Neighbours, Friends & Families

The Evolving Discourse Around Violence Against Women in Digital Media and Popular Culture
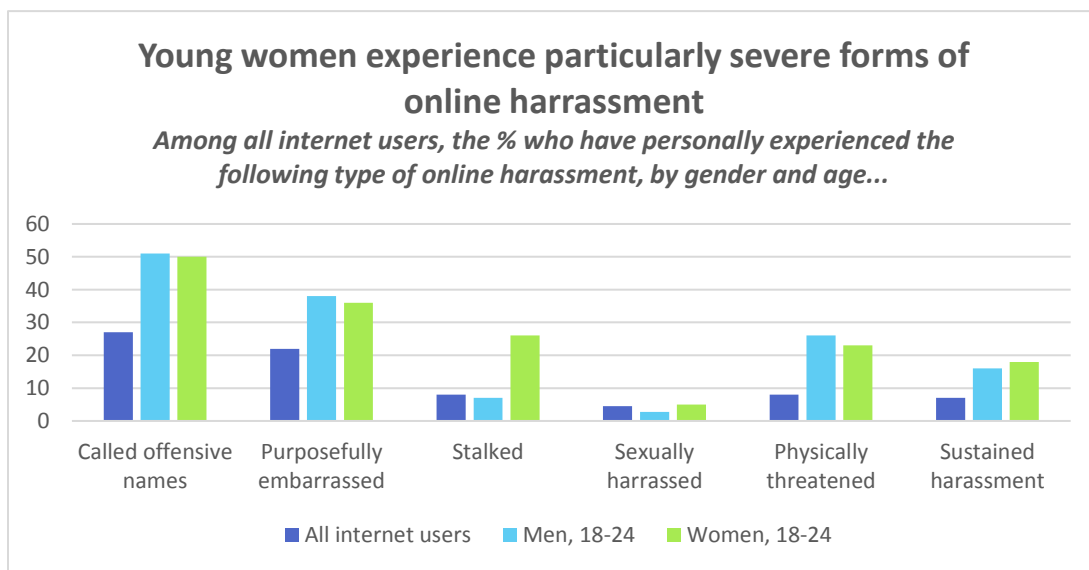
Technology, especially in the form of digital media, has upended everything from the ordinary ways we shop and maintain our health, to efforts to influence public policy or strategies to win elections. Naturally, technology has also made its mark on the conversations about violence against women, with varying effects. It would be hard to find someone in North America who hasn't heard of the social media-led #MeToo movement, or someone who hasn't heard, even in passing, the term "GamerGate", a malicious online campaign targeting female video gamers. Similarly, popular culture is increasingly interested in exploring once-taboo topics like domestic violence, as has been demonstrated in prominent TV series. Although today's discussions around violence against women have brought both the good, the bad and the ugly to light, digital media and popular culture's contributions have arguably steered the conversation in the right direction. Despite the problems, there is more visibility for a culture of misogyny, greater emphasis on holding perpetrators accountable for violence against women, and the recruitment of digital media platforms to combat harassment, a departure from the offensive tradition of blaming victims.

Digital Media

Digital media, including social media and media-hosting platforms, have long fostered an environment that is hostile towards women and girls, marking them easy targets for cyber-bullying and even extreme acts like "revenge porn" and stalking. In fact, the 2013 Canadian report, "Sexual Violence and Social Media: Building a Framework for Prevention" found that social media doesn't promote bullying and sexual violence so much as it extends its reach into new corners of victims' lives, and shapes the forms that the abuse takes. The popularity of digital platforms and the integral role they play in our social and professional lives, as well as their role in our entertainment and understanding of world events, means it's unhelpful to suggest that the solution to violence against women is to simply "get off the Internet." Digital media must be a core component, not just a minor part of the strategy to end violence against women.

