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THE EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN WORKING IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM FACING THE CHALLENGE OF VITUPERATIVE COMMUNICATION ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

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JUNE 2019

Words Do Hurt Me: The Experience of Women Working in the Criminal Justice System Facing the Challenge of Vituperative Communication on Social Networking Sites
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Special thanks to all peer reviewers of this publication

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Executive Summary

Online abuse communicated via social networking sites has increased dramatically in recent years. Criminal justice agencies have been slow to respond to the immense change that has occurred as a result of the way that individuals interact in the digital space. The emerging nature of the phenomena has created a policy vacuum, with evidence suggesting that a lag in institutional responsiveness leaves victims without adequate protection or recourse.

This research was undertaken as part of the MA in Social Research at the University of York. The research investigates the extent to which social networking sites have perpetuated a permissive climate towards gender-based violence, and the wider impact that such online abuse may have.

Empirical evidence gathered from ten women in the criminal justice sector, along with obscene tweets sent to women MPs over an eleven-day period, was interrogated using thematic analysis.

This scrutiny reveals that online abuse is misogynistic, regularly includes threats of sexual violence, comments on women's appearance, and dismisses female contributions to online discussions. When investigated further, it becomes clear that online abuse is not about image, political opinions, religious beliefs or sexual orientation – it is the consequence of being a woman on the internet. This report concludes that criminal justice institutions and social media companies must respond to online abuse more robustly, with the reporting mechanisms and sanctioning of online abuse substantially reinforced.

Dedication

A huge thank you is owed to the incredible women who have shared their time, patience and knowledge with me in order to make this research possible. Working with them has allowed me to stand on the shoulders of giants.

The pseudonyms used in this research are the names of the first ten women to have been killed by men in 2018, compiled by Karen Ingala Smith (2018).

3 January: Elizabeta Lacatusu, 44

5 January: Terrie-Anne Jones, 52

8 January: Claire Tavener, 27

9 January: Julie Clark, 59

10 January: Geraldine Mellor, 32

12 January: Amelia Blake, 22

13 January: Cassie Hayes, 28

26 January: Cheryl Gabriel-Hooper, 51

29 January: Janet Scott, 39

29 January: Paula Harris, 44

This work is dedicated to them.

1. Introduction

This research explores how women active in the criminal justice sector (whether as employees, volunteers or service users) have been affected by online abuse, and how they have witnessed the issue being tackled.

There is a growing recognition in both academic research and the media, that the amount of abuse orchestrated online has grown exponentially in recent years (Vera-Gray, 2017). Whether such insults are new, or simply an online adaptation of enduring misogynistic abuse (Mantilla, 2015) is debated. Nonetheless, criminal justice institutions have been slow to respond to the immense change that has occurred as a result of the way that individuals interact in the digital space (Jane, 2017). Consequently, the institutional response to online threats of gender-based violence is at best rudimentary and reactive. The emerging nature of the phenomena has created a policy vacuum, with evidence suggesting that a lag in institutional responsiveness leaves victims without adequate protection or recourse (Jane, 2017).

Drawing on theories of e-bile (Jane, 2012), gendertrolling (Mantilla, 2015) and silencing women (Salter, 2017), this study investigates the extent to which social networking sites (SNS)[1] have created a permissive climate towards gender-based violence, and the wider impact that such online abuse may have. Empirical evidence gathered from women active in the criminal justice sector is used to investigate experiences of abuse and the treatment of offences across English police areas.

The study reports verbatim the online abuse that women receive: using language that is typically coarse, obscene, and threatening, as well as incorrectly spelled and punctuated. This is a deliberate decision, drawing on Jane (2014):

> *Discourse of this type is metaphorically 'unspeakable', in that its hyperbolic profanity locates it well outside the norms of what is regarded as 'civil' discourse. My case, however, is that – despite the risk of causing offence – this discourse must not only be spoken of but must be spoken of in its unexpurgated entirety. There is, I argue, no other way to adequately assay the nature of a communication mode whose misogynistic hostility has serious ethical and material implications*
>
> (Jane, 2014: 558).

[1] 'SNS' is the term adopted to describe the forms of interaction that occur when using online communication platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which provide the opportunity to communicate abuse both swiftly and to a wide audience (Wall, 2007).

2. Background

2.1. Introduction

Online communication via SNS has increased substantially since 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2018). In the UK, 66% of adults use SNS (Statista, 2018).

Whilst online abuse is increasing, and with this type of abuse being acknowledged by the UN as "a global problem with serious implications for societies and economies around the world" (UN Broadband Commission, 2015: 1), its prominence has not been reflected by a similar increase in academic investigation (Jane, 2014). This is particularly apparent in the UK context, where there is a lack of research.

It seems that criminal justice institutions have been slow to respond to the immense change that has occurred as a result of the way that individuals communicate with one another in the digital space. Evidence suggests that such a lag in institutional responsiveness leaves victims without adequate protection or recourse (Jane, 2017).

Research investigating gendered abuse in computer mediated communication (CMC) is patchy, with investigations in the topic instead being carried out by female journalists (e.g. Cranston, 2015), and even popular fiction (McDermid, 2015).

It is clear that despite platforms such as Facebook and Twitter only having been in existence since 2004 (Ellison et al., 2007) and 2006 (Dale, 2016) respectively, threats of sexualised, gendered violence are now commonplace, and arguably an unavoidable part of being a woman in public life (Jane, 2017).

Some of the online attacks on women have been so extreme that they have gained significant notoriety, be they the abuse directed at female gamers ('Gamergate') (Dewey, 2014), the threats directed at feminist campaigner Caroline Criado-Perez in response to her campaign to put Jane Austen on the £10 note (Criado-Perez, 2013), or the torrent of abuse directed at women politicians (Urwin, 2013). These attacks share an eerie similarity: they are highly aggressive, label women as weak, frequently contain rape threats, and are overwhelmingly misogynistic (Doyle, 2011).

Interestingly, on the rare occasion that men are the targets of online abuse, this abuse is also gendered, with attacks focused on the female relatives of targets (Jane, 2014). This is illustrated in the case of journalist Jon Stewart, who reported how a photograph of his wife published online was described as "She's a liberal. They only come in ugly", and "Looks like a trip to Auschwitz might do her some good" (Jane, 2017: 11); and more recently by Stig Abell, who recounted how after an appearance on Sky News, his Twitter feed filled with rape threats directed at his wife and young child. "They were really graphic, and he was saying he knew where we lived" (Llewelyn Smith, 2018: 19).

2.2. Emergence of online abuse

The first academic research into the nature of technological communication emerged in the 1980s, straddling the disciplines of social psychology, culture and commerce (Jane, 2015). From the outset, this analysis appears to have determined that abuse in online communication is insignificant; suggesting that instances of 'flaming' serve to build group identity, are infrequent, or a source of entertainment (Jane, 2015), with McCosker (2013: 1) claiming that "online vitriol is an integral act of digital citizenship". Others have suggested that criticism of online abuse is an "Orwellian threat to free speech" (O'Neill, 2011: 1). Such criticism continues, as demonstrated by Jones (2017), who conflates criticism of left-wing organisations with misogynistic and violent online abuse:

> *Few would deny the importance of tackling online hatred…It is difficult, though, not to feel discomfort about three right wing newspapers - the Sun, the Daily Mail and the Times - all leading on the perils of social media…a press that routinely whips up hatred and bigotry repeatedly portrays the left as the perpetrators of online abuse, ignoring the open sewer of right-wing hatred online… Let's make sure there are clear safeguards, or history will repeat itself, and peaceful opponents of an unjust status quo will suffer the consequences.*
>
> (Jones, 2017: 1)

2.2.1. Link between online abuse and misogyny

One of the first detailed investigations into the misogynistic nature of online abuse is provided by Jane (2012) and the theory of e-bile:

> *The term e-bile…describes the extravagant invective, the sexualized threats of violence, and the recreational nastiness that have come to constitute a dominant tenor of internet discourse. My case is that a new descriptor is required in order to gather under one heading a variety of denunciatory forms that share characteristic, signal features and so demand a broad field of inquiry—one that is able to gather ostensibly variegated speech acts into a specific yet widely conceived theoretical reflection*
>
> (Jane, 2012: 531).

Mantilla (2015) builds upon this academic exploration with the concept of gendertrolling, which identifies seven characteristics of misogynistic online abuse.

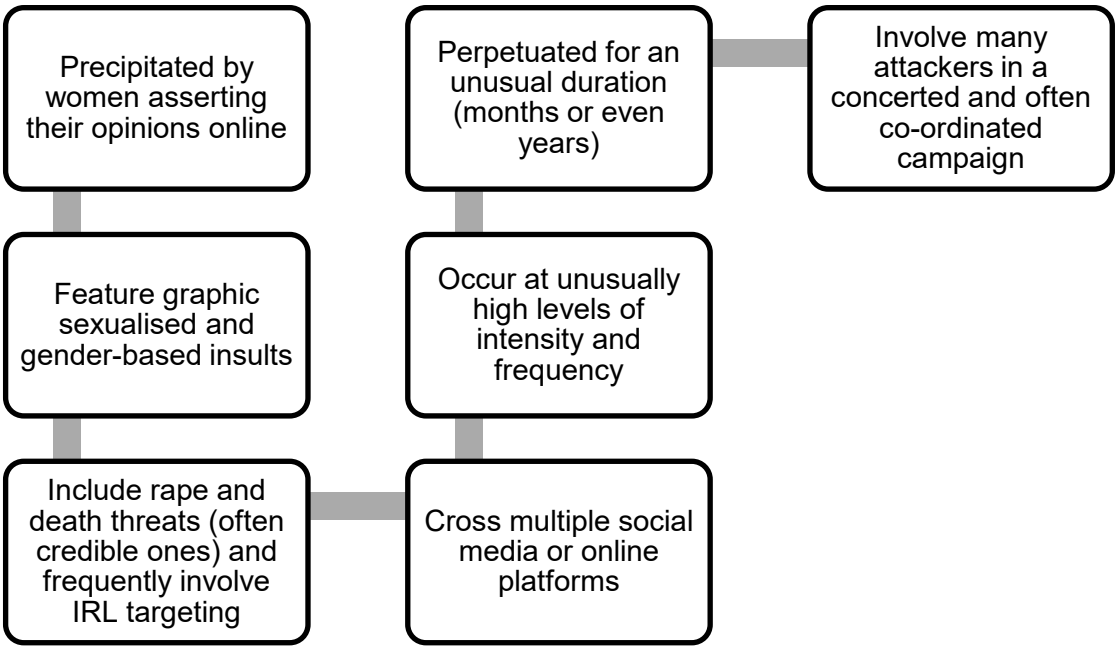

Figure 1: Seven characteristics of gendertrolling (Mantilla, 2015: 12)

Poland (2016: 42) has collected examples of online abuse, including the following encounter that is representative of the invective: "How about I shove my dick in your mouth and you shut the fuck up?" She comments that receiving such abuse is a familiar feature of being a woman on the internet.

Citron (2014) similarly found that internet accounts with female-sounding names received an average of 100 abusive messages for every four received by men.

From its inception, the internet has been dominated by men keen to engage in the wholesale silencing of women (Herring et al., 1995), a phenomena that continues to this day (Salter, 2017). For rather than creating an ideal environment, with CMC offering the opportunity for people to interact anonymously, and the absence of social cues remove differences in status and make communication more equal (Dubrovsky et al., 1991), the internet has instead become somewhere that women often find "cold and threatening" (Christopherson, 2007: 3052).

Consequently, it has been argued that the internet has failed to increase women's participation in public debate (Herring et al., 1995), although more recent research has suggested that the growth of SNS is an important means of maintaining friendships and engaging in political activism (Poland, 2016).

Whilst the additional communication mechanisms offered by SNS may have amplified sexism and threats of violence towards women (Vera-Gray, 2017), misogyny is not a new phenomenon (Jane, 2012). Such abuse can be traced back to Homer's Odyssey 3000 years ago (Beard, 2017). Beard herself has been the target of a sustained campaign of online abuse, much of it regarding her appearance (Mantilla, 2015), something that she describes as "truly vile" (Dowell, 2013: 1), and

which occurs whenever she speaks publicly (Boseley, 2017). Online abuse is thus perhaps another means for men to attempt to silence women who they perceive as attempting to influence current debate (Herring et al., 1995; Salter, 2017).

