

Just being a bit bitchy: The gendered valences of online anti-social behavior on Tattle Life

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Abstract

Tattle Life is a gossip website dedicated to the critique of online influencers. Described in the Guardian as a “troll’s paradise,” this site has been linked to doxing, cyberbullying, and other online anti-social behaviors. How do Tattle Life participants legitimize their behavior in the context of external criticism from media outlets, influencers, and the public, more broadly? To answer this question, this paper examines 920 posts from the “Tattle in the Press” forum, a unique space where community members share and discuss negative publicity about Tattle Life. Findings show that this online community legitimizes itself by deploying a feminine gender identity in three overlapping and internally contradictory ways: 1) to minimize the power of their community to do harm, 2) to provide moral justification for their actions, and 3) to claim the status of persecuted victims. Implications for understanding the perpetration of online anti-social behavior, more broadly, are discussed.

Keywords: Online anti-social behavior, gender, gossip blogs, hate-blogging, influencers

1. Introduction

“She comes across as one massive try hard!”

“She is ... simply... such a pretentious ... knob!”

The above quotes were taken from the online forum “Tattle Life” and were directed at UK-based online influencers by members of the public. If comments like these were made in a different venue: in person, by email, or even in Instagram comments, they might be flagged as cruel or harassing. But on Tattle Life, which is described by the Guardian as a “troll’s paradise” (Kale, 2021, n.p.), this behavior is not only tolerated, but encouraged.

Tattle Life is a gossip forum and commentary website (About Tattle Life, 2019) focused

predominantly on social media influencers and some celebrities. The site is organized into discussion threads, where contributors, also known as “Tattlers,” critique the online self-presentation of their targets.

For targeted influencers, Tattle Life’s billing as a “gossip forum” minimizes the harm they experience from this community (Abraham, 2021). They describe significant impacts to their mental health, as well as on their personal and professional lives (Abraham, 2021; Barry, 2020; Manavis, 2021). There have been reports of “doxing” attributed to the site, where personal details about someone’s life and family are published without their consent (Abraham, 2021; Manavis, 2021).

Despite these reports of abuse and harassment, Tattle Life remains a popular online community. In 2023, the forum reported 368,942 Tattlers, 12,007 of which are online at the time of writing. There are currently 38,292 unique discussion threads, over 14 million messages posted, and over 1 billion views (Tattle Life, 2023). While the actions of Tattlers can be understood as broadly anti-social, particularly to the targets of their ire, Tattlers themselves understand their actions as an important pillar of a “free and fair” democratic society, where they hold “those in a position of power and influence,” accountable (About Tattle Life, 2019), and they use a variety of gendered strategies to defend their practices.

This paper thus seeks to understand the perpetrators of online anti-social behavior in their own words. As a case study, it provides a valuable window into the communities that perpetrate online anti-social behavior. Additionally, it provides an opportunity to explore the role of gender in this behavior. In the tradition of celebrity gossip, Tattle Life is a feminized community of talk (Duffy et al., 2022; Kay, 2020), where most of the targets of the community identify as women. As such, this forum offers a unique opportunity to understand the role of gender in the perpetration of online anti-social behavior.

The research seeks to identify the values, discursive frames, and self-perceptions that lead people to engage in hurtful posting on Tattle Life. In

doing so, it is intended that researchers can better understand why people engage in online anti-social behavior, and the role that gender plays in its perpetration. The research does not offer judgements on the validity of claims of abuse, nor an assessment of the severity of harms attributed to this community. Rather, it focuses on how this activity is understood within the community itself. We take a deep dive into how Tattlers see themselves by qualitatively analyzing posts from the “Tattle in the Press” forum. Through our analysis, we show the different, conflicting, and gendered discourses that legitimate and reproduce this type of online anti-social behavior.

We first provide an overview of the relevant literature regarding gossip-blogging, and the perpetration of online anti-social behavior. We then introduce intersectionality as the theoretical framework that guides our analysis. After explicating our methods, we present our findings of the three ways that a feminine gender identity is operationalized to legitimate this community’s practices. In the discussion section we reflect upon the contribution of this to theory and the literature, before providing a summary of the paper in the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

This section explores the literature that conceptualizes online anti-social behavior broadly, to understand how hate- or gossip blogging, such as that on Tattle Life represents an important type of online anti-social behavior. We begin with a description of Tattle Life, then turns to an exploration of anti-social online behavior with celebrity gossip as a worthy case for studying this phenomenon.

