**Disbelief and counter-voices: a thematic analysis of online reader comments about sexual harassment and sexual violence** **against women**

**Introduction**

Technological advancements in online journalism have been celebrated as a means of engaging a wider audience and for enhancing the potential for democratic discussion and deliberation around political and social issues. Proponents of this approach have argued that the internet can act as an extension of the public sphere, space where citizens come together to debate matters of common concern (Papacharissi, 2002). Graham and Wright (2015) identify the potential for 'below the line' comments on news sites to contribute by providing a space for readers to discuss and deliberate current affairs. This assumes that the quality of argumentation – "a process whereby claims are attacked and defended and differences of opinion resolved" (Richardson and Stanyer, 2011: 986) – is of paramount importance. Most studies find that in reality, there is a lack of quality debate online, which undermines the deliberative potential of such spaces. Online spaces furthermore often operate as places where unrestrained bigotry is commonplace (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2016). The anonymous nature of comment fields is a crucial factor because research suggests that arguments and comments improve once anonymity is removed (Santana, 2014). Removing anonymity comes at a cost; however, as anonymity can also widen participation.

Given the extent to which hostility has been observed in online discussions, it is surprising that studies of online political participation have tended to ignore the representation and experiences of minority groups and women. It is therefore vital to recognise that the notion of an online space where citizens deliberate is mostly an idealised construction. Feminist theory reminds us that the public sphere is not a neutral space and that it reflects the inequalities that are experienced in the offline world and that the deliberation of public affairs is fraught with difficulties for women and minorities. Fraser (1990) argues that citizens cannot deliberate 'as if' social inequalities do not exist. This is in part because the discursive interaction within the public sphere is governed by protocols of style and decorum that are in themselves markers of status. This privileges particular ways of talking and therefore act as "informal impediments" (Fraser, 1990: 63) to equal participation because groups who have been traditionally marginalised struggle to make themselves heard. This means that public deliberation tends to operate to the advantage of dominant groups, which in turn impacts on what counts as a legitimate matter for public discussion.

In recent years the discussion of sexual harassment and violence has become much more discussed in public. While mainstream news coverage of these issues tends to be episodic and is at times problematic, (see Boyle, 2005), the emergence of the #MeToo movement and others have shown that online spaces provide opportunities for women to discuss issues which are important to them (Boyle, 2019; Mendes et al. 2018). There has, however, been a simultaneous rise in attempts to silence and intimidate women online (Jane, 2014). There are even specific online groups who espouse sexism and misogyny on various platforms (see Lumsden, 2019; Ging, 2019; Harmer and Lumsden, 2019) which make it difficult and at times harmful for women to discuss these issues in practice.

Our study employs qualitative thematic analysis of reader comments on articles that discuss sexual harassment and sexual violence in *The Guardian’s* women’s pages. We specifically explore the different discursive strategies employed by commenters to challenge and/or support the evidence and viewpoints expressed in the news stories under investigation, and in the public sphere at large, about sexual harassment and violence against women. We draw on the existing research into the mediation of sexual violence, and the gendered nature of online participation to inform our analysis. Our study demonstrates the different ways that readers challenge the claims made in the articles in order to undermine the idea that women widely experience sexual harassment and sexual violence. We are particularly concerned with the potential implications that these discussions have for the marginalisation of women's issues and perspectives online. We will firstly review the existing literature about the mediation of sexual violence and the participation of women in online discussions. We will then explain the methods employed in the study.

**Mediating sexism and sexual violence**

The portrayal of sexual harassment and sexual violence in various media contexts has been the subject of a good deal of academic research. Studies have shown repeatedly that not all forms of sexual assault stories are equally newsworthy. Reporting is often case-based rather than offering general coverage about trends and legislation. It is also clear that certain kinds of assaults, perpetrators and victims attract different levels of coverage (Boyle, 2005; Carter, 1998). Cases most likely to be reported in the media include stranger assaults, inter-racial assaults, sexual murder and serial rape even though most sexual assaults are committed by those known to the victim. Sexual assault is often portrayed as something committed by 'the other' and not by ordinary men. Perpetrators are, therefore, often labelled as the 'sex beasts' (Boyle, 2005: 69) or 'Monsters' (O'Hara, 2012). The ubiquity of terms such as 'date rape' mean that assaults by perpetrators who know the victim are frequently explained as miscommunications where female victims are assumed to be partially responsible, thus minimising the violence they experience (Lees, 1995). Moreover, sympathetic coverage depends on the perception of their sexual morality, social class, education level, race and ethnicity (Boyle, 2005; Meyers, 2013). Lees (2002:85-6) argues that the central question in press reporting of sexual violence is not 'what kind of man?' but 'what kind of woman?' which leads to an increase in media attention focused on the victim's behaviour (Meyer, 2010).

