Currently Trending: Women Turning Victimization into Empowerment

Last year, a 21-year-old female video game journalist, Alanah Pearce, realized that many of the rape threats she was receiving on her Facebook page were from young boys — tweens and teens rather than the middle-aged men she assumed would be capable of such vitriol. Pearce famously responded by finding the boys’ mothers through social media and telling them what their sons had said (True, 2014). When one mother responded in horror — “IM SO SORRY” (True, 2014) — Pearce tweeted screen shots of the conversation, writing, “Sometimes young boys on Facebook send me rape threats, so I’ve started telling their mothers.” The tweet received 44,807 retweets and 70,623 favorites, spreading its message across the Internet: “ ‘It was just a way to try to reach a resolution, to productively teach young boys it’s not okay to be sexist to women, even if they’re on the Internet,’ [Pearce] says, ‘that they are real people and that there should be actual consequences for that’ ” (True, 2014).

Pearce’s experience with threats of sexual violence is one shared by female writers and video bloggers, and women in general across the Internet. The Pew Research Center found that young women disproportionately experience severe types of online harassment, such as stalking and sexual harassment. Young women are 10 percentage points more likely to be stalked and sexually harassed online, and are more likely to experience sustained harassment (Duggan, 2014). Reasons for this abuse can be traced to the types of women who report the most vitriolic comments: Those who write about traditionally masculine topics, such as video games (Pearce, 2013); those who write opinion columns (Thorpe & Rogers, 2011); and those who write about feminist topics (Wind, 2015b). There is a clear correlation between women acting outside of the attributes of their traditional gender role (Eagly & Kauru, 2002) and threats of sexual violence on social media.

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1 Original tweet: https://twitter.com/Charalanahzard/status/538144080534847489
However, Pearce’s experience confronting threats is part of a growing movement of women who are challenging trolls on social media (Thorpe & Rogers, 2011; Pearce, 2013; Dewy, 2014; Wind, 2015b). Conventional wisdom tells social media users not to engage trolls — those who post inflammatory, often hateful, often anonymous comments or social media posts (Glass, 2015; Wind, 2015a; Wind, 2015b). But women who have an online presence are increasingly publicizing their efforts to defy Internet misogyny, pushing for positive change on social media and other online platforms. These women have demonstrated that while social media’s accessibility and anonymity create an atmosphere that facilitates aggression against women, it can also lead to positive interactions and change the way women are treated online. And their success in doing so shows an important trend: While online threats and harassment are part of the Internet noise, women’s demands to end victimization and misogyny are going viral, picked up by international media and retweeted, shared, and liked across the Internet.

Lindy Wind, a feminist writer and blogger, on the radio program This American Life told the story of confronting her meanest troll — a man who, using her dead father’s name, harassed her on Twitter. At the time she was engaged in an online debate among comedy writers and feminists about whether rape jokes are funny. Wind had written a blog arguing that “a lot of male comedians are careless with the subject of rape” (Wind, 2015a). Responses on social media were violent: “I love how the bitch complaining about rape is the exact kind of bitch that would never be raped”; “Holes like this make me want to commit rape out of anger”; “No one would want to rape that fat, disgusting mess”; “That big bitch is bitter that no one wants to rape her” (Wind, 2015a). Yet the response that shook her most was the one from a Twitter account bearing her recently deceased father’s name, details about her father’s life, and details about his death — indications someone spent time researching how to hurt her deeply and personally. West wrote a column about attack and her frustration in coping with the onslaught of hate that comes with her job. In what has
become an international story, the troll e-mailed her and apologized, and later talked with her for the radio program. Why did he take such pains to troll her from multiple online identities? Reading about women, especially heavy-set women, who were happy with themselves inexplicably infuriated him. Wind (2015b) wrote, “he hated me because, to put it simply, I don’t hate myself.”

