Challenging Women’s Digital Agency: The Frequency of Slut Shaming in Social Media

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Abstract

Slut shaming is a cyberbullying technique used to insult women’s suspected or actual sexual history in order to silence their perspectives. Although social media spaces are considered participatory platforms, women who share their feminist values in these spaces are often slut shamed, despite the fact that the Internet was originally viewed as a space for encouraging gender equality, because it offered users the possibility of creating post-gender identities online. By examining the misogynist online experiences of three feminists—Amber Rose, Zoë Quinn, and Amanda Hess—I argue that, in reality, social media spaces represent not tolerant spaces, but gendered, oppressive technologies.

Keywords

slutshaming, social media sites, cyberbullying, feminists, gendered technology, misogyny, public gaze

Social media sites are often promoted as democratic spaces that foster self-creation and public openness. Consequently, many women have been drawn to the potential of social media to publicize their identities, discuss women's issues, and connect to a supportive community. Although women are active users on social media spaces, those who express feminist ideals frequently become targets of slut shaming. Slut shaming, in digital spaces, is a bullying technique used to target any woman who has an opinion, despite her sexual history (Tanenbaum, 2015, p. 2). According to Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” (1986), the creation of the Internet was supposed to have signified the frontier of gender equality, since men and women would be represented as non-gendered identities in Internet spaces. Hacking (1986) argues that the idea of fluid identities is problematic, however, as the conception of the self is bound up with external classifications (p. 229). Although some women use social media spaces to publicly liberate feminist narratives, I argue that online spaces are gendered, oppressive technologies where women are required to embody patriarchal notions of femininity while also being sexualized by the public gaze.

Women who attempt to create their own digital bodies are often harassed by male audiences trying to define how women should behave and present themselves online. I will introduce three case studies of women who have used social media spaces as sites of feminist reconceptualization, but who have experienced backlash from their online communities: Amber Rose, a self-proclaimed feminist and Instagram star; Amanda Hess, a journalist who discusses female sexuality and desire; and Zoë Quinn, an indie video game developer. These three women have been slut shamed based on
their provocation against static conceptions of femininity. I will also examine the Internet site 4chan, which superficially appears to grant its anonymous users gender-neutrality, but actually reinforces masculine hegemonic values. 4chan is a controversial public Internet space where members attempt to classify themselves as gender-neutral; however, through their misogynistic treatment of women, 4chan members demonstrate that gendered subjectivities are intensified in digital spaces.

Since their development and popularization, social media sites have provided women with new spaces for personal exploration beyond identities tied to their traditional domestic roles. Boyd and Ellison (2008) have argued that social networking spaces create an opportunity to consciously construct the self-image and create "identity signals" to connect to an online community (p. 219). Accordingly, social media sites provide performative spaces that allow individuals to create a digital persona—a potential that is exemplified by my three case studies. As a self-identified feminist, Amber Rose uses her social media presence to respond to her online categorization as a slut, which is in part due to her former work as a stripper. Rose uses her digital presence to recreate the feminist self, and to highlight her involvement in feminist causes like the Amber Rose Los Angeles Slut Walk. In her use of her digital presence, Rose demonstrates that her association with a controversial occupation can offer an alternative model of what it means to be a woman (Hackman, 2015). In a second example, journalist Amanda Hess writes articles that empower women to explore their sexuality. In one piece, "Still Life", Hess challenges the stigmatization of the female orgasm, which was classified by medical practitioners in the early 20th century as a condition of mental illness (n.d., "Still Life"). In this article, Hess explains that medical and religious institutions considered female sexuality to be confined to the marriage contract, as women were required to fulfill the desires of their husbands. By describing the historical stigma against female sexuality, Hess uses her article to inspire modern women to embrace their sexual identities and no longer accept historical and contemporary social pressures of female respectability. Lastly, Zoë Quinn is an indie video game developer who was implicated in the infamous “GamerGate” scandal—an online campaign by individuals who felt threatened by feminist gamers like Quinn’s critique of the misogyny that dominates video game culture (Keith, 2015). Quinn changed the gender dynamics for women in the gaming world through the creation of her video game, Depression Quest, in which a female protagonist struggles with depression, yet embodies strength (Keith, 2015). Her protagonist is not the prototypical hypersexual and submissive female presence found in mainstream video games. This digital, feminist narrative is meant to inspire other women to redefine themselves and not to be controlled by repressive social expectations.

