More barriers than solutions: Women’s experiences of support with online abuse

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Abstract

Women have long fought for recognition and protection from the violence and abuse against them. This fight has only grown more complex with the introduction of digital technology and online abuse. In this thesis, I adopt a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understand how 15 women experience barriers to support when they are targeted by online abuse and examine their responses to those barriers. Drawing from a range of theoretical frameworks and literature, this thesis contributes to the current understanding of online gendered violence. Overall, I found that participants experienced and responded to barriers to support in three distinct ways: first, they experienced barriers across a range of environments, but most commonly at the institutional level with social media and gaming companies presenting the most problems. Second, they experienced barriers with digital dualism, whereby online abuse was treated as less harmful than other forms of offline abuse. And third, participants experienced barriers to support as something that they must respond to and which leaves them with few other options than to take responsibility for their safety and well-being. In chapters one and two I provide an overview of relevant literature and my methodological decisions. In chapter three I use Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model to create a schema of the barriers women face when they seek support for online abuse. In chapter four I narrow in on one particular barrier discussed in chapter three—digital dualism (Jurgenson, 2011). Digital dualism is the discursive habit of conceptually splitting online and offline life into separate and opposing domains. I employ embodiment theory and digital ontology, among other frameworks, to discuss digital dualism’s consequences as a barrier to support. In chapter five I look at participants’ responses to abuse in the context of these barriers. I combine the weak support ecosystem with gendered social oppression strategies, such as victim-blaming and rape myth acceptance, to explore indicators of responsibilization among participants’ responses to barriers to support. While online abuse mirrors inequality and abuse that predates the Internet, this research provides a much-needed foundation to articulate how targets of online abuse experience support barriers to online equality.
Keywords

Technology-facilitated violence and abuse, Online abuse, Cybermisogyny, Platform governance, Barriers to support, Support, Ecological model, Digital dualism, Ontological labor, Responsibilization.
Women have long fought for recognition and protection from the violence and abuse against them. This fight has only grown more complex with the introduction of digital technology and online abuse. In this thesis, I interview 15 women in order to understand how they experience barriers to support when they are targeted by online abuse and examine their responses to those barriers. Drawing from a range of theoretical frameworks and literature, this thesis contributes to the current understanding of online violence against women and girls. Overall, I found that participants experienced and responded to barriers to support in three distinct ways: first, they experienced barriers across a range of environments, but most commonly at the institutional level with social media and gaming companies presenting the most problems. Second, they experienced barriers in relation to digital dualism, whereby online abuse was treated as less harmful than other forms of offline abuse. And third, participants experienced barriers to support as something that they must respond to and which leaves them with few other options than to take responsibility for their safety and well-being. In chapters one and two I provide an overview of relevant literature and my research decisions. In chapter three I use Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model to understand the connections between the barriers women face when they seek support for online abuse. In chapter four I narrow in on one particular barrier discussed in chapter three—digital dualism (Jurgenson, 2011). Digital dualism is the tendency to think about online and offline life as two separate and opposing domains. I employ theories to help think through the physical body’s relationship to online spaces and to discuss digital dualism’s consequences as a barrier to support. In chapter five I look at participants’ responses to abuse in the context of these barriers. I combine the weak support ecosystem with other problematic practices, such as victim-blaming and rape myth acceptance, to explore how participants took responsibility for the abuse they experienced. While online abuse mirrors inequality and abuse that predates the Internet, this research provides a much-needed foundation to articulate how targets of online abuse experience support barriers to online equality.
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1 Introduction

The first time I *fully felt* the disorienting impact online abuse can hold in one’s life, I was 14 years old. Fourteen is a vulnerable age between childhood and adulthood, when social dynamics have neither the innocence of children’s play nor the empathy and relational wisdom of adult relationships. These teenage years, as most of us know, are naturally rife with unnecessary social anxiety and fear, and individual experiences during these years shape the contours of our choices and personalities as adults.

It was 2002, and mIRC (an internet relay chat) was a common place my social circle met outside of school to connect and socialize. Naturally, it became the experimental space where I, too, began to discover and develop my social preferences and behaviors. I could never have guessed that these new spaces for socializing would become the backdrop for experiences that would shape the adult that I became, and, indeed, the dissertation you are about to read.

In these chatrooms, I became the target of gut-wrenching bullying by my peers, many of whom were teens that I had considered friends. I felt humiliated and dejected, and my relationship with online spaces became fraught with anxiety and fear.

As I grew and the bullying subsided, new online social spaces emerged and were widely adopted by my peers. However, my enthusiasm for online communication was permanently shaped by these early experiences in mIRC. I refused to sign up for My Space—a choice that puzzled my well-meaning friends—and my relationship with Facebook lasted only a few years. It is only very recently—as a woman in my late twenties and early thirties—that I reactivated my Twitter for professional reasons.

In 2015, many years after that initial experience with online abuse, I decided to book accommodations using Airbnb for the first time. In the process of creating my account, I was asked to connect my social media profiles. Having recently deleted *all* of my social media accounts once again, I opted to ‘skip this step.’ In response, I received a notification suggesting I reconsider. The notification warned me that connecting other accounts
increased the chance of potential hosts accepting my request because it would confirm my identity.

This message felt surreal. It was as though Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter provided a validity of existence that I otherwise lacked. It was the first time I recognized—and experienced—the disadvantage of not having a social media profile. It was the first time I fully understood the implications of online spaces as central to, and deeply integrated with, the contemporary every day. These experiences shaped the project presented in this dissertation by influencing the important consideration given to the topic of online abuse, the questions asked, and the sincere empathy extended to my participants.

The material in this dissertation attempts to highlight the disorienting impacts of online abuse and the growing importance of online spaces as central to our lives. I especially hope to demonstrate that the need to protect people from online abuse and to offer support to those who experience it is one of the most important challenges we face in the digital age. Above all, I hope to contribute to a research field that is hard at work to ensure that 14-year-old girls—and everyone else, for that matter—feels comfortable and safe to take up space online.

1.1 Same problems with a digital twist

Throughout the twentieth century, women fought tirelessly for gendered violence to be recognized as a harm that should be formally prohibited by the same state, corporate, and social institutions that, for too long, had been complicit (Siegel, 2020). As a result, many forms of violence became formally recognized. However, responses to violence against women and girls (VAWG) were not universally practical or appropriate. Victims of marital rape, date rape, workplace harassment, and street harassment, among others, were faced with avenues for recourse and support that were underwhelming or, worse, came with serious deterrents including stigmatization and job insecurity (Rowland, 2004). Indeed, developing support for VAWG proved to be a struggle in its own right.

The struggle to develop support for VAWG is only complicated by the introduction of digital technologies and the cultures that form around them. As offline life became fully
integrated with online spaces (Chayko, 2017), new means of VAWG emerged (Brown & Hennis, 2019; Jane, 2017; Lewis et al., 2016) only to recreate or duplicate many of the challenges with providing support that long existed offline.

To address these recurring struggles, researchers first need to pinpoint their location. Using data from interviews with 15 women\(^1\) this research identifies how they experience barriers to support when faced with online abuse and how they respond to abuse in the context of these barriers. In the following sections, I provide an overview and definition of online abuse, explore the negative impacts, situate this study in context, and layout the flow of the proceeding chapters.

### 1.2 Cultural context

#### 1.2.1 Reality check: Online abuse and the early enthusiasm of online spaces

Early internet research focused on the potential of online spaces to liberate individuals from the physical constraints of gender, race, size, and disability (Haraway, 1991; Turkle, 1984), and promote open political and social discourse and deliberation (Dahlberg, 2001; Gimmler, 2001). The affordances of online spaces were further believed to give voice and publicity to people who may be left out by the cost and gatekeeping of traditional media (Sobieraj, 2018). Additionally, anonymity was thought to “obliterate real-life identity boundaries and enhance free and open communication” (Papacharissi, 2004, p. 267). Yet, these potential advantages did not (and do not) directly translate into a fair, inclusive, and egalitarian digital sphere. Indeed, the misuse and abuse of women and transgender folx in online spaces and networked communities’ dates as far back as the bulletin board systems (BBS) of the 1980s (Evans, 2018) and multi-user dungeon (MUD) games of the early 1990s.

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\(^1\)This study was transgender inclusive. The digital and analogue recruitment posters for this study indicated that anyone who identified as a woman was welcome to participate. No further demographic information on gender was collected. Given the gendered nature of online abuse, further iterations of this project ought to include non-binary individuals, as well. For now, this remains a limitation of the project.
(Dibbelt, 1993). So, while online spaces may provide avenues for open and equal discussion, it does not mean that people utilize them in that way.

The enthusiasm for early, text-based internet cultures’ ability to reduce differences between people, counter repressive gender structures, and create solidarity among marginalized groups “has clearly waned in the twenty-first century” (Cuboniks, 2018, p. 74). There is mounting evidence to suggest that online spaces, as with many offline spaces, are particularly hostile and exclusionary environments for women, Black people, Indigenous people, people of color (BIPOC), and gender non-binary folx (Amnesty International, 2018; Ditch the Label, 2019; Duggan, 2017b; Iyer et al., 2020). Experiences in these environments prompted journalist Lindy West (2017), among many others, to leave Twitter altogether, claiming that it is only good for “trolls, robots, and dictators” (para. 3). She further explained:

Twitter, for the past five years, has been a machine where I put in unpaid work and tension headaches come out. I write jokes there for free. I post political commentary for free. I answer questions for free. I teach feminism 101 for free. Off Twitter, these are all things by which I make my living—in fact, they comprise the totality of my income. But on Twitter, I do them pro bono and, in return, I am micromanaged in real time by strangers; neo-Nazis mine my personal life for vulnerabilities to exploit; and men enjoy unfettered, direct access to my brain so they can inform me, for the thousandth time, that they would gladly rape me if I weren’t so fat (West, 2017, para. 2).

These hostile environments feature co-ordinated campaigns of harassment (Quinn, 2017), inappropriate comments (Jane, 2014), men’s stranger intrusion (Vera-Gray, 2017), image abuse (Powell & Henry, 2017), and stalking, doxing, and other privacy invasions (Ecket & Metzger-Riftkin, 2020).

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2 Doxing is the practice of sharing an individual’s personal information online, such as their home address, phone number, place of employment, or other typically private pieces of information.
The myriad behaviors described above are collectively referred to as online abuse. More broadly, online abuse refers to any abuse, harassment, or mistreatment that takes place online or through an internet-connected device. Online abuse follows no single pattern. Instead, it ranges from “concentrated, frequent, highly threatening and hateful to […] comparatively sporadic and less inflammatory, unpleasant, non-threatening” content (Lewis et al., 2016, p. 8). While classic forms of online abuse such as name-calling, offensive content, vitriolic speech, and impersonation remain common, new forms of aggression continue to emerge (Brown & Hennis, 2019; Lewis et al., 2016). For example, a growing concern over the ‘internet of things’ potential to be used as an extension of control, particularly in cases of domestic abuse (Webb, 2020) has emerged in recent years. The ‘internet of things’—a term that describes the increased connectivity of the objects in our lives to the internet, such as thermostats, televisions, locks, and doorbell cameras—have already been hacked to torment people (Naughton, 2018; Vigdor, 2019). Zoom-bombing, the practice of disrupting an online class or meeting with racist or sexually aggressive content, only emerged at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic when school and work migrated online (Elmer et al., 2020). And deepfakes, a particularly dangerous use of artificial intelligence that creates hybrid videos of one person’s face and another person’s body, has emerged as a new form of image-based sexual abuse (Ajder, 2019; Gosse & Burkell, 2020; Nagel, 2020).

Megarry (2014) argues that sexualized online abuse, in particular, will lead to the exclusion of women’s voices. This is an important point with historical roots found in the work of Tuerkheimer (1987), who argues that street harassment effectively silences women because women know that responding to the harassment can escalate a situation. Indeed, research demonstrates that there are silencing strategies that emerge as coping mechanisms, and that women alter their behavior in response to online abuse, even going so far as to avoid certain spaces altogether (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017).

However, the reality might be more complex. To continue to enjoy these spaces (Jenson & De Castell, 2013), women have made remarkable use of do-it-yourself justice (Jane, 2016; see chapter 5) and have crowdsourced support (Lawson, 2018; see chapter 3). They also have other, less empowering responses, such as acceptance and minimization (Veletsianos
et al.; see chapter 5). Indeed, women continue to engage in these spaces, but in doing so put their mental, psychosocial, and personal health at risk.

For many women, opting out of online spaces is not only an act of self-silencing but it is also rarely a realistic option. When online activity is necessary for work, school, or other economic activities, removing yourself from online spaces requires removing yourself from school, work, and other economic activities (Jane, 2018; see chapter 4). In other words, to not be excluded from essential activities in their lives, women must continue to use these spaces while feeling anxious and fearful.

Notably, being online is sometimes not a catalyst in the first place. Some forms of online abuse—even sexualized online abuse—such as doxing, deepfakes, impersonation, stalking, and hacking accounts or hijacking smart home devices and a person’s ‘internet of things’—can happen without one ever having been vocal or present online in the first place. You do not need a social media account, a blog, or any kind of public profile to have your image shared without your consent, your reputation tarnished, and your personal agency removed.

With these and many other forms of online abuse growing more prevalent, internet research should strike a cautiously optimistic tone. The development of techno-social life and dominant contemporary uses of online spaces—specifically blogging, posting, and sharing ideas, opinions, news, and information—invites critical analyses of the internet’s public sphere potential. Over the last two decades, writers have explored whether online spaces could replicate, extend, or challenge the concept of the public sphere (Dhalberg, 2001; Papacharissi, 2001, 2009). Early academic literature focused on the deliberative and political potential of blogs, message boards, and chatrooms: some scholars believed the internet was “inherently democratic” (Barton, 2005, p. 177) and conceptualized online spaces as a digital extension of the Habermasian “bourgeois masculinist” (Fraser, 1990, p. 62) public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001; Gimmler, 2001), while others presented an inherent skepticism that such ideals could or should be replicated (Dean, 2003; Papacharissi, 2001, 2009). The Habermasian conception celebrated the ability for online spaces to mask identity and provide a platform for “uncoerced communication of equal participants with equal access and equal rights” (Dean, 2003, p. 21). Nonetheless, while Papacharissi (2001)
understood how this potential could play out in theory, she was primarily concerned that the commodification and commercialization of online spaces would stunt the internet’s public sphere growth potential and absorb it back into the status quo. She cautioned that, although online spaces “carry the promise of bringing people together,” they also “bear the danger of spinning them in different directions” (Papacharissi, 2001, p. 16). Shaw (2012) is likewise cautious to label online spaces and uses of the internet as a public sphere. She questions early “public sphere understanding of internet discourse” (Shaw, 2012, p. 42), particularly those following the Habermasian conception of the public sphere because it “requires inclusion, which in some cases may preclude the possibility of safe places for people whose interests are marginalised” by dominant groups (Shaw, 2020, p. 47). While there may have been a cause to celebrate the democratic potential of online spaces during the internet’s earlier days, these spaces have since become places where participation comes with risk (Stewart, 2016). This risk is even higher for equality-deserving groups and marginalized populations whose subject position becomes part of the abuse they experience (Ditch the Label, 2019; Duggan, 2017b; Iyer et al., 2020).

Despite such skepticism, there remains a strong tendency in popular and academic literature to celebrate these “liberatory” features and list the positive aspects of online spaces before embarking on a critique (a tendency to balance critique with complement, if you will). However, there is good reason to suggest it is time we do away with this balancing act because the very same tools once heralded as liberatory have been co-opted by oppressors to inhibit support and justice. Anonymity was (and still is) seen as allowing people to speak their minds without fear of consequences, but it is not afforded equally: many people must be named online, particularly for work and education. As well, anonymity is used by perpetrators of abuse to hide behind fake accounts, usernames, and IP addresses to remain unknown to those they abuse and harass, which makes dealing with online abuse under existing legal structures difficult, if not impossible (Banks, 2010; Citron, 2014). The ability of the internet to bring people together has all but backfired, resulting in white supremacist and reactionary politics at a scale not seen since the mid-twentieth century (Massanari, 2018; Nagle, 2018). While the internet may make it easier for niche communities to find one another, it also makes it easier for more nefarious
subcultures to do the same (Quinn, 2017). Furthermore, the consequences of these actions can be devastating to online users and communities.

### 1.3 Impact of online abuse

#### 1.3.1 Economic, personal, and social impact

The role of online spaces in a person’s life will affect the kind of harm that individuals experience as a result of online abuse. Significantly, there are serious consequences of work-related and professional online abuse. Many jobs now require an online presence or the use of the internet and information communication technology in some capacity. When access to these tools is reduced or avoided as a result of abuse, targets are at a disadvantage compared to their colleagues who can comfortably remain online.

There are myriad ways that this kind of online abuse can manifest. "Lies, privacy invasions, and technical assaults,” argued Citron (n.d., p. 6), “can make a mess of people's professional lives.” Jane (2018) developed the concept of economic vandalism to describe a variety of professional and economic repercussions women encounter as a result of online abuse. For example, employers use social media profiles to help make hiring decisions as much as 62% of the time (Sameen et al., 2015). As such, when people’s social media accounts are hacked or “[w]hen the top links in Google search results [wrongly] associate people with sexually transmitted diseases or mental illness, their careers can suffer” (Citron, n.d., p. 7).

Particular professions can make individuals more vulnerable. In previous work I adopt Jane’s (2018) concept of economic vandalism to demonstrate the impact online abuse has on the professional and personal lives of scholars and academics working in higher education (Gosse et al., 2021). This study found that participants who experience online abuse related to their work report feelings of anxiety and depression, lose confidence in their work, and change their relationship with social media (Gosse et al., 2021). Research has also focused on journalists, specifically women journalists, many of who face a
disproportionately high amount of online abuse related to their work compared to their male colleagues (Gardiner et al., 2016).

Politics is another professional arena where women and BIPOC face disproportionate amounts of online abuse (Wagner, 2020). For example, women have historically been excluded from public sphere responsibilities. The “exclusionary intent in online space may be an extension of attempts to exclude women from public spaces, town halls and common spaces of contemporary and historical democracy” (Lewis et al., 2016, p. 18). Nowhere is this truer than in the attempts to silence and humiliate women politicians. For example, when Canadian Liberal MP Iqra Khalid tabled an anti-Islamophobia motion, she received a torrent of abusive, discriminatory, and threatening emails—over 50,000 in total (Harris, 2017). Similarly, MLA Sandra Jansen of Calgary spoke on the floor of the Alberta legislation in November 2016 about the barrage of online abuse she received after she chose to leave the Conservative Party and join the New Democratic Party (NDP). “Please oppose it [the online abuse],” she argued, “Don’t ignore it. Don’t look the other way. Don’t excuse it. Because our daughters are watching us” (McConnell, 2016). More recently, Dr. Bonnie Henry, British Columbia’s provincial health officer, publicly discussed the vast amount of harassment, death threats, and misogynistic comments she has received during her work related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Ross, 2020). And in the 2020 Canadian election for the Green Party leader, newly elected leader Annamie Paul was subjected to racist, anti-Black, and anti-Semitic comments during a virtual town hall (Tasker, 2020).

In addition to certain kinds of jobs, certain kinds of content are particularly prone to abusive and violent backlash online. In particular, feminist civic engagement is known to be vulnerable (Lewis et al., 2016). During online recruitment for a research project that looked at women’s experiences of men’s intrusion in public spaces, Vera-Gray’s (2017) recruitment and data-collection website was inundated with vile and harassing comments fuelled by sexist and misogynist sentiments. Reflecting on her experience she notes that the personal impact was unavoidable:

This impact did not come from commentators who simply disagreed with the project’s aims and methods, though […] the arguments used in disagreement were
grounded in sexism. Rather, it was grounded in the personal attacks that were made to myself, my participants and to feminists in general. The aggressive nature of these comments encouraged me to engage in forms of safety work that I had not previously considered, as well as emotional work in managing the personal impact of abuse (Vera-Gray, 2017, p. 115).

Some online spaces, as well, are particularly rife with abuse and violence toward women—especially gaming websites (McClintok, 2015). While women make up a large portion of gamers, gaming culture remains primarily male-dominated (Jenson & De Castell, 2013; Paul, 2018). Many women gamers use coping and safety strategies to deal with the abuse, present and future, that they face in gaming environments (Fox & Tang, 2016; McClintok, 2015). Women video gamers will avoid certain games, limit the kinds of games they play, opt to not play with strangers, mute their microphone, and gender swap in their screen names and avatars to assume a neutral or man’s identity (Cote, 2017).

Regardless of the reason for using online spaces, emotional distress is a nearly universal outcome of online abuse (Lewis et al., 2016; West, 2014; Yabarra et al., 2006). As far back as 2006, Yabarra et al. (2006) found that 38% of youth who experienced online abuse reported emotional and psychological distress. In another study (West, 2014), participants reported damaged self-image, anxiety, depression, humiliation, and shame; adverse social impacts such as withdrawing from online activity, isolating from family, friends, and communities, and harm to their reputation. Economic and financial burdens were reported as well, such as job loss and loss of income (West, 2014). The fear of experiencing online abuse also has adverse effects, such as “cyber-ostracism” (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). This occurs when obsessive relational intrusion, which is the exploitation of women’s emotions through unwanted emotionally manipulative and demanding messages, poisons a person’s online environment and deters them from participating to avoid further unwanted communication (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002).

The integrated nature of online spaces and all other aspects of our lives is an important consideration for this work because abuse in one corner of the internet can have a damaging impact on another. This is made true by the socially integrated nature of online spaces, and
especially social media. Context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011) is the term used to describe the way previously separate aspects of an individual’s life are now connected under the same network. People from work, high school, college, people you met traveling or at the gym, people you game with, your closest friends, and your immediate and extended family virtually occupy the same space. When this space becomes a hub of abuse, it can effectively contaminate a person’s entire social world.

Despite many recurring themes, the impact and nature of online abuse are not the same for everyone. The abuse individuals receive online is frequently tied to their subject position and social location, often showcasing gendered and racist components (Duggan, 2017a; 2017b; 2014). This means that the content of the abuse is usually targeted, isolating elements of gender, race, religion, sexuality, dis/ability, geography, and class to tailor assaults to their target’s specific positionality (Barlow & Awan, 2016; Lawson, 2018). This contributes to a process that Lumsden and Harmer (2019) refer to as ‘Online Othering.’ Broadly, the process of ‘Othering’ requires “positional superiority” (Said, 1979, p. 7), and occurs when dominant social groups silence, speak for, and delegitimize others (Lumsden & Harmer, 2019, p. 15). Online, “myriad behaviors, interactions and discourses,” Lumsden and Harmer argue, “[…] shape the rules and norms concerning which individuals and groups are endowed with status and legitimated to participate in these spaces and those who are not (Lumsden & Harmer, 2019, p. 12). ‘Online Othering’ thus causes disenfranchisement and discrimination through abuse and violence, resulting in a wide range of dangerous social effects and impacts. The many adverse effects and limitations online abuse (unequally) place on individuals demands the creation of better support for those who are targeted.

1.3.2 These impacts necessitate (better) protection and support

Consistent with the response to other forms of VAWG, activists (Scott, 2020), lawyers (Goldberg, 2019), legal scholars (Citron, 2014), academics (Blackwell et al., 2017), and targets themselves (Quinn, 2017) have worked to create and provide support for targets of online abuse. Such supports have seen varying degrees of success, with roadblocks and barriers present in both formal (e.g., legal systems and social media platforms) and
informal (i.e., personal and social) frameworks. Within the last several years, there has been an uptick in research attempting to understand the phenomenon of online abuse, as well as initiatives from government and policymakers to address legal gaps. As this dissertation demonstrates, despite these efforts effective support is still lacking, leaving targets of online abuse with unclear paths to support.

Better support is all the more pressing in a world that is growing increasingly connected to online spaces. We have undeniably become the first generation to be socially integrated with digital technology. Though it is arguably less visible than anticipated by the futurists of the 1980s, this integration finds us physically dependent on Wi-Fi connections and affectively tethered to our smart devices (Langlois, 2014). For most of us, online spaces—social media, video streaming sites, online games, and messaging applications—have a constant and competing presence in our lives (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). It is a mistake to simply explain this phenomenon as a product of individuals choosing and inviting these devices and networks into our lives, as if there is a valid alternative choice. This integration is equally a product of the political and commercial institutions that comprise public and private life, all of which incentivize—and even necessitate—participation in online spaces. The growing expectation to incorporate online spaces into our lives needs to be met with better support for anyone who experiences violence and abuse in said spaces. While efforts to prevent online abuse in the first place are also important, the abuse that takes place online is an extension of the abuses people face offline, which have a long history and for which there is no easy fix. Instead, taking a harm reduction approach whereby targets get the support they need to lessen the harm associated with online abuse is of the utmost importance. This may include, among many other possibilities, platforms banning abusers, making the removal of reputationally damaging content easier, offering better reporting tools, or developing a shared vocabulary that impresses the seriousness and *realness* of online abuse. In the following section I lay out the flow of this dissertation. Each chapter addresses a different aspect of understanding how targets of online abuse experience barriers to support and how they respond to abuse in the context of those barriers. Together, the chapters provide a strong overview of the current support landscape available to targets of online abuse, examines the consequences of support barriers, and offers recommendations for improvement.
1.3.3 Purpose of study

Previous literature related to online abuse focused on four main aspects: the nature of online abuse; the cause of online abuse; the impact of online abuse; and women’s responses to online abuse. Looking at the nature and context of online abuse, scholars have focused on who is affected, where the abuse occurs, and what factors contribute or exacerbate the abuse (Duggan, 2014, 2017b; Görzig & Machackova, 2015; Jane, 2017; Mantilla, 2013, 2015; West Coast Leaf, 2015). Features of online spaces like anonymity, pseudonymity, user-generated content, and a lack of physical presence—contributing to greater status equalization (i.e. larger than life attitudes) and disinhibition—are some of the most commonly cited factors assessed as causing and contributing to online abuse (Banks, 2010; Citron, 2014; Finchman & Sanfillippo, 2015, 2016; Reagle, 2015; Stroud, 2014). Research focusing on the impact of online abuse tend to focus on social, personal, reputational, and economic harms (Citron, n.d.; Gosse & Burkell, 2020; Jane, 2018; Lewis et al., 2015; West, 2014). And literature that looks at the response’s to online abuse centers on targets’ responses, community responses, platforms’ responses, and legal responses (Chadha et al., 2020; Citron, 2014; Lawson, 2018; Jane, 2016, 2018; Olson & LaPoe, 2018; Vitis & Gilmour, 2016). This literature paints a robust picture of the problems and harms related to online abuse. As a unit of measure and consideration, support is rarely considered on its own.

In the current techno-social environment, targets of online abuse are required to navigate a complex (and often inaccessible) network of ‘solutions’ to effectively address their abuse, creating a Frankenstein-type response (Jane, 2016; Lawson, 2018). To effectively and holistically address the abuse, targets must stitch together a variety of insufficient-do-it-yourself responses that rely on the inconsistent support of the legal system (Bailey, 2016), tech companies and platform responses (Crawford & Gillespie, 2014), personal resiliency (Veletsianos et al., 2018), and the help of family and friends (Hodson et al., 2018). In some cases, exasperated by the roadblocks they face, targets of abuse have taken matters into their own hands with varying degrees of success (Jane, 2016). Exploring the experiences of women who have attempted to navigate these resources paints a complicated picture, often rife with victim-blaming, a lack of understanding of the connection between online
and offline life, and other obstacles that stifle the voices of women asking for support. In response to this messy web of support, this dissertation unravels the many roadblocks targets of online abuse face.

Using a phenomenological approach to conduct and analyze interviews, this dissertation focuses on women’s accounts of online abuse to understand how they experience, and how they respond to, barriers to support. This work presents the results of 15 interviews with women-identifying participants to better understand their experience of accessing support in the wake of online abuse. This approach revealed a series of barriers to support among social and personal networks, organizations and institutions like social media companies, workplaces, and health care, as well as larger socio-cultural and ideological barriers. With remaining options for support lacking in availability and efficacy, participants demonstrate evidence of self-responsibilization as a means of dealing and coping with online abuse in the context of these barriers.

1.4 Chapter outline

In chapter two, I explain my phenomenological methodology and provide details on the data collection and data analysis processes. I provide an overview of the research instruments and the decision-making processes that went into their creation. I then introduce the participants in this study and, using their own words, allow space for each of them to share their relationship to online spaces, their experiences with online abuse, and to reflect on what the most important part of their story is to them.

In chapter three I draw on Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model to create a schema of the barriers targets face when they encounter online abuse. I draw on literature from media studies, sociology, political science, legal studies, and library and information science to address the personal, social, legal, platform, and technological factors present in our culture as they relate to the difficulty of supporting targets of online abuse. Based on the data presented in the chapter, I recommend ways of moving forward to better support targets of online abuse.
In chapter four I narrow in on one particular barrier discussed in chapter two: digital dualism. One reason that preventing online abuse, and supporting targets of online abuse, has been so difficult lies in the out-dated cultural attitude that online and offline life are separate. I expand upon Jurgenson’s (2011) concept of digital dualism—the socio-cultural attitude and perception that online life is different and distinct from offline life—to argue that it is an unnecessary and harmful dichotomy. With a focus on discourse, I demonstrate the harm that emerges from the habit of referring to and thinking about offline life as *more real* and online life as *less real*. I offer the term ontological labor to describe the extra work targets of online abuse must undergo to convince others, and in some cases themselves, that the abuse and harm they experienced is real.

In chapter five I look at the impact that online abuse and a lack of support have had on participants and their responses to abuse. I draw on literature around governance, responsibilization, and social oppression strategies such as rape culture, victim-blaming, and slut-shaming. This literature tells us that such social oppression strategies cause responsibilization among women, where women cope with and respond to abuse in ways that sees them take responsibility for the harms perpetrated against them. While my participants do not point to causes, I show that they nonetheless exhibit personal responsibilization in their responses to online abuse through actions such as blame, acceptance, minimization, and control-seeking.

The last chapter offers some concluding thoughts on the project as a whole, its limitations, plans for knowledge mobilization, and recommends some areas of future study.

This dissertation also adopts the style of integrated articles. The reasons for this choice were twofold: first, using an integrated article style allowed me to speak to the different audiences who would be interested in, and benefit from, this work. Each chapter relies on a different body of literature within the scope of VAW and online abuse and is crafted as an article that can directly contribute to contemporary conversations occurring in the field.

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3 Chapter four has already been accepted for publication in an edited volume on technology facilitated violence and abuse. The chapter is presented here as it will be presented in print, save for the connecting material in section 4.1, which is why it includes its own methods section.
Second, the types of abuse that occur, the social factors that influence abuse, and certainly platforms’ policy and legal responses change rapidly. For example, at the time of data collection, which occurred in 2018, abuses such as deepfakes (Burkell and Gosse, 2019; Gosse and Burkell, 2020) and zoom-bombing (Elmer et al., 2020) had not yet existed. In the last few months alone, Facebook and Twitter have overhauled their policies around content moderation and removal in response to rising concerns over the internet-subculture-meets-conspiracy-theory known as QAnon (Conger, 2020; Edleman, 2020). While it is impossible to pin a moving target, using an integrated article format for this dissertation allows me to submit modified versions of these chapters for publication as soon as they are complete to advance scholarly understanding of online abuse in a timely manner.4

1.5 References


4 Currently, chapter three and five contain more data and interview material than would be included in a journal article and does not contain a method section (unlike chapter four) in order to reduce redundancy. As such, a modified version of these two chapters, which will include a methods section and reduce the findings section, will be submitted for publication in scholarly journals. Chapter four has already been accepted for publication in an edited collection.


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2 Methodology and participant positionality

2.1 Introduction

Experiences of online abuse range from commonplace, everyday interactions to traumatic, life-altering events. Thus, it can be a daunting request to ask someone to share their experience of abuse. In this research, a group of 15 women openly, honestly, and with bravery and vulnerability, reflected on what were sometimes painful, dark, and deeply buried memories. Here, I introduce these 15 women who have taken the time to share their stories. As we will see, their experiences of abuse and their relationships to online spaces vary widely. Yet, despite these differences, participants point to common underlying technological, social, and cultural themes that shape online abuse and even the digital landscape in which it occurs. By providing the context of women’s experiences, I demonstrate the importance and integrated nature of social media, gaming, email, and other ICT uses in their lives, underscoring the importance of safe online spaces in their day-to-day experiences.

