The Impact of Sexist Rhetoric on Women’s Participation in News Comments Sections

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A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of the comments section to online news articles enabled new forms of interaction, allowing readers to participate directly in the conversation. Scholars have hailed the comments sections as digital public spheres of democratic discourse. However, scant research has been done on how sexist rhetoric affects women’s ability to participate in online discourse, despite research indicating that such rhetoric is a problem. This thesis project draws connections between research on the comments sections, uninhibited behavior and flaming, cybersexism, and women’s participation in discourse to look at the impact of sexist rhetoric. I conduct a close reading of comments from BuzzFeed, MSNBC, and Fox News, analyzing the material using feminist and sociological rhetorical criticism. I argue that the presence of sexist rhetoric leads to a reduction in women’s participation in the comments and negative effects on women’s agency within the comments. Findings include consistent patterns of sexist rhetoric on all three sites, and consistent patterns of responses from women, the most predominant of which is silence. If the comments are to meet the ideal of a democratic public sphere, then the role of sexist rhetoric must be understood and mitigated.
DEDICATION

For all the women who make themselves heard, and those we haven’t yet listened to.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to my thesis committee for working with me on asking interesting questions and trusting me to figure out how to find the answers, and to my fellow MARW students for their feedback and camaraderie during the writing process. Finally, I am indebted to my family, as we have weathered and continue to weather life’s stormier moments together.
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

The introduction of news media to online spaces drastically changed the ways journalists and readers interact. Traditional print and broadcast media offer limited points of connection for audiences to respond to and communicate with publishers, writers, and one another: few letters to the editor make their way past the screening process to print, for example, and are often selected in alignment with the biases of the paper or the editorial group (McCluskey and Hmielowski 2011). Creating comments sections online for feedback on news articles altered the discursive landscape, allowing readers to offer instantaneous responses not only to the article, but also to each other (Weber 2013, Ruiz et al 2011). Although newspapers moderate their online comments, moderation often affects only the types of comments deemed most noxious (such as those that contain overt threats, hate speech, or spam), and participation in online comments sections provides fewer and weaker barriers to engagement than writing and mailing a physical letter to the editor (Diakopoulos and Naaman 2011). The proliferation of comments sections has meant that the role of historical gatekeepers, such as editors, has been reduced; discourse communities can now form in the comments sections themselves, and participants can develop their own methods of encouraging and limiting certain forms of participation.

During the past decade and a half, academic attention to comments sections has been focused largely on how such spaces expand the discourse available to consumers of news media. Comments sections are often framed as hallmarks of democratic debate, in line with Habermas’ theory of the public sphere (Ruiz et al 2011, McCluskey and Hmielowski 2011). Enabling individuals to comment on news articles online is described as a leveling of the playing field that enhances the democratic nature of online discussion. McCluskey and Hmielowski (2011) discussed anonymity in comments sections as a way for marginalized writers, such as women
and other minority groups, to make themselves heard in ways they might not be comfortable with in traditional print media. Comments sections are thus seen as online discourse communities forming in response to news articles, which provide a space for new perspectives to be aired.

In addition to assessing the comments sections, scholarly attention has long been turned towards conflict in online spaces. Despite this attention, studies on conflict online, including those that look at rudeness, hostility, flaming, and other negative forms of interaction, rarely focus on how the rhetorical environment of the comments silences certain forms of discourse or certain speakers. Flaming, for example, is often positioned as a minor problem in online communities—expected, perhaps at times unpleasant, but ultimately insignificant (Lea et al 1992, Lange 2006). Scholarship has, by and large, ignored that the impact of hostile online discourse can be to discourage participants from continuing to comment, while also making clear to potential participants that their contributions are unwelcome. Argumentation in comments sections is often framed as productive democratic debate—exchanges between equal parties where each participant acts in good faith, and in the absence of threatening or otherwise harmful speech (Ruiz et al 2011).

Such harmful speech often takes on visible biases and is aimed at particular targets, however. While McCluskey and Hmielowski (2011) argue that minority groups like women have more freedom to speak in online comments sections, Jane (2014) and Herring (1999) have pointed out that sexist online hostility can have a chilling effect on women’s participation. Research on comments sections has demonstrated that the topic of the news article affects the amount of discussion occurring, and that political topics generate a higher percentage of rude comments during the course of the discussions (Weber 2013, Burke and Kraut 2008). Politically charged articles are likely to see a higher amount of participation that commentators and outside
observers, such as researchers and other potential commentators, perceive as hostile or even toxic, which affects who will speak and what the response to that speech will be (Burke and Kraut 2008, Jane 2014).

Additional research on online rhetorical dynamics has shown that the use of sexist strategies like stereotyping, interrupting, and harassing women can reduce women’s participation or halt it entirely (Herring 1999, Megarry 2014). When considering comments sections as an aspect of discourse in the public sphere, it is therefore important to look more closely at the kinds of discussions happening and what impact sexist rhetoric can have. A particularly salient area for examination, given the combination of sexism in online spaces with the higher rate of discussion around political topics, is asking whether and how women’s participation in the comments section of news articles about feminism may be affected by sexist rhetoric. The notion of comments sections as democratic spaces is challenged if sexist rhetoric contributes to a reduction in women’s participation. Women faced with repeated exposure to sexist harassment online become increasingly likely to stop participating as time goes on, as Herring (1999) found, a result that undermines arguments about comments enabling broader participation, and which has a deleterious effect on the discourse by eliminating potentially relevant and valuable contributions (McCluskey and Hmielowski 2011, Megarry 2014).

The present study describes online hostility in detail, and the following chapters contain unedited and uncensored examples of such hostility, echoing Jane’s (2014) “deliberate strategy to speak of the ostensibly unspeakable so as not to perpetrate—and thus perpetuate—the tyranny of silence” around the content of sexist rhetoric in online spaces (533). Comments analyzed in the study include swearing, stereotypes, slurs, and threats of violence.
Background of the Problem

A common response to the problems raised by comments sections on news articles—such as flaming, hostility, and sexist attacks—is to tell people not to read the comments, or to advocate for closing comments sections entirely. However, as Weber (2013) notes, commenting on news articles is one of the main forms of engagement the public has with online news websites. Closing down the comments sections can result in lost opportunities for making connections with readers, including sources, and may represent a genuine free speech concern if corporations continue to exercise control over the kinds of speech and speakers deemed permissible. If, as McCluskey and Hmielowski (2011) allege, comments sections are spaces for discourse to flourish, shutting them down also shuts down opportunities for the citizenry to be active participants in the democratic process.

Further, justifying closing the comments entirely based on the presence of toxic forms of discourse does nothing to address the underlying problems leading the use of, for example, sexist rhetoric. If sexist, racist, homophobic, and other bigoted, slanderous, or inflammatory remarks are made in the comments sections, closing the comments down does not address the attitudes leading to such comments in the first place. Commentators’ ire may be turned towards individual writers in the absence of the comments section, which could produce an uptick in individually targeted harassment occurring on Twitter, via e-mail, or across other social media websites. How online hostility functions within the comments is an area in need of attention, given the rise in major publications deciding to do away with their comments utterly—a list that includes Wired, NPR, the Pacific Standard, and others. Newer publications like The Establishment, a multi-media online-only company founded by women, are developed from the ground up without even implementing comments sections due to the perception of the comments as a breeding ground for
hostility. Additional research on the impact of eliminating comments sections will need to be conducted as publications do away with them.

At present, however, research on the state of gender and sexism, Internet discourse, and comments sections has tended to be disjointed. Parallel research tracks exist, but have not seemed to make the interdisciplinary leap needed for deeper connections and understandings to emerge. The four main areas that form the framework for the present study include research on the comments sections themselves, studies of uninhibited behavior and flaming online, analysis of cybersexism, and examinations of the relationship between gender and amount of participation in discourse.

**Comments Sections**

Comments sections on news articles have become an area of intense interest for those who study discourse in online spaces. For the purposes of this thesis, a comments section is the area of an online publication, such as a newspaper, that allows user-generated feedback. Comments sections typically require some form of registration, such as a social media login that connects comments to a Facebook or Twitter account, or a registration specific to the website in question, making the use of pseudonyms or anonymous commenting permissible. **Commentators**, therefore, are any active participants in the comments section who produce alphanumeric or graphic responses to the article and to each other, or who engage with each other’s comments by selecting “like” or “dislike” options.

One area of interest to researchers studying the comments sections is whether comments sections on news websites produce quality discourse and debate (Ruiz et al 2011, Diakopoulos and Naaman 2011). Demonstrating the significant differences that exist between comments sections and traditional forms of engagement with news media has been a major project
Determining whether or not the comments sections enable new and broader forms of discourse has been a site of particular focus (McCluskey and Hmielowski 2011, Ruiz et al 2011, Diakopoulos and Naaman 2011). Additionally, scholars like Weber (2013) have sought to understand which types of online news stories produce the most engagement from readers, and whether the topic of the articles has an effect on whether commentators interact with one another. Understanding how politeness and rudeness function to increase or decrease engagement has also been a topic of study (Burke and Kraut 2008). A common thread throughout much of the existing research on comments sections is a reliance on Habermas and his concept of the public sphere, which is used to develop an understanding of quality discourse as it applies to online spaces. Studying how the comments sections serve to enable or silence certain voices as part of public discourse is a key part of this thesis project.

The ways comments can expand public discourse has, to date, been of great interest within academia, although emphasis on how individuals and groups can be silenced has been largely ignored. Methods of studying the comments section have included comparing the opinions in published letters to the editor with the opinions expressed in the online comments sections of the same papers, as well as interviewing journalists on how comments affect their work (McCluskey and Hmielowski 2011, Diakopoulos and Naaman 2011). Ruiz et al (2011) and Weber (2013) observe how comments sections may enable the expression of a wider range of opinions, and consider whether or not the comments function as spaces of democratic debate and discussion. Additionally, Burke and Kraut’s (2008) assessment of how rudeness and politeness can both encourage or discourage participation depending on the environment complements Weber’s (2013) analysis of what news topics are likely to generate responses and interactivity within the comments sections.
Interactions in the comments will be a significant part of the present research, and while interaction has been looked at from a quantitative perspective in previous studies, this study will take a qualitative approach. The research done by scholars working on comments sections has focused primarily on drawing conclusions from large batches of comments, the actual content of which is rarely discussed. While useful for establishing overall trends, the approach also leaves a number of gaps. The context of discussions in the comments is not often identified, nor is the impact of interactions on subsequent comments. For example, while Ruiz et al (2011) point out that many comments in their sample contain derogatory language, we are left wondering who the targets of that language are, and what the impact of such language is on the rest of the discussion. A lack of research into the impact of comments on other commentators is a significant gap in studies of the comments section. Qualitative research, such as ethnographic studies, case studies, and survey data will provide a deeper look at how discussions in the comments affect commentators individually and the discursive environment more broadly.

**Uninhibited Behavior and Flaming**

Research on uninhibited behavior in online spaces emerged alongside the Internet itself, as scholars observed what looked like drastic changes in behavior when individuals participated in computer-mediated communication. Kiesler et al (1985) conducted some of the earliest research into uninhibited online behavior, attempting to determine whether uninhibited behavior existed at all, and if so, what caused it. Further studies attempted to uncover whether reduced social cues were responsible for uninhibited online behavior, or whether such behavior occurs due to the social context in which it is enacted (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2011, Kayany 1998, respectively). Although not mentioned in much of the research on flaming and uninhibited behavior, it is also important to note that there are few consequences for uninhibited behavior
online, whether the behavior is productive or destructive. While little attention has been given to how implementing consequences might act as a deterrent, it seems likely that the current lack of consequences emboldens much of the uninhibited behavior that is seen.