On the radio program he told her, “Women are being more forthright in their writing. There isn’t a sense of timidity to when they speak or when they write. They’re saying it loud. And I think that … it’s threatening at first” (West, 2015a). His statement sheds light on why female video game bloggers, female opinion writers, and women in general receive such hateful comments when expressing themselves on the Internet — a medium that encourages strong opinions. Eagly and Karau (2002) use role congruity theory to explain why women suffer social backlash when they step outside of their traditional gender role. Women are to exhibit communal characteristics; they’re nurturing, caring and timid. Men are to exhibit agentic characteristics; they’re aggressive, assertive and dominant. When women exhibit male-assigned characteristics, they aren’t acting like women, and social pressure for their incongruity seeks to push them back into their more submissive role. This has negative effects on women’s involvement in civic life, making women feel less prepared to run for office (Fox & Lawless, 2004) and creating a social expectation among both genders that women are uninformed about politics and current events (Mendez & Osborn, 2010). Thus, West (2015a) points to an important purpose: Women who assert strong opinions online or who affiliate themselves with traditionally male forums such as video games are deliberately challenging gender roles. In response to her troll’s reason behind his hate she said, “You must know that’s why I do that, because people don’t expect to hear from women like that. And I want other women to see me do that and I want women’s voices to get louder.”

While Pearce’s and Wind’s responses to trolls had positive outcomes and gained national attention, raising awareness about online aggression toward women, there have been equally famous
unsuccessful attempts to curb misogyny on the Internet. Last year, “GamerGate” became an online culture war whose attack on women video game developers, critics and bloggers escalated from anonymous threats of sexual and other violence to “true” threats that prompted F.B.I. investigations (Dewey, 2014; Wind, 2015b). The online war wasn’t just about video games, it was “a proxy war for a greater cultural battle over space and visibility and inclusion” (Dewey, 2014). Video games are as much a traditionally male sphere as politics, with the same deeply ingrained social view of a “gamer” — nerdy white guy — as there is “leader” — wealthy white guy (Dewey, 2014; Eagly & Kauru, 2002). Egged on by headlines such as, “Feminist bullies are tearing the video game industry apart” (Yiannopoulos, 2014) on popular blog sites, GamerGate intensified to the point that some women who spoke out against the vitriol left their homes, fearing the seriousness of threats tweeted to them (Dewey, 2014). GamerGate died down late last year, but not to any clear resolution. However, some within the industry started their own campaigns to “speak up against harassment and threats of violence” (Zecher, 2014). Two thousand industry members signed on to an open letter calling for inclusivity in gaming and urging, “If you see hateful, harassing speech, take a public stand against it and make the gaming community a more enjoyable space to be in” (Zecher, 2014).

These women’s experiences show how social media has a dual purpose: It is a universally accessible and potentially anonymous platform to facilitate online harassment and threats of sexual violence against women whose voices are too loud or whose interests are too masculine. And it is a platform to easily facilitate mass opposition to harassment and threats. Women’s recent success in confronting trolls shows an important emerging trend: While hateful tweets and posts are a dime a dozen — “I was eating 30 rape threats for breakfast at that point,” Wind (2015a) describes — the stories of trolls being called out and told off are the messages that stand out and go viral. As loud as hateful online trolls are, the stories of women’s success standing up to them are even louder. Currently trending on Twitter: Women turning victimization into empowerment.
References


How This Award will Advance My Education

This award would advance my education both financially and substantively. Financially, the top award would cover nearly a term of tuition — extremely valuable when my paycheck from full-time employment goes to tuition and books, as well as living expenses. Substantively, being recognized by PSU’s Commission on the Status of Women and the Diversity Action Council would lend credibility to my thesis research. My research will focus on gender and its role in representation of constituents, as well as the impacts of inclusion in elected office on policy outcomes. Indeed, thinking through the juxtaposition of traditional gender roles and contemporary expressions of violence against women has already advanced my education, drawing on information learned in my Gender in Politics class as well as current events. Between the financial benefits and substantive benefits through credibility that will come with recognition, this award would be a great help in advancing my education.