

Review of the Literature on Gender and Cyberviolence

Helping Communities Respond: Preventing and
Eliminating Cyberviolence directed at Girls and
Young Women

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“We have to acknowledge that online threats are as real and unacceptable as threats posed in the offline world. The landmark resolution 20/8 on internet freedom adopted by United Nations Human Rights Council in 2012, affirmed that “the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online, in particular freedom of expression”, and set out a clear path in this respect.

Sarah Jeong, lawyer, journalist and author of *The Internet of Garbage*, provides proper context, "moderation paradoxically increases the number of voices heard, because some kinds of speech chills other speech. The need for moderation is sometimes oppositional to free speech, but sometimes moderation aids and delivers more free speech". (**Online threats of murder, rape, a daily reality for many female journalists**http://www.ifex.org/international/2015/08/31/online_threats_female_journalists/)

Introduction to the literature review

This literature review considers the gendered nature of cyberviolence, prevalence, manifestations or forms of misogynistic cyberviolence, interplay between on and offline gendered violence and misogyny, the normalization of cyberviolence, the role of anonymity and the consequences of cyberviolence directed at girls and women. Please note that although we prefer the term cyberviolence, because it is not yet widely used, a good deal of the relevant literature covered in our review deals with research on misogyny in cyberbullying.

A section of the review is devoted to *Video Games & Gender*. The video game section reviews the landscape of the games industry, representations of women in games, the culture of video game research and community and *gamergate*.

The literature review informed the design of our research with emerging themes shaping our interview and focus group questions. Both academic and popular cultural sources were considered for the literature review. Sources such as blogs, video-blogs (vlogs), and mass media offer critical and significant insights that expand the range of perspectives that we are able to include. Issues of gendered cyberviolence are often addressed by social media commentators in ways that more

accurately express the perspective of young women themselves than the academic literature might.

About Cyberviolence

The Internet has provided a virtual environment where individuals from around the world can come together and interact, breaking down traditional offline boundaries across race, religion, political ideologies, ability, class, age and gender. Ideally, this is where people with very different cultural values and norms socialize, collaborate and exchange knowledge. However, in many parts of cyberspace, individuals are engaging in a range of highly dangerous behaviors and activities. Due to the perceived anonymity offered by the Internet, some individuals feel freer to promote ideologies that are harmful and/or transgress broader, more progressive, societal values and social norms. This has been exemplified through the recent and increasing incidents of cyberviolence.

Once largely hidden from view, the brutality and consequences of cyberviolence are now being exposed and explored in unprecedented ways. Seventy-three percent of adult Internet users have witnessed some form of online harassment, and 40% have personally experienced harassment (Duggan, 2014). Cyberviolence is broadly defined as consisting of “different types of inappropriate and/or potentially harmful behaviour including: cybercrimes (e.g. exposure to hate, violence, misinformation, consumer exploitation), cybersexploitation, cyberstalking, and cyberbullying.” (Chisholm, 2006, p. 81)

The Gendered Nature of Cyberviolence

According to recent research conducted by the Pew Internet Research Centre (Duggan, 2014) on online harassment and threatening behaviors, age and gender are significant factors in prevalence of cyberviolence:

- Young adults aged 18-29, are the demographic group most likely to experience online harassment; 65% of this group of users have been subjected to one or more of the six elements of harassment¹ that were outlined in the survey.
- Overall, women are more likely than men to find their most recent experience with online harassment extremely or very upsetting—38% of harassed women said so of their most recent experience, compared with 17% of harassed men.
- Twenty-six percent of 18-24 year-old-women reported being the target of online stalking, while 25% report they were targets of online sexual harassment.

¹ The six different forms of online harassment used by Pew Research were witnessing (1) someone being called offensive names (2) efforts to purposefully embarrass someone (3) someone being physically threatened (4) someone being harassed for a sustained period of time (5) someone being sexual harassed (6) someone being stalked.

The research also outlines some general trends, such as:

- Men are more likely to experience name-calling, embarrassment or humiliation, while young women are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and stalking.
- Most harassment occurs on and through social media, although men highlight online gaming and comments sections as other spaces they typically encounter harassment.
- Those who exclusively experience less severe forms of harassment (such as name calling) report fewer emotional or personal impacts, while those with more severe harassment experiences (such as rape threats) often report on these incidents taking a serious emotional toll and having a negative impact their everyday lives.
- Peoples whose lives are interwoven with online spaces, such as those who use the internet for career networking and promotion or work in the digital technology industry, are most likely to experience increased harassment due to the ready availability of information about themselves.

These statistics and general trends are significant because we can see that the degree to which girls and women are targets of cyberviolence, the ways in which the cyberviolence is manifested and the impact on the victim differ between genders.