This chapter introduces the methodology used for data collection and analysis and provides details on the research process. But, more importantly, it also gives presence to participants by setting aside space for them to describe their relationship to online spaces and to describe their experiences with online abuse and the forms of marginalization, exclusion, and intolerance they encountered. After contextualizing participants’ experiences, I synthesize their understanding of the socio-digital landscape that permits and/or fosters online abuse. The goal of this chapter is to provide information that contextualizes the experiences of participants and thus serves as a reference point to the chapters ahead.

2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 RQ and purpose of study

The aim of this project is to answer the question: How do women experience barriers to support when they are targeted by online abuse? To address this, I asked three further
questions: What kinds of barriers have women encountered? What social, cultural, and digital factors contribute to their experiences of those barriers? And, how do women respond to abuse in the context of those barriers? Answering these questions involved understanding the context of women’s abusive experiences, their response to the abuse and abuser, and other individuals’ responses to the abuse, including institutional and sectoral responses. To do this work, I examined women’s lived experiences of online abuse in the context of support barriers using a phenomenological methodology with semi-structured interviews.

2.2.2 Method: Hermeneutic Phenomenology

No one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of society” (Said, 1979, p. 10).

2.2.2.1 Rationale

The goal of phenomenological research is to “acquire knowledge […] through concentrated studies of experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 25). Phenomenologists are concerned with the “common features” of lived experience (Starks and Trinidad, 2007, p. 1375). There are two primary phenomenological approaches: transcendental and hermeneutic. The former aims to isolate and bracket the researcher’s experience from the phenomenon under study to produce research free from judgment (Moustakas, 1994). The latter sees the researcher’s experience as important to interpreting meaning and sees the researcher herself as a research tool (Creswell, 2007; Gilbert, 2000).

In line with the feminist intent of this work, this project takes a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. This approach embraces my knowledge and experience of online abuse as a woman who relies on online spaces for work, who plays (or played) online games, and who volunteers her time to a crisis and support line at a local women’s shelter. These experiences do not bias my research outlook, but, on the contrary, they are a strength. They allow me to co-create meaning with participants and alleviate some of the
burden that participants in this research feel when telling their stories. Harnessing my contextual knowledge of online abuse allowed me to see the nuance of participants’ experience, to ask appropriate follow-up questions, and to seek clarification in the participant’s own words throughout the interview process. Additionally, it also allowed me to implicitly understand some aspects of participants’ experiences, such as why they might continue to chat with an abuser, why they continue to use the spaces where abuse takes place, and why the harm they experience is difficult to articulate.

Meaning is dependent on the cultural context in which it is situated, as well as the cultural context within which it is interpreted (Hall, 1973/1991; Patton, 2014). As some of the chapters reveal, the harm that stems from online abuse can be hard for participants to articulate. It is often cumulative, invisible, intuitive, and semantic—wounding parts of the mind and body that we do not easily see and in ways that cannot be easily described. The experiences of online abuse, and subsequent harm that results, may also be highly contextual. As a result, a knowledge of sub-cultural practices (e.g. gaming culture, meme culture) and experience with feeling socially bound to an online space (e.g. relying on online spaces for work) become important factors in identifying and understanding the harm. This further underscores the appropriate fit of hermeneutic phenomenology as a method for this study, as it provides space to acknowledge that my previous experience, my politics, worldview, and my philosophies naturally influenced the research design. While I did my best to remain neutral while speaking with participants—offering only empathy when they expressed any anger, frustration, and disbelief over their abuse and providing personal details to build rapport—I did allow my experience, my politics, worldview, and my philosophies to re-emerge during data analysis.

2.2.3 Research process

2.2.3.1 Instrument creation

Given the sensitive nature of this topic, I understood that recruitment would require patience. While purposive sampling was possible, I was hesitant to directly contact potential participants, even if they were public about their abuse. I felt it important that
they took the initiative to reach out to me. I did this to ensure that there was no perception of coercion or pressure to participate.

In alignment with the best practices for phenomenological research, this project used open-ended semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1995). The interview guide (Appendix G) was created to ensure that certain details of participants’ experiences were captured, though those details did not necessarily come to bear on the analysis. Whether the abuser was known or unknown, the duration of abuse, and across which platforms and for how long the abuse occurred were variables that were considered for each participant.

I choose to navigate the interviews using a narrative approach. This approach allowed me to understand participants’ experiences of online abuse in the context of their everyday lives (McCormack, 2004). Using a narrative approach, I began the interviews by asking participants to tell me about a time when they felt they were targeted by online abuse. This initial experience was then used to guide the remaining interview questions. In cases where participants mentioned several experiences the same follow up questions were asked about each experience.

Once drafted, all research instruments were submitted to the Western Research Ethics Board (WREB) for approval (Project ID 111100). The following instruments received approval on 6 March 2018.

- Recruitment poster (Appendix A)
- Social media script for recruitment (Appendix B)
- Third-party organization recruitment script (Appendix C)
- Recruitment screening tool (Appendix D)
- Email to schedule interview (Appendix E)
- Letter of information (LOI) (Appendix F)
- Interview guide (Appendix G)
- Debriefing letter (Appendix H)
- Saturation/study closed email (Appendix I)
2.2.3.2 Sensitive research

To prepare to conduct the interviews, I drew on sociological literature that looks at sensitive research (Newsom & Myers-Bowman, 2017). Sensitive research is sometimes referred to as research that uncovers “back regions” (Liamputtong, 2007), which are phenomena that occur in “private space, where personal activities take place and only insiders participate” (De Lanine, 2000, p. 67, as cited in Liamputtong, 2007, p. 2). While what qualifies as sensitive research depends on the context and cultural norms of participants (Liamputtong, 2007), Dickson-Swift et al. (2008) suggest that researchers consider the risk to both researcher and research participants. Given participants’ previous experience with abuse, and the increased surveillance by far and alt-right groups of researchers who do feminist research (Massanari, 2017; Vera Gray, 2017), I deemed this research to be sensitive. As such, I took appropriate steps to ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality. I also took steps to ensure that participants did not feel further discriminated against or marginalized. This included asking them if they are comfortable with the term target of online abuse, or whether they prefer other terms to describe their experience.

The extra step to ensure participants' anonymity and confidentiality meant that I could not do member-checking, a process that sees interviewers provide summaries of the research findings to participants to get feedback and reflection about the data. This approach is used in qualitative research to reduce bias and provide verifiability with research results. After careful consideration, I decided that the risk associated with keeping participants' emails and contact details outweighed the benefit I would receive from member-checking.

At the end of each interview I asked the following question: If someone were to tell your story, or share your experience, how would you want them to tell it? What would be important to you? This question was strategically placed at the end of the interview to give participants the final word and allow them to shape the information they just shared. Also, when working with vulnerable or abused people, it is a way to put the storytelling power back in their hands. This question was motivated by Zoë Quinn’s book (2017), Crash Override. In this book, Quinn explained that the origins of gamergate, as told by journalists and academics, very often left out the fact that the abuse that started the massive campaign
of harassment was preceded by intimate partner violence between her and an ex-boyfriend. Quinn identified this element of the story as important to them but noted that it was rarely reported and too often overlooked. This final question was my attempt to ensure that I do not replicate this error.

2.2.3.3 Recruitment

Recruitment took place between May 2018 and October 2018. During this time recruitment posters were placed around the community in London, Ontario at local libraries and coffee shops (Appendix A), posts were made to my personal Twitter account and shared by multiple followers (Appendix B), and emails were sent to third-party organizations (Appendix C), who then shared the study through their social media accounts and email listservs. Third-party organizations who helped with recruitment include The eQuality project, HeartMob, and MediaSmarts. All recruitment materials contained my email address so that prospective participants could email me directly, as well as a link to a recruitment screening tool (Appendix D) in case they preferred I reach out to them.

Once they arrived at the recruitment screening tool, hosted by Qualtrics, participants were asked three questions: whether they were 18 years of age or older, whether they experienced online abuse, and—if they responded yes to these two questions—whether they would be comfortable leaving their email address so I could reach out with more information. To provide context for this study the recruitment screening tool defined online abuse as: “a wide variety of behaviors and experiences, these might include but are not limited to inappropriate or harassing comments, posts, or tweets; the non-consensual release of intimate images or private information; or having a fake account created in your name, to name only a few” (Appendix D).

5 Gamergate was a campaign of harassment that started in 2014. While it purported to stem from outrage over ethics in games journalism, a truer motivation centered on a backlash of efforts to diversify the video game industry and video game content. As Quinn (2017) noted, the abuse originated as an extension of intimate partner violence. Soon after, that abuse extended to women game developers, journalists, and academics.
Once I received the email address for a prospective participant, I sent a formal invitation to participate in the interview (Appendix E). This email contained information about the purpose of the study, expectations for the interview, and the letter of information (Appendix F) outlining the processes of consent and participants’ rights. In this email participants were asked if they prefer a phone, Skype, or in-person (if they were in the London, Ontario area) interview, and were asked to provide times they would be available.

2.2.3.4 Sample

In total 15 interviews were completed. The majority of participants were in Canada (13 out of 15) and two were in the United States. The age of participants ranged from 21-44, with a median age of 31. Three participants identified as Black, Indigenous, or a person of color (BIPOC), 11 as white, and one participant preferred not to disclose.

Table 1: Participant demographics

<table>
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<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>BIPOC</th>
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<td>Country</td>
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<td>-----</td>
<td>------------</td>
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</table>

2.2.3.5 Interview process

All interviews took place over the phone or over Skype (there were no in-person interviews) and lasted an average of 2 hours (the shortest lasted 1 hour 15 minutes and the longest lasted 3 hours 30 minutes).

I began interviews by introducing myself and the nature of my project, seeking verbal consent, and asking if participants were comfortable having the interview recorded. I also provided participants with a pseudonym (or asked them if they wanted to choose their own) and explained that if at any point they wanted their data removed from the study then all they needed to do was send an email indicating their pseudonym and asking that the data for that pseudonym be removed. My rationale for providing participants with a pseudonym during the study, rather than assigning one afterward, was related to safety protocols. Given
the nature of this study, it was likely (and in the end, true)\(^6\) that participants were at an increased risk of being hacked or their online privacy invaded. I recommended to participants that they delete email exchanges with me and assured them that I would do the same. I also did not keep a master list connecting their real names or emails to their pseudonyms so that this information would be impossible for the wrong person to obtain. This was my attempt to ensure participants’ safety and use practices that best-upheld participant confidentiality.

The interview questions were divided into four parts: 1) social media use and relationship to online spaces; 2) questions about specific experiences; 3) reflections on past and current experiences; and 4) general questions. While the order of the questions was kept in mind, I used my familiarity with the interview guide to respond to participants as they told their story to keep a natural flow to the interview. Some interviews contained questions that others did not, as each experience required something different. Overall, keeping the interview guide in mind and ensuring that each question was answered by the end of the interview allowed me to collect data that could be compared across participants.

### 2.2.3.6 Saturation

During the interviews, I took notes of potential themes that were emerging. After each interview, I wrote a short interview summary. Using these two methods, I saw repeated themes emerge around interview 10. These cursory themes and commonalities across participants were confirmed by five more interviews. Specifically, saturation focused on finding similar “strands within individual accounts,” (Saunders et al., 2018, p. 1898) rather than the total repetition of responses.

Phenomenological research is interested in lived experience and individual accounts. With something like online abuse, where the kinds of abuse and harm range so widely, rarely are two experiences the same. Thus, I declared “theoretical saturation” (Guest et al., 2006;

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\(^6\) One participant in my study later become targeted by heavy online abuse, which included further invasions of privacy.
Saunders et al., 2018) and felt empirically confident to stop interviews once I saw a pattern emerge in the properties related to the central category under study—barriers to support.

The typical sample size recommended for phenomenological research is low, with Creswell (2007) recommending between 5-25 in-depth interviews to be conducted. There are strengths associated with small sample sizes (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). For example, using data from 15 participants has allowed me to become intimately acquainted with each participants’ transcript and spend time learning about the sociocultural practices they discussed (Crouch & MacKenzie, 2006) but with which I was not previously familiar, such as some social media and gaming websites. The small sample size further allowed me to make connections across participants as I was able to hold the information from their transcripts in my mind at once.

2.2.3.7 Data analysis

After the interviews were completed, I transcribed the audio files and removed all personal and potentially identifying information. I then uploaded the transcripts to the qualitative software program Nvivo 11 for coding and analysis.

The first step in data analysis was to read all transcripts and highlight all potentially significant statements, coding them as ‘significant statements.’ Significant statements are sentences or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) calls this step *horizontization*. At this stage, I also coded demographics and any content that helped to explain participants’ relationships to online spaces. In the end, I had coded the transcripts using three codes: significant statements, demographics, and relationship to online spaces.

Next, I reread the significant statements and coded for all content that captured the larger experience under study and that represent the participants' specific experience—Moustakas (1994) calls these *horizons*. I also coded content that did not necessarily represent the experience, but that might hold potential for further analysis. At the end of this process, I had coded the significant statements from step one into two subcodes: horizons and not horizons. During this second stage, I also began writing down themes that emerged. I ended
up with 42 possible themes. After spending time thinking through these themes, I was able to collapse and reduce them into 13 themes (see table 2)

Table 2: Overall themes from data analysis step two.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safety Work</td>
<td>This code describes the strategies, behaviors, and actions that participants engaged in to reduce the negative impact online abuse had on them and to keep themselves safe in the moment or from future potential attacks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Labor</td>
<td>This code describes the emotional effort participants put forth in processing their experiences with online abuse. This code also accounts for any time a participant indicates a sense of empathy toward perpetrators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>This code highlights the way participants have come to accept online abuse as part of being online. This understanding justifies people’s normalization of online abuse, whether it is toward themselves or from other outside sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimizing Harm</td>
<td>This code is used to capture the feelings participants have toward identifying online abuse as abuse or as something harmful. It also includes instances where someone else refused to acknowledge the harm or abuse participants experienced. Digital dualism plays a role in minimizing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>This code refers to the way online abuse affects a person emotionally and physically, whether it is personal, in their career, in their relationships, etc. It refers to the impact in the moment as well as any lasting impact after the abuse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semiotics</td>
<td>This code reflects the struggle participants have with talking about the abuse they experienced. It points to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
instances where the limitations of language were apparent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems with the digital</th>
<th>This code is used to identify the compounding issues people have with digital communication/digital life in general.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responses</td>
<td>This code includes any response that participants had to the abuse and the responses of others with whom they shared their experience (such as family, friends, platforms, therapists, police, etc.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Dualism</td>
<td>This code captures all instances where the separation between online and offline life was mentioned. Sometimes this was clear and obvious, and sometimes it was subtle and internalized. The distinction came from participants themselves, from the perpetrator, and from others with whom they shared their experience. This code also includes the labor participants performed to overcome this dualism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation of subjectivity</td>
<td>This code captures the subjectivation participants undergo as targets of online abuse. It does this by highlighting the different processes that change one’s identity construction (such as reputational damage).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>This code was used to capture the types of support participants used, regardless of helpfulness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to support</td>
<td>This code describes the barriers to support that participants encountered. These might be self-made, external, a result of digital dualism, or move beyond direct experience and reflect the wider social and cultural landscape.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blame</td>
<td>This code shows the different ways participants shoulder the responsibility for the abuse they experienced and the way other people in their life (service providers, friends and family, and abusers) have tried to victim-blame them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In step three I went through the horizons identified in step two and recoded the content according to the 13 themes. I then created a new Nvivo document with only the horizons and coded them a second time without looking at the first attempt. I then compared the two documents and made adjustments to anything I coded differently during the second attempt. This second approach to coding the same material provided me with the confidence that my themes were clear and that the material included in them was sufficiently related. These 13 themes were used to determine the structure and approach of chapters three, four, and five.

I then developed a textual description (focusing on what participants experienced) and a structural description (focusing on how they experienced it in terms of the conditions and context) for each participant (Moustakas, 1994). In the next section of this chapter, I include elements of the textual and structural descriptions to contextualize the experiences of each participant.

2.3 Online spaces and online abuse: Context of participants’ lived experience

In the following chapters, I focus on how women experience barriers to support and respond to abuse in the context of those barriers. The data in those chapters are specific to the respective topic and does not provide a wider frame of reference for each participant. Following the phenomenological praxis of coreantextualizing socio-cultural conditions and lived experience of research participants (Crewswell, 2007), the remainder of this chapter is dedicated to using participants’ own words to describe: 1) their relationship to online spaces; 2) their experience/s with online abuse and what they understand as most important to that experience; and 3) their understanding of the socio-digital environment that enables—and even encourages—online abuse.

2.3.1 Participants’ relationship with online spaces

Online abuse poses harm to individuals regardless of their relationship to online spaces. Whether someone uses email for their job, relies on social media to stay in touch with
family and friends, or relaxes each night playing online games, becoming the target of online abuse can and does have serious consequences (Lewis et al., 2016; West, 2014; Yabarra et al., 2006). While online abuse can be harmful to an individual regardless of their relationship to online spaces, understanding the role of online spaces in someone’s life can provide deeper insight into the disruption and harm caused by that abuse. In this section, I synthesize participants’ characterization of their relationship with social media, the internet, and online spaces in general.\footnote{Reminder that all names have been changed to pseudonyms and that all identifying information has been removed.}

\textit{Lilly}: Lilly used online spaces for work, leisure, and to stay connected to her communities. She relied on email for her “9 to 5” job. However, outside of this job she owned a book review website, blog, and managed a public Instagram and Twitter account associated with the site. Lilly explained that her online communities have been very important in the past and have helped her tremendously in the past, such as when her child was an infant and was quite sick. Having these online spaces allowed her to feel connected to family and friends during a difficult time.

\textit{Jane}: Jane used social media for work and leisure. Thinking about her relationship with social media she explained: “I think I need it more than it needs me.” She noted that she feels pressure from friends to be active on social media, which prompts her to maintain an online presence. Jane’s entire social circle uses social media to communicate and not having it would make it difficult to arrange plans and stay in touch with friends.

\textit{Ellie}: Ellie’s main career goal is to be a writer, and she knows that “a big part of being a writer is putting yourself out there via social media.” Typically, she has no problem with being active on social media. As she explained:

\begin{quote}
I love having social media be a part of my life and be a part of my identity. I don’t really feel the struggle that a lot of people do with how to present yourself on there.
\end{quote}
I’m a very ‘heart on my sleeve’ sort of person so I think it’s an extremely important part of my life for those reasons (Ellie).

Ellie also referenced social media as a gateway to many career opportunities she’s had and for helping her stay connected with other writers and researchers in her field while she was completing her Ph.D. Overall, Ellie has a deep sense of community on the social media sites she engages with, which have on several occasions doubled as important networking opportunities.

Melody: Melody sees social media as a prime tool for staying connected as she gets older and people close to her move away. She explained that Facebook in particular is “really hard to exist without.” Twitter also plays a role in Melody’s professional life, as she moves through her career mentors have advised her on the importance of an online presence.

Trish: Trish is keenly aware of the negative side of social media. She explains that for her, like many others, social media is addictive. Trish uses her computer for work, so she finds it easy to switch over and check social media: “I think I’m on it all the time.” Trish also uses social media to communicate and stay in touch with friends and to promote her work as a graphic designer. She mentioned that she often feels overwhelmed by the cruelty and hatefulness of other people online, but that her need to use social media ultimately prevails.

Maggie: Maggie is an artist and runs a medium-sized feminist Instagram account (approximately 35,000 followers) to display, sell, and share her art. She also uses Facebook to help in her advocacy work for women, Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color. Melody notes that she finds it difficult to disconnect and that she feels an internal pressure to keep active and relevant on her social media sites for her business. Finally, Melody strongly believes that the benefit of social media for her outweighs the abuse she faces.

Kate: Kate uses social media to stay connected with her family, who are located around Canada and internationally. She also uses social media for job searching, shopping, and socializing. She finds it easy to stay connected with others through social media and relies
on social media as a source of information. Kate also uses multiplayer online games in her spare time as a way to socialize and relax.

*Maya:* Maya believes that her relationship with social media is too enmeshed at times. She reports that her “online life” and “offline life” had become so blurred in the past that she found herself disengaging from important parts of her life, such as work, exercise, and proper nutrition. On the opposite side of that, social media has also played a role in securing jobs, and online gaming has helped her find inexpensive ways to relax, socialize, and have fun.

*Fiona:* Fiona breaks down her relationship with social media in two ways: positive and negative. On the positive side, she explained that it is the source of her career, as she works in digital marketing. She also explained that social media helps her connect with people she cares about, like friends and family, and stay in touch with people she has met while traveling. On the negative side, she reported that social media is “mentally-taxing.” For example, Fiona explained:

> It’s just a lot of information all the time and in today’s political climate it’s basically like, it’s a triggering event every time I get on social media. It’s just—the amount of meanness that’s out there—some days I just have to get out, get away from it because I can’t handle the amount of just how mean people are to one another (Fiona).

*Eva:* Eva is an activist, organizer, and director of a non-profit that seeks to unite communities and quell religious and cultural tensions in her city. She does the majority of her organizing and outreach on social media and believes that the online nature of her work offers a wider opportunity for people to get involved and understand the important work that the non-profit does. As she explains, “it’s that initial connection [online] that has really triggered most of our work here.”

*Candice:* Candice uses social media mostly for leisure, as her work does not require her to engage online. She uses it as “a bit of an escape” and to help her “relax and decompress.” She identifies herself as a “lurker,” and finds herself reading articles and other peoples’ posts more than creating content herself.
Wendy: Wendy is a sports journalist, so social media acts as a site of information and dissemination for her work, and as the first point of contact for many of the people she needs to interact with. She explains that she is “very rarely not connected somewhere.” For Wendy, Twitter is used primarily for work, while Facebook and Instagram are exclusively personal and for leisure. She feels pressure to be active online for work, explaining that “with journalists, there’s always somebody behind you that is willing to work that extra hour more and put that extra hour more of content out.” Wendy thinks that a combination of her personality and the online spaces she frequents make for an overall positive social media experience, but she adds that “when it gets bad, it gets bad.”

Julie: Julie explains that her peer group is oriented in such a way that social media is the “common and predominant mode of communication.” She also gets a lot of her freelance jobs through social media. While Julie considers herself very quiet and “closed in” in online spaces, she uses social media to share her illustrations and art.

Sara: Sara is a vegan activist for animal and environmental rights and much of her organizing takes place on social media. She also uses social media to connect with social groups, clubs, and talk to friends.

Abigail: Abigail understands that social media is an easy and convenient way to connect with friends, but she is overwhelmed by the “hurricane of information” she is presented with. She feels that “the kinds of information you’re exposed to can affect your quality of life offline.” For this reason, Abigail is trying to change her relationship with social media. Where once she felt she was “addicted to it” she is now working to make it less important in her life. One trouble she identifies in this effort is the “ambient pressure” she feels to be active online for professional reasons, noting that having a well-curated online presence can be advantageous in her career path.

All of the participants in this study characterized their relationship with social media and online spaces as necessary and important in some way. Whether it was for work (e.g., see Ellie, Fiona, and Wendy), advocacy (e.g., see Eva and Sara), to help with a hobby (e.g., see Lilly and Maggie), for leisure (e.g., see Maya and Candice), or to stay part of a community (e.g., see Melody and Kate), participants recognized that online spaces serve
important functions in their lives. In the following section, we see how online abuse complicates participants’ access to these spaces.

2.3.2 Participants’ experience with online abuse and response to how they want their story to be told

Participants began their interviews by reflecting on a time they felt they were targeted by online abuse. This reflection typically led to other stories and experiences of online abuse. The experiences reported in this study feature different types of abuse for each participant. It is important to explain the endemic nature of online abuse for some individuals. Some participants, such as Abigail, reflected on three experiences that occurred in her past. Other participants, such as Wendy, face online abuse on an ongoing basis: for her, it had become an expected, or at least an anticipated, part of her job as a journalist. Overall, most participants did not know their abuser personally. In some cases, however, abusers became known through repeat encounters and the ongoing nature of abuse.

*Lilly*: Most of Lilly’s experience with online abuse occurred on Instagram by people who are “always unknown.” According to Lilly, the focus of abuse almost always centers around her gender and is an effort to “silence” her. She explained that “quite often they [the perpetrators] rely on sexist commentary, trying to belittle me back into feeling like a woman who shouldn’t take up much space.” She also knows that many of the derogatory comments she receives are a response to the more politically-minded content she shares: “I’ve had people with some of my feminist stuff, they’re like ‘oh don’t worry, honey, one day you will find a husband and you’ll get a good fuck.’” Lilly explained that her experiences with online abuse have impacted how she understands her children’s relationship with online spaces: “It doesn’t feel safe as a place for my kids to play or learn or be unsupervised. I feel more comfortable letting them run around outside in the neighborhood than I do letting them surf the internet without me.”

When asked what she would want someone to highlight about her experience, Lilly explained that it is important that people see her not as a victim of abuse, but rather as someone galvanized by the experiences and who perseveres in the face of it. “I would like
to be more representative of women who take what is given to them and turn it into something better.”

Jane: Jane’s abuse came from a man she knew who was romantically interested in her friend. Her friend did not feel the same, and Jane believed that as a way to retaliate he wrote sexist and racist comments on both her and her friends’ social media profiles and photos. She believes that this man was insecure about himself and wanted to make her feel bad as a way to buoy himself: “It was like, you put on so much makeup, like, you ugly cunt, like just really stupid shit like that.”

When asked what she would want someone to highlight about her experience, Jane made a point to say that she wants her generation to make face-to-face discussions a more common part of how they communicate: “I think we need more face-to-face interaction […] because our generation lacks that. People will write paragraphs to each other and I’m like, why don’t you guys just talk about it in person? […] you can’t always be like, ‘give me 15 minutes, and then I will respond.’”

Ellie: Ellie has many experiences with online abuse. Her earliest memory began with a piece of writing she shared online. In reaction to her work, she received abuse from people calling her a “psycho feminist.” Shortly after this experience, Ellie became a target of gamergate. Thinking about her first experience on the blog, she explained:

As sick as it sounds, I’m really glad I had that experience in [year removed] because it prepared me for gamergate. I think gamergate would have been a much different experience for me if I hadn’t had that experience in [year removed]. But I kind of knew what to expect already (Ellie).

Post-gamergate, Ellie continued to be targeted by white supremacists for her outspoken views on diversity and racial injustice. She has experienced abuse across platforms, including social media, email, and particularly on YouTube, where people have made threatening videos about her. “People talk elaborately [about] the ways they’d like to kill you without [being] directly threatening… an example is ‘I’d like to shove her in an oven, but she wouldn’t fit’.” Her abuse has been primarily sexist and ableist: “they’ll often mock
autism and my weight always comes up.” The abuse is also commonly aggressive and threatening: “God, you know, sometimes it’s just as simple as ‘drink bleach, fatty’.” For Ellie, online abuse adversely impacts her career as a writer and educator, and it has curbed her desire to engage with social media as a creative outlet. Speaking about a significant professional award that she won, which was followed with more abuse, she noted: “Things that should be inherently positive become inherently negative.” Ellie’s abusers are usually unknown to her, but she explained that “after a while of the same people abusing you, you kind of get to know them that way.”

When asked what she would want someone to highlight about her experience, Ellie pointed out the need to consider the larger cultural and socio-political climate (neo-conservatism, neo-nazis, e.g.) when reflecting on her experiences with online abuse and the impact and effect it has on her. “What’s important to me is [...] to demonstrate how it is connected to other stories of online abuse and other things that are happening in the real world. I think the worst thing we can do is treat these stories like they’re just isolated incidents.”

**Melody:** Melody’s abuse started on the OK Cupid dating app by a man she did not previously know. The abuse became more severe as her abuser stalked and harassed her across multiple platforms. In the end, this particular abuser used Facebook, text messaging, and other dating websites and apps like Match and Tinder to monitor her online behavior. For more than a year Melody’s abuser would send her emotionally manipulative messages, claiming he was suicidal over her rejection, and demanding explanations for why she did not want to pursue a relationship. For example: “He started sending very manipulative, like emotionally manipulative messages about what I had done to him and how horrible of a person I was and how he was very upset, and this was like, ruining his life” (Melody). The communication was non-stop and lasted for over a year. Melody has since made her social media accounts private and will no longer use dating apps or websites.

When asked what she would want someone to highlight about her experience, Melody explained that it is important people know that online abuse can happen to anyone:

> And just because you understand that he’s emotionally manipulating you, for example, doesn’t mean that you don’t feel the fear anyway, or that you don’t feel the
discomfort that comes with that or the threat that comes with that. I think that is an important piece. You’re not immune to it, no matter who you are it can still happen (Melody).

Trish: Trish’s experiences with online abuse date back to the late 1990s when unknown older men from her hometown would message her on ICQ (a cross-platform messaging app) with inappropriate comments. During high school, she was also impersonated on ICQ. Someone created an account and pretended that it was her, attempting to “start trouble” with other people at school. One time, after meeting a man in person, the man found her Plenty of Fish (a dating website) profile and began messaging her. When she did not return the interest, he started sending her death threats. Then again in university, someone made a website about her to spread rumors, calling her a bitch and other derogatory names. Notably, this came up at the end of the interview because she had remembered it just then: “Man, I just realized, I remembered another thing — it’s like flashbacks.” More recently, and what she explained prompted her participation in this study, her Facebook profile photo was shared without her consent on a private Facebook group and she endured a barrage of mean and harassing comments as a result.

When asked what she would want someone to highlight about her experience, Trish pointed out that this “can happen to anyone” and that there is nothing special about her that made her a target.

Maggie: Maggie’s experiences with online abuse come primarily from her Instagram account, but she also receives abuse on Facebook. She receives aggressive and inappropriate messages—“always from men” who are “always unknown”—that are “very sexual and often entail sexual violence,” encourage her suicide, her rape, and other bodily harms. She knows that these messages come primarily from white men, but sometimes the abusers are young boys. Over the years she saw an interesting change in who is perpetrating the abuse: “It kind of went from these young jaded white boys or white men to trump supporters to now like, the very far left.” Comments include “really vile stuff […] death threats [and] threats against my family.”
When asked what she would want someone to highlight about her experience, Maggie wanted to emphasize that in her experience “the abuse is very gendered [...] and very sexually violent.” However, she also thinks it is important to “emphasize the positive aspect,” which for her is a large community of followers who have “rallied behind” her and “provided support and resistance.”

Kate: Kate was unsure whether she qualified for this study. She knew that what she experienced online was upsetting and made her uncomfortable, but she had not given much thought to labeling it as abuse. Most of Kate’s experiences with online abuse came from men she did not know and occurred in online games that had servers and groups “that were really unfriendly to female gamers.” She explained that she has “been kicked from servers [kicked out of games], sent lewd, violent, and rude chats and pics, catcalled over the microphones, [and] pushed off of [game] objectives and points.” A common experience for Kate was what she called “booby-trapping,” where male users would send her links to things she “should know about,” but the link would lead to a disturbing and sexually violent or invasive image or video of a woman being “humiliated or injured.”

When asked what she would want someone to highlight about her experience, Kate wanted to underscore the way that perpetrators use a degree of anonymity to their advantage, but that this anonymity is not afforded to the target. “I just think that the most important thing is that people understand that in spite of being anonymous that there are people actually behind, you know, the monitor. Whether you can see their face or hear their voice.” After admitting to having difficulty summarizing her thoughts, she explained: “I think it’s because it’s so steeped in emotion that it can’t be summed up well.”

Maya: Maya’s experiences with online abuse took place on social media platforms like My Video, Twitter, and online games, but her abusers also doxed her, shared her credit card information, and spread rumors about her to her roommates and other people in her life. She has also experienced blackmail and was coerced into maintaining a relationship with someone online. The abuse she experienced came from people she had developed strong relationships with online but who were otherwise unknown to her. Her abuse had gotten so bad that at one point she moved apartments after being doxed and deleted all social media
accounts. The abuse she received in-game is most often sexist and involves obsessive relational intrusion—the exploitation of women’s emotions (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002)—from male players who feel entitled to her time and energy.

When asked what she would want someone to highlight about her experience, Maya wanted to highlight that she considers herself to be a “right-winger,” and that online abuse knows no specific political affiliation. She mentioned that sometimes left-wing women appear to bear the brunt of online abuse, but in actuality, online abuse “is something experienced regardless of people’s politics.” She also wants to point out that while there are “little things you can do to try and make your experience somewhat less worse [sic],” there is “a hell of a lot that entire communities should be doing.”

