Online misogynistic harassment and response rhetoric: A case study of Anita Sarkeesian and her harassers

By

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Abstract

Online misogynistic harassment has created both a degrading and violent space for many people who have social media profiles. Even though social media platforms have started to update their rules regarding content and engagement expectations, harmful ideologies such as misogyny continue to flourish in posts, threads, and comment sections. Therefore, it is both important to know how to recognize when ideologies such as misogyny are causing harm online while also being able to understand certain ways that people could respond to online misogynistic harassment. This project will look at how misogyny takes places particularly within the online gaming community and how media critic Anita Sarkeesian adopts a "rhetoric of difference" (Flores, 1996) to combat the misogynistic harassment she encounters.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Anita Sarkeesian, founder of the non-profit online resource Feminist Frequency (feministfrequency.com), has dedicated much of her professional and adult life to creating open-source material about feminism and media. While the website for Feminist Frequency is where much of the dialogue that she and her colleagues have developed over the years is located, her critiques of films, games, books, and television shows can also be found on YouTube and other third-party sources that stream the Feminist Frequency podcast. Her public commitment to education and criticism is something she takes pride in and has defined herself through (Campbell, 2019). However, this public platform that she has created for herself has also exposed her to online hordes of people who are committed to shutting down any form of critical dialogue about the things they enjoy (Yamato, 2017). Despite the online harassment she has experienced as a result of being a proud feminist who is unwilling to censor her opinions on different forms of media, Sarkeesian has stayed committed to criticizing how historically marginalized people are depicted in the media that people across the world consume.

Although Sarkeesian is now a high-profile media producer and critic, early in her life her family instilled in her skepticism toward news media. Her parents were originally from Mosul, Iraq but eventually moved to Toronto. Sarkeesian recalls criticism of the news media was always a staple in their household. By the time she was six, her parents were constantly criticizing the media depictions of Iraq during the first Gulf War as being misrepresentative and letting those false narratives become justifications for conflict (Campbell, 2019). This skepticism eventually influenced her scholastic and professional experiences. Even though her earlier years in academia when she attended Santa Monica College and California State University, Northridge were mainly focused on intercultural communication and political theory, her experiences as an

organizer in New York led to her pursuing a master's degree in social and political thought at York University (Campbell, 2019). It was during her time at York that she began to focus on feminism and media.

Despite the fact that Sarkeesian discovered her interest in feminist theory during her time as an organizer and while pursuing a master's degree, she also recognized some of the pitfalls of academia. She became discouraged with the lack of access people outside of a university setting had to both the language and resources she found so integral to her understandings about intersectional feminism (Valenti, 2015). Due to these feelings of discouragement, Sarkeesian decided to embrace a more "approachable" type of instruction credited to bell hooks and her dedication to using open media platforms to engage a broader audience outside of academia (Valenti, 2015). After realizing that access to feminist theory and education was something she wanted to focus her career around, she began her YouTube channel and now non-profit organization Feminist Frequency. The videos that she made all revolved around being critical of different types of popular media and popular culture from an intersectional feminist perspective. What originally brought Sarkeesian into the public spotlight was her videos that she posted on YouTube, and more specifically, a Kickstarter she created for her new video series proposal, *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, in 2012 (Yamato, 2017).

The purpose of *Tropes* was to "create a video series on female representation in video games" that criticized both the roles women in video games played and the ways they were visually depicted (Yamato, 2017; VICE Life, 2018). The original intent of the Kickstarter campaign was to see if Sarkeesian could get funding in order to publish five videos that centered around different characters and popular games. Even though Sarkeesian initially only asked for 6,000 U.S. dollars, within a day she had already reached that goal and would eventually raise

over 25,000 dollars (TEDxTalks, 2012; Campbell, 2019). It wasn't until she decided to post a clip on her YouTube page explaining what the fundraiser was for that she began to see abusive, threatening, and sexually objectifying harassment. Even though some of her past videos on her page received some backlash from various "hate subscribers," they were always few and far between (Campbell, 2019). However, it only took a few hours for people to find this video and start the online harassment campaign Anita Sarkeesian has become known for.

Many of the posts these comments originally appeared on now have their comment sections disabled, and all comments deleted. However, Sarkeesian has recounted some of the worst ones in various interviews over the years. Some of the most graphic and memorable ones include pornographic harassment:

> The ones that really got to me, I'm sorry to be graphic, they would print out photographs of my face and then [masturbate] on them and then take a photo of that. There was something very real about that in a way that just photoshopping my face onto a pornographic image isn't. (Campbell, 2019)

Death threats were sent to university administrations that invited her to be a guest lecturer. One of the quotes that many articles cite states that one of the perpetrators claimed that if Sarkeesian were allowed to speak on campus, "This will be the deadliest school shooting in American history, and I'm giving you a chance to stop it" (Valenti, 2015). News outlets such as *The Verge* have documented various tweets that replied to her Feminist Frequency page. These tweets include racially charged slurs with the intent of attacking her intelligence, tweets telling her she should "kill herself," and tweets that downplayed the real-world effects of online death threats as something "NO one cares about, it's NOT a big deal" (Robertson, 2015).

Ever since these instances of online harassment took place, Sarkeesian has been asked to do various interviews, presentations, and guest lectures to talk to people about her experiences with online harassment. However, many of these videos don't allow viewers to make comments and if they are allowed to, they are strictly monitored and any comments that seem to be threatening can be taken down quickly. There are only a few videos left on the internet that allow people to comment on them if Sarkeesian plays any role in them. This thesis will cover one of the videos that allows comments, "How feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian fights trolls" (Washington Post, 2018). Since this is one of the few with comments enabled, I can analyze both the harassment in the comment section and how Sarkeesian responds to online harassment.

The two main questions I address in this thesis are (1) what does misogyny look like in an online context within the gaming community and (2) how can or ought feminists respond to online misogynistic harassment? Asking and answering these questions will help to raise awareness of the ubiquity and harms of online harassment and suggest ways of discussing online harassment that foreground the agency of people who are harassed. Oftentimes in discussions about acts of violence, the person who experiences the brunt of it is either utilized for their trauma as a news headline or described as a victim before anything else (Bates, 2021a). Additionally, I use the term "online misogynistic harassment" vs other terms such as "abuse" for two reasons. First, because it encompasses the gendered element that manifested in the attacks against Sarkeesian. Second, because harassment "includes wanting to embarrass, humiliate, scare, threaten, silence, extort or, in some instances, encourages mob attacks or malevolent engagements" (Women's Media Center, n.d.). This is distinct from abuse because abuse generally entails a singular actor who is not necessarily trying to instigate "mob attacks" (Women's Media Center, n.d.). I use theories of misogyny and entitlement as a lens for reading

and understanding certain comments as misogynistic harassment (Manne, 2018; Manne 2020; Bailey, 2021). Understanding the nature of online misogyny is necessary for understanding how to discuss and combat online harassment. I use the concept "rhetoric of difference" (Flores, 1996) to analyze how Sarkeesian responds to online harassment.

In this chapter, I first detail rationales for the proposed research. I identify books that look at the history of online harassment and what technical strategies social media platforms can use to help prevent future acts of harassment and violence. I then discuss some of the most recent research focusing on how people have responded to online harassment. I then briefly describe theories that will guide my analysis. First, the concepts of misogyny (Manne, 2018) and entitlement (Manne, 2020) can be used to understand online misogyny enacted in the comment sections of videos with Sarkeesian in them. Second, the concept of a "rhetoric of difference" (Flores, 1996) can be used to analyze how Sarkeesian has responded to online harassment. Finally, I outline my plan of study.

Rationale and literature review

There are many reasons why this project is important. Scholars are beginning to understand and converse about how comments made online can represent misogynistic ideology (Poland, 2016; Phillips, 2016; Bates, 2021a; Adams, 2017; Blodgett & Salter, 2018; Jane, 2016; Manne, 2018). As Laura Bates points out in *Men Who Hate Women: From incels to pickup artists, the truth about extreme misogyny and how it affects us all* (2021a), misogyny is manifesting in new and innovative ways online, and it is important that we treat it just as seriously as we treat other offline commonplace, familiar acts of misogyny because both manifestations stem from an endorsement of misogyny. Both examples also have led to material

acts of violence against women in particular, ranging from partner violence to mass shootings (Bates, 2021a; Poland, 2016).

Given the stakes of this situation, we need to continue to better understand the nature of online misogyny. People like Kate Manne (2018) and Moya Bailey (2021) have scholarship dedicated to the ways misogyny and misogynoir manifest in offline and online spaces. My research adds to their findings by looking into how comments made on Sarkeesian's video enact the misogyny in gaming culture. The more we amplify and define what online misogyny or misogynoir looks like, the more normalized acts of calling it out will be. In the following paragraphs, I more specifically discuss what literature exists on both the state of online harassment and the solutions that have been proposed to combat it.

Two recent discussions of online harassment and violence have addressed questions about the nature of online harassment and what to do about it. The first one is *Haters: Harassment, Abuse, and Violence Online* (2016) by Bailey Poland. In this book, Poland begins by looking at the rise of online abuse and why it is such a huge problem with wide-reaching effects and instigators. She follows by looking at different case studies of some of the more well-known and prolific acts of communicative violence and discusses why the online worlds in which these instances of harassment took place were not contained or shut down (Poland, 2016). She then moves on to critique the responses that women are usually told to take such as blocking, muting, or even getting off of the internet altogether. She concludes her analysis by arguing that social media platforms have an obligation to find more effective ways of shutting down harassment but that our first response to acts of violence ought to be teaching harassers not to actually commit these heinous acts of violence in the first place.

There are two reasons why I believe this analysis needs more expansion or revision. First, although Poland (2016) has recognized that people harassed should not have to change their online activities and has recommended that we should teach harassers to not harass other people, she has not provided a discussion about how this should take place or how we can instigate a broader cultural revolution that supports this effort. Second, she proposes technical solutions that social media companies should implement, but social media developers have continually shown that they were unwilling to take action when it is needed. The most recent United States Congressional suits and cases against Facebook show that even when social media companies recognize there is a problem with the way they allow people to organize, market, and communicate on their platforms, they are unlikely to take action especially if it might hurt their profits (McCluskey, 2021).

Similar to Poland (2016), Laura Bates in *Men Who Hate Women* (2021a) also looks at the impact that online harassment has on women and marginalized communities. From the beginning, her approach is different from Poland's in that she starts her analysis with more of a historical understanding of how internet mobs such as incels started their online community and crusades against people in the first place. However, her analysis is still very similar to some of the conversations Poland was having in 2016 that stemmed from the argument that women should not have only themselves to depend on when combating online harassment. Bates (2021a) also adds to the conversation that even when women take their stories to the media or people who they have been told have the power to look into these situations, they are oftentimes either told their problems "aren't that big of a deal" or they are treated simply as a profitable news headline.

What both authors have in common when it comes to their conclusions about what has to be done to prevent online harassment is that the people who commit these acts of harassment are the ones who need to change. Bates (2021a) and Poland (2016) both agree that our assumptions that women have an obligation to either change their forms of online engagement or abdicate from social media altogether feeds into the familiar narrative of victim-blaming (e.g., blaming people who have been sexually assaulted for the actions done to them based on their choice of clothing, how much they had to drink, or even their past discourse). While I wholeheartedly agree that more needs to be done in order to stop online radicalization and harassment from ever happening, I think it is also important to recognize that these types of changes won't happen overnight. If Bates (2021a) is right that there are possibly hundreds of thousands of people online who show signs of misogynistic radicalization, we need to pursue a path that looks to re-educate young people while also creating a vocabulary and archive of possible responses, in the case that people are affected by online harassment, before wholesale change occurs. These two books also go into detail about the technical approaches people can take on social media to avoid harassers such as increased privacy settings, appointing overseers, reporting, and enhanced scanning mechanisms as a tool for social media developers to implement (Bates, 2021a; Poland, 2016).