What is Cyberbullying?

Most young people do not identify with the term cyberviolence, and would only use that term to describe the most extreme instance of online abuse. Within the context of youth cultures, cyberviolence is a term that is often used interchangeably with cyberbullying, and framed as an activity that exists along a continuum of bullying behavior² that is inflicted and amplified through the use of computers, cell phones, or other electronic devices (Chisholm 2014: 78; Burgess-Proctor, Patchin, and Hinduja, 2009; Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012; Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fisher, Russell & Tippett, 2008).

Although cyberviolence represents the broader, overarching phenomenon that cyberbullying is situated within, cyberbullying is the most common/widespread used to describe this practice when it relates to young people. Indeed, anti-bullying discourse is used to frame the interventionist strategies designed to combat the increasing levels of cyberviolence involving youth precisely because it is a familiar discourse to students, having heard it all their lives within their everyday institutions (e.g. schools, community and religious centers) and social activities (e.g. camps, sports, clubs).

² Bullying behaviour is widely recognized as being a subset of aggression with a common definition being a “specific type of aggressive behaviour that is intended to cause harm, through repeated actions carried out over time, targeted at an individual who is not in a position to defend him/herself” (Olweus, 1980, p.16)

While some scholars argue that cyberbullying is simply an extension of traditional bullying, with the only difference being that the aggressive acts facilitated through information and communication technologies (ICTs) (see Williams and Guerra 2007), others suggest that it is a unique phenomenon that should be examined as such (Aboujaoude 2011; Ybarra and Mitchell 2004).

Cyberbullying occurs in many different forms, directly or indirectly targeting victims. Langos' (2012) definition takes this into account, and describes the phenomenon as involving "ICTs to carry out a series of acts as in the case of direct cyberbullying, or an act as in the case of indirect cyberbullying intended to harm another (the victim) who cannot easily defend him or herself" (2012, p. 288).

The Gendered Nature of Cyberbullying

In their review of research that specifically examines cyberbullying (as opposed to the other forms of cyberviolence), Connell, Schell-Busey, Pearce and Negro (2014, p. 212) present international statistics that suggest females are more likely to be victims of cyberbullying than males:

In a random telephone survey of 1,500 U.S. adolescent Internet users, Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak and Finkelhor (2006) found that females were more likely to be targets of Internet harassment. Likewise, Mesch (2009) examined interview data from 935 teens and found that 61% of girls reported being cyberbullied at least once, compared to only 39% of males. Additionally in a study of 1,671 Spanish students, more females reported being victims of cyberbullying via both mobile phone and the Internet (Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchan, Calmaestra, and Vega, 2009). In a similar vein, Dehue, Bolman and Vollink (2008) reported that girls were significantly more likely to have been cyberbullied.

There is a lack of critical research that explores the gendered nature of cyberbullying, and this knowledge gap has hindered the development of strategies to prevent and combat cyberviolence, which continues to evolve and spread unchecked and unchallenged (Connell et. al. 2014). Discussions related to cyberviolence against girls and women, for instance, are almost always framed by the hegemonic assumption that the perpetrators are male. However, the Internet is an ideal environment for the relational forms of (traditional offline) bullying favoured by females, and recent research indeed demonstrates that contrary to what we might think, school-aged girls are more likely to cyberbully than their male counterparts (Connell et. al., 2014). These findings are congruent with research that specifically examines gender stereotypes and social networking and report that their female participants readily acknowledged that "girls will not only be more harshly judged than boys for the content of their online profiles, but also for their degree of publicness" (Bailey et. al., 2013, p. 107).

Regardless of whether we are talking about cyberbullying specifically or cyberviolence more generally, the gendered nature of this phenomenon and the ways in which it affects girls and women around the world is of great significance and in need of immediate attention and action (Connell et. al., 2014).

What is Cybermisogyny?

In her article *Misogynistic Cyber Hate Speech*, law professor Danielle Keats Citron notes that misogyny has not been eliminated from society; rather, it has flourished in a new home – the Internet. Discriminatory and misogynistic behaviors that would be illegal, or unacceptable due to social norms and sanctions offline, abound online (Citron, 2011; Turton-Turner, 2013).

Although both men and women are targeted by cyberviolence, online harassment directed towards women – cybermisogyny – is so pervasive on social media networks such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter that dealing with it has become a normal part of being a woman online (Chemaly, 2012). The findings of a UK-based study analyzing the user generated content on Twitter reveals just how prevalent this issue is: within a 46-day period, more than 6 million instances of the word “slut” or “whore” were used in Tweets written in English, and approximately 20% of the Tweets analyzed in the entire study appeared to be threatening in nature, for example: “@XXX @XXX You stupid ugly fucking slut I’ll go to your flat and cut your fucking head off you inbred whore” (Bartlett et al., 2014b). Moreover, women are significantly more likely to be targeted on Twitter specifically because of their gender, and this harassment is amplified for women of color and members of the LGBTQ community (Bartlett et al., 2014a).

