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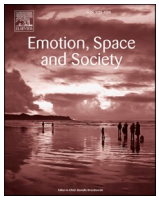

Reconfiguring academic feeling rules: Ramifications of digital violence

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A B S T R A C T

This study delves into the complex emotional responses of academics subjected to online violence, presenting a comprehensive exploration of this pervasive issue. Leveraging semi-structured individual interviews with eleven academics – from diverse academic levels and institutions in Europe and the United States – who reported experiencing online attacks, our research explains the intricate nature of their emotional experiences. The interviews offered insights into participants' coping strategies, emotional states during and after incidents, and the impact of these emotions on decision-making processes. Integrating sociological work on feeling and expression rules, and emotional work, with perspectives specifically focusing on gender, work, and emotions, our study sheds light on how academics encountered a phase of uncertainty in established conduct and emotional norms while navigating online harassment. This research then contributes a nuanced understanding of the emotional landscapes of academics facing online harassment, shedding light on coping mechanisms, emotional complexities, and ethical considerations inherent in this domain.

1. Introduction – a case on academic digital violence

> *"Yeah, yeah. And I like it. I'll make my peace with it. But it's like a permanent scar. It's just with me. It's not going to go away, and it flares up like a scar might for you. Where you get phantom limb pain, on occasion. Other times it's just fine. But it's a permanent change in the way you view the world and the way you view your workplace that you're working, so it used to be you know, oh we're a family, small university, no, no. [They'll] throw you in the fire to save themselves. Be aware of that!" (Int03)*

Finding our ways within the digital age has left a permanent mark on us academics, testing our trust and reshaping our relationships within the academic community or the institutions we work in. The honest comment above from one of our participants captures this scar left by the realities of not just the online violence, but also the sense of neglect that often accompanies it. Being academics ourselves and witnessing the online attacks our colleagues have been facing in last years, and the lack of institutional support, has motivated us to explore the complex emotional responses of academics subjected to online harassment. Crucially, we conceptualize these instances of online harassment as *workplace harassment*, even though they often occur on platforms not officially designated as institutional spaces. This reflects the evolving nature of academic work, where public dissemination, engagement, and visibility through digital platforms have become professional responsibilities under the university's *"third mission."* Academics are not only encouraged but expected to share their research with wider publics, contributing to societal debate via digital media. As a result, the boundaries between private and professional spaces have become increasingly porous. This also means that harassment targeting scholars for their research, public engagement, or teaching is not simply a personal matter but a professional concern, directly implicating academic institutions and their responsibility to safeguard their employees. This evolving reality shapes how academics experience vulnerability and trust within their institutions, ultimately transforming the emotional landscapes of academic life.

Universities often frame this outward-facing engagement as their "third mission," celebrating academics who bring research into dialogue with society. For scholars in fields such as gender and race studies, however, this engagement is rarely neutral. Their work is frequently cast as activist scholarship, whether they themselves identify with activism or not, because it directly addresses structural inequalities and social justice. In both physical and digital arenas, such scholarship intersects with contentious public debates, making visibility a double-edged sword: while it fulfils institutional imperatives of impact and engagement, it simultaneously heightens scholars' exposure to harassment and delegitimization. This tension is particularly acute in digital spaces, where the expectations of activism (speaking out, building solidarity, mobilizing publics) clash with the university's implicit emotional rules of composure, restraint, and depersonalization.

Recent research underlines how public engagement by academics is

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deeply entangled with institutional demands and unevenly distributed risks. Yelin and Clancy (2024), for instance, demonstrate that digital hate disproportionately targets scholars from marginalized backgrounds, resulting in "emotional harm, professional risk, and personal trauma." They argue that the visibility demanded by universities through public engagement frameworks often renders certain bodies especially vulnerable to misogyny, racism, transphobia, and other forms of digital violence. Their intersectional findings align with our data, particularly in showing how institutional imperatives clash with the safety needs of academic workers. We observe that, under these harsh realities of online harassment and institutional shortcomings – the academic culture of collegiality and institutional identity is influenced adversely. Consequently, in this paper our goal is to shed light on the coping mechanisms, emotional complexities, and ethical considerations inherent in such circumstances. In doing so, our research is in dialogue with the (few) studies that explore the strategies that women scholars adopted to cope with online harassment, that point out the gendered nature of online abuse and the weight of the hidden emotional labour of "coping." (Veletsianos et al., 2018). We write this research as the digital world increasingly overlaps with the traditional academic environments, influencing the nature of trust, vulnerability, and solidarity among scholars. Scholars in digital geography and media studies have demonstrated that physical and online spaces are deeply intertwined, with digital technologies actively reshaping physical space and vice versa (Castells, 2000; De Souza e Silva, 2006; Kitchin and Dodge, 2014). While this paper acknowledges this entanglement, our primary focus lies in examining how online harassment specifically alters the emotional landscapes and professional norms within academic life.

The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GPEA, 2020) has highlighted the alarming surge in violent attacks on educational institutions and their members worldwide. While the focus often lies on physical threats in conflict zones, a quieter yet equally dangerous feature is the growing online harassment academics face. This form of abuse, including hate speech, trolling, and personal attacks, has become a pervasive threat, undermining the credibility and expertise of scholars. In recent years, the digital landscape has paradoxically emerged as both a battleground and a sanctuary for academics, reshaping how they navigate professional and personal vulnerabilities.

Our work, by utilizing a research approach consisting of 11 in-depth interviews conducted with academics who have encountered instances of online violence specifically related to their academic research and work, attempts to explain the range of emotions felt. Through a careful analysis of its manifestations across a spectrum of social media platforms, disciplinary realms, demographic facets, and geographical boundaries, the primary objective is to unravel the complex dimensions inherent within. The intent is to analyse shared experiences within the academic milieu, offering a comprehensive clarification of this pressing issue. We are particularly concerned with understanding the perceptions of the interviewees regarding the responses of their peers or institutions when faced with these attacks. Our interest lies in comprehensively exploring the strategies articulated by scholars in their discussions, and how they view the measures undertaken by colleagues or institutions when these attacks occurred. As we navigate this critical issue, we will ask how this online violence reshapes the emotional landscape within academia, ultimately redefining the rules of academic conduct and engagement in a digital era. The paper is structured as follows: in the next section we discuss emotions in academia, its feeling rules, while section three details methodology and data collection. Sections four and five present and discuss the results, while in the last section will conclude arguing that emotional complexities become more salient in the cases of harassment.

