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Sexism in the Digital World: A Thematic Content Analysis of the Cyberbullying of Lil Miquela

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Sexism in the Digital World: A Thematic Content Analysis of the Cyberbullying of Lil Miquela

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Master's Thesis submitted to the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences at West Virginia
University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology

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ABSTRACT

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Miquela

Shyanne E. Schmithorst

As artificial intelligence (AI) evolves, social issues associated with this technology are also perpetuated. This is especially pertinent to online violence against women. In April 2016, fictional character “Lil Miquela,” an AI robot who would quickly rise to fame as a social media influencer, was created using Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI). Significant backlash has persisted against Lil Miquela throughout its existence, which has typically taken the form of demeaning comments made by other users on Lil Miquela’s social media pages. As the robot looks deceptively like a human female, the robot receives online treatment that mimics that of human women. Utilizing thematic content analysis of comments left by users on Lil Miquela’s Instagram page from late April to early May 2019 (N= 2719), I argue that misogyny, under the guise of aggrieved entitlement, is a significant driver of the demeaning comments directed at Lil Miquela, and that this is reflective of misogyny towards women in general. Furthermore, I discuss the role of male peer support in perpetuating this misogyny. By creating a typology of the different types of sexism that women experience and applying it to the case of Lil Miquela, it demonstrates how comfortable users are to degrade the bot, simply because it is a female AI that cannot feel or respond to insulting comments. Ultimately, the cyberbullying of the bot does cause harm to human women because the bot is representative of human women. This study examines the following questions: (1) How prevalent is sexism in Lil Miquela’s Instagram comments? (2) How does Lil Miquela’s sexist treatment online represent the sexist treatment that human women face? It was discovered that 15.7% of the comments on Lil Miquela’s Instagram are sexist in nature. Of those sexist comments, the majority (91.5%) reflected hatred of women in general, while other comments (7.1%) objectified women by reducing Lil Miquela to female genitalia, and the remaining comments were outright sexually violent towards women (1.4%). Undoubtedly, this breakdown reflects the association between abusive male peers, aggrieved entitlement, and sexism online that contributes to violence towards women as a norm.

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INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, artificial intelligence (AI) has intrigued the collective imagination. AI is defined as a “field that combines computer science and robust datasets to enable problem-solving” (International Business Machines Corporation 2020). Artificially intelligent beings can perform a vast array of human activities, which include walking, talking, and in the case of Lil Miquela and others, achieving influencer status on social media through an artificial personality. As AI has drastically increased in its scope and complexity over the decades, social issues associated with this technology have also arisen. One important social issue in the technological universe is the interaction between humans and AI, and how these interactions mimic human-to-human interactions. When the AI is a celebrity, such as Lil Miquela, these interactions often become public on social media.

In April 2016, the artificially intelligent, anthropomorphic, fictional robot Miquela Sousa, or Lil Miquela character, was developed by Trevor McFedries and Sara DeCou of Los Angeles-based technology company Brud (Petrarca 2018). The character was created using Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI), which the National Film Institute (n.d.) defines as “the 3D computer graphics used to create characters, scenes, and other special effects in movies, television, and games.” Lil Miquela’s hyperrealistic CGI and personality nuances are key to what has initiated curiosity, confusion, and contempt surrounding the bot’s character. Not only does the bot closely resemble a human female, but it also lives a human-like story, which keeps audiences engaged because they can, in some ways, personally relate to the bot. The bot’s humanlike social media pages have attracted considerably large audiences; this is particularly the case with the bot’s Instagram page, as it connects with over one million followers (Petrarca 2018).

Lil Miquela's likeness to that of a human female has also ultimately led to the high prevalence of harassment and violence against the bot on the bot's social media pages. The comfortability and frequency of such violence against Lil Miquela demonstrates a norm of online violence against women. Some members of society, primarily men, might feel a sense of aggrieved entitlement towards Lil Miquela that allows them to justify their negative treatment of the bot on its social media pages. They might feel that Lil Miquela—a minority *robot*—has taken the social media following, fame, and influencer status that should rightfully be theirs. Some entitled men may be further incentivized to harass the bot due to their feelings of aggrieved entitlement being validated and supported by the high number of other commenters who appear to feel the same way—in this manner, these men receive a form of peer support from these other commenters. As human women are consumers of the content on Lil Miquela's Instagram page, the backlash against Lil Miquela affects them because Lil Miquela is represented as *one* of them.

Lil Miquela is a victim of cyberbullying, or, as defined by Smith and colleagues (2008, p. 376), “An aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself.” The cyberbullying of Lil Miquela is perpetuated under the premise that robots like Lil Miquela cannot possibly feel emotions, and thus no harm is done to any persons. However, this behavior online reinforces negative stereotypes of women, and perpetuates violence against women as a norm online. As such, this kind of behavior can be considered a form of online sexism. Swim and Hyers (2009, p. 407) define sexism as “Individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, and organizational, institutional, and cultural practices that either reflect negative evaluations of individuals based on their gender or support unequal status of women and men.” Stankos (1995) argues that the location of women in today's male-dominated world leads to

increased risk and acceptance of attacks on women's sexual integrity. Based on the bot's feminine identity alone, in the male-dominated digital world, Lil Miquela is cyberbullied.

Utilizing thematic content analysis of comments left by users on Lil Miquela's Instagram page from late April to early May 2019 (N= 2719), I argue that misogyny, under the guise of aggrieved entitlement, is a significant driver of these demeaning comments directed at Lil Miquela, and that this is reflective of misogyny towards women in general. Further, I discuss the role of male peer support in perpetuating this misogyny. By creating a typology of the different types of sexism that women experience and applying it to the case of Lil Miquela, it demonstrates how comfortable users are to degrade the bot, simply because it is a female AI that cannot possibly feel emotions or respond to such comments. Ultimately, the cyberbullying of the bot causes harm to human women because the bot represents human women. This study examines the following questions: (1) How prevalent is sexism in Lil Miquela's Instagram comments? (2) How does Lil Miquela's sexist treatment online represent the sexist treatment that human women face?