**Fiona:** Fiona described her experience with online abuse as “relentless.” For three months she received messages on all social media sites, voicemails, emails, and, as an extension of abuse, her colleagues received messages from unknown and random people explaining how awful of a person Fiona allegedly was. These messages were the focus of a campaign to get Fiona fired over a video that went viral of her arguing with someone in a public place over a parking spot:

> And I’ll say, it was not my finest moment as a human being on this planet, I recognize that, but it was also a very human moment that was taken out of context and used against me in a very violent way (Fiona).

The person who recorded the video took it upon himself to “seek justice” and even admitted in an interview for a news segment that his goal was to ruin Fiona’s life. Fiona did not previously know this person. At one point, the man set up a website that encouraged people to publicly shame Fiona and get her fired from her job (where she was eventually let go); the website featured her name, email address, and home phone, as well as the name, email, and phone number of her colleagues. Many of the messages that Fiona received were sexually aggressive and contained threats to her safety. Ultimately, Fiona described the outcome of this campaign of harassment as “reputation assassination.”
When asked what she would want someone to highlight about her experience, Fiona wanted to make it clear that she survived the ordeal and that it changed her for the better: “Which seems so weird to say and hear, because, you know, being that terrible, I won’t let it beat me.” Fiona is also working on a book about her experience that she hopes to share with people.

*Eva:* Eva’s experiences with online abuse came mostly from the work she did with her non-profit. In particular, there is a radio station in her hometown that had been openly critical of her work. People in Facebook fan groups for this radio station have likewise piled on to the criticism and extended the harassment she experienced. In some cases, Eva has experienced personal threats and threats against her family: “They had said that maybe a good idea would be to burn down my house.” They also comment on Eva’s appearance: “They talk about the way I look, or how much I weigh, or what I eat—I highly doubt that if I was a man that this would be the way that it goes.” Many of Eva’s abusers are unknown to her personally. While most of them use “fake Facebook accounts,” she can see that some of them are members of her community who use their real names.

When asked what she would want someone to highlight about her experience, Eva wanted people to understand that she chooses to do the work that she does, and that her experiences of online abuse come mostly from that work. She explained that this is in contrast to many other people who are attacked based on who they are, for something they cannot choose to otherwise be: “There are people who can never take off Black skin, who are never not going to be Muslim, who are never not going to be an immigrant or a refugee to this country, that will be attacked for who they are. I’m attacked mostly for what I do.”

*Candice:* Much of Candice’s experience with online abuse took place in online games. She discussed taking steps to secure her identity as a woman because, as she explained, once it is revealed that you are a woman playing a game it “changes the entire dynamic.” She also experienced an in-game stalker as well as other men in games who opened up to her emotionally very quickly—another example of relational intrusion (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002)—which she described as strange because she does not know them, and they expect a lot of emotional energy:
They will just open up and just like, emotionally dump on you … They don’t care what you need or what you’re telling them, it does not matter. The fact is they feel entitled to your time and your attention no matter what (Candice).

More generally, Candice describes an unwelcoming culture of sexism, misogyny, and disrespect in online games. This atmosphere makes her feel small and uncomfortable standing up for herself and others. For Candice, most of the abuse she received came from people that she does not know, but occasionally it comes from people she met online and developed friendships with.

When asked what she would want someone to highlight about her experience, Candice wanted to underscore “how important it is to have support in the moment, when those things happen, and not just support after.” She explained that one of the hardest parts of the online abuse she experienced “was the silence on the other end.” In other words, she would like people to start speaking up and standing up for others when they see someone is being targeted.

Wendy: Wendy described her experience with online abuse as “gamergate light.” In her work as a sports journalist, she often experiences attacks from fans of the teams she covers. She rarely knows the people who send her abusive messages, but sometimes “it’s the same people so you almost get to know them.” Wendy commonly faces personal attacks on her appearance, but what bothers her the most is when her knowledge of sports is questioned and undermined because of her gender. As she describes: “It’s based on that sort of gendered divide where I don’t know anything because I’m a woman, versus I don’t know anything because I’m a shitty journalist.” Wendy described the sexist attitudes as also coming from people who appear to support her work: “They’ll be like, you know for a girl she knows what she’s talking about.”

When asked what she would want someone to highlight about her experience, Wendy wanted to underscore the importance of teaching a child how to be a “good online citizen.” She thinks that “a lot of schools, much like sex ed, just want to ignore it or be like, they’ll deal with that outside of the school walls.” Wendy argued that it is necessary for curriculum in schools to teach ways of living in and dealing with online spaces. She also pointed out
that “you should never accept what is said online and you should never blame yourself for what is being said.”

**Julie:** Julie’s earliest memory of online abuse takes place on message boards. She explained that when she was younger and just starting to explore online spaces on her own, she used a username that identified her as a woman. Julie believed that this left her open to explicit and sexually harassing private messages from unknown men. For the same reason, she does not use a microphone or voice chat when playing online games, because in the past she was abused and harassed when it became clear that she was a woman. As a result of these experiences, she no longer reveals her gender online whenever possible. On more than one occasion, encounters she had with other players left her feeling “really disturbed” and prompted her to “completely abandon that email and handle and everything and start fresh.”

When asked what she would want someone to highlight about her experience, Julie said it is important to have some level of empathy for abusers. She explained that we should not “write people off as monsters,” and instead we need to hope that people can change.

**Sara:** Sara described some of her abuse as an extension of drama: drama from ex-boyfriends and ex-friends who take to private messaging or Facebook messenger to send harassing comments. She described this use of text messaging as particularly disruptive: “I left class a few times this semester. I’m in university, and like I couldn’t go back [to class] because I was not emotionally available, I was crying or something.” She has also experienced a fair amount of abuse from people she does not know in response to the content she shares about veganism, animal rights, and environmental justice. She said that sometimes the comments are ridiculous and non-threatening, but hurtful, nonetheless. For example, she recalls one person telling her they are “going to force-feed [her] bacon.” Concerning her veganism, she finds that her character and gender is often what comes under attack—“words like slut, or bitch, and gendered things that you wouldn’t say to a guy”—and not anything about veganism itself.

When asked what she would want someone to highlight about her experience, Sara believed that sometimes you need to extend empathy to people who perpetrate online
abuse: “I mean that’s a whole subject, like about human relationships and regulating your emotions and being okay spiritually because people who are bullies and stuff, something’s not right within them that’s making them attack other people.” Even though someone might be trying to get a reaction out of you, Sara thinks that we need to try and rise above and choose to be kind and respectful.

Abigail: Abigail recalls three specific times in her life where someone online has made her “feel super uncomfortable.” The first two occurred over MSN and email, respectively. In both instances men she either did not know or did not know well repeatedly sent her unwanted emotionally manipulative messages—again, we see relational intrusion (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002)—despite her asking them to stop. In one case, “he was just sort of dumping something that he wanted on to me. Like his needs or his desires on to me, without really having to consider how that was going to affect me.” In another case, a man continued to threaten to come to her house, explaining that he knew where she lived. In the third instance, Abigail recalled girls targeting her in high school, posting untrue and mean comments about her in their status updates, which she describes as “fairly traumatic” because all of her “friends and family were seeing the things this person would post.”

When asked what she would want someone to highlight about her experience, Abigail wanted to highlight what she did wrong; she wants people to know that she didn’t stand up for herself and that she gave in to “certain pressures.” She clarifies that she is not blaming herself, but rather “it’s more just to alleviate myself of all of the guilt that I felt at the time for being afraid.” She added that she does not want to see other people feel guilty for something someone else has done:

Don’t take on the responsibility for somebody else’s fucked up behavior. Don’t absorb that [...] Just recognize that there’s a distinction between you and them, they are responsible for their behavior and you’re responsible for how you respond. Respond with dignity, respond with honesty, respond with respect, respond with kindness and then you’ll be able to sleep at night (Abigail).

The abuse participants experienced typically related to their work and social uses of online spaces. Overall, participants experienced a range of abuses, but strong common threads can
be identified, such as death threats, rape threats, sexist and racist comments, stalking, feeling driven off platforms, and the exploitation of women’s emotions—known as obsessive relational intrusion (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). While the choice to abuse rests only with the perpetrator, participants do point to other factors that make it easier for perpetrators to engage in abusive and inappropriate behaviors. In the next section, I outline some of the socio-digital factors that participants unanimously suggest permits and/or fosters online abuse.

2.3.3 A shared context: Anonymity, distance, and a lack of consequences

Throughout the interviews, there were three shared perspectives described by all participants: the role of anonymity, distance, and the protection those two things offer perpetrators. This aspect of their socio-digital context was apparent in each interview. Participants also spoke about these contexts as matter of fact—not as theories and possibilities, but as conditions that impact their lived experiences. In this section, I provide an overview of participants' shared understanding of the socio-digital landscape that permits and/or fosters online abuse.

Participants quickly pointed out that there is *something* about online communication, predominantly textual communication, that they believed offered a sense of freedom from responsibility for one’s actions. This freedom, they explained, emboldens people online to misuse and abuse social media and other information communication technologies however they choose: “They’re [the abuser] taking advantage of the socializing aspects [of online spaces]” (Kate).

Participants pointed to anonymity as contributing to this felt freedom. For example, when Maggie talks about the perpetrators of her abuse, she explained: “You can’t really tell their identity, and I think that probably gives them some courage because, like, the anonymous aspect allows them to say whatever they want to behind their keyboard and they are guaranteed some sort of protection” (Maggie). Kate also identified anonymity as something that people feel protected by and added that the shelter it provides only serves the
Perpetrators of online abuse, not the target: “People perceive that there’s a distance, they perceive that they are protected by their anonymity. But that protection is not afforded to their victims or the people that, you know, they have picked on” (Kate). Here Kate also mentioned that people perceive a distance between themselves and those with whom they communicate online.

Participants were very aware of the effects that distance had on communication: namely, that it provided people with a sense of bravado and release from responsibility. Reflecting on her experiences, Abigail believed that her abuser “said [these things] to me because there was like a distance between us… It created this sort of barrier, I guess, where you’re able to like, disconnect from the awkwardness of it and disconnect from the discomfort” (Abigail). Later in the interview, she picked up on this point again: “There’s something about like, yeah, you were a really big talker when you were on a keyboard” (Abigail). Fiona drew parallels between these behaviors in online and offline contexts:

In person, it’s a lot less socially acceptable to walk up to somebody and scream in their face that they’re a fucking cunt. You know, that’s just really inappropriate in person, but online it’s somehow okay for somebody to send me a message saying that (Fiona).

This distance also hides the consequences for those targeted by online abuse from perpetrators:

It’s quick to like, type a message when you’re angry and like, you’re saying things that maybe you don’t really mean and that are maybe hurtful. And it’s just easy to press send and not really think about the consequences and stuff (Sara).

Here Sara expressed concern for targets whose hurt and suffering are rendered invisible through the screen.

Maggie agreed with others that typing or saying hurtful things appear to be more permissible online than in offline contexts. She suggested that the reason for this is that there is little or no deterrent against saying or doing whatever people wish to online.
I think people felt that it’s okay. Like, you see a picture of a young woman and I think that they’re [the abusers] taught that you can abuse women to the extent that you feel like and there will be no payback, no repercussion online, and so they leave these hurtful awful comments because they think that they can get away with it (Maggie).

Anonymity remains an important part of online spaces, and it is easy to try and balance the critiques with complement. The fact remains, participants felt that this feature in particular—and other technological features such as distance communication—create an online culture that feeds into a larger digital culture that lacks accountability and does not hold perpetrators responsible for the harm they cause. As Ellie explained, many responses to online abuse only serve to further prove that “nothing bad will happen to you.”

### 2.4 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the research questions and purpose of this study, a rationale for the chosen methodology—hermeneutic phenomenology—and the research process, including instrument creation, considerations for sensitive research, recruitment, the interview process, as well as data analysis. It then shared abridged versions of participants' experiences of online abuse and their relationship to online spaces. This last part is an important extension of phenomenological work. As previously mentioned, the primary focus of phenomenology is to understand someone’s lived experience of a particular phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This type of methodological approach relies on the words of others. Thus, the research must be careful not to speak for (Alcoff, 1991) participants, and instead ensure balance by providing space for participants to discuss their experience and context in their own words and separate from the analysis.

Both the literature and data presented in the proceeding chapters seem to show that women are largely capable of managing and coping with online abuse (Cote, 2017). The experiences shared in this chapter show that, despite the online abuse they face, many of the women nevertheless continue to engage and be present in online spaces. We see this in Lilly, who for example wanted to remind people that she takes what is given to her and
turns it into “something better.” To do so, however, requires extra work and effort (and putting up with a lot of bullshit). The concern then becomes whether this is sustainable for women. Women should not be doing well despite online abuse; they should be given the space to thrive online on their terms. Understanding the barriers to support and the kinds of support that would be helpful to mitigate abuse and reduce the adverse impacts is a necessary step toward achieving that.

2.5 References


“We still don’t know how to support women through domestic violence, which has been happening since the beginning of time, let alone online violence” (Participant, Ellie)

3 “It’s too much anarchy”: Women’s experiences of barriers to support

3.1 Introduction

Online abuse is a growing and persistent problem in many online spaces. Making matters worse, social media companies, gaming companies, and policy and lawmakers face a variety of challenges that complicate their ability to provide support and create spaces free of such abuse (Crawford & Gillespie, 2016; Roberts, 2019; Schoenbeck et al., 2020). In keeping with these factors, research has found that targets of online abuse are under-supported (Vitak et al., 2017) and left primarily to deal with abuse themselves (Hodson et al., 2018). Despite this research, which is still growing, there is still a need to better understand the myriad barriers targets of online abuse face. This chapter draws on the insight and reflections of 15 women who have experienced online abuse to identify perceived barriers to support. The results reveal that participants experienced barriers across a range of personal, social, organizational, and cultural fields. Most barriers, however, were identified at the level of social media platforms.

With public and private life growing increasingly connected through networks and Wi-Fi signals—particularly in a post-pandemic world—there is an urgent need to safeguard individuals from a wide range of online abuses, and to ensure that members of equality-deserving groups are not further marginalized in online spaces. To date, there is a scarcity of support for targets of online abuse, and this scarcity reinforces already existing inequalities for women, Black people, Indigenous people, people of color (BIPOC), LGBTQI2+, and gender non-binary folx (Amnesty International, 2018). Previous research shows that women, especially women of color, transwomen, and non-binary folx face a disproportionate amount of online abuse, much of which is tied directly to their subject
position (Barlow & Awan, 2016; Burns, 2019; Ditch the Label, 2019; Lawson, 2018; Morris, 2020). In the absence of spaces that support and protect individuals from online abuse, people will continue to be marginalized in online spaces—which are an integral part of the public and private life—leaving behind a toxic, uninhabitable, and homogeneous landscape.

Previous research shows that online abuse has a variety of negative impacts: it has a silencing effect on targets (Barlow & Awan, 2016; Cote, 2017); it produces anxiety, depression, and causes reputational damage (Duggan, 2017); it extends the harm of other crimes (Powell, 2015); it has prevented people from entering careers, and driven people away from careers (Jane, 2017); and at its most extreme it has contributed to death by suicide (Dean, 2012; Gillis, 2013). These consequences are only a few of the many adverse effects online abuse has on individuals. In light of these effects, finding ways to better support targets of online abuse is an area of research with new political necessity.

Throughout this chapter I use the term ‘support’ to mean any intervention or structure that helps targets bear the weight of online abuse that they normally carry by mitigating the emotional, embodied, and social harm it causes them (Hodson et al., 2018). Importantly, support should not be conflated with justice, because—as others have criticized—justice as enacted by our criminal justice and penal system “continues to elude” targets of abuse and violence (Powell, 2015, p. 573). In the context of online abuse, support often takes shape through the actions of people, communities, institutions, policies, and laws. As this chapter demonstrates, despite actions from many people and many sectors, the current socio-digital landscape is still not doing enough to offer protection from the worst that online abuse offers.

Throughout the interviews, participants discussed a range of roadblocks to support. The relationships between these barriers are complex and they impact one another in meaningful ways. To best understand these barriers, I apply Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model. As Bronfenbrenner explains, observing the multiple and wide-ranging influences of an ecosystem “becomes possible only if one employs a theoretical model that
permits them to be observed” (p. 4). Thus, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model allows me to:

1) Organize the barriers to support that participants identified in a methodical and disciplined way;

2) Conceptualize the possible relationships between said barriers; and

3) Help demonstrate how the barriers intersect and influence one another.

The ecological model provides a schema for thinking through the interconnected nature of social systems. It offers the language and structure I need to show how social media companies are failing their user base (a not so revelatory finding, but one which this data helps nuance), and that an absence of support in one area contributes to shortcomings in other areas of support.

In the following section, I turn to the literature on online abuse and harassment, legal approaches to online harms, and platform governance to discuss the common supports that exist for targets of online abuse. I also point out several problems that limit and complicate these supports. I then give an overview of the ecological model and present the findings from a set of interviews with 15 women. Next, I provide a discussion of these findings and demonstrate the impact that macrosystems have on the barriers women experience at other levels of the ecosystem. And finally, I end with an outline of the theoretical and practical contributions of this work.

3.2 Literature review: Support

3.2.1 Personal and Social Support

Previous studies have found that personal and social support are the most common ways individuals offset the harm caused by online abuse. Hodson et al. (2018) and Veletsianos et al. (2018) found that women scholars who experienced online abuse tapped into personal reserves of strength and resilience both as coping mechanisms and as ways to take up space despite perpetrator’s efforts to deter them from doing so. Participants in these studies also turned to friends and family for encouragement, advice, validation, and to outsource
comment moderation as a way to filter out the worst of the abuse and avoid facing the full force of abuse on one’s own (Hodson et al., 2018; Veletsianos et al., 2018).

Dispersed online communities have proven to be just as important for support as closer networks of family and friends. In a study that analyzed responses to the misogynoir\(^8\) (Bailey, 2013) directed at actor Leslie Jones, Lawson (2018) found that online communities crafted awareness campaigns and calls to action as a mode of public support.\(^9\) These actions provided a bridge to “discursively ‘patch’” gaps in security and support that exposed “the vulnerabilities of platforms and the vulnerabilities of women of color” (p. 819). Twitter’s struggle with providing a means of protection for users and controlling the accumulation of abuse and harassment on their site is well documented (Amnesty, 2018). Lawson (2018) argues that Twitter’s shortcomings, as well as Jones’s race and gender, made her especially vulnerable to online abuse. Using hashtags to unite their message, communities of support rallied around Jones and attempted to alleviate the harm and disrupt the messaging by “drowning them out [the abusers] with kindness” (Lawson, 2018, p. 824).

Galvanizing larger online communities can be an effective way to crowd out abuse. This approach, however, requires the participation of many people. Mobilizing large crowds of people online is not easy for users with a small online presence or who are not public figures. Rallying online communities requires relying on the kindness of strangers. Lenhart et al. (2016) surveyed 3,002 American internet users and found that 72% of their sample witnessed one or more harassing behaviors online. Of that 72%, 65% either contacted the abuser or reported the content/abuser to the platform. These actions are an important component of building supportive spaces. Knowing how difficult it can be to rely on ‘the kindness of strangers,’ Hollaback!, an organization that works toward ending harassment, created HeartMob, an online space where people experiencing online abuse can seek out

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\(^8\) The term misogynoir was coined by Moya Bailey to “give intersectionality a break from doing a lot of the heavy lifting for Black feminist thought” (Bailey, 2013, p. 341).

\(^9\) Leslie Jones is known for her work on Saturday Night Live and starring role in the 2016 Ghostbusters remake. It was this latter role that generated unprecedented amounts of online abuse and coordinated campaigns of online harassment. Arguably, all of the abuse was targeted directly toward Jones’ gender and racial identity.
this bystander help. After describing their harassment, users can create a “help request” wherein other members of the HeartMob community provide supportive messages and assist with documenting the harassment (Blackwell et al., 2017, p. 5).

These types of personal and social forms of support are most immediately available to targets of online abuse. An over-reliance on these supports, however, reduces the expectations on other sectors (such as the law and social media companies) to mount more effective responses (Hodson et al., 2018). Shifting the responsibility of support to individuals and their social networks alleviates pressure on institutions who can and should do more to create safe and equitable spaces online (Sugiura & Smith, In Press). The responsibility to support targets of online abuse needs to be distributed across multiple sectors not only to reduce the burden on individuals but because different sectors have the access and ability to enforce different rules and sanctions. Law enforcement and its policy creation are one of these sectors.

### 3.2.2 Legal and Reparative Support

While many jurisdictions have reformulated existing laws and crafted new ones to address online harms, there remain many cases that do not technically warrant a legal response. For example, in Canada, the harmful practice of doxing—the public release of personal and private information, often in an attempt to elicit harassment from others—is not a criminal offense unless the information has been obtained by intercepting someone’s private communication (Criminal code of Canada, section 184(1)). This means that, for example, doxing transgender folx by releasing photos and information about them pre-transition—something Curlew (2019) calls a form of political violence—is not legally sanctioned. This is an important example because, while the act of doxing may not generate a legal response, the outcome of this act—violence, harassment, and discrimination—does. In other cases, a legal response is not possible because key pieces of information are missing, such as when the perpetrator is anonymous or in another jurisdiction. There are also types of online abuse that are “frequently dismissed as harmless expressions of free speech, everyday

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10 For a discussion of responsibilization see chapter five.
annoyances, or too ambiguous to legislate against” (Vera-Gray, 2018, p. 7, emphasis added). For example, non-direct death threats in which perpetrators theorize about how a target could die, but do not expressly state their intent or desire to cause their death, fall into a grey area that make them difficult or impossible to legislate against. Nevertheless, there is a concerted and growing effort to create new—and expand existing—laws to support and protect targets of a wider range of online offenses (Bailey et al., Forthcoming). In particular, experts like Danielle Keats Citron (2014), Jane Bailey (2016), Clare McGlynn (McGlynn, Rackley & Houghton, 2017), and Suzie Dunn (Dunn, Lalonde & Bailey, 2017) are legal scholars who are advocating for new ways to offer legal protection and support to targets of online abuse.

While lawyers and policymakers work to protect people using existing civil, criminal, educational, human rights, and administrative and regulatory law (eQuality Project, 2020), there is much more government could be doing to demand better responses from larger corporate structures. For example, in what many people thought was a watershed moment, the European Union court ruled in 2014 that “search engines [like Google] must remove personal information associated with an individual when the information is ‘inaccurate, inadequate, irrelevant or excessive’” (Cook, 2015). This is important for targets of online abuse who experience reputational damage from false content shared about them online, or for people whose intimate images have been shared without their consent and which appear in searches of their name. Countries have also focused specifically on requests to remove content containing hate speech. In 2018 Germany’s NetzDG law took effect, which allows the government to fine companies’ up to €50 Million if they do not comply with takedown requests. Regulations give companies between 24 hours and seven days to comply, depending on the complexity of the content (Lomas, 2017).

The UK has also proposed laws that would see social media companies and tech firms beholden to new “duty of care” responsibilities and guidelines (gov.uk, para. 1). The laws would require these companies to follow a set of safety guidelines or face heavy fines and

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11 NetzDG is the shorthand for Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz, which translates to The Network Enforcement Act.
penalties. Speaking about the issue, U.K Digital Secretary Jeremy Wright stated: “The era of self-regulation for online companies is over. Voluntary actions from industry to tackle online harms have not been applied consistently or gone far enough” (gov.uk, 2019, para. 10).

While some social media companies are working to increase justice for users, these efforts center around “perceptions of fairness among offenders” (Schoenebeck et al., 2020, p. 4, emphasis added) rather than the offended. The result of which is that targets of online abuse are not afforded many opportunities for justice or reparation. In addition to correcting this backward approach, policies must also operate intersectionally and consider a variety of subjectivities and social positions and identities when determining effective responses and supports (Schoenebeck et al., 2020). Schoenebeck et al. (2020) draw on critical race theory to guide their analysis of the types of justice online users envision in response to online abuse. Using this theoretical framework matters greatly, as it reminds us that “laws were not designed to treat everyone equally” (p. 4). This applies to all forms of law, policy, and justice. For example, Shoenebeck et al. (2020) found that among survey respondents, ‘banning users’ was a favored response to online abuse among all respondents except those who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native. For those participants, banning users was considered undesirable (Shoenebeck et al., 2020). The authors posit that “this group’s cultural preference for restorative justice rather than retributive justice” could account for the discrepancy (p. 18). As such, Schoeneback et al. (2020) conclude that there can be no ‘one size fits all’ approach to matters of justice and reparation for online abuse. Daly (2014), McGlynn (2011,) and Powell (2015) have all pointed out the need for more restorative, informal, and community approaches to justice. Thus, we need government and social media companies to respond with stronger, intersectionally-informed legal and reparative support. This might include “restorative justice approaches and, perhaps radically, forms of community or informal justice outside of the state” (Vera-Gray, 2018, p. 573, emphasis in the original). The state can and should still contribute to building support and protection, but only in addition to alternative efforts.
3.2.3 The importance of naming

One particular area the law can help with is in shaping the language used to talk about online abuse. Scholars point out that the current vocabulary used to talk about online abuse lacks explanatory power partly because of the variety of terms in use, and also because there is not yet a term that conjures a strong image, moment, or referent. To this end, boyd (2014) makes an astute point:

When Amanda Todd died by suicide after posting a video about her situation to YouTube, the media widely reported her death as being a result of [cyber]bullying. Although bullying played a role in Todd’s story, the video [she shared about her experience] described ongoing stalking, sexual harassment, and blackmail by a stranger, followed by a whirlwind of public shaming, harassment, and physical torment (p. 132).

Cyberbullying is an insufficient term to capture the seriousness of the abuse that Todd suffered. The consequence of offenses like blackmail, sexual harassment, and stalking, are far more serious than some mainstream perceptions of the consequences of cyberbullying. Megarry (2014) argues that language needs to convey the harm and efforts of online abuse to work toward equality in online spaces. Thus, applying a term that conveys the tragedy and danger of experiences like Amanda Todd’s is important because the language we use to talk about online abuse “frames our laws and public debates” (McGlynn, 2017, para. 8). A core tenet of the law is to “express our shared condemnation of specific practices with the hope of changing people’s behaviour,” McGlynn (2017) explained, and this can only be achieved if the label applied to the law and used in public discourse is the right one.

Importantly, who does the labeling matters greatly. In the past, definitions of violence were “crucial to the maintenance of male hegemony” (Price, 2005, p.14), particularly in instances where men did the defining. Price (2005) writes that historically, definitions of violence were based on men’s understanding and perceptions of the harm and not on the experiences of victim-survivors. For example, at one time, child sexual abuse was legally defined as statutory rape. This required evidence of vaginal penetration and thus excluded
the sexual abuse of boys. In this case, “the only harm recognized […] is the loss of virginity” (Price, 2005, p.14).

The process of specifically naming online abuse is important also because it gives that action a “social existence” (Mantilla, 2015, p. 15). When a term is given a social existence it then carries socio-cultural weight and can be discursively mobilized to convey meaning: it becomes “a form of power that circulates in the social field” (Diamond & Quinby, 1988, p. 185). A social existence is thus required to challenge the harms encompassed by that term in both a cultural and legal sense (Mantilla, 2015). Fairclough (2013) draws attention to the overlapping power of language and social relations, pointing out that language is a material form of ideology, and as such the right choice of language has practical effects. For example, before feminists campaigned to raise awareness and lobbied for legal rights and protection, issues such as domestic violence, rape, date rape, stalking, and sexual harassment in the workplace were at the same time ubiquitous and yet not widely recognized or acknowledged (Citron, 2014; Mantilla, 2015). We see this happening today with street harassment—a form of misogynistic behavior that is “still in the process of being named and culturally recognized as destructive to women” (Mantilla, 2015, p.152). While law and policymakers can help create nomenclature that gives forms of online abuse a social existence, decisive action from other stakeholders, such as social media and gaming companies, can also help to create a social understanding of right and wrong by demonstrating where the transgressions lie.

3.2.4 Platform support

As a result of highly publicized attacks, social networking sites have made more commitments to their online users and have taken some (though certainly not nearly enough) responsibility for the online abuse and harmful content that circulates on their sites. Events like the attacks on Leslie Jones (Lawson, 2018), Gamergate (Quinn, 2017), Facebook’s leak of content moderation protocols (Liptak, 2017), the rise of conspiracy theorist group QAnon (Conger, 2020), the dangerous spread of misinformation about COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2020), and the combined public work of activists
(Scott, 2020) and academics (Roberts, 2019; Jane, 2017) have required that companies respond, at least in part, to criticism, concern, and policy pressures.

There have been some highly political and public events where social media companies responded to some of the internet’s worst offenders: for example, in 2016 Twitter permanently banned far-right writer (and professional troll), Milo Yiannopoulos (Hunt, 2016). Since then other companies like Facebook, YouTube, and Apple have also banned particularly high-profile and influential users, such as Infowars host Alex Jones, for creating content that incites hate and violence (Coaston, 2018; Paul & Waterson, 2019). More often than not, however, social media companies claim only a marginal amount of responsibility to users.

Companies like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter provide tools to report harmful content, fake accounts, and dangerous users. The efficacy of these reporting features varies widely, however, as users report harmful content that does not technically violate platforms standards and terms of service. Most platforms also provide blocking functions that allow users to select who can view their content and whose content they see. This feature does not directly address online abuse, but it can be helpful for individual users on a small scale. Crawford and Gillespie (2016) view flagging user-generated content as a form of engagement “whereby users participate—or appear to—in the governance of social media platforms and the imposition and reification of community norms” (p. 411). For many individuals flagging (or reporting) content is more than just engagement—or apparent engagement—in community standards: it is also an appeal to safety and protection. In other words, reporting and blocking content and users becomes a first-line defense for some individuals. These tools often fall short, and this appearance of governance instead serves to placate users and allow companies to hide behind stale efforts to provide support.

Likely the biggest challenge facing social media companies’ response to online abuse, as well as harassing, hateful, and even criminal content, is platform governance. In 2017 a series of documents were leaked that detailed Facebook’s content moderation guidelines (Liptak, 2017). An investigation into these documents revealed that the amount of content that moderators are required to screen for possible removal leaves them with “‘just 10
seconds’ to make a decision” (Hopkins, 2017, para. 5). While the exact volume of content generated each day is hard to ascertain, Roberts (2019) reports that in 2015 four hundred hours of video content was uploaded on YouTube per minute, and approximately 350 million images were uploaded to Facebook on any given day (p. 22). This volume of content indicates the difficulty moderators face trying to view and assess the countless photos, posts, and videos reported daily. Even if all reported or flagged content was given ample time to be reviewed, problems remain with the criteria used to decide what gets removed and what does not.

As a result of a large amount of content uploaded and shared online each day, social media companies have relied on a combination of algorithms and humans to help sort through reams of online abuse and harmful content. In an interview with Kevin Roose on the New York Times podcast, Rabbit Hole, YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki stated:

> If we look at how our systems work, we definitely have a lot of—we have basically a system that is very heavy with humans that is extended with machines. There is an automated component, but then there’s also, of course, a human component” (Rabbit Hole, 2020).

The aim of these “human-algorithm hybrids” are “designed to simulate human judgments of importance and urgency” (Crawford and Gillespie, 2016, p. 412-413). Given the magnitude of content that companies must deal with daily, a system that incorporates humans and automated decision making seems like the best and obvious option. This approach, of course, is not without its setbacks.

### 3.2.5 The “automated” and “human component”

Some responses to detecting online abuse use “natural language processing and machine learning techniques” that aim to detect and prevent harmful and abusive language (Blackwell et al., 2017, p. 3). Blackwell et al. (2017) provide the example of Google and Jigsaw’s Perspective Project, which uses a machine-learning API to assign a “toxicity score” to a section of text. Unfortunately, these “toxicity scores” can be manipulated simply by playing with language (Blackwell et al., 2017). Given the vast cultural differences
among users and the potentially personalized nature of abuse, it is easy for perpetrators to go undetected by automated and algorithmically structured systems. Similarly, the focus on natural language processing fails to address other forms of online abuse that are not verbal/textual, such as video, stalking, hacking, doxing, and impersonation.

Blackwell et al. (2017) also raise concern over the consequences of classification; they explain that “classification becomes a concern when labeling decisions are made with little consideration of the biases inherent in—and thus, risks associated with—those decisions” (p. 4). For example, they (Blackwell et al., 2017) found that classification privileges dominant experiences and that online users feel invalidated when reporting tools do not capture their experiences. This is extra worrisome as historically and still today, dominant experiences represent a white, heterosexual, and male standard, but online abuse disproportionately affects women of color, LGBTQI2+, and non-binary folx. Similar concerns have been raised elsewhere by Noble (2018) and O’Neil (2017) who are concerned that dominant ways of being are algorithmically reinforced and imposed upon equality-deserving groups.

