THE IMPACT OF CONFRONTING ONLINE SEXISM ON THIRD-PARTY BELIEFS AND BEHAVIOR

A Thesis in
Psychology

by
Lizbeth M. Kim

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Science

May 2017
The thesis of Lizbeth M. Kim was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Stephanie A. Shields  
Professor of Psychology and Women’s Studies  
Thesis Advisor

Karen Gasper  
Associate Professor of Psychology

Jose A. Soto  
Associate Professor of Psychology

Alicia Grandey  
Professor of Psychology  
Director of Graduate Studies

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School
ABSTRACT

The internet is rife with harassing language, where women are targeted with severe forms of misogyny and sexism. Little is known about the effectiveness of internet users who confront these harmful comments on social media sites, although studies have examined the effects of sexism confrontations in real or imagined face-to-face situations. My Master’s research investigates how prevailing work on confrontation effectiveness and gendered emotion stereotypes apply to perceptions of online sexism confrontations. I conducted an experimental study that examined how an online confronter’s gender and displayed anger, when responding to a sexist post on a social media page, influences participants’ perceptions of the confronter, the sexist perpetrator, and motivation to post a response themselves. Findings showed that the female confronter was perceived as being angrier than the male confronter, and was less liked than the male confronter. In addition, participants viewed the sexist perpetrator as being more credible after seeing the female confronter’s response. Further, participants indicated low motivation to post a response to the conversation and held generally negative views about posting comments on the internet. Implications and future directions for mitigating online harassment and encouraging public intervention are discussed.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................. vi

LIST OF TABLES .................................................................................... vii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ......................................................................... viii

Chapter 1 Introduction ........................................................................ 1

Online Sexism and Harassment ............................................................. 2
Confronting Prejudice ........................................................................ 6
Group Membership: Who Can Confront? ........................................ 8
Gender and Emotion: How can people confront? .............................. 9
The Present Study .............................................................................. 11
Hypotheses ....................................................................................... 11

Chapter 2 Method ............................................................................. 13

Participants ...................................................................................... 13
Materials .......................................................................................... 13
Main Dependent Measures ............................................................... 14
  Ratings of the confronters’ anger ................................................ 14
  Ratings of the confronters’ emotionality ..................................... 14
  Ratings of the confronters’ credibility ........................................ 15
  Ratings of the perpetrator’s credibility ...................................... 15
  Motivation to post response ......................................................... 15
Exploratory Dependent Measures .................................................... 15
  Liking vs. respecting the confronter .......................................... 15
  Online and offline civic engagement ........................................ 16
  Reading and posting internet comments .................................. 16
Procedure ....................................................................................... 17

Chapter 3 Results ............................................................................ 18

Main Dependent Measures ............................................................... 18
  Ratings of Confronters’ Anger .................................................. 19
  Ratings of Confronters’ Emotionality ....................................... 20
  Ratings of Confronters’ Credibility .......................................... 20
  Ratings of the Perpetrator’s Credibility ..................................... 20
  Participants’ Motivation to Post Response ................................. 21
Mediation Analyses ......................................................................... 24
Exploratory Measures .................................................................... 27
  Liking versus respecting the confronter ................................... 27
  Online and offline civic engagement ....................................... 27
  Reading and posting behaviors ............................................... 27

Chapter 4 Discussion ....................................................................... 29
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1-1: Distribution of Pro- and Anti-feminism comments across anger scale ...............6
Figure 2-1: Proposed serial mediation model ........................................................................12
Figure 3-1: Proposed serial mediation model ........................................................................24
Figure 4-1: Revised serial mediation model ..........................................................................25
Figure 5-1: Exploratory mediation model ..............................................................................26
Figure 6-1: Partial serial mediation model with effect sizes and significance (** p < .01,
**p < .001) .........................................................................................................................30
Figure 7-1: Exploratory mediation model with effect sizes and significance (** p < .01) .....31
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1-1: Pro-feminism response themes ................................................................. 3
Table 2-1: Anti-feminism response themes ................................................................. 5
Table 3-1: Correlations among main dependent variables ........................................... 18
Table 4-1: Means and standard deviations for ratings of the male and female confronter .... 19
Table 5-1: Themes from participants’ responses to the comment thread ....................... 22
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Stephanie Shields for her guidance on this project, as well as our lab’s current research assistants—Riley Hellings, Katie Helfand, and Rachel Sorrentino.
Chapter 1

Introduction

It was a typical Wednesday evening in 2012 when Ciara Pugsley—a 15-year-old girl—committed suicide in the woods near her home. She had received several hateful online messages calling her names like “slut” through a popular anonymous social media website. Unfortunately, Ciara is just one of several young girls over the past decade who have taken their own lives after being harassed online. With the rise of social media platforms, online harassment has been increasing, and the vast majority of victims are women (Herring, 2003; Jones, Mitchell, Finkelhor, 2013). Social media websites are one of the most widely-used means of connecting with others and disseminating information. For example, 72% of all internet users in the United States have a Facebook account (Duggan et al. 2015). Websites like Facebook allow individuals to create a sense of solidarity through peer interactions within a collective space (Crossley 2015). These online communities, however, are rife with harassing language towards women which serves to disrupt the safety of these spaces (Herring 2003; Jane 2014; Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor 2013). The purpose of this study is to examine how confronters who speak out about sexism are perceived in the online domain. To my knowledge, no published research addresses this issue.

The online domain poses its own challenges with regards to harassment. Misogyny, sexist name-calling, and objectifying comments are perceived to be significantly more harassing when occurring online than when occurring in-person (Biber, Doverspike, Baznik, Cober, Ritter, 2002). The written medium may seem to “impl[y] some thought and seriousness to the behavior” (Biber et al., 2002, p. 38). Additionally, instances of online harassment often have large audiences, where other internet users (e.g., witnesses to the harassment) may choose to confront the
perpetrator or avoid participation in the interaction altogether. Hence, the internet enables harassers to post destructive messages easily and seemingly without direct consequences. Thousands of internet users watch these interactions unfold—thus, for witnesses who might hope to incite positive change by confronting harassment and sexism, the stakes are high.

In the following sections, I first describe the nature of online sexism as it occurs in contemporary, English-speaking digital spaces, including findings from my previous qualitative study investigating sexism in Facebook comments. Next, I discuss research that examines perceptions of people who confront both sexism and racism, and the effects of group membership and gendered emotion stereotypes as they apply to perceptions of confronters.

