ONLINE ABUSE AGAINST WOMEN: TOWARDS AN EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH

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RESUMEN

Although the Internet, information and communications technologies and social media have offered women unprecedented opportunities to access and participate in the public sphere, they also brought new critical issues to women's rights debate. Digital technologies are being used to disseminate sexist hate speech and inflict serious gender-based harms, posing new challenges to feminist politics and to campaigning on ending violence against women. This chapter aims to analyse the empirical literature's main trends concerning online abuse. Informed by a feminist phenomenologic approach, it presents a non-systematic review of the literature on online abuse combined with a meta-analysis review to outline the evolution of this issue's importance on impactful scholarship. It also examines the main research topics and methodological patterns, as well as the extent to which research tackled gender inequalities in women's cultural and structural position online and offline to think about the possibilities of a safe and fair online scenario. It ends with discussing the literature limitations, pointing out paths for future research on social media and online abuse.

Palabras clave

Online abuse; women; violence against women; misogyny.

1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, there is a long line of research on non-technological aspects of violence against women, encompassing cultural, socio-economic and psychological effects and legal and safety measures to protect victims, help survivors and prosecute offenders. Under the framework of current international policy, these endeavours commonly recognised violence against women as part of the *continuum of violence*. Liz Kelly (1987) first coined this notion to put forward how violence, from acts of intimidation to severe life-threatening behaviours of physical and sexual violence, is keen on perpetuating female subordination. It captures the everyday, routine and harmful behaviours women suffer for being women within a larger popular culture that genderised public and private realms. From intimate partner violence (Meyers, 1997; Simões, 2014) to street harassment (Logan, 2015; Simões & Silveirinha, 2019) and rape (Benedict, 1992; Silveirinha, Simões & Santos, 2020), violence manifests in a continuum of multiple, interrelated and recurring forms which reflect systemic gender-based discrimination.

The growing spread of the Internet and broad reach of information and communication technologies (ICTs) intensified rather than alleviate the ever-lasting challenges concerning violence against women. Although not always framed as part of the continuum, online violence is recognised by multilateral institutions, feminist scholars and activists as a severe and far-reaching phenomenon, with implications on women's online-expression and public participation, besides the emotional suffering and the fear of offline stigmatisation (Amnesty International, 2018).

Focusing on the gendered nature of online abusive behaviours and adopting a feminist phenomenological approach, this chapter evaluates the empirical literature's main trends concerning this issue. Following Kelly's insights, we frame online violence as part of the continuum. As other scholars (e.g. Citron, 2014; McGlynn, Rackley Houghton, 2017; Harris, 2020), we integrate violence perpetrated or facilitated by digital technologies into a broader set of behaviours that reflect a range of victimisation experiences. By adopting this lens, we position online abuse alongside harmful behaviours which happen offline, further acknowledging "the frequency, cumulative impact and effect of harm" (Harris, 2020, p. 318). Indeed, routine online harmful behaviour against women reflects the normalisation of practices that serve as a backdrop to gender inequalities both in real and virtual realms. As Citron argue (2015, p. 2), "cyber harassment is a persistent and repeated course of conduct targeted at a specific person, that is designed to, and that causes the person severe emotional distress, and often the fear of physical harm". Thus, like other forms of violence against women so too is online violence, in its multiple expressions, regularly rejected, minimised or excused as "normal" online behaviour (Penny, 2013).

As definitions of the problem are still a contested terrain (Menesini et al., 2012; van der Wilk, A. 2018), we use *online abuse* as an umbrella for all types of negative experiences that women go through online because of their gender, encompassing harassment, stalking and name-calling, doxxing, image-based abuse and rape threats.

1.1. GENDER AND DIGITAL CHALLENGES

The Internet and digital technologies have profoundly changed everyday practices in far-reaching ways. It is not surprising, though, that they have given rise to different interpretations of technology's role in social and cultural life. Critical media scholars have been highlighting the participatory potential of technology (Dahlgren, 2009), the effects of the intense mediation (Hepp, Breiter, & Hasebrink, 2018), of the active participation of audiences (Dahlgren & Álvares, 2013), of the permanent mediated connection (Livingstone & Lunt, 2014), as well as of the networks of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Newer communication models and social relations patterns are thus being put forward with significant challenges ahead.