2. Background: academia and feeling rules

Arlie Hochschild's influential studies in 1983 on emotional labour, intersecting with gender and work dynamics, highlight the significant role of cultural norms and interactions in shaping emotions within specific work settings. Her framework explores the cultural aspects of emotions, emphasizing emotional norms and their communicative function. In each context, cultural norms regulate the emotions that are appropriate or inappropriate to experience (feeling rules) and whether, how, and to what extent such emotions can be displayed (expression rules).

Hochschild (1983) theorises a distinction between emotion work, that is, adapting the emotions we feel to the contextual expression rules, and that is required in all social settings, and emotional labour, the handling of emotions to meet job requirements in those work settings that profit from (and pay for) this emotion work. Hochschild (1983) points out the gendered dimension of emotional labour, that is required particularly in service jobs, whose workers are mainly women, and its gendered consequences (Stulikova and Dawson, 2023). Broadly speaking, both emotional labour and emotion work have an important gender and racial dimension. Scholars have pointed out, for example, how emotional rules are different for men and women (e.g. Lorde, 1997) and marginalized groups (e.g. Campbell, 1994). Hence, exploring emotions as relational practices from an intersectional perspective allows us to analyse the social and cultural norms governing specific interactions, the power asymmetries they encapsulate, and how they effectively construct different subjectivities (Ahmed, 2004).

Like Hochschild, we're intrigued by the implications of emotion work on employees, from a cultural sociological perspective (Bericat, 2016). In our context, this relates to academics who might not have the freedom to express their genuine feelings of discontent, motivating us to explore the resulting outcomes. Universities, as social institutions, operate under their own set of emotional guidelines dictating acceptable behaviour. While it is widely recognized that precariousness and the increasing relevance of ranking systems generate anxiety (Espeland and Sauder, 2016), the display of emotions – particularly pride, anger, and shame – is discouraged in academic settings (Bloch, 2012). Moreover, while complaining against injustice and unfair treatment is seen as making trouble for the institution and its "happiness" (Ahmed, 2021), other types of emotions like empathy and sympathy are praised (Newcomb, 2021; Lawless, 2018). Fineman (2000:13), for example, delves into the dissonance between one's inner feelings and their outward expression, emphasizing the ongoing negotiation involved.

Within academia, emotions conform to gendered norms. Studies in academic discourse, such as those by Tracy (1997), Margolis (1992), Tracy et al. (1987), and Tracy and Baratz (1993), highlight the prevalent practice of moderating emotions. We seem to observe a recurring theme in academia: the significance of toning down personal or passionate involvement. One of the reasons why emotions are considered as less compatible with scholarly pursuits could be related their association with femininity and academia being a "men's world". Margolis' research highlights the sentiment among women scholars that expressing emotions is discouraged, fostering a belief that scholarly conduct demands a detached demeanour, focusing on abstract discussions. In her research on emotions within academia, Bloch (2012) points out how emotions are differently managed depending on the researchers' gender and relative position in the academic structure. Her analysis provides significant insights in the gendered dimension of emotional display. For example, while it is generally considered as breaching the feeling rules of academia, the occasional display of anger is as a sign of strength in men, and weakness, loss of control and lack of power in women. Also, particularly successful women in academia would be required to hide their pride, as it challenges the gendered cultural code, while men are provided discursive strategies enabling them to bypass the general cultural norm for which the display of pride is discouraged. At the same time, in reviewing the literature on gendered academic emotional labour, Lawless (2018) focuses on how it is embodied, pointing out for example how women are more likely to be evaluated by students based on their personalities and the frequency of their smiles. Then, women are required to express only those emotions that are related to their

professional role, not to be considered as incompetent or irrational (Rogers, 2017; Newcomb, 2021).

Moreover, research has pointed out that service work in academia – including mentoring, pastoral care and student-related activities, that are emotionally demanding and time-consuming – is disproportionally taken by women (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2024; Sümer and Eslen-Ziya, 2023), pulling them away from research more than men, as they tend to commit less with this "academic housework" (Heijstra et al., 2017). As Bellas (1999) demonstrates, emotional labour in academia is deeply gendered, with teaching and service, both requiring substantial emotional engagement, being culturally associated with feminine qualities. Women academics are expected to provide nurturing care to students, engage in pastoral work, and contribute disproportionately to service roles, all of which are emotionally demanding yet undervalued in institutional reward structures (Bellas, 1999). As emotional labour is invisible, it is also expected from women academics, as it became particularly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, when women faculty were required to provide heightened emotional support to students while managing their own stress under conditions of uncertainty (Newcomb, 2021; Berheide et al., 2022). This intensified burden is increasingly crucial in a neoliberal academic context, where care work remains feminized and devalued (Lawless, 2018; Fritsch, 2015). Building on these insights, Miller et al. (2019) and Harlow (2003) emphasize how emotional labour becomes also intensified for academics teaching diversity-related courses, where faculty, especially women and faculty of colour, are expected to manage not only their own emotions but also the emotional discomfort of students. This highlights how emotional labour in academia is not only gendered but also racialized, further demonstrating the unequal distribution of this labour within the academy.