**Online Sexism and Harassment**

The phenomenon of online hostility goes by many names—online incivility, harassment, cyberbullying, and hate speech. Although both men and women experience harassment on the internet, women experience more severe forms than men, including physical threats, sexual harassment, and online stalking (Duggan, 2014). These instances are most prevalent in online forums, social media sites, and blogs that foster discussions about politics and the news (Gammon, 2014). In addressing several notable instances of what she calls “e-bile,” Jane (2014, p. 566) highlights that “while such discourse may once have circulated infrequently or only in Internet niches, gendered e-bile has now become normalized such that it is now acceptable to express even the most minor disagreement through the most affronting, offensive and aggressive sexualised venom.” Indeed, prior qualitative studies have identified patterns of misogynist discourse in internet spaces like forums, news websites, and special-interest pages or blogs (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002; Ihrstad, 2015; Moss-Racusin, Molenda, & Cramer, 2015). In openly feminist contexts like a feminist forum and pro-feminist news pages,
backlash and trolling behavior abound (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002; Ihrstad, 2015). This effect is attenuated when posts present empirical findings: one study showed that comments on a news site and science interest pages were largely pro-feminist when they were in response to articles presenting factual evidence of gender bias (Moss-Racusin, Molenda, & Cramer, 2015). Still, social psychological research examining the phenomenon of online harassment is scarce. Jane (2014, p. 567) calls for more scholars to face “e-bile” regardless of personal discomfort, since “the risks associated with staying silent or speaking only obliquely about [it] in scholarship far outweigh the unpleasantness involved in examining this material in its uncensored entirety.”

In a qualitative study, I analyzed 866 comments posted in response to popular Facebook U.S. news posts discussing gender-related topics (Kim, 2016). Using thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I identified two major response domains: Pro-feminism and Anti-feminism, with several themes nested within each (Tables 1 & 2). Overall, there were more Anti-feminism comments (57% of coded comments) than Pro-feminism comments (43% of coded comments) and they were rated by coders as displaying more anger (Figure 1) and using power tactics, such as name-calling, more frequently than Pro-feminism comments. These findings confirm the pervasiveness of sexism in a highly-trafficked and mainstream internet space, as well as the emotionally charged nature of misogynist rhetoric.

Table 1-1: Pro-feminism response themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Category</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>% of PF comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussing gender inequality</td>
<td>Recognizes the existence of gender inequality</td>
<td>“Sexism permeates our upbringing and culture.”</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It exists</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men as oppressors</td>
<td>Describes men as perpetuating gender inequality</td>
<td>“Men don’t want women making more money than men. Men didn’t want women to have the right to even vote.”</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>Discusses historical examples that illustrate gender inequality</td>
<td>“Historically—spanning centuries—women were treated”</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
unfairly, in the sense that they were not allowed equal opportunities to men..."

“I am only basing my data on the research I have conducted and it is typically corporate level jobs where the inequality exists.”

“I’ll stop spitting out all this crazy feminist propaganda when every man who walks into my office stops assuming that every woman here is a secretary and no longer asks to speak to the ‘man in charge’.”

“It should matter because it is the right thing to do.”

Facts/data Discusses facts or empirical data that illustrate gender inequality

Personal experience Describes personal experiences that illustrate gender inequality

Morality Discusses moral values or fairness with regards to treatment of men and women

Discussing feminism Defines what feminism is, or who feminists are/should be

Combatting stereotypes Rejects stereotypes about feminists and women, or provides counterstereotypical examples

Social progress Acknowledges or expresses gratitude for social progress due to feminism

Prompting action/change Suggests specific actions to be taken as feminists

Asserting power Questions the logic or legitimacy of an argument or opinion

Denying opinion Invalidates argument based on the identity or experiences of person

Patronizing Using sarcasm or mocking statements

Calling out emotionality Claiming that one is emotional or overreacting

Name-calling/insults Using derogatory phrases to insult

Note: Subcategories are not mutually exclusive. Percents in right column represent proportion of PF (Pro-feminism) comments exhibiting the theme.
Table 2-1: Anti-feminism response themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Category</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>% of AF comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussing gender inequality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It doesn’t exist</td>
<td>Doesn’t recognize the existence of gender inequality</td>
<td>“Gender pay gap is a myth.”</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women are responsible</td>
<td>Describes women as being responsible for their outcomes</td>
<td>“If you are a moron and don’t negotiate it’s your fault. If you don’t work overtime it’s your fault.”</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender differences</td>
<td>Discusses biological or behavioral gender differences that justify gender inequality</td>
<td>“Man are better at physical and strategic work, woman are compassionate and nurturing.”</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facts/data</td>
<td>Discusses facts or empirical data that refute existence of gender inequality</td>
<td>“All the latest research shows that women are doing exceptionally well in the workforce and at life in general when compared to men.”</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal experience</td>
<td>Describes personal experiences that refute existence gender inequality</td>
<td>“Never worked in any job where women were paid less.”</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morality/fairness</td>
<td>Discusses moral values or fairness with regards to treatment of men and women</td>
<td>“How is that fair?”</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing feminism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining</td>
<td>Defines what feminism is, or who feminists are/should be</td>
<td>“It means ‘angry women’, yes?”</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men are victims</td>
<td>Discusses men as victims of feminism</td>
<td>“A lot of feminists speak as if all men are part of the patriarchy or priviledged, which is simply unfair and wrong.”</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political agenda</td>
<td>Discusses feminism as a political tool for liberals</td>
<td>“Why are we talking about this. Oh yeah CNN I know because you spend millions on Hillarys budget.”</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting stereotypes</td>
<td>Describes feminism or feminists as exemplifying stereotypical traits</td>
<td>“‘Strong woman’ or ‘Bitch on wheels’?”</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting egalitarianism</td>
<td>Promotes egalitarianism over feminism</td>
<td>“Shouldn’t we all just be humanists? Gender and race labels only serve to cause further division.”</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asserting power</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging argument</td>
<td>Questions the logic or legitimacy of an argument or opinion</td>
<td>“This is just confirmation bias.”</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning importance</td>
<td>Questions the importance of gender issues</td>
<td>“Point is, who cares. This is stupid.”</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patronizing</td>
<td>Using sarcasm or mocking statements</td>
<td>“You sound butthurt. Have a cookie.”</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Calling out emotionality

Claiming that one is emotional or overreacting

"Dear god. Let's over-read into everything. Let's make everyone butt hurt over sensitive whiny shits." 4%

Name-calling/insults

Using derogatory phrases to insult

"This comment is retarded." 7%

Sexism

Promoting sexist beliefs against women or sexually objectifying them

"Men do better quality of work than women." 11%

Note: Subcategories are not mutually exclusive. Percents in right column represent proportion of AF (Anti-feminism) comments exhibiting the theme.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anger Ratings of 1-2</th>
<th>Anger Ratings of 3-4</th>
<th>Anger Ratings of 5-7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ProFem AntiFem

Figure 1-1: Proportions of Pro- and Anti-feminism comments displaying low, moderate, and high anger; rated from 1 (not at all angry) to 7 (extremely angry)

Confronting Prejudice

Internet users face several options when encountering harassing language. A popular act of defense is to ignore these “trolling” comments, while another common response is to report them to a moderator (Gammon, 2014). However, neither of these behaviors helps mitigate the immediate harmful effects of such messages on women, or on internet users who may have impressionable beliefs about gender stereotypes. For those who do choose to directly and publicly confront online harassers, little is known about the effectiveness of doing so in an online context.