Contributing to the feeling of loss of control that is experienced by female victims is that they often have no idea who is attacking them! Instances of attacks on women by ‘cybermobs’ – a decentralized group of individuals loosely working together, usually to defend a perceived threat to the status quo – are becoming all too common (de Winter and Kocurek, 2012; Jenson and de Castell, 2013; Sarkeesian, 2012). The most intense and extreme forms of cybermob campaigns to date have overwhelmingly targeted individuals who self-identify as female, embody femaleness, and/or critique the rampant sexism that defines spaces and cultures associated with stereotypical (hegemonic) masculinity.³ But one does not have to present a challenge to the status quo to be a victim of anonymous online harassment. For example, in the distribution of “revenge porn” - where sexually explicit images or videos are distributed without consent - Citron (2014) found that in the 1,606 cases she examined, 90% of the targets were women.

³ Video game, heavy metal music, and comic book culture are all undergoing a cultural shift towards diversity and facing heavy resistance from the core (consumer/market) demographic of heterosexual, white males.

Forms of Cyberviolence and Cybermisogyny

Sanctioned cybermisogyny profoundly harms women, yet it is too often overlooked, or even trivialized (Buni and Chemaly, 2014; Chisholm, 2009). Some of the acts directed against girls and women described in the literature and outlined in our research are described below. Cyberviolence against girls and women can involve, but are not limited to:

- Violent threats (rape, death, etc.)
- Distribution of doctored photographs
- Inciting others to assault the victim
- Impersonation of the victim
- Identity theft
- Lies and slander spread online about the victim with the intention of damaging the victim's reputation (libel)
- Technical sabotage and privacy invasions such as hacking victims' computers, e-mail, social media accounts
- Strategically sharing hacked information with the intention of manipulating the victims life (this is particularly damaging if the victim is unaware that they are being targeted)
- Doxing (hacking and posting confidential information such as social security numbers, medical records, passwords, license numbers, banking information),
- Disclosing personal information such as address, place of work or school, daily routines and schedules online
- Defamation (posting or directly sending false information to victims friends, relatives, employers, potential employers with the intention of permanently destroying the victims reputation
- Creep shots (clandestine, lewd photos taken of girls and women without their consent or knowledge then posted online)
- Coordinated denial-of-service attacks and "image reaping" campaigns to shut down victims' websites and blogs.

Just joking around: The normalization of misogyny

Regardless of the manner of their involvement – as victims, as perpetrators, as bystanders - it is clear that the phenomenon of cyberviolence affects girls and women in more ways, and to a higher degree, than boys and men. Instances of gendered cyberviolence and cybermisogyny are not unusual in the 'wild west' of the Internet, and the online hate campaigns mobilized against females are "symptomatic of a broader normalization of old-style sexism evident in contemporary media such as advertising." (Turton-Turner, 2013) Indeed, many young women regard harassment and violence to be a normal, and perhaps expected, part of everyday life, especially during adolescence (Fineran and Bennett 1999; Richards and Marcum, 2014). Cyberviolence is normalized by recasting this behavior as freedom of expression, and further intensified by allowing perpetrators to post anonymously.

Requests for the cessation of gendered cyberviolence are often countered with arguments about free speech and democratic rights or that gendered cyberviolence is simply a form of “controversial humour” (Turton-Turner, 2013). Moderators often refuse to remove violent, misogynist humor, downplaying its offensiveness and justifying it as free speech, even though humour that is dependent on cruelty and debasement of others is often wielded as a tool of dominance (Oliver, 2007).

Social networking sites are littered with groups/pages labeled by administrators as “controversial humour” that celebrate and promote rape culture, encourage violence against women, and other issues/topics that represent a the fuzzy boundaries between freedom of expression, privacy and consent in online interactions, spaces, and networks. In her 2012 investigation of the (now defunct) Facebook page “12 Year Old Slut Memes” (which posts photographs of girls and women so that others can comment on their supposed promiscuity), Chemaly notes how the owners squarely place the blame on the victims, who often have no idea their pictures are being used this way: “You put something on Facebook, you no longer own it. Sometimes it pays to read the fine print. In short, shut your f**king mouth and accept you’re the one that put up that slutty photo, regret and forget, you f**cking moron.”