2.3. Prominent cases of online abuse

In a case that did much to raise public awareness of the issue, due to the severity of the attacks it generated, Criado-Perez has described how the abuse she received online made her fear for her safety:

> *Over the next couple of weeks I receive a steady stream of violent abuse, including rape and death threats. At its peak I am getting about one threat a minute, with men discussing how they will rape me together, which parts of my body will be penetrated and exactly how they are going to kill me… The threats are vivid, graphic, horrific. I can't help visualising them. I stop eating, I can't sleep, I keep crying from sheer exhaustion and despair at the hatred for women that is pouring relentlessly into my Twitter feed*
>
> (Criado-Perez, 2013: 1).

More recently, 'Remain' campaigner Gina Miller has received substantial online abuse, including multiple death threats; one of which resulted in the imprisonment for 12 weeks of the perpetrator. Miller told the court that she felt "violated" by the threats, and that she was "very scared for the safety of herself and her family" (Rawlinson, 2017: 1).

Jess Phillips MP often recounts the abuse she receives online, and how the 5000 rape threats she received made her consider withdrawing from Twitter completely (Press Association, 2016). In the summer of 2016, upon the advice of West Midlands Police and following the online publication on Twitter of a mocked-up photograph of her dead body, Philips had extra security fitted to her family home (Elkes, 2016), and a 'panic room' fitted in her constituency office (Oppenheim, 2016).

John Nimmo, who sent online death threats to Luciana Berger MP, was convicted of sending malicious communication. In a Victim Impact Statement, Berger stated, "the messages have caused me huge stress… I was extremely concerned for my safety and I felt completely under threat" (Sommers, 2016: 1). Nimmo was previously imprisoned in 2014 for sending abusive messages to Stella Creasey MP and Caroline Criado Perez. He was the third man to be convicted for threatening Berger in three years (Pettifor and Harpin, 2016).

2.4. Formal investigations into online abuse

The evidence of high levels of misogynistic abuse in CMC (Jane, 2017), has been reinforced by reports published by the UN Broadband Commission (2015) and Amnesty International (2017). The growth in online abuse in the UK led to an investigation by the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee. In July 2016, the committee received 98 pieces of evidence and heard from 31 witnesses, including a manager at Nottingham Women's Centre, who:

> *was the victim of a wave of vicious, targeted abuse on Twitter. She received the abuse in response to publicity following her work to have misogyny recognised as a hate crime by Nottinghamshire Police. She was subjected to misogynistic taunts regarding her appearance and also received death threats. She said: "It reached a crescendo when someone tweeted out a comment about wanting to find me and tie me up and then a gif image of a woman having a dagger plunge through the back of her head until it came out of her mouth"*
>
> *(Home Affairs Select Committee, 2017: 8).*

The committee report concluded that:

> *Most legal provisions in this field predate the era of mass social media use and some predate the internet itself. The Government should review the entire legislative framework governing online hate speech, harassment and extremism and ensure that the law is up to date. It is essential that the principles of free speech and open public debate in democracy are maintained—but protecting democracy also means ensuring that some voices are not drowned out by harassment and persecution, by the promotion of violence against particular groups, or by terrorism and extremism*
>
> *(ibid.:24).*

It is unfortunate that the General Election of 2017 prematurely concluded the inquiry, and that the recommendations of the Committee have not been further developed or implemented.

2.5. Relationship between online and domestic abuse

As illustrated by the Select Committee, whilst the online abuse most commonly analysed in the literature concerns politicians or celebrities (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017), it is not just high-profile women who are the targets of online abuse. Although its assessment of technology is now somewhat dated, Southworth et al. (2007) provide clear evidence of the use of technology in

domestic abuse. In addition to 'revenge porn' – where intimate images are circulated without consent (Salter, 2017), online abuse in the domestic sphere may lead to sexual violence or homicide, as illustrated in the case of a man who placed an advertisement on the online classifieds site Craigslist:

> *Posing as his ex-girlfriend and asking for 'a real aggressive man with no concern for women'. According to media reports, one week later, a man who had responded to the advertisement forced entry to the victim's home and raped her at knifepoint*
>
> (Henry and Powell, 2016: 11).

2.6. Crown Prosecution Service response to online abuse

The legal system in England and Wales, in common with systems elsewhere, has historically appeared unable to respond to the threat posed by online abuse. As Barker and Jurasz (2018) have stated:

> *Online forms of violence against women are frequently perceived as 'not real' due to the fact that abuse happens in the online sphere, including social media. This dichotomy between 'offline' and 'online' is not only incorrect when it comes to combatting online violence against women, but it also fails to take into account the fact that boundaries between 'online' and 'offline' aspects of everyday life are increasingly disappearing in the context of modern societies*
>
> (Barker and Jurasz, 2018: 1).

The increased awareness of online abuse has led to greater scrutiny of the legal sanctions on such behaviour. In October 2016, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) issued new guidelines regarding the prosecution of cases involving SNS (CPS, 2016a). The CPS list the range of online offences that are classed as potentially criminal:

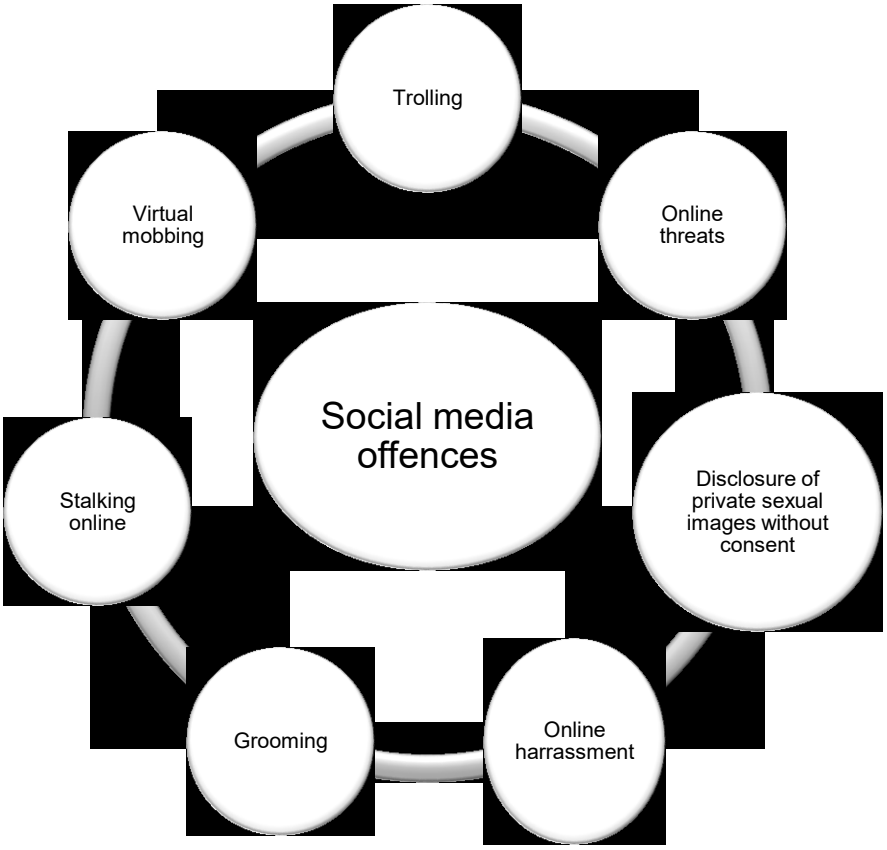

Figure 2: Social media offences as described by the CPS (Source: CPS, 2018)

The guidance provided to prosecutors makes specific reference to online abuse, making it clear that it is an offence to:

> *Send or cause to be sent through a 'public electronic communications network' a message or other matter that is 'grossly offensive' or of an 'indecent or obscene character'. The same section also provides that it is an offence to send or cause to be sent a false message 'for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience or needless anxiety to another'*
>
> (CPS, 2016a: 11).

Similarly,

> *Those who encourage others to commit a communications offence may be charged with encouraging an offence under the Serious Crime Act 2007: for instance, encouragement to tweet or re-tweet ("RT") a grossly offensive message; or the creation of a derogatory hashtag; or making available personal information (doxing / doxxing), so that individuals can more easily be targeted by others. Such encouragement may sometimes lead to a campaign of harassment or "virtual mobbing" or "dog-piling", whereby a*

number of individuals use social media or messaging to disparage another person, usually because they are opposed to that person's opinions

(CPS, 2016a: 12).

The literature suggests that criminal justice agencies have "done little to support women, to bring offenders to account, or to even acknowledge the problem of gendered cyberhate as a problem" (Jane, 2017: 88).

This contradicts statements from the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), who appears determined to prosecute those accused of harassment via SNS. The DPP states that "ignorance is not a defence and perceived anonymity is not an escape. Those who commit these acts, or encourage others to do the same, can and will be prosecuted" (CPS, 2016b: 1).

Nevertheless, there is an emerging consensus that police rarely enforce legislation relating to online abuse (Salter, 2017), and this contributes to the sense that institutionalised misogyny perpetrated by a majority male workforce is preventing offences from being taken seriously (Jane, 2017). This theme is developed by Wattis (2017), who asserts that a widespread culture of misogyny and victim blaming is endemic throughout policing. Even when the police do bring charges, there is evidence that when cases come to court, the actions of alleged perpetrators are frequently described by defence barristers as misunderstood or humorous (Jane, 2015).

An interesting point to emerge from analysis of the CPS guidance is that "where there is evidence of hostility based on race, religion, disability, sexual orientation or transgender identity, prosecutors should refer to…hate crime" (CPS, 2016a: 5). This demonstrates that sex is not a protected characteristic (Chetty and Alathur, 2018), and that misogynistic abuse of the kind uncovered in this research is not classed as a hate crime under current legislation.

2.7. Next steps

Reviewing the history of online abuse confirms that a lack of research evidence has led to a lack of action from criminal justice agencies.
In a bid to address this issue, and to provide an illustration of the nature and scope of online abuse, the following research questions were posed:

i. ***How are criminal justice advocates targeted online?***
ii. ***What effect does online abuse have on their interactions with the digital world?***
iii. ***How adequate is the current public policy response?***

3. Research Methods

This study is guided by feminist principles, in order to learn from the voices of women (Oakley, 1981) and to redress the traditional power imbalance that is present in a large amount of research (Burgess-Procter, 2015).

Ten women were recruited to participate in one-to-one interviews, all of whom were active users of Twitter and tweeting about criminal justice issues.

A list of participants (by pseudonym)

Pseudonym	Role
Elizabeta	Criminal justice professional
Terri-Anne	Feminist campaigner and criminal justice academic
Claire	Feminist campaigner
Julie	CSE whistleblower
Geraldine	Police officer
Amelia	Police officer
Cassie	Police officer
Cheryl	Criminal justice professional
Janet	Criminal justice academic
Paula	Feminist campaigner and criminal justice academic

Table 1: Participant details

In addition to the ten interviews, data was also collected from Twitter using an application programming interface (API) (Ackland and Zhu, 2015) across a fixed time period (3-14 June 2018: the interview period).

The purpose of collecting Twitter data was to gain an empirical understanding of the volume and nature of online abuse, which is not available in existing literature. The richness of the data collected emphasises how SNS have engendered a new form of social interaction, which merits new forms of analysis (Robson and McCarten, 2016). The API automatically downloaded all UK-based tweets that included a range of search terms (Table 2), from a research sample of all women MPs with active Twitter accounts (n = 193)[2].