LIL MIQUELA'S IDENTITY, CONNECTION TO HUMANITY, AND MEDIA BACKLASH



Instagram/@lilmiquela

Who is Lil Miquela?

Lil Miquela has built a consistent following because the bot's character is both hyperrealistic and reads like the biography of a human, Gen-Z female. The bot is designed to be attractive for advertising, modeling, and influencing. The bot's appearance consists of dark

brown eyes, dark brown hair with straight bangs, plump lips, noticeable freckles, and trendy makeup. The bot's life story reads like that of a real human, as Lil Miquela identifies as a person of color, has a pet dog named Harley Rose, has a crush on a boy named Nick, claims to lonely at times, and identifies as being part of the LGBTQ+ community (Callahan 2021). Lil Miquela's *Fandom* reports trivial idiosyncrasies that further build Lil Miquela's story, which include calling the bot's fans "Miqaliens," being known for not taking itself too seriously, wanting to appear on Spotify's A-list with one of the bot's electric songs, and openly enjoying time spent with both human and robot friends. Some of Lil Miquela's friends include bots Blawko and Bermuda, and, as they are called by the bot's fans, "flesh-and-bone influencers" J Balvin, Diplo, and Samantha Urbani (Miquelapedia n.d.). In 2018, Lil Miquela was dubbed by *Time* as one of the most influential people on the internet (Sokolowski 2020). Over the years since the bot's creation, consumers of media, particularly female consumers, continue to identify with Lil Miquela based on the bot's views of fashion, politics, and culture.

How Do People Connect (or Disconnect) with Lil Miquela?

As an online avatar, the way in which people interact with Lil Miquela is not unlike how they might behave around other robots. Broadbent's (2016, p. 645) annual review concerning the interactions between humans and robots reveal that human-robot interactions can be beneficial for humans in that they provide companionship and increased communication. Negative interactions with robots might include making humans feel uncomfortable as the robot may be perceived as a threat when they behave differently than expected. Furthermore, because of the robot, one may question who they are and project desires onto the robot. Given Lil Miquela's lifelike appearance and biography, interacting with the bot may indeed provide almost human-like companionship and communication, and may be a driver of how large the bot's audience has

become. However, this also allows for members of Lil Miquela's audience to attack and degrade the bot in ways they might do towards a human female. Such emotional damage directed towards the bot may indicate a desire from these users to engage in similar acts of cyberbullying towards human women.

Nass and Moon (2000) note that humanization towards computers or bots like Lil Miquela occurs when people apply gender, ethnicity, or other stereotypes to the computer or bot, or when they identify with it emotionally. Furthermore, people tend to interact with computers and bots similarly to how people interact with each other, exhibiting politeness and reciprocity. Additionally, people perceive them as having "personalities" and socially respond as such. Lil Miquela's audience very likely responds to the bot in a similar way. They may relate to the bot by applying feminine or Gen-Z stereotypes to Lil Miquela, or by emotionally relating to the bot's expressions or biographical experiences. This may cause them to like or feel positively towards Lil Miquela in a manner like how they would react to a human with similar characteristics. Indeed, this may be particularly salient because Lil Miquela is presented as a female—Reeves and Nass' (1996) earlier study found that people often treat computers or bots that have male and female voices differently, which may reflect other beliefs or stereotypes that are held about each gender.

As a social media influencer, Lil Miquela is meant to appeal to a large audience, many of whom may certainly be interested in social media influencing themselves. Blogging, online entrepreneurship, and public relations are some of the various activities influencers like Lil Miquela engage in to interact with such an audience (Favela 2021). Lil Miquela itself specializes in the fashion blogging industry. Madigan (2013) documents that in videogames such as *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*, it is not uncommon for people to relate to virtual characters or

creations, also called “avatars,” that are idealized in that they possess or display qualities that these people desire in the real world. Lil Miquela appears to fit the criteria of “idealized avatar” to the audience’s perspective through the bot’s publicized brand deals with companies like *Nike* and *Calvin Klein*, details in appearance such as high-quality nails and makeup, and aesthetic idiosyncrasies, such as a gap in the bot’s teeth. A significant proportion of Lil Miquela’s audience may follow the bot’s social media pages due to how much they desire to have the kinds of opportunities or physical details she does.

What Backlash has Lil Miquela Received?

Lil Miquela’s existence is met with curiosity, confusion, and contempt, not only because of the bot’s identity and story, but for being CGI at all. Bitencourt and colleagues (2021) define CGI influencers like Lil Miquela as “characters created with computer modeling techniques that have profiles on social networks and sociomaterial trajectories built with the aid of digital marketing, business intelligence, and media companies.” The novelty of CGI social media influencers is a big driver in marketing success, as these figures bring attention to their respective brands due to the unconventional nature of their advertising (Dodgson 2019). However, there has been significant backlash towards the rise of CGI social media influencers such as Lil Miquela because of this novelty and their ambiguous position in the online world. Klein (2020) states that people have been made uncomfortable because of the attractiveness of these bots, that they promote unrealistic beauty standards, and that competition for modeling and similar gigs is drastically increased against the human people in those industries. In the case of Lil Miquela’s Instagram profile, many of the bot’s followers are unsettled by the bots’ creator’s attempts to make Lil Miquela attractive, life-like, and possibly an idealized image of the bot’s fans or creator. Some comments include:

“[sic] Who knew a bitch could be so insecure she has to brainwash people into thinking she’s a robot when she’s just self-conscious.”

“[sic] I would’ve been scared shitless if I saw this bitch in person.”

“[sic] Sorry but bitch you not a robot, you’re a girl who digitally enhances her photos for whatever reason, as soon as you found out you’d become a conspiracy theory you carried on it then ‘revealed the truth’ that you are an actual robot, like no you’re not, you’re just a girl who wants some clout and attention. Surly someone has to agree with me?”

Molina (2020) concludes that through the bot’s presence on social media, Lil Miquela exacerbates the objectification of women and the commodification of the female body.

