



Perpetuating online sexism offline: Anonymity, interactivity, and the effects of sexist hashtags on social media



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ABSTRACT

Sexism and sexual harassment are not uncommon in online environments such as social networking sites, forums, and video games. This experiment investigated whether users' anonymity and level of interactivity with sexist content on social media influenced sexist attitudes and offline behavior. Participants ($N = 172$) used a Twitter account that was anonymous or had personally identifying details. They were asked to share (i.e., retweet) or write posts incorporating a sexist hashtag. After exposure, participants completed two purportedly unrelated tasks, a survey and a job hiring simulation in which they evaluated male and female candidates' resumé. Anonymous participants reported greater hostile sexism after tweeting than nonanonymous participants. Participants who composed sexist tweets reported greater hostile sexism and ranked female job candidates as less competent than those who retweeted, although this did not significantly affect their likelihood to hire.

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1. Introduction

Although the Internet was once hailed as a place in which all groups and identities would find a voice and be treated equally, many online spaces have been shown to perpetuate the prejudices and hostilities of the offline world (Herring, 1996; Penny, 2014). Objectifying portrayals of women are rampant on the Internet (Morahan-Martin, 2000) and sexism has been identified as an issue in blogs, online forums, social networking sites, and video games (Fox & Tang, 2014, 2015; Marwick, 2013; Pedersen & Macafee, 2007; Penny, 2014; Shaw, 2014). A recent Pew survey (2014a) found that many online communities are perceived as more hostile toward women than men. Additionally, women report greater emotional distress as a result of online harassment, indicating that their experiences are particularly insidious and likely qualitatively different than those of men (Pew Research Center, 2014a).

What may be just as pernicious as direct harassment is the presence of passive or indirect sexual harassment in online spaces (Barak, 2005). The concept of *ambient sexism* suggests that if sexist attitudes and behavior are prevalent in an environment, this atmosphere can have negative effects regardless of whether an individual is directly targeted by sexism or sexual harassment (Glomb

et al., 1997). Previous studies indicate that being surrounded by sexist attitudes and behavior is similar to direct harassment in its effects on women's psychological well-being (Glomb et al., 1997; Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007).

It is important to note that expressed sexism does not have to be characterized by hostility; one defense of sexist comments is that they are intended in a joking manner (Ford & Ferguson, 2004). Regardless of the tone, online sexism is pernicious; as Marwick (2013) notes, sexist humor in online contexts "reinforces male entitlement and conventional gender stereotypes while normalizing egregiously sexist behavior" (p. 12). Indeed, "everyday sexism" including sexist humor can be as detrimental as other forms of sexism, regardless of its alleged intentions (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). Women experience negative affect from sexist humor (LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1998) and in many contexts, sexist jokes are experienced in the same way as sexual harassment (Boxer & Ford, 2010). Men exposed to sexist humor subsequently believe sexism to be more normative, blame themselves less for their own sexist behavior, and engage in more discriminatory behavior (Ford, Boxer, Armstrong, & Edell, 2008; Ford, Wentzel, & Lorion, 2001).

At this time, although research is beginning to delve into the incidence of sexist content in social media, experimental research examining the effects of these messages is scarce (see Strain, Saucier, & Martens, 2015, for an exception). In this study, we examine one manifestation of online sexism: messages posted to the

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social networking site Twitter using a purportedly humorous sexist hashtag, #GetBackInTheKitchen. Additionally, given the lack of research on the role of affordances in influencing prejudicial attitudes and behavior, we wanted to investigate two social media affordances. First, because many social media sites afford anonymity, we wanted to investigate whether the effects of posting these messages as an anonymous source diverged from when the source was publicly identified. Second, we wanted to investigate levels of interactivity to determine whether sharing someone else's sexist message (i.e., retweeting) differed from writing and posting one's own sexist messages.

1.1. Twitter

Twitter is a microblogging platform and social networking site where users can post short status updates (i.e., 140 characters per post), also called a *tweet*. Users can also share others' posts via *retweeting* (Rudat, Buder, & Hesse, 2014). According to a recent Pew survey, 18% of Internet users are on Twitter, and this percentage has more than doubled since November 2010 (Pew Research Center, 2014b). Twitter currently has 288 million monthly active users, and 500 million Tweets are sent per day (Twitter, 2015).

Hashtags on Twitter are used to establish topical links. By using hashtags before words or phrases in their posts, users categorize tweets. By searching hashtags, users can find tweets relevant to a specific topic posted by other users on Twitter. Thus, Twitter enables users to disseminate their tweets publicly, and other users can easily track and view those tweets.

