 2015), to devise a definition of sexual violence and harassment against adult women that encompasses the malign creation and distribution of sexual imagery, with broader themes of violence, harassment and structural misogyny. Similarly, another theory that combines both older and newer scholarship is provided by Dragiewicz et al. (2018) in their theory of technology facilitated coercive control. This theory builds upon Stark's original (2009) work on coercive control, highlighting the way that online platforms exacerbate existing coercive behaviours, whilst also introducing new methods of abuse. Dragiewicz et al's (2018) study draws upon evidence gathered from a detailed review of the scholarship in this area to confirm the presence of harassment as integral to the theory of technology facilitated coercive control, confirming that the most common perpetrators of gendered online abuse are current and

former partners (Lenhart et al., 2016). Of relevance to this discussion is that in addition to detailing the behaviours that exemplify technology facilitated coercive control in the private sphere, such as the use of technology to stalk a partner's movements, the unauthorised sharing of sexual images ('revenge porn'), and the electronic control of financial affairs, Dragiewicz et al.'s (2018) work begins to explore the proliferation of such behaviour beyond the domestic sphere. For instance, Dragiewicz et al. (2018) provide the example of how perpetrators of domestic violence can use the opportunities presented by online networks to join together with wider misogynistic networks, in order to perpetuate the impact of abuse beyond the original target and impinge upon women in the course of their professional lives, using the 'Gamergate' episode as an example.

The theory of technology facilitated coercive control is one that concurs with more traditional scholarship in this area, confirming the presence of both misogyny and structural discrimination against women in the abusive behaviour that extends domestic violence from the physical world into the online space (Dragiewicz et al., 2018). Integral to the theory of technology facilitated coercive control is the question of the role played by the social media companies as both facilitators of abuse, and as crucial to its prevention (Dragiewicz et al., 2018), being one of the few theories to consider how the various platforms largely fail to tackle the abusive behaviour that occurs on their sites.

The theoretical framework considering technology-facilitated domestic abuse in political economy (Yardley, 2021a) has devised four distinct types of omnipresent behaviour found in episodes of domestic violence that have a technological component, namely establishing omnipresence, overt omnipresence, covert omnipresence, and retributive omnipresence

(Yardley, 2021a: 1484). This framework, along with examples of how they are manifested, is illustrated in Figure 2.8.

Establishing omnipresence
- Offenders gain access to victims' devices
- Passwords shared
- Spyware installed
- Use of location trackers

Overt omnipresence
- Undisguised monitoring and control
- Romanticization of stalking
- Multiple emails and text messages sent
- Perpetrators demand an instant response

Covert omnipresence
- Similar to gaslighting
- Makes perpetrator feel in control
- Victims often perceived as 'paranoid'
- Uses tracking apps and spyware

Retributive omnipresence
- Occurs once the relationship has ended
- Seek to regain control
- Humilation is key aim
- Designed to damage victims' reputation / profession

Figure 2.8: Conceptual framework of omnipresence (Source: Yardley, 2021a)

In work that concurs with the findings of Dragiewicz et al. (2018), Yardley (2021a) highlights how perpetrators of domestic violence are harnessing the technical developments of new technologies to commit enduring harms. For example, Yardley's (2021a) theory highlights how "smartphones, text messaging, social media, and GPS location tracking are all examples of technologies repurposed for abuse" (Yardley, 2021a: 1479), and used for acts of coercive control, harassment, and stalking.

The theory of technology-facilitated domestic abuse clearly positions the combined malign patriarchal influences of sexism and misogyny at the heart of the explanation for this behaviour. It confirms that the underlying impact of these tenets of patriarchal power have evolved and endured alongside the development of new communications technology, with the growth of neoliberalism adding to the pernicious online environment experienced by

many women.   Of particular relevance to this study is the dimension of retributive

omnipresence, which usually occurs once the intimate relationship has ended, and the

perpetrator seeks to regain control over their former partner. With the intention to cause

maximum humiliation for the woman concerned, retributive omnipresence will frequently

threaten to undermine an individual's professional reputation and economic security, for

example by using fake accounts to spread disinformation about their qualifications, or by

accusing them of malfeasance in public office (Yardley, 2021a).   When women attempt to

report such activity to the police, they are often told to change their mobile numbers or

delete their social media accounts – something that Yardley (2021a) claims institutionalises

misogyny and has links with victim blaming, whilst also making women individually

responsible for their own safety. Yardley's theory of technology-facilitated domestic abuse

in political economy has strong parallels with Vera-Gray and Kelly's (2020) theory of safety

work, which makes similar points about the individualisation of gender-based violence; and

Lewis et al.'s (2017) links with online abuse, public shaming and victim blaming (Lewis et al.,

2017).

Bailey and Burkell (2021) build upon the structural and institutional weaknesses highlighted

by Yardley (2021a) in their assessment of the scholarship in online gendered violence,

devising a theory of technologically facilitated violence that is based on structural and

intersectional perspectives (Bailey and Burkell, 2021: 531). In echoes of the work of Galpin

(2022), this theory of technology facilitated violence similarly recognises the role of gender

in this behaviour, as well as the greater impact on women from marginalised communities.

Bailey and Burkell (2021) draw on the race theories of Hill Collins (2017), along with

discussions of intersectionality (e.g. Crenshaw, 1991) to emphasise that for too long, the

experiences of marginalised women have been overlooked, which is a particular problem

when theoretical explanations of violence consider the issue from an individualised

perspective, ignoring the structural siting of multiple spheres of exclusion, harassment and

harm (Bailey and Burkell, 2021). In contrast, the theory of technologically facilitated

violence devised by Bailey and Burkell (2021) emphasises the need for wholesale structural

change to societal systems and institutions, including the composition of the social media

companies, which are overwhelmingly run by those who are male and white, in order to

offer genuine solutions to technologically facilitated violence. Furthermore, this theory

recognises the need for a collegiate approach to devising solutions to online abuse, that

involves "governments, platforms and online communities" (Bailey and Burkell, 2021: 537).

This theoretical approach to the issues of gender-based violence, intersectionality and

online abuse is wider in scope than some of the other theories discussed in this chapter, and

consequently provides an interesting rubric to consider the approach of policy makers,

online platforms and legislation, which is considered further in Chapter Three.

In order to assess how online abuse can be determined to be a form of gender-based

violence, it is useful to return to Pence and Paymar's Wheel of Power and Control (1993),

first introduced in Section 2.2, in order to discover whether it is possible to map the various

elements of technology facilitated gender-based violence highlighted here onto their

original typology. Table 2.1 takes the original version of the Wheel of Power and Control

(Pence and Paymar, 1993), and matches its different elements where there are points of

synchronicity that occur in the literature on the theorisation of gender-based violence that

occurs in the online space.   This theoretical work has a synergy with work that is being done

by women professionals in the USA, to document gendered online abuse, most notably by

Chemaly and Sussman (2020).

PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE ↔ POWER AND CONTROL		
Type of abuse	*Example provided in Power and Control Wheel*	*Example of gendered violence in the online space*
Using economic abuse	• Preventing her from getting or keeping a job • Making her ask for money • Giving an allowance • Taking her money • Not letting her know about or having access to family income.	**MAKING WOMEN WITHDRAW FROM THE ONLINE SPACE** (Yardley, 2021a)
Using coercion and threats	• Making and/or carrying out threats to do something to hurt her • Threatening to leave her, to commit suicide, to report her to welfare • Making her drop charges • Making her do illegal things	**THREATS (MADE TO INDIVIDUALS)** (McGlynn, 2017)
Using intimidation	• Making her afraid by using looks, actions, gestures • Smashing things • Destroying her property • Abusing pets • Displaying weapons	
Using emotional abuse	• Putting her down	**EMOTIONAL HARM**

	• Making her feel bad about herself • Calling her names • Making her think she's crazy • Playing mind games • Humiliating her • Making her feel guilty	(Dragiewicz et al., 2018)
Using isolation	• Controlling what she does, who she sees and talks to, what she reads, where she goes • Limiting her outside involvement • Using jealousy to justify actions	**SILENCING** (Galpin, 2022) **MAKING WOMEN WITHDRAW FROM THE ONLINE SPACE** (Yardley, 2021a)
Minimising, denying and blaming	• Making light of the abuse and not taking her concerns about it seriously • Saying the abuse didn't happen • Shifting responsibility for abusive behaviour • Saying she caused it	**BELITTLING** (Camp, 2018)
Using children	• Making her feel guilty about the children • Using the children to relay messages • Using visitation to harass her • Threatening to take the children away	**THREATS (MADE TO FAMILY MEMBERS)** (Jane, 2014b)
Using male privilege	• Treating her like a servant • Making all the big decisions • Acting like the "master of the castle"	**MISOGYNY** (Mantilla, 2015)

	• Being the one to define men's and women's roles	
PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE ↔ POWER AND CONTROL		

: Combining the wheel of power and control and theories of gendered violence in the online space (Adapted from Pence and Paymar, 1993)

By reviewing the literature of both gender-based violence and online abuse, it is possible to draw a number of important conclusions. Firstly, there is little doubt that the vast majority of scholars working in this field believe that online abuse is typically gendered, and as such, becomes another facet of gender-based violence (e.g. Galpin, 2022; McLachlan and Harris, 2022; Rogers et al., 2022). For whilst not universally agreed upon (e.g. Gorrell et al., 2020), most researchers investigating in this area believe that the majority of violent and aggressive online abuse is received by women (Kargar and Rauchfleish, 2019).

The scale of online abuse against women discussed in this chapter confirms that misogyny is a crucial factor in the production and dissemination of online abuse (Barlow and Awan, 2016), with social networking sites providing a major platform for misogyny. Indeed, there is some evidence that the emergence of the new forms of computer-mediated communication, have created new manifestations of misogyny (Ging and Siapera, 2018), in part by allowing those who share similar views to connect and maximise hate and hostility, phenomena that are amplified online (Harris and Vitis, 2020; Khosravinik and Esposito, 2018). The evidence confirms that, rather than being an individualised phenomenon, online abuse frequently contains several core elements, namely, being highly aggressive, labelling women as weak, and often containing rape threats (Doyle, 2011). This reinforces online abuse as a structural issue (Yardley, 2021a), and one that has the potential to affect all

women. This finding has important ramifications, as it removes the potential for blame from individual victims of online abuse and negates any discussion of what they may or may not have done to deserve such vicious invective (Jane, 2017a), and instead makes it a broader societal issue, a finding supported by the theoretical models provided by both Galpin (2022) and Yardley (2021a). There is also the potential for a wider negative impact, affecting women's very equity and citizenship (Jane, 2017a), as the online abuse received by women in the public sphere causes them to withdraw completely from their roles in public facing occupations. This concurs with the 'economic abuse' dimension found in the Wheel of Power and Control (Pence and Paymar 1993), which emphasises the financial and wider economic impact of episodes of gender-based violence.

On the rare occasion that men are the targets of online abuse, this abuse is itself gendered, with attacks focused on the female relatives of male targets (Jane, 2014b). This is illustrated in the case of journalist Jon Stewart, who reported how a photograph of his wife published online was described as "She's a liberal. They only come in ugly", and "Looks like a trip to Auschwitz might do her some good" (Jane, 2014b: 11). In the UK, journalist Stig Abell recounted how his Twitter feed filled with rape threats directed at his wife and young child, following the publication of his book: "they were really graphic, and he was saying he knew where we lived" (Llewelyn Smith, 2018: 19).

Furthermore, on the few occasions when women have been convicted of perpetrating online abuse, the threats have been sexual as well as violent, leading Lewis et al. (2017) to describe the online space as one that perpetuates online misogyny, or masculinised violence, rather than simply male violence.

This exploration of the corpus has confirmed the centrality of misogyny as an integral element of online abuse. By adopting theories of gender-based violence originally advocated by second wave feminists to define and then record violent behaviour (e.g. Pence and Paymar, 1993; Galtung, 1990; Kelly, 1988) it is possible to gaining a deeper understanding of this most contemporary demonstration of gendered harms. For despite their stated weaknesses, particularly in relation to intersectionality and the experiences of women of colour and those in the LGBTQ+ communities, these theories remain useful.

Furthermore, by bringing together these different theoretical ideas, and combining them with more recent scholarship on computer-mediated communication and the facilitation of online harms, it is possible to identify six elements of online abuse, namely emotional harm (Dragiewicz et al., 2018); harassment (Bailey and Burkell, 2021); threat (McGlynn, 2017; Jane 2014b); belittling (Camp, 2018); silencing (Galpin, 2022); and criticism of appearance (Backe et al., 2018).

An element of misogyny that does not map discretely onto the Wheel of Power and Control (1993) is the criticism of a woman's appearance. However, this dimension does appear in Jane's theory of e-bile (2014a). Furthermore, this aspect of misogyny frequently appears in first-hand accounts of online abuse, as evidenced in numerous tweets sent to Professor Mary Beard (Mantilla, 2015):

> *After a "Question Time" appearance… she was repeatedly vilified on an internet message board. One user described her as "a vile, spiteful excuse for a woman, who eats too much cabbage and has cheese straws for teeth." Less creatively, another commenter posted a doctored photograph in which an image of a woman's genitals was superimposed over Beard's face* (Mead, 2014: 2).

Beard describes the abuse she receives as "truly vile" (Dowell, 2013: 1), noting that it occurs whenever she speaks publicly (Boseley, 2017), frequently describing her as "old, clapped out and obsolete" (Lewis, 2020: 310).

Despite this thorough investigation of the interdisciplinary corpus, there remain a number of issues that the existing literature fails to consider. Crucially, there is very little attention paid to the consequences of online abuse being directed at women working in the public sphere, which is of critical importance given the centrality of social media and other online communication mechanisms to its operation (Mellado and Hermida, 2021; Terren and Borge-Bravo, 2021; Shirky, 2011). For whilst a small number of papers do consider the experiences of women working in some public sphere occupations (e.g. Veletsianos et al., 2018: Krook, 2017; Marshak, 2017; Salin and Hoel, 2013), this issue is much wider than the withdrawal of women from holding political office, around which much of the discussion is currently centred. There is a lack of evidence and scholarship considering the experiences of women working across public sphere occupations, and how these women are targeted online as a result of undertaking their occupational role. Consequently, there is a gap in the understanding of the impact that such abuse has on the individuals that receive it. Furthermore, there is a lack of knowledge around the reporting of abuse, and the decisions women make around choosing when (or if) to report the abuse that they encounter, and the consequences of doing so. These fundamental gaps in the literature are addressed in the form of three research questions, which are outlined in the Methodology in Chapter Four.

2.6.   Summary

This chapter provides a detailed overview of the literature underpinning this research, focusing on four key areas: gender-based violence, computer mediated communication, women's experiences of working in the public sphere, and misogyny.

Much of the literature discussed in this chapter (over 85 per cent) defines online abuse as a structural issue. In contrast, much of the literature written about online abuse prior to 2010 adopted a range of individualised explanations for the phenomenon (Henry and Powell, 2015), often informed by libertarian theories of free speech (Dragiewicz et al., 2018). It would appear likely that this change in approach has been driven by the discovery that women receive most of the abuse perpetuated via CMC (Backe et al., 2018), much of which is sexual in nature (Antunovic, 2019). The detailed examination of online abuse by feminist academics (e.g. Jane, 2017b; Mantilla, 2015; Citron, 2014) has revealed that the nature of this communication both reintroduces and reinforces traditional gender stereotypes, and thereby reconstitutes gender role models (Barratt, 2018). The utilisation of the technological advances instigated by social networking sites (SNS) to extend the patriarchy in this way (Campbell, 2017) has links with other forms of sexism (Carson, 2018), reflecting the social inequality that persists offline (Dragiewicz et al., 2018). The empirical evidence presented in later chapters confirms the work of scholars (e.g. Brown, 1998; Chen et al., 2020; Atkinson and Standing, 2019; Veletsianos et al., 2018) that sexual harassment in the workplace has found a new mechanism for dissemination in the online space, and that the presence of gendered abuse is not a new phenomenon.

Crucial to the future direction of this research is the identification of six elements of online abuse, namely emotional harm (Dragiewicz et al., 2018); harassment (Bailey and Burkell, 2021); threat (McGlynn, 2017; Jane 2014b); belittling (Camp, 2018); silencing (Galpin, 2022); and criticism of appearance (Backe et al., 2018). Using the theoretical structure provided by

the model of power and control first devised by Pence and Paymar (1993), it is possible to illustrate that many of these six elements of online abuse align with existing theories of gendered violence that occurs in the physical space.

This chapter has similarly highlighted three key areas where scholarship has failed to account for behaviour that commonly takes place in the online space. There remain critical gaps in academic knowledge around the online experiences of women working across the public sphere, and the impact upon individuals working in these occupations, when they receive online abuse. Lastly, there is a lack of empirical information on the reporting of abuse, whether to social media companies, employers, or the police. These fundamental gaps in the literature are addressed in the form of three research questions, which are outlined in the Methodology presented in Chapter Four.

The next chapter, Chapter Three, uses the thematic lenses provided in the literature review (gender-based violence, computer mediated communication, women's experiences of working in the public sphere, and misogyny) to explore the response by legislators, policy makers and law enforcement to online abuse. In later chapters, these four themes will be discussed further in relation to the empirical data collected and analysed as part of this study.

Chapter Three: Analysing the policy landscape on gender-based violence and online abuse in England and Wales

3.1.   Introduction

The literature on policymaking on gender-based violence provides information on the numerous proposals, initiatives, and pieces of legislation that have been made in this area. Analysis of developments in this area reveals a panoply of policy choices, all of which profess to tackle varying forms of gendered abuse, advocated across time and geographical location. These policy recommendations and calls for action have frequently been introduced on a piecemeal, sporadic basis, and have often emerged in response to public pressure (e.g. Penney, 2020; Zakrzewski, 2020; Mantilla, 2015); or, as Walby et al. (2014: 188) have vividly described (with reference to Jimmy Saville and Dominic Kahn), as a response "to the violence that emerges into public view in the form of 'scandals', when some famous man is accused of perpetrating gendered violence".

In England and Wales, in common with many other jurisdictions, what has been lacking is a comprehensive or structural approach to addressing the gendered violence committed online. At the same time, growing concerns about the safety of women and girls in the physical space, particularly following the murders of Sarah Everard and Sabina Nessa in London in 2021 (Stöckl and Quigg, 2021); and the increase in domestic homicide during the multiple Covid-19 lockdowns (Rochford et al., 2021) have led many to call for a wider public discussion about the impact of male violence in society (e.g. DeCook and Kelly, 2021; Dungay, 2021; Grant, 2021; Zempi and Smith, 2021). This is an evolving situation, and it seems likely that it will have developed still further by the time this thesis is submitted.

However, with that caveat, this chapter presents an analysis of the current policy landscape in England and Wales as it relates to online abuse and gender-based violence.

3.2.   Legislation on gender-based violence

In 1395, Margaret Neffield from York appeared in front of the ecclesiastical court to testify that her husband had caused her significant physical harm, including numerous broken bones. Despite hearing evidence supporting Neffield's claim from several independent witnesses, the court ruled that there were inadequate grounds to grant her a judicial separation and ordered her to return to her husband (Dwyer, 1995). This is the first recorded case of gender-based violence in England and Wales, emphasising the historical and enduring hierarchy by which men possess and control women (Dobash and Dobash, 1980), a patriarchal legacy which endures to the present day. Legislation prohibiting gender-based violence has been entered into statute since the nineteenth century, when the abolition of the right of chastisement in 1829, outlawed a man's right to use physical force against his spouse – a privilege that can be traced back to the Roman era (Dobash and Dobash, 1980). However, despite this change in the law, the status of women in relation to men remained subordinate, arguably until the second wave of feminist activism emerged in the 1970s (Maguire and Ponting, 1988), with very little progress made in upholding the rights of women, or even acknowledging the scale of gender-based violence; between the end of the first world war and the final third of the twentieth century (Mooney, 2000). In the 1970s, feminist activists campaigned explicitly for the criminalisation of gender-based violence (Hester, 2006), with the pioneering work of Dobash and Dobash (1980) revealing

the hitherto 'hidden' crime of domestic abuse (Walklate, 1995). However, despite the

passing of the Domestic Violence and Marital Proceedings Act (1976), which provided the

first intervention by the criminal law into acts of domestic abuse (Williams and Walklate,

2020); and the Domestic Proceedings and Magistrates' Court Act (1978), which extended

the powers available to magistrates to enable them to grant personal protection orders that

excluded a spouse from the matrimonial home, if there was evidence that harm would be

caused to residents if the individual remained in the property (Graham Hall, 1978); there is

copious evidence that gender-based violence remained an issue of little importance in

criminal justice policy for much of the latter part of the twentieth century (Walby et al.,

2014). Furthermore, it is important to remember that like much of the law in this area at the

time, this legislation only applied to married, heterosexual couples.

The lackadaisical approach from the criminal justice system is exemplified by the attitude of

the then Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Kenneth Newman, who in 1984

expressed that he wanted to shed police responsibility for gender-based violence:

describing it as 'rubbish' work that was not a police matter (Radford and Stanko, 1991). It is

not solely within the criminal justice system that the significance of gender-based violence is

undervalued as an offence. Within the academic discipline of criminology, Bourdieu (2000)

has been singled out for criticism (e.g. Walby et al., 2014) for his assertion that victims of

violence "often unwittingly, contribute to their own domination by tacitly accepting, in

advance, the limits imposed on them" (Bourdieu, 2000: 169).

It is important to note that for the majority of the twentieth century, the legislation

proscribing gender-based violence within relationships applied solely to physical assault, as

rape within marriage was not criminalised in England and Wales until 1991 (1989 in

Scotland) (D'Cruze, 2011), even though the evidence in this area suggests that sexual and

physical assault in interpersonal relationships commonly occurs simultaneously (West,

2004). Until the law changed in 1991, rape remained a man's marital right and a woman's

marital duty (Renzetti, 2013).

In April 2021, after successfully navigating a legislative path that was fraught with obstacles

(Bennett et al., 2019; Solace Woman's Aid and the Justice Studio; 2021), the Domestic

Abuse Bill became law (Home Office, 2021), and in doing so, provided the first ever legal

definition of the offence of domestic abuse (Stephens et al., 2021).   This definition states

that:

> *Behaviour of a person ("A") towards another person ("B") is "domestic abuse" if
> (a)A and B are each aged 16 or over and are personally connected to each other,
> and (b)the behaviour is abusive. Behaviour is "abusive" if it consists of any of the
> following: (a) physical or sexual abuse; (b) violent or threatening behaviour; (c)
> controlling or coercive behaviour; (d) economic abuse; (e) psychological,
> emotional or other abuse; and it does not matter whether the behaviour consists
> of a single incident or a course of conduct. "Economic abuse" means any
> behaviour that has a substantial adverse effect on B's ability to: (a) acquire, use
> or maintain money or other property, or (b) obtain goods or services. For the
> purposes of this Act A's behaviour may be behaviour "towards" B despite the fact
> that it consists of conduct directed at another person (for example, B's child).
> References in this Act to being abusive towards another person are to be read in
> accordance with this section.* (Domestic Abuse Act, 2021: Section 1)

Whilst full implementation of the various facets of this new piece of legislation is not

expected to occur until the latter part of 2022 (Home Office, 2021), it does contain a

number of important legislative changes, including greater recognition of emotional and

economic abuse, and the frequent occurrence of both within coercive control (Hulley,

2021). Other policies contained in the Act include the addition of non-fatal strangulation as

a specific offence (Ministry of Justice, 2022), and the confirmation of the existing criminal

law that places important restrictions on the 'sex games gone wrong' defence when such

activity leads to femicide (Yardley, 2021b); as well as a legal obligation upon local authorities to provide accommodation-based services for domestic abuse victims and their children (Holt and Lewis, 2021). The legislation also brings the provisions on coercive control contained in the Serious Crime Act (2015) into this wider ordinance on domestic abuse. However, whilst the government describe this new law as providing "landmark protection" (Home Office, 2021: 1) to victims of domestic abuse, the legislation has been criticised by some. Several scholars working in the field of violence against women and girls have described "the removal of 'violence' as a key rubric [suggesting] a 'watering down' or obfuscation of the serious and gendered nature of domestic violence and abuse" (Aldridge, 2021: 1824). In short, such critiques are concerned that this new legislation is incongruous with the efforts being made by social policy and third sector organisations to strengthen policies protecting women and girls from gendered violence (Aldridge, 2021), continuing a perpetual undermeasuring of the crime (Walby et al., 2014). Furthermore, despite evidence of a link between online abuse and gender-based violence (Lewis, et al., 2017; Southworth et al., 2007), there is no mention of either technology facilitated sexual violence (Henry and Powell, 2015), or technology facilitated coercive control (Dragiewicz et al., 2018) – or indeed, any other form of online abuse – within the new Act.

Legislation on coercive control was first introduced in 2015, when Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act (2015) included the provision of a discrete offence of coercive control (Wiener, 2017). This recognised in law the malign impact of "intimidation, isolation and control" (Stark, 2009: 5), which is often as dangerous as physical violence. The most recent guidance on coercive control, issued by the Crown Prosecution Service in 2017, describes the legislation as designed to "address controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family

relationship which causes someone to fear that violence will be used against them on at least two occasions; or causes them serious alarm or distress which has a substantial adverse effect on their usual day-to-day activities" (CPS, 2017: 1). The introduction of this law in England and Wales, along with similar legislation in Australia (Walklate and Fitz-Gibbon, 2019) evidences a statutory recognition of the wider scale of gender-based violence offences. This extends the focus from the very narrow definition first enshrined in law (Stark, 2009), to include various behaviour involving physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse (Heise et.al., 1999), which has now been further strengthened in the new Domestic Abuse Act (2021).

Whilst the passing of the offence of coercive control was a watershed moment, with the UK[1] becoming one of the first countries in the world to pass legislation on coercive control (Nugent, 2019), prosecutions of coercive control offences remain few, in part due to a difficulty (or possible reluctance) from the police service to gather the necessary evidence (Lewis et al., 2018; Wiener, 2017). This, along with the incessant failure to secure convictions for rape and other sexual offences (Daly, 2021; Brown, 2011) has echoes of the police's lackadaisical response to gendered physical violence evidenced in the 1970s and 1980s (Radford and Stanko, 1991).

3.3.   Statutory responses to cybercrime and online abuse

Just as there has been an increase in the number of cases of domestic violence during the period of the Coronavirus pandemic (Sasidharan and Dhillon, 2021), there has been an

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[1] Scotland passed similar legislation in 2018, which also covers former partners

analogous increase in the number of cybercrime offences being reported to the police since the multiple Covid-19 lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 (Buil-Gil et al., 2021). This increase in reporting has put a strain on police resources (De Kimpe et al., 2020), whilst also causing problems for a service that is still largely organised on local boundaries, when confronted with offending that can be perpetrated by or enacted upon people based in different regions or countries (Koziarski and Ree, 2020). Furthermore, many police officers remain unfamiliar with the intricacies of online offending (Wall, 2007), and may fail to appreciate its seriousness or complexity. When combined, these issues serve to exacerbate an underlying public concern that the internet is unsafe (Wall, 2008a), and may even contribute to a decline in police legitimacy from the wider population, as people lose trust in the ability of the police to prosecute cybercrime offences successfully (Koziarski and Ree, 2020). Evidence from the literature combines to suggest that the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and law enforcement remain at a disadvantage when attempting to confront online abuse and other forms of cybercrime. This is largely due to a lag in responsiveness in policy formulation and implementation (Jane, 2017a), which leaves organisations constantly on the 'back foot' in the face of constantly evolving technology.

For this reason, the criminal justice system in England and Wales, in common with criminal justice systems elsewhere, has often appeared unable to respond to the threat posed by online abuse (Barker and Jurasz, 2018).   Nevertheless, an increased awareness of the phenomenon has led to a greater analysis of existing legal sanctions surrounding this behaviour. In October 2016, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) issued new guidelines regarding the prosecution of cases involving social networking sites (CPS, 2016), highlighting that some fifteen existing pieces of legislation can be used to prosecute individuals accused of sending online abuse, including the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, the Protection

from Harassment Act 1997, the Malicious Communications Act 1988, and the Serious Crime Act 2015 (CPS, 2016). The multiplicity of this legislation mirrors the application of legislation in relation to gender-based violence, where, unlike countries such as Cyprus and Sweden (Walby et al., 2014), the UK (until 2021) has tended to apply general law rather than introducing specific legislation. This may perpetuate the perception that online abuse is not a significant issue, and as with gender-based violence, it frequently remains a 'hidden' crime (Radford and Harne, 2008). Despite the absence of online abuse from the new Domestic Abuse Act (2021), there is clear evidence of technology being used in offences of coercive control, whether in the installation of tracking devices on victims' mobile phones or enabling remote access to the home computer (Wiener, 2017); or by removing victims' access to the technology that facilitates relationships with others, such as text messaging and access to social networking sites (Fernet et al., 2019). All such activity is mentioned within the Crown Prosecution Service guidance on the offences that constitute coercive control (CPS, 2017).

Jane (2017a: 88) has argued that criminal justice agencies have "done little to support women, to bring offenders to account, or to even acknowledge the problem of gendered cyberhate as a problem" an assertion that is arguably strengthened by the finding that the police in England and Wales rarely enforce legislation relating to online abuse (Salter, 2017). The explanations presented for this are both diverse and complex, and encompass issues of misogyny, power, and freedom of speech, and are discussed in more detail in other chapters.

3.4. Online Harms White Paper

The growth in online abuse has led to an increase in the demand for regulation of SNS and other online platforms. The purpose of such a regulatory framework is to limit the dissemination of hate speech and threats of gender-based violence articulated via the internet (e.g. Suzor et al., 2019; Waterson, 2018; Taddeo and Floridi, 2016; Citron, 2014). In the UK context, this was emphasised in the government's White Paper on online harms, published in 2019, which states that:

> *…we should not ignore the very real harms which people face online every day. In the wrong hands the internet can be used to spread terrorist and other illegal or harmful content, undermine civil discourse, and abuse or bully other people. Online harms are widespread and can have serious consequences. …We cannot allow these harmful behaviours and content to undermine the significant benefits that the digital revolution can offer. … This White Paper therefore puts forward ambitious plans for a new system of accountability and oversight for tech companies, moving far beyond self-regulation. A new regulatory framework for online safety will make clear companies' responsibilities to keep UK users, particularly children, safer online with the most robust action to counter illegal content and activity* (House of Commons, 2019a: 3).

This view has been reinforced by the House of Lords Select Committee on Democracy and Digital Technologies (2020: 6), which strongly articulated that "there is a need for Government leadership and regulatory capacity to match the scale and pace of challenges and opportunities that the online world presents". Whilst the Committee felt that the government's White Paper "presents a significant first step towards this goal" (*ibid.*); they also stressed that "it needs to happen; it needs to happen fast; and the necessary draft legislation must be laid before Parliament for scrutiny without delay" (*ibid.*). The Report also emphasises that

Where harmful content spreads virally on their service or where it is posted by users with a large audience, they should face sanctions over their output as other broadcasters do. Individual users need greater protection. They must have redress against large platforms through an ombudsman tasked with safeguarding the rights of citizens. Transparency of online platforms is essential if democracy is to flourish. Platforms like Facebook and Google seek to hide behind 'black box' algorithms which choose what content users are shown. They take the position that their decisions are not responsible for harms that may result from online activity. This is plain wrong (House of Lords, 2020: 6).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the endurance of libertarian theories within computer mediated communication (CMC) outlined in Chapter Two, the regulation of online platforms is highly contested. Many concerns are based around issues of freedom of speech, particularly in the USA, related to the First Amendment of the US Constitution (Mantilla, 2015). Many freedom of speech advocates feel that any attempt at controlling the content displayed on social media platforms would undermine the role of the First Amendment in promulgating freedom of expression (Citron, 2014). Furthermore as both the influence and scope of CMC increases, there is a concern that the introduction of regulation could lead to greater surveillance from either (or both) corporate and state bodies (Duffy and Chan, 2019). This has led to a wider discussion about the potentially malign consequences of online engagement on individuals' privacy (Marwick and Hargittai, 2018), personal information, and wider freedoms (Trottier, 2015).

In addition to these ideological concerns is the practical challenge of how global platforms that are accessed worldwide and owned by private corporations, can be effectively regulated, and policed by individual nation states (Yar and Steinmetz, 2019). This dilemma has arguably led to a fragmented or non-existent regulatory response (Phillips, 2009). Whilst the insistence made by libertarians that the internet remain a bastion of freedom (Wessels, 2010) is a consistent presence in any discussions in this area, the reality is

somewhat more complicated. There is an argument that suggests that the way that social networking sites (SNS) and other online platforms are set up and managed is in itself in opposition to freedom of speech (Poland, 2016). This opinion posits that, rather than viewing online platforms as a medium designed to enshrine freedom of activity on the internet, social media companies can instead be viewed as a central point of control, acting as "intermediaries [that are] providing citizens with access to the digital public sphere" (DeNardis and Hackl, 2015: 761). Furthermore, the predominance of wealthy white men leading the dominant social media companies (Suzor et al., 2019), their location and focus on a North American audience (*ibid.*) means that only some voices are being heard. Analysis of the accounts suspended by Twitter for infringing their terms and conditions in three national elections that were held in France, Germany, and the UK in 2017 (Majó-Vázquez et al., 2021) showed that it was only those from the most extreme ends of the political spectrum that were sanctioned, and that action was overwhelmingly focused on accounts that were believed to be spreading misinformation, rather than personally abusive or violent tweets (Majó-Vázquez et al., 2021). The same study revealed that decisions regarding the suspension of social media accounts were predominantly made "unilaterally by private, for-profit companies with little accountability, oversight, or transparency" (Majó-Vázquez et al., 2021: 13). This confirms that technology is not value neutral (Murray, 2000), and that it instead magnifies issues of everyday life, absorbing and amplifying the beliefs and experiences of those responsible for its design (boyd, 2015).

When it comes to the issue of regulation, there appears to be a growth in the number of people who believe that legislative agencies must act to introduce legislation independently of one another, rather than waiting for a united global response. Such an approach

recognises that what is determined to be online abuse can vary between countries, and that there are different cultural contexts in operation, particularly between the USA and the European Union (Yar and Steinmetz, 2019). Legislation outlawing online abuse and imposing greater regulation of social media companies was implemented by the European Union in 2015 (Savin, 2018); with Australia following at a federal level in 2018 (Yar and Drew, 2019). With the publication of the long-awaited Online Safety Bill in July 2021 (Hansard, 2021a) it seems likely that the UK government will soon follow.

The contrasting view to that proffered by libertarian proponents in this area is that online abuse threatens key democratic principles, stopping people participating freely via CMC and therefore from reaching their full potential (Citron, 2014).   When considering the impact of online abuse on those working in the public sphere, such as academics, journalists, police officers, and politicians, the personalised attacks of the sort analysed in this thesis have the potential to threaten democracy itself (Ahmed and Madrid-Morales, 2021; Gorrell et al., 2020), as individuals withdraw from these occupations rather than navigate the daily barrage of abuse.

3.5.   Campaigning on gender-based violence

Alongside an increase in legislative activity, the past twenty-five years has seen a growing awareness from social policy institutions, charities, and campaigning organisations of the danger posed by gender-based violence (Matczak et al., 2011). In 1993, the UN General Assembly passed the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, with the aim of advancing international policies and legislation to eradicate gender-based violence

(UN, 1993); whilst in 1996, the World Health Organisation declared gendered violence a major public health issue (Krug et al., 2002). The policy advances made by these two organisations were followed in quick succession by organisations such as the World Bank, the European Union, and Amnesty International (Joachim, 2007), reflecting the growth in awareness of gender-based violence as an issue, and building on the work done by the feminist campaigners of the 1970s and 1980s. Within this mix, organisations working in local communities, including Refuge, Rape Crisis and Women's Aid remain of fundamental importance in advancing the policy agenda in this area (Matczak et al., 2011). However, despite the undoubted increase in awareness of and legislation focused on this issue since Margaret Neffield's unsuccessful attempt to gain a legal separation from her husband on the grounds of his violence in the 14th Century (Dwyer, 1995), it is estimated that in 2017, some 87,000 women worldwide were intentionally killed (UNODC, 2019). 58 per cent or 50,000 of these women were killed by a partner or family member (UNODC, 2019). These figures mean that around the world, 137 women are killed by a member of their own family every day (UNODC, 2019); a number that is increasing annually (UNODC, 2019). In England and Wales, the latest statistics gathered from the Crime Survey for England and Wales report that in 2018, some 1.6 million women experienced domestic abuse (Stripe, 2020; Elkin, 2019), although this figure is likely to be higher in reality, because gender-based violence remains a predominantly 'hidden' crime (Radford and Harne, 2008). Furthermore, the figures published by the Crime Survey for England and Wales (2018) were compiled before the increase in gender-based violence resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.6.   The policy response to misogyny

Several investigations have been undertaken by social policy and campaigning organisations

over the last five years into the causes and consequences of hate crime and online abuse

(e.g. UN Broadband Commission, 2015; Home Affairs Select Committee, 2017; Amnesty

International, 2017; House of Commons, 2019b; House of Lords Select Committee on

Democracy and Digital Technologies, 2020). Many of these investigations have considered

(either directly or indirectly) the role of misogyny.

As awareness of gendered online abuse has grown, the calls for misogyny to be categorised

as a hate crime have increased. The latest of these (at the time of writing) was spearheaded

by Baroness Rita Donaghy, a Labour Member of the House of Lords, in December 2021

(Brader, 2021). Baroness Donaghy asked the government what steps they are taking to

make misogyny a hate crime (Hansard, 2021c: Col. 1628), which received the answer that:

> *The Government are committed to tackling violence against women and girls. We*
> *have asked the Law Commission to undertake a review of hate crime legislation,*
> *including whether additional protective characteristics such as sex and gender should*
> *be included. The Law Commission is due to publish its recommendations imminently*
> *and it is important that we hear what the commission proposes before deciding on a*
> *position on this matter* (Hansard, 2021c: Col. 1628).

The Law Commission published its findings later that day, announcing that they had

recommended that "sex or gender should not be added as a protected characteristic for the

purposes of aggravated offences and enhanced sentencing" (Law Commission, 2021: 208).

This decision was made as the Law Commissioners felt that there was a lack of consensus in

the best way to apply hate crime legislation to acts of violence against women and girls, and

a concern that making misogyny a hate crime was not the most effective way of dealing

with crimes of this nature, recommending instead that the government consider introducing

a specific offence to tackle public sexual harassment, which it felt would be more effective.

(Law Commission, 2021). This decision was met with anger and disappointment by

campaigners, including Stella Creasy MP, the Fawcett Society and Reclaim the Streets

(Siddique, 2021). Following this recommendation by the Law Commission, the government

announced on 21 February 2022 that they would vote against the Lords Amendment to the

Police, Crime Sentencing and Courts Bill (Syal, 2022), a move which has left hate crimes

legislation unchanged. Within the same statement, it was declared that the Home Office

was "carefully considering" (Syal, 2022: 1) whether to introduce a new offence of public

sexual harassment, which also formed part of the Law Commission's recommendations (Law

Commission, 2021).

The review of hate crime legislation in relation to misogyny undertaken by the Law

Commission (2021) is but the latest policy inquiry in this area.

In July 2016, the Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry into hate crime received 98 pieces

of evidence and heard from 31 witnesses, including a manager at Nottingham Women's

Centre, who:

> *was the victim of a wave of vicious, targeted abuse on Twitter. She received the*
> *abuse in response to publicity following her work to have misogyny recognised as a*
> *hate crime by Nottinghamshire Police. She was subjected to misogynistic taunts*
> *regarding her appearance and also received death threats. She said: "It reached a*
> *crescendo when someone tweeted out a comment about wanting to find me and tie*
> *me up and then a gif image of a woman having a dagger plunge through the back of*
> *her head until it came out of her mouth"* (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2017: 8).

In March 2018, the Labour Party used an opposition debate to discuss misogyny as a hate

crime (Hansard, 2018). In moving the debate, the then MP for Grimsby, Melanie Onn, said:

> *There is a power imbalance in society that disproportionately affects women*
> *negatively, so I think misogyny should be an exclusive strand of hate crime. By setting*

the definition in statute, the Government would put down a marker to say that culturally endemic negative attitudes towards women are not acceptable. The recording of the crime would give a clearer picture of the scale of the issue, assist the police in taking action and intervening, and give women greater confidence that their concerns would be taken seriously (Hansard, 2018: Col. 132 WH).

In response, whilst welcoming the debate, the Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins MP), stated:

"At the moment we have no clear evidence to show the extent to which the range of crimes committed against women and girls are specifically motivated by misogyny, which is defined as 'the dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against women'" (Hansard 2018, Col. 142 WH).

Consequently, there remains no law prohibiting misogyny based on hate crime, although a successful pilot treating misogyny as a hate crime was carried out by Nottinghamshire police in 2016. This pilot has since been adopted by several police forces across England and Wales (Mullany and Trickett, 2018), including Greater Manchester Police in 2019 (Barker and Jurasz, 2020). Gender, unlike race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or transgender identity, is not a protected characteristic (Chetty and Alathur, 2018) under current legislation.

Similarly, in March 2020, Liberal Democrat MP Wera Hobhouse introduced the Hate Crime (Misogyny) Bill in the House of Commons, designed to "make motivation by misogyny an aggravating factor in criminal sentencing; to require police forces to record hate crimes motivated by misogyny; and for connected purposes" (Parliament UK, 2020: 1). If passed, misogyny would not become a hate crime, but it would mean that offenders would face a lengthier sentence if their behaviour was found to be motivated by misogyny (Barker and Jurasz, 2020). The Bill is currently[2] proceeding through its parliamentary stages, having had

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[2] April 2022

its second reading on Friday 18 March 2022 (Parliament UK, 2021), although as a Private

Members Bill, has little chance of becoming law (Hansard Society, 2019).

3.7.   Policy recommendations

The relative paucity of academic research into online abuse has undoubtedly delayed the

development and implementation of policy designed to tackle the issue (Barlow and Awan,

2016), and contributed to the languid introduction of legislation in this area (Hardaker and

McGlashan, 2016), a finding demonstrated yet again by the absence of online abuse from

consideration in the latest legislation on domestic abuse in England and Wales. Legislation

as evidenced in the form of Acts of Parliament is important, as it provides key definitions of

offences that can then be operationalised by criminal justice agencies, whilst in the longer

term also changing social norms, and ultimately containing the potential to "transform

online subcultures of misogyny to those of equality" (Citron, 2009: 404). However, as Citron

(2009) confirms, the failure of legislative bodies, criminal justice agencies and social policy

institutions to take decisive action in this area sends a message to those engaged in acts of

online violence and abuse that such behaviour is trivial, and will not be investigated

robustly, whilst simultaneously signalling to women that their abuse will not be taken

seriously. In this way, online abuse both perpetuates the inadequate treatment of

gendered violence witnessed in the physical space and allows technology to act as an

amplifier for many forms of misogynistic abuse.

The responsibility for the inertia in tackling online abuse is shared between governments,

law enforcement agencies and private technology firms (Jane, 2016), and requires action at

three levels – the personal, the organisational, and at a societal or cultural level (Hodson et al., 2018). Hodson et al's (2018) framework is a useful mechanism for summarising the multiplicity of policy recommendations found in the literature, whilst also confirming that the failure to tackle online abuse has occurred at every level (Jane, 2017a).

3.7.1. Personal responses

It is impossible to make policy recommendations that can be universally enacted at a personal level. Nonetheless, given the finding that the vast majority of those receiving online abuse rarely involve law enforcement agencies at all (Jane, 2017b), the activity employed by women at an individual level deserves recognition. The individual strategies adopted by women include seeking informal advice and support from family members and friends (Hodson et al., 2018), or from a wider feminist 'sisterhood', created to directly challenge online abuse (Antunovic, 2019). However, whilst personally valuable, it appears that many women have chosen to respond to receiving online abuse in this way *because* of the paucity of the legislative, occupational, or criminal justice sector response (Jane, 2017b). The management of online abuse at a personal level, without officially recording or reporting it, results in the extent of online abuse being perpetually under recorded (Backe et al., 2018), and contributes to the often-hidden nature of the offence (Campbell, 2017), and its links with public shaming and victim blaming (Lewis et al., 2017).

3.7.2. Organisational and governmental responses

It is at an organisational level that the most action is required, from both the public and

private sectors. Ideally this would occur at a global level, through the development of an

international consensus on the action that should be taken (Dragiewicz et al., 2018).

Academic research designed to contribute to the development of such policies should be

undertaken in an interdisciplinary fashion, to optimise the various strands of scholarship

that are already in place (Backe et al., 2018).

The literature suggests that in many countries, the laws available to tackle online abuse

effectively are inadequate (Henry and Powell, 2015). However, as illustrated by the

situation in England and Wales, even where there is legislation in place that facilitates the

prosecution of online abuse (e.g. CPS, 2018), the number of prosecutions remains very low,

and abuse continues to grow (Salter, 2017). The literature in this area states that the

policing of online abuse needs to be improved. There needs to be greater collective

pressure applied to police forces to tackle the issue (Bliss, 2019), along with an improved

awareness from individual police officers of the scale and consequences of online abuse. A

fundamental part of this process is better training for police officers (Lewis et al., 2018),

whose lack of technical competence (Edström, 2016) and understanding of the

pervasiveness and operation of SNS has been suggested as a reason for the lack of action in

dealing with such criminal activity (Eckert, 2018). However, it is important to recognise that

if every case of online abuse was reported to the police, then the criminal justice system

would be completely overwhelmed (Barlow and Awan, 2016). This raises other policy and

resourcing dilemmas, particularly in the UK, where the social policy landscape has been

under-resourced for many years, as a result of the austerity agenda pursued by successive

Conservative governments (Brown and Silvestri, 2020; Lewis et al., 2018).

It is not just legislative and social policy institutions that need to develop better policy responses when tackling online abuse. The technology companies have a similar responsibility to enact robust and responsive reporting mechanisms (Barlow and Awan, 2016), as at present there is clear evidence that such provision is both patchy and sporadic. Given the huge advances made in CMC, and the large number of tasks that are now monitored and automated online, it seems unlikely that the reasons for a fragmentary response to online abuse are purely technical. Instead it is proposed that this is an issue of the prioritisation of resources (Meserve, 2014). Meserve (2014) is one of many commentators to ponder that with such technical experts in their employ, there must be more options to halt online abuse available to technology conglomerates than the existing 'report button'.

However, even when action is taken at a corporate level, the effects are not always noticeable. As Jane (2017a) has highlighted, when Facebook banned anonymous accounts, in an attempt to curb online abuse, it made very little difference. The amount of online abuse that was perpetrated via the platform did not reduce, and it appeared that those engaging in this damaging communication remained willing to do so, even when their identity was in full view. This suggests that the potential for identification did not serve as a deterrent, possibly because the likelihood of subsequent criminal sanction was scant. Furthermore, when SNS such as Twitter do act to remove and subsequently delete sexist, criminal, or defamatory posts, this can have the unintended consequence of destroying the very evidence needed for a criminal prosecution, placing the onus on individual women to capture and store their own abuse via screenshots if they wish to pursue the matter beyond the confines of the platform concerned (Burgess et al., 2017).

3.7.3. Societal and cultural change

This is arguably the most difficult level on which to initiate change, as it requires challenging ingrained attitudes, beliefs, and biases. However, if policy change were to be enacted at the first two levels, then this may hasten the necessary cultural shift. The type of change that is required at a societal level could be encouraged if a "woman defined understanding" (McGlynn et al., 2017: 38) were adopted to categorise the types of abuse that is defined as threatening and potentially violent (McGlynn et al., 2017). This would provide a much clearer understanding of both the nature and consequences of online abuse. Having more women leading technology companies (Carson, 2018) would also promote a cultural change moving forwards.

3.8. Summary

This chapter locates this study within social policy foundations, outlining the key legislative and policy changes (as applied to England and Wales) in the areas of online abuse, gender-based violence and misogyny. In doing so, a wide range of interdisciplinary literature has been surveyed, in order to explore current legislation, and to present the range of policy changes acting at different levels that have been proposed by scholars drawn from a range of disciplines, in order to make improvements in these key areas. These recommendations will be reviewed in later chapters, in light of the evidence gathered from the empirical research undertaken as an integral part of this study.

The next chapter in the thesis (Chapter Four) presents the methodology adopted for this study. This is followed by four chapters that present the empirical research undertaken to answer the research questions first outlined in Chapter One.

Chapter Four: Methodology

4.1.   Introduction

The interdisciplinary review of the literature contained in Chapter Two presents four key areas for consideration in this study: namely theories of gender-based violence, the development of social media and other forms of computer mediated communication, the issues facing women pursuing careers in the public sphere, and the underlying malign influence of misogyny on these three areas.

As outlined in the introduction to Chapter Two, each of these elements has an impact on the definition, understanding, perpetuation, and response to online abuse. The sheer breadth of this corpus, coupled with the complexity of researching online abuse (Jane, 2015) presents a number of methodological challenges that must be addressed in order to successfully undertake a robust study, capable of collecting the most appropriate data, whilst also doing so in a way that is sensitive to the trauma often caused by receiving (and recounting) episodes of online abuse (Martin and Murrell, 2020). Consequently, the method of data collection, the sample frame and the form of analysis were all key considerations when devising a research design. Most importantly, each of these dimensions had to be considered from an ethical as well as a methodological standpoint at every stage of the process.

The three research questions posed by the study have been formulated to fill key gaps in existing scholarship. Building on the discussion in the literature review presented at Chapter Two, these questions seek to extend the academic knowledge on online abuse in three key areas. These are the online experiences of women working across the public

sphere; the impact upon individuals working in these occupations, when they receive online abuse; and the decision mechanisms underpinning the reporting of abuse, whether to social media companies, employers, or the police.

Figure 4.1 presents the three research questions:

Research Question One	Research Question Two	Research Question Three
• How are women in public facing occupations targeted online?	• What effect does online abuse have on women's interactions with the digital world?	• What factors influence the reporting of abuse?
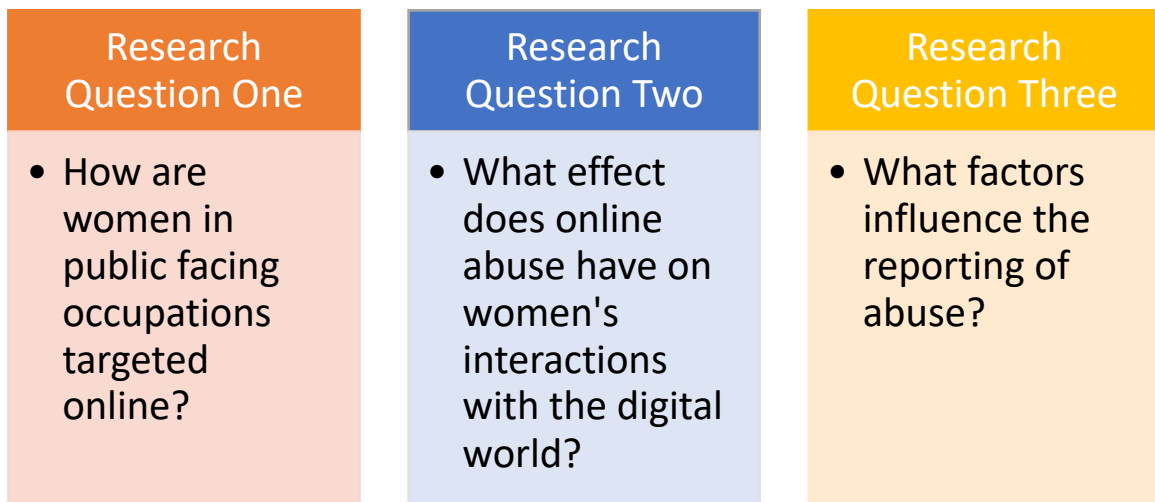
Figure 4.1: Research questions being answered in this study

This chapter will outline the methodology underpinning the study and discuss the different decisions that were taken in relation to the research design. It is divided into seven sections that merit consideration when undertaking research in this area.

4.1.1.   Structure of methodology chapter

Section 4.2 introduces the feminist research methodology underpinning this study and describes how this is demonstrated in the way that the research is articulated. Section 4.3 discusses the issue of researcher reflexivity, and why this is so important in a study of this nature. Section 4.4 discusses the rationale behind selecting a mixed methods framework,

before proceeding to detail the two empirical data collection mechanisms employed in the study. The first part of this describes the qualitative research that has been undertaken, providing information about the fifty semi-structured interviews undertaken during the fieldwork phase. The second part of this section discusses the analysis of real-time Twitter data that was carried out, providing information on how and why this data collection method was conducted. Section 4.5 presents the ethical issues that were considered and discusses how each of these has been addressed. Section 4.6 discusses the data analysis approach adopted in the study, detailing why reflexive thematic analysis was selected as the preferred analytical approach. The final part of the chapter, Section 4.7, describes what can happen when external factors disrupt the research plan, detailing the constraints imposed on the study caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Both the obstacles and the benefits of this situation are discussed.

4.2.   Feminist research methods

This study adopts an explicitly feminist stance, as first described in Chapter One. As Stanko (1990a) has emphasised, and as is illustrated in the literature review in Chapter Two, there are multiple theoretical strands of feminism. This finding equally applies to feminist research methods (Ackerly and True, 2010). The emergence of feminist methodologies can be linked to the second wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Roberts, 1981), with the differing perspectives focusing on various aspects and principles underlying the research process. All the approaches that fall under the umbrella of 'feminist research

methods' are constructed to challenge the "patriarchal paradigm" (Roberts, 1981: 14) that has traditionally typified academic research.

In this study, the adoption of a feminist research methodology is guided by the principles laid down by Rhode (1990: 619), that the research "promote equality between women and men"; make gender a focus of analysis; and describe the world in a way that reflects women's experiences (Westmarland and Bows, 2019). In addition, the study also draws upon the principles of phenomenological research methods (Aagaard, 2017), with a clear orientation to the importance of lived experience (Fendt et al., 2014). Intrinsic to this approach is Fendt et al.'s (2014) suggestion that findings of any research should be presented in a way that illustrates the connectedness and experiences of all participants (Fendt et al., 2014). By emphasising that participants' voices must remain paramount throughout the study, the commitment to a feminist methodology is operationalised in practice (Leavy and Harris, 2018) The designation of interviewees as equal participants in the research process (Ackerly and True, 2010) seeks to redress the traditional power imbalance that is symptomatic of much empirical research (Burgess-Procter, 2015).

The issue of participant voice is crucial. For, in contrast with the methodological imperative implicit in a feminist stance, namely that the women participating in the study are given a voice (Oakley, 1981); is the recognition that the objective of much online abuse is to silence women (Chemaly and Sussman, 2020). Indeed, numerous studies into violence against women have shown that "silence is a tool used by men to wield control" (Ahearne, 2020: 1). Therefore, central to the feminist methodology underpinning this study is an opportunity for women who have experienced online abuse to regain their autonomy through, and even to be empowered by, participating in this research (Westmarland and Bows, 2019).

Since its emergence some fifty years ago, much of the research adopting a feminist epistemology has used qualitative methods (Westmarland and Bows, 2019). This approach has been advocated (e.g. Campbell, 2002) as providing the best way to listen to and learn from the voices of women (Oakley, 1981). Given the selection of a mixed methods approach in this study, it is encouraging that the enduring dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative approaches (Bryman, 2016) may at last be coming to an end. For within the realms of feminist theory there has been a gradual move towards rapprochement between the two methods (Oakley, 1999), with advocates on both sides of the divide recognising the potential offered by the other. This study illustrates this, demonstrating that by combining the richness of data about women's lived experience (Brooks, 2007), gained from applying qualitative methods, with the evidence of strategic or systematic inequality that can be gathered from the scrutiny of large data sets more common in quantitative approaches (Bryman, 2016), it is possible to produce research that draws on the strengths of both perspectives. By adopting a mixed methods methodology, this study has devised a series of robust recommendations that can be adopted by policy makers (Westmarland and Bows, 2019), whilst also "distinguishing between personal experience and collective oppression" (Oakley, 1999: 251).

4.3.   Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a central tenet of a feminist research methodology (Hesse-Biber and Griffin, 2015), evidenced in the commitment to base all research on the lives and experiences of

women (Crasnow, 2015). For along with the objective of listening to women (Oakley, 1981) and establishing participants as co-producers of research (Westmarland and Bows, 2019), it is crucial that feminist researchers examine their own practice and reflect upon the work being undertaken (Ackerly and True, 2010) as an iterative process. As the study adopts an explicitly feminist perspective, it could be vulnerable to accusations of bias, from those who feel that the study must also include evidence from men; whilst also demanding a more neutral stance (e.g. Kerr and Lee, 2021). This first part of this section addresses these concerns, detailing the measures employed to identify and avoid bias.

The analysis of the online abuse of women frequently raises issues that are emotionally distressing, both for participants and the researcher alike. The second part of this section therefore explores the support measures put in place for participants, and the coping strategies employed by the researcher to mitigate the potential for harm arising from undertaking this study.

Traditional notions of bias, where there was an expectation that all researcher subjectivity be excluded from the final work in its entirety (Braun and Clark, 2013), has been challenged as being both unrealistic in the digital age, with assertions that 'big data' is value neutral (Leurs, 2017), and incompatible with feminist research methods (Westmarland and Bows, 2019). It was obvious from the outset that a 'neutral' position in relation to the issue of online abuse would be impossible to maintain throughout this study, due to the researcher's own experiences of online abuse (arising from conventional engagement in discussions on current affairs on Twitter), coupled with holding a feminist viewpoint, and feeling empathy towards the distressing situations recounted by participants. Counsel has been taken from Hammond and Kingston (2014: 332), who advise that "research is not

undertaken in a vacuum, and researchers cannot claim to be neutral, detached or objective from the social world we study: our thoughts, feelings, experiences and behaviours are influenced by wider society and our own individual biographies, which can affect research findings."

Instead, a position of "deep reflexivity" (Greene, 2013: 143) has been attempted, with open communication with participants paramount, and all interactions assessed both during and after the interview process. The 'insider/outsider' role discussed in Section 4.5.1.1. (below) was an integral part of this reflection, and an awareness of the complexity of this role was part of the reflexivity process. Underpinning this process was a realisation that acknowledging personal motives and beliefs is crucial in qualitative research (Letherby, 2014).