2.1 Tattle Life as anti-fandom

According to the site’s “About” page, Tattle Life is a venue for “commentary and critique of people that choose to monetise their personal life as a business and release it into the public domain” (About Tattle Life, 2019, para. 1). It is difficult to find externally verified information about the Tattle Life platform and its origins. According to the website itself, Tattle Life is owned and operated by *Lime Goss*, a UK-based influencer news and gossip website, and was founded by someone using the name Helen McDougal, although the identity of the founder is contested (Inside Tattle Life, 2020). The oldest threads visible on the public version of the site date back to 2018, which was also the year that the internet archiving tool *Wayback Machine* began crawling the site. As such, we can reasonably assume that Tattle Life was launched around 2018. It has gathered considerable

momentum since then, and the web traffic data published on the Tattle Life home page suggests a large and active community.

From the home page, a user can select from six different categories of “Public Figure Gossip,” including Families, Gurus, Instagrammers, Bloggers, Influencers, and Traditional Celebs. Each category contains between 1,000 and 4,000 threads, and each thread is dedicated to the discussion of a particular celebrity influencer. To this extent, Tattle Life operates like many other online fan communities, but in an anti-social way (Mardon et al., 2023). Members of the site are not motivated by a mutual appreciation for the subjects of these forum discussions. Rather, they are motivated by a generalized disdain for their targets. Tattlers mine their targets’ social media posts for seeming inconsistencies, catalogue their missteps, and celebrate their failures. On Tattle Life, threads function as spaces to mock, ridicule, and criticize targets. The collective scorn of the community for their subject matter marks Tattle Life as a community of “anti-fandom” (Gray, 2003; Click, 2019; Pyo, 2023), which differs from normative fan cultures in that it is fueled by contempt and dislike (Ng, 2022). This is an example of online anti-social behavior that also occurs on other online celebrity gossip, tabloid, or hate blog sites. The next section will address the literature on these sites.

2.2 Gossip, hate-blogs, and audience power

Online forums such as Tattle Life, Get Off My Internets, and Mumznet are often conceptualized within the tradition of celebrity gossip, which first appeared in magazines and later in online publications like Gawker, TMZ.com, and popular blogs by cultural commentators like Perez Hilton (Fairclough, 2008). Fairclough (2008) writes that online gossip blogs introduced a more interactive and collaborative relationship with audiences than their print predecessors could. Gawker was an early instigator of this, famously inviting audience members to submit their celebrity sightings for display alongside a map to track their movements in a feature called “Celebrity Stalker.” With the connectivity and immediacy of digital media, audiences could participate more directly in the production of mediated gossip culture.

The participatory features of digital gossip culture have led some to emphasize the subversive and empowering aspects of these communities. Some research has highlighted their social utility for participants (Hunter, 2016; Miltner, 2017; McRae, 2017). Hunter (2016), for instance, argues that it allows participants to express a backlash against the commodification of online communities, while

McRae (2017) conceptualizes them as critical publics against which authentic online self-presentation is judged.

Indeed, in the tradition of much of audience reception research and fandom studies there has been an effort to foreground the agency of audiences who consume media texts in complex, diverse, and often subversive ways (Castleberry, 2019; Feasey, 2008; Jane, 2019). In a mass media context, the interpretive practices of audiences have been lauded as an important, even feminist (Hannell, 2020) or queer (Vist et al., 2021) challenge to cultural hegemony, a form of “punching up” to dominant powers (Jane, 2019).