These studies address the conflict between perceived rationality in academia and the notions of so-called irrationality and emotional, personal involvement and explore the gendered (and intersectional) dimension of academic feeling rules. However, they are focused on universities as academic work settings. Instead, our analysis posits that social media have modified and enlarged the scope of academia as a working environment, making its boundaries porous and blurred (e.g. Oksanen et al., 2022; Lupton et al., 2018a). Digital media expand the academic workplace beyond universities building walls and campuses in three ways. First, academics are invited to share their research insights and promote themselves online, to engage with the broader society. In this sense, digital (and, particularly social) media increase the visibility of academics, the breadth of their interactions, hence the broader public can interact directly with scholars. Second, the grammars of communication and interactions of digital environments are different from those in academic settings. Third, digital environments enable that "collapse of contexts" that are not usual in workplaces, thus introducing aspects related to academics' private life that may be less explicit in in person only academic environments. These three main elements influence scholars' visibility and availability, beside virtually expanding what can be considered as an academic workplace. Hence, we are interested in understanding how this redefinition of what an academic work setting is impacts on the feeling and expression rules at play.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants and data collection

The present study employed individual interviews conducted with academics who had previously participated in a survey encompassing academics across diverse research fields in Europe and the United States, specifically targeting individuals who self-reported experiencing online attacks (Eslen-Ziya et al., 2024). Within the survey, respondents were asked if they were open to being interviewed about their encounters. A total of eleven academics (8 female, 2 male, 1 non-binary) who reported being subjected to online attacks and expressed willingness to participate were included in this research. These participants represented various academic levels, ranging from PhD candidates to tenured Professors, and came from different European universities, with the exception of one participant affiliated with a Canadian institution. They were all white, with age ranging from 25 to 50, however we have not collected social class data. Ethical review and endorsement were obtained from Sikt – the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Ref. 775544). Both the primary authors and a research assistant conducted the recruitment process, and the interviews.

Although we acknowledge the importance of intersectionality in understanding how online harassment impacts academics differently, we made a deliberate decision not to disaggregate the data in this paper by gender, class, ethnicity, or other social positions. This decision was made for two key reasons: first, our small sample size ($n = 11$) would not allow for meaningful intersectional analysis; second, prioritizing participant anonymity was essential given the potentially identifiable nature of these experiences. However, we recognize from both existing literature and our own broader survey data that scholars from marginalized groups face heightened risks and distinct forms of harassment. While this study does not explicitly address these intersectional dynamics, future research with a larger and more diverse sample will aim to explore these dimensions more fully.

3.2. Interview procedures

The semi-structured individual interviews, lasting between one to 2 h each, aimed to delve into several key areas. Firstly, participants were asked about their strategies in dealing with the encountered online harassment: whether they responded immediately, informed friends, or reported incidents to the university's human resources office. Secondly, the interviews explored the emotional aspect, focusing on participants' feelings both at the time of the incidents and presently, along with their coping mechanisms and how these emotions influenced their decision-making processes. Thirdly, participants were asked about the reactions they received when seeking assistance from others. Additionally, they were questioned about their use of social media during and after the incidents, assessing if and how this usage had changed. Finally, participants were invited to offer advice to individuals undergoing similar experiences. All interviews were conducted in English, recorded, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. To ensure confidentiality, any identifiable information was redacted from the transcriptions.

3.3. Data analysis

The interviews underwent analysis using a thematic analysis framework, following the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012). Thematic analysis, known for its adaptable and exploratory nature, employs interpretive strategies to discern and organize patterns and meanings within the dataset. Our analytical process adhered to the recommended six-step approach by Braun and Clarke (2012) for systematically coding and scrutinizing the interviews. A qualitative software facilitated the coding and analysis phases. Initially, we immersed ourselves in the data to grasp its essence, making initial observations. Then, we coded the data for its explicit meaning. This was followed by a comprehensive review of the coded segments to unveil underlying patterns and generate cohesive themes. These emergent themes underwent thorough refinement, ensuring clarity and coherence, while defining their boundaries to ensure distinction. The established themes provided the foundational structure for our findings, emphasizing a focused exploration of our participants' emotions.

3.4. Ethics and reflexivity

Research involving academics' experiences on online violence poses potential risks to both participants as well as for us, the researchers.

Safeguarding the anonymity of our participants was a paramount concern. Some narratives contained public elements, and identities could potentially be inferred from the quotes provided, linking incidents with specific individuals. This ethical challenge was carefully navigated during both the research and writing phases, prompting selective inclusion of quotations in this article to protect participants' identities. At the same time, we made sure to remove from the interview transcription anything that during the interview was described as meant to be private. Moreover, as researchers, we found ourselves sharing a common ground with many participants, being in an "insider" position. While this insider perspective facilitated understanding, it also posed a risk of biasing our analysis. To counteract this potential bias, we maintained a reflexive stance, ensuring a degree of separation from our participants' narratives. Furthermore, delving into this subject matter introduced safety concerns for us as researchers. We anticipated potential backlash within academia and on social media platforms. Particular attention was also given to create an intimate and safe(r) environment for the interview: the online setting was extremely helpful, in this direction, as the interviewees were free to choose where to be during the interview. During the interview, we expressed empathy and participation, careful, attentive, and active listening, paying attention not to be judgmental and welcoming and naming the different emotions circulating during the interviews, hence constructing a shared space. These considerations remained focal throughout our research.

4. Results of the analysis

In this section, we present extracts from our analysis and discuss how the emotions of shame and anger were felt and managed in academia once our participants were subjected to online violence. The attacks included a wide range of practices, from online comments on social media to personal emails (and other practices removed for anonymity reasons), sometimes resulting in ethical reviews of the researchers' (or the attackers') behaviour. On occasion, these attacks specifically targeted one researcher, while in other cases they targeted the researcher as representative of something – for example, disruptive troll actions during online presentations of university degrees about gender or race studies. The attacks specifically regarded researchers' professional roles and activities, questioning their expertise, their role as teachers and mentors, the relevance of their research topics, and, on occasion, their public role as experts (for example on gender studies). Even though the attacks were diverse, the emotional impact was the same: this is the reason why here we do not dwell on the specific attacks the interviewees have experienced, and we focus instead on the consequences.

Furthermore, we are aware that younger researchers and scholars with minoritized backgrounds are more likely to see their expertise questioned (Veletsianos et al., 2018) and in fact this was reflected in the profiles of our interviewees. However, rather than differentiating based on academic background or gender, here we focus on how the feeling rules have minoritized our participants, regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity. This section is composed of three parts. The first part emphasizes the emotional impact of online attacks on the participants, highlighting how their experiences led to feelings of distress, anxiety, and shame. We examine how these attacks penetrated their private and intimate spheres, raising questions about how digital spaces redefine academic feeling and expression rules. The second part of the analysis focuses on the ambivalent institutional commitment. Here, we explore how universities, as concrete buildings rather than spaces for knowledge, enforce clear rules on what emotions are allowed or required in response to such experiences. Many participants felt dismissed and undervalued by their institutions, which often offered non-performative support that failed to address the issues concretely. This section highlights the additional burdens placed on attacked researchers, who are often tasked with finding solutions themselves, further reinforcing the emotional order of academia. The third part of this section examines the emergence of solidarity spaces and new academic feeling rules created by our participants. We focus on their agency, the validation of their emotions, and the process of allowing themselves to feel these so-called forbidden emotions. In contrast to the often bureaucratic and slow institutional responses, online solidarity networks provided crucial support, fostering a transnational space of belonging. This space allowed participants to experiment with different feeling and expression rules, empowering them to express emotions like rage and injustice and inspiring changes in their research agendas and practices. Through these sections, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex emotions experienced by researchers subjected to online violence and the varied responses from institutions and solidarity networks.