Vera-Gray (2017) suggests that for those researching the issue of online abuse, the emotional labour invested in such investigations is doubled, as "not only is there work to be done in managing the research subject (and our own position in relation to it), but we have to conduct both work to manage our responses to our own experiences and histories of men's violence, as well as safety work, that is the work of managing one's own safety in relation to men's practices" (Vera-Gray, 2017: 73).

This was undoubtedly the case when managing the emotional risks (Westmarland and Bows, 2019) of a prolonged period of data collection. Whilst emotion in research is important (Javaid, 2019); and personal involvement with participants pivotal (Oakley, 1981) when sharing experiences of online abuse with a wider audience, it requires both resilience (Westmarland and Bows, 2019) and the creation of practical measures to navigate the impact of listening to multiple instances of sexual and / or violent threats (Rager, 2005). This became particularly important during the period of the first Coronavirus lockdown in spring

of 2020, when online interviews were taking place in the researcher's home, often with children present, albeit in a separate room.   Examples of the practical measures taken to protect the researcher included the opportunity to 'debrief' with doctoral supervisors (Rager, 2005), spacing interviews out, so that no more than two interviews were held in any one day (Gregory et al., 2020), and workload management to ensure that data collection was interspersed with other necessary administrative tasks or training activity. These 'self-care' (Rager, 2005) measures were particularly important during the Covid-19 lockdown, when a lack of professional boundaries and less of an opportunity to discuss feelings about interviews with colleagues (Gregory et al., 2020) made research in this area all the harder. Adopting this supported course of action did go some way to ameliorate the emotional impact of data collection, although the words of Behar (1996: 161), which provide a reminder of the value of "doing research that breaks your heart" remained prescient throughout.

4.4.   Data Collection

4.4.1. Selection of a mixed methods framework for data collection

Two data collection mechanisms are utilised in this study, demonstrating its mixed methods approach. Mixed methods approaches to conducting social science research have become very popular over the past fifteen years (Timans et al., 2019), with many studies now describing their research as adopting a mixed methodology (Landrum and Garza, 2015). Whilst there is some scepticism regarding whether mixed methods research is either

appropriate for the number of studies it is applied to, or truly is a mix of methods (e.g. Creswell, 2011; Yin, 2006), there is nevertheless a particular benefit to feminist researchers in adopting this methodological approach, as it provides evidence to support the causal claims arising from both literature and empirical data (Crasnow, 2015). In this study, adding Twitter data to the more traditional forms of evidence gathered from literature and interviews provides an additional insight into the scale and nature of online abuse that cannot easily be demonstrated using other means. Employing a mixed methods framework in this instance therefore provides a new way of addressing complex research questions (Crasnow, 2015) and important social problems.

The interdisciplinary nature of this study, first highlighted in the literature review in Chapter Two, similarly lends itself to a mixed methods approach. Hesse-Biber (2015: xxxiv) has described how mixed methods approaches play a pivotal role in the 'de-disciplining' of research, explaining that:

> *The fields of multimethod and mixed methods research (MMMR) hold a prominent place in the de-disciplining process given their potential to provide the flexibility to tackle complex analytical and interpretative issues that arise when bringing diverse ways of thinking and different types of data to bear in seeking answers to multifaceted questions*

The suitability of the mixed method framework is further confirmed when applied to research involving social media, such as this. For as Snelson (2016) explains, there has been a significant growth in the number of research studies involving the interrogation of social media data in recent years, many of which have adopted a mixed methodology. The reasons for doing so can vary. "Studies [may be] designed to investigate people and their perceptions or use of social media, themes in social media content, or a combination of both" (Snelson, 2016: 12).

The mix of methods employed in this study fits well into Snelson's (2016: 12) diagram of exploratory sequential strands in social media studies, presented at Figure 4.2, and confirms this as a suitable methodological framework to adopt.