However, Jane (2019) points out that changes to the media landscape with the arrival of digital media have reconfigured the balance of power between audiences and cultural producers, necessitating researchers adopt a more critical lens towards audience practices. We position gossip blogs, or “hate-blogging” as it is sometimes called (Duffy et al., 2022), among those audience practices that deserve a more critical lens. These spaces tend to be overlooked in the literature on anti-social online behavior. In part, we would argue that this is because gossip blogs are feminized communities of speech, construed as “politically powerless” (Kay, 2020) and unworthy of serious attention. However, critics have begun to point out the negative impact that such communities have on their targets (Duffy et al., 2022; Jane, 2014; 2019; Lawson, 2021). Duffy et al. (2022), for instance, argue that hate blogs enact a type of gendered authenticity policing. Furthermore, as online reputation increasingly comes to shape professional opportunities and employability, influencer hate blogs like Tattle Life can have an outsized impact on the lives of their targets (Jane, 2018). These works show how gossip or hate-blogging can constitute a form of online anti-social behavior with material consequences for targets, suggesting a need to understand more about why perpetrators seek to engage in this behavior. The present research contributes to filling this gap.

2.3 Why people engage in online anti-social behavior

The past decade has seen the rise of new forms of what some researchers call “dark participation” (Frischlich et al., 2019; Lutz & Hoffman, 2017; Quandt, 2018): online activities that are intentionally harmful to targeted individuals and groups. Research on online harassment and abuse (Marwick, 2021), trolling (Hannan, 2018), doxing (Franz & Bennett Thatcher, 2023), cyber-stalking (Kircaburun et al., 2018), revenge porn (Davis Kempton, 2020), and mis-

and disinformation (Veebel, 2015) speak to the more harmful aspects of participatory digital media cultures.

To date, research regarding harmful forms of online participation has tended to focus on the content and practices (Klonick, 2015; Quandt, 2018; McGlynn et al., 2017), or the experiences of targets (Blackwell et al., 2017; Franz & Bennett Thatcher, 2023; Sobieraj, 2020; Veletsianos et al., 2018). Some have underscored that it is often women, women of color, and other marginalized communities who are disproportionately burdened by online anti-social behavior (Jane, 2014; McMillan Cotton, 2018). Such research provides important context, but questions remain as to why perpetrators engage in these behaviors.

In that vein, a smaller body of research has begun to interrogate why people engage in anti-social forms of online expression. For example, Massanari (2017) shows how the design and affordances of platforms facilitate and encourage the propagation of “toxic technocultures,” while Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016) show that culture plays a role in the propagation of bad behavior online. Within this cultural and technical context, scholars have identified several motivations for online anti-social behavior such as “retributive justice” (Blackwell et al., 2018; Marwick, 2021), the performance of one’s in-group membership (Lewis et al., 2021), and defense against perceived identity or community threats (Rubin et al., 2020).

These studies begin to paint a picture of the logics at play in the perpetration of online anti-social behavior. However, scholarship in this area is still nascent. In part, this is because it is methodologically challenging to get perpetrators to reflect earnestly on behavior which is often judged negatively by outsiders. The present study contributes to filling this research gap by examining the “Tattle in the Press” forum, a unique archive where perpetrators self-narrativize their community and its practices. In doing so, we contribute to clarifying how communities of online anti-social behavior sustain, legitimate, and reproduce themselves.

Furthermore, the research that exists on perpetrators of online anti-social behavior does not offer insights specific to feminized communities, which represents a major scholarly gap. When gender distinctions are considered, women are frequently studied as targets of abusive behavior (Vitak et al., 2017), rather than as perpetrators. Despite this, a recent report suggests that women are perpetrators up to 31.1% of the time (Powell et al., 2022). As such, the anti-social behavior emanating from feminized communities like Tattle Life warrant further study, as does the role of gender in how these communities

understand themselves and their practices. With these research gaps in mind, this study asks the following questions:

- A) RQ1: How do Tattlers explain and legitimate their online anti-social behavior?
- B) RQ2: What is the role of gender in justifying and legitimating this form of online anti-social behavior?

3. Theoretical framework

The analysis that follows was approached from an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1989). We begin from the position that social identities such as race, class, age, sexuality, and in this case, gender function as important organizing features of social relations (Shields, 2008). Intersectionality maintains that these social identities are not stable, unitary, and discrete categories. Rather, they are an intersecting, evolving, and mutually constituting set of relations (Joshi, 2022). Importantly, intersectionality draws attention, not only to the ways that different identity categories intersect, but also to the way that these aspects intersect with structures of power and systems of oppression such as sexism, racism, and homophobia in myriad, complex, and sometimes contradictory ways.