One response by people who are the victims of harassment has been described as "Self-Blame," or "Comparing harassment to others' experiences, blaming one's own naiveté, feeling stupid" (Veletsianos, Houlden, Hodson, & Gosse, 2018. p. 4698). People have been known to do this when they describe their experiences with online harassment as something "that is inevitable" based on the content they have chosen to write about or because of something they said that people took offense to. These actions all attempt to do what Chadha, Steiner, Vitak, & Ashktorab (2020) have concluded to be "normalizing harassment," or assuming that online

harassment is justified or inevitable for certain individuals who seek to participate online. It should be noted, however, that this form of reaction offers no change to the status quo of online harassment. This response blames victims rather than harassers.

There is a rich literature base that has begun to develop on other ways feminists respond to online violence. One type of response could be described as corporate and institutional efforts. Some scholars advocate for direct legal engagement when faced with online harassment. Instead of focusing on what people can do individually, these scholars state that the most effective way to create change is to create legal constraints on the ability for people to engage in online harassment. Media and Culture scholar Dr. Emma A. Jane (2016) in "Online misogyny and feminist digilantism" indicts what she labels as "do-it-yourself strategies" in response to targeted online misogyny (p. 285). What Dr. Jane (2016) endorses instead is "a hybrid of feminist activist efforts" which essentially focuses on the importance of collectivist efforts that target corporate and legal reforms (p. 291). The intent is to re-articulate the problem of online misogyny as a societal issue that isn't focused on what the victims of online harassment should do, but what the structures around them should do to create safe spaces online (Jane, 2016). Chara Bakalis (2017) echoes this call for legislative reform in "Rethinking cyberhate laws." This article takes an even more collectivist and multi-faceted approach to understanding the importance of online harassment with its focus on how harassment manifests based on "disability, race, sexual orientation, transgender identity or religion" (Bakalis, 2017. p. 86). Bakalis (2017) contributes to the conversation about improving laws to reduce cyber harassment by answering arguments against increased abilities for prosecution as an encroachment on "freedom of speech" online (p. 101).

However, there are many scholars who have joined the discussion around responses to online harassment who either reject or depart from utilizing a criminal justice framework as a response mechanism. For example, Schoenebeck, Haimson, & Nakamura (2020) argue for a frame of what they define as "justice theory" when responding to online threats. This approach seeks to decide on responses based on what the victims of harassment feel is the most appropriate given what they have been targeted with. From their studies, they conclude that most people favored responses that would ban offenders from utilizing certain websites and comment sections, removing content that was particularly violent or inappropriate, and apologies from the people who targeted them. These responses fit a frame of justice rather than criminal justice which focuses more on prosecutions than rehabilitation (Schoenebeck et al., 2020).

Another area of research that has been done on responding to online harassment focuses on individualized responses people take in the face of cyber misogyny and harassment. While the studies that have been done interview a variety of people with numerous opinions on the best ways to combat online violence, responses can be broken up into a few different categories. The first one that has been documented frequently is what scholars have labeled either "self-censorship" or "self-protection" (Chadha, Steiner, Vitak, & Ashktorab, 2020; Chen, Pain, Chen, Mekelburg, Springer, & Troger, 2018; Veletsianos, Houlden, Hodson & Gosse, 2018; Fox & Tang, 2016; Adams, 2017). Self-censorship actions consist of avoiding engagement online on certain platforms, not posting certain content for fear of backlash, and having other people monitor their social media comments so that certain content could be erased. While self-protection is synonymous with self-censorship in many ways, the biggest difference is that these actions include utilizing different security settings on social media to either prevent people from making inappropriate comments to blocking people who slip through security cracks.

More specific analysis about women involved in the online video gaming community has started to become more widely published as well. In an article entitled "Women's experiences with general and sexual harassment in online video games: Rumination, organizational responsiveness, withdrawal, and coping strategies," Jesse Fox & Wai Yen Tang (2016) describe responses reported by women who they recruited from "online forums, blogs, and social media sites" to participate in interviews about their experiences with harassment that took place within online games. While many of their responses would fall under the different areas of self-response discussed above, the specificity of their actions were notable and unique to the gaming community. Of the women who were interviewed, their most common responses to harassment that took place in the gaming community included "gender bending or gender neutralization through screen name or avatar choice, avoiding communication with other players, and seeking help or social support inside and outside the game. Both general and sexual harassment predict women's withdrawal from online games" (Fox & Tang, 2016. p. 1290). These results indicate the importance of continuing research that is based around agency creation and building when it comes to online harassment.

The second area of response is what Veletsianos et al. (2018) calls "Resistance." While resistance can take many different forms, I view this as a more offensive strategy that focuses on how victims of harassment respond to harassers. Veletsianos et al. (2018) claims that resistance more broadly encompasses "Speaking out, trolling back, refusing to remain silent, attempting to engage harassers in dialogue" (p. 35). Rhetorical scholars such as Madison Snider (2021) in "The Bully Pulpit: Trolling the trolls with polysemous monstrosity" have looked at how people like Haley Morris-Cafiero utilize photography to both hijack harassment-based comments and "troll" abusers online by pointing out the absurdness of their actions through public callouts. This

method of hijacking is discussed by Dr. Adrienne L. Massanari and Dr. Shira Chess in their 2018 article "Attack of the 50-foot social justice warrior: the discursive construction of SJW memes as the monstrous feminine." While they focus more on the discursive constructions of what alt-right people have coined as the "Social Justice Warrior," they make a concluding argument about embracing the "monstrous" or absurd labeling that harassers might stick us with (Massanari & Chess, 2018. pp. 14-15). Instead of retreating and leaving more space for harassers to comment online, people shouldn't feel opposed to being continually "monstrous" back to them in the comments (Massanari & Chess, 2018. pp. 14-15). The tactic of satire and sabotage in the form of "trolling back" has also been utilized by the online icon "ContraPoints" in response to right-wing conspiracies and harassment tactics (Roose, Mills, Longoria, & Gnanasambandan, 2020). Dr. Whitney Phillips in her book *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things* (2015) takes on a similar line of thinking but labels her tactics as "trolling back the trolls." This type of technique seems to argue that targets of harassment should commandeer the language and strategies that incels and alt right members use to try and humiliate or laugh at the initial harassers to give people a taste of their own medicine, in elementary terms.

While there seems to be a very rich and ever-expanding literature base about responses to online harassment, it is important to continue amplifying the importance of (1) online harassment as a very real and impactful form of communicative violence and (2) continuing to add to the archive of possible communicative responses that people can take when they are harassed. What my analysis will do that other scholarship before has not, is critically examine the public response that Sarkeesian has continued to give since the first few years after the beginning of the harassment campaign targeting her. As I will discuss later on, pointing out her attempts at agency

creation is something noteworthy and important to add to the scholarship about what victims of online harassment could do in response to online harassment.

Methods and plan of study

The main text that I will center this research around is a video interview by the *Washington Post* entitled "How feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian fights trolls" (2018). While Sarkeesian has either been asked to give a speech for or has been interviewed by many different news outlets since the beginning of the harassment campaign against her (e.g., VICE Life, 2018; TEDxTalks, 2012; Comedy Central, 2014; XOXO Festival, 2014), I chose to focus on this video for a few different reasons. First, because of the overall intent of this video. From the title, viewers know that the video will focus on the types of tactics Sarkeesian herself embraces when dealing with both harassers and what happens after the initial attacks. Since the purpose of my research is to look at the communicative ways people can react to misogynistic online harassment, I chose this video because its purpose fits the scope of my research. Second, because the message that Sarkeesian was intending to relay to her audience seemed to also be present in the earlier interviews and speeches she gave. After spending some time looking at other videos and interviews of Sarkeesian from big platforms like TEDx and VICE, she routinely briefly mentioned the dehumanizing aspects of being known as a "victim" of harassment (Yamato, 2017). Once I identified this trend throughout many of her speeches, I concluded that the text selection should be "How feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian fights trolls" (Washington Post, 2018) since the focus of the video was centered around her moment of reclamation from being just another person who was attacked on the internet.

The second chapter of my thesis analyzes the comments on the *Washington Post* video "How feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian fights trolls" (2018). In order to read the comments that

were made on the video, I use Kate Manne's (2018) definition of misogyny. I chose to use Manne's (2018) account because on face the comments sound like misogyny in a common understanding of the term (hating women) and respond to Sarkeesian calling out various aspects of the video gaming industry which has consistently been dominated by men. As Manne (2018) explains, men will begin to harass women online, or enact misogyny, as a form of "policing behavior" when they feel like women are either stepping out of line or threatening aspects of their lives they wish to stay untouched. While it is true that some of the comments aren't easily attributed to a certain gender because of the opaque nature of online usernames and activity, a lot of the hateful comments were based on an understanding of her, being a woman, taking offense to things that are generally considered "made for men." Along with this, the sentiment that the commenters embraced were eerily similar to what Manne in *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women* (2020) identifies as male entitlement and the lack of entitlement for women to certain goods and roles. Additionally, Manne (2018) states that anyone can be misogynist regardless of their gender or any other personal identifications. I believe what matters most in deciding how to read the comments are their nature and how their tactics for materializing misogyny. In this instance, I discuss how certain male entitlements to money, attention, and truth telling are embraced to enact misogyny. It should be noted also that some of the threats that were made in regard to her personal safety at in-person events at various universities and conventions were enacted by cis men.

There are a few additional reasons why I decided to use misogyny as the lens for understanding these comments. First, because most of the comments that I read as negative were criticizing Sarkeesian for bringing attention to issues in the gaming industry, asking for labor compensation, or not focusing on other problems that they thought were more important. To

them, it was egregious for a woman to have the audacity to voice dissent on issues that they deemed to be outside of a woman's expertise. They wanted to police her actions and dissent because they believed that she had stepped out of line and outside of the archetype that the United States patriarchal society has relegated women to (Manne, 2018). Women aren't meant to voice their displeasure in most instances but especially not about a male-dominated activity. Second, because many of the comments either criticized Sarkeesian for being a feminist or depicted her as being a bad person who plays the victim to get money and fame. Manne (2018) discusses how people who think women are engaging in these types of acts will find ways to police their actions and will usually justify it based on views which stem from patriarchy and entitlement. Therefore, the types of comments and the phrases used throughout the comment section led me to believe that reading these comments through lenses of misogyny and entitlement would be accurate as long as I discussed other ideologies that presented themselves.

In the third chapter I utilize a concept developed by Dr. Lisa Flores (1996) in "Creating discursive space through a rhetoric of difference: Chicana feminists craft a homeland" as my lens for understanding Sarkeesian's rhetorical acts in "How feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian fights trolls" (Washington post, 2018). In this essay, Flores (1996) looks at how Chicana feminists create discursive space and homes for themselves and their scholarship. In order to do this, Flores (1996) argues that Chicanas utilize a "rhetoric of difference" in order to redefine themselves outside of external perceptions and depictions of them. This allows them to reclaim their identities so that they can create a sense of agency or "home." I use this as my lens for understanding Sarkeesian's response to how her harassers and the public have defined her because of her insistence on the importance of rejecting what others think of you or have positioned you as being. I ultimately argue that Sarkeesian adopts a rhetoric of difference by

carving out space, creating a home, and building bridges through (1) rejecting popular narratives and redefining herself through the things she wishes to be known for and (2) building bridges of solidarity with other feminists through word choice and calls to action. I utilize various quotes from the *Washington Post* clip and also reference other videos of Sarkeesian to support my argument.

In my concluding chapter, I summarize the key findings of my research. I also point out some of the limitations to my research and potential areas of future inquiry. The limitations I discuss include focusing on different identity intersections and prejudices as a justification for online harassment, looking at how online harassment takes place on other platforms such as, but not limited to, Instagram, and finding ways to end the cycle of violence that creates the conditions for online harassment.

Chapter II:
Understanding YouTube comments as misogyny

Introduction

Media critics and gamers such as Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn have had to navigate their presence online around the constant barrage of demeaning and threatening messages left on any video or post they allow comments on. This phenomenon of online harassment and misogyny has unfortunately not subsided since the initial controversies starting in 2012. Twitch streamers and YouTube content creators such as Natalie Casanova and Pieke Roelofs were just two of the most well-known dissenters who publicly backlashed against the gaming industry in the summer of 2020 for supporting sexist images and streamers who propagate violence against women and non-binary folks (Patin, 2021). A Google spreadsheet that eventually accumulated evidence of over 400 different incidents of harassment, manipulation and sexual assault that occurred on the Twitch streaming platform was directly responsible for creating public pressure and exposure that eventually led to the CEO taking action (Patin, 2021). This collectivized dissent became so widely recognized that Twitch CEO Emmett Shear's public commitment to better practices on Twitch translated into policy updates which attempted to make it harder for people to sexually harass and threaten streamers in chat forums (Patin, 2021).