Media coverage of sexual violence is also often criticised for perpetuating rape myths. These are "generalized and false beliefs about sexual assault that trivialize a sexual assault or suggest that a sexual assault did not occur." (Franuik et al. 2008: 790). Rape myths include suggestions that the victim is lying, deserved the assault or somehow provoked it through the way she was behaving or the way she dressed. Other myths excuse the perpetrator by suggesting he could not help himself or that he is not 'like that' (Franuik et al., 2008). Rape myths function to downplay or dismiss accusations about sexual assault (Gill, 2007). Endorsing these myths provides a means of control that allows people to protect themselves from the idea that they or their loved ones may be victimised. They also allow women to believe they can control whether they become a victim by behaving in the ‘right’ way (Lonsway and Fitzgerald, 1995). Crucially these myths allow men to distance themselves from the 'bad' men who perpetrate sexual assaults. Rape myths also allow perpetrators to justify sexually violent behaviour and allow non-perpetrators to express hostile sexism by excusing such behaviour (Franuik et al. 2008). The over-representation of the concern that men will become victims of false accusations also underlines the fact that 'normal' men are not violent (Gavey and Gow, 2001).

While news media representations can be problematic, recent research has highlighted the potential of digital spaces to provide forums for women to challenge such representations and discuss the impact of violence against women on individuals and society (Keller, 2012; Jane, 2016). Salter (2013) argues that new media technologies have enabled the internet host counter-publics, where allegations of sexual violence and its consequences can be received and discussed in new ways. Online discussion of issues like sexual assault and sexual harassment is, therefore, a necessary means for women to challenge rape myths and other discriminatory discourses. Women's participation online, however, is fraught with difficulties.

**Gendering online spaces**

Most studies of women's online participation attempt to explain and make sense of online abuse and misogyny in social media environments. Scholars have found that patriarchal and misogynist sentiments are repeated freely online (Abraham, 2013; Jane, 2014; Fox et al., 2015; Garcia Favaro and Gill, 2016; Lewis et al., 2016; Shaw, 2016). Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016) identify the extent to which violence and vitriol are directed towards women online. They refer to this as 'networked misogyny' whereby the online environment leads to heightened levels of abuse and vitriol women experience online. These authors further stress the importance of examining the different structures which enable online abuse. Research should, therefore, go beyond questions of online affordances, moderation and legal solutions, to acknowledge that networked misogyny is as much a consequence of wider patriarchal society as it is as a product of the online environment.

Women who have experienced online abuse, claim that it can be challenging to respond to and can lead to accusations of being weak, thin-skinned and lacking a sense of humour which precludes their ability to contest the motivations or effects of these kinds of communication (Jane, 2014). Other scholars frame online abuse as another mechanism for violence against women (Lewis et al., 2016; Lumsden and Morgan, 2017). Empirical findings further indicate that online attacks are aimed disproportionately at women, and in particular at women of colour or those advocating explicitly feminist messages (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016; Lewis et al., 2016). A plethora of misogynist tactics, such as trolling (Buckels et al., 2014; Shaw, 2016), making sexist 'humorous' comments (Jane, 2014; Fox et al., 2015), silencing (Garcia Favaro and Gill, 2016; Shaw, 2016), tacit shaming strategies (Abraham, 2013) all attempt to silence women's voices online and re-inscribe the internet as a site of patriarchy. This research unequivocally demonstrates that online participation is a gendered activity which has specific risks for women.

Similarly, online reader comments on news sites do not operate as a neutral arena for polite discussion. Almgren and Olsson (2015) how online comments are shaped and structured by the producers of such sites, which in turn impacts on the ways users can participate. Online spaces also reflect unequal power relations by privileging some voices and silencing others, therefore reflecting inequalities experienced in the offline world (Harmer and Lumsden, 2019; Fox et al. 2015). Research into reader comments remains limited (Graham and Wright, 2015) even though they are one of the most common forms of user-generated-content in mainstream news websites and the gendered nature of these spaces has hardly yet been explored. Studies which examine the gendered nature of such spaces are scarce, but there are a few notable exceptions (see Vochocova et al., 2016; Bergstrom and Wadbring, 2015; Garcia-Favaro and Gill, 2016). Evidence suggests that people who comment online are somewhat atypical since only a small number of readers enter such discussions (Bergstrom and Wadbring, 2015). Light and Rogers' (1999) demonstrated that very few people contribute the majority of comments. Those who comment tend to be young, well-educated, frequent internet users. Engaging with reader comments is more common among men than women, and the nature of that engagement is also mediated at some level by gender. Men are more likely to engage with 'societal issues' while women are more likely to offer personal experiences (Bergstrom, 2008).

Our study aims to bring together these strands of research to demonstrate that the problematic representations of sexual harassment and sexual violence are being re-invented in the online era through the inclusion of public comments on articles which reinforce rape myths and undermine women’s accounts of harassment. While much of the existing literature tends to concentrate on how specific sites or social networks function to exclude women, our study shows that news or current affairs sites are subject to similarly gendered expectations and constraints. Moreover, although our study does not engage with abuse or vitriol, we argue that disbelieving or challenging women's experiences of sexual harassment and violence are an example of networked misogyny which attempts to silence women and trivialise their lived experiences.

