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“Don’t Take on the Responsibility of Somebody Else’s Fucked Up Behavior”: Responding to Online Abuse in the Context of Barriers to Support

Chandell Gosse*

1. INTRODUCTION

Decades of research on violence against women and girls (VAWG), such as date rape or street harassment, have repeatedly found that women and girls are held responsible for their safety and well-being.¹ Current literature suggests that this conclusion remains true online: women targeted by technology-facilitated violence and abuse, a range of behaviours perpetrated online intended to harm,² are held accountable for the perpetrator’s online behaviour and, consequently, are forced to take ownership of the task of avoiding, preventing, and responding to the abuse perpetrated against them.³ This is known as responsabilization.

Responsibilization is a strategy that flows from social, political, public, and private institutions, such as government, education, legal systems, and, more recently, social media platforms. These institutions are built upon and partly sustained by socio-cultural, political, and economic ideologies like patriarchy, white supremacy, and colonialism, to name a few. Responsibilization commonly manifests as discourses whereby personal freedom, well-being, and maximizing quality of life become an individual’s responsibility.⁴ A classic example of this is neoliberalism’s “bootstrap” ideology, which removes responsibility for social

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¹ Fiona Vera-Gray, “‘Talk About a Cu*t with Too Much Idle Time’: Trolling Feminist Research” (2017) 115 *Feminist Rev* 61 [Vera-Gray, “Talk About a Cu*t”].

² Jane Bailey, Nicola Henry & Asher Flynn, “Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse: International Perspectives and Experiences” in Jane Bailey, Asher Flynn & Nicola Henry, eds, *The Emerald International Handbook of Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse* (Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2021) 1 at 1.

³ Kalyani Chadha et al, “Women’s Responses to Online Harassment” (2020) 14 *Intl J Comm* 239; Amy Shields Dobson, “‘The Things You Didn’t Do’: Gender, Slut-shaming, and the Need to Address Sexual Harassment in Narrative Resources Responding to Sexting and Cyberbullying” in Heidi Vandebosch & Lelia Green, eds, *Narratives in Research and Interventions on Cyberbullying among Young People* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019) 147; Emma A Jane, “Feminist Flight or Fight Responses to Gendered Cyberhate” in Marie Segrave & Laura Vits, eds, *Gender, Technology and Violence* (London, UK: Routledge, 2017) 45 [Jane, “Feminist Flight”].

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France*,

welfare from the state and focuses it instead on the individual.⁵ The trouble with such discursive practice is that placing these expectations on the individual alleviates accountability of larger institutions, including public institutions like the government and private institutions like social media platforms, and absolves them of the responsibility to remedy harms related to structural oppression. These hegemonic discourses operate more specifically through socio-cultural practices that individuals encounter in their daily lives. In the case of VAWG, and gendered violence more broadly, examples of such practices and norms include rape culture and victim-blaming. Victim-blaming, for example, works by shifting responsibility for safety from violence and abuse onto targets/victims, thus rendering them accountable for preventing it in the first place and blaming them for not having done enough to avoid it. Responsibilization in the context of technology-facilitated violence and abuse (TFVA for short, henceforth referred to as online abuse) is made worse by the lack of support⁶ generally available to targets of online abuse.⁷

Because responsibilization is an indirect and oftentimes covert process, it is difficult to measure. Thus, in order to understand how responsibilization manifests, researchers need to instead look for indicators — or evidence to suggest — that individuals have become responsibilized. This article draws on data from 15 interviews with women who have experienced online abuse to explore the kinds of responses they have to such abuse.⁸ I find four indicators in participants' responses that suggest they have become responsibilized: blame, normalization, minimization, and control-seeking. These indicators of responsibilization function to ultimately hold women accountable for their abusers' behaviours.

In the first part of this article, I review relevant literature related to women's responses to online abuse and provide an expanded definition of

1977-78, ed by Michel Senellart, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004).

⁵ Johanna Bockman, "Neoliberalism" (2013) 12:3 Contexts 14.

⁶ In this article, support is used to refer to a variety of formal (such as legal and platform) and informal (social and personal) mechanisms in place that work to reduce the negative consequences and alleviate the burden of dealing with online abuse.

⁷ James J Brown & Gregory Hennis, "Hateware and the Outsourcing of Responsibility" in Jessica Reyman & Erika M Sparby, eds, *Digital Ethics: Rhetoric and Responsibility in Online Aggression* (New York: Routledge, 2019) 17; Emma A Jane, "Feminist Digilante Responses to a Slut-shaming on Facebook" (2017) 3:2 Soc Media + Society 1 at 3 [Jane, "Feminist Digilante Responses"]; Jane, "Feminist Flight", *supra* note 3; Ruth Lewis, Michael Rowe & Clare Wiper, "Online Abuse of Feminists as an Emerging form of Violence Against Women and Girls" (2017) 57:6 Brit J Crim 1462.

⁸ All participants in this study identify as women. However, to reflect the robust knowledge that shows that the online abuse of women is part of a spectrum of online gender-based violence, I refer more broadly to women, transgender, and gender non-binary individuals when referring to the literature or the problem of online abuse more generally.

responsibilization. I then elaborate on the harmful socio-cultural practices that place responsibility for safety and well-being on targets of abuse and violence. Finally, I review the methodology for this study and bring together insights from the literature and personal accounts of interviewees to discuss how women who experience online abuse demonstrate responsibilization.

2. BACKGROUND, FRAMEWORK, CULTURE

(a) Context

Many jurisdictions have reformulated existing laws and crafted new ones to address online harms; however, there remain many cases that do not technically qualify for a legal response. Luckily, there is a concerted effort to create new — and expand existing — laws to support and protect targets of a wider range of online offences.⁹ In particular, experts like Danielle Keats Citron,¹⁰ Jane Bailey,¹¹ Clare McGlynn,¹² and Suzie Dunn¹³ are legal scholars who advocate for new ways to offer legal protection and support to targets of online abuse. Nevertheless, legal support for qualifying cases remains expensive and inaccessible for many. And while legal scholarship has contributed greatly to this topic, much of this work has not yet trickled down to frontline law enforcement.

Social media platforms have the largest role to play in proactively intervening in online spaces to prevent and punish online abuse. Companies like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter provide tools to report harmful content, fake accounts, and dangerous users. The efficacy of these reporting features varies widely, however, as users report harmful content that does not technically violate platforms' standards and terms of service. Most platforms also provide blocking functions that allow users to select who can view their content and whose content they see. This feature does not directly address online abuse, but it can be helpful for individual users on a small scale. Kate Crawford and Tarleton Gillespie view flagging user-generated content as a form of engagement “whereby users participate — or appear to — in the governance of social media platforms and the imposition and reification of community norms.”¹⁴ For

⁹ Bailey, Flynn & Henry, *supra* note 2.

¹⁰ Danielle Keats Citron, *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

¹¹ Jane Bailey, “Canadian Legal Approaches to ‘Cyberbullying’ and Cyberviolence: An Overview” (2016) Ottawa Faculty of Law Working Paper No 2016-37, online: <ssrn.com/abstract=2841413>.

¹² Clare McGlynn, Erika Rackley & Ruth Houghton, “Beyond ‘Revenge Porn’: The Continuum of Image-Based Sexual Abuse” (2017) 25:1 *Fem Leg Stud* 25.

¹³ Suzanne Dunn, Julie S Lalonde & Jane Bailey, “Terms of Silence: Weaknesses in Corporate and Law Enforcement Responses to Cyberviolence against Girls” (2017) 10:2 *Girlhood Studies* 80.

many individuals, flagging (or reporting) content is more than just engagement — or apparent engagement — in community standards: it is also an appeal to safety and protection. In other words, reporting and blocking content and users becomes a first line of defence for some individuals. These tools often fall short, and this appearance of governance instead serves to placate users and allow companies to hide behind stale efforts to provide support.¹⁵

In the current techno-social environment, targets of online abuse are required to navigate a complex (and often inaccessible) network of “solutions” to effectively address their abuse, creating a Frankenstein-type response.¹⁶ To effectively and holistically address the abuse, targets must stitch together a variety of insufficient do-it-yourself responses that rely on the inconsistent support from institutions like the government, the legal system,¹⁷ and social media platforms.¹⁸ They must focus primarily on personal resiliency and resourcefulness¹⁹ and rely on the help of family and friends.²⁰ In some cases, exasperated by the roadblocks they face, targets of abuse have taken matters into their own hands, with varying degrees of success.²¹ Exploring the response women have to online abuse in such an environment paints a complicated picture.