It has been repeatedly asserted by members of these groups that the derision of women (and other vulnerable groups) is free expression, in the interests of simply having a good laugh in a utopian space that “doesn’t really exist”. This rationalization here is that the abuse is not real; it’s a joke in a virtual world and therefore doesn’t have an impact on the woman’s ‘real life’ (Turton-Turner, 2013).

Anonymity: Fueling Cyberviolence?

There are few repercussions to expressing gendered hate online individuals believe they can engage in this behavior without personal consequences. (Citron, 2011; Jenson and de Castell, 2013). The anonymity of the bully is another way a power imbalance is created online. Anonymity can heighten the threatening nature of an act of cyberbullying, or the victim’s resultant sense of powerlessness (Dooley, Pyzalski, and Cross, 2009; Levy et al., 2012). Anonymity can allow perpetrators of online misogynist hate speech to broaden their audience and deepen their impact without fear of consequences. Individuals who would not otherwise engage in traditional bullying behaviors do so online in response to the anonymity offered through electronic media. (Tokunaga, 2010)

Consequences of Cybermisogyny

Threats of violence discourage people from pursuing their interests online. Female victims of cyberviolence move offline, shutting down social media profiles and removing their online presence. Additionally, women who witness cybermisogyny and cyberviolence may become reluctant to participate out of fear of similar victimization and, therefore, being forced offline harms society as a whole (Sampat, Prior, Nair, and Quinn, 2015). Additionally, victims may face offline impacts due to threats of rape and violence such as having to change schools, anxiety or panic

attacks related to personal safety, and not participating in the ordinary routines of their lives. Professional lives are also impacted, as staying offline can hinder one's ability to do their job. For example, being removed from a company's contact directory, or not being able to post a professional profile on your company's website or social networking sites such as LinkedIn, having search engine results linking victims' names to negative content (i.e. allegations of mental illness) can impact victims employment, educational and social opportunities (Citron, 2011).

Statistics related to cyberviolence under-represent the true extent of the problem because victims are often reluctant to come forward out of embarrassment or fears that the issue won't be taken seriously (Citron, 2011). Victims may believe that there are neither resources in place (in the form of legal or administrative consequences) nor available institutional supports or solutions. Additionally, victims may fear that by drawing attention to the situation they might exacerbate the problem.

Interplay between On and Offline Gendered Violence and Misogyny

"So, too, cyber hate can skew how society perceives and treats women, entrenching hateful attitudes and discrimination. The search-ability and persistence of digital content ensures the continuation of these harms." (Citron, 2011)

A 2013 report from the World Health Organization called violence against women "a global health problem of epidemic proportion," from domestic abuse, stalking, and street harassment to sex trafficking, rape, and murder; this epidemic is thriving in the petri dish of social media. There is a deep contradiction at play: While the Internet has made feminist voices more visible and has provided a space for different types of voices to be heard, there is an intense backlash against these 'outspoken' women. Jessica Valenti, for example, a columnist for the UK news website The Guardian and founder of Feministing.com is one of the most successful and visible feminists of her generation. However, she advises the incoming generation of feminist writers to do so anonymously due to the "emotional ramifications of constant, round-the-clock abuse" (Goldberg, 2015). For online harassers, silencing feminists and female community members, whether through sexual slurs or outright threats, is an overt goal.

Moreover, technology is increasing violence against women, not just reflecting it. Anne Collier, co-chair of the Obama administration's Online Safety and Technology Working Group, identifies and explains this catch-22 situation: "On the one hand, these online images and words are bringing awareness to a longstanding problem. On the other hand, the amplification of these ideas over social media networks is validating and spreading pathology" (Buni and Chemaly, 2014). It's little surprise that the Internet has become a powerful tool in violence against women: A 2012 survey conducted in the US by the National Network to End Domestic Violence found that 68% of local domestic violence programs reported victims who were experiencing technology-enabled abuse, often across multiple platforms. Around the world, rapists are using cell phones to record the attacks to silence their victims,

either by blackmailing victims out of reporting the crimes to the authorities or slut-shaming (Burgmann, 2012; Haddadi, 2012). A report by the Pakistan-based organization Bytes for All released a study showing how social media and mobile technologies cause real/offline harm to women in the country (Bukhari, 2014)

Cyberviolence Against LGBTQ*

Boys and men, too, face and experience cyberviolence, often for being or seeming gay. (Baum, Catalano and Rand, 2009.) The suicide of Tyler Clementi, an 18-year-old college freshman at Rutgers University in 2010, shocked the world, but also shed a much-needed light on the (then) hidden teenage worlds of computing, sex, bullying, and unkindness (Parker, 2012). Tyler's then-roommate recorded and live-streamed his intimate activities with another male without his knowledge or consent. Clementi was not publicly out as a homosexual male, and after being exposed as gay, he committed suicide by jumping off the George Washington Bridge.