**Methodology**

This research comprises an inductive thematic analysis of the reader comments from nine articles about sexual harassment and sexual violence from the women’s pages of *The Guardian* website. Our research aims to explore the different discursive strategies employed by commenters to challenge and/or support the evidence and viewpoints expressed in the news stories under investigation, and in the public sphere at large, about sexual harassment and violence against women.

*Sampling*

*The Guardian* is one of the few centre-left newspapers in the UK, although its comments section is notorious for attracting people who do not share the politics of the newspaper (Richardson and Stanyer, 2011). We chose *The Guardian* as previous research shows that the comments are dialogic (Richardson and Stanyer, 2011), which is important as the purpose of the research is to analyse the way these issues are debated and framed online. *The Guardian’s* community rules and standards state that "the key to maintaining the *Guardian* website as an inviting space is to focus on intelligent discussion of topics…" and that "we will *consider*removing any content that others might find extremelyoffensive or threatening**.**" We contend that the women’s pages or section of a website are designed specifically for women to discuss issues which pertain to them, therefore, while discussing sensitive topics like sexual harassment and assault, we would expect participants to engage in good faith discussions. We chose to focus on articles by the founder of the *Everyday Sexism Project* Laura Bates (who regularly contributes commentary pieces about sexism and sexual harassment to the website) because she is a prominent contributor, and her articles attract a good deal of discussion from readers.

We identified all articles that were published by Bates; the vast majority appeared between 2014, 2015 and 2016. We identified 161 articles. We chose to focus on articles which specifically discussed sexual harassment or sexual violence to ensure that we could compare the different comments, even though we are aware that this is an idealised view of user-generated content. All eligible articles and their comments sections were reviewed, and we then chose three articles from each year which had the most comments. The full list of articles analysed can be found in Appendix A. The number of comments on each article varied, with the lowest number of comments being 154, and the highest number being 1927. The number of comments in the final data set is 5947.

*Thematic Analysis*

The selected webpages were converted into PDFs and uploaded to Nvivo 10 for analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen as the most appropriate method of analysis to give an overall sense of what was happening in this specific data set. We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach for conducting the thematic analysis. In order to familiarise ourselves with the data, we re-read the chosen articles carefully. We also read and discussed *The Guardian* community standards and participation guidelines, as well as the community FAQs pages to understand what is considered acceptable by the newspaper. This also helped us to understand how the moderators define the terms 'community', 'debate', 'open conversation'. Due to the large sample size, both authors coded half the data separately. We inductively coded each comment, placing no restriction on the number of codes generated. We had frequent discussions about what our codes meant and which themes were present and most prevalent. Some codes we identified included: 'not-all-men', which was applied when posters referred to the fact that most men do not commit sexual assault. Another example was 'statistics needed' which was applied when posters suggest articles need to use statistical evidence. Once we had coded all comments, we combined the data and worked together to group our codes into categories. Areas of significant overlap were identified and developed into broader themes.

Our analysis indicated that there were three clear ways in which posters expressed disbelief in the comments sections of Laura Bates' articles. They are; openly questioning the evidence referred to in the article; dismissing sexism as a causal factor in violence and harassment, and questioning the perceived feminist agenda of the author and her sources. Each one represents a means of undermining the issues discussed, and at times the author herself, creating a discursively patriarchal space in *The Guardian’s* women’s pages, which purport to be a space for women. Although we present them singularly for clarity, each form of disbelief should be considered as interwoven and mutually reinforcing, thus creating an online environment that actively downplays the causes and consequences of sexual harassment and sexual violence. Our analysis also found that a small minority of posters actively challenges the tactics used to undermine or derail the discussions. We have called this the counter-voice. We identified two strategies of asserting criticism of disbelief in the comments, first emphasising the role of structural inequalities and emphasising the value of women’s lived experience. We have anonymised all direct quotations from the articles, and we have not edited comments for spelling or grammatical errors in order to present the data as it appeared online.  Each of these themes will now be explicated in turn.

**Disbelief**

*Questioning the evidence*

Disbelief surrounding the prevalence of harassment, misogyny and sexism is expressed in two key ways; first, general disbelief that these events occur daily, and that large numbers of women experience them. Second, a belief that men are not collectively responsible for committing these acts of violence (be they physical, emotional, or sexual). These comments imply that the stories Bates’ refers to are exaggerated, or entirely fabricated and that such behaviour is perpetrated by an 'insane' or 'criminal' minority of men, who are not representative of all 'normal' men.

One of the most prominent ways of undermining the discussion were posts that outwardly and directly express scepticism about the accuracy or validity of the issues being reported. This can be seen in comments such as:

“I don’t believe this”

And:

  “I find this hard to believe”

Such comments are presented as statements of fact. Posters provide no evidence or reasoning but simply dismiss the issues being raised. This is a powerful stance to take, and as we discuss below, is inherently patriarchal*.*Thisdisbeliefcan also take on a more aggressive tone, for example:

“quite far along bullsh\*t spectrum”

And:

“That, to me, sounds like total bollocks.”