The sample was chosen as it provides a discrete group of women active in the public sphere with a measurable online presence, who have also been subject to online abuse (Amnesty International UK, 2017). The search terms (Table 2) were chosen after consulting the “Rapeglish Generator” (Jane, 2017: 36), an online resource that

[2]MpsonTwitter.co.uk

records and tracks contemporary online misogyny. The content of the data is symptomatic of the nature of this abuse:

> *Discourse of this type is metaphorically 'unspeakable', in that its hyperbolic profanity locates it well outside the norms of what is regarded as 'civil' discourse. My case, however, is that – despite the risk of causing offence – this discourse must not only be spoken of but must be spoken of in its unexpurgated entirety. There is, I argue, no other way to adequately assay the nature of a communication mode whose misogynistic hostility has serious ethical and material implications*
>
> (Jane, 2014: 558).

Jane's (2014) work is consistent with that of Sutton (1995), which finds that there are more abusive terms applied to women than men, and that they have a predominantly sexual connotation. Sutton's research found that misogynistic abuse directed at women falls into the following categories:

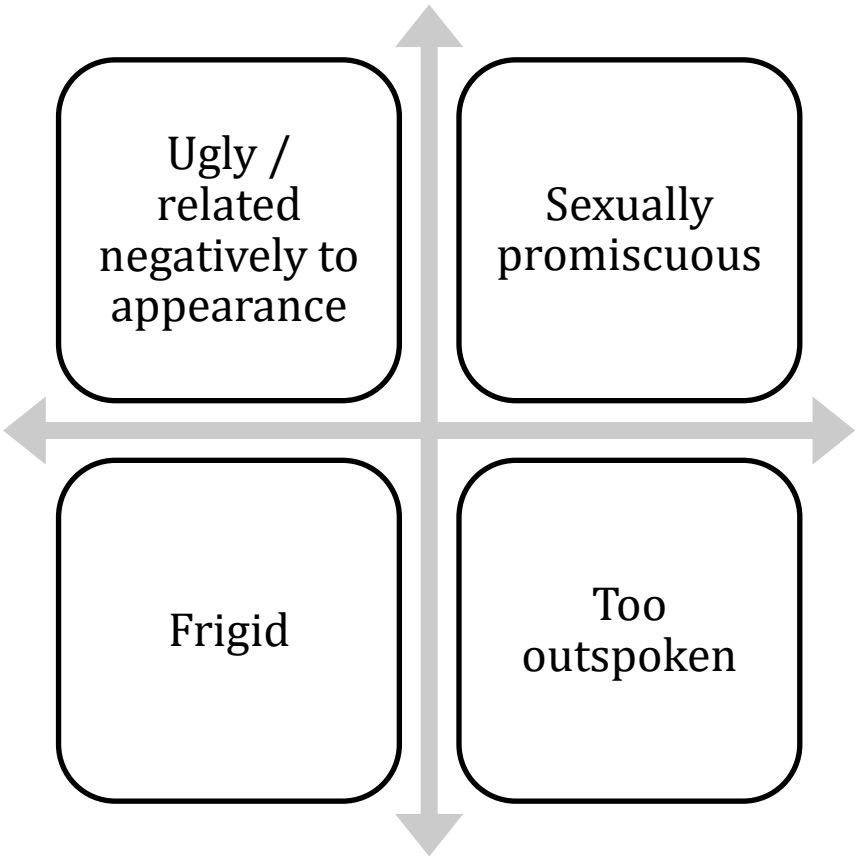

Figure 3: Categorisation of misogynistic abuse (Source: Sutton, 1995)

Search terms used in API

Anal	Fuck	Stink
Arse	Gash	Stupid
Ass	Kill	Ugly
Bitch	Lesbian	Whore
Butt	Pig	Witch
Cock	Plug	
Cripple	Rape	
Cum	Retard	
Cunt	Rot	
Dead	Shit	
Dick	Slut	
Facefuck	Split	

Table 2: Search terms used in API

The API provided a data sample of 5275 tweets that featured the words in the table above, out of a total of 317,258 tweets sent to women MPs – 1.6 per cent of the total. These tweets were collected over a period of eleven days. After an initial test, all retweets (RTs), where "messages originally posted by other users can be re-posted to one's followers as a re-tweet" (Kumar et al., 2015: 24), were removed from the sample, as they resulted in duplication, whilst also increasing the number of tweets in the sample to over one million.

3.1. Ethics

Given the sensitive nature of this research, special attention was paid to ethical considerations. The study was subject to detailed scrutiny by the departmental ethics committee at the University of York, before full ethical clearance was granted.

Every effort was made to ensure that interview participants gave their informed consent (Bryman, 2016), were represented fairly, and that the details of any individuals or criminal cases identified during discussions were kept confidential (Denscombe, 1998). In addition, given that the interview process could cause distress, participants were offered details of sources of support, provided by Women's Aid. The research also met the Violence Against Women and Girls Sector Shared Core Standards (Imkaan et al., 2016).

4. Research Findings

4.1. Themes identified in the data

The data gathered from criminal justice practitioners was categorised into six themes. The linkages between these themes and the research questions are illustrated in Figure 4.

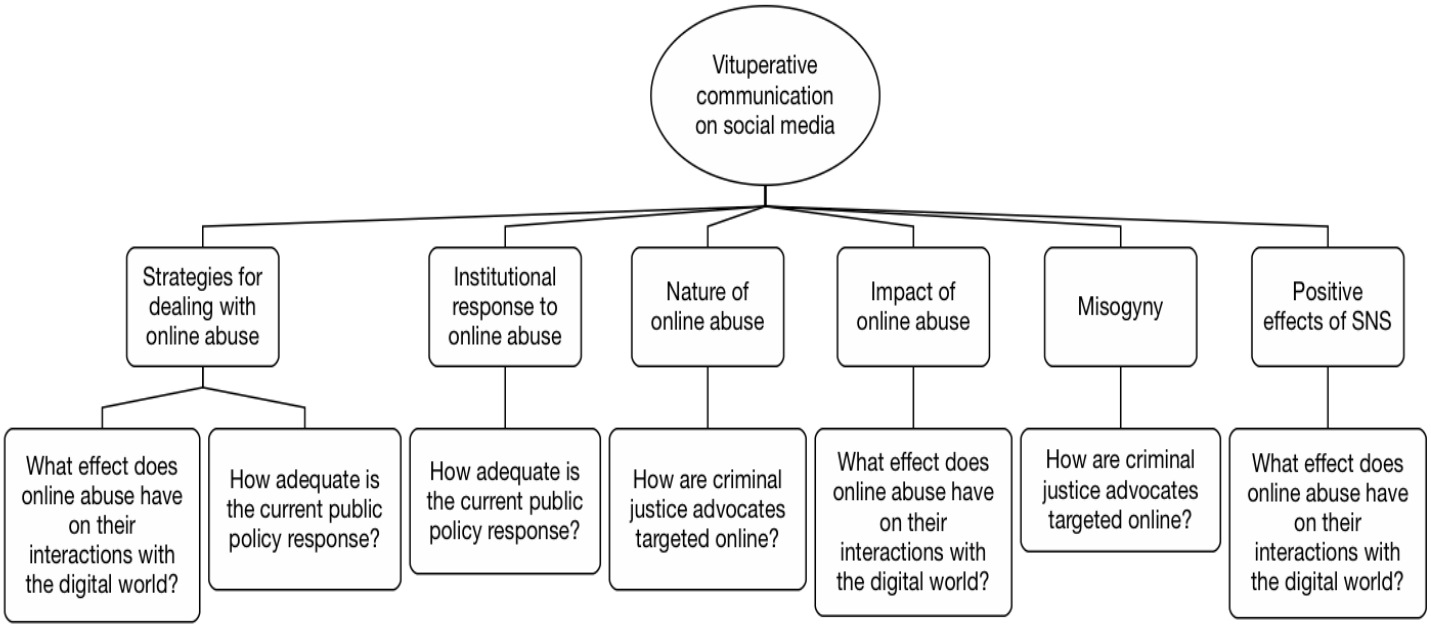

Figure 4: Relationship between research questions and analytical themes

4.2. The frequency and scale of online abuse

Theresa May received the largest number of tweets during the 11-day period (n = 2152, or 60 per cent of the total), unsurprising given her position as Prime Minister. This abuse was highly gendered and misogynistic. 35 women received only one tweet, and 53 received none. The MPs receiving the largest number of tweets are shown at Figure 5.

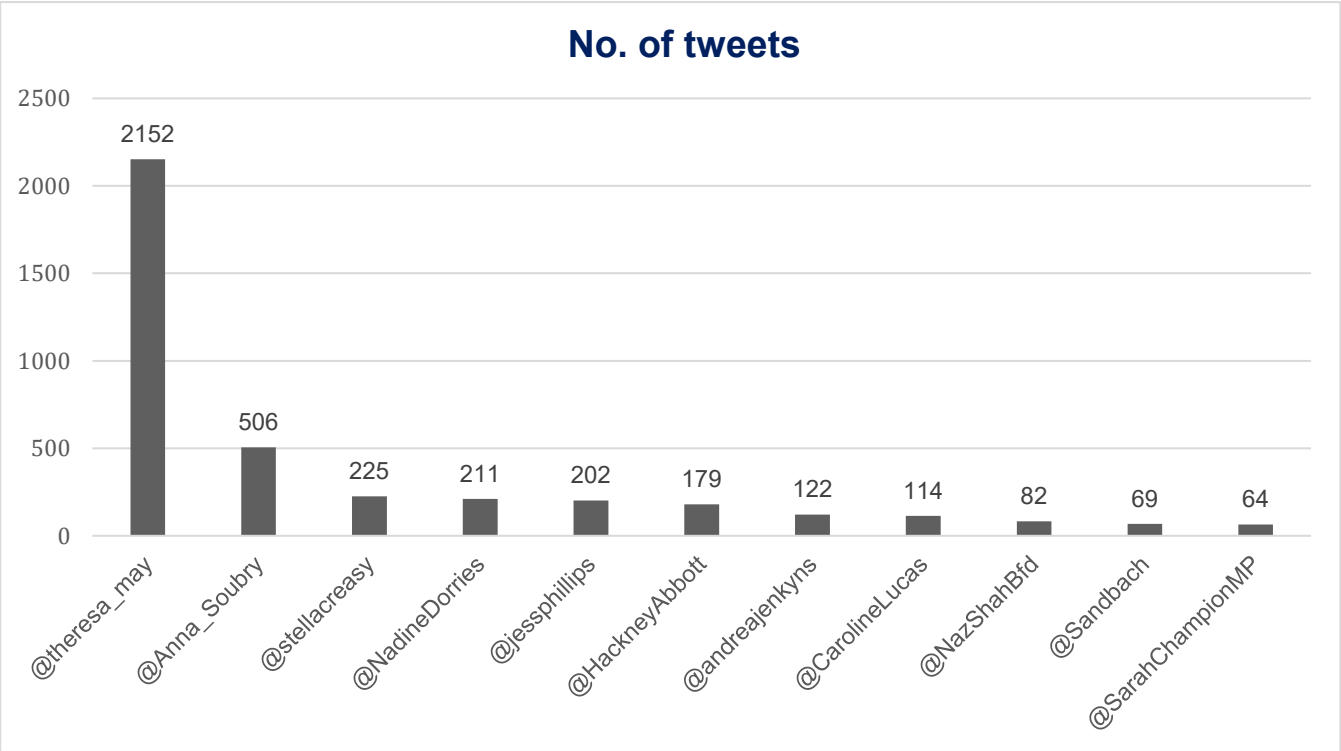

Figure 3: Ten MPs receiving the largest number of tweets during the data collection phase

The MPs in Figure 5 are listed in Table 3:

Twitter handle	Name
@theresa_may	Theresa May
@Anna_Soubry	Anna Soubry
@stellacreasy	Stella Creasy
@NadineDorries	Nadine Dorries
@jessphillips	Jess Phillips
@HackneyAbbott	Diane Abbott
@andreajenkyns	Andrea Jenkyns
@CarolineLucas	Caroline Lucas
@NazShahBfd	Naz Shah
@Sandbach	Antoinette Sandbach
@SarahChampionMP	Sarah Champion

Table 3: MP Twitter handles

4.2.1. Abusive tweets sent to women MPs

The frequency of obscene phrases directed at women MPs over the course of the 11-day period is revealed in Figure 6.