Automated detection and decision making are problematic not just because they attempt classification, but also because the algorithms that shape them are created with the same biases as the people who make them. These biases have consequences, particularly for equality-deserving groups. Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) coined the term *algorithmic oppression* to capture the way racism and other forms of discrimination are not just baked in—but are also “the architecture and language of technology” (p.9). By pointing out the myriad ways algorithms shape what information we have access to (vis-à-vis search engines), Noble (2018) explained that widespread use of algorithms “demands a closer inspection of what values are prioritized in such automated decision-making systems” (p. 1).

Research such as Noble’s (2018) has garnered attention from large tech companies, many of who make promises to do better (Tufekci, 2018). But where companies fail in their response, users have relied on DIY automated tactics. For example, during gamergate in 2014, a user-created auto-blocklist (called the *good game autoblocker*) circulated on
Twitter, which aimed to “free users’ Twitter feeds from hurtful, sexist, and in some cases deeply disturbing comments” (Gosse & O’Meara, 2018, p. 4). The blocklist raised many concerns among Twitter users for its generous inclusion parameters and was met with widespread outrage and condemnation by many in the gaming community (Gosse & O’Meara, 2018). “In the end, the bot was a discursive sledgehammer, effectively shutting out between 8,000 and 10,000 accounts from subscribers’ Twitter feeds” (Gosse & O’Meara, 2018, p. 4). While the bot was indeed effective at shielding some users from seeing and experiencing online abuse, it raised questions over who should have a role in content curation/moderation.

Sarah Roberts’ (2019) work on commercial content moderators gives us the best insight into understanding the limitations and broken model behind human-led moderation. Roberts (2019) pointed out that content moderation is far beyond the capabilities of existing software and algorithms because much of what is submitted for review (via flagging or reporting) requires a nuanced understanding of the context from multiple angles:

> It is where the nature of the content (that is, what it is or what it depicts), its intent (that is, what it is meant to do when consumed or circulated), its unintended consequences (that is, what else it might do, beyond its first-order intent), and its meaning (which can be highly specific, culturally, regionally, or otherwise) all intersect. From there, it must then be evaluated against “the rules,” both of the platform or local context of the ecosystem (its social norms, expectations, tolerances, and mores) and of the larger, open world and its social, cultural, commercial, and legal regimes and mandates (p. 34).

This complex practice, combined with the limited time to make decisions, means that abuse that requires nuance in order to understand its full effect can be easily overlooked. For video content, the ability for machines to detect offensive content or content that goes

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12 The auto-blocklist worked by cross referencing the followers of the most vocal and volatile gamergate supporters. If a user followed at least two of those accounts, their account was included on the blocklist. Despite the blocklists’ effort to shield people from abuse and harassment, this inclusion criteria was problematic for many reasons, one of which is the assumption that following a Twitter account is equivalent to supporting the user of that account: an assumption that has grave consequences for journalists and others’ interested in understanding opposing views.
against community standards is even more complex because many of the natural language processing and machine learning techniques used to detect and prevent harmful and abusive content rely on text (Blackwell et al., 2017). This leaves video content as one area of moderation that relies almost exclusively on human moderators.

Much of the content moderation that occurs online leaves little room for human interaction (Myers West, 2018). In her study on users’ experiences with content moderation, Myers West (2018) found that the “perceived absence of a real person on the other side of the computer screen was a particular source of frustration for many users” (p.4377). Even when human interaction does occur, it is typically hidden and made invisible due to the poor labor conditions that put workers at risk of “burnout, desensitization, and worse because of the nature of their work” (Roberts, 2019, p. 25). “This invisibility is by design,” explains Roberts (2019, p. 3), because acknowledging it would mean acknowledging that there is a problem. The adverse impact of content moderation on the individuals who do that work indicates a much larger problem of violent and abusive content.13 In fact, in early 2020 Facebook agreed to pay $52 million US in damages to current and previous content moderators who claim they developed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) during their time moderating content for the company (Newton, 2020). The settlement is viewed as Facebook’s first acknowledgment of the harmful and dangerous work of its content moderators.

Journalists, activists, and scholars alike have been quick to point out the growing problems facing social media companies and other online spaces, including content moderators, the users of those sites, and the legal jurisdictions in which users reside. The magnitude and complexity of such problems require responses across multiple sectors to see positive change, and in particular to see protection and support for individuals targeted by online abuse. Efforts to provide better support should be grounded in the experience of targets themselves. Speaking with people who experienced online abuse offers practical insight into how they can be better supported, and understanding how to better support targets of

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13 I want to recognize that content moderators not only bear witness to the kinds of abuse discussed in this dissertation, but they also have the misfortune of watching content related to suicide, child abuse, and other obscene material.
online abuse is essential to creating equality, both online and off. In response to this need, this chapter asks: How do targets of online abuse experience and perceive barriers to support? To help categorize and think through the interconnected nature of these barriers, I apply an ecological model to analysing participants’ responses.

### 3.3 Conceptual framework: The ecological model

The ecological model was first conceived by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as a way to understand the multiple and overlapping influences of environments on an individual’s development. Since its original conception, the ecological model has been used widely in public health (e.g., Baral et al., 2013; Campbell et al., 2009) and policy-related research (e.g., Golden et al., 2015; Johnson, 2011), including in such areas as intimate partner violence (Little & Kantor, 2010; Smith Slep et al., 2014). In recent years, researchers have applied the ecological model in analyses of support and coping mechanisms among targets of online abuse and harassment (Hodson et al., 2018; Houlden et al., 2021). Continuing in the tradition of the latter, I harness elements of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model as a means to an end: to treat barriers to support as both discrete units and as deeply interconnected.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) described the ecological model as a “set of nested structures” comprised of micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems. These systems are connected by the idea that individuals are “affected by events occurring in settings in which the person is not even present” (p.3). The reverse is also true: larger systems, institutions, and cultural values and attitudes are similarly affected by individuals and events far beyond their obvious and immediate setting.
There are three “nested structures” (a.k.a. levels) that comprise Bronfenbrenner’s conception of the ecological model: microsystems, meso- and exosystems, and macrosystems (see figure 1).

1. The microsystem represents a “complex of interrelations within the immediate setting” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 7). It is comprised of one’s relationship to themselves, their social relationships, as well as the nature of such personal and social connections.

2. The meso- and exosystem, which accounts for the variable settings and systems that an individual directly participates in and those in which they “may never enter but in which events occur that affect what happens in the person's immediate environment” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 7). The former is referred to as the mesosystem, which bring two or more relationships from the microsystem together—this might include relationships in your community or at your workplace, as well as social media platforms, and the latter as the exosystem, which might
include the laws that shape what is or is not permitted on social media platforms or the functionality and affordances of any given technology.

3. The macrosystem draws awareness to the “overarching patterns of ideology and organization of the social institutions common to a particular culture or subculture” (p. 8). These larger values, beliefs, and attitudes manifest as ideologies that influence all other aspects of the ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In previous work, Hodson et al. (2018) used the ecological model to examine a variety of supports that could help to mitigate abuse and provide targets of online abuse with what they need to recover from their experiences. Houlden et al. (2021) use the ecological model to sketch out the relationships between support and coping and to inform how support for coping can be improved in the case of online abuse. In both cases, the authors found that forms of support were concentrated at the micro-level. Thus, they advocate for stronger measures across the ecosystem, particularly at the meso-level, which includes the social media platforms and social networking sites where much of the abuse takes place. To implement stronger measures, however, it is necessary to identify the issues that prevent these forms of support from reaching their potential (or to determine whether they have potential). As such, the focus of this study builds upon previous research by taking an inverse approach: this chapter focuses not on what supports were helpful to participants, but instead aims to identify what barriers existed among the different supports accessed.

3.4 Findings

Throughout the interviews, participants commented on the barriers they encountered when they sought support. The types of support participants discussed using are commensurate with the types of support found in other studies (Hodson et al., 2018), what differs here is that when asked what supports they used or relied on, or what supports they wish they could have accessed, participants overwhelmingly focused their conversations on barriers to support and not the experience of support itself. The rest of this chapter is structured according to the different levels of the ecological model, in order to understand the barriers
and how they relate to one another, as well as to identify the areas where stronger support is needed.

### 3.4.1 Microsystem barriers

A microsystem barrier refers to any barrier a participant encounters when they exercise support tied directly to their immediate setting. Throughout the interviews, participants focused on social and community barriers to support.

#### 3.4.1.1 Social and Community Barriers (Microsystem barrier)

For some individuals, the harms that online abuse causes are not easily imagined or understood. Without directly experiencing online abuse it can be difficult to picture what it feels like. In fact, without being the person targeted by the specific form of abuse, or without knowledge of the context of the abuse, it can be difficult to understand the harm. To outsiders, online abuse looks like the odd insult from a stranger, for others, it might appear as something that *just happened online*. The point is, for participants in this study, this lack of contextual knowledge made reaching out to friends and family difficult. They felt that without first-hand experience or more knowledge on the subject, others they spoke with tended to minimize the harm they experienced.

Participants described experiencing a lack of understanding from their friends when seeking social support. In particular, there was a sense that friends and family did not have a framework to understand what online abuse was, what it felt like, how serious it can be, or how to console or offer advice to those targeted. This lack of a framework for those in a participant’s social network led to poor social support. Lilly explained that one of her friends downplayed the insults she received online: “One of my friends, her first reaction is always, ‘it’s just a bot.’ They could be specifically naming me and she’ll say, ‘no, it’s probably just a bot’” (Lilly). While Lilly mentioned this in a more lighthearted fashion, Maya’s friends were dismissive and tended to redirect the issue: “Whenever I would try to talk to them [my friends] about this experience their responses tended to be, ‘you just need to have more of an offline life’ or ‘you just need to get over it’—which wasn’t always helpful” (Maya). Ellie and Melody both explained that their friends recommended they
block their harassers, which for various reasons, such as the volume of abusive posts for Ellie, or Melody’s need to keep tabs on messages from a stalker, was not feasible. Fiona points out that she had a “really supportive” group of friends, but that “most people don’t know what to do.”

Participants pointed out that a lack of support from fellow online users is also difficult to deal with. Candice explained that: “It is [important] to have support in the moment, when those things happen, and not just support after because I think the hardest part about a lot of those experiences was the silence on the other end” (Candice). Maya also wished to see more support from online users: “Where were the adults? Like not just in these kids’ lives or in these people’s lives, but like where were the adults in the rooms? Where was anyone setting boundaries? [...] Where was boundary culture when I needed it?” (Maya). Fiona believed that a lack of support from other users online can be accounted for by the relative novelty of online abuse:

> You know, if somebody came up to me in person and I was surrounded by a bunch of friends and started screaming at me a bunch of obscenities my friends would probably be like ‘hey dude, what’s going on? Step back.’ But online, when you’re surrounded by friends, quote-unquote, they don’t know what to do. They’re like, well that’s weird, I’m just going to turn off the computer (Fiona).

Intervention from other online users may not curb abuse, but at the moment that abuse occurs it can help people feel supported by knowing that other users are witnessing it and acknowledging that it is wrong. As Maya explained it: “there are little things that you can do to try and make your experience somewhat less worse [sic] but there’s a hell of a lot that entire communities should be doing.”

### 3.4.2 Meso- and exosystem barriers

Meso- and exosystem barriers represent factors that prevented individuals from receiving help or protection from organizations and establishments that they turned to for support. Among the participants in this study four barriers were discussed: workplace barriers; barriers to mental health support; barriers in the justice system; and platform barriers.
While workplace barriers fit within the mesosystem and barriers in the justice system fit within the exosystem, barriers to mental health support and platform barriers must be further divided between both meso- and exosystem barriers (see table 3).

Table 3: Division of meso- and exosystem barriers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mesosystem</th>
<th>Exosystem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workplace barriers</td>
<td>Barriers in the justice system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to mental health support</td>
<td>Barriers to mental health support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Practitioners’ limited knowledge</td>
<td>• Cost associated with therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platform barriers</td>
<td>Platform barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Limitations with blocking functions</td>
<td>• Lack of responsibility/accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Affective limitations to reporting</td>
<td>• Piecemeal nature of abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Limits to policies and regulations</td>
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3.4.2.1 Workplace barriers (Mesosystem barrier)

Workplaces account for a large portion of where many individuals spend their time. People build professional and social relationships at work and they invest a lot of emotional, physical, and psychical energy at work. In turn, workplaces can be important for development. These factors make it all the more demoralizing when workplaces offer no support to employees experiencing online abuse (or any abuse, for that matter). For Fiona, the experience with online abuse carried over into her workplace. A video of her having an altercation with someone over a parking spot was recorded by a third party (who was not
involved) and shared online, where it went viral. The online abuse began once she was identified as the woman in the video. Fiona was doxed, which means her personal information, including her phone number, address, and place of work was shared online. Soon after, strangers harassed her employer and colleagues, they sent emails and left messages demanding that she be fired, and they made sexually inappropriate and fictitious comments about her to her colleagues. She explained that her coworkers were shocked, unsure what to do, and made few attempts to console her. This is similar to the social and community barriers described earlier but differs slightly because it impacted relationships at work with her supervisor and colleagues. Fiona reflected on this by trying to put the situation in context:

But most people I think, had I gotten sick–like if I got cancer or if I was in a car accident, or somebody in my family had died, like that is a trauma that people can relate to. Like even if they haven’t gone through it they are like, oh that’s terrible, that’s awful. They’ll support you, they’ll bring you food, they’ll reach out to you. But when you are cyberharassed nobody knows what to do with that (Fiona).

Despite the moments of rationalizing the behavior of her colleagues, Fiona wished that there was more direct support from her place of work: “I just wish there had been more support from my employer because I was being sexually harassed and violently threatened. And they didn’t—that didn’t concern them at all.” In fact, not only did her employer fail to offer support to an employee experiencing the level of sexual harassment and abuse that Fiona faced, but she was ultimately fired.

### 3.4.2.2 Barriers to mental health support (Mesosystem barrier)

As is common for individuals who experience different forms of abuse, participants in this study either sought or thought about seeking therapy. In Maya’s experience, she described her therapist as “very nice” and said she that she listened, however, “she still had the tendency to say ‘oh don’t you think you’re giving this person power?’” Maya felt “there was a little bit of victim-blaming” in comments like these and thought that they minimized her experience. In Fiona’s case, she explained that she was very happy and grateful for her therapist. She points out, however, that her therapist was “very experienced treating trauma
and PTSD” but was still “blown away that this had happened.” Her therapist, presumably well versed in different kinds of harm and trauma, had not heard of the kinds of abuse that Fiona faced, nor was she familiar with the consequences of online abuse. This indicates a larger lack of understanding and education about online abuse on behalf of this mental health professional.

3.4.2.3 Barriers to mental health support (Exosystem barrier)

Although Ellie worried about experiences like Maya and Fiona’s, and that worry deterred her from seeking therapy, she explained the cost associated with therapy was “the number one reason” she did not go. In other words, Ellie felt she could not explore this potential support system due to economic precarity.

3.4.2.4 Barriers in the justice system (Exosystem barrier)

There was a general sense among participants that police and law enforcement was a “waste of time” (Ellie) and some felt that there was no point reaching out because they did not think that “laws [...] have caught up to [online] spaces” (Wendy). Those who did reach out to police experienced issues with jurisdictional boundaries and the limits of tracking online accounts. When speaking with law enforcement Maya was told that “it [the perpetrator] would have needed to be somebody within Canadian jurisdiction,” and Fiona was told that her abusers would need to “live in this state.” The police told Eva that it would be “hard to follow through with any sort of action” because many of the accounts responsible for the abuse did not use their real picture or their real name.

These are not necessarily failures on behalf of law enforcement, but rather limitations of the laws that law enforcement operates within. It is important to note, however, that there have been many anecdotal and documented cases where individuals encounter law enforcement officers who do not understand the seriousness of online abuse. Additionally, police support—even if appropriate laws were in place—is not available to everyone equally, as many people face systemic (and outright) racism and discrimination and thus do not see the police as an institution that can help (Goel et al., 2017).
Participants also noted how frustrating it was to see law enforcement squander opportunities to set stronger precedents for how online abuse should be handled. For example, Ellie pointed to the FBI’s gamergate report as a particularly disappointing moment:

When the FBI report came out that was alternatively devastating because it was kind of like, the one opportunity for some sort of justice to be served that would work as some sort of deterrent, but, it was almost like the opposite of a deterrent, it was like, ‘oh here’s this report that proves nothing bad will happen to you’ (Ellie).

Blame for the idea that “nothing bad will happen to you” belonged equally to social media and gaming companies who in many contexts are not legally responsible for much of the content uploaded and shared by their users.14

3.4.2.5 Platform Barriers (Meso- and Exosystem barriers)

Throughout the interviews, participants mentioned the limited nature of support from social media and online gaming companies (i.e., platforms). Overall participants explained that platforms fail to support them in two ways: first, by failing to enforce repercussions or hold abusive users accountable for their actions; and, second, by limiting investment into inbuilt tools that work to support or guide targets of online abuse, which further renders content control effectively useless.

3.4.2.5.1 Platforms: Meso-level

Platforms, while largely free of legal responsibility for the abuse people face, have options such as blocking and reporting that allow individuals to remove or flag unwanted or inappropriate content and users. Blocking functions are one of the most common defense tools used to shield oneself from online abuse. The problem with blocking is that the process focuses on micro-interactions between two users and is not tailored to the needs of those combatting online abuse from multiple perpetrators. This becomes evident if we look

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14 In the United States the Communications Decency Act protects social media companies from being held liable for user generated content except in some cases, such as copyright infringement.
at the blocking process on major social media websites, like Facebook or Twitter. Blocking someone is a simple ‘click and choose’ feature. However, as Ellie explained:

If you have ever got nasty tweets, like, just blocking everyone seems like a great solution, but if you’ve ever been in the position where you’re really being inundated you’ll understand that like ‘just blocking everyone’ is maybe a solution but it takes hours and hours and hours of your time (Ellie).

Here Ellie pointed out that blocking is a time-consuming and inefficient process to address the torrent of harassing behavior experienced by many targets of online abuse. Abigail adds that blocking people is also not effective when the abuse spans across a person’s social environment. She pointed out that sometimes the person abusing or harassing you is someone known in other, offline contexts, at which point you cannot “just block and never hear from them again” (Abigail).

Users also have the option to hide content that they do not want to see. Like blocking, hiding content is also time-consuming on a large scale. It is also a band-aid solution that does little to support targets of online abuse. “If you don’t want to see something,” Lilly explained, “you can just hide it. But I don't feel like that deals with the problem. If you are hiding something off of your feed it means you are not looking at it but it’s still there.” There are two problems with this. First, if the content is private—as with a direct message—hiding the content might prevent the target from rereading it, but by being read once the message has already harmed. And second, if a target hides content from their social media profile the content may still be available for others to see.

Blocking users and hiding content only affects the target and does not prevent other people from seeing the abusive content. Additionally, these functions only work when you know those people or things exist. Ellie articulated an important barrier to support that she encountered and continues to encounter, as she aims to control the vitriolic content that is available about her online.

You can search your name on YouTube, but it’s only going to come up with 10% of the videos that mention me because it’s only going to [show the videos] with my
name in the title or the description [...] I can’t find the videos that are about me, sometimes I can find them, like through happenstance or because I’ll go to the profiles of my harassers on Twitter and I’ll be like, ‘oh, great! This guy made a YouTube video about me and it has 50,000 views.’ It’s really impossible for anyone to mitigate their abuse on YouTube [...] I think that YouTube has the biggest role in perpetuating online abuse because it’s not directed at you like it is on Twitter, so you know about it, it’s like—and maybe this is just my personality, but what upsets me more is not people yelling at me on Twitter, which I can see and process and block, it’s the idea of the people yelling about me out there that I can’t see (Ellie).

Video content that is not easily identified poses a particular barrier to safeguarding oneself from current and future online abuse.

Participants also highlighted the affective limitations of reporting features on platforms. The automated response participants received after reporting what in some cases was especially egregious content felt clinical and unsympathetic. Participants noted that they were given no indication as to whether the user was penalized or whether the content was even removed. Kate explained that the reporting function is all that targets have and it would mean a great deal to targets if there was some form of meaningful engagement from platforms:

> It would have been nice to see what happened when you reported a user, to know that there was some kind of closure on your end—like someone had seen that complaint and considered it at least [...] it might have been nice if it was just, ‘Hey, we saw what you saw.’ Even if it didn’t result in a ban or block or IP ban, just something to know that people had seen what you had seen (Kate).

Whether it was a human commercial content moderator or an automated decision, participants felt that responses from social media companies were robotic and impersonal.

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15 Once participants block a user or hide content, e.g., on Facebook or Twitter, they can no longer see the person or their posts, which is why they are not certain if anything came from their reports.
As a result, women experiencing abuse give up on using platform reporting tools for support as they do not feel they work effectively.

3.4.2.5.2 Platforms: Exo-level

Participants’ primary concern was that platforms are not required to take responsibility, legally speaking, for the abusive and violent content shared by their user base. As Wendy pointed out: “I wish there was more company responsibility. Like, it’s too much anarchy I think, which is unfortunate because then you get into a whole [discussion] about free speech.”

Participants were acutely aware that companies did not have an interest in moderating or policing behavior. Even when participants did the work to locate and report harmful material about them that was harassing and abusive, they found that getting it removed from the platform was next to impossible. Fiona and Trish explained that social media companies simply did not respond to repeated requests to have the content removed. As Fiona described it, she was met with a “too bad, so sad” attitude from such companies, who were only moved to respond if content clearly violated their terms of service: “That’s what they would say every time. This doesn’t violate our terms of service.” In fact, Fiona hired an online reputation company for “a lot of money to work on suppressing things. Trying to get videos removed and images removed.” Fiona said that she “spent tens of thousands of dollars in debt just dealing with it.” Kate knew that there was no point relying on moderators or in-game customer service reps because, as she explained: “they don’t moderate behavior unless it’s going to cost the company money.”

The lack of legal and ethical responsibility from platforms demonstrates a dearth of accountability and consequences for abusive or generally poor behavior, thus incentivizing said behavior. As Maggie discussed:

I think with online abuse people feel much more powerful to say things that they wouldn’t normally say to someone’s face, because again, they are behind a keyboard [...] oftentimes it’s not even their real photo, it’s not even their real name. They create a second account that they can log in to, they have that safety and that
protection, and they can say whatever has been festering and has come up to the surface, and they can just lay it out and leave it there and walk away and they know that there will be zero repercussions (Maggie).

As Eva noted, online users who feel they “can marginalize until the cows come home” need to be held accountable. Participants widely agreed that there needs to be stronger messaging and action on behalf of platforms that “that kind of abuse, that negligence, is not going to be tolerated” (Maggie).

Participants raised concerns over the piecemeal nature of reporting abuse to platforms. Fiona, who has been repeatedly told that the content she reported did not violate platforms’ terms of service, explained that “one message doesn’t [count], but hundreds do.” In her experience, the abuse she received crossed multiple platforms and came from hundreds of users, but there was no way to demonstrate that these individual incidents formed a pattern of abuse. Fiona wished that platforms would consider patterns of behavior, rather than looking only at isolated incidents. While the issue here might not be solved by pointing to the multiple and overlapping abusive messages—as each message, no matter how many times repeated, may still not violate community standards—there remains the limitation of being able to express the interconnected and often vast nature of the abuse that, for example, Fiona experienced.16

Me flagging a video in one place sure, that doesn’t—that looks harmless, but I had to go through and flag hundreds of comments and hundreds of messages and hundreds of videos [...] The video was posted over and over and over again and I had to flag it everywhere. And all of those were treated like individual incidents and not related to each other. So there needs to be one way for me to submit it in aggregate to say, no this is a pattern of abuse (Fiona).

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16 This then becomes a problem of our limited capacity to identify abuse effectively (see macrosystems section below).
The private messages, public posts using her name, and comments to those posts were all reported as separate instances of abuse. Abuse in this case is akin to death by a thousand cuts.

One of the more common suggestions from participants was that users be removed from platforms for violating terms of service or being repeatedly reported for abusive messages. For example, Wendy hoped to see changes to policies and regulations from platforms or from governments that would give strength to blocking and reporting tools. She wished that Twitter, in particular, would “change their policy and actually look into blocked tweets and maybe not allow the same IP address to make multiple accounts” (Wendy). Ellie referred to this action as “deplatforming.” She explained:

I wish deplatforming was a thing [...] there should be some, something that’s put in place. Some sort of deterrent and I think deplatforming is the best deterrent [...] Deplatforming essentially just means that when someone has white supremacist inclinations you wipe them from your platform. You definitely don’t give them a blue checkmark (Ellie).

Similarly, Candice wanted to see users get auto-banned, Maggie recommended users be warned and then banned if they continued to abuse, and Julie advocated for a “flagging situation where users could be IP banned if they have enough strikes against them.” These solutions would not only serve targets of online abuse, but would also send a message to larger online audiences and users about the kinds of behavior not tolerated in these spaces.

### 3.4.3 Macrosystem barriers

Macrosystem barriers stem from larger social and cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes. Individuals have the least direct contact with this level of the ecosystem, and as a result, the barriers it presents can be quite opaque. While participants did not point directly to macrosystem barriers, they were nonetheless aware that different ideologies within the macrosystem, such as patriarchy, white supremacy, racism, and sexism, shaped their experience of abuse and the availability of support. These elements were discussed by participants throughout the interviews; however, participants did not connect these
macrosystem ideologies to the barriers to support they experienced. In total, I identified three barriers embedded in the macrosystem: digital dualism, cultural discourse around how best to respond to abuse, and an absence of established ways of speaking about online abuse.

### 3.4.3.1 Digital dualism (macrosystem)

The characterizations of online spaces as *more real* and offline spaces as *less real* is known as digital dualism (Jurgenson, 2011). Digital dualism creates conditions that make it easy to invalidate and dismiss online abuse by treating the non-physical experience of online spaces as reason for a lack of vulnerability and possible harm. Online abuse is not the only type of non-physical abuse to be dismissed—far from it. Online abuse is added to the list of other non-contact offenses, such as emotional and verbal abuse, that are also treated as less serious than physical abuse (Powell & Henry, 2017). Fiona explained that this treatment of online spaces as less real, and thus online abuse as less real and less serious, made her wary of speaking out “because [...] it looks like, ‘oh, people are saying mean things to you on the internet? That’s sad.”

Maya explained that when she tried to seek support in the past she had been dismissed based on the fact that the abuse took place online: “I would also try to tell people offline, but the thing is even now, people [...] love to respond to it with, ‘oh but Maya, it’s just online, it’s not real.’” Like other participants, Maya is pointing here to the treatment of online spaces as less “real” than offline spaces.\(^{17}\)

### 3.4.3.2 Cultural discourse (macrosystem)

On several occasions, participants pointed out that established ways of responding encourage a kind of quietism on behalf of those targeted. Specifically, participants were keenly aware of the internet mantra *don’t feed the trolls*, and many of them suggested that it had helped shape their response to the abuse. The popular advice was cited as helping shape how participants responded to the abuse. Melody explained: “I realized that

\(^{17}\) For an in-depth discussion about digital dualism see chapter four.
responding gets you nowhere. Like it just makes things worse and it just gives them more
power to keep doing what they are already doing” (Melody). Maggie echoed the same
sentiment:

I find that if you engage, regardless of the way—whether you are super neutral, you
stay level headed, you offer them, you know, evidence or statistics to show why
their point of view might be incorrect, they will keep going, with progressively
nastier comments to you until I finally pull the plug and delete them or block them
(Maggie).

Katie remarked that engaging made her an easier target for abuse: “You know, the more I
stuck around to try and make my case, the more I felt like I made myself a target” (Katie).
Defending oneself is an instinctual form of self-protection and thus of personal support,
however, perpetrators often use attempts to regain control as fodder for further abuse and
therefore don’t feed the trolls was viewed as somewhat helpful in this regard. Nevertheless,
the advice represents a larger cultural issue that promotes “victim complicity with online
abuse” (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017, p. 927).

3.4.3.3 Communicative barriers (Macrosystem barrier)

Participants identified difficulty finding the words to describe online abuse to others as
well as trouble identifying their own experiences online as abuse in the first place. Three
participants admitted a reluctance to participate in this research because they were not sure
whether their experiences qualified as abuse. In one case, a participant emailed me before
agreeing to participate and detailed some of her abuse. In this initial email, she described
bribery, extortion, threats of violence, being driven off platforms, and invasions of (digital)
privacy, and still, this participant was unsure whether they qualified as having experienced
online abuse. This reluctance demonstrates a need for society to develop a language and
awareness around online abuse. Abigail explained that a language, or as she put it, a
“vocabulary” would have been particularly helpful for her to share with others what was
going on: “I needed a vocabulary for that, does that make sense?” (Abigail). Fiona also
described not knowing how to label or describe her experience: “I had to explain what was
happening to me when I didn’t even understand what was happening to me” (Fiona). For
Fiona, “the ambiguity of the intrusion makes it difficult to confront directly” (Vera Gray, 2018, p. 86). While establishing a language is not the only remedy needed here, having the words to express and materialize one’s experience is an important component.

Even when they did have the language, participants were reluctant to label their abuse as abuse, citing this study as a turning point for rethinking how they choose to label their own experience. Melody explained:

And I guess the interesting thing is that it took me a while to admit that this was an example of online abuse. Like even when I first saw your thing [recruitment post] I was like, oh have I? Was this really online abuse? He didn’t threaten me. And then I was like, well wait a minute, yeah it was. I mean, it was short of threatening me, it was terrible. He basically—so I guess it took a while to admit that it was even abuse but I mean, it clearly is (Melody).

Abigail noted something similar:

I was interested because we had spoken about your research and just through talking to you it was clear that you considered what I had to say to be something that was worth talking about. Which is interesting to me because I didn’t necessarily consider it something that was worth talking about until you mentioned it, like until you said, until you were interested in what I had to say (Abigail).

This was an incredibly important point. Providing people with a way to describe an experience is an important political and supportive act that can help give it meaning.

3.5 Discussion

Throughout the interviews, participants discussed a wide variety of barriers they encountered when seeking support for online abuse. While participants discussed experiencing barriers to support that can be classified across all levels of the ecosystem, the attention given to each level was not equal. Meso- and exosystem barriers were most frequently discussed. Macrosystems, while commonly discussed, were harder to identify. Factors like discourse, power, and identity operate undetected and their effect is
deliberately difficult to recognize (Fairclough, 1989; Butler, 1990). Participants described the most diverse range of barriers at the meso- and exo-levels. In particular, platforms—which provide the structures for abuse to occur—were discussed the most. In this section, I will first discuss how participants pointed to a need for greater macrosystem support that can in turn positively affect other systems of the ecosystem. I then turn my attention to more specific barriers that participants pointed to and suggest possible ways of moving forward.

3.5.1 The Need for a Communicative Framework

A notable element in the data was the identified need for greater macrosystem support by way of a stronger, more precise, and commonly shared vocabulary—I call this a communicative framework. A communicative framework is a discursive structure that acknowledges, reflects, and supports targets of online abuse through community-shared discursive practices, mainly a shared vocabulary, that effectively communicate experiences of online abuse (Megarry, 2014). It would allow targets of online abuse to make meaning of, legitimize, and name the harms they experience, provide shared terminology that allows people to communicate experiences with one another, carry a shared knowledge of what online abuse is and why it is harmful, and it would legitimize labeling online harms as abuse.

Participants were reluctant to identify their experience as online abuse because they were not certain if it ‘qualified’. They also expressed difficulties communicating their experience of online abuse because they were unsure how to identify it and how to describe it to others. When they did try to describe it, friends and family did not fully perceive what was happening to them or how harmful the experience was. While I label this as a macro-level barrier, the effects of a communicative barrier could also be felt at the meso- and exo-level, where participants tried to access support from employers and colleagues, therapists, and law enforcement.

Online abuse has an alien familiarity. This alien familiarity is a result of the relative novelty of online abuse, which mirrors long-established inequalities and social problems that are played out in comparatively unfamiliar and uncharted environments. This leaves targets to
feel the impact of abuse without the confidence or context to necessarily name it as such. Complicating matters is the miscellany of names used to describe online abuse. In this chapter, I use the term online abuse for short, but there are many names used to describe the same phenomena: technology-facilitated violence, cyberbullying, online hate, online harassment, and cybermisogyny are a common few. Naming online abuse is then further complicated by the fact that there is a wide collection of actions that any single term needs to connote (e.g., stalking, doxing, impersonation, non-consensual distribution of intimate images, sexual deepfakes).