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┌─────────────────┐                          ┌─────────────────┐
│  Qualitative    │                          │  Quantitative   │
│    strand       │                          │    strand       │
│  ┌───────────┐  │   Analysis of            │  ┌───────────┐  │        Final analysis
│  │ Data from │  │   qualitative    ──────▶ │  │ Data from │  │   >      and
│  │  people   │  │   data                   │  │  content  │  │        interpretation
│  │(Interviews)│ │                          │  │ (Tweets)  │  │
│  └───────────┘  │                          │  └───────────┘  │
└─────────────────┘                          └─────────────────┘
```
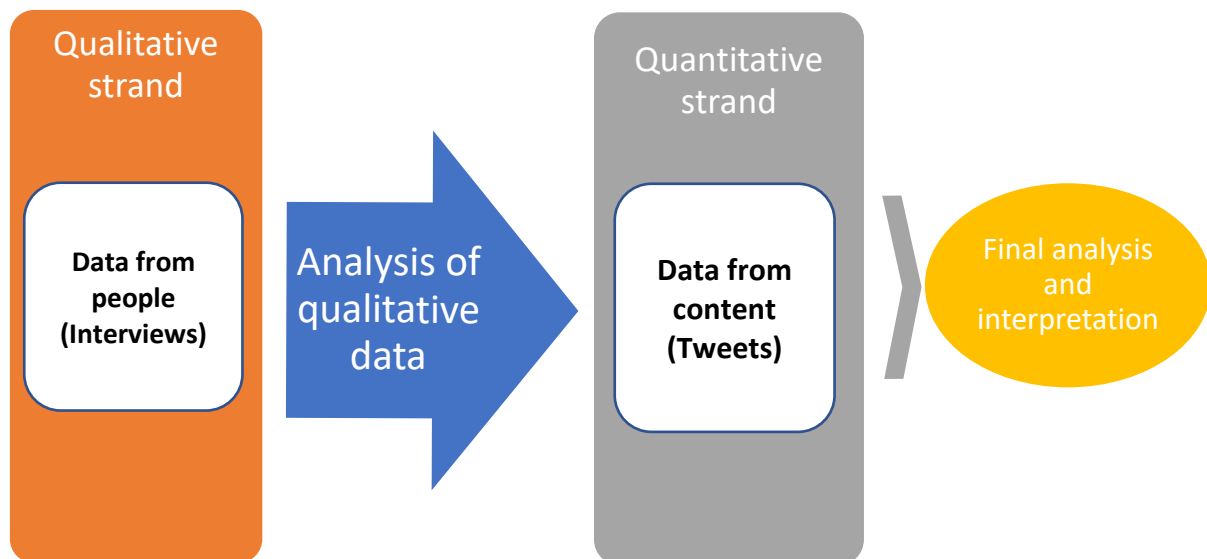
Figure 4.2: Exploratory sequential strands in social media studies (Adapted from Snelson, 2016: 12)

4.4.2. Semi-structured interviews as a means of data collection

The first means of gathering data took the form of semi-structured interviews undertaken with women serving in four public facing occupations – academia, journalism, policing, and politics.

Semi structured interviews are a traditional method of data collection that offer an effective way of gathering a substantial amount of qualitative data from a diverse population (Braun

and Clarke, 2013). Hesse-Biber (2007: 114) describes semi structured interviews as a research method that "is conducted with a specific interview guide— a list of written questions… [that must be covered] in the interview". The advantage of semi structured interviews over more rigid questionnaire-based surveys is the ability to ask questions and probe for new information as the conversation develops, and as such it is a more natural form of conversational communication, involving interviewees in the creation of knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2007). The use of interviews also fits well within the study's feminist epistemology, as it enables the collection of both a wide range of personal narratives about women's lives (Oakley, 1999), and a multiplicity of different views (Brooks, 2007). When taken together, this provides access to experiences that may traditionally go unrecorded (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

In order to operationalise research into the perpetuation and response to online abuse in public facing occupations, the experiences of women working within four occupational groups frequently targeted for online abuse were investigated, namely academia, journalism, policing, and politics. These four occupational groups were selected because there is occupation-specific evidence highlighting the prevalence of misogynistic abuse directed at women employed in these sectors (policing: Salin and Hoel, 2013; politics: Krook, 2017; journalism: Marshak, 2017; academia: Beard, 2017), reflecting the discrimination and harassment that women have traditionally encountered offline (Carver and Chambers, 2011).

However, despite the value of these individual investigations, there remains an absence of prior research examining the experiences of women employed across the public sphere, as one comprehensive account. This is one of the gaps that this study seeks to fill.

The decision to focus the study solely on the online experiences of women, and not include evidence from men is worthy of further explanation. Whilst there have been a number of studies focusing on the online experiences of both men and women in public facing occupations (e.g. Ward and McLoughlin, 2020; Binns, 2017), there is a robust rationale for excluding men from this research. Firstly, there is the finding that women's online experiences are overwhelmingly underpinned by misogyny, violence and threat (Poland, 2016), which is reinforced by a consistent underestimation of the scale of gender-based violence (both physical and virtual) from the (male) academy (Ahmed and Madrid-Morales, 2021; Walby et al., 2014). Secondly, as is illustrated in both the thematic literature review in Chapter Two, and the empirical contributions gathered from participants in the fieldwork phase, there is a clear link between online abuse, gender-based violence (Salter, 2017), and the misogynistic aim to silence women's contributions in the public sphere (Mantilla, 2015). Whilst men in politics (Bardall, 2011), journalism (particularly sports journalism) (Binns, 2017) and academia (Veletsianos, 2016)[3] also experience threats of violence, they do not do so *because* they are men. Therefore, the gendered characteristics of the online abuse received by women in the four occupations selected for closer analysis means that to include men in this sample would risk creating a "false symmetry between men's and women's experiences" (Krook, 2020: 107). Furthermore, insisting on a gendered comparison of male and female experiences risks drawing potentially misleading conclusions, whilst also ignoring the very real risks navigated by women on a daily basis (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017).

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[3] The review of the literature has failed to find any published work specifically comparing the online abuse of male and female police officers.

When developing the research sample, the impact of intersectionality was given particular

consideration, in recognition that women are often members of numerous demographic

groupings, and that these multiple identities frequently intersect, creating myriad levels of

discrimination and/or deprivation (Beckman, 2014). Measures taken to capture the issues

encountered online by women with intersectional identities included targeting women from

Black and minority ethnic backgrounds for recruitment to the sample, along with younger

women and women identifying themselves as being members of the LGBTQ community.

These three groups were chosen in recognition of the evidence that in the specific area of

online abuse (Law Commission, 2018), it is younger women (aged 18 to 29) who are most

likely to be the target of online abuse (Lenhart et al., 2016), along with women of colour

(Evolvi, 2019; Krook, 2017) and lesbians (Gardiner et al., 2016). This focus was somewhat

successful in engaging women from these groups to the research sample, largely due to the

use of snowball sampling. However, despite these efforts, this study continues to reflect the

fact that the advancements made by women in public facing occupations (who have fought

hard over many years to challenge traditional male hierarchies), have been made

overwhelmingly by white, middle-class women, who remain over-represented within the

occupations of academia, journalism, policing, and politics. (Lamprinakou, et al., 2016;

Mackay, 2004). With this in mind and given the researcher's own identity as a white

woman, the ability to recognise and achieve true intersectionality within this study remains

problematic (Crenshaw, 1991). For despite the various attempts that were made to address

this bias in the sample, there is no doubt that, in the words of Westmarland and Bows

(2019: 15), "we can, and must, do better".

4.4.2.1. Recruitment of participants for interview

Participant recruitment to the semi-structured interviews followed both a traditional and a contemporary approach. The researcher's previous occupational links with a major UK political party were used to identify possible interviewees from within the political sphere, who were then approached by email. Such a technique is not uncommon amongst qualitative researchers, where using existing contacts can make access easier (Silverman, 2010).

 The social networking site, Twitter, was also utilised as a recruitment mechanism. Whilst a relatively new method of enlisting research participants (Mannix et al., 2014), the use of this means of recruitment has increased rapidly (Hokke et al., 2019), with a growing recognition that the "integration of social media into daily life…makes it disconcertingly easy" (King et al., 2014: 246), as well as a cost-effective (O'Connor et al., 2014) way for social science researchers to contact possible participants.

Furthermore, in studies where the focus for investigation is computer-mediated communication, such as this, online platforms often prove to be participants' preferred method of contact (Hokke et al., 2019).

The first stage of Twitter recruitment consisted of 'following' women in the four chosen occupations who are also frequent users of Twitter; before then tweeting them with a (very) short summary of the project, as shown in the Twitter screenshot at Figure 4.3.
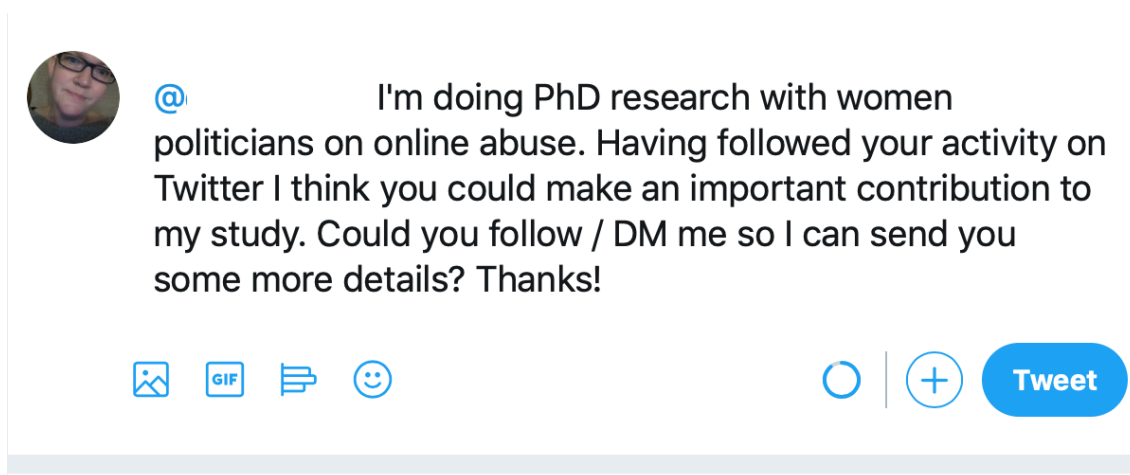
Figure 4.3: Example tweet sent to potential research participants

In sending such tweets, there was an acknowledgement that there was a degree of risk

associated with using the researcher's personal Twitter feed as the recruitment mechanism

(Hokke et al., 2019). The contested area of online abuse, and the potentially inflammatory

topics and potentially dangerous individuals engaging in it, means that there was a

consistent possibility that the study could become the target of stranger intrusion and

abuse, as faced by others undertaking online feminist research (e.g. Vera-Gray, 2017).

Guidance was drawn from the methods literature (e.g. Hokke et al., 2019; Sloan et al.,

2019), and a number of measures were employed to mitigate this risk. These procedures

included ensuring that no personal information was available on the Twitter feed, and that

mechanisms were in place to record and report abuse, should the need arise.

The initial contact made by Twitter was then followed up by direct message (DM) or email, if

an individual expressed an interest in knowing more about the study. If, after ten days, a

reply had not been received, it was assumed that the individual did not wish to participate,

and no further contact was made.

Once participants had been recruited, snowball sampling was employed to recruit further interviewees (Sturgis, 2016). This proved a highly successful strategy, and it illustrates the informal support and networking mechanisms that women in public facing occupations frequently create and maintain.

Whilst, as Silverman (2010) notes, such decisions are not uncommon amongst qualitative researchers, where using existing contacts can make access easier, there is a potential for introducing bias into the sample by using such techniques (Robinson and Seale, 2018). It is also important to be aware of the use and consequence of 'insider status' when drawing upon personal and professional contacts to recruit research participants. This phenomenon describes how similarities in occupation or demographic group can be used to create a rapport between the interviewer and interviewee. Whilst insider status may help to ameliorate traditional power imbalances between researcher and participant, and make certain findings easier to identify; conversely, being an outsider may lead to more detailed questioning and a lack of bias (Hesse-Biber, 2007). In reality, it is likely that researchers move between the roles of insider and outsider throughout the interview process (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

In order to achieve geographical parity, interviews took place with women working in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and in both urban and rural areas. In addition, nine interviews were undertaken with academics and journalists working in mainland Europe, and in the USA, to investigate whether women's experiences were significantly different in other countries.

Political participants were drawn from across the spectrum, and included representatives from the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National

Party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in Northern Ireland, the Green Party and the Women's Equality Party.

Crucially, the political allegiance of women employed in academia, journalism and policing was neither identified nor discussed, given the predominantly apolitical nature of their roles.

Table 4.1 provides the pseudonyms and occupation of each interview participant. These pseudonyms were drawn from a list of women who have lost their lives to male violence during 2021, compiled by Karen Ingala Smith for the Counting Dead Women Project (Ingala Smith, 2021). The rationale for using these names is to pay tribute to these women, albeit a very small one.

These names were selected in date order of the day that the women were murdered (with duplicate names removed), and therefore no inference to ethnicity, age, or class should be attached to any pseudonym that appears in this thesis.

Pseudonym applied	Occupational sector
Eileen	Academia
Sue	Academia
Carol	Academia
Jacqueline	Academia
Mary	Academia
Tiprat	Academia
Christie	Academia
Souad	Academia
Ann	Academia
Rose	Academia
Ranjit	Academia
Helen	Academia
Emma	Academia
Nicole	Academia

Linda	Journalism
Sophie	Journalism
Michelle	Journalism
Judith	Journalism
Anna	Policing
Samantha	Policing
Sarah	Policing
Geetika	Policing
Imogen	Policing
Karen	Policing
Stacey	Policing
Smita	Politics
Patricia	Politics
Phyllis	Politics
Klaudia	Politics
Simone	Politics
Sherrie	Politics
Constanta	Politics
Loretta	Politics
Sally	Politics
Peggy	Politics
Charmaine	Politics
Kerry	Politics
Julia	Politics
Beth	Politics
Maya	Politics
Maria	Politics
Agnes	Politics
Wendy	Politics
Caroline	Politics
Svetlana	Politics
Nicola	Politics
Agita	Politics
Lauren	Politics
Jill	Politics
Esther	Politics

Table 4.1: Pseudonym and occupation of each interview participant

Tables 4.2 and 4.3 provide additional information about research participants, detailing the occupation and geographical location of every woman interviewed. An important point needs to be made about the participants from the USA. It became obvious when speaking with these women that the occupational boundaries between journalist, academic and writer are far more fluid in the US, and therefore that it was common to find a woman fulfilling the role of any (or all) of these occupations at any particular time. This is an interesting observation, as it meant that their experiences were multivarious and provided a rich insight. It does, however, mean that it is difficult to apply the same discrete occupational categories as their UK and European counterparts. For the sake of consistency, the individuals to whom this applies are listed in Tables 4.2 and 4.3 by the occupation identified when the first contact was made. Within the main body of the text, the quotes attributed to these women reflect the duality of their chosen roles.

Occupational sector	Role held in the sector	Number of interview participants
Academia		14
Journalism		4
Policing		7
Politics:		26
	MP	7
	Local councillor	3
	Former MP	6
	Peer	2

	MLA/MSP[4]	5
	Party staffer	2
	Other office holder[5]	1

Table 4.2: Numbers of interview participants by occupational sector

Occupational sector	Geographical location	Number of interview participants
Academia	UK	7
	US	5
	EU	2
Journalism	UK	2
	US	2
Policing	England and Wales	7
Politics	England	17
	Wales	3
	Scotland	5
	Northern Ireland	1

Table 4.3: Geographical location of interview participants

Each woman was interviewed once. The duration of each interview varied, depending on the flow of conversation (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002), as well as competing demands on schedules. Most interviews lasted some 45 minutes. The longest (with a former MP) lasted 90 minutes, and the shortest (with a journalist) lasted 25 minutes.

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[4] MLA – Member of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly; MSP – Member of the Scottish Parliament
[5] Mayoral Candidate

When the data collection phase was being planned, a presumption was made that most interviews would take place in person, face-to-face. In reality, and as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent (first) lockdown, which coincided with the data collection interval, only four of the interviews took place in this way, with the rest having to be rearranged to be undertaken via telephone, Zoom or Skype. This is illustrated in Figure 4.4.

Interview medium
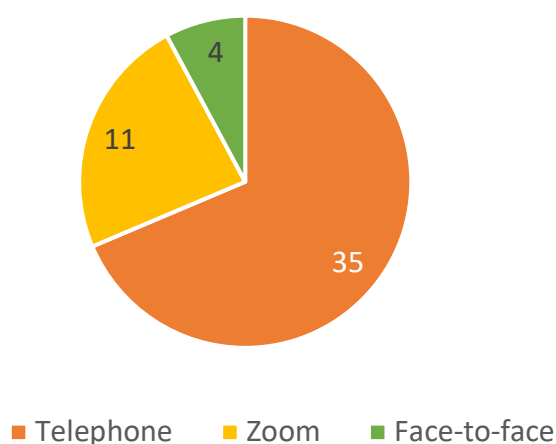
Figure 4.4: Mechanism employed for conducting semi-structured interviews

The implications of this change in methodology are discussed in detail in Section 4.7.

The topic guide (at Appendix 5) was written in such a way as to ensure that the interviews followed the tenets of feminist interview practice, taking an "empathic stance" (Renzetti, 2013: 11), and attempting to view the situation from the participants' perspective. This approach uses flexible conversation in order to overcome the traditional power imbalance between interviewer and interviewee, which is particularly common when the researcher is

male and the participant female (Robson and McCartan, 2016); and also enables a process of co-production between researcher and participant in the study, a central feature of feminist methodology (Ackerly and True, 2010). Whilst the interviews are obviously designed to best generate answers to the research questions, there is also a desire to adopt an inductive approach (Lapadat, 2012), allowing the research to be guided by the topics that may arise during the interview process, and overcoming any prior expectations that the researcher may have (Ackerly and True, 2010).

Interviews were digitally recorded (with consent) using a laptop computer, with a back-up recording taken on a mobile phone in case of equipment failure (Bryman, 2016). Recordings were professionally transcribed, to overcome limitations arising from the researcher's disability, recognising that whilst using a professional transcription service proved the only way to overcome such constraints, the inevitable errors in transcription that result from having a third party extrapolate the data in this way took some time to correct. Furthermore, handing over the transcription task to someone else lost an opportunity to get closer to the data and identify initial themes (Bryman, 2016). The measures taken to mitigate for this distancing from the data are discussed in Section 4.6.

All data, both written and audio, has been stored in accordance with the University of York's data management policy.

4.4.3. Data collection using a Twitter application programming interface (API)

The second mechanism employed for gathering data involved the collection and analysis of real-time Twitter data sent to women in the four occupational groups, identifying the

existence, content and implications of three 'Twitter storms' experienced by a Member of

Parliament[6,] an academic, and a journalist.

A Twitter storm is described as "a sudden spike in activity surrounding a certain topic on the

Twitter social media site" (Technopedia, 2013: 1).   As Morello (2015) has highlighted, such

storms often arise from nowhere, and can have protracted consequences, being swiftly

disseminated across the social media platform as a result of multiple tweets and retweets

(Vasterman, 2018; Pfeffer et al., 2014). By focusing on these storms of communication, it

was possible to illustrate the scale and ferocity of the tweets that are frequently sent to

high-profile figures as a result of their engagement in public discourse. Becoming immersed

in the prodigious amount of abusive content contained over a six-month period enabled a

greater understanding to be gained of the reality of communicating online as a high-profile

woman, which is subsequently captured within this analysis. This immersion in the data

allowed an empathetic sense of the reality of online abuse to be gained. This in turn

enabled a greater understanding of the situation faced by participants, which aided the

interview phase of data collection.

API research is "a type of investigation based on the information collected by social media

platforms and made available through standardized commands to query, filter, format and

download such information" (Venturini and Rogers, 2019: 533). The use of API research has

increased significantly over the past decade (Riffe et al., 2014), as it offers social scientists

the opportunity to access previously unimaginable amounts of empirical data on any given

topic (Majó-Vázquez et al., 2021; Sloan et al., 2019); although there is a growing recognition

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[6] Whilst a Member of Parliament at the time of the data collection, Tracy Brabin resigned as the MP for Batley and Spen in May 2021, upon being elected as Mayor of West Yorkshire.

that the use of such data brings with it a number of ethical challenges (e.g. Sloan et al.,

2019; Venturini and Rogers, 2019; Hokke et al., 2019).

By employing an API to collect a large amount of data (Golder and Macy, 2015), it is possible

to gain an empirical understanding of the volume and nature of online abuse. The growing

use of this research method emphasises how social networking sites (SNS) have engendered

a new form of social interaction, which merits new forms of analysis (Puschmann, 2019;

Robson and McCartan, 2016). Much of the social science research conducted using an API is

quantitative in nature, focusing on analysing and illustrating the extent of the volume of

tweets on a given issue (e.g. Gorrell et al., 2020; Micalizzi, 2021). Whilst acknowledging the

contribution made by such an analytical approach, this study places a greater emphasis on

the qualitative examination of the textual content of tweets sent during three separate

storms of activity that occurred during a specific time period, recognising the benefit to be

gained from an in-depth analysis of the rich data that such activity contains (Humprecht et

al., 2020).

The program designed to use the Twitter API was written specifically for this study. The

software was employed to collect the tweets that named any of the women contained

within a sample frame of 200 individuals who had a) an active online presence and b) who

belonged to any of the four occupational groups being investigated in the study. Data was

collected between 1 January 2020 and 30 June 2020.

The API made available by Twitter for public use provides detailed information about any

given tweet, some of which (such as the identity and location of the sender), is deemed to

be prohibited information by the university, on ethical grounds.

With technical assistance, software was designed to collect the data from the API in real time, before then displaying it in a form that was both practicable and which fulfilled the criteria outlined by the university's policy on the use of social media data for research.

The program that was employed removed prohibited information from each tweet (such as geographical location), whilst simultaneously replacing the sender's Twitter handle with an anonymous code. This ensured complete anonymity for the sender of every tweet. This anonymous code remained the same throughout, so it was possible to track the activity of a particular user, without ever being aware of their identity.

For the purposes of the research, it was necessary to ensure that the program only anonymised the name of the sender of the tweet, and not the woman being contacted. As all the women in the sample frame are public figures with verified accounts, independently deemed by Twitter to be an individual judged to be "of sufficient public interest in diverse fields, such as journalism [or] politics" (Paul et al., 2018: 1); this was regarded as acceptable by the DEC and abides by university policy in this area. Such individuals are identified with a 'blue tick', as illustrated in Figure 4.5.

Figure 4.5: Example of a Twitter profile with 'blue tick' verification

None of the women identified in the three case studies using Twitter API data were interviewed, as to do so would have compromised the guarantees of anonymity provided to interview participants.

The tweets that are analysed and presented in Chapter Five have had any identifying data removed, as illustrated in Figure 4.6.

THEME:	EXAMPLE:
Threat	It would rule if you died
Emotional harm	Making such a storm in a teacup, I can't help but think that you're a fake
Harrassment	You're parliament porn
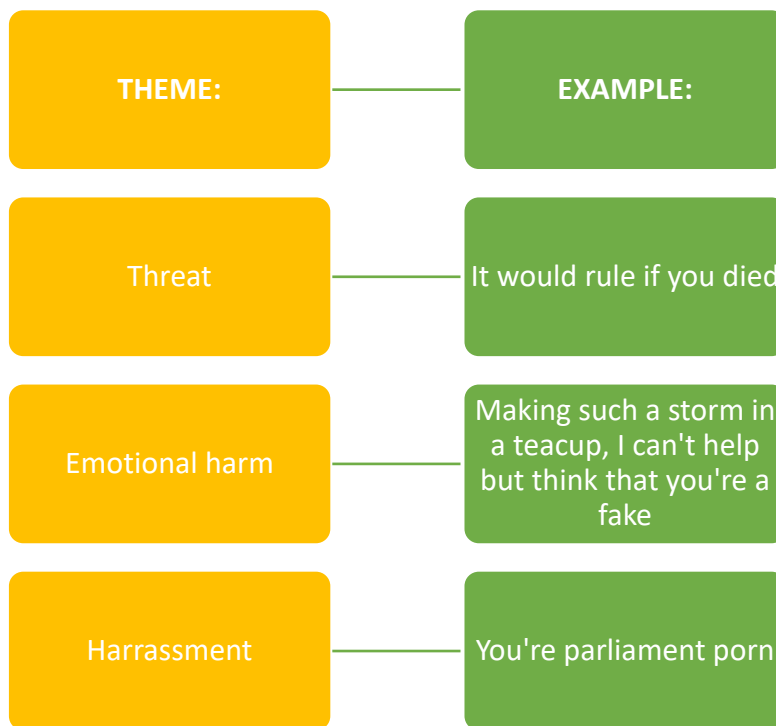
Figure 4.6: Illustration of the use of anonymised tweets

This process follows best practice in the ethical use of social media data, as laid down by the British Psychological Society (2017) and Association of Internet Researchers (Markham, 2012). It further protects the privacy of Twitter users and ensures that there is minimal potential of them coming to harm, if "comments made in the heat of the moment… that

may otherwise have been 'lost in the crowd'" (University of Sheffield, 2018: 5) become the focus of academic study.

As further demonstrated in Figure 4.5, the tweets included in Chapter Five are used to illustrate overarching themes in the data, not to identify their sender or to cause additional distress.

When combined, the removal of location information and the senders' identity provides a sophisticated ethical process that ensures current guidelines in this area are met.

The software designed to interrogate the Twitter API also automatically tagged the tweets sent to the sample frame that contained obscene or unpleasant terminology, as defined by Ofcom (2016). In September 2016, Ofcom published the results of a detailed survey undertaken by Ipsos Mori, which was commissioned to "establish a contemporary barometer of offensive terms in terms of acceptability" (Ofcom, 2016: 12), by interviewing 248 participants from across the UK, and asking them to decide upon the obscenity or otherwise of 144 potentially offensive words and six gestures.

These terms were used as the basis of deciding whether a tweet was likely to be viewed as obscene or offensive by those on the receiving end, although as is acknowledged by Ofcom (2016), the context in which a word or phrase is used is crucial when judging its acceptability. Such a judgement can only be made by human intervention, and therefore the categorisation of tweets containing any of these terms purely acted as an indicator of where further analysis would be beneficial.

The full list of the words compiled by Ofcom (2016) is provided in Table 4.4

General	Race and identity	Body parts	Sexual orientation / gender identity	Mental / physical condition	Religious insults	Hand gestures	Sexual references	Older people
Bastard	Chinky	Arse	Batty boy	Cretin	Fenian	Blow job	Bonk	Coffin dodger
Bellend	Choc ice	Arsehole	Bender	Cripple	God	Iberian slap	Bukkake	FOP (Fucking old person)
Bint	Coloured	Balls	Bum boy	Div	Goddamn	Middle finger	Cocksucker	Old bag
Bitch	Coon	Beaver	Bumclat	Looney	Jesus Christ	Two fingers with tongue	Dildo	
Bloody	Darky	Beef curtains	Chi-chi man	Mental	Kafir	Two fingers	Ho	
Bugger	Dago	Bloodclaat	Chick with a dick	Midget	Kike	Wanker	Jizz	
Bullshit	Gippo	Bollocks	Dyke	Mong	Papist		Nonce	
Cow	Golliwog	Clunge	Faggot	Nutter	Prod		Prickteaser	
Crap	Gook	Cock	Fairy	Psycho	Taig		Rapey	
Damn	Honky	Cunt	Fudge packer	Retard	Yid		Shag	
Dickhead	Hun	Dick	Gay	Schizo			Skank	
Feck / effing	Jap	Fanny	Gender bender	Spastic /spaz			Slag	
Fuck	Jock	Flange	He-she	Special			Slapper	
Ginger	Kraut	Flaps	Homo	Vegetable			Slut	
Git	Nazi	Gash	Lezza / lesbo	Window licker			Tart	
Minger	Negro	Knob	Muff diver				Wanker	
Motherfucker	Nigger	Minge	Nancy				Whore	
Munter	Nig-nog	Prick	Pansy					
Pissed	Paki	Punani	Poof					
Pissed off	Pikey	Pussy	Queer					
Shit	Polack	Snatch	Rug / carpet muncher					
Sod off	Raghead	Tits	Shift lifter					
Son of a bitch	Sambo		Tranny					
Twat	Slope							
	Spade / Spic							
	Taff							
	Wog / Wop							

Table 4.4: Full list of words and gestures included in the Ofcom research (2016: 15)

The .txt output file produced by the software tagged the presence of any of these terms in any of the tweets, which further enabled the identification of the three Twitter storms discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

Before embarking on this manner of data collection, considerable thought was given to the fact that the detailed exploration of online abuse contained in the three cases selected for qualitative analysis could raise ethical implications for the three women being studied. However, as each of the three storms had prompted a robust response from the women themselves whilst it was taking place (as illustrated in the response to the first storm, shown in Figure 4.7) and had also been subject to media coverage at the time, the decision was taken that the risk of additional harm being caused as a consequence of this study was negligible.

Figure 4.7: Politician's response to online abuse received on Twitter

The program developed for this data collection process and discussed here is posted on GitHub, a major open-source software platform. It is currently listed as a private file with limited access, but will be made publicly available, along with detailed instructions regarding

the use of the API data by the software, following publication of this thesis. This will enable

other researchers to conduct similar analysis in the future, should they wish to do so.

During the six months that API data was being harvested, over 25 million tweets were

collected, creating files amounting to some 2GB in size. The data was then output as text

files and analysed using the NVivo data analysis tool. Further information about this process

is provided in Section 4.6, and the results are presented in Chapter Five.

4.5.   Ethics

The commitment to a feminist methodology, which was outlined at the opening of this

chapter has within it a clear ethical commitment to ensuring the safety, wellbeing,

autonomy and respect of each participant. Such a commitment draws upon the work of

Downes et al. (2014), and in particular the value of co-production of research, and its role in

empowering participants. The rules and procedures governing empirical research should, if

implemented appropriately, ensure that the safety and wellbeing of individuals is protected

before, during and after their participation in research (Orb et al., 2001). Such systems are

vital in ensuring that the ethical violations of the past are not repeated (Orb et al., 2001),

and are now mandatory across research and educational institutions when undertaking

research with human subjects (Kent et al., 2002). Whilst some have suggested that

university ethics committees can be rather rigid in their procedural approach to ethical

commitments, a situation that is often exacerbated when Departmental Ethics Committees

(DECs) are unfamiliar with the nuances of social media research (Hibbin et al., 2018), The

University of York has a clear policy on the importance of abiding by ethical standards in

research. The latest version of this policy, entitled the code of practice and principles for

good ethical governance, published in 2017 states that:

> *Ethics is usually defined in relation to standards of conduct or as a set of moral*
> *principles or moral judgments (between right and wrong). Research is not a purely*
> *technical or instrumental activity - it should be a reflective activity with moral*
> *underpinnings. We all need prompts to ensure that we keep learning. Ethics helps us*
> *through the cycle of doing, reflecting, doing better next time…put another way, how*
> *we research (process) matters as much as what we produce (outputs).* (University of
> York (2017:1)

It was this policy that was followed when securing ethical clearance for this study.

4.5.1. Obtaining ethical approval for the research

An application for ethical approval for this research was initially made in June 2019. The

Social Policy and Social Work Departmental Ethics Committee (DEC) subjected the

application to detailed scrutiny, highlighting the potential for problems around the areas of

online documentation, support to vulnerable participants, and the appropriate organisation

of fieldwork when faced with balancing the competing demands of constraints on

participants' time and finite research resources. The guidance provided by the DEC that

accompanied this process ensured that the application was successful once revised and

resubmitted in August 2019, with ethical approval granted in September 2019. A copy of the

successful ethics application, along with the approval document, can be found at

Appendices One and Two.

The university's various policies around the ethical conduct of research were regularly

reviewed to ensure that the project continued to fit within the ethical parameters set by the

DEC as the research evolved over time. In July 2020, between the period of ethical

clearance being granted, and the fieldwork being completed; the University of York adopted

a new policy regarding the use of social media data in research (2020).   Upon publication,

the policy was scrutinised to ascertain if it necessitated any changes to the use of the

Twitter API to collect live data. The new policy confirmed the view of the DEC committee

that this mechanism for data collection was ethically appropriate.

4.5.2.   Protecting research participants from harm

4.5.2.1.   Securing informed consent

As is mandatory practice when undertaking empirical research, a detailed consent form was

provided to each participant in advance of the interview, to ensure that informed consent

was secured before any data was collected. In keeping with the online nature of the topic,

an online consent form was used, with all participants being sent a link beforehand to the

information sheet and detailed consent form. Automating the consent procedure made it

easier to monitor the process, ensuring that authority for participation was properly

supplied, and avoided the loss of paper forms. This became particularly important during

the first period of Covid-19 lockdown (between March and June 2020), which coincided with

the interview schedule, as many participants were working from home, and often found

themselves without access to the administrative framework that typifies office-based

working. A copy of the information sheet and detailed consent form are provided at Appendix Three and Four.

The process for participants to confirm their consent using the online form followed the protocol laid down by both the British Psychological Society (2017) and Kraut et al. (2004). This protocol specifies that the "use of radio buttons or check boxes can… be an effective strategy for allowing participants to indicate that they have read and understood key aspects of the consent information" (BPS, 2017: 9), and that it is acceptable to "allow a procedure in which subjects click a button on an online form to indicate they have read and understood the consent form" (Kraut et al., 2004: 113).

Once the consent form had been completed, a copy was automatically emailed to both the participant and to the researcher. Having sought advice from the university's IT services department, the online consent form was produced as a 'Google form'. This form was then stored (along with all other electronic data generated by the study) in a separate folder on the researcher's personal Google drive on the university's network, with the security and other settings integral to the form covered by the service level agreement negotiated by the university with Google UK.

4.5.2.2. *Preserving anonymity*

A number of guarantees regarding anonymity were made in relation to the study.

Firstly, the names of any alleged abusers provided during interviews have been redacted from the thesis, in order to protect both parties. This is an important measure in protecting

interviewees from any potential harm, as a result of repercussions that could be taken by an abuser.

Given the nature of the topic, several participants discussed the impact of both past and ongoing criminal cases adjudicating upon the abuse they had encountered. Where this occurred, these discussions have been kept confidential, and are not included in the thesis (Denscombe, 1998).

4.5.2.3. Other protective measures employed

As this research involved women talking about their experiences of abuse, there was a risk of further distress being caused when interviewees were asked to recount examples of online harm. It was therefore made clear in the information sheet, consent form, and at the start of the interview that the participants were in control of the interview and any information discussed. This meant that there was always the option to end the interview or change the topic being discussed where necessary. In the event, all 50 women spoke freely and with determination about their experiences, with many describing the opportunity to participate in the study as the chance to regain power over a previously abusive situation, as well as an opportunity to demonstrate solidarity with women who may encounter abuse in the future. Interview participants were informed about support available from Women's Aid, who are experienced in signposting support services for survivors of abuse, and who make particular reference to the information that they have produced for researchers investigating violence against women and girls (VAWG) to distribute to participants. Much of this information is contained in the Women's Aid Survivors' Handbook (2021).

Furthermore, the Violence Against Women and Girls Sector Shared Core Standards (Imkaan et al., 2016) were followed throughout, in order to ensure that the research met the highest of ethical principles.

Before data collection commenced, a protocol was designed to enable guidance and support to be secured for any woman who disclosed that their current online activity was making them feel unsafe. This was highlighted in the consent documents, which state "I understand that if the researcher thinks that I or someone else might be at risk of harm, they may have to contact the relevant authorities." In the event, this protocol was unnecessary, as fear of imminent harm was not disclosed to the researcher by any of the participants.

4.6.   Data analysis

4.6.1. Explaining the chosen analytical approach

Reflexive thematic analysis has been adopted as the analytical framework for the empirical data collected in this study. Whilst this form of analysis is common, being used in research worldwide (Braun and Clarke, 2019), it is not its ubiquitous prevalence in qualitative research that has prompted this methodological choice. Rather, the importance of the social justice motivations of the researcher, and the centrality of participants' voices, both of which lie at the heart of this approach (Braun et al., 2019: 849) made the selection of reflexive thematic analysis crucial.   Unlike other forms of analysis, thematic analysis is widely reported as not having an extensive history (e.g. Bryman, 2016), although various forms of qualitative analysis have been described as 'thematic' as far back as the 1930s

(Braun et al., 2019). Certainly over the last 50 years, it has become the method of analysis most frequently used by qualitative researchers (Seal, 2016).

Nevertheless, thematic analysis was first established as a discrete methodology with the publication of Braun and Clarke's highly significant model in 2006, which first outlined the various benefits that adopting a thematic analytical response offers to qualitative researchers seeking to undertake robust analysis of their data. Over the last 15 years, Braun and Clarke have since refined their initial methodological interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2021), and now define thematic analysis as an "umbrella term" (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 844) comprising of three discrete models: coding reliability thematic analysis, codebook thematic analysis, and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021: 850). This study has adopted the reflexive model of thematic analysis, as in addition to the social justice perspective fundamental to the ontology of the research, the analysis presented in this thesis is also undertaken without a code book or adherence to a specific level of saturation (Braun and Clarke, 2021). The notion that analysis of the data collected as part of this study could ever reach "saturation point" (Mason, 2010: 5), with no new findings to be deduced (Low, 2019) underestimates the richness of the data collected in the course of this project (as will be evidenced in the following chapters), and the temporal nature of the concepts being discussed (Low, 2019), which will alter and evolve as online behaviour, legislation and technology changes over time. Consequently, it was important to adopt an analytical approach that was both iterative and flexible, and which correctly identified the researcher as a "storyteller" (Braun et al., 2019: 844) entrusted with participants' experiences. Whilst almost wholly in agreement with the various iterations of the Braun and Clarke model (e.g. 2006; 2013; 2019; 2021; 2022), in one area this study diverges, namely in the use of the first person. For whilst participants' contributions are provided verbatim, the rest of this thesis

is written in the third-person traditional academic style most common in mixed methods research (Zhou and Hall, 2018). Braun and Clarke (2022) argue that adopting a first-person writing style is an important part of ensuring that the tenets of reflexive qualitative research are properly followed. This study hopes to illustrate that the guiding principles of Braun and Clarke's methodology can be upheld, despite this relatively minor difference of opinion.

Braun and Clarke's (2006: 87) "six phases of analysis" provided a logical framework for the analytical process, as illustrated in Table 4.5:

Phase	Description
1. Data familiarisation	Reading and re-reading transcripts and API data, noting initial ideas.
2. Generating codes	Coding relevant features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Constructing themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes	Confirming that the themes identified adequately answer the three research questions and that there are no obvious gaps
5. Defining themes – linking themes to research questions	

6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research questions and literature review.

Table 4.5: Phases of thematic analysis (Source: Braun and Clarke, 2006: 87)

4.6.2. Applying reflexive thematic analysis to the data set

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to interpret the data collected from the semi-structured interviews and the Twitter API. Computer – assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) (Bryman, 2016) software in the form of NVivo was employed to manage the data analysis, increasing both its validity (Rivas, 2018) and robustness (Bryman, 2016).

Figure 4.8 provides a screenshot of some of the 184 individual codes[7] (in alphabetical order) that made up the second stage of the data analysis process.

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[7] Codes are called 'nodes' in NVivo
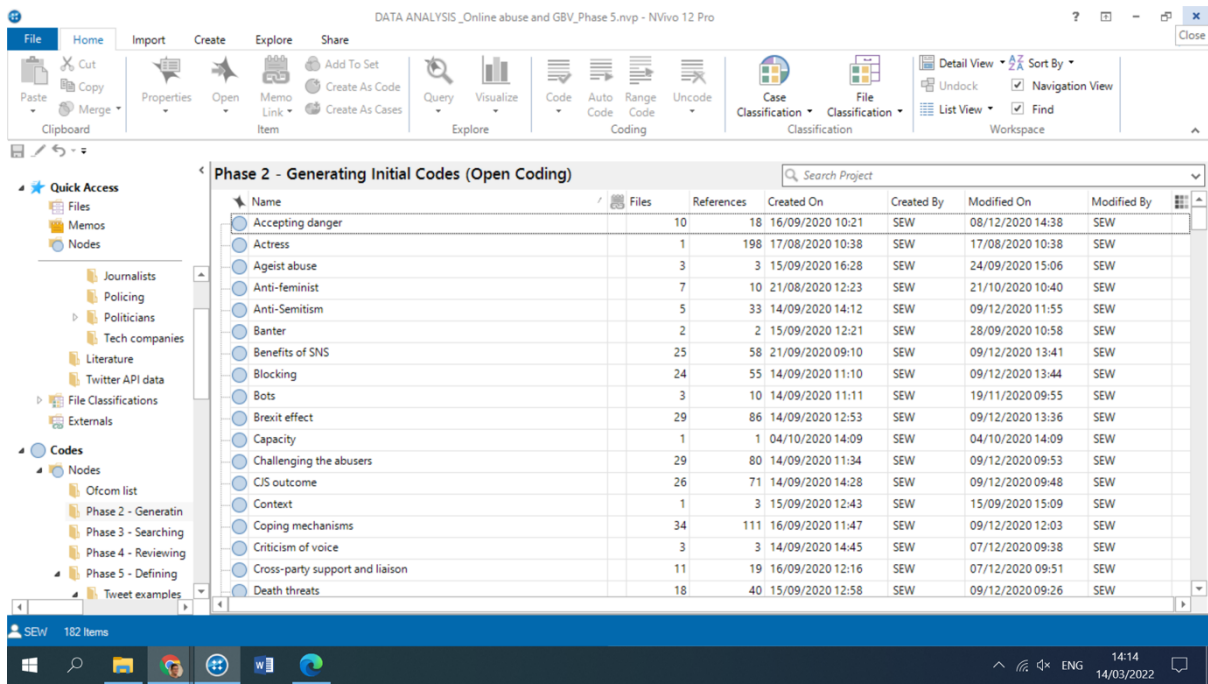
Figure 4.8: Generating codes (Phase 2) using NVivo

Figure 4.9 illustrates how these initial codes were used to construct and review themes (phases three and four of the Braun and Clarke (2006) model).
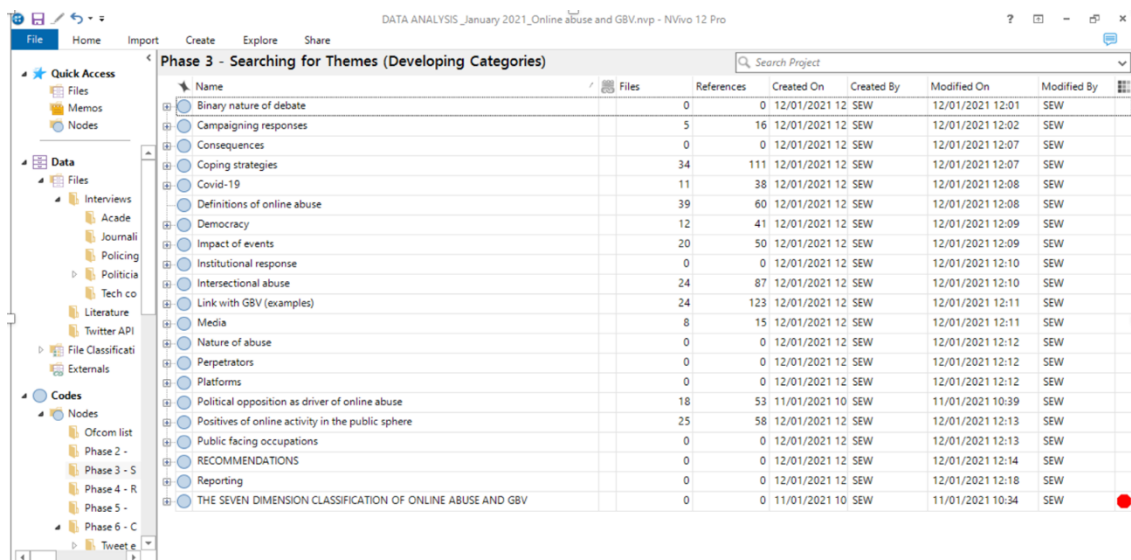
Figure 4.9: Constructing and reviewing themes (Phases 3 and 4) using NVivo

Figure 4.10 illustrates the final stage of the reflexive thematic analysis process, showing how the data has been condensed from 184 initial codes to a thesis with four discrete empirical chapters.
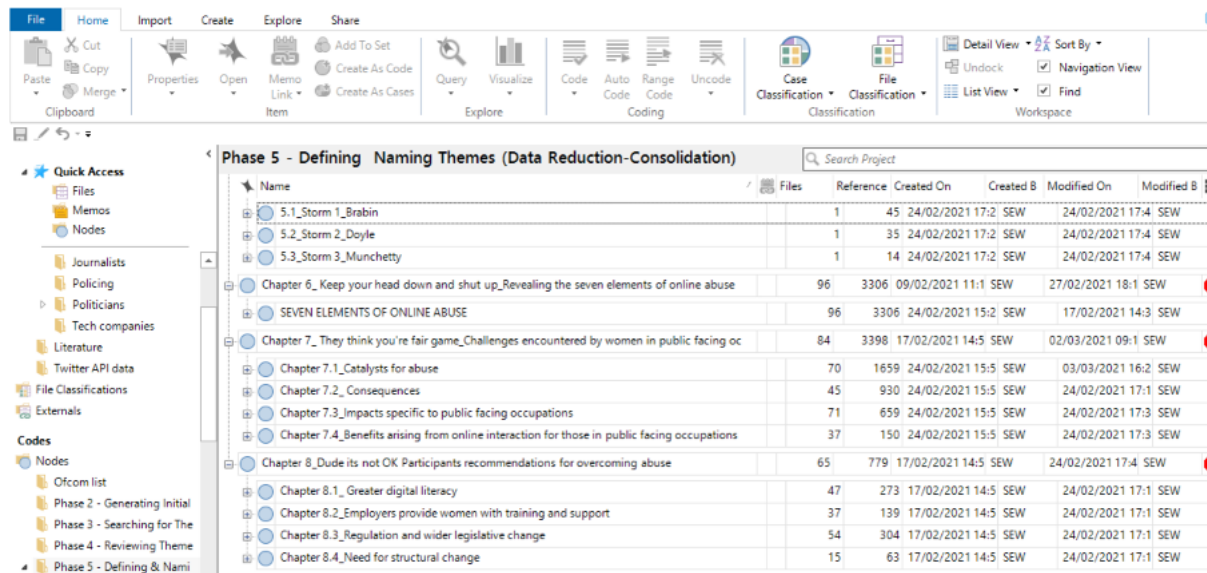
Figure 4.10: Producing the report (Phase 6) using NVivo

Integral to the iterative reflexive thematic analysis process was the use of memos (using an NVivo research journal) that was used to record the numerous thoughts and observations that arose, producing an audit trail (Bryman, 2016) that was followed to devise a logical path through the multiple sources of information.

Analysis has taken a deductive approach, with data collected before any analysis took place, a situation created by circumstance and timing, rather than indicating a preference for deductive over inductive approaches (Rivas, 2018). This part of the study was particularly affected by the first Covid-19 lockdown, as the researcher frequently had to reschedule

interviews, due to participant availability and her own childcare responsibilities, which were brought to the fore when schools were closed during the data collection period.

However, rather than creating an obstacle, this method of analysis had the advantage of allowing the key findings from the literature review to be applied to the data set, enabling a broader perspective to be applied to the process.

The data has utilised the systematic coding opportunities offered by NVivo (Silverman, 2010) to identify patterns in online abuse, devise themes and ultimately answer the research questions. By using the system in this way, a synergy has been achieved between the different data sources.

4.7.   Impact of Covid-19 on research methodology and data collection

The Covid-19 pandemic that swept through much of the world at the beginning of 2020 had numerous impacts on this research project and the way it was conducted. The most immediate of these was the requirement to move all interviews from being held face-to-face to being undertaken by telephone or via the Zoom videoconferencing platform (Archibald et al., 2019). This particularly impacted on plans made for the overseas component of the research to be undertaken with American politicians, journalists and academics, which had to be moved completely online, following the ban on entry to the USA instituted by Presidential Proclamation in March 2020 (White House Archive, 2020).

This was soon coupled with the moratorium issued by the White Rose Doctoral Training Partnership on all research trips in April 2020. Once the possibility of in-person research was excised, alternative methods were sought.

There is some debate within the methods literature regarding the use and effectiveness of telephone interviews, when compared to their face-to-face equivalents. Hesse-Biber (2007: 31) has gone so far as to assert that "interviews that are not conducted in person often make it more difficult for the interviewer to establish rapport with the respondent, and the researcher also loses the impact of visual and verbal cues, such as gestures and eye contact." However, in the period since this work was published, people have arguably become more familiar with using different forms of communication technology. Indeed, as Braun and Clarke (2013) have suggested, whilst "virtual interviews" (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 79) may differ from their face-to-face counterparts, this does not mean that the results they produce are inferior. There is currently a limited amount of published evidence comparing the experience of collecting data by telephone versus Zoom and other online platforms, where a version of face-to-face contact is possible (although this will undoubtedly change following the changes to working patterns and communication methods post-pandemic). Those that have made such a comparison report that both researchers and participants preferred interviews via Zoom than by telephone, declaring them "convenient... [and a good way] to facilitate personal connections" (Archibald et al., 2019). Research undertaken for this study found that participants based in the USA, where the use of Zoom has been routine for almost a decade (Kelly, 2020), were more hesitant to use the platform, only agreeing to do so if the meetings were arranged through the university's own Zoom account, where stronger security and controls and privacy settings were in place. This was due to the occurrence of "Zoom-bombing" (Hernandez, 2020: 1), where individuals and groups are subject to multiple forms of abuse (Hernandez, 2020). This issue is discussed further in Chapter Six.

The negative impact of "Zoom fatigue" (Wiederhold, 2020: 437) became widely recognised as more people used the platform during the Covid-19 lockdown. The issue of "interview fatigue" (Ackerly and True, 2010: 169) was far more of a problem when employing Zoom as the means of communication than was experienced in conversations conducted either face-to-face or on the telephone. It was important to recognise this as an issue for both the researcher and participant, and consequently, the scheduling of interviews was more widely spaced when using this mechanism of data collection (Gregory et al., 2020).

It is irrefutable that whatever the perceived strengths and weakness of the different interview methods, the Covid-19 situation necessitated many changes in the way that research is undertaken, and universities operate (Smyth, 2020), and this study is no exception.

In the event, whilst the potential for interviews with US politicians dissipated swiftly once the pandemic took hold, due to the increased demands on their time, and the pressure of the forthcoming Presidential election[8], the availability of high-profile women based in the USA and mainland Europe within the other three occupational groups increased. This appeared to be an unintended consequence of the lockdown, which left some participants more available to contribute to research (Gregory et al., 2020). As a result, it was possible to conduct interviews that would not have taken place outside of the Covid-19 restrictions, as these individuals would not normally have had the time to engage in doctoral research. This illustrates how the changes in methodology that emerged as a result of the pandemic were not wholly negative (Stephens et al., 2020).

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[8] Held November 2020

Within the UK, politicians were also managing a much-increased workload in the spring of 2020, however, this did not lead to the same number of cancelled appointments. Most elected representatives (and participants from the other three occupational groups) were willing to rearrange scheduled face-to-face appointments to take place over the telephone or via Zoom. This confirms Bryman's (2016) assertion that telephone interviews (and their more recent online equivalents) present a level of flexibility that is not easily matched by in-person conversations.

Crucially, the widespread switch to homeworking necessitated by the pandemic has emphasised the importance of computer mediated communication in multiple facets of occupational and personal life and highlighted the essentially false dichotomy between the 'online' and 'offline' space (Barker and Jurasz, 2018). This arguably makes this study more prescient than ever.

4.8.   Summary

This chapter describes the methodology employed in this study. It details the research in seven interrelated areas: feminist research methods, ethics, reflexivity, data collection, data analysis, and the impact of externalities. These seven components are discussed in detail in order to explain why the study has been conducted in the way that it has, and the reasons underpinning these decisions.

The thesis now moves on to present the empirical data collected as part of this study.

Firstly, Chapter Five takes a closer look at the nature and scale of online abuse, made

possible by analysing Twitter data collected in real-time between 1 January 2020 and 30

June 2020.

Chapter Five: "Stupid woman, no class" – an analysis of three Twitter storms

5.1.   Introduction

The quote used in the title of this chapter was contained in a tweet sent to the Labour MP

for Batley and Spen, Tracy Brabin[9], on 5th February 2020 at 21:59. It was number 49,339 out

of a series of 50,424 tweets sent to the politician in response to an appearance that Brabin

made at the Despatch Box in the Chamber of the House of Commons two days before.

This spike in the number of tweets sent to women in public facing occupations is

representative of a Twitter storm: "a sudden spike in activity surrounding a certain topic on

the Twitter social media site" (Technopedia, 2013: 1).

As part of the wider analysis of online abuse experienced by women in public facing

occupations, this chapter scrutinises three such Twitter storms, experienced by an MP, an

academic and a journalist, using a Twitter API. Unlike similar studies of abuse occurring on

Twitter (e.g. Micalizzi, 2021; Ward and McLoughlin, 2020; Gorrell et al., 2020; LeFebvre and

Armstrong, 2018); this is a predominantly qualitative piece. This analysis investigates the

nature and tone of these three Twitter storms, rather than undertaking a purely

quantitative piece of analysis. By analysing the data in a qualitative way, it is possible to

illustrate both the vast scale and the rancorous nature of these events. Becoming immersed

in the prodigious amount of abusive content contained over a six-month period enabled a

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[9] Whilst a Member of Parliament at the time of the data collection, Tracy Brabin resigned as the MP for Batley and Spen in May 2021, upon being elected as Mayor of West Yorkshire. For the purposes of this chapter, Brabin will be referred to as the Member of Parliament throughout, in recognition of the position she held when data was collected and analysed.

greater understanding to be gained of the reality of communicating online when employed in a public facing occupation, which is captured within this analysis. This immersion in the data allowed an empathetic sense of the reality of online abuse to be gained. Furthermore, interacting with these three Twitter storms provides an unambiguous response to the first research question posed in this study, namely **'how are women in public facing occupations targeted online?'**

5.2. Storm One: Tracey Brabin MP, 3 February 2020

As summarised in the introduction, the first storm subject to scrutiny involves Tracy Brabin MP. On 3 February 2020, the then Shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport raised a point of order about Brexit at the Despatch Box (Rawlinson, 2020). As she did so, the broken ankle she had sustained the previous day caused her to stumble, and her dress to fall forwards, exposing her left shoulder (PA Media, 2020). The image was captured on camera and prompted the tweet shown in Figure 5.1. This tweet was sent at 18:00 on 3rd February 2020.

Figure 5.1: Tweet sent to Tracy Brabin MP, 3rd February 2020

The tweet sent to Brabin at Figure 5.1 generated a total of 55,368 tweets over the following three days. In contrast, the MP's Twitter feed normally received an average of 90 tweets per day.

Figure 5.2 illustrates the evolution of the storm over the period.
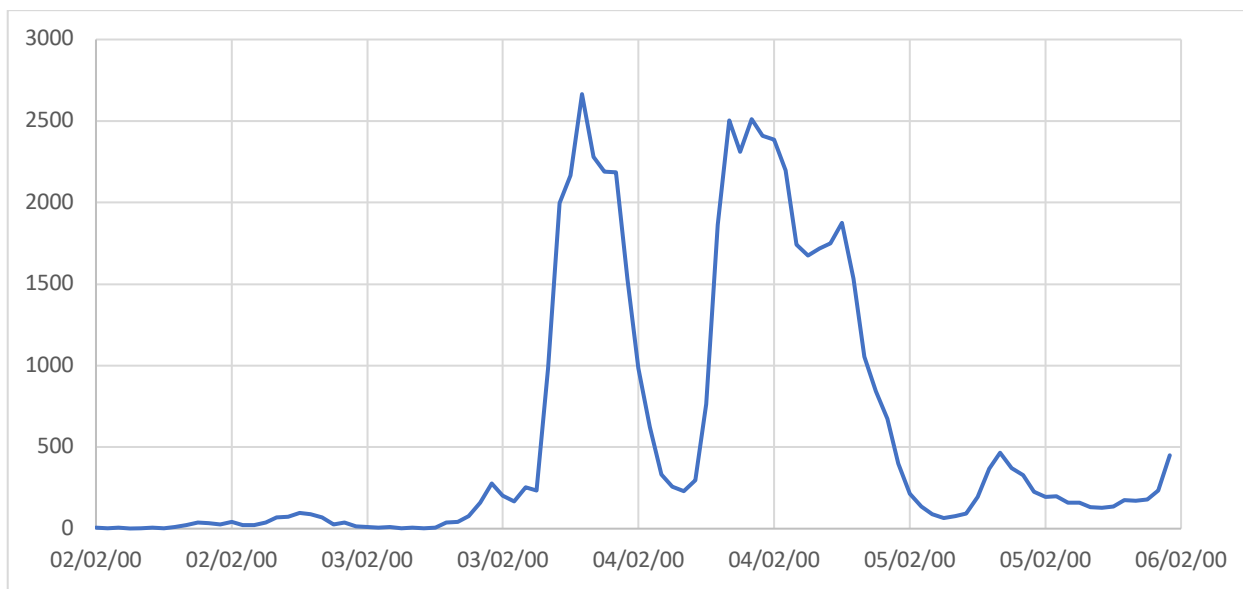
Figure 5.2: Tweets sent to Tracy Brabin MP – 3-7 February 2020 – as captured by Twitter API

In response to the growing storm, at 15:55 on 4[th] February, Brabin tweeted the comment shown in Figure 5.3.

Figure 5.3: Tracy Brabin MP's response on Twitter

This gave rise to yet more tweets, although many were retweets of Brabin's comment, in support of her stance. Many of the negative tweets coming after 15:55 on 4th February were sexualised, suggesting that Brabin's robust response unleashed a gratuitously sexual invective, as illustrated in the example provided in Figure 5.4.

Figure 5.4: Sexualised tweet sent to Tracy Brabin MP

5.3.   Storm Two: Jude Ellison Sady Doyle, 22 February 2020

The second storm being analysed occurred between 21 -23 February 2020, and targeted the US academic and writer, Jude Ellison Sady Doyle [10]. Doyle is a prolific user of online platforms and has been the target of online abuse on several occasions (Doyle, 2011). They are also a prominent supporter of the Democratic Party and have in the past championed both Hillary Clinton (Crockett, 2016) and Elizabeth Warren (Doyle, 2020) in their respective Presidential bids.   On 21 February 2020 they tweeted about their experience growing up with an aggressive father, and how this made them fearful of verbal hostility, as a reference to their dislike of the then candidate for the Democratic Party nomination, Bernie Sanders. Doyle's tweet is provided at Figure 5.5.

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[10] At the time of this research and analysis, Jude Ellison Sady Doyle was known as Sady Doyle.

Figure 5.5: Tweet sent by Doyle, 21 February 2020.

Doyle's tweet provided at Figure 5.5 generated a total of 14,485 tweets over three days.

They usually received an average of 355 tweets per day. Figure 5.6 illustrates the evolution

of the storm.

Figure 5.6: Tweets sent to Jude Ellison Sady Doyle – 21-25 February 2020 – as captured by Twitter API

5.4.   Storm Three: Naga Munchetty, 25 April 2020

The final storm being analysed occurred between 25-27 April 2020 and targeted the broadcast journalist Naga Munchetty. On 25 April, she was presenting the television show 'BBC Breakfast', between 06:00 and 09:15. At 10:01, she was sent the tweet at Figure 5.7.

Figure 5.7: Tweet sent to Naga Munchetty, 25 April 2020

The tweet sent to Munchetty and reproduced at Figure 5.7 generated a total of 32, 929 tweets over three days. In contrast, the journalist's Twitter feed normally receives an average of 150 tweets per day. Figure 5.8 illustrates the path of the storm over the three-day time period.
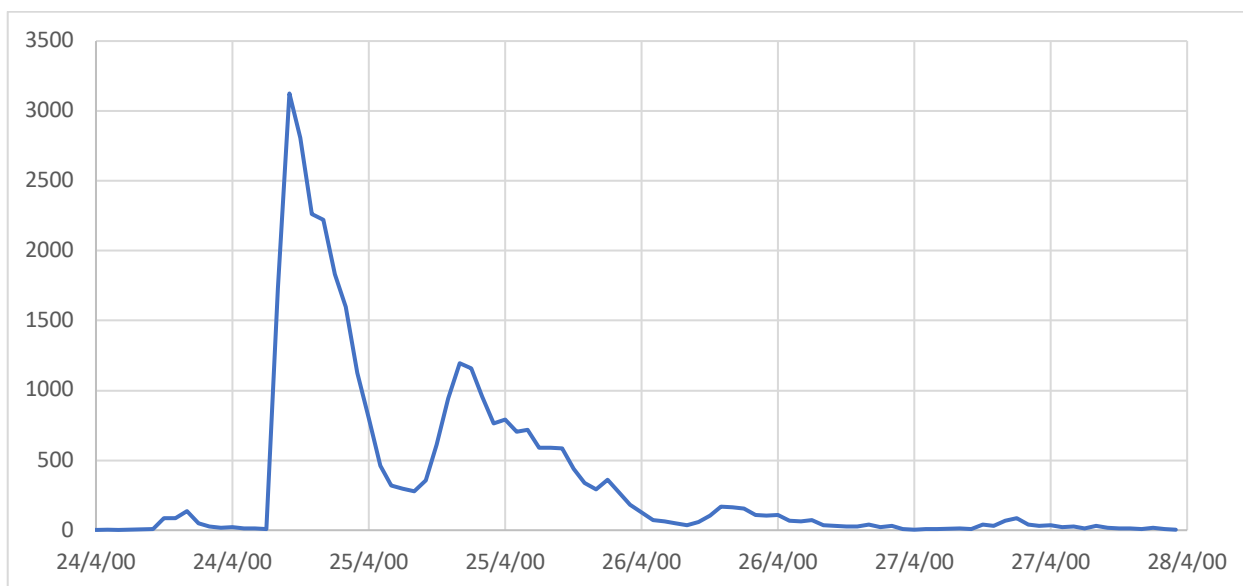
Figure 5.8: Tweets sent to Naga Munchetty – 25-28 April 2020 – as captured by Twitter API

At 17:07 on the same day, Munchetty replied with the tweet shown at Figure 5.9.

Figure 5.9: Naga Munchetty's response on Twitter

In a repetition of what occurred in Storm One, Munchetty's response gave rise to yet more tweets, and, in common with the support shown to Brabin in Storm One, it is possible to surmise that the retweets of Munchetty's comment occurred to show agreement and allegiance with the journalist. The pivoting of both these loci for abuse into (somewhat) supportive environments has strong parallels with the work of Micalizzi (2021), and the identification of Twitter as a possible site for the advancement of public discourse on the sociocultural construction of the role of women. As a further example, a considerable amount of abusive language (as defined by Ofcom, 2016), was used to criticise the individual

who originally complained about Munchetty's choice of footwear. This highlights that abuse

storms can operate in both directions, once disseminated amongst a wider audience.

5.5.   Investigating the eye of the storm – analysis of the Twitter data

5.5.1. Scale of activity

A total of 103, 531 tweets were collected across the three storms, out of a total of 25 million

tweets gathered throughout the period that the API was operational. Figure 5.10 provides

this information for each individual.
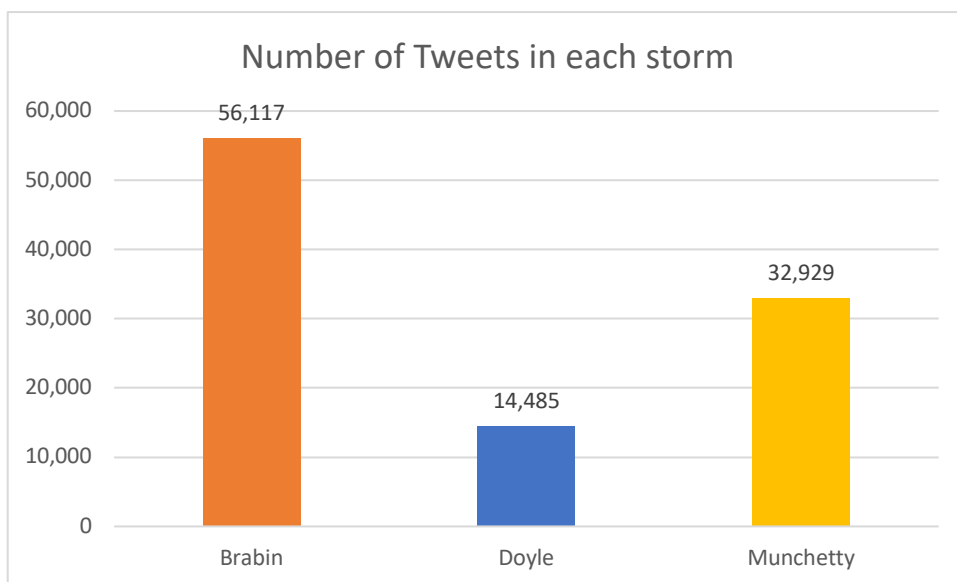
Figure 5.10: Number of tweets in each storm

As discussed in the methodology provided in Chapter Four, NVivo was used to analyse this

data set. By using a combination of word frequency tables, text searches, and matrix coding

queries, it was possible to analyse the content of the tweets sent to the three women across

the given time periods. This allowed a greater understanding to be gained about the

content of the tweets sent to the women, as well as identifying similarities and recurring themes.

5.5.2. Identifying the scale and nature of obscenities in the tweets

A text frequency search was used across the data, in order to identify the one thousand most frequently used terms in the tweets. This list was cross referenced with the Ofcom list of offensive words (2016), and the offensive terms were created as nodes in order to allow further qualitative coding. The words in the Ofcom list (2016) that did not appear in the initial word frequency query were then searched for individually, using text searches. A total of 78 of the 148 offensive words were found.

Figure 5.11 shows the ten most frequently occurring offensive words across the three storms.
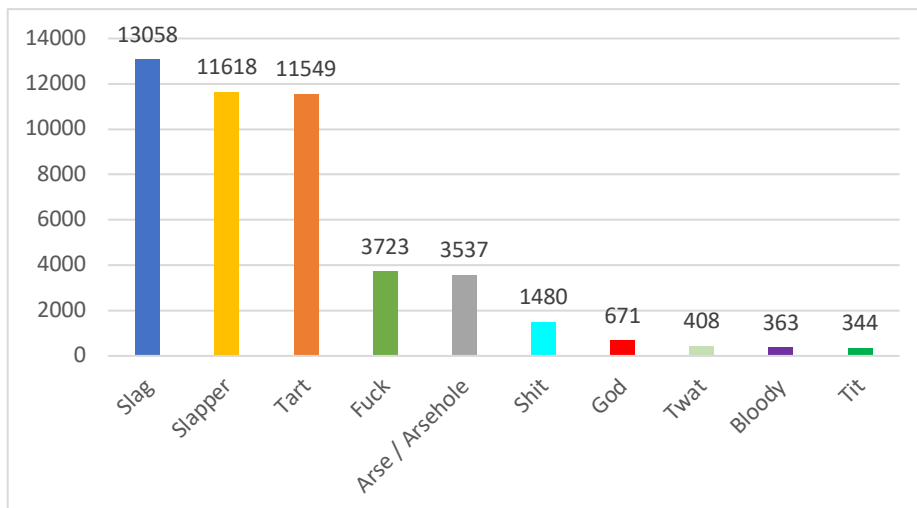
Figure 5.11: Ten most frequently occurring offensive words found across the three storms (Adapted from Ofcom, 2016)

However, these totals can be misleading, given the huge numbers of particular words in

Storm One, as the NVivo matrix coding query provided at Table 5.1 reveals.

	Storm One (Brabin)	Storm Two (Doyle)	Storm Three (Munchetty)
Slag	13055	0	3
Slapper	11618	0	0
Tart	11548	1	0
Fuck	2439	983	301
Arse / Arsehole	3480	0	57
Shit	627	764	89
God	503	95	73
Twat	336	2	70
Bloody	215	0	148
Tit	328	4	12

Table 5.1: Results of matrix coding query on Ofcom offensive words list (Adapted from Ofcom, 2016)

The data visualisations for each storm look very different, as shown in Figures 5.12 – 5.14.
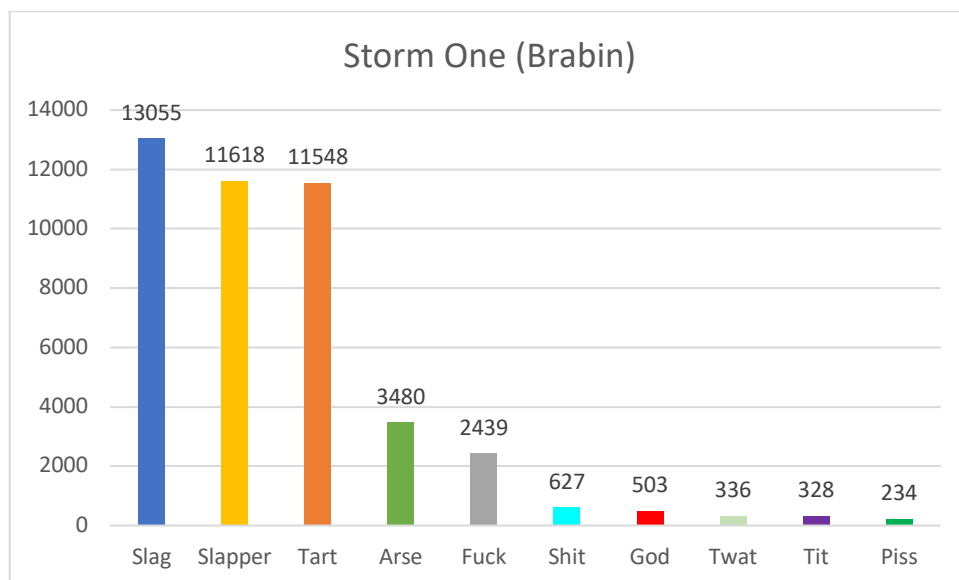
Figure 5.12: Ten most frequently occurring offensive words in storm one (Adapted from Ofcom, 2016)
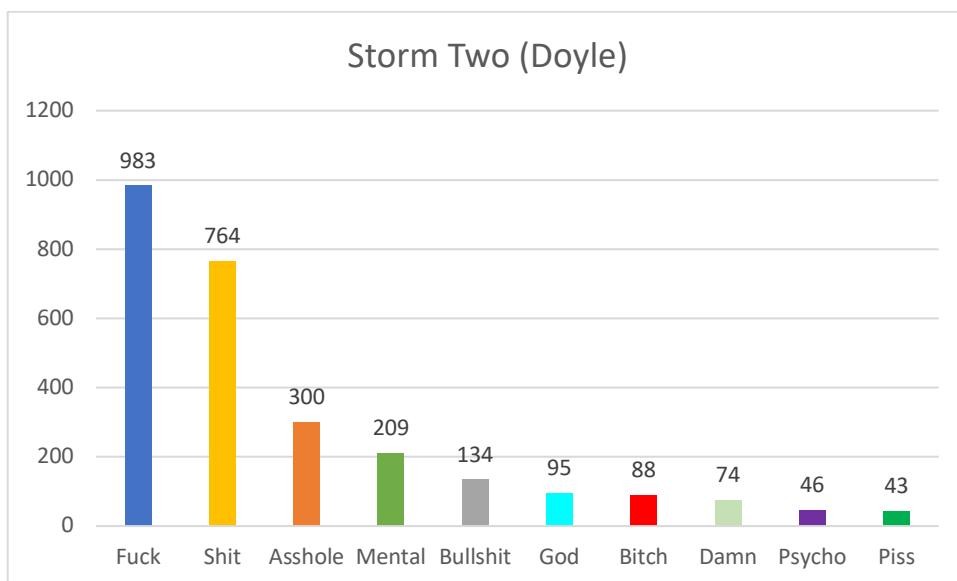
Figure 5.13: Ten most frequently occurring offensive words in storm two (Adapted from Ofcom, 2016)
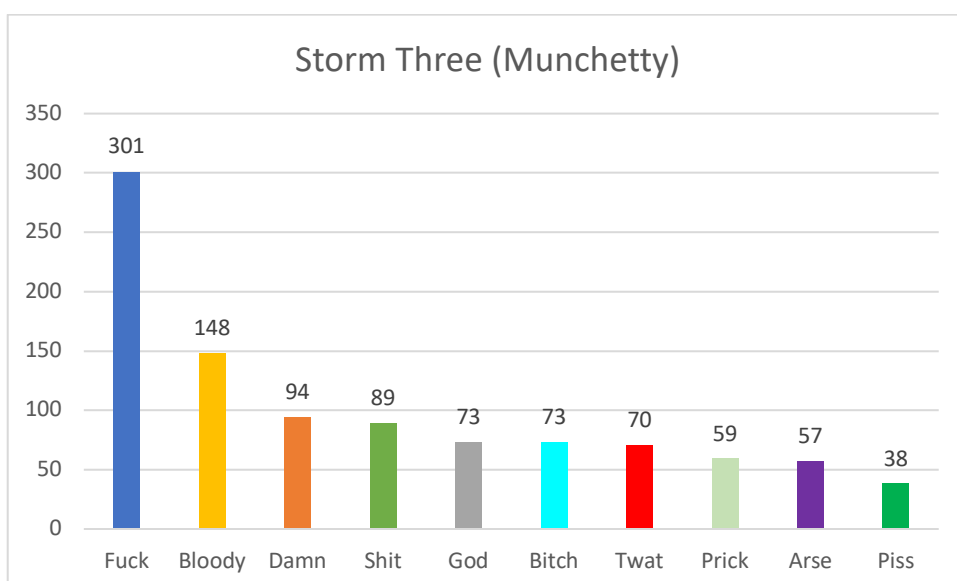
Figure 5.14: Ten most frequently occurring offensive words in storm three (Adapted from Ofcom, 2016)

57 of the words in the Ofcom list were not found in any of the tweets analysed. The words that did not appear were predominantly those associated with race, sexual orientation and disability, which suggests that this is not a robust measure of the online abuse associated with issues of intersectionality. A further nine of the Ofcom words did appear in the tweets

but were not employed in an offensive context (e.g. hun and slope). These nine words have therefore been excluded from the analysis.

However, as is illustrated in the title of this chapter, which contains no profanities, the malign and pervasive nature of online abuse means that the issue is much wider than individuals grappling with obscenities, as will be shown in the coming sections.

5.5.3.   Applying Twitter data to theories of online abuse and gender-based violence

There is a value to be found in revisiting the six elements of online abuse first discussed in the literature review in Chapter Two, which emerged by bringing together the various theoretical ideas on gender-based violence, computer-mediated communication and the facilitation of online harms. These six factors are emotional harm (Dragiewicz et al., 2018); harassment (Bailey and Burkell, 2021); threat (McGlynn, 2017; Jane 2014b); belittling (Camp, 2018); silencing (Galpin, 2022); and criticism of appearance (Backe et al., 2018). Utilising an NVivo word frequency query across the dataset allows an insight to be gained into the tone of the tweets found in each of the storms. When viewed in isolation, these words and phrases often appear unremarkable. However, when read as a whole, these tweets convey a wider derogatory culture, that frequently denigrates the women's appearance, experience, knowledge and opinions.

5.5.4. Identifying how women in the public sphere are targeted online – learning from the Twitter data

The process of subjecting the API data set to scrutiny has identified the presence of each of

the six elements of online abuse first discussed in the literature review in Chapter Two:

emotional harm (Dragiewicz et al., 2018); harassment (Bailey and Burkell, 2021); threat

(McGlynn, 2017; Jane 2014b); belittling (Camp, 2018); silencing (Galpin, 2022); and criticism

of appearance (Backe et al., 2018). In addition, analysing the data collected as part of this

research has uncovered a seventh element of online abuse that is not as common in existing

literature, that of defamation. For as well as receiving tweets that incorporated these six

malign behaviours, this research has found that the three women targeted in the three

Twitter storms analysed in this study were also subject to abuse that denigrated their

professional reputation, probity and honesty. For the purposes of this research, the

definition of defamation that is applied is the one provided by Marwick and Miller (2014: 9),

which states that "defamation is the communication of a false statement of fact that harms

the reputation of a victim, and includes libel, which covers written published statements,

and slander, which covers spoken statements." Whilst drawing on a definition that has been

devised by academics rather than legal tort, it is clear that many of the tweets contained in

the three Twitter storms sought to besmirch the character of the recipient.

In a wide-ranging discussion, Angelotti (2013) highlights the challenges presented to existing

laws on defamation, from computer mediated communication, emphasising how Twitter

has "increased the pressure of being first to publish, often to the detriment of truth and

accuracy" (Angelotti, 2013: 432).   In addition (in one of the few articles to reference

defamation in the context of online abuse), Watts et al. (2017) suggest that the level of

harm caused by what they describe as 'cyber-bullying' may lead victims to lodge civil claims

against their attackers, although Marwick and Miller (2014) confirm that such cases are vanishingly rare. However, in an indication of the lack of consensus on this issue, Lidsky (2000) warns against the use of defamation law in an attempt to stop the spread of online falsehoods, expressing concern that to do so risks endangering the public's right to free speech. This work has clear echoes of the wider debate on internet freedoms first discussed in Chapter Two.

By undertaking a thorough analysis of the tweets in each of the three Twitter storms, using the seven themes of defamation (Marwick and Miller, 2014; Watts, 2016); emotional harm (Dragiewicz et al., 2018); harassment (Bailey and Burkell, 2021); threat (McGlynn, 2017; Jane 2014b); belittling (Camp, 2018); silencing (Galpin, 2022); and criticism of appearance (Backe et al., 2018), it is possible to gain a greater appreciation of the damage that can be caused to women in public facing occupations who receive such communication. This then provides a greater understanding of the damage to occupational standing that can be induced as a result of being caught in a Twitter storm. Examples of these tweets by category are provided in Figure 5.15.
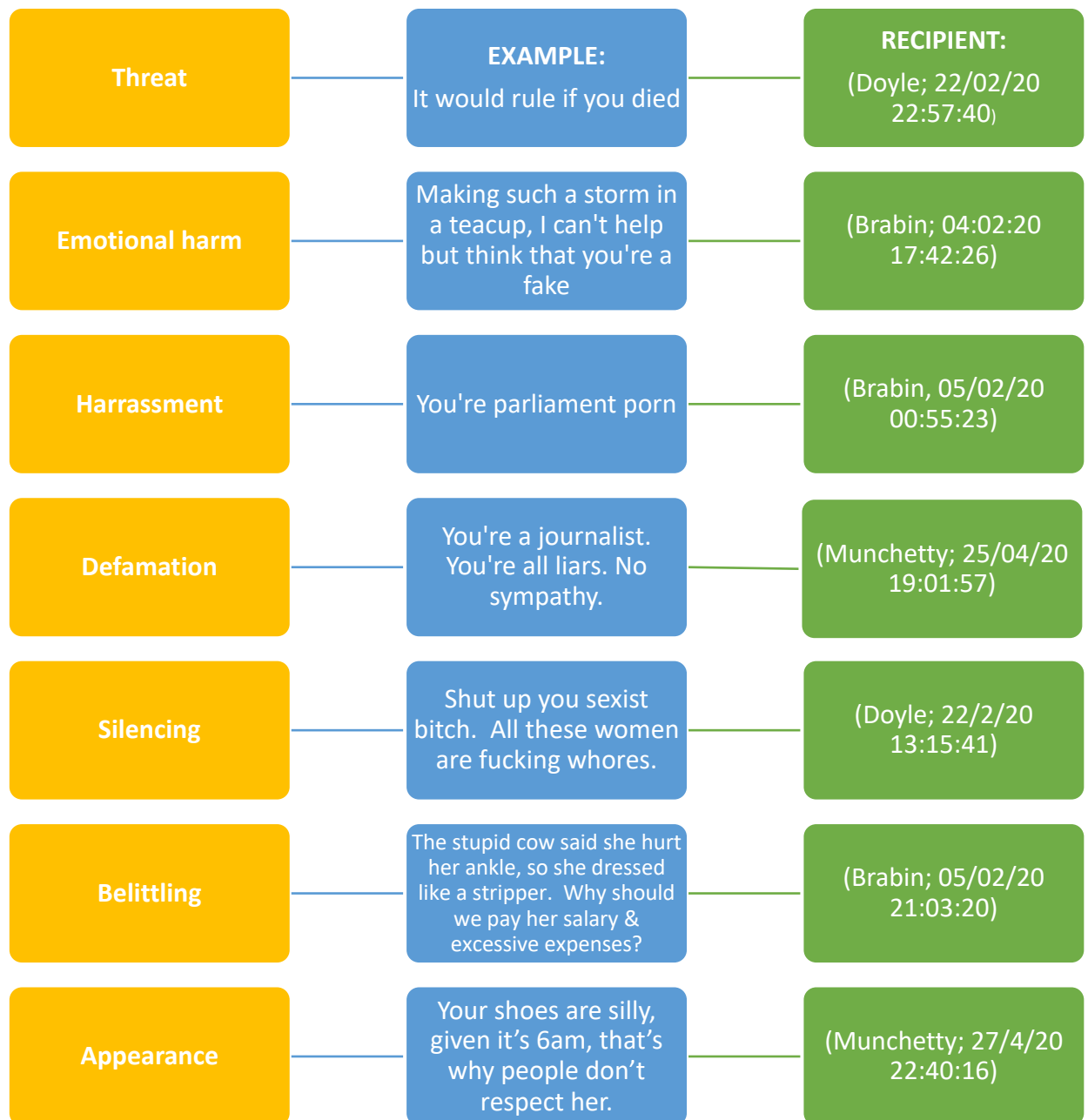
Figure 5.15: Examples of tweets in each of the seven categories of online abuse

Brabin's previous occupation as an actor was a frequent topic of the abusive tweets directed at her, with almost nine thousand of these also referring to prostitution. This illustrates the enduring notion of acting as a profession akin to sex work, which dates back to the 17th Century (Rosenthal, 2007). An example of four of these tweets is provided in Table 5.2,

where the reference to Brabin's age is also a common feature of the online abuse

experienced by older women (Pickard, 2020; Lewis, 2020).

04/02/20 10:07:05	She looks like a 50p whore
04/02/20 10:54:02	Put some clothes on love, you look like a tart!
04/02/20 12:06:52	You look like you've been in a broom cupboard with Bercow's wife! Is it really appropriate to go to Parliament dressed as a veteran hooker?
04/02/20 12:11:08	Actresses and prostitutes were once much the same thing. Some would say they often still are. Still, the old tricks come in handy when she has to go and pick up the postal votes. She's 50 years too old for that crowd but they're not fussy.

Table 5.2: Tweets sent to Tracy Brabin MP referencing prostitution

5.6.   Summary

Collecting data using an API enabled qualitative analysis of three Twitter storms to be

conducted. By using the theories of gender-based violence and online abuse first identified

in the literature review in Chapter Two to analyse a large dataset, it has been possible to

confirm that online abuse is a manifestation of gender-based violence. In addition, this

chapter has also applied the six elements of online abuse discussed in the literature review

to this dataset (emotional harm (Dragiewicz et al., 2018); harassment (Bailey and Burkell,

2021); threat (McGlynn, 2017; Jane 2014b); belittling (Camp, 2018); silencing (Galpin, 2022);

and criticism of appearance (Backe et al., 2018)). Most importantly, detailed scrutiny of the

three Twitter storms discussed in this chapter has identified an additional component of

online abuse, defamation. Whilst not commonly discussed in the literature on gender-based

violence or online abuse, it has been mentioned by both Watts et al. (2016) and Marwick

and Miller (2014). Given its importance in the data presented here, this element will be

investigated in the empirical research going forwards, joining the other six elements

originally identified in the literature review. By combining these overlapping elements, it is possible to gain a greater insight into the impact of online abuse on gender-based violence.

As a consequence, these seven elements will remain at the forefront of the analysis of the 50 semi-structured interviews with women in public facing occupations, which follows in the next three chapters. The first of these, Chapter Six, further operationalises and evidences the seven elements of online abuse that have been discussed in this chapter.

Chapter Six: "Keep your head down and shut up" – investigating the elements of online abuse

6.1.   Introduction

This chapter analyses the interview data that has been collected in order to examine and further understand the online experiences of women in the occupations of academia, journalism, policing and politics.   In doing so, it outlines seven pervasive elements of online abuse initially identified in the literature review and the three Twitter storms. For as will be evidenced in this chapter, these seven elements chimed with the experiences of women working across the public sphere that were shared with the author. A reminder of these seven elements is provided at Figure 6.1.
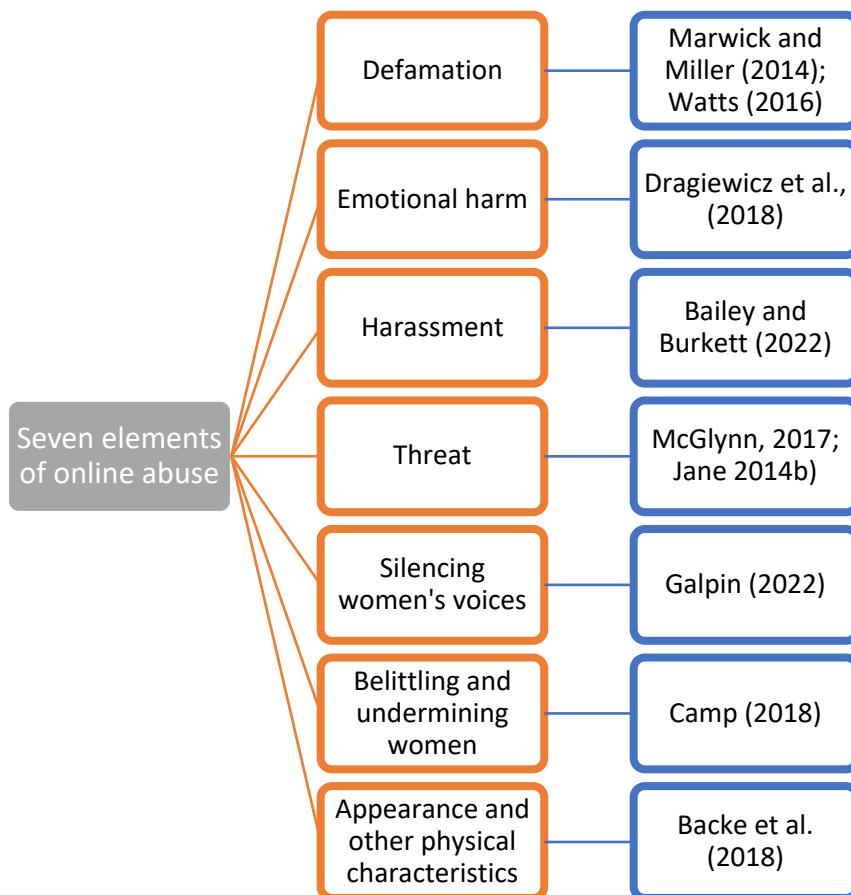
Figure 6.1: Seven elements of online abuse

6.2.   Defamation

Receiving online abuse has multiple impacts. One consequence that has attracted limited consideration to date is the effect that online abuse can have on an individual's professional standing within their chosen occupation and the wider community in which they work. Having a strong professional reputation is obviously important for all employees working at a senior level. However, there is evidence that this reputation building is particularly crucial for *women* holding senior positions, as they seek to break through the "glass ceiling" (Palmer and Simon, 2010: 22) that is present in many occupations, in order to secure gender equality (Aaltio et al., 2008). To achieve a position of power or authority and then risk having that standing undermined by online abuse is both personally and professionally damaging. This section considers the three most common professionally damaging defamatory attacks that were recounted by research participants: attacks on integrity, ability, and the accusation that an individual was a 'traitor'.

For the purposes of this discussion, the definition of defamation that has been applied is the one provided by Marwick and Miller (2014: 9), namely that "defamation is the communication of a false statement of fact that harms the reputation of a victim, and includes libel, which covers written published statements, and slander, which covers spoken statements." In reality, whilst these issues have been delineated for analytical purposes, an attack on an individual's personal or professional reputation presents risks at multiple levels, and therefore could be applied to numerous dimensions discussed in forthcoming chapters.

6.2.1. Integrity

The questioning of an individual's integrity occurs both as direct accusation and as an implied slur. Whether made implicitly or explicitly, the articulation of allegations was frequent, and often felt relentless.

> *"[I receive online abuse] basically challenging my ethics, or the way I operate, or… 'will the [role name] answer why she hasn't done anything about this', neglected duty, etcetera. So, those sorts of things."*

[Karen, Senior Police Officer]

An academic working in the area of biological sciences spoke of the unexpected consequence of winning a large grant for a research project:

> *"Yeah, I got some blow back [online] saying … wow what a, what a horrible use of money, or suggesting that I would use the money irresponsibly."*

[Eileen, Academic at a European university]

Politicians often found their integrity being impugned in relation to financial impropriety, particularly if they had expressed an interest in supporting external organisations either in their constituency or the wider community:

> *"And then they chose to believe that I was taking money from the [utilities] industry, which was nonsense. I was a water company shrill; I was this, I was that, and it just went on and on and on. Shale gas was another one where they chose to do the same kind of thing."*

[Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Whilst occurring over a decade (three parliaments) ago, the parliamentary expenses scandal

of 2009, when the Daily Telegraph newspaper discovered a web of financial irregularities

and illegal claims of public money made by MPs (Crewe and Walker, 2019), continues to

negatively affect the way that politicians are perceived. This is often expressed in the online

abuse they receive, with their financial integrity frequently questioned. One former MP

illustrated this:

> *"And it's like when they talk about, expenses, you know, I never coined anything
> other than accommodation and my train fare, but when they talk about MPs
> expenses, if you count the fact that you've got to rent an office and buy equipment
> and all the rest of it, then if you count that as expenses, it can come to like a huge
> amount, but it's actually running two businesses if you've got two offices. You
> know. But the abuse doesn't recognise that"*

[Lauren, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

This echoes the work of Bishop (2014), who found that the then Conservative minister

Esther McVey MP received a considerable amount of online abuse relating to expense

claims:

> *In the case of the person who posted about Esther McVey, they used it as an
> opportunity to express their dissatisfaction of her as a Conservative Party politician,
> such as references to her completing "expenses" forms and pejoratively calling her a
> "Tory." In fact such allegations were unfounded as McVey entered Parliament after
> reforms had been made to deal with the "expenses scandal"* (Bishop, 2014: 120).

The Twitter storm involving the former Labour MP Tracy Brabin discussed in Chapter Five

included 33 separate references to financial integrity over the purchase of the dress she was

pictured wearing. A summary of these is provided in Figure 6.2.

Tweets directed at Tracy Brabin MP regarding parliamentary expenses

On the piss all night on expenses

Bet you want me to pay your excessive expenses

Sick of politicians lying about their expenses

Nice to see how you spend your expenses

Spends all her time fiddling her expenses

Free beer, two bars all on expenses

That pisses me off - clothes on expenses!

Can you claim expenses for that?

Dressed inappropriately and claiming taxpayers expenses

I bet you're claiming dubious expenses

Kept on full salary falsified expenses

You claim for anything on expenses

Bet it was bought on expenses

Figure 6.2: Anonymised summary of comments made on Twitter regarding the expense claims of Tracy Brabin MP

6.2.2.   Ability

As well as questions about integrity, women also found their professional abilities under

constant scrutiny:

> *"A number of accounts, all of them anonymous, literally every time I say anything, say I'm stupid, I'm naïve, that the comments I make on behalf of the organisation are inaccurate. So there's that very targeted abuse, like every time you say anything, we're going to say to you you're wrong."*

[Sarah, Senior Police Officer]

Sarah's contribution also confirms the enduring nature of sexism within policing (Brown,

1998). For long before the advent of online abuse, Berg and Budnick (1986) highlighted how

the traits of competence and technical proficiency were more likely to be assigned to male

officers.

Similar experiences were shared by women in other professions:

> *"A stream of stuff that comes through, just kind of like normal, I hate to say normal, but like, it's kind of like normal to like undermining me in my role, telling me I'm stupid or don't deserve to be in the role I'm in, that kind of stuff."*

[Wendy, Local Councillor]

Several participants recognised that the treatment that they had received had parallels with

gender-based violence experienced in the offline space:

> *"So, you know, people on message boards started suggesting that I made up … the incident for attention. That there was this huge kind of attention seeking merit around it, which is of course the same kind of narrative used when women voice sexual assault offline."*

[Christie, Academic at a UK university]

> *"Actually spreading of lies and misinformation is a form of abuse as well, because that is bringing to that person's door even more anger and we do live in such a volatile political time just now."*

[Constanta, Political Staffer]

6.2.3. Traitor

A specific epithet that arose repeatedly during the period of data collection was the use of the word 'traitor', which was frequently directed at politicians during the various Brexit debates in Parliament. Many politicians felt that the use of the term contributed to and exacerbated the febrile atmosphere that they were navigating prior to Britain's exit from the European Union in 2020. This term, which does not appear on the Ofcom list of offensive terms (2016), nevertheless had a deleterious impact on those to whom it was targeted, as three women explained:

> *"The tone and the nature of the aggression [of the online abuse], the far right, the use of terms like traitor and betrayal and that sort of language."*

[Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Patricia, who was a Member of Parliament until the General Election of 2019, made a direct link between the abuse that she received online, and the abuse she faced in the street:

> *And there's a lot of that [online abuse], like in that period outside of Parliament when we had all those demonstrators and it got very difficult at one point to walk down the street without people shouting after me, and being told I was a traitor and I was this, I was that. This was from the Brexit side particularly."*

[Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Whilst Patricia's evidence is compelling, such an assertion should be treated with a certain amount of caution, as there is no direct evidence linking the two. Similar evidence was provided by a political staffer:

> *She also got, I remember, an email, it was like a Christmas card because Christmas was coming up, and you know, and then I opened it up and it was kind of like, you're a traitor to your race, the white race is rising, Brexit has arrived.*

[Constanta, Political Staffer]

Obviously, the term 'traitor' is not in and of itself, an abusive one. However, when weaponised in a politically febrile environment, and combined with racist jibes, as is evidenced here, many of the participants felt that it contained a potentially dangerous message. This was presciently explained by the daughter of a serving politician, writing at the height of the Brexit debate in Parliament:

> *I am scared. I am scared when I scroll through the replies to her tweets calling her a liar and a traitor. I am scared when our house gets fitted with panic buttons, industrial-locking doors and explosive bags to catch the mail…Even if we disagree with our politicians, when was this something we actively wanted to hurt them for? This whole thing has gone too far. When people start getting hurt, that is the moment we should step back and ask if any of this is even worth it. All the anger and the screaming and the taking sides. The traitors and the liars and the surrendering* (Cooper, 2019b: 1).

What Cooper (2019b) describes is the concern that many women in public facing occupations feel, namely that the changes to the nature of public debate, the switch from robust discussion to violent invective, contains within it a threat to the safety of women that mirrors the threat posed by gender-based violence in the private sphere.

6.2.4. Defamation cases in law

Whilst there is clear evidence that defamation is a persistent element of the online abuse

directed at women in public facing occupations, there have been very few cases of

defamation brought before the courts (Marwick and Miller, 2014). In England and Wales,

the Defamation Act of 2013 could arguably be used in cases of online abuse, however, when

prosecutions into online abuse have been instigated, they are more likely to be pursued

under the Communications Act (2003), as the provisions within this piece of legislation are

more likely to meet the CPS guidelines for prosecution (Coe, 2015). In Scotland, in a

landmark case that occurred during the data collection phase of this study, the former

leader of the Scottish Labour Party, Kezia Dugdale, faced legal action from blogger Stuart

Campbell, after she used her weekly column in the Daily Record newspaper to accuse him of

sending homophobic tweets (BBC News, 2020). As a result, in April 2019 Campbell

successfully sued Dugdale for defamation. However, the Judge decreed that Dugdale was

legitimate in making the claims about Campbell's tweets, on the grounds of "fair comment"

(Carloway, 2020: 2). This decision was unsuccessfully appealed by Campbell in May 2020,

with the Court of Session agreeing with the original ruling (Carloway, 2020). When the

judgement was handed down, Dugdale expressed her relief in the media, stating "I felt

really flat for ages after it, like I'd pulled this valve, and it was just the pressure kind of

leaking away. I felt exhausted and flat and just relief, more than anything" (Ross, 2020: 1).

Campbell was the editor of the 'Wings Over Scotland' website until it closed in May 2021[11].

The website had long been associated with online abuse (Hames and Hinde, 2021), and had

its Twitter account removed in March 2020, when the platform claimed that Wings Over

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[11] Whilst Campbell announced that the site was closing in May 2021, the site remains available and is occasionally updated

Scotland had broken its rules "against managing multiple Twitter accounts for abusive purposes" (Herald Scotland Online, 2020: 1). Dugdale received a significant amount of abuse during her time in frontline politics, including three death threats made via Twitter over the course of six years (Herald Scotland Online, 2018).

The role of referenda (including the Scottish independence referendum of 2014) as a catalyst for online abuse directed at women in public facing occupations is discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven.

6.3. Emotional Harm

Emotional harm is another area of concern raised by participants in the study. Emotional harm is by far the biggest consequence of online abuse and was both discussed by participants in the empirical research and found in the literature. The variety of issues raised under this topic have been grouped into three themes: the effect on an individual's wellbeing, the wider impact of emotional harm on the person targeted, and the repercussions of the emotional harm as it relates to others, such as family members, friends and staff.

6.3.1. Impact of online abuse on individual wellbeing

"I don't know anyone who's trying to do socio-political activism who's not utterly worn down… like ground down to a paste from having to deal either from active abuse or the fear of abuse and having to sort of tie themselves into knots and take elaborate measures to avoid it."

[Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

> *"I knew that all that abuse would continue [after the election] and I was expecting my majority to go down to a couple of thousand, and I thought they'll keep coming, they'll smell blood and all I used to do was get bullied, permanently. It was absolutely horrendous."*

[Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

The interviews undertaken with women in public facing occupations elicited testimony that revealed the scale of harm inflicted on their emotional and physical wellbeing caused by online abuse. This empirical information echoed that provided in the literature (e.g. Hodson et al., 2018; Jane, 2017a; and Mantilla, 2015). Once again, there were considerable similarities evident between the four different occupational groups. Reiterating the quote from Phyllis, who was a Member of Parliament until the General Election of 2019, many women described online abuse as a form of bullying:

> *"Yes, I would term it as bullying, … it really is bullying. So, for example, a lot of my abuse is from people that are not my constituents.   It's not like I'm deliberately describing it as bullying. I actually can't think of another way of describing it."*

[Jill, Member of Parliament]

Jill spent some time attempting to unpick the nature of the online abuse she receives on a regular basis:

> *"I would say they're bullies. And I think the traits of a bully are very cowardly."*

[Jill, Member of Parliament]

Other women spoke of their bemusement regarding online abuse, and questioned the motivations of those who chose to send it:

"The thing that it reminds me [of] is just how people have this desire to do this to strangers, to insult and harass and bully strangers. Is that just innate in humanity or has that always been there, and has the internet has just created a process to finally let it out, or is it something about the internet that encourages it? Like why someone will use that little opportunity that they have to then direct something so hurtful at someone that they've never met, about something that's completely unrelated. Why do they do that? What is the kick that they are getting out of doing that? Like it's … it's just bizarre to me."

[Jacqueline, Academic at a UK university]

Wendy felt that often, the sending of abuse was an end in itself:

"People don't want me to reply, they don't expect a reply, it's just abuse. And I think that's what changed, is before, even if it was like something at a level I would consider abuse, it would be in anticipation of a response. Whereas now, I don't think these people even want a response, they just want to fling mud."

[Wendy, Local Councillor]

Similarly, another participant pondered on whether there had been a change in the social or

political climate that had led to a greater tolerance of abuse:

"I will say that I think it has become more permissible to talk about stuff that has been less acceptable and it's more socially acceptable to say something really nasty, whereas before you probably would have socially, people would have cut down on it. Now I think they have… people feel that open permission to say more stuff."

[Karen, Senior Police Officer]

Sometimes, the motivation driving online abuse was political.

"There was an attempt … in 2013, when a Liberal Democrat councillor who'd gone to UKIP, or was about to go to UKIP, started trying to bully me and undermine me online, because of council cuts, as though that was my fault."

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[Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Politically motivated abuse is a particular problem for women politicians, and crucially, the abuse is not restricted to one specific political party or ideology.

Another characteristic of online abuse discussed was the sheer nastiness of many of the comments:

> *"There were some who almost pretty much any time I put a tweet out, would give me some sort of sneering comment and you know, wind people up. Every time you tweet the negatives, you get a whole load of bile, basically.*
> *The abuse was more misogynistic, it would be absolutely vitriolic… it was so horrific."*

[Stacey, Senior Police Officer]

Sometimes, abuse sent via online platforms was consolidated with abusive emails:

> *"I definitely got one and maybe two emails to that account that said things like you're a stupid bitch, you should kill yourself, or something like, it was something about killing yourself, bitch, something. I think it was either one or two."*

[Jacqueline, Academic at a UK university]

The abusive tone of much online abuse was similarly raised by others:

> *"When I started looking into it and looking at it [the online abuse], I was really shocked and dismayed at the amount of like, just huge amounts of swearing, huge amounts of negativity, political criticism, insults, rudeness, just nastiness, that were on my profile."*

[Beth, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

> *"I don't expect to receive absolute, misogynistic, homophobic, absolute hate of my mere existence."*

[Karen, Senior Police Officer]

> *"There's one guy in particular who essentially told me to burn in hell, where at least I'll see my dead dad again. So that was nice."*

[Simone, Member of Parliament]

A significant factor in the emotional harm engendered by online abuse is the fear that it generates. This seemed to be a particular issue for politicians who had lost their seats in the General Election of 2019. This is unlikely to be a coincidence, as these constituencies were often the areas where debate was most polarised, public attention was most focused, and consequently, where levels of online abuse were highest. The women in these seats often had little protection afforded to them in terms of a litany of staff and extra security, leaving them feeling more vulnerable than those holding Front Bench positions.

> *"I got to the point where I was genuinely fearful about going on the train, fearful of walking my dog, fearful of going to events, and I started to shrink in… social media had made me feel unwanted in my home, it made me feel that I couldn't go to the pub because I didn't know who was sitting at the table next to me. I didn't want to go anywhere on my own."*

[Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

> *"So, there was about three months, sort of June, July and August 2017 where I didn't go to the constituency on my own at all. I just didn't go there because I was too nervous about staying overnight in the house. And it was at that point that we had all the panic alarms installed, which was being done as part of parliament security upgrade, but that was my absolute priority, to get the panic alarms in that house."*

[Beth, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

> *"I would have a wobble about my security, probably once a year, when I'd see something online that really scared me … there'd be that one day a year I'd just needed to hide from the world because I was scared about someone hurting me."*

[Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Issues around safety were not confined only to women involved in national politics and affected politicians serving at a local level. Kerry spoke of her fears as a Muslim woman representing a local council ward in an inner city:

> *"So, I have seen people online, saying things like 'what's [NAME OF CITY] doing, electing you know, people', and using the 'n' word. But if that became physical then I would be really worried. And I do worry, in my head… I do actually worry that if someone attacks me and says, you know, that woman, or 'n' woman that lives there is a councillor. And if the EDL[12] comes to me where I live, then if they do find out that it's a politician that's Black, why have they elected her, then they could attack somebody in the street, that looks just like me."*

[Kerry, Local Councillor]

It is worth noting however, that fears around personal safety were not solely limited to politicians. Police Officers, academics and journalists had all received threatening online abuse as a result of their role or the issues that they were working on:

> *"My role as Hate Crime Coordinator and the abuse [I received] … I was fearful of further abuse."*

[Anna, Police Officer]

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[12] English Defence League, a Far-Right political organisation

Christie spoke about the abuse she received as a consequence of working on a piece of work

based on the growth of the involuntary celibacy (Incel) (Ging, 2019) movement in the UK:

> *"And that was the first time I'd say I was properly kind of made to feel scared and that there was a real concern for my physical safety."*

[Christie, Academic at a UK university]

Similar fears were expressed in regard to activity in the USA:

> *"And then really with the rise of Trump… the anti-Semitism online has been… just fucking terrifying but it's also been fucking terrifying offline"*

[Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

The emotional fallout of receiving online abuse was highlighted by Beth:

> *"Certainly in the last year it became quite a physically threatening, and the kind of spill over between the Twitter threats and abuse and what was going on outside our workplace... those lines became blurred, and we felt very much under psychological and physical siege."*

[Beth, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

A consequence of the fear discussed here is that women begin to make choices about the

sort of work they will be involved in, limiting both their own career choices (and potential

advancement) and the coverage of socially important issues, as Ann, an academic and

journalist based in the USA, explained:

> *"Right now, in the United States … women journalists who I've spoken to really would love the opportunity to write about white supremacist extremism. But they don't, because of their profound worries about their own personal safety and their families."*

[Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA]

Tiprat, another US based academic, spoke about how the experience was often isolating:

> *"I think that made it much more frightening, and much more harmful, and much more, you know, just anytime you're subjected to something and it's easier to take it personally as though you've done something instead of saying, oh, this is a pattern."*

[Tiprat, Academic based in the USA]

6.3.2. Wider impact of emotional harm

Being exposed to the sorts of violent invective illustrated above inevitably has an impact on many aspects of an individual's life. The long-term psychological consequences were discussed by two women who had been involved in particularly high-profile political campaigns:

> *"And I think that, one of the reasons why I burnt out was my experience that being in politics, in particular in politics in an age of social media, is that you are very much required to have a persona…and that online persona always has to be ready for the battle and the fight that is involved online. I felt like the person that I was having to be was further and further away from who I really was, and that the person the people saw was also not the person that I really was. But I didn't have any choice in it."*

[Klaudia, Politician in Scotland]

> *"Every time I did go into Twitter, which I had to do for work, you would be faced with this absolute wall of abuse. All designed to make you feel crap about yourself and your own abilities. You have to build far greater resilience to deal with that, and I talked quite openly about this at the time, that my fear was, as much as I was*

> *able to give myself the emotional armour to protect myself, what was the price of that. Was it empathy, were you less willing to feel other people's experiences because you'd built up so many barriers to protect yourself from it?"*

[Julia, Politician in Scotland]

The theory of emotional labour, first discussed in Chapter Two, where the "trained management of feeling" (Hochschild, 2012: 24) becomes an intrinsic part of an individual's employment, is evident in the experiences of the women participating in this study. Indeed, the various testimonies presented here suggest that the effort expended on managing the emotional response to online abuse by women in public facing occupations is even greater than the emotional labour demanded in the workplace described by Hochschild (2012); with it subsuming many parts of an individual's existence.

Sophie highlighted the degree of emotional labour that women in public facing occupations undertake, both individually and collectively, to manage the onslaught of online abuse that is received. An important part of Sophie's contribution is the assertion that, just like in the forms of emotional labour Hochschild (2012) discussed in her original study, there is very little recognition of this work.

> *"Somebody needs to be doing this work and the [tech] companies aren't doing it, at least not in any effective ways and so we're all just like picking it up and no one even – no one notices it's getting done… yeah, it's just another form of unpaid women's labour."*

Sophie went on to highlight the inequity of this situation:

> *"The idea of it is to simultaneously acknowledge that it is unfair that we have to think about this… we never talk about the emotional experience of this, we are individually left to be alone with our emotional experiences."*

[Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

One aspect of the barrage of online abuse faced by many women in public facing

occupations is the relentlessness of the situation, which adds to the emotional harm that it

causes, as there is a feeling that it is inescapable.

> *"It's constant and exhausting and that's even you know when you're not engaging, right?"*

[Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

> *"It affects my partner, who wanted to take on everybody who was threatening me and then we couldn't get away from it… No. We just can't get away from it."*

[Karen, Senior Police Officer]

> *"Oh my God, it's twenty-four-seven… it's really, I think it's too much. It's really too much."*

[Jill, Member of Parliament]

In addition to the emotional effort of managing online abuse, dealing with the sheer deluge

of communication received, especially during a 'Twitter storm' of the type analysed in

Chapter Five, is hugely time consuming:

> *"Often I just don't gravitate toward it because I'm like 'do I have the energy to deal with the bullshit today?' …that's like exhausting, honestly."*

[Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

"It was just sort of relentless. I think there was something like seven or eight thousand responses, most of which were negative."

[Samantha, Senior Police Officer]

"It absorbed so much time and energy, it was so difficult to do anything else."

[Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

As Patricia expressed, many women in public facing occupations feel that the need to monitor their online activity is hugely time consuming, and creates a substantial burden, particularly for those often less senior in occupations, who have few support staff (Ward and McLoughlin, 2020). In addition, the fatigue caused by the constant surveillance of social media sites has been linked by some participants to both staff sickness and feelings of 'burn out'.

6.3.3. Repercussions of online abuse on others

The impact of online abuse is not just felt by the individual being targeted. The consequences of unpleasant, and frequently violent invective can spread to family members, staff and even the wider community. The fear that is described in Section 6.2.2.1. is often felt most around the threat that is posed to women's friends and family members, as Peggy explained:

> *"I took my son to an event in the constituency and … I noticed he was standing with his back to the wall by the door and I was like, come over here. And my son said, "I'm just going to stand here", and I said why, and he said, "because if I've got my back to the wall people can't harm me from behind, and if I'm by the door I can escape." And I just wanted to burst into tears that my son feels that way."*

[Peggy, Member of Parliament]

> *"The fear [I had] for my mother was just awful, like truly, truly awful. My stepfather dealt with it. My stepdad's brilliant, but he dealt with it by learning self-defence. Because he was scared, they were scared."*

[Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

> *"Somebody messaged me and said, it serves you right if your daughter gets raped in front of you. They made that physical threat to me and to my family."*

[Agita, Member of the House of Lords]

Some felt that the threat posed to their family was so great, that they put in place

safeguards to protect them:

> *"I spoke to my daughter if I ever had to leave her alone because I was popping out for something, I would say stay in my room, lock the front door, lock the bedroom door and if anyone bursts in, lock the bathroom door and jump out the window. You know, I drilled her into how to escape."*

[Beth, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

> *"And, in a case with a guy… he said, "protect your child, it would be a shame if something happened to him in a few years when he's going to school or something", which was obviously horrible. The fact that he threatened my child … resulted in us having to go and have a conversation with my son's head teacher and my other son's nursery manager, that's not a conversation we wanted to have. So, regardless of the fact that the guy maybe didn't intend to do anything in the physical world, that had an impact on me and my husband in the physical world."*

[Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Threats to family members, whilst more common amongst politicians, were not restricted

solely to this group, with academics, police officers and journalists all recounting similar

episodes:

> *"They've made so many comments about my ethnicity, they've written about my family, my husband, my son…what really bothered me was to see family and friends mentioned on these white supremacist sites, because obviously they didn't ask for any of that…they really didn't."*

[Linda, UK-based journalist]

> *"He sent WhatsApp messages…And the day after he started writing stuff about my mother, that my mother was a horrible person, stupid like me and all that, he did threaten my father rather a lot. I can never listen to those audio messages from that night. But my lawyer says there are a lot to my dad too. And then my lawyer basically said a lot of actual death threats were to me and my father in those audio messages. That was the final incident. That's when the police intervened, and they sent him a formal restriction order."*

[Ranjit, Academic at a European university]

> *"It does have an impact, a really big impact, which I have to watch actually, on my family, particularly on my daughter. She literally searches my Twitter account every day. So, she doesn't just look me up, she looks up what people are saying about me and…she really worries. The long-term effects on people like her are really profound."*

[Sarah, Senior Police Officer]

Several women felt a sense of responsibility for their loved ones being exposed to online

abuse:

> *"Well, I chose to enter public life. I chose to stand for Parliament. They didn't. None of them have chosen to do that. My kids, my grandkids, my staff aren't public figures."*

[Loretta, Member of Parliament]

In July 2017, in a speech which brought the online abuse received by politicians to the

forefront of public attention, the Labour MP for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, Diane

Abbott, read out a sample of the abuse received by her office, during a debate on abuse and

intimidation in UK elections in Westminster Hall (Hansard, 2017). One of the most striking

observations that she made was when talking of the impact of online abuse on her staff

team:

> *One of my members of staff said that the most surprising thing about coming to work for me is how often she has to read the word "nigger." It comes in through emails, Twitter and Facebook.... I accept that male politicians get abuse, too, but I hope the one thing we can agree on in this Chamber is that it is much worse for women. As well as the rise of online media, it is helped by anonymity. People would not come up to me and attack me for being a nigger in public, but they do it online. It is not once a week or during an election; it is every day. My staff switch on the computer and go on to Facebook and Twitter, and they see this stuff.* (Hansard, 2017: Column 159WH)

The experiences Abbott recounted in this debate were familiar to contributors in this

research, who felt a sense of both concern and responsibility for their staff:

> ***"I get really protective. I go really mamma bear about our team. I'm probably more protective of them."***

[Souad, Academic at a UK university]

> ***"I worry about the wellbeing of my staff and actually that's the thing that will break me. The fact that I wasn't there when this bloke broke into the office. It's the only time I think when I've sat in my office in Westminster and I wept because it's me, you know, they're conscripts to this life."***

[Peggy, Member of Parliament]

Once again, the most vitriolic and potentially dangerous attacks were directed at the staff of

politicians based in the more marginal constituencies, where debate was the most heated.

> *"I've always felt really worried… I seriously felt, because of social media, more fearful for their sake. But also the impact on them for having to trawl through it, having to see it all the time, I didn't see half of what they did.*
> *They cared about me, and we were a really strong team. And they saw how hard we were working, and they were getting annoyed about how I was getting treated and how I was being perceived and what they were saying about me*

[Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

> *"We put in place a thing where my staff would take a route into reading my notifications, and it got to the stage where they stopped that because of what it was doing to their mental health. When I spoke to them about how long it would take them to go through it, it was quite clear about that, and we probably should have stopped it earlier than we did actually. But I think because I wasn't seeing it therefore, I wasn't aware and they hadn't seen the difference because it was changing at a time when I really didn't have the capacity anymore, so they wouldn't have necessarily realised that it was suddenly so much worse. I think that for people that have never seen it, it's a kind of a shock … and the work they were having to wade through was taking hours."*

[Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Charmaine, Caroline, and Beth each expressed concern about the impact of online abuse on

new or younger staff members, providing the following illustrations:

> *"For most of my staff, this was their first job in politics, most of them, and either they were pretty young or came from elsewhere. So, they aren't necessarily used to that and so it's hard for them. And so, in a sense, I think that some of the people who probably end up bearing the brunt of the impact of such abuse, are the staff of those who's positions are in leadership or people who are in senior roles like being an MP."*

[Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

> *"So, my staff who are, were amazing, incredible, and protective, they saw all of that [the online abuse]."*
>
> *"My staff's physical wellbeing, because my public, I mean we never published my office address, but they always, and we saw what happened with Jo Cox[13]. They were always with me, and therefore, they were potentially vulnerable. Their emotional wellbeing [was being jeopardised], and it's really hard, to see someone that you work with every day, someone that you're fond of, and I had a very, very close-knit team, for their own mental health. So they became increasingly protective of me, but they were seeing… in order to protect me, they were seeing things that were just awful."*

[Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

> *"I was most concerned about my staff in the constituency office because they're the most vulnerable, and that's where the attacks tended to take place. We're very heavily securitised, especially at the Houses of Parliament, so I was concerned about them."*

[Beth, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

The feelings of being overwhelmed and exhausted discussed in Section 6.2.2.2. were shared

by political staffers, who often found themselves in the front line when dealing with online

abuse:

> *"It was just, it was relentless, it really was relentless, for six months it was relentless."*

[Constanta, Political Staffer]

> *"Especially once she was elected, it was absolutely impossible, because… at that point it was literally…there were hundreds of comments every couple of seconds."*

[Svetlana, Political Staffer]

Svetlana also revealed the impact that the role working for a high-profile politician had:

---

[13] The assassination of Jo Cox, the Labour MP for Batley & Spen, in June 2016.

> *"So, I think it's the fact that it was every single day, it was draining… and I know, for my colleagues, it really did affect their mental health."*

[Svetlana, Political Staffer]

Concern about the impact that receiving online abuse had on others was not limited to family members and staff. An academic working in the field of sexual violence felt a sense of responsibility towards her research participants, when the WordPress website set up for their use was infiltrated by men's rights activists:

> *"Basically a bunch of comments came through from men … who were saying things like 'this research is a waste of time', to things like 'this bitch has no idea' … 'what a cunt'. They even created a YouTube video that seeks to make fun of the research, it was just so odd."*

> *"And then under the YouTube video there were then all of these comments … that weren't directed at me so much as kind of making fun of the research, making fun of the institutions, and then just going off on a bit of a rant about how feminists have lost the plot and are dirty and we bleed everywhere, and you know all kinds of things like that."*

> *"But then I [had]… to disable the comments, because what started to happen was that women that had previously left comments on there saying that they wanted to participate or they were interested in the project … men had started posting underneath their comments, and so those women were being notified.*

> *And someone who commented underneath [a] post, something like, even if this bitch thinks that men just want to, you know, kiss her, hahahaha, you know, how narcissistic can you be. Something that was quite mean, and it was directed at her. The abuse wasn't only directed at me, it started to become directed at the other women that had chosen to participate, or to at least express support for participation."*

[Jacqueline, Academic at a UK university]

An MP in Scotland spoke about the responsibility she felt towards a company in her constituency that became the target for online abuse as a consequence of appearing in a social media post with her:

> *"I did feel terrible because I thought, here's a local business, who's facilitated a visit, and that's what they've got for it."*

[Esther, Member of Parliament]

This was not a unique occurrence, with another MP reporting a similar online attack directed at a volunteer at a local food bank:

> *"There's this lovely guy Roy who runs the food bank, and he's like eighty-six or something, and he, he's not a [name of party], but he does go in to back me and he'll say certain things. They'll say, you know, she's done fuck all, blah, blah, blah, and he'll say oh, no, no, no, she's done X, Y and Z. And then someone will say, you know, what do you know, God I've looked at your profile, I could do what you've done in fifty years in a year. You know, just really nasty. So, this poor old man, and he's lovely. So, I phoned him just to check he was ok."*

[Jill, Member of Parliament].

Sometimes, simply being tagged by a politician caused a member of the public to become the target of online abuse:

> *"So, there's a woman that I met at a mental health event … and she'd written this brilliant thing about how to cope with anxiety and so I retweeted it and said this is brilliant, and she got back to me and said, I'm so flattered that you have retweeted it and what you've said, but could you un-retweet it please because I'm just getting all this abuse… so that's what I did … online abuse doesn't just affect me, it's very much, like classic violence against women and girls, the first thing that they have to try and do is to isolate you, to stop other people talking to you, to stop people interacting, to make that tedious. And that's literally rule one of a domestic abuser. It's very, very similar."*

[Peggy, Member of Parliament]

As Peggy emphasises, the repercussions faced by women interacting with politicians on Twitter, evidenced here by an individual requesting to be removed from prominence, provides another parallel with the silencing and ostracization that is a recognised feature of gender-based violence (Camp, 2018). This type of harm is pernicious and enduring and illustrates how detriment can be caused to others.

Peggy expressed concern for the wellbeing of members of the public who read or commented on the online abuse that was directed at her. Recounting the experience of meeting a constituent who was under the mistaken belief that she had called a section of voters 'stupid', an accusation that she had proved to him was incorrect:

> *"And he was like, well that's not what I was told. I was told this, this, and this …*
> *and I read this on the internet, I read that. So, directly, he was harmed by that,*
> *because he is not a well person, so he was harmed by it. So, it's not just harming*
> *me, it is harming vulnerable people who, the people who are doing it claim to*
> *represent. Whereas all I want to do is help these people. And so, I offered, on a*
> *number of occasions I have dropped all charges against people who have literally*
> *threatened the life of me and my family, because I can see that they are not the root*
> *of the harm. They are a product of it, just as I am, and they are a victim of it just as*
> *I am a victim of it."*

[Peggy, Member of Parliament]

When viewed as a whole, the testimony provided here reveals the scale of harm being wreaked on women across public facing occupations. The following quote from Kerry, encapsulates the feelings of many of the women spoken to about the emotional harm inflicted by online abuse:

"It doesn't really matter who you are, as long as you're a woman and a politician, people tend to forget that you're a mum, you're a wife, you're a sister, you're a cousin, you're a friend."

[Kerry, Local Councillor]

6.4. Harassment

Whilst equally responsible for causing the sort of emotional harm to the individual and wider community that is discussed above, harassment is nevertheless subtly different. The accounts of online harassment provided here reveal a systematic campaign of intimidation targeted at an individual, which is frequently perpetrated by one person or group. In this way, it has clear parallels with the theories and discussions occurring on gender-based violence outlined in Chapter Two. The harassment dimension of online abuse outlined in this section uses the framing provided by Walklate (1995), which defines sexual harassment as a public manifestation of gender-based violence. Whilst not always overtly sexual, the harassment described here certainly fits within Walklate's (1995) typology, as a form of violence that is precipitated by gender and occurs within public gaze.

6.4.1. Orchestrated attacks

One way that online abuse becomes harassment is when multiple attacks on an individual take place, orchestrated by either an individual or a group. Such attacks are increasingly common and had been experienced by women across the four professions being investigated in this study. Tiprat, an Academic in the US, described what this means in reality:

"Hordes of men, sometimes thousands, coordinate with each other on various online forums, come together to attack a woman."

[Tiprat, Academic based in the USA]

Tiprat's description certainly applies to the situation described by Linda, a journalist in the UK, who finds herself the focus of orchestrated campaigns of harassment whenever she has a book published.

"When my first book came out, in 2017, which is on gender, I did get some sexists and misogynists who targeted me a little bit. But it was when my latest book came out last summer that I got a huge amount of abuse from racists online. A community of people online started to mobilise. One of them made a YouTube video of me, where he, so I'm of Indian heritage, he pretended to be Indian and imitated, tried to imitate me, pretended he was interviewing me, but he played me himself, and that got taken down because there were a lot of complaints. But he put it back on to BitTube, another platform, not YouTube."

[Linda, UK-based journalist]

Linda was not the only research participant to have been the focus of such malign activity. Sarah recounted her experiences of harassment, both experienced by her personally, and those that she had been made aware of in an operational capacity:

"At a countrywide level, whereas before there was social media … you could have an instance where somebody would abuse somebody in the street it would be a one on one, or a one on five, or a one on ten intervention, when it happens online, so many more people can see it and therefore it becomes a much bigger thing more quickly. So, I think it has a bigger impact on victims because they think they've been more widely humiliated."

[Sarah, Senior Police Officer]

"The people who do it know that they are chasing you to your very marrow. Everything you do, they are chasing you all the time and never leaving you alone. And the 'pile-ons', in inverted commas, are exactly designed to make an individual feel persecuted and overwhelmed. There's no question in my mind about that. Then when they think they've done their job, they back away."

[Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

The phenomenon of multiple people orchestrating an attack was similarly experienced by

Linda, this time via a website for supporters of white supremacy:

"Well, the community of people who organise around this kind of intellectual racism, scientific racism, they are quite small and they're very global, so they all know each other. In my last book, I did write about the rise of the far right and some of these individual figures, so they targeted me as a result of that…then there was a lot of stuff on white supremacist websites, mainly in the US, and that doesn't really stop, that seems to be ongoing."

[Linda, UK-based journalist]

The perpetrators of orchestrated campaigns of harassment were not only drawn from Far-

Right organisations. They also emanated from small, locally based groups, particularly in

marginal parliamentary constituencies, where election campaigning was especially intense.

"What was really damaging, and I regret never really getting a handle on…I don't know if I could, was community groups. So, there would be like [village name] Uncensored, a community, gossip Facebook site, and a similar group that covered [local town] and the admin on those would be horrendous and if any of our members went on to defend me or push back, they got blocked, their comments were deleted, and they were blocked. So, all this stuff was going to thousands of people, like she's blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and it was just like, where has this come from. I've never met these people. All I've done is try and help people with their casework, try and be a good local MP."

[Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

"Sometimes things got to such a level of vitriol, so then you think there's probably some forum somewhere already where somebody's posted the link and they kind of almost like agree to gang up, and I think that is what the behaviour is like.   And I don't know what was on those horrible forums, but I can't help but feel that it is more that people are being radicalised and egged on by others in a way that is much more than a random group of friends that meet down the pub. People gravitate towards others that are like them, so the people who are most extreme find others who are extreme."

[Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

"There would be insults, so, if I did a media appearance, there would be occasionally, and you realise afterwards that sometimes this was orchestrated by troll armies, so people would put the message out on their Facebook and then everyone would come off Facebook and pile on to Twitter to attack me. Some of which were accounts that only had two followers and had literally been set up in order to harass and insult."

[Beth, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Whether organised by groups with a well-financed, well-organised network, or more organically created, where individuals sharing similar viewpoints 'pile on' to add to the abuse being directed at an individual, the one thing that such orchestrated activities share is the ability to mobilise at speed, use multiple platforms, and exert a significant amount of pressure and distress upon an individual (Thompson and Cover, 2021):

"A video on Facebook doesn't stay on Facebook. It goes to Instagram, and it goes to WhatsApp, and then it went to Twitter."

[Souad, Academic at a UK university]

"There's also a kind of abuse that I think is the hardest to get people to pay attention to, which is a relentless deluge of like negative content from lots and lots of accounts. Each individual person can look at their individual tweet and be like 'I

am just criticising you', but when you experience it from hundreds and hundreds of people, and it's organised online… it's just harassment."

[Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

"There's certainly good evidence that online people … at the really nasty end, you know, by finding other people, someone who may have just sat, before the internet, just sat in their own bedroom and thought dark thoughts but now they find other people around the world thinking in similar ways and be affirmed and strengthened by that probably does create more of a physical risk."

[Maria, Member of the House of Lords]

"It first became noticeable, I mean in an organised way, it was clearly organised, that was the thing that made it worse, the organised nature of it. That was what changed."

[Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Peggy described the scale of a typical campaign of harassment:

"It's not just like abuse, it's harassment because it's thousands of messages. … I have a man who has sent me thousands and thousands of emails, like proper, genuine harassment. Originally, when I reported that to the police they went and told him not to do it, to pack it in, and it made it worse. And it is deeply misogynistic, deeply racist stuff that this man sends me It is just horrendous. Absolutely horrendous. And, when I say thousands, I mean it … on one occasion he sent me in twenty minutes a hundred and twenty emails."

[Peggy, Member of Parliament]

Wendy and Simone each provided examples of orchestrated campaigns of online harassment, illustrating how politicians at both a local and national level can be targeted for abuse:

"He routinely will post screenshots of my profile and tell people to go and like give me abuse basically, that's what he does. And he's got hundreds of thousands of followers. And basically what he does, the thing that I reported was again he had screenshotted my profile on the tweet I put out, he blocked me so I can't see it, I just notice a spike in abuse … and then I'll ask someone to go check his profile and yeah, he'd screenshotted me."

[Wendy, Local Councillor]

"So, for me it doesn't necessarily bother me if someone swears at me. That I can take. But it's when it's a sustained and repeated tirade, that I think it becomes abuse. There has been… there's one guy in particular who basically was responding to every single tweet I put out, with something incredibly derogatory."

[Simone, Member of Parliament]

Rose described how some pile-ons can emerge from nowhere, seemingly sparked by a

misunderstood or throwaway comment.

"And actually, what I got was a massive pile on, to the point where I did something I've never done before which is, I protected my [Twitter] account for a few days. There wasn't a sustained trolling or a sustained campaign. It wasn't coordinated. It was just a massive pile on of people, a lot of them repeating things that had already been said. If you dare say, [something is] not as clear cut as that, then you're immediately… they'll pile on and start. And otherwise rational people tell you you're just like cruel and heartless and what harm can it do."

[Rose, Academic based in the USA]

Contributors felt that such attacks were still harmful, and had a detrimental impact upon

the individual, because they still utilised time and energy, and were ultimately a distraction

from existing workloads:

"We need an understanding of ok, this is what this is, this is why this is not benign, this is why this seemingly non-abusive pile on is in fact abuse."

[Rose, Academic based in the USA]

"On certain topics, people pile on, so you know, groups of… and I've had that happen to me a couple of times, groups of racists from across the world, you know, it can happen at any time. You look at something you posted ages ago and suddenly one very influential person on Twitter picks it up and suddenly all their followers are piling on and there's nothing you can do about that, it's just happening."

[Linda, UK-based journalist]

As has been illustrated in the literature (e.g. Tariq and Syed, 2018), the experiences of women of colour are frequently the most extreme. This was certainly the experience of Kerry, who felt that her intersecting identities made her a target for harassment.

"Because I'm a woman, because I'm Black, because I wear a hijab, if you escalate it then they would just come out from all over the place and I feel, I have that fear of these great boxes I'm ticking. One of them is going to be the target, and then obviously the other two would come on board as well."

[Kerry, Local Councillor]

It is important to acknowledge the difference between the sending of individual malicious tweets, and an orchestrated campaign that may involve many people from across the world. This is a differentiation that is not always made, and consequently, the seriousness of attacks of online abuse can be overlooked, or incorrectly described as a 'spat', rather than an organised hate campaign (Salter, 2018).

'Doxxing' is the term that describes a form of "online abuse where a malicious party harms another by releasing identifying or sensitive information" (Snyder et al., 2017: 432). Whilst originally a hallmark of the Gamergate scandal in the USA, which saw the personal details of many women working in and writing about the computer gaming industry released with malicious intent (Salter, 2018), doxxing has become an all-too-common feature of online abuse.

The following contributions relate directly to the experience of being 'doxxed', illustrating that geographical boundaries prove no barrier to those intent on perpetrating online abuse:

> *"Oh, a couple of years ago … I was doxxed … by an account in the States, and they linked to a company that, when my husband was self-employed, they thought they'd put my home address, but it was actually our old address on a website in the States."*

[Michelle, Journalist based in the UK]

> *"Women are doxxed collectively. So, people [are] sharing our private information for the purpose of malice and using that in a threatening way."*

[Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA]

The literature confirms that the aim and consequence of orchestrated attacks, 'pile ons' and doxxing is to silence women, whether in prompting them not to comment on controversial topics, remove their social media accounts or shut down their blogs (e.g. Searles et al., 2020; Citron, 2014). Removing the opportunity for women to engage in free speech, risks ensuring that the only voices that are heard are those that are white, male and privileged (Phillips, 2012).

6.4.2.   Protective measures employed by women to protect themselves against harassment

Just as women have long had to employ various measures to protect themselves against the they have faced in the physical world (Wise and Stanley, 1987), similar measures are frequently necessary online. Sophie described the measures that she had to take to protect herself against doxxing attacks:

"We actually delayed the launch of the project so that we could take some time to lockdown our information online. It took an entire weekend to scrub my address from the internet. One of the things people don't understand is the amount of labour that is required… Like the tax. Like if you want to speak online and not be threatened, the amount of labour that it requires. And money, you know I pay an annual service to keep scrubbing my address from the internet, right?"

[Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

Linda, who discovered that her personal information had been distributed across several white supremacist websites, attempted to safeguard her privacy in order to reduce the risk to her safety. However, she found this an impossible task:

"It's quite difficult. There's not really anything I can do about it. I did, for the white supremacist website that listed all my family background and my parents' names and my old address and my husband's name and my son's name on their website, I did ask Google, I put in a request with Google to get that page taken down, but they wouldn't take it down, so there's not really anything I can do."

[Linda, UK-based journalist]

The work that Sophie and Linda describe having to undertake to protect themselves has clear parallels with the safety work that women are obliged to take against public sexual harassment (Vera-Gray, 2018).

This appeared to be a particular problem for academics. This group of women may have been more aware of their need for safety work, because they were less likely to have the protective barrier provided by a staff team.   This often left them feeling isolated and at risk. (See Chapter Seven). Numerous examples of safety work undertaken to alleviate both the likelihood and impact of online abuse were offered by the contributors to this study. These

examples broadly fit into two categories: the safety work undertaken to protect oneself and

one's work; and the safety work undertaken to protect children and other family members:

> *"I hid my pregnancy. I was on the news at eight and a half months pregnant and I hid my belly under a table. So, I entirely hid my pregnancy on social media."*

[Christie, Academic at a UK university]

> *"I try very hard when I do any media. Like I don't do it at my house. You just won't believe how many journalists have said, oh, can we interview at your house, can we film you at your home? I'm like, no!"*

[Souad, Academic at a UK university]

> *"There's filters on all the stuff on my website… on my emails, so even my Twitter account has muted certain words, so I won't see it. Most of us have taken our own protection levels to say, seriously."*

[Emma, Academic at a UK university]

Emma felt that the safety work she employed was an inevitable consequence of speaking

out. This has parallels with the notion of a 'tax' being paid by women for using their voices,

described earlier in this chapter.

> *"If it means I can continue my online presence, continue to live my online life without seeing stuff on a regular basis, that's something I can live with. Is it enough? Of course not."*

[Emma, Academic at a UK university]

"I don't have my personal account linked into my work accounts. So I've got a Twitter account, I've got an Instagram account which is with friends, but I don't share those two things, I try and keep, I guess because of what I work on, my actual personal life off the internet."

[Jacqueline, Academic at a UK university]

Jacqueline went on to explain how the safeguards women employ in their online activity

mirrors the actions taken in the offline environment, a point that was echoed by Ann, and

which emphasised the global nature of this kind of protective toil:

"The sort of thing women are doing online when they're having to use these platforms to communicate messages around feminism or violence or anything that's going to be likely to encourage, this kind of [abusive] behaviour. We do that work online, habitually without even thinking about it."

[Jacqueline, Academic at a UK university]

"So, what I generally recommend is that [women behave online] in the same way that women adapt to threats offline, to the degree that we don't even think about it, right? Like most women don't think about it, it's just part of their daily routines. They don't do certain things, and I hate that, I understand the costs of that level of vigilance, whether it's conscious or not."

[Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA]

Some women felt that the measures that they had to employ to protect themselves and

their loved ones from online harm were explicitly undermined by their employer, or by

others within their occupational sphere:

"You're just constantly negotiating. Like, if you are someone who's speaking publicly at a conference, you then ask can you take this photo in a certain way, and

the amount of times I was at a public engagement and said please only photograph me straight on."

"And then, they put it on their social media feed, and I have asked people to take things down and then I've also had to negotiate this weird space where some people say, well what if I post it as an Instagram story, so it won't be traceable either, and if we also cut off part of your baby's face. And you end up… because I think actually, definitely with the kind of work that I do, there's people who really want to almost exploit the fact that I'm working and have a baby attached, and it looks good on them."

[Christie, Academic at a UK university]

Just like academics, local politicians mostly work alone, and rarely have a staff team to support them or to triage their social media activity. The measures that Wendy had taken to protect her young family were similar to those taken by Jacqueline:

"I've just had a baby. I won't put my child's picture online. I'll make sure that her face is always hidden. I'm very specific about not tweeting my location and things like that."

[Wendy, Local Councillor]

6.4.3. Illustrating the link between online harassment and gender-based violence

As discussed in Chapter Two, social media platforms and other technological resources are often harnessed in order to facilitate or perpetuate a campaign of gender-based harassment that originates in the offline space. Ranjit shared her experience:

"He started with the insults, very early, with the name calling and all that. That's when I started receiving hundreds, and I mean hundreds of messages, initially only WhatsApp, and then he moved onto other platforms, of messages every night, saying that I was horrible, and he wanted to get rid of me and I was a prostitute. He used to do it, well I cannot say every night because I remember some nights that he didn't do it, and I felt wonderful in the morning because I didn't wake up to a

hundred messages, insults, you know. And when he realised that I wasn't answering his messages, I wasn't paying attention… that's where the real abuse started. So I had two violations of my personal data, my email and my Twitter account. In my Twitter account he found private conversations. So he found this conversation, has taken this conversation, taken screen shots of those, and published those on his Facebook."

Ranjit's description of the abuse she suffered illustrates once again how perpetrators often use multiple platforms to disseminate online abuse (Rohlinger and Vaccaro, 2021). Within this account, it is also possible to see how the abuse was emotionally harmful:

"This was a crescendo, it was a continuous, like a growth of these messages every night. Til the final episode was on 16 July when I woke up to twelve new voice messages. I never listened to them. There were also eighty-six written WhatsApp messages. But the other thing which I learned from that time also is I had blocked him on Facebook a long time before…WhatsApp was the only possible social media to harass me."

[Ranjit, Academic at a European university]

6.5.   Threat

Unlike some of the other elements of online abuse discussed in this chapter, the overwhelming majority of threats are overt, and specifically designed to provoke fear. It is within this dimension that online abuse most closely aligns with gender-based violence.

In an echo of the gender-based violence that occurs in the physical space, the threats made online can take a multiplicity of forms.   The different types of threat received by the women engaged in public facing occupations who were interviewed as a part of this study are illustrated in Figure 6.3.
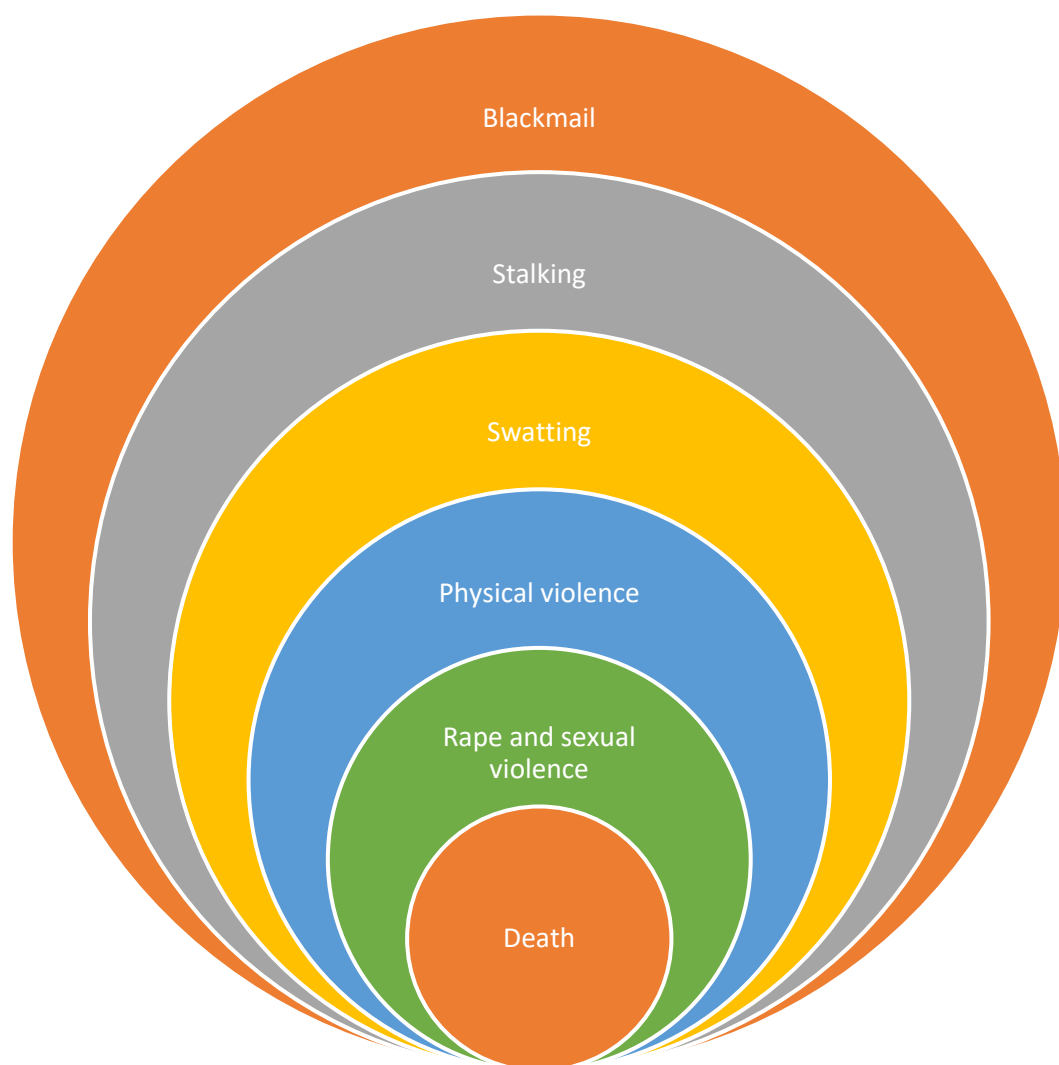
Figure 6.3: Types of online threats directed at women in public facing occupations

Academics were the group most likely to receive online attention that they defined as akin to stalking, whilst politicians were the occupational group that received the most death threats and threats of physical violence. Journalists featured in most of the threat types at a relatively low level, except for rape and sexual harm, where they were prominent targets. Police officers were not routinely targeted for this type of online abuse, with the data suggesting that they were more likely to receive online abuse criticising their appearance, competence, and integrity.

The threats made towards women varied by country, with women based in the USA more

likely to report having received certain types of threat (such as blackmail and swatting),

which suggests that some of the threats posed by online abuse are potentially more

extreme in the USA than the UK.

These observations must be treated with a degree of caution, given the small sample sizes

involved in the project. Furthermore, and as discussed more fully in Chapter Nine, there is a

disparity in the numbers of participants represented from each occupational group, with

more politicians recruited than other occupational categories.

6.5.1. Blackmail

Only one woman interviewed as part of this study reported having received online

communication that contained a threat of blackmail:

> *"I've had threats along the lines of … we have your private password information*
> *and will be hacking your accounts unless you do X. That sort of thing. I had a very*
> *persistent series of messages that were very threatening, 'why aren't you answering*
> *me, I have access to your accounts, I'm sorry but now we're going to have to take*
> *over your accounts'."*

[Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA]

However, a reference to the offence of blackmail did appear in one of the abusive tweets

sent to the politician Tracy Brabin during the Twitter storm analysed as part of Chapter Five.

Blackmail also features in the literature on online abuse. Henry and Powell (2015) include

blackmail as one of the range of behaviours in their typology of technology-facilitated sexual

violence and harassment, explaining how "email, the internet and mobile phone

technologies are being used as a tool to harass, intimidate, humiliate, coerce and blackmail women" (Henry and Powell, 2015: 115). Whilst Henry and Powell's (2015) focus is, like this research, on the role of online abuse in gender-based violence, their findings relate to intimate partner violence, specifically revenge porn; as opposed to women who receive online abuse as a consequence of their roles in public facing occupations, and the risk of blackmail appears smaller amongst those interviewed in this study. Similarly, work by Jane (2017a) reports the growth of blackmail related to revenge porn from former male partners; and the emergence of rape video blackmail, where a woman is subjected to sexual violence which is filmed, and with the victim then blackmailed with the threat of the video being released on the internet.

6.5.2. Stalking

For some, using social media sites in the course of their work had led to them becoming the target of behaviour that is akin to stalking:

> *"On Facebook I was posting issues surrounding social justice and racism and a guy contacted me privately… and then he started calling my office. And then he Googled me, found my office phone number from the department website…And then called me a couple of times just to chat about race. And that was, that was bad. I almost completely stopped answering my office phone because of it. It wasn't a face-to-face thing, but that was the first time that I've felt threatened, felt that my safety was threatened because of what I had said online."*

[Eileen, Academic at a European university]

> *"The worst situation I had was with one particular man who was prolific on social media within my area of interest, and I started receiving inappropriate messages privately, and pictures and… at the time, I didn't realise that what was happening was abusive and … exploitative, and manipulative, actually. Obviously, I slowly, I unravelled what was going on and realised that it was, what made me really upset was I found out he was also doing it to other women, who were far more vulnerable than me. It's been really difficult and it's an ethical dilemma about what to do*

about it, really. It was really unpleasant, and quite targeted, and because his account was anonymous, he got away with it."

[Carol, Academic at a UK university]

"I've had a couple of problems with stalkers. When I was working in Wisconsin in 2011 - I had a couple of right-wing folks, who knew I was working on the ground during protests, and set out to find me, set out to find my home … and in one case, someone posted a picture of someone who wasn't me and said it was me, and … to find me in a crowd to harass me."

[Judith, Journalist based in the USA]

6.5.3. Swatting

Swatting is the term applied to a crime which is predominantly found in the USA and remains relatively unheard of in the UK. It describes the act of "falsely reporting people to the police so that SWAT teams descend on their homes" (Lukianoff, 2015: 48), and is most commonly used as a tactic in intimate partner violence (Wu, 2015). Whilst the incidence of swatting events amongst the contributors to this study was rare in comparison to other threats meted out online, the act contains such a huge potential for harm that it is worth recording here.

Furthermore, and analogous to other forms of online abuse, there is evidence that the threat posed by swatting is greatest amongst women of colour and other minority groups:

"I have called my police department to say there is the chance that I might be swatted. And that can be very dangerous and violent. Last year a man was killed when someone, when the police shot the man in his own house because someone called in a false report. If you are in a neighbourhood where most of the people are Black, in the United States for example, swatting a target can get many people

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potentially hurt, killed or jailed. It's just the way the bias works. It's just much more dangerous in a neighbourhood marginalised already."

[Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA]

Despite the danger posed by swatting, both participants who were most concerned about becoming a target for the offence had found it hard to make their local police departments take their concerns seriously:

"And I called them up [the police] and I was like look, here's the situation and they literally said… we have nowhere in our system to record this like – cause I wanted to say to them like if we get a call trying to send a SWAT team to my house like… ask some questions. Right? (laughs)"

[Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

"When I called the police, I had to explain to them at that point what swatting was, and why if someone called in a distress call with my address, they needed to understand that's what may be happening."

[Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA]

6.5.4. Physical violence

In contrast to the discussion on swatting, threats of physical violence remain an all-too-common feature of online abuse and were similarly the most common threat experienced by participants in this study:

"The landscape of online misogyny and the real threat of that type of violence moving off screen and on to the streets has heightened in the last couple of years.

So, although I [now] get less abuse, I'm also more scared about my physical safety."

[Christie, Academic at a UK university]

"Over the last three years or so, I've had all of these attacks, malicious communications, that I think there's been four cases of people found guilty. Suddenly they've got a platform so, things like posting a picture of a gallows with somebody hanging and my name next to it, the thing with guns… we've had… and this is to do with a court case that is ongoing, is just where one person was trying to incite people to find out where I lived, it's just absolutely horrendous.

[Loretta, Member of Parliament]

"Depending on whatever they need to be focused on at the time, the harassment is varied from Islamophobic because my name sounds like it's Arab, … if I write about race, it might be about hanging or lynching … a lot of pornography, which takes the form of either images or video.

[Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA]

During the election [of December 2019] I received some of the worst abuse of anyone. Someone said they wanted to poison me with Ricin. And then they threatened to lock me in my house and bomb me and film me.

[Jill, Member of Parliament]

"There's a fella that got three month's suspended sentence a few months back for making a threat on private messenger to me. He sent me a private message on Facebook, calling me a fucking tramp, and a slapper, and then threatened me… he said something else, he called me a couple of sentences of abuse and then he said, 'you're fucked'."

[Sherrie, Member of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly]

"So, one example that stands out, was when somebody said they wanted to see me on the end of a bayonet. That made me feel very uneasy."

[Julia, Politician in Scotland]

As the awareness of online abuse targeted at women in public facing occupations has

grown, those most intent on causing harm via the distribution of online threats of violence

appear to have become more circumspect in their use of the various platforms. Many

perpetrators are now careful not to use unmistakably violent terms, as they realise that the

use of such language can attract the attention of filters or more formal regulatory sanctions

from the various online platforms:

> *"Abuse is… a lot more violent, a lot smarter, so you know, they probably don't use words anymore, right, because they know we'll get them banned off the platform."*

[Souad, Academic at a UK university]

Some of the most dangerous offenders do not use violent terminology at all, as Sue

explained:

> *"One of our biggest challenges with social media is context, because within the domestic violence space, often the threat is only really understood if you know the partner and you know the history. So, for example, an abusive partner might say 'on the day that I kill you, I'm going to deliver you roses'. And so, they might post a picture of roses on her Facebook page or tag her on Twitter. She's terrified. But that doesn't violate any of the terms and conditions of the social media platforms, because it's a picture of roses."*

[Sue, Academic based in the USA]

This highlights once again, the importance of context, and how it is essential to have

increased awareness of the potential for harm widely communicated to those responsible

for online platforms, law enforcement and legislation.

6.5.5. Sexual violence

Arguably the clearest manifestation of misogyny in online abuse is exhibited through the delivery of threats of rape and sexual violence (Jane, 2016), which have become an all-too-common feature of online interaction for many women in public facing occupations. The research undertaken by Amnesty International (2017), coupled with testimony from the likes of Diane Abbott MP (Hansard, 2017) was echoed in the empirical research undertaken for this study:

> *"The first time that I ever really felt that I suffered from it [online abuse] was very, very, very graphic descriptions of how people would harm and rape me. Going into really specific details about how they would do that, as if they'd really thought about it. And it's never really gone away."*

[Peggy, Member of Parliament]

> *"Depending on what I'm working on, I get a lot of threats. I should be explicit that that includes like rape threats and death threats."*

[Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA]

> *"I get rape threats… I have no tolerance of them."*

[Agita, Member of the House of Lords]

Once again, the issue of race and gender intersects in the abuse that is generated when women speak out in the public sphere:

"[Four years ago], I wrote an article in a newspaper… that article has been shared like a hundred thousand times. It's been quoted, picked up etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, by lots of press across the world. It was about a movie … but within twenty-four hours … I was inundated with rape threats and death threats, and frankly, most people who write for newspapers don't have to worry about it. I do. And that's not because I'm writing for a newspaper, it's because I'm a migrant woman of colour in Britain, daring to criticise a British film. And that's the reality of it."

[Emma, Academic at a UK university]

The presence of online abuse is viewed as so predictable by some women that they have mechanised routines to manage it:

"It's almost funny because I have this standing joke with my literary agent, that I keep a file on my computer. It's my standard death threats and rape threats file."

[Emma, Academic at a UK university]

6.5.6. Death threats

Whilst still the rarest form of threat made against women in politics (Krook, 2020), and despite being an offence under section 16 of the Offences Against the Person Act (1861), the Protection from Harassment Act (1997), section one of the Malicious Communications Act 1988, and section 127 of the Communications Act 2003 (CPS, 2016); several contributors to this study had received death threats via online channels:

"I got stuff saying, 'she should be hung up', 'she should be in a body bag'. There was a stupid article [in a national newspaper] about how Brexit was going to lead to a crisis in body bags because they were made in the EU, so they were saying 'perfect for our MP' and all that sort of stuff."

[Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

> *"But I haven't reported it [online abuse], even death threats. It's quite normal for journalists, I have to say, and I've had death threats in the past, even before I became an author, when I was working for the BBC."*

[Linda, UK-based journalist]

> *"There's someone who wanted to… threatened to kill me with a machete."*

[Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Whilst the women interviewed for this study showed an enormous degree of resilience when faced with threats of abuse, violence and death, there is no doubt that receiving communication of this nature had an impact, which often endured long after the event:

> *"There are certain things that I now associate with that first death threat… I wore an Apple watch up until that point and my Twitter alerts, notifications came through on my watch. I haven't had my watch on since that weekend, because death threats flashing up at you is not really something that …I don't want to wear that watch again."*

[Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

The death of Jo Cox was an enduring topic within the interviews. Every participant without exception (including those based outside the UK) discussed the assassination of the Labour MP for Batley and Spen in West Yorkshire, by neo-Nazi Thomas Mair on 16 June 2016. Whilst evidence given at his trial showed that Mair had used the internet to both gather information about Cox and to plan his crime (Liem and Geelen, 2019), there is no indication

that Mair targeted Cox for online abuse prior to committing murder. Nevertheless, for all

the women interviewed, the death of Jo Cox remains a shocking reminder of the

vulnerability that they share. This was best summed up by Phyllis, who was a close friend

and Parliamentary colleague of Jo's:

"Listen… there was a reason it was Jo that was killed, you know. They didn't pick on a strapping six-foot bloke, did they? They went for a woman who dared to be strong and ferocious and brilliant and brave. They silenced her the only way they could. Misogyny runs through absolutely all of it.

[Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

The threat of death remains an ever-present danger for women in many public facing

occupations. Despite this, women are still prepared to hold public office, irrespective of the

risks that they face:

"I'm much more scared of a world where this [online abuse] stops people coming forward than I am scared of a world where people come forward and might suffer it. I'm much more frightened of the bullies winning and taking over the playground. I'm willing to give my life to that. I'm much more frightened to, to sit down than I am to stand up because what sort of world would my kids grow up in if people don't keep putting themselves forward?"

[Peggy, Member of Parliament]

6.6.   Criticism of appearance and other physical characteristics

6.6.1.   Physical characteristics

The Twitter storms analysed in Chapter Five demonstrated that a significant amount of the

abuse women receive online focuses on their appearance and other physical characteristics.

The dominance of physical characteristics as a focus for the content of online abuse is further corroborated by the evidence analysed here. This denigration is most pronounced in three areas: physical appearance, voice, and age.

> *"I get gendered hate speech; I get anti-Semitic hate speech and I get fatphobic hate speech. Right?"*

[Judith, Journalist based in the USA]

6.6.2. Criticism of appearance

The literature on online abuse recognises that a focus on appearance is often central to the abuse that women receive (e.g. Backe, et al., 2018), primarily as a consequence of sexism and a wider misogyny (Jennings and Coker, 2019), which endures within public facing organisations with a strong occupational culture, such as policing (Steinþórsdóttir and Pétursdóttir, 2021).

This appears to be particularly applicable to women in public facing occupations, whose occupational roles routinely expect them to interact with the media, or to have their image featured on publicity materials for their employer:

> *"It's just an obsession with commentating on how you look all the time. I've had a group of trolls who became really obsessed with my front teeth. I've got really wonky front teeth, and every time I post anything, they did a zoom in of my teeth and circled them and commented on them. It was really quite bizarre."*