In my qualitative study, approximately sixty percent of all Pro-feminism comments were posted as direct confrontations towards Anti-feminism comments, showing that substantial efforts are
being made by well-intentioned internet users to confront harmful comments directly (Kim, 2016). Still, no existing work directly examines people’s perceptions of these online sexism confrontations.

Most social psychological work examining prejudice confrontations positions participants as the recipients of a confrontation rather than as a third-party individual observing the confrontation interaction (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006; Gulker, Mark, & Monteith, 2013). For example, Gulker, Mark, and Monteith (2013) had participants complete a mock lexical decision task with pre-determined feedback indicating that they either had gender or racial bias. Afterwards, participants received an email from the experimenter that confronted them about their bias, and the experimenter was either White or Black and male or female. Overall, participants (who were predominantly White) took confrontations about racism the most seriously when they came from the White experimenter, and were generally unconcerned when confronted about sexism, regardless of the gender of the experimenter. Other studies have used similar tactics to examine participants’ reactions to receiving prejudice confrontations (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006).

I found two studies that examined third-party observers’ reactions to confrontations (Becker & Barreto, 2014; Gervais & Hillard, 2014). Gervais and Hillard (2014) had participants read a vignette about a workplace situation in which a male coworker made a sexist statement and was subsequently confronted by a male or female colleague in a leadership position. Overall, female participants liked the confronters more than male participants, and were more surprised when reading about a male (versus female) confronter. Becker and Barreto (2014) also had participants evaluate a confrontation interaction through reading a vignette about a woman confronting a man at a party about a sexist statement he made beforehand (results of this study are discussed in a later section). While these studies are relevant in examining third-party perceptions of confrontations, they both present imagined scenarios that involve face-to-face
interactions. It is unknown whether perceptions in these contexts also apply to perceptions of social media confrontations, where people’s written comments may be construed differently compared to imagined spoken dialogue (Biber et al., 2002).

**Group Membership: Who Can Confront?**

One factor that influences perceptions of confronters is whether they belong to the target group (i.e., the group that is being stigmatized). For example, when confronting sexism, the gender of a confronter affects how the confronter is perceived by both recipients of the confrontation and third-party observers. Both women and men rate men as more effective and credible than women when publically confronting sexism (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Gervais & Hillard, 2014). In fact, in one study, women were more likely to proactively report sexism when men rather than women suggested that they were targets of sexism in a mock job interview scenario (Cihangir, Barreto, & Ellemers, 2014). According to research on persuasion, people who are perceived as acting outside of group-interest induce greater surprise and deeper message processing in observers (Petty, Fleming, Priester, & Feinstein, 2001). Thus, when confronting sexism, men may be taken more seriously due to their non-target status. Additionally, social roles (Eagly, 1987) and prescriptions of “feminine niceness” (Rudman & Glick, 2001) lead people to expect women to behave in warm and friendly ways, while men are expected to behave in assertive and leader-like ways. Consequently, women receive backlash when violating these prescriptive norms by publically confronting someone (Gervais & Hillard, 2014).

The influence of target group membership can also be seen in perceptions of confronters of racism. When participants (who were predominantly White) were confronted about racism towards Black targets, they evaluated White confronters more positively and took their claims more seriously, but Black confronters were perceived as complainers (Czopp & Monteith, 2003;
Additionally, in comparison to Black confronters, White confronters elicited less uneasiness and induced more feelings of guilt in participants (Czopp & Monteith, 2003). Again, research demonstrates that being a member of the targeted group can pose problems when speaking out about prejudice towards your own group.

**Gender and Emotion: How can people confront?**

Another factor that influences evaluations of individuals is their display of emotions, as emotions are perceived differently based on who expresses them. Throughout history, Western beliefs about women’s emotions have characterized them as being childlike and “dangerously unregulated” (Shields, 2007, p. 106). Shields (2007) discusses late 19th century depictions of feminine and masculine emotion in science and popular culture, wherein feminine emotion was portrayed as an “unstable sensitivity of feelings,” while masculine emotion was portrayed as a “passionate force evident in the drive to achieve, to create, and to dominate” (p. 97). In essence, the former was unbridled while the latter was effective. Additionally, current Western social norms dictate that women’s emotions should be nurturant and communal (e.g., being affectionate, sympathetic, sensitive) while men’s emotions should be agentic (e.g., being confident, angry, forceful) (Eagly & Karau, 1991; Shields, 2005). Deviations from these emotion prescriptions lead to various consequences for women. For example, Brescoll and Uhlmann (2008) found that in a workplace context, angry women were perceived as deserving a lower salary, and were rated as less competent workers than men. Additionally, participants attributed men’s anger to frustrating situational factors while attributing women’s anger to dispositional factors (e.g., “She is an angry person,” p. 269). In another study, Salerno and Peter-Hagene (2015) found that in a jury deliberation situation, men who showed anger gained influence over group decisions while
women who showed anger lost influence. Thus, when women violate expectations about gender and emotion displays (Eagly, 1987; Rudman & Glick, 2001), they are negatively evaluated by others. Indeed, the colloquial label of “RBF,” or “Resting Bitch Face,” is a term that is disproportionately assigned to women and demonstrates Western discontentment with (and sensitivity towards) women’s anger (Camia, 2016). Even when angry women are portrayed in popular television and film, they are often highly sexualized (e.g., Scarlett Johansson as Marvel’s Black Widow) in a manner that stifles the extent to which they can exude agency and respectability (Camia, 2016).

Anger is the most prominent emotion that arises in situations of conflict (Allred, 1999), yet little is known about the role of anger in sexism confrontations. Studies examining racism confrontations have shown that male confronters as well as gender-unspecified confronters were evaluated more negatively when confronting racism in a more angry or hostile way (Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006; Schultz & Maddox, 2013). Showing similar results, Becker and Barreto (2014) found that when participants read a vignette about a woman who confronted a man at a party about sexism, participants preferred her nonaggressive confrontation over her aggressive confrontation that involved her slapping the man. However, male participants were threatened by her nonaggressive confrontation as well, while female participants were not. Thus, it appears that when confronting sexism, the expression of physical displays of anger by women can undermine their message. However, due to the scarcity of research in this area, it is unclear how other displays of anger (e.g., angry online comments) are perceived when both women and men confront sexism. The current study investigates how the gender and displayed anger of online sexism confronters affects perceptions of the confrontation interaction.
The Present Study

In this study, I examined how third-party observers perceive an online confrontation to a sexist post based on the confronter’s gender and displayed anger. Specifically, I conducted a 2 (anger level: neutral, angry) X 2 (confronter gender: male, female) between-subjects experiment to examine how the gender and displayed anger of a confronter influences participants’ beliefs about the confronter, the sexist perpetrator, and their own personal motivation to speak up about sexism.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1a. Given that women’s emotions are perceived to be uncontrolled, attributed to disposition, and negatively evaluated when violating prescriptive femininity (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Eagly, 1987; Rudman & Glick, 2001; Shields 2007), I hypothesized that if a woman confronts a sexist online post, then she will be judged as more angry and emotional than a man who confronts a sexist online post.