The comments in this category do not actively seek to invite discussion. Instead, they present a fixed and non-negotiable stance. The use of curse words here makes the tone more aggressive and acts as a means of closing down the issue. Using words like “bullshi\*t” and “bollocks”, rather than respectful utterances that express understanding or empathy, implies an angry or agitated response. This strengthens the sense of disbelief evident in these comments by clearly signalling to other readers that these issues are not to be taken seriously.  This form of disbelief also throws into question the lived experience that the article or other commenters are discussing, for example:

“It’s a common strain of the ‘It 100% definitely happened because someone said it did’ Disease”

And:

"Pics or it didn't happen"

This last comment suggests that the provision of evidence is key to illustrating the realities of sexist harassment; however, our analysis shows that commenters want specific kinds of evidence in order to be convinced. In response to an article where the author included some tweets from women reporting examples of their own experiences, one comment declared:

“The problem with the article is that it has no statistical evidence just anecdotal evidence from twitter. Which is not to say that twitter should be ignored but it's hardly scientific.”

This call for statistical evidence implies that women’s accounts are not reliable corroboration for persistent sexism or sexual harassment. It also ignores the extent to which it is difficult to quantify low-level forms of sexism that take place in everyday situations. It is, therefore implied that women’s lived experiences of sexism are not a valid way of understanding the phenomenon. Dismissing the examples included in the article as mere anecdotes suggests that women online are not reliable witnesses of their harassment. Other posters also argued that using women’s own stories is not a legitimate means of discussing the issue because their accounts cannot be verified:

“Why Laura Bates thinks repeating a load of unverifiable stories over and over achieves anything is beyond me. We don’t accept this kind of “evidence” in ANY other type of reporting, why is it accepted here?”

And:

“That's the thing: it's a very short series of steps from unverifiable glorified anonymous gossip on a website with an agenda… to being accepted as gospel (and any objection to its unverifiable nature being socially unacceptable bigotry against whichever agenda is floating it).”

This second comment argues that Bates is seeking to exclude opinions and perspectives which do not conform to a specific world view. The poster argues that Bates’ use of the lived experience of women (taken from her *Everyday Sexism* blog) to support her point is akin to reporting 'unverifiable gossip'. The use of this highly gendered term (gossip) to refer to women's experiences of sexual harassment or violence is dismissive. The poster complains that commenters who call for different kinds of evidence are seen as bigots. Considering the extent to which this happens in the discussions, such responses do not seem to preclude criticism.

It is already apparent that many posters are sceptical of using personal experiences to support the idea that sexism and sexual harassment are prevalent. However, even when statistical data was included, many posters were unhappy or suspicious about its presentation, interpretation, or credibility. For example, posters accused the author of selecting dated numbers to support her point:

“Is that relevant to Laura's use of old, misleading and wrong numbers?”

And:

“and the statistics used in newspaper articles are often selective or don’t show what’s being argued.”

These posters attempt to undermine the article by questioning the validity of the data it employed, as well as suggesting the author is misusing it. Another poster also suggests that the author is selective about the data that is included:

“in this articles context we are not seeing anything as a who=le because she is wilfully ignoring a (albeit smaller part) of domestic violence.”

This poster accuses the author of ignoring domestic violence perpetrated against men which the poster believes is a “willful” attempt to distort the issues by focusing solely on women which they suggest offers an incomplete account of the phenomenon.

Openly questioning the use of statistical evidence was also used by posters to undermine the prevalence of sexual assault:

"1) "Sexual assault" is not rape. 2) Even if one in four women experience sexual assault in their lifetime, it doesn't mean that 1 in four men commit sexual assault; it could be a much smaller number of repeat offenders."

This comment acts to undermine the seriousness of the violent acts discussed, differentiating the acts as two-tiered, rather than presenting them as unacceptable acts of sexual violence. Rather than highlighting the 1 in 4 figure as a legitimate cause for concern, the commenter reformulates it to argue that the number of men committing these violent acts is minimal due to 'repeat offenders'. Many other comments also sought to highlight that not all men behave in this way:

"You insult all of us who are men by implying that this is normal male behaviour, It certainly is not. You probably pass by ten thousand men before you meet one who would even consider this, unless you live in a very different city to the one I live in"

These comments effectively change the focus of the discussion from being about women’s experiences of violence or sexism to the injustice of wrongly suspecting men of being capable of sexual violence. Furthermore, this 'others' sexual violence as something committed by a tiny minority of men, thus minimizing the prevalence of the problem. Questioning the evidence supporting the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault operates in a similar way to rape myths which are generalised and false beliefs about sexual violence that trivialize incidents of sexual violence or suggests that it did not occur (Franuik et al., 2008). Endorsing rape myths allows people to believe that they can control whether they are victimized in this way and allows men to distance themselves from the 'bad' men who perpetrate such assaults.

*Questioning sexism*

Following on from the rejection of the idea that sexual harassment is as prevalent as the articles claimed, many posters also sought to downplay the role of sexism or misogyny in cases of sexual violence. Posters provided various explanations by arguing that perpetrators had mental health problems; were sexual deviants or were excessively aggressive. This further serves to create a perception of perpetrators as 'disturbed' individuals who are distinct from the 'majority of men'. This constructs such violence as derived from individual mental instability or criminality rather than as evidence of sexism and misogyny.  Posters frequently invoked mental health problems as potential explanations for a range of experiences being reported in the blog posts.