Of course, there has been progress in making digital media safer for women, aided by considerable public pressure. As Jordan Fairbairn writes in her research paper "Rape Threats and Revenge Porn: Defining Sexual Violence in the Digital Age," ending violence against women in digital spaces necessitates moving away from victim blaming. Ideas that women can address harassment on their own, that harassment can be dismissed as innocent teasing, and that harassment is a normal part of online platforms must be rejected. Public campaigns ultimately persuaded Twitter to overhaul its harassment policy in September 2018, and YouTube to announce in April that it too would review and potentially revamp its current harassment harassment policies[i]. Altering the discourse around violence against women cannot be left to simple acts of solidarity; only the active and full commitment of digital media companies to combat harassment will continue to move conversations surrounding violence against women in the right direction.

Fortunately, the rise of digital spaces has also led to innovative ways to support domestic violence victims. There are new ways for victims to reach out for help, be it via smartphone apps or better online services, and it's become crucial for service providers and shelters to have a social media presence in order to easily connect with victims/survivors. Likewise, the birth of social media campaigns such as #MeToo and #TimesUp have helped the public to understand just how common violence against women is in virtually any setting, and helped to normalize the act of holding serial abusers like Harvey Weinstein and Jeffrey Epstein accountable for their actions, instead of shaming victims.

Young women experience particularly severe forms of online harrassment
Among all internet users, the % who have personally experienced the following type of online harassment, by gender and age...

Source: American Trends Panel (wave 4). Survey conducted May 30 – June 30, 2014. n=2,839.
Graph adapted from Pew Research Centre

Definitions

Digital Media: video, audio, software, or other content that is created, edited, stored, or accessed in digital form[ii]; we are including social media in our definition

Revenge Porn: sexually explicit images of a person posted online without that person's consent especially as a form of revenge or harassment [iii]

Popular Culture

On the popular culture front, major television shows like Grey's Anatomy and Big Little Lies have brought the subject of domestic violence into the public eye. Each of the shows have approached the subject in a unique manner: Grey's Anatomy features a character named Jo, a doctor who flees her domestic violence situation to start over, while Big Little Lies dissects the implications of intimate partner violence through the character Celeste as she wrestles with her complicated abusive relationship and her desire to protect her young sons. These shows demonstrate to viewers the difficulties of leaving an abusive relationship, enabling viewers to build empathy and resist viewing a real-life neighbour or co-worker who stays in abusive relationship as weak or unwilling to accept help[iv]. As the book "No Visible Bruises" by Rachel Louise Snyder eloquently points out, domestic violence remains a prevalent cultural problem, because people still blame women for not leaving, instead of questioning why men can't control their

Statistics

• **57%** of women worldwide have experienced harassment or assault on Facebook, **23%** on Facebook Messenger, **10%** on Instagram[v]

• **62%** of women worldwide have experienced generally abusive language or comments directed at them

• **46%** of women worldwide have experienced sexist or misogynistic comments directed at them

• **26%** of women worldwide have endured threats (direct or indirect) of physical or sexual violence against them (**that's 1 in 4!**)

• Young women aged **18 to 24** experience certain types of harassment at disproportionately high levels: **26%** stalked online, **25%** target of online sexual harassment [vi]

violence[vii]. With TV series taking on the issue in informed and compassionate ways, we can hope for a shift in the public perception of domestic violence that encourages more bystanders to reach out and support victims and inspires victims to seek help and escape abuse. As with any phenomenon that disrupts the status quo, we expect digital media's role in shaping conversations around violence against women to evolve, and to gain prominence. New media will be a battleground for abusers and the groups championing the end of violence against women alike. We can anticipate more disclosures of ground breaking yet disturbing stories of violence against women as victims/survivors feel more empowered to share their experiences. Along with a heightened willingness to explore taboo topics affecting women, these stories will promote greater accountability for those who use abusive behaviour in their intimate relationships.

We also optimistically anticipate a shift in the attitudes of those governing digital platforms and technology companies towards harassment policies for users. one where these policies are drafted proactively rather than reactively. At the same time, we as a society will be forced to contend with new, unprecedented threats to women's safety in digital spaces, given the rapid advancements in video manipulation and impersonation software, and emerging cybersecurity risks that make stalking and invasion of privacy easier and more feasible than ever before. With all these forces at play and influencing the discussions on violence against women in digital media and popular culture, this field is certainly one to watch. It will be part of the fight to end and prevent violence against women.

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