In a way or another, critical analyses have been centred on the dichotomy between the risks (Livingstone & Brake, 2010) and the opportunities (Papacharissi, 2010) of an environment of deep mediatisation (Couldry & Hepp, 2018) and permanent mediated connection (Livingstone & Lunt, 2014). On the one hand, horizontal communication models have replaced the mainstream's rigid vertical structures, with benefits for groups historically oppressed and silenced. Indeed, thanks to the Internet and ICTs, women worldwide could become active in public discourse, build digital communities, and create transnational feminism networks to defy mainstream politics better (Young, 2015; Hendricks & Bachan, 2015). As Young (2015, p. 857) contends, the "boundary-crossing nature of ICTs has transformed political space for women in transnational terms, and previously male-dominated international relations have been reconfigured in significant ways by the digital revolution".

On the other hand, however, the Internet and ICTs have also created new opportunities for violent behaviours outward across digital platforms, affecting women disproportionally. Evidence of these harmful behaviours is carried out by research produced worldwide, including in Portugal (Simões, Amaral & Santos, 2021; Santos, Amaral & Simões, 2020). However, the leading impactful research is written in English and mostly addresses the North American, Australian and Western European contexts, where, at least, some manifestations of online abuse are legally addressed beneath the United Nations' influence, the Council of Europe and the European Union.

In the European Union, one in ten women has experienced online abuse since the age of 15, comprising unwanted or offensive sexually explicit emails or SMS messages and offensive or inappropriate advances on social media platforms (FRA, 2014).

In a Pew Research Center poll, 40% of U.S. Internet users reported experiencing harassment online, with women between 18 and 24 years old experiencing disproportionately high levels of severe forms of harassment (Duggan, 2014). Almost one in four women from the U.K., U.S., Spain, Denmark, Italy, Sweden, Poland and New Zealand has suffered online abuse or harassment (Amnesty International, 2018). In every 14 tweets received by 778 journalists and politicians from the U.K. and U.S. throughout 2017, one was considered "problematic" or "abusive" (Delisle et al., 2019). Also, cyber intimate partner victimisation has been reported to occur in over 60% of participants of a cross-cultural sample (Marganski & Fauth, 2013).

Research also provides evidence to support the contention that, much of the times, hostile misogynistic rhetoric and graphic threats of sexual violence arise in tandem with actions for building awareness and facilitating discussion on feminist issues (Marwick & Miller, 2014; Banet-Weiser, 2015; Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Jane, 2017; Massanari, 2017). In particular, this happens when users counter back high profile women engaged in feminist debates (Lewis, Rowe, & Wiper, 2017). Against this backdrop, forms of "popular misogyny" have been seen as embodying a "call and response" dynamic towards "popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2015).

Overall, online abusive behaviours inflict individual suffering but also compromise feminist messages and foster toxic environments. Thus, although there are important distinctions to be made between misogyny and anti-feminism, their boundaries are increasingly porous (Ging & Siapera, 2019). As Ging and Siapera (2019, p. 2) highlight, misogyny comprises "a more general set of attitudes and behaviours towards women" while anti-feminism can be equated to "a response to a distinct set of gender-political values that are not espoused exclusively by women". Rather than stressing each one's unique features, the authors contend that what should merit our reflection is "the mutual interplay between them".

1.2. ONLINE ABUSE EXPRESSIONS

Different forms of gendered abuse, targeting anonymous or high profile women, have thrived online in the past decades. They comprise a diverse set of conduct, such as sexually graphic rape and death threats, persistent stalking and harassment, image-based abuse and extremely virulent commentary, for which there is no commonly accepted terminology, has already been noted. Along the way, scholarship on the issue has used a wide range of terms and definitions, making it difficult to acknowledge and compare data on the phenomenon. Sometimes, popular notions obliterate behaviours' gendered nature, even if data point in that direction (Lewis, Rowe, & Wiper, 2017, p. 1464). The terms and definitions are also frequently borrowed from the national legal lexicon or from platforms governance policies whose terminology options also shape popular imaginaries and policymaking.