As research on uninhibited behavior developed, scholars focused on flaming as a subset of such online activity. Flaming, for the purposes of this thesis, can be understood as a hostile exchange fueled by strong emotions, ad hominem attacks, and often characterized by bigotry or violent language, such as sexism, racism, or threats (Lea et al 1992). Although not the subject of this thesis, it is important to draw a distinction between flaming and trolling. Trolling is typically defined as an individual behaving insincerely and attempting to disrupt the course of an online discussion with bad faith arguments and random interjections (Herring et al 2002). While flaming and trolling are often conflated, the key distinction often rests on intention: flaming is seen as being driven by genuine anger, while trolling is positioned as performative or distracting rather than serious. Intentionality is not the project of this thesis, however. The impact of sexist rhetoric is my primary concern, and therefore comments that could be regarded as either flaming or trolling will be included, regardless of any stated or assumed intent.

Despite the limited research into trolling, studies on the causes of flaming are more numerous. Research into flaming expanded on prior debates about the causes of uninhibited behavior and focused on why negative behaviors occur in online spaces (Lea et al 1992, Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2011). Debates also continued regarding how best to define flaming, which reopened the question of intentionality (O’Sullivan and Flanagin 2003, Lange 2006). Studies of flaming have also broadened to include how communities respond to flames and how discussions of flames occur (Lee 2005, Lange 2006). Understanding the impact of flaming behavior on a discursive environment has not been extensively studied, but will form part of the project of this
thesis. Jane (2014, 2015) has drawn direct connections between sexist flaming, which she refers to as *e-bile*, and reduced participation from women in online environments. The impact of sexist flaming on women is an area in need of further attention, which Jane (2014, 2015) calls for. The present thesis represents an attempt to begin filling that gap.

Studies on uninhibited behavior and flaming have taken different approaches, often looking at the effect of reduced social cues or of the social context of a discussion. The reduced social cues researchers have tended to looked at the physical responses of individuals in computer-mediated environments (Kiesler et al 1985, Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2011), while the social context scholars have examined the discursive strategies used in various spaces (Kayany 1998, Lee 2005, Lange 2006). Additional debates continue to happen over how best to define flaming and whether it can even be defined at all (O’Sullivan and Flanagin 2003, Jane 2015, Lange 2006). Ignoring gender as a factor in who flames and who is flamed remains an issue within studies of online hostility, regardless of what the researchers believe the cause of the behavior to be. Jane (2015) is one of the only scholars to specifically emphasize the gendered nature of flaming as a problem for the state of online discourse. Research into how gender, race, and other facets of identity inform who flames and who is seen as a viable target of flaming is scarce.

**Cybersexism: Sexism Online**

*Cybersexism* is defined for this thesis as sexist behavior occurring in computer-mediated communication and technologically mediated spaces (Poland 2016). The online expression of hostile and benevolent sexism both fall under the umbrella of cybersexism. *Hostile sexism* involves the use of overt bigotry, violent threats, and reductive stereotypes; *benevolent sexism* involves covert bias and the essentializing of women to gender-stereotyped, subordinate roles.
Studies of cybersexism are limited, but have focused on what forms it takes and what impact it has on women’s participation in online spaces. The effect of sexist rhetoric on women’s online presence is a major concern of this project, and research into cybersexism provides a framework for understanding the issue. For example, connections can be drawn between Herring’s (1999) work on the dynamics of gender-based harassment in online spaces and how the comments sections enable greater participation in discussions of news articles (McCluskey and Hmielowski 2011). Herring’s analysis of gender harassment occurring in a news-driven listserv conversation aligns well with Weber’s (2013) assertion that newsworthiness impacts engagement and interactivity, and addresses the lack of attention given to gender in most of the research on comments sections.

Although focused on interactions happening outside of the comments section, scholars like Barbara Ritter (2014) have worked to understand when people feel comfortable engaging in gender-based harassment in online spaces. Studying online and offline classroom interactions and students’ perception of the harm caused by sexist harassment in both environments has also been a focal point (Biber et al 2002). Jane (2014, 2015) has made significant contributions to the research on cybersexism, proposing frameworks for understanding and studying the specifically gendered nature of online harassment. Megarry (2014) studied women’s discussions of online abuse and silencing by way of the #mencallmethings hashtag on Twitter. Megarry (2014) continues Herring’s (1999) project, demonstrating that sexist rhetoric continues to be a significant factor in shaping women’s online lives and how discourse functions. Although limited, the available research makes a strong argument for the existence of cybersexism as a category of Internet behavior deserving of additional attention.
Studies of cybersexism have included the development of theory surrounding the behavior, surveys of students, and case studies (Ritter 2014, Jane 2014, Biber et al 2002, Herring 1999). However, an issue with the existing research on cybersexism is its scarcity. While foundational, Herring’s (1999) case study was conducted nearly two decades ago, and the environments and forms of discussion she studied have changed significantly in the intervening years. Megarry’s (2014) study goes some distance toward closing that gap, but work remains to be done outside of social media websites. The constantly shifting nature of the Internet combined with the limited number of studies on how gender shapes conversations in the comments section leaves a gap in the research on cybersexism, which this thesis attempts to fill.

**Women’s Participation in Discourse**

Understanding the role of gender in shaping conversational norms both online and off has been a research problem for numerous scholars (James and Drakich 1993, Brescoll 2011, Sussman and Tyson 2000). A major meta-analysis of research into who speaks more in mixed-gender discourse environments offline revealed that, despite the stereotype of women as chatterboxes, men tend to take control of conversations in nearly every scenario (James and Drakich 1993). Further analysis by Brescoll (2011) provided insight into organizational gender imbalances. Details on who tends to assume discursive control offline and the strategies used provides a starting point for studying online imbalances of the amount of talk. However, much of the existing research on such imbalances focuses only on face-to-face interactions. Online environments have often been positioned as neutral spaces, and little attention has been given to how gender can affect who speaks and how much. Sussman and Tyson (2000) provided an early challenge to the idea that the Internet is a gender-neutral space where offline factors of identity stop affecting who speaks and what they are permitted to say. Turning Sussman and Tyson’s
analysis to the comments sections of news articles can reveal whether or not similar patterns persist in the discourse communities formed by user-generated interactions and contributions.

Although the bulk of the research has been focused on offline spaces, and often looks only at professional organizations for its sample populations, the patterns revealed by the research remain useful (James and Drakich 1993, Brescoll 2011). For example, gender stereotypes inform beliefs about speech in offline spaces, where women are often perceived as talking too much despite talking as much or less than men (James and Drakich 1993). Among those who acknowledge gender differences in the amount of face-to-face talk, however, many argued that the Internet would eliminate status markers and create more equitable conversational spaces—an argument challenged by research on cybersexism (Herring 1999). Just as research on differences in the amount of talk offline was required so that people could attempt to begin challenging stereotypes and creating the conditions for equitable speaking time, research into gender differences in participation online is an important part of understanding the Internet’s discursive spaces.

Sussman and Tyson’s (2000) work on gender and power in online interactions forms a valuable baseline for continued work in this area, although, as with much of the research on cybersexism, the research was conducted in Web 1.0. That is, Sussman and Tyson performed their study before the shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. Web 1.0 was characterized by read-only content, professional versus personal publications, and message boards rather than social media (Dumitrescu 2015). Where Web 1.0 was a primarily static environment, where the goal was to replicate the sense of reading print text and broadcast media on a computer, Web 2.0 both enables and demands active engagement from users as readers, producers, and observers of content. As Internet technology and use grew more sophisticated in the aftermath of Web 2.0,
there have been increasingly higher levels of interactivity between individuals and online spaces. Further studies on how communication and gender function in a Web 2.0 environment is therefore essential, given the radically different nature of the environment.

Summary

Research into comments sections, uninhibited behavior and flaming, cybersexism, and women’s participation in discussion has contributed to a greater understanding of discourse in each separate area. The comments sections themselves have been studied as spaces where democratic debate flourishes, while the causes and effects of flaming and uninhibited behavior on online discourse continue to be a source of contention within the literature. Although limited, research on the role of sexism in silencing women and determining who speaks, whether face-to-face or online, has demonstrated the need for additional study on how gender-based harassment affects discourse.

Perhaps the most significant gap this thesis attempts to bridge is the disconnect between all four areas. While the existing research has made major contributions to our understanding of online discourse, the subjects are rarely, if ever, studied in connection with one another. A great deal of work has been done to demonstrate that comments sections provide the opportunity for discourse, but the role of gender-based harassment is absent from the major works in that area and in research on hostility and aggression online. Studies of cybersexism are limited, and have not focused on whether women’s participation is affected in discussions of news articles pertaining to feminism and women’s lives and issues. Bringing these subjects together will assist in the closure of some long-standing gaps in the scholarly study of online rhetorical practices.
Rationale & Significance of the Study

Methods of studying online discourse have largely been quantitative, attempting to demonstrate the scale of behaviors such as interactivity in comments sections, flaming, sexist interactions, and the dampening of women’s participation in conversation (Weber 2013, O’Sullivan and Flanagin 2003, Lange 2006, Herring 1999, Jane 2014 and 2015, Megarry 2014, Sussman and Tyson 2000). Research into the comments sections, uninhibited behavior and flaming, cybersexism, and women’s ability to contribute to the discourse has used survey data, experimental conditions, and analysis of extensive corpuses of comments from numerous online environments—yet gaps remain, both within each area and between them, which this thesis attempts to fill by putting the research areas into conversation with one another. Research taking a qualitative approach to the analysis, where in-depth examinations of the conversations themselves and the context in which sexist interactions occur, is scant. As a result, this thesis approaches the examination of sexist rhetoric from a qualitative perspective.

The study bridges a gap between several related but previously disconnected areas of research through the application of feminist and sociological rhetorical analysis. Additionally, the study contributes to an updated understanding of the discourse environments created by the comments sections of news websites and the commentators in those environments. The research assists in moving the conversation about online rhetorical practices forward and provides an updated analysis of how gender shapes discourse in online news sites’ comments sections.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to analyze different forms of sexist rhetoric and the impact of sexist rhetoric on women’s participation in the comments sections of news articles about feminism and women’s issues on three major websites: BuzzFeed, MSNBC, and Fox News.
Existing research on how the comments sections promote discourse, as well as how hostile and sexist online rhetoric can stifle it, have occurred in different fields with minimal overlap. The present study represents an attempt to create a bridge across those interdisciplinary gaps by applying a feminist and sociological rhetorical lens to the conversations happening in the comments sections of news websites. In an environment where online hostility towards women is normalized and debates rage about whether to close comments sections entirely, capturing a fuller picture of the kinds of rhetorical environments that currently exist is essential for helping us chart a course forward (Jane 2014, 2015, Ruiz et al 2011).