This interface between one's identity and structures of power is a dynamic process that people actively participate in. "We are not," as Shields (2008) writes, "passive recipients of an identity position" (p. 302). Rather, we "practice" identity, negotiated against the imposition of systemic oppression. Intersectionality, then, allows us to interrogate the relationship between identity positions and power, highlighting the "multiple axes of power and difference" that shape how we move through the world (Rice et al., 2019), and providing the conceptual language to consider individual behaviors within their larger social contexts.

Using this intersectionality framework necessitates that we understand our data in the context of the power relations that shape social identities and how they are practiced (Collins, 2000). In this case, that context involves the historically entrenched patriarchal social order that has relegated women to a subordinate social, political, and economic position to that of men. According to intersectionality, the identity category of "woman" intersects with patriarchal power structures in ways that can simultaneously oppress and produce social advantages, depending on where and how that identity is deployed, and in relation to what other identity markers, claimed and otherwise.

In adopting intersectionality as our guiding analytical frame, we respond to calls from Joshi (2022)

and others (Trauth et al., 2016) for more Information Systems research that examines how identity locations generate and reify systems of subordination. We position ourselves alongside others who have sought to, not simply identify identity factors that shape behavior, but rather to explain *how* complex and dynamic social locations operate to enable and drive choices and behavior (Trauth & Connolly, 2021).

4. Method

This study involved a qualitative textual analysis (Smith, 2017) of 920 posts in the "Tattle in the Press" forum. In this forum, Tattlers post links to news articles written about the Tattle Life community, and offer their own commentary on these articles. Much of the reporting about Tattle Life foregrounds the abusive and bullying behavior on this site and its impacts on targets. Tattlers use this forum to share and discuss these articles with one another, responding to claims of abuse, and, generally, defending this space and its community of users. We selected this forum because it is the space where Tattlers write about themselves and their own motivations for anti-social behavior, rather than writing about and criticizing their targets. This forum allowed us to focus on Tattler's self-description and rationales for their behavior as a case study for understanding the motivations and logics that undergird this type of anti-social online behavior.

Data collection occurred in August 2022, at which time the "Tattle in the Press" forum contained 920 posts, published over a 9-month period between April 18, 2021 and January 22, 2022. All 920 of the publicly visible posts in this forum were collected manually, copied into a series of Word documents, and uploaded to NVivo™ for coding.

Initially, the first author conducted a pilot study, coding 14% of the data, or 130 posts independently, using the coding schema of the five discursive neutralization strategies outlined by Wahlström et al. (2021). These include denial of the victim, 2) denial of responsibility, 3) denial of injury, 4) condemning condemners, and 5) appeals to a higher authority. However, it quickly became apparent that this straightforward qualitative content analysis approach would fail to capture significant narrative devices, such as the importance of *delegitimizing* discourses, as well as the feelings of persecution expressed by community members, and the efforts to define the community and articulate their collective values on their own terms.

The preliminary findings of this pilot study were shared with the rest of the team in August 2022 for discussion. At this point it was decided that an inductive or open approach to coding would be more

appropriate for the analysis of the larger sample. Using NVivo™, the posts were coded inductively and iteratively using a grounded theory approach (Dougherty, 2002; Glasser & Strauss, 2009). Inductive coding is common in exploratory research and in areas where there is limited knowledge about the phenomenon under study (Chandra & Shang, 2019). Given that our research questions are exploratory in nature and that there is limited research on the gendered dimensions of online anti-social behavior, an inductive approach that “begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12) was best suited in this case. In accordance with the norms of data analysis using grounded theory, the coding scheme was established by way of an iterative and cyclical process: as the researcher immerses themselves within the data and significant themes and patterns begin to make themselves evident, the researcher reflects upon, and as necessary, regroups or reclassifies existing codes, until a cohesive and comprehensive organizational schema for the data is achieved (Charmaz, 2014).