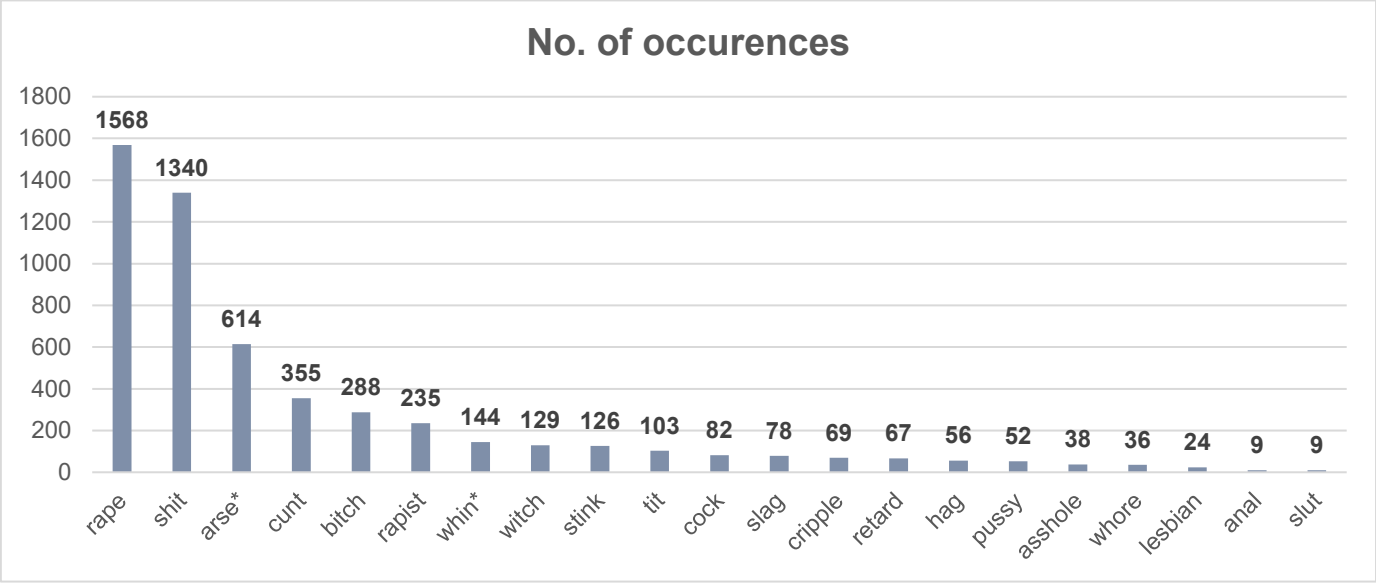

Figure 6: Frequency of obscenities in Twitter API data

Analysis of the API data revealed the frequent recurrence of a series of words not included in the original search (Table 2). These words are provided at Table 4.

Liar	Traitor	Vile
Alcohol	Whining	Hag
Dick pics	Tits	Pussy
Scum	Fat	Dumb
Evil		

Table 4: Additional terms arising from analysis of API data

4.3. Relating the findings to the research questions

4.3.1. The fourfold typology of abuse

The first research question considers how criminal justice advocates are targeted online. Nine out of ten of the interviewees had received online abuse, echoing Jane's (2017) finding that experiencing online abuse is synonymous with being a woman on the internet. Primary analysis undertaken for this study formulated a fourfold typology of abuse: obscene tweets, tweets questioning an individual's competence or credibility; remarks criticising women's appearance, and physical, violent and / or sexual threats. This develops and updates Sutton's (1995) categorisation of misogynistic abuse.

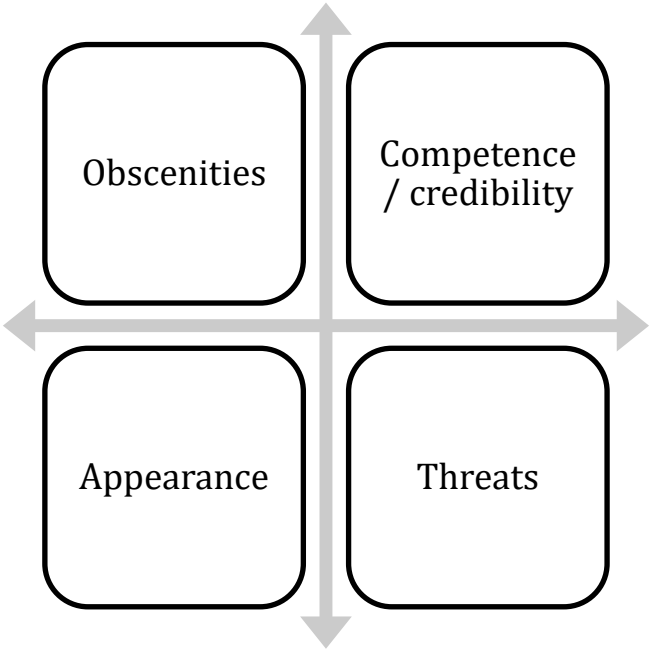

Figure 7: Fourfold typology of abuse

4.3.1.1. Obscenities

The obscene abuse directed at research participants was frequently misogynistic, despite being made in response to a wide range of topics:

> *The first time I got a nasty tweet somebody tweeted me in reply to something I'd said and called me… a "cock-sucking euro cunt".* [*Elizabeta*]

> *I [get] called everything you can think of… a rape apologist, a Muslim-fucker… saying that I hate victims of abuse and that I'm in on it, and that I'm covering it up for Pakistani guys and*

that I use victims to line my own pocket but that I don't actually care about the trauma, saying that they hope that I get raped if I walk down a street in Oldham… proper random shit! [*Julie*]

I'm just trying to think of a couple [of examples]. Things like 'I wish you had fallen into the path of Peter Sutcliffe' who is the Yorkshire Ripper [*Claire*].

4.3.1.2. Credibility and competence

Abuse directed at an individual's credibility, competence or honesty was common:

There's a small group of people who will always criticise whatever I say. Doesn't matter what it is, sometimes if I'm talking about something they completely agree with. They'll tweet things like "Oh what does she know about policing?" "She's got it wrong again" "How supercilious is she?" It's undermining of my authority… it's belittling or demeaning. [*Cheryl*].

There [was] lots of really nasty stuff that she put on: corruption… really defamatory stuff [*Amelia*].

This random [man] yesterday started kicking off saying "you're a fake! You're a liar! You're not who you say you are, we know who you are", and I'm like I've got no idea what you're talking about… [*Terri-Anne*].

4.3.1.3. Appearance

Unsurprisingly, a lot of abuse related to the women's appearance.

I've had [tweets] saying 'what sort of woman are you…you're a fat lesbian bitch', where they make comments about your body and about what you look like [*Terri-Anne*].

I'd been on the Victoria Derbyshire show [BBC 2] and some bloke tweeted me and said 'what you said was alright, but why on earth does your fringe go up and down as you speak? It was really distracting!' and I'm like oh god that's so weird [*Cheryl*].

> *[I've had tweets saying] 'she's too ugly to rape' or 'I'd rape her but her tits are too small'. Things like that, that are just demeaning and objectifying* [*Claire*].

4.3.1.4. Physical, violent and sexual threats

The most distressing testimony surrounded the threats that participants had received. Whilst not all had personally been subjected to violently threatening invective (four out of ten), those that had recounted it vividly:

> *He would tweet things like 'I'm getting on a ferry…[and] I'll be taking my Stanley knife with me'. And then he'd post signs of being at the bottom of my street, which was really really distressing. In one tweet he put "someone should turn up at her doorstep with a knife, and just lose control in front of her daughter" and then tweeted about himself with a knife* [*Claire*].

> *And you know, they say they're gonna come and rape you or they're gonna come and kill you and this sort of stuff. I've had guys send me, you know little GIFs of women being beaten up or women being raped…I was sent clips of a woman being gang raped and beaten up. I was sent like a thousand dicks, just so many dick pics that I get.*
> *I had a guy who kept making new Twitter accounts every time I blocked him, and he would just find pictures of me on the internet, of me speaking at a conference or me doing something and he would cut my head off it and he would send it to me and say like 'I've cut your head off because… your body is nice but your fucking face ruins it for me and every time I was masturbating your ugly face was ruining it, so I've cut your head off...'* [*Terri-Anne*].

> *I got one comment… saying things like 'You ought to be raped by some of these men, and then you would change your opinion' [Cassie].*

As *Janet* so eloquently described, there was often no need for the perpetrators of abuse to have had any 'real life' contact with their targets in order for their words to have an impact:

[The internet] does open up a whole new world for people to get in touch, and target women…it's almost as if they want to do it all through the words they use in their messages… [it] is so powerful that they don't even require meeting these people sometimes. It's all about how far they can control just through their vocabulary and narratives and that is really scary.

The fourfold typology of online abuse emerging from the semi-structured interviews was reflected in the API data of tweets sent to women MPs, as Table 5 reveals.

Theme	Example of data from API
Obscenities	@sarahwollaston you stinking rotten hypocrite what a shit you are you will be voted out of office you sick careerist slimeball slug
	Can't believe what @lucyfrazermp said about the Scot's She's so far up her own arse she could give herself a colonic with a sneeze #Cunt
	@stellacreasy Yea why did you bother You've clearly got the social grace and decorum of a rancid piece of shit God knows why you even get up in the morning to kill babies most likely cause you're a sordid fucking creep with no sense of dignity or propriety Do fuck away off thanks
	@Theresa_May got Fucked in the Arse And you can tell it hurt the snotty little bitch #PMQs
Competence / credibility	@tracey_crouch Shows how clueless and out of touch you really are I'd feel guilty taking my salary if I was as clueless as you are
	@LauraSmithMP Hey shit for brains You just pissed away every Airbus job in Bristol Stupid cunt
	@Alison_McGovern Christ I that it was thick as pig shit Rayner Dumb and Dumber
	@Anna_Soubry Soubry shouldn't be let anywhere near government Old hag should be sent to the knacker's yard asap complete liability to the Conservative Party
Appearance	@AngelaRayner I don't like them legs on the left the bitch
	@claireperrymp Shame she's got a lovely pair of tits
	@NickyMorgan01 Says the old hag that looks like Jimmy Saville

	@andreajenkyns You Arrogant little shit And get your roots done
Threat	@theresa_may FUCK YOU IF YOU KILL #TommyRobinson #AMERICANS WILL COME YOU BITCH RELEASE TOMMY NOW AND NO REVOLUTION WILL START OTHERWISE ITS YOUR HEAD IM NOT KIDDING
	@HackneyAbbott i wrote you a letter diane and you didn't get back to me so I ask the question again can me and my mates rape you
	@heidiallen75 I don't buy comics and I certainly do not buy mainstream media propaganda I don't fund organised crime One final thing twice you have been abusive try that shit in the street and I'll slap the taste out of your vile mouth permanently
	@PreetKGillMP Stupid bitch I hope she burns

Table 5: Tweets demonstrating the fourfold typology of abuse

4.4. Impact of online abuse

Unsurprisingly, being on the receiving end of such abuse has an impact, both online and in 'real life'. In recounting the online abuse she received, Criado-Perez said:

> *The threats are vivid, graphic, horrific. I can't help visualising them. I stop eating, I can't sleep, I keep crying from sheer exhaustion and despair at the hatred for women that is pouring relentlessly into my Twitter feed*
>
> (Criado-Perez, 2013: 51).

Participants in this study shared similar feelings:

> *The messages kept getting worse and worse. Then he was phoning me leaving me messages, then he was ringing at work becoming extremely abusive, it frightened and intimidated me* [*Julie*].

He would stalk relentlessly, anything he could find about me, he found details about my identity, and the names of my cats, the name of my daughter… it's very scary [Claire].

I got a postcard. I still don't know who it's from, it came to my house with my name and address on it, and it was nice! It said… "I absolutely love your work, I follow everything that you do, I love everything that you say" and then it just says "from your secret admirer" at the bottom of it. And I thought, how the fuck have they got my address? [*Terri-Anne*].