To assess the impact of sexist rhetoric on women’s participation in the comments, articles about feminism and women’s issues were selected from BuzzFeed, MSNBC, and Fox News. These sites were chosen because they provide a range of reporting styles and commenting environments, thus diversifying the source of the comments and reducing the likelihood that any particular pattern is unique to an individual site. The comments from the articles were analyzed to determine what forms sexist rhetoric takes and how women respond to the use of sexist rhetoric in the comments sections. Articles about feminism and women’s issues were selected as the sample, since past research has demonstrated political and social issues tend to generate higher rates of commenting and interactivity, and discussions of feminism in particular tend to draw sexist hostility (Weber 2013, Herring 1999). For the purposes of the study, articles on women’s issues are those focusing on health, interests, careers, safety, hobbies, and other relevant areas with a particular emphasis on women as the subject. Expected outcomes of the study include developing a greater understanding of the rhetorical environment created by comments sections on major news websites, as well as gaining additional information on the role of gender in shaping online discourses.
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the research draws on *Feminist Rhetorical Practices* (2012), in which Royster and Kirsch point out that rhetorical research has centered on “power elites by race, class, and gender, that is, rich, famous or infamous, white males; and attention directed toward public domains….that is, arenas in which white, elite males have dominated historically” (30). This thesis moves the focus away from rich and famous or infamous white men and onto the impact of sexist rhetoric and gendered discourse on women within public domains. Although Rosyter and Kirsch (2012) might note that the comments sections of news websites have still “been shaped or controlled by power elites,” scholars like McCluskey and Hmielowski (2011) would argue that they are spaces for discourse that occur outside the historical power structure of communication with news organizations (30).

Further, I draw on Royster and Kirsch’s (2012) description of a feminist rhetorical practice that is interdisciplinary in nature, and involves critical work “that is helping us to know more broadly and deeply the nature, scope, impacts, and consequences of rhetoric as a multidimensional human enterprise” (41). In drawing on research from multiple disciplines to create bridges across the gaps between them, and analyzing the rhetoric to more clearly understand its “nature, scope, impacts, and consequences,” I align myself with the feminist rhetorical practices Royster and Kirsch (2012) explore (41).

I also apply feminist and sociological rhetorical criticism to the comments as defined by Brock et al, which they describe as “Criticism that attempts to place, define, and assess rhetoric within a societal context,” and that “assesses human communication in terms of societal structures, traditions, norms, and conventions” (21). By focusing on how commentators use
sexist rhetoric and what the impact of the rhetorical choices is on women’s ability to participate, I can make use of Brock et al.’s framework for rhetorical criticism.

**Research Questions**

The goal of this study is to develop a stronger understanding of how gender affects conversations in the comments sections of news articles, and what impact sexism still has on women’s ability to participate in discussions related to their lives.

RQ1) What sexist rhetoric is used in the comments sections of news articles about feminism and women’s issues?

RQ2) How do women respond to the use of sexist rhetoric in the comments sections of news articles about feminism and women’s issues?

Based on the questions above and the existing research, I hypothesize the following:

H1) Sexist rhetoric will include the use of hostile and benevolent sexism, gender-based and sexual harassment, and implied or overt threats of violence.

H2) In the aftermath of the use of sexist rhetoric, women’s responses will take the form of passive language and stances, accommodating aggressive conversational norms, or ceasing to participate.

**Definition of Terms**

*Commentator.* An individual who participates in the comments section of a news website through the contribution of alphabetic text or graphic comments (such as photos, emoticons, or other images), or by rating other participants’ comments.

*Comments Section.* The section of a news site, typically at the bottom of or linked to an article, where readers can act as commentators and submit feedback, engage in discussion, or read and rate other commentators’ responses.
**Cybersexism.** Sexist behavior occurring in computer- and technologically-mediated environments. Poland (2016) defines cybersexism as “the expression of prejudice, privilege, and power in online spaces and through technology as a medium” (3).

**E-bile.** As defined by Emma Jane (2014), e-bile is the “extravagant invective, the sexualized threats of violence, and the *recreational nastiness* that have come to constitute a dominant tenor of Internet discourse” (emphasis in the original) (532). E-bile is used as a replacement term for flaming, thus expanding the discussion and emphasizing the vitriolic and gendered nature of much online harassment.

**Feminism.** A political, personal, and ideological framework predicated on the belief that gender equity—including social, political, and economic equality—is a necessary component of society.

**Flaming.** A contested term within academic spaces. Generally: emotional, aggressive, angry invective, which often includes ad hominem attacks, swearing, derogatory language, and other negative affect (Lea et al, 1992). Flaming is most often, although not always, assumed to be a phenomenon of Internet-based behavior and distinct from offline speech.

**Objectification.** A remark reducing a woman to an object, most commonly a sex object. As defined by Nussbaum (1995), objectification can be understood as “the seeing and/or treating of someone as an object” (251).

**Sexism.** Statements and behaviors that imply or rest on the implication that women are inferior to men or should be made to occupy subordinate roles to men in social, political, and economic arenas.

**Sexist Rhetoric.** Statements that take a variety of forms, ranging from hostile to benevolent sexism, and rely on gender stereotypes, essentializing and generalizing women, erasing women’s
experience, or silencing tactics. Herring (1999) describes gender harassment, here termed sexist rhetoric, as “unwanted contact that targets individuals with offensive message content by way of their gender,” and makes note of discriminatory behavior, sexual harassment, homophobia, hostile and benevolent sexist stereotypes, essentializing, and more (153, 156, 157, 159). Sexist rhetoric is not rooted in intentionality, but in impact. Even if someone claims not to have meant to be sexist, the types of insults and attacks that fall under the umbrella of sexist rhetoric still create an environment that is hostile to women. Examples of sexist rhetoric include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Hostile sexism: The use of gender-based profanity and insults, such as: bitch, cunt, slut, whore.
- Benevolent sexism: The use of gender-based stereotypes that seem positive, but keep women in subordinate roles, e.g. positioning women as “hardwired” for facilitative roles rather than leadership.
- Gender stereotypes: Framing women as catty, shallow, talkative.
- Essentializing and generalizing women: Reducing cisgender women (women who identify with the sex they were assigned at birth) to reproductive capabilities; discussing women as a monolithic whole with universal characteristics.
- Erasing women’s experience: Explaining women’s expertise or experiences back to them, denying that women could have had experiences as described, e.g. denying that a woman experienced sexual harassment.
- Silencing tactics: The use of interruption, accusation (e.g. accusing women of censoring men), coercion, and implied or overt threats of violence to reduce or stop a woman from participating in discourse.
**Trolling.** Although often conflated with flaming, trolling as defined by Megarry (2014) is typically understood as insincere behavior that nevertheless disrupts the course of an online discussion (51). Trolling is often accomplished through the use of bad faith arguments, random interjections, off-topic commentary, or inflammatory remarks that the troll may insist are not representative of their real beliefs should the comments be challenged.

**Uninhibited Behavior.** As defined by Kiesler et al (1985): online behavior that is more emotional, expressive, and aggressive than offline behavior, often identified through the use of superlative language (both positive and negative), excessive punctuation, writing in all capital letters, swearing, and other language indicating strong reactions (89).

**Women’s Issues.** As defined for the purposes of data collection, these are issues related to women’s health, interests, careers, safety, hobbies, and other relevant areas, as determined by considering what Royster and Kirsch (2012) describe as “not only…the existence of women’s experiences but also the impact and consequences of women’s lived realities” in contrast to “a focus on men as rhetorical subjects” (29, 30). Identified through the use of key words on each news website.

**Ethical Considerations**

A significant ethical consideration affecting the project is whether or not commentators contributing to discourse within the comments section of news articles should be studied. As comments are published in a nominally public forum and no intervention is applied to the commentators themselves, IRB approval was not required for the present study. However, consideration was given to whether or not to change the names of individual commentators to protect their privacy. Commentators who participate in the comments section of a news website do so with the understanding that their contributions become part of public discourse, although
they may not be comfortable knowing that their contributions are the target of third-party academic attention. As a result, the names of commentators have been changed except where a user name is relevant to the analysis. These instances are noted when they occur.

**Delimitations**

As this is a qualitative study, I have not engaged in large scale data collection or conducted statistical validation of the data I did select. Although additional research exists on computer-mediated communication, I have chosen to focus my attention on the areas most relevant to the study at hand—namely research that looks directly at comments sections, at uninhibited behavior and flaming, at cybersexism, and at women’s participation in discourse. The topic of the news articles assists in terms of ensuring a suitable sample population of comments.

The narrow focus of this thesis project limits its value as an intersectional examination of the many factors that contribute to bias and bigotry in online discussions. While care was taken to identify harassment based on race, sexuality, and other factors of identity when gender was also used as a form of attack, non-gender factors by themselves are outside the scope of the present study. Additional work taking a more intersectional approach to the issue of silencing and harassment in the comments section of news articles will move the conversation forward.

**Limitations**

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, only three websites were selected for analysis, producing a corpus of 36 articles and 6,336 total comments, of which 5,532 were selected for further analysis; of those, 812 comments were identified as containing sexist rhetoric or responses to sexist rhetoric. While the results provided by in-depth analysis of individual comments and context are valuable, this thesis has goals other than making generalizations about
all comments sections or all news websites. Research on the trends seen in comments sections already exists, and the purpose of this study was not to replicate that information, but to generate a deeper understanding of some of the kinds of interactions we are likely to see in the comments.

The websites selected for this study occupy a potentially contentious space, given that the biases of each site and the sites’ audiences are clear. A study conducted by the Pew Research Institute revealed how readers cluster around certain news organizations depending on their political biases; among consistent conservatives, 47 percent of readers selected Fox News as the main source of their news, while MSNBC and BuzzFeed both have audiences that lean more towards the liberal side of the spectrum (Mitchell et al 2014). Of the three sites chosen for the present study, BuzzFeed was listed by Pew as the most consistently distrusted source in terms of news reporting (Mitchell et al 2014). BuzzFeed often positions itself explicitly as writing to, by, and for a specific third-wave and digitally savvy feminist audience, although this positioning is complicated by both the publication of sponsored content and content that runs counter to BuzzFeed’s stated values, such as articles participating in objectification. Despite the complexities, BuzzFeed draws an audience of primarily young and liberal-leaning readers. Fox News leans hard to the conservative side of the political spectrum, as the framing of the articles on the site and the support of its more conservative makes clear. MSNBC, in contrast, leans more to the liberal side of the spectrum, and many of its commentators do as well.

It can be argued that there is no neutral or at least less obviously biased publication represented in the current study, which is undeniable. However, an implication of the questions this study asks is whether sexism is a consistent rhetorical feature in the comments sections of news websites regardless of their ideological bias and even when those websites occupy vastly different political positions. Application of the patterns observed in this study to the comments
sections of websites that are regarded as more neutral will enable better comparison of how
different discourse communities handle and respond to the types of sexist rhetoric that appear.
While outside the scope of the current study, anecdotal observation of the comments sections of
news articles about feminism and women’s issues on other websites, such as The Atlantic,
showed markedly similar patterns to those produced by the study, which are discussed in Chapter
IV (61). Additional research on how sexist rhetoric functions and is challenged within comments
sections with different forms of bias will be a valuable contribution to the ongoing discussion of
the role of sexism in online spaces.