Women respond to online abuse in a variety of ways. The most common responses include blocking and deleting content and users, using pseudonyms, and withdrawing from online spaces or avoiding them altogether.²² Other strategies include self-monitoring, impression management, self-censoring,²³ and rationalization of abusive actions.²⁴ These actions are a kind of “safety work,” a

¹⁴ Kate Crawford & Tarleton Gillespie, “What is a Flag For? Social Media Reporting Tools and the Vocabulary of Complaint” (2016) 18:3 *New Media & Society* 410 at 411.

¹⁵ Cynthia Khoo, “Deplatforming Misogyny” (2021), online: *Leaf* <www.leaf.ca/publication/deplatforming-misogyny/> at 54.

¹⁶ Emma A Jane, “Online Misogyny and Feminist Digilantism” (2016) 30:3 *Continuum* 284 [Jane, “Online Misogyny”]; Caitlin E Lawson, “Platform Vulnerabilities: Harassment and Misogynoir in the Digital Attack on Leslie Jones” (2018) 21:6 *Information, Communication & Society* 818.

¹⁷ Bailey, *supra* note 11.

¹⁸ Crawford & Gillespie, *supra* note 14.

¹⁹ George Veletsianos et al, “Women Scholars’ Experiences With Online Harassment and Abuse: Self-protection, Resistance, Acceptance, and Self-blame” (2018) 20:12 *New Media + Society* 4689.

²⁰ Jaigris Hodson et al, “I Get by With a Little Help From My Friends: The Ecological Model and Support for Women Scholars Experiencing Online Harassment” (2018) 23:8 *First Monday*.

²¹ Jane, “Online Misogyny”, *supra* note 16.

²² Chadha et al, *supra* note 3; Laura Vitis & Fairleigh Gilmour, “Dick Pics on Blast: A Woman’s Resistance to Online Sexual Harassment Using Humor, Art and Instagram” (2017) 13:3 *Crime, Media, Culture* 335.

²³ Chadha et al, *supra* note 3; Citron, *supra* note 10.

²⁴ Jane, “Feminist Flight”, *supra* note 3.

term coined by Liz Kelly to describe “strategies that women develop in response to their experiences in public.”²⁵

These responses involve minimizing an individual’s online presence, but this is not to suggest that targets of online abuse are passive. Many targets of online abuse respond assertively, engaging in proactive behaviours, including forming counter-publics that allow them to resist online abuse as a collective.²⁶ Jane characterizes these varied reactions as *flight or fight* responses. “The former,” she writes, “has a chilling effect” that can cause targets of online abuse to limit or refrain from using the internet and taking up space online.²⁷ “The latter,” on the other hand, “manifests in the individual and collective push-back.”²⁸ The *fight* response has grown increasingly visible in public spaces.

Public displays of informal justice are of particular interest and consequence for Jane, who refers to such acts as “feminist digilantism.”²⁹ Digilantism describes a “spectrum of do-it-yourself [DIY] attempts to secure justice online.”³⁰ These methods can include “trickery, persuasion, reputation assaults, surveillance, public shaming, [and] calls to action.”³¹ The objective of digilante responses varies from person to person, but it can include trying to create accountability or “critical witnessing”³² by bringing attention to abusive material that otherwise would not have been viewed by anyone other than the intended recipient.³³

One example of a widely applauded feminist digilante is Alanah Pearce, a video game journalist who contacted her abusers’ mothers to expose their behaviour and posted the embarrassing exchanges online. Pearce’s response was widely distributed and frequently touted as “perfect.”³⁴ This type of digilante response aims to create “*offender accountability and control*,”³⁵ aspects of

²⁵ Liz Kelly, “Standing the Test of Time? Reflections on the Concept of the Continuum of Sexual Violence” in Jennifer M Brown & Sandra Walklate, eds, *Handbook on Sexual Violence* (London, UK: Routledge, 2012) xvii; Fiona Vera-Gray, *The Right Amount of Panic: How Women Trade Freedom for Safety* (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2018) at 14.

²⁶ Anastasia Powell, “Seeking Rape Justice: Formal and Informal Responses to Sexual Violence Through Technosocial Counterpublics” (2015) 19:4 *Theoretical Criminology* 571; Megan Stubbs-Richardson, Nicole E Rader & Arthur G Cosby, “Tweeting Rape Culture: Examining Portrayals of Victim Blaming in Discussions of Sexual Assault Cases on Twitter” (2018) 28:1 *Feminism & Psychology* 90.

²⁷ Jane, “Feminist Flight”, *supra* note 3 at 58.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Jane, “Online Misogyny”, *supra* note 16; (Digital + Vigilantism).

³⁰ Jane, “Feminist Digilante Responses”, *supra* note 7 at 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Vitis & Gilmour, *supra* note 22 at 340; Evi Gerling, “‘Looking Death in the Face’: The Benneton Death Penalty Campaign” (2004) 6:3 *Punishment & Society* 271.

³³ Jane, “Feminist Digilante Responses”, *supra* note 7.

³⁴ Jane, “Online Misogyny”, *supra* note 16.

³⁵ Powell, *supra* note 26 at 582 (emphasis in original).

support that are currently absent for targets of online abuse. However, Jane cautions readers who are overly optimistic about such responses. She argues that, when DIY justice is heralded as a great response to online abuse, it might inadvertently make others assume that no other interventions are required.³⁶ To her point, requiring that women be the ones to seek or exact justice *does* shift the problem of online abuse from a public to a private concern,³⁷ and it removes some much-needed pressure urging public and private institutions, like governments and social media platform companies, to do more.

However, such exposure vis-à-vis digilante responses can exacerbate the original abuse, a common problem that occurs when targets of abuse choose to engage with perpetrators. This choice is sometimes called *feeding the trolls*.³⁸ Overall, Jane's primary concern is that DIY justice will not adequately address the problem of online abuse. Responsibility should not fall to targets of abuse. Instead, there needs to be a concerted effort to hold perpetrators responsible across many sectors, including government and platform companies.³⁹

Nonetheless, digital communication tools allow users to create new social practices that wrest control from the technologies' patriarchal roots.⁴⁰ This accessibility provides avenues for informal justice outside of regulatory state justice.⁴¹ While there are many ways to do this, one particularly effective way is through sharing one's experience of victimization, abuse, and/or violence with an audience that immediately acknowledges the harm incurred. Such sharing can lead to community validation; Vitis and Gilmour write that "public and communal records of harassment function as a personal testimony" that achieves validity through "critical witnessing."⁴²

Such informal justice and DIY responses arise, in part, from the underwhelming response and support provided by policymakers, law enforcement, and social media and gaming companies. In other words, targets respond not only to the abuse itself but must also to the "dearth of adequate institutional responses."⁴³ Such support barriers include the lack of a communicative framework,⁴⁴ which makes effectively labeling their experiences of abuse *as abusive*, and discussing them with others, a difficult task. Also, by

³⁶ Jane, "Feminist Digilante Responses", *supra* note 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Rebecca Mackinnon & Ethan Zuckerman, "Don't Feed the Trolls" (2012) 41:4 Index on Censorship 14.

³⁹ Jane, "Online Misogyny," *supra* note 16.

⁴⁰ Claire L Evans, *Broad Band: The Untold Story of the Women Who Made the Internet* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018); Ian Sample, "Why is the Internet so overwhelmingly male?", *The Guardian* (19 October 2018), online: < www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/oct/19/global-inequalities-make-the-internet-overwhelmingly-male > .

⁴¹ Powell, *supra* note 26.

⁴² Vitis & Gilmour, *supra* note 22 at 6.

⁴³ Jane, "Feminist Digilante Responses", *supra* note 7 at 2.