A broad spectrum of terms and definitions is now part of national and international conversation. It comprises, among others, the concepts of: "cyber-harassment" (Citron, 2014; 2015), "gendertrolling" (Mantilla, 2015), "technology-facilitated sexual violence" (Henry & Powell, 2015), "ebile" (Jane, 2014), "rapeglish" (Jane, 2017), and "cyber violence and hate speech online", as used in a recent report commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the FEMM Committee (van der Wilk, 2018). This report highlights how at the European level, despite recognising at least some forms of online abuse as gendered, routinary and harmful, there is an absence of consensual definitions comprising different manifestations of online abuse.

As driving forces of a definitory framework, research patterns on the phenomenon can shed light on the knowledge's current erratic condition. Over the years, the literature on online abuse has delimited research problems and lines of inquiry while gathering some context-specific data on the scope, main actors, and impacts, shaping further research options.

This chapter develops these reflections in more detail in the next sections focusing on impactful research in order to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What appears to be the relevance of online abuse over the years within impactful research?

RQ2: What are the main topics when addressing online abuse?

RQ3: To what extent has research mobilised gender inequalities in women's cultural and structural position online and offline?

RQ4: What are the main methodological approaches adopted?

## 2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

Guided by the above research questions, we used a non-systematic review of literature combined with a meta-analytic review in order, firstly, to outline the evolution of the importance of online abuse in impactful empirical-based scholarship on communication (RQ1). While qualitative analyses of literature help provide in-depth descriptions of particularly relevant studies, as we have done in the introductory section, a meta-analysis can better afford to synthesise and analyse a body of quantitative research (Lipsey & Wilson, 2001). For this meta-analysis, we begin by identifying eligible studies published in the last 20 years in academic journals, conference proceedings and books indexed in the Web of Science Database. Through term-searching on "online abuse" on communication research outputs, we retrieved 131 studies published within the selected time-frame whose titles and

abstracts were screened to ensure their relevance. After step aside 82 studies for not focusing specifically on online abuse or not presenting empirical research, we end up with 49 papers. Each study's full content was then read and examined according to a content analysis protocol aimed at identifying the central topic of each study (RQ2), the role of gender in this impactful research sample (RQ3) and the main methodological approaches adopted to study online abusive (RQ4).

3. RESULTS

As Figure 1 shows, from 2009 onwards, online abuse has been attracting relative increasing interest, validating at some point, the scientific importance of conducting empirical-based studies on the issue. The past few years have been especially fruitful in this regard. In 2020, 15 studies of the sample were published, while only one was published between 2009 and 2011.