Lil Miquela has also been involved with other forms of controversy. Several LGBTQ couples were not satisfied with a Calvin Klein advertisement that featured Lil Miquela and American model Bella Hadid. Many of these couples felt that the ad was “queer-baiting” and “tone deaf” because the advertisement appeared to hint at Lil Miquela being attracted to Bella Hadid but did so in a way that was ambiguous. Further controversy came after Lil Miquela claimed in a video blog dated from 2019 that she was sexually assaulted by a man in a rideshare. Before she escaped from the car, the man allegedly was threatening towards the bot, touched the bot’s leg, and asked the bot many inappropriate questions (Wakefield 2019). The backlash from this incident was significant, as commentators claimed the bot’s creators just fabricated this story to make the bot seem more relatable to humans. Some of the comments on Twitter were:

“[sic] absolutely fucking not. ABSOLUTELY FUCKING NOT. A virtual project telling me some story of an unreal sexual assault pisses me off just as much as when women lie. It’s a fabrication. A dangerous one. There are ways to make @lilmiquela relatable. This isn’t one of them.”

“[sic] It’s like whoever is behind this character obviously went through so much to make her as relatable as possible... They were like ‘to make her more realistic, let’s pretend she was sexually assaulted.’”

These controversies have set the stage for commentators to continue their attacks against Lil Miquela, and indirectly, this backlash against Lil Miquela has been backlash against women. Lil Miquela’s story is reminiscent of the experiences of women during the #MeToo movement. Chatergee (2018) of *National Public Radio* reports that an online survey that 81% of women experienced some form of sexual harassment during their lifetime. Brenzda (2019) argues that

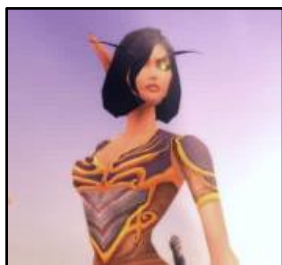
Lil Miquela's assault could have not possibly occurred, that it belittles the experiences of women, and even empowers those who may deny the sexual assaults of women. However, Lil Miquela's backlash in this incident is indeed representative of that of the many women who reveal experiences of sexual assault receive—shock, disbelief, and ostracization.

SEXISM IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

The impact of sexism online has taken recent scholarly interest. Tyers-Chowdhury and Binder (2021) of The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) have brought forth several striking conclusions addressing the gender digital divide for females. According to their analyses, 52% of young women globally have experienced some form of digital harm, and 87% of young women believe that the problem of digital harm towards women is getting worse. Furthermore, 25% of young women who are harassed online cite reasons such as “authorities don't care” and “it's not worth reporting” as reasons why they do not report their abuse. Women may practice self-monitoring online, as to avoid criticism for activities such as maintaining an open profile, having too many friends in general or too many male friends, or for revealing photos. Over three-quarters of women who have experienced abuse or harassment on social media made changes to the way that they use their platforms, according to a 2017 *Amnesty International IPSOS MORI* poll. Furthermore, 55% of the participants, after experiencing online abuse or harassment, reported that they had experienced stress, anxiety, or panic attacks. UNICEF further reports that 59% of women who have experienced online abuse stated that their emotional and/or physical well-being and relationships have been negatively affected. As a result, their confidence in feeling safe using the Internet has gone down.

Srivastava and colleagues (2017) note that online misogyny and other types of harassment associated with the use of social media are under the umbrella of what concerns

fourth-wave feminism, a movement to address the most recent social issues concerning women, including the #MeToo movement, sexist imagery in the media, and rape culture, among other issues. Sobieraj (2017) reinforces that women face increasing hostility in the digital world, including in discussion rooms, gaming communities, comment sections, and on social media platforms. These actions persist because aggressors intimidate, shame, and discredit women to limit the impact of women in digital spaces. Indeed, behavior in online spaces, such as the ones in videogames, can be used as predictors for online misogyny. Offline sexist beliefs, game-related factors such as perceived territoriality, advancement, and competition, and environmental factors such as peer harassment are predictors of sexism in online videogames (Seo and colleagues 2021), as well as masculine norms such as the desire for power over women and heterosexual self-presentation (Fox and Tang 2014). Lil Miquela is not dissimilar in appearance to video game characters. For example, Lil Miquela resembles this *World of Warcraft* character:



UpperCutCrit/It's a Man's World of Warcraft



Instagram/@lilmiquela

Online misogyny is also persistent in politics. Inguanzo and colleagues (2021) found that those who hold hostile sexist views are more likely to generate political content online. Barker and Jurasz (2019) note that the effects of online misogyny are significant, as women's equal participation in public and political life is met with significant obstacles, and women's rights to freely express their views are threatened by online violence against women. The authors emphasize the normalization of casual, everyday misogyny, as the Internet gives a voice to "those who speak the loudest" without challenge. Indeed, those members of society who "speak

the loudest” are usually given the platform and the confidence to, as they experience aggrieved entitlement and use peer support from each other to belittle women. In the case of Lil Miquela, the bot provides a “front” to attack women. Fox and colleagues (2015) found in a study that examined sexist hashtags on *Twitter* that anonymity and retweeting tweets with sexist hashtags perpetuate both online and offline sexism.

Moloney and Love (2018, p. 1) offer a sociological perspective of online misogyny, and from feminist media scholarship, examine four terms with the intent of being descriptors of acts of online misogyny which include online sexual harassment, gendertrolling, e-bile, and disciplinary rhetoric. Further within the broader context of gender theory, the authors argue that men dominate online spaces due to abilities of “using textual and visual cues to signal a masculine self, enforce hegemonic gender norms, oppress women, and keep men ‘in the box.’” Lil Miquela is indeed a victim of these acts of online misogyny, and particularly relevant terms are e-bile and gendertrolling. Jane (2014, p. 532-33, 536) provides insight into e-bile, or “the extravagant invective, the sexualized threats of violence the recreational nastiness that have come to constitute a dominant tenor of Internet discourse.” Female victims of e-bile suffer extensively, and have responses that range in intensity from “feelings of irritation, anxiety, sadness, loneliness, vulnerability, and unsafeness; to feelings of distress, pain, shock, fear, terror, devastation, and violation.” Further, women are reluctant to speak out against this type of abuse because they do not want to be perceived as not having thick skin, lacking humor, or as opposed to free speech principals. Mantilla (2013) further discusses gendertrolling. Gendertrolling is another barrier that normalizes online violence against women, as these online harassment campaigns target feminist ideas and reinforce that the digital world is a male-dominated space. Gendertrolling is comprised of the often-coordinated participation of numerous people using

gender-based insults such as “whore” and “slut,” among other forms of vicious language, in a manner that is unusual in its intensity, scope, and longevity. Commonly, such forms of online behavior are done in reaction to women speaking out using online platforms.