⁴⁴ Clare McGlynn, "Call 'Revenge Porn' What it is: Sexual Abuse" (10 July 2017), online:

firmly distinguishing between online and offline spaces, friends and family compartmentalize the harm as only occurring online.⁴⁵ This is an example of digital dualism — the habit of treating online spaces as *distinct from* and *less real than* their offline counterparts.⁴⁶ Finally, social media and gaming platforms lack effective reporting processes, have little incentive to implement their own guidelines, and suffer from a lack of legal, social, and ethical responsibility.⁴⁷ These barriers to support are further complicated by the fact that members of equity-deserving groups are disproportionately impacted by online abuse. Indeed, oppressive structures of racism, xenophobia, islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and other systems of oppression and their intersections put some individuals at a higher risk of experiencing online abuse.⁴⁸ These same structures can also make it more difficult to access the support resources that *do* exist. For example, not everyone is equally empowered to seek help from law enforcement, an institution with deeply racist roots.⁴⁹

Throughout the literature that looks at responses to online abuse, there are themes of safety work,⁵⁰ awareness-raising,⁵¹ galvanization of communities,⁵² and efforts to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions.⁵³ Absent from this literature are responses that involve or rely on institutions (such as the

Vox < www.vox.com/first-person/2017/7/8/15934434/rob-kardashian-blac-chyna-revenge-porn-abuse > .

⁴⁵ Chandell Gosse, “‘Not the Real World’: Exploring Experiences of Online Abuse, Digital Dualism, and Ontological Labor” in Bailey, Flynn & Henry, *supra* note 2, 47.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*; Nathan Jurgenson, “Digital Dualism Versus Augmented Reality” (24 February 2011), online: *The Society Pages: Cyborgology* < thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2011/02/24/digital-dualism-versus-augmented-reality/ > .

⁴⁷ Crawford & Gillespie, *supra* note 14; Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018); Sarah Roberts, *Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

⁴⁸ Charlotte Barlow and Imran Awan “‘You need to be sorted out with a knife’: The attempted online silencing of women and people of Muslim faith within academia” (2016) 2:4 *Social Media & Society* 1; Chandell Gosse et al, “Impacts, Lessons Learned, and Best Practices for Supporting Knowledge Workers Targeted by Online Abuse: A Knowledge Synthesis Grant” (August 2021), online (pdf): < harassment.thedlrgroup.com/report/ > ; Ditch the Label, “Exposed: The scale of transphobia online” (2019), online: *Brand Watch* www.brandwatch.com/reports/transphobia/ > ; Marian Duggan, “1 in 4 Black Americans have faced online harassment because of their race or ethnicity” (2017), online: *Pew Research Center* < www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/25/1-in-4-black-americans-have-faced-online-harassment-because-of-their-race-or-ethnicity/ > .

⁴⁹ Khoo, “Deplatforming Misogyny”, *supra* note 15 at 208.

⁵⁰ Vera-Gray, “Talk About a Cu*t”, *supra* note 1.

⁵¹ Vitis & Gilmour, *supra* note 22.

⁵² Lawson, *supra* note 16.

⁵³ Jane, “Online Misogyny”, *supra* note 16.

government or social media platforms). In their 2015 report on VAWG, the United Nations Working Group on Broadband and Gender (UN) outlines the lack of institutional, legal, regulatory, and policy measures to support and protect women from online abuse.⁵⁴ The adverse impact that a lack of support from stakeholders can have — stakeholders who *allege* to have women, BIPOC, or gender non-binary individuals' protection in mind — is enormously problematic. Considering what is known about how women commonly respond to online abuse, coupled with the lack of support available to targets of online abuse, we can see that women are often left carrying the burden of safety and well-being online, just as in offline spaces. This process is called responsabilization.

(b) Framework: Responsibilization

Responsibilization is a mechanism of governance that shifts responsibility for social risks (such as poverty, illness, or abuse and violence) onto individuals, where previously that responsibility was the duty of someone else or was not considered a responsibility in the first place.⁵⁵ Like discourse, responsabilization operates through “remote and indirect action”⁵⁶ by developing “techniques for leading and controlling individuals without at the same time being responsible for them [i.e. the individuals under control].”⁵⁷

Responsibilization is closely associated with Foucault's work on governmentality.⁵⁸ Unlike contemporary uses of the terms *governance* and *government*, which refer to political and state action, Foucault employs an older meaning that describes a wider range of prescriptive control techniques, which range “from ‘governing the self’ to ‘governing others.’”⁵⁹ This use of the term *governance* or *government* is important because it offers a way to point to and critique the many processes that shape, influence, and possibly control behaviour. Responsibilization is one of these processes.

⁵⁴ The UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development Working Group on Broadband and Gender, “Cyber violence against women and girls: A world-wide wake-up call” (2015), online (pdf): *UN Women* <www.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2015/cyber_violence_gender%20-report.pdf> ; Khoo, “Deplatforming Misogyny”, *supra* note 15.

⁵⁵ Guy Richard Kempster, “Responsibilization” in Margaret E Beare, ed, *Sage Reference: Encyclopedia of Transnational Crime & Justice* (London, UK: Sage Publications, 2012) 356.

⁵⁶ Jarkko Pyysiäinen, Darren Halpin & Andrew Guilfoyle, “Neoliberal Governance and ‘Responsibilization’ of Agents: Reassessing the Mechanisms of Responsibility-shift in Neoliberal Discursive Environments” (2017) 18:2 *Distinktion* 215 at 216.

⁵⁷ Thomas Lemke, “‘The Birth of Bio-politics’: Michel Foucault’s Lecture at the Collège de France on Neo-liberal Governmentality” (2001) 30:2 *Economy & Society* 190 at 201.

⁵⁸ Foucault, *supra* note 4.

⁵⁹ Lemke, *supra* note 57 at 191.

This mechanism can be applied in many domains and “leads to areas of social responsibility becoming a matter of personal provisions.”⁶⁰ For example, protection from sexual violence still belongs to the domain of law enforcement. However, such protection has strongly adopted discourses that position women, gender non-binary people, and other high-risk target groups as central in preventing their own victimization.⁶¹ Appeals to this responsibility include policing one’s clothing, never leaving one’s drink unattended, and avoiding walking alone, all of which suggest it is the victim’s own decisions that place them at fault for being drugged and/or attacked.

Responsibilization always operates in service of power and is typically accounted for by an appeal to freedom. Individuals are persuaded to take responsibility for their well-being with the promise of achieving “personal freedom, possibilities of self-realization and maximization of quality of life.”⁶² As such, neoliberalism is the most common site where power is critiqued in this sense. The dominant neoliberal narrative is that individuals are responsible for the conditions of their own lives, as opposed to a broader understanding of humans as subjected to power structures outside of their control. However, promises of “personal freedom,” “self-realization,” and “maximization of quality of life,” to name only a few, serve other power structures as well. These power structures include, *and are not limited to*, tech oligopolies, misogyny, patriarchy, and a colonial sense of justice, all of which contribute to discourses of violence and abuse.

While the neoliberal appeal to personal freedom is rightfully critiqued as a primary agent of responsibilization, Pyysiäinen, Halpin, and Guilfoyle argue that individuals may instead “end up in situations where choices are not rewarded [such as through the maximization of quality of life] but instead, risks are realized [such as crime victimization].”⁶³ The authors call this “responsibilization through threat to personal control.”⁶⁴ The idea here is that individuals become responsibilized through a perceived threat to their safety and well-being. When this occurs, there are two likely outcomes: indifference or control.

Indifference is a form of learned helplessness where people learn “that they cannot influence the rule that works upon them and thus relinquish efforts to change the course of things.”⁶⁵ As a state of feeling and response, learned helplessness occurs when an individual expects to have no control over a situation.⁶⁶ People who become indifferent may not challenge other powers, such

⁶⁰ *Ibid* at 201.

⁶¹ Vera-Gray, “Talk About a Cu*t”, *supra* note 1.

⁶² Pyysiäinen, Halpin & Guilfoyle, *supra* note 56 at 216 — 17.

⁶³ *Ibid.* at 221.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* at 217. Pyysiäinen, Halpin, and Guilfoyle are interested in responsibilization as an instrument of neoliberal governmentality. While my research has implications for neoliberalism and neoliberal governmentality, such a focus is outside the confines of this chapter.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

as law enforcement in the case of sexual violence. They also no longer require attention or resources from such institutions, and in that way, they remove any pressure to take responsibility that such powers might feel. It results in a “‘silent conforming’ or taming of resistance instead of a responsabilization proper.”⁶⁷

Control, on the other hand, is a complementary but opposite reaction to “responsibilization through threat to personal control.”⁶⁸ Having a sense of control allows individuals to better cope with stress.⁶⁹ This is true regardless of whether the control is actual or perceived, meaning the perception of control is enough to ease stress for individuals in difficult situations.⁷⁰ This differs from learned helplessness: rather than relinquish their “attempts at controllability,” individuals “strive to restore their threatened personal control.”⁷¹ Controllability is achieved when targets assume (at least some) responsibility and through that regain a sense of dominion over a situation.⁷² For example, in the case of sexual violence, women may choose not to leave their drink unattended or choose to walk in groups because they believe it decreases their chance of being attacked.