Figure 1 - Online abuse publications by year
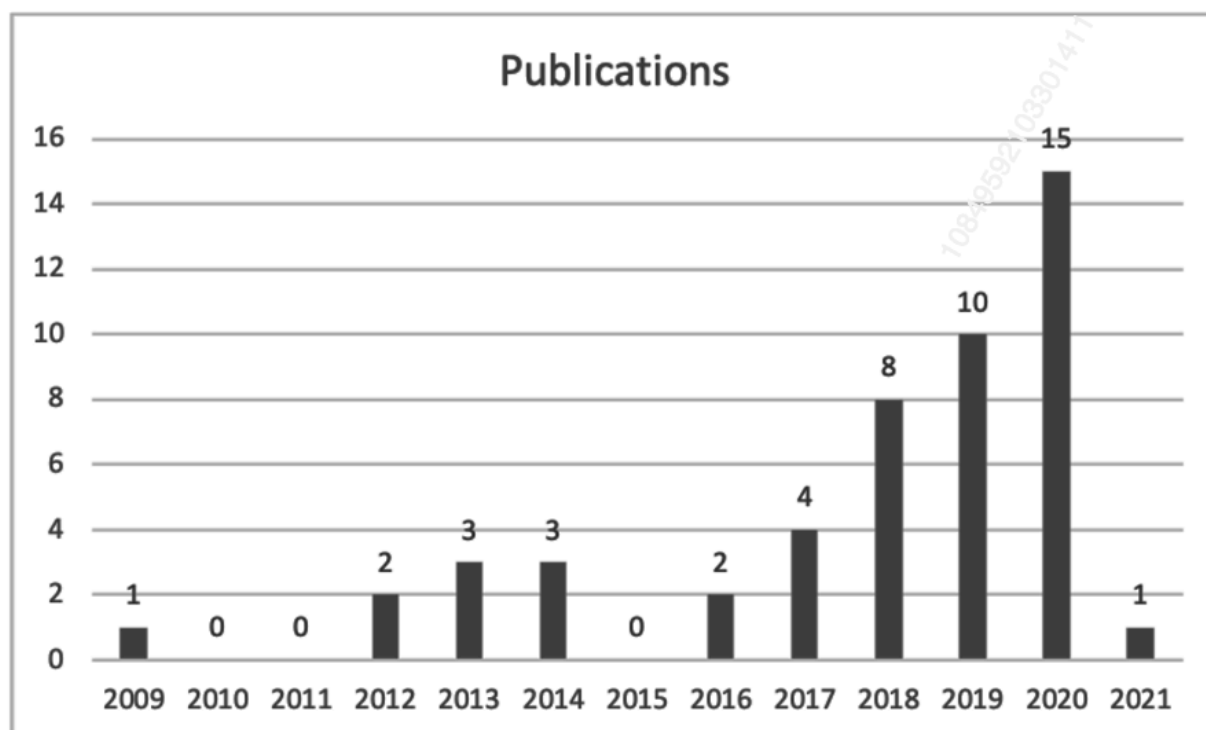
Source: own elaboration

The central topic of each study included in the sample is present in Table 1. As this table shows, the diversity of topics is significant, covering both pieces of research directed at the dynamics of activism and research focused on the study of the nature and prevalence of various forms of online abuse, encompassing doxxing, digital dating violence, gendered cyberhate on the workplace, hate speech, trolling and Right-wing nationalism. This conceptual diversity reflects the lack of consensus

regarding the terminology used to investigate online abuse, which compromises the design of a stable defining framework's, as stated above.

Table 1 - Table of publications by topics

Topic	Authors
Activism	Douai, Lannon, & Halpin, 2013; Chiluwa, 2012
Aggressive online behaviours	Gainsbury, Browne, & Rockloff, 2019
Anti-feminism	Ging, Lynn, & Rosati, 2020
Cyber security	Pitchan, Omar, & Ghazali, 2019
Deep fakes	Yadlin-Sega, & Oppenheim, 2021
Digital Dating Violence	Van Ouytsel et al., 2019
Doxxing	Lee, 2020
Female Journalists	Koirala, 2020
Gendered cyberhate on workplace	Jane, 2018
Harmful online communication	Einwiller, & Sora, 2020
Hate speech	Workneh, 2019
Image-based sexual abuse	Mandau, 2020
Instagrammers	Duffy, & Hund, 2019
Journalists online abuse	Chen et al., 2020; Gardiner, 2018; Muddiman, & Stroud, 2017; Binns, 2017
Online anti-Muslim abuse	Awan, 2014
Online comments	Sanderson et al, 2020; Searles, Spencer, & Duru, 2020; Wright, Jackson, & Graham, 2020; Mabweazara, 2014; Van den Bulck, & Claessens, 2013; Binns, 2009;
Online harassment	Sahrasad et al., 2020; Kargar, S; Rauchfleisch, 2019; Pain, & Chen, 2019; Veletsianos, et al., 2018; Eckert, 2018
Online hate	Barlow, & Awan, 2016; Rohlfing, & Sonnenberg, 2016
Online misogyny	Thompson, & Wood, 2018; Kavanagh, Litchfield, & Osborne, 2019
Online racism	Kilvington, & Price, 2019
Online risks	Ming, Shi, & Taha, 2020; Bulger, 2017
Online trolling	Bishop, 2017
MeToo Movement	Worthington, 2020; Sun, 2020
Political metaphors	Heo, 2020
Responses to digital abuse	Graeff, 2014
Right-wing nationalism	Udupa, 2019; Caiani, & Wagemann, 2012
Sexism	Sobieraj, 2018; Benton-Greig et al., 2018; Tromble, & Karin, 2020
Sexist abuse	Adams, 2018
Trolling	Leaver, 2013