Given the significance of this public pressure that derived from exposing the comments that creators received, it is important for both gamers and scholars to continue publicizing comments that are harmful. Additionally, coupling this exposure with explanations for how we should interpret them as negative and worthy of rejection is also important, not only for creating a roadmap for future actions, but also for getting credible responses from people who can create change. In this chapter I analyze comments on one of the only YouTube videos of Sarkeesian

that allows viewers to comment. These comments highlighted the different types of misogynistic harassment she has received over the years. I argue that the commenters enact forms of misogyny supported by ideologies such as capitalism, colonialism and racism in an attempt to harass Sarkeesian and uphold various forms of male entitlement.

Online misogyny is a fairly new research area that has been evolving over the last few years. Dr. Kate Manne has been the only scholar to dedicate a whole book to defining what misogyny is and how it is utilized to uphold systemic patriarchy (Manne, 2018). Dr. Moya Bailey (2021) expanded on this interpretation and coined the term "Misogynoir" which she describes as "The unique co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization" (p.1). Researchers have also recently focused on incel culture in online forums and spaces and cultivated discussions about online sexism and misogyny (Poland, 2016; Phillips, 2016; Bates, 2021a; Adams, 2017; Blodgett & Salter, 2018; Jane, 2016; Manne, 2018; Bailey, 2021). Within Communication Studies, scholars such as Dr. Kishonna Gray and Dr. Moya Bailey have also focused their work on how misogynoir is rooted in popular culture and online gaming settings regarding stereotypes about and of Black women (Gray, 2020; Bailey, 2021).

In this chapter, I first define and discuss the theories of misogyny and entitlement that frame my analysis of comments on Sarkeesian's *Washington Post* video entitled, "How feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian fights trolls" (2018), which is a part of a YouTube documentary series dedicated to understanding harassment against content creators. Next, I describe the method I used to collect and analyze comments. I then apply the theories of misogyny and entitlement defined by Kate Manne (2018; 2020) as a lens for reading the comments. I ultimately argue that

the comments uphold men's entitlement to knowledge, money, and attention at the expense of women.

Defining Misogyny and Entitlement

I follow philosopher Kate Manne's definitions of misogyny and entitlement in her books *Down Girl* and *Entitled*. In *Down Girl*, Manne (2018) describes misogyny as

> a property of social environments in which women are liable to encounter hostility due to the enforcement and policing of patriarchal norms and expectations—often, though not exclusively, insofar as they violate patriarchal law and order. Misogyny hence functions to enforce and police women's subordination and to uphold male dominance, against the backdrop of other intersecting systems of oppression and vulnerability, dominance and disadvantage, as well as disparate material resources, enabling and constraining social structure, institutions, bureaucratic mechanisms, and so on. (p. 19)

In *Entitled* Manne (2020) defines misogyny as "a property of social environments girls and women navigate, wherein they are liable to be subject to hateful or hostile treatment because of their gender—together, in many cases, with their gendered 'bad' behavior" (p. 9). Manne (2018) describes misogyny as policing the actions of girls and women with hostile actions that serve to uphold patriarchal understandings of gender roles (pp. 19, 28). Manne (2018) also often refers to misogyny as the "law enforcement" branch of patriarchy because it punishes and polices women and girls for their actions (p.20). Although Manne (2018) notes that multiple systems of oppression compound to make experiences with misogyny different (race, ethnicity, sexuality, abilities), she understands her definition to be focused mostly on the concept of policing gender (pp. 25-26).

I read the comments on Sarkeesian's *Washington Post* video through the lens of misogyny for two main reasons. First, many of the comments display a policing or gatekeeping nature. Gatekeeping refers to the way many comments were meant to delegitimize Sarkeesian's discourse to the point where what she said was dismissed as simply fictional. To commenters, it was egregious for a woman to have the audacity to voice dissent on something they didn't take offense to (death and rape threats) and enjoyed as a pastime (video games). As I will discuss in the following section, many commenters delegitimized claims Sarkeesian made throughout the video by retelling her story in their own words, prescribing opinions on her character, and by endorsing double standards for who can make money in the gaming industry. In other words, the commenters attempted to police her actions and dissent because she was seen as a threat to male entitlement and acted outside of the archetype to which American patriarchy relegates women (Manne, 2018).

The second reason I utilize misogyny to analyze comments on Sarkeesian's video is the nature of the backlash against Sarkeesian's complaints about the visuals and storylines of video games and against her original Kickstarter campaign. The commenters on the *Washington Post* video condemned her as "playing the victim" or "using a victim card" to garner sympathy and support for her views. They often attributed her proclaiming to be a feminist to various diseases and medical states. Manne (2018) points out that labeling women as hysterical or claiming they have some sort of medical disorder are ways of policing women who are seen as stepping out of their loyal, supporting, and care-giving roles in patriarchal systems (pp. 119, 237). The comments are designed to police women who are seen as stepping out of line.

Understanding these comments as misogyny, or policing to uphold patriarchy, gives a name to the injustice seeping through the comments. However, it is also important to understand

why misogyny is perpetuated by individual users regardless of upholding a structure. Kate Manne (2020) addresses this question in *Entitled* where she argues that it is important to recognize that people don't have to be misogynists in order to perpetuate misogynistic acts (p. 10). While there can certainly be misogynists, she prefers that we save that label for the "over-achievers" who constantly perpetuate misogyny (p. 10). However, it is still significant to know both what are some of the gendered norms and regulations women and girls are held to and why they are held to them.

Her answer to "why" is that it comes down to entitlement (Manne, 2020, p. 11). Manne (2020) defines entitlement as "the widespread perception that a privileged man is owed something" (p. 4). In other words, their social positions entitle them to certain "goods" which ought not be taken away, especially from people who aren't the initial receiver of these "goods," namely women and girls. Manne (2020) organizes the book's chapters around the various goods men are entitled to receive from women (sex, care, nurturing, and reproductive labor) and goods historically perceived as "only for men" (power, authority, and claims to knowledge) (p. 11). Ultimately, Manne (2020) argues that misogyny enforces entitlement to goods that privileged men often believe they have a right to receive and maintain.

Other prominent scholars such as Dr. Moya Bailey (2020) have re-tooled our understandings of misogyny through her coined term *Misogynoir* which takes an intersectional approach to understanding misogyny for women of color. While Sarkeesian is not a Black woman, she does occupy different spaces given her ethnicity and familial background which should be considered when trying to understand how people interact with her and the misogyny she experiences. Therefore, I find it important to utilize a framework of misogyny that also focuses on the ways the different intersections that Sarkeesian occupies can influence how

misogyny takes place in the comment section. Additionally, given how different ideologies such as ableism, imperialism, and classism justify and enhance the misogyny within the comment section, it is essential that I combine the focus that gender has in Manne's philosophy with Bailey's focus on multiple forms of oppressions. Ultimately, I argue that the commenters used a number of different ideologies and understandings of entitlement in an attempt to police the complaints of Sarkeesian and prevent her from being heard, understood, and taken seriously.

Methods

Data source and selection

I chose to focus on the comment section of the *Washington Post* video for a few reasons. First, because scholars are beginning to understand and converse about how comments made online can represent misogynistic ideology (Poland, 2016; Phillips, 2016; Bates, 2021a; Adams, 2017; Blodgett & Salter, 2018; Jane, 2016; Manne, 2018). Given this, I wanted to join the conversation to expand the archive that is being created about online acts of misogyny. Second, as Laura Bates points out in *Men who hate women* (2021a), misogyny is manifesting in new ways online. Therefore, it is important that we treat it just as seriously as we treat other offline commonplace, familiar acts of misogyny because both manifestations stem from an endorsement of misogyny. Both examples also have led to material acts of violence against women in particular, ranging from partner violence to mass shootings (Bates, 2021a; Poland, 2016). The third reason why I chose to analyze this video, is because it is one of the only videos on YouTube of Sarkeesian that allows for comments. Most other videos don't allow comments and have disclaimers saying comments are closed for the sake of her health and safety. Lastly, I chose this video because the main topic that Sarkeesian is asked to focus on is directly related to my research project. Instead of simply being asked to recount her experience with harassment,

she is asked how she responds to online harassment and what it means for her to embed her stories with both a retelling of events and what people can do to respond to harassment.

Given the stakes of this situation, we need to continue to better understand what types of comments constitute misogyny. As I previously mentioned, Kate Manne (2018) and Moya Bailey (2021) have described the ways misogyny and misogynoir manifest in offline and online spaces. My research will both confirm the work that Manne (2018) and Bailey (2021) have done in reference to misogyny online and add to their findings by looking into how comments made on Sarkeesian's video expose the misogyny in gaming culture more broadly. The more we amplify and define what online misogyny or misogynoir looks like, the more normalized acts of calling it out will be.

The terms I chose to focus on were a variety of terms that were identified within the top fifty-five of the online tool called Voyant, which is an online text-mining tool. While Voyant automatically gives you the frequency of reoccurring words and places them in a ranking system from most to least used, some of the terms it included were insignificant for the purposes of my research. These include terms such as "like" "the" and "as" which didn't give me much information on the content or purpose of the comments. Therefore, I chose terms that were still used ranging anywhere between twenty-one to sixty times, which are significant numbers given the total amount of comments amount to around one thousand After making sure that the words I chose to start my analysis from had significance when it came to frequency, I wanted to focus my selection on terms that I thought would, on face, be relevant to misogyny and entitlement.

To identify trends and patterns of misogyny within the comment section of the *Washington Post* video, "How feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian fights trolls" (2018), I adopted a method almost identical to Bailey (2021) in the first chapter of *Misogynoir Transformed.*

Bailey analyzed two separate viral YouTube videos that documented the racialized violence done to “Shakara” Niya Kenny and Dajerria Becton, two young black girls. Bailey’s analysis began by looking at the two most commonly used terms in the comment section of the videos and the context in which they were used. To collect this information Bailey (2021) first used a comment collector tool created by Philip Klostermann to instantaneously retrieve all of the comments and then placed those comments into a text-mining tool (Voyant). The results supported Bailey’s (2021) argument that people tend to think about race as the number one reason behind these acts of violence instead of considering both the race and girlhood of Shakara and Dajerria.

To collect information about some of the commonly used terms in the comments of the *Washington Post* (2018) video, I used the comment scraper Botster because Klostermann’s was no longer available. As did Bailey (2021), I then used the text-mining tool Voyant to identify contexts where the words were used. When users click on a term on the farthest left section on the Voyant page, it automatically highlights the places the term appears in the comments on the middle section “reader.” This allowed me to efficiently identify the comments that were relevant to my analysis and gave me the context for where search terms were found. I also used other functions such as “circus” which generated a word cloud chart to visually represent the number of times a word occurred in the comments. Finally, I used the “trends” function that used a bar chart and trend lines to show when words were used and how frequently they occurred. This function in particular allowed me to determine if there were words that occurred in the same comment.

After deciding on what types of terms would be useful for answering my research question, the first term I choose to focus on was “victim.” This term is used sixty times and is ranked as the ninth most commonly used word. Almost every time this term was used, the

commenters used it in a negative way either to discredit Sarkeesian's experiences or to portray her and her work as deriving from malicious intent by saying she is a "professional victim" (used seventeen times). Only twice was the term used either in a neutral way or in defense of Sarkeesian's actions. The second term I focus on is feminist, used thirty-five times along with the associated word feminism, used twenty-three times. Feminist is ranked as the twenty-first most commonly used term and feminism is ranked thirty-seventh. Almost anytime these two terms were used, the commenters were critical of feminism. The last set of terms that I focus on are "fraud," used twenty-four times and ranked thirty-fifth, "con artist" used twenty-one times and ranked forty-fourth, "money" used thirty-one times and ranked twenty-fourth, and "liar" used twenty times and ranked fifty-third. These terms were used interchangeably throughout the comments at times to discredit Sarkeesian's claims in the video and to indict her as a professional media critic. Table 1 represents this data in a chart for visualization and documentation purposes.