These avenues to responsabilization — appeals to freedom and threats of a loss of control — are important for understanding how the “indirect action” of responsabilization works on individuals (i.e., the hegemonic motivation behind responsabilization). What these accounts fail to do is point to “the role social power structures play in reproducing the established order,”⁷³ thus rendering accounts of personal responsabilization devoid of social and material conditions. Such conditions are a key source of understanding responsabilization because they account for the more practical processes that “compel individuals to regard *themselves* . . . as *personally responsible* for their actions.”⁷⁴ In the following section, I review oppressive social practices that operate as techniques of responsabilization exercised *against* women.

(c) Oppressive Social Practices

Extant literature on VAWG demonstrates the way victim-survivors become responsible for protecting themselves against violence and abuse.⁷⁵ Many factors

⁶⁶ Mario Mikulincer, *Human Learned Helplessness: A Coping Perspective* (New York, NY: Springer, 1994).

⁶⁷ Pyysiäinen, Halpin & Guilfoyle, *supra* note 56 at 222.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* at 217.

⁶⁹ Norman S Endler et al, “Controllability, Coping, Efficacy, and Distress” (2000) 14:3 *European J Personality* 245.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Pyysiäinen, Halpin & Guilfoyle, *supra* note 56 at 222.

⁷² Christina M Hassija & Matt J Gray, “Adaptive Variants of Controllability Attributions Among Survivors of Sexual Assault” (2013) 6:4 *Intl J Cognitive Therapy* 342.

⁷³ Charles Masquelier, *Critique and Resistance in a Neoliberal Age: Towards a Narrative of Emancipation*, (London, UK: Springer, 2017) at 55 — 56.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* at 47 (emphasis added).

contribute to such responsabilization, but the most salient “responsibilization techniques” are the primary tenets of rape culture: rape-myths, victim-blaming, slut-shaming, and the concept of the ideal victim.⁷⁶ These oppressive social practices contribute to how society and individuals think about and discuss targets, victims, and survivors of abuse, which in turn shapes how targets view and conduct themselves.

Rape culture is the term given to a culture whose media objects, attitudes, ideologies, and economics normalize male aggression and, in fact, position it as desirable.⁷⁷ Rape culture also normalizes, or at least permits, the use of language with a particularly violent and derogatory flair.⁷⁸ For example, one of the most common tactics levied against women online is the rape threat.⁷⁹ Rape threats are “the modus operandi” for those who want to critique women journalists, politicians, and other public-facing individuals.⁸⁰

Born of rape culture is a society rife with rape myth acceptance. Rape myths are widely held beliefs that justify and excuse men’s aggression against women.⁸¹ Typical rape myths include expected responses to assault (“*why didn’t she fight back? Why doesn’t she have any bruises?*”), the perception that women frequently lie about assault, and the belief that women are culpable in their victimization by drinking alcohol, dressing inappropriately, and so on. A well-established consequence of rape-myth acceptance, and thus rape culture, is victim-blaming.

In victim-blaming, people imply that targets of abuse and violence did something to warrant or invite the abuse, “such as not having boundaries, assertiveness skills, self-esteem, or a knowledge of self-defense.”⁸² Victim-blaming attitudes sometimes describe the abuse as mutual, when in fact it is both unilateral and unidirectional.⁸³ But at its core, it works by excusing the

⁷⁵ Rael J Dawtry, Philip J Cozzolino & Mitchell J Callan, “I Blame Therefore It Was: Rape Myth Acceptance, Victim Blaming, and Memory Reconstruction” (2019) 45:8 *Personality & Soc Psychology Bull* 1269; Elizabeth Fast & Cathy Richardson, “Victim-blaming and the Crises of Representation in the Violence Prevention Field” (2019) 10:1 *Intl J Child, Youth & Family Studies* 3; Renae Franiuk et al, “Prevalence and Effects of Rape Myths in Print Journalism: The Kobe Bryant Case” (2008) 14:3 *Violence Against Women* 287; Stubbs-Richardson, Rader & Cosby, *supra* note 26.

⁷⁶ Lara Karaian, “Policing ‘Sexting’: Responsibilization, Respectability and Sexual Subjectivity in Child Protection/Crime Prevention Responses to Teenagers’ Digital Sexual Expression” (2014) 18:3 *Theoretical Criminology* 282 at 284.

⁷⁷ Emilie Buchwald, Pamela R Fletcher & Martha Roth, eds, *Transforming a Rape Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2005); Karen Lumsden & Heather Morgan, “Media Framing of Trolling and Online Abuse: Silencing Strategies, Symbolic Violence, and Victim Blaming” (2017) 17:6 *Feminist Media Studies* 926.

⁷⁸ Emma A Jane, “‘Back to the Kitchen, Cu*t’: Speaking the Unspeakable About Online Misogyny” (2014) 28:4 *Continuum* 558.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*; Lumsden & Morgan, *supra* note 77.

⁸⁰ Lumsden & Morgan, *supra* note 77 at 928.

⁸¹ Dawtry, Cozzolino & Callan, *supra* note 75.

⁸² Fast & Richardson, *supra* note 75 at 10.

perpetrator and removing power and agency from those who have been harmed.⁸⁴

Being inundated by victim-blaming and rape-myths shapes the way people think about targets of abuse and violence. Stubbs-Richardson, Rader, and Cosby looked at the online social influence of victim-blaming versus victim-supporting tweets surrounding three rape cases (the story of Rehtaeh Parsons and the Steubenville and Torrington rape trials).⁸⁵ They found that users who posted victim-blaming tweets had more followers and received more retweets than those tweeting victim-supporting content.⁸⁶ These findings become more frightening when placed in the context of work by Franiuk et al., whose research found that when exposed to media propagating rape-myths, such as victim-blaming tweets, participants were more likely to absolve perpetrators of responsibility.⁸⁷ These effects may prevent targets of online abuse from seeking formal avenues of support, as victim-blaming “adds to the shame and humiliation that they already feel.”⁸⁸ For example, Dobson’s analysis of anti-sexting PSAs found that teenage girls are positioned as both the primary targets of intimate-image related abuses *and* as responsible for preventing abuse by not engaging in sexual self-imaging.⁸⁹ When images are shared without consent, targets of image-abuse may feel ashamed that it happened precisely because of the messages they receive, which tell them it was their responsibility to avoid it in the first place. This approach swaps harm reduction for risk management, the result being educational tools for potential targets of abuse “in which perpetrators of abuse or violence are strangely absent.”⁹⁰

The difficulty that women experience seeking and getting support in a landscape rife with rape myth acceptance and the amplification of victim-blaming messages is magnified by the concept of the “ideal victim.”⁹¹ The ideal victim is “reasonable, rational, and responsible”⁹² and is to “behave as if nothing untoward has happened to her.”⁹³ In other words, it is both an imposed identity and an expectation for a certain performance from targets of abuse — one that is

⁸³ Fast & Richardson, *supra* note 75.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Stubbs-Richardson, Rader & Cosby, *supra* note 26.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Franiuk et al, *supra* note 75.

⁸⁸ Fast & Richardson, *supra* note 75 at 10.

⁸⁹ Dobson, *supra* note 3.

⁹⁰ Kath Albury & Kate Crawford, “Sexting, Consent and Young People’s Ethics: Beyond *Megan’s Story*” (2012) 26:3 *Continuum* 463 at 465.

⁹¹ Elizabeth Comack & Tracey Peter, “How the Criminal Justice System Responds to Sexual Assault Survivors: The Slippage Between ‘Responsibilization’ and ‘Blaming the Victim’” (2005) 17:2 *CJWL* 283 at 283.

⁹² *Ibid.* at 298.