Additionally, a single term may not be the solution—there may need to be a set of terms established to talk about online abuse. As participant Abigail explained, she “needed a vocabulary.” The focus here is not only on the term itself but on the need to agree collectively on a shared vocabulary because widespread adoption and shared meaning are how targets will communicate the harm they experience. It is time to formalize the vocabulary around online abuse so that targets of online abuse, their friends and families, and legislators, can firmly point to an action, name it, and understand the weight it carries. Who does the naming is central to this process (Price, 2005) and any effort to formalize terminology and strengthen communication around online abuse should be a reflection of targets’ lived experience.

One way to begin creating a communicative framework is to educate and spread awareness about online abuse. This could look similar to the efforts underway to raise awareness of and advocate for better mental health resources, including public service announcements and asking journalists to find more consistent ways of covering stories about online abuse. The messy part of establishing cultural values is that no single person can make it happen. Instead, we need change, agreement, and compliance across sectors (Carey, 1992). The law is one area in particular that holds great sway over how we conceptualize and refer to harm (McGlynn, 2017). Activists and academics should continue to put pressure on policy and lawmakers to create better legislation regarding the various kinds of online abuse.

Developing a communicative framework may not seem like the most direct way to overcome barriers to support, and no doubt the benefits are not immediate. Nonetheless, a
communicative framework has a ripple effect: it shapes laws, and those, in turn, shape how we address injustice, which in turn shapes values and attitudes regarding which actions are permissible in a culture. In other words, a communicative framework has a framing effect for what is and is not acceptable, which, because they are interconnected, influences policies and practices throughout micro-, meso-, and exosystems. Change at the macrosystem level involves a slow process of imbuing a culture with new ideas, setting new precedents, and upending tradition.

A communicative framework can also help bring to focus the way oppressive practices and ideologies, like those found in the macrosystem, influence barriers and contribute to online abuse. By creating a communicative framework that is built on the recognition of intersecting oppressive ideologies and practices, we will also be creating a framework that allows people to mount better efforts to challenge institutions that attempt to silo online abuse (McGlynn, 2017). Such a framework should also provide people with the language and knowledge needed to end or reduce the distinction made between online and offline life, known as digital dualism. By creating a shared recognition of the harm online abuse causes, and better integrating an awareness of online abuse into other anti-violence and anti-oppressive work, a communicative framework can alleviate the hard work targets do of demonstrating to others that the abuse they experience is real (see chapter four). In other words, it can empower people through a process of language as praxis so that they can hold institutions to account.

In combination with other efforts (like those mentioned in the literature review, and those in the proceeding section), developing a communicative framework is an important aspect of support that should not be taken for granted. Language not only reflects social life, but it has material consequences for social relations (Fairclough, 2013). Developing a communicative framework, which includes a shared vocabulary with a social existence (Mantilla, 2015), can help targets overcome some of the barriers they experience across the ecosystem. In particular, it will help them struggle less in their effort to explain the experiences to families, friends, coworkers, and therapists, it will provide clarity so that targets can better position and articulate their own experiences, and it will help develop the framework needed to hold other institutions to account.
3.5.2 Practical Contributions: A List of Actions

Participants also experienced barriers to support that are far more direct. These typically occurred at the micro-, meso-, and exo-level. The communicative framework previously discussed would be of benefit in overcoming these barriers, however, there are also some actions that can be taken immediately. Below is a list of possible changes that would strengthen support for targets of online abuse across micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystems.

In terms of social support, participants indicated that greater support from fellow online users is important to them. Blackwell et al. (2017) found that “labeling […] abusive experiences enabled by technology” as online abuse helped bystanders “understand the breadth and impact of this problem” (p.11). Part of this work could be captured by public awareness and education campaigns, mentioned above as part of an effort to create a communicative framework. It would also require publicly funding organizations like HeartMob, which help create supportive publics.

Publicly funded support for targets and victim-survivors of all forms of abuse is necessary. Reducing the costs associated with support (like those associated with therapy or the costs associated with professional help to have content removed) would alleviate class or economic precarity. In their book, Crash Override, Quinn (2017) explains that online abuse is worse when you are poor: reputation management, private investigators, lawyers, and mental health support are expensive resources, and this is sometimes compounded by a loss of income. Celebrities and public-facing individuals, such as politicians, have public relations teams and lawyers to help them remove content, document abuse, and follow up with possible legal avenues such as copyright or defamation. Reducing the cost associated with support would open these directions to a wider variety of people.

Supportive publics can also be shaped by continuing—and ramping up—the legal and legislative work already underway. For example, legislators (with the help of social media companies) can craft laws that reflect globally connected spaces, and which could offer alternatives for overcoming complex barriers such as jurisdictional boundaries and the pseudo/anonymity of users that Maya faced, for example.
On a local scale, legislators ought to focus their attention on the role of workplaces as a source of support or a site of neglect for targets of online abuse. Many workplaces already address workplace harassment and domestic/sexual violence that extends to the workplace.¹⁸ Mandating that workplaces do the same for online abuse is a needed change. This might mean that targets are provided job protection if online abuse impacts their ability to work or threatens their reputation, or that they are granted reduced hours, leaves of absence, and other accommodations to help address the emotional cost. One way to encourage this change is to redefine employers’ definition of a workplace to include online spaces. This could also be a goal of the communicative framework. This is particularly important at a time when many workplaces have adopted work-from-home models and thus require employees to be online to be at work.

The most tangible barriers reported by participants were concentrated at the platform level. Based on the interviews with participants, it is clear that targets of online abuse believe that platforms play an important role in creating safer and more supportive spaces. To start, platforms need to hold users accountable. They could do this by using their power to deplatform and suspend accounts, autoban repeat offenders (e.g., by blocking IP addresses), or, as one participant wished, send reports to users outlining or summarizing the reported and abusive content they posted. These suggestions would alleviate some concern participants had over the lack of responsibility and accountability that perpetrators face.

Arguably the most important role platforms have in reducing barriers is in creating more effective tools and built-in functionality to better support targets of online abuse. Importantly, these tools and functions need to be crafted with careful consideration of those they are meant to support. Seemingly doable changes could involve allowing content to be removed that involves or directly refers to the person requesting its removal (like The Right to be Forgotten—which legislators also play a role in) (Cook, 2015) without needing

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¹⁸ Ontario Bill 168 (2009) s32.0.4 states that if an employer is aware of domestic violence that would likely expose a worker to injury in the workplace, the employer has a duty to take precautions to protect the worker.
lawyers to get involved. It could also involve giving users the choice to mass block users and remove content. This might be similar to the functions we have with email. Choosing multiple posts or users to block at a single time would reduce the number of times targets spend engaging with abusive content.

When targets do report abusive content and abusers, platforms need to work on providing a more affectively appropriate response. Participants indicated that a lack of follow-up with reporting tools was a source of frustration. Having someone bear witness—knowing someone has seen your complaint—is an important aspect of support. This is similar to Myers West’s (2018) findings, which suggest that online users feel extra frustrated by automated systems, particularly when there is a perceived lack of presence by a real person. There are of course practical limitations to receiving feedback to reports—as Roberts (2019) points out, there are far more reports of content that violate terms of service or transgress personal and social boundaries than there are people to view the content. A partial solution here could be setting up a notification system that lets targets know when a moderator has seen and witnessed the abuse, or a function that allows reported content and users to be tracked (think: a food delivery app) so that targets can see how complaint processes unfold. Both of these options would provide some closure and validation for targets of online abuse. Automating an affectively appropriate response, however, might undermine the importance of that very practice.

Lastly, participants would like to see platforms create a tool to aggregate harmful content to show patterns of abusive and harassing behavior. Currently, users targeted by multiple abusive messages have to report content (and users) as separate incidents. If a pattern of abuse can be established, it might then be easier to request that platforms remove content or ban users. This could provide much-needed context for content moderators (if they were granted enough time to review large files) and automated systems. Organizations looking to help targets of online abuse might also want to invest in creating a similar tool for aggregating abuse that spans multiple platforms. This might also be helpful for law enforcement and would most certainly streamline the documentation process, which currently rests with targets of abuse.
3.6 Conclusion

I opened this chapter with a quote from Ellie, who pointed out that her expectations for receiving support for online abuse are low because we still do not know how to support women from types of abuse and violence that long predate digital technology. I think that this idea is central to understanding where limitations to our ability to support targets of online abuse lie. As a culture, we are still a far cry away from protecting and supporting individuals from domestic violence, sexual violence, and other forms of gender violence and abuse. The barriers we face online cannot be worked through without simultaneously working through the barriers that existed even before digital spaces became enmeshed with our daily lives. While tech-based solutions from platforms, for example, are certainly important, such responses are ineffective without a change in the values needed to prompt better protection. This is not to undermine the discussion above: the recommendations in this chapter will no doubt help alleviate some of the barriers to support and mitigate some of the impacts of online abuse. This is to say that no tool, law, or vocabulary alone can end online abuse. As such, we need approaches from all sectors of society and all levels of the ecosystem, but importantly we need those sectors to understand the impact they have on one another.

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4 “Not the real world”: Exploring experiences of online abuse, digital dualism, and ontological labor

4.1 Bridging chapters three and four

In chapter three I outline the different ways participants experience barriers to support. These barriers arose across the ecological system and included micro-level social barriers among friends and family; meso- and exo-level barriers among social media and gaming platforms, mental health support, and law enforcement; and macro-level barriers that manifested in larger cultural ideologies, values, and beliefs. The barriers participants experienced were most concentrated at the meso- and exo-level, and specifically with platforms. A common thread that underlines many of the barriers experienced, however, was a difficulty in communicating the experience and subsequent harm of online abuse. I note in chapter three that remedying this involves—at least in part—creating a shared communicative framework.

One of the macro-level barriers participants noted, however, involved a substantial roadblock to creating this communicative framework. Specifically, participants indicated that they experienced a strong dichotomy in the way online life and offline life were treated. This differential treatment is known as digital dualism, and it most commonly appears in the treatment of online spaces as less real and offline spaces as more real. This dichotomy was very clear in some cases, such as when participants received advice to simply ‘get offline’ as a way to cope or deal with the abuse. A deeper exploration of the data for evidence of digital dualism, however, revealed few clear-cut cases. This chapter focuses exclusively on digital dualism and its consequences for targets of online abuse.

4.2 Introduction

Online environments, such as social media, online games, email, and instant messaging, have become a central part of our existence. They are a principal mode through which people experience their social, personal, and economic lives. The term for this is “digital existence” (Lagerkvist, 2019), which captures an important new epoch in mediated
experience, but which also grows increasingly redundant as distinctions between the online and offline, the virtual and physical, collapse. In the last decade, much attention has been paid to the problems online abuse raises for women’s digital existence (Amnesty International, 2018; Barlow & Awan, 2016; Burkell & Gosse, 2019; Citron, 2014; Duggan, 2017; Hodson, Gosse, Veletsianos, & Houlden, 2018; Mantilla, 2015; Powell & Henry, 2017; West Coast LEAF, 2014). Despite the breadth of extant literature, online abuse remains a complex issue in need of further research.

This chapter aims to better understand the experiences of online abuse in relation to digital existence by sharing findings from a set of interviews with 15 women. In particular, the central focus of this chapter is digital dualism, which is the process of making and thinking a distinction between online and offline life, experiences, spaces, and most importantly for this study, harms (Jurgenson, 2011a). This distinction manifests in the treatment of offline life as more real than online life. The response to digital dualism is what I call “ontological labor,” a form of effort exerted by women to convince others, and in some cases themselves, that the online abuse they experience, and the impact of that abuse, is real. This chapter also lends much needed evidence to the currently under-utilized concept and problem of digital dualism (Jurgenson, 2011a, 2011b).

The first part of this chapter describes what digital dualism is, how distinctions between online and offline life have been addressed in academic literature, and ends with a description of how I use the term. The second part of this chapter focuses on findings from the interviews with women and offers an interpretation that demonstrates the impact of digital dualism vis-à-vis their experiences with online abuse. The final part of this chapter explores the concept of ontological labor and demonstrates how the women in this study engage in it.

Before moving forward, I want to note that it is necessary to differentiate linguistically between “online” and “offline” spaces to address the problem of digital dualism. By doing so, however, I am in some ways reinscribing the exact dichotomy I want to elide. There are, of course, reasons to use the language of “online” and “offline,” particularly as they describe different modes of communication and mediation. So while this chapter relies on
the argument that marking a distinction between online and offline makes almost no sense for many people whose lives and experiences in each are entwined, the fact remains that to talk about the enmeshed nature of experiences with and experiences without a screen, wi-fi connection, or device, I do require a reference point. I do not have a path out of this paradox, and so in this chapter I rely on this linguistic distinction, but I wish to acknowledge it upfront so as not to undermine the arguments I make.

4.3 Digital dualism

Media theorist Nathan Jurgenson (2011a, 2011b) popularized the concept of “digital dualism” in a series of essays on The Society Pages’ Cyborgology section. For Jurgenson (2011a), digital dualism is a bias that treats offline/physical life as real and online/digital life as virtual and somehow less real. Jurgenson points out that there is a strong and unflattering proclivity in the literature around digital culture that relies on the argument, more or less, that “the problem with social media is that people are trading the rich, physical and real nature of face-to-face contact for the digital, virtual and trivial quality of Facebook” (Jurgenson, 2011a, para. 6). The bias, in this case, is in the preferential treatment given to offline forms of communication, mediation, and interaction.

This bias also reinforces notions of online and offline life as separate and opposing. In the Cyborgology essays, Jurgenson (2011a) primarily critiques scholarly work and discussion for relying on such a tidy distinction between online and offline life. In particular, he critiques authors who continue to use now-outdated frameworks, such as Turkle’s (1984) concept of the “second self,” writing that “conceptually splitting so-called ‘first’ and ‘second’ selves creates a ‘false binary’ because ‘people are enmeshing their physical and digital selves to the point where the distinction is becoming increasingly irrelevant’” (Jurgenson, 2011a, para. 5). This irrelevance is central to Jurgenson’s critique, which he further develops later describing digital dualism as not only a bias (2011a) but also a fallacy (2011b). Given the biased and fallacious nature of digital dualism, Jurgenson (2011a) advocates for an alternative perspective, which he calls “augmented reality” (para. 2). Augmented reality rests on the understanding that material reality and digital information influence and inform one another (Jurgenson, 2009).
4.3.1 Beyond digital dualism: IRL fallacies, embodiment, and digital ontology

Other scholars have articulated the limitations of conceptually separating online and offline spaces, but the concept of digital dualism has not yet been fully explored in academic literature. Instead, it is more common for scholars to engage with the concept of digital dualism without naming it as such. For example, Robinson (2015) writes about an “online-versus-‘in real life’ fallacy” (p. 80). In her article, she reflects on her experience with online abuse, which was an instance of “highly publicized violence against Black folks” (p. 80), and explains that her surprise over the adverse impacts the abuse caused was not a result of “two worlds [unexpectedly] colliding” (p. 80), but rather the very belief that there are two worlds (i.e., online and offline life) unraveling before her. Other important works that contribute to understanding the nuances involved with making and thinking a distinction between online and offline life include the use of embodiment theory by feminist scholars (Richard & Gray, 2018) and scholars who research technology-facilitated violence and abuse (Powell & Henry, 2017), as well as scholars in the field of digital ontology (Lagerkvist, 2019; Schwartz, 2019).

Early internet researches argued that a virtual presence can liberate individuals from the bodily constraints of gender, race, size, and ability/disability, to name only a few (Haraway, 1991; Turkle, 1984). This cyberutopian concept is a form of digital disembodiment. Since then, feminist scholars have pushed back on this assumption and argued that the body—and bodily subjectivity—is central to the experience one has in online spaces (Pham, 2011; Richard & Gray, 2018). For example, as a way to nuance our understanding of how women operate online, Black cyberfeminists have adopted an intersectional framework that honors the complexity of identities “operating and existing in digital spaces” and argues that individuals cannot “rid bodily identifiers in any realm” (Richard & Gray, 2018, p.121). Thinking specifically about the erasure of race, Pham (2011) compares the rhetoric of digital disembodiment to the “neoliberal racial agenda of colorblindness” (p.3). Disconnecting the body from the user is not only impossible, but Pham further points out that such utopian conceptions of bodily liberation wrongly assume that “the disappearance of the body in cyberspace would effect the disappearance of the desire to consume
difference” (p. 3). This is to say that collapsing, erasing, or pretending to collapse and erase identities such as race and gender does not prevent individuals from having differential experiences based on their identity and social locations, but instead “conflates or ignores intragroup differences” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242) that are important to crafting open and equitable online spaces. Therefore, treating the body as necessarily tied to one’s online experience provides room to think through the body as a site of power and struggle that shapes digital spaces.

Powell and Henry (2017) explain that embodiment theory has been underutilized particularly in cybercriminology. As a result, they advocate for an analytical framework that incorporates a theory of digital embodiment to better understand the consequences of drawing a dichotomy between online and offline life. For them, digital embodiment offers important avenues for thinking about the way digital life is lived through our bodies (Powell & Henry, 2017). Writing specifically about technology-facilitated sexual violence, they point out that dominant conceptions of violence and abuse as physical and bodily devalue online harms, many of which are “non-contact’ offences” (Powell & Henry, 2017, p. 61). Digital embodiment, then, offers a connection between non-contact offenses and embodied harms.

Just as digital embodiment situates the body as central to the lived experience of digital culture, digital ontology demonstrates that vulnerability is a fundamental experience of being human whether that human experience is online or offline. It also recognizes that the philosophical tradition of ontology “has sought to eliminate or ignore the very embodied particularities that give vulnerability its shape and pull” (Schwartz, 2019, p. 82). This inclination to eliminate the body is heightened in socio-digital culture. Despite the appearance of being more technologically connected than ever before, digital culture might be pulling us away from understanding ourselves as ontological beings who are interconnected with the world and with each other (Miller, 2019). Miller (2019) points out that the distanced and mediated nature of online interactions offers a new kind of omnipresent, metaphysical condition in time and space “which is beyond the body as we currently understand it” (p. 178).
In response to these inclinations, digital ontology repositions embodiment and vulnerability as central to any discussion about digital existence. Schwartz (2019) argues that digital existence is not at all disembodied, but instead creates new demands for care and “complex vulnerabilities” that require rethinking and reorienting our relationship to familiar binaries like “mind and machine or body and text” (p. 85). These complex vulnerabilities are omnipresent, no longer tied to time and space. As such, they give rise to new possibilities of what it means to experience embodied vulnerability (Lagerkvist, 2019).

A key argument within digital ontology is that online spaces and digital existence give rise to a misunderstanding of our ontological status that manifests as a “heightened impression of invulnerability in online social encounters with others” (Miller, 2019, p. 178). This misunderstanding is an important characteristic of digital dualism and, as I later show, a leading cause as to why the women in this study engage in ontological labor.

4.3.2 A binary of habit: A habit born of discourse

The central concern in this chapter is not with expanding and nuancing the concept of digital dualism, though that work must be done to understand the consequences that emerge from it. My interest rather is in the fallout that stems from digital dualism. Establishing that pathway requires an understanding of how digital dualism operates. Jurgenson’s description of digital dualism as a bias (2011a) and a fallacy (2011b) is an important contribution and central to conceptualizing what I argue is a harmful distinction. However, I expand on Jurgenson’s original understanding of digital dualism and add that it is also a discourse that produces a habit, in addition to a bias and a fallacy. Acknowledging the discursive elements of digital dualism is important because it helps demonstrate how power is exercised through the language we use to talk about online and offline life (Butler, 1997; Fairclough, 1989).

More specifically, Jurgenson’s critique focuses specifically on the way some scholars discuss online and offline spaces. To extrapolate this to a larger public, who likely thinks less deliberately about their choice of language and position on such a topic, it is necessary to expand on Jurgenson’s concept of digital dualism to more clearly account for the casualness and naturalization—or the “habit of”—digital dualist thinking. Fairclough
(1989) writes that when discursive practices—ways of speaking, thinking, and being—are regularly deployed, the beliefs that fuel them can become “common sense” (p. 77). While digital dualist thinking might not be intentional, the tendency to speak in these terms is catchy—it spreads and becomes part of the socio-digital fabric. And once repeated often enough it becomes an existing convention that governs and legitimizes social relations (Fairclough, 1989). With these additions to the concept of digital dualism in mind, the remainder of the chapter address two questions: How do participants experience digital dualism in relation to online abuse? And what are the implications of these experiences for digital existence?

### 4.4 Methods

While anyone can be subjected to online abuse, research shows that women are more likely than men to be targeted (Duggan, 2017) and that women experience “a wider variety of online abuse, “including more serious violations” (Lenhart, Ybarra, Zickuhr & Price-Feeney, 2016, p. 4). This study aimed to better understand women’s experiences with digital dualism in relation to online abuse. As such, findings in this chapter come from a set of interviews with 15 women who had experienced online abuse. Recruitment posters containing a link to an online screening tool were distributed throughout a medium-sized city in Canada and were shared on Twitter, Facebook, and through listservs from personal accounts and third-party organizations. An invitation to participate was extended to anyone who fit the study’s inclusion criteria. This process continued until clear themes began to emerge in the data, at which point recruitment stopped. The interviews took place from May to October 2018 over telephone and Skype. Each interview lasted between 1 hour 15 minutes and 3 hours 30 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview guide.

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19. This study was trans-inclusive. The digital and analogue recruitment posters for this study indicated that anyone who identified as a woman was welcome to participate. No further demographic information on gender was collected. Given the gendered nature of online abuse (Mantilla, 2015), further iterations of this project ought to include non-binary individuals, as well. For now, this remains a limitation of the project.

20. Participants were required to be 18 or older, identify as a woman, and have been the target of online abuse.
The majority of women in this study were from Canada (n=13) and two were from the United States. They ranged between the ages of 21 and 44, with a mean age of 31. The experiences they discussed took place over a diverse range of online spaces including: major social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube; email and text messaging services; dating platforms such as Tinder and Plenty of Fish; massive multiplayer online games like RuneScape and Star Wars Galaxies; personal blogs and forums such as Reddit and Tumblr; and older sites like MSN, ICQ, and Myspace. The types of abuse they experienced were far more wide-ranging than the sites on which they experienced them. For the safety and protection of the participants in this study, all names have been changed and cities, schools, and places of work have been removed.

4.5 Digital dualism in everyday life: Findings

This section highlights the interview data that were about “digital dualism.” This includes any instance where participants mentioned a structural or conceptual separation between online and offline life. In total, the theme of digital dualism emerged in the data in three ways: as advice from others to turn off the computer, delete social media, and block users; as a denial of experiences as real; and as internalized by participants.

4.5.1 “You should stop using social media altogether”

A primary mode through which participants experienced the treatment of online and offline life as separate and opposing is in the advice they received from others when they shared their experiences of online abuse. For example, Ellie explained: “A big frustration for me is when I tell people about the problems I’m having and they say ‘well, you should stop using social media altogether, you should delete your Instagram, you should delete your Facebook, you should just stop.’” For Ellie, this is not a possibility: “I hate when people say that to me. I’m like, this is my fucking job, like, I can’t.” Ellie made the point that even if she did “just stop,” the consequences of not having an online presence would be disruptive and damaging to her career.
Another participant, Candice, expressed a similar sentiment, noting that the advice she received tended to overlook the fact that online interactions are embedded in offline social contexts:

People are like, why don’t you turn it off [...] but like, if you have a shitty situation at work why don’t you just stop? Leave your job, and never come back? Like that’s what people seem to kind of think, that you have total control (Candice).

Candice pointed out that online spaces are not necessarily independent from other aspects of people’s lives, and that there is an unreasonable expectation that you can ignore online abuse—“that you have total control.”

Abigail explained that in her experience people have also assumed that she had “total control.” In her case, the assumption was coupled with the expectation that perpetrators of her abuse were unknown and anonymous, but as she pointed out, that is not always the case:

The obvious response is always, well just block them. And that hasn’t changed, it was true ten years ago and it’s true now [...] but] these interactions were embedded in social contexts, they weren’t just like these random people that I could just block and never hear from again. It doesn’t work like that (Abigail).

Melody was also encouraged to “just block” her stalker when he began contacting her on different mobile apps:

Originally [my friends] recommended that I just block him off everything, like including I block his number. And the reason I didn’t do that was because I wanted to see what kind of messages he was sending so that I would have a record if I ever needed to report him or something (Melody).

Melody pointed out that blocking her stalker was not an option, despite her friend’s recommendation, because doing so would limit her ability to keep a record of his harassing behavior and potentially her ability to report him and protect herself. This is a stark
reminder of the inadequacy of advice to “get offline,” because not seeing the abuse does not render the abuse any less harmful.

Having received the same advice so often has made some participants reluctant to seek support. For instance, Ellie explained: “There are some people I love and care about who I don’t talk to about what’s going on in my life because I don’t want to hear them say, ‘oh, just get offline.’”

4.5.2 These aren’t “real social phenomena”

Participants in this study described encountering situations where the very real nature of their abuse was doubted, downplayed, or ignored. For example, during her undergraduate degree, Maya wanted to write a paper exploring online abuse as a way to think through her own experiences. Her professor at the time rejected the topic, telling her that online abuse was not a “real social phenomena” and nothing she had described was “real and had happened because it hadn’t happened in a face-to-face space.” Her professor instead asked why she did not instead focus on “the elements of the virtual in face-to-face space.”

The women I spoke to expressed the belief that online abuse is generally devalued and taken less seriously than other kinds of abuse, such as physical abuse. For instance, Maya sought therapy during the height of her abuse only to have those experiences dismissed:

I would end up talking to counselors about this and there certainly was a lot of not understanding that stuff that goes on online can and will hurt you [...] [There was one] counselor, she listened, she was very nice. She still had the tendency to say ‘oh don’t you think you’re giving this person power?’ So there was a little bit of victim-blaming going on where I think she still struggled to see anything experienced online as real (Maya).

At other times, she wanted—but was hesitant—to reach out:

There’s been times where I thought about calling a distress center just to be like, I’m experiencing some stuff, like PTSD [...] and [it would be great] to be able to actually
share that this was an online thing and not have someone say like, oh honey, don’t you know that that’s not real? (Maya).

Ellie explained that she was concerned that the onus would be on her to try to convince the therapist that the negative impact it has had on her is real: “[One reason for not seeking therapy] is that I think it would be more emotionally taxing for me to have to explain to someone what online abuse is.” Expressing a similar sentiment, Fiona explained that the abuse itself left her with little energy to justify or explain the harm she had experienced. For this reason, Fiona did not seek support from law enforcement out of anticipation that her abuse would not be taken seriously: “At the time there was nothing [no laws or legal avenues of support]. And if I had to sit down with like, some 60-year-old cop and try to explain to him what Twitter was? Forget it.” The concern here is twofold: first, that as targets of abuse you will have to explain (and re-explain) what online abuse is, how it manifests, and how it hurts; and second, after giving all of that emotional energy, you will be misunderstood or dismissed. This barrier to seeking support is amplified for certain communities where there is a history of state violence and tension with law enforcement.

The text-based and verbal nature of online abuse was also used as a way to deny women’s experiences of harm. Fiona explained: “Online abuse is seen as something that is in the ether. Like it’s just words. Actually, a couple of weeks ago I had a conversation about this with one of my coworkers. He doesn’t think that words hurt.” Maya explained that her therapist demonstrated the same attitude as Fiona’s co-worker, but focused on the online nature of those words—singling out the source of words as determinants of their impact: “Very often people’s harsh words do become part of your self-talk [...] So [it was hurtful] for somebody who had the expertise to be able to say, yes, words matter. Oh, but not when they are said online.”

While it might be relatively easy to shrug off the occasional insult, the repetition of injurious speech (Butler, 1997) is dangerous. As Maya explained:

Human beings connect through conversation and we do tremendously great things, but we can [also] do really evil things [...]. People talk each other out of suicidal
states, and they’ve talked each other into it. [...] I think when we discount that, we’re literally discounting part of what it means to be human (Maya).

Such speech constructs subjects through a process of “violating interpellation” (Butler, 1996, p. 204) that shapes and limits one’s understanding of themselves. This process involves more than just the harmful language spoken at that moment—it also invokes “a community and history” (Butler, 1996, p. 204) of words and speakers which represent larger structures of limitation, oppression, and marginality. For example, Wendy, who described herself as able to dismiss much of what is said to her online, explained that the cumulative nature of online abuse “gets to you after a while.”

The denial of online abuse as a real experience also came from perpetrators. Participants described how perpetrators shirked responsibility and downplayed the impact of their actions. For example, Trish explained that after confronting a man who shared her image without consent, the perpetrator became defensive: “He was like ‘go think of something in the real world’ and I was like, ‘just because it’s online doesn’t mean it’s not the real world’… he said something like ‘stop telling yourself that’ to get away with it.” Reflecting on this problem, Lilly pointed out:

> It doesn’t matter if they say it to your face or they say it to you online, you are damaged by this abuse, and you shouldn’t be able to say ‘oh well it was just on Facebook’ or hide behind the fact that you are on a keyboard (Lilly).

Ellie described comments she has received in which perpetrators tried to deny her space and context to understand their actions as violent or abusive by redirecting the harm: “One time a guy threatened to lock me up in Guantanamo, or like, one time they talked about flying me to Somalia so that I could experience what real violence was like.”

Perpetrators’ belief that online abuse is less injurious and less consequential to those targeted is self-serving. It works to detract from the harm perpetrators cause and allows

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21 This comment points to the intersection of sexism, misogyny, and colonialism. In addition to the misogynistic intent and denial of harm embedded in this comment, there is also a reproduction of damaging stereotypes born out of colonial sexism, which assumes that women in the Global South are treated worse than women in North America.
them to deflect responsibility. However, it also reflects a wider hierarchy of harm that has long circulated in offline spaces, where forms of abuse without physical markers are invisibilized and lack what little protection exists (Sims, 2008).

4.5.3 “Real life,” “real world”: Internalizing discourses

The phrases “real world” and “real life” were frequently adopted by participants in this study (used by 13 out of 15 participants). Participants sometimes knowingly used the term. For example, Ellie said: “I think obviously online abuse is real life, you know, quote-unquote ‘real-life abuse,’ because obviously online is real life.” She also pointed out that she uses the language “‘IRL [in real life] abuse’ and ‘digital abuse’” in gaming contexts. But most often participants unknowingly and casually used this language to mark a distinction between online and offline experiences. For example, Lilly used the term to point out that perpetrators of online abuse should face the same consequences as they would with other kinds of abuse: “I feel like they deserve to be treated just as if they had hurt me physically, like in real life.” Jane used the term to talk about the limitations of escaping online abuse: “There’s less control you can have online because there’s no way of really running, you’re running around within the construct of the internet, but in real life, you can literally run anywhere.” And Abigail used the term to point out that the comments said to her would likely not have been said offline: “I didn’t know how to respond to it because I don’t think he ever would have said those things to me in real life.”

Although participants use the terms “real world” and “real life” to mark a difference between online and offline abuse, under their experience, many participants do not have the benefit of fully engaging with this online/offline divide. To use Robinson’s (2015) point, online abuse unravels the perception that online and offline life are distinct from one another. While participants might discursively engage with distinctions between online and offline life, their position as targets of online abuse pulls them away from fully engaging in this divide and instead returns them to a place where online life and offline life are completely enmeshed. This “returning” occurs in two ways: through the impact of abuse (i.e., the way experiences of online abuse permeate a target’s emotions and embodied vulnerability), and through the content of the abuse they receive, which makes them think
about “what […] it’s like for [other] women in real life” (Candice). For example, Kate described being sent “booby traps” in the form of links to videos she was told to watch. When she followed the link it would lead to a woman being humiliated in a sexually violent way: “Even when someone would say like, Google ‘goatse’ or ‘two girls one cup’, those were pictures of real people, right? Like in real life situations and so it always forced your hand to think about real world violence” (Kate).

Participants also drew on similarities between online and offline abuse to contextualize their experiences, for example, by comparing them to other instances of street harassment and catcalling. Lilly explained: “For me, it falls under the same realm as when I was 16 and I’d walk down the street and people would grab my butt or catcall at me.” Kate described online abuse as her first experience with verbal harassment:

I remember my first catcall not being person to person, but just online […] The graphic ‘I’m going to suck your tits and have sex with you and whatever,’ it actually predated the first time I was yelled at in public (Kate).

The offline abuse and harassment women are regularly subjected to acts as another reminder that there is no difference between the consequences and embodied impact of abuse online and abuse offline.

