

Anti-feminist Misogynist Shitposting: The Challenges of Feminist Academics Navigating Toxic Twitter

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Introduction

Gender-trolling is a specific form of online violence where entangled forms of abuse including misogyny, (hetero)sexism, racism, nationalism, transphobia and anti-feminism coalesce to create new forms of gendered knowing and being online steeped in hate (Mantilla 2013; Ringrose 2018). We apply the concept of gender-trolling in this chapter to explore an episode where our own digital feminist pedagogies on Twitter were attacked and patrolled by an angry mob of trolls. We want to position the Twitter trolling event in the context of post-truth populism where groups are struggling and fighting to gain visibility in the on/offline sphere and at the same time delegitimize other knowledge and groups, and ultimately aiming to drive other voices and views offline and out of the online public space (Salter 2018). In order to demonstrate our argument, we look in depth at the trolling episode, which involved an attack on tweets regarding a Masters level session that was exploring arts-based methodologies in sex education, specifically making Play-Doh genital models.

As we explore, anti-feminist, misogynist and right-wing conservative discourses manifested in the Twitter troll attack take four broad pathways. The first tweet trail we follow was aimed at lambasting feminist academia as part of a crisis of education and putting legitimate academia at risk. Secondly, the trolls positioned Professor Ringrose's account as a parody as a mode of defamation, to delegitimize her authority in the public domain. Thirdly, we found a defensive response to the idea of 'clitoral validity' reproducing phallogocentrism

that sought to reinforce penile advantage and men's sexual superiority over women through derogatory comments about women and vulvas as well as sexualized attacks on Ringrose herself. And finally, and relatedly, we found moral panics about childhood innocence positioning sexuality education as risky, inciting hysteria around the Play-Doh genitals as evidence of sexual degradation of children by feminist academics. Taken together these four discursive tweet pathways display and disseminate anti-feminist and misogynist ideologies to delegitimize social justice discourses and control and police such voices in digital public space (Salter 2016).

The original tweet made over 200,000 impressions indicating its widespread visibility as an object of ridicule by the trolls. We will argue that platforms like Twitter magnify and amplify these discourses, by algorithmically promoting troll swarms. Twitter's main corporate goal is user engagement by any means, whatever hashtags/topics that can attract postings are what constitute their trending topics (Burgess and Baym 2020). Online performances of hate and discrimination are hence implicitly endorsed by the Twitter platform (Marwick and Lewis 2017) since the machine learning tools created to detect codes of direct threat and violence do not necessarily pick up the swarming activity, the momentum through which attacks occur in a pile-up. As we noted, the connected aim of the trolls operating in the network is to intimidate and threaten feminist accounts off the platform. Indeed, as part of the trolling, the geolocation of the tweet and Professor Ringrose was discussed (akin to doxxing) to threaten and incite fear (Jane 2016), leading to Professor Ringrose having to make a police report. Yet the attack was judged by the police as bullying rather than hate because direct threats of sexual violence were not detected, and responsibility for intervention was deflected back to Twitter reporting systems. The Twitter reporting, however, had little effect. In our conclusions we will, therefore, argue that universities need to be thinking about these digital politics of hate. In the context of this volume, trolling is important in relation to

politics of truth and voice, who can speak and gain legitimacy, and how hate and misogyny are mobilized to silence feminist voices (Banet-Weiser 2018) in the post-truth context. If feminist academics are to be taking up positions of visibility and thus becoming likely subjects to ongoing episodes of abuse and reputational defamation, what must their institutions do to manage this risk and protect academics (Ringrose 2018)?

Techno-politics of Online Hate

The first point we wish to make is how platform-specific affordances (boyd 2014) and platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al. 2015) of social media platforms facilitate online discriminatory and oppressive performances. Twitter as a platform provides a vehicle to create vast networks of loosely associated online communities that follow one another based on shared feelings/affects and ideas (Papacharissi 2015). In the case of anti-feminism and misogyny, these are values of defensive anxiety around (particularly angry, white) men losing privilege and entitlement (Kimmel 2015) and a deep attachment to heteropatriarchy (Ging 2019). We will argue phallogocentric value systems seek to maintain women in a subordinate position to masculinity politically and psychosocially through digital tactics of control, harassment and abuse, aiming to drive women back to the private sphere (Pateman 1988, in Salter 2016). Such tactics are performed on Twitter through (male-dominated) linguistic and behavioural patterns and homosocialization central to the dissemination of misogyny and anti-feminism which seek to legitimize masculine superiority over women/femininities (Pascoe 2007).