⁹³ *Ibid.* at 299.

unattainable because it is not based in reality. Lise Gotell describes the ideal victim as “a symbolic and unreal construct.”⁹⁴ In other words, the “ideal victim” is an impossible standard imposed on victim/targets of all kinds of violence and abuse, and one against which targets of violence and abuse measure themselves. When targets inevitably fail to meet this impossible standard, that “failure” is seen as a personal failing, preventing women from reporting the abuse or seeking support for their abuse. This leads to victims taking on responsibility for the abuse. The “ideal victim” is further contingent on social practices, class, and subject positions like race, gender, and sexuality.⁹⁵

As the above section shows, rape culture, rape-myth acceptance, victim-blaming, and stereotypes of the ideal victim work together to responsabilize women. In analyzing interviews with women who experienced online abuse, I looked for evidence of responsabilization. I found that, while participants did not point to *how* they became responsabilized — that is, they did not state the influence of oppressive social practices directly — they nonetheless *demonstrate evidence of personal responsabilization* by way of the *kinds* of real responses they have to online abuse, many of which point to these social practices. In the next section, I discuss the methodology of the study and then examine four responses that emerged from the reactions that participants had to online abuse.

3. RESEARCH

(a) Methods

For this research, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 women who experienced online abuse using a phenomenological approach. For recruitment, the term “online abuse” was defined as a misuse of online spaces and digital tools. This definition can refer to a wide variety of behaviours and experiences, including harassing comments, posts, or tweets; the non-consensual release of intimate images or private information; or the creation of a fake account in another person’s name. These experiences are unwanted and inappropriate.

To prepare to conduct the interviews, I drew on sociological literature that looks at sensitive research.⁹⁶ Sensitive research is sometimes referred to as

⁹⁴ Lise Gotell, “The Ideal Victim, the Hysterical Complainant, and the Disclosure of Confidential Records: The Implications of the *Charter* for Sexual Assault Law” (2002) 40:3 Osgoode Hall LJ 251 at 276.

⁹⁵ Cassandra Cross, “Denying Victim Status to Online Fraud Victims: The Challenges of Being a ‘Non-ideal Victim’” in Marian Duggan, ed, *Revisiting the ‘Ideal Victim’: Developments in Critical Victimology* (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2018) 243; Karaian, *supra* note 76; Mikaela Pitcan, Alice E Marwick & danah boyd, “Performing a Vanilla Self: Respectability Politics, Social Class, and the Digital World” (2018) 23:3 J Computer-Mediated Communication 163; Jane Doe, *The Story of Jane Doe: A Book About Rape* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2003).

⁹⁶ Kimmery Newsom & Karen Myers-Bowman, “I Am Not a Victim. I Am a Survivor”:

research that uncovers “back regions,”⁹⁷ which are phenomena that occur in “private space, where personal activities take place and only ‘insiders’ participate.”⁹⁸ While what qualifies as sensitive research depends on the context and cultural norms of participants,⁹⁹ Dickson-Swift et al suggest that researchers consider the risk to both researcher and research participants.¹⁰⁰ Given participants’ previous experience with abuse, and the increased surveillance by far and alt-right groups of researchers who do feminist research,¹⁰¹ I deemed this research to be sensitive. As such, I took appropriate steps to ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality. These included using pseudonyms twice removed from the participant, transcribing and anonymizing transcripts soon after the interview ended, and counselling participants on how to delete our email exchanges. I also took steps to ensure that participants did not feel further discriminated against or marginalized. This included asking them if they were comfortable with the term *target* (instead of victim) of online abuse, or whether they prefer other terms to describe their experience.

The extra step to ensure participants’ anonymity and confidentiality meant that I could not do member-checking, a process that sees interviewers provide summaries of the research findings to participants to get feedback and reflection about the data. This approach is used in qualitative research to reduce bias and provide verifiability with research results. After careful consideration, I decided that the risk associated with keeping participants’ emails and contact details outweighed the benefit I would receive from member-checking.

To further facilitate a sensitive interview process, I asked the following question at the end of each interview: If someone were to tell your story or share your experience, how would you want them to tell it? What would be important to you? This question was strategically placed at the end of the interview to give participants the final word and allow them to shape the information they just shared. Also, when working with vulnerable or abused people, it is a way to put the storytelling power back in their hands.

Recruitment took place primarily online through Twitter, Facebook, and listservs with the help of third-party organizations. Posters were also distributed in a mid-size Canadian city. Most participants were in Canada (13 out of 15) and two were in the United States. All interviews were conducted in English and

Resilience as a Journey for Female Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse” (2017) 26:8 J Child Sexual Abuse 927.

⁹⁷ Pranee Liamputtong, *Researching the Vulnerable: A Guide to Sensitive Research Methods* (London, UK: Sage Publications, 2007) at 2.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* at 67.

⁹⁹ Liamputtong, *supra* note 97.

¹⁰⁰ Virginia Dickson-Swift et al, “Risk to Researchers in Qualitative Research on Sensitive Topics: Issues and Strategies” (2008) 18:1 Qualitative Health Research 133.

¹⁰¹ Vera-Gray, “Talk About a Cu*t”, *supra* note 1; Adrienne L Massanari, “Rethinking Research Ethics, Power, and the Risk of Vulnerability in the Era of the ‘Alt-Right’ Gaze” (2018) 4:2 Soc Media + Society 1.

online using Skype. The age of participants ranged from 21 to 44, with a median age of 31. Three participants identified as Black, Indigenous, or a person of colour (BIPOC), 11 identified as white, and one participant preferred not to disclose. While one participant explained that a man used racial slurs in his abusive comments toward her, participants who identified as BIPOC focused primarily on their experiences with the gender-related aspects of abuse online. This is likely due to the nature of the study, which focused on women. There was widespread recognition from participants, however, that online abuse does not impact everyone equally, and that members of equity-deserving groups are at higher risk for experiencing abuse.

Data analysis took place with Nvivo 12 using an open coding approach to develop 13 common themes. Data was then recoded using these 13 themes on two separate occasions. A comparison of the two files was then completed to ensure the themes were clear and there was consistency across coding. The data presented in this article emerged from the code “response,” which included the responses that participants had to the abuse and the responses of others with whom they shared their experience (such as family, friends, platforms, therapists, police, etc.). Finally, all identifying information has been removed and participants are identified using pseudonyms.

(b) Findings

Throughout the interviews, participants indicated they responded to their experiences of online abuse by blocking and reporting content and users to social media and gaming moderators, talking with friends and family, and feeling angry, fearful, and lonely. Underlying these responses were common themes that suggest participants adopted practices of personal responsabilization. The four themes — blame, normalization, minimization, and control — were influential throughout the narrative of participants’ experiences and reflect foundational elements of their response processes. This analysis also considers reported responses from friends and family of the targets, when those responses contribute to a participant’s responsabilization.

(i) Self-Blame

Throughout the interviews, responsabilization manifested as self-blame for the abuse participants experienced. While the women in this study expressed some level of awareness that online abuse was not their fault, partial self-blame remained a common response as participants shared responsibility for their abuse with their abusers. For example, reflecting on the early days of communicating with her stalker, Melody explained, “I think unfortunately the mistake I made was being very open with him because that’s naturally how I am and so throughout our conversations, I probably told him a lot more than I should about myself.”

Relatedly, some participants were quick to point to other online behaviours that they proactively avoided because they *could* invite abuse. For example, Lilly

expressed her surprise over men messaging her because she felt the content of her social media profiles was carefully curated and did not “give off” the impression that inappropriate messages were welcomed:

My public profile is about books, it’s about feminism, it’s about One Less, it’s about Me Too, it’s about mental health. These are all things that I feel strongly about. And under no circumstances is it in any way, you know those social media sites that are very like — look at me in a bra, look at me in a bikini. It’s got nothing to do with that and yet I still constantly get private messages from men saying ‘dtf?’ [down to fuck?] And I’m going yes, what part of my book blog makes you think ‘okay, let’s do that’ (Lilly).

The implication here is that some online users behave in ways that *do* welcome online abuse. So, while Lilly is not blaming herself, she indicates that there are some behaviours whereby she could fathom being blamed. Lilly admitted that this line of thinking is “very anti-feminist,” but that people should understand that “anything can be changed to be inappropriate if you’re not careful.” As a result, Lilly feels she must be hyper-attuned to the potential misuse of posts and photos she shares online.