 “This is not just a simple case of casual misogyny. This is a serious pathology that requires psychiatric treatment.”

And:

“So we're now determining that a probably mentally ill psychopath… who attacked and killed the first person (an 82-year-old woman) who was unlucky enough to be caught unawares by him... is symptomatic of a culture of misogyny in our society?”

Here one victim is described as merely being 'unlucky'. Posters also explain such behaviour by suggesting that perpetrators have abnormal sexual desires:

“I don't think this is some shocking subtle form of sexism, its just weird people continuing to be weird, its not like your average guy is going to do this, not even close to average.”

Once again, some posters object to the characterization of this behaviour as sexist. These denials that such violence is linked to sexism and misogyny are stated in exact terms. Many posters were particularly explicit that such behaviour is not the way that ‘normal’ men behave towards women:

“they are a minority of men thus it isn't an issue of sexism ingrained in culture, but in these specific men. Who I might add are almost certainly mentally ill”

The desire to offer alternative explanations emphasises that these incidents mostly result from individual behaviour rather than being indicative of broader cultural hostility towards women. For example:

“It doesn't even matter if they are doing it because they like the idea of humiliating women, they are a minority of men thus it isn't an issue of sexism ingrained in culture, but in these specific men.”

Many of the posters agreed that the examples of harassment discussed were evidence of individual ‘bad apples’ rather than a systematic regime of oppression that targets women. According to these posters, such behaviour was only carried out by a minority of criminals and deviants:

“I don't think that we do anyone any favours - including the victims of what is a very unpleasant offence - by trying to characterise this as a manifestation of sexist culture carried out by any sort of significant percentage of the male population.”

This allows posters to distance themselves, and the majority of men, from sexist attitudes and behaviours. Violence against women is, therefore 'othered' and portrayed as a pathological complication for individual perpetrators, rather than a systematic and ingrained cultural problem. These comments serve to preclude any more extensive examination of the issue because it is assumed that a few individuals are responsible. This is also evident from the volume of comments explicitly criticising the author for choosing to characterise these incidents as evidence for sexism:

“And you, like the authors of this piece, are assuming that this is some form of

everyday sexism and that no discussion of mental issues is necessary.”

The complete dismissal of sexism as a potential explanation again precludes any broader examination of the cultural conditions which give rise to the sexist harassment of women in public. Once again we see parallels with the way sexual violence is reported in the news whereby coverage focuses on the often competing stories of individual men and women and fails to connect these stories to wider social inequalities which support sexual violence (Boyle, 2005). This othering of sexual violence allows people to believe that nothing can be done about these problems.

*Questioning the feminist agenda*

The third means of expressing disbelief that we encountered was the suggestion that the author’s feminist views mean that her writing is biased. Many of the commenters take up this idea, questioning whether she is capable of discussing this issue neutrally or objectively:

“I thought the article was generally sound, but lost objectivity on this point, which made me question other facts etc.”

The poster argues that the article lacked objectivity which undermined its overall message, as though the comments section where this article appears usually follows the same rules as traditional journalism. Other comments claim the author is biased because she emphasizes a specific angle on sexism or harassment:

“I would say that this is more to do with the poor quality of many of the journalists who present everything from one perspective.”

Once again, the posters conflate a commentary piece with journalism. As well as demanding balanced reporting, they also ignore the fact that it is unclear how it is possible to report on matters of violence or harassment in a neutral or balanced way. There are also suggestions that Bates is using outdated information to skew the facts and further her feminist agenda. One example accuses the author of deliberately using out of date information:

“Yes, I know that was the case in 2010. I don't know why you keep using that figure when it's no longer relevant: the number is down to below 1.5 per week.

Wait, yes I do know why you keep using out of date stats - it's because you have an agenda to promote.”

This post attempts to undermine the author's argument by suggesting that she is attempting to further her cause by deceiving readers:

“"Crimes of this nature" - meaning ones entirely made up by a blogger with an axe to grind?”

Although the fact that Bates has an agenda is common currency in the comments, many do not elaborate on what that agenda might be. However, the implicit assumption is that it is illegitimate or questionable to use a media platform to demand social change. Other commenters were explicit about their objections to Bates' agenda, stating that such subject matter:

“This shouldn't be fodder for petty gender warriors.”

Openly referring to her perceived feminist aims as ‘petty’ reinforces the idea that the article has no business discussing the issue of gender-based violence or sexism and actively seeks to undermine the credibility of the author. It is not just Bates who receives criticism for highlighting the persistence of gender inequalities; other commenters who express some form of support for the author’s perspective are similarly criticised for having a feminist agenda:

“I think you're so desperate to push your feminist agenda that you are missing the point that someone wanking in public is clearly mentally ill.”