This process took place in ongoing consultation with the other members of the research team. Through weekly discussion and continued iteration between the first and second author, six discursive themes were ultimately identified within the data. These included narratives of 1) holding others to account, 2) harm minimization, 3) retribution on moral and ethical grounds, 4) unfair persecution, 5) appeals to tradition, and 6) accusations of censorship. These themes were shared with the larger research team for a signal check and compared against the existing literature to identify gaps and areas of alignment with scholarship on online anti-social behavior, anti-fandom communities, and hate-blogging. Particular attention was paid to the way that the themes seemed to diverge from the existing literature, or how they deepen and extend existing literature. Aligned with other scholarship that engages in critical qualitative text analyses, the validity and rigor of the research comes from a deep reading of the data, a reflection of the data with respect to existing literature, and the identification of unique themes within the data that provide new insights (Darawsheh, 2014).

5. Findings

The research finds that perpetrators use various strategies to legitimize themselves and delegitimize critics of their activities. Importantly, the ways Tattlers justify their online anti-social behavior has a clear gendered valence: gender is used in internally contradictory ways to minimize the perceived impact of Tattler’s actions. Gender functions in three distinct

but overlapping ways to delegitimize criticism and legitimize the community. Firstly, culturally devalued notions of women’s talk as “gossip” and “bitchiness” denies the power of their actions to cause harm to targets. Secondly, feminine stereotypes are used to provide moral justifications for the behavior of Tattlers. Finally, gender-based oppression is invoked to position Tattlers as the “real” victims. In the following sections, we analyze each of these themes in turn. The quotes presented in the findings below have been selected as representative examples of the general sentiment of each thematic cluster.

5.1 Strategic denial of power

The selective and strategic denial of power and agency allows Tattlers to deflect accusations of harm for the damage that their targets experience. Tattlers frequently deny the claim that any real harm results from their actions by using dismissive language to describe their posting behaviors. As one Tattler comments, “they really wanted to shut down a website because people were being a bit bitchy?”

The language of “bitchiness” functions to minimize the harm of their behavior in distinctly gendered ways. Another participant states, “Here on tattle [sic] we’re a bit bitchy about those that turn their life into the Truman show on steroids to make money.” Characterizing speech on Tattle Life as “bitchy” functions to separate this community from more “serious” (and non-feminized) forms of speech, minimizing the impacts of their activities. Another Tattler posts, “we’re no saints on a gossip forum. But the worst you get is bitchy comments and I’d file them under not that bad.” This feminized framing helps Tattlers create distance between their practice and what they describe as *actual* abusive behavior. Another Tattler explains that targets of Tattle Life “make up a load of stuff about fearing for their lives and security issues to make out [that Tattle Life] is dangerous rather than bitchy,” making that distinction salient.

The decidedly feminized language of “being a bit bitchy” mobilizes the culturally devalued status of women’s talk to minimize the impact of the community (for other examples see Kay, 2020). In doing so, this gendered language serves to diminish the force of external critique. In some instances, community members use it to juxtapose Tattle Life against other, and what they would describe as, *worse* sites of abuse, framing their own as “not that bad” by comparison. This framing also positions criticism of Tattle Life as misplaced energy. As one Tattler writes, “Ignore all those forums by far extremists, terrorists, neo Nazis [sic], sexual abuse and all that. Tattle is the

dark forum because at worst it's a bit bitchy." By characterizing their own activities as "bitchy," this Tattler disavows the capacity of their practices to do damage. Tattlers thus employ the sexist trope of "bitching" to deny accusations of harm. This repeated use of gendered language draws upon gender-binary power differentials to suggest Tattlers' practices are frivolous, harmless, and not to be taken seriously, which releases them from having to answer to the complaints of targets.

Feminized language like "bitchy" is part of a denial of power that allows the community to evade responsibility for the impacts Tattle Life has on targets. For example, one commenter employs a self-trivializing description of the Tattle Life community to deny harms: "I always thought if employers take comments from a few faceless ninnies as reasons to stay away from you then [...] they are just a handy excuse." Gossip forums, such as Tattle Life, are culturally feminized in such a way as to make them easy to dismiss as frivolous and harmless (Duffy et al., 2022). Tattlers' posts in the "Tattle in the Press" forum selectively evoke this frame to dismiss accusations of harm and minimize their impact on targets.

