Feminist Media Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfms20

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To cite this article: Hande Eslen-Ziya, Alberta Giorgi & Ceren J. Ahi (18 Nov 2023): Digital vulnerabilities and online harassment of academics, consequences, and coping strategies. An exploratory analysis, Feminist Media Studies, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2023.2281268

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2281268

Published online: 18 Nov 2023.

FEMINIST MEDIA STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2281268

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Digital vulnerabilities and online harassment of academics, consequences, and coping strategies. An exploratory analysis

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ABSTRACT

Academic research is currently undergoing a wave of contestation, ranging from violent attacks and life-threatening situations to public undermining of their research and online threats and harassment. A variety of actors engage in hostile behaviors, including ordinary people as well as state institutions, and address scholars working in diverse disciplines and on diverse topics, such as climate change, vaccination, gender studies, colonialism and Islam studies. Recent research shows that female scholars, sexual and racialized minorities, and precarious researchers are the most likely target of online attacks. This contribution presents the results of a research project on academics facing online harassment in times of populism, drawing on data from an original survey to explore the ambivalences of academics' public engagement, the public role of universities, and, more broadly, the impact of current attacks on academic knowledge.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 14 September 2023
Revised 2 November 2023
Accepted 3 November 2023

KEYWORDS
Digital vulnerabilities; online harassment of academics; coping strategies; online threats to academics; social media

Introduction

Being an academic has become more intertwined with the use of digital media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Academia.edu or LinkedIn (George Veletsianos and Royce Kimmons 2016; Robert Kozinets 2016). Often encouraged by their institution, scholars use the digital environment to disseminate research findings, for teaching and networking purposes, for building collaborations, and for public engagement. In this scenario, online harassment has also become a common issue, ranging from acts of privacy invasion such as stalking and doxing to threats of physical harm, negative comments and belittling of scientific work (Chandell Gosse, George Veletsianos, Jaigris Hodson, Shandell Houlden, Tonia A Dousay, Patrick R Lowenthal and Nathan Hall 2021). Though the literature studying workplace harassment in higher education is rich, the research on cyberbullying of academics on digital media platforms is only

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recently growing (see: Gosse et al. 2021; Houlden Shandell, Jaigris Hodson, George Veletsianos, Chandell Gosse, Patrick Lowenthal, Tonia Dousay and Nathan C Hall 2022; Charlotte Barlow and Imran Awan 2016; Lida Marie Blizard 2016; George Veletsianos, Shandell Houlden, Jaigris Hodson and Chandell Gosse 2018; Helen Cowie and Carrie-Anne Myers 2023). This paper presents an exploratory analysis based on survey data collected from academics working in different research fields, in Europe and the United States. Our sample is not representative, yet findings point out a concerning trend: the academics who report to have been attacked online may consider changing research topic. Hence, online harassment targeting academics emerges as an urgent matter, particularly in the current climate of attacks against science and universities, on the one side (see: Hande Eslen-Ziya and Alberta Giorgi 2022), and the constant push for academic self-branding within "academic capitalism" (Sevil Sümer and Hande Eslen-Ziya 2023), on the other.

Theoretical framework

In this article we approach higher education as an institution created and sustained through a complex interaction of organisational, cultural, and individual factors operating within the overall context of "academic capitalism" (Sümer and Eslen-Ziya 2023): "market-like behaviours" where practices of commercialisation, internationalisation, and competition for scarce resources—like external funding or research time—open the need for dissemination of research and public engagement on online platforms. In return, such digital engagement and merging of personal and professional identities in online spaces enhance the risk for academics to be attacked. According to Alice Marwick and Danah Boyd (2011) digital engagements create vulnerabilities for scholars as the messages shared can reach wider populations, online spaces, and infinite contexts (Bonnie Stewart 2016), in some cases triggering harassment and online misogyny.