4.1. Navigating emotions amidst online attacks

In this section, we delve into the emotional experiences of our participants following online attacks. These attacks elicited a wide range of intense emotions, such as distress, anxiety, fear, and shame, profoundly impacting their mental well-being and sense of professional identity. Participants described feeling overwhelmed and isolated as they struggled to manage the barrage of social media activity and the additional stress of transitioning to online teaching. The personal and dehumanizing nature of these attacks further exacerbated their emotional distress. We explore how these experiences led to self-doubt and silencing, as well as the various strategies participants employed to cope, including withdrawing from social networks and avoiding burdening colleagues. This section highlights the complex interplay of emotions and the significant toll that online harassment takes on academic professionals, emphasizing the need for a deeper understanding of how digital spaces breach and redefine academic feeling and expression rules.

After our participants encountered online attacks, they expressed feeling a range of emotions, including distress, stress, anxiety, fear, nervousness, sadness and even shame. Most of the interviewees explain that, at first, they did not know how to react, and then the attacks start taking their tolls and in their own words, they described themselves as 'an emotional mess,' feeling like a 'wreck' (Int02), questioned in terms of scientific authority and then "self-doubting", "silenced" (Int11). Such decisions were particularly consequential for scholars working in fields like gender, race, or migration studies. Precisely those areas celebrated by universities under the third mission for their societal relevance were also those most exposed to public contestation, leaving researchers to shoulder the emotional costs of visibility without adequate institutional protection. They described feeling overwhelmed due to the barrage of social media activity, the multitude of issues they had to handle following the incident, and the additional stress of transitioning to online teaching.

One of our participants expressed that the transition felt like a merging of stress factors, especially because of the shift from in-person to online teaching—a new and unfamiliar experience for them (Int02). This online space was described to be also irregular, as it emerges from the following quotes:

> They are not real people. I'm not a real person. That's what social media does, strips us of our humanity, it to humanise us all of the users. (Int03)

> … literally by myself in a room in my own, like, in my office, in my house. So it felt very violating to be in my own personal space and to have these things happen in my home. (Int09)

The online space emerges as a de-humanizing and at the same time very personal space. Receiving social media comments or emails or having an online class or meeting disrupted while being in front of the screen in the safety of the home was perceived as particularly impactful. Online attacks are described as shocking also because they penetrate the private space and the intimate sphere. Hence, this raises the question of

how digital spaces breach and redefine academic feeling and expression rules. For those positioned especially at the intersection of research and activism, these attacks carried additional layers of complexity. Their emotional responses were shaped not only by academic norms of restraint but also by activist expectations of speaking out and showing solidarity, producing a double bind of feeling rules that were often impossible to reconcile.

These excerpts then reveal a layered emotional landscape, where the immediate aftermath of online harassment triggers not only feelings of distress and fear but also self-surveillance. Participants continually evaluated their own emotional responses, assessing which emotions were legitimate to feel and express within their professional environment. This constant internal negotiation between felt emotions and permitted emotions directly relates to feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983), which define what emotions are appropriate within academia's professional culture. The fact that participants felt the need to withdraw, to shield colleagues from their distress, or to contain their emotional expressions points to the operation of these feeling rules, which discourage overt displays of vulnerability, particularly in environments where rationality, composure, and resilience are valorised (meaning: these emotional performances are rewarded, respected, and expected in academic culture) (Bloch 2012).

Once these attacks happened the strategies employed by our participants varied. In some cases, for instance the attacks led the researchers to abandon their research topics, as it emerges in this quote:

> Like this is a topic that I'm not doing anymore, and I feel really bad about this. Because it means that they've won, you know, they could they trying to silence you and they silenced me, but it's just, it's not worth it. It's not worth it for me to get to say anything about this topic, which is, I mean, really bad, because I do think it is important. (Int10)

This type of reaction is particularly related to research topics perceived as at risk of being attacked, such as, for social sciences, gender, race, or migration studies. In other cases, when our participants talked about their experiences, the fear extended to those close to them, impacting their sense of freedom. One participant recounted how her partner became fearful for her safety, leading to restrictions like not allowing her to go for walks alone.

> Yes. Exactly. She was fearful that I be attacked. And I thought, you know, people don't know me that well, right? And so nobody is going to recognise me. But I was talking to the therapist, and the therapist said no, she's right. Don't go for walks (Int03).

This is particularly impactful for researchers living in university cities, or small and medium urban environments. Upon experiencing these intense emotions, some chose to withdraw from their social networks without informing their colleagues. This decision was made in an effort to shield themselves from potential further stigmatization and protect their colleagues and loved ones:

> I took … took some action, so I [cut out] colleagues, the administration and you know, but I didn't share it with my spouse. And I didn't share with family or friends. I just really kept it to myself, because I wanted it to go away (Int02).

These excerpts show the complex emotion work at play: the experience of a violent attack online leads to self-inquiry and self-reflection, as well as to adapt one's emotion to the variety of life contexts, including family and work relations. Also, these citations illustrate how harassment-related emotions invest all the other relationships, leading to redefine individuals' interactions. For example, some interviewees refrained from sharing their problems to "avoid burdening" their colleagues. This reported motivation is particularly revealing, as it implies that people who have been attacked feel like a burden to others – and to their colleagues in particular. Also, it implies that asking for support in the academic work environment is problematic and a potential breach of the expression rules – that, apparently, prescribe to refrain to show the need for support and solidarity. In this sense, seeking for justice and support after having been attacked can be seen as a sign of weakness, that needs to be avoided (Bloch, 2012), or as something that can cause waves in the institution – which, again, needs to be avoided (Ahmed, 2021).