Hypothesis 1b. Given that men are perceived as being more credible than women in face-to-face sexism confrontations (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Gervais & Hillard, 2014) and target group members who confront prejudice are perceived as complainers (Gulker, Mark, & Monteith, 2013), I hypothesized that if a woman confronts a sexist post, then a) she will be judged as less credible than a man who confronts the sexist post, and b) the sexist perpetrator will be judged as more credible than when a man confronts the post.

Hypothesis 1c. Given that angry women and target group members who confront prejudice towards their group are negatively evaluated overall (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Gulker, Mark, & Monteith, 2013), I hypothesized that if a woman confronts a sexist post, then
participants will have lower motivation to personally confront the post than when a man confronts the sexist post.

Hypothesis 2. I hypothesized that there would be a significant serial mediation model, in which the confronter’s gender predicts participants’ ratings of the confronters’ emotionality, which then predicts ratings of the confronters’ credibility, and lastly predicts ratings of the sexist perpetrator’s credibility (Figure 2). Through this pathway, I predicted that, if an angry woman confronts a sexist post, then she will be judged to be more emotional which leads to judgments of lower credibility, and ultimately higher perpetrator credibility.

Figure 2-1: Proposed serial mediation model
Chapter 2

Method

Participants

A total of 210 undergraduate students were recruited from Penn State University’s introductory psychology participant pool after a power analysis determined that this sample size approached 95% power. Two participants were excluded for failing the attention check placed in the survey, resulting in a final sample of 208 (108 women) participants. Participants received course credit for their participation. The sample was predominantly White (81%), followed by Asian or Asian American (9%), Hispanic or Latino (4%), Black or African American (3%), Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (1%), and American Indian or Alaska Native (.5%). Two participants declined to respond with their racial identity and two others indicated “Other.” The average age of participants was 18.7 years.

Materials

Screenshots of two different real Facebook news posts were used to create both the filler stimulus and experimental stimuli. The filler news post (Appendix A) was edited to feature two fictitious comments nested underneath the article. The main experimental stimulus (Appendix A) was also edited to feature two fictitious comments nested underneath the article, wherein the first comment was sexist in nature and the second comment was a confrontation. Both the sexist comment and confronting comment were modeled after the most frequently occurring response themes identified in my previous qualitative study (Kim, 2016). Different versions of this latter
news post were created to manipulate the gender of the confronters, with a username of either “Brandon” or “Brittany.” The sexist perpetrator’s username consistently displayed “Michael.” The anger level of the confronter’s message was also manipulated by Brandon/Brittany either writing: “It’s a problem when women aren’t recognized for their achievements like men are” or “It’s a PROBLEM when women aren’t recognized for their achievements like men are!” These messages were pilot-tested with an undergraduate student sample to ensure that displayed anger was successfully manipulated.

**Main Dependent Measures**

**Ratings of the confronters’ anger**

As a manipulation check, participants’ perceptions of the confronters’ level of anger were measured using a 3-item scale asking how angry, upset, and irritated the confronter was. Participants answered on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Extremely). The items were averaged to create a combined score ($\alpha = .92$).

**Ratings of the confronters’ emotionality**

Perceptions of the confronters’ level of emotionality were measured using a 7-item scale. Items asked how emotional, oversensitive, melodramatic, and overtaken by their feelings the confronter was. Reverse coded items asked how composed, under control, and calm the confronter was. Participants answered on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Extremely). The items were averaged to create a combined score ($\alpha = .84$).
Ratings of the confronters’ credibility

Perceptions of the confronters’ credibility were measured using a 4-item scale. Items asked how valid, legitimate, and credible the confronter’s message was, as well as how seriously participants took them. Participants answered on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Extremely). The items were averaged to create a combined score ($\alpha = .84$).

Ratings of the perpetrator’s credibility

Perceptions of the sexist perpetrator’s credibility were measured using the same 4-item scale as above.

Motivation to post response

To assess participants’ motivation to add their own response to the comment thread, participants were first asked: “Imagine that you were asked to provide your own response to this conversation. What would you say?” Participants were given a blank comment box to enter their response. They were then asked to rate on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Extremely) how likely they would be to post what they wrote.

Exploratory Dependent Measures

Liking vs. respecting the confronter

As an exploratory investigation, measures of how much participants liked and respected the confronter were included. Items were based on Dodd, Giuliano, Boutell, and Moran’s (2001)
study of perceptions of women and men who did and did not confront sexism. Single items asked: “How much do you like Brittany/Brandon?” and “How much do you respect Brittany/Brandon?” Participants responded to them using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Extremely).

Online and offline civic engagement

Participants were asked to indicate to what extent they engaged in various behaviors pertaining to civic or political causes over the past 12 months using Jugert, Echstein, Noack, Kuhn, and Benbow’s (2012) adapted scales from Lyons (2008). Both the 6-item Online Civic Engagement (α= .80) and 7-item Offline Civic Engagement (α= .83) scales were used, for which participants responded to the questions on a 5-point scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very often). Items included behaviors such as taking part in demonstrations, boycotting certain products for political reasons, linking news or video with political content online, and participating in an online petition. The items were averaged to create a combined civic engagement score (α= .85).

Reading and posting internet comments

The last exploratory measure asked participants how often they typically read and post internet comments. Single items asked: “How often do you read the comments on internet posts?” and “How often do you post comments on internet posts?” Participants answered the questions on a 5-point scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very often). Participants were also asked an open-ended question: “In general, could you describe your experience with reading and posting comments online?”
Procedure

Participants were recruited through Penn State University’s SONA system and took a Qualtrics survey online from any location. Upon starting the survey, participants were informed that the study’s purpose was to examine their attitudes about the way people discuss the news online. After providing informed consent to the study, participants were given the following instruction: “On the following pages, you will see two online news posts taken from a social media website. Identifying information including last names and profile images have been edited out for privacy reasons.” Participants were then shown the filler news post and asked to answer each of the main dependent measures in reference to it. Participants were then randomly assigned to see the second news post with either a male or female confronter and a neutral or angry confrontation message. They answered the same main dependent measures, as well as all of the exploratory dependent measures. At the end of the survey, participants answered demographic questions and were debriefed on the purpose of the study.
Chapter 3

Results

Main Dependent Measures

Correlations between all main dependent variables are presented in Table 3. Ratings of the confronters’ displayed level of anger were positively correlated with ratings of their emotionality, credibility, and participants’ own motivation to post a response. Additionally, ratings of the confronters’ credibility were negatively correlated with both the ratings of their emotionality, and ratings of the perpetrator’s credibility.