Table 1

Words Chosen for Analysis and Number of Times Used

Words	**Count**
Victim, Professional Victim	77
Feminism, Feminist	58
Fraud, Liar	44
Money	31
Con artist	21

After I chose which terms to focus on, I read the comments where they were used. I identified what patriarchal norms the comments upheld and how they attempted to enforce them.

I found that they could be organized into three broad categories: Men are entitled to knowledge and truth telling; Men are entitled to making money; Men are entitled to attention, and women are expected to give it to them.

In the following sections, I will separate my analysis by what the systems of patriarchy and misogyny have socialized people into believing men are entitled to, and explain how Sarkeesian is seen as threatening these entitlements. These subsections will include the male entitlement to knowledge creation, earning more money than women, and receiving attention. Throughout my analysis, I will also identify other ideologies that are present such as imperialism, capitalism, and racism which I argue are designed to support male entitlements. The evidence that I use to make these arguments will come in the form of quotes from the comment section that I chose while looking through the comments that included the key terms and phrases that I previously discussed.

Discussion

Men are entitled to knowledge.

Knowledge and the ability to determine the truth of a situation are sources of power. Although knowledge and truth are malleable and dependent upon a variety of factors, one aspect of knowledge creation that is not as malleable is who can be entitled to creating it. In *Entitled* (2020), Kate Manne explains how men are taught to believe they are entitled to creating truth and knowledge, while women are not. Indeed, she argues that men will assume the role of "knower" as a result of this entitlement which she goes on to highlight is the assumption that men are "dispensers of information," can "offer corrections" to the narrative that is being pushed and do so with "authoritative explanations" (p. 140). As she explains in her introduction (2020), entitlement is something that stems from patriarchy and can be utilized as a justification for

enacting misogyny. Even though women are sometimes seen as truth creators, they are not entitled to this role, like men are, and often must work hard to acquire arbitrary credentials before becoming credible speakers.

Despite the fact that women have the opportunity to prove themselves worthy of being truth arbiters, they can be met with contempt or backlash from entitled men. In the case of Sarkeesian and her *Washington Post* (2018) video, commenter Retro Blue (2022) highlights this role that entitlement plays in terms of truth and knowledge. They begin by saying, "This woman believes that men are to blame in videogames portraying women as powerless yet she goes out there always trying to play the victim and presenting herself as weak." Retro Blue (2022) starts the comment by using "authoritative explanations" and offering correctives to the narrative via declarative statements such as, "This woman believes that men are to blame" and declaring that Sarkeesian is "trying to play the victim" by "presenting herself as weak" in an attempt to reclarify what her narrative is and her intentions. Instead of taking her words at face value, Retro Blue (2022) enacts entitlement by reinterpreting a situation they were not involved in. This is an obvious example of adopting the "knower" trait that Manne (2020) explains is a result of entitlement to knowledge and truth.

Directly following this, Retro Blue (2022) embraces a framework of information dispersion by providing their views of Sarkeesian, solely based on videos of her and her public appearances. Retro Blue (2022) declares their opinions about Sarkeesian by saying she is a "traumatized narcissist" who is only out to paint herself as the "victim" and to create a terrible reality for men by "blaming them" for everything that is wrong in video game culture. The use of name-calling and the term victim can be seen as reconstructing Sarkeesian's character as defined through Retro Blue's (2022 own opinion. Retro Blue's (2022) comment shows exactly what

Manne (2020, p. 144) argues is the lack of entitlement to authority for women when they aren't allowed to be truth arbiters. In this case, Retro Blue (2022) assumes the position of disperser of information by not only retelling Sarkeesian's gaming critiques and labeling them as fallacies but also attempting to blame Sarkeesian for harming people (men) with her rhetoric.

Understanding women as unreliable arbiters of reality compared to men socializes all into acting as if men are entitled to knowledge and its creation. The effects of this manifest into people wanting to silence, demean, and constantly disagree with women's accounts (Manne, 2020, p. 158). Commenters like Retro Blue (2022) show that people expressing men's entitlement to knowledge may take the form of coopting the narrative and then putting their own spin out. In this case, Retro Blue (2022) both prescribes an alternative narrative about Sarkeesian's commitments and role as a media critic but also shares their own determinations about her character as well. All of these actions enact entitlement to knowledge designed to silence and delegitimize Sarkeesian's claims.

The impact that male entitlement to knowledge can have on women is far-reaching. For Sarkeesian, it means she is second-guessed and has her own words manipulated to fit the narrative that commenters like Retro Blue (2022) have created. It also means that her role as a media critic is criticized as a way for her to "play the victim" in the stories she researches and develops for her audience. Instead of her work being recognized as intellectual labor and creativity, it is described as fundamentally flawed and factually incorrect. The experiences Sarkeesian has online are, however, common for women offline and especially for women who experience life at multiple different intersections. Tressie McMillan Cottom (2019) criticizes this very notion that knowledge and creativity stem from what men, particularly white men, say and think:

> A Professional Smart person can be so without ever reading a black woman, ever interviewing a black woman, ever following a black woman, or ever thinking about a black woman's existence. (p. 219)

McMillan Cottom succinctly lays out exactly why giving opinions and reinterpretations of women's truth is flawed and damaging. The commenters do not critically think about situations through the lens of the people who are targeted by violence, and don't even come with the capacity to do so because of their lack of exposure to the authentic truthmaking of those who are historically marginalized.

Retro Blue (2022) was, unfortunately, not the only commenter who authoritatively redefined Sarkeesian's character and declared that she was untrustworthy and a liar. GuyOnYouTube (2021) declared their opinion on Sarkeesian by saying, "LOL This fanatical feminist is a great troll of media. She's nothing more than a shakedown artist in reality who tricks media into believing the most outrageous fabrications. Her schtick is playing the eternal victim of trolls yet it is she who is the real troll." GuyOnYouTube (2021) claims Sarkeesian is a liar who uses "being a victim" so that she can trick people into believing everything she says. Other commenters like Nahelon Valar assert similar arguments without clear warrants when they say, "This woman is a professional victim bullshit artist. Not to mention she has actually harassed people online herself." The phrase "professional victim" was used a few different times throughout the comment section in an attempt to discredit and influence the viewers' opinions on the validity of Sarkeesian as a whole.

Utilizing no context or references at all, commenters such as Motiwaras asserted that Sarkeesian has, at one time or another, claimed she doesn't actually play video games. Regardless of whether or not this is a true statement, it has no relevance to the video or her career

as a media critic. Her career does not rely on her embodying the lifestyle of a "gamer," and nothing justifies the harassment she has experienced since publishing her *Tropes* video collection. Everything she has experienced has been a result of her criticizing the gaming industry for the depictions of women in video games, which she spent months researching. However, Motiwaras decided to take this opportunity to twist the narrative and situation of the *Washington Post* (2018) video to generate distrust in Sarkeesian's explanations. All of these examples represent the rhetorical power of misogyny in terms of male entitlement to knowledge while also showing how misogyny can be utilized to discredit women and their truth claims.

Men are entitled to money.

Kate Manne (2018) explains in *Down Girl* how patriarchy comprises strict roles men and women must play when it comes to who is entitled to make money and when. Women are expected to give attention and admiration and are prohibited from taking away masculine coded goods such as "money, and other forms of wealth" (p. 130). Therefore, women are essentially made to play supporting roles for men in the economy and should be criticized if they step outside of that role. Commenters such as Sahaj Motiwaras (2021) and many others reinforced this entitlement through misogyny. Motiwaras (2021) enacts misogyny and entitlement by labeling Sarkeesian's call for financial compensation as "manipulation" and as a way to satiate her "money hungry" needs. Manne (2018) predicts this type of reaction when she talks about how people who embody misogyny would react if they see a woman threatening to take what they view as masculine coded goods, in this case, money (p. 132). People will resort to writing off women as "greedy, corrupt, illicitly entitled, and out of order" (p. 132). This is exactly what happens from the start of Motiwaras'(2021) comment and many others who claimed Sarkeesian was simply trying to scam people of their money. What is most interesting to me, however, is

that the situation they are referencing (1) occurred almost a decade earlier, (2) wasn't a part of the conversation in the *Washington Post* (2018) video, and (3) she only asked for 6,000 dollars in compensation but ended up receiving more because people were interested in her project. These facts reinforce the power of men's entitlement to money and how, consequently, women can be described as "money hungry" instead of providing for themselves.

This entitlement works at the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy: women must encourage and support men who make money, but not be seen as potentially taking money away from them. Instead, they are expected to do the labor that is required to sustain men emotionally, mentally, and physically so that men can make as much money as possible. This is particularly interesting when compared to the lack of dissent seen when it comes to people streaming themselves playing video games on platforms like YouTube or Twitch, which often ends up being their main source of income. For example, one of the most well-known Fortnite (a free to play battle royale game) streamers to this day goes by the screen name Ninja. In a recent stream, Ninja told his viewers that during the peak of his career he could make up to five million dollars just in one month (Fischer, 2021). These royalties came from both his streams and his very own "creator code." Despite the fact that Sarkeesian did not force people to donate money and simply asked if people would be willing to contribute to her six-thousand-dollar goal, commenters like Motiwaras (2021) continue to hound her about her seeking compensation where it is due. Inherent in this comment is also a complete devaluation of the many hours spent doing the research and editing to make these sometimes-hour-long episodes for *Tropes*. When you compare this to men like Ninja who not only don't create the games they are playing but also make millions of dollars off of them by creating exclusive content, there is clearly a double standard when it comes to who should be compensated for their labor in the gaming industry.

The inherent devaluation of Sarkeesian's labor in comparison to "famous" gamers such as Ninja and the labeling of her as a liar by commenters like Motiwaras (2021) are clear examples of misogyny and entitlement. In regard to the devaluation of labor, it is important to recognize how we can identify this as misogyny instead of simply a misunderstanding of how much work goes into the content Sarkeesian makes. Comments that represent Sarkeesian as "money hungry" or describe the videos she produced and the non-profits she created as frivolous, are playing into the devaluation of certain forms of work. In a recent article, J. Edward Anthony interviews Dr. Brooke Erin Duffy of Cornell University on this exact phenomenon that has become so widespread. In her book, (*Not) getting paid to do what you love* (2017) Duffy argues that content creators, a role assumed to be predominantly performed by women, is a form of labor that is not only time intensive but also valued less compared to more male-dominated roles such as coding and programing. Dr. Duffy argues that this rise in "invisible labor" has created a gendered division of labor in online spaces which is placing more value on the creative and tech-based work that men do compared to women content creators.

Motiwaras (2021) was accompanied by over thirty other commenters in their crusade against Sarkeesian and her past acceptance of money for labor. Max Hell (2020) in particular sustains the atmosphere of devaluation as discussed by Dr. Duffy (2017) when they state, "30000+ for a free account and some videos..... if you're in need of money, remember that there are idiots willing to give it to you for nothing." Others took issue with what they saw was her "ploy" for money but blamed it on her being able to claim victimhood to garner financial support. This is seen best in comments by people like daboys1215 (2020) who argued that Sarkeesian was "Just another feminist who loves victimhood. Then turns around and makes money off of being a victim. BooooHoooo!!!" Regardless of how they criticized Sarkeesian, it

all ultimately seemed to rely on the notion that Sarkeesian shouldn't be given financial compensation, which patriarchy says is first and foremost an entitlement to men.

Men are entitled to attention.

The last patriarchal entitlement that I discuss deals with the expectations of women when it comes to attention. Manne (2018) argues that we are taught to believe women should be givers of attention to men and whoever men deem worthy of receiving attention. Women are not supposed to direct their attention inwards or out to those who men have determined aren't worthy of their attention. Manne (2018) labels this as the "Tyranny of vulnerability," which she says plays out by "pointing to any and every (supposedly) more vulnerable person or creature in her vicinity to whom she might (again supposedly) do better, and requiring her to care for them, or else risk being judged callous, even monstrous" (p. 28). If women are caught focusing their attention on themselves, they should expect to hear criticism and receive some sort of shaming.