5.2 Moral justifications to protect the vulnerable

Tattlers justify their online anti-social behavior by positioning Tattle Life and its participants as champions of truth and integrity who hold others accountable for deceptions and swindles. As one Tattler states,

We are not mean, we are holding to account. There's a difference. If these bloggers and influencers tell lies and profit from those lies, if they beg for money and don't keep to the promised rewards, if they crowdfund a project and it doesn't materialise, they are defrauding people. [...] It's easier for [journalists] to call us bullies rather than to check out if what we are saying is true. All we are doing is trying to ensure these influencers are held to account

This type of justification serves to position Tattlers' activities as akin to investigative journalism and the democratic tenets it aims to uphold. The community is framed as an important check against power, where members uncover the truth, find "receipts," and hold powerful others to account. Through this lens, the Tattle Life community is legitimized by appeals to a moral code that makes the community just and socially necessary.

Importantly, the moral grounds upon which they justify their activities rely upon different feminine

stereotypes than those described in the last section. As another Tattler states,

It's ok to sell skincare to vulnerable women, omitting the fact that you yourself get fillers/botox. Give me a break. A lot of influencers now try to recruit to mlm [multi-level marketing] schemes too. They behave in very exploitative ways [...]. And they think we shouldn't even be allowed to discuss it

In this example, the reference to "vulnerable women" positions the Tattler in the role of defender for these imagined, gendered, and victimized subjects. In the claims that influencers "exploit" their audience, Tattlers allocate little agency to women outside the Tattle community. Posts that justify anti-social online behavior as protection for "vulnerable women" frame these audience members as manipulated dupes who are taken advantage of by malicious influencers and the brands that support them. This image of the audience relies upon another sexist stereotype of women as passive objects who require an active subject to act on their behalf. Invoking this familiar imagery facilitates the legitimization of Tattlers' activities as a necessary practice that responds to influencers' abuses of power.

The discourse of protecting the vulnerable is also visible in references to the children of influencers. The treatment of children is invoked as justification for why targets deserve the hate they receive. Targets' perceived failings as mothers constitutes a moral transgression that justifies this response. For instance, one community member explains,

How dare these parents disrespect their child so much they take away their autonomy [i.e. the choice to disclose]? Imagine if another adult disclosed someone else's private medical diagnosis without consent? That person would be shamed and people would be disgusted.

Targets are described as bad mothers who use their children and violate their privacy. In this vein, many participants view the negative media coverage about Tattle Life as focused on the wrong issue. As one Tattler states, "What they fail to mention is that [targeted influencers] have literally sold their souls (and often that of their children) to get where they are." Another explains that media outlets should see the real evil as "children working and being used as content with no regard for their privacy."

In these comments, feminine stereotypes of the saintly mother are weaponized to render Tattlers' online anti-social behavior as morally just. The logic goes that these targeted influencers are bad parents who need to be stopped, and Tattle Life is one way to hold these bad mothers to account.

As others have argued, motherhood is a narrative frame and feminized stereotype that helps to legitimize women's performance of political anger (Sparks, 2014). It presents a way to enact anger that "simultaneously defeats the usual charges that angry women are irrational and shrill" (Sparks, 2014, p. 19). Tattlers also leverage the connotations of motherhood to legitimize their own practices as being the protective, motherly guardians of duped young women who are manipulated by influencers' idealized self-image, and of exploited, uncared for children.

Tattlers bestow the category of victim on the following imagined groups: 1) helpless women fans of influencers who buy products marketed through deception, and 2) the children of influencers who are monetized and exploited for personal gain. Influencers who are the targets of nasty Tattle Life commentary are, conversely, never considered to be victims of bad behavior. Victimhood is consistently denied to targets, and is, instead, sometimes bestowed upon the Tattlers themselves, as discussed in the next section.

5.3 Victimhood & persecution

In the third thematic finding, the community uses sexist tropes to deny the victimhood of targets in two distinct ways. Firstly, targets are portrayed as irrational, hysterical women that are weak or overly sensitive. Secondly, targets are portrayed as insincere and conniving manipulators, whose complaints of abuse from the Tattle Life community are a ploy to garner attention and sympathy.