[Sarah, Senior Police Officer]

> *"I did something on ITV, and someone commented on my makeup. It seems minor, it's not really minor…. I think it's just a reality that people feel they can make a comment on your life, twenty-four-seven. The fact that they feel they can comment*

> *on that is, is… or you're fat, you're fat or you're thin, people commenting on my weight, I mean really, really?"*

[Jill, Member of Parliament]

> *"People who have a track record of disagreeing with you, criticise your appearance… I bet there wasn't a single word about a man and what they were wearing."*

[Loretta, Member of Parliament]

As with other forms of online abuse, the targeting of women in public facing occupations for criticism or ridicule of their appearance was both frequent and unpredictable:

> *"Just last night I had a guy email me insults about my weight, and then a really offensive, what I assume was an offensive picture, I didn't look at it."*

[Judith, Journalist based in the USA]

One contributor mused that some women were targeted for online abuse more than others, drawing on her own experience:

> *"I haven't had much. Well, apart from the odd comment telling me I'm ugly, or that I'm stupid. But I'm not like the others, like Jess Phillips or Diane Abbott. I don't know how some people get chosen as the target for abuse. Is it because they are younger and prettier than me?"*

[Agnes, Member of Parliament]

Sometimes, the focus on a woman's appearance appeared to have more malevolent intent, appearing to be driven by a desire to discredit or humiliate:

"Then there are the groups that are about appearance … when pictures have been taken of me in Downing Street they try and zoom in on my badge and try and catch you out to see if you've exposed something that you shouldn't expose, either about your body or the post."

[Sarah, Senior Police Officer]

"And they've got [a photo] where I'm kind of looking down, and they took a screenshot that's all blurry, and made it look like I'm asleep in the Chamber, and then spread this thing that I was. And of course, other people start picking stuff like this up, so it just became… it was horrific."

[Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

"Nor did I think it's possible that my hair would be discussed as much as it was. And then it manifested in that people felt the need to complain about me, make a complaint about me to the offices of the Police and Crime Commissioner. The bit that I remember more than anything else was that people said I've got no standards and I was letting the police down by the way I was dressed."

[Karen, Senior Police Officer]

The abuse that Karen referred to was also mentioned by other police officers in their

discussions about online abuse:

"How dare they judge her by her appearance when she's utterly capable and able, and I felt very indignant about that. It was further evidence to me of the venom that there is and the incapacitating nature of that type of trolling."

[Stacey, Senior Police Officer]

The outrage articulated by Stacey on Karen's behalf evidences both the existence and

benefit of mutual support networks frequently created by women in public facing

occupations; an issue that is discussed further in Chapter Seven.

The gendered focus on appearance is a global issue, and not one limited to the UK or USA:

> *"I will never necessarily be acknowledged for who I really am, … I've lived in several different countries so I feel like my identity will always be pegged at that level of how I look rather than who I am."*

[Nicole, Academic at a UK university]

Once again, the experiences of women of colour and minority groups were likely to generate even more abuse of this kind. Kerry frequently finds herself receiving racist abuse, instigated by her appearance, as she explained:

> *"I mean, I think I've received more due to the fact that … I'm a woman and Black, I feel that I did get more. But for being a woman … wearing a hijab, I have as well. Something I tweeted came up and I think there was kind of a little bit of a xenophobic thing going on. It was nothing to do with people who care about anti-Semitism or xenophobia. It was just somebody picking on someone with a hijab on."*

[Kerry, Local Councillor]

Smita, who like Kerry, is also a local Councillor, described how, as a Muslim woman, she felt that she had to deal with criticism of her appearance from both sides. Within hours of being elected in a marginal seat, she found herself on the receiving end of unpleasant comments from men within the Muslim community:

> *"It [online abuse] got all negative because of me and my appearance. So, I wear my headscarf as a turban … and … I wear makeup. And the pictures that were going round, suddenly there was a huge amount of abuse from men, saying that I'm not covered enough. It really, really got to me in that first week and this was before I'd*

even started, before I'd even gone into the council to do any official work. The hate abuse that I got … just because of what I was wearing, with some people having the view that I was showing my face and I was wearing far too much makeup it was horrible, it was a really, really difficult time."

[Smita, Local Councillor]

In an example that highlights the multi-faceted nature of misogyny, and that criticism of appearance can often hint at a more malign threat, Peggy offered the following example:

"There was a bloke recently, sort of left-wing bloke who said to me that I need fucking to get my teeth fixed, that … a good fucking would fix my teeth."

[Peggy, Member of Parliament]

After losing her seat at the General Election, one former MP remained the target for abuse, as her former staff member explained:

"Another thing as well is they spread awful pictures, which had been photoshopped and made her to look awful, like the implication was that she was a pig or stuff like that. They'd photoshopped the pictures. Some people who were just like, oh, you, again, usual thing, you know, you're a pig ignorant cow, this is what you deserve."

[Constanta, Political Staffer]

One interesting finding to emerge from the interviews was that even positive online interactions often focused wholly on a woman's appearance, rather than what she was saying or the role she was fulfilling, which the individuals concerned found frustrating:

"I had a comment on the back of my telly appearances… people saying, oh, you've had a haircut, why don't you get something more girly and flattering."

[Beth, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

> *"She would write a policy post, but the tweets and responses would be about how they didn't like her hair, or her dress, or her earrings, or her makeup, or the shoes she was wearing."*

[Svetlana, Political Staffer]

This empirical evidence echoes the work of numerous studies that have emphasised how women politicians find their clothing and other aspects of their appearance the focus of much greater scrutiny than their male counterparts (Hayes et al., 2014).

Caroline recalled her experience of speaking in the emergency Parliamentary debate on the use of force in Syria, which took place in April 2018:

> *"Obviously, it was very challenging, and I was in favour, and someone wrote to me asking where my dress was from. I've just given a speech about whether we should deploy troops, and one lady wants to know where my dress is from. So, really? You're not going to ask where a man's suit's from. And they think they're being really supportive, and you're like really?! Did I not actually make a difference to what you're paying attention to?"*

[Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

6.6.3. Criticism of voice

The criticism of a woman's voice as an element of misogyny can be scrutinised at several levels. This chapter examines the criticism of women's voices in two different ways – the criticism of the physical sound of her voice; and in Section 6.3.3. the silencing of women's voices as a deliberate act.

When considering the online abuse related to physical features that is received by women in public facing occupations, a woman's voice is a prominent target. This has echoes with older (pre-internet) research, with Beard (2015) highlighting how public speaking has been

viewed as the very essence of masculinity since (at least) the Second Century AD, emphasising how a deep and powerful voice was frequently perceived as a "defining attribute of maleness" (Beard, 2015: 812). Similarly, the criticism of Margaret Thatcher's voice, which was described as "shrill" (Wilson and Irwin, 2015: 23) when she was elected Leader of the Conservative Party in 1975 (Blundell, 2008), precipitated the now famous intervention by her advisors that led to her undertaking a series of lessons to make her voice seem "firmer and more powerful" (Coffè, 2020: 423). Some have argued that the efforts that were made to modify Thatcher's voice to make her sound "more like a man" (Grebelsky-Litchman and Katz, 2019: 701) were an integral part of her election success (Wilson and Irwin, 2015), with others believing that the distinctive nature of her voice acted as a clarion for the many organisations and individuals who were vehemently opposed to her political agenda. (Shaw, 2018). Whilst the modification of Thatcher's voice is now an integral part of her narrative, few male voices have been subjected to such detailed and enduring public scrutiny.

The intervening decades have not done much to alter the criticism of how women's voices sound. A number of politicians recounted their own experiences, starting with Beth, who shared a time she had featured in the Daily Mail newspaper:

"Quentin Letts did a sketch about me and portrayed me as shrieking."

[Beth, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Whilst Julia recalled receiving online abuse that criticised her in a similar fashion:

"People would comment on my voice being too high, or [that I] speak too fast."

[Julia, Politician in Scotland]

Agita recognised a very gendered difference in the way that women's articulation is perceived:

> *"So, what you get called…the difference in, you know, a man is strong, and a woman is sort of breathy or shouty … and it's like very subtle use of language that I really worry about."*

[Agita, Member of the House of Lords]

As an aside, it is interesting to note that in their analysis of mixed gender presidential campaigns, Grebelsky-Litchman and Katz (2019) found that if women are perceived as too masculine (like Hillary Clinton), voters think they are competent, but dislike them; whilst if they are perceived as too feminine (like Sarah Palin) voters like them but do not believe them to be competent. The explanation offered by this study is that institutionalised misogyny means that women in public facing occupations, whether in politics, policing, journalism or academia, are criticised – on both social media platforms and in traditional media outlets, however they present themselves.

6.6.4. Criticism of age

Age and ageing were also weaponised by perpetrators engaging in online abuse, as the criticism of older women became yet another target for the opprobrium of physical

characteristics. Whilst not as frequent as negative comments made about appearance or

voice in this research, there remained a strand of abuse that sought to disparage women's

competence as they got older:

> *"I mean something about being a woman in a senior position, I think is one thing, rarely do you see that abuse directed at men who just happen to be grey and wrinkly. If there was a senior policeman who was grey and wrinkly, I don't think it'd get mentioned. yet women who are in senior positions, it seems ok to either go, 'cor, she's hot stuff', could be at one end of the spectrum couldn't it, and that would seem appropriate, or at the other end, you know, whatever amount of abuse you want to dish out, as to how somebody looks."*

[Samantha, Senior Police Officer]

This is consistent with the work of Pickard (2020) and Lewis (2020), who both highlight the

castigation of older women as an essential component of modern misogyny; whilst also

echoing the ageist abuse directed at the politician Tracy Brabin, analysed as part of Chapter

Five. Research by Steinþórsdóttir and Pétursdóttir (2021) adds a further dimension to this

area of abuse. In a study that considers the attitudes of serving police officers in Iceland,

Steinþórsdóttir and Pétursdóttir (2021) found that young men, especially those newly

recruited, were the group most likely to hold sexist attitudes towards female colleagues. It

is proposed that this occurs as a consequence of these officers seeking to reassert male

dominance within policing, fearing that any move towards greater equality could pose a

threat to their own occupational advancement (Steinþórsdóttir and Pétursdóttir, 2021).

The experience of Caroline neatly emphasises how the different elements of physical

characteristics are frequently weaponised in online abuse. She highlighted how the anti-

Semitic abuse that she and three parliamentary colleagues had received had targeted

different aspects of their appearance for denigration:

> *"[Individual One] … I mean actually, because [she] got horrendous abuse, awful, awful abuse, and out of everybody got the worst out of all of us, out of all four of us … but [Individual Two] and [Individual Three] get ageist gendered abuse. Right. So, they get a three-level hit, and [Individual Three] is very upfront about that. So, mine will be sexualised; [Individual One's] really was, you know, she's a beautiful woman, so hers would be sexualised, and gendered, but much more sexualised, and racist, but they would bring [Individual Two and Individual Three's] age into it. The men [male Jewish MPs] never got any of it. It was very much about the four women…"*

[Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

6.7. Belittling and undermining of women

Camp (2018) demonstrates how the belittling of victims is an integral part of gender-based

violence within the domestic sphere. This study has confirmed that this is similarly

evidenced in the online abuse that women serving in public facing occupations regularly

receive.

> *"You know nothing, you're just a dafty lassie who couldn't hack it in politics…"*

[Julia, Politician in Scotland]

Julia provides a striking example of the online abuse she received, the purpose of which was

to undermine and belittle her work as a politician. This type of online abuse is different

from other examples that have been provided in this chapter, as it contains no obscenities,

or any other overtly discriminatory tropes that can be identified as abuse by either text filters or human moderators. Nevertheless, this type of malign communication has a clear purpose, namely, to undermine public confidence in women tasked with making important decisions, and consequently it can be hugely damaging. As more than one participant remarked, this type of abuse is pernicious, and is rarely directed at men:

> *"It's like sexism. It's like all the obvious stuff we can deal with, all the obvious bullying, you kind of deal with that. But the problem with all this social media abuse is that so much of it is really low level. You know, just grinding sexism. When you see women on Twitter and they're in positions of authority, or positions of expertise and they're going with my expertise this is this, this and this. And then some fucking bloke will pop up and go, well yes, but really…. and that's a form of abuse."*

[Rose, Academic based in the USA]

> *"You have to balance the benefit of tweeting out and informing people as to what it is that we are up to as an organisation, against being the subject of ridicule, abuse and so on. I think there's this army of armchair warriors, mainly looking out for women who are opinionated and intelligent and an expert and looking to comment in a negative way."*

[Stacey, Senior Police Officer]

> *"There is this awful sense in which women are the easier targets, and I think probably women, there is more of a…an attempt on Twitter to humiliate women than men. Absolutely humiliate them by making them feel worthless."*

[Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

> *"Something I've been subjected to is, and this has been offline as well as online, is 'God this is what happens when you put a woman in charge', type thing."*

[Sarah, Senior Police Officer]

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Agita summed up what she believed were the potential consequences of the incessant

belittling and undermining of women were:

> *"It's like women are worthless, that they have no value, so they can just be raped*
> *and abused and just calling them a fucking cunt online is ok."*

[Agita, Member of the House of Lords]

6.8. Silencing women's voices

The silencing of women's voices as an integral component of misogyny has a long history

(e.g. Beard, 2017; Banet-Weiser, 2018). One example of how online abuse is used in an

attempt to silence women – through criticism of the sounds of their voices – has already

been discussed. This section will consider the concept of silencing in more detail, examining

three ways that it can be exhibited, as illustrated in Figure 6.4.
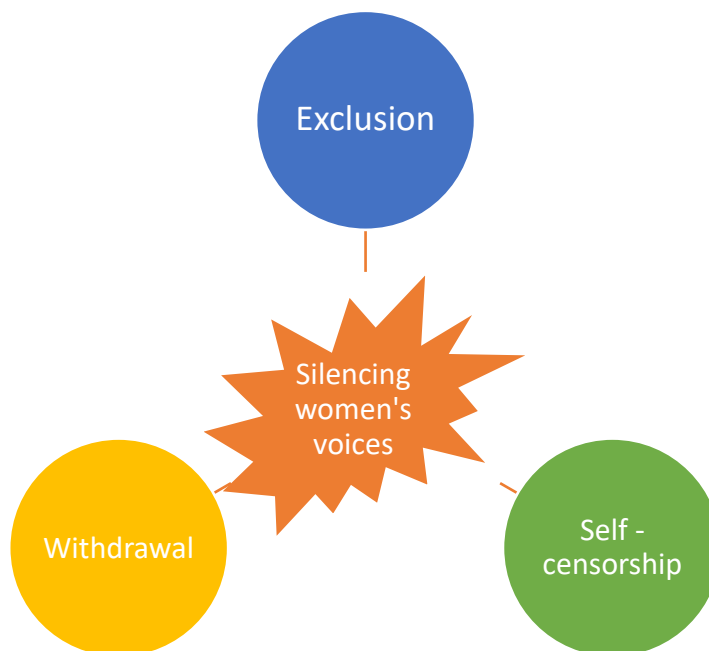
Figure 6.4: Three ways in which the silencing of women is exhibited

As Figure 6.4 illustrates, the act of silencing a woman online can take a variety of forms.

These methods may be overt and unmistakable, as Kerry demonstrated:

> *"Because I have an opinion, he's trying to shut me up. But what happened was, in that panic, you feel helpless, you know? His motivation [for the abuse] was to silence me, to scare me, to say that you're weak."*

[Kerry, Local Councillor]

However, sometimes the bid to silence is more implicit, with the pressure exerted on an

individual to moderate their contribution in the online space:

> *"I think the structural impact is similar to the ways that women have been silenced throughout history. It creates an effect where women are more afraid to speak out, more afraid to put their necks out, more afraid to give opinions, more afraid to occupy political office or positions of authority. And I think that this effect is in tandem with what happens in women's real life lives, where women, they're not heard, or women's voices are seen as though she has a terrible voice."*

[Tiprat, Academic based in the USA]

> *"I think a lot of what they do is to try and discourage you from doing the kind of reporting you do, rather than… I don't know, they may be personal in the stuff they say. Ultimately what they're trying to do is discourage you from covering the topic which is criticising them."*

[Linda, UK-based journalist]

> *"To me there's no difference between online and real life, I mean, all our cities, all our villages, all our roads, all our public spaces are meant to exclude women. So, any space therefore we occupy is despite the best efforts and despite the design. It's not because they were made for us."*

[Emma, Academic at a UK university]

As has been illustrated in the discussion of the other dimensions of online abuse, the impact of being silenced is not experienced equally, with women of colour and other disadvantaged groups more likely to be targeted, replicating their experiences in the offline environment:

> *"So, this is something that I think most of us who, especially a lot of women of colour, were very aware of from day one, and we have been arguing about it and writing about it and blah, blah, blah, blah. Not surprisingly, nobody listens to us. I mean, nobody listens to women, and women of colour even less."*

[Emma, Academic at a UK university]

> *"I mean the structural impact is very clearly that women, people of colour, trans folks, Jews, all of us are hesitant to speak when folks in the majority are not hesitant, right? …and so structurally, it has a silencing effect."*

[Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

> *"I mean it ultimately drives women and people of colour offline and out of the conversation. So much of our political and social discourse takes place online, takes place on our Facebook pages and in the case of, you know, journalists, the abuse is taking place on Twitter. And for so many people, harassment just reaches a point where it's just not worth it, so they end up taking their voice out of the conversation. Which, by the way, is generally the intention, right? Like the idea is to drive women and people of colour offline."*

[Judith, Journalist based in the USA]

One view that emerged from the empirical data was the feeling that women were less likely to be asked to contribute to online discussions, evidencing yet another way that women are being excluded:

"One thing I think can be tricky with social media, is the bias by omission as well, which is a tricky one to prove that they've not actually had a go at you, but you're cut out of the conversation. Or you're cut out of the coverage. And I think that happens to women more often."

[Lauren, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

"Women are much, much more circumspect, in my experience, around their activity, about what they are prepared to share … and what they're prepared to comment on. So, therefore, in my experience it would be that women's voices are quieter."

[Imogen, Senior Police Officer]

When viewed as a whole, the silencing of women has an even greater consequence than just removing the voices of potentially influential women from the online space. For the act of silencing may also prevent women from forming the networks that are essential to both tackling online abuse, and to successfully progress on their chosen career path:

"It absolutely keeps us from entering public conversations or exerting our full power in public conversations, but it also keeps us from connecting with each other, right? And it keeps us afraid of using these tools to connect with each other …to organise, or just to get social support and build connections. Structurally, this kind of harassment keeps us afraid of connecting. Or it creates high costs to pay for attempting to connect."

[Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

"My concern is that there are obstacles, multicultural barriers to women in semi-public authority, and this level of hostility, it intensifies everything. And we already know that girls who have been watching, girls are inhibiting themselves."

[Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA]

The women spoken to in this study revealed how the abuse that they had received, and that

they had witnessed other women in public facing occupations experience, became a

mechanism for self-censorship, and led some women to ultimately withdraw from online

platforms:

I've definitely turned down things because I'm not doing this to get abuse. Or I've minced my words or tone-policed a bit … for sure. And I think also, by being off social media, the type of work I do means that I probably am missing opportunities as well.

[Souad, Academic at a UK university]

"If I tweet out and then people are scornful or sarcastic, then friends and potentially family can see that, and that's an inhibiting factor of and in itself, isn't it?"

[Stacey, Senior Police Officer]

I've been careful, which has avoided a lot of abuse I could have got. But I've also restricted how much I've engaged with online. And as I say, … it's more the limiting element, in that I don't even engage. There are things I wouldn't say because I know I will get attacked.

[Michelle, Journalist based in the UK]

"I just keep my head down. And I'm very clear on that. I'm very careful about what I tweet. There are certain issues I won't touch with a bargepole, even though I have thoughts and opinions, there are certain, oddly enough, there are a lot of feminist issues that even as a feminist I will not talk about in public. Because it's too dangerous. I've been doing this now for eleven years, and from day one it was like, we do not engage in anything controversial because it is too fucking dangerous."

[Rose, Academic based in the USA]

There were participants across all four occupational groups who had chosen to withdraw

from social media, as a result of the online abuse that they had received:

> *"I no longer use Twitter in a professional capacity…because of the online abuse I have received in the past."*

[Anna, Police Officer]

The evidence provided here by Anna highlights an unintended consequence of the police

using social media as a mechanism for communicating with the public (Walby and Joshua,

2021). As O'Connor (2017) confirms, by using online platforms as a way of providing

information, individual officers may find themselves in the position of being "risk

communicators" (O'Connor, 2017: 900), which in turn jeopardises their safety and

wellbeing.

> *"So, the way I handled [online abuse] was, I actually started shutting myself off. What I started doing was when things got loud and messy, and it felt very obvious to me that the landscapes were shifting, I just turned my accounts private."*

[Nicole, Academic at a UK university]

Many women found themselves weighing up whether the benefits they gained from

engaging in the online space was worth the time, abuse and emotional labour it demanded.

> *"There's a couple of MPs I spoke to, [named current Parliamentarian] I think she said when she went on maternity leave, she went off Twitter, and she's never gone back…and I was just like wow! Because actually you don't have to [use social*

networks]. I think now that there's more people just making that conscious choice."

[Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

"Twitter, which I was on until a month ago… discourse there has degraded over time, I think. It's become more and more vitriolic. Abuse has become more and more open. I think partly because the platform allows it. On the day I left I had someone offering to punch me in the throat, and Twitter said it wasn't in violation of their rules, that's when I thought I'm not going to be on this platform. And it just got incessant, it just wouldn't stop that week. And so I came off."

[Linda, UK-based journalist]

"When I withdraw, there's several reasons for it. When it's just like you can't control… it's just too much effort… it becomes a full-time job trying to keep up with your social media presence, and that's not where my interest lies, I just don't have enough hours in the day. Then the rest of it was just like it's too much noise, I would prefer to be heard in a different way."

[Nicole, Academic at a UK university]

"I remember saying to friends, it's like being in an abusive relationship and if I saw a friend of mine like that I'd say get out, you're better than this, you don't have to put yourself through this, you know, no one should have this just because they're trying to do their job."

[Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

But the decision to withdraw from the online space was not without consequence, both

personal and professional.

"So, I left Facebook in the summer of 2019, when the birth of my daughter coincided with a documentary I put out on the BBC… so I had some safety issues around that. So, for me the safest thing was to shut down Facebook. Then I had a

baby and I wanted to engage with other young mums in my area and it became almost impossible for me to engage in baby programming without having a Facebook account."

[Christie, Academic at a UK university]

"I certainly know many people who would be personally affected by some of the things that have been said to me. I kind of did withdraw. I stopped doing things online for a couple of months. I've gone a bit quiet on Twitter and [my followers] they go no, please come back again. I don't post huge amounts to be fair, I have considered it, but it's really what's expected of me in my job, I think."

[Samantha, Senior Police Officer]

The opposing demands of career obligations and emotional wellbeing, meant that

occasional breaks from social media were more common than complete withdrawal, giving

women the opportunity to prioritise their mental health, whilst still maintaining a presence

in the online space.

"When I had that three month pause from Twitter and Instagram, I just had so much more time. But you also realise that if you don't go onto social media, you feel so much better. Regardless of abuse actually, I mean Twitter, yes, you do find interesting news on there and there's interesting stuff to find, but it's not necessary. I mean, I'm very rarely looking at Twitter or Insta right now."

[Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

"I have had colleagues say to me that if they were me, they would have shut down the account by now because, your job doesn't require you to put up with this level of abuse. Just withdraw. I've never got to the stage with Twitter where I've thought I'll withdraw completely. But there have been periods of time where I've just gone a bit quieter, where I've just felt that the public noise and angst has risen to a degree, when I thought I don't actually want to be in the middle of this frenzy, so I've gone a bit quieter and just retweet stuff."

[Sarah, Senior Police Officer]

"The number of times I deleted Twitter off my phone… And then I ended up coming back because mainly I like to read my news on Twitter, I like to see what's going on, I like to keep in touch with the debate, but I knew I was better off [without it] … and I still kept on saying I'm better off just leaving it."

[Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

The evidence presented in this section reveals how silencing is used against women in public facing occupations, as an integral part of the misogyny that underpins online abuse. Silencing is different from other forms of online abuse, as it often operates in an insidious manner, coercing women to silence themselves, or remove themselves from the conversation by leaving the online space. Unlike some of the other elements of online abuse discussed in this chapter, the silencing of women's voices is multi-faceted, and can be demonstrated both overtly and implicitly. What is interesting is how women have recognised and sought their own coping strategies for dealing with this dimension of misogyny, whether by forming alliances with other women, or by changing the way that they communicate online. These strategies will be considered further in forthcoming chapters.

6.9.   Summary

This chapter contains a huge amount of detail about the experiences, impacts and nature of the online abuse directed at women working in public facing occupations, and the associations that exist between online abuse and gender-based violence.   The reason for presenting the information in this way is that it is only by viewing online abuse through the

seven separate lenses of defamation, emotional harm, harassment, criticism of physical

characteristics, belittling and undermining, silencing, and threat, that the true enormity of

the situation faced by women working across a panoply of public facing occupations can be

appreciated. This study is the first to gather and present empirical data from the four

professions of academia, journalism, policing, and politics in one place, and to use this

information to provide a comprehensive understanding of online abuse delivered to women

in these professions.

The next chapter, Chapter Seven, uses the data gathered from the semi-structured

interviews to focus on women's experiences of working in public sphere occupations and

investigates how those serving in public-facing occupations encounter episodes of online

abuse.

Chapter Seven: "They think you're fair game" – challenges specific to women serving in public facing occupations

7.1.   Introduction

This chapter first identifies and then explores factors that are specific to public sphere occupations, particularly in relation to online activity (Dey, 2019). These factors were evident in the experiences recounted by participants in the semi-structured interviews as having a specific impact on their use and relationship with online technologies, and as will be demonstrated, affected the nature and severity of the online abuse that they consequently received.

The chapter opens by identifying two features intrinsic to public facing occupations that have a direct impact on the experience of online abuse: firstly, the expectation that those holding positions within academia, journalism, policing, and politics be forever readily available and accessible online; and secondly, that their seniority may act as an insulator from abuse, not by preventing pernicious communication, but providing ways in which they can limit their exposure to it. Sections 7.3 and 7.4 then introduce the issues within public facing occupations that can provoke or exacerbate online abuse, to provide a context for what follows. This is followed by Section 7. 5, which discusses the consequences that can result for both an individual and an organisation (typically an employer or political party) when they are targeted for online abuse. Section 7.6 identifies the elements specific to public facing occupations that make a sustained onslaught of online abuse particularly problematic.   Finally, Section 7.7 presents the various benefits to individuals serving in public facing occupations accrued from having and maintaining an online presence. Such

advantages highlight why advising women to simply abandon their professional online

activity is neither a realistic nor acceptable solution.

Figure 7.1 provides a visualisation of four of these dimensions, using anonymised tweets

[14]sent to the journalist Sonja McLaughlan, in response to a live television interview she

conducted with the Captain of the England Rugby Union team in February 2021 (Pattle,

2021). This exchange confirms the findings of Searles et al. (2020), that the abuse received

by women working in occupational domains traditionally perceived to be 'male' is

frequently amplified.

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[14]As she has a verified account and a public profile, the tweet from broadcaster Helen Skelton has not been anonymised.

Catalysts for abuse

BBC Sport @
@BBCSport

Owen Farrell says "there's no point in talking about" Wales' controversial opening try after England were beaten 40-24 in Cardiff.

#sixnations #bbcrugby #WALvENG
6:58 PM · Feb 27, 2021

♡ 1.7K   ♡ 613   ↥ Share this Tweet

Consequences

···

Replying to @Sonjamclaughlan

Sonja I was shocked at the way you spoke to the men after the rugby. I thought you were unladylike, aggressive, rude and ill informed. Watch the **interview** and learn from it. Gabby wasn't much better.

Impacts specific to public facing occupations

Sonja McLaughlan @
@Sonjamclaughlan

Toxic, embarrassing, disgraceful, appalling. Just some of the feedback I've had.

Thanks for using @ sign so it's all hit home.

Now imagine getting inundated with abuse for doing your job.

In my car crying. Hope you're happy
8:15 PM · Feb 27, 2021

♡ 17.1K   ♡ 6.9K   ↥ Share this Tweet

Benefits arising from online interaction for those in public life

Helen Skelton @ @HelenSkelton · 12h
You know that cliche comment people share about women fixing each other's crowns. Well @EllyOldroyd & @Sonjamclaughlan are two of those women who do that without going on about it. Very grateful for these women paving the way and crossing my path. #justsaying #creditwhereitsdue

Figure 7.1: Illustration of the challenges of online abuse specific to public facing occupations

7.2. Characteristics intrinsic to public facing occupations

7.2.1. Expectation that women in public facing occupations be active online

A key characteristic of serving in a public facing occupation that was highlighted by research participants is the public's expectation that they have an online presence, and furthermore, that they always be contactable, present and open to scrutiny. Such a pronouncement must, however, be viewed with a degree of caution. For there is a chance that this may be exaggerated within this research sample, as those who already actively use social media platforms (and thus are exposed to online abuse) may be more likely to want to discuss it in this doctoral study. Nevertheless, even with such caveats regarding the robustness of the sample, the constant availability of those in the public sphere is not always beneficial, especially to the individual. Research by Walby and Joshua (2021) highlights how the Canadian police force use social media platforms as a way of improving their engagement with the community, whilst also seeking to increase their legitimacy. However, as both the empirical evidence collected as part of this study, and the work of O'Connor (2017) suggests, the intention of police communication online is often the provision of information, rather than attempting to engage in a dialogue with the public. This assumption from the police fundamentally misunderstands the nature of social media sites, which operate upon a premise of engendering a greater openness with the public (Wessels, 2010). By adopting a model of one-way communication, the police service as an institution frequently chooses to ignore the public's response to its online activity (O'Connor, 2017). Whilst the organisation may choose to operate its social media communication in a unilateral manner, this is not always equally adhered to by the public, who may wish to create and maintain an online

dialogue. In the event of such a communication mismatch, the responsibility for providing a response to individual members of the public may fall to individual officers.

Furthermore, as highlighted in the exploration of the experiences of journalists (e.g. Searles et al., 2020; Antunovic, 2019) and academics (Kapidzic, 2020), the expectation that women in public facing occupations habitually engage in online dialogue reframes the online presence from a purely leisure pursuit into a facet of occupational activity, and thus the consequent online abuse into a form of workplace harassment. This supports the work of both Hochschild (2012) and Vera-Gray (2017) in their wider interpretation of the emotional impact of malign workplace activity; and supports the discussions in Chapter Two, which defined online abuse as another form of the occupational sexual harassment first identified in the 1970s (Croall, 1995):

> *"There's still pressure as an academic to have an online presence and be disseminating your work in that way. We have an impact factor in academia, and you have to prove that you are being impactful and social media is… definitely as a young academic it is expected that I am on social media and that it is accessible to my students. My social media is part of my work, and we talk all about workplace safety, but I don't have health and safety worrying about my online presence, even though I'm constantly encouraged to be putting things online."*

[Christie, Academic at a UK university]

> *"I've just signed the contracts for my new book, and in my contract, it said I'm obliged to tweet about my books when they come out. The reason I joined social media in the first place, is because my first book was coming out and there was that same expectation in writing that you would be on social media. And that's why I joined social media, because I really didn't have any interest in joining it. And I tried, as far as possible, to use it not as a personal platform, so I didn't put personal information on there, or stuff about what I'm doing or my everyday life. Just work stuff."*

[Linda, UK-based journalist]

"I need it [social media] for the job that I do. People want you to be open and accessible and visible. So to delete it and not have that presence I think would have a detrimental impact on my professional life."

[Wendy, Local Councillor]

These contributions highlight the commonality of experience across the public sphere, whilst also confirming that women feel a huge pressure to be visible and accessible online, despite the potentially negative consequences associated with doing so. Once again, participants positioned the issue of gender at the forefront of their experience. This contribution proved particularly apposite:

"I definitely got more online abuse than my male colleagues, but that's you know, that was legit. Right? That is fair game. I'm in the public eye."

[Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

The phrase 'fair game' was used repeatedly by interviewees when describing their role and the online activity that it generated, and in particular, the expectation that it necessitated an active online presence, echoing the findings of Veletsianos et al. (2018):

"I think people feel that we're fair game. And I think the way the media treat people has really deteriorated…in the run up to the last election, there was quite a lot of unpleasant social media content. You know, we just hid it, but when you actually click the button and realise it is somebody you go running with… I think people do just forget that you're human…"

[Nicola, Member of Parliament]

"People will always say 'you're in politics, grow a thick skin', but I don't accept that at all, because I think everybody, regardless of how thick your skin is, is a human being.
And you see what abuse all the other women get, all the other female MPs, and you just think ok, by doing this you're putting yourself in sort of the lions' den, to receive further abuse, almost as if you've got to accept it, that that's part of the job."

[Smita, Local Councillor]

"So, you're fair game, I think. I can imagine how difficult this must be for actual public figures. I'm just a journalist, but for politicians and pop stars and such, it must be horrendous. I can't even imagine what they go through all the time, the number of lies and stuff that gets spread about them online and they really can't do anything."

[Linda, UK-based journalist]

The minimising of their own experiences, as illustrated here in Linda's contribution, was a common occurrence, with many participants downplaying their own online abuse in relation to other occupational groups or named individuals. The reasons for doing so remain unclear but may be symptomatic of women downplaying their occupational achievements and career experiences (Lopata, 1993), or a reflection of the institutional failure to take online abuse seriously (Dragotto et al., 2020; Powell and Henry, 2018), with it instead being seen as part of the "wallpaper of sexism" (Lewis et al., 2018: 531) all too frequently associated with working in the public sphere:

"I've been kind of lucky actually, I don't know why but a lot of my fellow activists have had it a lot worse than I've ever had it…"

[Mary, Academic at a UK university]

"I do sometimes wonder whether because of what I do for an occupation, as a law enforcement officer, I get slightly less than other people? When I look at politicians' accounts, when I look at accounts from women in media, and when I look at some of the female Police and Crime Commissioners, I definitely don't get quite as much as they do."

[Sarah, Senior Police Officer]

"I mean look, I've certainly experienced online abuse but I haven't experienced it like some other folks have had it, and I feel like my own personal story of abuse is not that interesting…"

[Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

One participant not only sought to minimise the online abuse she had received during an election campaign, but expressed a sense of guilt for not standing for political office again, partly as a result of her experience:

"I feel a bit of a coward actually for not wanting to be a candidate again, because I look at people like Jess Phillips or Diane Abbott and I see the strength that they have, and the admiration I have for them, and I feel like when I'm not standing, I feel like I'm letting people down."

[Klaudia, Politician in Scotland]

However, not all participants felt an expectation from either their employer or the wider public that they be active in the online space:

"I actually think having an online presence is a personal choice. We don't say to people, you have to have an online presence as a senior policewoman. Certainly I don't feel under pressure to have an online presence, and nobody's ever said to me in my organisation from a hierarchy perspective, you must have an online presence."

[Geetika, Senior Police Officer]

> *"Police forces do not force you to have an account, and don't want everyone to have an account. There are Chief Officers who use it as a tool, but certainly in my force nobody is forced to do it. I don't know any forces where they are really forced to do it."*

[Karen, Senior Police Officer]

Interestingly, during the period that this research was undertaken, North Yorkshire Police attracted attention for deciding to reduce the number of individual Twitter accounts held by serving officers. The change in policy was embarked upon, in the words of North Yorkshire Police, in order to "improve the service we provide to our communities through social media, enabling them to receive the North Yorkshire Police content they need through fewer channels" (North Yorkshire Police, 2021: 1). Despite promoting this change as a positive one, many took issue with the alteration to this means of public engagement, believing it would "suppress the human side of policing" (BBC News, 2021: 1). This debate is further illustrated in Figure 7.2, which shows an (anonymised) response directed at North Yorkshire Police that appeared on Twitter, and which was further disseminated via the BBC News website (2021).

Figure 7.2: Tweet illustrating the debate over the reduction in Twitter accounts by North Yorkshire Police (taken from BBC News website, 2021)

7.2.2. Seniority of position provides an insulation from abuse

By speaking to women holding a variety of positions within the occupations of academia,

journalism, policing, and politics, it became obvious that whilst having a senior role in an

organisation frequently earmarked an individual as a target for increased amounts of online

abuse, at the same time, the more senior a person became, the more likely they were to have staff members who would filter abuse for them. Furthermore, as first outlined in Chapter Four, women holding senior positions in public facing occupations are often granted verified account status by Twitter.   This is the process whereby an individual is independently deemed by Twitter to be judged "of sufficient public interest in diverse fields, such as journalism [or] politics" (Paul et al., 2018: 1). The Twitter organisation believes that the process of verification "lets people know that an account of public interest is authentic. To receive the blue badge, your account must be authentic, notable, and active" (Twitter, 2021b: 1), with a detailed set of criteria to be met for verification to be granted. Despite having a set of published criteria, the process of verification is still opaque, with the decision made solely by Twitter, and outside of published timescales or processes.

Account verification provides a number of additional controls, which together create an additional level of protection from abuse for those who secure it. For example, it enables users to limit their notifications, meaning that they are unlikely to receive the same number of notifications as a standard user of the platform. This allows them to take measures to avoid the sort of Twitter storms presented in Chapter Five. However, the advantages of having a verified account rely on both the woman concerned correctly receiving verified status, which can be a complicated process; and also relies on them being aware of the tools available to set the appropriate privacy settings. As will be demonstrated in Chapter Eight, this is frequently not the case.

This research provided the opportunity to identify differences *within* the professions of academia, journalism, policing and politics. During conversations, it became apparent that

women at different levels of a professional hierarchy experienced online abuse in

contrasting ways. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when a woman has reached a certain level of

seniority, they are more likely to have access to a range of protective measures that insulate

them from seeing and experiencing the worst excesses of online abuse. These measures

may take the form of the Twitter verification scheme discussed above, or occur because of

the presence of multiple staff members, which may include an individual tasked with

managing the individual's social media profile.

Sophie, an Academic and Journalist based in the USA, explained how she had found a way to

access personalised support from Facebook, an organisation that is notoriously hard to

contact outside of automated mechanisms (Nicholson, 2021). This enabled her to report

abusive or threatening posts outside of the normal channels, and for such posts to be

rapidly removed, limiting the harm they caused:

> *"I have had success using a back channel to Facebook to get things addressed …*
> *emailing an actual human person there, but that's not something that most people*
> *have access to. Literally, when people find out that I have access to an actual*
> *human person at Facebook, they treat me as though I am a wizard."*

[Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

Being part of a large organisation, such as a police force, offered protection from the worst

ravages of online abuse:

> *"So, I have some layers of… protection's too strong a word because it isn't really*
> *protection, but I've got an extra set of eyes I guess, looking at it and seeking to*
> *protect me. I've never reported anything to the police, because to be frank, if it were*
> *to reach that sort of level, probably the security team within [the named force]*
> *would investigate it for me."*

[Sarah, Senior Police Officer]

Similarly, when women reached a senior position in politics, they typically saw less of their

social media, even though the actual amount of abusive communication being directed at

them increased at this point:

> *"It's interesting because you have to withdraw from social media to an extent. You are in a position of leadership, and in some ways that gives you a lot of freedom. I think because I wasn't seeing it therefore, I wasn't aware [of the abuse]. My staff were having to wade through it all, and it was taking hours."*

[Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

In contrast, it became clear that in the case of politicians, women at a relatively junior level

(i.e. 'backbench' MPs and junior ministers) were frequently left to manage their own social

media presence, with the limited staff members they had at their disposal almost entirely

engaged on constituency casework:

> *"When I was a junior minister and I would still be reading my Twitter mentions, I would see sometimes that people would tag me and also Nick Clegg or David Cameron, and I'd get lots of abuse. But obviously David Cameron and Nick Clegg weren't reading their Twitter mentions. Like, it's kind of self-evident. And so, in a sense, I think that some of the people who probably end up bearing the brunt of the impact of such abuse, are either the staff of those whose positions are in leadership, or people who are in senior roles like being an MP, or an academic or journalist who are in the public eye, but who are not always operating at a level where they would have staff to manage it for them. Such as backbench MPs or junior ministers."*

[Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Furthermore, the organisation of the Parliamentary system at Westminster does little to provide universal institutional support to individual members. Instead, the House of Commons has been described as:

> *659 individual small businesses, working under an ever-increasing load and more complex environment. They now deal with issues and communicate in ways unheard of a few years ago. They require more backup staff, more computer resources, and more allowances to enable them to travel back and forth to Parliament, living away from home for days at a time, while keeping in touch with the problems and issues of their constituents* (Besley and Larcinese, 2011: 292).

This problem is exacerbated for local authority representatives, who have no staff support to call upon, and who receive only very limited expenses, usually undertaking paid employment in addition to their elected duties.

7.2.3. Reporting relationships with the police

Holding a position of seniority within academia, journalism, policing, and politics is also likely to provide women with greater access to the police and other law enforcement agencies, if they find themselves on the receiving end of online abuse. For whilst the literature discussed in Chapters Two and Three revealed a fairly unsatisfactory, ill prepared or inexperienced response to online abuse from criminal justice agencies, many of the politicians spoken to in the course of this research were able to report having a broadly positive relationship with the police when reporting incidents of online abuse or threatening behaviour. Furthermore, it became clear that the police often work in co-operation with the Parliamentary security team, to monitor the social media accounts of politicians, as Patricia explained:

> *"I was on a coach down to London for the People's Vote march[15] and the police called me to say they'd picked up this tweet and that they were worried. I hadn't even seen it. So, fair dues to the police for doing a good job there. They handled it really quickly."*

[Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Charmaine recounted a similarly positive experience, and illustrated how her own staff had worked together with the police and parliamentary security teams to identify and prosecute the perpetrators of abuse:

> *"I had one case where someone who made a threat towards me had sent multiple unpleasant tweets and emails in the past, and my staff recorded it all on a spreadsheet. So that was more ammunition for the police. So, the police went around and arrested him. Sometimes the police took action, sometimes it was more a kind of tracking and using parliamentary security services. I felt like parliament had really, really upped its game and the police took it really seriously. It felt that they were professionalised in providing that support, so that was good."*

[Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Loretta recounted a similarly positive relationship with the police in her constituency:

> *"What I would say is the [name of local] police have been amazing; in that they have taken this seriously from the word go. They have never not taken it seriously, which I know has been very different to colleagues from all parties around the country. From the point this all started, we have emailed [threats or abuse] to a point of contact, we've emailed with copies and screenshots of anything we've seen. And they've assigned a police officer to really dig down and look at all of the communications from this person over the last couple of years, and the police have built a much bigger case by, you know, the cumulative effect of the posts, and linking them to stronger, more unpleasant language. The police have been really good."*

[Loretta, Member of Parliament]

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[15] 23 March 2019

However such positive experiences were not universal amongst politicians. Peggy

demonstrated how, whilst generally well-meaning, the treatment she received from her

local police force, often felt like she was having to relive the abuse she had encountered,

which was both upsetting and traumatising:

> *"When I initially had a problem with all the rape threats [in 2015], I went to the police and back then I think they were less prepared for this sort of digital crime. I think they are better now if I'm honest. But like any victim of a crime, violence against women and girl crimes just seems to be the worst, the onus is on me to do all of the work. When I initially went to the police, they came back to me with hundreds of pages of evidence of people saying stuff to me [online], and how this one particular person caused me all this harassment, and I was expected to read though it all. I just gave up because it made me feel ill and I didn't want to do it. It's very, very time consuming and I don't have a lot of spare time. And today as well, that hasn't moved on. To get any conviction against people who are perpetrating it [online abuse] really badly, I actually have to be caused harm; so the resilience, and the mechanisms that I would use to protect myself, they have to be undone in order for me to take cases to court. I will be caused harm, because I will read it and I will read the things about how they want to kill my children, and it's very, very harmful to me. And it's harmful to how I behave in the future. And there is a problem with that, because somebody else could subjectively look at that, it shouldn't be me who has to do it."*

[Peggy, Member of Parliament]

Peggy's experience reflects wider concerns about the way women are treated by the

criminal justice system when they seek to report gender-based violence, as was evidenced

in the media discussions of the reporting and prosecution of rape in July 2021 (Jackson,

2021).

For women in public facing occupations outside of the political sphere, particularly those

based in the USA, their interactions with the police when reporting online abuse were far

more varied, which is more consistent with the findings of Koziarski and Ree (2020) and Jane

(2017a):

> *"When I had received a threat online, I called the police and they literally said… 'we have nowhere in our system to record this'. And they were saying we feel for you, but we have no way to record this, like there is no place in our system for us to put this information… good luck to you. They were utterly uninterested."*

[Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

> *"I have reported online abuse to law enforcement in the past, although nothing's ever come of it, so I've stopped doing that."*

[Judith, Journalist based in the USA]

Both Sophie and Judith chose to forego contact with the police when faced with episodes of

online abuse, instead seeking to block known abusers, or increase security settings on their

online accounts. They devised and managed these solutions themselves, without

intervention or assistance from any criminal justice agencies, which they had decided was

futile.

7.3.   Catalysts for online abuse

It is not only the role that they hold that singles out women in public facing occupations for

online abuse. The abuse is frequently exacerbated by the news cycle, the political

landscape, the nature of the debate, and certain key contentious issues, any (or all) of which

can coalesce with an individual's perceived position of authority within an organisation to

create a toxic combination where abuse appears to flourish. As demonstrated in Chapter

Three, sometimes abuse may be triggered by a trivial event or throwaway comment.

However, this study has discovered that there are certain issues that act as a catalyst for

abuse. These issues are predominantly those that require people to adopt a binary position.

Three issues which were repeatedly mentioned by research participants were the issues of

Scottish independence, Brexit, and gender identity.

7.3.1.   Scottish independence

The referendum on Scottish independence took place on 18 September 2014. In a hard

fought, and often tempestuous campaign, voters in Scotland voted by 55.3 per cent to 44.7

per cent to remain part of the United Kingdom (Mullen, 2014). The result was not uniform

across the country, however, and some areas, including Glasgow and Dundee, voted heavily

for independence (Mullen, 2014).

Scottish politicians spoken to as part of this research identified the referendum of 2014 as

being a catalyst for online abuse, with supporters on both sides of the independence debate

frequently engaging in vituperative communication.

> *"I know there are some who want to tell us that the referendum campaign was wonderful, which Salmond[16] himself said it was terrific and joyous, I can tell you it wasn't.*
> *It was utterly horrible, foul, nasty and abusive and it gave the public permission to be exceptionally bad. I was seeing it online…*
> *I responded to a comment which was 'scum out of Scotland' or something, and they just shouted abuse at me…"*

[Sally, Politician in Scotland]

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[16] Alex Salmond, Leader of the Scottish National Party at the time of the independence referendum of 2014.

Even politicians from other parts of the UK who expressed support for the 'NO' campaign

(those wishing Scotland remain part of the United Kingdom) found themselves the target of

abuse:

> *"You would know if you posted something about campaigning to remain in the Union, that you would get this onslaught from Scottish Nationalists, or trolls or whoever. You would get, within a minute, you'd get a hundred and something [tweets] based on what you'd said on Twitter."*

[Loretta, Member of Parliament]

Wendy, a local councillor in Scotland, similarly felt that her position on the Scottish

independence issue made her a target for online abuse:

> *"The SNP, being the front for independence, we are a very targeted group in terms of online abuse."*

[Wendy, Local Councillor]

The Scottish referendum campaign presented what some believe was the first – and

possibly the worst – orchestrated campaign of abuse against women politicians:

> *"I think the independence referendum was the first mass political campaign that generated online abuse, certainly in a UK context. I believe Scotland was the petri dish…for really rabid online abuse. It's not exactly a very proud thing for Scotland to have been first in, but that's the way it is. I think, up to the Scottish independence referendum, there were huge numbers of people online, they were getting really strongly passionate about it and also arguably, that's when troll factors started to get properly involved. I don't know what the Scottish independence referendum would have been like without social media. It's hard to think it could have been any worse."*

[Klaudia, Politician in Scotland]

Klaudia's view has been echoed in the limited research in this area, with McKay (2020)

confirming that the independence referendum of 2014 saw female politicians receiving a

large amount of sexist and homophobic abuse. The reasons for this are complex but are

likely to include the enduring presence of sexist viewpoints that believe women in politics

are subverting traditional gender norms (Childs, 2008), an ideology that is likely to be

magnified in the case of LGBT women (Pedersen et al., 2014).

The campaign for independence that has continued in the years since the referendum was

held, was thought to bring together several controversial issues in coalescence, within the

one campaign:

> *"I think there were different kind groups of people who I annoyed by existing. So, there was kind of Brexity, UKIPy people, there were the cybernats. Obviously the Brexity kind of people said how dare I want to remain in the EU, the cybernats said how dare I want to stay in the UK, the Corbynistas said how dare I have been in coalition with the Conservatives!"*

[Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

> *"The Scottish independence referendum was one of the first times that binary identity politics was felt so strongly by so many. Brexit is another. The Scottish independence referendum was about the idea of, depending on which way you looked at it, losing your country…"*

[Klaudia, Politician in Scotland]

> *"In the run up to, and in the aftermath of, the Independence referendum, that's when it [social media debate] was at its most heated. And that's because we push people into poor extremes, and people become less tolerant of each other. And when there's only two answers to one question, that's compounded."*

[Julia, Politician in Scotland]

Julia continued, drawing parallels between the Scottish independence referendum, and other binary debates that have taken place in the UK since 2014:

> *"So, there's no doubt in my mind that political culture's got harsher and less tolerant because we've been, certainly in Scotland, obsessed with binary questions. So, we face complex questions presented as having two easy answers when really, the truth is that you can't resolve these things with a tick box exercise…"*

[Julia, Politician in Scotland]

7.3.2. 'Brexit'

The neologism 'Brexit' was first coined in 2012, when it emerged in the media and online in reference to debates around the benefits (or otherwise) of the UK ending its membership of the European Union (EU) (Fontaine, 2017). The referendum on the issue was held on Thursday 23 June 2016 (Smales, 2017), and resulted in a national vote in favour of leaving the EU by a margin of 51.9 per cent (Matti and Zhou, 2017) to 48.1 per cent (Mavragani and Tsgarakis, 2019). Like the Scottish independence referendum, the decision to vote 'leave' was not uniformly reflected across the country, with wide geographic and demographic variations in the result (Matti and Zhou, 2017). The rancorous nature of the Brexit referendum campaign, coupled with the tortuous parliamentary negotiations that followed, as the UK government attempted to pass into law the results of the legally non-binding result (Smales, 2017), has led to a large amount of debate and scrutiny in the five years

since the vote took place. Whilst the academic scrutiny of online abuse has been limited

(Jane, 2017a), there *have* been several studies highlighting the rise in online abuse that

occurred in the Brexit referendum campaign and its aftermath (e.g. Evolvi, 2019; Gorrell et

al., 2020; Ward and McLaughlin, 2020; Watson, 2019).   It was unsurprising, therefore, to

find that Members of Parliament participating in this study had found themselves similarly

targeted:

> *"[Brexit] was vicious, that was really vicious. That was online …. and an attempt to really make me feel as though I was not welcome here. And that was UKIP, and there's been some really vicious stuff in this area from UKIP. Really vicious stuff against other women."*

[Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

> *"You know, I don't think they would have done that [online abuse] to the men. There are male MPs who took the same Brexit position as me, and both ultimately have lost their seats, but they didn't get the abuse. It was just legitimised. The lack of respect and the aggression was horrific."*

[Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

> *"The Brexit referendum definitely polarised people, and so, I've been seen as essentially, I'm just a Brexiteer. I mean, there's nothing more to my personality, according to some people online, than me being a Brexiteer, and that makes me terrible. [In their opinion] I'm scum, I'm a traitor, I'm all sorts of stuff, which I was never really getting before."*

[Simone, Member of Parliament]

Despite facing online abuse, some were philosophical about the consequences of such a

polarised debate, believing it inevitable:

"In terms of Brexit … I received both abuse and support, both from Remainers and Brexiteers, because there was no way that you're ever going to make everyone happy, actually, in the Brexit debate. Broadly speaking, everybody got a level of abuse about Brexit because you couldn't have it otherwise. I campaigned for Remain, I also then voted for the deal because I think it needs to be over, and my constituents voted Leave, and so I was pragmatic in my approach towards Brexit… Everybody got a level of abuse. You know, if I'd had been very, very pro-Remain, I'd have got loads of abuse from Brexiteers, and vice versa. I mean, some of the more middle-class abuse I got from Remainers was quite entertaining."

[Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

"I think particularly after Brexit and the way in which politicians of all flavours, were treated by the media [online abuse increased]. Because it divided the country in two…there weren't many people who were just indifferent! And therefore, by their very nature, they were going to be confrontational."

[Nicola, Member of Parliament]

However, what was unexpected, was that women in other areas of politics, such as

Members of the House of Lords, and local authority representatives, were also targeted.

Smita confirmed the rise in Islamophobic abuse on SNS post-Brexit, also highlighted by

Evolvi (2019), in her examination of Twitter:

"So, whenever something big happens, like Brexit, or if there's been a big terrorist incident … then I know that I've just got to deal with things online, in a different way. After the abuse I received during Brexit, I discussed it with other BME councillors, and we picked it up with the [council] leader, and she recognised it as a wider issue, and just said, "look, if anybody feels that they are under attack or they are receiving abuse as a result of Vote Leave, then you've got to report it straight away", and I think she reassured us a little bit that we weren't on our own at that point. And then a lot of the colleagues around the room stood up and said, you know, I voted to leave but there's no way that I would ever endorse that kind of activity. So, that reassured us a little bit."

[Smita, Local Councillor]

Similarly, women across the other three occupations being investigated also found themselves receiving more online abuse both during and after the Brexit referendum.

> *"I do think – this may just be a coincidence – my book came out last summer, which was after the Brexit vote, that there is a little bit more confidence among certain racists to talk about, to be openly racist now, which they didn't have before."*

[Linda, UK-based journalist]

> *"We [name of force] were involved in an investigation into something that was said to be connected to the referendum. The abuse against me, actually from both sides of this argument massively increased at that time.*
> *Whenever I've tweeted about the police's role in providing advice to government on the use of the EU powers, I get a lot of comments saying "oh, she must be a Remainer", a complete poo-pooing of any professional views I might have."*

[Sarah, Senior Police Officer]

7.3.3. Gender identity

The third topic highlighted by participants in the study as a catalyst for online abuse was the issue of gender identity. Unlike the other two catalysts discussed in this chapter, this is a debate that has not been subject to a public vote, or party-political campaigning. Indeed, some have gone so far as to argue that it is a debate that has occurred predominantly online (e.g. Colliver, 2021). Nevertheless, despite lacking an overt and more traditional political platform, the debate around gender identity has gained a notoriety for generating online abuse in the same way as the other two issues discussed in this chapter.

Debate has centred around the awareness of the structural rights (Colliver, 2021) of (mainly) transgender women to access public spaces using their preferred gender identity; and the concerns of others that some single-sex spaces remain (Aspani, 2018). This debate has been notable in several ways. In addition to being located predominantly online, it has brought together people ascribing to a number of different intersectional identities and has proven challenging for many women who have previously found their identities as feminists and champions of women's rights unchallenged by a dominant hegemony. However, in common with the Scottish independence campaign, and the Brexit referendum, this catalyst for online abuse has once again seen women in public facing occupations the target of unpleasant and occasionally violent abuse:

> *"I just need to put a photograph of a [trans] flag out, and you get the abuse coming in. I receive online abuse fairly regularly because some of the things I put out on social media are clearly linked to trans rights and trans issues. I do find it quite upsetting. I'm not LBGT, I'm an ally, and I've often thought that if I was any of those LGBT, or a combination, it would be really awful… because most of what I put out is not controversial. But I then start to get abuse back that's political: 'what are the police doing… the police should be out locking up burglars', and all that kind of thing. That's one thing. Then there's the complete anti-trans stuff, which is really hurtful."*

[Samantha, Senior Police Officer]

Samantha then discussed what had happened when she had tweeted about the police using preferred pronouns:

> *"I knew that it was always going to have a degree of controversy, because many people will say, 'what right has anybody got to tell me what pronouns I should be using?'. I knew that would be the case. I never expected it to get at one point over one million views. I think if I had, I'd have probably spent a bit longer planning it. That said, I don't think I'd have changed anything particularly, about what I said."*

[Samantha, Senior Police Officer]

It was not just in the realm of criminal justice that gender identity was a point of conflict:

> *The gender identity issue has also led to a massive kind of reaction. I would maybe tweet out something, [like] asking people to fill in the consultation response, something that's not controversial, just asking people to fill in a government consultation, and then I'll get replies to that, saying that I hate women, or that I am a misogynist.*

[Wendy, Local Councillor]

> *"Most recently, I have been affected by the discussion around gender identification. That has been the closest I have been to feeling abused. And I wasn't involved in the debate around gender identification, but I suddenly realised that people were calling me a 'TERF'[17]. That somebody put a label on me, which means that they don't even then need to have any conversations with me, it just became a truth"*

[Sally, Politician in Scotland]

> *"When I've been engaging very carefully in a debate around trans issues and whether trans women should be able to compete at the Olympics, on the back of something I tweeted, I had an email from an individual saying, 'we're watching your Twitter account, you tweeted two things from the Daily Mail, how dare you, if you tweet a further thing from the Daily Mail, you'd better watch out.'"*

[Agita, Member of the House of Lords]

> *"I will not engage in any conversation about trans rights, no matter what I think, because it doesn't matter how carefully people phrase what they're thinking. If you do it wrong … and I've seen this. I have seen perfectly innocent attempts to be inclusive get it a little bit wrong and get absolutely hammered. And it genuinely scares me."*

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[17] Trans exclusionary radical feminist

[Rose, Academic based in the USA]

What these three catalysts for online abuse share is a demand that individuals adopt a clear position on the given issue. Such an insistence leads to the forming of very binary opinions. Many participants in this study highlighted this lack of nuance in key debates.

7.4.   Lack of nuance in debate

The lack of nuance in debate, or an increased polarisation of opinion, as described by participants in this research, echoes the work of Sunstein (2009a) on group polarisation, and Pariser (2012) on filter bubbles, first discussed in Chapter 2.   Whilst not directly referencing either theory, participants in this research did describe their concerns over the polarisation of debate, especially in relation to the three catalysts for online abuse presented earlier in this chapter. Of most concern, was the perceived lack of nuance in discussions that occur over social media (Harlow et al., 2020):

> *"What's been demonstrated to me is that we've lost the nuance of debate. And actually, I think that's one of the things that social media has exacerbated."*

[Esther, Member of Parliament]

> *"In reality, lines are fuzzy, difficult, and humans are awkward, and there will always be someone that you annoy. There will always be an exception to the rule, and [people online] do not want to deal with exceptions. They don't want to deal with nuance and complication and humanity. They want everything to be simple. If we don't manage to get a set of manners on how we interact on social media, and we spend more of our lives in fact on social media, then we lose the ability to debate."*

[Rose, Academic based in the USA]

> *"One of the problems with our political system is nuance is dead. People are looking for ulterior motives and debate has gone."*

[Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

For Esther, a Member of Parliament elected for the first time in 2019, there is a link between the lack of nuance in debate, and both the Scottish Independence and Brexit referenda, which only offered a binary choice to voters on important issues. It has been argued that making decisions in this way traduces political debate and increases polarisation (Reisach, 2021):

> *"I think we like to put people in boxes, you know, when we think about unconscious biases, you know, we like to know what categories people fit into, so before we can add all our assumptions onto them, and I think there's no doubt that both referendums have been incredibly divisive."*

[Esther, Member of Parliament]

Speaking to people for this research has revealed support for a possible link between the lack of nuance in debate and a growth in intolerance, as suggested by Sunstein (2009a):