There were many people throughout the comment section who identified different areas in Sarkeesian's video or her life more broadly where she failed to focus her attention on who they thought deserved attention and care. One of the ways this conversation took place was in reference to her focus on how she has been treated because of her role as a media critic. Commenter mcsofty (2021) endorses this patriarchal norm when writing, "You are a lying fraud that would rather talk about how princess toadstood has to fight the patriarchy than talk about how women in Iran and countless places like it are locked in houses as maids." Mcsofty (2021) was joined by other commenters such as carl watson (2020) whose concern for women in countries throughout the Middle East seemed to be at the top of their priority list. Watson (2020) stated, "She was a hack 'journalist' who begged online for money to the amount of hundreds of thousands of dollars. To make a YouTube channel which made videos about how video games

are sexist.....didn't fight for women in say..saudi Arabia. Not allowed to drive, forced to marry and are stoned to death if they disagree. ...no made videos about how video games are sexist."

For people like mcsofty (2021) and watson (2020), women who live in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia are the only ones who deserve to be saved and focused on within feminist advocacy. Despite Sarkeesian's own familial background and political commitments to intersectional feminism (Feminist Frequency, no date), to most of the commenters on the *Washington Post* video, her feminism is fundamentally flawed given her lack of verbal condemnation of other acts of violence across the globe. mcsofty (2021) and watson (2020) directed their critcisms of Sarkeesian at her seeming lack of care and attention to women whose lives they viewed as worse than hers. For watson (2020) in particular, they point out the fact that Sarkeesian was using her time and energy to support herself financially and to criticize miniscule problems such as gaming culture instead of fighting for women in the Middle East. This can be directly linked to the idea that women aren't entitled to giving attention to themselves when there are others who seemingly have it worse off in comparison.

I do not wish to discredit the lived experiences of women in other countries who experience oppression due to various political, religious and domination-based logics. However, I do think it is important to consider the intersection between colonial exceptionalism and misogyny that is present in these types of comments. To these commenters, women in the west experience no issues in how they are treated in comparison to how they believe women in places like Iran and Saudi Arabia are treated. This same exceptionalism-based logic has been used to justify wars and military occupation for decades. During the post-9/11 era the lives of women in the Middle East have been front and center within western-based political controversies. To wage war or to continue with occupations are dilemmas that are both complicated and can

contain multiple different justifications. However, the perceived experiences of women and their subjugation are almost always a part of the case for why western countries justify their actions, but especially when it takes place in countries throughout the Middle East. Megan K. Stack (2021) puts it best in her article "The Inconsistency of American Feminism in the Muslim World" when she talks about U.S. wars waged against Afghanistan and ultimately argues, "advertising the confinement of women in Afghanistan wasn't useful only because we wanted to have a war; it also allowed us, the Americans, to feel enlightened and superior."

The last sentence of mcsofty's (2021) comment which proclaims that Sarkeesian is a bad person, follows the path that Manne (2018) outlines would occur if women are seen as stepping out of the role of attention-giver. Manne (2018) states that if women are perceived to be withholding attention and care from people who are considered to be in need of help, they will be faced with various shaming tactics. In this case, mcsofty (2021) decided to bluntly describe Sarkeesian as a "bad person" who aggressively attacks people to acquire money. This is exactly what Manne (2018) argues will happen if women are seen as lacking in giving attention to those in need. They will be criticized, shamed, and thought of as bad people for stepping out of their caring and nurturing role. The shaming that occurs when women like Sarkeesian are seen as diverting their energy away from vulnerable people while also inherently condemning men is present in this particular comment. The shaming that takes place is the manifestation of misogyny as a way to police Sarkeesian's actions.

There were other commenters who also took it upon themselves to criticize Sarkeesian for "complaining" about her experiences by comparing her to other people who might also be going through hardships. For the commenter Temple of Light (2021), instead of focusing on women in other countries, they chose to pick another group of people to compare her experiences

to. They argue, “I've seen homeless people live more honest lives, they blame no one for their misery and do not complain. They smile back when you smile at them. people like Anita live their modern privileged lives and complain about their own inventions of first world problems. What a fraud of a person.” For The Temple of Light (2021), Sarkeesian’s situation should not even be considered an issue and is nothing compared to people who are houseless. The Temple of Light (2021) also utilizes this example to shame Sarkeesian for not just simply smiling through the pain when she received multiple threats of violence and sexual assault. When women like Sarkeesian attempt to position their moral focus away from the needs of people who are suffering “the most,” they are seen as stepping out of line. When it comes to Sarkeesian, the sympathy she gives is no longer focused solely on the men present in her life, but instead on her own well-being, something to which Temple of Light presumes she is not entitled.

Throughout this discussion, I have separated the types of entitlements for the sake of clarity and organization. Despite the separation, the entitlements can and do intersect in various ways. Many comments embraced multiple entitlements at once which led to me using different portions of a comment in separate sections. For example, Motiwaras’ (2021) complete comment read:

> She's literally a liar and she loves manipulation because she's just hungry for money that's all, because she just want to scam people with her Kickstarter campaign because she wants attention. Also she admits that she's not a gamer then why make videos about videogames even if you don't like them? Because she wants attention I just hope her career will go away and hopefully her website will shut down!!

In the first half of this comment, Motiwaras (2021) made assertions policing men's entitlement to money. The final part policed men's entitlement to attention and to knowledge and its creation. Despite the intertwining nature of some comments they all represent, in one way or another, various sources of power that men are entitled to.

Conclusion

While different social media platforms such as Twitch, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook have been finding new ways to limit the amount of hateful comments people are allowed to make (Spangler, 2021; Patin, 2021; Döring & Mohseni, 2017; Bates, 2021a; Poland, 2016), there still seem to be endless accounts of hateful posts that cause harm to the people they target. In my own experience with social media, the feminist influencers I follow are always posting screenshots of the threats, taunts, and harassment they receive either on their photos or in their direct messages. Most of the time, the comments that these platforms determine to be the most egregious will tend to be deleted once they are reported. However, as I have discussed in this chapter, dangerous and violent ideologies such as misogyny, colonialism, racism, and capitalism often function in insidious ways and require a deeper understanding of how they are perpetuated in order to understand the true harm they can cause. Taking this insidious nature into account, I wanted to utilize this chapter to focus on some of the comments that have been made on this interview of Sarkeesian that function to reinforce misogyny in order to uphold patriarchal tenets such as (1) Men are entitled to knowledge creation (2) Men are entitled to money and (3) Men are entitled to attention. It is important that analysis like this happens so when social media platforms make changes in the future, people have the information needed to rally for expanding the scope of comment filtering to include misogyny and patriarchy.

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that various commenters used misogyny and entitlement as defined by Manne (2018; 2020), while also leveraging ideologies such as capitalism, racism, and colonialism, in an attempt to broadly police the actions of Sarkeesian. Future research in this area of study could continue to analyze how problematic ideologies are sustained on the internet while also focusing on how we can best combat these ideologies before more people can become radicalized. Either way, being able to build up an archive dedicated to pointing out violent ideologies and how they insidiously manifest on the internet is an important step needed for bringing about material change to online harassment.

Chapter III:
Agency creation as a response to online harassment: Anita Sarkeesian and her adoption of a rhetoric of difference

Introduction

Now that I have discussed how misogyny and entitlement manifest in the comment section of the *Washington Post* video, "How feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian fights trolls" (2018), in this chapter I focus on how Sarkeesian responds to misogynistic online harassment. Even though Sarkeesian has likely adopted different response mechanisms throughout the years she has experienced online harassment, I focus on how in the *Washington Post* (2018) video she combats online harassment through the three-step process described in "Creating a discursive space through a rhetoric of difference" (Flores, 1996).

Online harassment based in racism and misogyny has been prevalent since the creation of online communication networks. However, researchers have seen a stark rise in the scope and impact of online harassment throughout the past decade. A study done by the Pew Research Center in 2021 indicates that around 41% of Americans have been targeted by online harassers and that women in particular were more likely to be affected by online harassment (Vogels, 2021). With this in mind, the main question I seek to address in this chapter is, how are feminists responding to online harassment? With the continued rise in online hate and its translation into material forms of violence against women and non-cis men (Phillips, 2016; Bates, 2021a), it is important to highlight effective communicative practices used to combat online hate campaigns. Two of the most widely known collective attacks to have targeted non-cis men and feminists in particular are what people have labeled "Gamergate" and the 2012 hate campaign waged against Anita Sarkeesian, the founder of the nonprofit, Feminist Frequency. To describe how feminists respond to online harassment, I focus on the video, "How feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian fights trolls" (Washington Post, 2018). Since Sarkeesian was a part of one of the first major

instance of online harassment directed towards women speaking out about the gaming industry, it is important to understand how Sarkeesian's experiences are similar to online harassment campaigns in the gaming community that came afterwards. The types of threats Sarkeesian received and the people who threatened her were seemingly identical to the ones from Gamergate. These harassers usually self-identified as gamers or people who Matt Lees and other scholars have argued were the founders of the modern-day alt-right movement in the United States (Lees, 2016; Bezio, 2018; Bates, 2021a; Phillips, 2016; Poland, 2016).

Despite the robust social scientific literature base that has developed about how people respond to online harassment (Chadha, Steiner, Vitak, & Ashktorab, 2020; Chen, Pain, Chen, Mekelburg, Springer, & Troger, 2018; Veletsianos, Houlden, Hodson, & Gosse, 2018; Fox & Tang, 2016; Adams, 2017; Snider, 2021; Massanari & Chess, 2018; Roose, Mills, Longoria, & Gnanasambandan, 2020; Phillips, 2016), little research has been performed from a rhetorical perspective. This research includes analysis of self-resistance strategies that embrace the absurdity of online comments by using ironic pictures of the quotes painted on and around the receiver to instigate laughter so to delegitimize the attacks (Snider, 2021). Taking a rhetorical perspective that focuses on Sarkeesian's response to the victimhood narratives that have defined her is an important intervention that the current social scientific research doesn't discuss. Rhetorical methods allow us to reflect on one individual's experience and what their specific experiences can tell us about the real-world effects of their chosen responses instead of reducing her response to a number in a data set. Additionally, focusing on rhetoric allows us to look at Sarkeesian's message in the *Washington Post* (2018) video in the context of her original response to her harassers and her current strategy of redefinition in the face of being defined by the harassment campaign that targeted her in 2012.

Given the gap in the rhetorical perspective, my research will aim to extend the current database of analysis about the rhetorical strategies that feminists like Anita Sarkeesian have used in response to targeted, misogynistic harassment. This type of research is particularly important when put into context with the second chapter of this thesis since the ways that misogyny and entitlement manifest in this case study is through online rhetoric. Therefore, understanding rhetorical tactics that feminists have used to respond to misogynistic harassment can be integral for individuals who want to take action. I argue that Sarkeesian adopts a "rhetoric of difference" (Flores, 1996) in order to create agency and build community with other feminists. I begin by overviewing events preceding the harassment campaign waged against Sarkeesian and the people targeted in Gamergate along with their initial responses. Then I explain why I use a "rhetoric of difference" (Flores, 1996) as a lens for analyzing the video "How feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian fights trolls" (Washington Post, 2018). This will be followed by my analysis where I will read Sarkeesian's response through a lens of a "rhetoric of difference" (Flores, 1996) by identifying how Sarkeesian carves out a space through redefinition, creates a home by redefining her narrative and role in the media, and builds bridges with other feminists with word choice and mobilizing calls.

Anita Sarkeesian and Gamergate

Stemming from her original love and disdain for media, in 2009 Anita Sarkeesian founded her YouTube channel and now non-profit organization Feminist Frequency. When she first started Feminist Frequency Sarkeesian made videos that critically engaged with various media, such as the iconic *Twilight* series (Valenti, 2015). This sentiment has stuck with Sarkeesian and Feminist Frequency over the years and can still be seen in the merchandise that the website sells with bags stating, "Be critical of the media you love" (feministfrequency.com).

What originally brought Sarkeesian into the spotlight was her videos that she posted on YouTube, and more specifically, a Kickstarter she created for her new video series proposal, *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* (Yamato, 2017).