For Melody, the gravity of her situation began to sink in only once she labeled her abuser’s behavior in relation to its offline counterpart: “He started messaging me on there and that’s when I was like, that’s just gone overboard, this is almost stalking, well I guess not almost, he’s a cyberstalker, essentially.” Like Melody, Ellie drew on the offline equivalent of the behavior to understand the significance and seriousness of her abuse:

When someone makes a two-hour video about you, like, the real life equivalent of that is someone holding a lecture to a lecture hall of tens of thousands of people talking about how you’re a horrible person and you need to be stopped (Ellie).

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22 Goatse is an internet shock site that operated in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Two girls one cup is the nickname for a Brazilian fetish pornographic video that circulated widely in the mid 2000s.
Participants commonly connected the online abuse they encountered to other types of offline abuse that they have experienced. This is a reminder that online abuse is not a distinct and separate form of abuse, but instead is part of a spectrum, or continuum, of abuse and violence (Kelly, 1987). Drawing on this continuum, participants also relied on similarities between online and offline abuse as a way to justify and account for the harm they experienced.

4.6 Digital dualism in everyday life: Interpretation

The separation of online and offline life came from participants themselves, the perpetrators of abuse, and from others with whom they shared their experiences. These findings are symptomatic of a culture that privileges face-to-face communication over digital communication (Jurgenson, 2011a) and where discursive practices of distinguishing online and offline life govern and influence the way we speak, think, and act toward digital culture. For example, recommending that participants turn off their computer, sign out of social media, or remove themselves from online spaces, stems in large part from the digital dualist belief that online and offline life is separate and opposing. Specifically, digital dualism operates here in two ways: first, it implicitly treats targets of online abuse as less vulnerable; and second, it relies on digital disembodiment.

The type of advice participants received implies that individuals can stop the harm associated with abuse by simply cutting off communication. These strategies, however, cannot be realized because digital life is real life and you cannot just “sign out” of life. Furthermore, this type of advice demonstrates a misunderstanding of a core tenet to our ontological status: that we are profoundly vulnerable. It assumes that people are somehow less vulnerable as humans in online spaces and can thus easily protect themselves from harm and abuse. The consequence of normalizing this type of advice—or, of treating it as common sense (Fairclough, 1989)—is that it implants in individuals, and their support networks, a sense of false control over the repercussions of online abuse. This type of advice also assumes that the abuse, and the harm that it causes, can be turned off as easily as the devices themselves, as if the abuse is localized to the screen before us, rather than something that sits with us—that we carry affectively throughout our day.
Powell and Henry (2017) use Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence to demonstrate how “dominant conception[s] of ‘real’ violence [...] hide or render invisible forms of non-physical violence” (p. 50). What they are pointing to here is a long history of physical abuse being considered more dangerous and certainly more worthy of attention than emotional, verbal, and psychological abuse. Online abuse has been treated in similar ways, which I argue is a product of digital dualist thinking. It also reflects wider attitudes toward gendered violence generally, where targets and victim-survivors are responsible for avoiding abuse (see chapter five) and the harm they experience is erased or minimized. Online abuse becomes another example of these non-contact offenses and thus adopts a similar fate in terms of the (lack of) urgency and care it is given.

In particular, the textual basis through which much of the online abuse occurs is used against targets as a way to try and convince them that the abuse, and thus their feelings, are not legitimate. Perpetrators also embody this digital dualist tendency and use it as a way to avoid responsibility and downplay the impact of their actions. In fact, perpetrators are susceptible to the same digital dualist habits as the families and friends’ participants rely on for support. The difference, however, is that for perpetrators, drawing that distinction between offline as real and online as unreal is overtly self-serving.

Despite perpetrators’ attempts to downplay their abusive actions, participants were clear that what is said, shown, and shared online produces the same effect as it would if these actions occurred offline. However, digital existence is full of contradictions and many of the participants in this study continue to use language like “real life” or the “real world” despite an expressed concern for others doing and thinking the same thing.

The casualness with which participants used the language of the “real world” and “real life” demonstrates the power of digital dualist thinking. As Fairclough (1989) explains, when discursive practices are repeated enough, they begin acting like common sense. In

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23 Not all online abuse is text based, of course. Harms involving image-based abuse, control over the Internet of Things (IoT), and some forms of cyberstalking do not necessarily involve text.
other words, the use of this language—"real world" and "real life"—reflects a system of hegemonic domination that participants are simultaneously critical of and participating in.

Importantly, when participants use the phrase “in real life” they are not doing it to belittle experiences or downplay their abuse or emotions, and to be clear, their friends and family are not necessarily doing so either. Digital dualist frameworks are widely accepted and naturalized in socio-digital culture and the casualness and banality of this reference point—the real world—is indicative of this. It is, however, important to try and move beyond these casual references because the way we talk about the interconnectedness of online and offline life influences the way we treat and act toward said connection. A person’s thoughts, actions, and choices are shaped by social conditions. Discursive practices, like those found in digital dualism, create social conditions that can too often limit possibilities for social existence (Butler, 1997), such as how individuals see themselves in relation to others and the wider public sphere.

4.7 Ontological labor

Citron (2009) writes that “the online harassment of women exemplifies twenty-first century behavior that profoundly harms women yet too often remains overlooked and even trivialized” (p. 373). Part of that trivialization stems from the digital dualist discourse that dismisses online spaces as merely virtual and less real and gives the “impression of a lack of embodied vulnerability” (Miller, 2019, p. 172).

But perhaps the most dangerous aspect of digital dualism is that those who tend to subscribe to the dichotomy fail to recognize that they do so. This is precisely Fairclough’s (1989) point about the way discourse becomes naturalized, appearing as “common sense” and making the power relations enacted through it difficult to identify. In the case of digital dualism, the power relations prioritize the physical over the virtual and the atom over the digit. Without acknowledging the practice of digital dualism, or the power relations that give it strength, individuals cannot understand the harm it causes. It is “a violence which is wielded precisely inasmuch as one does not perceive it as such” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2004, p. 272).
When digital dualism is naturalized and invisibilized it further erases the harm of online abuse because it hijacks an important process of recognition. Recognition is about being seen, heard, and having a framework to make meaning of and understand one’s experience. As Langlois (2014) points out, defining oneself and one’s experiences involve an element of recognition that requires “patterns and rhythms of relationality” which are granted by others (p. 142). Drawing on Crossley (2001), Lumsden and Morgan (2017) explain that symbolic violence systematically denies some people a “degree of recognition enjoyed by others” and represents “the felt and/or lived suffering” of those who are “denied a basic level of recognition by their wider society” (p. 930). If digital dualism denies or hijacks recognition, then ontological labor is a response that encourages the process of recognition to continue and it necessitates the consideration of embodied vulnerability in online spaces. Ontological labor also has a deeply political and historical lineage that demonstrates women’s struggle to have the violence and abuse they face taken seriously.

Ontological labor is the term I give to the process of overcoming what amounts to a denial of experience. The reactions and advice women receive about their online abuse—like being told to stop using social media altogether—and the way perpetrators claim they do not cause harm—for example, by telling women to “lighten up” because whatever said or shared was “just online”—is evidence of this denial. Ontological labor, then, involves dismantling other people’s perceptions of online spaces as less real and online abuse as less harmful.

The practice of ontological labor is not exactly new. Women have long had their experiences of abuse rendered invisible, dismissed as unimportant, or had the onus of proof and persuasion rest solely with them (Price, 2005). If there is a difference between the ontological labor women engage in as a result of online abuse, it is one of circumstance and not of measure. Ontological labor is different from other forms of negation women face in social life. Unlike gaslighting, the process of emotionally manipulating someone into questioning their sanity, the abuse women experience is not necessarily questioned, largely because textual and photographic evidence is abundant in these circumstances. In online abuse cases, it is the effect of/affect caused by the abuse which is called into
question. In other words, ontological labor is not about trying to show that something occurred, it is about trying to show others that it had a real impact.

The need to engage in ontological labor stems from a complex set of factors: the trivialization of women’s experiences, the treatment of non-contact offenses as less serious, and the common disbelief surrounding victim-survivors’ experiences of violence and abuse, to name a few. These factors are compounded in online contexts by digital dualism. Focusing specifically on this online component, ontological labor then comes from: 1) a widespread treatment and deep-seated understanding of online and offline life as separate and opposing; and 2) perceptions of vulnerability as primarily physical (which also involves a disconnect between social, physical, and psychical states of being). For the participants in this study, ontological labor is a gendered process performed in three key ways: demonstrating to others that one’s online life is not distinct from their offline life; convincing others that words are hurtful, and; constructing frameworks for exploring and understanding online abuse.

First, participants explain that being a target of online abuse means to be constantly demonstrating that online spaces are not distinct from other aspects of their lives. In Ellie’s experience, she found she had to explain to people that social media is part of her job, and thus disconnecting is not that simple. In Candice and Abigail’s experience, they found themselves having to reorient people’s conception of online abuse so that it includes already established social relations; relations that cannot be neatly separated as either online or offline. This work is exhausting and requires that targets of online abuse take it upon themselves to convince others why their experiences matter.

Second, participants perform ontological labor in the work they do to convince others that online abuse causes (embodied) harm. This involves disregarding perpetrators’ attempts to downplay or devalue the harm they cause and advocating for themselves by insisting that online abuse is real. This advocacy is quiet, and it emerges in conversations with friends, family, and therapists. Maya explained that she is practiced in trying to convince others that online abuse is real:
“So I’ll tell them, ‘okay, it’s not real?’ [They say] ‘Right, nothing that happens online is real.’ And I’ll ask them, ‘are you saying that in good faith?’ [They say] ‘Well I mean if it was real, you would actually show that you were really suffering.’ ‘Ok […] so nothing that happens online is real?’ [They say] ‘Correct.’ ‘Could you give me your credit card for a minute?’ and then [they say] woah, woah, woah! (Maya).

Third, participants’ performance of ontological labor includes an effort to create a framework and a space to understand online abuse as such. As I have demonstrated, participants tended to make sense of their experiences by pointing out the similarities they have with other forms of physical and/or offline abuse (e.g., when Ellie explained how outrageous the YouTube videos made about her are), or by relating them to their analog counterparts (e.g., when Melody made sense of her experience by comparing cyberstalking with stalking more broadly). Participants were aware that some of the abuse they experienced would have been considered more serious and treated differently if it had occurred in an offline context. As mentioned earlier, physical abuse is treated as more serious than emotional and verbal forms of abuse, and emotional and verbal forms of abuse displayed online are further trivialized. Following this logic, it is understandable that participants try to show that one harm, online harm, is similar to other, offline harms that tend to carry more weight. The act of relating online abuse to other types of abuse, which have established frameworks for processing the transgression, is a fundamental aspect of ontological labor. Comparing online abuse with offline abuse is a way for participants to rationalize their feelings and contextualize the harm in ways that are familiar to them precisely because there is no common framework for understanding online abuse in its own right. In some ways, then, comparing different forms of abuse is a way to create a framework and carve out a social existence for online abuse.

Ontological labor also involves an enormous cognitive burden that comes from the emotional toll that retelling experiences of abuse—any kind of abuse—has on an individual. Couple that emotional exhaustion with the likelihood of not having one’s abuse seen as abuse in the first place, and the strength of digital dualism as a barrier begins to take shape. While also adding to the labor women already perform to keep themselves safe (e.g., avoid walking alone, dress “with discretion,” Gardner, 1990), this ontological
negation and undermining of experience denies them permission from themselves or from others to feel the impact of such abuse. It is more important to understand that treating online and offline life as separate is itself a form of harm and barrier to support. Whether or not there is a difference between online and offline life, treating them as though there is no difference can help individuals, like the women in this study, feel supported throughout what is undoubtedly a difficult and harmful experience.

Not all women will experience ontological labor in the same way. Depending on their intersecting identities, their labor may be more onerous. As Sexwale (1994) explains, “although many forms of violence against women are common across the board, some forms and/or their incidence are strictly related to one’s positioning in terms of the diversity of our realities” (p. 200). These same realities influence the level of ontological labor that targets engage in. Not only are the bodies we inhabit tied to the lives we live through online spaces, but when confronted with online abuse, those bodies become barriers to access in online and offline spaces: religion, race, sexuality, and gender become factors, among many others, that complicate support seeking and being believed.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter expands on the original concept of digital dualism as a bias (Jurgenson, 2011a) and fallacy (Jurgenson, 2011b), and demonstrates the way it operates as a discourse and a habit. As a discursive practice, digital dualism denies women who experience online abuse the space they deserve to have that abuse seen, interpreted, and treated as real and embodied. For participants, this applies to other social media users (i.e., the perpetrators of abuse) and people and institutions on whom the women have leaned for support (such as therapists, friends, and family). The consequences of digital dualism, beyond the difficulty of creating a shared communicative framework—which is all but impossible when online abuse is treated as less real and thus less harmful than contact offenses like physical abuse—result in a complex form of bringing experiences of harm into being. I call this process ontological labor, as it represents a type of work targets of online abuse engage in as a result of digital dualism to give meaning and existence to the harm they experienced. It is a labor that produces the capacity to convince others, and themselves, that the harm
they experienced *was real*. Importantly, ontological labor focuses on validating experiences of online abuse as real and requires women to go above and beyond already expected and practiced safety work to keep spaces of sociality—such as social media, mobile communication apps, and online game sites—accessible and safe. Hence collapsing the online/offline divide becomes an important step toward supporting targets of online abuse, because having space and capacity to experience phenomena as real is a core element of one’s existence, digital or otherwise.

### 4.9 References


Chapter Five. “Don’t take on the responsibility of somebody else’s fucked up behavior”: Responding to online abuse in the context of barriers to support.

5.1 Bridging chapter four and five

In the previous two chapters, I explore a range of barriers targets of online abuse experience. In the face of these barriers, targets are left with few options to seek justice, feel vindicated, or get help processing the emotional turbulence that comes from online abuse. Left with few formal options for targets to respond to the abuse, women take it upon themselves to respond. In this chapter, I examine the way participants respond to online abuse in the face of such barriers and lack of support. I further enrich this framework by exploring the way social oppression strategies compound barriers to support. These strategies are specifically gendered in nature and include cultural conditions such as rape culture and practices such as victim-blaming, slut-shaming, rape myth acceptance, and conceptions of the ideal victim. These strategies predate online abuse but have a strong influence in online spaces. They send the message to women that they are responsible for their safety and well-being and that it is up to them to prevent their own victimization. Combined with the absence of a strong support ecosystem, these social oppression strategies work together to responsibilize targets of online abuse. Responsibilization is a macro-level problem that adversely impacts the micro-level by placing the burden of responsibility on the individual. By this same token, responsibilization benefits meso- and exo-level barriers by further removing pressure from institutions, such as social media companies, who ought to share more of the responsibility. In other words, responsibilization is all the more dangerous in a support ecosystem where large tech oligopolies already shirk responsibility and the law tends to have a loose grip. As a result of this landscape—specifically, a bare support landscape filled with social oppression strategies—participants engage in a range of responses that suggest they are responsibilized. These include blame, normalization, minimization, and control-seeking behaviors. In this chapter I nuance these responses by placing them in the context of the above-mentioned landscape.
5.2 Introduction

Decades of research on offline violence against women and girls (VAWG), such as date rape or street harassment, have established that women and girls are held responsible for their safety and well-being (Vera Gray, 2017). Current literature suggests that this conclusion remains true online: women targeted by online abuse are held accountable for the perpetrator’s online behavior and, consequently, are forced to take ownership of the task of avoiding, preventing, and responding to the abuse perpetrated against them (Chadha et al., 2020; Dobson, 2017; Jane, 2017b). This ‘responsibility-taking’ indicates that targets have been responsibilized.

Responsibilization is a strategy levied in service of structures of oppression, including larger socio-cultural ideologies like patriarchy, white supremacy, and colonialism. Responsibilization first appears in the form of hegemonic discourses in which responsibility for personal-freedom, well-being, and maximizing quality of life is placed on the individual (Foucault, 1977-78/2004). Placing these aspirations on the individual removes accountability from larger institutions and serves to absolve them of the responsibility to rectify harms that occur as a result of structures of oppression. These hegemonic discourses operate through cultural practices, which I call social oppression strategies, that impact individuals directly.24 In the case of VAWG, examples of responsibilization techniques through social oppression strategies include rape culture and victim-blaming, to name only a few. These social oppression strategies work to shift responsibility for safety on to women, rendering them accountable for preventing their own abuse and violence. Because responsibilization is an indirect process, it is difficult to measure. Thus, in order to understand how responsibilization manifests, I instead look for indicators—or evidence to suggest—that individuals have become responsibilized. In this chapter, I explore women’s responses to abuse in the context of barriers to support. I find

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24 In this chapter social oppression strategies refer to any act (e.g. victim-blaming), setting (e.g. rape culture), category (e.g. the ideal victim), or belief (e.g. rape myth acceptance) that socially disadvantages women, girls, transgender and non-binary folx in the service of patriarchy.
four indicators in participants’ responses that suggest they have become responsibilized: blame, normalization, minimization, and control-seeking.

First, I review relevant literature related to women’s responses to online abuse, followed by an expanded definition of responsibilization. I then elaborate on the harmful social oppression strategies that place responsibility for safety and well-being on targets of abuse and violence. Finally, I present and discuss findings from a set of interviews with 15 women who have experienced online abuse. Their responses to the abuse show how blame, normalization, minimization, and control-seeking are strategies that ultimately hold them accountable for their abusers’ behavior.

5.3 Women’s responses to online abuse

Women respond to online abuse in a wide variety of ways. The most common responses include blocking and deleting content and users, using pseudonyms, and withdrawing from online spaces, or avoiding them altogether (Chadha et al., 2020; Vitis & Gilmour, 2016). Other common strategies include self-monitoring, impression management, and self-censoring (Chadha et al., 2020; Citron, 2014). Rationalizing abusive actions (Jane, 2017b) and treating them as normal (Chadha, 2020) or “taken-for-granted” (Dobson, 2019, p. 155) is also common. Liz Kelly (2012) coined the term safety work to describe precisely these kinds of actions and behaviors that Vera Gray (2018) describes as “strategies that women develop in response to their experiences in public” (p. 14). In Chadha et al. (2020), participants also engaged in safety work, treating online abuse “as a predictable—even inevitable—phenomenon that women cannot escape when using social media” (p. 240).

But this does not suggest that targets of online abuse are passive. Many targets of online abuse respond assertively, engaging in proactive behaviors including forming counter-publics that allow them to resist online abuse as a collective (Powell, 2015; Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018). Jane (2017b) characterizes these varied reactions as flight or fight responses. “The former,” she writes, “has a chilling effect” that can cause targets of online abuse to limit or refrain from using the internet and taking up space online (p. 58). “The latter,” on the other hand, “manifests in the individual and collective push-back” (Jane,
The fight response has grown increasingly visible in public spaces, providing new directions for research into community responses and other assertive strategies including naming and shaming bad behavior, and informal avenues of justice.

Community responses to online abuse sometimes use hashtags as a way to unify their message. #IamJada (Powell, 2015), for example, was a social media campaign created in response to the hashtag #JadaPose. #JadaPose was a “sickening trend” (Bates, 2014) where users mocked the photograph of an unconscious woman whose sexual assault had been photographed and shared on social media. In an act of reclaiming, then 16-year-old Jada posted a photo of herself flexing a solidarity fist with the hashtag #IamJada. A much larger community responded using the same hashtag to send supportive messages, calls to end rape culture, and images posing with the same solidarity fist. Naming and shaming bad behavior includes the creation of (often public) resources, like Instagranniepants, that point out inappropriate behavior (Vitis & Gilmour, 2016). Artist Anna Gensler started the Instagranniepants account to document unwanted and highly inappropriate comments she received from men on dating websites, posting to the account hand-drawn images of their comments next to naked cartoon caricatures. According to her Instagram bio, the purpose of this account is to objectify men “who objectify women, in 3 easy steps: Man sends crude line via internet. Draw him naked. Send portrait to lucky man, enjoy results” (Instagranniepants, 2019). On some occasions, she also documents the man’s response to her Instagram post of the drawing. Finally, public displays of informal justice, are of serious interest and consequence. These responses are known as what Jane (2016) refers to as feminist digilantism (Jane, 2016). Digilantism is a term used to describe a “spectrum of do-it-yourself [DIY] attempts to secure justice online” (Jane, 2017a, p. 3). These methods can include “trickery, persuasion, reputation assaults, surveillance, public shaming, [and] calls to action” (Jane, 2017a, p. 3). The objective of digilante responses varies from person to person. One common objective is to create accountability, as seen with other public displays of informal justice, such as Instagranniepants. Another is to offer other avenues of critical witnessing (Vitis & Gilmour, 2016) by bringing attention to
abusive material that otherwise would not have been viewed by anyone other than the intended recipient (Jane, 2017).

One example of a widely applauded feminist digilante is Alanah Pearce, a video game journalist who contacted her abusers’ mothers to expose their behavior and posted the embarrassing exchanges online. Pearce’s response was widely distributed and frequently touted as “perfect” (Jane, 2016). Such digilante responses aim to create “offender accountability and control” (Powell, 2015, p. 582, emphasis in original), aspects of support that are currently absent for targets of online abuse. However, Jane (Jane, 2017a) cautions readers who are overly optimistic about such responses: she argues that, when DIY justice is heralded as a great response to online abuse, it might inadvertently make others assume that no other interventions are required. To her point, requiring that women be the ones to seek or exact justice does shift the problem of online abuse from a public to a private concern (Jane, 2017a), and alleviates pressure on institutions to do more.

However, such exposure vis-à-vis digilante responses is not always effective. Feminist digilante efforts have at times exacerbated the original abuse, a common problem that occurs when targets of abuse feed the trolls (MacKinnon & Zuckerman, 2012). In the case of Olivia Melville, who reposted derogatory comments aimed at her on her public Facebook page, the strategy she used had the unintended consequence of amplifying the abuse. She found herself targeted by a wider audience and with increasingly aggressive comments, which ultimately reduced aspects of her agency she was trying to regain in the first place (Jane 2017a).

There are two identifiable types of digilantism: 1) the type in which targets do not identify the perpetrator and instead focus on raising awareness, and 2) the type in which targets identify the abuser and encourage others to take some kind of action (Jane, 2017a). The former is the kind of digilante justice Gensler exhibits with Instagranniepants. By choosing not to publish the profiles of the men who sent her lewd and sexually aggressive comments, “Gensler departs from the more vindictive expositional aspects of traditional shaming practices and focuses attention on the behaviors and attitudes being exhibited rather than making the shame subject personally identifiable” (Vitis & Gilmour, 2016, p. 14). The
latter kind involves more risk for everyone involved and is ethically questionable. Overall, Jane’s (2016) primary concern is that DIY justice will not adequately address the problem of online abuse. Responsibility should not fall to the target of abuse. Instead, there needs to be a concerted effort to hold perpetrators responsible across many sectors (see chapter three).

Nonetheless, digital communication tools allow users to create new social practices that wrest control from the technologies’ patriarchal roots. This accessibility provides avenues for informal justice outside of regulatory state justice (Powell, 2015). While there are many ways to do this, one particularly effective way is through sharing one’s experience of victimization, abuse, and/or violence with an audience that immediately acknowledges the harm incurred. Such sharing can lead to community validation: Vitis and Gilmour (2016) write that “public and communal records of harassment function as a personal testimony” that achieves validity through “critical witnessing” (Vitis & Gilmour, 2016, p. 6).

Such informal justice and DIY responses arise, in part, from the underwhelming response and support provided by policymakers, law enforcement, and social media and gaming companies. In other words, targets respond not only to the abuse itself but must also respond to the “dearth of adequate institutional responses” (Jane, 2017a, p. 2). In chapter three, these support barriers are examined in more depth. These included a lack of a communicative framework, which makes effectively labeling their experiences of abuse as abusive, and discussing it with others, a difficult task. Also, by firmly distinguishing between online and offline spaces, friends and family compartmentalized the harm as only occurring online (see also chapter four). This is an example of digital dualism—the habit of treating online spaces as distinct from and less real than their offline counterparts. Finally, platform barriers were most frequently discussed by participants, with ineffective reporting processes and a lack of legal, social, and ethical responsibility noted as primary concerns.

Throughout the literature that looks at women’s responses to online abuse, we find themes of safety work (Vera Gray, 2018), awareness-raising (Vitis & Gilmour, 2016), galvanizing communities (Lawson, 2018), and efforts to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions
(Jane, 2016). Absent from this literature are responses that involve or rely on organizations and institutions (such as the law or social media companies). In their 2015 report on VAWG, the United Nations (UN) outline the lack of institutional, legal, regulatory, and policy measure to support and protect women from online abuse (The Broadband Commission, 2015). The adverse impact that a lack of support from stakeholders can have—stakeholders who allege to have women, BIPOC, or gender non-binary individual’s protection in mind—is enormously problematic. Considering what we know about how women commonly respond to online abuse, coupled with the established lack of support available to targets of online abuse, we can see that women are often left carrying the burden of safety and well-being online, just as they have been in offline spaces. This process is called responsibilization.

5.4 Responsibilization

Responsibilization is a mechanism of governance that shifts responsibility for social risks (such as poverty, illness, or abuse and violence) onto individuals, where previously that responsibility was the duty of someone else or was not considered a responsibility in the first place (Kempster, 2012). Like discourse, responsibilization operates through “remote and indirect action” (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017, p. 216) by developing “techniques for leading and controlling individuals without at the same time being responsible for them [i.e. the individuals under control]” (Lemke, 2001, p. 201).

Responsibilization is closely associated with Foucault’s (1977-78/2004) work on governmentality. Unlike contemporary uses of the terms governance and government, which refer to political and state action, Foucault (1977-78/2004) employs an older meaning that describes “movement in space, material subsistence, diet, the care given to an individual and the health one can assure him, and also to the exercise of command, of a constant, zealous, active, and always benevolent prescriptive activity” (p. 167). More concisely, Foucault defines government “as the ‘conduct of conduct’ and thus as a term which ranges from ‘governing the self’ to ‘governing others’” (Lemke, 2001, p. 191). This use of the term governance or government is important because it offers a way to point to
and critique the many processes that shape, influence, and possibly control behavior. Responsibilization is one of these processes.

This mechanism can be applied in many domains, and “leads to areas of social responsibility becoming a matter of personal provisions” (p. Lemke, 2001, p. 201). For example, protection from sexual violence still belongs to the domain of law enforcement. However, such protection has strongly adopted discourses that position women, gender non-binary, and other high-risk target groups as central in preventing their victimization (Vera Gray, 2018). Appeals to this responsibility include policing one’s clothing, never leaving one’s drink unattended, and avoiding walking alone as if it is the victim’s own decisions that place them at fault for being drugged and/or attacked.

Responsibilization always operates in service of power and is typically accounted for by an appeal to freedom. Individuals are persuaded to take responsibility for their well-being with the promise of achieving “personal freedom, possibilities of self-realization and maximization of quality of life” (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017, p. 216-217). As such, neoliberalism, arguably, is the most common site where power is critiqued in this sense. The dominant narrative here is that individuals are responsible for the conditions of their own lives, as opposed to a broader understanding of humans as beings subjected to power structures outside of their control. However, promises of ‘personal freedom,’ ‘self-realization,’ and ‘maximization of quality of life,’ to name only a few, serve other power structures, as well. These power structures include, and are not limited to, tech oligopolies, misogyny, patriarchy, a colonial sense of justice, and the discourses of violence and abuse they produce.

While the neo-liberal appeal to personal freedom is rightfully critiqued as a primary agent of responsibilization, Pyysiäinen et al. (2017) argue that individuals may instead “end up in situations where choices are not rewarded [such as maximization of quality of life] but instead, risks are realized [such as crime victimization]” (p. 221). The authors call this “responsibilization through threat to personal control” (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017, p.
The idea here is that individuals become responsibilized through a perceived threat to their safety and well-being. When this occurs, there are two likely outcomes: indifference or control.

Indifference is a form of learned helplessness where people learn “that they cannot influence the rule that works upon them and thus relinquish efforts to change the course of things” (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017, p. 217). As a state of feeling and response, learned helplessness occurs when an individual expects to have no control over a situation (Mikulincer, 1994) and typically develops over time (Prihadi et al., 2019). On first appearance, this may seem like a departure from responsibility-taking and thus responsibilization; upon closer inspection, however, it fulfills the same mandate. Rather than becoming responsibilized by way of realizing and exercising personal freedom to extract themselves from an abusive situation, people are rendered complacent, silent, or indifferent toward the abuse (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017). This works in the service of power as it effectively removes individuals from the pool of people who need to be directly governed. In other words, people who become indifferent may not challenge other powers, such as law enforcement in the case of sexual violence. They also no longer require attention or resources from such institutions, and in that way remove responsibility from such powers. It results in a “‘silent conforming’ or taming of resistance instead of a responsibilization proper” (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017, p. 222).

Control, on the other hand, is a complementary but opposite reaction to “responsibilization through threat to personal control” (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017, p. 217). Having a sense of control allows individuals to better cope with stress (Endler et al., 2000). This is true regardless of whether the control is actual or perceived, meaning the perception of control is enough to ease stress for individuals in difficult situations (Endler et al., 2000). This differs from learned helplessness: rather than relinquish their “attempts at controllability,” individuals “strive to restore their threatened personal control” (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017, p. 222). Controllability is achieved when targets assume (at least some) responsibility and

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26 Pyysiäinen, Halpi, and Guilfoyle (2017) are interested in responsibilization as an instrument of neo-liberal governmentality. While my research has implications for neo-liberalism and neo-liberal governmentality, such a focus is outside the confines of this chapter.
through that regain a sense of dominion over a situation (Hassija & Gray, 2013). For example, in the case of sexual violence, women may choose not to leave their drink unattended or choose to walk in groups because they believe it decreases their chance of an attack.

These avenues to responsibilization—appeals to freedom and threats of a loss of control—are important for understanding how the “indirect action” of responsibilization works on individuals (i.e., the hegemonic motivation behind responsibilization). What these accounts fail to do is point to “the role social power structures play in reproducing the established order” (Masquelier, 2017, pp. 55-56). So, while Foucault’s (1977-78/2004) account of responsibility-taking is successfully located in neoliberal political contexts, he—and, I would add, Pyssiäinen et al. (2017)—does not ground the analysis in the material conditions that impose “representations embodying the interests of the socially dominant [read: white cismen]” (Masquelier, 2017, p. 55). This renders accounts of personal responsibilization devoid of social and material conditions. Such conditions are a key source of understanding responsibilization because they account for the more practical processes that “compel individuals to regard themselves … as personally responsible for their actions” (Masquelier, 2017, p. 47, emphasis added).

When looking at something as materially embedded as violence and abuse, it is irresponsible not to look at the practical processes that drive responsibility-taking. This is especially true for gendered expressions of violence and abuse because men are not governed using the same techniques as women.27 In the following section, I review social oppression strategies that operate as techniques of responsibilization exercised against women.

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27 The same argument can be made for Black people, Indigenous people, people of color, LGBTQI2+, and gender non-binary individuals, all of whom are not governed by the same techniques as white, cisgender individuals.
5.5 Social oppression strategies

Extant literature on VAWG demonstrates the way victim-survivors become responsible for protecting themselves against violence and abuse (Dawtry et al., 2019; Fast & Richardson, 2019; Franiuk et al., 2008; Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018). Many factors contribute to such responsibilization, but the most salient “responsibilization techniques” (Karaian, 2014, p. 84) are the primary tenets of rape culture: rape-myths; victim-blaming; slut-shaming; and the concept of the ideal victim. These social oppression strategies contribute to how society and individuals think about and discuss targets, victims, and survivors of abuse, which in turn shapes how targets view and conduct themselves.

Rape culture is the term given to a culture whose media objects, attitudes, ideologies, and economics normalize male aggression and, in fact, position it as desirable (Buchwald, et al., 2005; Lumsden & Morgan, 2017). Rape culture also normalizes, or at least permisses, the use of language with a particularly violent and derogatory flair (Jane, 2014). For example, one of the most common tactics levied against women online is the rape threat (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017). As Jane (2014) explains, online discourse “has developed an economy which trades in the rape threat, the snuff fantasy and an endless daisy chain of accusations that yet another ‘slut’ is a ‘dumb bitch ass cum dumpster’ (joeyncarsensmom 2010) who deserves to ‘Choke And Die On That Dick’ (‘Dear Slut, I Hope You Choke and Die on That Dick’ 2013)” (p. 566). Rape threats are “the modus operandi” for those who want to critique women journalists, politicians, and other public-facing individuals (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017, p. 928).