Our starting point to work with social media is understanding an entwined relation between the online and offline domains, in a way that gendered power dynamics, inequality and discrimination in wider society are reproduced and often amplified in social media

(Mendes et al. 2019; Ringrose 2018). Such exclusionary and discriminatory digital (gendered) performances are being carried out as multiple forms of ‘technology-facilitated violence’ (Ging and Siapera 2018: 516) such as cyberharassment, cyberbullying, doxxing, flaming, and (gender-)trolling (Jane 2014, 2016; Mantilla 2013; Salter 2018). These forms of violence are often sexualized (Powell and Henry 2017) seeking to sexually denigrate women, with women constituting disproportionate victims of online hate and violence (Moloney and Love 2018; Pew Research Center 2017) while the perpetrators are mostly white, cis-gender, heterosexual, privileged, middle-class men (Vera-Gray 2017).

The affordances of social media enable alliances between different social groups united in beliefs and demands for male supremacy. In this respect, Ging (2017) develops the notion of ‘manosphere’ to demonstrate how heterogeneous, toxic, masculinist, alt-right internet sub-cultures unite in their fight against feminism and gender equity (Ging 2019). Moreover, the influence of online abuse and violence extends far beyond the digital sphere, causing the victims stress, danger, anxiety and suicidality (Mendes et al. 2019; Moloney and Love 2018). The ongoing risk of violence, harassment and/or abuse requires marginalized groups to ‘bargain’ with digital patriarchy by compromising their feelings and opinions often going as far as removing themselves from the platforms (being cancelled) for fear of further abuse (Regehr and Ringrose 2018). As put by Dragiewicz et al. (2018), these misogynistic and anti-feminist tactics alter patterns of social media use, fundamentally disciplining women and regulating the online visibility of progressive gender politics.

One of the central tactics of Twitter trolling and swarming we analyse in this chapter is ‘shitposting’ which is an internet strategy to bait viewers to posts through outrageous claims including hate and abuse, to provoke emotional reactions in users (Evans 2019). As we will explore, shitposting is a joined-up tactic of trolling and particularly gender-trolling, where followers pile up with immediate, reactive and often highly offensive content. The

platform's hate detection mechanisms fail because it does not detect nuanced use of human language (Zhang and Luo 2019) nor does it grasp the affective modulations (Massumi 2015) of interlinked group-networked practices which rely on volumes of shitposting. In this way, trolling violence is underestimated and reporting to either the platform or police gains little traction.

Research (Herring et al. 2002) on experiences of trolling suggests crucial differences between trolling and other acts of hate and harassment online (e.g. flaming or insulting). One major difference is that trolling is often identity-based and interlinked with sexism and racism (Ortiz 2020; Sundén and Paasonen 2020). When trolling tactics are addressed to a specific gender, as Mantilla (2013: 563) argues, the 'generic forms of online trolling' become 'gendertrolling' because they express anti-feminist, misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, with white supremacist and other elements of far-right conservative forms of hate (Marwick and Lewis 2017). Moreover, gender-trolling should be understood as a more dangerous form of harassment and violence for the possibility to experience it across various platforms simultaneously and its adoption of language of (gender-based) hate and insults to actualize collective coordinated effort aimed to 'purge' the internet from women and feminists (Mantilla 2013).

Given all this, the costs of becoming a #TrendTopic on a platform like Twitter seems harder for women as they face the manoeuvres of digital sexual violence throughout the net (Ortiz 2020; Powell and Henry 2017) designed to cancel their voices. As we argue in our conclusions, therefore, there is a need for feminist activism and scholarship to rethink and recontextualize gender-trolling within a post-truth era where the techno-political background of online gendered-hate is being reconfigured through regulations of online speech designed to police and silence feminism and social justice.

Pandemic Pedagogy and Its Discontents

In 2021, the Masters module Gender, Sexuality and Education that we co-teach was running in an online format via Zoom. The session on youth sexuality and relationship and sex education was the midpoint of the ten-week module and the start of a conceptual move from theoretical foundations of gender, sexuality and feminisms to putting theories into feminist praxis. Building on the research-policy-practice relationships that Professor Ringrose activates as part of her academic advocacy work, one of her key collaborators, the School of Sexuality Education (SSE) charity, was invited to the module for the third year running to deliver a session that demonstrates a workshop taught in secondary school using Play-Doh to create genitals. The session is run by a medical doctor who is also a sex education facilitator in secondary schools. In previous runs of the module, the workshop has focused solely on creating vulvas as a way of prioritizing feminine body parts given the lack of consideration of female sexual pleasure in global sex education (Allen 2013). The session's goal is to theorize and materialize empowerment and understandings of sexual and reproductive organs and sexual pleasure, with a focus on the exploration of the clitoris which has been neglected globally in sex education practice (Hirst 2012). Purposefully focusing on exploring the clitoris, the session works to explain that anatomically correct images of the clitoris were not created till 1981, showing how heteropatriarchal, Western, male-dominated science and medicine has neglected women's health and well-being in profound ways (Ringrose et al. 2019; Russo 2017).