4.4.1. Wellbeing and security of others

In addition to fears for their safety, other concerns most frequently centred on the security and wellbeing of loved ones:

She tracked down my children through social media… I think at that point, that's when it got too much for me. Cos I thought that's my personal life: attack me all you want in my work life … but when you start stepping over into my personal life, that's when I felt I had to make a complaint [*Amelia*].

I had it really, really bad last year… I think I blocked about 57 self-identifying paedophiles on Twitter. My husband [said],"You've got to be really careful, because if this sort of shit starts coming to the house, you know, we've got kids here…it's gonna get really dangerous, we're gonna need to move" [*Terri-Anne*].

A man, he was American I think, said 'Your daughter will soon be raped by dicks of all sizes, colours and shapes' and I threw my phone down [Claire].

4.5. The nature of online abuse

As well as examining the content of the abuse that criminal justice advocates receive, it is useful to consider *who* is sending the communication. Evidence from the interviews suggests that the majority of abuse comes from three major sources: those identified as being on the far-right of the political spectrum, individuals who

disagree with an aspect of criminal justice policy or practice, and those who could be described as misogynists.

4.5.1. Far-right political extremists

> *[My tweet] got picked up by… a member of the right wing, and they started making comments and I got private messages. They must have a network of other people that they're linked in with, and I just got bombarded with negative private messages, with negative comments, it was awful [Cassie].*

> *I can put something on Twitter and one minute later I can be getting quite offensive… messages from far-right groups which can be in relation to anything, usually in relation to Pakistani men. So, they're usually quite racist and toxic messages… at the moment I seem to get a lot of far-right groups that follow me and a lot of Tommy Robinson supporters* [*Julie*].

> *I've got the right wing who hate me, because… so like EDL, BNP, Brexiteers and all that.. and I don't even talk about all that shit online! They, they.. there's something about the fact that… because I work in CSE [child sexual exploitation] and I'm very vocal about CSE, and I will not jump on the 'all Pakistani men are rapists' bandwagon, they hate me because they know that I just won't do it… And [at the moment] there's this troll from the EDL, Tommy Robinson and all that* [*Terri-Anne*].

The API collected 130 references to Tommy Robinson and the EDL, as the word tree at Figure 9 illustrates:

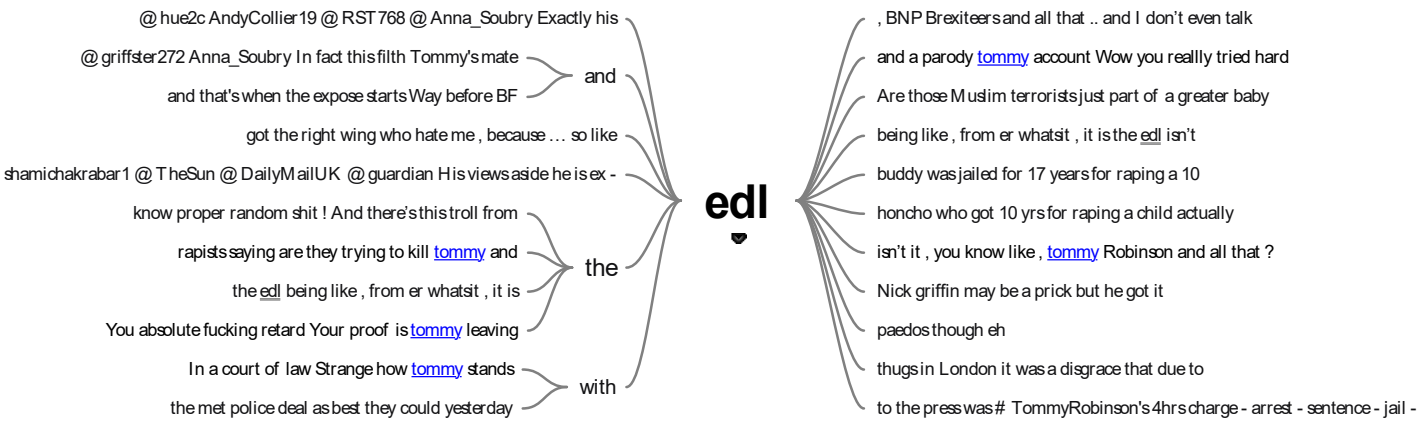

Figure 8: Mentions of Tommy Robinson and EDL

4.5.2. Opponents of an aspect of criminal justice policy

Some women felt that they were being negatively treated because of their role as criminal justice practitioners, as *Cheryl*, *Amelia* and *Janet* explained:

> *My experience of abuse, which comes from the police family - and is minimal, I don't want to overstate it - stems from three things. I'm being critical of the police, and you know nobody likes having their baby called ugly. I'm a woman, and I'm also not a police officer. I'm not [one] of them* [*Cheryl*].

> *[I've had] significant online abuse. Every time [named police force] put anything on…social media about anything good that we're doing. As soon as you put anything out there about doing anything good, what you'll find is there'll be negative tweets saying 'well I'll think there'll be 1400 girls in Rotherham disagree with you' … there's this backlash of people saying "well look what happened at Hillsborough, look what happened in Rotherham"* [*Amelia*].

> *I've had abuse about my views on policing which has been very difficult, which I think is related more to my role as an academic, which I have found very difficult* [*Janet*].

Within the API data, discussion of criminal justice was predominantly based around the imprisonment of Tommy Robinson; and the alleged failure to prosecute those responsible for CSE.

4.5.3. Misogyny

The final group of people who appear to choreograph online abuse can loosely be described as 'misogynists'. Abuse of this nature was so prevalent, it formed an underlying theme in the data.

Whilst arguably more difficult to categorise than those responsible for online abuse in the other two areas, those on the receiving end of such abuse were in little doubt as to its origin.

> *And then I've got [abuse from] the MRA [men's rights activists], the anti-feminist, anti-woman sort of thing with 'don't you have an opinion online / who the fuck do you think you are' … that's the sort of real, misogynist, deep hatred of women… [and] some little bastard put all of my contact details, and absolutely everything they could find [about me]*

> *and put it on a Reddit MRA forum, for like, men who hate feminism. And that was.. I could not deal with that. I had to shut down my social media accounts for a few weeks.* [*Terri-Anne*].

> *Just being a feminist is quite enough for them. And I've had them saying they will hunt me on St George's Day and 'This is the time of year we get out our knives and hunt* [*Claire*]'.

> *When I've been on television talking about domestic abuse, I get quite a bit of [abuse], almost nastier but more removed, because I have no idea who these people are. Stuff around how it's not just women who get abused it's men. It's the Father's for Justice brigade type thing I suppose. The people who hate the idea that domestic abuse might be not a gender-neutral issue. …I don't find it threatening in any way, it just happens* [*Cheryl*].

There is often a crossover between the three groups of online abusers, as Cassie explained:

> *Perhaps wrongly, I automatically assume that the abuse that I was getting from the far right was men. But maybe I'm jumping to conclusions there* [*Cassie*].

A large proportion of the tweets gathered by the API fall broadly under the heading of misogyny, due to the language favoured by the sender, as the summary in Figure 9 illustrates.

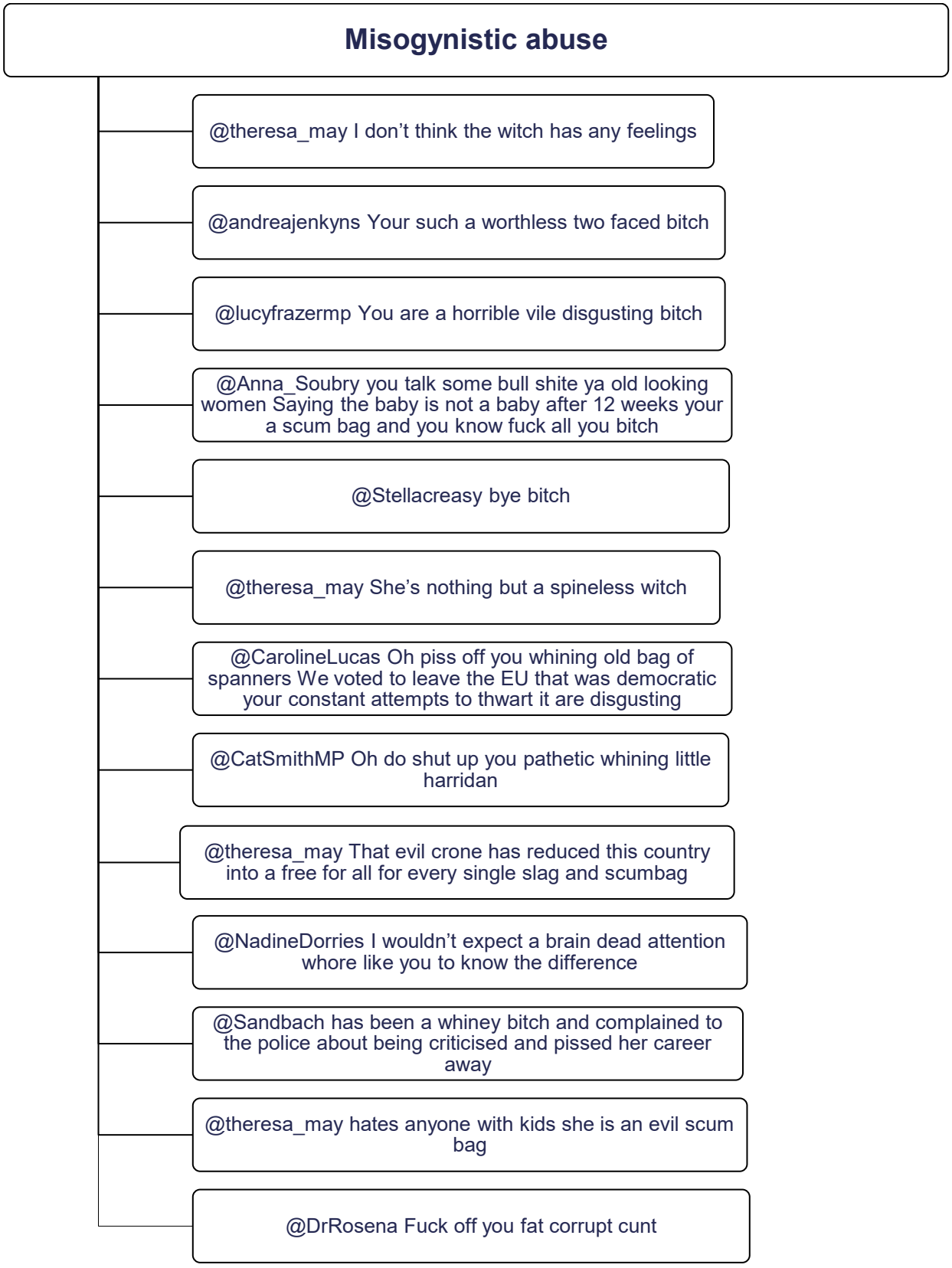

Figure 4: Example of misogynistic tweets sent to women MPs

Another interesting finding is that a considerable amount of online abuse comes from overseas, particularly the USA:

> *One of the officers I work with, she launched a campaign. And she's supportive of the government's 'guns and knives take lives' initiative and fronted that and the abuse she got from that – mostly from Americans! I don't know why they'd tapped into our local social media.. but the abuse she got… saying these really horrendous things, talking about what gender she was and commenting on her physical appearance. Really nasty things. It was mainly [coming from] an American audience, that had found somebody in [named police force], because it was about guns and knives…* [*Amelia*]

> *I know a large proportion of them [online abusers] were American because I could just tell from their account and their information. Which I suppose in some ways gives you a bit of peace of mind really. That they're a long way away* [*Cassie*].

4.6. Strategies for dealing with online abuse

Interviewees shared the informal strategies they adopt to deal with online abuse, outlined in Figure 11.