We see this decision to avoid sharing emotional distress with colleagues or family can be seen as a form of emotion work – the unpaid, private management of feelings to preserve social harmony (Hochschild, 1983). However, in the context of academia, where collegiality, professional reputation, and institutional belonging are essential for career survival, this emotion work blurs into emotional labour. In this sense, participants were not only managing emotions for personal reasons, but also because the performance of resilience, composure, and self-sufficiency is implicitly required within academic environments. The failure to perform these emotions for instance, by openly admitting fear, vulnerability, or distress, could risk being framed as professional weakness, particularly in precarious academic environments (Ahmed, 2021). Thus, the emotional work required to sustain one's professional image after an attack becomes emotional labour, even if not formally compensated, because it is inseparable from maintaining one's academic position and institutional standing.

Moreover, "avoiding burdening" others also involved downplaying their own feelings compared to others in similar situations. One participant exemplified this mindset with the following quote:

> I didn't talk to the activist because, yeah, I felt like they experience things much worse than mine (Int01).

We see this quote as exemplifying a clear instance of emotional labour, where the participant actively minimized and managed their own distress to conform to a hierarchy of suffering. By comparing their experience to that of activists facing more extreme risks, the above mentioned participant engaged in emotional labour by suppressing legitimate distress to perform gratitude and composure in line with academic feeling rules that privilege rational detachment over emotional expression (Bloch, 2012; Lawless, 2018).

Taken together, these narratives show how online harassment turns the university's third mission into a site of emotional contradiction. On the one hand, academics are encouraged to extend their scholarship into public debates, often on highly politicized issues such as gender and race. On the other hand, when such visibility provokes hostility, institutions retreat into silence, leaving individuals to absorb the emotional toll. The result is that the very mission meant to showcase societal relevance becomes a generator of hidden and unevenly distributed emotional labour. Also, juggling both an academic and activist identity then has in this case added complexity to our participant's emotions. While admitting to feelings of insecurity and stress, they expressed experiencing shame in being part of an institution (university) that in principle could have protected them, in contrast with unshielded activists. Rather than questioning the university's actions to safeguard them, our participant dealt with the concern that others might perceive it as protective, leading them to feel hesitant about expressing their grievances:

> But I think that I felt a little bit ashamed, by my position as a researcher let's say protected by the university, say I am experiencing something negative, which is a kind of harassment and which is very stressful for me, for my work, for my family for my partner and so on. So, I was ashamed of that, a little bit. To think that I was allowed to express to my, to people I work with, work also where I do activism, to say "I feel harassed by this" (Int01).

From the words of the interviewee, it emerges that their emotional distress feels like a breach of activism feeling rules. Shame is a powerful emotion, that expresses an internalized negative sanction for breaching societal norms (Goffman, 1967; Scheff, 2003). In this sense, the expression of shame is, for our interviewee, a way of explaining that they

are aware of the difference between activist and academic feeling rules, and at the same time it is a way of reinforcing those same rules: while it is legitimate for activists to feel afraid and victimized, it would not be legitimate for academics. In different contexts – academia or activism – different feeling and expression rules are at play: hence the difference in activist-researchers' experiences. This duality highlights the complex emotional landscape that these individuals navigate. While activists may find legitimacy in expressing fear and victimization, academics often face a culture that suppresses such expressions. This dichotomy not only influences how emotions are managed but also underscores the unique challenges activist-researchers face in reconciling their roles. Understanding these distinct emotional frameworks is crucial in addressing the support needs of academics who engage in activism, and in fostering environments where they can express their emotions authentically and without fear of retribution or stigmatization.

4.2. Ambivalent institutional commitment

In many cases, the ones who shared what was going on with their colleagues and bosses felt that their concerns were not taken seriously, which also made them feel dismissed and undervalued in their workplace. One participant expressed frustration with their head of department, who downplayed their concerns by saying, "don't worry too much about it." The participant wondered, "are you taking this seriously enough?" and had expected their head of department to be more worried or anxious (Int02). This response illustrates how academic feeling rules actively shape institutional responses to harassment, framing distress as an overreaction and positioning emotional containment as the expected professional response (Bellas, 1999; Ahmed, 2021). By discouraging emotional expression, institutions not only delegitimize the experience of harassment but also frame the act of seeking support as a breach of professional norms. This exemplifies how feeling rules in academia often equate institutional calmness with competence, at the expense of validating the distress of targeted scholars. While such comments may be intended as reassurance by institutions or colleagues, they often delegitimize both the feelings and the expression of those concerns. Moreover, this downplaying can lead to an institutional "non-existence" of the issue, as it emerges in the following excerpts:

> So yeah, at the end of the day, nothing actually really happened from it concretely (Int09)

> so I received a lot of interpersonal support […] but there was no kind of official support […] None of my direct colleagues asked our institution to do something, for example. […] no kind of vocal support, […] beyond patting me on the shoulder. […] the support I received was in the form of individual emails or individual coffee conversations or things like that (Int11)

These quotes reflect what Ahmed (2021) defines as institutional non-performativity, the performance of acknowledging harm without enacting concrete change. Academic feeling rules play a central role in this process by shifting online harassment into the private emotional domain of the affected scholar. Emotional containment, expected under these rules, positions the attacks as something to be endured individually rather than collectively addressed. This process of individualization aligns with the broader neoliberal framing of the academic workplace, where structural issues are reframed as personal burdens (Bellas, 1999; Berheide et al., 2022). In fact, patting on the shoulder expresses non-committal empathy from colleagues, who contribute to frame the attack as something personal, restricted to the area of private life, not a concern for the institution. In this sense, the reactions repositioned the attacks into the private sphere, and de-politicized them. This contradiction is striking when placed against the university's public-facing mission. While institutions benefit from the visibility of scholars who speak on issues of gender, race, or other politicized topics, they often withdraw support when that same visibility provokes hostility. The third mission thus becomes asymmetrical: universities encourage outreach as long as it enhances reputation, but disavow responsibility for the emotional and professional consequences when it generates risk.