As we all joined into the session on 9 February, however, we were suddenly instructed to also include diagrams and modelling time devoted to creating the penis as well as the vulva/clitoris, which was not planned. Including the penis in the modelling session created a different dynamic in several ways than in the previous years. First, as some of the students rightly pointed out, it reinforced a binary idea of genitals rather than fully considering

intersex and other issues explored in the module. What we would come to understand later, moreover, is that producing Play-Doh penises would eventually be read as juvenile, disgusting, perverted and more. But none of this occurred to us as we worked our way through the impromptu session. Proud of the way the session had proceeded despite the limitations of Zoom online-only engagement (fatigue, glitches, disembodiment), Professor Ringrose used some of the Play-Doh genital images that students were asked to capture and upload onto an interactive digital teaching space (with students' consent) as well as a selfie to make an Instagram post about the teaching session. Mindful of potential hate and toxicity that Twitter can attract she then put four of the six images (minus her selfie) onto Twitter.

The following day the tweet was picked up by @oldandrewuk, an account with almost 20,000 followers, linked to an educational blog run by Andrew Old, titled 'Scenes from the battlefield: Teaching in British Schools'. The disparaging tweet read (Figure 1): 'Next time somebody asks if it's worth getting an MA in education, pass this on.'



Figure 1. Andrew Old responding to Prof. Ringrose's first Tweet

This tweet started to generate negative comments and shortly thereafter Professor Ringrose posted a second tweet (Figure 2): 'Some men are seriously threatened by play-doh vulvas! My Tweet has gone viral with Twitter trolls who think that women's sexual empowerment does not belong in the classroom! Guess What? Your aggressive digs just make us feminists stronger! Please retweet if you agree! 🗨️❤️👉'



Figure 2. Screenshot of Prof. Ringrose’s two Tweets

From here the Twitter activity escalated. Perhaps the tweet calling out the trolls struck a nerve and shortly afterwards the first tweet was picked up and quoted by a known anti-feminist, misogynist and, we would argue, shitpost catalyst Peter Lloyd @suffragentleman invoking Professor Ringrose’s account as a ‘parody’ to their followers (Figure 3): ‘This is NOT a parody! It’s a real tweet from a gender studies professor at University College London @ucl 🤪’.



Figure 3&4 Peter Lloyd’s two Tweets

Shortly after this tweet, Peter Lloyd tweeted a response to one of the images showing a student's comments around their experiences of building a penis (“‘Funny the penis is so much easier and simpler than the vulva’”) saying ‘Really? Given that most women can’t orgasm through sex alone, I think it’s men who have the last laugh’ (Figure 4). This smack of shitposting is designed to galvanize their followers into binary thinking around the penis and vulva, with an evolutionary psychology discourse of penile superiority and male sexual dominance over women (Ging 2019).

Unpacking Shitposts: Four Twitter Pathways of Hate

Using feminist critical discourse analysis (Lazar 2005), we investigate the discursive themes in 180 trolling replies and quoted retweets. These replies showed a convergence of online communities coming together in response to Professor Ringrose’s two tweets. All tweets have been strictly transcribed verbatim with all original emojis, punctuation, letter case and spellings left unchanged. As we proceed, we will explore the four interrelated discursive pathways of the tweets:

1. Education in a legitimacy crisis in need of correction.
2. attacks on Professor Ringrose’s account and feminist academia as a parody.
3. Masculinist projections of penile superiority debasing women’s sexual pleasure and empowerment.
4. Moral panics about childhood innocence and sex education as perverted.

Through conceptualizing Twitter’s affordance of visibility, we also unpack how tactics like gender-trolling, flaming and shitposting are being widely and strategically weaponized to shut down feminist public pedagogy in digital spheres (Ringrose 2018) and to remove feminist discourses from online public space (Salter 2018). We shall reflect on how Twitter as a

platform has failed to afford effective tools to tackle disinformation, gendered hate or abuse (also intersecting with racism, transphobia etc.), and tolerated or even amplified online hostility and ‘toxicity’ against women and feminism (Amnesty International 2018).