**Researcher Bias**

I come to this research from the perspective of an individual who has personally been
targeted by sexism in offline and online spaces, including comments sections, as well as a
scholar who focuses on feminist rhetoric and its role on the Internet. My research is shaped by an
explicitly feminist rhetorical perspective, as well as the understanding that sexism exists,
negatively impacts women’s ability to participate online, and is something to be understood and
combated. The field of rhetoric is one that emphasizes the public nature of our work and the
importance of asking questions that matter in the world beyond academia. It is with these
motivations in mind that I have conducted my research.
CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The comments sections of news articles have been studied as sites of productive
democratic debate where people whose voices may otherwise go unheard can find opportunities
to speak (Diakopolous and Naaman 2011, McCluskey and Hmielowski 2011, Ruiz et al 2011,
Weber 2013). However, the Internet as a whole has been shown time and time again to contain
many of the same sexist biases as offline spaces. While comments sections are not exempt from
such biases, little attention has been given to how sexism shapes the discussions occurring below
news articles, and how women can be discouraged from participating in conversations about
news items specific to women’s lives, health, and careers. Research into online discourse has
looked at broad trends in the comments sections but has neglected to look more specifically at
the kinds of conversations happening in those spaces.

However, research into conversations online has historically shown that they can be more
contentious than not. Scholars studying uninhibited behavior and hostility in online spaces have
been limited by definitional dilemmas, and an emphasis on determining the causes rather than
the impact of such behavior. Scholars have debated whether flaming is caused by the reduced
social cues associated with online communication or if it is a context-driven activity reflecting
the norms of the space in which it occurs. Few scholars have focused their attention on how
flaming itself reshapes the rhetorical environment, and how sexism and other forms of bias affect
who flames and who is targeted for flaming. Cybersexism affects women’s online experiences at
every level—the enactment of sexism online increases the hostility women must navigate to
participate in both personal and professional networks. Research into cybersexism is scant,
although what does exist paints a grim picture of what many online spaces look like for women.
Intersections of identity like race, sexuality, and disability also contribute to who is targeted for
harassment in online spaces and what such harassment looks like. The confluence of hostility and sexism in online spaces reduces how much and when women participate. Research has shown women tend to participate less in mixed-gender discussions offline, and the little research focusing on online conversations has produced similar results. As a conversation lengthens, women’s participation tends to drop and men assume greater and greater control of the discursive space.

This literature review covers research focusing on each of the four broad areas outlined previously: comments sections, uninhibited behavior and flaming, cybersexism, and women’s participation in conversation. The first section addresses research on the comments sections themselves, including how they have been conceptualized as a discourse environment. The second section focuses on research regarding uninhibited behavior and flaming in online spaces. The third section looks specifically at cybersexism, the gender-specific harassment that is a common feature of Internet discourse, including in the comments sections. Finally, the fourth section discusses research related to women’s participation online and offline, and how gender and power interact to silence women. The four sections of the literature review underpin and provide a framework for necessary additional research into how women are silenced in the comments sections of news articles on feminism and women’s issues, areas where women’s voices are essential.

The four research areas have existed in parallel for decades, yet almost no studies have made an attempt to combine them. This thesis brings the research together, identifies gaps, and attempts to build bridges between them. The project of the thesis is to determine what forms of sexist rhetoric appear in the comments section of news websites and how women respond to sexist rhetoric, using a feminist and sociolinguistic analytical lens. The literature review
addresses each of the four research areas as they have been studied in isolation, while the study itself combines the methods and approaches of each to create knowledge about gender and conversation online.

Comments Sections

The introduction of the comments sections to news websites changed the discursive landscape, opening up opportunities for readers to respond not only to articles themselves, but also to each other. As Weber (2013) points out, “commenting on the news is the most common form of participation in contemporary news use,” making the comments an important area of study for anyone interested in public discourse (942). Additionally, as Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011) write, “37% of online news users (and 51% of 18-29 year olds) think that commenting on news stories is an important feature to have” (133). A more recent non-academic study of 8,500 commentators found that 34 percent of people who comment anywhere online are under 30, and 76 percent are men; nearly a quarter of people who responded to the survey comment on at least one article per day (Aschwanden 2016). Access to comments sections, far from being something people ignore or discard, represents an important part of public discussion of news.

Scholarly research on the comments sections has relied heavily on Habermas’ concept of the public sphere (1991) and his rules for debate (1984) (McCluskey and Hmielowski 2011, Ruiz et al 2011). Although the existing scholarship does not present a utopian view of the comments section, much of the research emphasizes how online commenting on the news opens up broader forms of interaction (McCluskey and Hmielowski 2011, Ruiz et al 2011). The impact of newsworthiness on the type and quality of comments has also been a focus (Weber 2013, Ruiz et al 2011). Despite the emphasis on public discourse, however, scant research has been conducted
on harassment in the comments sections and how the presence of hostility affects the usefulness of applying Habermasian ideals.

Through *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991), an interdisciplinary work on how sociological, economic, and political factors created the opportunity for the public sphere to arise in Europe, Habermas describes how “The *publicum* developed into the public, the *subjectum* into the [reasoning] subject” (emphasis in the original) (26). The “reasoning subject,” whether accommodating or resisting authority, is the object of attention from scholars who see the comments section as a digital version of the public sphere: a place where an ongoing negotiation of social narratives takes place. While Megarry (2014) criticizes scholars for using Habermas’ theories but ignoring the role of factors like power politics in shaping discourse, McCluskey and Hmielowski (2011) write that the comments sections’ “role of facilitating communication among citizens embodies the ideals of the public sphere” (304). Comments sections do open up the possibility of participation to members of the audience historically not able or willing to participate in public discourse, bringing online conversations closer to Habermas’ ideal than letters to the editor, which tend to reflect the biases of the editorial group (McCluskey and Hmielowski 314).

As spaces that are less constrained by “gatekeepers within news organizations limiting opinions,” online comments sections enable a broader range of participation (McCluskey and Hmielowski 304). Although newspapers exercise authority over what content may be posted, i.e. through moderating comments and mandating some form of registration, the environment of the comments section creates room for marginalized voices to engage in the conversation. Additionally, McCluskey and Hmielowski argue the perceived anonymity of comments sections could “perhaps lead to better representation among women and racial minorities who express
reluctance to submit signed letters” for publication in the newspaper, often due to fear of backlash (308). Supporting their argument, McCluskey and Hmielowski report that online comments produce a fairly even split between sets of contrasting sentiments regarding the Jena Six\(^1\) incident they studied, while two thirds of published letters to the editor shared the opinion of the newspapers (312). McCluskey and Hmielowski conclude their study shows “the promise of online reader posts to bring additional views into public discourse,” since the comments section provided a wider and more evenly balanced range of reactions (314). Expanding on the concept, Ruiz et al argue that comments sections are “far more open, accessible, and efficient than the mechanisms of participation in the legacy media” (464). Reducing barriers between commentators and the paper, and making it easier for people to interact, increases engagement from the public.

Although the increased engagement is a focus throughout research into the comments, content analysis has received almost no attention. While speech itself, the discursive environment, and whether commentators interact with each other have been important factors of study, few scholars have engaged in any in-depth assessment of the content under consideration: the text of the comments. Ruiz et al (2011) write, for example, “we have to assess…what is being said and how,” and attempt to extend the discussion to how participation actually functions, yet do not provide qualitative analysis of the comments they gather (465). Instead, Ruiz et al turn to Habermas’ rules for debate in their study of whether the comments left beneath news articles make worthwhile additions to public discussion.

\(^1\) The Jena Six incident occurred in 2006, during a period of heightened racial tension at an Alabama high school, which culminated in violence between students. The Jena Six were six black students who were convicted of attacking a fellow white student. The case became a flashpoint for discussions of racial prejudice, given that white students were not charged for acts of violence—including hanging nooses in a school courtyard—and the initial charges against the Jena Six seemed too serious.
Habermas (1984) lays out a number of rules for whether speech acts should be considered rational, which Ruiz et al use as a foundation for analyzing comments. The rules include speech acts aimed at achieving consensus and resting on shared norms, arguments that are topical and intended to persuade an audience, participants’ ability to weigh evidence and change their conclusions when warranted, participants who engage in “cooperatively seeking the truth,” and the participants’ ability to understand and communicate their own desires and feelings (Habermas 17-19). Using those rules, Ruiz et al identify two types of comments sections. Comments sections with robust interaction, more comments, and larger numbers of commentators with heterogeneous viewpoints are considered communities of debate, and described as existing in line with Habermas’ rules (482). However, Ruiz et al also note that communities of debate have higher levels of derogatory and insulting language (480). Comments sections that provide primarily heterogeneous statements and very low interaction are what Ruiz et al call “a dialogue of the deaf” (482). Such comments sections contribute little to the public sphere beyond limited repetitions of the conclusions reached in the news articles themselves. Diversity of opinion expression is required for higher-quality comments, and, as Weber (2013) notes, interactivity is an important feature of the comments.

Studies of interactivity have found there are qualities of the articles themselves that affect the kinds of discussions in the comments. Online newspapers, argues Weber (2013), provide “the potential for quality discourse,” if the topics being covered are socially and politically relevant to the audience (953). Diakopoulos and Naaman found support from the newsroom, writing that “Some journalists noted the impact of topicality on the nature of the discourse they observed in the comments” (135). The perceived newsworthiness of an article has a significant impact on whether or not people comment on it, and also on whether or not they talk to each other. As
Weber points out, “the potentials for quality discourse emerge only when…there is a certain degree of interactivity among the users’ comments” (942). Weber challenges framing the comments sections as a public sphere if people respond to an article and move on without engaging other commentators—what Ruiz et al called a dialogue of the deaf. Instead, Weber studies how factors of newsworthiness affect discourse and drive interactions. Like Weber, Ruiz et al (2011) observe “politics…was the most discussed topic,” and that very few commentators left more than one response on average (475). However, Weber also found “very strong support for the news factor model,” given that the topic of an article had a significant impact on the number of commentators and how often they responded to one another (949). McCluskey and Hmielowski (2011) found a similar result: 38.5 percent of comments on the Jena Six articles, covering a politically charged topic, were interactions with other commentators. While assessing the best way of generating interactivity, Burke and Kraut (2008) found that “politeness increases reply rates in some technical groups, but rudeness is more effective in some political groups” (281). Although Weber does not address the tone of the comments in his sample population, it seems likely that Burke and Kraut’s findings would apply to news articles on political subjects.

Factors of newsworthiness that Weber found to produce a significant positive impact on interactivity in the comments section include how close a story’s topic is to a commentator’s home state or nation, the impact the subject has on a social group or category, and whether the article builds on previous stories on the same topic. Newsworthiness is a determining factor in whether people will comment at all, as well as whether they will respond to one another, and commentators’ perception of which articles are worth commenting on are embedded in the broader social context of the newspaper. Burke and Kraut’s study found similar results, and demonstrated that while the newsworthiness of political topics generated more discussion,
“politics groups are generally perceived as significantly ruder than other groups” (283). Despite the potential benefits of higher interactivity, Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011) found reporters and editors expressed concern about the quality of the comments, along with many of the commentators. Newsworthiness might increase interaction, as Weber argues, but the quality of such interactions is up for debate.