Feminists like these three use social media spaces to subvert traditional conceptions of gender and to present the dynamic self. The dynamic self represents the ability to have multiple and competing identities, allowing individuals to embody apparently contradictory positions such as strength and vulnerability. Amber Rose presents dynamic feminism by exploring both her domestic and sexual side on her Instagram site. For instance, Rose posts photos of herself provocatively dressed while performing her domestic responsibilities as a mother. In one Instagram selfie with the caption “morning”, Rose wears a sheer white dress that comfortably hugs her hourglass frame, while holding a household cleaning product (Instagram, 2015). Even though Rose is posing, she is still showcasing an interesting juxtaposition between sexual provocateur and motherhood, which are normally disassociated. Rose provides a complex approach to sexuality and domesticity, thereby demonstrating how females can embody both. In a similarly provocative way, Amanda Hess uses her Twitter account to discuss serious issues through her sarcastic tone and dry sense of humour. In one instance, Hess contrasts the seriousness of a rape case mistrial with the humorous use of emojis to highlight female sexual injustices. In one tweet, Hess writes: “emoji on trial: ‘The defendant argued there were at least two consents for sex three, if one counts the winkie face’” (Hess, 2015). This tweet conveys a powerful message in a comedic tone by contrasting rape with an emoji, which is considered a light-hearted communicative symbol. Zoë Quinn also uses social media sites to discuss dynamic female identities. She uses her ask.fm page to discuss topics ranging from her favourite video games to her sexual history. When one fan requested Quinn’s advice before having her first lesbian encounter, Quinn wrote a detailed response that disclosed her first lesbian sexual experience (Quinn, n.d.). Each of these cases indicate the ability of social media sites to complicate female choice because they allow women the spaces to self-represent, in comparison with traditional media platforms, where women’s identities are
shaped by outside forces (Dubrovska & Wood, 2009, p. 93).

While social media sites can take on a transformative nature for feminists, who may find them to be freeing and tolerant spaces, online spaces can also be confining and distressing for the women using them. Women often present their vulnerabilities within the Internet public space (Dubrovska & Wood, 2009, p. 93), and while these revelations can help women feel closer to their community, these actions can also position them within the public glare. As a predominant form of online harassment, slut shaming signals the societal expectation for women to act as though they are pure and docile. Moreover, slut shaming suggests that women who reveal their sexual selves are “dirty.” Tanenbaum (2015) explains that in the 1980s, the term “slut” referred only to promiscuous females, but is now a ubiquitous term applied to any female who does not act as deemed appropriately in public spaces (p. xxi). Slut shaming encompasses a wide range of harassment, including derogatory name-calling, targeted and habitual cyberbullying, and even sexual and violent death threats.

Despite the fact that Amber Rose, Amanda Hess, and Zoë Quinn explore different elements of their sexual nature, they have all been slut shamed for their disclosures. In fact, the very spaces that feminists have used are often the same spaces where they are abused. Rose has been slut shamed on social media by her ex-boyfriends, who have publicly detailed her sexual history. Rose’s former partner, hip-hop artist Kanye West, stated that he needed to take “30 showers” after being intimate with her (Hackman, 2015). Quinn was similarly slut shamed publicly by her ex-boyfriend through his blog, thezoepost, where he detailed her sexual history and included screenshots from their texts and private images sent to him by Quinn (Gjoni, n.d.). Gjoni used his online space to counter Quinn’s sexual agency by stating that she had cheated on him, and that he required protection before their sexual relations because she was with “guy after guy” (Gjoni, n.d.).

While West and Gjoni may appear to be jilted ex-lovers, divulging private details to shame and embarrass, slut shaming is also used against women who do not have a relationship with the harasser. Gjoni’s slut shaming of Quinn led to a public slut shaming campaign called “The Five Guys Controversy”, which argues that Quinn’s success in the video game industry is only due to her sexual relationships with five men from the video game world (Triple Zed, 2015). The ironic act of men slut shaming women while simultaneously sexualizing them highlights the patriarchal desire to control female sexuality. While some women have used online spaces to break barriers and openly discuss their sexuality, other individuals feel threatened by female strength, and harass and attempt to disempower them by using slut shaming as a silencing and subjugating tactic.

When slut shaming crosses into life-threatening circumstances, it presents a much more dangerous reality for women who want to define the conditions of their sexuality. Jane (2014) explains that gendered “e-bile” is a popular form of not only digital misogyny, but also Internet discourse (p. 567). E-bile is an extreme form of slut shaming used against women because it colludes sexual and violent imagery (Jane, 2014, p. 558), and attempts to control female sexuality through violent discourse. When Hess used Twitter to be provocative and topical, a Twitter account was also used in an attempt to victimize and bully her. An anonymous user created an account under the hashtag #HeadlessFemalePig, in which individuals could post death threats against Hess. The word “Pig” in the hashtag emphasizes the idea that women who are open about sex are filthy. One tweet, for instance, stated “I am 36 years old, I did 12 years for ‘manslaughter’, I killed a woman, like you, who decided to make fun of guy’s cocks” (Hess, 2014). Hess’ harassment was an extreme form of slut shaming, but it also exemplifies the reality that women who publish opinions can become targeted by an online mob. When she went to the police, Hess says, they were unaware of Twitter and could not help her (Hess, 2014), which underscores the fact that online threats are often considered an accepted part of Internet culture (Nakamura, 2015, p. 225). As a result, there is often little legal consequence for participation in slut shaming, and feminists may become afraid to promote their social causes in public Internet spaces.