1. Feminist Academia as an Embodiment of Crisis in Higher Education

Next time somebody asks if it’s worth getting an MA in education, pass this on.

The first notable form of negative responses stemmed from Andrew Old’s tweet (see Figure 1) designed to ridicule the legitimacy and seriousness of using Play-Doh as a teaching tool delivered in a Masters level class. Old’s followers seem to hold themselves up as genuine academic authorities who are outraged at the legitimation and visibility of feminist academia:

how is this worthwhile education at a university level?? my god, no wonder the western world is collapsing.

This is close to the work of Newton, Darwin and Einstein. I’m gobsmacked at your incredible insights

Another lamented the loss of ‘true’ academics saying ‘once upon a time we had Benjamin Jowett’ whom we discovered by googling was a theologian tutor at the University of Oxford in the 1800s. These tweets signal a rejection of feminist academia, a melancholic yearning for the ‘classics’ embodied by the old, white, male, conservative scholars who made ‘real’ contributions to knowledge, civilization and society compared to Professor Ringrose.

The rejection of feminist content was driven home through a populist, conservative and capitalist discourse of rights as taxpayers to justify their acts and carry out public shaming of high-profile feminist scholars to remove them out of online public space. Many posters bemoaned public money funding a feminist scholarship at a ‘top’ reputable university for example:

University College London. Taxpayer funded. Let that sink in.

Really hope you’re a parody. Sadly, I fear you’re serious and I’m paying for this 🐷👩 through my taxes.

The conservative elitist discourse against feminist academia being funded by taxpayers also expressed itself as anti-intellectualism more generally. One account, for instance, denounced the Play-Doh activity as sickening:

You spend your day making play doh penises when most of us are working hard and putting ourselves at risk. It makes me sick to my gut that you people are allowed to call what you do work. You are a disgrace. I hope you are not being funded by the taxpayer!!

In addition to rejecting academia as worthy or legitimate, posters also pointed to the idea of sex education as a direct cause of ‘men becoming more feminine’ and hence signalling ‘a dying civilization’. In the tweet below a history of ‘Greeks, Romans and Germans’ was recounted as a warning of a crisis of masculinity, under the influence of feminist academia. It also manifested how anti-feminism has been racialized by online (white-)nationalists where ‘a

normative white masculinity' is 'both privileged and under attack' (Bjork-James 2020: 177) and demonstrated the entanglement of anti-feminism and (white-)nationalism.

Obsession with gender and sexuality is a sign of a dying civilization, along with men becoming more feminine. Was happening to the Greeks before the rough and ready Romans extinguished them. Was happening to the Romans before the rough and ready Germans extinguished them.

Another thread saw nationalist and conservative fear of China as a rising political and economic power, which the dying civilization and failure of worthwhile academia in the UK was hastening. China was often presented in those tweets as a seemingly positive example of focusing on 'churning out engineers, doctors, scientists and innovators' to 'build a huge economy and empire' without having to introduce sex education to its population.

“AnD I FeEl soRrY fOr cHiNa wHeRe oNLY a FeW sChOoLs hAVe sEx eDuCaTiOn”

Meanwhile china is churning out engineer's, doctors, scientists and innovators whilst Western unis are making cocks out of play doh
Meanwhile in China, a billion people still manage to procreate by copulation, despite never playing with plasticine. In between all this amateur shagging they still manage to build a huge economy and empire.

However, the common reference to China was constructed based on a racist, Orientalist view seeing China as a distinct pre- or anti-feminist culture that prospered through ‘amateur shagging’. The core of the tweeters’ political agenda to recover the hierarchy of gender and race in the British Empire was buttressed by a masculinist, patriarchal and heteronormative notion that equates sex with (hetero-)sexual reproductive intercourse.

2. From Mocking to Anti-feminist Abuse

In similar tweets, Play-Doh genital building was ridiculed and mocked as ‘nursery school activities’ for young children such as ‘ball pool’ or ‘sand pit’. Those narratives sought to suggest our teaching represented an infantilizing model of higher education. The delegitimization of the content took greater flight, however, with Peter Lloyd’s tweet signalling ‘parody’ which seemed to unite the trolls to collectively patrol, mock and shame feminist accounts. Professor Ringrose has been called a parody by right-wing commentators in the past in coverage in *The Daily Mail*. Usually combined with sarcastic humour, such parodying is a form of homosocial banter (Haslop and O’Rourke 2020; Ringrose et al. 2021), a way of disparaging feminism and feminists through ridicule and shaming them in a bid to harass them off the platform and cancel them from the digital public domain (Moloney and Love 2018; Regehr and Ringrose 2018; Ringrose 2018).