Table 3-1: Correlations among main dependent variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Confronters’ Anger</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Confronter’s Emotionality</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Confronter’s Credibility</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>-.37**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Perpetrator’s Credibility</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Motivation to Post Responsea</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.001</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aIncludes only the continuous items associated with this variable
**p < .01.

To assess the effect of manipulating the confronter’s gender and displayed anger on these dependent variables, I conducted a 2 (Confronter gender: man/woman) x 2 (Confronter anger: neutral/angry) between-subjects ANOVA on each of the four main dependent variables. The means and standard deviations for all dependent measures can be found in Table 4. The results are discussed in more detail in the following sections.
Table 4-1: Means and standard deviations for ratings of the male and female confronter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Neutral Male</th>
<th>Neutral SD</th>
<th>Neutral Female</th>
<th>Neutral SD</th>
<th>Angry Male</th>
<th>Angry SD</th>
<th>Angry Female</th>
<th>Angry SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confronter’s Anger</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>5.24</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confronter’s Emotionality</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confronter’s Credibility</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpetrator’s Credibility</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation to Post Responsea</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes only the continuous items associated with this variable

*Note. N = 208*

**Ratings of Confronters’ Anger**

Confirming the effectiveness of the anger manipulation, there was a significant main effect of the confronters’ anger condition on perceptions of displayed anger, in that participants rated confronters in the angry condition ($M = 5.46$) as being more angry than confronters in the neutral condition ($M = 4.67$), $F(1, 207) = 18.05, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .08$. It should be noted that even in the neutral condition, confronters were rated as being moderately angry with a mean of 4.67 on a 7-point scale.

There was also a significant main effect of confronter gender on perceptions of displayed anger, with participants rating female confronters ($M = 5.34$) as being more angry than male confronters ($M = 4.79$), $F(1, 207) = 9.001, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .04$. 


Ratings of Confronters’ Emotionality

For participants’ ratings of confronters’ level of emotionality, there was a significant main effect of the anger condition in that participants rated both confronters in the angry condition \((M = 4.02)\) as being more emotional than the confronters in the neutral condition \((M = 3.24)\), \(F(1, 207) = 28.13, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .12\).

Ratings of Confronters’ Credibility

For participants’ ratings of confronters’ credibility, there were no significant main effects of confronter gender or anger, and no interactions \((p = .54; p = .48; p = .25)\). The means of ratings for both male \((M = 4.93)\) and female \((M = 5.05)\) confronters indicate that all confronters, regardless of gender or displayed anger, were perceived as being relatively credible (out of a 7-point scale).

Ratings of the Perpetrator’s Credibility

For participants’ ratings of the sexist perpetrator’s credibility, there was a significant main effect of confronter gender, with participants who saw a woman confront the perpetrator rating the perpetrator as more credible \((M = 2.32)\) than participants who saw a man confront him \((M = 1.68)\), although ratings overall indicated generally low perceived perpetrator credibility, \(F(1, 207) = 10.63, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .05\).
Participants’ Motivation to Post Response

Three coders (the primary researcher and two research assistants) independently coded the 208 open-ended responses provided by participants. A small subset of 30 responses was first used for pilot-coding and establishing the initial coding scheme. Throughout coding the remaining responses, disagreements about the coding scheme were resolved through discussion. Inter-coder reliability was calculated based on the final set of codes (average pairwise percent agreement = 95.96%; Krippendorff’s Alpha = 0.82).

Overall, responses were coded as belonging to the Pro-feminism or Anti-feminism domain. The majority of participants’ responses were pro-feminist (i.e., in support of feminism/gender equality; 83% of all responses), while a few responses were anti-feminist (i.e., against feminism/gender equality; 3% of all responses) and a few more were unable to be categorized (14% of all responses). Eight different response themes were identified within the Pro-feminism category, while five responses themes were identified within the Anti-feminism category (Table 5). Importantly, these themes were not mutually exclusive. Comments on average exhibited 1.64 themes.

Within the Pro-feminism category, the most frequently occurring response themes included explicit pro-equality statements (e.g., “Women’s achievements should always be just as respected as men’s”; 36% of all responses), statements recognizing the value of people’s accomplishments (e.g., “This woman is being recognized for her hard work as everyone should be and nothing else”; 34% of all responses), and statements challenging the sexist perpetrator (e.g., “Michael, I understand you must feel very threatened by women moving up in society but please at least try to not exhibit your flaming insecurities”; 22% of all responses).

Interestingly, one pro-feminist theme—“Gratitude towards male confronter”—refers to participants’ responses that showed appreciation for the male confronter, Brandon. For example,
one participant said, “I agree with you Brandon and am happy that males can recognize that there is still inequality between genders.” Another participant said, “Way to go Brandon it’s about time someone who isn’t a woman stands up to inconsiderate men who are overly sexist.” Despite there being very few instances of this theme (occurring in only 2% of all responses), there were no responses of this nature directed towards the female confronter, Brittany.

Within the Anti-feminism category, each of the themes occurred very infrequently due to the low number of responses. Responses included statements that claimed feminism is extreme or illogical (e.g., “Feminism contains no logical thought”; 5% of all responses), statements that downplayed the issue of sexism (e.g., “I don’t understand why women feel they are unequal with men we are equal”; 4% of all responses), and statements questioning the relevance of gender (e.g., “what’s [sic] the point of pointing out her gender. That’s just asking for someone to get butt-hurt and complain at this time in history”; 4% of all responses).

Table 5-1: Themes from participants’ responses to the comment thread

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Theme</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>% of all comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro-feminism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement with confronter</td>
<td>Explicit agreement with Brandon/Brittany</td>
<td>“I agree with Brandon”</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratitude towards male confronter</td>
<td>Expressing appreciation towards Brandon</td>
<td>“Thank you for your respect Brandon.”</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combating stereotypes</td>
<td>Rejecting stereotypes about women or feminists</td>
<td>“A woman is more than just a man’s wife.”</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizing skills/achievements</td>
<td>Emphasizing the value of people’s accomplishments</td>
<td>“There is nothing wrong for honoring a woman and her achievements.”</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexism is a problem</td>
<td>Acknowledging that sexism is a past or current problem</td>
<td>“Females have been in the shadows of males for decades. And now they are finally being recognized for all of their wonderful achievements!!”</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-equality/feminism</td>
<td>Expressing support for gender equality/feminism</td>
<td>“Women need to be recognized more for their achievements, especially in historically male dominated fields like science”</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to responding to the comment thread, participants rated how likely they would be to publically post what they wrote. There was no main effect of confronter gender as predicted, but there was a significant effect of confronter gender qualified by an interaction with displayed anger, $F(1, 207) = 3.99, p = .05, \eta_p^2 = .02$. Upon probing the simple effects, within just the neutral condition, participants were more motivated to post their response after seeing a male confronter ($M = 3.44$) compared to seeing a female confronter ($M = 2.75$), and this effect is marginally significant, $F(1, 207) = 3.54, p = .06, \eta_p^2 = .02$. 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenging the perpetrator</th>
<th>Directly disagreeing with or insulting Michael</th>
<th>“Michael, you are obviously ignorant and a sexist individual who has no idea how the world works.”</th>
<th>22%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excitement about article</td>
<td>Expressing excitement or positivity towards the article</td>
<td>“good for her and Scotland!”</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anti-feminism</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminism is extreme/illogical</td>
<td>Describing feminism or the confronter as being exaggerated/extreme</td>
<td>“Women are dramatic and think they don’t get enough credit”</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexism is not a problem</td>
<td>Stating that sexism is not a current problem</td>
<td>“Men and women are in most places treated equally and there’s little proof that states otherwise”</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Bad” feminism exists</td>
<td>Acknowledging that not all feminism is positive</td>
<td>“There are feminists that put a bad name on feminism…”</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender is irrelevant</td>
<td>Stating that the issue is not about gender</td>
<td>“Why does gender even matter here, her scientific achievements don’t have a gender.”</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displeasure at overall conversation</td>
<td>Expressing annoyance or lack of concern with the conversation</td>
<td>“I don’t understand why people discuss this on social media”</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Themes are not mutually exclusive. Percents in right column represent proportion of all comments exhibiting the theme.