From the research in the field, four main elements emerge. First, "cyberhate" against academics is particularly relevant for those working in politically polarizing fields, such as climate change, gender, and immigration (Jason Branford et al. 2019). Second, the studies on cyberbullying against faculty members by students and colleagues have shown how women, LGBT+ communities and people with minority backgrounds are more likely to be the targets of online attacks (Atte Oksanen, Magdalena Celuch, Rita Latikka, Reetta Oksa and Nina Savela 2022; Blizard 2016; Gosse et al. 2021; Veletsianos et al. 2018; Wanda Cassidy, Chantal Faucher and Margaret Jackson 2014), and that women are less likely to receive effective support by their institutions (Shandell et al. 2022). Third, these intersectional vulnerabilities characterise scholars' activities across scientific disciplines: from social research (Elaine Campbell 2017) to medicine (Tricia R Pendergrast, Shikha Jain, Seth Trueger, Michael Gottlieb, Nicole Woitowich and Vineet Arora 2021) and beyond. Fourth, online attacks have a meaningful impact on researchers, in terms of their self-confidence and mental health and, in some cases, safety (Daniel Nölleke, Birte Leonhardt and Folker Hanusch 2023). We join this growing body of research to advance our understanding of the impact of online harassment on the working conditions of scholars in higher education institutions as well as their online participation. We enquire whether it will influence what they decide to share and what areas of research they choose to pursue, and whether it may, in some cases, lead to self-censorship.

Data and methods

From October to November 2022, we circulated an online survey, primarily through our extended networks. Our aim was not to analyse a representative sample: rather, the survey was meant as a call to understand if the topic was relevant to academics. At the end of the survey was an invitation to leave an email address to be contacted if available for in-depth interviews. By the closing date, we obtained 162 respondents. When we started the second phase of the project (in-depth interviews), we realized that the low number of respondents was profoundly connected to a lack of a shared awareness and conceptualization of online harassment as a diffused, systematic and structural issue. Hence, we think it is important also to share the survey data we collected, to start analyzing the first voices raising the topic.

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the study participants. Most participants were female (75.5%), and many work in social sciences (34%). The age distribution shows a concentration of participants within the 41–50 age range, with 32.5% falling into this category.

We continue our analysis by investigating the most used social media platforms among our participants. The data indicates that ResearchGate emerges as the most popular for sharing academic news (63.7%), closely followed by Academia (63.3%) and LinkedIn (48.2%). YouTube was the preferred choice for disseminating teaching content (19.2%), while Twitter was the most dominant platform for expressing political opinions (23.3%), followed by Facebook and Medium, both with an 18% usage rate.

The findings further underscore the significant prevalence of online harassment, with approximately half of the respondents ($n = 81$) having reported experiencing such incidents. Regarding the content of social media posts and the occurrence of negative reactions online, we conducted bivariate correlation analyses to explore any associations between post content and online harassment. The results revealed statistically significant positive associations between experiencing online harassment and posting academic content ($r = 0.19$, $p < .1$), posting political content ($r = 0.26$, $p < .05$), and posting teaching content ($r = 0.28$, $p < .01$). However, no statistically significant association was found between online harassment and posting personal content.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics ($n = 160$).

Variable	Number of respondents (%)
How do you describe yourself?	
Female	102 (76%)
Male	22 (16%)
Non-binary/third gender	4 (3%)
Prefer to self-describe	4 (3%)
Prefer not to say	3 (2%)
Age	
24–30	17 (11%)
31–40	36 (23%)
41–50	52 (33%)
51–60	26 (16%)
61 and over	4 (3%)

Table 2. Coping strategies for online harassment ($n = 81$).[1.]

Coping strategy	% of participants
Block the person on social media	72%
Ask for support from friends and family	41%
Ask for support from my colleagues - offline	39%
Reduce public appearances and participation in public discussions	32%
Report the incident to the institution I work	27%
Disclose it on social media	24%
Ask for support from my university – offline	23%
Ask for support from my colleagues – online	20%
Think about changing the subject matter of my work	20%
Ask for support from my colleagues - online	17%

Table 2 presents a summary of the most frequently expressed coping mechanisms among participants, selected from a broader range of options. Many participants (72%) resort to blocking individuals on social media platforms. Additionally, the findings highlight a concerning pattern, with 32% of academics who encountered online persecution opting to limit their public appearances and participation in public discussions, while 20% contemplate altering the subject matter of their work.

Conclusion

This is an exploratory analysis: the number of respondents is limited, mainly related to our expanded network, and we had not adopted a sampling strategy. Yet, those who have decided to answer the survey had something to say about what is going on in their online environments. Two elements emerge: first, we lack a shared conceptualization of online harassment, which leads to an underestimation of the issue and the absence of shared strategies to respond. Second, the fact that many respondents considered to change their research field is extremely worrisome. In this sense, the analysis contributes to the growing discussion on online harassment and cyberbullying in academia, highlighting the need for further analysis on the types of attacks, the likely targets, and, more importantly, what are the possible countermeasures.

Note

1. This analysis employs a smaller fraction of the sample as it includes only the participants who experienced online harassment before.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the Universitet i Stavanger and the Center for Advanced Internet Studies (CAIS).

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