In other cases, institutional support can take the form of what Sarah Ahmed calls "non-performative" actions: institutional speeches or policies that "do not bring into effect what they name" (Ahmed, 2021, 30). This approach involves appearing to take action without actually addressing the issue, thereby diminishing the requests for genuine change. For example, one interviewee explained that their institution, instead of providing support, turned to them for a solution after they reported being attacked:

> My dean asked me to create a kind of a group […] on this on online harassment and bullying and sexist and […] I became identified in my school as somebody to talk to it about these issues (Int11).

This reflects a classic example of what Berheide et al. (2022) describe as the "feminized burden" placed on women and marginalized academics to provide emotional labour in the form of institutional care work. By transforming the target of harassment into the institutional expert responsible for solutions, the university not only displaces its own responsibility but also doubles the emotional burden placed on the targeted academic, expecting them to simultaneously perform recovery and institutional repair (Bellas, 1999; Miller et al., 2019).

In this above instance for example, the institution's response placed additional burdens on the already distressed researcher, tasking them with addressing the problem rather than offering concrete support. This not only added to their stress but also shifted the responsibility from the institution to the individual. Such actions reveal a pattern where institutions acknowledge issues in a superficial manner, without implementing substantive changes. By making the attacked researcher responsible for creating solutions, the institution effectively avoids taking meaningful action, thereby reinforcing the existing emotional order and maintaining the status quo. In fact, institutional responses like these can be interpreted as further burdens on the attacked researcher, who becomes the point of reference for dealing with such attacks. Actions such as putting the victim in charge of a commission or offering them the chance to explain their experience during departmental meetings have a twofold implication: for the institution, it is a non-committal way of acknowledging an issue (a "non-performative" action, Ahmed, 2021); for the attacked researcher, it is an additional burden, as recounting their experience in public or listening to the experiences of others who have been attacked can be a source of further stress.

Moreover, these actions reinstate the emotional order of academia. First, they create a specific context in which emotions of distress and concern may be expressed, thus reinforcing the rule of emotional moderation outside of that context. Second, they reinforce the "positive" emotional tone of academia through the institutionalization of a specific "complaint context." Third, by placing the attacked researcher in charge of the "complaint context," the institution essentially communicates that heated emotions have no place in academia. For the issue to be attended to institutionally, researchers are expected to "moderate" their emotions and produce a material object, such as filing a report. This institutionalization of complaint spaces reproduces what Harlow (2003) and Ahmed (2021) both describe as the policing of emotional expression among marginalized scholars, particularly women and scholars of colour. The emotional labour required to carefully craft complaints into acceptable institutional language further reflects the gendered and racialized nature of academic emotional labour (Miller et al., 2019). The institution demands that complaints become emotionally palatable and procedurally manageable, reinforcing institutional comfort at the expense of the complainant's emotional truth.

Depending on researchers' roles and gender, the feeling and expression rules in academia change (Bloch, 2012). Therefore, an intersectional approach is necessary to disentangle how emotions are experienced. The majority of our interviewees identified as women, and

their interviews revealed the significant role of gendered feeling and expression rules, which are interconnected with other concerns. For example, one participant noted that they might have made a different decision about reporting if they had tenure, indicating the influence of job security on the willingness to come forward. Another participant highlighted the additional risks faced by colleagues with intersecting marginalized identities, which could significantly impact their careers. These experiences underscore the necessity of considering multiple intersecting factors, including gender, tenure status, and racial or ethnic background, when examining how researchers navigate emotional responses and institutional support in the face of online attacks. For example, a tenured professor might feel more secure in reporting an attack, while a non-tenured faculty member may fear repercussions that could affect their career prospects. Similarly, individuals from marginalized racial or ethnic backgrounds may experience heightened vulnerability and a greater sense of risk in reporting attacks, knowing that their identities may compound the negative consequences:

> And I think the fact I am not sure whether I would make a different decision after getting tenure, because this was a very complicated situation, but I would have been less worried, definitely. (Int02)

Other factors played a role as well, as illustrated by the following excerpt, in which the interviewee describe how their specific situation made them feel safer in relation to the attacks.

> I have white privilege, so it's … I'm threatened by it, but I have Muslim colleagues, I have Arab colleagues, and that would be very, very bad to their career if that happened to them (Int08)

These accounts reveal that institutional support is not only inconsistent but also stratified along lines of security, identity, and disciplinary legitimacy. In practice, this means that the emotional labour of sustaining public engagement falls most heavily on those already in precarious or marginalized positions, reinforcing rather than alleviating structural inequalities within academia. What emerge then from these excerpts then is that not only academic feeling and expression rules are stricter for marginalized and minoritized subjectivities: those who have been attacked risk being subjected to a secondary victimization by the institution. Instead of being defended, they are questioned by the institution about their responsibility and so-called wrong doings, increasing the vulnerability (and silencing) of minoritized subjects within the academia[1] (cf. also Pearson et al., 2023).

For others, sharing their emotions led to deteriorating relationships with their departments. As one participant grieved: 'I think one of the biggest things for me was the loss of my relationships with that department' (Int03). This highlighted a meaningful expectation of support and solidarity from both institutions and individuals, an expectation that, in this instance, was not met. It signified a breakdown in anticipated support systems and left a void where support and understanding were not received. The sense of isolation evolved into bitterness. As our participant expressed, they no longer desires any association with them:

> So and it's like wow you threw me to the [cut out] And so I will never, never, ever trust them. I don't talk to them, I don't have anything to do with them. In fact, I would say I pretty much despised them (Int03).

This sense of betrayal reflects what Gómez (2022) calls 'institutional betrayal,' where the failure to meet expectations of care and support magnifies the harm caused by the initial attack. Institutional betrayal is particularly acute when the victim has invested significant emotional labour into the academic community, reinforcing how emotional attachment to the institution becomes a vulnerability when harassment occurs. The expectation of support that the institution failed to meet reinforces the expression rules of not complaining or making concerns about online attacks – or, if concerns are made, then it is up to the scholar to understand how to react and deal with the attacks, while the institution takes no responsibility. This is not always the case, as in other instances institutions did support the scholars – yet, the hesitancy and mixed expectations tell us something about the complex positions in which scholars feel to be in relation to their institutions. Moreover, it is important to point out that the actions of the institutions do not appear to be related to the severity of the attacks, nor to how researchers have experienced these attacks: it is more related to the specific academic contextual culture, and the specific position of the researchers.