LGBTQ youth are less likely than heterosexual youth to disclose victimization of cyberbullying to adults or the authorities (Levy et al., 2012). A US national survey of LGBTQ and allied youth between the ages of 11-22 suggests that youth choose not to tell their parents about cyberviolence about because they are afraid that their technology use will be restricted or supervised, they believe that parents cannot stop cyberbullying or will not believe them, and importantly, fear of disclosing their non-heterosexual identities to parents (Blumenfeld and Cooper, 2010). LGBTQ teens and allied peers also believe that it is the responsibility of peers – particularly bystanders – to combat cyberviolence through a call for a change in what is currently considered to be normal and acceptable for bystanders (Levy, et al., 2012).

Consequences of Cyberviolence

Cyberbullying is a form of cyberviolence. According to Connell et. al. (2014), cyberbullying has a greater impact on victims than traditional bullying, perhaps because of the potential to reach and include a greater audience of witnesses, it lasts longer because it stays up online and it follows the victim into every aspect of their lives. Anonymity or the mediation of technology may result in the degree of bullying being more intense and escalating to a greater extent than if the incident were occurring offline. Moreover, there are often no adult witnesses such as parents or teachers who can intervene early to de-escalate the situation.

Youth involved in cyberbullying across multiple roles are also associated with negative emotional or psychological characteristics – namely, low self-esteem, but also sadness, hostility, and depression (Levy, et. al., 2012). In their research study that included the perspectives of almost 2,000 middle school students in one of the largest school districts in the US, Patchin and Hinduja (2010) suggest that low-self esteem and might be an outcome of being involved in cyberbullying – as either a bully or a victim – although it may not have a causal relationship to the bullying acts.

Girls who bully have a four times higher risk for depression than those who don't and girls who reported being cyberbullied were three times more likely to meet

clinical criteria for depression. If connected to unwanted sexual advances, the odds of depression went up sixfold (Selkie, Kora, Chan, and Moreno, 2015)! Research on the affects of cyberbullying amongst female college students report very similar findings – those involved in cyberbullying (as victims or bullies) had increased odds of depression, as well as substance abuse, with the highest odds among those who had experienced unwanted sexual advances online or via text messages. As well, recent research studies support a link between cyberbullying and suicide among adolescents (Bonanno and Hymel, 2013; Connell, et.al., 2014; Hinduja and Patchin, 2010; Schneider, O Donnell, Stueve and Coulter, 2012).

Generational differences in perceptions of cyberviolence: Normalized cybermisogyny and the gendered hierarchy

Adult and youth notions of cyberviolence are not always aligned, due to differences in perception of what counts as bullying and the language used to describe these incidents. (Levy et al., 2012) Additionally, the few laws and policies that are in place to deal with cases of cyberviolence are often not informed by the ways in which girls and young women understand and actively negotiate their lived experiences of sexuality, harassment, and consent. Objectification, sexual harassment, and abuse are a part of the fabric of young women’s lives, thus any effective intervention will need to consider how and what this group thinks about cyberviolence (Hlavka, 2014; Orenstein 1994).

Girls’ tend to characterize their experiences of everyday harassment as normal, primarily through assessments of a “natural” and uncontrollable male sexual aggression and their understanding of harassment (from both sexes) as a normal adolescent rite of passage (Phillips, 2000). The mutually exclusive positions of male power and privilege and female acquiescence are reinforced by young people’s descriptions of normal or routine sexualized interactions, which in turn works to reinforce a system of compulsory heterosexuality that sanctions cyberviolence directed towards LGBTQ persons (Fineran and Bennett, 1999).

In sum, sexual harassment continues to be an instrument that sanctions and maintains a *gendered hierarchy* (Herring, 2002; MacKinnon 1979; Shariff and Gouin, 2005). Teen/young peoples’ ideas about sex reflect the gendered hierarchy, and technology aids in supporting (hegemonic) notions of male aggression (sexual or otherwise) towards females as “natural” and thus excused as “boys will be boys” instead of incurring real life consequences. This is a cycle that needs to be disrupted with online and offline interventions that encourage youth to critically consider the systems of inequality they are supporting by engaging in these actions.

Throughout the literature review, we have tried to demonstrate that cyberviolence against girls and young women is a multi-faceted and complex issue that can take many forms, is deeply rooted within the gender inequalities that still exist in the offline world. Cybermisogyny runs rampant and unchecked on the Internet because misogyny is still viewed as “business as usual” in offline world; cyberbullying is normalized as “boys will be boys”, with only the most extreme cases of abuse – i.e. those that result in the untimely and tragic death of a young person victimized by

cyberviolence – getting attention, and then subsequently dismissed through the same adage.