In the first instance, while Tattlers concede that targets are genuinely hurt by their activities, they reject the validity of targets' complaints. In these cases, Tattlers claim targets are too sensitive, and as such, the Tattle Life community should not be at fault for causing harm. Rather, any harm results from a personal failing on the part of the target who is too thin-skinned to take the criticism. For instance, one Tattler remarks,

I don't think Tattle is anything like as bad as the moaners make out. I think the meaning of the word troll has been diluted to make people feel better. For me a troll would say things like I hope you die, I hope your kids get cancer, you should be stabbed etc. Saying you don't think the offspring of a celebrity isn't [sic] cute or that someone isn't talented is not trolling. [...] They are so thin skinned and cannot take constructive criticism [sic] and just think they are right.

Such comments do not deny the target's experience of harm. Rather, they divert responsibility for that harm onto targets themselves.

The second way that this community denies targets' claims of victimhood is by rejecting the idea that targets experience harm at all. This reasoning rejects the sincerity of targets, painting them as disingenuous or outright lying about their experiences, and suggesting that complaints are made to garner public attention and sympathy. As one discussant puts it, "I am tired of influencers using mental health issues and serious mental illness to deflect criticism, to increase engagement and make sales." This frame leans on well-entrenched stereotypes of women as conniving, untrustworthy, and attention seeking.

While denying targets' victimhood, Tattlers also construct themselves as victims. In this case, Tattlers use the feminized reputation of the site to claim that they are unjustly targeted because women are oppressed in a patriarchal society. Criticism from outsiders is delegitimized by arguing that the attention paid to this community is sexist and reflective of a society that marginalizes and denigrates women. As one Tattler writes, "Its [sic] my belief that it's because it's a forum most frequented by women discussing women - a man can talk shit all day on a forum about footballers and no one would bat an eyelid." Another participant posts, "Every time I see one of these reports, I wonder why the (largely male) forum Kiwi Farms NEVER gets discussed, despite being about a million times worse than Tattle." As these comments show, constructing this identity as persecuted involves a feminist critique. When confronting accusations of victimizing others, the subordination of women under patriarchy grants this community access to their own victimhood.

Constructing this shared identity as a persecuted group is one important process by which the community deflects criticism and legitimizes their practices. The "Tattle in the Press" forum functions to sustain a sense of a community under attack. The view that they are mischaracterized and treated unfairly is generative of a sense of community and solidarity. It becomes "us against them", where "them" refers to journalists, media outlets, influencers, other online communities, or anyone who critiques them.

6. Discussion

This research showcases how external critique of the online anti-social behavior occurring on Tattle Life is absorbed into the narrative construct of the community in the "Tattle in the Press" forum. The patterned ways that Tattlers respond to criticism and accusations of harm show how participants work to discursively legitimate themselves through distinctly gendered logics: (1) Tattler's suggest they can't cause harm because they are just "being bitchy;" (2) Their

behavior is morally justified because their targets are constructed as bad mothers and conniving women who victimize their children and audiences; (3) Finally, they view themselves as unfairly singled out and targeted as a *feminized community*.

The findings showcase the complex and perhaps counterintuitive ways that people interface with broader structures of power in the perpetration of online anti-social behavior. Tattlers operationalize systems of gender oppression to normalize and legitimize their own practices as well as to undermine their targets and critics. A feminine gender identity and its subordinated position in relation to a masculine gender identity is claimed for the community when strategically advantageous. Facing accusations of harm, participants adopt the mantle of inconsequentiality, insignificance, and non-seriousness that is a component part of a sexist system of oppression that functions to denigrate and dismiss women's talk as "just gossip" (Kay, 2020) and their anger as "bitchiness." Simultaneously, they weaponize this same system of gender oppression in assigning their targets the label of irrational, emotional, and untrustworthy women, or unfit mothers to discredit them. In other instances, however, they critique the system of gender oppression that they use, such as when they point to women's subjugation under a patriarchal social order to invalidate external criticism as an expression of a sexist culture that expects women to be quiet, pleasant, and compliant.

Theoretically, these findings showcase a push and pull dynamic that is active, intentional, and processual. These perpetrators of online anti-social behavior are not only practicing multivalent identity categories in ways that generate and reproduce systems of oppression (Joshi, 2022). They are also actively and strategically operationalizing the systems of oppression that intersect with those gender identities to produce social advantages in context.