Positioning the blogs as being motivated by a broader feminist agenda downplays the seriousness of the subject matter and appears to cast doubt on the author's credibility. Another poster goes much further, stating:

“The whole article is a bit of a stretch, but if your project - like Laura Bates's does - depends on your being known to a wider public, then you have to make sure that you are, and a bit of gratuitous exaggeration helps with the notoriety.”

This poster accuses the author of exaggerating the problem for her gain, implying that she is only interested in self-promotion. Feminism, in general, is cast as an illegitimate ideological position and Bates is constructed as being biased and lacking in credibility. Previous research has also shown that women who discuss feminist topics are more likely to receive online vitriol (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016; Lewis et al. 2016). Moreover, online newspaper comments often present feminist politics as suspect (Garcia-Favaro and Gill, 2016). In this case, since the politics of *The Guardian* a broadly left-of-centre, it is perhaps ironic that participants on a progressive mainstream site appear to reinforce anti-feminist sentiments.

**Counter-voices**

Although our analysis shows that those questioning the evidence of sexual harassment and misogyny, and the agenda of those writing about it, is pervasive in this online space, it is crucial to recognize that there is some discursive resistance, which we have termed the counter-voice. Like disbelief, counter-voices take on a variety of tones. We identified two subcategories of counter-voice. Firstly, these commenters pointed out that sexual violence and harassment are structural problems and secondly, they argue that women's lived experiences are essential forms of evidence. We have labelled these subthemes 'Emphasising structural inequalities' and 'Defending lived experiences’. Counter-voices argue that sexual harassment is an important societal issue by defending the validity of using women’s lived experiences as evidence, as well as countering the idea that sexual violence and harassment are not prevalent. These subthemes will be discussed in turn.

*Emphasising structural inequalities*

Disbelief, as outlined above, can be seen as dismissing sexism and sexual violence, and individualizing the problem; implying that the men perpetuating it are 'crazy', under the influence of drink or drugs, or are criminals. Some of the counter-voice comments seek to challenge this characterization of harassment as an individual offence, by reasserting that any discussion about violence and harassment needs to place society, power and patriarchy at its centre. For example:

"I think you're missing the point that the open disbelief, ridicule and derailing on this thread is sadly not restricted to the usual CiF misogynists. It is an attitude reflected in the wider society"

And:

**“**To be honest i think these figures are pretty indicative throughout society not just fresher's week. Maybe wider studies need to be conducted in to this area to ascertain the full extent within our society as opposed to suggesting its only within certain areas.**”**

By bringing society and structural power to the conversation, these counter-voice comments challenge those posters who dismissed sexism a factor in sexual assaults. They assert the extent to which acts of violence and harassment are, in fact, ubiquitous:

"No. it's a very common phenomenon. You rarely see men with psychiatric conditions walking down the road masturbating. These guys are "normal" - they just think it's their right to behave like this. Women frequently experience this sort of public insult - hurled at them because they are female, - everyday sexism."

And:

"I’ve been reading threads of this nature for years, and without fail, there’s a parade of men ready to discuss how they don’t know anything about this, are you sure that happened, it can’t happen very much etc."

In challenging disbelief in this manner, these counter-voices work to validate Bates’ message, and importantly, provide alternative viewpoints in the comments to those already discussed. This is important because providing another perspective has an impact on the online environment. It is not then just a space where women’s stories can be undermined but is also a site of resistance where other viewpoints can be read and responded to by those who are supportive of the need to address persistent inequalities.

*Emphasising lived experiences*

Counter-voices also seek to act in defence of the lived experience of women, which many commenters dismiss as 'anecdotal evidence', by emphasising the value of sharing the examples given by Bates. Negative comments are actively challenged, and they argue that not all facts can be verified in the way posters are demanding:

"Just because things don't happen to you doesn't mean things don't happen."

And

"it is wholly believable to me that such a scene could play out exactly that way, and I suspect to the many, many, many other women who have had similar experiences. There is nothing in it that strains credulity that I can see."

This defence of the lived experience is significant because it reinforces the message in the article. It also seeks to undermine the basis for criticism that disbelieving commenters assert, by exposing them to experiences that they will not recognise. As well as defending the lived experience of sexism, counter-voice commenters also defend Laura Bates motives:

"My problem, darling, is that as soon as one of these blogs appears, men like you are all over it, demanding 'proof' 'statistics' 'accuracy' 'evidence'. Darling, there isn't room for all that in a little blog article, and even if there were all the facts you could wish for, you would then quibble with them ad nauseum"

And:

"I've done some searching this morning, but everywhere I look I keep coming across the 'two women a week' figure instead of the one and a half you're quoting. You know, sometimes people simply go by the facts available to them, as opposed to what you seem to be suggesting, that they know about the 'one and a half' and are ignoring it to prove a point."

The emergence of these counter-voices indicates that despite the disbelief demonstrated by some, there is potential for online comments to provide a forum to discuss the experiences and views of groups who are ordinarily marginal within public discourse, even if some of those participating are not supportive. The presence of counter-voices is an essential reminder that women and feminist activists can and do make use of digital spaces to contest and organize against the oppressions they experience (Keller et al. 2016; Salter, 2013).