> *"I can't help but feel that it is more that people are being radicalised and egged on by others [online] in a way that is much more than a random group of friends that meet down the pub. A part of it is because people gravitate towards others that are like them, so the people who are most extreme find others who are extreme."*

[Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

The reason we're in this situation is that we're in such a polarised world now… and social media really amplifies that. Meaning, if you have a face-to-face conversation, there's much more nuance. [But when] you get on social media, suddenly you have to pick a side, then you have to stick to that side, and people dig their heels in. And you're not allowed to say, 'I don't know', or 'I haven't thought about it'. You have to have an opinion. And that's very dangerous, because we haven't always thought through things and you know, if you look at [many] debates, you're just not allowed to say 'I just don't know' because social media doesn't give you that space for grey. It's all very black and white."

[Michelle, Journalist based in the UK]

Twitter can be very divisive. I think that nature of the beast has changed a lot over the years. It was very different ten years ago. It was quite gentle; it wasn't the way that it is now. It's really, I think, morphed into something else since. I do think the extremist elements online are kind of successfully dominating those platforms more and more, making it more difficult for everyday people with nuanced opinions or uncertain opinions which most of us have… most of us don't hold very extreme opinions… to exist online. So, I think we're getting pushed further and further away. If everything is 'us and them' on social media, social media's an amplifier for that.

[Sally, Politician in Scotland]

Linda, a journalist based in the UK, felt that the voices most often heard in online debates were white and male, reflecting research undertaken by Kasana (2014) that reported that the most vocal online political commentators fitted that description:

"If you happen to be a woman, or you happen to be a minority, and a minority woman in particular, then it's almost impossible, I think, to be heard without receiving abuse. It's really, really, unfair."

[Linda, UK-based journalist]

Linda made an important distinction, however, between opinions aired on online platforms, and the reality. Her opinion chimes strongly with that of Bruns (2019), who is sceptical about the power attached to filter bubbles and echo chambers:

"I think it's a very poor gauge of popular opinion, of public opinion. I think the people who are on it [social media] are certain kinds of people. And it's definitely not representative of the population at large. It's not a public survey. And I think it's becoming more and more unrepresentative as time goes on, because of the extremist element who are so disproportionately active on it."

[Linda, UK-based journalist]

Julia, a politician who has worked on many campaigns, agreed with Pariser's (2012) description of online filter bubbles, believing that political discussion that occurs on online platforms is likely to reinforce the views of those contributing:

"It delivers on a confirmation bias, where you convince people that agree with you already that you are even more right in your outlook, but what you don't do is persuade people of your cause…"

[Julia, Politician in Scotland]

Several contributors felt that the polarisation of debate in itself was a contributory factor in the growth of online abuse:

"I think Brexit has changed the conversation in terms of what people think they can tweet."

[Agita, Member of the House of Lords]

"In politics generally, the atmosphere is so toxic. I'm not sure we can divorce social media from everything else in this respect, it's just one of the more intense expressions of the horrible state that the country's in at the moment. I mean, the country's in a dark place. It's frightened, it's negative, it's scapegoating everything and everybody, including the European Union. Social media has become a really focused and intense expression of all that."

[Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

"If you dare to say, 'it's not as clear cut as that' [about any issue], then you're immediately attacked… they'll pile on and start. And otherwise-rational people tell you you're cruel and heartless.   But people get very, very worked up and they grab on to things very, very tightly and I think that creates an environment where abuse becomes a natural biproduct, actually. As soon as you take this to its logical end, abuse is the end point, and it is almost always abuse of women."

[Rose, Academic based in the USA]

7.5.   Consequences of abuse

At an individual level, one of the main consequences of women in public facing occupations receiving online abuse is that they withdraw from the online space, something that was discussed in detail in Chapter Six. However, the consequences of online abuse are broader than this, and frequently extend into the occupational and organisational sphere, as illustrated in Figure 7.4.
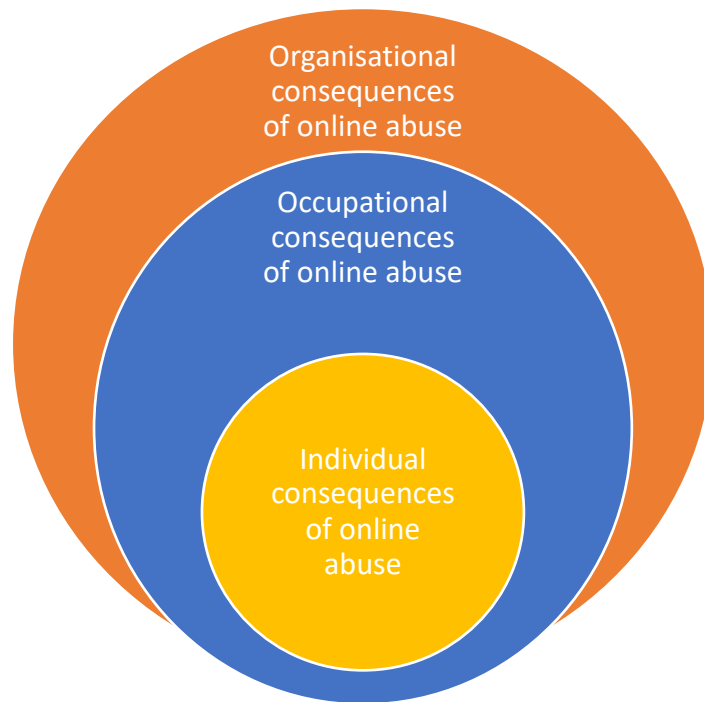
Figure 7.3: Illustration showing how online abuse spreads from the individual level

This section will discuss two further consequences of online abuse identified during the course of this research: the occupational impact; and the framing of abuse as an attack on the wider organisation that women in public facing occupations represent.

7.5.1. Occupational impact

Chapter Six introduced seven elements of online abuse and discussed these in relation to the individual. This section analyses the impact of online abuse at a wider level, namely the harm that is inflicted on an individual's occupation. Once again, the four public facing occupations of academia, journalism, policing and politics are scrutinised, drawing upon the experiences of women employed across these four professions.

In October 2019, the House of Commons Joint Committee on Human Rights (House of

Commons, 2019b) published the report of their inquiry into threats posed to Members of

Parliament. Following a detailed investigation, the report concluded that "MPs are regularly

threatened with physical violence and are subject to harassment and intimidation whilst

going about their wider public duties. This undermines our democracy and demands action"

(House of Commons, 2019b: 3). It is a fact that MPs have always faced a threat to their

safety. The terrorist murder of David Amess MP in October 2021, and the assassination of Jo

Cox in June 2016 (Durie, 2021) are but the latest deaths of politicians. Before these most

recent attacks, seven other Parliamentarians had been killed, including the Prime Minister,

Spencer Perceval, who was killed in 1812 by a man who blamed the Conservative

government for his wrongful imprisonment in Russia; and Anthony Berry, who was staying

at the Grand Hotel in Brighton when it was bombed by the Provisional IRA in 1984 (Power,

2019). However, the investigation undertaken by the House of Commons Joint Committee

on Human Rights (2019b) identified that online platforms present a new source of hazard.

The committee declared that:

> *The advent of social media means that the whereabouts of MPs, whether at home or at work, are very widely known. Social media is important for MPs to communicate directly with their constituents and account for what they are doing on a regular basis. It can be a tool to foster democracy, to enable people to discuss the issues of the day and to allow people to learn about and assert their rights. But it is also used by people who anonymously threaten MPs and by those who whip up hostility and violence towards MPs. (House of Commons, 2019b: 5)*

This concurs with research previously published by Amnesty International (2017) and is also

echoed in the empirical evidence collected in this study.

What is important to note is that as well as having a significant negative impact on the

individual, the online abuse and associated threats detailed in this study has a similarly

malign effect on an individual's ability to do their job effectively. This has far reaching

effects on both their professional standing, and also their ability to serve the public in the

way they intend:

> *"It [online abuse] has an impact on my job. I find it really hard to do surgeries, I only have one surgery a month. I would love to do more, but to do four surgeries a month on my own, just isn't… I just wouldn't feel comfortable doing that. So, I do one a month, and I do that alone. I know my male colleagues will do more. It limits my participation in politics."*

[Wendy, Local Councillor]

Two current Parliamentarians, one first elected in 2010, and the other entering Parliament

in 2019, demonstrated the effect of online abuse on politicians' ability to fulfil their role

effectively:

> *"Of course it [online abuse] does impact all the time, that's why we do the job in a totally different way than we did. So, for instance, I never advertise where I'm going to be. I used to do open surgeries all over the constituency, you know, supermarkets, libraries. People would just roll up. Now, we do them all in the office, where we've got huge security. Every person who comes into the office, we know their name, their address. If anybody's coming, we know who they are, where they live, and if we have any worries, we'll just do the surgery over the phone. So it's just massively impacted the way we do the job."*

[Loretta, Member of Parliament]

> *"The fact that Victoria Atkins [18] has not got a Twitter account, because of the amount of online abuse she receives. She's a Minister, but she cannot have a Twitter account … they are stopping her from doing her job. It is disgusting. In any other profession, how could you have this base of people stopping you from doing your job? The most important job in this country?"*

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[18] Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in the Home Office

[Jill, Member of Parliament]

However, whilst it is easy to share Jill's frustration at the situation faced by the government Minister she identifies, she is incorrect in her assertion that it is only politicians that face curbs on their occupational activity as a consequence of online abuse. As Veletsianos et al. (2018) reveal, women academics are also frequent targets for abuse, which damages their occupational impact: "the harassment that women scholars face online… seeks to silence and marginalize women scholars' voices, and adversely impacts not just women's personal and professional lives but also the public's access to scholarship" (Veletsianos et al., 2018: 4690). The demands of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) also expose UK academics to online abuse. The pressure to build professional collaborations (Kapidzic, 2020) and perform successfully in the REF leads many academics to increase their online presence, in a bid to evidence public engagement with their research (Barlow and Awan, 2016). But this in turn has led to an increase in the amount of abusive and threatening communication they receive. Writing in advance of the REF in 2014, Alison Phipps urged that "HEFCE[19] and the higher education sector in general need to understand and acknowledge what they are asking academics to do, offer us better support, and pay particular attention to the problems faced by women in the public eye. It is harder for us to have impact in the first place – and when we do, it comes at a price" (Phipps, 2014: 1). Christie confirmed this when recounting her own experience, believing that the safety work (Vera-Gray, 2018) that women are necessitated to engage in is a manifestation of institutional gender bias:

> *"It's absolutely unfair to say, 'well because you're a woman you need to operate differently and potentially limit career opportunities for yourself because it's unsafe'. That's just entirely unequitable. It's a real point of contention … I'm*

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[19] Now the Office for Students and UKRI

constantly having to unfortunately argue to do things that are less safe, for the purposes of my career and I don't have a good answer for you about what I can do to mend that."

[Christie, Academic at a UK university]

In the USA, academics must achieve tenure in order to obtain job security and career progression (Shreffler et al., 2020). One way that a candidate is judged suitable to be awarded tenure is through their level of public engagement (Tierney and Lechuga, 2010), with online platforms increasingly used as a mechanism for securing public engagement in research (Barlow and Awan, 2016). The targeting of women academics for online abuse and threats is having a deleterious effect on this process. Eileen is an academic from the US, at the time of this research, she was on a secondment to mainland Europe, but recounted her experience aiming to secure tenure in the USA:

"My job is my ability to speak as an expert in this field. So, in the US we have the tenure system for faculty... basically you're in a job and then you have six years to demonstrate that you are an expert in your field, and if at the end of that time they say yes, you've demonstrated that, you get to keep your job. And if you don't, you're fired.
And women are denied tenure at a much higher rate than men. And so, if something is affecting your ability to be an expert and speak out as an expert, and if you're dealing with harassment all the time, instead of writing papers, it just continues to widen that gap. And so it's [online abuse] not about thoughts and feelings, it's not about 'oh how do I feel at the end of the day?'. It's about how it affects my job, and that affects my pay cheque, that's the bottom line. Online abuse has a real consequence to it."

[Eileen, Academic at a European university]

The early investigative work undertaken by journalists to document the existence of online abuse (Cranston, 2015), means that there is a larger amount of evidence of the online abuse

received by women journalists than many other professions. In one of the first pieces of

quantitative research to be undertaken into online abuse, Gardiner et al. (2016) analysed

the comments that were made in response to articles published on the Guardian

newspaper's website. Their study found that whilst the

> majority of our regular opinion writers are white men, we found that those who
> experienced the highest levels of abuse and dismissive trolling were not. The ten
> regular writers who got the most abuse were eight women (four white and four
> non-white) and two Black men. Two of the women and one of the men were
> gay. And of the eight women in the 'top 10', one was Muslim and one Jewish
> (Gardiner et al., 2016: 1).

As well as highlighting the gendered nature of online abuse, Gardiner et al's study (2016)

confirms the negative impact that intersectional identities have on those engaging online.

More recent research has concurred with this view, emphasising that being the target of

online abuse can have a negative impact for both the journalist and their publication

(Searles et al., 2020).

Three journalists spoken to during this study recounted the impact that online abuse had

had on their ability to work successfully and effectively in their chosen occupation:

> *"There is one kind of online abuse that is becoming more common, which is…
> taking offline action. So, they're calling your employer. I've heard stories about
> abusers calling the Department of Family and Children's Services, trying to have
> somebody's kids taken away."*

[Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

> *"If and when I move on from [current employer], it will be really nice not to do this
> every day."*

[Michelle, Journalist based in the UK]

"I've had people tweet at and call my previous employers saying that I should be fired for my political views."

[Judith, Journalist based in the USA]

Conversely, in comparison to the other three occupations being investigated in this research, there is currently very little research into the experiences of police officers, in relation to the occupational impact of receiving online abuse (Lee, 2020). This was borne out by the data in this study, which confirmed that police officers are less likely to receive online abuse that makes a direct threat:

> *What is interesting, and I can only conclude that it must be because I am a law enforcement professional… perhaps they conclude that I can do more with it [an overt threat] than an average member of the public.*

[Sarah, Senior Police Officer]

This further strengthens the findings discussed in Chapter Six, namely that police officers are more likely to be targeted for abuse that questions their integrity or ability, or criticises their appearance, voice, or age, rather than making direct threats.

7.5.2. Online abuse as an attack on an organisation

The focus of this research on occupational groups enables a broader analysis to be undertaken, enabling the reframing of some episodes of online abuse into an organisational rather than a personal attack:

"I and other women I know, have given up real opportunities in our work, speaking engagements, because of threats and bomb threats to their organisations"

[Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA]

"I don't see [perpetrators] as dangerous as such. I think they're abusive, and I think a lot of what they do is to try and discourage you from doing the kind of reporting you do. Ultimately what they're trying to do is to discourage you from covering the topic which is criticising them."

[Linda, UK-based journalist]

"Some of [the online abuse], I'm getting attacked a hundred per cent because of my association with [employer]. So, there are a couple of accounts that attack anyone who's associated with [employer], and then they tend to continue with those that engage, and I have no problem engaging with them."

[Michelle, Journalist based in the UK]

For some contributors, realising that the online abuse they received had an organisational

focus, rather than being intended for them as an individual, made it easier to deal with:

"When you look at their profiles, some of the people that dish out the abuse, they are anti everything, anti-establishment, anti-everything. I kind of look at them and think, I wouldn't want to meet you, I wouldn't want to have anything to do with you … I don't really like your principles."

[Samantha, Senior Police Officer]

"Some accounts just, literally, every time you tweet something, immediately respond with some sort of insult, based on a real or perceived view they have of your organisation, or what it might stand for."

[Sarah, Senior Police Officer]

7.6.   Impacts specific to women in public facing occupations

The discussion on the occupational and organisational impacts of online abuse illustrated how online abuse directed at women in public facing occupations can impact at multiple levels. A number of these impacts are specific to those serving in the public sphere, due to the nature of the role and the public exposure that it often brings. This section will be discussing two such impacts in greater detail: the impact on women's participation in certain occupations and the wider impact on democracy, before then considering what happens to women if they choose to leave the public sphere.

7.6.1.   Impact on participation in public facing occupations

The UK General Election of December 2019 saw 77 Members of Parliament stand down, a record number of resignations (Belam et al., 2019). Whilst some went on to pursue careers as Peers in the Upper House (Schofield, 2019), the majority of those not standing left the occupation of politics altogether.

Nineteen of those choosing not to stand again were women, including two former Conservative Cabinet Ministers (Walker and Mason, 2019). The Conservative Party were particularly affected by the loss of female representatives, with "one in six of the women who were elected for the party in 2017 standing down" just two years later (Walker and Mason, 2019: 1). The reasons for the departure of so many MPs were varied, and undoubtedly affected by internal disputes occurring at the time in both of the two main parties. However, upon announcing their decision not to stand again, several women cited the online abuse they had received as a reason (Watson, 2019). For example, the former MP

for South Cambridgeshire, Heidi Allen, told her constituents in an open letter printed in the

local newspaper that:

> *I am exhausted by the invasion into my privacy and the nastiness and intimidation that has become commonplace. Nobody in any job should have to put with threats, aggressive emails, being shouted at in the street, sworn at on social media, nor have to install panic alarms at home. Of course public scrutiny is to be expected, but lines are all too regularly crossed, and the effect is utterly dehumanising. In my very first election leaflet, I remember writing "I will always be a person first and a politician second" - I want to stay that way. So, I have reluctantly come to the decision that I will not re-stand when the next general election comes.* (Pengelly, 2019: 1).

This sentiment was shared by a number of politicians spoken to in the course of this

research, both from those who had held political office in the past, or who were currently

serving in an elected capacity:

> *"My feeling when I lost was at first shock, and then the next day relief. It was just relief that I didn't have to put up with it anymore. That it was worth paying the price of losing my job, losing my career, and everything, because it meant the end of social media abuse. That's how much it weighed on me. I remember saying to friends, it's like being in an abusive relationship and if I saw a friend of mine like that I'd say get out, you're better than this, you don't have to put yourself through this, you know, no one should have this just because they're trying to do their job."*

[Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

> *"When Brexit was at its height and divisions were strongest amongst political parties, I did hear a few of my colleagues say I wonder whether this is worth it, my family are upset."*

[Lauren, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

> *"All of my children, at some point over the last two or three years have said to me, is this really worth it Mam? Do you really want to stand again? All have thought, perhaps you should just not do this anymore, which is quite a thing coming from the type of family that my family is. I would say that there's quite a lot of people in politics at the minute, who have not been able to cope with it. It's had an impact on their health."*

[Loretta, Member of Parliament]

As well as affecting their own decisions to stand for public office, several politicians

expressed concern about the possible impact online abuse could have on women deciding

to enter the political arena in the future:

> *"The reason why, in my mind, there's so few women MPs, is that there are so few women putting themselves forward for any positions in public life. So right through from parish councils, school governors, you know, all of these things, from a very basic level…and that's due to online abuse."*

[Nicola, Member of Parliament]

> *"I'm forever encouraging women to get involved, but I know one hundred percent there are young women that look at the replies that I get on Twitter and look at how I deal with things on Twitter, and they say to me, 'oh, I couldn't deal with that, I couldn't do that, I couldn't do what you do'. So, I know it's one hundred per cent putting women off."*

[Wendy, Local Councillor]

> *"I would feel myself being hypocritical, because [when I was an MP] I would go into schools on a Friday and encourage people to get involved in politics, going 'it's great, hopefully you guys will be MPs one day', and in my heart I was thinking I wouldn't touch it with a barge pole."*

[Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Indeed, two women (who had previously sought public office) revealed that their

experiences of receiving explicit and violent online abuse had prompted them to seek

alternative careers:

> *"About fifty per cent of the reason why I'm not standing is because I am not putting myself up for public scrutiny in the way that Diane Abbott is, or Dawn Butler is, having no support or ownership from their own party."*

[Souad, Academic at a UK university]

"I think that one of the things that puts me off getting back into politics in a serious way is the compromise you have to make in terms of the persona and the realness…I think that the two aspects of the abuse, the abuse that you get and the level of accountability that you are held to unreasonably, frankly drives anyone normal away from politics, and then you end up just having very ideologically driven sociopaths being the only people who would be willing to get into that space, and if they fill the vacuum, it just makes matters even worse."

[Klaudia, Politician in Scotland]

Whilst the issue of women leaving the political sphere due to online abuse gathered a lot of media attention in December 2019, it is not just in the occupation of politics that there are problems of recruitment and retention. Whilst perhaps not as publicised as the leaving of a political career, there is growing evidence that women from other public facing occupations are similarly leaving the workplace. Kavanagh and Brown (2020) highlight the deleterious impact that online abuse has on women academics, substantially harming their professional progress (Citron and Norton, 2011):

"I think that all of us have different tolerance levels. I mean the thing that got me really involved in doing this [interview] was the number of women that I knew that were stopping their public engagements."

[Eileen, Academic at a European university]

Similarly, whilst the number of women serving at a senior level within the police service has increased over the last decade, less than a third of senior officers are women (Uberoi et al., 2021).   Evidence obtained for this study suggests that one of the many factors that may be acting as a disincentive to more women applying for promotion within the police service is the hostility that they may encounter online:

"I do know a lot of women who have talked to me about not wanting to get into really senior positions because of online abuse. They just think that intrusion is too great."

[Imogen, Senior Police Officer]

If women serving in public facing occupations such as academia, journalism, policing, and politics leave these professions, or choose instead to follow a career in the private sector, multiple negative consequences will result. These were usefully summarised by Julia:

"The idea that people might choose not to participate in democratic activities because of their fear of abuse, in a digital or a physical sense, I find really disturbing…I fear about the future of politics, because what you'll end up with getting is more very confident, privately educated, 50-year-old, white, middle-class men. We all pay a price."

[Julia, Politician in Scotland]

The organisational and structural ramifications associated with a decline in the number of women in public facing occupations, as predicted by Julia, could include a roll back in efforts to counter sexual harassment in the workplace (Jane, 2018), a widening of the gender pay gap (Kavanagh and Brown, 2020), and a policy vacuum at the heart of government. Ultimately, when online abuse forces women out of public life (in whatever form), the outcome is a further silencing of women's voices; this time at a level that jeopardises women's power and representation across society (Ginsberg, 2019).

7.6.2. Impact on democracy

Section 7.6.1. concluded with a summary of the potential structural impacts that could be precipitated by the online abuse of women in public facing occupations. This study has revealed that there is an even greater structural threat posed by such vituperative communication – namely a threat to democracy itself. Whilst such a claim may at first appear overblown or exaggerated, evidence gathered during this research has concurred with the findings of Gorrell et al. (2020), Krook (2020) and Majó-Vázquez et al. (2021) that the targeting of one section of the population for abuse, threat and violent invective in this way is of profound concern.

The potential threat to democracy posed by online abuse was most clearly articulated in this research by politicians, who recounted their experiences during the numerous Parliamentary debates following the publication of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. The Bill was first presented to MPs in July 2017 (Walker, 2021) with the passing of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 finally becoming law, having received Royal Assent, on 23 January (Walker, 2021). The tortuous legislative process, which included the resignation of Theresa May as Prime Minister and the 'snap' General Election of December 2019 (Prosser, 2021); was accompanied by numerous protests and demonstrations outside the Palace of Westminster (Elbaum, 2019), which frequently left MPs feeling at risk for their safety:

> *"In that period outside of Parliament when we had all those demonstrators, it got very difficult at one point to walk down the street without people shouting after me and being told I was a traitor. This was from the Brexit side particularly. I knew it was going to be really hard and that's exactly how it turned out. There was an awful attempt to shout me down, I was having abuse thrown at me, online and in person."*

[Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Patricia proceeded to express her frustration with the advice that was given to

Parliamentarians not to engage in certain activities:

> *"When all the people were demonstrating outside on College Green and all the way along Abingdon Street and Parliament Square, the Parliamentary authorities would say things like 'don't go over to interviews unaccompanied'. But that is what being an MP is all about. The media were camped out on College Green, and we were being asked to go out there and do stuff, and that's what MPs do."*

[Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Lauren also referenced the same demonstrations, emphasising the risk to the safety of

those working within the Parliamentary estate:

> *"It was especially hard when the Brexit debates were on, people were outside the Palace [of Westminster], chanting and goodness knows what else. Things got heated if there were protests, so I'd always make sure that my staff contacted me on the WhatsApp to make sure they got home safely."*

[Lauren, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

It is important to note that it was not just in Westminster that MPs were being threatened:

> *"Just before the run up to the General Election, with the 'Surrender Bill' [20] bollocks that Boris Johnson and his allies were advocating, there was a massive piece of graffiti appeared up in my constituency that called me a Nazi…Now given how well documented my [Jewish] faith has ended up being, there are definitely interesting connotations to all of that. That completely freaked me out because I'd not heard that kind of stuff in the constituency before, ever."*

[Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

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[20] Prime Minister Boris Johnson used the phrase 'Surrender Bill' in the autumn of 2019 to describe the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 2) Act 2019, which the Conservative government opposed (Mason, 2019).

Some actions towards MPs were investigated by the police, and remain subject to criminal

proceedings:

> *"There are a couple of people at the moment who are on a charge. They have been charged with criminal offences from the Brexit angle because of an attack they made on me on social media. They effectively threatened [me] with a [weapon]."*

[Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

In its investigation into the abuse of MPs and the associated threat to democracy, the House

of Commons Joint Committee on Human Rights (2019b) emphasised the danger of such

threats:

> *MPs should be able to get on with their work and with the job for which they were elected, vote without looking over their shoulder and freely engage with their constituents and the wider public. No MP should face a barrage of abuse for doing their work as a holder of public office. It is in no one's interest, if to stay safe, MPs retreat and become far more remote for constituents.* (House of Commons, 2019b: 23)

This assertion was substantiated by Phyllis, an MP until December 2019, who spoke about

the impact that online abuse had on her ability to properly fulfil her responsibilities as a

constituency MP:

> *"You can't be a very good MP if you're protecting yourself. It's not just about the physical thing of being out there, it's just a psychological thing. You can't be a very good MP if you're defensive and you think people are against you and everyone's out to get you and you feel threatened in your head. You've got to go out there smiling and shaking hands and saying hello to everybody and wandering around being pleased to see them."*

[Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Peggy highlighted how attacks made on online platforms can cross over into the offline

space, becoming a genuinely physical threat:

"A man came and attacked my office, because of what he believed I had said about people who voted Brexit. He was charged, and he was convicted of causing public disorder. I have since met with him and talked to him, which is good because it meant that I got to find out why he felt that way about me. And the reason that he felt that way about me was because of things he'd read about me by these people who troll me online. So, he had said to me, 'I read that you said that people who voted Brexit were stupid'. So, I showed him a video of me at the People's Vote march where I'm stood on the stage in front of all the Remain campaigners and I start my speech by saying I never ever want to hear anybody saying that the people who voted Brexit are stupid."

[Peggy, Member of Parliament]

Within the confines of the House of Commons chamber itself, the fear of the threat to personal safety had a huge impact on the behaviour of some politicians, who made decisions that ultimately risked jeopardising the democratic process:

"Once we got into the votes against Article 50, or the votes against the Withdrawal Bill, any of those votes, there was a lot of stuff [online abuse] that looked like it was coming from the constituency, to give you the psychological frighteners, to criticise and undermine and get you to vote in a different way. I was worried about people's psychological resilience during large votes, so [for example], when we had a big vote about supporting the Prime Minister's deal on Brexit, yes or no, colleagues would go out and brief the media that they weren't, that they were going to vote with the Tories and then over the course of the day there would be a Twitter pile on, and then by the time it came to voting, there'd be this sort of, you know, twelve tonnes of anguish and then they'd vote with the Opposition. I'm worried that people's [MPs] minds were changed by social media. I'm worried about the fact that they can be swayed politically by it. I think that's bad for democracy."

[Beth, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

"I've sat in rooms with colleagues, not necessarily from my own political party, but also from my own political party, who have said that they voted, that they felt frightened about the way that they might vote and have changed the way that they were going to vote in Parliament, based on online abuse. Especially those who were from the Tory side who often voted Remain did. And it was women who were saying it."

[Peggy, Member of Parliament]

> *"There was one time where I had voted in a particular way and I was going to put something out on Twitter about it, but it was quite late at night, and I just thought, I really don't need this now, so I didn't say anything."*

[Lauren, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Peggy highlighted that it was not just on debates around Brexit that politicians' votes were swayed by the impact of online abuse. The validity of other votes, including those on military action, and time limits on abortion, was also jeopardised:

> *"In matters of war, I remember there was a significant amount of abuse sent to the women who were considering voting for the bombing in Syria, and I certainly suffered this. There was a huge amount of images sent to me of decapitated bodies and stuff, but those pictures were not in any way associated with allied forces. They were not even in that country. You get quite a lot of that in the abortion debate as well, sending you graphic images of dead foetuses and things. And that can change… it won't change the way a person thinks, but it makes people [MPs] think I'm just going to abstain from this."*

[Peggy, Member of Parliament]

Whilst it was politicians that were predominantly affected by the threat to democracy posed by online abuse, potential disruption to the democratic process as a consequence of online abuse was also felt by women in other public facing occupations.

In the USA, the register of electors in many States is a public document, available for anyone to access (Bennett, 2016). Whilst some voters may request that their home address remain confidential, this is frequently only permissible if the individual can prove that they have previously been a victim of domestic violence (NCSL, 2021). Online abuse, targeting or

other victimisation is not included as a reason for exclusion from the registers, leaving many

women fearful of being targeted:

> *"I have a friend who I worked very closely with for years who eventually just took herself off of the voting rolls because she was so anxious…and that's bad, right? Not being able to vote, as a citizen. But even if you spent a lot of time and money, which many of us do, removing our private information from the Web, in the United States at least, your address is public information if you vote. Also, something that I've been talking to legislators about, there needs to be a way for people's public information, you know, their residential and private information not to be public facing, as a function of their being able to exercise their right to vote."*

[Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA]

> *"If you know some very basic information about someone, and you know where to look you can find their information in the voter rolls; or if you're willing to lie you can buy a tranche of voter rolls for very cheap money, that's likely to have your person in it. It's very easy, through the voting rolls, to find somebody's real address. I know people who don't vote because of this, who literally have been disenfranchised…because they decided that the risk calculus goes a different way for them."*

[Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

It is clear from the empirical evidence presented here that women across public facing

occupations are deeply concerned that online abuse is negatively impacting on the

articulation of democratic freedoms in many countries:

> *"What these trolls are doing is they're stopping us from having democracy in this country. That is the message I want to get out there. These people are stopping us having democracy. It is serious, serious stuff that they're doing."*

[Jill, Member of Parliament]

"Negative online activity gives space and oxygen to the types of views and commentary or communities that polite good manners would have prevented previously, and it has an impact on how those people are seen in the public eye, which is broader than them just not wanting to be in it. It is actually undermining. You're seeing people being taken down [online], and shamed, and that has a real fundamental impact. I think that is not helpful for our democracy and for the way in which women are perceived in society."

[Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

"The pollution of the digital space … which was once termed a great democratic space is in itself anti-democratic. That's the sorrow of it really. That we've allowed the information space to become so polluted that it's sort of eating its own baby in some way."

[Helen, Academic based in the USA]

7.6.3. Experiences of politicians upon leaving the public sphere

A number of the politicians who contributed to this study left the UK Parliament at the 2019 general election. Whether they had chosen to resign from their position and not stand again, or were beaten by an opponent, many found that once they had left the public sphere their online interactions both decreased and became less abusive:

"Before the election, I said if I lost, the one thing I would do would be to throw my phone in the sea and not have any social media. And of course, I've set up my own Facebook account now, but actually it's nice to enjoy it as a normal person and member of the public."

[Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

"I remember after the election when I lost my seat feeling I don't want to go onto Twitter because of the gloating, which I was sure would happen because the abuse was quite bad when I was a minister. And when I finally did go on a few days later I was like, woah, this is quite lovely, because it was like a tap had turned off. As soon as I lost my seat, the abuse stopped."

[Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

"It all stopped once I was no longer in the public eye. I like the lack of pressure, I mean I don't tweet for weeks, I'm mostly quiet. I don't care. For me, not being in the public eye so much now, is still in some ways good. It's a tool I can have, like when I want to go onto Twitter, I can choose how I want to use it. So I get in less bother!"

[Julia, Politician in Scotland]

The experiences of these three women upon leaving the political arena confirms the exhaustive nature of emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012), and the toll it takes on women across the public sphere.

7.7. Benefits arising from maintaining an online presence

Despite the multifarious malign effects experienced and recounted by participants, there remain huge benefits to individuals serving in public facing occupations as a result of having and maintaining an online presence. Such advantages have previously been identified by Evolvi (2019); Khan et al. (2014) and Marwick and Hargittai (2018). The data presented here has highlighted three key benefits of online interaction as a facet of work in public facing occupations, namely its value as a communication tool, the importance of having and maintaining a voice in the online space, and the opportunities provided for mutual support, especially from other women also working in public facing occupations.

7.7.1. The benefits of using social media platforms as a communication tool

The benefits of the multiplicity of online platforms as tool to communicate with the wider public are innumerable, but at the most basic level include the opportunity to interact directly with constituents and other members of the public, beyond the confines of traditional media (Coleman, 2005), and the scope to gain a snapshot of public opinion in a much quicker way than would have been possible before the advent of the internet (Soontjens, 2021).

Despite the innumerable problems they may personally have experienced, the vast majority of participants were able to appreciate and capitalise upon the use of online platforms as a means of communication:

> *"I get an awful lot of casework come through Facebook. We treat it in the same way as we do emails, basically. A constituent can contact me via Twitter, via Instagram, via any of those means, I think it's useful being that open and transparent, and giving people as many possible ways to get in touch with you as they can."*

[Simone, Member of Parliament]

> *"The social media accounts you have during the campaign you always maintain, so people are instantly able to contact you once you're elected. You walk in on a Monday and look at a laptop and the email is already up and running, and so people's expectations of contact and response are instantly different from what they were twenty years ago."*

[Esther, Member of Parliament]

> *"When I was in [constituency name], it was a tool for me to communicate with my constituents. Sharing your insights with people and noting future predictions or observations that are slightly left field can be very validating, and that's one of the*

things where I think a different gender or different race perspective can come in and allow parity of being heard. So, that's why I think they're [online platforms] important. Everyone's equal."

[Lauren, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Even those who have now left frontline politics, still appreciated the benefits of online

interaction:

"For me, even though I'm not in the public eye so much now, [social media] is still in some ways good. It's a tool I can have, like when I want to go onto Twitter and have a conversation, I can choose how I want to use it."

[Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

The communication benefits were the most apparent for politicians, but women in other

public facing occupations also harnessed the benefits accrued from having an online

presence, although the threat posed by online abuse remained ever present:

"I wrote an article that was shared a hundred-thousand times or more. It actually does mean that people are interested in talking, and there was lots of positive stuff that happened, and I had lots of journalists and writers and historians got in touch, and that was really interesting. It created a community."

[Emma, Academic at a UK university]

"You have to balance the benefit of tweeting out and informing people as to what it is that we are up to as an organisation, against being the subject of ridicule, abuse and so on."

[Stacey, Senior Police Officer]

7.7.2. Social media platforms provide women with a 'voice'

Academics such as Crawford (2009), Jackson and Banaszczyk (2016) and Harp et al. (2019) have written in detail about the role that social media platforms have in giving women a voice, and many of the women contributing to this study support this viewpoint, drawing on their own experiences:

> *"It's really important. It gives me a channel to the outside world, that I wouldn't otherwise have. Because we're a small party, and our political system and our media's quite hostile in a way to small parties. It doesn't easily give us platforms or airtime, or space, and so it was really important for me to have a way of putting my perspective out there"*

[Maya, Politician in England]

> *"People have the right to information. I think at this point in time, national media has not shown themselves to be terribly adept at always promoting what is correct."*

[Nicola, Member of Parliament]

> *"I don't expect everybody to agree with what I say. In fact, sometimes I will be deliberately provocative to start a debate, or to progress an idea or an opinion."*

[Julia, Politician in Scotland]

In addition, several women spoke of the importance of maintaining their own Twitter account, as a means of having an 'authentic' voice, over and above the corporate channels of their organisation, that were frequently run by internal PR teams:

"I wanted to make sure that [my organisation] had its own voice separate to mine. [The organisation] can't say things that I can say, and vice versa, and I wanted to make sure that was clear."

[Souad, Academic at a UK university]

"I have had over time, particularly from communications professionals, people suggest that they run my Twitter account. But then I think you do lose [my] voice, and over time it just becomes a corporate account which I think then becomes less interesting."

[Sarah, Senior Police Officer]

"I felt that it was important to maintain an authentic first-person presence on Twitter, because that was the most effective way of using it. People wanted to believe it was you and they were engaging with you, and that I was responding to things."

[Julia, Politician in Scotland]

However, as the online space has become more crowded, some felt that their ability to make their voice heard effectively had waned, and they found themselves moving away from social media:

"Being in the public sphere I'm actually really introverted, and I think I just naturally gravitate away from places where there's noise, where I have to fight to be heard, and it's just because there's so many voices all the time."

[Nicole, Academic at a UK university]

Balancing the desire to maintain 'authenticity', fight through the accumulated 'noise' within the online space, and preserve personal safety highlights once again, as first discussed in Chapter Six, how exhausting this element of working in the public sphere can be. It also has

echoes of emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012), with much of this effort going largely unnoticed.

7.7.3. Social media platforms provide mutually supportive relationships

There is clear evidence in the literature (e.g. Salter, 2013; Dragiewicz and Burgess, 2016; Huntemann, 2015) that women have sought and formed a variety of informal networks to counter the personal and professional impact of online abuse. Over time, and as awareness of the issue has increased, these networks have become more occupation-specific, and it is now possible to access the support of academics (Hodson et al., 2018), journalists (Gardiner, 2018), police officers (Tomyn et al., 2015) and politicians (Al-Rawi et al., 2021) when faced with an onslaught of abuse as a result of activity in the public sphere. Furthermore, organisations such as Women's Aid, long tasked with supporting victims of gender-based violence in the physical space have also launched online versions of their services (Smith, 2014), whilst other purely online campaigning groups have also been instigated, to both amplify the existence of abuse, and seek to mobilise a movement against such nefarious activity. A good example of this is the #EverydaySexism project, founded by Laura Bates in 2013, where women from around the world submit examples of the sexism they have experienced, in both the online and physical space (Bates, 2016). The campaigning organisation, Glitch, launched in 2017, focuses specifically on tackling the impact of online abuse in the public sphere, particularly for women of colour in the UK (Sobande, 2020). Glitch have had some notable successes, most recently with the launch of the 'Draw the Line' campaign in association with BT Sport (Glitch, 2021). However, this campaign focuses on combatting issues of racist abuse in sports, and whilst a worthy cause, is not specifically

concentrated on addressing the underlying misogyny intrinsic to much of the abuse

discussed in this study. For the women spoken to during this research, the importance of

informal networks remained central, and far outweighed their use of more formal support

organisations, echoing the findings of Hodson et al. (2018):

> *"Our [senior] women officers group recognises the need to support one another, we absolutely do, but that's not because we feel in any way isolated from our male colleagues. When I talk to colleagues who've suffered it [online abuse] and come out the other side, they say there's something hugely affirming about how many supportive messages they get, how much action is taken that they don't have to ask for, so that you don't feel alone when it's going on, and that's really affirming."*

[Imogen, Senior Police Officer]

> *"I think sometimes what has helped is talking to other female politicians about it, to say, 'oh well, it's not just me'. I watch out for other people as well, so when I've seen other people getting online abuse I kind of check in with them to see how they are. I've become much more aware of it."*

[Agita, Member of the House of Lords]

> *"I get emails, because people know I work on this issue, saying things like 'oh I've a colleague who's going through this sudden deluge out of the blue, how do I help them?'… Or 'I know a woman whose partner is stalking them online' … it's become part of our job to triage other people – nobody's paying us for this, it is yet another tranche of women's work…"*

Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

Sometimes, this support had a protective purpose, especially during a Twitter storm or

similar form of online attack; and as illustrated in the discussion of Twitter storms in

Chapter Five, can help turn the narrative from a negative to a positive:

> *"When I see individuals receiving some sort of negativity, I always chip in with a positive comment, and you can see other people doing that as well. So, you can see*

that there's a lot more people trying to just throw in more positive stuff, when there are individuals that just have to be negative about everything."

[Smita, Local Councillor]

"I run my own social media accounts literally unless I'm being deluged by an online attack, at which point I have a few friends who will take it over for me temporarily, so that I can know what's coming in without having to drink directly from the feed. My roommate at the time of my first experience of online abuse was the first person to do it, and she just said, 'I will monitor [it], I will tell you what's going on'."

[Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

The informal networks forged online are even more vital for women of colour:

"I have been online for twenty-five years, fully knowing that this is not a friendly space, this is not a safe space, but it's the only way I can contact my community of fellow women of colour who are political activists or activists…We know this. And that means the community was also very quick at sharing information about how to protect ourselves and what to do. We share techniques and strategies; we speak up for each other. It's a constant process of solidarity that's in place. We know we see the world differently. We are able to say uh-uh, we don't believe that."

[Emma, Academic at a UK university]

A number of women shared their own experiences, which revealed just how crucial such informal support networks are for women experiencing online abuse in the course of their work:

"It is important too for women who were victimised… when you join with other women it does help, you feel a little bit more empowered, a little bit more less like

you don't have any control over things. A lot of women don't feel that way. But some of us do, and we can be emboldened and be able to take the forefront on some of these issues as long as we're not fearful of actual physical bodily harm."

[Tiprat, Academic based in the USA]

"Women of colour, have always come with that attitude [of distrust in the platform] online, as well as elsewhere, because frankly we know, most women of colour know, we can't trust the cops, we can't trust the institutions, we can't trust our employers, we can't trust X, Y, Z. So, the only way it works is if we protect ourselves."

[Emma, Academic at a UK university]

"In this day and age, when our leaders are really intent on leading by fear and division, connection is one of the most radical things we can be building with each other."

[Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

There was also a feeling that whilst the informal networks were valuable, there was a need

for more formal support, paid for by the technology platforms themselves:

"Somebody needs to be doing this work and the companies aren't doing it, at least not in any effective way and so we're all just like picking it up and no one even notices it's getting done…"

[Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

"We need to translate existing mechanisms of law into the online realm. And even though it doesn't necessarily help you in real time, there's some comfort in knowing if you're in the mix of our movement, you're part of trying to campaign for this stuff to improve. A lot of women draw a lot of strength from that, knowing that ok, we might have to put up with it [online abuse] now, but we're not accepting it. We're trying to do the heavy lifting to get those who wield power and have responsibility for these platforms, as well as the legal system, to catch up with the twenty first century and put protections in place that'll make things better for

women now, and our daughters and their daughters and the generations that are coming after."

[Maya, Politician in England]

"We're now seeing start-ups who are trying to find solutions to online abuse and harassment, mostly led, actually, all led by women, as far as I know. What we're seeing from younger women is much more of a feeling of… 'I'm not putting up with this and you shouldn't either'. And while that's just a relatively small mindset change, it does seem to be generational, younger women really, really, really want things to be better."

[Rose, Academic based in the USA]

However, whilst the empirical evidence presented here demonstrates the value of informal support systems and grassroots campaigning around the issue of online abuse, it is important to recognise that for some, such networks are not easily accessible, and that the opportunity to utilise support is not equally shared (Salter, 2013).

7.8. Summary

This chapter considers the facets of a career in public service that appear to initiate and exacerbate online abuse. Two of these key features were analysed in detail: firstly, the expectation from the public at large that women employed in academia, journalism, policing or politics be readily available at all times, and also constantly be expected to engage in open discourse; and secondly, that achieving seniority in public office frequently serves as an insulator from abuse, by limiting exposure to it. Such shielding may however come at a price, with the vicious invective instead being received by members of staff, who must

frequently deal with such communication as a part of their job. The chapter has also

identified three issues that appeared to provoke online abuse: the Scottish independence

referendum of 2014, the referendum on membership of the European Union, which took

place in June 2016, and the debate around gender identity. Whilst very different issues, all

three of these topics are potentially binary in nature, forcing people to favour a particular

'side', a position that appears to be exacerbated by the nature of discussion on SNS, where

there is a clear lack of nuance. The latter sections of the chapter outline the consequences

of online abuse, at an individual, organisational, and democratic level. The final section

considers the role that online platforms play in providing a mechanism for mutual support

for women in public facing occupations, and how these support systems, both formal and

informal, can be particularly valuable for women who are members of minoritized

communities.

The next chapter, Chapter Eight, builds upon the themes discussed so far, by considering

how online abuse can be tackled. The suggestions discussed in the next chapter have been

made by women affected by online abuse, who have drawn upon their own experiences in

order to suggest a positive way forwards.

Chapter Eight: "Dude, it's not OK" – participants' recommendations for tackling abuse

8.1.   Introduction

This chapter presents the recommendations that the 50 contributors of empirical evidence

proposed as ways of tackling online abuse. These recommendations have been organised

into a series of actions at an individual, organisational, legislative and structural level, which

reflects a synergy with the levels at which the impacts of online abuse occur, as discussed in

Chapter Seven.

Figure 8.1 provides a visual representation of these different tiers of recommendations:
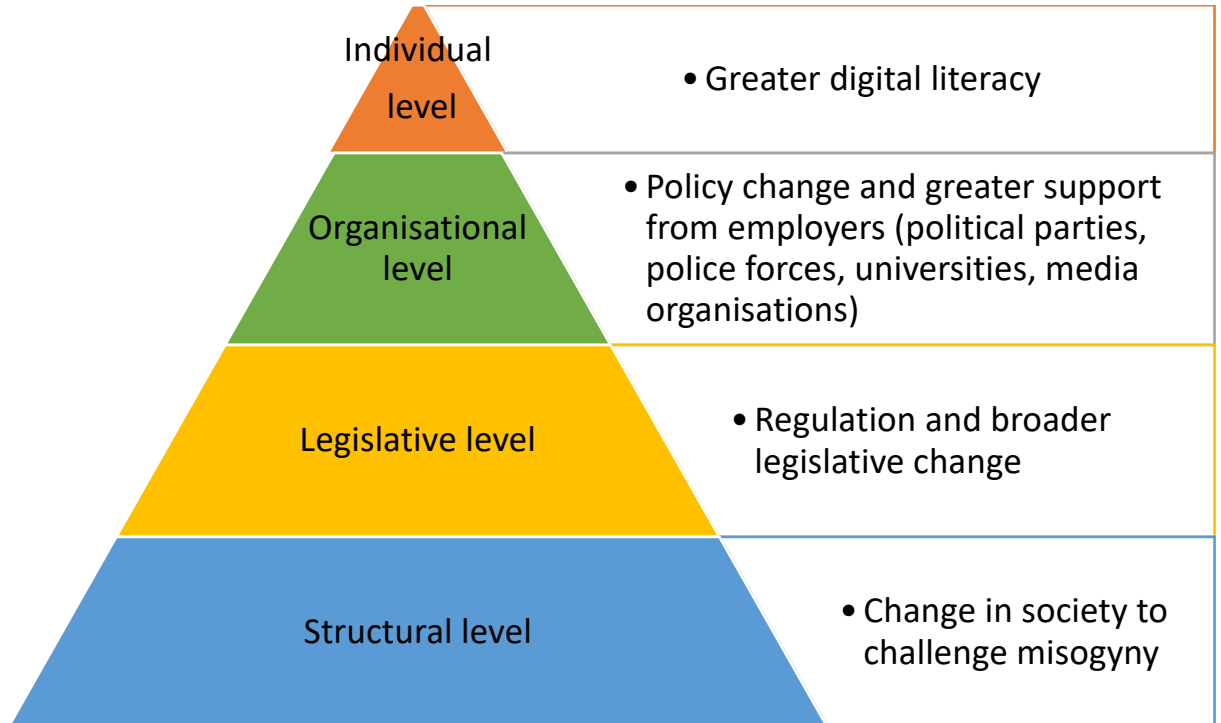
Figure 8.1: Illustration showing the different dimensions that recommendations focus upon

In Chapter Four, the importance of listening to women's voices (Oakley, 1981) was positioned as central to the methodology, scope and direction of this research. Another tenet of a feminist methodology, namely that gender be positioned at the forefront of research (Farrell et al., 2018) has proven similarly intrinsic to this study, with the consideration of gender as a driver of online abuse dominant throughout. This approach is most clearly reflected in this final analysis chapter, where the recommendations made by the women who participated in the semi-structured interviews have been placed uppermost in the discussion of possible solutions and ameliorations to the issue of online abuse. Adopting such a technique arguably draws upon the principles of phenomenological research methods (Aagaard, 2017), with a clear orientation to the importance of lived experience (Fendt et al., 2014). In addition, allowing the participants' voices to remain paramount in the study's recommendations, ensures that the commitment to feminist methods presented within the research design is operationalised in practice (Leavy and Harris, 2018); and that the primacy of collaboration that has been a driver throughout the research process continues into the development of recommendations. Furthermore, placing a continued emphasis on the voices of the women participants reaffirms the importance of intersectionality in this area (Evolvi, 2019; Farrell, 2018), across the individual, organisational, legislative and structural levels. Souad was one contributor who highlighted the need for the voices of women of colour to be central in any discussion about the improvements that should be made to online platforms:

> *"Black Lives Matter, Black Twitter, Feminist Twitter are huge communities for online platforms, yet they are constantly being marginalised or forgotten about when it comes to product changes, or when it comes to new things that you can do on the platform. They're not thinking about how it might affect or impact those communities or giving them greater control to have agency on the platform."*

[Souad, Academic at a UK university]

8.2. Recommendations for individuals working in public facing occupations

From their induction into employment and beyond, women working in public facing

occupations should be provided with the skills that they need to both contend with and call

out online abuse, both for themselves and their co-workers:

> *"I think what we need is just better digital literacy. We need to help people. For instance, I think if we ask students to make digital portfolios and digital content, we should be also teaching digital logistics and digital safety. I think we need to expand that to the workplace as well."*

[Christie, Academic at a UK university]

> *"We just need good digital security habits, the same way you lock the doors in your house when you go to sleep, you need to be aware of what the risks are of using social media. Studies have shown that women are less aware of what the technological risks are. They're less aware of what the back doors are, what the privacy issues are, and I think that's just a matter of confident fluency with technology more broadly."*

[Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA]

> *"I think one of the issues with social media is people feel that you have to reply to them. So, I think you have to encourage new journalists if they're going to use it [social media], to use it as observers rather than for themselves. Because I just think that's how you can get the best use out of it without actually having any of the negatives."*

[Linda, UK-based journalist]

This opening tranche of recommendations is not designed to circumvent the need for the

organisational or structural change that is presented later in this chapter. However, there is

a need for a practical array of digital responses that individuals can adopt, in recognition of

the fact that women serving in public facing occupations who are experiencing frequent

episodes of online abuse, or a Twitter storm of the type outlined in Chapter Five, do not

have the luxury of waiting for structural change to materialise.

Several participants shared the acts of digital self-care that they had implemented, both for

themselves and other colleagues:

> *"Understanding what kind of content goes best where is actually quite useful. That's what I do to limit my exposure to abuse. For instance, I would probably express my most controversial opinions on Facebook because I know only my friends and family can see it."*

[Mary, Academic at a UK university]

> *"Normally [the action I take] it's just either blocking or muting people or unfollowing them or turning it off and walking away for a period of time. That has always done the trick. Twitter has better tools now for blocking unwanted contact, so I have had to lock down my account. I also had to lock down my @, so I now don't see people @ing me if I don't follow them."*

[Rose, Academic based in the USA]

> *"I don't have my personal account linked into my work accounts. So I've got a Twitter account, I've got an Instagram account which is with friends, but I don't share those two things. I guess because of what I work on, I keep my actual personal life off the internet."*

[Jacqueline, Academic at a UK university]

Jacqueline identified that this bifurcation of her online presence provided another example

of the safety work undertaken by women (Vera-Gray, 2018), first discussed in Chapter Six:

"This is a really important thing, right. I think the best part of the safety work that women are doing, I'm doing that automatically. I hadn't really thought about what I was doing… but automatically I'd marked that division. I've made a conscious decision to not talk about my son online, I didn't talk about him when I was on maternity leave. I guess that is in part about abuse and it is just the knowledge I guess that trolls or people that want to make you feel bad are willing to try anything they can that might give you that fear of something happening to you in the actual real world. So I kept those details offline."

[Jacqueline, Academic at a UK university]

Michelle undertakes very similar safety work in relation to her family, as she explained:

"So, I'm kind of obviously quite careful about what I put online. For example, I don't mention that I have children on Twitter at all, and on Facebook I don't mention their ages or genders. I think if you read my Facebook, where I'm very careful with my friends, you can see that I'm a parent, but you can't see more than that."

[Michelle, Journalist based in the UK]

Emma discussed the personal checklist that she has devised for herself, which she uses

when being asked to interact with people in the online space:

"On Facebook I will not accept friend requests from people I don't know. On Twitter I do lots of things. I have certain phrases on mute, I have entire accounts on mute. If somebody shows up in my mentions, I will engage once, and I've become very quick at realising that somebody's not engaging in good faith, so by the second tweet I mute them. If they come in with mansplaining or with condescension or with anything that I find unacceptable, and that might change because one day I'm in a good mood, the other day I'm having a rough day, it doesn't matter, it's instantly viewed, I don't need to know. I think that is about saying that nobody's entitled to my time. I mean I wouldn't talk to people on the street randomly. They don't deserve my answer, so why should they have that online?"

[Emma, Academic at a UK university]

In the political sphere, The National Democratic Institute (NDI), based in Washington D.C,

provides training and support for women candidates seeking election in the global south.

They work with women across a range of countries to improve their safety, both online and

in the physical space. The NDI has created an online safety tool called Think #10 (NDI,

2018), which is designed to help individual women who are standing for elected office:

> *"NDI have developed a safety planning tool, it's called Think #10, which says that*
> *if you're a woman going into politics, there are ten things you need to focus on in*
> *order to enhance your safety and security. And one of them is your digital footprint.*
> *So if the safety planning tool says you're at moderate risk, you should maybe*
> *change your password once a month. If the safety planning tool says you're at*
> *elevated risk, change your password twice a month. If you're at a severe risk, then*
> *change your password every day, or, maybe have two or three different machines.*
> *So, it's the same ten things, but depending on your own assessment of your risk*
> *level, you may have to do them more intensely or differently."*

[Helen, Academic based in the USA]

The #Think 10 tool developed by the NDI illustrates how organisational and structural

change can be operationalised at an individual level.

Several politicians described how they had been assisted – and had in turn assisted others –

with measures similar to those implemented on a more formal level by the NDI:

> *"It's much, much better to ruthlessly block and ruthlessly hide or delete tweets and*
> *Facebook posts that are negative, and just clean up your feed. You don't want these*
> *people in your life. You just don't need to see that [abusive content], but I think that*
> *kind of digital hygiene, a lot of politicians find really hard. I was showing a*
> *colleague of mine how to block, and this woman was like, no, no, I never block*
> *anyone, I never block anyone. But you have to. You have to. Twitter has blocked*
> *thirty-five thousand accounts, who were following me, because they've worked out*
> *they were fake. And colleagues were saying, oh, oh, all my Twitter followers seem to*
> *have gone down. And I'm like yep, Twitter has had a massive clean-up, has taken*

all the fake profiles down, all those people you were talking to, they're not real. You've wasted your time. You've been arguing with a machine in St Petersburg."

[Beth, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

"I long since turned off notifications so that my phone didn't light up every time somebody said something mean about me on the internet. I was astonished when I would talk to colleagues in Parliament about it, because so many of them hadn't taken that basic step to protect themselves yet. And I would show them how to do it and it would give them a bit of immediate relief."

[Julia, Politician in Scotland]

"I think part of it is actually making people aware of the options available to them when it comes to reporting accounts. Making them aware of cases where those reports have been successful as well, because I know a lot of my colleagues have received abuse, and I've said, oh, well report it to Twitter, report it to Facebook or whatever, and a lot of them have said, well what's the point, nothing ever happens. And then I'll say to them, well I managed to get this account removed and this one removed, and this. And I've found that they're a bit more willing to hit that report button. So, part of it is making people aware that those options are there."

Simone, Member of Parliament]

Women were asked whether their own experiences would make them reconsider their decision to serve in the public sphere. For the vast majority, they strongly asserted that it would not, and that instead, young women should continue to be encouraged to enter public facing occupations, in order to ensure that women's voices continue to be heard in these spaces:

"I would want my Goddaughters to see me asking the Prime Minister questions, and that being a wonderful thing… and they can say to the world there is no glass ceiling they can't break. I want that. I don't want them to think that they've been bullied online since they were kids and why would they put themselves through that again."

[Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

"You need to ignore the bastards. You've got to crack on. Each generation has had its own complainers of doom, and reasons why women shouldn't get involved."

[Beth, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

"I recommend young women to get stuck into politics. But I do so in the hope that having more women participating will help to change the systemic nature of the abuse that we face."

[Wendy, Local Councillor]

Nevertheless, it was felt that before doing so, women must be aware of the online

environment that they are entering:

"So what I try to say to young women starting out is 'look, yeah this is hard and real and it's unfair'. I really like to validate that upfront: it's so unfair. And yet here we are and so here are some tips, right? Because I think if we skip that it's unfair part it can wind up being victim blamey. Here's the world we live in, we can't change it, so here are the things YOU have to do… because we don't want to lose our voices and everything they want to contribute and so, here are some things we know about how to manage this horrible situation we're in."

[Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA]

"I will never stop encouraging women, especially young women, to get involved in politics. But I would say it with the caveat that this space isn't great, and it does need to change, but hopefully if we get more women participating it will change."

[Wendy, Local Councillor]

"What I would say to young women is to build healthy self-care habits around your digital presence. They should think about what they're saying and how it may affect them…and build healthy habits like stepping away when things get too much: that should always be okay."

[Mary, Academic at a UK university]

For some however, their experiences of online abuse had made them wary of encouraging others to enter the same profession:

"I'm always encouraging women to get involved, but I know one hundred per cent that there are young women who look at the replies that I get on Twitter, and they say to me, oh, I couldn't deal with that, I couldn't do that, I couldn't do what you do. So, I know it's putting women off. I've got loads of evidence from women saying, I'd hate to be a politician, I couldn't do what you do."

[Wendy, Local Councillor]

"When we've looked at the factors which deter people from standing for elected office or being involved in public life, the single biggest factor that turns women off is how they're treated online… there's so much talent and potential there who, I think, might now choose to do something different other than stand for elected office. Now, they'll probably go on and do amazing things in much quieter, private spheres…"

[Julia, Politician in Scotland]

8.3. Organisational responsibilities: action necessary from employers

Given the nature of the roles that the women contributing to this research hold within public facing occupations, the recommendation that employers provide greater support to staff members facing online abuse becomes potentially more complicated, as it requires

action from organisations that are themselves likely to attract public attention and debate as a result of the changes that they implement in this area.

Nevertheless, it is clear that women employees across public facing occupations both need and deserve adequate protection from online abuse to be provided by their employers, an aspect that many participants in this study believed was currently lacking.

8.3.1. Need for organisational awareness of online abuse

Sejal Parmar (2016), in a study of women journalists, demonstrated how senior managers and those holding leadership positions within the industry were often unaware of the scale and content of the online abuse that their employees received. Women frequently report having to source support from their own informal networks, with little formal organisational support available from their employers (Lees Munoz, 2016). This is echoed in the work of Martin and Murrell (2020), which found that the occupational culture within newsrooms was one that demanded that journalists simply "grow a thicker skin" (Martin and Murrell, 2020: 100) in order to manage online abuse. The findings of such research illustrates the need for greater awareness of the issue from leaders and decision makers within the public sphere, along with training from corporate HR departments for all staff. The collected conclusions of these studies are similarly reflected by the participants in this research:

> *"When I think about my job, I feel like a lot of the men just don't even know [about the online abuse I receive]. The chair of my department or the head of the unit, or the people on the tenure committee. Like, giving those people a solid training in the barriers that women face when they want to exude expertise, particularly in controversial fields. I think it would be good to make them read your thesis. I think*

that when our male colleagues learn about, just what exactly we go through and how frequently, I think many of them will be enlightened and want to help."

[Eileen, Academic at a European university]

"It's about awareness, I guess, which I didn't have when I started my PhD. I didn't have an awareness that this [online abuse] was something that could possibly happen. So, I think it's about being aware that this is something that can possibly happen, and maybe try and have a safety plan in advance, for the actions I would take."

[Jacqueline, Academic at a UK university]

As has been illustrated repeatedly throughout this study, it is intersectional women who are most likely to be at the forefront of any abuse, and consideration of their needs must be paramount when it comes to raising awareness:

"There are all of the intersections that are quite persistent, if you're a person of colour, if you're a religious or sexual minority, it's amplified. You're double, triple jeopardy. So if you're a Black, Muslim women, all bets are off in terms of what your institution might do to stand behind you…if you want women to succeed in your organisation, in your political party, in your newsroom, then you need to be aware that the standards generally used to access what risk is, or what threat is, are standards of essentially the least vulnerable in the organisation, usually able-bodied men, usually white, who don't have experience of being harassed on the street, or sent rape threats, it is just not within their world view."

[Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA]

Souad highlighted that political parties, in particular, were failing to provide adequate training or support for women candidates, with their (typically) male leaders failing to recognise online abuse as a widespread issue:

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> *"We know that employers, who will predominantly be made up of white men, won't have a clue how to protect their colleagues, specifically the women, around online sexual harassment now. Political parties are still not taking responsibility for having to make candidates safe."*

[Souad, Academic at a UK university]

Souad is not alone in her criticism of political parties for failing to provide adequate training or support for women representatives (e.g. Perraudin, 2016):

> *"Louise Ellman[21] had Neo-Nazi material sent to her, and the party said that that wasn't racist. It was downloaded from a Neo-Nazi American website. I literally had to print off copies of it and put it on every desk at the PLP[22] meeting, for that person to be suspended, and for the Chairman and Jeremy Corbyn to even comment. That's how bad it was."*

[Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

> *"Political parties need to do much, much more to protect women, and platforms need to do much, much more to dial it down."*

[Peggy, Member of Parliament]

> *"I think we have a lot of help and support, but that doesn't always help when you open a reply, and you see something which you feel is threatening."*

[Agita, Member of the House of Lords]

Ultimately, in order for policies on training and support to be successfully implemented within an organisation, there has to be endorsement from the senior leadership of that organisation for doing so, as Eileen summed up:

> *"We need to teach the people in charge that are making personnel and job decisions, and we need to teach the men around us."*

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[21] Member of Parliament for Liverpool Riverside 1997-2019.
[22] Parliamentary Labour Party

[Eileen, Academic at a European university]

8.3.2. Organisational support for women receiving online abuse

It is clear that central to providing an effective organisational response to overcoming online abuse is the need for employers to provide support and a sense of collective responsibility to their employees when individuals are faced with unpleasant, threatening, or violent online invective. This support can take many forms, but the assistance most identified as useful by contributors involved the recording and reporting of abuse by institutions, which would in turn make it easier to seek further action from online platforms and law enforcement.

> *"I think there are things that the parties and others need to do. Whether in terms of induction or asking people to stand, employers should stand up and say these are not acceptable norms."*

[Sherrie, Member of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly]

Sometimes, support can be as simple as ensuring that all online contact goes via an institutional email account:

> *"If something comes through your institutional email address, you've got the university there to support you, and you know, you can keep records of all of this."*

[Jacqueline, Academic at a UK university]

Several examples of organisations offering effective support to their employees at risk of online abuse were offered by participants. It is gratifying to see such systems in place, and proves that there is no reason why this cannot become commonplace across public facing occupations:

> *"Hope Not Hate train staff in how to be careful. And then their research team report for them to Twitter directly. They work hard to keep people safe, keep activists safe online, in terms of making sure that whatever they're doing online, they're not exposing themselves, because they need those people to be in that space."*

[Michelle, Journalist based in the UK]

> *"Through Parliament there is a twenty-four-seven kind of mental health chat line. I suggested that if staff members were feeling really stressed by reading online abuse, they should get in touch with it, because you didn't have to do anything, it was literally a conversation, they didn't ask who you worked for or that kind of thing. It was really, really good."*

[Svetlana, Political Staffer]

> *"When I did some work for the BBC, I got proper support for the first time ever, because it was deemed to be a high-risk project. That was the first time that I've ever experienced that, and I just think there needs to be more of it. So, the BBC have a very good standard of aftercare … and they were really worried for me. They had a digital forensic person who was in charge of really helping me to protect myself and change my social media practises in order to do that.*

[Christie, Academic at a UK university]

However, other participants provided examples of a lack of support, where women had been left to tackle online abuse without any organisational assistance. One notable case that was mentioned, which has also been the subject of analysis by Thielman (2020) and Waisbord (2020), was the experience of Felicia Sonmez, a journalist in the USA:

There was a case here last month, I think, in the Washington Post, after Kobe Bryant died, the Washington Post reporter Felicia Sonmez, she tweeted an article, she didn't even write it, she tweeted a Daily Beast article…and her publisher sent her an email saying, you're dishonouring the institution by doing this. And then they put her on leave and told her if she felt unsafe maybe she should consider going to a hotel, and in the meantime tens of thousands of people are harassing her online and that just stood in very stark relief to a case the year before where a male political writer was being harassed, and the newspaper paid for him to go to a hotel for three days, and also paid for security for him for three days. And for some reason, because this is a woman commenting on sexual violence, this wasn't considered worthy of their institutional support. And that was a complete and abject failure."

[Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA]

The induction process for newly elected MPs does not appear well equipped to provide the sort of organisational support that is required. Esther was elected as an MP for the first time in December 2019. She felt that the training that she received failed to prepare her for, or support her in, the realities of being a politician in the twenty first century:

"The induction training was literally like a day of sessions, which basically said, you need to get an office, but didn't necessarily tell you how to do that, or what the support was. Basically, what our system currently does, is takes people through a gruelling campaign, they win, then on Monday morning, and it's just them, and they've got no support around them, they need to recruit the staff and everything else they need."

[Esther, Member of Parliament]

Lauren felt that providing a mentor for newly elected members would be a helpful addition to the existing induction regime:

"We've got to make it [Parliament], we've got to make it accessible and inclusive, and safe. What I would suggest is that when someone is newly elected, there should be a designated mentor with experience. It would be good, having somebody that's been there years, who can say ok, if this happens contact me. I think that should be part of an induction policy. And that could link to the social media… I think more of a personal touch of having somebody that's doing the job with you, that has been doing the job for a long time and has that experience, could help you."

[Lauren, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

In addition to the support provided to individuals, the NDI also works with political parties

and campaigning organisations in a number of different countries:

> *"The NDI are currently working in Zimbabwe and Malawi, to really develop the support for women activists who are by their nature and their issue, in danger. Part of that will develop civic activist online support, to assist women who are operating and trying to operate in the public space, online, in a closed public space. Because, whilst Zimbabwe and Malawi aren't totally closed to everything, to women in the LBGT movement they are very, very closed, very, very hostile."*

[Helen, Academic based in the USA]

Souad emphasised how it is vital to speak to women in public facing occupations about their

experiences of abuse, in order to put additional safeguards and support systems in place:

> *"We have to listen to them and find out how we can support them both as employers and brands, as civil society, as legislation we have to do something about the exodus of people leaving the online space."*

[Souad, Academic at a UK university]

This is an interesting point, and one which is partially reflected in the Online Safety Bill

(2021a), which emphasises that online platforms should regularly review and reflect upon

measures taken to keep users safe from the harm caused by online abuse. However, as is

demonstrated in the criticism of changes made to the Twitter platform in August of 2021

(Silberling, 2021), modifications to platforms and online services are all too often made

without proper consultation or involvement of the type advocated by Souad.

Whilst it could be argued that all organisations have a responsibility to provide support for

staff who encounter online abuse, universities are in a distinctive position, where they have

an obligation to provide support to both their staff and their students:

"If as an academic you're sending out young women after graduation into the world, and you haven't talked about the sexism that they will face and they already face, you haven't done your job. That's the reality of it. If we're pretending that women aren't going to go out into academia or banking or whatever industry, and they haven't already been faced with sexism, we're lying to them. So I keep telling my students exactly that. The world is not structured for you. We need to figure out how to change it, but until then you have to learn to survive in this world and have the resilience to do it."

[Emma, Academic at a UK university]

8.3.3. Links with necessary structural change

Whilst it is vital to involve women in shaping the organisational support that is provided by

employers, it is equally important that this task does not become yet another responsibility

that women must carry out in the course of their employment:

"I do hesitate [to suggest things] though because we don't need more work. It's not my job to stand up for harassers and educate the men."

[Eileen, Academic at a European university]

If the management of online abuse is to be dealt with effectively it needs to be both

properly recognised as an occupational task, which is appropriately recompensed:

"We need to be properly paid. So many people ask us to do things for free, and people just don't get it. We need more people talking about money when it comes to this work."

[Souad, Academic at a UK university]

Furthermore, it is clear from both empirical evidence provided for this study, and the existing literature, that the recommendations for organisational change discussed here will only prove successful if implemented along with a comprehensive programme of structural change:

> *"I think it's really unfair to put the onus of this on individual women. I really think online harassment training and seminars etcetera, are all well and good, but I really think energy is better spent trying to create societal change. So many of the issues that I work on, whether it's disinformation or extremism or online abuse, it always comes back to, well what do we do for the individual? And the best thing we can do for the individual is push for systemic change."*

[Judith, Journalist based in the USA]

> *"I keep telling my students 'the world is not structured for you. We need to figure out how to change it, but until then you have to learn to survive in this world and have the resilience to do it'. But we can't stop there because frankly just telling them that puts them more at risk than anything else. What we also need to do is to say, ok, we're also working to change the laws, we're strengthening our structures, we're changing our institutions, but also, we're teaching girls to fight back. Because I'm sorry, saying well gee, you deserve to wear a short skirt and go out at night is not enough, until we change all the other things. And frankly that change is going to take a long time. So, you know what, teach the girls to not only say yes, this is my right, I have the right to be safe, I have a right to be free, but I'm also going to be able to fight if necessary."*

[Emma, Academic at a UK university]

Blumell (2018) asserts that the presence of benevolent sexism, of which paternalism is a key element, can jeopardise the occupational progress of women journalists. Ann agreed:

> *"And, I would say this… for journalists in particular, for politicians too, but for journalists in particular, freedom of expression is centrally important and the way that companies like Facebook have approached this problem [online abuse] when it pertains to women is quite infantilising, because they actually categorise women and children, like we're all on the Titanic and in a lifeboat. It's fucking stupid. And so, at the same time as I was advocating very aggressively for women's safety, I equally aggressively was advocating for their vehement expression, artistic expression, political expression."*

[Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA]

This identifies a need for a new campaign of feminist activism in the workplace, this time oriented at the online space. The empirical evidence presented here emphasises the need to raise awareness of, and to change attitudes towards, misogynistic online abuse, once again echoing the struggles against sexual harassment led by second wave feminists in the 1970s (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020).

In a recommendation that straddles both the organisational and structural realms, Caroline suggested that activists found to have engaged in online abuse should have their Labour Party membership rescinded:

> *"People can say whatever they want to say, but that doesn't mean they are allowed to be members of mainstream civic organisations. If they are vile and racist, they don't get to be in the Labour Party. So, they can say it, they just don't get to be in my world.*
> *Which I don't think is unreasonable, in terms of freedom of speech in the UK. I think that the Labour Party is meant to be a family and a gang, and we're a private members club, a Parliament thing."*

[Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

This proposal shares some similarities with the pledge made by the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, who stated in the House of Commons on 14 July 2021 that any England football supporter who had been found to engage in the online racist abuse of players following the European football championships would be banned from football grounds throughout the country: "Today we are taking practical steps to ensure that the football banning order regime is changed, so that if a person is guilty of racist online abuse of footballers, they will not be going to the match—no ifs, no buts, no exemptions and no excuses" (Hansard,

2021b: Col. 362). To date, there has been no further explanation from government as to how this will be implemented by local police forces.

In a similar fusing of structural and organisational reform, the school curriculum needs to be modified to include proactive teaching on online abuse prevention, as part of an existing programme of IT and internet safety:

> *"There is no quick answer, but I do think that we have an opportunity through reform of the parts of the curriculum that deal with digital technologies, to actually teach [children] from a very young age, what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour online. And how to deal with abuse, and also teaching people, boys especially, that misbehaviour is not acceptable and has consequences. And then we need to find ways to make it have consequences. And this means introducing closed social media communities into schools and having them properly moderated. We need to model the good behaviour and we demonstrate the consequences of bad behaviour. The challenge with that, of course, is that schools have no resources, and the majority of teachers lack the correct understanding. So we need to get into teacher training, and we need to get into the curriculum and that needs to happen at all levels. We need to be teaching lecturers how to support their students. We need to be teaching students at university. We need to have some kind of educational platform for all ages, where you show what online abuse is, why it's unacceptable, and this is what you do if you see this happening to other people, this is what you do if this happens to you, this is where you get support, this is where you get help, this is where you get counselling. That's what we need. And for my money, if we're looking at cultural change, then it's up to us to find ways to educate younger people so that we start to see that trickle through."*

[Rose, Academic based in the USA]

This recommendation demonstrates how the structural and organisational change required to address this issue is interdisciplinary in nature and requires a social policy response from multiple agencies in order to effect viable change:

> *"One of the things that Google's doing that's really interesting, and needs to be, it should be part of mainstream education, they're doing online citizenship courses. Where they're going into schools to teach children how to be a good citizen online. Unsurprisingly they went into one of my schools, maybe… to prove to me that they were actually doing something… they're now training the trainers and they're training teachers to do it."*

[Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

8.4.   The need for legislative and regulatory change

The following recommendations focus on the need for legislative change, the introduction of regulatory frameworks, and the changes in policing that would be beneficial in effectively tackling online abuse.

These recommendations were made *before* the final publication of the draft Online Safety Bill, which was jointly published by the Department of Culture Media and Sport, and the Home Office on 12 May 2021 (Hansard, 2021a). Consequently, none of these recommendations directly address the new legislative or regulatory framework outlined in the new Bill. Nevertheless, many contributors to the study were aware of the various policy proposals contained in the government's Online Harms consultation, which ran between April and July 2019, and the subsequent response to the consultation which was published as a White Paper in December 2019 (HM Government, 2020), and referred to them.

8.4.1.   The need for regulation of social media companies

All interview participants identified a need for the greater regulation of online platforms:

> *"I think regulation is very important. I think regulation ensures that we keep the [social media] companies accountable, and accountability and transparency are the cornerstones of any healthy, democratic society."*

[Jacqueline, Academic at a UK university]

> *"It [the online space] shouldn't be lawless anymore. We need to figure out some rules and regulations about this. That's what I think what needs to happen. We shouldn't, women shouldn't, have to change their behaviour. We've all moved online, let's make it a better place to live."*

[Christie, Academic at a UK university]

> *"Long term, we need legislative change. We need a framework that looks at online harms, and the definition of it, and making sure it's intersectional. We need tech companies to look at moderation and invest in it properly. We need tech companies to be designing platforms with safety by design as its core principle, rather than profit."*

[Souad, Academic at a UK university]

Some felt that state regulation of online platforms was necessary because social media

companies could not be trusted to implement the various improvements required without a

legal obligation to do so:

> *"They feed off dissent. They feed off rage. That's how they make money. They can't even be trusted to keep their house in order, so I don't think they are anywhere near to knowing how to address gender-based violence properly. I don't trust them to act on it, because they don't. They make money from not very ethical ways. So, they're not driven to find a solution. It would have to come from policy level."*

[Nicole, Academic at a UK university]

> *"We need to hold the social media companies to account. Government legislation on social media companies is long, long overdue. Because they're not going to self-correct, because they've got no incentive to do that. We can't wait for the US because they're never going to catch up quick enough with us. So do I think the British government should be doing something, and putting legislation in place? Yes. Do I think that's enough? No. Do I think that our government should be speaking to other governments worldwide about what's going wrong? One hundred percent."*

[Michelle, Journalist based in the UK]

> *"I think more regulation is required. If social media is going to be used for responsible reasons, and that's why it was designed, then they do need to exercise more control over the platform, because it's not a free platform, it is owned by a company that I think should have more regulated responsibilities for how that platform is used, because they're profit-making companies aren't they? So, like any other profit-making company, they have social responsibility and other responsibilities for the safety of the people using it."*

[Geetika, Senior Police Officer]

Despite the largely favourable response to the possibility of greater regulation of online platforms as a mechanism to tackle online abuse, Rose sounded a note of caution:

> *"I think the regulation question is really interesting, because on the one hand regulation does force companies to take actions that they might otherwise not have bothered to take. On the other, our lawmakers are not particularly savvy, and the law-making process is not responsive. I can see the benefits that regulation would have, but the tech lobby is well funded, and our law makers are not as digitally literate as I would like, and we would potentially be at risk for bad law rather than good law."*

[Rose, Academic based in the USA]

Samantha was concerned that in England and Wales, the introduction of legislation covering online platforms may result in placing additional pressures on already stretched local police forces:

> *"The social media companies are making a lot of money aren't they. It's not in their interests to have loads of regulation. We struggle as the police to get much information from them [when we need it for detecting crime], it's certainly not volunteered very easily. So it just depends on how that greater regulation will manifest itself. It certainly wouldn't be great if it all falls to the police to try and enforce things."*

[Samantha, Senior Police Officer]

Tiprat highlighted an important difference between the USA and other countries, which acts

as a reminder that it is likely to prove impossible to introduce a regulatory regime that

would be adopted by governments worldwide, due to different laws and existing regulatory

frameworks (or lack of them) (Chenou, 2014):

> *"I think first of all, that the threats of violence should be taken very seriously. I think right now they're not. I think that they [social media companies] don't take the idea of violence against women seriously. I think that they need to do more to have more women involved, to be aware of this as a problem. I don't know how much they can do. There's a lot of problems in the United States because website forums, any kind of online forums, there's a rule in our Communications Act that says that they're not responsible for the content."*

[Tiprat, Academic based in the USA]

Caroline developed this point further, discussing how governments and legislators in

different countries are likely to implement any new regulatory framework:

> *"In the history of communications, these are very, very new platforms still, and this is an emergent industry. On that basis you're going to have to give guidance to, and work with the platforms, about the cultural norms in each country, and how we fit that in and what censorship really looks like. There is a conversation to be had with everybody, and it has to be country by country, as what we expect [in the UK] and what the Americans expect are completely different. Ideologically, because of the Bill of Rights, America will want a complete free speech platform.*
> *I think we want regulation in the UK, and I think France will, but there's limits to that. The rest of the world will probably look at us, to see what we do, as we're the main drivers of this technology. But we've never had the conversation about what should or shouldn't be OK in IT."*

[Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

It should be noted that Caroline's comments do not consider the role of China in the use

and development of social media. Research by the Chinese government has estimated that

802 million people in China are regular users of social media sites such as WeChat, Sina

Weibo, Tencent QQ, Toudou Youku, Baidu Tieba, Douban, Zhihu, Meituan Dianping, Momo

and Meitu (Azad et al., 2020: 61). This amounts to some 57.7 per cent of the country's

population (Azad et al., 2020). More recent research, undertaken by Su et al. (2021)

suggests that the widespread use of virtual private network (VPN) technology has breached

the "great firewall of China" (Su et al., 2021: 2), and enabled access to platforms such as

Twitter and Facebook, which is likely to have increased access to computer mediated

communication even further. With this in mind, the assertion that the UK has an influential

role to play in this area is questionable.

Tiprat's contribution to the discussion on regulation also highlights the need for action from

both legislators and technology companies:

> *"Legal changes need to happen, both in terms of the laws that are there, as well as in the training of law enforcement. Tech companies need to be doing more, I think they're kind of trying but again, consciousness is really important. I guess I feel like the internet really needs to be governed a lot more. We really need some kind of legal structure that is applicable to the internet, and we need teeth, so that people who do clearly violate clear laws, are prosecuted, and that they're made examples of.*
> *Do I think the British government should be doing something, and we [USA] should be putting legislation in place? Yes. Do I think that's enough? No. Do I think that the US government should be speaking to other governments about what's going wrong? One hundred percent."*

[Tiprat, Academic based in the USA]

Mary felt that the UK government's current proposal that the regulatory function of social

media should be undertaken by Ofcom, presented a workable solution:

> *"The government needs to step up and regulate social media companies just the way Ofcom regulates similar organisations."*

[Mary, Academic at a UK university]

Emma presented a paradigm for the future regulation of online platforms, which also

highlighted several of the issues that are currently viewed as problematic in their

operational methods:

> *"I believe that tech should be regulated, not only for tax purposes but actually for business processes. I find it really fascinating that we have spent the last decade demonising banks, and the evil bankers. The reality is that the banking sector is more regulated than most parts of our economy. And tech is almost as powerful, if not more powerful in terms of reach, political power, social power, as banking and yet it is the least regulated. And we somehow pretend that we can kind of continue this way.*
> *We need taxation, that's the first thing. We need serious regulations about the way these [social media] companies are structured. Look at firms like Facebook, Zuckerberg pretty much has all rights to all decisions made. This is a publicly traded company across the world which has huge impacts. This is a publishing platform in addition to all the other things. Just because we haven't figured out where to fit it in terms of our business ideas, and that's not to do with business, that's to do with politicians, does not mean that we cannot regulate it. And if we speak to, for example, half a dozen people in the banking industry, they would be able to tell you what regulations need to apply.*
>
> *If you speak to half a dozen people who are leaders in the retail sector, they'll be able to tell you what regulations need to apply. I mean, Facebook Market Place is a retail space. Why is that not regulated? Right? Why is there no consumer protection? These are small things. This is always over-thought and it's therefore over-complicated, but we actually need to look at the fact that there are across the board we have regulations for industry, and this is not rocket science."*

[Emma, Academic at a UK university]

Judith presented a possible blueprint for the development of social media companies, that

she believed would do more to tackle online abuse at a strategic level:

> *"Tech companies need to better protect the vast majority of their users, over that of the privileged and the few. I feel like tech companies, for so long, have been so worried about so called censorship… but usually that so called censorship they're talking about is a small, a very small group of extremely vocal and extremely online white men. But it's not just those men who are users of social media. Most social media users are women and people of colour, and the tech platforms need to centre their policies around the vast majority of their users being able to be online free from harm, hate and harassment."*

[Judith, Journalist based in the USA]

Judith then proceeded to highlight what she believed were important differences between

Twitter and Facebook. For context, the interview with Judith took place before Donald

Trump lost the US Presidential election in November 2020, and before he was banned from

Twitter in January 2021 (Twitter, 2021a; Majó-Vázquez et al., 2021):

> *"In early 2018, Twitter devised a world leaders' policy, because they kept getting asked why they were leaving Trump tweets up that would violate the terms of service of the platform. And so, basically, Twitter made the call that if a world leader says it or does it, it's newsworthy… so we have to leave it up. What that does, if a world leader knows they can say or do anything and they have no risk of being thrown off the platform, is give them another tool. It gives them a tool to engage with online harassment. It gives them a tool to say whatever hateful things they want because they know that they're not going to suffer the consequences. And again, this is at the expense of the vast majority of Twitter users."*

> *"I think another interesting thing that people don't often realise, is that Twitter has decided not to take political ads, whereas Facebook do. So, Facebook is still a customer of the Trump campaign, and the Trump campaign is a customer of Facebook, as are all the many Trump associated super PACs.[23] So, there's actually a lot of political money on the table. Realistically, I don't think that Trump, or the Trump campaign, could stop buying Facebook ads, because it's the best way they have to reach out to voters. But the threat is always hanging in the air, so I think Facebook has an incentive there as well."*

[Judith, Journalist based in the USA]

This difference was similarly highlighted by Sue, who illustrated how this could have an

impact on the measures that could be adopted by the individual social media companies:

> *"Can Twitter improve their policies? Absolutely. Can they hire more moderators? Absolutely. At the same time, Twitter has no income model, they don't have enough ad revenue. They keep laying off staff. There's no profit model, so I don't know that Twitter's going to last. So, asking them to hire more moderators, when their model is not profitable, isn't viable."*

[Sue, Academic based in the USA]

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[23] Political Action Committees, who fund election campaigns in the USA.

Sarah, a senior police officer, highlighted three areas where change is needed:

> *"Regulation, law change and responsibility on social media companies to provide intelligence to law enforcement about repeat offenders, would be three really worthwhile changes, I think."*

[Sarah, Senior Police Officer]

Helen believed that it was of vital importance for different actors within the various realms

of social policy institutions to work together in formulating regulatory and legislative

responses to online abuse:

> *"There's a need for three key actors. The main representatives in the political sphere, so you've got to have women in parliament, you've just got to, and I think we know that. But you also need an autonomous civil society, that is supportive. And then thirdly, you need what I call the femocrats, the Commission on Equality or similar organisations. You have to have that public sector civil service element available to you. You need the three-legged stool, in order to progress on these sorts of issues."*

[Helen, Academic based in the USA]

Helen's proposition emphasises yet again the importance of having women in the spaces

where these decisions are made, for the issue of online abuse to be properly and effectively

recognised, something that was emphasised by Julia:

> *"Online abuse requires a concerted strategic effort across just about every aspect of public policy. We already know that women are walking away from standing for elected office, so that's the main reason we have to double down on the idea of quotas and positive action because you can't be what you can't see. That's the first step. We've also got to dramatically change the political culture, and, in part, that's got to be about having fewer binary debates."*

[Julia, Politician in Scotland]

Sarah outlined the current position of police forces in England and Wales, in relation to

dealing with incidents of online abuse:

> *"So, at the moment, they're very focused on what they would describe as high-end social media activity. But I think there is a role for them to take that regulation broader into anything that would be an on-street offence. So, if people were to target an individual repeatedly and make offensive comments on any of the protected characteristics on the street, then that's an aggravated public order offence. But, because it happens a lot online, people think the same rules don't apply. To make sure you can investigate it properly, I think there has to be a responsibility on social media companies to identify account holders to law enforcement. Social media companies can shut things down, but they never review these accounts and I think they should be telling the police, and that would enable police forces to issue harassment warnings in a way that they find it really hard to do at the moment. Police forces don't investigate it [online abuse] to the degree they probably should, because it's not really flagged as high-level offending. I think there's a responsibility on social media companies, and I also think there's a secondary responsibility to ensure a legal framework that's in place for police forces to support our activity. In order to identify who an account belongs to, you have to be able to say it's a serious offence, which in legal definition is [an offence that attracts] over three years in prison, but few actually meet that bar."*

[Sarah, Senior Police Officer]

Fellow police officer, Geetika, was concerned that achieving effective cooperation between

police forces and online platforms may prove problematic, providing an example of the

existing relationships with social media companies and wider technology organisations as

her evidence for this:

> *"When there is a stalking and harassment type case over social media, we have to go through the usual channels to try and obtain that information from places like Google and Twitter and some of them are not based in this country, their laws are not the same as ours, so, some of those investigations can get very complicated in terms of trying to get hold of that material."*

[Geetika, Senior Police Officer]

This frequently impedes ongoing police investigations:

> *"When it comes down to very particular details of the platforms, or places, or people that are using the accounts that Twitter or Facebook might hold, they have to provide that information to us, as opposed to us being able to extract it out of the system, and it becomes almost impossible to investigate."*

[Geetika, Senior Police Officer]

Sherrie, a politician in Northern Ireland, was able to provide a comparison to the activities of the police in England and Wales with the actions of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI):

> *"In Northern Ireland we have the strictest domestic abuse, harassment and stalker legislation. The police need to act, they need to reflect the changed environment in which people are failed. We should have assurances from the police and others that they do take it seriously and will investigate. In my own case, [the perpetrator] got a custodial sentence, albeit suspended. I thought the judge was pretty good at that. I think there is a developing recognition of the harm that this type of abuse can do. The perpetrators should feel shame on their community for having done what they did."*

[Sherrie, Member of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly]

Jacqueline and Tiprat, whilst located in different countries, shared similar experiences when they had attempted to report the online abuse they had received to the police:

> *"They trivialised it and said it's not a problem, it's not as serious as other forms of sexual violence like rape, they did all of the stuff that I'd spoken about in terms of sexual harassment in offline public spaces, which is the discourse around it, and did the exact same things in terms of the online abuse, that's how they chose to discredit it."*

[Jacqueline, Academic at a UK university]

> *"Every woman I know, who's tried to report to the police has found that it was a complete fiasco, and the police didn't understand, they told her to turn off her*

computer, and that's ridiculous, because if people are coming after you, turning off your computer's not going to stop them. Law enforcement should do more, because if law enforcement took these threats more seriously, I think that would have a chilling effect on men doing these things, if there were some more men arrested and put in jail for these kinds of things, and I think that's happened a little bit more in the United Kingdom."

[Tiprat, Academic based in the USA]

Whilst this section discusses the situation across multiple jurisdictions, with many differing legislative and criminal justice responses, there is a widespread feeling of frustration, which confirms work by Lewis et al. (2017).

Two contributors offered information about work being done in the USA to increase the knowledge of criminal justice practitioners overseeing cases involving online abuse:

"I would say the last frontier has been judges, because judges have been very hesitant to touch technology. And the younger judges are much better about it, but the older judges are so worried. So, we've actually put together a judicial code. We started in 2017 and we launched it last year and we designed it with judges for judges. The majority of the training is to help judges remember that cases involving social media are no different to what they've been trained their entire career: to assess credibility. It's more just to get them comfortable with different platforms, how they work, what they do, and how you sort of owe it to the people coming before you that you understand generally how these platforms work. Otherwise you're out of touch with your constituency, and you're not a good judge."

[Sue, Academic based in the USA]

"Now we're at the point where I am working with legislators on setting up a swatting database[24], where police are trained in these tactics, and where you can register yourself as a potential swatting target, so that they know."

[Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA]

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[24] The act of "falsely reporting people to the police so that SWAT teams descend on their homes" (Lukianoff, 2015: 48).

8.4.1.2.   *Reporting incidents of online abuse to social media platforms*

The issue of reporting online abuse to social media platforms at both an individual and a structural level was a key topic for participants. At its most basic, women expressed concern about their ability to report incidents of abusive or dangerous communication, and often felt that no action was taken to identify or appropriately penalise the perpetrators. This supports work by Hodson et al. (2018), and Regehr and Ringrose (2018), which has identified a widespread dissatisfaction with the outcomes of reporting incidents of online abuse to *all* the social media platforms:

> *"I do actually believe in free speech, to a point, actually if someone wants to call me a fucking cunt, that they can. But that doesn't mean it should be allowed to stay there or remain for ever. The [social media] companies should have strong systems and act very quickly, as fast as possible, to ensure that things are pulled down when they should be pulled down."*

[Maria, Member of the House of Lords]

> *"The social media companies should have a set of principles, that I should be able to direct myself towards, if I suffer abuse. An easy contactable line of complaint or an issued formula that investigates it. I also think that people who do abuse others, shouldn't be allowed to be anonymous."*

[Sherrie, Member of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly]

> *"There's a lot of people hiding behind mirrors, just feeling able to just hurl abuse, knowing that they will never be identified. I think people, on Twitter, and this is why I came off it, people get away with so much, because they're anonymised. People are just completely anonymous, so you could be talking to somebody in America about something in [name of city], and it's not relevant to them, but they just happen to be racist, and they just want to comment on what you've got to say. I think the anonymisation of individuals should be banned, because it becomes impossible for the police or anybody else to do anything about it."*

[Smita, Local Councillor]

Smita further emphasised that she felt that there was a difference in the way she was treated when reporting offences to Facebook, as opposed to Twitter or some of the other platforms. Her experience had led her to conclude that the technical measures available to users, in the form of a single button on the site, made reporting online abuse to Facebook a simpler process:

> *"Facebook is probably easier to report things and see, you know, and I do it quite often, perhaps if I see things that I think are offensive, report the individual and then you get a report back from the administrator to say yes, it is or no it's not … but even then, I think they just need to step up that side of things."*

[Smita, Local Councillor]

At the intermediate level, there was a substantial degree of incomprehension about the continued availability of anonymous accounts, particularly on Twitter. The evidence provided by research participants echoes the work of Tromble and Koole (2020), which found that the vast majority of tweets from anonymous accounts sent to politicians in the UK, US and the Netherlands were negative and abusive, and often contained racist and / or sexist epithets.

Many of the women who contributed to this study concurred with the work of Ooi et al. (2021), feeling that prohibiting anonymous accounts would be a relatively simple measure for online platforms to implement and would ameliorate the most extreme forms of online abuse, which are overwhelmingly delivered by people using anonymous accounts, or pseudonyms:

"The difficulty with identity, and people not having to prove their identity when they register an account on social media, is that these people [engaging in online abuse] could be anybody. It could be your next-door neighbour, it could be somebody physically close to you, and that's when the risks come. You don't actually know who these people are. It's the responsibility of those companies running social media to take a more proactive approach to protecting people."

[Geetika, Senior Police Officer]

Karen explained how her own force was unable to trace several of the perpetrators who had

subjected her to online abuse, due to them having anonymous Twitter accounts:

"We have been unable to trace some of the accounts [responsible for online abuse] because some of these accounts are difficult for us to trace, and the threats to me are not life and death and therefore Twitter won't reveal where they come from."

[Karen, Senior Police Officer]

Samantha expressed a degree of frustration with the continued presence of anonymous

online accounts, feeling that the impact on policing was particularly detrimental:

"On social media people can be very anonymous, can't they? So, it really annoys me that the people who tend to be quite abusive, are anonymous and you don't really know who they are. And that almost gives people something to hide behind doesn't it, because they then think they can say and do anything that they want to do. It annoys me for lots of reasons. You see somebody [online] who purports to be a police officer, but takes every opportunity to be negative about policing, with everything that's going on, anybody would think they're being forced to stay there."

[Samantha, Senior Police Officer]

Emma highlighted that the presence of anonymous accounts on online platforms was itself

imbued with stereotypical assumptions:

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"I don't think I was alone in noting that this idea of being anonymous and therefore safe implicitly worked off the premise that the default identity that people would have while they were being anonymised and therefore safe, was that of a white man."

[Emma, Academic at a UK university]

Nevertheless, the decision to prohibit all forms of anonymity in online platforms, as well as being hugely challenging to police, also risks silencing the voices of members of the most marginalised communities, who may rely upon the benefits afforded by anonymity to fully express their identity or beliefs (Lingel, 2021; Hardaker and McGlashan, 2016). Similarly, victims of online abuse may adopt anonymity or a pseudonym in order to engage online without facing a threat to their personal safety (Campbell, 2017).

This emphasises the need to involve a more diverse group of stakeholders in designing the responses to online abuse, in order to reflect the multiplicity of users of online platforms:

"We're trying to do the leg work, the groundwork, the heavy lifting to get those who wield power and have responsibility for these platforms, as well as the legal system, to catch up with the twenty first century and put protections in place that'll make things better for women now, and our daughters and their daughters and the generations that are coming after. And then there is obviously a whole swathe of legislative reform that needs to happen because the laws that we have – that may well have been written a couple of hundred years ago – aren't equipped to deal with the twenty first century digital age of information. Those laws need to be updated and the involvement of women and minority groups who are disproportionately on the receiving end of abuse, have to be a part of that process. They have to be a part of the process that's designing digital citizenship programming and education, the elements needed to help determine how it is rolled out, they need to be part of whatever task force or whatever it is that needs to be set up to examine how our legislative structures and processes and natural laws need to evolve to mitigate some of this stuff."

[Maya, Politician in England]

Twitter has long been criticised for allowing users to remain anonymous, should they so wish (Sterner and Felmlee, 2017). However, whilst Facebook has a 'real name policy' whereby users of the site are expected to provide their genuine first and last names, this can easily be circumvented (Barlow and Awan, 2016). As indicated here, this requirement has done little to halt the perpetuation of online abuse via the Facebook site, as false identities and nicknames are frequently adopted instead (Dragiewicz et al., 2018).

There was a degree of scepticism regarding the social media companies' attitude to online abuse, and their willingness to position themselves as part of the solution, an issue also raised by Majó-Vázquez et al. (2021):

> *"Twitter creates a system that makes it easier for people to abuse anonymously and without repercussions or without taking accountability for what they say."*

[Julia, Politician in Scotland]

There was a strong feeling that ultimately, the solution to online abuse must come from the platforms themselves, as they had best access to the technological expertise needed to create effective barriers to the delivery of vituperative communication. Many expressed frustration about their engagement in this area to date:

> *"The platform creators must have the antidote. Nobody else can work at the scale that they can. The issue is that their business model is based on making money out of hate.*
> *They are only now just saying 'we need help, we didn't realise it was so bad'. It's just crap. Just rubbish. Activists have been at this for a decade already, and they have been knocking on those doors and they have gone to San Francisco, and they have had those conversations and they've been literally swatted away and abused and discredited. But now I think that their business model is being hit by the bad publicity, as actually women are a very big market. That is now causing them to take it much more seriously, and to try and engage with civil society."*

[Helen, Academic based in the USA]

> *"Why are the systems not there to protect us? This is what I'm working on… we need to be shining a spotlight on the fact that this is not acceptable. This is not acceptable. Facebook are not doing a good enough job. I think there should be a Facebook moderator that pops up saying, 'are you sure you want to post this?' or something like, 'would you like it if someone said this about you?' Something really like whoa, to make your stop in your tracks. I don't know. It would just be worth a trial."*

[Jill, Member of Parliament]

The undoubted complexity of the current situation, and of any possible structural, legislative or regulatory solutions are manifest. The situation is perhaps best summed up by Caroline, a politician who lost her seat in the House of Commons in December 2019. As catalogued across the last three chapters, Caroline received a barrage of misogynistic and anti-Semitic abuse from a variety of online actors both during and after her time in the Westminster Parliament:

> *"So, there will be more research about online hate and women, and it's incredibly important that there is … I'm interested in what recommendations you make, because it has to be more than just acknowledging that there is a problem. Because I don't know what the answers are to it, and I've lived through it."*

[Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

8.5.   The need for structural change

In the literature review presented at Chapter Two, the underlying presence of misogyny in all elements of online abuse was first discussed. It is unsurprising therefore that the spectre of misogyny was frequently raised by interview participants:

> *"Online abuse is just like all the forms of violence against women that we see offline. It's all about control. It's all about reminding you about your position, in terms of the patriarchy. Don't step out of line, don't get too cocky, don't get too vocal, don't have too many followers, don't look like that, don't dress like that. It's a constant reminder of upholding patriarchal norms. And it's another tool that patriarchy can use."*

[Souad, Academic at a UK university]

> *"Why do people have this desire to do this to strangers, to insult and harass and bully strangers? Is that just innate in humanity or has that always been there, and has the internet just created a process to finally let it out, or is it something about the internet that encourages it? Like why someone will use that little opportunity that they have to then direct something so hurtful at someone that they've never met, about something that's completely unrelated. Why do they do that? What is the kick that they are getting out of doing that?"*

[Jacqueline, Academic at a UK university]

> *"We had misogyny long before we had Google. Like, I'm not just defending the companies because I work with them. I'm defending them because I truly don't think they're solely responsible for a cultural phenomenon that we've had for thousands of years. I have a problem with holding the tech companies accountable for hundreds and thousands of years of structural power and control."*

[Sue, Academic based in the USA]

Whilst much of the evidence presented here was gathered from academics, who may have a scholarly familiarity with the issues surrounding gender and harm, it is not *only* women in the academic profession that recognised online abuse as a manifestation of gender-based violence:

"Men get to the point where they think it's ok to send indecent images of yourself to women online because actually that's all they deserve. So, I think that's the impact of misogyny at an individual level."

[Sarah, Senior Police Officer]

"The political landscape certainly encourages online abuse, and in the last five years it's gotten worse. But I think the abuse of people of colour and women online is a much more deeply rooted political issue than politics. And I would say our politics reflects misogyny and racism as a society, rather than the other way around."

[Judith, Journalist based in the USA]

Interestingly, some contributors felt that the presence of misogyny in the online space had

raised awareness of the phenomenon, leading it to be more widely acknowledged and

discussed:

"I'm actually quite heartened that misogyny is playing out in a digital space because we can prove it finally. It's not just something done in the quiet of a private space."

[Sue, Academic based in the USA]

"I think if somebody's being specifically targeted because they're a woman… obviously we've seen quite a lot of stuff on misogyny, so, if somebody is targeting women due to a hatred of women specifically, then yes, I think people feel vulnerable and exposed by that, because it's difficult to know when that's going to extend into the physical space, isn't it?"

[Geetika, Senior Police Officer]

In just the same way as in the literature review in Chapter Two, participants in the

interviews made their own connections between online abuse and the treatment of

domestic violence and sexual violence in the 1970s and 1980s, as identified by Dobash and

Dobash (1980) and Wise and Stanley (1987):

> *"It's like we've gone back to the 1960s in terms of gender discourses in the digital space."*

[Christie, Academic at a UK university]

> *"I think it [online abuse] has got worse. But hasn't it always been the case? Men abuse women. Women just have to take it and suck it up? I do wonder where it's going to end, and what all the battles we fought were for. It just seems that men are hardwired to abuse women. What I do know is that not one of the men who send this abuse would be able to do my job, not one."*

[Agnes, Member of Parliament]

> *"It does feel that we are targeted by young, empowered men who all of a sudden can be really abusive to women of a certain generation who fought for women's rights."*

[Sally, Politician in Scotland]

Consequently, there was a feeling that there is a need for a similar campaign of

consciousness raising around the issue of online abuse, on a par with that of second wave

feminism that took place some fifty years ago:

> *"I feel like this is a problem on a par with you know, raising awareness about rape and domestic violence… that it requires a huge societal change and it's very hard to envision how we're going to get there, but I do think consciousness raising about it is really important."*

[Jacqueline, Academic at a UK university]

Similarly, just as in the literature (e.g. Suzor et al., 2019; Jane, 2017a; Henry and Powell,

2015), the link between gender-based violence and online abuse was also clear to

participants:

> *"I see it as all of a piece, in the sense that in a patriarchal society women's agency, women's independence, women's authentic voice is punished, in the home through domestic violence, in the workplace. In terms of gender-based violence, it is women being out in public or attacked through rape or other kinds of means, it's the taking of autonomy to leave your home and do what you want to do."*

[Jacqueline, Academic at a UK university]

> *"We don't see this as a new phenomenon, it's just the newest iteration of an old phenomenon, all those things that continue to undermine and weaken women's protection in the physical space from violence and domestic partner violence, intimate partner violence, street violence, all of that, all those things are still at play in the digital world."*

[Helen, Academic based in the USA]

> *"I can say personally, online abuse is just a constant reminder of just how acceptable violence towards women and gender non-conforming people is. When I see the abuse in my inbox or online, it just reminds me constantly of the level of threat that it's still societally ok to lob at women."*

[Judith, Journalist based in the USA]

8.5.1. Structural impacts of online abuse

Having articulated what they believed was a link between online abuse, misogyny and

gender-based violence, some contributors further illustrated what they believed was the

structural impact of online abuse. This is important to consider in order to then be able to

devise recommendations.

> *"It's really hard to hold the technology companies solely responsible. Do they have a role? Absolutely. But I want us to be talking to men, that this behaviour is out of bounds and it's on all of us to intervene in that behaviour wherever they do it."*

[Sue, Academic based in the USA]

> *"So, if the bar is lowered on how you refer to women on social media, it just feels like the bar's being lowered all the time in other areas. In terms of some of the stuff I'm looking at around trafficked women and rape, it's terrifying, because it's like women are worthless… that they have no value, so they can just be raped and abused and just calling them a fucking cunt online is ok."*

[Agita, Member of the House of Lords]

> *"I think online abuse is just another example of this sense where women are not allowed to occupy certain positions in the social sphere and are punished through violence, through silencing, through threats of violence. Like racism, like any kind of prejudice, threats of violence and then actual occasional violence, keep people from voicing their opinions. They keep people from being more autonomous and being more authentic."*

[Tiprat, Academic based in the USA]

8.5.2. Recommendations for structural change

In many ways, addressing online abuse at a structural level presents the most complicated

policy challenge. However, it is clear from the evidence presented in this study that it is

only by addressing the issue at a structural level that real progress will be made. It has

repeatedly been shown that policy recommendations which fail to address the underlying

structural inequality that precipitates gender-based violence are unlikely to succeed, as they

place the onus on the individual to resolve an intractable problem, without providing the

necessary mechanisms to do so (Atkinson and Standing, 2019).

> *"I really think energy is best spent trying to create societal change. Whether it's*
> *disinformation or extremism or online abuse, it always comes back to, what do we*
> *do for the individual? And the best thing we can do for the individual is push for*
> *systemic change."*

[Judith, Journalist based in the USA]

Research by Atkinson and Standing (2019) has shown that feminist and intersectional voices

have traditionally been excluded from change making at this level, meaning that

recommendations, which come directly from women, and which are underpinned by a

feminist ethos are even more apposite.

8.5.2.1.   Structural solution: Challenging and changing misogynistic abusive behaviour online

Contributors to this research overwhelmingly felt that challenging and changing

misogynistic abusive behaviour, whether in the physical or the online space lay at the heart

of tackling this issue from a structural perspective. This echoes the work of Edström (2016),

who spoke of the need to expose and challenge the behaviour of violent actors online, in

order to make such behaviour unacceptable.

Sue, an Academic based in the USA, termed this the "Dude, it's not OK" proposition:

> *"At a macro level, I really believe we need to be arming young men to see it and*
> *name it. I want us to give men more tools to be able to say, when there's a rape joke*
> *made at a bar, to be able to say, 'dude, not funny'. We've got to be intervening and*

saying this is out of bounds, this is unacceptable behaviour and I want more men on Twitter to be interrupting and them to be reporting the rape threats the minute they see it, and then challenging the person saying it, saying 'dude, not ok'."

[Sue, Academic based in the USA]

Given the widespread acknowledgement in the literature that the dominant voices online are typically male and white (e.g. Williams et al., 2019), Sue asserted that there is a need for men to use their accumulated power in the online space, in an appropriate way:

"Men have power, and they need to be flexing it and we need to give them tools on how to do it appropriately, because coming at one inappropriate comment with a flaming minimalization of calling somebody an idiot and stupid is fun, and it feels good, but it's ultimately about saying this behaviour is out of bounds, we need to not confront it with behaviour that's also out of bounds, which is demeaning and belittling."

[Sue, Academic based in the USA]

Sue went on to explain how this approach was more common in other countries:

"They've done more work in the Scandinavian culture to encourage bystander intervention and engagement and more gender equity. I would love to get some of that and pepper it around the US. I understand the challenges, but I really feel that we need to do more as a society to hold people accountable for the behaviours."

[Sue, Academic based in the USA]

Others expressed support for Sue's recommendation:

"Men need to do something about it too. It can't just be women speaking up for women. It's much easier, it's always much easier to intervene on someone else's behalf, than to intervene on your own behalf. So I hope that what we're seeing with the Black Lives Matter movement gaining support from people who aren't Black, that they will now intervene in a way they wouldn't have before. We've got to expect more from fellow citizens, whether that's online or not, to intervene, to protect."

[Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019]

Kerry agreed, but emphasised that the responsibility lies with all users of social media

platforms to campaign against online abuse and to acknowledge it publicly when it occurs:

"I don't think things will change unless we see… what the Suffragettes did, what political women did, what women in academia are still doing. You need to know who's your ally online… that other women are coming on board to support you, or other men are coming onboard to support you. Even if you don't know these people, they should actually come and support you."

[Kerry, Local Councillor]

Such an approach has been analysed by Wong et al. (2021), who have investigated the

effect of bystander intervention in abusive Facebook posts. They discovered that reporting

abuse, defending, and supporting the victim were the most common interventions, and that

reporting was far more likely to occur if the reporting of abusive or harmful posts was both

simple and anonymous. This confirms the need for online platforms to streamline their

reporting mechanisms, and to publicise the ease with which reporting can be done.

In addition to practical change fostered by social media companies, Julia highlighted the

need for a wider cultural reorientation in the language that politicians use in the public

sphere. Political communication needs to become more temperate, in order to avoid

adding to an already febrile atmosphere which works to silence a genuine multiplicity of

voices and opinions:

"You need to go back and look at how you share power. How do you have more deliberative processes for people to feel like they have agency in decisions that are made about their lives? How do you get politicians themselves to behave better? The language that they use almost creates the environment where people can be bolder in their own choice of words… you've almost got to reteach the politicians the art of persuasion. How they need to behave differently if they want more people to buy into their beliefs. This has been coming for a long time, it's just been expediated by

events such as the economic crash, the referendums, and an explosion in productive technology like social media, all of these things have created the climate that we're in so there's not one easy fix."

[Julia, Politician in Scotland]

Sarah spoke about her experience within policing, giving an example of what happened when a female officer became the target for online abuse. She highlighted her disappointment that male officers did not intervene in an abusive episode:

> *"No men were calling it out. It was obvious that one of them [the perpetrators] was still a serving police officer, and in fact he took his tweet down… but that will only be because he was like, 'oh blimey, [Sarah] could report me to professional standards and I could get investigated'. Whereas you'd really hope that they would be self-controlling enough, even if they thought some of the things they thought, not to write them on a public forum."*

[Sarah, Senior Police Officer]

8.6. Summary

This chapter has brought together the various recommendations for tackling the online abuse of women working in public facing occupations, as proffered by participants in the empirical phase of this study.

These recommendations fall into four categories: the actions that women can take as individuals, the support and activity that should be provided by employing organisations, the regulatory and legislative responses that are likely to be effective, and finally the pervasive structural change to gender relations in society that would make misogynistic online abuse unacceptable in mainstream discourse.

At a structural level, it was felt that equalising the position of women and men throughout society would have the most enduring impact on overcoming online abuse. An integral part of this systemic change is making men more aware of the sheer scale and nature of the abusive content that women in public facing occupations are required to navigate on a daily basis. Such knowledge would assist in embedding the expectation that everyone, especially men, should challenge individual instances of online abuse that they witness, in order to further create a climate where such attacks are made socially unacceptable. There also needs to be a reorientation of public discourse, to allow for greater nuance in debate, which would remove the need for participants in political discussions to repeatedly adopt uncompromising positions.

At a legislative level, there was overwhelming support for greater regulation of the online platforms, as outlined in the Online Safety Bill published in May 2021. It was also felt that along with any introduction of new legislation in respect of online activity had to come adequate training and resourcing of police forces to enable any such legislation to be properly implemented. In addition, the social media companies should be compelled to take a greater responsibility for the acts of violence, aggression and intimidation that take place on their platforms, and provide innovative solutions to overcoming such activity, using technical means where appropriate. Anonymous accounts should be heavily restricted, if not removed entirely.

At an organisational level, participants strongly believed that public sphere employers, whether universities, media organisations, criminal justice agencies or political parties, should provide a greater level of training and support for their employees. Women should

feel that they have a guarantee of protection from their employer when faced with abuse during the course of their employment. This should include employers taking on the responsibility for reporting online abuse to the social media companies, or law enforcement, where required.   This change to occupational culture should come from the top, with organisational leaders and senior managers aware of the pernicious consequences of online abuse upon all staff, whatever their role or level of seniority. Members of public facing occupations who enact online abuse should have their membership of the organisation scrutinised, with the possibility of removal, if appropriate.

At an individual level, both women and men should be provided with training in digital literacy, strongly underpinned by the principle that engaging in online abuse is never acceptable. This training should continue through into the continuous professional development schemes that all public sphere employees undertake, in order to ensure that women are enabled to maintain up-to-date skills in reporting and protecting themselves from being targeted online; whilst also providing men with the tools they need to act as effective bystanders and allies against abuse.

As has been illustrated by the participants' contributions throughout this chapter, these issues are frequently interrelated, with change required across all four levels in order to be effective.

The next chapter, Chapter Nine, draws this doctoral study to a close. This final chapter of the thesis restates the aims of the research study first presented in Chapter One, before proceeding to answer the three research questions, a reminder of which is presented at Figure 8.2.

How are women in public facing occupations targeted online?

What effect does online abuse have on women's interactions with the digital world?

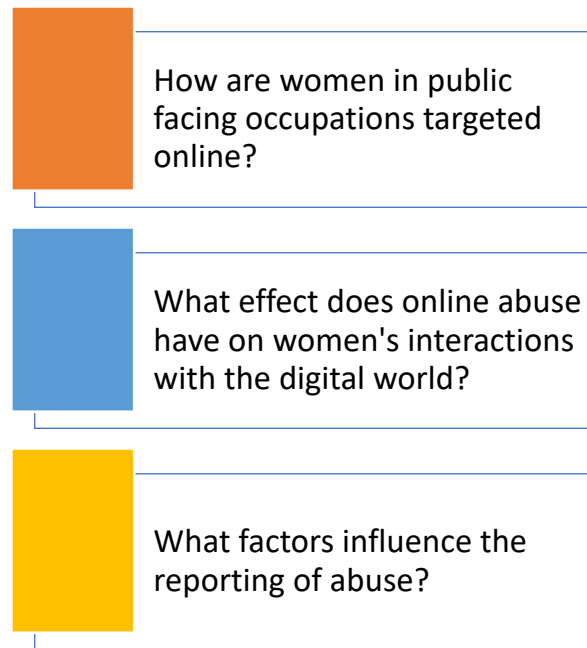What factors influence the reporting of abuse?

Figure 8.2: Research questions to be answered

Chapter Nine also discusses the significance of the study's findings, along with the potential contribution that this research could make. The chapter concludes by considering the limitations of the study, and how the research could be further developed in the future.

Chapter Nine: Conclusion – assessing the impact of online abuse on gender-based violence

9.1. Introduction

The aim of this doctoral research study is to investigate the relationship between the online abuse experienced by women employed in public facing occupations, and gender-based violence.

This final concluding chapter brings together the aims and objectives of the research, along with the answers to the research questions first outlined in Chapter One. The significance of the study's findings is discussed, along with the potential contribution that the research could make in this area of scholarship. The chapter concludes by considering the limitations of the study, and how the research could be further developed in the future.

9.2. Restating the aims and objectives of the research

The impetus for this doctoral research comes from the recognition that online abuse is increasingly part of the role for women serving in public facing occupations. Such abuse is highly gendered, and often questions women's competence, integrity, or appearance; and is imbued with threats of violence. The malign impact of technology on women employed in public facing occupations must be addressed, in order to ensure that the benefits of the new ways of working that have materialised as a consequence of technological advancement, are experienced equally. The aim of this research was to investigate the extent to which social networking sites have perpetuated a permissive climate towards gender-based violence, and to examine the wider impact that such online abuse can have.

The objective of the study was to gather a range of empirical and interdisciplinary evidence in order to make realistic and workable recommendations to address the problems caused by online abuse, which can then be implemented across the public sphere.

9.3. Themes identified in the doctoral study

Reflexive thematic analysis of the empirical evidence was undertaken, drawing on the Braun and Clarke (2006) model. Utilizing the NVivo software program as a mechanism to assist the analytical phase across all areas of the study enabled the structured investigation and subsequent triangulation of data. Analysing the data sources using the robust and systematic functionality offered by the software allowed themes to be identified that may otherwise have been overlooked. It also provides a synergy to the study, underpinned by a recognised model in Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021).

A number of overlapping conceptual themes have been drawn from the different data sources. These are illustrated in Figure 9.1.
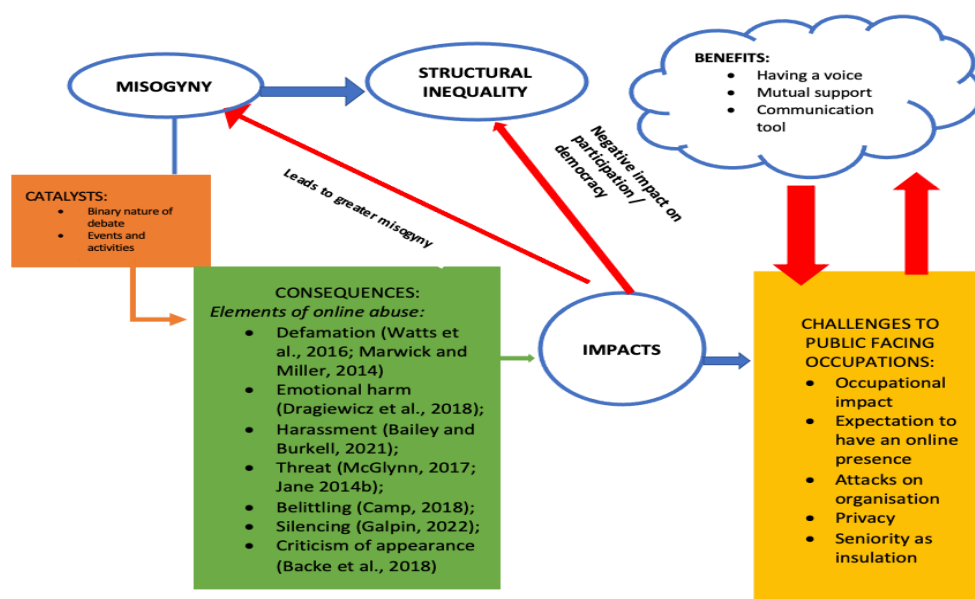

Figure 9.1: Thesis conceptual map

Figure 9.1 illustrates in diagrammatic form how, by bringing together three sources of data, in the form of an existing interdisciplinary yet disparate corpus, the qualitative analysis of three Twitter storms, and 50 semi-structured interviews, it has been possible to obtain a greater understanding of the online abuse of women working in the public sphere. This doctoral study has confirmed that the gendered abuse directed at women via online platforms shares many characteristics of the gender-based violence modelled by Pence and Paymar (1993) and others. Similarly, much of this vicious invective is underpinned by misogyny and a wider structural inequality that has persisted for centuries. Nevertheless, as well as evidencing striking similarities with the gender-based violence that occurs in the physical space, this research also identifies a number of important differences.

It is clear that the online abuse directed at women serving in public sphere occupations is frequently triggered by a topical event or news item, something that is exacerbated by the increasingly binary nature of political events. Three such examples that are discussed in this thesis are the referenda that were held on Scottish independence in 2014, and membership of the European Union in 2016, and the ongoing debate around gender identification. Each of these acted as catalysts for increases in the online abuse that women faced, even if they themselves had never issued a public statement in relation to any of these topics. The visible articulation of gendered violence in the form of online abuse towards public sphere representatives is new, as it is not shrouded in the secrecy that is commonly found in the gender-based violence that occurs within intimate and familial relationships.

Figure 9.1 further demonstrates how online abuse frequently consists of a number of elements, namely emotional harm (Dragiewicz et al., 2018); harassment (Bailey and Burkell, 2021); threat (McGlynn, 2017; Jane 2014b); belittling (Camp, 2018); silencing (Galpin, 2022); and criticism of appearance (Backe et al., 2018). The seventh element of online abuse, that

of defamation, was identified as a result of the detailed scrutiny of three Twitter storms, outlined in Chapter Five. The qualitative analysis of this large and detailed dataset, which catalogued the experiences of a politician, academic and broadcast journalist, revealed how women serving in the public sphere frequently face the denigration of their abilities, honesty and personal probity. This facet of online abuse is not a common feature of the existing literature, although it has been mentioned briefly by both Watts et al. (2016) and Marwick and Miller (2014). In contrast, in this study, defamation is revealed to be an integral part of women's online experience.