Lil Miquela has played a significant role in the examination of interactions between humans and AI with a specific focus on violence against women. For all intents and purposes, Lil Miquela was created as and is designed with the intent that audiences will treat the bot as a *female* robot, or essentially, any other girl. Lil Miquela inherently represents actual women because the bot was designed to identify and connect with a female audience, and the bot’s audience appears to relate to Lil Miquela as such. Violence against Lil Miquela is violence against actual women because although Lil Miquela cannot internalize sexist comments, the bot’s audience can, which inherently includes female women. Lil Miquela is, through fashion and other related content, a symbol for the idealized lives of young American women. Gen Z has formed emotional and mental relationships with bots such as Lil Miquela, and this is because of the great extent that the bots are anthropomorphized (Kugler 2023). Lil Miquela is a natural outlet for some members of society to feel a catharsis in releasing sexist and other demeaning comments, as it is not possible for the bot itself to be harmed emotionally. Lil Miquela is indeed a *victim* as the bot has experienced gender-based attacks online. Misogyny towards the bot reflects the aggrieved entitlement that some members of society have towards women, and this indirectly impacts women because women are belittled in the often male-dominated Instagram world.

AGGRIEVED ENTITLEMENT, MALE PEER SUPPORT, AND THE CONNECTION TO
ONLINE VIOLENCE AGAINST LIL MIQUELA

Aggrieved Entitlement

Cyberbullying towards Lil Miquela, particularly sexism towards the feminine bot, persists because of the aggrieved entitlement that some members of the bot's audience may feel. As Lil Miquela has achieved celebrity status and fame, this has likely antagonized some users, mainly men, who might feel that they are the rightful heirs to the bot's status, revenue, and the bot itself. Because Lil Miquela is not human, some users, especially male users, may further feel entitled to degrade and humiliate the bot because it, perceived as a "she," is taking space and attention away from "their" platforms. Indeed, Lil Miquela provides an anonymous, impersonal front to indirectly attack women because of the very nature of the bot's existence. Aggrieved entitlement, as defined by Kimmel (2013, p. 18, emphasis in original, 32) captures how cyberbullying, and thus sexism, towards Lil Miquela persists because of the foundation of aggrieved entitlement:

It is that sense that those benefits to which you believed yourself entitled have been snatched away from you by unseen forces larger and more powerful. You feel yourself to be the heir to a great promise, the American Dream, which has turned into an impossible fantasy for the very people who were *supposed* to inherit it.

It is sense that some members of society feel on conscious and unconscious levels that they are the rightful heirs of America's bounty, that they have had what is "rightfully theirs" taken from them by the faceless, feckless government bureaucrats, and given to "them", undeserving minorities, immigrants, women, gays, and their ilk.

Scholars have addressed the impact of aggrieved entitlement both online and offline. In their exploratory study examining "Women Against Feminism" *Tumblr* postings, DeKeseredy and colleagues (2015) found that young, mostly white women have perpetuated the patriarchy of aggrieved entitlement through anti-feminism postings. Like a mirror to cyberbullying, aggrieved entitlement can also be observed in political outcomes. As DeKeseredy and Currie (2019) note, the 2016 election of Donald Trump demonstrated how disingenuous angry white men will go to great lengths to meet the standard of hegemonic masculinity, and it results in more danger than is often realized. Furthermore, on college campuses, despite mostly being in privileged positions,

many male college students may feel “stiffed” and are “not supportive of progressive efforts aimed at making communities safer and more equitable for women, sexual minorities, and ethnic minorities” (DeKeseredy and colleagues 2019, p. 15).

Male Peer Support Theory

Male peer support theory is directly related to aggrieved entitlement because aggrieved entitlement is reinforced with the support networks that male peers provide. Male peer support theory “refers to the attachments to male peers and the resources that some men provide which encourage and legitimize woman abuse” (DeKeseredy and Schwartz 1990, p. 130). Additionally, Schwartz and DeKeseredy (2008) propose that societal patriarchy is what ultimately contributes to violence against women, and those that are more likely to be abusive towards intimate partners adhere to patriarchal values and practices.

Offline studies have addressed the impact of male support in many subcultures where women are victimized. In many cases, these cultures directly translate to online behavior. Male commentators receive validation and confidence from each other in their pursuit of cyberbullying Lil Miquela, just as they receive validation and confidence offline. Decades of studies have captured the disproportionate amount of violence against women on college campuses because of male peer support (e.g., DeKeseredy and Kelly 1995; Schwartz and DeKeseredy 1997; Schwartz and colleagues 2001; Schwartz and colleagues 2006; Franklin and colleagues 2012). In rural areas, the role of male peer support is a core component in violence against women. DeKeseredy and colleagues (2007) report that male support has a role in the enablement of sexual assault after a divorce/separation in rural areas. Furthermore, Hall-Sanchez (2014) finds that in some rural communities, male peer support (i.e., drinking with male friends, informational support, and attachment to abusive peers) creates the foundation for abuse to occur.

Studies both online and offline have addressed the impact of technology-facilitated abuse towards women. DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2016), in their study that examined image-based sexual abuse, or revenge porn, found that gender is a major risk factor for being harmed by image-based sexual abuse by current and former intimate male partners. Furthermore, Schwartz (2021, p. 628) notes that online misogynists are often “white supremacists, alt-right extremists, and anti-feminists” that use the red pill from *The Matrix* film as a symbol to represent that they “have the ultimate hidden truths revealed to them.” As Godenzi and colleagues (2001) note, male peer support groups gravitate towards the Internet to potentially share violent pornography and spend a great deal of time consuming it. Mikorski and Szymanski (2017) conducted a study that examined heterosexual males and Facebook use. The authors found that unique predictors of making unwanted sexual advances towards women are the use of pornography, Facebook use, the interaction of playboy norms and association with abusive male peers, the interaction of power over women norms and association with abusive male peers, and the interaction of violence norms and association with abusive male peers.