Abigail also explained that she restricts her behaviour to pre-emptively dissuade abuse:

I’m much more likely to be very meticulous and careful about how I respond to situations and what situations I put myself in than most of the friends [. . .] an example of that is like, I’m using Tinder, but I’m not putting my real name on Tinder (Abigail).

Both Abigail and Lilly expressed a belief that they could modify their behaviour to avoid or mitigate the chances of abuse. This is an example of internalized victim-blaming wherein participants come to believe that some actions that they or others engage in are *blameworthy* and should be avoided. Thus, blame was expressed as blaming oneself and as an acknowledgment that some actions could result in blame.

Participants’ expressions of blame demonstrate responsibility-taking for their abuse. The attitudes that fuel self-blame and internalized victim-blaming are understandable in a culture that normalizes male aggression and tells women they are responsible for keeping safe from abuse and violence. Participants shared no shortage of examples of receiving such messages. For example, people often told Ellie to “quit using social media because [she was] bringing this [abuse] on [her]self” (Ellie), and Maya learned that her characters must be aware of how they dress in-game so as not to attract unwanted attention. Reflecting on one incident, she recalled, “Out of the blue, [someone said] ‘who’s the slut?’ Two dudes walk in [to the game] and the rude comments start, and then they argue, ‘well you shouldn’t be dressed like that if you don’t want comments like that’ [Audible sigh]” (Maya).

Despite sometimes taking on some of the blame for their victimization, participants wanted to let others know that nothing a person does online warrants abuse and that people should not blame themselves:

You should never accept what is said online and you should never blame yourself for what is being said [. . .] Saying you need a thicker skin is the modern-day version of ‘you need a longer skirt’ (Wendy).

Abigail had a similar message:

Even if you did do something where you knew this was going to be the outcome, that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have done it. That doesn’t mean you have to feel guilty about it. That doesn’t mean that this is somehow your responsibility to fix [. . .] Don’t take on the responsibility of somebody else’s fucked up behaviour (Abigail).

The dualism of acknowledging that people should not blame themselves for any abuse they experience, while at the same time taking on blame or seeing certain actions as blameworthy, speaks to the hegemonic nature of responsabilization. This is a nature that has individuals adopt beliefs that do not serve them, and which in fact undermine and are contrary to other beliefs they hold. In this case, it is at once recognizing that — as targets of online abuse — they are not to blame, while at the same time avoiding behaviour that could be seen as blameworthy. The ability to convince an individual to behave in a way that they do not believe is needed speaks to the strength of victim-blaming and ideal victim discourses, both of which serve the larger task of responsabilization. That both beliefs can be held at once demonstrates the insidious operation of responsabilization dynamics.

(ii) *Normalization*

Participants expressed normalizing online abuse in two ways. First, abuse was conceptualized as an *expected* experience of being online. Second, it was understood as a condition that must be *accepted* in order to continue engaging online.

(iii) *Online abuse as expected*

Participants indicated that they have come to expect online abuse as “part and parcel of having an online presence” (Maggie). Participants discussed this expectation as a kind of gradual conditioning whereby they became less shocked by — and even acclimatized to — abusive comments online over time: “It’s kind of changed as I’ve gotten more and more use to it,” explained Lilly. “You kind of get to the point where some of it bothers you and some of it doesn’t.” Maggie notes that she used to be shocked by the abuse, “but now it’s kind of like, oh another one of these” (Maggie).

The expectation of being subject to online abuse also translated into a loss of feeling for many participants. Two participants described this using almost identical language: Jane described feeling “numb to them [abusive comments]”

because she “sees them all the time,” and Ellie explained, “After it just happens to you for a couple of years, [it] starts to feel like — well you just kind of get numb to it.”¹⁰²

(iv) *Online abuse as inherent in online engagement*

The expectation of online abuse turned into a kind of acceptance for some participants. This was particularly true for those whose work and activism involved exposure to online abuse. Eva and Sara both acknowledged how harmful their experiences have been, and how overwhelmed online abuse has made them feel at times; however, because they rely on social media to help others, they spoke about accepting online abuse with a sense of duty. For example, Eva explained, “I do this work and it’s my choice to do this work and because I choose to do this work, I choose to endure this online abuse” (Eva).

Normalization via acceptance was difficult for Ellie, who struggled with the implications of online abuse for her career as a writer and someone who works with video games. She pointed to wider attitudes by others in her field: “this is games and if you can’t hack it, don’t be a game developer, don’t be a games journalist, don’t be in games academia, because this is part of it” (Ellie). She recognized that this is ultimately true for her, but the level of unfairness leaves her frustrated.

For Ellie and other participants, normalizing online abuse is an understandable reaction. Frequent experiences of abuse and violence increase an individual’s tolerance for it.¹⁰³ This is a coping mechanism that allows targets of abuse to continue with their lives.

Participants exhibited competing reactions to the notion that online abuse was an almost-unavoidable part of being online. These reactions indicate that acceptance among participants was not an agreement that online abuse is permissible, but rather a recognition that it is not something they feel they can do much about or that they expect to see disappear.

(v) *Minimization*

In addition to blame and normalization, participants also minimized their abuse by expressing concern that it “wasn’t as serious as some other kinds of harassment” (Kate) and pretending they were not bothered by inappropriate comments. Participants also received messages of minimization from perpetrators of abuse and friends with whom they shared their experiences.

On two occasions, participants emailed me before accepting an invitation to participate out of concern that their experiences would not qualify for the study. When asked about the initial email during the interview, one of the participants, Kate, reflected:

¹⁰² Chadha et al, *supra* note 3 at 249 (interestingly, in Chadha et al a participant also used this language, noting that online abuse made her feel “numb”).

¹⁰³ Heather R Hlavka, “Normalizing Sexual Violence: Young Women Account for Harassment and Abuse” (2014) 28:3 *Gender & Society* 337.

I wasn't sure it was really related to the research topic, or as serious as some other kinds of harassment [. . .] It's such a big topic, and [. . .] people have suffered more at the hands of strangers online than I have. My experience really wasn't that, I don't want to say that bad, because it wasn't great, but it's not as bad as it could have been (Kate).

For Julie, minimizing the abuse looked very different from Kate. She explained that she used to harbour a lot of internalized misogyny as a way to cope with and make sense of her experience. As Julie described it, pretending to enjoy the sexist and misogynist jokes was an attempt to convince herself that the comments were not harmful: "I would kind of, almost enable that kind of behaviour [. . .] Like, 'I'm one of the good ones, I don't mind offensive jokes' [. . .]. And then you realize, oh this feels like garbage" (Julie).

Other forms of minimization included downplaying abuse and comparing it to other forms of abuse and violence. Ellie offered a very powerful demonstration of this. She explained, "I don't want to sully the term victim-blaming by applying something that happens to rape victims to online abuse, but there is definitely a similar logic that happens. You put yourself in this situation, you egged this on" (Ellie). Here Ellie was reluctant to use the term victim-blaming to describe what happens to victims of online abuse, as though the abuse she experienced does not deserve the same response as other offences. However, victim-blaming logic is not reserved for only the most serious of crimes or for offline offences.

On several occasions, it was apparent that perpetrators contribute to this discourse of minimization. Participants described scenarios where perpetrators downplayed their abuse by suggesting physical harm — apparently the only outcome of consequence — is unlikely in online contexts. Ellie recalled:

They [the perpetrators] were just like, 'well, what are you afraid of? Why won't you interact with us?' and I was like, 'I'm afraid of all the people who are coming into my Twitter mentions screaming at me. And they were like, 'well, no one's ever actually been hurt, so you have nothing to be afraid of (Ellie).

The assumption perpetrators are making here is that online abuse is less real or less hurtful because it takes place online.¹⁰⁴ At times, friends and family were no more supportive. Overall, Melody stated that her friends were helpful and she was glad for their support, but they still had the tendency to downplay and minimize the ongoing harm: "I told my best friend [. . .] at first he was like, 'I think you're making a big deal out of this; I don't think that this guy is out to get you'" (Melody). Another friend of Melody's told her that he thought that "this person might be [. . .] misguided" and that "he just doesn't have the social norms that most guys would have" (Melody). By minimizing the situation, Melody's friends unintentionally normalized her abuser's inappropriate behaviour.