Tropes was a project Sarkeesian had been thinking about making since she first started her career as a media critic. The purpose of *Tropes* was to criticize the ways women were depicted in video games and the lack of playable characters who were women. Additionally, *Tropes* was created so people could ponder how to create change and accountability within the gaming industry (Yamato, 2017). To raise funds, Sarkeesian published a Kickstarter campaign online. The original intent of the Kickstarter campaign was to see if Sarkeesian could get funding to publish five videos that centered around different characters and popular games. Even though Sarkeesian initially only asked for 6,000 U.S. dollars, within a day she had already reached that goal and would eventually raise over 25,000 dollars (TEDxTalks, 2012; Campbell, 2019). When she posted a clip on her YouTube page explaining what the fundraiser was for, she began to see abusive, threatening, and sexually objectifying harassment. Even though some of her past videos on her page received some backlash from various "hate subscribers," they were always few and far between (Campbell, 2019).

The video comments were so violent and negative that many of the posts these comments originally appeared on now have their comment sections disabled (Valenti, 2015). However, Sarkeesian has recounted some of the worst ones in various interviews over the years. Sarkeesian said the comments she received ranged from threats of sexual and physical violence to slandering her and people in her family. Even death threats were sent to university administrations that invited her to be a guest lecturer (McDonald, 2019). One of the quotes many articles cite states that one of the perpetrators claimed that if Sarkeesian were allowed to speak on campus, "This

will be the deadliest school shooting in American history, and I'm giving you a chance to stop it" (Valenti, 2015). News outlets such as *The Verge* have documented various tweets that replied to her Feminist Frequency page. These tweets include racially charged slurs with the intent of attacking her intelligence, tweets telling her she should "kill herself," and tweets that downplayed the real-world effects of online death threats as something "NO one cares about, it's NOT a big deal" (Robertson, 2015).

Since the start of this online harassment campaign in 2012, Sarkeesian has not backed away from her role as a media critic and advocate. She still runs Feminist Frequency and has even created a new platform called "The Games and Online Harassment Hotline" (https://gameshotline.org/). On her Feminist Frequency page, she is still dedicated to engaging critically with various media and popular culture. However, she now uses a podcast format. On Feminist Frequency, she and her team have curated a collection of free, online sources for people who wish to become more informed about feminism. Even when they can't provide free sources of information, they still recommend various sources people can either get at their local libraries or purchase for themselves in order to become more educated on issues of intersectional feminism and online harassment towards women (feministfrequency.org). The Games and Online Harassment Hotline is tailored towards reporting instances of online harassment and giving people a space where they can talk about their experiences of harassment.

While 2012 was a very notable year for Sarkeesian as it marked the start of the online harassment campaign waged against her, 2014 also became a flagship year for increased cybersexism. What later became known as "Gamergate" first began as a blog post written by the ex-boyfriend of the *Depression Quest* game developer, Zoe Quinn. Zoe's ex was upset over their breakup and wrote that Quinn's video game had garnered moderate success because she

allegedly slept with various games journalists in hopes of promoting her game (Johnston, 2014). This blog post was so widely believed that Quinn began experiencing "death threats, rape threats, and the public leaking of personal information" (Lees, 2016). Eventually, other game developers, journalists, and actors such as Brianna Wu, Felicia Day, and Leigh Alexander were threatened as well (Lees, 2016). On social media, their mention and response sections are still filled with people who threaten or harass them. Online harassment campaigns are ongoing and have long-lasting effects on the lives of the people targeted.

However, the community of harassers didn't get radicalized overnight. In fact, the instigators of the death threats and stalking had been radicalizing for over a decade on the internet. Laura Bates (2021a), the founder of the Everyday Sexism Project published her book, *Men who hate women: From incels to pickup artists, the truth about extreme misogyny and how it affects us all,* on this very issue. In this book, she retraces the historical background of online misogynistic violence and ultimately links it to a group of people commonly known by the term "incel." Bates defines incel as an "involuntary celibate" (Bates, 2021b), a phrase originally used by a woman named Alana who inadvertently set up an online community that would eventually be the birthplace of the violent incel movement. What started as a self-help community for men and women struggling to date later led to the radicalization of many men. While there are various types and levels of incels, Bates (2021b) states that all incels

> subscribe to a transnational ideology characterized by white male supremacy, oppression of women and the glorification and encouragement of male violence. Seeing themselves as perpetual victims oppressed by a "feminist gynocracy," they believe that sex is their inherent birthright as men, and that rape and murder are

> appropriate punishments for a society they perceive as withholding sex from them.

Even though this group of people found each other as far back as the nineties (Bates, 2021b), this same ideology has stuck around and even grown in its numbers since its founding.

Based on her own undercover work on the internet, including the number of blog posters on Reddit and YouTube video viewers on incel ideology-based clips, Bates (2021a) estimates the number of incels is in the hundreds of thousands (pp. 36-37). The rise in numbers is due to a number of factors including the rise in heads of state who also adhere to a misogynistic ideology, the most well-known person in the U.S. in the past decade being Donald Trump (Bates, 2021a, p. 22). However, radicalization has been taking on recruiting tactics more insidious than ever. In an article published in *The Guardian,* Bates (2021b) states,

> Today's incels are also experts at finding and recruiting young men online. They do not depend on boys coming to them: indeed, many young men I meet whose ideas reflect this ideology have never actually heard of the term "incels." They are groomed over computer headsets, in gaming strategy chatrooms, via viral videos and funny memes. They are targeted on bodybuilding forums, where extremists know they will find a self-selecting group of boys already anxious about societal notions of tough, traditional masculinity.

With this unprecedented rise in online harassment campaigns over the past decade, it is important to know how the radicalization takes place and also what we can do to prevent and respond to it. While I don't go into detail about all of the ways that radicalization can occur in this project, chapter two discusses one of the ways that misogyny and entitlement can radicalize individuals under a patriarchal mindset.

While Laura Bates (2021a) has been able to trace the roots of online incel ideologies, it should be recognized that this was an ideology that has been present even before the beginning of the internet. Some cyber-sexist researchers state that the online actions of people reflect their real-world ideologies (Bates, 2021a; Poland 2016). Misogyny affects the online and offline experiences of women and non-cis men, and it will continue to for as long as there is no uniform way to chase out this type of thinking. The ultimate end goal of all our actions taken against online harassment should be bounded in trying to end sexist oppression and misogyny. Online platforms should also be held accountable for their lack of action against harassment campaigns despite them being aware of what is taking place (McCluskey, 2021). However, we should also be willing to combat specific instances of harassment while we wait for structural changes to occur in order to not only stop harassment but also help people retake their online and offline lives.

One specific instance of learning how feminists can respond to online misogynistic harassment takes place in the video, "How feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian fights trolls" (Washington Post, 2018). Sarkeesian uses this video to talk about how she wants her own identity to be understood despite the fact that she was a victim of online harassment, and to model how people ought to talk about feminist advocacy. Even though the commenters who I focused my analysis on in chapter two are more than likely less than amenable to the rhetorical tactics that Sarkeesian uses in this video, since their misogynistic predispositions won't be resolved by watching one video, I argue that the target audience, which are feminists and The Lily subscribers, are who she wishes to reach with her video. I believe this to be true both because of the platform that created this video series and because of the feminist calls to action she makes at the end of the video. Sarkeesian's appeals to the redefinition of her own identity

and solidarity building could be an effective way to reach the intended audience. Considering both the purpose of the video and the presumed audience, this is an excellent case study to use for understanding how feminists could respond to online misogynistic violence in the face of erasure and over-victimization. In the following section, I explain the theory of a "rhetoric of difference" (Flores, 1996) and why I choose this theory as a way to understand the response rhetoric of Anita Sarkeesian in the *Washington Post* (2018) video.

Defining a rhetoric of difference

In "Creating a discursive space through a rhetoric of difference: Chicana feminists craft a homeland" (1996), Lisa Flores sets out to show how Chicana feminists feel as if they are often misrepresented in "mainstream" depictions of their lives. In response to various misrepresentations, Flores (1996, p. 144) argues that Chicana feminists adopt a three-step discursive process that allows them to establish their own space, create a home, and build connections with other feminists. Flores (1996) first describes how Chicanas/os are constantly finding themselves caught between their Mexican heritage and their lives in America. Despite their ethnic background and familial history, Chicanas/os also feel influenced by the places they reside in the United States. Flores (1996) describes this feeling as being neither "truly Mexican nor truly American" (p. 142). This sentiment is formed not just through the ways Chicanas view themselves, but also by the way other people perceive them. For Chicana feminists, this is also magnified by their commitments to feminism which Flores (1996) describes as an acceptance of isolation. She articulates this by stating:

> Moraga argues that allegiance to feminism and commitment to women have alienated Chicanas from many Chicanos, "Because heterosexism—the Chicana's sexual commitment to the Chicano male—is proof of her fidelity to her people,

> the Chicana feminist attempting to critique the sexism in the Chicano community is certainly between a personal rock and a political hard place." (p. 144)

Even if a Chicana feminist decides to fully embrace feminism in the face of Chicano backlash, she still can find herself isolated due to Eurocentric ideals embraced by white feminists in the United States (Flores, 1996, p. 144).

Given that the experiences of Chicana feminists go against both the heterosexist nature of their existence within a Chicano-led culture and the western ideologies in the space that they occupy, Flores (1996) argues that Chicanas live a "border experience" that necessitates a rewriting of Chicana history (p. 145). This endorsement of rewriting attempts to allow Chicanas the ability to carve out a space and create an identity for themselves, through themselves. In order to undertake this redefinition, Chicanas have taken up what Flores (1996) labels as a "rhetoric of difference." Simply put, a rhetoric of difference is defined as

> repudiating mainstream discourse and espousing self- and group-created discourses. Through the rejection of the external and creation of the internal, marginalized groups establish themselves as different from stereotyped perceptions and different from dominant culture (Schwichtenberg, 3). Through this struggle with dominant culture, marginalized groups are able to establish self and group autonomy because the individuals and groups name themselves. (pp. 145-146)

The impact that embracing this type of rejection and identification has on the individuals involved range from self-affirmation of one's identity to pride (Flores, 1996, p. 146). Flores (1996) identifies the alternative identities that Chicanas face as that of "sex-object" for the white man and "servant" to her Chicano brothers (p. 147). By embracing a rhetoric of difference,

Chicanas redefine themselves as other than what these dominant narratives around them have entrenched.

In order for Chicana feminists to carve out a discursive space for themselves, there is a focus on the "material" or "everyday" lives of Chicanas. Despite the differences that are found in their everyday lives and the experiences of white feminists in the United States, Flores (1996) says that emphasizing the actions of Chicanas in their own lives in order to embrace and celebrate their own culture between borders is necessary for creating a discursive space and creating bridges with other feminists (pp. 147-148). Amplifying mundane experiences of Chicanas allows them to create new rhetoric that is more accurate and less based in how outsiders view them. When Chicana feminists find ways to express themselves and the hardships they encounter, it helps other feminists identify similarities and differences between lived experiences that could lead to more solidarity and feminist bridges that better the lives of women and non-cis men.

This rhetorical strategy is useful for various reasons. For the person who utilizes this strategy, it is a helpful guide for understanding the steps one could take when outsiders view you through a lens that is inaccurate or unsatisfying. For people looking in from the outside, a rhetoric of difference gives them an alternative perspective which can reframe the way they think and talk about a person in the future. Despite Flores (1996) creating this theory of a "rhetoric of difference" to describe actions Chicana feminists have taken, I apply it to the words and actions of Sarkeesian. The general structure and steps Flores (1996) describes are similar to how Sarkeesian responds to popular narratives about herself.

In the following section, I introduce the *Washington Post* (2018) video that asks Sarkeesian to tell her audience "something she has never said before." I then argue that

Sarkeesian embodies and enacts a "rhetoric of difference." Finally, I discuss how this form of agency creation and redefinition can inform people about what certain responses to online harassment may achieve.

Analysis

Video background

"How feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian fights trolls" (2018) is part of a video series by the *Washington Post*, in collaboration with The Lily, called *Unfiltered* that they have described as a video series which "asks YouTubers to share a story their followers haven't heard before." The Lily describes itself as "A product of The Washington Post, The Lily is a destination for stories central to the everyday lives of millennial women. We share the varied and diverse experiences of a generation" (Thelilynews, no date). *Unfiltered* interviewed seven women, who had popular YouTube Channels, to expose some of the hardships these YouTubers experienced after posting videos (Thelilynews, no date).