Male peer support theory can additionally be used to understand the cyberbullying of bots like Lil Miquela because online male bonds create safe places for the expression of negative feelings towards women, especially when, in the case of Lil Miquela, the woman-like AI appears inherently unaffected itself. Seeing offensive comments, for some members of Lil Miquela’s audience, may make them feel more inclined and incentivized to write their own offensive comments because the other comments they see act as a source of support and reinforcement for their feelings of aggrieved entitlement. Many male peers pay no grievance to who consumes Lil Miquela’s content, including the reaction to Lil Miquela. As the literature shows, women are

disproportionately abused online and offline, and some men have developed entire support networks to justify abuses towards women online and/through bots like Lil Miquela.

DATA

The data for this study comes from “Club 404,” a group of Rutgers university students who researched the harassment of social media influencers: Gail Caputo, Jim Brown, Sora Kiwior, Christopher Till, and Milosz Krupinski. The data was collected by archiving the 2,719 posts of Instagram user `lil_miquela` from the end of April 2019 to the beginning of May 2019. The students used a Python library called BeautifulSoup4, and Selenium, a Python tool that automates the use of a browser window and allows the user to click on comments and load all user comments. The data was identified by one of the following categories: spam/catch all, harassment towards Lil Miquela, harassment in general, self-promotion, robot questions, flirting, and defense of the robot. Each of the comments towards the bots are accessed through Excel files, which organize the comments both by the sentiment of the comment and by the usernames of the commenters.

METHODS

A thematic analysis approach is taken to address the themes of harassment that Lil Miquela faces, particularly as it pertains to sexism against women. Thematic analysis is a method used to analyze qualitative data for the purpose of finding themes, or patterns of meaning (Braun and Clarke 2006), as well as explore explicit and implicit meanings within the data (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2014). Neuendorf (2015) notes that the data for conducting thematic analysis are the messages themselves within the text, and that as salient themes emerge inductively from the texts, codes are developed by the investigator. From this method, Thomas (2006) concludes that thematic analysis can produce reliable and valid findings through an easily

used systematic set of procedures. To analyze the umbrella of comments towards Lil Miquela, emergent coding methods were utilized. Charmaz (2008, p. 155) defines an emergent method as indeterminate, open ended, and beginning in the empirical world, while Elliot (2018) outlines the functions of coding data, and notes that coding is the process of indexing or mapping the data, and by breaking down large sets of data, discoveries about the data can be made. From there, knowledge accrues by the building of an inductive understanding of it.

The comments towards Lil Miquela, therefore, can be coded for the purpose of this study by first being organized into two binary comment categories, i.e., those comments that are offensive towards Lil Miquela and those that are not. The comments that are deemed offensive were categorized based on the criteria that the comment is inherently harmful towards Lil Miquela, the bot's creators, or those users that appear to support Lil Miquela. Thereafter, these offensive comments can be categorized as those that are sexist in nature and those that are not. Similar to Rodriguez-Sanchez and colleagues (2022), sexist Instagram comments are defined by the comment expressing sexist behaviors or discourses. Sexism is defined as "Individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, and organizational, institutional, and cultural practices that either reflect negative evaluations of individuals based on their gender or support unequal status of women and men" (Swim and Hyers 2009, p. 407). Finally, the sexist comments can be broken down into three distinct categories of sexism, which is laid out in Table 1.1:

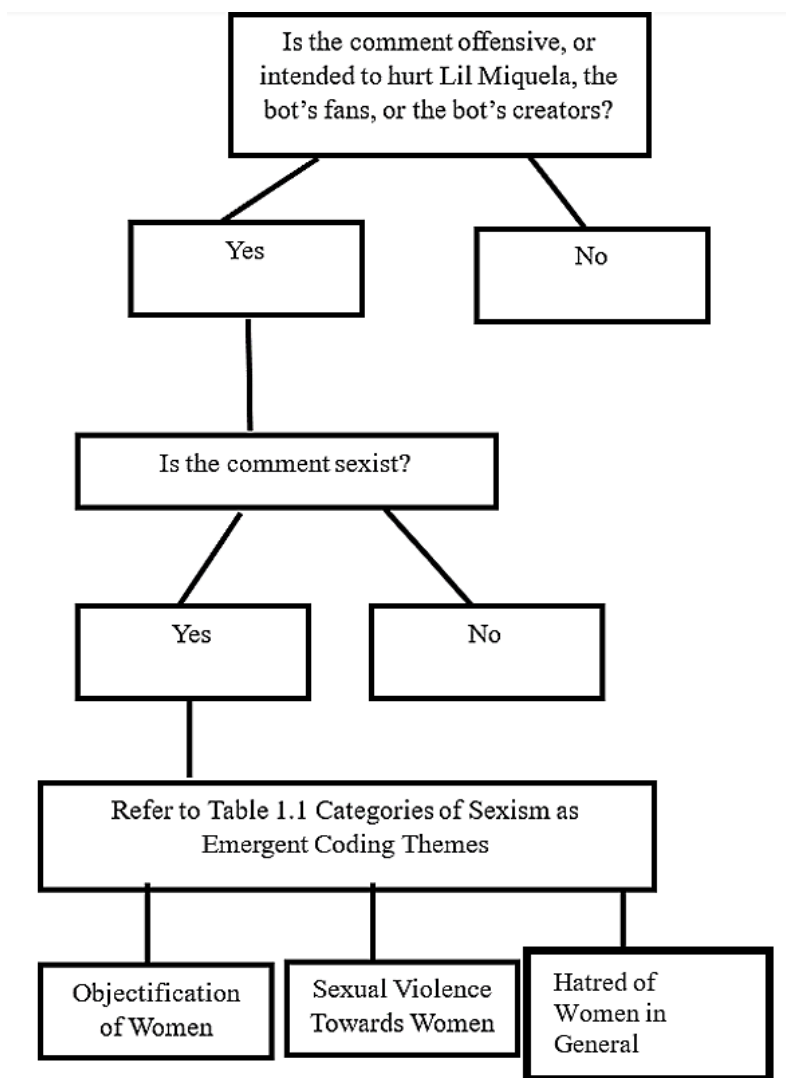
Table 1.1 Categories of Sexism as Emergent Coding Themes

Category	Definition of Category	Example in Lil Miquela's Instagram Comments
Objectification of Women	The text presents women as objects apart from their dignity and personal aspects, or assumes or describes certain physical qualities that women must have in order to fulfill traditional gender roles	"[sic] You got no boobs what the fuck are you covering?"