Despite the acknowledged presence of rudeness in the conversations, one aspect of public discourse rarely covered by research into the comments sections is harassment. Ruiz et al (2011) note that debates around eliminating anonymity or the comments section altogether arise from “the accumulation of insults and derogatory language in poorly overseen comments in news,” and find that 10 percent of comments contain derogatory language (464). However, Ruiz et al do not go on to analyze the forms derogatory language takes beyond including an example of a commentator deliberately misspelling the word “cunts” as “runts” to bypass moderation of profanity (472). Weber (2013) acknowledges the primary limitation of his study into interactivity in the comments is a lack of content analysis. The content analysis was sacrificed in favor of the quantitative analysis, which Weber notes is enabled by coding a large sample of comments (954). Despite the acknowledgement, the limitation remains—little insight into the quality or impact of interactivity can be gained from a study that does not include examples of the interactions. We are left to wonder about the tenor of the interactions Weber demonstrates: do they align with Habermas’ ideal of democratic debate? Or are comments sections spaces where harassment has a visible impact on the course of the discussion? Lacking specific examples prevents us from drawing conclusions about the interactions taking place on news websites, which is a gap this thesis attempts to fill.
While the comments clearly allow for more views to be included than do letters to the editor, ignoring the content associated with comments and interactivity means ignoring whether those newly expressed viewpoints were the target of more challenges, harassment, or silencing tactics. Someone who feels safer commenting online than sending a letter to the editor may lose that sense of safety if they see others being attacked or are attacked themselves, which is an issue not addressed in the key scholarship on comments sections. Understanding the impact of sexist rhetoric and whether hostile speech stymies or stifles comments is critical for determining whether the comments can be seen as part of a true public sphere. After all, according to Habermas, anyone must be able to participate for the space to be considered a democratic public sphere. Without understanding how comments sections can also function to silence commentators, we cannot say for certain whether the comments sections facilitate or undermine valuable public discourse.

**Uninhibited Behavior and Flaming**

From the earliest days of Internet access, debates arose about the impact of computer-mediated communication on discussions and on the people having them. Was the seemingly uninhibited behavior scholars observed a by-product of the medium, or were people engaging in the same types of communicative behaviors they would in any other environment? Should flaming be considered unique to the Internet, or is it no different from offline expressions of anger? Jane (2015) divides the trends in flaming research into three main waves: trying to determine whether CMC environments or social context caused flaming (see Lea et al 1992, Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2014, and Kayany 1998), attempting to generate a more rigid definition of flaming (O’Sullivan and Flanagan 2003), and finally ignoring it almost completely.
Other scholars have attempted to determine what strategies people use when faced with flaming and other uninhibited online behaviors (Lee 2006, Lange 2006).

Early research into Internet-based discourse focused on the causes of uninhibited behavior and flaming. Kiesler et al (1985) conducted one of the first studies on the subject, arguing that reduced social cues contribute to a flattening of hierarchies, which they claim explains the exuberant, emphatic, or angry statements often produced in online discussions. Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2011) offer support for the reduced social cues position in their examination of how a lack of eye contact correlates with a higher level of threatening behavior in online chat. As they discovered, three times as many threats were issued in tense discussions where participants could not see or identify one another, and aggression was higher across in the board when conversations occurred online (439). Even in research on the comments section, scholars like Diakopoulos and Naaman cite such early research, writing that “a lack of status cues and social context can introduce unwelcome low-quality contributions into online communication systems” (133). The argument that the lack of offline cues contributes to uninhibited and therefore poor quality conversations is a strong one.

Other scholars, however, argue that uninhibited online behavior arises from the social context of the Internet itself. The social context argument positions online behavior in part as an extension of offline behavior—if people feel it is acceptable to behave a certain way in a certain space, they probably will. Lea et al (1992) argue that a lack of social cues may partially but not wholly explain flaming for that reason. While a lack of immediate physical cues can reduce concern for audience reactions, people do not lose all sense of social decorum when seated at a computer. Swearing online, for example, which is often included in the scholarly definition of flaming, “often means the substitution of strings such as ‘@#$%*ing’ rather than actual
swearing,” which Lea et al describe as a form of self-censorship indicative of stronger inhibitions about language in cyberspace (11). Lea et al posit that flaming is a context-dependent activity reliant on “social groups and which of their associated norms are salient” for determining whether flaming will be accepted (29). Additional research focusing on group norms has provided additional support for the social context explanation.

Kayany (1998), for example, demonstrates varying levels of uninhibited behavior associated with Usenet groups. Kayany observes the occurrence of flaming within political, national, or religious discussion groups and argues the context of the discussions affects the level of flaming. Weber’s research on how newsworthiness affects interactivity in the comments sections of news articles supports Kayany’s interpretation. Additionally, different levels of flaming were found across all four groups within Kayany’s study, which further supports the social context hypothesis. As the social context camp points out, if the medium is the primary cause of uninhibited behavior and flaming, we could expect to see roughly equal amounts of uninhibited behavior everywhere. The wide variation in levels of flaming suggests that the topics under discussion and the norms of a particular discussion environment affect how people choose to behave.

Few studies have discussed the possibility that both explanations have merit. Despite a lack of existing discussion of blending the arguments, this thesis takes the position that factors from each camp must be considered to paint a fuller picture of the nature of online discourse. Evidence exists for the reduced social cues argument, with Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2014) showing an increase in aggression when participants are invisible to each other. However, as the social context argument reveals, the context of the discussion undeniably plays a role in expression (Kayany 1998). As researchers continue to observe online behaviors, it is important
to consider how particular online environments—such as a comments section—enable or constrain certain actors, and what offline beliefs those behaviors are rooted in.

The consideration of online environments continues to be crucial as we turn to the portion of the literature concerned with defining flaming. One of the major sources of conflict in the literature regarding flaming has been how to define the behavior (O’Sullivan and Flanagin 2003, Lange 2006, Jane 2015). Lea et al (1992) describe flaming as the “hostile expression of strong emotions and feelings,” which continues to form the foundation of much flaming research (2). Following the work done by Lea et al, many scholars attempted to create a framework for how flaming should be understood. “Reconceptualizing ‘Flaming’ and Other Problematic Messages” is a representative example (O’Sullivan and Flanagin 2003). O’Sullivan and Flanagin define flaming as communication that intentionally and purposefully violates the norms of a specific community (70). Using this definition, the influence of the social context explanation is visible: flaming is not a violation of general social norms, but of the norms of a particular space.

From there, O’Sullivan and Flanagin develop an interactional norm cube, which considers the perspective of the sender, receiver, and any third-party observers, weighing the sender’s perspective highest of the three. As a result, O’Sullivan and Flanagin’s interactional norm cube classifies a message as a “true flame” when it is intended as such by the sender and understood as one by all three parties (82). Any other scenarios are considered missed flames, failed flames, or miscommunication. While O’Sullivan and Flanagin situate flames in a variation of the rhetorical triangle, they also fall prey to the intentional fallacy, which undermines the usefulness of their framework. As Lange (2006) puts it, “it is not always easy (or even possible) to determine or access a sender’s intention,” which makes it difficult to use O’Sullivan and Flanagin’s interactional norm cube for determining whether or not a message is a flame.
“Challenging the Flaming Doxa”). O’Sullivan and Flanagin also offer no explanation for why a lack of intent to violate a norm means no norm was violated, or why lack of intent to cause harm means no harm was caused.

Other scholars turn their focus from building frameworks and definitions to considering how flaming is part of the broader rhetorical environment. One example of this emphasis is Lange’s 2006 article, “What is Your Claim to Flame?”. Lange explores the concept of “flame claims,” which she defines as norm-setting exchanges occurring when participants in CMC environments accuse another participant of flaming. Lange writes that “flame claims and flames are not the result of cultural norm violations” as O’Sullivan and Flanagin argue, but part of a constant, ongoing contextual negotiation of norms (“Conclusion”). Lange sees flaming and flame claims as power plays, which aligns well with analysis of how sexist rhetoric and power interact in online spaces. However, Lange focuses only on what she calls “males jockeying for social position” in tech-focused environments (“Flames and flame claims”). Lange’s conclusions come across as excusing the behavior and normalizing aggression as a masculine trait, which hides the more violent forms of online hostility under the label of minor social conflict.

In stark contrast to Lange’s view of flaming, Jane (2015) redirects attention to the issue of flaming itself, redefining it as e-bile and arguing for a renewed focus on the rhetorical strategies used in instances of flaming. Jane argues that “‘flaming’ is the only term whose definition solely involves invective, insults, negative affect, and so on,” which is why she focuses on flaming research to discuss e-bile (66). She draws on works in flaming research and real-world examples of e-bile to support her argument for describing the “rhetorical noxiousness” of online harassment and focusing on its impact as a critical element of analysis (65). Previous scholarship neglected key factors of e-bile by focusing on definitions instead of
what Jane describes as “the growing power and prevalence of hostility on the Internet, as well as its gendered nature” (66). Jane focuses her critique on her concern about scholars’ reduced attention to flaming in recent years, even as the presence of “e-bile has increased” (emphasis in the original) (66). She calls for more research into e-bile as a phenomenon with ethical, moral, and psychological effects, “a more permissive/looser definition of flaming to avoid under-coding” incidents of sexist abuse online, and a stronger emphasis on analyzing discourse (Jane 80).

Although limited, scholarship on the effects of flaming does exist. Lee (2005), for example, argues for developing a better understanding of how individuals within specific communities respond to flames and the “hostile emotional battles” flaming involves (386). Lee’s work offers interesting insight into rhetorical methods for dealing with hostility, which he describes in the context of conflict management. Lee identifies “salient behavioral patterns group members adopted to cope with flaming,” which included “withdrawal, apologizing, denunciation, posting poems, mediation, showing solidarity, joking, ritualizing, and normalizing” (387). Traditional conflict management requires assessment of immediate social and physical factors; dealing with conflict when none of the interlocutors are interacting in the same location requires a different set of rhetorical strategies. Lee categorizes conflict management strategies as “competitive-dominating, cooperative-integrating, and avoiding strategies,” which are broken down by whether the interlocutors and greater community attempt to directly challenge the flame, integrate it into the overall social norms, or ignore the issue entirely (which includes acceding to the flamer or a target leaving the group) (388). Of particular interest to the project of this thesis is Lee’s assessment of both temporary and permanent withdrawal from the USENET group, which he describes as “a form of giving up negotiation”
Lee offers no analysis of which members choose to leave a group most often, beyond noting that “the more a member becomes uncomfortable with a dominant group identity…the easier he or she may find it to leave the group” (392). Withdrawing from the group due to alienation or personal attack is framed as giving up the ability to negotiate; Lee does not address whether there is any cost to remaining in the face of discomfort, or consider whether silencing participants may sometimes be the goal of flaming.

While Lee considers some of the impacts associated with hostility in online spaces, he does not address the role of gender in shaping who is targeted for hostility and what that looks like. This gap is common across much of the flaming research; on the main studies of flaming, only Jane (2014, 2015) has made significant strides in connecting flaming and sexist harassment. For example, Lea et al (1992), Kayany (1998), and O’Sullivan and Flanagin (2006) include so few examples of flaming as to make gender an invisible component of their research. While Lange’s examination of conversations between men shielded her analysis from how sexism can shift the tenor of a conversation, she does not mention the gender imbalance in her sample population, let alone question it. Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2014) and Lee (2005), strikingly, include gendered attacks in their examples, yet do not acknowledge sexism as a factor. For example, Lee cites the following comments, which were directed by different members of a group at a single individual: “What the fuck are you talking about bitch? Dumb broad, you should get off that high horse your [sic] on. And stop playing the ignorant little slut” (388). While Lee describes these comments as “hostile verbal behavior,” he does not analyze the gendered nature of the attacks. Similarly, Lapidot-Lefler and Barak identify “You’re talking like a typical woman” as “insulting, sarcastic, teasing, negative, or cynical comments,” but do not mention the explicit gendered component of the statement (437). At the same time, Lapidot-
Lefler and Barak argue that “invisibility renders irrelevant stereotypes and prejudices related to gender” and other factors, a position directly contradicted by the gender stereotyping they report as an example of hostility (435). Unfortunately, Lapidot-Lefler and Barak do not make note of this contradiction or analyze gender further.