Strategies to combat or prevent cyberviolence

Other prevention and intervention programs, which address both offline and online bullying, address multiple levels of factors that influence bullying with a tiered model (borrowed from public health). The first tier is universal preventative education; the second involves more focused prevention and intervention strategies for particular students; the third tier involves interventions for perpetrators that can include counseling services, law enforcement, the medical community, and other stakeholders (Donlin, 2012; Nigam & Collier, 2010 – as cited in Levy et. al., 2012, p. 47).

Changing social norms

Research that examines the construction of social norms suggests that if young people perceive bullying as an acceptable social interaction, they are more likely to engage in bullying. These observations are similar to research findings of studies that examine why youth engage in risky or dangerous behaviour (e.g. drug and alcohol use) (Levy et. al., 2012). Strategies to develop prevention and intervention programs that are capable of addressing the multiple levels of factors that influence the normalization of cyberviolence between and amongst young people need to focus on the **de**-construction of the powerful, 'loading bearing' social norms that are the key to supporting the acceptance and practice of gendered cyberviolence as "business as usual".

The role of bystanders

Research has shown that interventions that target social norms about cyberviolence, particularly the actions of bystanders, can result in more positive, pro-social behavior among youth, and reduce bullying (Levy et al., 2012; Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, and Hymel, 2010). Front line workers such as teachers and counselors further acknowledge the importance of involving bystanders in developing strategies to combat cyberviolence, both on and offline (Orpinas and Horne, 2006).

According to Johnson (2013):

When we factor in anonymity bystanders can escalate an act of cyberviolence by supporting the perpetrator, contributing damaging comments or content and as a result escalating the situation, forwarding content which increases the scope and reach of the act. However, sometimes bystanders act transparently supporting the perpetrator online as an act of solidarity to confirm a sense of belonging to the group, either voluntarily or as a result of peer pressure aligning themselves with the perpetrator to avoid becoming a victim of cyberviolence themselves. Bystanders can also de-escalate

an act of cyberviolence by stepping in and supporting the victim, by expressing condemnation of the act, by drawing the incident to the attention to the incident. However, Johnson (2013) suggests the benefits of bystander intervention are complex. Bystanders who intervene can quickly become targets themselves particularly if they are members of a marginalized community, and having bystanders jumping into the conflict can escalate a conflict which might have diffused had it been ignored.

Teen Drama vs. Harassment

A five-year ethnographic study that examined youth bullying suggests that most teens do not identify with the bullying or cyberbullying rhetoric used by parents, youth advocates, and mental health professionals (Levy et. al., 2012). Rather, youth describe these social interactions as “drama,” a dismissive term used by teens – but especially girls – to describe a range of social practices involving interpersonal conflict between individuals. This recasting of cyberviolence as drama effectively blurs the lines between serious and non-serious conflict, and also eliminates the need to identify either a bully or victim (Allen, forthcoming; Marwick and boyd, 2011).⁴

Any strategy developed to combat cyberviolence against girls and young women needs to be grounded in their own perceptions and perspectives of this issue in order to be effective. The strategy should include a means for collecting this information (girls’ notions of what constitutes or ‘counts’ as cyberviolence, cyberbullying, bystanding, victim and bully subject positions, etc.), preferably through the use of digital media that can be used to communicate information and represent difficult knowledge/issues in a creative and familiar way; also importantly, digital media production gives ‘voice’ back to victims and others who may feel silenced.

Video Games and Gender

Video Game Development, Culture, and Scholarship in Montreal and Canada

The industry has become one of the largest entertainment industries worldwide, one of significant economic and cultural importance. Within the last decade, and particularly over the last few years, the digital games industry and its consumers have moved well beyond the boundaries of console and computer based play to mobile devices, social media games, film, music and television, and a variety of

⁴ Definitions of drama differ between researchers. Marwick and boyd (2011), for instance, argue that drama is “social and interpersonal; involves relational conflict; reciprocal; gendered; and, often performed for, in, and magnified by networked publics.” (p. 5) Allen (forthcoming) defines drama as “social interaction with the following attributes: 1) conflict; 2) excessive emotionality; 3) excessive time and attention; and 4) practices that overlap with bullying, gossip, and aggression.”