**Discussion of the main findings**

Our analysis demonstrates that comments on articles about sexual harassment and sexual violence undermine the seriousness of the discussion about violence against women and sexual harassment in three overlapping ways. Firstly, the comments actively question the extent to which the reported examples happen, they question the evidence provided for experiences of such behaviour within the article, and they criticise the author’s presentation or interpretation of that evidence. Secondly, posters minimised the role of sexism or misogyny in the perpetration of sexual assault. Instead, they attributed it to alternative causes, such as mental health issues or criminality. These posts furthermore presented sexual violence as an individual issue, perpetrated by ‘bad apples’ rather than a systematic social problem. Thirdly, sceptical commenters attempted to undermine the author’s arguments by suggesting that her feminist politics render her unable to report on the matter objectively and that she uses deliberately misleading evidence to promote her agenda. Strikingly, although perhaps not surprisingly, these comments mirror the problematic media coverage described earlier whereby sexual violence is ‘othered’ and portrayed as acts which are not committed by ordinary men (Boyle, 2005; Franuik et al. 2008; O'Hara, 2012). This demonstrates the extent to which rape myths remain a prevalent part of the way sexual harassment and violence are discussed in public debate.

Online comments provide citizens with opportunities to engage in debates about social issues. Under normal circumstances, there are obvious advantages to people interrogating the veracity of the information they receive from news websites. However, our analysis demonstrates that if much of this criticism challenges the existence of sexism and women's experiences of violence or harassment, then such questioning can become problematic. If the lived experiences of women are deemed to be untrustworthy and unreliable sources for understanding sexual harassment and violence, it is difficult to envisage how online reader comments can work as an effective means allowing equal participation in the public sphere. We argue that our analysis shows that these online reader comments reflect Fraser’s “informal impediments” (1990: 63) to equal participation in the public discussion. Comments which challenge the lived experience of women and reject the evidence that harassment is widely experienced serve to undermine women's ability to be heard and have their concerns taken seriously. While we cannot assume these commenters are male, research suggests that men are more likely to post comments than women in online discussions, and are more likely to comment more frequently (Vochocova et al., 2016). Even if these commenters are not male, the content of these posts can still be seen as a discursive enactment of patriarchy as they work to undermine stories of sexual violence against women.

We argue that disputing women’s experiences, the existence of a sexist culture that enables sexual harassment and violence and questioning the agenda of those initiating such discussions are detrimental to the public understanding of these issues. It also means women who ought to be heard become even more excluded. Put another way, one person’s rational interrogation of the evidence looks a lot like online othering or discrimination. We would also argue that the motivations of individuals in such comment spaces are beside the point because othering women online can be detrimental to their status as equal participants in society (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016; Harmer and Lumsden, 2019). While the messages in our analysis are not always overtly abusive or misogynistic, they still reinforce women's outsider status in more subtle and potentially enduring ways. This 'ambient sexism' (Fox et al. 2015: 436) might deter women from sharing personal experiences of sexism in public forums, or posting reader comments in general, regardless of whether or not they have been individually targeted with disbelieving comments. Therefore, regardless of the motives of the questioning strategies we identified, these posts may still undermine women's participation by sending the unambiguous message that sexual harassment and violence are not topics that deserve a place in the public discussion online. Excluding women's concerns contributes to a sense in which they are othered and marginalised in online spaces (Harmer and Lumsden, 2019).

Importantly, our analysis also showed that whilst there are many comments that could be perceived as somehow undermining the discussion of sexual harassment and sexual violence, the final theme we identified shows that there are a number of posters who are willing to challenge the questioning discourses taking place in this space. These counter-voices assert that sexual harassment and violence are structural problems which are routinely experienced by women and that women's lived experiences are essential for understanding sexual harassment and violence. They also argue that women's experiences should not be distrusted and disbelieved. This indicates that while online reader comments are problematic forums for the discussion of sexual harassment and sexual violence, there is also some potential for these spaces to be used for the discussion of issues that affect women.

**Conclusion**

The study employs qualitative thematic analysis of reader comments on articles that discuss sexual harassment and sexual violence in *The Guardian’s* women’s pages. We have explored the different discursive strategies employed by commenters to challenge and/or support the evidence and viewpoints expressed in the news stories under investigation, and the public sphere at large, about sexual harassment and violence against women. Our analysis demonstrates that comments often expressed disbelief in response to the articles. Disbelief about sexual harassment and violence was expressed in three overlapping ways: firstly, by actively questioning the evidence for, and the extent of, such behaviour. Thirdly, commenters undermined the author’s arguments by attacking her feminist agenda. Our analysis also showed that some comments challenged this discourse of disbelief. Counter-voices asserted that sexual harassment and violence are structural problems which are routinely experienced by women and that their lived experiences are essential for understanding sexual harassment and violence. So, while online reader comments can be problematic forums for discussions of this nature, there is also some potential for women to use reader comments to resist attempts to dismiss their concerns.