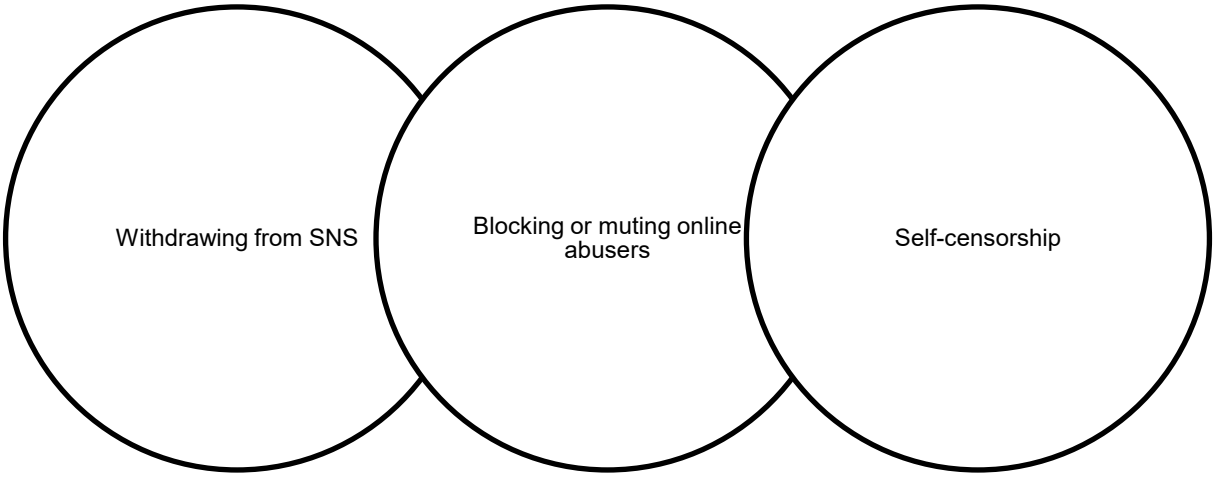

Figure 5: Informal strategies employed to deal with online abuse

4.6.1. Withdrawing from SNS

The biggest decision that participants had to face was whether to delete their online presence altogether.

> *Some little bastard put all of my contact details… absolutely everything they could find and put it on a Reddit MRA forum, for men who hate feminism. And that was… I could not deal with that. I had to shut down my social media accounts for a few weeks* [*Terri-Anne*].

> *And I went to work the following day, spoke to IT and just told them that I was going to anonymise my account. To be honest… I wanted to come off. I would have come off then and there because I thought 'I don't need this'* [*Cassie*].

> *Probably several times I've thought about it [withdrawing from SNS]. That was probably one thing, when I set up my own account, that was at the back of my mind y'know? Am I opening myself up to abuse by putting my picture out there, sharing some of my life?* [*Geraldine*]

Ultimately, all participants had chosen to maintain their online presence, sometimes in an altered or anonymised form. Some did so as a show of strength and defiance, others kept a SNS profile reluctantly, and some because to separate the online and offline aspects of their work was impossible, particularly if they were self-employed.

> *I don't think I've ever done it for more than three days [withdrawn from SNS] because it feels like defeat, and also as my activism has grown, people rely on you. I get DMs all the time from women who want advice or signposting and so I just feel that, if I'm not there, that woman doesn't get that [help] … [Claire]*.

> *I do think about it.. [withdrawing from SNS] but it's the wrong time…my business is growing, I need the exposure. Whether people have realised it or not, social media is the new marketing. You don't put an advert in the newspaper anymore, you don't put an advert on the TV. You make YouTube videos at home; you go and do online Q&As on Periscope. The best way to become a freelancer…is to… harness your social media [but] the negative impact is massive…Whenever I think about coming off it, I realise that the marketing element of what I do would end, and that would be the end of it* [*Terri-Anne*].

I just think that I won't be beaten by these madmen. They're not important enough to me, and the fundraising, and the awareness raising, is far more important that some man with a keyboard making a death or a rape threat. Basically most of the time I just think 'fuck them, I'm staying where I am.' It does worry me that I'm actually quite immune to some of the really horrible things that are said [Claire].

4.6.2. Blocking or muting online abusers

There was debate amongst participants whether it was better to 'block' or 'mute' the accounts responsible for perpetrating online abuse. Blocking describes the process whereby Twitter users can stop the selected account from viewing or responding to their tweets (Zimmer and Profres, 2014). However, when an account is 'blocked' in this way, the account holder is notified – leading some online agitators to regard being blocked as a sign that they have achieved their aim (Milosavljević and Broughton Micova, 2016). The alternative is to 'mute' the perpetrators of online abuse, meaning that they can be removed from the Twitter feed without notification (Gibbs, 2014).

I just mute them, I don't want to give the satisfaction of blocking cos you see those people who have on their Twitter feed "As blocked by…". So you just mute them and let them shout into the void, all they want. At first, I blocked…when you stop hitting your head against a brick wall it stops hurting. [*Elizabeta*].

Some of the stuff I've had… how I've dealt with it… is just to immediately block people. I immediately block them, if there's any kind of sexual, inappropriate commentary then I just get rid of it. [*Janet*].

Even when I blocked certain individuals other people would come and say "ooh, you've been blocked" y'know? Making fun of the fact that I was constantly blocking. I felt that blocking them was the best way forward. I blocked thirty plus individuals [Cassie].

4.6.3. Self-censorship

There was clear evidence that women used self-censorship in their online activity in a bid to avoid attracting abuse. This phenomenon is rarely mentioned in academic literature but was a common feature in the interviews.

> *I'm sure a lot of people including myself stop and think about what you might say in case you are going to be targeted by people who are going to be abusive. I do think it stops women saying things all the time. And also, that fear of looking silly. I think that's something I hear from women much more on social media than I do from men* [*Janet*].

> *I almost never tweet much about me personally, or about feelings and emotions. It's just information giving and really dull stuff about what I've done that day. I mean I would love to do the James Blunt type responses to some of these that are making absolutely awful unprecedented comments, I'd really love to reply and [the communications team are] saying "No don't you'll only make it worse!" So it is an inhibitor in that sense* [*Cheryl*].

4.7. Institutional response to online abuse

In addition to the informal coping strategies outlined in Section 4.6, the study found that a number of participants had made the decision to report the abuse they had received.

The decision to report online abuse is not an easy one, with participants often feeling conflicted about the most appropriate way to proceed, as *Janet* illustrated:

> *No I haven't [reported any online abuse]. I'd probably say I've dealt with it in a way that has been slightly... influenced by my position and my job. I'm not suggesting that's a good thing to do. In fact it's probably a very confused response to it if I'm completely honest. When I get some abuse about… my role, I'm never sure really how to deal with it. I make it very clear that I don't find it acceptable in an open forum as well, on my own timeline. But I've never chosen to make a formal complaint about anybody… because it's never been so so bad that I've felt that I had to.*

Cheryl made a similar point, highlighting how the decision to report is made more difficult given the opacity of laws and policies surrounding online abuse:

So for some people that [example of abuse provided] may be abuse, because it was a personal comment about my appearance, but I wouldn't expect the police to get involved in that. So I think, I don't know enough about what the police are meant to do. What constitutes abuse? Is it a hate crime? Is it something I have that falls within those protected characteristics? What would someone have to do to me for me to think that this was a police matter?

4.7.1. Reporting online abuse to the police

Only four out of the ten women interviewed had reported the abuse to the police, usually in response to threats to their personal safety. None of the women who reported abuse was a serving police officer, which is intriguing, given their greater knowledge of the law.

I report dick pics and rape threats and death threats; I reported the guy that kept sending me those GIFs of women being beaten up and raped; I reported the guy that kept sending me pictures of me with my head cut off, I've reported accounts that were sending me really vile abuse… horrible things saying, "no guys would ever fuck you unless he was raping you"… you just think, fucking hell, you're so dangerous, someone needs to report this stuff [Terri-Anne].

And so I said I don't care really, this has gone to the stage where this man is making my life hell and it is stalking, it is harassment but it is also some quite serious threats. This is the evidence. It was very easy to put that in front of the police, and make a great case, the fact that this man was the same man and it would not be hard to find his name [*Claire*].

I have reported maybe about 15 or 20 instances in the last 18 months [Julie].

Elizabeta made the decision to report the abuse that she had been subjected to via Twitter, as she felt it to be no different to abuse delivered in person:

I was so cross. [I reported it] on the grounds that if somebody said that to me when I was walking down the street I'd report them cos that would be threatening.

This view confirms Wall's (2007) assertion that criminal behaviour that occurs online should not be viewed as less serious by the police and courts, and corresponds with CPS guidance.

> *If I stood in front of you and started calling you names or was extremely racist or threatened your life and you rung the police, they would turn up and I'd be arrested. Why should you be allowed to say those things to me, on social media, either using your own name or under a pseudonym, and that's OK?* [*Julie*].

> *If there are threats being made that are in effect criminal offences then of course the police ought to be dealing with it, and dealing with it appropriately* [*Cheryl*].

It is disappointing to note that all four interviewees felt that their experience of reporting had been negative, and had not resulted in action being taken.

> *The poor old police inspector didn't really know what to do. We're going back to 2012/13, it was all still quite new. Someone took a statement from me and just said, 'I don't really know'. At the time, the advice, when I phoned 101, [was] "well perhaps you shouldn't be on Twitter"* [*Elizabeta*].

> *I've been sent actual death threats and I've been told by the police that's not a crime and I'm like, death threats are a crime though. And it's the same [when] I've been sent rape threats and they go 'oh yeah but it's on social media.' I don't give a fuck mate, it's still against the law! Just because it's on Twitter or Facebook doesn't mean it's less serious they're still the same type of offender - they're just using a different medium* [*Terri-Anne*].

> *There was one man… I did go to the police but he's in Southern Ireland and they have no similar online laws so they would have had to extradite him to be able to prosecute him for an online crime over there, which they couldn't justify. And they patched that through to CPS, and I went and made numerous statements, gave them a pile of evidence, files and files of the tweets, and they just said that they couldn't progress it to CPS. They said that because of him being in Ireland it would be too difficult to progress* [*Claire*].

4.7.2. Reporting online abuse to Twitter

When reporting online abuse directly to Twitter, many had received an equally negative response:

> *[I reported to Twitter] this person's making direct rape [and] death threats and he's actually saying what block he lives on and I was [saying] you need to do something, and there were just loads of things on Twitter going "this has not violated Community Guidelines".. Like how, HOW?! It's a direct death threat, using his address of where he lives! How can Community Guidelines not follow the law?* [*Terri-Anne*].

> *There are other parties in this equation that need to play their part. So persistent virulent abusers ought to be being closed down by the social media companies in my view. But they don't, they're not going to are they?* [*Cheryl*].

> *I think they [social media companies] should be more on the front-foot. There are massive, multibillion companies out there that that could find it all in a flick of switch, why don't they close it all down?* [*Amelia*].

4.7.3. Positive response to reporting

There was some evidence of agencies assisting in halting abusive communication, and protecting women at risk:

> *One person in [named police area] got loads of online abuse to the point they moved home cos people found out their address… and I had to help them register to vote without disclosing their address on the electoral register. Cos they were frightened if they actually went on the electoral register again in order to vote then the [abusers] would find them again. So there's a way now, if you approach the court there [is] a way to be allowed not to go on the electoral register. She didn't want to report the abuse, she just wanted to keep herself safe and off the radar* [*Amelia*].

> *Because of… some of the intimidation that I've had, I have a personal alarm that records if I need it to record. My home and*

workplace are fitted with a panic alarm, that goes straight in as a silent 999. My phone and my husband's phone and my son's phone are tagged to the police. So if they ring 101 it would actually be responded to as a 999 call. I'm now working with [named police force] looking at how they can improve their services, not only to vulnerable women but also victims of harassment and online abuse [*Julie*].

Eventually I got in touch with Bruce Daisley, who's the European CEO of Twitter…he gave me a direct number to contact him, and he would take down the accounts as quickly as possible. So they were blitzing 6/7 accounts a day. It's a kind of privilege I've got, most women don't have that. I think it's because my account is well respected, and it's a fundraising account, and my activism is largely really positive and it's a large-ish account. I've had that special privilege, whereas a woman with only a hundred or two hundred followers, she doesn't get that. She doesn't get to have that access… and that shouldn't be that I can email Daisley, and he acts on my behalf. But I do. It ought not to be that way, it should be that Twitter were active enough at shooting down all kinds of threats [*Claire*].