"How feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian fights trolls" was posted by the *Washington Post* on October 16th, 2018 and is one of the only videos on YouTube to have Sarkeesian as the presenter and allow for comments on the video. The video has over 46,000 views to date. This is similar to the number of views for the first four videos posted in the series. While the *Washington Post* is better known for their online news website, as of April 2022 they have over 2 million subscribers to their YouTube channel. Sarkeesian's video was liked only 762 times while it was disliked by over 6,000 people[1]. Every other video in the series had a ratio of likes to dislikes that was the opposite of Sarkeesian's except for the video by Kat Lazo entitled, "Kat Lazo on the incredible backlash to 'Latinx'" (Washington Post, 2018). The people who are

[1] By April 2022, the number of people who disliked the video was taken off. This information was accurate in September of 2021.

probably a part of the group of individuals who took part in disliking the videos made comments about this "ratio" and how it must represent popular opinion on the statements given in these videos.

"How feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian fights trolls" (Washington Post, 2018) is three minutes and eighteen seconds long. The entire video is shot in black and white with Sarkeesian sitting down, cross legged on a metal stool. Throughout the video, the camera zooms in or out to emphasize certain statements Sarkeesian makes. The video is broken up into different sections beginning with her introducing the main focus of the video. She then transitions into giving examples of her accomplishments that are often forgotten when people talk about her. Next, she discusses her own recollection of her time on YouTube and the harassment she experienced. However, shortly after this she explains the impact that only being known by what harassment has been done to an individual can have on people. Finally, she concludes by saying despite being defined by her experiences with online harassment, she is committed to retelling her story for the purposes of creating networks and connections with people to help end online harassment.

These bits of information show the need for Sarkeesian to carve out a discursive space for herself and others. This is especially true given how Sarkeesian's victimhood often overshadows her, or as Dr. Rebecca Stringer (2014) puts it, takes away her agency as a person outside of the violence she fell victim to. While not all people who are targets of harassment have such a large platform for sharing their stories, Sarkeesian was given the ability to share her experiences and connect with other people who have been victims of online harassment. In the following paragraphs, I argue that in this video Sarkeesian embraced a "rhetoric of difference" (Flores, 1996). I divide my analysis into two sections which follow the three steps or strategies that

Flores (1996) argues Chicanas take to counter popular narratives about them. The first section focuses on how Sarkeesian redefines herself to counter past media depictions, which comprises the first and second steps Flores (1996) argues are taken when adopting a "rhetoric of difference." The second section focuses on the wide-ranging effects of online harassment and the calls for collective storytelling and action, or the third step in a "rhetoric of difference" (Flores, 1996).

Carving out space and creating a home

To start the process of adopting a "rhetoric of difference," Sarkeesian first reports some of her accomplishments and accolades because mainstream definitions of her only focus on the harassment she experienced (Washington Post, 2018).[2] I describe the first half of the video as discursively carving out space and creating a home because she identifies mainstream narratives about herself but then juxtaposes them with what she wants people to know her for. Sarkeesian begins the video by introducing herself, noting what she is usually asked to talk about in video interviews, and saying she is going to step out of the role she is normally asked to play. The exhaustion she feels from having to constantly fit a certain role for reporters who write stories about her is seen in her sigh at the eight second mark. She vocalizes this exhaustion further by stating she is tired of letting her experiences with online harassment be the purpose of the presentations she is asked to give, instead of letting it be but one small part of her story. This sense of tiredness is also displayed by her sitting instead of standing throughout her speech.

She then begins to juxtapose the public opinions that have shaped her identity with how she wishes to be known:

[2] This is the source of all video quotations.

> I play video games, but that's not why you know me. I founded a nonprofit organization that amplifies the work of women and gender-nonconforming people worldwide, but that's also not why you know me. I've produced nearly 150 videos, written dozens of articles, and contributed to a handful of anthologies. But that's not why you know me either. If you know me, it's because I've been harassed.

In this section of the video, Sarkeesian discusses things like the pastimes she enjoys, her professional work and her academic contributions to introduce herself and show she is a multidimensional person. While it might seem frivolous to identify these aspects of her identity, Sarkeesian expresses this same sentiment through her laughter and exasperated exclamation of the word "shit." She shows her viewers through repeated phrases such as "but that's not why you know me" that there are counternarratives and definitions of herself that others have forced onto her. The camera person also zooms into Sarkeesian whenever she says "but that's not why you know me" to emphasize that this is a significant issue for her. Even though she later recognizes it is important for her to share her story about online harassment, she makes it known that she cannot be defined by the harassment she has experienced. While this is a fine line to walk, Sarkeesian is able to do this by prioritizing her deconstruction of these counter-narratives before she begins retelling how she has experienced online harassment.

When Sarkeesian creates a juxtaposition, she is "countering other-created images" (Flores, 1996, p. 146). This form of countering has to identify both what the alternative narratives constructed about a person or group are, followed by what this person or group would instead like to be known by. In order for Sarkeesian to "regain control of her subjectivity" she "creat[es] knowledge about herself" through the snapshots of what she enjoys and has

accomplished both academically and professionally (Flores, 1996, p. 147). This is significant for Sarkeesian not only because she is able to humanize herself for viewers who might not know her well, but also because it allows her to create self-imposed agency. She directly points this out later in the video when she says, “One of the big costs of online harassment is that it takes away our humanity. It forces us to put up these shelves and these walls just to exist online.” Even when she is discussing how online harassment is affecting her, Sarkeesian still chuckles or laughs throughout these moments in the video. These moments of laughter seem to occur either because of how the real-world effects of online harassment create a sense of anxiousness and insecurity and/or because it is ridiculous that she even needs to explain the severity of rhetorical harassment.

However, it could be the case that the laughter from Sarkeesian could give commenters, like the ones discussed in the previous chapter, leverage to show how even Sarkeesian views what is happening online as a joke. When she chuckles during her discussion of some of the most heinous acts of sexual harassment that she encountered in the past, viewers could see this as diminishing the offline effects of this type of harassment. Nonetheless, I believe that Sarkeesian shows her viewers what is at stake for people who are defined by the online harassment that is done to them through her words and juxtaposition. In order to combat dehumanization and erasure that occurs when online harassment is present, she tells viewers that people can reclaim space for themselves through their counternarratives.

However, Sarkeesian hints to how erasure of her identity has taken place even when popular news outlets and reporters ask for her story. When this type of erasure occurs, it become difficult to engage with others or use one’s story to build solidarity. Flores (1996) says that Chicana feminists in particular find it hard to create solidarity with those who “are calling for

allegiance" (white feminists) because more often than not, "She finds herself asked for her opinion and then brushed aside or positioned as an exotic to be studied" (p. 147). While there are other things at play for Chicana feminists including (but not limited to) race, ethnicity, and class when it comes to their involvement with white feminists, Sarkeesian also seems to experience a call to give her side only to be made a spectacle of and parts of her identity ignored. Sarkeesian has been asked to tell her harassment story for live audiences on major platforms like TEDxTalks (2012), Comedy Central (2014), and the XOXO Festival (2014). However, these presentations never forefront her subjectivity outside of the harassment she experienced. Sarkeesian argues that this erasure takes place in her personal life as well when she interacts with people at gatherings. She explains how people start conversations by speaking about the online harassment she experienced, only to follow up with questions about how and what she is doing now. During this time in the video, the film makers take a side-angle view of Sarkeesian which she eventually turns towards to show her frustration and exasperation that is present on her face. This prioritization of telling the story of harassers and their actions creates what Bates (2021a) calls a "deeply problematic and mutually parasitic" relationship between the media landscape and abusers (p. 170). Instead of forefronting a discussion about Sarkeesian the person, news outlets have continually fed into the sensationalizing of her experiences.

What Sarkeesian does through her enactment of a "rhetoric of difference" that is similar to Chicana feminists, yet unique to her own subject position, is insert what she believes has been left out of media portrayals of her. Even though the people and companies who have interviewed Sarkeesian in the past might have had the intent of elevating her voice, they have instead made her a spectacle in a like manner to what white feminists have done to Chicanas. In mostly making their headlines and the purpose of her speech based around the online harassment she has

experienced; they are painting her as only a victim. While Sarkeesian recognizes she has been a victim of harassment, she challenges the constraints that victimhood has placed on her identity by reconstructing her subjectivity to also include what she enjoys and does. Sarkeesian does what past Chicana feminists have also done in the face of external definitions which is identify them and deconstruct them through (1) a retelling of her own history and (2) redefining herself through her everyday joys and material achievements.

Constructing bridges and pathways

As Chicana feminists build bridges and pathways to other feminists and Chicanas (Flores, 1996), so Sarkeesian also attempts to create pathways in the video. One rhetorical technique Sarkeesian uses is pluralization. When she talks about her own experiences with feeling dehumanized or erased because of the constant questions she gets about her harassers and being defined by their actions, she makes it known that her experiences and their impacts aren't unique to her. For example, she states:

> For years I have been defined in the press and the popular consciousness by what has been done to me rather than by what I do. The net result of this harassment is that women's own voices are drowned out, and the substance of our work is diminished or erased altogether. Like, I'll meet people at parties or whatever, and they'll be like, "Oh, you were the one that was harassed. Right. So, what are you doing now?"

She describes what being defined by others does to people when she states, "One of the big costs of online harassment is that it takes away our humanity. It forces us to put up these shelves and these walls just to exist online." Right before the end of this sentence, the filmmakers focus on

her feet instead of her face to represent this distancing and dehumanization that occurs when women are expected to change who they are online for the purposes of safety.

Apart from pointing out that her experience is unfortunately something many women experience when they choose to create an online presence, Sarkeesian also recognizes that collectivized action is needed to end online harassment. In her concluding remarks, she bluntly states:

> I'm weary to my bones with this discussion, but I'm gonna keep participating in it because ultimately the commitment to exposing online harassment is the first and most important step we can take in reclaiming our lives. So, I am going to continue to talk about it, for as long as it takes. I have to fight for a world in which women are seen as the fully human people that we are, where we're free to be recognized for what we do rather than what's done to us.

Even though Sarkeesian's final words are about what actions she has committed herself to, viewers are still left with an understanding of the importance of collective action. She frames her actions around not just helping herself, but all women who are either the targets of online harassment or experience its chilling effects. Her continual use of words like "we" and "our" show the wide-ranging effects of online harassment and the potential for solidarity it brings. These phrases signal that women aren't alone in their experiences with harassment, and that they can count on each other to listen and help in whatever ways possible. When she uses these phrases, the filmmakers capture fewer close-up shots of Sarkeesian so viewers can feel like she is creating a communal space that welcomes other voices, instead of just focusing on her own experiences. By using these strategies, Sarkeesian exposes the truth behind how she feels about

interviews centered around her experiences and shows that avoiding these dehumanizing acts can serve the lives of many other people.

Sarkeesian's use of these words to create ties and community with other victims of harassment is inherently an example of what Flores (1996) says Chicana feminists do when "creating bridges" (p. 151). In reference to the beginning of the video, I have argued that Sarkeesian both carves out a discursive space for herself through recognizing her experience with online harassment and creates a space in this new reality by asserting that she is not defined by these actions, but instead by what she does and enjoys. However, even after she creates a new home for herself, she also attempts to create bridges that lead to alliances and sisterhood with women who have found themselves in a similar position.

Sarkeesian shows that while it is important for her to create a discursive space and home for herself, it is just as important to create networks of solidarity that aim to combat online misogynistic harassment. As Flores (1996) states, even when feminists create agency and space for themselves, it is important to both establish ties with other feminists as well as break down borders that section off feminists from one another. Flores (1996) elaborates by looking at the magnitude of the battle that Chicana feminists have in front of them by saying, "Realizing that fighting oppression requires more strength than they alone can provide, Chicana feminists construct bridges that connect their newly gained homeland to those surrounding lands upon which they once stood" (p. 151). Sarkeesian's words are reminiscent of this sentiment through her own commitment to "exposing online violence" in an attempt to "reclaim" the lives of women, much like herself, who have been erased by their harassers. However, she also lets it be known that she is willing to suffer through the recounting of her past in order to create ties and community with women who are currently experiencing online harassment. It is through this

recognition of where she has been and where she is now along with her commit that likens back to creating "Alliances and Hermanas" (Flores, 1996, p. 151).

