

# Social media and misogyny

Can sociological theory help us explain misogynistic online abuse?

The word misogyny refers to hatred, prejudice or distrust of women. Misogyny is found in all kinds of social settings, but recent research has looked at the nature and extent of misogyny on some social media platforms.

## The campaign and the research

In May 2016 a cross-party group of MPs led by Yvette Cooper launched a campaign and a public consultation called 'Recl@im the Internet' in an attempt to tackle the growing scale of online abuse, particularly that aimed at women. To coincide with the launch of this campaign the think tank Demos published research

### Box 1 Methodology

The objective of the Demos research was to provide a general overview of the volume and nature of how the words 'slut' and 'whore' were being used on Twitter. The two words were chosen based on findings from a 2014 Demos study which had identified them as the most frequently used gendered insults on Twitter. The research looked at the following questions:

- How many times a day were the two words used?
- How many of these uses might be termed aggressive?
- Were there any other types of use of the words?
- How many users were involved?
- How many of these users were UK-based?
- How many people were mentioned in tweets containing either word?
- What gender were the users?

Using sophisticated machine-learning classifiers and human analysts, tweets containing the words were analysed and the following broad categories emerged:

- 1 those with pornographic content, often with links to pornographic sites
- 2 those (a significant volume) with overtly aggressive language
- 3 'self identity' — a small proportion used the words in the context of self or group identity, e.g. 'happy birthday, little slut'
- 4 other — this included those that did not fit into any of the above categories, and covered cases where people were sharing news articles or having discussions about 'slut shaming'

In terms of the Recl@im the Internet' campaign, the second category was the most important.



showing the scale of misogyny on the social media platform Twitter (see Box 1).

The researchers monitored the use of the words 'slut' and 'whore' by UK Twitter users over a 3-week period from the end of April 2016. In that period, the research showed that 6,500 individuals were targeted by 10,000 aggressive and misogynist tweets. A look at tweets internationally showed 1.46 million tweets in the same 23-day period. This research revealed that more than 200,000 aggressive tweets using the same two misogynistic words were sent to 80,000 people. One of the surprising results from the research was that more than half of the offenders were women.

Yvette Cooper said that the idea for the Reclaim the Night movement of the 1970s, in which women undertook street protests to demand action against the frequent harassment, intimidation and violence faced by women out at night. Quoted in the *Guardian* newspaper (26 May 2016), she said:

... for some people online harassment, bullying, misogyny, racism or homophobia can end up poisoning the internet and stopping them from speaking out. We have responsibilities to online citizens to make sure the internet is a safe space. Challenging online abuse can't be done by any organisation alone ... This needs everyone.

### 'Celebrity' victims

Many women who become the target of online abuse are public figures in one way or another. Mary Beard, professor of classics at Cambridge University who has presented television series and appeared on BBC1's *Question Time*, has spoken out about a 'vile torrent' of online abuse, much of it aggressive and sexual. She said that the kind of abuse she has experienced 'would be quite enough to put many women off appearing in public' and identified the abuse as 'brutal sexism'. Katie Hopkins and Hillary Clinton are other well-known women who have suffered extreme online abuse.





Actress Leslie Jones was hounded off social media in July 2016 by a campaign of racist and misogynist abuse

In January 2014 two people pleaded guilty to sending abusive and menacing tweets to the feminist campaigner Caroline Criado-Perez, who came into the public eye after her successful campaign to have a woman featured on British bank notes. For 2 days after her victory she received around 50 online rape and murder threats every hour. One of the two who pleaded guilty was a woman, Isabella Sorley, aged 23.

### How can we explain female 'trolls'?

This is, of course, extraordinarily difficult, and there is certainly no single, simple explanation. One could talk about some women's sense of insecurity and feeling inferior to more apparently successful or good-looking women, or perhaps they themselves have been the victim of online abuse and they are 'getting their own back'. Certainly posting abusive comments on social media is not new. While the stereotype of the poster of misogynistic comments is the 'macho' male, the Demos research was not the first to find that women could be equally abusive towards other women. A 2014 study from the cosmetics firm Dove found that from over 5 million negative tweets about body image, four out of five were sent by women.

### Norms and values

Sociology students will be well aware of the importance of socialisation, particularly primary socialisation, where we learn important and essential things about how to behave in our particular culture and in specific contexts. It may be that because the internet and social media are relatively new phenomena, and despite attempts to instil good 'netiquette', some people, male and female alike, see the internet as somehow not the same as 'real life'. People who would shy away from any kind of physical abuse of another person, or who wouldn't insult someone face-to-face, particularly a stranger, somehow fail to see that what they are doing is just as hurtful — in fact, given how messages spread and snowball online, one could argue that internet abuse can be even more harmful.

The campaign launched by Yvette Cooper and others can be seen as an attempt to socialise internet users into a set of norms and values in which aggressive, abusive and misogynistic behaviour is viewed as deviant. There is an implicit reference to how some people exhibit different forms of behaviour when posting, and how hurtful this can be to their victims, in this quote from Alex Krasodonski-Jones, one of the Demos researchers. Note the section I have italicised:

“This study is a bird's eye snapshot of what is ultimately a very personal and often traumatic experience. While we have focused on Twitter, who are considerably more generous in sharing their data with us, it's important to note misogyny is prevalent across all social media. *This is a stark reminder that we are frequently not as good citizens online as we are offline.*”

### Using this concept

Although this article has focused on misogyny, remember that other types of abuse exist on social media, including racism, homophobia, religious intolerance and bullying. Look again at how the Demos research was carried out, and identify the advantages of the methods used, and also any criticisms that could be made of it. There is an interesting article on the BBC website about the experiences of outspoken Pakistani women and the abuse they have received. You can find it on [www.tinyurl.com/h999ssf](http://www.tinyurl.com/h999ssf).

### References

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