In addition to responding to the comment thread, participants rated how likely they would be to publically post what they wrote. There was no main effect of confronter gender as predicted, but there was a significant effect of confronter gender qualified by an interaction with displayed anger, $F(1, 207) = 3.99, p = .05, \eta_p^2 = .02$. Upon probing the simple effects, within just the neutral condition, participants were more motivated to post their response after seeing a male confronter ($M = 3.44$) compared to seeing a female confronter ($M = 2.75$), and this effect is marginally significant, $F(1, 207) = 3.54, p = .06, \eta_p^2 = .02$. 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenging the perpetrator</th>
<th>Directly disagreeing with or insulting Michael</th>
<th>“Michael, you are obviously ignorant and a sexist individual who has no idea how the world works.”</th>
<th>22%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excitement about article</td>
<td>Expressing excitement or positivity towards the article</td>
<td>“good for her and Scotland!”</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anti-feminism</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminism is extreme/illogical</td>
<td>Describing feminism or the confronter as being exaggerated/extreme</td>
<td>“Women are dramatic and think they don’t get enough credit”</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexism is not a problem</td>
<td>Stating that sexism is not a current problem</td>
<td>“Men and women are in most places treated equally and there’s little proof that states otherwise”</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Bad” feminism exists</td>
<td>Acknowledging that not all feminism is positive</td>
<td>“There are feminists that put a bad name on feminism…”</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender is irrelevant</td>
<td>Stating that the issue is not about gender</td>
<td>“Why does gender even matter here, her scientific achievements don’t have a gender.”</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displeasure at overall conversation</td>
<td>Expressing annoyance or lack of concern with the conversation</td>
<td>“I don’t understand why people discuss this on social media”</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Themes are not mutually exclusive. Percents in right column represent proportion of all comments exhibiting the theme.
Mediation Analyses

To test the proposed serial mediation model in Figure 3, I analyzed whether participants’ ratings of the confronters’ emotionality and ratings of the confronters’ credibility mediated the relationship between confonter gender and ratings of the perpetrator’s credibility.

I ran Hayes’ (2016) PROCESS macro for SPSS using Model 6 and 5000 bootstrap samples. The results indicated that the pathway from confonter gender to confonter’s emotionality was not significant, $t(207) = 0.18, p = 0.85$. However, the pathway from confonter’s emotionality to confonter’s credibility was significant, $b = -0.48, t(207) = -5.72, p < .001$. Additionally, the pathways from confonter’s credibility to perpetrator’s credibility, $b = -0.19, t(207) = -2.68, p < .01$, and the direct effect from confonter gender to perpetrator’s credibility, $b = 0.67, t(207) = 3.45, p < .001$, were both significant. Overall, confonter’s emotionality and confonter’s credibility did not significantly mediate the relationship between confonter gender and ratings of the perpetrator’s credibility in this serial mediation model.

Figure 3-1: Proposed serial mediation model
As an exploratory analysis, I re-ran the serial mediation using ratings of the confronter’s anger (the manipulation check) instead of ratings of the confronter’s emotionality because there were significant main effects of both confronter gender and anger on this measure (Figure 4).

![Figure 4-1: Revised serial mediation model](image)

Here, the results indicated that the pathway from confronter gender to confronter’s anger was significant, $b = 0.55, t(207) = 2.89, p < .01$. Additionally, the pathway from confronter’s anger to confronter’s credibility was significant, $b = 0.30, t(207) = 4.25, p < .001$. Last, the pathways from confronter’s credibility to perpetrator’s credibility, $b = -0.19, t(207) = -2.71, p < .01$, and the direct effect from confronter gender to perpetrator’s credibility, $b = 0.69, t(207) = 3.48, p < .001$, were both significant. The indirect effect of confronter gender on ratings of the perpetrator’s credibility through ratings of the confronter’s anger and credibility is significant as evidenced by the 95% confidence interval not including zero, effect = -0.03, 95% CI [-0.09, -0.01]. Since the direct effect still holds significance, the revised model satisfies a partial serial mediation.

As another exploratory mediation analysis, I tested whether participants’ ratings of the confronter’s anger mediated the relationship between confronter gender and participants’ motivation to post their response (Figure 5). I used Hayes’ (2016) PROCESS macro for SPSS using Model 4 and 5000 bootstrap samples.
Results indicated that the pathway from confronter gender to confronter’s anger was significant, $b = 0.55$, $t(207) = 2.89$, $p < .01$. Additionally, the pathway from confronter’s anger to participants’ motivation to post their response was significant, $b = 0.26$, $t(207) = 2.84$, $p < .01$. The direct effect from confronter gender to participants’ motivation to post their response was insignificant, $b = -0.32$, $t(207) = -1.22$, $p = 0.22$, and the indirect effect of confronter gender on participants’ motivation to post their response through ratings of the confronter’s anger is significant as evidenced by the 95% confidence interval not including zero, effect = 0.15, 95% CI [0.04, 0.36]. Thus, this model fulfills full mediation (Sobel test, $t = 2.02$, $p = .04$).
Exploratory Measures

Liking versus respecting the confronter

I conducted a 2 (Confronter gender: man/woman) x 2 (Confronter anger: neutral/angry) between-subjects ANOVA on participants’ ratings of how much they liked and respected the confronter.

There was a significant main effect of confronter gender on participants’ ratings of how much they liked the confronter, such that participants liked the male confronter ($M = 5.11$) more than the female confronter ($M = 4.65$), $F(1, 207) = 4.04$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2_p = .02$. There were no significant main effects or interactions for participants’ ratings of how much they respected the confronter, although the means for respecting the male ($M = 5.38$) and female ($M = 5.17$) confronter indicate that participants viewed confronters as being relatively respectable.