Although social media platforms are often viewed as democratic spaces, the harassment of women on these sites highlights the Internet as an oppressive, gendered technology, despite being originally mythologized as the frontier of social acceptance and equality. The conception of an all-inclusive Internet culture was echoed by feminist media scholar Donna Haraway (1983), who proposed that the digital mediation of men and women would coalesce into the post-gender cyborg (p. 292). The cyborg would become the only online identity and would break gendered perceptions in order to create
a networked reality, defined by the post-genre gaze (Haraway, 1983, p. 292). Male and female stereotypes would diminish, and the post-genre cyborg would traverse Internet spaces through a novel perspective. Haraway’s article reveals the nascent time of new computer technology through a feminist techno-deterministic perspective, yet these contemporary examples demonstrate the Internet as an intensely gendered space. Gender equality in physical spaces is emphasized in contemporary, Western culture, but is not reflected in online spaces (Hackman, 2015), and some men have used Internet spaces to project an illusion of the type of female who should inhabit online culture. This male fantasy does not value feminist points of view, and acceptable female behaviour is governed by mainstream, misogynistic social rules. Amber Rose, Zoë Quinn, and Amanda Hess challenge misogynist viewpoints, and, by doing so, they will continually face slut shaming in an attempt to silence them.

Furthermore, even certain Internet spaces that mythologize neutral gender identities often end up reinforcing existing social biases. The creation of the post-genre self as promoted by Haraway’s post-genre cyborg is negated in online spaces where genders are clearly delineated. 4chan is a controversial and popular website where users can post images to a public platform without any strict guidelines (What is 4chan?, n.d). 4chan also engenders the promotion of “zero identity principles”; 90% of 4chan users have the username “Anonymous” (Manivannan, 2013, p. 121). In actuality, however, the site is highly gendered. Not only does 4chan provide the option to choose a female gendered username, “femanon” (Manivannan, 2013, p. 109), but at one point, part of the site employed a wordfilter that changed the username of all posters using the “femanon” name to “cumdumpster”. This sexual and misogynist language could be offensive to all members of the 4chan community, and presumes the Western male heterosexual identity of its user base. Furthermore, the discourse within 4chan spaces encourages sexist perspectives. Even though the 4chan site, as a public website, appears to be open to diverse publics, women’s actions are specifically undermined and manipulated on the site. When one “femanon” posted an image of herself in a corset on one of the site’s image boards, the board’s moderators changed the username to “cumdumpster” and banned her from re-editing the post (Manivannan, 2013, p. 110). 4chan therefore functions as a performative space for sexist individuals to anonymously and publicly express behaviours that are not acceptable in physical spaces against women and other marginalized groups (Manivannan, 2013, p. 110).

Additionally, 4chan members have taken their “zero identity” personas into other social media realms like Twitter in attempts to extend their misogyny into mainstream Internet spaces. For example, 4chan users began a Twitter hate campaign called “Operation Lollipop” to target ethnically diverse feminists. 4chan users also hacked into feminist Twitter accounts and retweeted hashtags such as #WhitesCan’tBeRaped (Ganzer, 2014, p. 1098). After being hacked by 4chan, British comedian Laurie Pennie stated that perhaps her digital body was a “4chan creation” (Ganzer, 2014, p. 1098). 4chan users’ actions against feminists spotlight the sexist ideology that plagues Internet culture. Although there are ongoing attempts to erase the gendered body in social media spaces, it is impossible to escape from one’s subjective experiences because, as these instances of slut shaming reveal, the neutral human being is non-existent.

Digital feminist sovereignty in social media spaces challenges masculine control of the female identity, and slut shaming attempts to dismantle the strength in feminist exposure. Amber Rose, Zoë Quinn, and Amanda Hess provide three case studies out of countless women who have undermined female stereotypes but have incurred the wrath of the online community. The frequent occurrences of slut shaming have led some to suggest creating online spaces exclusively for women (Hess, 2015); however, a feminist digital diaspora from public Internet space would further marginalize women and create a vacuum for further sexist biases to circulate. Hess writes that feminists should endure slut shaming in order to normalize their feminist causes, and online harassment towards women actually demonstrates how women are becoming influential as their publicness places them in positions of power (Hess, 2014). Digital female bodies as the subjects of surveillance are often manipulated and objectified by their exposure because their presences are seen as a form of truth (Ball, 2009, p. 639). Feminist Fruzsina Órődőgh echoes this belief when she describes 4chan’s hacking into her account as allowing her feminist causes to become visible to the Internet community (Ganzer, 2014, p. 1099). If women separated themselves from mainstream social media spaces, they would allow the wounds of slut shaming to deepen, thus preventing them from reclaiming their feminist identities. Significantly, females who choose to be discreet online may not only risk the perpetuation of
misogynist values, but also risk internalizing the mediated gaze and unconsciously enabling misogynist ideals. It is therefore up to women to consistently conquer online harassment, and attempt to inscribe feminist values within the social infrastructure of the Internet. Feminist resistance and disruption against misogynistic discourse may help future generations of women to experience a more tolerant and respectful Internet reality.

References

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