The research undertaken for this study has similarly identified two aspects of online abuse that are of particular relevance to those working in the public sphere. One of these is a negative consequence, and the other a positive, thereby usefully illustrating how having an online presence whilst employed in a public sphere occupation can be both constructive and disadvantageous to women's careers – often at the same time. The first challenge emanates from the expectation that those holding positions within academia, journalism, policing, and politics be forever readily available and accessible online; and secondly, that their seniority may act as an insulator from abuse, not by preventing pernicious communication, but providing ways in which they can limit their exposure to it. Both of these factors are discussed in greater detail below.

At the same time, this study has also confirmed that engaging in online activity can bring significant benefits, both at an individual and an organisational level. For as Figure 9.1 indicates, communicating with others active in the online space is not only a useful mechanism for the advancement of policies and ideas, it also enables women to create mutually supportive communities that act as a palliative to the inevitable abuse that occurs.

9.4. Contribution to knowledge

This doctoral research makes a key contribution to knowledge in the scholarship of online

abuse. This research is the first to gather and present empirical data from the four public

sphere professions of academia, journalism, policing, and politics in a single study, whilst

also bringing together the experiences of women based across the UK, the USA and

mainland Europe. This type of comparison has not been undertaken before, and it adds a

rich understanding of the similarities and differences of the challenges faced by those

employed in public sphere occupations across a range of countries. This analysis has been

used to provide a comprehensive account of the online abuse directed at women across

these four professions, based upon seven thematic elements.   One of these seven

elements – defamation – was identified directly as a result of analysis of the three Twitter

storms in Chapter Five and draws attention to the malign impact that online abuse can have

on an individual's reputation and occupational standing.

By undertaking a comprehensive evaluation of the literature in this area, it has also been

possible to map the different behavioural elements frequently found in online abuse onto

the theories of gender-based violence that were devised to account for violence that occurs

in the physical space, such as the Duluth model (Pence and Paymar, 1993), which were

devised long before the emergence of computer mediated communication. This theoretical

process confirms that the harms perpetrated online are yet another manifestation of the

personal and structural misogyny that women have faced for centuries.

By adopting the seven thematic lenses of defamation (Watts et al., 2016; Marwick and

Miller, 2014) emotional harm (Dragiewicz et al., 2018); harassment (Bailey and Burkell,

2021); threat (McGlynn, 2017; Jane 2014b); belittling (Camp, 2018); silencing (Galpin, 2022)

and criticism of appearance (Backe et al., 2018) it has been possible to determine that the nature of the abuse received by women frequently differs according to occupation. Detailed analysis of the empirical data has revealed that there is an important divergence in the types of abuse sent to women holding different positions within the public sphere, with police officers far more likely to be targeted for abuse that questions their integrity or ability, or which criticises their appearance, voice, or age. In contrast, women politicians and journalists are more likely to receive violent or sexualised threats; whilst women in academia appear to receive both types of abuse, with examples of the vituperative communication that this group receive meeting all seven of the elements identified in this study.

The qualitative analysis of Twitter storms is a novel mechanism for both illustrating and assessing both the scale and content of Tweets, enabling a much greater understanding of the nature of the online abuse received by women working in the public sphere. When brought together with the interdisciplinary literature and the rich empirical data gained from the 50 semi-structured interviews, a much broader picture of the nature of gendered online abuse as it occurs in the public sphere is acquired than has been achieved in previous scholarship.

9.5. Answering the research questions

The aims and objectives of the research are operationalised as three research questions, considering how women serving in public facing occupations are targeted online, the effect that online abuse has on women's interactions with the digital world, and whether there are

any discrete factors that either precipitate or prevent women reporting the episodes of

abuse that they experience.

9.5.1. Research Question One

The first research question investigated in this study was **'how are women in public facing**

occupations targeted online?'

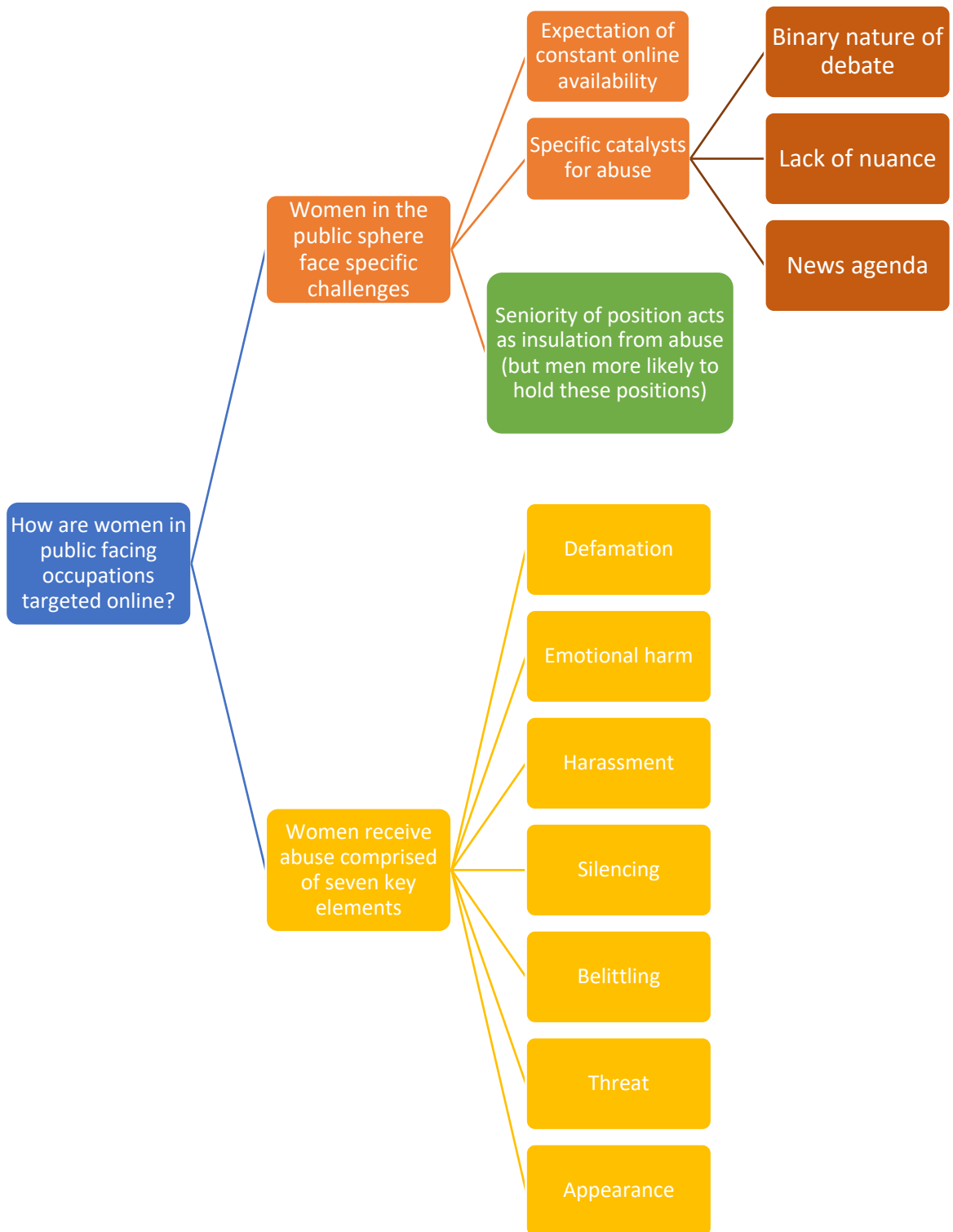Figure 9.2 summarises the response to this question.

Figure 9.2: Research Question One: How are women in public facing occupations targeted online?

Exploring the issues surrounding this question resulted in the identification of two of the

study's key components: seven elements that frequently appear in episodes of online

abuse; and the challenges arising from online participation that are most likely to affect women in public facing occupations.

By adopting a range of different methodological approaches, it has been possible to make connections between the phenomenon of online abuse and the presence of gender-based violence, as encompassed in the title of the thesis. This scrutiny has revealed that rather than simply having an impact on gender-based violence, online abuse is in *itself* another manifestation of the gender-based violence first officially recorded back in the 14th Century (Dwyer, 1995). This study has built upon theories of gender-based violence in order to identify seven separate lenses through which to analyse the act of online abuse. These lenses are defamation; emotional harm; harassment; physical characteristics; belittling and undermining; silencing; and threat. One of these – defamation – arose from the qualitative analysis of three Twitter storms, targeted at a politician, an academic and a broadcast journalist, having previously only been identified in two papers (Watts et al., 2016; Marwick and Miller, 2014). By applying these lenses to analysis of the literature in this area, real-time Twitter data collected using an API, and the empirical accounts provided by fifty women employed across the public sphere, it is possible to gain a comprehensive understanding of how women in public facing occupations are targeted online, as these dimensions are present, whether in whole or in part, within all the online abuse that women receive, whether based in the UK, USA or mainland Europe. By identifying *how* women in public facing occupations are targeted online, key elements of the complex power relationships and interactions that occur online for women in the public sphere have been identified and demonstrated within the seven elements of online abuse. Each of these elements (both individually and combined) was evident in the wide range of abusive communication analysed in this study.

Interestingly, the distribution of these different dimensions is not equal across the public sphere, with women receiving different types of abuse, depending upon their occupation. This study has shown that out of the four public facing occupations scrutinized, politicians and journalists are more likely to receive online threats that are violent or sexualised, with police officers more likely to receive abuse that targets their professional competence, age or appearance. Furthermore, the literature and empirical data suggests that out of the four occupational categories discussed in this research, it is academics who receive online communication that is likely to be both violent, threatening, and sexualised, whilst also commenting on different facets of their physical appearance. The reasons for this are unclear, and worthy of further investigation. However, it is possible that those engaging in perpetuating online abuse are more wary of attracting legal sanction from police officers, who are more familiar with the criminal penalties available via the Offences Against the Person Act (1861), the Malicious Communications Act (1988) or the Serious Crime Act (2015) (CPS, 2018), and who would therefore be more likely report offences occurring in these categories, in order to seek redress under these laws.

This research has identified that there is an ever-increasing expectation from the general public that women working in the public sphere be constantly readily available online. Such an expectation increases the unpaid emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012) and safety work (Vera-Gray, 2018) expected of women, as well as the staff members that they employ. As a part of this analysis, two specific catalysts that make online abuse more likely were identified, namely the creation of binary debates that force individuals to favour one side over another; along with an associated lack of nuance within such debates.

An interesting finding to emerge in this study is that seniority of position frequently acts as an insulator against the worst features of online abuse. This is because once individuals

reach a certain level within an organisational hierarchy, they are less likely to actively engage with their own online accounts, either because the responsibility for the routine operation of these accounts has been delegated to a member of staff; or because the various automated safeguards provided by the social media companies (such as verified account status from Twitter) mean that the abuse that occurs is not seen by the individual to whom it is sent. Whilst this may provide a welcome respite for some, it often leaves individual staff members vulnerable to the malign effects of the abuse instead, whilst simultaneously doing nothing to protect those whose positions are not deemed senior enough to benefit from the protection offered by verification.

A consistent thread running through this doctoral research is the finding that women who hold multiple intersectional identities, whether due to race, class, sexuality or disability, frequently find themselves more heavily targeted for online abuse, a position that reflects their enduring inequality in the physical space. It is disappointing, if unsurprising, to confirm that these multiple discriminations perpetuate and have not been overcome in newer communication forms.

9.5.2.   Research Question Two

The second question in this study considered **what effect online abuse has on women's interactions with the digital world**.

The answer to this question is summarised in Figure 9.3.
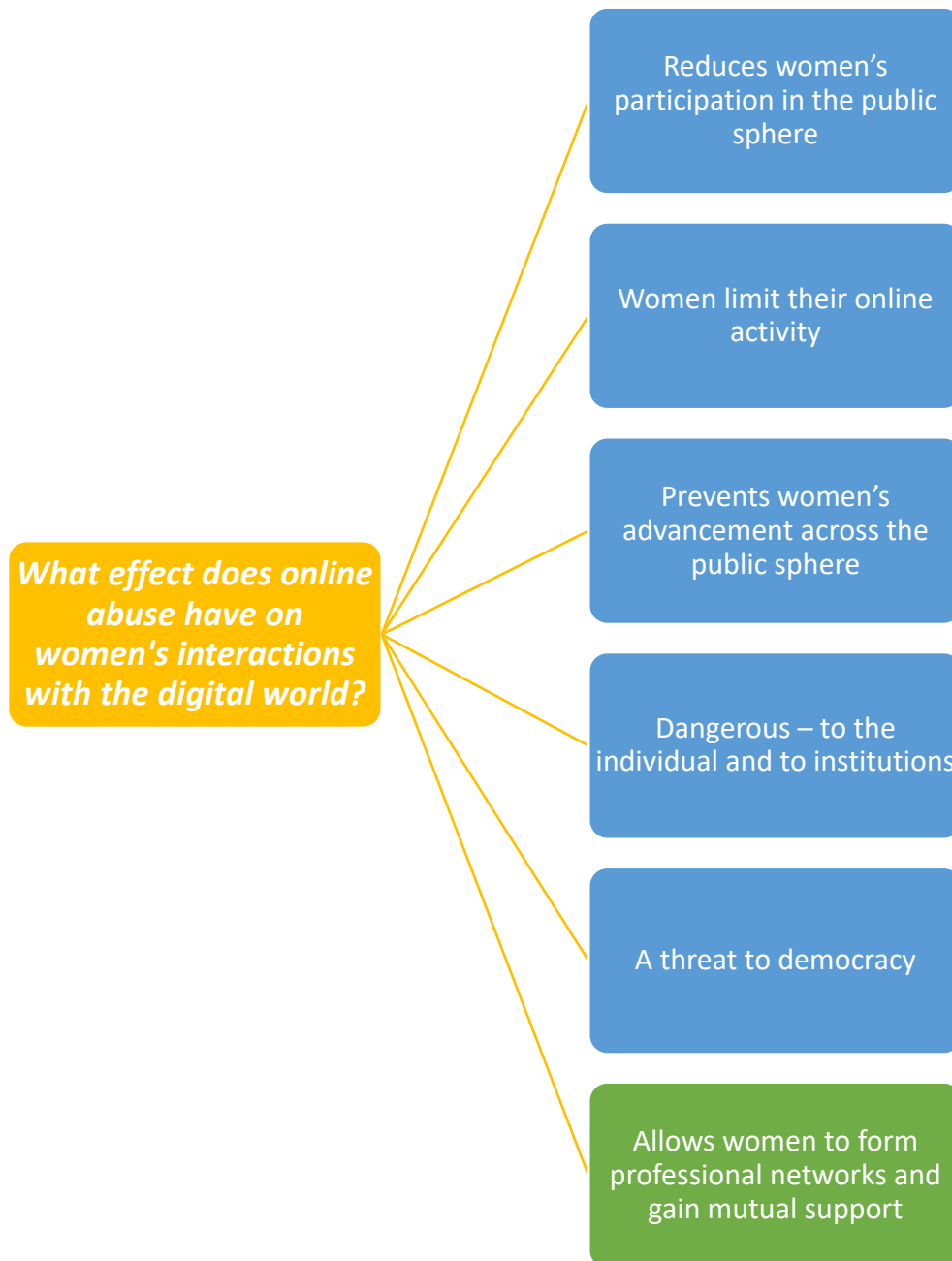
Figure 9.3: Research Question Two: what effect does online abuse have on women's interactions with the digital world?

This study has demonstrated that the effects of receiving online abuse are experienced at

an individual, organisational and structural level. For the individual, it is clear that receiving

online abuse causes a great deal of emotional harm. The empirical evidence presented in

the earlier chapters of this thesis concurs with the existing literature in this area and

confirms the effect of online abuse on an individual's wellbeing. Contributions provided in

this study also demonstrate the wider impact of emotional harm as it relates to others, whether family members, friends or staff, or a combination of all three.

This type of emotional harm is pernicious and enduring and illustrates how detriment can be provoked at multiple strata.

Ultimately, the effect of online abuse for an individual may be their complete withdrawal from digital interaction, as they choose to exit from the online space. Such action is taken as both an overt occupational choice, and an emotional necessity.

The effect of online abuse is not only experienced at an individual level, as the consequences frequently extend out to affect the organisational sphere. The online abuse and associated threats detailed in this study have the potential to negatively affect an individual's ability to do their job properly and serve the public in the way that they intend. A further consequence of malign online communication is that women may choose to withdraw entirely from the public sphere. This was evidenced in the General Election of December 2019, when a large number of Parliamentarians left the House of Commons, with many citing online abuse as a reason for their career change. Whilst an individual deciding to pursue an alternative form of employment is not unusual, the motivations for doing so in this situation have a potentially wider impact. The withdrawal from the public sphere risks jeopardising the advancement of women at both an organisational and a structural level, as women lose their voice in the places where power is held and decisions are made, illustrating the act of silencing that is also frequently designated as an element of misogyny. When viewed as a whole, the silencing of women has an even greater consequence than removing the voices of potentially influential women from the online space, as the act of silencing may also prevent women from forming the occupational and social networks that

are essential to both tackling online abuse and facilitating positive occupational advancement.

This research has also highlighted how online abuse could have a deleterious impact upon women's engagement in the wider public sphere, potentially jeopardising the progress that women have made towards equality across all four of the occupations being analysed in this study. The organisational and structural ramifications associated with a decline in the number of women holding senior positions in the fields of academia, journalism, policing, and politics could include a reversal in efforts to counter sexual harassment in the workplace (Jane, 2018), a widening of the gender pay gap (Kavanagh and Brown, 2020), and a policy vacuum at the heart of government.

Moreover, this research has revealed that democracy itself is jeopardised by online abuse, as women may feel pressurised to alter the way they are planning to vote in parliamentary debates as a consequence.

However, it has been emphasised throughout this study that online interaction is rarely wholly negative. For despite the multifarious malign effects described throughout this thesis, there remain huge benefits to individuals serving in public facing occupations as a result of having and maintaining an online presence (Khan et al., 2014; Marwick and Hargittai, 2018). Three key benefits identified during the course of this research include the value of online interaction as a communication tool, the importance of having and maintaining a voice in the online space, and the mutual support that is gained from other women working in public facing occupations, particularly during or after episodes of online abuse.

9.5.3. Research Question Three

The third and final research question posed in the thesis was seeking to determine if there were **any factors that either encouraged or prevented women employed in public facing occupations from reporting the abuse they encounter** to law enforcement agencies or to the social media platforms upon which the abuse occurs.

The answer to this question is summarised in Figure 9.4.
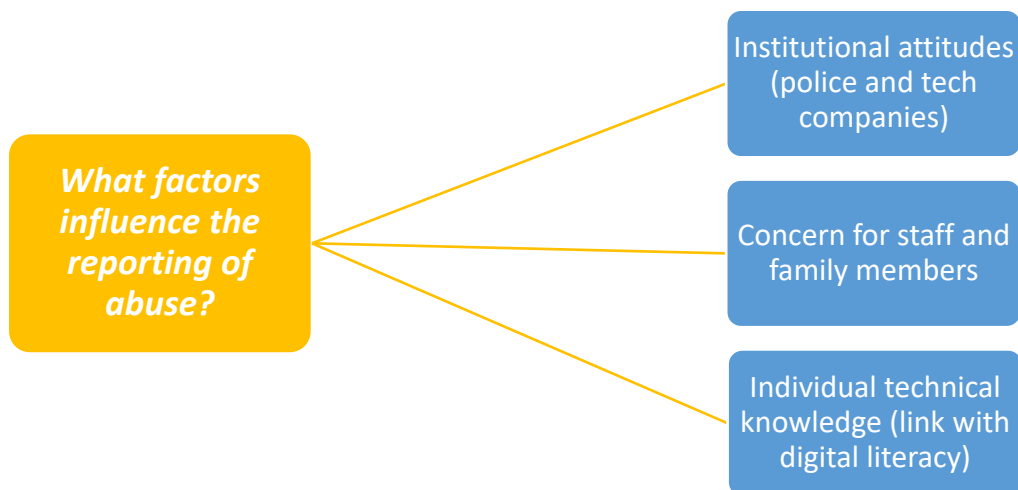
Figure 9.4: Research Question Three: What factors influence the reporting of abuse?

There is a difference in the support and reporting mechanisms available on the different social media platforms, which makes reporting abuse complicated. Furthermore, there appeared to be little homogeneity of experience, with participants' expressed satisfaction with the responses they had received from online platforms varying considerably. This made women sceptical about reporting abuse, with many describing it as both pointless and time consuming.

Holding a position of seniority within a public facing occupation appeared to provide greater

access to the police and other law enforcement agencies with whom to report abuse.

Whilst obviously of benefit to the individual, this highlights a possible bias present in the

criminal justice system, with 'ordinary' women unable to benefit from such ease of access

when they find themselves on the receiving end of online abuse. For whilst the literature

discussed in Chapter Two revealed an unsatisfactory, ill prepared or inexperienced response

to online abuse from criminal justice agencies, many of the politicians spoken to in the

course of this study were able to report having a broadly positive relationship with the

police when reporting incidents of online abuse or threatening behaviour.

However, despite potentially having greater access to official reporting mechanisms, the

attitude of the police when investigating cases involving high-profile women still often

resulted in revictimization, with the onus on the individual to evidence instances of

threatening, violent or sexualised abuse. This is one of many ways in which the handling of

online abuse by the criminal justice system in the present day, reflects attitudes towards

victims of domestic violence and sexual harassment found in the research undertaken in the

1970s and 1980s.

Where women did choose to report instances of abuse, this often arose out of a wider

concern for the safety of their staff, co-workers, or family members, who were often

perceived as becoming the 'collateral damage' of online abuse, increasing the emotional

harm and stress on an individual, and blurring the line between occupational and personal

identity.

Finally, when women held more junior positions within a profession, or were without a staff

team to call upon for technical assistance, there was often a lack of knowledge about how

to report online abuse, and who to best make any report to, whether police or social media

platforms. This emphasised the need for greater digital literacy, ensuring all women know

how to report online abuse, and to feel confident in doing so.

9.6. Recommendations to address online abuse

Chapter Eight brought together the recommendations for addressing online abuse proposed

by the fifty participants in the empirical phase of this study. These are summarised at Figure

9.5.
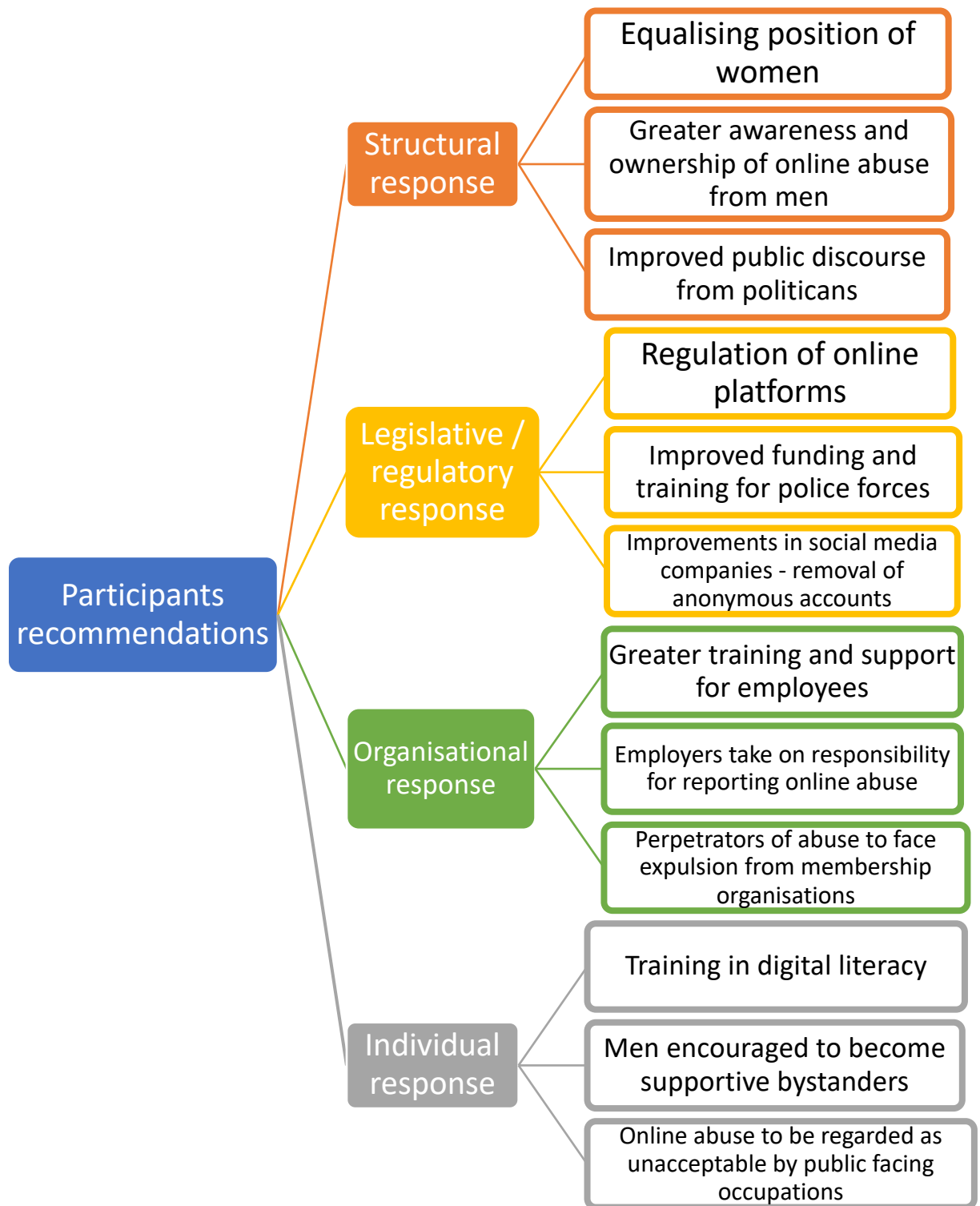
Figure 9.5: Participants recommendations for addressing online abuse

These recommendations are drawn from the empirical evidence, ensuring that women's

voices remain at the centre of the research process (Oakley, 1981). They provide policy

proposals designed to work at a structural, legislative, organisational and an individual level.

It is suggested that government (as operationalised through Ofcom) and public facing

occupations, in their role as employers, work with the multiplicity of social media companies

to create an interdisciplinarity of approach, to dovetail with the interdisciplinary range of

investigative techniques and potential solutions to the problem of online abuse. Stepping

outside academic and policy boundaries in this way increases the potential to harness the

plurality of policy solutions and technical approaches, to resolve a problem that occurs

beyond traditional disciplinary parameters.

9.7. Opportunities for future research

The first opportunity for future research identified by this study is the further exploration of

the nature of abuse directed at women in different occupations within the public sphere.

As outlined in the previous section, this study observed a difference in the abuse received

by academics, journalists, police officers and politicians. However, it is not clear why this is

the case, and whether this a new phenomenon, or one that has always existed, albeit

unrecorded. This study found a paucity of both literature and empirical research

considering the online experiences of women police officers, when compared to the other

occupational groups studied in this research, and it would be a worthwhile exercise to

attempt to address this data gap in a further study.

Since this research commenced, a number of events have occurred that have called into

question the occupational culture of policing, principally in relation to the Metropolitan

Police Service. The abduction, rape, and murder of Sarah Everard by a serving police officer,

and the subsequent police response to a vigil held in her honour (Wistrich, 2022); along with

the conviction of two serving police officers for illegally distributing images of the bodies of

Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman to a WhatsApp group (Jones and Wilson, 2021) are two

cases that have attracted significant public outrage. In February 2022, a report by the

Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC, 2022) into the dissemination of misogynistic

online abuse (including rape jokes) via WhatsApp by police officers serving at Charing Cross

Police Station was published (Dodd, 2022). The subsequent charging of two men with

multiple counts of sending "grossly offensive messages on a public communications

network contrary to Section 127 of the Communications Act 2003" (IOPC, 2022: 1), whilst

the public concern about gender-based violence was already high (Wistrich, 2022) has led to

a debate about the presence of misogyny in policing. This culminated in the final weeks

before this thesis was submitted for examination, with the Mayor of London declaring that

he had lost confidence in the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Service, Cressida

Dick, to resolve the structural misogyny (and other issues) present within the organisation.

As a consequence of his intervention, the Commissioner resigned, and has yet to be

replaced (Talora, 2022).

Given these significant events, which included prosecutions for the dissemination of online

abuse in two separate cases, there are a number of ways in which this research could be

developed. If there is a statutory public inquiry into police conduct, as some have called for

(Syal, 2021), the issues raised in this research, will be particularly relevant, and could make a

worthwhile contribution.

9.8. Generalisability of this research

As a primarily qualitative research project, the findings of the study are not statistically generalisable (Smith, 2018) to the wider population of women serving in public facing occupations, nor are they meant to be representative of the wider occupational groups of which they are a part.   However, if a more holistic view of generalisability is adopted, utilising the concepts of analytical generalisability (Lewis, 2014) and naturalistic generalisability (Stake, 1978) then this study has much to offer. When viewed through a lens of analytical generalisability, there are a number of areas in which the theoretical findings of this research could provide a useful contribution to scholarship in this area. By applying traditional theories of gender-based violence, such as the power and control wheel (Pence and Paymar, 1993), the continuum of violence (Kelly, 1988), coercive control (Stark, 2009), and the theory of cultural violence (Galtung, 1990), to the episodes of gendered violence that occur in the online space, there is an opportunity to better understand the existence of this behaviour as a public manifestation of abuse, and to put in place safeguards to protect women from its repercussions, whilst still facilitating the online domain as a location for the gaining and sharing of mutual support and understanding.

If naturalistic generalisability is adopted, then it is likely that the combination of the thick descriptions provided in the quotes from the semi-structured interviews conducted with women serving in the occupations of academia, journalism, policing, and politics; coupled with the verbatim tweets gathered in the three Twitter storms, will enable women who are themselves active in the online space to recognise a synergy with their own experience (Chenail, 2010).

As is made clear throughout this thesis, the motivations for this project come fundamentally from a desire to effect realistic policy change. Whilst the limited measures contained in the Online Safety Bill (2021), which are designed to provide a degree (through Ofcom) of regulation of social media platforms, are to be welcomed, there is a clear need for policy, organisational and institutional change to acknowledge and designate as unacceptable this form of gender-based violence. In order to achieve this aim, identification and understanding of online abuse as a manifestation of gender-based violence needs to be widely communicated, in the hope and expectation that this understanding will compel those in positions of power throughout the public sphere to effect meaningful and enduring policy and behavioural change

9.9. Limitations of this research

There are a number of potential limitations associated with this doctoral research. Firstly, there is a disparity in the numbers of participants represented from each occupational group, with more politicians recruited than other occupational categories. It is possible therefore that the impacts of online abuse on this group have influenced the wider findings of the study, although the triangulation of semi-structured interviews with Twitter data and the literature review has been applied in an attempt to negate the presence of any unintended bias. The small sample size found in some of the occupations investigated here, is an inevitable consequence of choosing to focus on 'elite' participants (Gray and Jones, 2016). Furthermore, the reliance on snowball sampling, whilst an effective way of gaining access to chosen populations, will also negatively impact upon generalisability. Despite this obvious and acknowledged limitation, the relatively small total number of women in senior

roles in some of the occupations under consideration (e.g. policing) means that the sample size, when viewed as a proportion of the total population, is not as insignificant as may first appear.

This imbalance in participant recruitment is also a result of the limited availability of women across the public sphere, which ultimately dictated the scheduling of interviews.

Similarly, the data gathered from Twitter via the API, as presented in Chapter Five, provides a novel and informative case study of the experiences of three women targeted for a dramatic increase in social media traffic. However, this data provides a snapshot of one period of time, on one social media platform, and therefore cannot be relied upon to provide a definitive or comprehensive account (Majó-Vázquez et al., 2021) of the online experiences of all women employed in the public sphere.

Like many other projects that have been conducted over the past two years, this research was also affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, the consequences of which would have been unthinkable when the study was first designed in 2017. The first lockdown that was enacted in March 2020 meant that the plans for overseas face-to-face research was postponed indefinitely. Furthermore, politicians in both the UK and the USA became increasingly unavailable, with interviews often cancelled at very short notice, as they prioritised the very real needs of their constituents. In addition, the researcher's own caring responsibilities came to the fore, as schools closed to many pupils for nine months.

However, this enforced change to the research design was not wholly negative. Many participants were willing to conduct interviews online or via the telephone, and the enforced requirement for many people across the globe to work at home and halt their plans to travel actually led to greater access to women in certain professions, particularly

academics and journalists based in the USA. It also confirmed the importance of reflexivity

when undertaking social research, and certainly put this to the test at numerous points

during the data collection interval. Ultimately, the Coronavirus outbreak has confirmed the

importance of the online space and made the dichotomy between activity undertaken

online and activity undertaken face-to-face increasingly illusory.

9.10.   Final thoughts

This study has confirmed the presence of misogynistic online abuse as a factor in the

working routines of women employed across a range of public facing occupations.

Furthermore, this research has shown that such abuse is not simply a factor within gender-

based violence, it *is* gender-based violence. The evidence recounted here has often proved

challenging to chronicle, as its content and consequence has frequently been distressing.

However, to return to the words of Peggy, first recounted in Chapter Six, it is imperative

that these experiences are recorded:

> *"We don't fight this by hiding from it. I'm much more scared of a world where online abuse stops people coming forward than I am scared of a world where people come forward and might suffer it. I'm willing to give my life to that. I'm much more frightened to sit down than I am to stand up."*

[Peggy, Member of Parliament]

UNIVERSITY *of York*

SOCIAL POLICY AND SOCIAL WORK

DEPARTMENTAL ETHICS COMMITTEE

APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Instructions

The Social Policy and Social Work Departmental Ethics Committee (DEC) oversees all research studies undertaken in the Department. This form must be used for all submissions for ethical approval, including student research. Please note that research activity (including contacting prospective participants) cannot begin until a letter of approval has been issued by the DEC.

Please complete all sections as applicable and sign the undertaking (electronically). Once completed, email it - with all required attachments - to spsw-ethics@york.ac.uk for review by the DEC.

Do I need to apply?

If your study will be reviewed by an equivalent ethical review body then you do not need to apply separately to the DEC. For example, submissions to an NHS Research Ethics Committee, or an ethics committee from another UK university, does NOT need further ethical approval from the DEC. However, you are required to notify the DEC that such a review has taken place (see the Documents Library). Research using only archived secondary data is also outside the DEC review process.

If you are unsure if you need to apply to the DEC please contact us for advice: spsw-ethics@york.ac.uk.

Checklist (click on the box to enter a cross)

☐   I have answered all relevant questions of the application form.

☐   I have attached a data management plan (an SPSW requirement).

☐   I have attached a risk assessment form (an SPSW requirement).

☐   I have attached all additional documents that will be used to recruit participants, such as information sheets, consent forms, recruitment materials (e.g. posters or flyers).

☐   I have attached any quantitative data collection instruments (e.g. questionnaires) the research will use.

☐   *For student applicants:* My supervisor has reviewed and signed my application (using an electronic signature)?

Part 1: Overview of the research

Please provide details about the Principal Investigator (lead staff researcher or student).

Name	Susan Watson
Course (students only)	PhD – Social Policy & Social Work
Supervisor (students only)	Prof John Hudson and Dr Rachel Vipond
Job title (staff only)	
Email address	Sew566@york.ac.uk
Telephone	07973 622459

When do you expect the fieldwork to start and end?

October 2019 – July 2020

For staff: List any SPSW DEC member who might have a conflict of interest so should not act as reviewers for the project, such as those consulted in the development of the project, or close colleagues. *A list of members can be found in the Ethics for Research section of the Yorkshare VLE.*

> None

What is the full title of the research project?

> Exploring the role of social media abuse in gender-based violence

Is the research funded? If so, please name the funding body(ies)

> White Rose DTP (ESRC)

If the research is funded, does the funding source create any ethical concerns and/or actual or perceived conflicts of interest?

See section 4 "Funding" of the University's Code of practice and principles for good ethical governance

> No

What are the research aims?

> Online abuse communicated via social networking sites such as Twitter has increased exponentially in recent years. Social policy institutions have been slow to respond to the immense change that has occurred as a result of the way that individuals interact in the digital space. The emerging nature of the phenomena has created a policy vacuum, with evidence suggesting that a lag in institutional responsiveness leaves victims without adequate protection or recourse.
>
> My research investigates the extent to which social networking sites have perpetuated a permissive climate towards gender-based violence, and the wider impact that such online abuse may have. Empirical evidence will be gathered from women working in occupations in the public sphere who are active on social media in order to investigate the content and nature of abuse, and the consequences that it has, both at an individual level, and for wider female participation in the public sphere. Such an examination is both timely and pertinent, given the growing expectation that individuals interacting with the public must be routinely readily available on social networking platforms. I want to use the information gathered in this study to examine the nature of this abuse in more detail, in order to learn directly from their experiences. My intention is to use this evidence in a way that will make a real contribution to curbing such abuse.
>
> The review of the literature undertaken to date confirms that there is limited evidence into online abuse derived from robust academic research. It is the belief of this study that this paucity of research has contributed to an institutional inertia on the issue, and that the phenomena of

vituperative interlocution in computer mediated communication is highly pernicious. In a bid to address this issue, a framework for investigation has been devised that will create a pathway to new knowledge, operationalised through three overarching research questions:

How are women in public facing occupations targeted online?

What effect does online abuse have on interactions with the digital world?

What factors influence the reporting of abuse?

Please summarise the research methods, listing <u>each</u> research activity (e.g. focus groups, telephone interviews, online questionnaire etc)

This predominantly qualitative study will investigate the experiences of women in occupations in the public sphere who have an active online presence.

Research methods:

Semi-structured interviews:

Between 30 and 50 semi-structured interviews will be undertaken, spread across a range of occupational groups operating in the public sphere. An example of the occupational groups that will be approached is provided in Table 1:

Occupation group	Type
Politicians	MPs
	Local councillors
	Campaigners
Academics	UK
	USA
	EU
	Australia
Criminal Justice Advocates	Police officers
	HMI
	Prosecutors
	Defence barristers
	Victims
	Whistle blowers
Entertainers	Musicians
	Actors
Journalists	Newspaper
	Broadcast
	Online
Tech companies	Twitter
	Facebook
	YouTube
	LinkedIn

Table 1: Occupational groups identified for interview

Due to the growth in online abuse directed at women in the public sphere (Jane, 2017a), it is likely that women in public facing occupations who are active online will have received such aggressive invective; and if they have not, that is also an interesting finding and worth analysing.

These interviews will take place in person, or by telephone, or online, via Skype / FaceTime.

Twitter application programming interface (API)

In addition to semi-structured interviews, data will also be collected from the social networking site Twitter, using an application programming interface (API) (Ackland and Zhu, 2015) for a discrete time period. The API will run at the same time as the semi-structured interviews, collecting data from tweets sent to women working in the public sphere.

The purpose of the observational data collection exercise (Golder and Macy, 2015) facilitated by the API is to gather evidence regarding the volume and nature of online abuse, which is not

available in existing literature. It is hoped that the richness of the data collected will emphasise how social networks are forging a new form of social interaction, which merits new forms of analysis (Robson and McCarten, 2016). The API will automatically download all UK-based tweets that included a range of search terms (Table 2), from a research sample of women in public facing occupations (as specified in Table 1).

This sample has been chosen as it represents a group of women active in the public sphere with a measurable online presence, who may have received online abuse (Amnesty International UK, 2017). The search terms will be chosen in consultation with the "Rapeglish Generator" (Jane, 2017a: 36), an online resource that records and tracks contemporary online misogyny.

This data will then be analysed using NVivo to provide evidence of both the nature and scale of online abuse.

Please briefly summarise the key ethical issues or risks that you have identified in this research.

As this research involves women being interviewed about their experience (if any) of online abuse, there is some risk they may be upset if talking about specific examples of abuse, and they will be given the opportunity to end the interview or change the topic. Participants will also be reminded that they can withdraw from the study at any point, and their data will be removed and destroyed. They will be assured they do not need to give lots of specific examples or discuss episodes that are particularly sensitive. Participants will be informed about support that they can access (if they wish) once the interview has concluded, with detailed information sourced from Women's Aid, who are experienced in signposting support services for survivors of abuse, and who make particular reference to the information that they have produced for researchers investigating violence against women and girls (VAWG) to distribute to participants. Much of this information is contained in the WA Survivors' Handbook, which is available here: (https://www.womensaid.org.uk/the-survivors-handbook/). I have also discussed the study with Independent Domestic Abuse Services (IDAS), who are experienced in providing information and support across the Yorkshire region, and who are confident that their website will be able to provide information about the support that is available in the area surrounding the university. Furthermore, the Violence Against Women and Girls Sector Shared Core Standards (Imkaan et al., 2016) are being followed throughout, in order to ensure that the research meets the highest of ethical standards.

If the names of abusers (or their organisation) are provided during the course of an interview, these will be redacted from the final thesis, in order to protect the interviewee from any potential harm. If a research participant indicates that they feel at current risk from their online activity, I will first inform my supervisors as a matter of urgency in order to seek their guidance, and then inform any necessary agencies deemed appropriate. The online consent form that participants will complete clearly states that:

"I understand that if the researcher thinks that I or someone else might be at risk of harm, they may have to contact the relevant authorities".

There is also a potential professional risk, if women employed in the public sphere speak out against expected or compulsory employment practices that necessitate the use of social networking sites. In order to mitigate this risk, pseudonyms will be used, and the details of individual employers removed, to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. In addition to abiding by the guidelines provided by Imkaan et al. (2016) discussed above, the study also seeks to follow feminist research practices (Oakley, 1981), sharing a commitment to learn from women's lived experience (Hesse-Biber, 2012). This exerts a positive influence on the entire research process (including the ethics underpinning the study), by ensuring that the researcher remains reflexive throughout, and that the participants feel fully involved and invested in the process, being consulted about the nature and depth of their participation (Hesse-Biber, 2012). The topic guide is written in such a way as to ensure that the interviews follow the tenets of feminist interview practice, taking an "empathic stance" (Renzetti, 2013: 11), and attempting to view the situation from the participants' perspective. This approach uses flexible conversation in order to overcome the traditional power imbalance between interviewer and interviewee, which is particularly common when the researcher is male and the participant female (Robson and McCartan, 2016); and also enables a process of co-production between researcher and participant in the study, a central tenet of feminist methodology (Ackerly and True, 2010). Whilst the interviews are obviously designed to best generate answers to the research questions, there is also a desire to adopt an inductive approach (Lapadat, 2012), allowing the research to be guided by the topics that may arise during the interview process, and overcoming any prior expectations that the researcher may have (Ackerly and True, 2010).

The API will remove senders' Twitter handles at source, ensuring anonymity, as I will never have access to them. Tweets published in the final thesis will be paraphrased where necessary, a process that follows best practice of the ethical use of social media data, as laid down by the British Psychological Society (2017) and Association of Internet Researchers (2012). This protects the privacy of Twitter users and ensures that there is minimal potential of them coming to harm, if "comments made in the heat of the moment… that may otherwise have been 'lost in the crowd'" (University of Sheffield, 2018: 5) become the focus of academic study.

Part 2: Research participants and activities

Please describe the research participants taking part in each activity listed in Q8.

If your study has explicit inclusion / exclusion criteria, please list them.

Semi structured interviews:

Women in public facing occupations (as detailed in Table 1).

Twitter API

Twitter users who send public tweets using a pre-defined set of search terms.

The search terms (Table 2) will be chosen using the "Rapeglish Generator" (Jane, 2017a: 36), an online resource that records and tracks contemporary online misogyny. The content of the data is symptomatic of the nature of this abuse:

Discourse of this type is metaphorically 'unspeakable', in that its hyperbolic profanity locates it well outside the norms of what is regarded as 'civil' discourse. My case, however, is that – despite the risk of causing offence – this discourse must not only be spoken of but must be spoken of in its unexpurgated entirety. There is, I argue, no other way to adequately assay the nature of a communication mode whose misogynistic hostility has serious ethical and material implications (Jane, 2014b: 558).

Alcohol	Pig
Anal	Pussy
Arse	Rape
Bitch	Retard
Cock	Rot
Cum	Scum
Cunt	Shit
Dead	Slut
Dick	Tits
Dick pics	Traitor
Dumb	Ugly
Evil	Vile
Fat	Whining
Fuck	Whore
Gash	
Hag	
Kill	
Lesbian	
Liar	

Table 2: Pre-defined search terms to be used in the API

Approximately how many participants will take part in each activity listed in Q8.

Semi structured interviews:

Between 30 and 50 semi-structured interviews, spread across a range of occupational groups operating in the public sphere, as shown in Table 1.

Twitter API

Approximately 50,000 obscene tweets, depending on the time period and news agenda in operation at the time of the research.

If the research may involve 'vulnerable' populations or children, please describe the ethical challenges that arise and how these will be managed.

By 'vulnerable' we mean anyone disempowered and potentially susceptible to coercion or persuasion. This may include people vulnerable through social context (e.g. homelessness, poverty); through experiences (e.g. of trauma or abuse); through learning difficulties, dementia or mental health needs; or through other factors. Please also provide details of the relevant DBS checks and/or ISA registration that have been undertaken.

The DEC have identified that this research may involve women who could be described as 'vulnerable' because they may have experienced online abuse, and that such activity may have caused them to feel unsafe in the offline environment (e.g. Phillips, 2018; Lammy, 2019). I concur with this potential vulnerability and recognise that individuals may become upset when talking about specific examples of abuse. As already discussed, participants will be given the opportunity to end the interview or change the topic under discussion and will also be reminded that they can withdraw from the study at any point, with their data removed and destroyed.

However, as revealed in the pilot of this project, undertaken as part of the MA in Social Research, some interviewees may have received no abuse when engaging in online discussion and activity, and this finding is itself worthy of exploration and analysis.

Conversely (and speaking personally), I know of no woman active in online forums who has not been subject to abuse – myself included, and so there is some difficulty in potentially classifying the women participating in this project as 'vulnerable' – as to do so risks classifying all women active online as such, given the pervasiveness of the phenomenon.

Please describe how will research participants be identified, and who will be involved in the process?

Participant recruitment will follow both traditional and contemporary approaches. Six participants in the research undertaken for the MA in Social Research (which served as a pilot for this study) have requested to participate in semi-structured interviews for this study, and once recruitment commences, they will be contacted to ask if they would still like to do so. Whilst the pilot considered one aspect of this research topic, there remains a significant value in undertaking these further interviews, as the scope of this doctoral research is much broader and is considering the topic across the entire public sphere and social policy institutions, and as such, is a very different piece of research. Any woman who has previously been interviewed will be

treated in exactly the same way as a new participant, and the same safeguards regarding informed consent, anonymity and the application of pseudonyms will be applied throughout.

I will also use my professional links with the major UK political parties to identify possible interviewees, who will then be approached by email. The social networking site, Twitter, will also be utilised as a means of recruitment. The first stage of recruitment will consist of 'following' women in the defined professions, who are frequently tweeting, before then tweeting them with a (very) short summary of the project.

Part 3: Choosing whether to participate

Please describe the process by which prospective participants will receive information about the research, including who will provide information, when and how.

If a different process will be used for different participants or different activities, please describe each separately.

Prospective participants in the occupations outlined in Table 1 will be contacted by email with a detailed description of the project (as described in Question 7 above), along with a link to the online information sheet, which has been produced using Google Pages and is stored and managed by the university's IT department.

The online information sheet is available here:

https://sites.google.com/a/york.ac.uk/participant-information-sheet_v2/home

Please note that this is a 'dummy' web page put up solely for the purpose of allowing the DEC to view the information. The site is not yet publicly available.

In both cases, a follow-up email will be sent after ten days if a reply has not been received, after which it will be assumed that the individual does not wish to take part, and no further contact will be made.

The first stage of Twitter recruitment will consist of 'following' women in the professions outlined in Table 1, who are frequent users of Twitter; before then tweeting them with a (very) short summary of the project, as shown in the Twitter screenshot at Figure 1[25].

---

[25] This is provided for demonstration purposes only, as recruitment has not yet commenced.
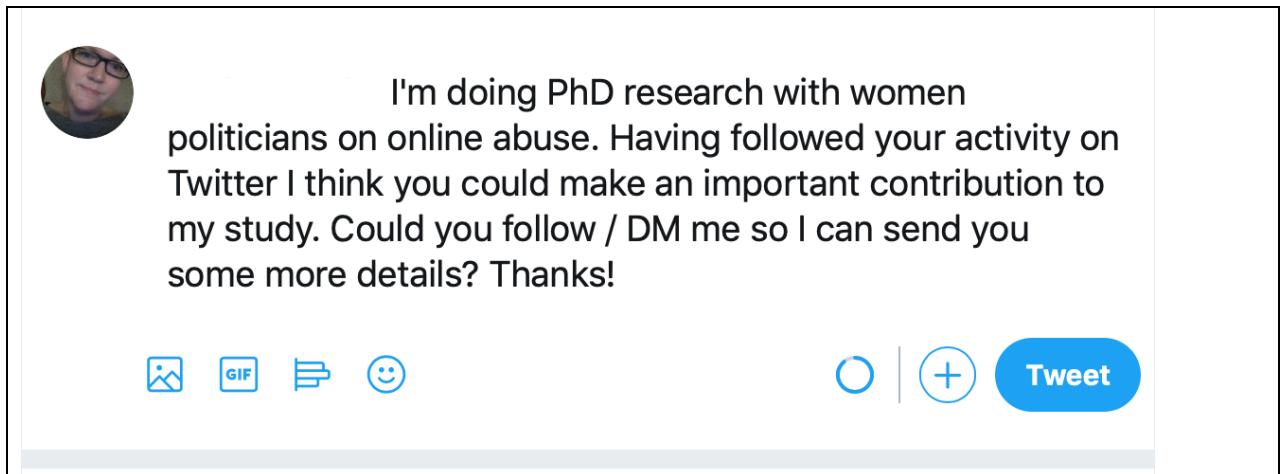
Figure 1: Example tweet that will be sent to potential research participants

In sending this tweet, there is an acknowledgement that there is a degree of risk associated with using the researcher's personal Twitter feed as the recruitment mechanism (Hokke et al., 2019). The contested area of online abuse, and the potentially inflammatory topics and individuals involved in it, means that there is a possibility that the study could become the target of stranger intrusion and abuse, as faced by other professionals undertaking online feminist research (Vera-Gray, 2017). Guidance has been gathered from the methods literature (e.g. Hokke et al., 2019; Sloan, 2019), and consequently a number of measures will be employed to mitigate this risk, including ensuring that no personal information is available on the Twitter feed, and mechanisms to record and report abuse should the need arise.

The initial contact made by Twitter will then be followed up by direct message (DM) or email, if an individual expresses an interest in knowing more about the study. If, after 10 days, a reply has not been received, it will be assumed that the individual does not wish to participate, and no further contact will be made.

Please describe how prospective participants will give their consent to the research.

If a different process will be used for different participants or different research activities, please describe each separately.

15.1: Participants in semi-structured interviews

Prospective participants will be sent a link to a detailed consent form, which will be available online. By automating the consent procedure, it is hoped that it will be easier to monitor the process of consent, ensuring that authority for participation is properly supplied, and avoiding the loss of paper forms.

Following the helpful advice of the DEC, the online consent form and information sheet have been re-written and are now produced using the Google suite of applications, and as such are

stored on my personal Google drive on the University's network and are covered by the service level agreement negotiated by the university.

The online consent form is available here.

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1XOpaKgZfpEF5-kGqOqDvOK5aJRQqtA_EyQ3fNtRIaPQ/prefill

Please note that this is a 'dummy' form put up solely for the purpose of allowing the DEC to view the information, and therefore the links provided are not operational. The site is not yet publicly available.

Once the consent form is completed correctly, a copy of the form will be emailed to each participant and to the researcher automatically. This information will be stored in accordance with the data management plan, just as a traditional paper copy would be, whilst the online data will be stored on my personal M: drive, along with all other data generated by the study.

When confirming online consent, the process for signatures will follow the protocol laid down by both the British Psychological Society (2017) and the American Psychological Society (2004), which specifies that the "use of radio buttons or check boxes can also be an effective strategy for allowing participants to indicate that they have read and understood key aspects of the consent information" (BPS, 2017: 9), and that it is acceptable to "allow a procedure in which subjects click a button on an online form to indicate they have read and understood the consent form" (APA, 2004: 113).

Before any interview commences, the researcher will ask the participant a number of questions to confirm their identity and willingness to proceed. This will provide two-factor authentication of the electronic signature.

If any participant requests a consent form to be provided by paper or email, then this will be arranged, and paper copies will be stored securely as detailed in the Data Management Plan.

Given that the amount of data collected by the API is likely to run into hundreds of thousands of tweets, it will be impossible to gain consent from each of the individuals responsible (The University of Sheffield, 2018), particularly as many Twitter users provide "sparse, invented, incomplete or ambiguous profile information" (Golder and Macy, 2015: 9).

Furthermore, given the expected explicit and violent nature of many of the tweets, such data is arguably "exempt from the seeking of informed consent, in order to protect the safety of the

researcher and to ensure that social media research ethics does not result in an indirect censorship of critical research" (Townsend and Wallace, 2016: 12).

If you do *not* envisage providing an information sheet and/or obtaining a signed (or audio recorded) record of consent, please justify and explain the measures taken to compliance with data protection legislation.

n/a

If research participants are to receive any payments, reimbursement of expenses or other incentives for taking part in the research, please give details.

No payments or other incentives will be made to participants.

Part 4: Research activities

Please describe what participation in each research activity involves (e.g. what activities, how often / for how long, with whom, in what setting)?

Participation will be in the form of one semi-structured interview. Each interview approximately one hour. Any follow-up will be done via email, and again with specific consent.

Interviews will take place in participants' place of work, at the University of York or another appropriate public environment. Interviews may be conducted face-to-face, on the telephone or via Skype / FaceTime or similar online communication mechanism.

Please provide a summary of the headings you will use in any research instruments e.g. topic guide / questionnaires.

You should ensure that these headings are included within the Participant Information Sheet

19.1: Participant information web page

Background

What is the purpose of the study?

Why have I been invited to take part?

How can I take part?

What happens in the interview?

Do I have to take part?

On what basis will you process my data?

How will you use my data?

Will you share my data with third parties?

How will you keep my data secure?

Will you transfer my data internationally?

Will I be identified in any research outputs?

How long will you keep my data?

What rights do I have in relation to my data?

Questions or concerns

Right to complain

What should I do next?

19.2: Provisional topic guide

This topic guide is currently provisional, as the subject of the research is cutting edge and therefore may change, as a consequence of literature that may emerge as a result of the literature review that is presently being undertaken. The committee can be reassured that the broad topics provided below are unlikely to be subject to revision, however, individual questions may be refined if deemed absolutely necessary.

How long have you worked in your current occupation?

How long have you been active on social media?

What social media platforms do you use?

Do you run your own social media accounts or is this task delegated to others?

If delegated, to whom, and why?

Do you consider yourself to have received online abuse?

Can you tell me a bit about the nature of this abuse?

Has this abuse increased over the past 3 years?

How has the abuse increased? (quantity / tone / obscenity)

Have you reported any of this abuse? Can you give me an example?

Why did you make the decision to report?

Who did you report to (police, other authorities)?

What response did you receive?

What action (if any) was taken?

Have you ever felt that the abuse you have received has 'crossed over' into the physical world?

Have you ever felt threatened, or felt that the wellbeing of your colleagues is at risk?

Do you have any concerns about the wider impact of this abuse on those around you?

Has your awareness of online abuse ever influenced an occupational / personal decision?

How?

Can you tell me a bit more?

Have you ever considered withdrawing from any / all forms of social media?

Do you have any concerns about the impact of this abuse on women's involvement online?

Do you have any concerns that this abuse may extend out from the digital sphere to have a negative impact on women's occupations?

How?

Would you encourage young women entering the workforce to enter the same profession?

Is this advice influenced by online abuse in any way?

Is there anything you feel I have forgotten or that you would like to add?

Do you think research participants may be distressed by their involvement in the research? If so, what action will you take to mitigate these?

As this research involves women being interviewed about their experience (if any) of online abuse, there is some risk they may be upset if talking about specific examples of abuse, and they will be given the opportunity to end the interview or change the topic. Participants will also be reminded that they can withdraw from the study at any point, and that their data will immediately be removed and destroyed. They will be assured they do not need to give lots of specific examples or discuss episodes that are particularly sensitive. Participants will be informed about support that they can access (if they wish) once the interview has concluded, with detailed information sourced from Women's Aid, who are experienced in signposting support services for survivors of abuse, and who make particular reference to the information that they have produced for researchers investigating violence against women and girls (VAWG) to distribute to participants. Much of this information is contained in the WA Survivors' Handbook, which is available here: (https://www.womensaid.org.uk/the-survivors-handbook/). I have also discussed the study with Independent Domestic Abuse Services
(IDAS), who are experienced in providing information and support across the Yorkshire region, who are confident that their website will be able to provide information about the support that is available in the area surrounding the university.

Is any element of the fieldwork taking place outside the UK? If so, you should refer to the University of York 'Guidance on conducting research outside the UK' and paragraph 2.13 of the Code of practice and principles for good ethical governance and explain how you will take account of political, social and cultural sensitivities.

Possibly in the USA, but this has not yet been arranged.

Part 5: Data processing and protection

Please note: all applications include a completed Data Management Plan. You should refer to the University's guidance on Research Data Management

State any promise you will make to participants about how their data will be used, including in publications and dissemination, for example whether names, job titles, or direct quotations will be used, and state what protection of anonymity you are offering.

Please be aware of your Funder's requirements for data to be made available for reuse. If your funder does not have a policy, the <u>*University Research Data Management Policy*</u> *should be followed. This states: 'Where possible, relevant elements of research data must be deposited in an appropriate national or international subject-based repository, according to their policies. Data should be kept by the researcher in an appropriate manner when suitable subject repositories are not available.'*

Given the nature of this research, there is a potential professional risk to women employed in the public sphere who speak out against expected or compulsory employment practices that necessitate the use of social networking sites. In order to mitigate this risk, pseudonyms will be used, and the details of individual employers removed, to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. If the names of abusers (or their organisation) are provided during the course of an interview, these will be redacted from the final thesis, in order to protect the interviewee from any potential harm. If a research participant indicates that they feel at current risk from their online activity, I will first inform my supervisors as a matter of urgency to seek guidance, and then inform any necessary agencies deemed appropriate. The online consent form that participants will complete clearly states that:

"I understand that if the researcher thinks that I or someone else might be at risk of harm, they may have to contact the relevant authorities".

In line with feminist research practices (Oakley, 1981), the women participating in this research will be integral to this process throughout. The participants themselves will decide (in consultation with the researcher) the level of anonymity / identification they wish to balance. For example, women with a high profile in the public sphere who have previously shared details of their abuse (e.g. as Diane Abbott MP did in the Westminster Hall debate on 12 July 2017) may be willing to waive their anonymity in order to share their stories and contribute valuable evidence to the study. Conversely, there may be some women for whom strict anonymity must be maintained, in order to guarantee their personal and / or occupational security and safety. Realistically, it is likely that the majority of participants in the semi-structured interviews will fall in the middle of this continuum, meaning that their wellbeing will best be guaranteed as a result of their employment details being anonymised, but their wider occupational group can be disclosed in order to add a richness to the data they provide. Being aware of the significance of these issues, and the need to address them on an individual level, in consultation with the women themselves, makes it much easier to anticipate any potential issues before they occur. The DEC can be assured that ultimately, the individual agency, security and wellbeing of the participants will always be placed ahead of any research aims, and these decisions will determine the methodological and recruitment approaches adopted (Vera-Gray, 2017).

What will you do if information is disclosed to you that legally requires further action or where further action is advisable?

I will first inform my supervisors as a matter of urgency to seek guidance, and then inform any necessary agencies deemed appropriate. The online consent form that participants will complete clearly states that:

"I understand that if the researcher thinks that I or someone else might be at risk of harm, they may have to contact the relevant authorities".

GDPR Declarations (please check box to confirm)

☒   I have considered whether any personal or special category data being collected is the minimum necessary to answer the research question(s)

☒   I have considered anonymising or 'pseudonymising' data to mitigate data protection risks.

☒   I have considered whether I need to consult with the Information Governance Office (e.g. where sharing data with third parties outside the university)

☒   I have considered whether the study requires a Data Protection Impact Assessment (see here)

Are there any other specific ethical problems likely to arise with the proposed study? If so, what steps have you taken or will you take to address them?

None

Part 6: Signatures

I have checked this form carefully and I am satisfied that the project meets the required ethical standards.

Signature of Principal Investigator or student	
Date of submission	4 September 2019

For student applications

Signature of supervisor	(on behalf of both supervisors)

Appendix 2: Ethics approval document – September 2019

JOINT REVIEWERS' DECISION FORM

Panel member names:	Ethics sub-committee
Application reference:	SPSW/P/2019/6
Applicant name:	Susan Watson

Note: If you feel this ethics application raises substantive issues on wider ethical practices on Departmental or University levels, please contact the Ethics Chair in the first instance

What is the agreed decision? (please insert an "x " against one of the following):

	Refer to full SPSW Ethics Committee
	Refer to University Ethics Committee
	Abandon for ethical reasons
	Major alterations required (resubmit amended form with track changes)
	Minor alterations required (resubmit amended form with track changes)
x	Approved with conditions
	Approved without conditions

Details of recommendations to applicant (please use the headings provided)

1) Main application form

Vulnerable population (Q12) – Absolutely acknowledge your point about the inherent risks in presuming that women who are active online are by default vulnerable. However, it is important while this research is undertaken that it factors in the potential that participants *may* be vulnerable as a result of any abuse they have experienced, how this might influence them in the context of the research, and that appropriate safeguards and strategies to respond to this if necessary are in place. Happy at this stage that this has been considered and factored into the research design.

2) Consent form (if applicable)

Please add in an explicit acknowledgement that the participant understands/confirms that their participation in the research is entirely voluntary (regardless of whether they subsequently choose to withdraw) – this could be part of Q5 or added in as its own point

Exploring the role of social media abuse in gender-based violence

Participant Information Page

(Version 2.3 – 1 October 2019)

Background

I am a PhD student in the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of York. I am undertaking a research study exploring the role of social media abuse in gender-based violence. Before agreeing to take part, please read this information carefully and let me know if anything is unclear or if you would like further information.

What is the purpose of the study?

The study is designed to investigate the variety and extent of online abuse received by women, and the impact that this has on their interactions with the digital world, their wider occupational role, and the decisions they make about interacting in public. I want to use the information that women provide to examine the nature of any abuse in more detail, in order to learn directly from their experiences, and to use this evidence in a way that will make a real contribution to curbing such abuse through policy recommendations made via published articles and / or conference proceedings.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part because you are a woman with an active online presence, employed in an occupation that requires you to have regular contact with members of the public, and as such, you may have been subject to online abuse, or know others who have.

How can I take part?

If you would like to be involved, simply contact me to arrange an interview.

What happens in the interview?

The interview will last for up to an hour, and is designed to answer the following research questions:

- How are women targeted online?
- What effect does online abuse have on their interactions with the
- digital world?
- How adequate is the current public policy response?

With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded so that I have a true record of what you say. If you would prefer not to be recorded, I will ask if I can take handwritten notes of our conversation, which will be stored afterwards in a locked cabinet at the University of York. Whether a record of our conversation is kept electronically via audio file or on paper, only I will know it is you who has said it. Your words could be put into the report, but it will not be possible to identify you. Pseudonyms (that you can choose) will be used to ensure anonymity.

Do I have to take part?

No, participation is optional. If you do decide to take part, you will be given a copy of this information sheet for your records and will be asked to complete an informed consent form. If you change your mind about taking part at any point during the study, you will be able to withdraw your participation without having to provide a reason, and your details and any research data already gathered about you will be deleted immediately.

What should I do next?

Contact Susan Watson at susan.watson@york.ac.uk or on 07973 622459, or the study supervisor, Dr Rachel Vipond, at rachel.vipond@york.ac.uk or via the Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of York, York YO10 5DD. 01904 321226. If you would like to know more about the process of ethical clearance that this study has been subject to, please contact the Department of Social Policy and Social Work Ethics Committee at spswethics@york.ac.uk.

Appendix 4: Paper version of participant consent form

<div align="center">

CONSENT FORM

Exploring the role of social media abuse in gender-based violence

</div>

Form for participants to provide informed consent for involvement in doctoral research study
(Version 2.4 – 3 September 2019)

		Please initial box
1	I have been told what this research is about and what it involves. I have read the project information available online and have had opportunity to ask questions.	
2	I understand that I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason, and that any data collected about me will be removed from the study and destroyed.	
3	I consent to my data being stored securely on the University of York's servers, as detailed in the online information page.	
4	I understand that my real name will not be used and that my personal information will remain confidential.	
5	I agree to be audio-recorded. I understand that I can still take part without being recorded if I wish.	
5a	**IF NO TO AUDIO RECORDING:** I agree to the researcher taking handwritten notes, which will be stored securely and not shared with anyone else	
6	I understand that my words may be used in research reports.	
7	I understand that my data will be retained in line with legal requirements or where there is a business need. Anonymised transcripts will be kept for ten years from the end of the study; consent forms will be kept for three years from the end of the study; audio recordings will be deleted at the end of the study.	
8	I agree to take part in the research	

Participant signature: _____   Date: _____

Researcher signature:_____   Date: _____

Appendix 5: Topic guide

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in my doctoral research study, exploring the role of social media abuse in gender-based violence.

1. How long have you been active on social media?

2. What social media platforms do you use?

3. Do you run your own social media accounts or is this task delegated to others?

   a. If delegated, to whom, and why?

4. What do you classify as online abuse?

5. Can you tell me about some of the online abuse that you have received?

6. Do you think online abuse has increased since the Brexit referendum / Independence referendum / is affected by political events?

7. How has the abuse changed? (quantity / tone / obscenity)

8. Have you reported any of this abuse? Can you give me an example?

9. Why did you make the decision to report – or not?

10. Who did you report to (police, other authorities)?

11. What response did you receive?

12. What action (if any) was taken?

13. Have you ever felt that the abuse you have received has 'crossed over' into the physical world?

14. Have you ever felt threatened, or felt that the wellbeing of your colleagues is at risk?

15. Do you have any concerns about the wider impact of this abuse on those around you?

16. Has your awareness of online abuse ever influenced an occupational / personal decision?

      a. How?

      b. Can you tell me a bit more?

17. Have you ever considered withdrawing from any / all forms of social media?

18. Will you maintain a social media presence going forwards?

19. Do you have any concerns about the impact of this abuse on women's involvement online?

20. Do you have any concerns that this abuse may extend out from the digital sphere to have a negative or dangerous effect on women doing their jobs?

      a. How?

21. What do you think should / could be done to address the issue of online abuse?

22. Would you encourage young women to enter your industry, given the likelihood that they too will experience online abuse?

23. How do we arm them to deal with it?

24. Is there anything you feel I have forgotten or that you would like to add?

25. Is there anyone else that you think I should talk to, or who you can put me in touch with?

Glossary of terms and abbreviations used in this thesis

Term / abbreviation	Definition
Alt-Right	A neo-Liberal grouping, frequently associated with online abuse and wider misogyny
Bulletin boards	Early form of virtual communities, before the advent of social networking sites
CMC	Computer – mediated communication
CPS	Crown Prosecution Service of England and Wales
Cybercrime	The use of the internet to enact criminal or deviant behaviour
DEC	Departmental Ethics Committee, Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of York
DM	Direct message sent using Twitter
Doxxing	Where a malicious party harms another by releasing identifying or sensitive information (Snyder et al., 2017: 432)
E-bile	Sexualized threats of violence and recreational nastiness present in online abuse (Jane, 2014a)
EDL	The English Defence League, a Far-Right political organisation
Emotional labour	The trained management of feeling required from women working in public facing occupations (Hochschild, 2012)
Equalisation hypothesis	Believes that the absence of social cues created in online communication makes interactions fairer and more equitable
EU	European Union
Feminist research methods	Research approaches that challenge the patriarchal paradigm common in much research
First-wave feminism	Campaigns against female subjugation by their husbands organised in the 19th Century
Flaming	Term first used to describe the behaviour in virtual communities and discussions that would now be called online abuse
GBV	Gender-based violence: A range of harmful behaviours perpetrated against women
Incel movement	Involuntary celibate movement: a misogynistic online group that targets women
Intersectionality	The way that the impact of different demographic characteristics coalesces to improve or worsen a woman's experience
Misogyny	A systematic facet of social power relations arising when women attempt to gain power and authority in a patriarchy (Manne, 2018)
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly of Northern Ireland
MP	Member of the Westminster Parliament
MSP	Member of the Scottish Parliament
NGO	Non-governmental organisation

Online abuse	Highly aggressive, frequently abusive and threatening communication sent to women online
Peer production	The co-creation of knowledge online
Pile on	Orchestrated online attack involving many people, usually directed at one person
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
Public sphere	A platform for debate where public policy is determined and implemented (Habermas et al., 1964)
Revenge porn	The unauthorised distribution of sexual images
Safety work	Activities that women employ to protect themselves from the risk of sexual harassment, sexual assault or rape (Vera-Gray, 2017)
Second-wave feminism	Campaigns organised by feminist campaigners in the 1970s and 1980s to increase awareness of domestic abuse, sexual harassment and inequality
SNS	Social networking sites (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Linked In)
Social identity model of de-inviduation effects (SIDE)	Believes that the features of CMC lead to 'toxic disinhibition' and online abuse
Swatting	The act of falsely reporting people to the police so that SWAT teams descend on their homes (Lukianoff, 2015: 48)
Twitter 'storm'	A sudden increase spike in activity on an individual's Twitter feed (Technopedia, 2013)
Twitter API	Application programming interface: Research based on the information collected by Twitter and made publicly available to users using standardized commands to query, filter and format the data (Venturini and Rogers, 2019)
Up-skirting	The taking of a photograph or video up a woman's skirt, often without her knowledge
VAWG	Violence against women and girls
Verified accounts	Public figures deemed by Twitter to be of sufficient public interest to be classed a verified account and given a 'blue tick'
Web 2.0	The technological advancement that emerged in the early 2000s, and enabled the creation of social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook
Zoom-bombing	Attacks made on an individual or a group via the Zoom online communication platform

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