merchandise from clothing to figurines. Within Canada, Montreal has become an important geographical location for video game development, and continues to grow due to substantial financial investment and support through the Quebec provincial government (Klyne, 2010; Van Praet, 2012). Montreal boasts a robust ecosystem of small commercial studios as well as large multinational game corporations, education and training programs, and of course, research and scholarship (Parker, 2013; Della Rocca, 2013; Lessard, 2013). Video game research and scholarship in Canada is focused on developing a multi- and interdisciplinary field of 'game studies' that gives equal weight to knowledge derived from small scale feminist analysis case studies and qualitative ethnographic work as positivist, 'big data' quantitative work; Canadian Game Studies Association (CGSA), the national scholarly society, provides direction and space for this work; a similar research trajectory can be seen in international organizations like Digital Games Research Association (DIGRA),

The expanding demographics of video game culture

The opening up of gaming culture has encouraged everyone –not just teenaged boys – to play games, and recent demographic information on “gamers” seems to show a steady democratization happening between the sexes. For example, in 2011, the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) reported that 38% of gamers in Canada were female; in 2014 the number of female gamers in Canada rose to 48% (ESA 2011, 2014).

However, while the above statistics might suggest that that digital games culture has moved beyond its sexist, misogynist roots and is now inclusive and welcoming, qualitative research on the experiences of women-in-games in North America demonstrate that this is not the case. Despite the rise in the number of females reporting that they play games, we are far from resolving issues of misogyny and inherent sexism in digital games culture and industry (Anthropy, 2012; Jenson and de Castell, 2011, 2013; Sarkeesian, 2013; Stermer and Burkley, 2012; Taylor, Jenson and de Castell, 2009; Westecott, 2009; Wingfield, 2014).

For over a decade, the term “Women in Games” (WIG) has referred to an array of projects and initiatives that share a common goal: getting more women into the digital games industry. Unsurprisingly, the video game industry continues to be dominated by men, with statistics indicating a 4-6.9% level of female participation in the workforce (Prescott and Bogg, 2011). Ara Shirinian’s “10 years of Salary Surveys” (2012) for *Game Developer Magazine* reports that the highest proportion of female workers in the industry were in 2005 and 2010, when women comprised almost 10% of the workforce.

Girls and women are considered to be both separate and unequal participants in games culture, and it continues to be a struggle to examine and talk about females’ participation in gaming culture as equal members, not as “girl gamers” or as a group that is somehow different from or disadvantaged in relation to their male counterparts (Fisher, Jenson, and de Castell, 2015). Digital games culture and industry is organized by a gendered power structure described by Fron, Fullerton,

Morie and Pearce (2007) as a “hegemony of play,” which normalizes the patriarchal system by organizing digital games culture according to deeply structured presumptions of difference between the sexes.

According to Jenson and de Castell (2011) “such deeply structured presumptions of difference between and among girls/women and boys/men has sustained a persistent conceptual stranglehold on identities as singular, immutable, unchangeable forces governing how we learn, how we think, and how we play” (p. 64). These taken-for-granted assumptions marginalize and alienate players who do not self-identify as or represent the de facto “hardcore gamer” market demographic “characterized by an adolescent male sensibility that transcends physical age and embraces highly stylized graphical violence, male fantasies of power and domination, hyper-sexualized, objectified depictions of woman, and rampant racial stereotyping and discrimination (Fron et. al., 2007, p. 315).

Representations of women in games:

Historically, representations of women in digital games have not been produced by women, but by men. This unequal power dynamic has led to the development of key ‘controlling images’ that define the parameters and norms for female participation in this domain, and include but are not limited to pinkification, marginalization, sexualization, and exclusion.

Pinkification:

As *the* cultural signifier for anything feminine, pink is used to organize and differentiate ‘girls games’ from other digital games, which by default are created for the male consumer. This reinforces stereotypical gender-based play. Pink games function as a mutually exclusive barrier for female participation in *other* (non-pink) genres, as well as demarcates this territory as a “no play” zone for male players. In short, pink games explicitly reproduces the sexism that games culture organizes itself by.

Marginalization:

Women mostly appear in video games as non-playable characters such as quest givers, objects of affection or conquest, or non-interactive “background decoration” (Bergstrom et. al., 2011; see Sarkeesian, 2013; 2014). Although there are some notable exceptions of female protagonists in heavily marketed big-budget (re: non-pink) console-based games, such as the *Tomb Raider* and *Mass Effect* series, and *Mirror’s Edge* (2008), the mainstream games industry continues to show resistance to developing complex and meaningful female characters. At best, this reluctance reflects a corporate-minded desire to not mess with a formula that is profitable. At worst, it reflects an ongoing insensitivity to the diversity issues that are now dominating discussions of character selection, creation and customization (Bergstrom et. al., 2011; Brock, 2011; Burgess et. al., 2011; Gray, 2012; Pace, Houssian, & McArthur, 2009).