Much previous scholarship confined its examples of flaming to less unpleasant examples, as Lange did, or avoided or ignored the gendered aspects of online hostility, as Kayany did. The research on flaming has, by and large, underplayed the issues associated with online hostility, ignored the interplay of rhetoric, sexism, gender, and power, provided insufficient definitions, and refused to engage with the reality of flaming behaviors. Despite its limitations, flaming research has covered a great deal of ground, producing valuable debate about whether online hostility is caused by online environments or develops as a result of specific cultural norms. However, the dominant research trends have also resulted in a widespread failure to consider the full extent of flaming and its connection to online harassment, or to connect the role of sexist rhetoric and flaming.

**Cybersexism: Sexism Online**

While research into flaming struggles with definitions and debates over the cause, online hostility continues to be a problem, particularly for women. Megarry (2014) cites the “Habermasian tradition” often applied to online space, noting that “Habermas’ romanticized view of public debate does not recognise the ways in which moments of deliberation are characterised by power politics” (48). The notion of the Internet as a democratic space ignores how factors like gender can affect women’s ability to participate. While McCluskey and Hmielowski (2011) believe marginalized groups have a greater opportunity to be heard, for example, Megarry argues the same factors leading to marginalization offline are present online.
Despite harassment occurring in online spaces, research into the sexist rhetoric aimed at women online is rare (Jane 2014). However, research has painted a bleak picture of the online landscape. Scholarship has demonstrated the impact of cybersexism on women (Ritter 2014, Jane 2014), the rhetorical patterns such behavior often follows (Herring 1999, Biber et al 2002, Megarry 2014), and the ways women are silenced in conversations (Jane 2014, Herring 1999).

Online hostility has a detrimental effect on the lives of people targeted—and when flaming and hostility occur, the people most often targeted tend to be those who are already marginalized offline. Jane (2014) provides an overview of the mass media coverage of cybersexist hostility, which shows women are more likely to be the targets, more likely to feel silenced by online hostility, and more likely to take it seriously. On the other hand, men are less likely to be targeted, and more likely to regard harassment as an acceptable feature of online life. Adding to that imbalance, Ritter (2014) finds men were more likely to engage in online sexual harassment, and to regard the online environment as accepting of their behavior (209, 210). Biber et al (2002) find women apply a “more stringent” judgment to sexual harassment than men do, whether it occurs online or off (38). However, as Biber et al also show, women are the primary targets of sexist harassment, and so it should not perhaps be surprising that the people bearing the brunt of unpleasant environments take a dimmer view of the behavior.

Jane (2014) finds that while men tend to believe online harassment is not a serious problem, “Women… describe emotional responses ranging from feelings of irritation, anxiety, sadness, loneliness, vulnerability, and unsafeness; to feelings of distress, pain, shock, fear, terror, devastation, and violation” (536). The volume, intensity, and gendered nature of attacks on women contribute to women feeling that the Internet is less a level playing field than a minefield to be carefully navigated. In addition to women reporting that they are negatively affected by
harassment in online spaces, the response often tends to be one of minimizing or ignoring the
sexist aspects of such rhetoric. Megarry (2014) points out that while the media covered the
#mencallmethings hashtag, the stories deemphasized sexism, framing the behavior as generic
trolling. Women, however, report moderating their behavior in hopes of mitigating exposure to
sexist rhetoric, and strategies for doing so include avoiding speaking on certain issues, using
pseudonyms when writing, and even retreating from the Internet entirely (Jane 2014). The
behavior modification finding aligns with Herring’s (1999) finding that women eventually fall silent in the face of ongoing sexist rhetoric.

Studies have identified shared rhetorical characteristics of sexist online harassment. Jane
(2014) finds consistent “reliance on profanity, ad hominem invective, and hyperbolic imagery of
graphic—often sexualized—violence,” as well as intense scrutiny of women’s appearance and
perceived sexual availability (533). Megarry (2014), studying women’s stories of online abuse
on the Twitter hashtag #mencallmethings, notes “the similarity between the types of abuse they received indicates that women are targeted for online harassment on the basis of their identities as women” (49). Like Jane, Megarry finds insults focused on physical appearance, with emphasis on threats of sexual violence (53). Herring (1999) also finds men relying on gender stereotypes and sexual harassment when attempting to establish dominance over women online. Ritter (2014) looks specifically at cybersexual harassment, which she defines as “misogynist behaviors that are insulting, hostile, or degrading towards women” and occur in a computer-mediated environment (198). Ritter breaks cybersexual harassment down into active and passive, verbal and graphic forms of activity. Active verbal and graphic harassment occur when someone deliberately sends text or images to their target; passive verbal and graphic harassment occur when someone uses a sexist profile picture or display name, or posts sexually harassing materials
in an environment visible to multiple people, such as a comments section. Like the other researchers, Ritter finds that men are more likely to engage in cybersexual harassment.

The role of sexism in creating negative online environments for women has continued to be a source of interest for scholars, although rhetorical analysis of what impact sexist rhetoric has on discourse remains scant. Biber et al (2002) provide some insight through their study of reactions to classroom-based sexist harassment that occurs online and off. Students in the study, in contrast to the original expectation, “held similar or even more stringent standards” for how they expected people to behave online (Biber et al 36). Biber et al conclude that the environment plays a role in shaping standards for etiquette, since writing down sexist comments and posting them online “implies some thought and seriousness to the behavior” (38). Sexist remarks online are perceived as a deliberate rhetorical choice rather than an off-the-cuff remark made in person, and are thus afforded more conversational weight.

Megarry (2014) also compares online and offline behavior, using street harassment as an act that has striking parallels to sexist harassment online. Megarry writes that harassers, online and off, are often protected “by anonymity and frequently address women's bodies in a way which is sexually explicit and debasing” (52). As Jane (2014, 2015) and Megarry both point out, the online harassment of women is typically sexual in nature, whether it takes the form of sexual harassment or threats of sexual violence. Further, street harassment and online harassment might be aimed at one woman at a time, but the comments made reflect derogatory beliefs and attitudes about women as a group. Megarry identifies several common threads emerging from her analysis, including a focus on “stereotypical ideas of femininity” and women’s physical attributes, as well as threats of physical and sexualized violence (49). Megarry’s findings are in
line with Herring’s, in that the function of sexual harassment is to establish dominance over women, and that violent comments and sexist rhetoric often result in silencing women.

Herring’s (1999) work on the rhetoric of online harassment remains an essential study of how sexist rhetoric functions and what effects it has. Herring identifies patterns of sexist rhetoric, including explicit and overt sexual harassment, accusing women of censorship, and interrupting and talking over women. Herring’s goal is to study the “rhetorical mechanisms of harassment itself,” placing each incident of gender harassment into a broader social and discursive environment where the role of gender in shaping interaction is significant (153). This thesis adopts a similar strategy for assessing the content of comments left on news articles. Herring (1999) identifies five stages of gender harassment: the initial situation, the start of the harassment, women’s resistance to harassment, men escalating their harassment, and two possible final stages, which involve targets accommodating the group norms or falling silent entirely (156). In the examples Herring studies, women’s participation decreases by 30 to 40 percent in the face of sexist rhetoric; in one group, 80 percent of women who noted the hostility towards women ended up ceasing their participation (161).

Herring writes that in the initial situation leading up to an incident of harassment, “women do not intentionally disagree so much as pursue their own agendas, as if they had the same discursive rights as men” (156). Women in both incidents Herring studies were talking as if the online environment was the level playing field it is so often described as, which Herring argues is often seen as reason enough for men to feel they should assert their dominance. Women attempt to resist the harassment in each interaction, but Herring observes that no response from a woman was sufficient to deescalate the gender harassment. In one group, the sexual harassment became more violent; and in the other, more overtly sexist language was used. The choice of
sexist language in both groups during the escalation phase is also similar. A harasser in one
group calls his target a “bitch,” while a harasser in the other group complains about his target
“bitching” (158, 159). Reductive, sexist rhetoric was used to attack the women in both groups for
the remainder of the interactions.

Herring also notes that the tenor of the men’s responses shifted depending on whether
they talked to a woman or to another man. Men respond to each other respectfully, and talk to a
participant whose gender is not immediately known “as if she might be male and therefore due
greater respect” (162). The appearance of feminine names or other indicators of gender continue
to be relevant in online discourse spaces, and in how people interact in the comments sections
where a profile picture may not always be present. Men in each incident Herring studied end up
having engaged, respectful, and productive disagreement with each other, of the kind Weber
(2013) and Ruiz et al (2011) hope to find in the comments sections of news articles, while
women are targeted with repeated and escalating sexist rhetoric.

Despite the portrayal of the Internet as a gender-neutral space, Herring observes that
“women tend to participate less, introduce fewer successful topics of discussion, and receive
fewer public responses than men,” and that sexual objectification and sexual harassment remain
common (152). Herring also describes ways men can interrupt women in online discussions,
which occur when a writer extensively quotes another participant, but breaks up the text with
their own interspersed comments. Herring justifies describing this strategy as a method of
interrupting women’s speech because of how overwhelmingly men used such interrupted quotes
to disrupt women’s speech, and its connection to verbal interruption as a similarly gendered
tactic. Interruptions are a method of gaining control of a conversation, and in the absence of
being able to verbally interrupt women, men achieve the same ends by inserting their own words throughout a woman’s quoted comments.

Dealing with the various examples of sexist rhetoric is not without a cost. “Persistent harassment takes its toll on women,” as Herring puts it, and the outcome is often that women either change how they interact to suit men’s demands, or stop contributing entirely (159). Herring notes that “contributions by women steadily decrease and contributions by men increase …–a classic pattern in mixed-sex asynchronous groups” (154). That is, in mixed-gender groups, men begin to assume more control of the discourse as time goes on. Jane (2014) observes the rhetorical tenor of many online spaces is characterized by sexist rhetoric, which harms and can ultimately silence women. “By normalizing a hostile and hateful mode of discourse…e bile has the potential to reduce the inclusivity and civility of both on- and off-line culture,” Jane writes (542). Megarry (2014) notes that silencing women has a deleterious effect on women themselves, by restricting their personal and professional lives, and limits the number of perspectives included in public discourse.