Online and offline civic engagement

Through analyzing mean scores, participants indicated fairly low levels of civic engagement on a 5-point scale in both online ($M = 2.09$) and offline ($M = 1.94$) contexts during the past 12 months.

Reading and posting behaviors

When asked specifically about how often they read and post comments on the internet, participants indicated slightly more reading ($M = 3.30$) behaviors than posting ($M = 1.69$) behaviors on a 5-point scale.
Participants also provided open-ended feedback on their general experience with reading and posting online comments. The primary researcher alone coded each response as exhibiting either positive, negative, or neutral valence towards reading and posting comments. Twelve responses were unable to be coded due to their unclear nature (e.g., “nothing”). Sixteen percent of the responses indicated positive experiences, with one person saying: “I like reading posts to see how people interpret information differently.” Another person stated a similar sentiment by saying, “I enjoy reading what other people have to say and then comparing it to my own [opinion].” Several of the positive responses specifically indicated that online comments are funny or entertaining, with one person stating: “I just read the comments because I think it's [sic] funny when people argue in the comments of online posts.”

However, fifty-six percent of responses indicated fairly negative or contentious experiences with reading and posting comments. Many indicated that they read comments but rarely post them. For example, several participants noted the argumentative nature of comment sections, with one participant saying: “I read a lot of things...that are controversial. However, most of the time, I would rather keep all of my opinions to myself rather than arguing with some idiot on a computer.” Another participant stated: “The comment sections of many online news articles are essentially toxic as people are constantly trying to anonymously force their views down each other's throats. I usually read...and never post anything myself because I do not want to get involved in the chaos.” Other participants expressed judgment about people who post comments, where one participant stated: “I cringe because I find it weird that people argue with strangers.” Another person said: “You see a lot of dumb people posting their opinions and others posting theirs and arguing with each other.”

The remaining twenty-eight percent of responses were neutral in valence and most commonly described, again, that participants tended to read comments but rarely post comments (e.g., “I read articles and posts online but it is very rare if I ever comment”).
Chapter 4

Discussion

This study examined the effects of an online sexism confronter’s displayed gender and anger on third-party attitudes. Participants’ perceptions of confronters’ anger, emotionality, and credibility were assessed, as well as perceptions of the sexist perpetrator’s credibility and participants’ own motivation to post a response to the conversation.

Although I hypothesized that the female confronter would be perceived to be angrier, more emotional, and less credible than the male confronter, findings supported only the first hypothesis in that participants rated female confronters as being significantly angrier than male confronters. Although ratings of emotionality were significantly associated with ratings of anger, the emotionality scale assessed confronters’ perceived level of control over their feelings which appears to be a different construct from the perceived intensity of emotion (anger scale). Participants may have viewed all confronters as being similarly emotional given the emotionally-charged nature of the conversation. With ratings of the confronters’ credibility, participants viewed all confronters as having moderate levels of credibility. Exploratory measures also revealed that participants generally respected all confronters, but liked male confronters more than female confronters. These findings bolster Dodd, Giuliano, Boutell, and Moran’s (2001) findings that people judge confronters differently in terms of liking and respecting them, such that female confronters may face penalties specifically with regards to being liked.

I also hypothesized that participants would judge the sexist perpetrator as being more credible when a woman confronts the post compared to when a man confronts the post. Findings supported this hypothesis as participants who saw the female confronter rated the perpetrator as being significantly more credible than participants who saw the male confronter. This finding supports the literature showing that group membership can impact the way confronters are
perceived, such that men are taken more seriously and generally viewed more positively when calling out sexism (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Gervais & Hillard, 2014; Petty, Fleming, Priester, & Feinstein, 2001). It is interesting, however, that there were no significant effects of manipulating confronter gender (or anger) on actual ratings of the confronters’ credibility. Instead, the confronter’s group membership influenced perceptions of how legitimate or illegitimate the sexist perpetrator was. Ultimately, when a woman confronted an instance of sexism, the sexism was seen as being less problematic.

A partial serial mediation model (Figure 6) further explained this pathway by illustrating that, when controlling for confronter gender, being perceived as angrier led to being perceived as a more credible confronter, which in turn resulted in the perpetrator being perceived as less credible. However, to complicate the matter, the direct effect was still significant in that being a female confronter resulted in the perpetrator being perceived as more credible.

![Partial serial mediation model](image)

**Figure 6-1**: Partial serial mediation model with effect sizes and significance (* * * p < .001, ** * p < .01)

These results illustrate the tricky waters that women may face when confronting sexism. Unlike men, confrontational women are not only perceived as being angrier, but their in-group status
may grant more credibility to sexist perpetrators regardless of their own credibility. Men, however, may be perceived as credible through their more “tempered” anger, and their non-target group membership ultimately validates their intentions and reduces the credibility of the perpetrator.

Last, I hypothesized that participants who saw a female confronter would indicate lower motivation to post their response to the conversation. Findings partially confirmed this hypothesis, in that only within the neutral condition, participants were marginally more motivated to post a response after seeing the male confronter compared to the female confronter. A mediation analysis (Figure 7) showed that subjective ratings of confronters’ anger fully mediated the relationship between confronter gender and participants’ motivation to post the comment that they wrote.

![Figure 7-1: Exploratory mediation model with effect sizes and significance (*** p < .01)](image)

This suggests that, controlling for confronter gender, higher ratings of confronters’ anger predicted higher motivation in participants to post their response. People may perceive higher anger as a general indication of urgency in the matter, which thereby increases the perceived importance of adding their opinion to the conversation. However, given that when manipulating
the independent variables (gender and anger conditions) a marginally significant effect of confronter gender occurred in the neutral condition, people may default to gender stereotypes in contexts that lack urgency. In other words, in the neutral condition, participants may have interpreted a man speaking out as an indication of greater urgency than a woman speaking out, thereby indicating higher motivation to add their opinion following his comment. However, it is important to note that across all conditions, people in general did not feel very motivated to post a response to the comment thread.

When examining participants’ written responses to the comment thread, the majority of participants provided support for the confronter’s message, regardless of whether or not they felt impelled to post their response publically. Thus, a challenge in confronting online sexism may lie in increasing people’s motivation to publically post their pro-feminist thoughts in the face of harassment. Exploratory descriptive measures about the participants revealed that they did not consider themselves to be very civically engaged (both offline and online) over the past year, and that they somewhat frequently read internet comments and seldom post internet comments. Open-ended responses further revealed that participants largely feel uncomfortable with posting their opinions on social media due to the fear of getting entangled in an argument with strangers. It is an intriguing question regarding whether witnesses of in-person sexism face similar fears when contemplating whether or not to intervene, or if intervening online is perceived as particularly daunting for unique reasons. It would be beneficial for future research to address this question.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Because the sample for this study was comprised of undergraduate students, the results may not necessarily generalize to older populations who may exhibit different behaviors and attitudes towards social media and online commenting. Demographic research on Facebook users
show that, while 18 to 29-year-old internet users are the most likely to have Facebook accounts, the number of Facebook users above this age group is increasing each year (Duggan, 2015). Future research should investigate whether conflict avoidance and/or self-presentation concerns remain consistent across older age groups, given that these factors may influence whether participants feel motivated to post comments online. Additionally, older age groups may differ from college students in reported levels of civic engagement due to differences in career and life situations (i.e., more exposure to and concern for “real world” issues). Research should examine whether greater civic engagement in this context is predictive of higher motivation to confront online harassment.