Following Peter Lloyd’s invocation to parody there was a huge swathe of replies saying that ‘you missed out “parody” in your bio’ or ‘Saturday Night Live alert’. In addition to simplistic mocking and repetitions of the teaching activity as a parody other related tweets tried to clarify that ‘this is NOT parody’ and expressed sarcasm as to how this could constitute ‘serious academia’:

This would be funny if it wasn’t considered serious academia for grown ups.

@uclnews I wonder why I wasted 8 years doing a degree and PhD in theoretical physics when I could have been making a plasticine cunt...

All for this. The more play-doh in higher education, the better. Can't have those big salaries going to waste. And yes, clitoral validity is a key issue in today's phallogocentric society.

The sarcasm expresses a defensive rejection of arts-/play-based participatory feminist pedagogies while defending phallogocentric ideas of proper academic knowledge by undermining pedagogical hands-on methods that challenge the 'seminal' ideals of giving lectures as the only proper university teaching. Comparably, LEGO as a 'serious' (and masculine) play has also been used by academics in teaching and research (Gauntlett and Holzwarth 2006) without coming under attack. This indicated that it is the message of sexual empowerment that seems to irritate the trolls who reject a method of Play-Doh teaching, wishing to hold gendered power structures of masculinist knowledge and hierarchies in place. This is also apparent in tweets that attempted to discount sex education by juxtaposing it to physics or engineering, creating a binary illusion of feminist academia as not as 'legitimate knowledge' as 'hard' (objective) scientific disciplines (Massanari 2018). It is through joking that the trolling points to an alleged common sense of what is proper academic work. Massumi (2015) calls these processes 'affective modulation' where targeted repetition over time solidifies what is considered normal. Here we see how the social media vernacular of 'parody' creates a homosocial masculinity bond to unite the trolls (Gibbs et al. 2015). As the in-side joke repeats, the humour works to affectively conceal the truth claims into common sense, it

shuts down complexity and critical thinking, which is what feminist pedagogy is promoting (Lawrence and Ringrose 2018).

Emojis also played an important part in doing shorthand ‘emotion work’ (Riordan 2017), and were included in many tweet replies to signal affective messages such as bull shit (🐮💩) in an earlier tweet and humour ‘gold’ in the following tweet.

Thank fuck you’re not furloughed or we’d all miss this clitoral validity
gold 😂😂😂

Here the poster references COVID-19 working conditions where the UK Government implemented a furlough scheme to mock Professor Ringrose still having a job. The clown emoji seems to have become a well-versed visual signifier for enabling viral mocking and derision. *Urban Dictionary* defines the clown emoji as an ‘overused’ tool ‘to express something funny’ but also to ‘burn someone in insult form’¹.

3. Heterosexist defensiveness: male sexual prowess against the feminist vulva
Biological essentialism, heterosexism and their heteronormalizing power are evidenced in another form of anti-feminist discourse articulating hostility towards feminist sex education. A range of tweets tried to sexualize the vulvas, relating them as either poor facsimiles of vulvas, to make offensive jokes about women’s sexual organs or to parody identity politics and race-colour:

I smell fish

¹ The original information can be accessed from *Urban Dictionary* at <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=%F0%9F%A4%A1+%28Clown+Emoji%29>

If your vulva is green, then you should improve your vulva hygiene.

- My vulva is not multi-coloured. Am I abnormal? - Not if your vulva identifies as multi-coloured.

Other tweets refer to the penis through heterosexist in-side jokes. They use irony and laughter to heterosexualize the Play-Doh genital models and compare them to sex toys as the only knowable referent point for a model penis. For instance:

Thanks but I'll stick with Fleshlight.

Worst. Dildos. Ever.

It is through sarcastic humour, that these tweets are trying to maintain the heterosexual order as the common sense (Massumi 2015), and to sexualize the genitals through a pornified male gaze as seen in the following poster who uses the phrase 'clitoral validity' from the original tweet to turn it into a heterosexual sex scene with 'the wife':

I often ask the wife as I'm frantically validating her clitoris, "is it valid yet, love?"