Despite the valuable research already conducted on the presence of cybersexism and sexist rhetoric in online spaces, research is scarce. Megarry (2014) identifies “a lack of cohesion across individual studies, and no commonly accepted standards for data interpretation and analysis” as further gaps in the field (47). Additionally, few scholars studying cybersexism acknowledge or include any factors beyond gender in their analysis, despite the intersectional nature of much online abuse. Leaving out race, sexuality, and other factors of identity and their intersections creates a significant gap. This thesis cannot close that gap entirely, but will note where intersections of sexist rhetoric and other forms of biased and bigoted rhetoric intersect.
Women’s Participation Online

Women’s participation in conversational spaces, whether online or off, is affected by sexism, and the effect of sexism on discourse has come under examination. The stereotype of women as chatterboxes formed the basis of a significant meta-analysis, which itself inspired additional research into face-to-face conversational patterns (James and Drakich 1993, Brescoll 2011). Although early research into online spaces hypothesized that the removal of visible gender markers would also eliminate many of the gendered patterns of offline conversation, scholars like Sussman and Tyson (2000) find otherwise. The impact of sexism on social status and the socialization of individuals according to gender both affect how much people talk, and the end result tends to be that men talk more than women in a wide variety of contexts.

One of the landmark studies in the amount of talk by gender was a meta-analysis performed by James and Drakich (1993), who seek to unpack the stereotype that women talk more than men do. They select 40 years’ worth of research on face-to-face interactions in mixed-gender groups, concluding that men talked more in the majority of all situations, whether they were formal and task-focused or casual conversations. James and Drakich use status characteristic theory for their analysis, which argues that “individuals evaluate themselves relative to other individuals with whom they are participating” in a particular social situation or environment (286). Since men are afforded more power in social situations, James and Drakich argue, they are likely to contribute a greater amount of the discourse. Brescoll (2011) takes the argument a step further, exploring the concept by studying the effect of power on volubility between women and men in organizational contexts.

Brescoll cites James and Drakich’s meta-analysis as foundational in “identifying the unique contributions” of power and gender to determining how much someone will speak, but
notes that previous work failed to “manipulate power independent of gender” (623). Brescoll’s article covers three studies, including “the total amount of time each senator spent speaking on the [United States] Senate floor for the entirety of two different congressional sessions (2005 and 2007),” survey-takers’ fear of backlash based on how long they talked, and how people rated fictional CEOs, whose sample biographies varied by gender and talkativeness (626). Brescoll finds the role of power to be significant in shaping the amount of talk in the Senate, also noting that the small number of female senators “affected the statistical power of the study” (629). It cannot be ignored that having so few women in the Senate that it becomes challenging to even study them is itself a telling indicator of the effects of gender and power. Brescoll’s other studies also show that women are more fearful of backlash for talking, and that men will talk more than women.

Although interesting and valuable, James and Drakich (1993) and Brescoll (2011) look only at face-to-face interactions. The role of social status, gender, and power in shaping who speaks and how much is valuable information to have, but does not translate easily to studies of online spaces, which are often presumed to be more neutral. Sussman and Tyson (2000), in contrast to the idea of the level playing field, argue that gender remains an important factor in online communication (382). However, Sussman and Tyson note that “fewer studies have examined male/female communication across other media, such as…the less gender-conspicuous atmosphere of cyberspace,” and theirs is a limited foray into the topic (383). It is also important to point out that while markers of gender online have never been truly invisible, they were certainly less conspicuous during the Web 1.0 period in which Sussman and Tyson were writing. Even in that less visibly gendered environment, however, Sussman and Tyson see strong interactions between gender and power in shaping the amount of talk.
Social status and gender roles play a significant part in determining who talks more, regardless of the environment where the talk happens. As Sussman and Tyson predict, for example, gender differences in power and communication style do not disappear when people are talking online, which is likely influenced by language use patterns learned offline that also affect writing (384). “Discourse medium becomes irrelevant” when power and gender have already affected the ways people communicate (391). The Internet may seem like a level playing field because it separates participants in space and time, but all other factors leading to imbalances in power and status remain in place.

However, social roles can also lead to situations where women speak more than men. For example, James and Drakich (1993) argue that “the differential cultural expectations about women’s and men’s abilities and areas of competence” can create scenarios where women speak more, which suggests that gender stereotypes and their effects are deeply ingrained into everyday conversational situations (286). Specifically, women are likely to talk more when their speech serves to continue a discussion, rather than dominate it. James and Drakich believe there is a tendency for men to “fail to notice the social value” of speech that serves “socioemotional” rather than “functional” ends, leading to women’s facilitative contributions to a discussion going unnoticed (303). Sussman and Tyson (2000) also find evidence supporting that conclusion in online spaces. Although Sussman and Tyson hypothesize that men would start more discussions, they find the opposite result. They argue that, in part, women may have been engaging in an online version of “supportive work to prolong the longevity of a conversation,” even though men’s contributions were numerically greater overall (391). Sussman and Tyson and James and Drakich alike conclude that it is important to consider social expectations regarding gender and how such expectations affect conversations.
James and Drakich argue that dominance of conversation is more complex than men simply devaluing women’s speech, and argue instead for focusing on the “shared set of performance expectations” applied to everyone. However, the role of status in determining what kind of speech is coded as rhetorically valuable cannot be divorced from the ways sexism and social status combine to affect speakers and speech (301). Brescoll (2011), for example, considers the rhetorical choices women make when deciding how much and when to speak, finding even that women in positions of power are constrained by sexism. Brescoll (2011) conducted a study in which people were told to think of themselves as either the most or least powerful person in the room. Among her key results were that men who believed themselves to be the most powerful would talk more than all other groups, while women who believed themselves to be the most powerful would talk the same amount as women who believed they were the least powerful (632). Further, men who believed themselves to be the least powerful still reported that they would talk more than women who believed themselves to be the least powerful. The result, given women’s similar amount of talk regardless of status, is that even women who occupy the highest status position are likely to talk less than the lowest-status man in the room. Women cited wanting to avoid the backlash associated with talking too much as a motivating factor in restricting their own speech—a decision apparently justified by the results of Brescoll’s third study, which showed the most talkative female CEO biography was “rated as significantly less competent” than her equally talkative male counterpart (635).

Even with the stereotype of women’s talkativeness affecting perceptions of their competence, James and Drakich (1993) find that 42.9 percent of the studies they analyzed showed men talking more than women, with a further 17.9 percent showing men talking more in some circumstances. In only 3.6 percent of studies did women talk more than men. Sussman and
Tyson (2000) add to this finding, noting that offline, “across contexts men tend to be more dominant, both from a verbal and non-verbal perspective” (383). Sussman and Tyson also include the results of their study of online communications, writing that “it is interesting to note that the total number of male postings…was nearly double the number of female postings” when they looked at the amount of talk (389). Additionally, while men and women contributed roughly the same amount of discussion on topics coded as feminine, men’s contributions significantly outpaced women’s when the topic was coded as male (390). As Sussman and Tyson put it, “men had much more to say than women irrespective of sex-typed topic” (390). At the very least, men felt more comfortable taking up more space than women did, regardless of where the discussion was happening. The result demonstrates the presence of offline speech patterns in an online space; although women are stereotyped as chatterboxes, research shows men talking more in almost all contexts.

Determining how people converse in online environments remains an important area of study as we attempt to understand if online spaces uphold, enhance, or alter offline patterns of gender and power. Startlingly few studies have examined this area, however, which is a gap I hope to address during the course of this thesis project. Another weakness is the lack of intersectionality across studies of gender and conversation, since analysis looks at gender but leaves out race, class, sexuality, disability and other factors. When looking specifically at online spaces, Sussman and Tyson also leave out all discussion of the tenor of the newsgroups, never addressing whether commentators were deliberately keeping women out or driving them away from discussion certain topics, for example. As a result of these gaps, additional research into the role of sexism and how it shapes online conversations is essential.
Summary

Research into the comments section, uninhibited behavior and flaming, cybersexism, and women’s participation in discourse has been valuable, but remains incomplete. Studies of the comments sections overemphasize the potential for a democratic public sphere without analyzing the content of the discussions occurring. Scholars who focus on uninhibited behavior and flaming ignore its most troubling aspects, and leave aside the question of how offline biases shape online behavior. Examinations of cybersexism have not looked specifically at how women engage with the news organizations and the news articles that relate to our lives. Women’s participation, online and off, is undeniably shaped by sexism, gender roles and expectations, and socialization experienced by people regardless of gender. Few studies have looked closely at how sexism can affect whether women are able to actively participate in shaping discourse in the comments sections. The research to date has demonstrated both the possibility for democratic public spaces in the comments section of news articles and the reality of sexist rhetoric and bias online. As a result, questions remain about whether women are welcome in the comments section and whose voices we may not currently be hearing. This thesis represents an attempt to begin answering some of those questions.
CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

The present chapter contains an explanation of the methodology used for the study, which examines what forms of sexist rhetoric appear in the comments sections of news articles about feminism and women’s issues, and how women respond to sexist rhetoric in such spaces. The chapter includes an overview of the methodology, the basis from which the methodology was drawn, descriptions of the commentators and the websites selected for the study, and the processes used for gathering and analyzing the data.

Previous research into the comments sections, uninhibited behavior and flaming, cybersexism, and studies of women’s participation in discourse online have largely been focused on quantitative examinations of behavior. Studies have tended to highlight the possibility for conversations in the comments to align with the democratic ideals outlined by Habermas, but often focus on quantitative analysis of broad patterns rather than looking closely at the content produced in the comments sections. When online sexism itself is the focus of scholarly attention, few studies have looked specifically at how sexist rhetoric appears within comments sections, or at how women engage with major websites that report on news about feminism and women’s lives and interests. While the ubiquitous nature of sexism in online spaces has become clear, few qualitative studies have made an attempt to examine the types of sexist discourse or the responses to sexism that occur in the comments section of news websites.

Overview of Methodology

Three websites that report and often editorialize on news issues were selected for analysis for the purpose of developing a better understanding of the use of sexist rhetoric in the comments sections and women’s responses to sexist rhetorical practices. This study focuses specifically on
BuzzFeed, Fox News, and MSNBC because they offer comments section functionalities that all have differences in how commentators can engage with each other, and because each website caters to different audiences. Comments were gathered from across the 2016 calendar year from articles related to feminism and women’s issues, focusing particularly on those topics to help determine whether women’s voices are silenced on topics related to their lives, health, careers, and hobbies. As comments were collected and read, themes were identified and particular examples were chosen to act as representative examples of the broader themes.

Case studies were chosen as the best method for analyzing the material. While comments sections on news articles have been studied from a quantitative perspective, as seen in the literature review in Chapter 2, very little qualitative analysis of the kinds of discussions occurring within the comments has been performed. The existing research has provided a window into the role of flaming in shaping conversations about the news from the perspective of tracing interactions and the spaces in which online hostility occurs (Weber 2013; Kayany 1998). Although useful, a deeper understanding of the actual language used in conversations occurring in the comments sections can help provide much-needed context and focus for further research while also illuminating the current state of online discourse regarding the news. Further, while sexist rhetoric as it is employed in online spaces has been studied, the research is limited and largely outdated, and has not focused on sexist rhetoric in the comments section of news websites (Herring 1999; Megarry 2014; Jane 2014, 2015). This study thus bridges a gap in research into the comments sections and how comments are interpreted, as well as brings feminist rhetorical criticism of sexist language into a new space.

Feminist rhetorical criticism, as explained by Brock et al (1990), begins with the understanding that gendered rhetoric “reflects and fosters a gender-based class relationship” and
attempts to “describe, interpret, and evaluate the power differentials” associated with gendered language, such as sexist rhetoric (301). Drawing on the sociological perspective, feminist rhetorical criticism rests on “the belief that human issues are best understood as the creation of societal systems” rather than the creation of individuals acting in a manner divorced from external social influence (Brock et al 281). The framework of feminist rhetorical criticism allows for an examination of sexist rhetorical practices and women’s responses to sexism within the comments section of news websites while also contextualizing those behaviors as part of larger social patterns of discourse.