Born of rape culture is a society rife with rape myth acceptance. Rape myths are widely held beliefs that justify and excuse men’s aggression against women (Dawtry et al., 2019). Typical rape myths include expected responses to assault: “why didn’t she fight back? Why doesn’t she have any bruises?” Or, the perception that women frequently lie about assault,

28 In this article, Jane (2014) argues that “Despite the risk of causing discomfort or offence” online abuse “must not only be spoken of, but must be spoken of in its unpurgated entirety because euphemisms and generic descriptors such as ‘offensive’ or ‘sexually explicit’ simply cannot convey the hostile and hyperbolic misogyny” embedded in this language (p. 559). Hence the explicit language.
and the belief that women are culpable in their victimization by drinking alcohol, dressing inappropriately, and so on. A well-established consequence of rape-myth acceptance, and thus rape culture, is victim-blaming.

In victim-blaming, people imply that targets of abuse and violence did something to warrant or invite the abuse, “such as not having boundaries, assertiveness skills, self-esteem, or a knowledge of self-defense” (Fast & Richardson, 2019, p. 10). Victim-blaming attitudes sometimes describe the abuse as mutual, when in fact is it both unilateral and unidirectional (Fast & Richardson, 2019). But at its core, it works by excusing the perpetrator and removing power and agency from those who have been harmed (Fast & Richardson, 2019).

Being inundated, it would seem, by victim-blaming and rape-myth supportive content shapes the way other people think about targets of abuse and violence. Stubbs-Richardson et al. (2018) looked at the online social influence of victim-blaming versus victim-supporting tweets surrounding three rape cases (the story of Rehtaeh Parsons and the Steubenville and Torrington rape trials). They found that users who tweeted victim-blaming tweets had more followers and received more retweets than those tweeting victim-supporting content (Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018). These findings become more frightening when placed in the context of work by Franiuk et al. (2008), whose research found that when exposed to rape-myth supportive media (such as victim-blaming tweets), participants were more likely to absolve perpetrators of responsibility (Franiuk et al., 2008). These effects prevent targets of online abuse from seeking formal avenues of support, as victim-blaming “adds to the shame and humiliation that they already feel” (Fast & Richardson, 2019, p. 10).

According to Stubbs-Richardson et al. (2018), rape myths circulate at the macro-level, as well as the community and individual level. A very clear example of macro-level circulation is found in anti-sexting public service announcements (PSAs). Dobson’s (2019) analysis of anti-sexting PSAs found that teenage girls are positioned as the primary target of intimate-image related abuses, and “also as the main agents responsible for preventing such [abuses] by not engaging in any kind of sexual self-imaging, even when their images
have been shared non-consensually” (Dobson, 2019, p. 149). This approach, though unsurprising, is peculiar as it swaps harm reduction for risk management, the result being educational tools for potential targets of abuse “in which perpetrators of abuse or violence are strangely absent’ (Albury and Crawford, 2012, p. 465)” (Dobson, 2019, p. 149).

The difficulty that women experience seeking and getting support in such an unsupportive landscape (i.e. a landscape rife with rape myth acceptance and the amplification of victim-blaming messages) is magnified by the concept of the “ideal victim” (Christie, 1986). The ideal victim is “reasonable, rational, and responsible” (Comack & Peter, 2005, p. 298) and is to “behave as if nothing untoward has happened to her” (Comack & Peter, 2005, p. 299). In other words, it is both an imposed identity and an expectation for a certain performance from targets of abuse—one that is unattainable because it is not based in reality. In other words, the ‘ideal victim’ is an impossible standard that targets of violence and abuse measure themselves against. When targets inevitably fail to meet this impossible standard, that ‘failure’ is seen as a personal failing, preventing women from reporting the abuse or seeking support for their abuse. This leads to taking on the responsibility for abuse. The ‘ideal victim’ is further contingent on social practices, class, and subject positions like race, gender, and sexuality (Cross, 2018).

As the above section shows, rape culture, rape-myth acceptance, victim-blaming, and stereotypes of the ideal victim work together to responsibilize women. In analyzing the interviews with women who experienced online abuse, I looked for evidence of responsibilization. I found that, while participants did not point to how they became responsibilized—that is, they do not state the influence of social oppression strategies directly—they nonetheless demonstrate evidence of personal responsibilization by way of the kinds of real responses they have to online abuse. In the next section, I examine four themes that emerged from the responses that participants had to online abuse.

5.6 Findings

This section reports on four themes that emerged from 15 interviews with women targeted by online abuse. Throughout the interviews, participants indicated they responded to
online abuse by blocking and reporting content and users to social media and gaming
moderators, talking with friends and family, and feeling angry, fearful, and lonely. Underlying these responses were common themes that suggest participants’ adopted
practices of personal responsibilization. The four themes—blame, normalization,
minimization, and control—were influential throughout the narrative of participants’
experiences and reflect foundational elements of their response processes. This analysis
also considers reported responses from friends and family of the targets, when those
responses contribute to participants’ responsibilization.

5.6.1 Blame

Throughout the interviews, responsibilization manifested as blame for the abuse
participants experienced. Sometimes the blame was ascribed retrospectively. For example,
reflecting on the early days of communicating with her stalker, Melody explained: “We
started talking and eventually he asked for my number so that we could text and, well, so I
gave it to him […] but] knowing what I know now I shouldn’t have done that so soon.”
During the interview, Melody continued to focus on the mistakes she
made that contributed
to the abuse: “I think unfortunately the mistake I made was being very open with him
because that’s naturally how I am and so throughout our conversations, I probably told him
a lot more than I should about myself.”

The women in this study expressed on some level an awareness that online abuse was not
their fault. Nevertheless, partial blame remained a common response. Like Melody,
Candice also shared responsibility with her abusers. Referring to her username and her
use of voice chat, both of which revealed her gender identity, Candice said, “at that point,
I was like, this is my first experience and I wasn’t very guarded with my information, with
being female, like I didn’t really think about it.” Candice explained that she is now “extra
careful” about what information she shares and does not reveal her gender, as she believed
these actions contributed to the abuse and harassment she endured.

Relatedly, some participants were quick to point to other online behaviors that they
proactively avoided because they could invite abuse. For example, Lilly expressed her
surprise over men messaging her because she felt the content of her social media profiles
were carefully curated and did not “give off” the impression that inappropriate messages are welcomed:

“My public profile is about books, it’s about feminism, it’s about One Less, it’s about Me Too, it’s about mental health. These are all things that I feel strongly about. And under no circumstances is it in any way, you know those social media sites that are very like—look at me in a bra, look at me in a bikini. It’s got nothing to do with that and yet I still constantly get private messages from men saying ‘dtf?’ [down to fuck?] And I’m going yes, what part of my book blog makes you think ‘okay, let’s do that’” (Lilly).

The implication here is that some online users behave in ways that do welcome online abuse. So, while Lilly is not applying self-blame, she indicates that there are some behaviors whereby she could fathom being blamed. Lilly admitted that this line of thinking is “very anti-feminist,” but that people should understand that “anything can be changed to be inappropriate if you’re not careful.” As a result, Lilly feels she must be hyper-attuned to the potential misuse of posts and photos she shares online.

Abigail also explained that she restricts her behavior to pre-emptively dissuade abuse:

“It’s literally just in the last maybe four months that I’ve been thinking about how extraordinarily careful I am to never put myself in a situation, like much more so than when I look around at my friends, I’m much more careful than my friends. I’m much more likely to be very meticulous and careful about how I respond to situations and what situations I put myself in than most of the friends that I would be able to compare myself to. So, an example of that is like, I’m using Tinder, but I’m not putting my real name on Tinder” (Abigail).

Both Abigail and Lilly expressed a belief that they can modify their behavior to avoid or mitigate abuse. This is less of an example of sharing or adopting blame, and more an example of internalized victim-blaming wherein participants come to believe that some actions are blameworthy and thus need to be avoided. Blame in these later instances (with Abigail and Lilly) is not placed on the self (as with Melody and Candice), but the possibility
that some actions could result in feeling blamed nonetheless influenced their behavior and decision-making.

Participants’ expressions of blame demonstrate responsibility-taking for their abuse. The attitudes that fuel self-blame and internalized victim-blaming are understandable in a culture that normalizes male aggression and tells women they are responsible for keeping safe from abuse and violence. Participants shared no shortage of examples where they received such messages. For example, people often told Ellie to “quit using social media because [she is] bringing this on [her]self” (Ellie) and Maya learned that her characters must be aware of how they dress in-game so as not the attract unwanted attention. Reflecting on one incident she recalls: “Out of the blue, [someone said] ‘who’s the slut?’ Two dudes walk in [to the game] and the rude comments start, and then they argue, ‘well you shouldn’t be dressed like that if you don’t want comments like that’ [Audible sigh]” (Maya).

Despite sometimes taking on some of the blame for their victimization, participants wanted to advocate for targets and let others know that nothing a person does online warrants abuse and that people should not blame themselves:

“You should never accept what is said online and you should never blame yourself for what is being said […] You are entitled to your feelings and no one has the right to tell you how you should or should not feel […] Saying you need a thicker skin is the modern-day version of ‘you need a longer skirt’” (Wendy).

Abigail had a similar message:

“Even if you did do something where you knew this was going to be the outcome, that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have done it. That doesn’t mean you have to feel guilty about it. That doesn’t mean that this is somehow your responsibility to fix […] Don’t blame yourself for this, don’t take on the responsibility of somebody else’s fucked up behavior. Don’t absorb that” (Abigail).

The dualism of acknowledging that people should not accept blame for any abuse they experience, while at the same time still accepting blame or seeing actions as blameworthy,
speaks to the hegemonic nature of responsibilization. That both of these beliefs can be held at once demonstrates responsibilization’s insidious operation.

5.6.2 Normalization

Participants expressed normalizing online abuse in two ways. First, as an expected experience of being online. And second, as a condition to be accepted in order to continue engaging online.

5.6.2.1 Online abuse is an expectation

Participants indicated that they have come to expect online abuse as “part and parcel of having an online presence” (Maggie). Participants discussed this expectation as a kind of gradual conditioning, whereby they became less shocked—and even inured—by abusive comments online over time: “It’s kind of changed as I’ve gotten more and more used to it,” explained Lilly, “You kind of get to the point where some of it bothers you and some of it doesn’t.” Maggie notes a similar experience:

“I remember texting or calling him [her partner] and being like, oh my god, these messages that I just got, you won’t believe what happened. And it was just such a surprise, but now it’s kind of like, oh another one of these” (Maggie).

The expectation of receiving online abuse also translated into a loss of feeling for many participants. Two participants described this using almost identical language: Jane described feeling “numb to them [abusive comments]” because she “sees them all the time” and Ellie explained, “After it just happens to you for a couple of years, [it] starts to feel like—well you just kind of get numb to it.” 29

5.6.2.2 Online abuse to be accepted

The expectation of online abuse turned into a kind of acceptance for some participants. This was particularly true for those whose work (e.g., Eva) and activism (e.g., Sara)

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29 Interestingly, in Chadha et al. (2020) a participant also used this language, noting that “online harassment left her ‘numb’ because she has ‘become used to it’” (p. 249).
involved exposure to online abuse. Eva and Sara both acknowledged how harmful their experiences are, and in particular how overwhelming online abuse has made them feel at times, but because they rely on social media to help others, they spoke about accepting online abuse with a sense of duty. For example, Eva explained:

“I do this work and it’s my choice to do this work and because I choose to do this work, I choose to endure this online abuse […] I feel like I have a lot of community support but at the end of the day I’m still the one that’s doing the work and I’m still the one that’s out there, kind of as a punching bag for the community folks that are really angry about the changes in our community, so it’s scary but it’s still necessary to do this work and so it comes with the territory” (Eva).

Sara stated her acceptance with an even stronger stance:

“If it’s about a larger social issue and it’s not just about you, like it’s about the earth, the environment, animals, world health and world hunger, then it’s bigger than you and you should be able to take that […] it’s more important than any bullying that might happen” (Sara).

Sara is not only suggesting that online abuse is an expected reality, but that it is one people need to learn to deal with.

Normalization via acceptance was difficult for Ellie, who struggled with the implications of online abuse for her career as a writer and someone who works with video games. She pointed to wider attitudes by others in her field, which suggest that “this is games and if you can’t hack it, don’t be a game developer, don’t be a games journalist, don’t be in games academia, because this is part of it” (Ellie). She recognized that this is ultimately true for her, but the level of unfairness leaves her frustrated:

“It makes me so angry […] I think all the time that my options literally are: be abused and continue to be abused online, or like, give up on all my hopes and dreams […] Like everything that I’ve ever wanted to do with my life, like, abuse will now be a part of that. But when I originally wanted to do those things abuse wasn’t a part of that (Ellie).
For Ellie and other participants, normalizing online abuse is an understandable reaction. Frequent experiences of abuse and violence increase an individual’s endurance for it (Hlavka, 2014). This is a coping mechanism that allows targets of abuse to continue with their lives.

Participants exhibited competing reactions to the notion that online abuse was an almost-unavoidable part of being online. These reactions indicate that acceptance among participants was not an agreement that online abuse is permissible, but rather a recognition that it is not something they feel they can do much about to that they expect to see disappear.

### 5.6.3 Minimization

In addition to blame and normalization, participants also minimized their abuse by expressing concern that it “wasn’t as serious as some other kinds of harassment” (Kate), and pretending they were not bothered by inappropriate comments. Participants’ also received messages of minimization from perpetrators of abuse and friends with whom they shared their experiences.

On two occasions, participants emailed me before accepting an invitation to participate out of concern that their experience would not qualify for the study. When asked about the initial email during the interview, one of the participants, Kate, reflected:

“I wasn’t sure it was really related to the research topic, or as serious as some other kinds of harassment […] It’s such a big topic, and […] people have suffered more at the hands of strangers online than I have. My experience really wasn’t that, I don’t want to say that bad, because it wasn’t great, but it’s not as bad as it could have been” (Kate).

For context, Kate later described countless examples of harassment while playing video games, dealing with a stalker online, and feeling unwanted and excluded from spaces she wanted to be a part of.
For Julie, minimizing the abuse looked very different from Kate. She explained that she used to harbor a lot of internalized misogyny as a way to cope with and make sense of her experience. As Julie described it, pretending to enjoy the sexist and misogynist jokes was an attempt to convince herself that the comments were not harmful: “I would kind of, almost enable that kind of behavior […] Like, ‘I’m one of the good ones, I don’t mind offensive jokes’ and blah, blah, blah. And then you realize, oh this feels like garbage” (Julie).

Other forms of minimization included downplaying abuse and comparing it to other forms of abuse and violence. Ellie offered a very powerful demonstration of this. She explained: “I don’t want to sully the term victim-blaming by applying something that happens to rape victims to online abuse, but there is definitely a similar logic that happens. You put yourself in this situation, you egged this on” (Ellie). Here Ellie exhibited a reluctance to use the term victim-blaming to describe what happens to victims of online abuse, as though the abuse she experienced does not deserve the same response as other offenses. However, victim-blaming logic is not reserved for only the most serious of crimes.

On several occasions, it was apparent that perpetrators contribute to this discourse of minimization (see chapter four). Participants described scenarios where perpetrators downplayed their abuse by suggesting physical harm—apparently the only outcome of consequence in their mind—is unlikely. Ellie recalled:

“They [the perpetrators] were just like, ‘well, what are you afraid of? Why won’t you interact with us?’ and I was like, ‘I’m afraid of all the people who are coming into my Twitter mentions screaming at me. And they were like, ‘well, no one’s ever actually been hurt, so you have nothing to be afraid of” (Ellie).

The assumption perpetrators are making here is that online abuse is less real or less hurtful because it takes place online. This discursive assumption is known as digital dualism (Jurgenson, 2011). At times, friends and family were no more supportive. Overall, Melody stated that her friends were helpful and she was glad for their support, but they still had the tendency to downplay and minimize the ongoing harm: “I told my best friend […] at first he was like, ‘I think you’re making a big deal out of this; I don’t think that this guy is out
to get you”’ (Melody). Another friend of Melody’s told her that he thought that “this person might be [...] misguided” and that “he just doesn’t have the social norms that most guys would have” (Melody). By minimizing the situation, Melody’s friends unintentionally normalized men’s inappropriate behavior. Melody pointed out that she agreed with her friends, but that their support and perspective did not make her feel any safer. Abigail expressed a similar sentiment wherein she turned to family and school officials for support, but she did not feel she received the validation she required: “There wasn’t any kind of outrage or like, that this was very serious, when it felt very serious to me” (Abigail).

Minimization does not stem from a lack of concern or care, at least it did not seem that way among family, friends, or for oneself. Instead, minimizing the harm of online abuse is emblematic of wider social constructs that positions people as less vulnerable in online spaces, and online spaces as less real than their offline counterpart (for a deeper discussion of this issue see chapter four). Despite minimizing their abuse, participants nonetheless experienced a vulnerability that encouraged them to seek control in the form of protection strategies.

### 5.6.4 Control-seeking

Participants took direct actions to help maintain or regain control of their online presence and online spaces. Many of these behaviors double as a kind of safety work by protecting participants’ sense of power in online spaces. In some cases, these actions operated as a kind of safety planning, which involved emotional, physical, and technological planning to create a safe space. Ellie offers a clear example:

> “One time my name was mentioned in an Infowars article, like Alex Jones Infowars, and I spent two days just trying to find everything that people were saying about me because, man, those Infowars fans. If anybody’s going to do something crazy it’s them. So yeah, I’m not saying that this is a good response to have, but my response tends to be trying to track down everything that’s happening so that I know how bad it is” (Ellie).
Rather than control the content itself, Ellie’s attempt at control manifested as an attempt to anticipate further abuse. She was concerned that an Infowars reader may escalate the abuse into offline spaces, and she felt a sense of personal control in knowing what to expect. Despite the additional harm that reading these comments likely had, Ellie did so as a way to maintain awareness of what people are saying about her so she could assess and address any threat leveled against her.

Other participants were also concerned about threats to their safety and explained that they frequently weighed the benefit of having or maintaining their online presence. While Lilly explained that on several occasions she thought “do I want to keep doing this? Do I care this much about books to keep dealing with people like this?”, for others, the choice to remove themselves seemed clear. For example, Kate regularly opted to leave whatever space she was using: “I would even just log out and be like, you know what? Today is just not my day” (Kate). Similarly, Julie recalled a time when a man tried to get personal information from her. After she denied his request, he became verbally aggressive. In response, she “completely abandoned that email and [Twitter] handle and everything and kind of started fresh” (Julie).

The most common form of control-seeking behaviors among participants, however, were small modifications to their online presence and behavior. These included two-step verifications, using “jibberish passwords” (Ellie), keeping accounts private or “pretty tight when it comes to who can see what” (Eva), and changing game servers or social media accounts. When it came to games, in particular, participants pointed out that they conceal “any kind of perceived femininity or feminine traits in online MMORPGs [massive multiplayer online role-playing games]” (Kate). In one case, Candice contacted administrators to have her username changed to “something gender-neutral,” because, she explained, “mine was gendered female […] so now [that it is changed] everyone thinks I’m a dude if I don’t use voice chat” (Candice).

Participants also noted trying to diffuse situations in several ways. “Usually de-escalating is the first line of defense for me,” explained Lilly, “if you are engaging me and asking me questions, even if they are abusive or awful, I will try to talk you down.” Another
participant, Trish, described trying to reason with people: “I need to make someone see what they’re doing and see themselves. Even if it’s for a second” (Trish). Participants engaged in this emotional labor to negotiate meaning and space with perpetrators to persuade them to back down from their abusive stance.

Maya described being able to sense when abuse is about to happen and that she aims to speed up the process:

“I’ll say the words so that we can by-pass this part because we already know how this ends. You can have a chunk of my energy, here you go, I’m now going to delete you and block you, don’t forget to call me a coward and the door will hit my ass on my way out – Goodbye” (Maya).

For Maya, control-seeking was about leaning into what she saw as an inevitable process.

Finally, two participants attempted to regain control using digilante strategies to hold abusers accountable. Maggie tracked down one of her abusers, when she realized the abuser was a youth, she took screenshots of the messages and “emailed it to their mom” (Maggie). Maggie tried this same approach a second time with a different abuser:

“[Another time a man] was just saying the most awful, vile things about indigenous people. And so, I ended up screen capping the entire thing and I sent it to his employer, which happened to be here in [name of city]. I sent it to his HR department. Ultimately, I don’t know what happened, they did contact me and they said they will look into it, but I don’t know what the final result was” (Maggie).

Fiona also used digilante tactics:

“There was this one guy who sent me a message and I went and looked at his profile […] and it listed his employer […] And so I went and found the director of marketing and director of HR and took a screenshot and sent it to them and said, ‘I want you to know that this gentleman who works for your company and is representing your company sent me this harassing message.’ And within an hour I got a response back
from both of them saying they are really sorry, and they were going to talk to him about it” (Fiona).

Neither Maggie nor Fiona knew if there were any consequences for their abusers’ actions, but they nonetheless described feeling a slight sense of vindication knowing they were able to exert control by trying to hold the men accountable.

These four themes—blame, normalization, minimization, and control-seeking—are not forms of responsibilization themselves. Instead, they are types of responses that have been influenced by the social oppression strategies that cause responsibilization and shaped by the limited options for support (Dawtry et al., 2019; Fast & Richardson, 2019; Karaian, 2014). Thus, these themes provide evidence that participants have been responsibilized.

5.7 Discussion

Responsibilization is a technique of oppressive power structures. It is a vehicle that allows institutions and ideologies to wield power, shape culture, and exercise a degree of dominance within societies. It works by shifting responsibility for safety and well-being onto individuals (Kempter, 2012) and works only if those individuals hegemonically adopt responsibilizing tasks. In practice, social oppression strategies, including rape culture, rape myth acceptance, victim-blaming, and conceptions of the ideal victim are techniques through which responsibilization affects individuals.

Specifically, these social oppression strategies, in combination with the barriers to support, leave women responsible for preventing and responding to online abuse. Across the data, there are ample indicators of responsibilization. In this discussion, I demonstrate the impact that social oppression strategies and barriers to support have on participants' responses to online abuse.
5.7.1 Self-blame and the internalization of victim-blaming ideologies and rape myth acceptance

Some of the strongest evidence for personal responsibilization emerged out of participants’ tendency to accept partial blame for their experiences of online abuse. Blame manifested primarily as self-blame, and self-blame is closely associated with, and arguably born of, discourses of victim-blaming.

But marking a distinction between self-blame and victim-blaming is important. Victim-blaming has a negative connotation and is typically done to someone as a way to reduce their power in a situation and make them responsible for the harm they incurred. Participants did not exhibit victim-blaming behavior proper. In fact, participants who self-blamed simultaneously noted the importance of not blaming oneself and of not taking responsibility for “somebody else’s fucked up behavior” (Abigail). Instead, the evidence here suggests that participants internalize victim-blaming ideologies. Such internalization took on several forms. For example, participants pointed to their behavior as triggers for abuse, such as having a “naturally” open personality (Melody) or not being “guarded” enough (Candice) with their information. In other cases, participants modified their behavior as a way to avoid possible blame.

Abigail’s comparison of herself to her friends as someone who would never put herself “in a situation,” and Lilly’s surprise that she receives sexual messages from men despite never posting content “in a bra” or “in a bikini”, is a new twist on an old problem: the internalization of rape myth acceptance and its mapping on to digital spaces. Instead of the myth that “if a woman is raped, it must be because ‘she asked for it’ by dressing too promiscuously” (Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018, p. 99), the thought is that certain kinds of photographs and content can lead to online abuse. This also points to the internalization of victim-blaming ideologies, as well as rape myth acceptance, whereby participants avoid behaviors that they believe could invite abuse as a way to help absolve them of the shared

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30 That said, Maya did encounter this exact rape myth, when two players told her that her in-game character “shouldn’t be dressed like that if you don’t want comments like that.”
blame or responsibility that wider social discourses place on them. Thus, rape myths and victim-blaming not only have the impact of making targets of online abuse further responsible for their safety but also makes them internalize this responsibility. With this internalization they may not necessarily blame themselves—at least not yet—but there is an implication that some online behaviors (e.g., sharing photos of oneself in a bra or bikini) should be avoided as they could be blameworthy according to society at large. Social and cultural messages of the ideal victim further incentivize avoiding certain behavior. The impact of these results in self-censoring and self-monitoring.

Indeed, it is precisely because these women are responsibilized by the broader systems of oppression that the behaviors they indicate they deliberately avoid could, in reality, place them at higher risk of becoming targets. It is important to consider that, aside from the behaviors within women’s control, there are few other options for them to rely on. Choosing to take responsibility—that is, to avoid any behavior that might increase the risk of abuse—regardless of how unfair it may be, is a completely reasonable response to the threats these women have faced to their emotional and physical safety. While I point to indicators of responsibilization via victim-blaming and rape myth acceptance, I cannot discount the reality that some actions and behaviors do place individuals at a higher risk of online abuse in the socio-material context where these women live and work. So of course, they take steps to avoid said actions and behaviors. Regardless of whether this is how things should be, it is the way things are—and these behaviors are a response to the way things are.

The internalization of rape myths and victim-blaming ideologies are also suggestive of cultural tendencies to excuse men’s poor behavior and absolve them of the harm they perpetrate—boys will be boys, after all. We see this tendency in another of Melody’s friends, who excused the behavior of her stalker when he said: “he just doesn’t have the social norms that most guys would have” (Melody). As exhibited earlier in the discussion on anti-sexting PSAs (Dobson, 2019), even the subtext of educational material meant to support targets of online abuse places the responsibility of safety on targets. The implication being that boys and men are not in control of their behavior.
As discussed earlier in this chapter, cultural frameworks of safety wrongly hold women accountable for their well-being. Under these frameworks, assuming blame is perhaps better explained as a way to try and identify measures of control to mitigate online abuse and violence. As Hassija & Gray (2013) point out, self-blame can “promote a greater sense of controllability as one’s future behaviors are potentially modifiable and can thereby be altered to reduce the likelihood of future negative outcome” (p. 344).

### 5.7.2 Normalized bad behavior normalizes bad behavior

Personal responsibilization was also evident in participants’ sense of normalization. Participants did not *accept* online abuse in the sense that they consented or agreed to it, but rather they all acknowledged that it is a condition of being online that is out of their control. For most participants, normalization and acceptance were a result of recognizing that they have little influence over the “rule that works upon them” (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017, p. 217), which looks a lot like learned helplessness. Thus, for some participants, online abuse became something they expect, and in some cases, cease to experience as hurtful.

Living in a patriarchal and misogynist society requires operating with an awareness of and vulnerability to violence and abuse that shapes the way women take up space in public. As stated earlier, rape culture is an active element of popular culture, and it normalizes male aggression (Lumdsen & Morgan, 2017) through all forms of media, socio-cultural values, attitudes, and ideologies. This means that before experiencing online abuse, the participants in this study are already inundated with messages of rape myths, slut-shaming, victim-blaming, and the ideal victim. This level of exposure easily conditions targets of online abuse and shapes their socialization, so that normalization and acceptance become conditioned responses to a culture that also normalizes these things. In other words, rape culture drives responsibilization by shaping, influencing, and priming women to normalize and accept the online abuse they experience.³¹

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³¹ The priming effect of rape culture can also be said to influence the other themes found in participants responses, particularly blame and minimization
For some participants, enduring online abuse seemed like a personal choice, a duty, and an obligation. This was strongest with participants who relied on online spaces for their work and activism. For them, there was a sense of *needing* to accept that online abuse will be a part of their online experience, and, by extension, the work/cause. One participant, Sara, argued that sometimes the issues are “bigger” than the abuse they face and that they “should be able to take that.” The projection of her values on to others is indicative of a wider culture—and rape culture particularly—that normalizes and devalues some forms of abusive behavior. The concept of digital dualism (see chapter four) illustrates the tendency to regard online abuse as less serious and less harmful. Had the focus been physical abuse rather than online abuse, Sara would likely have not recommended that individuals accept the abuse.

Normalization and acceptance are not easily adopted attitudes. Rather, normalization is a learned strategy that becomes apparent through repeat encounters with perpetrators who are rarely held to account and systems that do little to protect targets of abuse. Given the circumstances, it is necessary for women whose work or hobby aligns with online spaces to adopt an attitude that prepares them to anticipate online abuse. This is not a form of resignation, but an attitude of necessity: a kind of anticipatory acceptance that also acts as a coping strategy to build a bulwark against the shock of inappropriate and often vile messages. The consequences of this ‘necessity’ are steep, and the important work is to then pair acceptance with regaining control by developing environments that promote support and protection, rather than indifference and helplessness (Kususanto et al., 2019).

### 5.7.3 Minimization: Coping, gaslighting, and silencing

Participants minimized their abuse in several ways. First, abuse was often compared to other, more extreme, examples of abuse. This left one participant hesitant to admit that discourses of victim-blaming played a role in her experience. Second, participants were often uncertain whether the harm they experience qualified as *abuse*. Finally, abuse was minimized by downplaying offensive content and humor. This suggests internalized misogyny—an attitude that separates women from “other girls,” or as one participant explained, positioned her as “one of the good ones.” In these cases, minimization is a
gesture that works to convince oneself that things ‘are not that bad.’ It further acts as a coping strategy that works to “mitigate or eliminate harm” (Veletsianos et al., 2018), which helps reformulate one’s relationship to online spaces. This is also an example of safety work in its less tangible form: it is one of many “habitual strategies” (Vera Gray, 2018, p. 14) that women use to rationalize the responsibility placed upon them for their abuse.

When other people minimize the harm of online abuse, however, it can have a kind of gaslighting effect. For example, deeming an experience as less dangerous than it might feel, or suggesting perpetrators are “just a bot” (Participant Lilly, Chapter three, p. 77) or not really “out to get you,” as one of Melody’s friends assured her, may be an effort to offer comfort and make someone feel safer, but it also undermines the consequences and downplays the harm that online abuse can cause. Regardless of the intended outcome of downplaying or minimizing abuse, it always has the effect of excusing the poor behavior of perpetrators, an action indicative of rape culture.

Minimization is also evidence that responsibilization was a successful technique, as it works in service of power structures that might otherwise be rightly held accountable for protecting citizens and online users. Through minimization, women become silent or indifferent toward their abuse. As mentioned earlier, this is a mechanism of responsibilization, as it tames resistance (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017) and removes individuals from the groups of people who need to be governed. Participants also create an identity of someone who is responsible for their abuse based on these behaviors. This identity is driven by governmentality and related to social oppression strategies that reflect societal attitudes toward gendered violence, the online environment generally speaking, and the role of women online, in particular.

5.7.4 Control-seeking: Safety work and DIY justice

Personal responsibilization was also apparent through participants' attempts to control the abuse. Participants expressed a tendency to restrict their online behavior and engage in safety work. This included limiting the types of information and photos participants share, eliminating the use of voice chat, and sometimes leaving online spaces altogether. Participants also described using functions like two-step verification, complex passwords,
and tight security features as a way to pre-emptively mitigate abuse. To assess the extent of the threats against them, one participant purposely exposed themselves to online abuse as a way to exert control and get a better sense of the situation. These are examples of shifting responsibility for safety and well-being on to the individual, the response to which is the uptake of social responsibility as a matter of personal provision (Lemke, 2001).

The lack of manifest support from a range of actors, including social media companies and law enforcement, further responsibilized participants, compelling them to seek control. For example, the lack of formal justice available to targets led participants to create a sense of justice and accountability where there was none. At their own risk, participants used DIY and digilante tactics to try and hold perpetrators responsible. And lastly, participants often tried to diffuse situations—a very gendered response—which for the most part was a way to rectify an abusive situation, either by trying to make someone change their mind or “make someone see what they’re doing” (Trish).

5.8 Conclusion

Responsibilization, in a true circular fashion, is not only born of but also benefits institutional (e.g. social media companies and law enforcement) and cultural power structures (e.g. misogyny and white patriarchy). When targets of online violence take responsibility for the abuse launched against them, it requires energy, and that energy is taken away from efforts to hold institutions and perpetrators (men) accountable. Responsibilization tries to tranquilize change in the service of power. The tricky thing about interrupting this process is that it requires more than just offering better support, it also requires exposing, challenging, and dismantling harmful ideologies, belief systems, and values that underpin the responsibility-taking that equality-deserving groups have long undergone as a way to deal with multiple forms of oppression and discrimination. Eliminating the problem may not be possible. The immediate focus instead should be on reducing harm in the here and now by offering stronger and a wider range of effective support from all stakeholders.
In this chapter, I examined the role of barriers to support and wider social oppression strategies on participants' responses to online abuse. Their responses provided indicators that participants are responsibilized, and thus take on the responsibility of avoiding, preventing, and responding to their abuse. These indicators included blame and self-blame, the normalization and acceptance of online abuse, minimizing the abuse, and seeking control over the risk of abuse and related harms.