We see the tweeters as producing 'virtual manhood acts' (Moloney and Love 2018: 603) and their tweets also demonstrate traits of a 'baseline masculinity' (Pascoe 2007: 87) where male sexual strength, prowess and heterosexual-male superiority must be displayed

against femininity. Accordingly, every attempt and/or implication that *might* challenge the tenets of these masculine norms are belittled or mocked as a tactic of self-protection (Kimmel 2015) of ‘fragile masculinity’ as seen in the following tweet (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Snowman meme

In this tweet, a snowman penetrates a snow woman from behind with a snow-penis. The snow woman is face down on the ground and one of the snow man's arm is pinning her down while the other raising in a high five - presumably a homosocial salutation to the 'brothers' out there who identify with sexual domination over women. This tweet demonstrates how gender-trolling often occurs through using lad banter graphic language (Mantilla 2013) of images, memes and GIFs. The tweet is a graphic representation of penile masculine superiority used to put the feminist tweets about clitoral validity in their place, indicating that as part of the shitposting there is some deep reactive desire to disqualify any discourse of women's sexual empowerment. The use of sexualizing humour through images are explicitly used for justifying male superiority through *apparent* male sexual prowess. Other tweets sought to involve Professor Ringrose in the sexual *mise-en-scène*:

She clearly has trouble achieving orgasm, and it's the fault of men.

Sending sexualizing graphic images and comments to Professor Ringrose constitutes a form of ‘unwanted sexual attention’ (Barak 2005) and harassment, and should be read as abuse in the guise of sarcastic humour. Notably, it was not recognizable to the police who reviewed the case, since the shitposters were aware of the law and reserved making explicit threats of sexual violence. Seen on a continuum of digital sexual violence (Powell and Henry 2017), these discourses, images and graphics create a form of digital lad banter and online sexual harassment (Haslop and O’Rourke 2020; Ringrose et al. 2021). The unwanted sexual attention, hence, becomes a viral tactic for justifying the male superiority and punishment of those women who express feminist ideas (Cole 2015; Jane 2014).

Going even further than casual sexual harassment a small proportion of tweeters posted explicitly Men’s Rights Activist (Ging 2017) derived tweets with memes that denigrate Professor Ringrose.

A wide selection of twats to be sure but the biggest must be you.

(Meme in Figure 6 included in the tweet below)



Figure 6. Anti-feminist meme ‘THE SHOOMER’

Culturally associated with radicalized far-right conservative ideology (Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir 2020), the misogynistic meme in Figure 6 becomes particularly noteworthy

since it portrays feminists as ‘repellent’. The meme as a form of accessible and graphic language is weaponized to quickly spread discontent, disinformation and exclusionary masculinist ideology, and to regulate the online sphere (Ging 2017; Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir 2020). We see a distinctive strand of digital ‘witch hunt’ (Siapera 2019) where women are persecuted and threatened with the aim of driving them off the online public space. For instance, one of the tweets mentioned the physical geolocation of Ringrose’s (similar to doxxing) replying ‘From “Woking” indeed...’ which appeared to communicate an implicit threat to incite fear over disclosing her address and at the same time intend a wordplay as a mockery or insult of ‘wokeness’.

4. Feminist Sex Education as Perverting the Innocent Child

Other tweets displayed implicit and explicit mocking expressions of making Play-Doh genitals as perverted or mentally-ill behaviours that need to be disciplined and rectified. Terms in this vein that were used to describe Professor Ringrose included: idiot, moron, lunatic, pathetic, sick, fucked, nutty, damaged goods, pervert. Some posters mentioned that the activity was akin to what lads do at school and get in trouble for:

I used to get a slap round the ear for doing this at school.

Several tweets like this one talked about how unfair it was that this practice was now being used by feminist academics, something that was out of step with normal and proper childhood educational settings. Other tweeters were more outraged by the practising of genital modelling with children, saying for instance ‘they’re just kids’. These tweets were organized around a protectionist discourse (Egan and Hawkes 2008) of imperilled childhood innocence (Garlen 2018), which further related to Professor Ringrose being called a pervert or ‘grooming children’:

Keep away from my fucking grandkid you creeps

This is absolutely disgusting, and deeply disturbing. How do they get away with this?!

Absolutely preposterous. Beyond repulsion.

Sick bastards. Leave kids the fuck alone and let them develop, naturally. Tender your resignation 'Prof' you complete and utter lunatic.

We see a conservative, puritan discourse on sexuality intertwined in these attacks, since our activity with Masters level students incurred concerns about exposure to sex education putting childhood innocence at risk and ideas that discussing genitals and sexuality with young people was 'disgusting' and 'beyond repulsion':

I am a woman, and you sort are vile. You encourage the degrading of females. How stupid you are with the dopey empowerment and Feminist buzzwords stick your plastic sex toys and stay away from grooming children.

This poster invoked her identity 'as a woman' in order to legitimize herself as a protector of children and reject feminist ideas about 'empowerment' as actually 'degrading'.