The discourses identified in the Tattle Life community reveal three key tensions worth unpacking. First, the denial of their own power through the language of gossip and bitchiness rests uncomfortably alongside the competing and contradictory claim that their activities are an important bulwark against abuses of power. In these discourses, Tattlers understand themselves as "punching up," (Jane, 2019) calling out power imbalances, and acting as moral crusaders on behalf of more vulnerable victims. These conflicting discourses represent rhetorical moves that lend advantages depending on the critique they're responding to. In effect, they allow Tattlers to evade accusations of perpetrating harm and maintain a coherent self-image as morally righteous.

Secondly, they critique a patriarchal social order while operationalizing its tropes of feminine gender identities to their advantage, as discussed above. Finally, a third tension emerges where they see themselves as victims of sexist oppression, while rejecting and negating that victimhood when it concerns the targets of their ire. These tensions reflect the complex and dynamic way that individuals interface with broader structures of power in the constitution of their group identity. In this sense, our analysis is aligned with Duffy et al.'s (2022) conceptualization of hate-blogging as an expression of displaced feminist rage at a sexist system of oppression, and the struggle to challenge and resist it.

Our exploration into Tattlers' justifications for their online anti-social behavior offers lessons for scholarship in this area. Firstly, it is useful as a snapshot of some of the ways that perpetrators of online anti-social behavior legitimate their practices. This kind of data are often hard to come by, as perpetrators are usually anonymous, difficult to find, and unlikely to sit for qualitative interviews. As such, our analysis of the "Tattle in the Press" forum offers a unique window into at least one type of online anti-social behavior that could be useful for thinking about larger trends. Secondly, this work offers insight into the role of gender discourses in the perpetration and legitimation of online anti-social behavior, providing new insights not captured by previous scholarship.

Our research also has limitations worth mentioning here. Firstly, this analysis is focused on one forum. The study was exploratory by design, and we took a qualitative, context rich, and time-consuming approach deliberately to uncover insights and themes that might otherwise be missed with other kinds of analysis. Nevertheless, this focus on a single forum limits the generalizability of this work. The insights gained here will allow us to search for clues in larger scale surveys or big data textual analysis in the future, such as the presence of distinctly gender essentialist motivations for the perpetration of anti-social online behavior. At this time, however, the results of this study are not intended to be generalizable and should not be viewed as such. Despite this limitation, methods like these can provide new ways of understanding perpetrators of online anti-social behavior when other approaches are impossible.

7. Conclusion

As a gossip forum, Tattle Life is imbued with the feminized connotations of gossip. In this, it offers the unique opportunity to study the role of gender-based discourses in the perpetration of online anti-social behavior. In this study, we analyzed the Tattle Life

forum, “Tattle in the Press,” a place where Tattlers comment on how they are portrayed in media outside of Tattle Life. “Tattle in the Press” represents an interesting place to study the way perpetrators of anti-social online behavior justify their actions in their own words. We conducted a qualitative thematic discourse analysis on 920 posts using a grounded theory approach guided by intersectionality. Our analysis revealed the following three key tensions in how Tattlers justified their anti-social behavior: 1) they narrativize their practices as both harmless and important bulwarks against abuses of power, 2) they critique a patriarchal social order while operationalizing its tropes of womanhood to their advantage, and 3) they claim to be victimized by a sexist culture, while denying their targets that victimhood. All three tensions highlight the active and strategic ways that perpetrators of online anti-social behavior interface with broader structures of power to legitimize, normalize, and enable their practices.

This study provides a starting point for future work seeking to understand the different motivations and justifications used by perpetrators of online anti-social behavior. For instance, the discourses of victimhood and persecution employed here have also been identified in far-right and conspiracy theory communities (Armaly et al., 2022). These parallels between far-right discourses and hate-blogging discourses warrant further study in future work. Our research on Tattle Life provides one roadmap for future studies seeking to develop deep and context-rich understanding of how perpetrators of online anti-social behavior view themselves and their actions, and the role of gender identity in these conceptualizations.

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