¹⁰⁴ Gosse, *supra* note 45.

Minimization does not stem from a lack of concern or care for oneself or on the part of family and friends, or at least it did not seem that way. Instead, minimizing the harm of online abuse is emblematic of wider social constructs that positions people as less vulnerable in online spaces, and online spaces as less real than their offline counterparts.¹⁰⁵ Despite minimizing their abuse, participants nonetheless experienced a vulnerability that encouraged them to seek control in the form of protection strategies.

(vi) *Control-seeking*

Participants took direct actions to help maintain or regain control of their online presences and online spaces. Many of these behaviours double as a kind of safety work by protecting participants' sense of power in online spaces. In some cases, these actions operated as a kind of safety planning, which involved emotional, physical, and technological planning to create a safe space. Ellie offers a clear example:

One time my name was mentioned in an *Infowars* article, like Alex Jones *Infowars*, and I spent two days just trying to find everything that people were saying about me because, man, those Infowars fans. If anybody's going to do something crazy it's them. So yeah, I'm not saying that this is a good response to have, but my response tends to be trying to track down everything that's happening so that I know how bad it is (Ellie).

Rather than control the content itself, Ellie's attempt at control manifested as an attempt to anticipate further abuse, and she felt a sense of personal control in knowing what to expect. Despite the additional harm that reading these comments likely had, Ellie did so as a way to maintain awareness of what people were saying about her so she could assess and address any threat levelled against her.

Other participants were also concerned about threats to their safety and explained that they frequently weighed the benefit of having or maintaining their online presence. Lilly explained that on several occasions she thought, "do I want to keep doing this [work]?" For others, the choice to remove themselves seemed clear. For example, Kate regularly opted to leave whatever space she was using: "I would even just log out and be like, you know what? Today is just not my day" (Kate). Similarly, Julie recalled times where she "completely abandoned [her] email and [Twitter] handle and everything and kind of started fresh" (Julie).

The most common form of control-seeking behaviours among participants, however, were small modifications to their online presence and behaviour. These included two-step verifications, using "jibberish passwords" (Ellie), keeping accounts private or "pretty tight" (Eva), and changing game servers or social media accounts. When it came to games in particular, participants pointed out

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

that they concealed “any kind of perceived femininity or feminine traits” in online games (Kate) by using gender-neutral avatars and avoiding voice chat.

Maya described being able to sense when abuse was about to happen, indicating that she aimed to speed up the process:

I’ll say the words so that we can by-pass this part because we already know how this ends. You can have a chunk of my energy, here you go, I’m now going to delete you and block you, don’t forget to call me a coward and the door will hit my ass on my way out — Goodbye (Maya).

For Maya, control-seeking was about leaning into what she saw as an inevitable process.

Finally, two participants attempted to regain control using digilante strategies to hold abusers accountable. On two occasions, Maggie tracked down her abuser and sent screenshots of the messages to one perpetrator’s mother (because he was a youth) and to another’s employer.

Fiona also used digilante tactics:

There was this one guy who sent me a message and I went and looked at his profile [. . .] and it listed his employer [. . .] So I went and found the director of marketing and director of HR and took a screenshot and sent it to them [. . .] Within an hour I got a response back from both of them saying they are really sorry, and they were going to talk to him about it (Fiona).

Neither Maggie nor Fiona knew if there were any consequences for their abusers’ actions, but they nonetheless described feeling a slight sense of vindication from knowing they were able to exert some control and try to “hold [their abuser] accountable” (Fiona).

These four themes — self-blame, normalization, minimization, and control-seeking — are not forms of responsabilization themselves. Instead, they are symptoms of responsabilization that manifest as types of responses that have been influenced by oppressive social practices and shaped by limited options for support.¹⁰⁶ Thus, these themes provide evidence that participants have been responsabilized.

4. DISCUSSION

Responsibilization is a technique of oppressive power structures. It works by shifting responsibility for safety and well-being onto individuals¹⁰⁷ and works only if those individuals adopt responsabilizing tasks. In practice, oppressive social practices, including rape culture, rape myth acceptance, victim-blaming,

¹⁰⁶ Dawtry, Cozzolino & Callan, *supra* note 75; Fast & Richardson, *supra* note 75; Karaian, *supra* note 76.

¹⁰⁷ Kempster, *supra* note 55.

and conceptions of the ideal victim, are techniques through which responsabilization affects individuals.

Specifically, these oppressive social practices, in combination with barriers to support, leave women responsible for preventing and responding to online abuse. Across the data, there are ample indicators of responsabilization. In this discussion, I demonstrate the impact that oppressive social practices and barriers to support have on participants' responses to online abuse.

(a) Self-Blame and the Internalization of Victim-Blaming Ideologies and Rape Myth Acceptance

Some of the strongest evidence for personal responsabilization emerged out of participants' tendency to accept partial blame for their experiences of online abuse. Blame manifested primarily as self-blame, and self-blame is closely associated with, and arguably born of, discourses of victim-blaming.

But marking a distinction between self-blame and victim-blaming is important. Victim-blaming has a negative connotation and is typically done to someone as a way to reduce their power and make them responsible for the harm they incurred. Participants did not exhibit victim-blaming behaviour proper. In fact, participants who self-blamed simultaneously noted the importance of not blaming oneself and of not taking responsibility for "somebody else's fucked up behavior" (Abigail). Instead, the evidence here suggests that participants internalize victim-blaming ideologies. Such internalization took on several forms. For example, participants pointed to their behaviour as triggers for abuse, such as having a "naturally" open personality (Melody). In other cases, participants modified their behaviour as a way to avoid possible blame.

Abigail's comparison of herself to her friends as someone who would never put herself "in a situation," and Lilly's surprise that she receives sexual messages from men despite never posting content "in a bra" or "in a bikini," is a new twist on an old problem: the internalization of rape myth acceptance and its mapping on to digital spaces. Instead of the myth that "if a woman is raped, it must be because 'she asked for it' by dressing too promiscuously,"¹⁰⁸ the thought is that certain kinds of photographs and content can lead to online abuse.¹⁰⁹ This also points to the internalization of victim-blaming ideologies and the acceptance of rape myths insofar as participants avoid behaviours that they believe could invite abuse as a way to help absolve themselves of the shared blame or responsibility that wider social discourses place on them. Thus, rape myths and victim-blaming not only make targets of online abuse further responsible for their safety but also make them internalize this responsibility. With this internalization they may not necessarily blame *themselves* — at least not yet — but there is an implication that some online behaviours (e.g., sharing photos of oneself in a bra or bikini) should

¹⁰⁸ Stubbs-Richardson, Rader & Cosby, *supra* note 26 at 99.

¹⁰⁹ That said, Maya did encounter this exact rape myth when two players told her that her in-game character "shouldn't be dressed like that if [she didn't] want comments like that."

be avoided as they *could* be blameworthy according to society at large. Social and cultural messages about the ideal victim further incentivize avoiding certain behaviours. The impact of these messages is self-censoring and self-monitoring. Furthermore, the concept of the ideal victim is deeply rooted in white, cis-gendered, and able-bodied subjectivities, which are unalterable and cannot be avoided. For this reason, maintaining a sort of *ideal victimhood* is not only unachievable, but entirely impossible for some. Just as oppressive structures of racism xenophobia, islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and other oppressive systems and their intersections make individuals vulnerable to online abuse, so too do they put an extra tax on individuals to fit within the status quo.¹¹⁰

Indeed, it is precisely *because* these women are responsabilized by the broader systems of oppression that the behaviours they indicate they deliberately avoid could, in reality, place them at higher risk of becoming targets. It is important to consider that, aside from the behaviours within women's control, there are few other options for them to rely on. Choosing to take responsibility — that is, to avoid any behaviour that might increase the risk of abuse — regardless of how unfair it may be, is a completely reasonable response to the threats these women have faced to their emotional and physical safety. While I point to indicators of responsabilization via victim-blaming and rape myth acceptance, I cannot discount the reality that some actions and behaviours *do* place individuals at a higher risk of online abuse in the socio-material contexts where these women live and work. So, of course, they take steps to avoid said actions and behaviours. Regardless of whether this is how things *should be*, it is the way things *are* — and these behaviours are a response to the way things *are*.