Future research should aim to provide further nuance to this work by examining whether responses differ according to subject positions such as race, class, gender identity, and among public or private-facing individuals. Having a better understanding of whose toolbox is best equipped to respond to online abuse and why will provide avenues to strengthen responses and help fix a broken support ecosystem.

5.9 References


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6 Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This project explored the barriers women experienced when seeking support for online abuse, as well as their response to abuse in the context of those barriers. The experiences of these women vary: some were stalked, doxed, had information and photographs shared without their consent; others were endlessly ridiculed, harassed, and sent sexually explicit messages; some women experienced depression, ostracization, and economic setbacks, while others felt angry and galvanized; some left online spaces like social media or gaming platforms to get away from the abuse, while others dug in their heels and found ways to cope despite the barrage of abuse. In all of these cases the availability of support was much the same: lacking to non-existent. No matter the abusive experience, women found themselves without the support they needed. This dissertation intended to identify where exactly barriers to support exist, learn more about them, and understand how women respond to abuse in the face of such barriers.

In this concluding chapter, I provide an overview of the dissertation, summarize the findings of each chapter, and highlight the connections between them. I then review the significance of this work and discuss plans to mobilize the research and discuss the impact this research has already had. Last, I lay out some of the limitations this project presents and recommend topics for future research.

6.2 Research Objectives and Summary of Findings

The goal of this dissertation was to understand how women experience barriers to support when they are targeted by online abuse. To address this, I asked three further questions: What kinds of barriers have women encountered? What social, cultural, and digital factors contribute to their experiences of those barriers? And, how do women respond to abuse in the context of those barriers?

Based on interviews with 15 women who experienced online abuse, I found: 1) while participants experienced barriers across all levels of the ecosystem (micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-levels), institutions like social media platforms and gaming companies
presented the most problems at the meso and exo level. 2) Digital dualism—a macro level barrier—is a particularly significant barrier to support. This barrier involves the discursive habit of conceptually splitting online and offline life into categories that are separate and opposing (Jurgenson, 2011a, 2011b). This tendency prevented friends, family, perpetrators, and in some cases, participants themselves, from recognizing the real and embodied effects of online abuse. And 3) in the absence of appropriate supports, women who are subject to online abuse are responsibilized, and accept responsibility for their safety and well-being, as a way to cope with the abuse. The three core chapters (i.e. chapters three, four, and five) in this dissertation focus on one of these three findings. Overall, the three results chapters speak to different aspects of the same overarching issue: a dearth of support.

In the first of these three chapters (chapter three), I explore the types of barriers to support that women encountered. I employed Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model to understand where barriers emerge within participants’ social environment and how those barriers influence and relate to one another. Overall, barriers to support emerged across the micro-level (e.g. friends and family), the meso-level (e.g. work and mental health support), the exo-level (e.g. the justice system), and the macro-level (e.g. with communicative barriers and digital dualism). However, barriers were most commonly reported at the meso- and exo-level, with online spaces such as social media and gaming companies discussed most often. For example, participants pointed out that social media and gaming companies offered little in the way of protection; reporting and blocking tools presented functional limitations; the moderation of content and complaints was impersonal and lacked meaningful engagement; there were few to no consequences for perpetrators; and, bad actors were rarely held to account on these platforms. Other significant barriers were found at the micro-level, where participants felt unable to communicate their experience to friends and family. Such difficulty with communicating was tied in part to macro-level barriers, such as the absence of a well-established communicative framework and digital dualism. The absence of a communicative framework meant that participants lacked the language and vocabulary to talk about online abuse, and that the people with whom they did speak to about it did not have a firm understanding or awareness about what online abuse is, how it manifests, and its consequences. Digital dualism similarly complicated
participants’ ability to effectively communicate their experience. In addition to causing problems at the micro-level, these two macro-level barriers also presented problems in other areas of participants’ lives, such as when speaking with law enforcement (exo-level) and mental health professionals (meso-level) who were unfamiliar with online abuse.

In chapter three it became apparent that friends, family, law enforcement officials, therapists, even perpetrators, and even participants downplayed and minimized the impact of online abuse based on digital dualist thinking, which includes the assumption that online life is ‘less real’ than offline life. This seemed like an exceptionally salient point and one that has received some attention (c.f. Powell & Henry, 2017), but which nonetheless remains underexplored in media studies.

The second results chapter (chapter four) is devoted to a fuller exploration of this discursive habit as it manifested in participants’ experiences, with a focus on the consequences. Digital dualism is the habit of making a distinction between online and offline life (Jurgenson, 2011a, 2011b). The impact of digital dualism as a barrier to support is complex, particularly because it involves larger cultural habits and values, and it feels less tangible than other barriers such as the limitations experienced with platform support. Participant reports of the impact of digital dualism can be characterized in two ways: as an assumption that they had, and should exercise, a choice to remove themselves from the abuse and the abuser; and as an assumption that abuse experienced online was less ‘real’ than abuse in offline contents.

For many participants, the choice to share their experience of online abuse resulted in minimization from others who told them to ‘get offline’ or ‘delete the app.’ The assumption here is that removing oneself from online spaces is a way to control abuse. In other cases, participants reported that people devalued the abuse they experienced as less hurtful because it occurred online. This occurred through friends and family, for whom it seemed as though participants ought to be less vulnerable online; through perpetrators of the abuse, who denied the harm they were causing, citing the mediated and textual nature of their abuse as less damaging than physical abuse; and through participants themselves, many
who internalized digital dualist discourses by casually referring to offline life as ‘real life’ and admonishing themselves to ‘get over it’ because it was ‘just online.’

These digital dualist discourses and practices resulted in a process I call ontological labor, whereby participants become responsible for convincing others, and themselves, that the abuse they experienced was real. Ontological labor is participants’ response to a denial of experience, and the labor becomes one of responsibility for bringing one’s own experiences of harm into being. Ontological labor also becomes one more way that participants take responsibility for their safety and well-being. Throughout the interviews, there were many instances where participants took responsibility for supporting and protecting themselves from online abuse. In the next chapter, I explored how such ‘responsibility-taking’ emerged in the absence of strong support.

In the third results chapter (chapter five) I show how, taken together, the barriers presented in chapters three and four represent a complex landscape where participants face many roadblocks and challenges in their efforts to secure support and protection from online abuse. Uncomfortable turning to law enforcement, often unprotected by legislation, aware of platform limitations (and general apathy), and feeling misunderstood by friends and family, participants were left with few options with which to formally respond to the abuse. The limitation to responses is further compounded by a rape culture (Buchwald et al., 2005) full of socially oppressive practices such as victim-blaming (Fast & Richardson, 2019), slut-shaming (Dobson, 2019), rape myth acceptance (Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018), and conceptions of the ideal victim (Comack & Peter, 2005). Research shows that these practices send women clear messages that they are primarily responsible for protecting themselves against any abuse directed toward them (Dawtry et al., 2019; Lumsden & Morgan, 2017).

These socially oppressive practices, combined with barriers to support, left women with few options for response to online abuse. In the absence of a strong support ecosystem, participants tended to engage in behaviors of blame, normalization, minimization, and control-seeking. These behaviors served several purposes: they were sometimes coping strategies, sometimes ways of navigating socially oppressive strategies such as victim-
blaming, but almost always they were a way of creating safer spaces to remain online. Whatever their purpose, however, these behaviors indicated that participants had become responsibilized.

6.3 Research Significance

From these findings three recommendations for strengthening support became evident. First, the platforms on which the abuse takes place—such as social media and gaming platforms—need to be a central site of intervention. Chapter three recommends practical ways to improve reporting functions. In addition to improving reporting tools and protocols, however, platforms need to take a stronger stance against abuse by holding perpetrators accountable and having real consequences for actions, such as deplatforming. Sadly, without legal or governmental involvement, platforms will continue to use their discretion, which to date has involved a soft stance on any violence and abuse that does not transgress criminal laws or leave the company legally culpable.

Second, online abuse challenges common ideas of safety, and we should not underestimate the importance of validating that such experiences are harmful. While validation is an important experience that targets of online abuse can have (Vitis & Gilmour, 2016), it is also one of the experiences most often missing. In particular, a culture of validation is an important step to allow and encourage disclosure of online abuse. Furthermore, it is only if people are empowered to disclose their experiences that they can ask for help and support if and when it becomes available. This directly relates to the third recommendation: the need to develop a communicative framework. This need was also identified in chapter three, whereby participants describe not knowing how to talk to others about their experience, or, when they did, others did not understand the significance of their experience and did not know how to respond.

A communicative framework would do more than just provide a shared language to talk about the phenomenon: it would also communicate the harm of online abuse to those targeted and to society more broadly. Development of a communicative framework involves coordinated efforts across a range of sectors, including but not limited to law and law enforcement, mental health professionals, and importantly anti-violence organizations,
most of whom already work to expand narrowed definitions of violence and abuse (see knowledge mobilization below for more on this). Educational toolkits and public service announcements would also play important roles in coordinating messages about the severity and ‘real’ nature of online abuse. While national and international organizations (such as Federal governments or the United Nations) could begin this work under mandates to end gender-based abuse, more research would need to be done to understand how best to coordinate participation in creating a shared communicative framework.

Identifying the barriers is a necessary step toward developing ways to address the gaps in support and mitigate factors that exacerbate the abuse, both of which can have a positive impact on individual targets of online abuse. The potential impact of this work, however, moves beyond support for the individual and also helps shape online environments as equal and equitable social, democratic, and participatory spaces central to twenty-first-century life. The centrality of online spaces, and digital existence, requires affording the opportunity of participation to all members of a community—something online abuse forcefully detracts from. The increase of online abuse erodes important societal functions that exist everywhere, but which increasingly unfold online (e.g. financial tasks, careers, information sharing via news and governments, education, dating, socializing with friends and family, relaxation and playing games, to name a few). As a result, our social, economic, and political futures remain unstable so long as online abuse continues to proliferate, attackers face no consequences for their actions, and social media companies refuse to acknowledge and respond to the weight of the shared spaces they created carry. This research offers a strong foundation for a better understanding of the challenges that individuals—and thus a functioning society—face with online abuse. Now, the task post-dissertation is to effectively mobilize this research to ensure it has the greatest impact.

6.3.1 Knowledge Mobilization

I look forward to sharing the research presented in this dissertation. Chapter four, “Not the real world”: Exploring experiences of online abuse, digital dualism, and ontological labor, will be in an edited volume that is set to be published in early 2021. Chapters three and five will be modified for scholarly journal submissions. Work from this dissertation will also be presented at academic conferences. In addition to scholarly outputs, I plan to share
this research with institutions outside of the academy. In chapter three I write that a communicative framework involves “creating a shared recognition of the harm online abuse causes” and that this can be done in many ways, one of which includes “better integrating an awareness of online abuse into other anti-violence and anti-oppressive work” (p. 94).

Some of this work is already underway. In July 2020 I began working alongside Anova, a local women’s shelter and anti-violence organization I have volunteered with for the last two and a half years, to help them update staff and volunteer training manuals to include tech safety. This involved rethinking safety planning protocols and developing strategies to assess an individual’s digital safety in addition to their physical and emotional safety. I also gave five workshops to staff and volunteers about online abuse, the focus of which was informing them about what online abuse is, how it manifests, and its impact and consequences. In particular, the workshops and parts of the training guide equip staff and volunteers to recognize, validate, and respond to online abuse just as they do with other kinds of abuse. My work with Anova has also inspired them to create a resource page on their website dedicated to online abuse (currently under construction) and spread awareness of online abuse through their social media. This is just the start of what I hope becomes larger-scale efforts to use the already-in-place resources of anti-violence organizations to soften the edges of online abuse and become strong systems of support within local communities.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

A phenomenological approach was a strong choice for this research. As a method, it centers the participants’ perspective and allows insight to emerge from their experiences with the phenomenon under study. Despite this fit, the phenomenological analysis presented two related limitations: the limitations of language and lower levels of validity.

As described above, participants noted the lack of established and shared ways of speaking and thinking about online abuse. Participants themselves were not immune to this and also struggled at times to describe their own experiences. The question to be asked, then, is
whether—as researcher and participant—we had the requisite language and shared meaning to accurately communicate the experiences under study. While phenomenological analysis is primarily descriptive, some interpretive work had gone into analyzing the data to overcome this problem. Bringing together data points that came from follow-up questions, situating participants’ lives in the context of their relationship to online spaces, and conversations about my choice of language, which included exploring the possible critiques and strengths of those choices, worked to detangle (and re-entangle) aspects of lived experience that illuminate each other.

Phenomenology is criticized for its lack of validity and reliability due to the inherently subjective nature of the work (Tuffour, 2017). In truth, this critique is levied against non-positivist work more broadly. A common way to address this critique and strengthen the validity of descriptive, and most importantly, interpretive analysis is through member-checking. Member-checking is an established protocol used to raise levels of validity and reliability in qualitative research. As I explained in the methodology chapter, the sensitive nature of this research topic and participants’ history of online abuse required extra steps to ensure participant confidentiality and anonymity. This included deleting contact information as soon as the interview was over and recommending that participants do the same. I determined this to be the best practice given the character of participants’ abuse, which included stalking, hacking, and doxing—invasions of privacy that could risk identifying their participation in the study. To address this reliability gap, I used interviewing techniques that included mirroring what participants were saying, summarizing the gist of participants experiences throughout the interview, and ensuring participants have a role in how their story is shared by asking them how they would like it to be told and what the most important part is to them.

Other limitations in this study offer room to grow and explore more inclusive research practices in future work. Specifically, I have learned the need to look at gender abuse more broadly, and to conduct purposive sampling to achieve a more intersectional and diverse sample. This research focused on self-identified women’s experiences with online abuse. As I point out in footnote 17 on page 113, this project was transgender-inclusive, however, beyond confirmation that the participant identified as a woman, no other demographic
information related to gender was collected. When I began conceptualizing this project in 2015 the research and literature on online abuse was still quite exploratory: the central focus was exploring the kinds of online abuse that existed and the frequency of abuse. Understanding online abuse as an extension of violence against women and girls (VAWG) was an important component to consider. Today, however, research shows that transgender and non-binary individuals are deeply impacted by online abuse, as well (Ditch the Label, 2019). For me, this means that future research on this topic needs to expand its conceptualization of online abuse from an extension of VAWG to an extension of gendered abuse and violence more broadly.

The gendered limitations of my research can also be applied to race. My sample is predominately white, which does not accurately represent individuals who are most impacted by online abuse. Future research ought to conduct purposive sampling to ensure the representation of equity and equality-deserving groups and to better account for intersectional and diverse experiences of online abuse. This is particularly important in the context of barriers to support because the availability and appeal of things like carceral and judicial justice are not the same for everyone. White women, for example, generally have more options when dealing with the police and formal institutions that have a history of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism (Amnesty International, 2020; Goel et al., 2017).

In addition to addressing the limitations of this work, future research can also expand on theory and build on findings in two ways. First, future research should aim to understand the scale of digital dualist thinking. This could involve looking at examples of the discursive tendency in everyday life. It could also involve historicizing the concept of digital dualism and the ontological labor women engage in as a result to understand its connection to other forms of gendered and racialized labor. Secondly, future research could explore whether improvements in any one area of support (personal, social, platform, platform).

32 For an example, see Appendix J, which shows the Canada Post community mailbox for package deliveries in my apartment’s lobby. The text on the mailbox reads: “Delivering the online world.” This is a causal and subtle example of how we live with ingrained distinctions between online and offline life (image taken by me).
mental health, or legal, for example) decreases indicators of responsibilization, such as blame, acceptance, minimization, and control-seeking.

Lastly, future research can build on the findings presented in this dissertation. One way to do this is to expand the focus of research from understanding the adverse impacts of online abuse to understanding the adverse impact of *continuing to maintain an online presence despite—and in the face of—online abuse*. While women engage in safety work (Kelly, 1987, 2012) that sometimes entails removing themselves from online spaces, deleting accounts, or quieting their voices, by and large women are finding ways to continue to be online even in the face of online abuse. The issue then becomes that women pay an added cost to be online.

The abuse itself is a cause of inequality and the obligation to fight to take up space deepens that inequality. The recommendation here is subtle and requires a slight reorientation of current research. Rather than explore the self-silencing and self-monitoring that targets of online abuse engage in (Chadha et al., 2020), or the more theatrical and public responses to online abuse, such as feminist digilantism (Jane, 2016), the focus of future research should be on those who do not wish to make their responses public and who cannot easily self-silence or remove themselves from online spaces. While self-silencing is indeed an issue that warrants further exploration, and feminist digilantism is a powerful way to take up and reclaim space, it only accounts for two ends of the spectrum. What I am proposing is research that nuances the middle ground.

Above all, future research should incorporate an ‘on-the-ground’ approach that focuses on practical applications and conceptualizes how to work alongside social media companies, Internet service providers, legislators, and front-line workers, all of whom should play a central role in crafting better support. While exploratory and theoretical research continues to serve an important function, incorporating plans for knowledge mobilization beyond the academy, to include policy contribution and help serve non-profit and community organizations, must become an obligatory piece of research on online abuse and violence: the stakes are too high for anything less.
6.5 References

https://www.amnesty.ca/blog/anti-black-racism-and-policing-canada-we-need-new-transformative%E2%80%AFapproaches-upholding%E2%80%AFpublic


https://www.brandwatch.com/reports/transphobia/

Dobson, Amy Shields. (2019). ‘The things you didn’t do’: Gender, slut-shaming, and the need to address sexual harassment in narrative resources responding to sexting and cyberbullying. In:

Heidi Vandebosch and Lelia Green (Eds.) Narratives in Research and Interventions on Cyberbullying among Young People. Springer. 147-160. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-04960-7_10


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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment poster

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH ON ONLINE ABUSE

We are looking for women volunteers to take part in a study that looks at experiences and perceptions of online abuse. You may take part in this study if you:

- Identify as a woman
- Are 18 years or older
- Speak English
- Experienced online abuse

If you are interested and agree to participate you will be asked to take part in an interview. Interviews will take place over the phone or Skype. Your participation would involve one session running about 30-90 minutes long.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please go to https://goo.gl/To9H2x or contact:

Chandell Gosse
Faculty of Information and Media Studies
Email: [removed]
Appendix B: Social media script for recruitment

Social Media Script for Recruitment

(To be used on Twitter)

Tweet 1

Have you seen the uglier side of social media? Our #research is looking to speak with women about their experiences with #OnlineAbuse - Check out the study here: <URL>

Tweet 2

#Research study looking to speak with women about experiences and perceptions of #OnlineAbuse Check out the study here: <URL>
Appendix C: Third-party organization recruitment script

Subject Line: Research looking at women’s experiences with online abuse

Hello [insert name of contact],

My name is Chandell and I’m fourth year Ph.D Candidate in Media Studies at Western University. I’m conducting research along with my supervisor, Dr. Jacquelyn Burkell, which looks at women’s experiences with online abuse.

In particular, our study seeks to: 1) understand how women think about the consequences of online abuse; 2) identify the barriers to support that women targeted by online abuse encounter; and 3) explore the kinds of support that women would like to see created or changed.

We plan to conduct one-on-one interviews with women over the age of 18 who identify as having been targeted by online abuse.

I’m emailing today because [name of organization] has a strong reputation for helping women and your organization’s values align with the values of this project. As such, I am wondering if you would assist in recruiting participants for this project.

Recruitment could entail posting the following link to social media or emailing it to a listserv: [https://goo.gl/To9H2x](https://goo.gl/To9H2x) I’ve also attached the recruitment poster and the letter of information and consent in case you want more information.

Once this research is completed, we hope to share the findings with organizations such as yours in an effort to better support women impacted by online abuse.

If you have any questions whatsoever, please feel free to contact me by replying to this email or the project supervisor, Dr. Jacquelyn Burkell, at [email removed].

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration,

Chandell Gosse

Ph.D Candidate
Faculty of Information and Media Studies
Western University, London ON
[email removed]
Appendix D: Recruitment screen tool

Online Abuse

**Block: Default Question Block (3 Questions)**

We are looking to speak with women over the age 18 about their experience and perceptions of online abuse. Through one on one interviews with participants this study aims to:

1) understand how people think about the consequences of online abuse
2) identify the barriers to support that women targeted by online abuse encounter, and
3) explore the kinds of support that people would like to see created or changed.

Interviews will take place over the phone or over Skype. If you are interested in participating or would like more information about the study, please answer the questions below. All emails collected and any correspondence will remain confidential.

Q1. Are you 18 years of age or older?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q2. Have you been targeted or impacted by online abuse? (Please note, online abuse refers to a wide variety of behaviors and experiences, these might include but are not limited to inappropriate or harassing comments, posts, or tweets; the non-consensual release of intimate images or private information; or having a fake account created in your name, to name only a few.)

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q3. If you are interested in this study, please leave your email address and we will reach out with more information.

End of Block: Default Question Block
Survey termination message

To be displayed after survey is closed.

Thank you for your interest in our study. We have reached maximum participation and are no longer recruiting participants. Below are some resources to check out if you or someone you know is in need of support because of online abuse.

Mental health resources:

http://www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca/ - Canada

https://www.mentalhealth.gov/ - United States

http://www.yourlifecounts.org/need-help/crisis-lines - Global

Online abuse resources:

http://www.crashoverridenetwork.com/

https://iheartmob.org/
Appendix E: Email to schedule interview

Subject Line: Invitation to participate in research about online abuse

Hello,

We have received your email address from the online survey you completed about the research study, *Experiences and Perceptions of Online Abuse*. You are being invited to participate in a study that we, Chandell Gosse and Dr. Jacquelyn Burkell, are conducting. Briefly, the study involves participating in a one-on-one interview over the telephone or Skype. The interview should last between 30 to 90 minutes. In this interview you will be asked questions about your experiences of online abuse, available support for online abuse, and the consequences of online abuse.

If you still want to participate in the study, please let me know when you are available for the interview, which time zone you are located in, and your preferred method of contact (phone or Skype).

Attached is the letter of information and consent form for your records.

Thank you,

Chandell Gosse
Ph.D Candidate
Faculty of Information and Media Studies
Western University
[email removed]
Appendix F: Letter of information

Experiences and Perceptions of Online Abuse
Letter of Information and Consent

Principal Investigator
Jacquelyn Burkell, PhD
Western University, [email removed]

Additional Research Staff
Chandell Gosse, PhD Candidate
Western University, [email removed]

Invitation to Participate
You are being invited to participate in a research study that looks at experiences and perceptions of online abuse. You are receiving this letter because you expressed interest in participating in our study.

Why is this study being done?
Through one on one interviews with participants this study aims to 1) understand how people think about the consequences of online abuse; 2) identify the barriers to support that women targeted by online abuse encounter; and 3) explore the kinds of support that people would like to see created or changed.

How long will you be in this study?
Interviews will take place over the phone or over Skype (whichever is easiest for you). Interviews are expected to last anywhere between 30 minutes and 1.5 hours. After the interview is done you will no longer be in the study, but you are still welcome to reach out to the researchers if you have any questions.

What are the study procedures?
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to schedule an interview at a time that works best for you. Interviews will take place over the phone or over Skype, whichever you prefer. Interviews will be audio-recorded, but if you prefer not to have your interview recorded you may still participate in the study. Please note, however, the first few minutes of the interview must be recorded in order to obtain a record of verbal consent.
After that, if you do not wish to have the interview recorded, the interviewer will gladly turn off the recording device and continue by taking written notes.

During the interview you will be asked a series of questions about your experience or perception of online abuse. These questions will involve asking about the impact online abuse has had on your life, the types of support used or made available to you and other targets of online abuse, and what your experience or opinion of those supports are.

What are the risks and harms of participating in this study?

The possible risks and harms to you include emotional reactions from reliving potentially painful experiences. These emotional reactions might include anger and sadness, among others. If you would like to speak with a mental health professional or require assistance in dealing with online abuse, please refer to this list of resources.

Mental health resources:

http://www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca/ - Canada

https://www.mentalhealth.gov/ - United States

http://www.yourlifecounts.org/need-help/crisis-lines - Global

Online abuse resources:

http://www.crashoverridenetwork.com/

https://iheartmob.org/

What are the benefits of participating in this study?

You may not directly benefit from participating in this study but information gathered might provide benefits to society as a whole, which include better understanding of the barriers to support women experience when targeted by online abuse.

Can participants choose to leave the study?

If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request withdrawal of information collected about you. If you wish to have your information removed please let the researcher know.
How will participants’ information be kept confidential?

All data collected will remain confidential and accessible only to the investigators of this study. If the results are published, your name will not be used. If we use direct quotes from your interview, we will remove any identifying descriptors (such as names of cities, schools, or places of work). If you would like to receive a copy of any potential study results, please contact Chandell Gosse by email at [email removed].

While we do our best to protect your information there is no guarantee that we will be able to do so. If data is collected during the project is required to report by law, such as abuse to a child under the age of 18 or expressed intent to harm oneself or others, we have a duty to report to the proper authorities.

The researcher will keep any personal information about you in a secure and confidential location for a minimum of 7 years. Once the interview is completed, you will be given a pseudonym to keep for your records. The audio recording and the transcription will be saved using this pseudonym and no record of your full name will be retained. If you choose to withdraw from the study after the interview is complete, simply provide the researchers with this pseudonym and all data associated with this name will be removed and deleted. All audio recordings of the interview and transcriptions of those interviews will be kept on an encrypted USB in a locked drawer. All correspondence via email will be deleted and no record of your email address will be kept. Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

Are participants compensated to be in this study?

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research.

What are the rights of participants?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time.

You do not waive any legal right by signing this consent form.

Whom do participants contact for questions?
If you require any further information regarding this research project or your participation in the study you may contact Dr. Jacquelyn Burkell by phone at [phone number removed] or by email at [email removed]. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Research Ethics at [phone number and email removed].

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Verbal Consent

Do you confirm that you have read the Letter of Information [or the Letter of Information has been read to you] and have had all questions answered to your satisfaction?

☐ YES ☐ NO

Do you agree to participate in this research?

☐ YES ☐ NO

Do you consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research?

☐ YES ☐ NO

Do you agree to be audio-recorded?

☐ YES ☐ NO
Appendix G: Interview guide

Preamble and Consent

[turn on recording device]

Hi [Participant Name], my name is Chandell, I’m calling from Western University.

[introductory remarks to build basic rapport]

As you know I am conducting a research project to understand people’s experiences and perceptions of online abuse. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this project!

[pause for potential response]

I have emailed you a copy of the consent form. Do you have any questions about it?

[clarify or answer any questions]

I have just a few questions before we begin the interview.

Do you confirm that you have read the Letter of Information have had all questions answered to your satisfaction?

☐ YES ☐ NO

Do you agree to participate in this research?

☐ YES ☐ NO

Do you consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research?

☐ YES ☐ NO

Do you agree to be audio-recorded?

☐ YES ☐ NO

[if yes, proceed to interview – if no, turn off recording device and begin taking notes by hand]

Before we begin I just want to remind you that it’s your right at any point to stop or not answer a question I ask.

Demographics

1. In what year were you born?
2. In what country are you located?
3. Do you identify as a racial (visible) minority?

**Main Questions**

4. Can you tell me a bit about your relationship to social media, the Internet, and digital technology?
   
   a) Do you use it for work or mostly leisure?
   
   b) Do you feel pressure to be active online or on social media?

5. How would you describe online abuse?
   
   a) What is the difference between online abuse and offline abuse?
   
   b) Where does your understanding come from?
   
   c) Are there any specific moments or experiences that you think shaped your understanding of online abuse?

6. Can you tell me about a time where you felt you were targeted by online abuse?

7. Please describe to me the context surrounding your experience.
   
   a) Was your abuser known or unknown to you?
   
   b) Was it one abuser or multiple?
   
   c) On which platforms did this occur?
   
   d) Was there a difference between platforms?
   
   e) How long did it last?

8. How did this experience make you feel?

9. How did this experience impact your life or career?

10. What do you think the consequences are for targets of online abuse?

11. Why do you think you were targeted?

12. How did you respond to the online abuse?

13. Did you use any resources, other people, or types of support to help you respond or handle the experience?
a) If so, what were they?

i. Platform? Legal? Social? (micro, meso, macro?)
   - What was their reaction or response?

ii. What was your experience of that support?

b) If no, why not?

14. Why did you choose to respond that way?

15. Did the support you relied on help you?

   a) If so, how?

   b) If no, why do you think?

16. Was it easy to access that support?

   a) What made it easy?

   b) What made it difficult?

17. Are there types of support you wish you could have accessed?

   a) If so, what are they?

18. Are there changes you’d like to see made to the types of support you mentioned using?

19. In thinking about online abuse, what would justice for those targeted mean to you?

20. Has this experience changed the way you feel or use social media, the internet, or digital technologies?

21. Is there anything else you want to share with us about this experience?

22. How would you like to see your experience shared in reports of this data?
Appendix H: Debriefing letter

Subject Line: Thank you for your participation

Hi again,

Thank you for your participation in this study. The purpose of this study was to listen to your experience of online abuse and understand what consequences or impact it’s had on you (no matter how big or small they might seem, they are all important and should be taken seriously). In listening to your experience, we also wanted to identify any difficulty you had when looking for support, protection, or relief from online abuse, and to ask you what kinds of support you would like to see created or changed in the future. We know that there are many kinds of online abuse and that sometimes seeking support for any of them can be difficult and overwhelming. For this reason, your contribution to this study and topic is so valuable.

We know talking about this is not easy, so if our discussion has left you feeling uncomfortable or emotionally distressed, please consider reaching out to these resources:

- Mental health resources:  
  http://www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca/ - Canada  
  https://www.mentalhealth.gov/ - United States  
  http://www.yourlifecounts.org/need-help/crisis-lines - Global

- Online abuse resources:  
  http://www.crashoverridenetwork.com/  
  https://iheartmob.org/

We want to remind you that your interview and data is confidential and will only be viewed by the principle investigator, Dr. Jacquelyn Burkell, and myself, Chandell Gosse. If you decide you no longer want your interview and data to be used in this study you have the right to ask me to remove it and I will gladly do so for you. All results will be published anonymously and we will only use direct quotes if you have explicitly given us consent to do so. If you have not consented to this your interview transcripts will be summarized and paraphrased in any publications.

Should you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me, Chandell Gosse, at [email removed].

Thank you again for your contribution to this study,

Chandell Gosse  
Western University  
[email removed]
Appendix I: Saturation/study closure email script

Subject Line: Maximum participation reached for study about online abuse

Hello,

We have received your email address from the survey you completed online about the research study, *Experiences and Perceptions of Online Abuse*. We are writing to let you know that we have reached maximum participation for this study.

We want to sincerely thank you for taking the time and expressing interest in our study. Below are some resources to check out if you are in need of support because of online abuse.

Mental health resources:
http://www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca/ - Canada
https://www.mentalhealth.gov/ - United States
http://www.yourlifecounts.org/need-help/crisis-lines - Global

Online abuse resources:
http://www.crashoverriddenetwork.com/
https://iheartmob.org/

If you have any questions or would like to receive a copy of any potential study results, please let me know.

Thank you,

Chandell Gosse
Ph.D Candidate
Faculty of Information and Media Studies
Western University
[.email removed]
Appendix J Example of everyday digital dualism, Canada Post community mailbox for package deliveries. “Delivering the online world.”
## Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Chandell Gosse

### Post-secondary Education and Degrees:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Degree(s)</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>St. Thomas University, Fredericton, NB, Canada</td>
<td>B.A. (Honors)</td>
<td>2006-2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB</td>
<td>M.IDST.</td>
<td>2012-2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Western Ontario, London, ON, CA</td>
<td>Province of Ontario Graduate Scholarship</td>
<td>2014-2021</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Honours and Awards:

- Province of Ontario Graduate Scholarship
- 2016-2017, 2017-2018

### Related Work Experience:

- **Researcher**
  - Royal Roads University
  - 2017-Present
- **Research Assistant**
  - Western University
  - 2015-2020
- **Adjunct Professor**
  - Western University
  - 2018
- **Teaching Assistant**
  - Western University
  - 2014-2019

### Publications:

#### Book Chapters


**Peer Reviewed**


**Non-Peer Reviewed**