Gender-Trolling as a Trap of ‘Unwanted Visibility’

Having teased out the primary discourses manifested in the trolling episode in the previous sections, we now offer a conceptualization of gender-trolling in relation to post-truth politics to account for how gendered hate and violence has been facilitated and amplified in social network sites such as Twitter. Gender-trolling as a networked form of harassment has been picked up by anti-feminist and misogynistic online groups (Mantilla 2013; Marwick and Caplan 2018) and can be better understood if we consider the dynamic entanglement of a vast array of online feminist and anti-feminist discourses, affects and the platform specificity of Twitter.

The original tweet, which received over 200,000 impressions, exemplified how specific articulations of feminisms in an online public platform can initiate a huge connective backlash causing (im)possibilities for visibility of feminist pedagogy (Ringrose 2018). The concept of ‘context collapse’ (Marwick and boyd 2011: 114) demonstrates the challenge to manage one’s digital performances on social media platforms which singularize and reduce the context of posting (to a limited number of characters) and reach unpredictable audiences to view/comment/attack. In our case, we are called upon to perform a public digital feminist pedagogy by our institution (Ringrose 2018) and yet this invokes a wide range of anti-feminist and misogynistic hostilities (Banet-Weiser 2018). Although they are not the intended audience, the trolls, fuelled by disinformation and misperceptions about (feminist) sex education and academia and moral panic logics, flooded the original tweet with male supremacist and conservative replies, emojis, GIFs and memes expressing disgust, scorn, anger and mockery.

Moving beyond the politics of making feminist issues visible in the mediascape (‘clitoral validity’ in this case), we also take account of online visibility as ‘the potential audience who can bear witness’ (boyd 2014: 11) which is intersected with the economy of

(gendered-)visibility (Banet-Weiser 2018). Marwick and Lewis (2017) have pointed out that online hate groups and trolls have adopted some tactics such as memes, bots and networks to enhance the visibility of their messages. The feature of the Twitter platform allowed their replies to appear right under the original tweets which rendered the trolls and shitposts an exhibit space out of the control of the original poster. In this regard, our feminist pedagogy to challenge both phallogocentrism and the patriarchy in current sex education practices was hijacked by the anti-feminist and misogynist troll mob.

In doing so, posters used various tech skills and known troll tactics out of the ‘alt right playbook’ (Ging 2021) such as: using satirist humour and irony in memes and GIFs; posting sexist and racist hate comments; publicly posting private information about the selected target(s) (e.g. location of Professor Ringrose); and disrupting meaningful, on-topic dialogue via posting with off-topic, marauding banter (e.g. shitposting) (Ortiz 2020). In this sense, the shitposting is distinctly anti-feminist and misogynistic, and these trolling tactics should be conceptualized as ‘unwanted visibility’ in terms of their intrusive presence in the context. More importantly, such ‘unwanted visibility’ is enabled and amplified by the Twitter platform and its algorithms of hate speech detection. Research on social media detection approaches enabled by machine learning and artificial intelligence showed that these are replicating racial and gendered bias (Caliskan et al. 2017; Carlson and Rousselle 2020). Our experiences mirrored these findings as misogynistic slurs such as ‘cunt’, ‘slapper’, ‘bitch’, went undiscovered and unremoved even in conversations reported, which contradicted Twitter’s policy on hateful conduct to prohibit ‘repeated and/or non-consensual slurs, epithets, racist and sexist tropes, or other content that degrades someone’ (Twitter Help Center 2021). Also, because such trolling tactics do not operate through visible violent hate speech, even when reported they are not understood as causing (enough) harm by either the police or the

platform to do anything. This is also part of the post-truth landscape to legitimate and normalize anti-feminist hatred.

Our theorization of gender-trolling as a form of ‘unwanted visibility’ also considers the relations between platform designs and how users perceive, understand and approach certain platforms (Bucher and Helmond 2018). For social media platforms that technologically feature machine learning and economically benefit from interactions with user-generated contents, the relation between the platform and its users is not at all unidirectional, since the platform influences and is influenced by its users. We noticed some trolls responding to Professor Ringrose’s second tweet saying such as ‘8 hrs later and only 23 RT’. Those replies tried to quantify and measure and then delegitimize the visibility of Ringrose’s tweet which noted that the former tweet had ‘gone viral’ with trolls and asked feminists in her own feed to retweet and show support for feminist work on women’s sexual empowerment. The troll rejects the claim of visibility of virality, in an attention economy which to them signals feminists are having a reaction. Such quantification is based on the capitalist logic of social media interactions being translated into profitable and legitimating attention, which the trolls seek to cancel off the platform. Researchers have expressed concerns about social media platforms’ encouragement of polarizing views and disputes for its (profit-)ability to turn such disputable contents into traffic and trends for the corporates to monetize while disregarding their social responsibility to deal with hate and abuse (Bartow 2009; Munn 2020; Shepherd et al. 2015).