	(compliance with beauty standards, hypersexualization of female attributes, women's bodies at the disposal of men, etc.).	
Sexual Violence Towards Women	Sexual suggestions, requests for sexual favors or harassment of a sexual nature (rape or sexual assault) are made.	"[sic] Let me cum in u whore"
Hatred of Women in General	The text expresses hatred and violence towards women.	"[sic] U fucking bitch"

This table was adapted from Rodriguez-Sanchez and colleagues (2022 p. 230-231)

Figure 1.1 Flowchart for Filtering Lil Miquela's Instagram Comments from April-May 2019



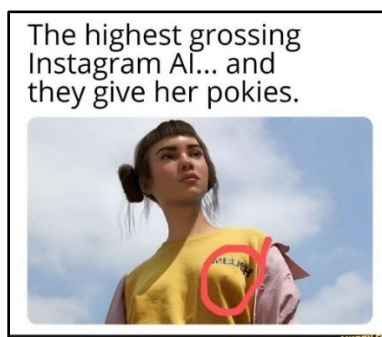
RESULTS

Reactions towards Lil Miquela were a range of emotions. Table 1.2 demonstrates how some comments were neutral or even complimentary, and ultimately non-offensive. Most non-offensive comments were expressions of confusion about what Lil Miquela actually is. While this may not be offensive at face value, skepticism towards Lil Miquela demonstrates a hesitancy to accept Lil Miquela as a legitimate Instagram creator, thus justifying online cyberbullying for some commentors. Furthermore, an unsurprising finding is that a grand majority of comments were offensive, or intended to hurt Lil Miquela, the bot's fans, or the bot's creators. These offensive, non-sexist comments consisted of expressions of fear towards AI, general hatred, and gender-neutral criticisms towards Lil Miquela. Table 1.3 is a breakdown of sexism towards Lil Miquela, using the definitions identified in Table 1.1.

Fundamentally, these comments reveal that because Lil Miquela is a form of AI, commentators feel especially secure in their anonymity is a tool to bully Lil Miquela. Indeed, the spirit of these comments appears to reflect the same types of criticism that human content creators may receive. Lorenz (2018) reports that according to a *Pew Research Center Survey*, 59% of the teenagers that use Instagram report being bullied. One important factor in bullying is the anonymity of users on Instagram. Bullying is done not only by private messages, but also by the creation of "hate pages," where a specific person is targeted in the creation of pages designed with the intent to trash another person by uploading photos of the victim, exposing secrets, and screenshots of texts saying offensive comments about the victim.

Drackett and colleagues (2018) found that feminist literature has revealed many instances where online sexism is acceptable, with the caveat that it is often constructed as a form of humor.

Furthermore, their thematic content analysis revealed that online sexism is abundant in Internet memes. This meme is sexist in nature and has Lil Miquela as the subject:



iFunny / #lilmiquela

Felme, Rodis, and Zhang (2020) argue that because social media platforms create environments in which women are bullied and harassed, traditional feminine norms and stereotypes are reinforced through online aggression towards women. Indeed, this case is clearly illustrated through the frequency of these comments towards Lil Miquela. Associations with abusive male peers are abundant in Lil Miquela’s Instagram page, as evidenced by the frequency of offensive comments.

Table 1.2 Breakdown of Non-Offensive Comments and Offensive, Non-Sexist Comments in Lil Miquela’s Instagram Comments from April-May 2019

Category of Comment	Comment Category Breakdown and Examples	Frequency
Non-Offensive Comments	<p><u>Expressions of Confusion</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “[sic] I’m confused, I thought you were an actual person....” • “[sic] @areenakhurram899 I’m so confused” <p><u>Expressions of the State of Being “Shook” (or rattled/up surprised [eWiktionary, n.d.]</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “[sic] Sorry Tana cant come to the phone right now.....oh why? Because I oficially have shook syndrome.” • “[sic] @_sheppard I AM SHOOK <p><u>Expressions of Skepticism Towards Lil Miquela</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “[sic] But how can a robot feel negativity? Hmm.” • “[sic] i’m so confused she says she’s a robot then posts pictures of her drinking LIQUID like wouldn’t that kill a robot what this is why i have trust issues.” <p><u>Expressions of Praise Towards Lil Miquela</u></p>	19.5%

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “[sic] Little confused but shes really pretty!” • “[sic] Yall i got a serious ass question... Is it cool to date a robot cause im seriously feeling this one.” 	
Offensive, Non-Sexist Comments	<p><u>Expressions of Fear/AI Takeover</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “[sic] creepy as hell” • “[sic] Ew your scary” • “[sic] ‘A robot thing’ I’m freaking out” • “[sic] @becclane she’s stealing your jobs!!!!” • “[sic] Fuck no. Get the water b4 they take over.” • “[sic] OH FUCK ANOTHER ONE” • “[sic] oh fuck sake not another one” <p><u>General Hatred/Disapproval</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “[sic] everyone hates u” • “[sic] Get the fuck off insta” • “[sic] @drippy.moods7 no she is a parody of the modern day internet famous female who lacks depth and parrots mainstream views for attention” <p><u>Appearance Degradation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “[sic] change 🍌 ur 🍌 damn 🍌 hair 🍌” • “[sic] Dairy is cruel though, miquela” • “[sic] Crusty ass nails” • “[sic] damn you ugly” • “[sic] fuckin robot ass lookin” 	80.5%