4.8. Positive effects of SNS

The final theme to emerge from the data was the positive impact that engaging online can have. Many interviewees found Twitter to be a source of both professional and personal support.

For a lot of reasons… I think Twitter is a fabulous and underused tool, not only for not only getting information about things that I'm interested in, in relation to policing, and other things, other social issues… But I think it's also a really good way of scanning out the current climate for what's happening in policing from a practitioner's perspective. So I like it, obviously because I'm a researcher, I build curriculums for my students at the university and I think it's always good to make sure you're focused on the most recent issues and I get a lot from police officer users of Twitter. I enjoy it. I enjoy having conversations with people [*Janet*].

> *I like the Twitter response, from women supporting each other, I like [the women MPs] who've all been supporting each other and going out and doing it and then tweeting it, and other women not only knowing what they're doing and also then supporting it* [*Elizabeta*].

> *I [like] the reach that it has. I originally connected with other feminists on Twitter. It's where a lot of feminists base themselves, and manage to link up, coordinate campaigns, promote each other's voices. It's where most feminists locate their activism. So it makes sense to be there* [*Claire*].

4.8.1. Absence of online abuse

Some participants in the study reported having received very little online abuse, as *Geraldine* illustrates: "I don't think I've received any abuse, personally to me". *Geraldine* felt that this was reflective of her role as a police officer, and her belief that there is a groundswell of support for law enforcement professionals on Twitter: "Well I do think there's quite a lot of support for police out there [on] Twitter".

Geraldine was not alone in reporting an absence of online abuse. *Elizabeta*, a feminist campaigner and criminal justice practitioner, reported her own experience of using Twitter as a campaign tool:

> *The government were saying they would bring out coins to commemorate the First World War… and they're all blokes! And I said, what a disgrace there ought to be a woman! We were torn between Edith Cavell and…Vera Britten, as two female examples. We decided on Edith Cavell because we thought she was less contentious because she wasn't a pacifist and she died…so I set [up] a Change petition and I got no abuse for it whatsoever".*

Elizabeta expressed surprise that this had been the case:

> *The first thing anybody said to me was you'll get shit loads of abuse and I would say well no actually I haven't... I don't know why, whether Edith Cavell was considered to be more respectable, [but] you can't get more respectable than Jane Austen [reference to Caroline Criado-Perez's campaign]. I'm always surprised that I haven't had [threats].*

Nevertheless, the women who had not received online abuse themselves all knew someone who had and were keen to recount their experiences:

> *I've got a good friend in the job [police service], and only last year she had to take all her Twitter stuff down. She basically shut the account down because she'd gotten a load of threats* [*Geraldine*].

4.9. Influence of the news agenda

Whilst all the interviewees agreed that the volume of online abuse had increased over the last two years, there was no pattern to its delivery. Participants reported that abuse was sporadic and unpredictable:

> *[Online abuse] tends to go though peaks and troughs. So, I might put an article out, one of my blogs might be really successful…so it depends how far they get shared, right? So I might get one blog that's particularly controversial, particularly… I dunno, it's rubbed someone up the wrong way or something like that… the abuse will climb instantly. but I might have like a week where I get fuck all. So it depends really… on what I've said or done* [*Terri-Anne*].

> *Abuse spikes whenever it's around sportsmen. Whenever there is someone famous, that's when the abuse gets worse. And it's generally men who are defending their favoured sportsperson. It becomes more aggressive and a lot more targeted. It fluctuates, I don't [receive high] levels of violence or aggression generally* [*Claire*].

> *It's provoked. The Panorama [television] programme that I was on… provoked a lot of adverse comment about me and how I came across. So yeah there is just this little group. I just kind of roll my eyes and think 'oh here we go again'* [*Cheryl*].

This study found that online abuse is often generated in response to events covered in the media, as illustrated by the spike in abuse caused by the imprisonment of Tommy Robinson during the fieldwork phase of this study. A further example of how the news agenda can influence online abuse is seen in the case of Jess Phillips MP. During the period that the Twitter API was collecting data, Phillips made a speech at the Cheltenham Science Festival, detailing the abuse she had received online, and calling for anonymous Twitter accounts to be prohibited.

> *In one night I received 600 rape threats. It was probably more, but I stopped counting. I don't feel I am physically in any danger and I don't think my children are in any danger…however, where it does worry me, and I think we have to do something about, is when it affects our democracy. I have come to the viewpoint that I don't think people should be allowed to be completely anonymous online anymore*
>
> (Lee, 2018: 1).

In response, the API collected the following tweets:

@jessphillips is a man-hating Neo-feminist a direct affront to half of the electorate and an insult to the other I trust the rabid lunacy of her feminist positions will one day be exposed Hopefully the damage she and her ilk do in the meantime will not be permanent
@jessphillips This is a very old story and can be easily explained She got publicly upset and made a scene out of being told I wouldn't even rape you What happened next 600 copycat cases This is a non-issue and isn't a story
@jessphillips I'm sorry but completely unmasking people online just because you can't handle what they say freedom of speech is stupid Plus you haven't released any evidence of these 600 rape threats Seems pretty fishy
So if a rape victim wants to be anonymous she will say no Dumb @jessphillips
@jessphillips whoever would like to rape you are uglier than a goat but you can get some psychopath
@jessphillips no way who would rape that
@jessphillips is clearly lying about all these supposed rape threats' and people saying things about her kids she is attention seeking clearly I mean just look at her
@jessphillips I wouldn't even rape you
@jessphillips just the whores Duvet
@jessphillips not even an afghan refugee would rape you Calm tf down
@jessphillips Personally I'm wondering how many of them even exist Jess has form for making shit like this up
@jessphillips Really I wouldn't even rape you
Dear @jessphillips I see you once again have achieved blanket media coverage on your 600 rape threats in a day claim Few believe this to be factual Moreover you do realise that ending internet anonymity would be applauded by regimes in China or Iran
I fell for her story. Smelt a rat as no arrests but still accepted what she said and media outlets had published Lesson learnt - Never trust @jessphillips again Disgusted beyond belief Using Rape for Political campaigning Not good Unbelievable

@jessphillips after 600 rape threats dyu think it's time to re evaluate what you said to provoke those
@jessphillips and yet no-one was arrested let alone prosecuted Was it perhaps because what really happened was that she had 600 trolls saying they WOULDN T rape her It was a ploy to get Jess to do exactly what she's doing complain about NOT being threatened
@jessphillips You lied about 600 rape threats so why should anyone believe you
@jessphillips don't worry my dear I wouldn't even rape you as you are the most sexually unattractive woman to exist in all of God's creation You also have a garbage personality as well
@jessphillips Count yourself lucky you don't live in Africa The rapes per capita are far far higher there than here in the UK

Table 6: Tweets sent to Jess Phillips MP

5. Discussion

This study reveals that harmful and misogynistic abuse is common online, and that it is not just women with a visible public profile that are targeted for abuse. Frequently, women who simply express an opinion via SNS become the object of attack.

The Twitter data collected via the API provides both a graphic illustration of the nature of abuse directed at women politicians, and the sheer scale and frequency of abuse – collecting over five thousand tweets containing a limited selection of words in just eleven days. It could be argued that by deciding to focus on tweets sent to female parliamentarians, the data concentrates on an elite group, who are, due to their position and access to criminal justice agencies, far more likely to receive a favourable response when abuse is reported – as illustrated in the case of Jess Phillips, who has direct contact with the police in her Birmingham constituency (Oppenheim, 2016). Similarly, Luciana Berger MP has seen the successful conviction of three individuals sending online abuse (Pettifor and Harpin, 2016), which whilst undoubtedly welcome, contrasts strongly with the experiences of the women interviewed in this research. Having analysed the tweets amassed during the data collection period, the difference between passionate debate, which could be regarded as part of the 'rough and tumble' of political life; and the vicious invective and threats of physical harm, illustrated in Tables 5 and 6 is clear.

This report discusses the cases of four high-profile women who have received online abuse: Caroline Criado-Perez, Gina Miller, Jess Phillips and Stella Creasy. When analysed using the fourfold typology of abuse introduced in Section 4.3.1., it is clear that each of the cases fits the typology in its entirety, thus proving its reliability.

A novel finding emerging from this research is the significant influence that the news agenda has on levels of abuse. It was apparent that the imprisonment of far-right activist Tommy Robinson generated an increase in online abuse. Similarly, coverage of Phillips' speech at the Cheltenham Science Festival gave rise to a spike in abuse directed at the politician. When considering the cases detailed in the background chapter, each confirmed that abuse rose dramatically as a consequence of an increase in their media profile. This reveals how media coverage of events cannot be separated from online abuse, and that social media and news reporting has a complex and multi-directional relationship, as suggested by Barker and Jane (2016).

Despite the influence of the news agenda, there remains no discernible pattern to the delivery of online abuse. Whilst interviewees recognised that certain actions would make abuse more likely, all spoke of its sporadic and unpredictable nature. This is most clearly evidenced in the online campaigns to feature a woman on UK currency. The campaign to place Jane Austen on the £10 note generated thousands of malign and threatening tweets (Jane, 2017), whilst the campaign to honour Edith

Cavell on the £5 coin generated no negative comment whatsoever, as summarised in Figure 12.

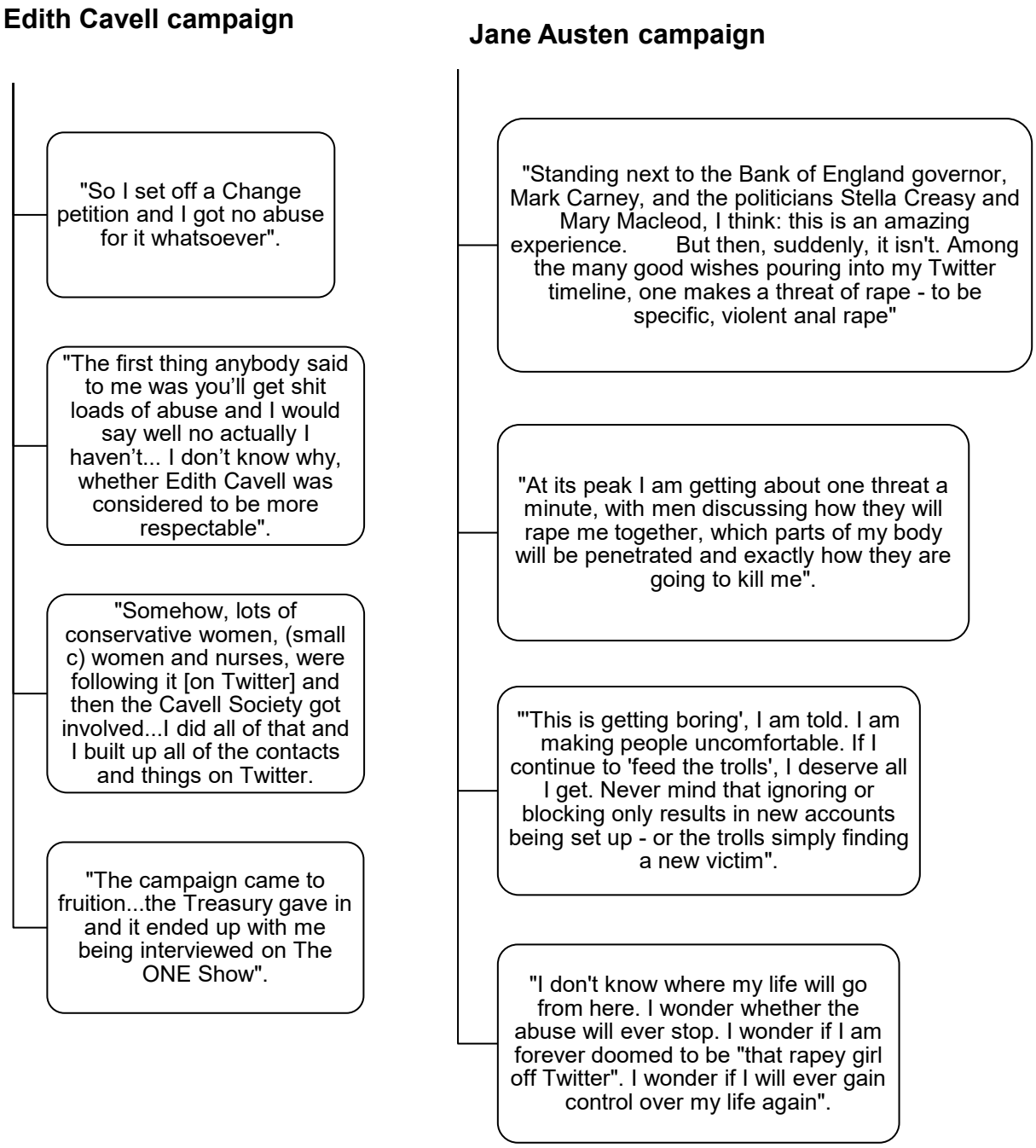

Figure 11: Comparison of Edith Cavell and Jane Austen currency campaigns

The comparison of the response to two similar campaigns highlights the folly of telling women not to engage in online campaigning on 'controversial' issues, as it is impossible to predict what perpetrators of online abuse will latch on to as a focus for their attention.