Empirical research has evidenced how publicity and visibility have become a major challenge for feminists and women to negotiate on Twitter (Mendes et al. 2019). This hence creates a trap where on one hand public platforms like Twitter are widely used to promote feminist visibility, and on the other hand feminists and women are being primary targets for trolls and other online abuse (Jane 2016). This adds to the precarity of practising feminist

pedagogy online and hugely undermines women's parity of participation in public spaces, and also contradicts Twitter's claimed endorsement for public conversation and for protecting against hate speech. In addition to the problems with algorithms and designs that have built-in bias and normalized polarization and harassment, Twitter's current mechanisms of tackling hateful conducts shift the responsibilities to its users by asking them to report problematic and harmful behaviours or use blocklist as a form of self-care (Wheatley and Vatnoey 2020). The focus on individual-level responsabilization is insufficient to tackle trolling as a collective form of online abuse, with wide homosocial reach in the case of misogynist networks; and is totally inadequate in tackling the structural and systemic gender inequalities that are intrinsically intertwined within infrastructures of social media platforms like Twitter.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, we explored an online gender-trolling event targeted at Professor Ringrose in response to tweeting about Play-Doh genital building session conducted online for Masters students in the context of a global pandemic. We summarized the main discursive themes as categorized in four pathways: education in crisis; feminist academia as a parody; masculine penile superiority and moral panics about childhood innocence. We demonstrated the main goal of gender-trolling is to disrupt dialogues through using repetitive, systematic techniques such as 'luring into pointless and time-consuming discussion' (Herring et al. 2002: 372) which we identified as shitposting. Moreover, shitposting in this paper was identified as anti-feminist and misogynist, as we also showed sarcastic humour was part of the affective spread of digital lad banter (Haslop and O'Rourke 2020; Ringrose et al. 2021) with a goal of harassment to cancel women and feminists, and to silence their voices in online public space.

At the same time, they employ strategies of avoiding Twitter Artificial Intelligence (AI) hate speech detection and future legal consequences.

The affordance of visibility was discussed to explain how gender-trolling created a trap and obstacle for digital feminist pedagogy on Twitter. However, as mentioned previously, a reconceptualization of gender-trolling is needed for a more comprehensive definition (Ortiz 2020). Trolling is not only the digital performance of hate directed to a collectively chosen target (Ortiz 2020: 6) but also the enactment and reproduction of social inequity. Our definition of gender-trolling describes the act as a form of collective and identity-based online violence adopting sarcastic lad banter humour, interlinked with (white)cis-heteronormative masculinity and regressive far-right politics.

Our position on gender-trolling is both ethical and epistemological (Ringrose et al. 2019) since we are challenging the ways that recurrent forms of online abuse are shaping the possibilities for women and marginalized people to create expression and voice, to make truth claims and dialogue with audiences online and offline. Yet also, we are pointing at how online abuse, taking discursive and affective forms of hate, disgust and satirical humour, feed into post-truth politics through abusers' modulation and reshaping of what is (not) legitimate knowledge. Facing such a post-truth climate and invasive 'alt-right gaze' (Massanari 2018: 3), feminist researchers must carefully reconsider what online space means and does for conducting, disseminating and promoting gender-progressive academic work.

We close this chapter by emphasizing the need to consider gender-trolling as a structural inequity problem but also as gendered violence and hate crime. In a moment where misogyny is starting to be recognized legally as a hate crime in the UK (Dathan and Hamilton 2021), we are pushing for the recognition of gender-trolling as digitally-mediated gendered abuse. Moreover, a multi-dimensional approach to addressing gender-trolling is urgently needed which moves beyond individual self-care/protection and calls for further public

debate, and legal and institutional change. Stakeholders such as social media platforms must take measures to counter these abuses instead of continuing to amplify them for their profitability. Moreover, universities encourage both scholars and PhD students to disseminate their work via social media as representatives of the institutes. Yet any encounter with online abuse is easily framed as individual-based, avoiding the need for institutional intervention nor support to prevent or protect academics from these attacks. This problem reveals significant neglect of gendered power relations endemic to knowledge production and contributes to the entangled dynamics that push feminist scholars out of the public sphere.

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