Sarkeesian's overall tone and language, as I have previously pointed out, show that while she is trying to re-establish her own agency through her individualized examples, she is also trying to create community. In the video she draws on personal narratives while recognizing that other people have experiences similar to her own and argues that they must all work together to end the oppression they are experiencing. Her acknowledgement of the erasure and dehumanization which people have and will experience allows her to create a network where people can gather and share their own realities. While different people will have different types of encounters with harassment, Sarkeesian attempts to establish bridges for herself and other people by emphasizing the importance of collective action.

Sarkeesian also attempts to create pathways through hypothesizing a new type of online space that would allow for feminists to speak their mind without fear of retaliation. When these new spaces are created, Flores (1996) states that Chicanas are free to talk how they would like and not be constrained by how others want them to speak and expectations of them (p. 151). Sarkeesian recognizes the importance of creating an online world where women can interact without worrying about external opinions. She emphasizes the importance of this towards the end of the video when she states, "It's both a tragic and exciting thought experiment, to think about what women would be known for if we didn't have online harassment. What women could be known for is everything." This moment in the video is emphasized when the filmmakers do a voice-over of Sarkeesian instead of visibly showing her talking. This strategy amplifies that when all of the chatter and external voices that define women are silenced, they will be able to create narratives for themselves. In order for women to create a home for themselves, they must

be able to celebrate and embrace their own possibilities without fear of harassment. In instigating collective efforts towards ending online harassment, Sarkeesian is creating bridges with others and making a home for people to reside.

Conclusion

Online harassment is an ongoing problem that affects the lives of people across the globe. People like Sarkeesian and those who were the main targets of Gamergate prove that online harassment can translate to offline stalking, death threats, and violence. Emerging scholarship ranging from feminists to social scientists all shows that the impacts of online harassment, and the lack of institutional responses, are causing victims to take matters into their own hands. Even when harassment cases are publicized, Sarkeesian's own experiences show us that the lives of victims can become secondary to the click-worthy nature of the harassment that is done to them.

This chapter shows the potential for a rhetorical intervention to both recognize and amplify responses people take against online harassment. I have shown that reading the response of Sarkeesian through a lens of a "rhetoric of difference" shows how victims of online harassment can create agency for themselves and solidarity with other people who have similar experiences. While I have chosen to analyze the rhetorical acts of Anita Sarkeesian through a "rhetoric of difference," communication scholars can continue to build on the social scientific work that has already been done in order to highlight and analyze potential responses. The work of ending online harassment is far from finished, but it is important to continually document and expand the tools victims have to personally respond to harassers and their accomplices.

The steps taken in embracing a "rhetoric of difference" are especially important when people are facing the type of misogynistic and entitled harassment I identified in chapter two. The first two steps--recognizing the problems with mainstream narratives that can circulate about

a person and redefining those narratives on the targeted person's own terms--can help in fighting misogyny and gaslighting (Abramson, 2014). As I previously discussed, entitlement to knowledge and its creation can erase the opinions and knowledge of women through inaccurate retellings of past experiences. Additionally, male entitlement to dictating where a woman's attention should be rationalizes people criticizing women for focusing their efforts on injustice that they find miniscule, which in this case would be online harassment. Therefore, amplifying rhetorical strategies such as a "rhetoric of difference" as a possible strategy for feminists to combat online misogynistic violence is significant because it gives individuals a guide for redefining mainstream misogynistic narratives and the possibility for stabilizing solidarity bridges.

Chapter IV: Conclusion

Problems and findings

Two issues structured this project. First, misogynistic harassment online can cause real offline harm both emotionally and physically to its targets. Second, there is a lack of consensus on how best to combat misogynistic harassment online both at the individual and institutional level. After identifying these two issues, I focused the scope of my research on answering the questions (1) what misogyny looks like in an online context within the gaming community and (2) how can or ought feminists respond to online misogynistic harassment. I chose to utilize the experiences of Anita Sarkeesian for answering these questions. I analyzed online comments on the video "How feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian fights trolls" (Washington Post, 2018) and the video itself. The video enabled me to analyze a well-circumscribed case of misogynistic harassment in the gaming community and how one feminist responded to this type of harassment.

To address the question of what misogyny looks like in an online context within the gaming community, in chapter two, I looked at the comment section of the *Washington Post* video, "How feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian fights trolls" (2018). To define misogyny, I utilized the works of Kate Manne (2020) and Moya Bailey (2021) who have foundational work in regard to defining misogyny. The main argument that I forwarded in this chapter was that the commenters upheld key tenets of patriarchy such as men are entitled to knowledge and truth making, men are entitled to making money, and men are entitled to receive attention. I argued that these aspects of patriarchy were enforced through a lens of misogyny and entitlement. While misogyny is not a new concept, being able to identify certain rhetorical acts as misogyny can help in both naming the issue and fighting back against it. I ultimately found that the commenters

attempted to police Sarkeesian by reframing the narrative she created, shaming her for thinking she ought to receive money for her own labor, and criticizing her for bringing attention to her own feminist issues when other people in the world experience worse hardships.

To answer the second question of how feminists can respond to online misogynistic harassment, in chapter three, I analyzed the video "How feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian fights trolls" (Washington Post, 2018). I argue that Sarkeesian adopted what Lisa Flores (1996) defines as a "rhetoric of difference." I situated this within a conversation about how Sarkeesian and other gaming critics such as Zoe Quinn have faced online harassment and misrepresentations due to their roles as self-proclaimed feminists in the gaming community. Even though there are a variety of ways that people respond to violence and harassment, it is important to understand the justifications people have for utilizing the response mechanism they chose. Throughout this chapter, I focused on how in the face of public opinions of her, she enacts a "rhetoric of difference" by publicly redefining herself through the things she advocates for and does, instead of by what has been done to her. I ultimately found that Sarkeesian adopted the three-step process of a "rhetoric of difference" outlined by Flores (1996) by identifying popular narratives about herself and redefining them to carve out space and make a home while also creating bridges of solidarity with other feminists through her word choice and calls for action. It is my hope that this chapter was able to clearly identify how an understanding of a "rhetoric of difference" can shed light on the words and actions of Sarkeesian.

Anita Sarkeesian and her Kickstarter series showed what could be possible for feminist gamers in a community that supports heteronormative stereotypes. She showed viewers and continues to show supporters on her nonprofit websites that you can be someone who enjoys playing video games while also being critical of certain aspects of them. In her own right, she

has created her own space and home for gamers and feminists. The feminist frequency slogan "Be critical of the media you love" is her attempt to create both a shared sense of appreciation for various media outlets while also trying to transform the ways digital media is created. Sarkeesian shows in various videos and articles that you don't have to renounce the media you love but being able to constructively criticize it can create new avenues for residing in digital spaces. In the video "How feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian fights trolls" (Washington Post, 2018) Sarkeesian tries to push back against false popular narratives about herself by retelling her story and letting viewers know what she thinks reframing her own experiences could do for people who have or will experience online harassment. She recognizes the importance of her history with harassment, but she also wants people to be able to know her as an academic, feminist media critic and advocate for transforming the lives of feminists online.

Throughout my time researching this project, I have found people using different mechanisms to help combat online harassment. I have also found that organizations and platforms that operate online are taking steps to help prevent online harassment and reprimand people who harass others online. To supplement these institutional and technical efforts, it is important to address broader social, cultural factors contributing to online harassment by highlighting both the underlying ideologies harassment stems from and how certain feminists have responded when other preventative measures have failed. It isn't enough to sit around and wait for institutional actors and corporations to find the most non-controversial way to deal with harassment. This is not to say those actions aren't good and shouldn't be an ultimate goal in the fight towards ending online harassment. However, the mental and physical safety of people is at stake everyday as a direct result of online harassment. Therefore, feminist advocates must be committed to finding ways to directly or indirectly combat online harassment stemming from

ideologies that manifest in our material lives such as (but not limited to) sexism, racism, misogyny, imperialism, and capitalism.

Limitations and future research

While digital media has been used to harass and demean people without fear of retaliation or accountability, it is also being used in transformative ways. Dr. Moya Bailey (2021) argues for the importance of digital media in its ability to help create connections that would not have been possible if not for the internet's expansive reach (p. 82). However, in creating more visible communities online through strategies such as telling personal narratives and public ideology exposure, Bailey (2021) and Sarkeesian (Washington Post, 2018) both show the backlash and violence that can result from trying to create networks of feminism and transformation. Women and especially trans women of color will always be the ones who suffer the most when exposed to broader audiences in online spaces. With this in mind, understanding the ways identity can play into the violence people could be exposed to should be central in conversations about digital and offline activism. Understanding online misogyny and how one feminist responds only partially addresses the massive problem of online harassment. It is necessary for researchers to continue focusing on different technical, political, and individual solutions that would be helpful in different instance of online harassment. All of these instances are magnified by different identity categories, which means that further research should focus more centrally on other intersections that weren't in the scope of my research. For example, I discussed how ideologies such as misogyny, imperialism, and racism can create a basis for online harassment. Further research could be done over how ethnicity, homonormativity, classism, etc. can play into online harassment.

Additionally, researchers should analyze more online content from different domains. I analyzed only one video. Although this video helped me narrow the scope of my research and discussion, it limited my ability to talk about different platforms and communities where online harassment takes place. In the future, it is imperative that researchers investigate other online platforms to better understand the far-reaching effects of online harassment. For example, researchers could analyze comments on online content created by people such as U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to see whether and to what extent other sorts of ideologies like racism and classism are leveraged to police her feminist advocacy in a political context.

Another challenge that future research should address is how we ought to break the cycle of online harassment. As my analysis has shown, Sarkeesian's video response to online harassment was met with further online harassment in comments on the video, which may elicit more responses and more harassment. What preventative measures can reduce online harassment? Being able to identify and describe misogynistic harassment is an important step, but it is imperative that we find ways to end the cycle of violence. Individual responses such as adopting a "rhetoric of difference" can be important for individual subsistence and agency. However, as I discussed in the third chapter, it will more than likely not stop the perpetrators of online harassment because of how deeply ideologies such as patriarchy are embedded into systems and structures including language, entertainment media, and more. Therefore, future research must focus on how we can prevent those ideologies from taking hold and manifesting online.

The ultimate goal for ending online harassment would include some combination of external pressure placed upon users who engage in harassment by the platforms that house them,

and a response by community members as well. Although it is hard to come up with a universal solution to online harassment given the numerous social media platforms available to people now, one thing that can happen is establishing community expectations and guidelines for people to follow. These guidelines could include intricate explanations of what type of language and engagement would be recognized as unacceptable along with explaining why these actions should be rejected. However, I recognize that taking putative measures against people can enact carceral logics which directly contradict radical feminist praxis. As a result, future research that focuses on how to best handle online harassment in ways that directly addresses the ideologies they embrace is of the utmost importance. Moya Bailey (2021) discusses the method of calling in users in a public setting where they can be held accountable for their actions while also laying out ways they will improve in the future. The specific example Bailey (2021) gives is that we can use live functions on social media platforms to stream conversations about accountability with people who are accused of wrong-doing. This type of thinking could be helpful while developing a framework of accountability and rehabilitation for people online. Future scholarly work could focus more directly on what this could possibly look like on different social media platforms.

It is difficult to predict the infinite amount of possible online social media platforms that will arise in the future. Just in the previous few years apps like TikTok have gained popularity and created a new outlet where people can harass or experience harassment. With every new social media platform comes new people, technology and organizations in charge of monitoring what happens on their sites. As a result, there might not be one universal method that can be applied to monitor and deter online harassment. Only a broad range of research and advocacy can create a community that constrains harassers. Therefore, creating an archive of research that

has identified how ideologies can manifest in online rhetoric and how people ought to respond to targeted harassment could help create a basic blueprint needed for combating online harassment.

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