Source: own elaboration

To access the extent to which research has mobilised gender inequalities in women's cultural and structural position online and offline, we identified the presence or absence of a gender perspective in the analysed studies. As Figure 2 shows, the gender-based nature of online harmful digital practices is presented in less than half of the sample. This result reflects the still modest articulation of evidence of online abuse, its scope, victims and drivers with gendered dynamics in society, and inconsistent recognising of the intertwine of structural inequalities online and offline.

Figure 2 - Gender-based focus
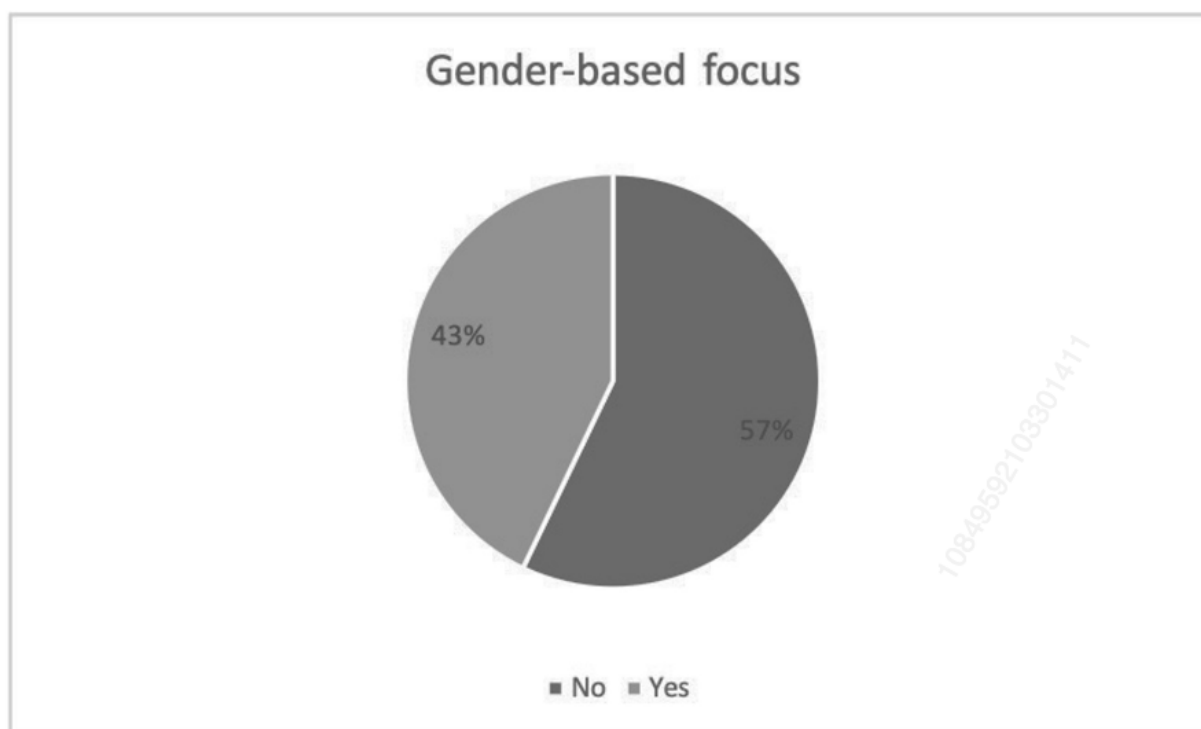
Source: own elaboration

Regarding the methodological options, results show the use of methodologies that seek to understand the sphere of production, content, and, in some cases, the networks established online between different actors. However, there is also a significant research investment on acquiring knowledge on Internet and platforms users' practices and consumption. Figure 3 shows these methodological trends, which are based predominantly on qualitative approaches.