Table 1.3 Breakdown of Sexism Towards Lil Miquela in Lil Miquela’s Instagram Comments from April-May 2019

Category of Sexist Comments	Sexist Comment Examples	Frequency
Objectification of Women	“[sic] She has no boobs” “[sic] Clothes them legs your pussy stank” “[sic] U have no boobs” “[sic] No tits no ass.” “[sic] What the fuck even are you you freak of nature humanoid alien creature sex doll headass.”	7.1%
Sexual Violence Towards Women	“[sic] let me eat ya ass” “[sic] @sinkfloat that’s why she says black lives matter, she wants a huge cock rammed up her ass! Got it 🍌🍌” “[sic] i wish i could nut in dat ass”	1.4%
Hatred of Women in General	“[sic] Bitch wtf” “[sic] Bruh who tf is this bitch.” “[sic] ur a fucking whore @lilmiquela hope u die slut” “[sic] WTF is this hoe ass shit” “[sic] @alizerattii what even is this bitches eyelashes lmao”	91.5%

DISCUSSION

Instagram, along with other social media platforms, can act as spaces for male peer support networks where men feel encouraged to express their feelings of aggrieved entitlement. This is particularly relevant as it pertains to other users, such as Lil Miquela, who are not men and have considerable influence on these platforms that these men do not have. AI social media influencers, such as Lil Miquela, provide an anonymous front for these men to take out their aggression on women and use their peer support network to feel collectively encouraged to do so. Although Lil Miquela is specifically designed to imitate a human woman, justifications of cyberbullying towards the bot persist simply because the bot is a *bot* and is portrayed as a female. Indeed, as women are consumers of the bot's content, women can potentially internalize these comments, which contributes towards the norm of online violence against women.

Bots like Lil Miquela are examples of victims of sexism in the digital world. Unlike human women, Lil Miquela itself cannot report any harassment to authorities or feel the futility of doing so. This opens a front to for members of its audience, particularly aggrieved men, to perpetuate male dominance. Lil Miquela has been gender-trolled, although because the bot itself does not have a gender, this reflects the attitudes that may be held by some users towards women. Lil Miquela has also been the victim of e-bile, or targeted, misogynistic sexualized threats of violence. While sexual violence towards women is not the dominant result of the types of sexism and discrimination that Lil Miquela faces, millions of women view thousands of comments on Lil Miquela's social media pages every day, and thus can potentially become indirectly victimized as they can plausibly see many more sexually violent comments. As noted,

one major limitation in this study is the one-month time frame that the Instagram comments were captured.

Lil Miquela, by virtue of being an AI influencer, has taken attention away from men who may feel entitled to the popularity and attention the bot has received in a difficult, competitive arena of social media. Some men may feel “stuffed” that Lil Miquela, a feminized bot, has more website traffic than them. Furthermore, these men may also feel entitled to reflect on their negative and gendered feelings towards female users like Lil Miquela by gendertrolling or commenting e-bile to cyberbully Lil Miquela. This happens because those men who have experienced aggrieved entitlement have either directly or indirectly developed male peer support networks which provide encouragement and an incentive to continue cyberbullying the bot; this is achieved through the male peer acceptance of the users perpetrating the cyberbullying. Stankos (1995) argues that the location of women in the modern, male-dominated world leads to women’s sexual integrity being threatened due to the increased risk and increased acceptance of attacks of it. Lil Miquela’s Instagram comments, almost 30 years later, are an example of this acceptance of attacks on women’s sexual integrity, as men feel accepted by each other on this social media platform in perpetrating sexism against Lil Miquela.

CONCLUSION

The collective imagination has been further inspired by bots such as Lil Miquela, and the collective fascination with AI will only continue to grow. It is our responsibility to harbor strong, diverse communities that utilize AI to improve the lives of everyone. To achieve this goal, it is important to account for what interactions between AI and humans look like. In the case of Lil Miquela, the bot was cyberbullied and misogynized. However, in the future, with considerable

effort, interactions between AI and humans will be more inclusive overall. As such, the first step is recognizing the social problem of the norm of violence towards Lil Miquela.

Lil Miquela is one of several AI robots that are on the verge of being indistinguishable from human social media influencers. In the same way that human women tend to receive misogynistic treatment through cyberbullying, Lil Miquela is attacked and demeaned through misogynistic comments on the bot's social media pages. Due to aggrieved entitlement and male peer support, some commentors, even though they may not directly attack human women, perpetuate the normalization of violence towards women online because Lil Miquela is represented as a human woman. Although only approximately one fifth of the comments on Lil Miquela's Instagram page from April-May 2019 were classified as sexist, those 20% of comments were telling, as comments such as “[sic]im just tryna lick som robot ass bruh hmu” towards Lil Miquela were unacknowledged and even accepted by Lil Miquela's audience.

In the battle to achieve gender equality, and making the digital world a better place for characters such as Lil Miquela and those followers that seek to hear those stories, there are important actions to take. *The Council of Europe* (2020) is an organization that actively partakes in efforts against online sexism. The screen on the website reads “Sexism: See it. Name it. Stop it.” The hashtags #StopSexism and #MeToo are also provided. Furthermore, it is noted that sexism can be prevented by making sure that gender-sensitive language and imagery is used in public communication, and that research is promoted in this area. Cooper (2015) in an article from *The Guardian* also presents a call to action in the fight against online sexism. The author brings important practical advice to readers, stating “First, we need new guidelines and capacity for the police and prosecutors to deal with violent threats, hate crime and stalking, which clearly break the law.” The author then places responsibility on online institutions to prevent sexism,

racism, or bullying, and to set the standards for the behavior that they expect. The author also suggests taking a role in showing more support for those who have suffered and educating the next generation about the consequences of online misogyny, racism, or hatred.