Sexualization:

Perhaps the most visible form of control, sexualization is, at least, the most discussed example of the sexist culture of digital games in both scholarly and popular literature (Downs & Smith, 2010; Fox et. al., 2014; Ivory, 2009; Kennedy, 2002; Stermer & Burkley, 2012). Sexual objectification of women in this domain is not contained to in-game representations. Real world (i.e. non-pixelated) women are sexually objectified in advertisements to sell games, consoles, computers and more. In addition to print and web advertising, the presence of in-the-flesh female “booth babes” are an expected cultural norm at large digital games gatherings such as fan conventions, tournaments, and launch parties (Taylor, Jenson & de Castell, 2009). This normalized objectification of women can sometimes create inhospitable conditions for female fans and players, who are not there to indulge the sexual fantasies of male gamers, but just want to partake in a culture that they enjoy.

Exclusion:

Women are continually excluded from full participation in digital games spaces as “gamers” through marketing and cultural practices. Despite recent initiatives to open up games culture to those on the outside, the majority of bestselling games are still primarily developed for and directly marketed to boys and men. Women do not have access to all the things a male gamer does, simply by virtue of their gender. Only “niche” (i.e. pinkified) or “legitimate peripheral participation” are acceptable. It is also common for women to be explicitly excluded from amateur and professional gaming tournaments, purely on sexist grounds (*Borderhouse*, 2011; Figueira, 2014).

In short, girls and women who play and make games are subjected to pinkification, marginalization, sexualization, and exclusion. The experience of being a woman in games – whether you are a player, designer, developer, educator, scholar or journalist – is one of constant negotiation and deflection with the dominant, interweaving discourses that work to keep girls and women in subordinate positions. The examples presented above are only some of ways the hegemony of play exerts its control by normalizing women’s subordinate status and disciplining discourses that are critical of the status quo/unchecked male privilege. Women who transgress these imposed boundaries are subject to harassment, both on and offline, further exemplifying why women-in-games groups and spaces are now, more than ever, viewed as necessary to challenge sex- and gender-based discrimination and change the social norms of this toxic culture.

Cybermisogyny and Video Games

The project of documenting women’s everyday experiences playing digital games has revealed how normalized gender-based harassment has become in this domain, and how it drives girls and women away from traditional gaming spaces, quickly and permanently (Nardi, 2010; Salter and Biodgett, 2012). Gendered harassment can range from one-time, casual, misogynistic expressions to large-scale, long-term, collaborative efforts focused on aggravating an individual or organization. While these moments of harassment are often discrete incidents between individuals, when reported and accumulated, they add up to form a striking picture of systemic

and structural oppression (Jenson and de Castell, 2013). Women who speak up and out about sexism in digital games culture and industry are met with coordinated online and offline attacks by cybermobs of anonymous individuals who take it upon themselves to discipline feminist “social justice warriors” (SJWs). One does not even have to identify as a feminist to be targeted. As the case of Bioware game writer Jennifer Hepler demonstrates, one only needs to be a female working in the industry to have your comments taken out of context and become the target of a hate campaign (see Amini, 2012; Griffiths, 2012; Polo, 2012).

Gamergate, August 2014-present

Hints of a potential large-scale backlash against “feminists in games” started popping up in 2012, mostly targeting Anita Sarkeesian, founder of *Feminist Frequency*, and her attempt to fund a video series that would critically investigate and interrogate the use of tropes of women in video games (Sarkeesian, 2013). This heightened hysteria about the expansion of video games beyond the hegemony of play recently reached a pinnacle moment with the emergence of the online movement known as “Gamergate” in August 2014.

At its core, Gamergate is organized reactionary rage by anonymous individuals heavily invested in maintaining the balance of power in favour of the hardcore gamer and the hegemony of play. Despite claims that Gamergate is about lobbying for an open dialogue regarding “ethics in video game journalism,” when analyzed through a feminist lens, it is difficult to interpret this movement as anything but rampant misogyny due to unchecked, white male privilege and entitlement that is fueled by (and fuels) a hegemony of play where female participation is understood in relation to male (Cross, 2014; Kain, 2014; Quinn, 2014; Sierra, 2014; Singal, 2014; Stuart, 2014; van Veen, 2014, 2015; Vossen, 2014; Zina-Walschots, 2015).

Those interested in supporting women in games is a potential target caught in the crosshairs of Gamergate. For example, the academic community’s commitment to fostering a diverse and inclusive research culture in the area of games studies has been twisted to contribute to development of conspiracy theories related to academia and scholarly organizations imposing an activist, equity-seeking, “social justice warrior” agenda. Game studies academics who self-identify as feminists have been specifically targeted under the belief that a “feminist ideological takeover” within the Digital Games Research Association (DIGRA) is responsible for the influx of diverse and critical voices now participating in the development of digital games.