On Twitter, several sexist hashtags have gone viral. Some sexist hashtags, such as #LiesToldByFemales and #IHateFemalesWho, promote stereotypes and hostility toward women. Others, such as #RulesForGirls and #MyGirlfriendNotAllowedTo, suggest that men are responsible for regulating women's behavior and that women should submit to male authority. Some of the most appalling, such as #ThatsWhatSlutsDo and #ItsNotRapelf, promote rape myths and dehumanize women as objects whose only function is sex.

In response to sexism online and offline, hashtags have also been generated as a form of activism, referred to as *hashtag feminism* (Clark, 2014). Hashtags such as #EverydaySexism and #YesAllWomen have been used to draw attention to the pervasiveness of sex- and gender-based discrimination, harassment, and abuse that women experience (Thrift, 2014). The hashtag #WomenAreTooHardToAnimate challenged game developers' and players' excuses for the lack of women in video games (Huntemann, 2015). #NotBuyingIt has been used to draw attention to objectifying and offensive portrayals of women in advertising and other media (Clark, 2014).

As these examples indicate, hashtags can be used not just to link posts thematically, but also to convey attitudes and social identity via Twitter. Another key aspect of Twitter is that it affords anonymity. Unlike sites like Facebook, Twitter does not enforce a real name clause in their user agreements. Thus, users may adopt handles that mask their identity and choose not to reveal any personally identifying information in their biographical details or avatars. Given these affordances, Twitter is an optimal place to examine the effects of online anonymity on prejudicial attitudes and behavior.

2. Disinhibition in online environments

Scholars have long expressed concerns regarding the negative outcomes associated with online anonymity (e.g., Joinson, 1998; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). Suler (2004) developed a framework known as the *online disinhibition effect* to understand what elements of online environments embolden users to engage in

behaviors they are unlikely to perform face-to-face. The online disinhibition effect is not inherently negative, but can manifest as *toxic disinhibition*, which includes negative behaviors such as flaming, trolling, and cyberbullying (Christopherson, 2007; Dillon & Bushman, 2015; Lea, O'Shea, Fung, & Spears, 1992; Moor, Heuvelman, & Verleur, 2010; Udris, 2014). Six factors underlie the online disinhibition effect: invisibility (i.e., a lack of cues), asynchronicity, minimization of authority, dissociative anonymity, dissociative imagination, and solipsistic introjection. Five of these factors are relevant to sexism in online contexts.

In line with previous theorizing (e.g., Kiesler et al., 1984; Lea, O'Shea, Fung, & Spears, 1992; Lea & Spears, 1991, 1992), Suler (2004) argues that *invisibility*, or the inability to physically observe other respondents via CMC, removes some of an individual's concerns for impression management. Because of the lack of cues in computer-mediated environments, users engaging in negative behaviors are incapable of observing others' nonverbal reactions, which typically play a regulatory role in face-to-face interaction (Lea, O'Shea, Fung, & Spears, 1992). Thus, users cannot observe facial expressions or other nonverbal indicators of disapproval in reaction to sexist comments online. Further, the *asynchronicity* of the environment diminishes the sense of immediacy. Feedback is not instantaneous, which may further limit the perceived impact of a negative message. If no one responds immediately to regulate a sexist comment, it may not be perceived as harmful or inappropriate. Without receiving negative or otherwise discouraging feedback, or only receiving feedback after a delay, users may perceive sexism as acceptable and even perpetuate it.

Minimization of status and authority is associated with individual invisibility online. Online environments can equalize communication between two parties as cues providing information regarding status are largely absent (Christopherson, 2007; Suler, 2004). This missing status information can, however, also be the impetus for negative behavior in online environments as individuals realize there is no authority figure to monitor or regulate prejudicial actions online. With a lack of enforcement and the threat of punishment removed, individuals may be more likely to perceive sexism as acceptable or behave in a sexist manner themselves.

Suler (2004) conceptualizes *dissociative anonymity* as the ability to distance behaviors performed online from the physical self. Many online environments, including Twitter, do not require one's real name. Moreover, individuals can refrain from sharing or simply fabricate identifiable information such as their location or demographic details. This lack of a connection to their identity may encourage users to behave antisocially as they can convince themselves that online behavior does not represent who they are offline. Further, this disjoint between the online and offline world creates a *dissociative imagination* (Suler, 2004). Because individuals maintain a separate or different identity online, it is easy for them to conceptualize the online world as a distinct entity that does not affect or bleed into the offline world. What happens online stays online, and thus sexism is further justified or excused because there are no "real world" consequences associated with it for either the offender or the target.

Given these factors promoting online disinhibition, we chose to examine the effects of anonymity. In a social media context such as Twitter, anonymity is easily manipulated, and thus many users are not associated with their true identities.

2.1. Effects of anonymity

Survey research has often supported Suler's (2004) online disinhibition effect by finding an association between the perception of anonymity and the perpetration of online aggression (e.g., Udris, 2014; Wright, 2013). Anonymity has also been associated with higher levels of incivility in content analyses of online political

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