Ultimately, Lil Miquela's existence has been met with curiosity, confusion, and contempt. The bot's feminine identity as a relatable fashion blogger has gained the bot a large audience of both followers and detractors. To protect the people in this audience, the cyberbullying, and particularly sexism against Lil Miquela, must be addressed. As stated by Leisl Yearsley concerning the development of AI, which extends to the treatment of AI (Salesforce 2022):

“We should be thinking about the values these systems will hold. How will they make decisions if their decision-making is better than ours? Where does that come from? Do we want to give them human values? The same values that also gave us slavery, sexism, racism — some of the more appalling values we hold?”

LIMITATIONS

This study was completed with several major limitations. Firstly, the data used for the study captured only about a month in time, which might not adequately represent the comments that were and are being made on Lil Miquela's social media pages. Indeed, as popular culture fluctuates in the opinion of AI, this is also reflected in social media comments. Secondly, as this is an exploratory study, this pilot does not implement a test of intercoder reliability, or the extent to which multiple researchers agree on their assignment of coders (Swarts and Geisler 2019). Thirdly, due to the nature of this study's method, the researcher was required to make decisions based on an interpretation of texts, and thus the data may inevitably be “influenced by the researcher's personal biases and idiosyncrasies” (Anderson 2010, p. 2).

Furthermore, it is additionally important to capture this study's theoretical limitations. Indeed, there is conclusive evidence of gender harassment towards Lil Miquela, but the extent of this is yet to be explored. Although it is logical to assume that males are commenting most of the sexist remarks towards Lil Miquela, this was not confirmed by this study. As noted by DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2016), because there is a wide audience of people who are able to read comments like those on Lil Miquela's social media pages, this sets the stage for gender-related offenses because many people (including males) with the same misogynistic opinions are able to gather together in the same virtual space. Beyond this baseline logical explanation however, there is little direct confirmation of male peer support.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Due to the nature of exploratory studies, there are an abundance of avenues through which future research can be conducted. To advance a better theoretical understanding of the online violence against Lil Miquela, the user-to-user interactions, group orientations, and other forms of communication between users on Lil Miquela's page, as well as the demographics of the users commenting, could be further explored. To better understand male peer support, the online community needs to be more concretely captured. Furthermore, the sexist treatment towards Lil Miquela could be captured appropriately under a general feminist theory of gender harassment.

This study did not address if Lil Miquela's profile or popularity acted to specifically belittle or empower human women. Furthermore, this study did not capture the entire, detailed reaction to Lil Miquela, or important questions such as how women may respond to the bot's existence specifically. This study also did not investigate the role that women may play in perpetuating sexism online in cases like Lil Miquela. Although these research problems could be

speculated here, further studies are needed for complete exploration, especially through a feminist lens. Interviews that capture people's reactions to Lil Miquela would provide rich context behind Lil Miquela's scientific story.

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APPENDICES

Figure 1.2 Proportion of Offensive Comments in Lil Miquela's Instagram Comments from April-May 2019

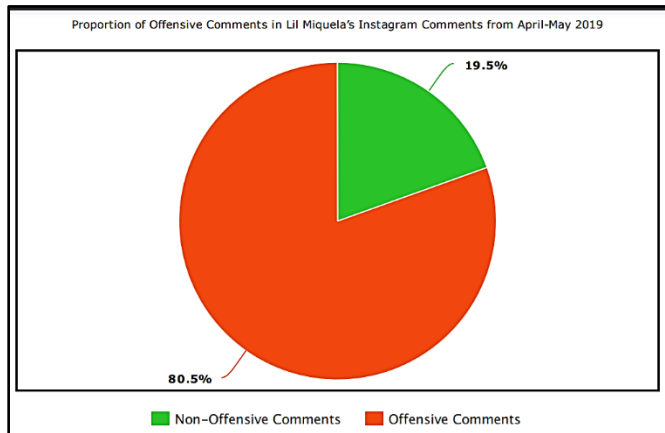


Figure 1.3 Proportion of Sexist Comments Within Lil Miquela's Offensive Instagram Comments from April-May 2019

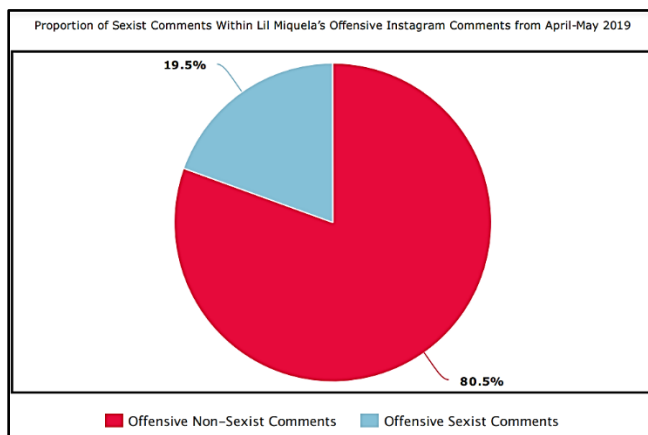


Figure 1.4 The Division of Sexist Comments in in Lil Miquela's Offensive Instagram Comments from April-May 2019

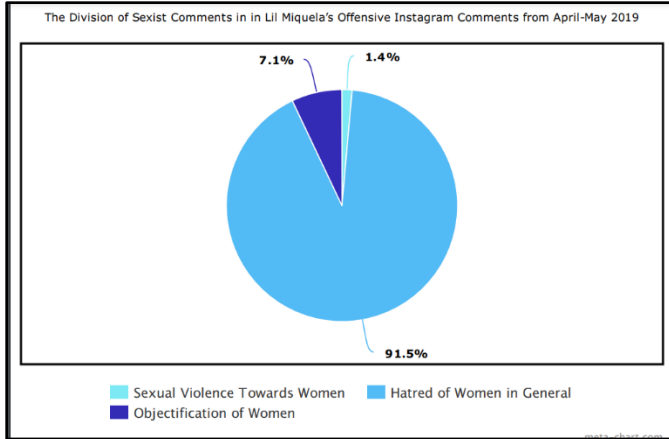


Figure 1.5 Proportion of Sexist Comments in Lil Miquela's Instagram Comments from April-May 2019