4.3. Emergence of solidarity spaces and new academic feeling rules

This section explores how, in the face of ambivalent institutional responses, other actors and spaces become crucial in providing support to researchers experiencing online attacks. Personal relationships play a pivotal role, but the solidarity experienced online emerges as particularly significant. We examine how online networks of support create a transnational space of belonging that contrasts with the often slow and ineffective institutional reactions. This space allows for experimentation with different feeling and expression rules, empowering researchers to express their emotions and seek justice collectively.

While institutions emerge as ambivalent, other actors come to the fore as crucial. First of all, personal relationships are pivotal in offering support, as this interviewee explains:

> … what really helped me was, you know, the friend who monitored what was, what was being said. Like that's something that you really need. So, I mean in terms of support. Of course, that's really nice that your friends are there, but that monitoring was really something that was very, very helpful. Yeah, that actually helped me (Int12)

This quote reveals that in the absence of institutional mechanisms, scholars turn to informal, personal networks to manage both the emotional and logistical burdens of harassment. This informal support acts as a substitute for institutional emotional labour, reinforcing the extent to which emotional labour in academia is offloaded onto individual relationships rather than being institutionally recognized (Bellas, 1999; Berheide et al., 2022).

However, what all the interviewees reported as crucially relevant was the solidarity experienced online.

> … we were very grateful for the fact that other people raised their voice for us while we couldn't, […] You are not alone […] the power of un-silencing, is I think, one of the lessons that I've learned from this […] There are networks of solidarity that are … they're there. I mean, they might seem invisible, they might seem inaudible, but they're there. And they can be very powerful, these networks of even online solidarity. Which can be very powerful I think and empowering as well. (Int11)

This quote highlights how online solidarity networks do more than offer emotional support, they actively challenge dominant academic feeling rules. By affirming anger and political voice as legitimate emotional responses, these networks create a counter-space where new feeling and expression rules emerge, validating emotions that are often suppressed in traditional academic contexts (Ahmed, 2021). The collective support was expressed particularly in the cases involving topics connected to public activism – such as in the case of gender studies.

The reactions of solidarity in the cases of online attacks built up an alternative space with respect to the institutional one. While the institutions seemed to be slow in reacting, not effective, and, overall, not particularly supportive, thus making the scholars questioning their role within them, the online support networks made it visible the existence of academia in the sense of transnational groups of scholars participating in the same intellectual space.

[1] In fact, it is likely not by chance that only white persons answered to our call for interviews.

> the collective response to this kind of episode I think it's important. I mean to feel that you are part of something bigger than you […] Association makes you stronger (Int07)

This quote speaks to the importance of collective emotional labour, where the emotional burden of harassment is distributed across a supportive network, rather than being confined to the individual. This collective emotional labour directly resists the individualization and privatization of harassment experiences imposed by institutional responses. It also reframes academic belonging, no longer defined through institutional affiliation, but through a transnational, issue-based solidarity that generates new collective feeling rules. This transnational space of solidarity works as a network of support and belonging, somehow replacing the local institution – neoliberal and bureaucratized, according to many – as the space of belonging. Also, this transnational and supportive online space works as a place in which to experiment different feeling and expression rules.

> I mean there is a before and after. […] I mean it has changed my research agenda totally. I mean now it had gender violence has become one of my topics. […] I think I am a stronger person and I feel more empowered to talk (Int11)

This shift reflects what Berheide et al. (2022) describe as a transformative form of emotional labour—where coping mechanisms evolve into acts of public scholarship and political engagement. Here, emotional labour becomes visible, politicized, and reframed as a collective and intellectual endeavour, rather than an invisible, feminized burden.

Some of the interviewees, after the attacks and in relation to the online support that made it visible the existence of an online academic space of solidarity, felt more legitimate to feel and express injustice. Rather than a somehow prohibited feeling, rage emerges in the words of the interviewees as a source of awareness and renewed passion – and, ultimately, rage is framed in a discourse of empowerment:

> … this event was clearly designed to make us shut up and not talk, they wanted us to not be able to talk about gender studies […] that's a form of public violence […] And so, I was angry for myself, but I was also angry politically because, you know. These people can't be allowed to silence us (Int09)

This redefinition of rage as politically productive directly confronts the academic feeling rules that traditionally mark anger as unprofessional or irrational (Ahmed, 2021). By reclaiming anger as a valid and necessary response, these networks not only reframe individual emotional labour but also challenge the emotional order of academia itself (Harlow, 2003).

As the following quote points out, rather than private concerns, online attacks have a political aspect, particularly in relation to certain topics. In this sense, online attacks had also the effect of challenging academic feeling and expressing rules, turning out to be also inspiring experiences:

> … let's make it public, collective and lets something about that collective as a group as a collective and not only it's my problem (Int01).

This emphasis on collective action highlights a shift from individual emotional labour to collective emotional mobilisation, redefining the feeling rules associated with professional identity. By making harassment public and politicized, scholars collectively reframe online violence as a structural issue, rather than an individual failure to manage emotions appropriately. This marks a crucial rupture from neoliberal academic norms that individualize both success and suffering. Some of the interviewees, then, have also modified their practices: rather than reporting to the institution, they have learnt how to face the attacks in a transnational space of solidarity, challenging and changing the rules in the way.

Hence, the emergence of solidarity spaces and new academic feeling rules highlights the importance of supportive networks in countering the emotional toll of online attacks. These transnational and online spaces offer a sense of belonging and empowerment, enabling researchers to challenge traditional academic norms and express their emotions authentically. By shifting the focus from institutional inadequacies to collective support, these networks provide a crucial alternative for researchers seeking to navigate their emotional responses and continue their work with renewed passion and resilience.