Further, this study examined the effects of a confronters’ gender and anger without including consideration of their racial identity. It is often the case that an internet user’s gender and racial identity are simultaneously visible and mutually constitutive in shaping observers’ attitudes about them. Additionally, certain racial groups are stereotyped in the U.S. as being masculine or feminine (i.e., African Americans and Asian Americans, respectively), which could possibly lead to differing attitudes regarding the appropriateness and credibility of confronters from these racial groups who show anger (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013). Future research should take an intersectional approach to examine how gender and racial stereotypes concurrently impact attitudes about online confronters who show anger.

Last, this study examined perceptions of an online confronter who responded directly to a sexist comment. Internet users can demonstrate pro-feminist or activist messages in other ways as well, for example by posting a standalone status update or a link to a news article. By examining these other displays of online activism that do not involve a direct confrontation interaction, future research can investigate whether attitudes about activist internet users are influenced by whether or not another internet user is directly targeted by their message, thereby creating a situation of conflict. This research can also examine whether people are more or less motivated to
post these standalone messages compared to posting a confrontation in direct response to a perpetrator.

**Implications**

Overall, the findings from this study show that there are consequences when women confront online sexism. More specifically, female confronters are perceived as being angrier than male confronters, are less liked than male confronters, and third-party observers view the sexist perpetrator as being more credible compared to when they see male confronters. Simply belonging (or not belonging) to the targeted group when confronting prejudice can have major effects on how problematic the instance of prejudice appears to be. Additionally, people appear to view commenting on internet posts as a negative and unpleasant activity, where both quantitative and qualitative responses indicate that even if people express confrontational thoughts towards the sexist perpetrator privately, they feel low motivation to add their response to the conversation publically. This finding presents a concern with regards to mitigating online harassment—if sexist internet comments go unchallenged (or are weakly challenged), what effects do these comments have on targets who scroll past them on a daily basis? It is imperative that future work continues to explore avenues for combatting the rampant sexism on the internet, and for encouraging members of the online public to speak out in the face of oppressive language.

**Conclusion**

My Master’s project investigated perceptions of online sexism confrontations based on the confronter’s gender and displayed anger. I began the paper by describing what is known about online misogyny, and the influence of factors like group membership and gendered emotion
stereotypes on perceptions of confronters. I then outlined the methodology and results of the study. Findings illustrated that online sexism confrontations made by women may be less effective than confrontations made by men due to negative perceptions of women’s anger. Further, findings revealed that participants have low desire to publically intervene in an online context. These results highlight the need for male allies to speak up about sexism online, and efforts to ensure that harassing language is not left unchecked on the internet.
References


Appendix A
Stimuli

Filler news post:

Exposing The Myth Of The Productive All-Nighter

No matter what anyone tells you in college, remember this simple fact: the all-nighter is never worth it. It may get you a few extra points, and may save...

Sarah: Why are people so willing to sacrifice sleep...it never pays off and you act like an idiot the next day. Glad this article is setting things straight!
Like Reply
Matt: Actually I've gotten a lot done whenever I forced myself to stay up. I do it every now and then, you should try it
Like Reply

Manipulated news posts:
This Female Scientist Will Soon Be Featured on Scottish Currency
Mary Somerville helped discover Neptune

Michael: Females are taking over everything with their whiny man-hating campaigns. That's what happens when you let them out of the house.
Like Reply

Brittany: It's a problem when women aren't recognized for their achievements like men are.
Like Reply

Write a comment...
This Female Scientist Will Soon Be Featured on Scottish Currency
Mary Somerville helped discover Neptune

Michael: Females are taking over everything with their whiny man-hating campaigns. That's what happens when you let them out of the house.
Like  Reply

Brandon: It's a problem when women aren't recognized for their achievements like men are.
Like  Reply

Write a comment...
Appendix B

Dependent Measures

Anger scale from 1-7 (manipulation check)

- How angry is Brandon/Brittany?
- How upset is Brandon/Brittany?
- How irritated is Brandon/Brittany?

Emotionality scale from 1-7

- How emotional is Brandon/Brittany?
- How oversensitive is Brandon/Brittany?
- How melodramatic is Brandon/Brittany?
- To what extent is Brandon/Brittany overtaken by his/her feelings?
- How composed is Brandon/Brittany? (R)
- How under control is Brandon/Brittany? (R)
- How calm is Brandon/Brittany? (R)

Credibility scale from 1-7

- How valid is Brandon/Brittany’s argument?
- How legitimate is Brandon/Brittany’s argument?
- How credible do you think Brandon/Brittany’s is?
- How seriously do you take Brandon/Brittany?

Liking item from 1-7

- How much do you like Brandon/Brittany?

Respecting item from 1-7

- How much do you respect Brandon/Brittany?

Filler Items

- How happy is Brandon/Brittany?
- How excited is Brandon/Brittany?
- How conceited is Brandon/Brittany?
- How self-righteous is Brandon/Brittany?

Motivation to Respond

- Imagine that you were asked to provide your own response to this conversation. What would you say? (open-ended)
• How likely would you be to post what you wrote? (1-7)

Offline Civic Engagement Scale from 1-5

How often have you done the following things during the last 12 months?

• Done volunteer work for a cause
• Worn bracelets as a symbol of support for a cause
• Donated money to a social or political cause
• Taken part in a concert or fundraising event with a social or political cause
• Taken part in a demonstration
• Distributed leaflets with political content
• Bought or boycotted certain products for political reasons

Online Civic Engagement Scale from 1-5

How often have you done the following things during the last 12 months?

• Linked news, music, or video with social or political content to your online peers
• Discussed societal or political content online
• Participated in an online-based petition
• Protested or boycotted online
• Connected to a group in an online social network dealing with social or political issues
• Visited a website of a political or civic organization

Reading online comments item from 1-5

• How often do you read the comments on internet posts?

Posting online comments item from 1-5

• How often do you post comments on internet posts?

Experience with reading/posting comments (open-ended)

• In general, could you describe your experience with reading and posting comments online?

Demographic items

• What is your age?
• What is your racial identity?
  o American Indian or Alaska Native
  o Asian or Asian American
  o Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- White
- Other
- I prefer not to respond

• What is your gender identity?
  - Woman
  - Man
  - Other
  - I prefer not to respond