Figure 3 - Methodological trends
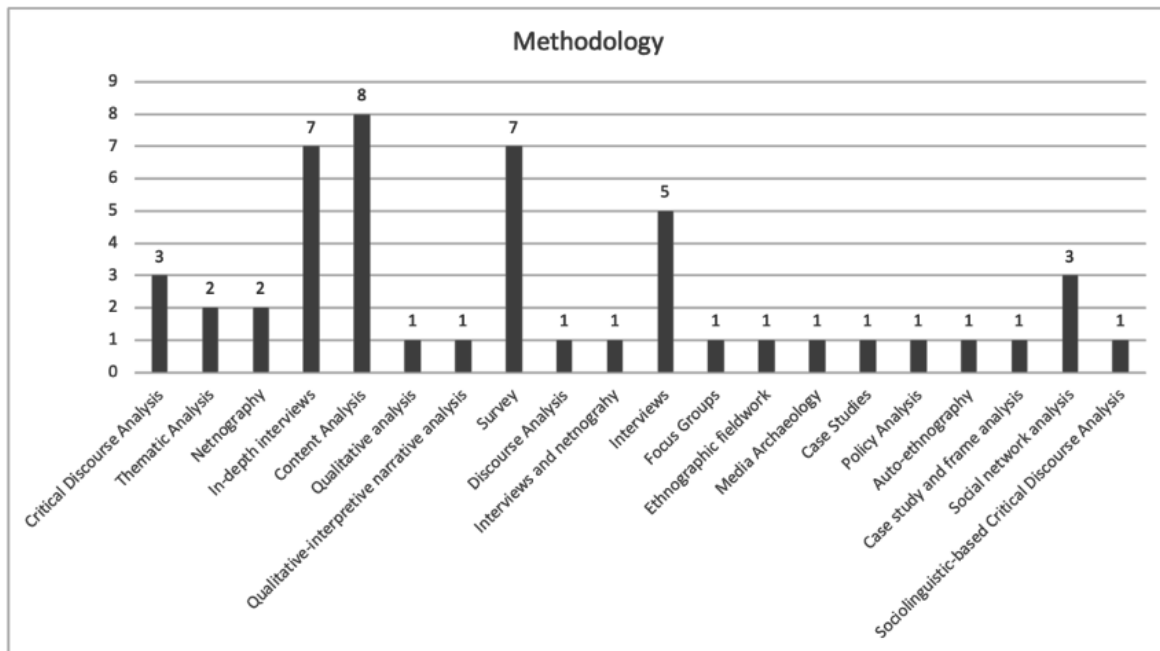
Source: own elaboration

4. CONCLUSION

This chapter aimed to analyse the empirical literature's main trends concerning online abuse against women to shed light on this phenomenon's current state of knowledge. Even though the subject's interest highly increased in the past years, there is a lack of empirical-based studies on the issue and a defining framework to approach online abuse. As revealed, research uses a wide range of terms and concepts to address it, mainly through the recurse of qualitative approaches and methods.

Moreover, research still focuses on the digital environment unique conditions, highlighting online abuse as a harmful communication behaviour rather than a form of violence against women and neglecting the link between digital technologies, structural sexism and gender-based violence. This is far from meeting what feminist scholars and activists have stressed in the past years: the need to tackle online abuse by overseeing the ideologies that sustain dominant power and unequal gender relations, and systemic discrimination.

At the current stage of knowledge, addressing online abuse implies a gender-based focus dealing with a messy web of ideas and a complex array of many different dispersed actors. This task is mandatory if we want to tackle gender inequality and ensure that women can fully exercise participatory rights. For this purpose Kelly's (1987) continuum of violence is a promising departure. It offers a framework

to navigate the competing values and beliefs underpinning the range of abusive behaviours and helps to put forward a common and understandable normative lens to look to the gendered nature of online abuse.

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