Perpetrators are not always men. In some cases, women internalize the oppressive discourses that work against them, only to become perpetrators themselves — this is known as lateral violence.¹¹¹ The internalization of rape myths and victim-blaming ideologies in particular is suggestive of cultural tendencies to excuse men's poor behaviour and absolve them of the harm they perpetrate — *boys will be boys*, after all.¹¹² We see this tendency in another of Melody's friends, who excused the behaviour of her stalker when he said, "he just doesn't have the social norms that most guys would have" (Melody). As exhibited earlier in the discussion on anti-sexting PSAs,¹¹³ even the subtext of

¹¹⁰ Barlow and Awan, *supra* note 48; Gosse et al, *supra* note 48; Ditch the Label, *supra* note 48; Duggan, *supra* note 48.

¹¹¹ Emma A Jane, "Feminism is Eating Itself: Experiences and Perceptions of Lateral Violence Online" in Jane Bailey, Asher Flynn & Nicola Henry, eds, *The Emeralds International Handbook of Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse* (Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2021) 171 at 180.

¹¹² In all but one interview, participants in this study experienced abuse by perpetrators they identified as men. In one interview, Maggie explained, "I think quite a bit of mine [the abuse] comes actually from women, surprisingly."

¹¹³ Dobson, *supra* note 3.

educational material meant to support targets of online abuse places the responsibility of safety on targets, the implication being that boys and men are not in control of their behaviour.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, North American cultural frameworks of safety wrongly hold women accountable for their well-being. Under these frameworks, assuming blame is perhaps better explained as a means of identifying measures of control to mitigate online abuse and violence. As Hassija and Gray point out, self-blame can “promote a greater sense of controllability as one’s future behaviors are potentially modifiable and can thereby be altered to reduce the likelihood of future negative outcome.”¹¹⁴

(b) Normalized Bad Behaviour Normalizes Bad Behaviour

Personal responsabilization was also evident in participants’ sense of normalization. Participants did not *accept* online abuse in the sense that they consented or agreed to it, but rather they all acknowledged that it is a condition of being online that is out of their control. For most participants, normalization and acceptance were a result of recognizing that they have little influence over the “rule that works upon them,”¹¹⁵ which looks a lot like learned helplessness. Thus, for some participants, online abuse became something they expect.

Living in a patriarchal and misogynist society requires operating with an awareness of and vulnerability to violence and abuse that shapes the way women take up space in public. As stated earlier, rape culture is an active element of popular culture, and it normalizes male aggression¹¹⁶ through all forms of media, socio-cultural values, attitudes, and ideologies. This means that before experiencing online abuse, the participants in this study are already inundated with messages of rape myths, slut-shaming, victim-blaming, and the ideal victim. This level of exposure easily conditions targets of online abuse and shapes their socialization so that normalization and acceptance become conditioned responses to a culture that also normalizes these things. In other words, rape culture drives responsabilization by shaping, influencing, and priming women to normalize and accept the online abuse they experience.¹¹⁷

For some participants, enduring online abuse seemed like a personal choice, a duty, and an obligation. This was strongest with participants who relied on online spaces for their work and activism. For them, there was a sense of *needing* to accept that online abuse will be a part of their online experience, and, by extension, their work/cause. Of course, such a “choice” is not really a choice when online spaces are so central to our lives. Being online despite abuse might currently be unavoidable, but by accepting that they will experience abuse if they

¹¹⁴ Hassija & Gray, *supra* note 72 at 344.

¹¹⁵ Pyysiäinen, Halpin & Guilfoyle, *supra* note 56 at 217.

¹¹⁶ Lumsden & Morgan, *supra* note 77.

¹¹⁷ The priming effect of rape culture can also be said to influence the other themes found in participants’ responses, particularly blame and minimization.

are online, participants are taking responsibility vis-à-vis a kind of discursive duty to persevere.

Normalization and acceptance are not easily adopted attitudes. Rather, normalization is a learned strategy that becomes apparent through repeat encounters with perpetrators who are rarely held to account and systems that do little to protect targets of abuse. Given the circumstances, it is necessary for women whose work or hobbies happen in online spaces to adopt an attitude that prepares them to anticipate online abuse. This is not a form of resignation, but an attitude of necessity, a kind of anticipatory acceptance that also acts as a coping strategy to build a bulwark against the shock of inappropriate and often vile messages. The consequences of this “necessity” are steep, and the important work is to then pair acceptance with regaining control by developing environments that promote support and protection, rather than indifference and helplessness.¹¹⁸

(c) **Minimization: Coping, Gaslighting, and Silencing**

Participants minimized their abuse in several ways. First, abuse was often compared to other, more extreme, examples of abuse. This left one participant hesitant to admit that discourses of victim-blaming played a role in her experience. Second, participants were often uncertain whether the harm they experience qualified *as abuse*. Finally, abuse was minimized by downplaying offensive content and humour. This suggests internalized misogyny — an attitude that separates women from “other girls,” or, as one participant explained, positioned her as “one of the good ones.” In these cases, minimization is a gesture that individuals employ to convince themselves that things “are not that bad.” It further acts as a coping strategy that works to “mitigate or eliminate harm,”¹¹⁹ which helps reformulate one’s relationship to online spaces. This is also an example of safety work in its less tangible form: it is one of many “habitual strategies”¹²⁰ that women use to rationalize the responsibility placed upon them for their abuse.

Minimization is also evidence that responsabilization was a successful technique, as it works in service of powerful institutions, such as social media platforms, that might otherwise be held accountable for protecting citizens and online users. Through minimization, women may become silent or indifferent toward their abuse. As mentioned earlier, this is a mechanism of responsabilization, as it tames resistance¹²¹ and removes individuals from the groups of people who need to be governed.

¹¹⁸ Kususanto Prihadi et al, “Cyber-victimization and Perceived Depression: Serial Mediation of Self-esteem and Learned-helplessness” (2019) 8:4 Intl J Evaluation & Research in Education 563.

¹¹⁹ Veletsianos et al, *supra* note 19.

¹²⁰ Vera-Gray, “Talk About a Cu*t”, *supra* note 1 at 14.

¹²¹ Pyysiäinen, Halpin & Guilfoyle, *supra* note 56.

(d) Control-Seeking: Safety Work and DIY Justice

Personal responsabilization was also apparent through participants' attempts to control the abuse. Participants expressed a tendency to restrict their online behaviour and engage in safety work. These restrictions included limiting the types of information and photos participants shared, eliminating the use of voice chat, sometimes leaving online spaces altogether, and increasing online security. These are examples of shifting responsibility for safety and well-being onto the individual, the response to which is the uptake of social responsibility as a matter of personal provision.¹²²

The lack of manifest support from a range of actors, including social media companies and law enforcement, further responsabilized participants, compelling them to seek control. At their own risk, participants used DIY and digilante tactics to try and hold perpetrators responsible.

5. CONCLUSION

Responsibilization, in a true circular fashion, is not only born of but also benefits institutional (e.g., social media companies and law enforcement) and cultural power structures (e.g., misogyny and patriarchy). When targets of online abuse take responsibility for the abuse launched against them, that assumption of responsibility requires energy, and that energy is taken away from efforts to hold institutions and perpetrators accountable. Responsibilization tries to tranquilize change in the service of power. The tricky thing about interrupting this process is that it requires more than just offering better support. It also requires exposing, challenging, and dismantling harmful ideologies, belief systems, and values that underpin the responsibility-taking that equality-seeking groups have long undergone as a way to deal with multiple forms of oppression and discrimination. Eliminating the problem may not be possible. The immediate focus instead should be on reducing harm in the here and now by offering stronger and more varied and effective support from all stakeholders, especially social media platforms.

In this article, I examined the role of barriers to support and oppressive social practices on participants' responses to online abuse. Their responses provided indicators that participants are responsabilized, and thus take on the responsibility of avoiding, preventing, and responding to their abuse. These indicators included blame and self-blame, the normalization and acceptance of online abuse, minimizing the abuse, and seeking control over the risk of abuse and related harms.

Future research should aim to provide further nuance to this work by examining whether responses differ according to subject positions such as race, class, and gender identity, and whether they differ between public or private-facing individuals. Having a better understanding of which toolboxes are best

¹²² Lemke, *supra* note 57.

equipped to respond to online abuse, and why they are effective, will provide avenues to strengthen responses and help fix a broken support ecosystem.