**References**

Abraham, B. (2013) Fedora Shaming as Discursive Activism. *Digital Culture and Education* 5(2): 86-97

Almgren, S. and Olsson, T. (2015) ‘Let’s Get Them Involved’…to Some Extent: Analyzing Online News Participation. *Social Media and Society* 2: 1-11

Banet-Weiser, S. and Miltner, K.M. (2016) #MasculinitySoFragile: culture structure, and networked misogyny. *Feminist Media Studies* 16(1): 171-174

Bergstrom, A. (2008) The Reluctant Audience: Online Participation in the Swedish Journalistic Context. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 5(2): 60-80

Bergstrom, A and Wadbring, I (2015) Beneficial yet crappy: Journalists and audiences on obstacles and opportunities in reader comments. *European Journal of Communication* 30(2): 137-151

Boyle, K. (2005) *Media and Violence*. London: Sage

Carter C (1998) ‘When the “extraordinary” becomes “ordinary”: everyday news of sexual violence’, in C. Carter, G. Branston and S. Allan (eds) *News, Gender and Power*. London: Routledge.

Franuik, R., Seefelt, J. L. and Vandello, J. A. (2008) Prevalence of Rape Myths in Headlines and Their Effects on Attitudes Toward Rape. *Sex Roles* 58: 790-801

Fraser, N. (1990) Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. *Social Text* 25/26: 56-80

Fox, J., Cruz, C. and Lee, J.Y (2015) Perpetuating online sexism offline: Anonymity, interactivity, and the effects of sexist hashtags on social media. *Computers in Human Behavior* 52: 436-442

Garcia-Favaro, L. and Gill, R. (2016) ‘Emasculation nation has arrived’: sexism rearticulated in online responses to Lose the Lads’ Mags campaign. *Feminist Media Studies* 16(3): 379-397

Gavey N and Gow V (2001) ‘”Cry Wolf”, cried the wolf: constructing the issue of false rape allegations in New Zealand media texts’, *Feminism and Psychology* 11 (3): 341-360.

Gill, R. (2007) *Gender and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press

Graham, T. and Wright, S. (2015) A Tale of Twi Stories from ‘below the line’: Comment fields at the *Guardian*. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 20(3): 317-338

Harmer, E. and Lumsden, K. (2019) Online Othering: An Introduction, in Lumsden, K and Harmer, E (eds) *Online Othering: Exploring Digital Violence and Discrimination on the Web*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-33.

Jane, E. A. (2014) ‘You’re a ugly, whorish, slut’: Understanding E-bile. *Feminist Media Studies* 14(4): 531-546

Jane. E. A. (2016) Online misogyny and feminist digilantism, *Continuum*, 30:3, 284-297,

Keller, J.M (2012) VIRTUAL FEMINISMS, *Information, Communication & Society*, 15:3, 429-447.

Keller, J., Mendes, K. and Ringrose, J. (2016) Speaking ‘unspeakable things’: documenting digital feminist responses to rape culture. *Journal of Gender Studies* 27(1): 22-36

Lees S (1995) ‘Media reporting of rape: the 1993 British “date rape” controversy’, in D. Kidd Hewitt and R. Osborne (eds) *Crime and the Media: The Postmodern Spectacle*. London: Pluto.

Lees S (2002) *Carnal Knowledge: Rape on Trial*. London: Women’s Press.

Lewis, R., Rowe, M. and Wiper, C. (2016) Online Abuse of Feminists as an emerging form of violence against women and girls. *British Journal of Criminology*

Light, A. and Rogers, M. (1999) Conversation as publishing: The role of news forums on the web. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 4(4)

Lumsden, K. and Morgan, H. (2017) Media framing of trolling and online abuse: silencing strategies, symbolic violence, and victim blaming. *Feminist Media Studies* ADD issue number etc.

Meyer A (2010) “Too Drunk To Say No”, Feminist Media Studies, 10 (1): 19-34.

Meyers M (2013) African American Women in the News: Gender, Race and Class in Journalism. New York and London: Routledge.

O’Hara S (2012) Monsters, playboys, virgins and whores: Rape myths in the news media’s coverage of sexual violence, *Language and Literature* 21(3): 247-259.

Papacharissi, Z. (2002) The virtual sphere: The internet as a public sphere. *New Media and Society* 4(1): 9-27

Richardson, J. and Stanyer, J. (2011) Reader opinion in the digital age: Tabloid and broadsheet newspaper websites and the exercise of political voice. *Journalism* 12(8) 983-1003

Salter, M. (2013) Justice and revenge in online counter-publics: Emerging responses to sexual violence in the age of social media. *Crime Media Culture* 9(3): 225-242.

Santana, A. (2014) ‘Virtuous or Vitriolic.’ *Journalism Practice* 8(1): 18-33

Slavtcheva-Petkova, V. (2016) “We are not fools”: Online News Commentators’ Perceptions of Real and Ideal Journalism. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 21(1): 68-87

Vochocova, L., Stetka, V. and Mazak, J. (2016) Good girls don’t comment on politics? Gendered character if online participation in the Czech Republic. *Information, Communication and Society* 19(10) 1321-1339