It is clear that the effects of online abuse are multiple, ranging from fear, to embarrassment and humiliation, to anger; all of which it could be argued have the intention of silencing women (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017; Salter, 2017). Evidence from this research suggests that the silencing of women may also occur domestically, as the partners of those targeted for abuse express the wish that women stop campaigning, driven by safety concerns.

> *I got my first rape threat and I told my husband and he said, "What do you expect? You've put your photo on Twitter". I was really unhappy.* [Paula]

> *My partner was concerned, and she didn't really like the idea of me being out there and a flag flyer of this area of work* [Cassie].

> *It takes a huge toll on my husband, he's often saying "You've got to be really careful…if this sort of shit starts coming to the house, you know, we've got kids here…it's gonna get really dangerous"* [Terri-Anne].

In a related example, one participant revealed how her own experience of online abuse had affected her attitude regarding her children's use of SNS:

> *I've had to restrict my own daughter's use of social media…I've had to tell her "You cannot have a Facebook account because he will find it," I've had to deliberately curtail how free she can be, and that feels awful… because of my online activity, that's affected her freedom [Claire]*.

The trauma resulting from online abuse often causes physical symptoms, including insomnia, loss of appetite and anxiety attacks.

> *So it.. made me ill actually …I'm not even going to lie about that, that shit made me ill. I was so stressed, I wasn't sleeping, at all* [*Terri-Anne*].

> *I would get very anxious and very panicky in front of my daughter. We were on holiday once and I couldn't focus on the day and all I could think about was checking Twitter, seeing who'd said what, seeing what had been revealed. Desperately ringing people trying to get tweets taken down. It used to cause the most incredible anxiety, trying to firefight* [*Claire*].

> *I think women who've been abused, even if they're putting [on] a brave face on Twitter, and even if they are purporting to be strong, I feel that some of those women are far too vulnerable to not be affected by it. I think that women who've gone through various forms of male violence are in different stages of recovery, and I don't think their mental health is robust enough to not let that affect them* [*Claire*].

This finding supports the suggestion that online abuse should be treated as a public health issue:

> *When it comes to many problem behaviours that affect our physical and mental wellbeing, we're not just a collection of individuals whose behaviour is unaffected by others. Taking a public health approach to online abuse involves us accepting that our own behaviour might be important in preventing it*
>
> (Sodha, 2017: 1).

A key effect of online abuse to emerge from this study is the impact on employment. A number of the women interviewed spoke of the negative consequences that online abuse had had on their employment, especially when allegations of professional misconduct or alcohol abuse were made via the 'LinkedIn' SNS.

> *So he'd say that I was a drunk, he made up some awful things about the parenting of my daughter. He'd have me being rushed to hospital, he'd say that had happened, he'd blog about these things and it's incredibly distressing* [*Claire*].

Furthermore, participants spoke at length of their professional reliance on SNS to undertake PR, media and campaigning tasks, particularly when self-employed. This finding adds weight to the assertion made by Patel that "You don't do things on the internet – you just do things" (Patel, 2014; p. 1), highlighting that in reality, the completion of tasks using technology is not separate from other activities, and that for many women, deleting their SNS presence is not a realistic solution.

The requirement to use social media for work, and thus risk becoming the target of online abuse, and the feelings that this engenders echoes Hochschild's (2012: 24) work on emotional labour, where the "trained management of feeling" becomes an intrinsic part of the job, with "women…more likely to be presented with the task of mastering anger and aggression in the service of 'being nice'. There is some research that explores the link between emotional labour and social media, highlighting how the use of Twitter "means that boundaries become blurred and discussions can cross between the professional and the personal with no clear distinction between the two" (Bridgen, 2011: 3), with the line between 'work' and 'non-work' increasingly

indistinct (Smith Maguire, 2008). This is particularly troubling when individuals are required to establish social media accounts as part of their employment, as is becoming common in some police forces.

> *It was suggested by my supervisor at the time [that I open a Twitter account]. I restricted my settings so that only people I approved could see my tweets. But my supervisor… said 'oh no, you need to open it up everybody, or you won't get many likes and you won't reach a good enough audience.' I really think that there shouldn't be an expectation that you will have these accounts. It's almost become 'If you don't have these accounts then you're not effective in-role.' And I think that's so wrong, I think it should be personal choice* [*Cassie*].

The failure of criminal justice agencies to tackle online abuse was seen by two interviewees as reflecting institutional misogyny.

> *What I gather, from other women in the same situation as me, [is] no one else has ever had [complaints] upheld either. The things that me and other feminists have reported in this movement and have never had them removed… it's just amazing. The response from Twitter is… institutionalised prejudice* [*Terri-Anne*].

Institutional misogyny was also proposed as a possible explanation for the failure to recognise sex as a protected characteristic under hate crime legislation (Chetty and Alathur, 2018). There is some evidence that this may change, following a successful pilot treating misogyny as a hate crime by Nottinghamshire police, which is now being implemented (albeit piecemeal) across a number of other police forces (Mullany and Trickett, 2018).

When considering the existing policy response to online abuse, it is necessary to examine the issue in the wider context. Many interviewees felt that police officers were unaware of the scale and potential for harm of online abuse. Participants felt that this made the police unable to advise or respond appropriately, a situation compounded by a lack of training.

> *I would expect police officers to take those complaints seriously, and to understand what to do with them. And I'm not sure they do. I can imagine the response as 'Well, have you been injured?' There may be a lack of clarity as to what constitutes abuse. That's one of the things that we often find. Cops are often very busy and this would rank low on the list of priorities. The fact that it's online and the perpetrator may not*

> *be in the same house, may not make it any less risky than if the perpetrator's in the house making those threats* [Cheryl].

Cuts to police funding, as a result of the austerity agenda pursued since 2010 (Laverick and Cain, 2015), are putting huge pressure on resources. This makes the investigation and prosecution of online abuse, and the training of police officers, unlikely to be a priority in the near future. Indeed, one interviewee feared that giving a greater priority to the investigation of online abuse would be at the cost of prosecuting domestic abuse, making her reluctant to involve the police, for the fear of putting another woman at risk of imminent physical harm.

> *I would hate, for public funding in other areas to be further limited if we were trying to push funding into online abuse, because women are still dying. Yes the threats are vile and dreadful, but if police are being, and this sounds awful but there ought to be enough money for there to be proper resources, for the police to prosecute these cases. The more severe cases and the more relentless cases, or even every case, but we know in reality that's not the way it is. And even I understood… I don't really want you chasing down every idiot that tweets a death or rape threat at me, because I can actually cope with that. I would rather we stopped the two dead women a week.*
> *That sounds awfully disloyal to women who suffer online abuse, but something has to be prioritised, and if it was going to take funds away from domestic violence policing for example, because coppers were tied up trying to find some guy who's just being a bit of a dickhead online, and that meant a response time was lowered to a woman who is actually being beaten. I can't really consent to that* [*Claire*].

This contrasts strongly with the resources invested in protecting MPs from those who perpetrate online abuse, raising the troubling question of whether the position held by politicians affords them access to a superior level of justice than the women who contributed to this research. If this is the case, it would mean that the impact of online abuse on women with less power goes unseen and ignored. The recommendation of the Home Affairs Committee that social media companies be responsible for paying for the policing of online abuse, in a similar way that charges are levied on football clubs for the policing of their matches (Home Affairs Committee, 2017: 24), provides an interesting suggestion for meeting this additional funding requirement.

This study provides a number of suggestions for policy change. Two interviewees raised the possibility of prohibiting anonymous social media accounts, which would

resolve the problem of online abusers creating multiple anonymous accounts with the sole purpose of perpetrating vituperative communication.

> *I think some of the social media forums should take more responsibility […] the holders of the power in Twitter who will allow people to have fully anonymous accounts. [They could] say if you choose to have an anonymous profile you might have to give some kind of information just to Twitter. At least then you have got some kind of proactive strategy that is going to enable an investigation into somebody, should they be abusive. The powers that be have to take responsibility for it, much more than they do* [*Janet*].

> *So persistent virulent and anonymous abusers ought to be being closed down by the social media companies. But they don't, they're not going to are they?* [*Cheryl*]

This suggestion was similarly made by Jess Phillips MP during the data collection period.

In this study, this suggestion was made within a demand for a wider complaints framework, that would compel SNS to take improved action against online abusers.

> *The corporates, people who actually run these facilities, I think they have to be asked to take more responsibility. They [could run] a full-scale study to have a particular social media forum, whereby they had to give some kind of detail of themselves [and see] if that particular site had lower levels of online abuse* [*Janet*].

> *I think… when you can set up a profile, that's not even a real profile, that's not even about you, I mean I look at a photo of someone who's abusive and it's not even them is it, there's not their name is it? While you can make a profile that has nothing attached to it other than an email address… this is just hatred about someone you've never even met* [*Amelia*].

This echoes once again the recommendations of the Select Committee report (2017), which advocates that the community standards for SNS be strengthened, with the possibility for compulsory reporting and the imposition of financial penalties if abusive content is not removed promptly.

Whilst the primary focus of this research has been the negative impact of online abuse, it is important that the positive impact of social media is not ignored. SNS enable women to mount campaigns on emerging issues, and to support each other

personally, politically and in response to online abuse. SNS may also provide a platform to share experiences of domestic abuse:

> *Utilizing Twitter to share their lived experiences with abusive relationships and reasons for staying… [with] Twitter function[ing] as a connective mechanism where women can understand the lived experiences of domestic violence and access a large community where information and support can be exchanged*
>
> (Weathers et al. 2016: 2).

The women interviewed in this research felt that their lives had been enriched by SNS, despite the abuse that they had received. In many cases, it was the relationships that they had formed via SNS that gave the women the courage and tenacity to continue speaking out, despite the online abuse that they had received.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary of findings and contribution to knowledge

This report demonstrates the level and nature of online abuse directed at women involved in the criminal justice system in England, and the impact that it can have. By combining interviews and data from Twitter, the study reveals that women receive obscene abuse related to their appearance and competence; and that such abuse often contains threats of a physical or sexual nature. The impact of receiving such hatred is substantial and enduring, causing health problems, a loss of confidence, and fear. Despite facing such negative consequences, the women interviewed refused to be silenced or intimidated by the abuse they received, often redoubling their efforts to make their voices heard. Their strength and tenacity deserve to be reflected in the actions of public policy institutions and social media corporations, whose policies in relation to the reporting and sanctioning of online abuse must be substantially reinforced.

Whilst small, this study provides a significant amount of data about the challenge of online abuse. The evidence uncovered has often proved challenging to chronicle. This diverse range of voices can best be summed up in the following quote from Margaret Atwood:

> ***"Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them".***

This research is now part of a wider doctoral study into the link between online abuse and gender-based violence, where the issues raised here will be explored in greater depth. If you are interested in finding out more, please email sew566@york.ac.uk.

Susan Watson can also be found on Twitter @suwatson.

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