5. Discussion: coping strategies, academic feeling rules, and the blurring boundaries of contemporary academia

The strategies enacted by the interviewees to cope with the online attacks largely match those highlighted by the few studies on the topic. Drawing on, and readapting, psychological literature on sexual harassment, Veletsianos et al. (2018) explored through a qualitative study the strategies that women scholars adopted to cope with online harassment, pointing out the gendered nature of online abuse and the weight of the hidden emotional labour of "coping." This resonates with Bellas (1999), who highlights that academic emotional labour itself is gendered, with women disproportionately tasked with emotionally intensive forms of service and care work roles that remain undervalued in academic reward structures. This broader gendered division of labour within academia shapes the feeling rules our participants referenced, where women academics in particular are expected to perform resilience and composure while simultaneously acting as emotional buffers for students and colleagues (Bellas, 1999). These findings suggest the co-existence of four mechanisms – self-protection, resistance, acceptance, and self-blame – articulated in four, non-mutually exclusive, strategies: reactive, anticipatory, preventive, and proactive, with the first being the more common. From our study, it also emerges an increasing awareness and attention towards online violence: while the interviewees have been selected precisely in relation to their experience of online violence, in their accounts they often point out how the reaction strategy they adopted also includes strategies to anticipate and prevent further attacks.

The most interesting finding, however, concerns the fact that in reacting to online attacks, scholars are also influencing the academic feeling and expression rules. As highlighted by the literature on the topic, our findings too show how certain emotions – including rage, despair, annoyance – are sanctioned and disciplined in and by the institutions. This is consistent with Ahmed's (2021) concept of institutional non-performativity, where institutional speech about addressing harm does not translate into meaningful action. Instead, expressing distress risks being framed as unprofessionalism, a breach of the expected emotional politeness in academic life (Bellas, 1999). Yet, the interviewees also point to the relevance of the online academic context, which, in a way, blurs the boundaries between academic institutions and "the outside". Online academic networks act as an academia outside of the material walls of academic institutions: loosely connected communities that can be sources of solidarity and strength. Regardless of personal connections, online spaces are also contexts in which the attacked scholars experience different feeling and expression rules than those in place in academic institutions: in these contexts, rage, emotional vulnerability and ambivalence can be felt and expressed, and, most of all, are validated. The interviews show how this external validation has empowering effects, and can influence what occurs within the academic walls, slowly opening the room for the transformation of feeling and expression rules within academia as well.

Our findings also point out the relevance of institutional support for online attacks (Veletsianos et al., 2018), particularly for women and scholars with a minority backgrounds – in fact, recent survey showed gender difference in the effectiveness of support (Houlden et al., 2021). Institutional responses were often experienced as "institutional betrayal" (Gómez, 2022), where the lack of meaningful action or the

shifting of responsibility onto the victim reinforced the sense of vulnerability and professional precarity. In the case of online attacks, it may be particularly complex for institutions to design effective policies, further complicated by the increasing casualization of the faculty in many academic contexts. Yet, as Lupton et al. (2018b, 15) point out in their critical analysis of the "digital academic", "The nature of the academic workspace for nearly all faculty members globally is digitized to a greater or lesser degrees and in ways in which they may have little opportunity to challenge or change". This blurring of boundaries between private and professional, and between institutional and public spheres, then is part of what renders online harassment simultaneously personal and professional—a point that needs to be central to future institutional responses.

Our findings highlight the transformative potential of online academic networks in reshaping the emotional landscape of academia. These networks provide a space where emotions such as rage, vulnerability, and ambivalence can be expressed and validated, contrasting with the often restrictive emotional norms within institutional walls. The external validation found in these online spaces can empower scholars and gradually influence institutional norms, fostering a more supportive and emotionally inclusive academic environment. By doing so, these networks do not only offer solidarity but actively re-write academic feeling rules, contesting the emotional silencing historically imposed on women, racialized scholars, and academics working in politically charged fields. We say this as we underscore the importance of institutional support for scholars facing online attacks, particularly for women and those from minority backgrounds. However, institutional support will only become truly effective when institutions recognize online harassment not as a private or isolated issue, but as a structural condition of contemporary academic life – one that is deeply entangled with the changing nature of academic work, the neoliberal valorisation of public engagement, and the ongoing politicization of certain fields, including gender and race studies.

6. Conclusion - re-shaping of academic feeling rules

This research - by integrating the seminal works of Hochschild on emotional labour, and incorporating insights from intersectional studies scholars like Lorde (1997) and Ahmed (2004) studies the complexity of emotional responses of academics subjected to online violence. All the attacks targeted the researchers in their professional roles – hence, while being online, these attacks can be framed as related to the workplace, considering that contemporary workplace for academics is expanding beyond the walls of academic buildings. In this sense, the emotional rules of academia expand their validity beyond their usual contexts, and the negotiations occurring in the online setting, in turn, will impact on the workplace rules, more broadly. It outlines how our participants found themselves reassessing their emotional engagements and strategies, and developing a scepticism towards the imbedded norms of academic expression and behaviour. Their experiences showed a significant shift in how emotions are managed and articulated in academic settings, while the online sphere has paradoxically become a space of intense personal and professional vulnerability and visibility. For them this further necessitated the development of new emotional coping strategies and rules. In return, these new dynamics required a questioning of what was appropriate emotional responses within professional academic settings. Moreover, our findings demonstrated that the institutional response to our participants' experiences of online harassment often lacks the urgency and support. This gap, we found, though unintentionally has promoted the emergence of online solidarity spaces for our participants. It was within these spaces that academics found and offered support beyond the boundaries of their immediate institutional networks. Such online relationships not only provided immediate relief and validation but also help facilitate a collective redefinition of academic norms and responsibilities.

In conclusion, our research stresses the need for a broader understanding of how online and offline academic environments interact and influence the emotional and professional lives of academics. Moreover, the increase in online harassment as a serious concern contrasts the often-unaddressed issue of in-campus violence, suggesting a continuum of challenges that are not bound by the physical walls of institutions. We show that, as academia evolves, so must ***our*** approaches to protecting and empowering ***us*** scholars within all the spaces ***we*** occupy. We then present this study as a call to action for institutions to recognize and adapt to the changing and ever-present dynamics of harassment, ensuring a safer and more supportive academic landscape for us all; while recognizing and adapting to the changing dynamics of harassment and allowing different form of expressions.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Hande Eslen-Ziya: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Alberta Giorgi:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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