**Basis for Methods Used**

The methodology described in this chapter draws on the methods used by Herring in 1999, and builds a framework based on feminist and sociological criticism as described by Brock et al and Royster and Kirsch. While scholars like Lee (2005) and Lange (2006) performed qualitative case study analysis of flaming behaviors in online communities, their analysis did not bring a specifically feminist or sociolinguistic lens to the kinds of conversations under consideration. Lee, as mentioned in the literature review, cites an example of overt sexist language as an example of hostility without acknowledging the gendered component of the interaction; a lack of attention to gender as a topic for sustained analysis is common in research on the comments sections.

Additionally, the majority of scholars assessing online hostility turn to quantitative analysis to develop an understanding of the patterns of behavior in online spaces (Kayany 1998; Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2012; Lea et al 1992; McCluskey and Hmielowski 2011; Ruiz et al 2011; Weber 2013). While the quantitative groundwork for understanding interactivity and participation in the supposedly democratic sphere of the comments sections of news articles is
therefore in place, qualitative analysis of the conversations happening there are rare, and even more rarely do they focus on gender as a site of productive analysis. As an almost singular example of rhetorical analysis focusing on gender-based harassment online, Herring’s (1999) study was particularly useful for developing the methodology used for the current study.

Herring develops case studies examining two examples of extended sexist rhetoric and gender-based harassment that occurred in online spaces serving different populations and that had different goals for participants’ behavior. The case studies were written from the perspective of analyzing gender harassment using sociolinguistic rhetorical criticism. In describing her own methodology, Herring writes that she chose two separate sources for data collection because “if significantly similar gender dynamics are found between two otherwise dissimilar data samples, the chances that this is due to coincidence are greatly reduced” (153). The three websites selected for the current study were chosen for a similar reason: if shared patterns are found across BuzzFeed, Fox News, and MSNBC, which all have different audiences, different commenting mechanisms, and different political leanings (which are left of center, right to far right, and left to far left, respectively), the chances of the similarities in patterns of sexist rhetoric and women’s responses to sexist rhetoric occurring due to chance or the idiosyncrasies of a particular audience population are likewise reduced.

In addition to identifying patterns of sexist rhetoric across websites, patterns in the language choices of instances of sexist rhetoric itself are also considered for the purposes of the present study. Using sociolinguistic and feminist approaches to rhetorical criticism, textual analysis from close reading of the comments helps identify patterns of language as they relate to gender and gendered communication with the ultimate goal of increasing what Brock et al describe as “understanding of the rhetorical act” (286). Megarry (2014), in a similar vein, makes
a case for examining certain types of gendered interactions online specifically as online sexual harassment. She uses textual analysis of the submissions to a particular Twitter hashtag (#mencallmethings) and media coverage to argue for online sexual harassment as a framework for understanding online hostility towards women. Although not framed specifically as rhetorical analysis, Megarry’s attention to the gendered component and effects of language choices on who participates in discourse provided a model for the current study.

Rhetorical criticism, for the purposes of this study, is undertaken as a recursive process of describing “explicit behaviors, the means employed, the circumstances…and the social outcome produced,” evaluating the rhetorical choices on display, and writing with a social goal in mind, as Brock et al (1990) describe it (12). Approaching the analysis with the intent of understanding the sexist rhetoric on display as well as the effects it has on women’s responses and ability to participate in public discussion offers the opportunity to develop a better understanding of how the comments sections of news websites function or fail to function as spaces of democratic public discourse. Knowing whether or not women are being silenced within the comments sections of news articles about feminism and women’s issues can inform our decisions about what changes, if any, need to be made to how comments sections are organized and run. The methods used for gathering and analyzing data were developed with those goals in mind.

**Commentators**

The commentators chosen for the study were selected from the broader commentator populations on BuzzFeed, Fox News, and MSNBC based on their use of sexist rhetoric and the ways in which women responded to it. While the majority of people employing sexist rhetoric self-identify or are perceived as men, this was certainly not the case in every example. Identifying information on commentators was not available for each example, since
commentators on Fox News and MSNBC choose usernames rather than using their Facebook profiles, as is the case on BuzzFeed. Where available, contextual information was used to determine the likely identifying information of a commentator, and self-descriptions by commentators were taken at face value. For example, if a commentator’s username is John Smith or they refer to themselves as a man in the course of their comment, it is assumed they are probably a man. Identity tourism, where an individual assumes an identity not their own while in an online space, is likely in the comments sections; however, it is difficult to determine when this is occurring without tracking down and interviewing individual commentators, which is outside the scope of the current study. Other demographic information on the commentator populations, such as age, race, or class, is also impossible to determine. The benefits and limitations of this approach are discussed in Chapter I and again in Chapter V.

**Websites Studied**

The three websites used for the study were chosen for the purpose of varying the data sources. The study looks specifically at the comments left on articles dealing with feminism and women’s issues, as published by the major news websites BuzzFeed, Fox News, and MSNBC. All three websites have different commenting structures, different writing styles, different audiences, and different commentator populations. See Appendix B (133) for visual representation of the comments sections of each website. The variation in the websites reduces the likelihood that patterns observable across all of them arise from some factor specific to a particular website and instead point to a broader pattern that may be observable in many other news websites as well. Although it is not possible to generalize results from such a limited sample, varying the data sources increases the validity of the study and creates opportunities for future research. While these websites are not unbiased news sources, the identification of similar
patterns of behavior on each site despite the differences in those biases helps justify ongoing research into other news websites. A brief description of each website and its commenting functionality follows.

BuzzFeed is a digital news and entertainment media company, founded in 2006 by Jonah Peretti. The website features content created by users of the website, advertisers, and paid staff members, and ranges from quizzes and lists to long-form investigative journalism to videos and social media posts. According to Alexa, an Amazon-owned California-based company that ranks websites based on traffic, BuzzFeed is the 63rd most visited website in the U.S. and the 192nd most visited website globally, placing it ahead of Fox News globally and ahead of MSNBC domestically and globally. Whether people are watching for the latest viral content or seeking out BuzzFeed’s news reporting, the site is consistently popular.

Comments appear at the bottom of any given article page on BuzzFeed, and are labeled “Facebook Conversations.” Anyone who wishes to leave a comment on the article does so using their Facebook profile—if the reader is logged in to Facebook in the same browser, their profile picture appears automatically. Comments can be sorted by Top, Newest, or Oldest. Longer conversation threads are “nested,” with replies showing up beneath and indented past the original comment. Extended comment threads must be manually expanded once a certain number of replies has been reached.

Fox News is a U.S. news organization owned by 21st Century Fox. It was founded in 1996 by Rupert Murdoch and Roger Ailes, and has basic cable and satellite television news components in addition to the website. The website offers breaking news, the latest headlines, photos, and a range of subsections including videos, politics, entertainment, science, and more. According to Alexa, Fox News is the 45th most visited website in the U.S. and the 236th most
visited website globally, placing it slightly ahead of BuzzFeed in the U.S. and ahead of MSNBC in the U.S. and globally.

Not every article on Fox News provides an option to leave a comment. When commenting space is available, a link to the comments section appears under the headline along with social media sharing options, an e-mail option, and a print option. The comment box is at the bottom of the page, and features the number of people “listening.” Presumably this means the number of other site visitors currently on the same page, although the feature is not explained. Commentators must register to leave a comment on a Fox News article, and can do so with a Fox News account, or by signing in with a Facebook, Google+, Twitter, Yahoo, LinkedIn, or AOL account. Comments can be sorted by Newest, Oldest, or Hot Threads.

MSNBC is also a U.S.-based cable and satellite television company. The organization provides coverage from NBC news, focusing primarily on politics and current events, and was founded in 1996. The website offers three main sections: Explore, Watch, and Join In. Most of the primary news offerings are located under the Explore section, including sections specific to articles and material about Democrats and Republicans, along with health, national security, and society. The Watch section offers links to the main video personalities and segments, while Join In offers readers the option to follow specific writers and topics. MSNBC has an Alexa rank of 616th in the U.S. and 2,078th globally, placing it behind both BuzzFeed and Fox News.

Comments on MSNBC are located through a linked speech box at one side of the article page, which is labeled “Speak Out.” Only a few recent comments appear on the article page; to read the entire selection, a reader or commentator has to open a separate tab or window. Once the comment page is opened, comments are sorted into groups, which a commentator can join to keep up with a particular perspective or set of other commentators. Readers must create an
account using Facebook, Google+, Twitter, or register with MSNBC before being able to comment. Commentators can upload a user avatar or leave it blank. Unlike the comments sections on BuzzFeed and Fox News, MSNBC enables commentators to include block quotes from one another’s comments and italicize text.

**Data Collection**

After selecting the three websites to study, a date range for articles was selected. A year-long time span was chosen to allow for sampling across a relatively long period of time in the life of an article. Additionally, selecting articles across a year prevents articles and comments related to any one event—like the 2016 presidential election—from dominating the results. A pool of five articles per month per site was selected, with one article per site per month to be randomly selected for inclusion in the final pool.

Due to the fast-paced nature of online publishing, obtaining articles by searching on the websites themselves became impractical. None of the three selected websites offer an advanced search option with date limiting capabilities. As a result, Google was used as a data collection tool, since it enables researchers to isolate search results to a single website and a specified date range. For example, entering the Boolean phrase “site:BuzzFeed.com” and a keyword into Google’s search bar returns only results from BuzzFeed containing that keyword. Selecting the “Tools” link below the search bar and choosing the “Any Time” option enables a search within a custom time range.

Searches were conducted one month at a time using selected key words to help limit the results to articles on feminism and women’s issues. As previously defined, feminism pertains to a political, personal, and ideological framework predicated on the belief that gender equity—including social, political, and economic equality—is a necessary component of society, and
women’s issues pertain to issues and events related to women’s health, interests, careers, safety, hobbies, and other relevant areas. Given that there is a “lack of cohesion across individual studies, and no commonly accepted standards for data interpretation and analysis” of sexist rhetoric and online harassment, the list of search terms was developed in the absence of formal structures for ensuring the best results (Megarry 2014). A list of words related to feminism and women’s issues was built based on topics commonly associated with feminism and women in the news, current issues (such as debates about equal pay and abortion), and issues likely to be more related to women than to men. Key words used to conduct the Google searches thus include the following: feminism, feminist, abortion, reproductive rights, birth control, equal pay, wage gap, sexism, rape, women. While a much broader range of key words could have been employed, this selection provided sufficient results for the purposes of the current study.

Once the Google search had been performed, articles fitting the criteria were opened and their comments sections scanned briefly. Only articles containing 10 or more comments (not including nested replies) were selected for the original bank of articles. A smaller number of comments would be unlikely to produce enough interactions for examination. No cap was placed on the number of comments an article could have to be included in the pool, which created a wide range of possible articles.

When this process was completed, the initial pool of articles contained 180 pieces. Using a random number generator, the list of articles was then reduced to one article per website per month, providing a pool of 36 total articles and 6,336 total comments. Six articles from the final pool were again randomly selected and set aside for double coding. Double coding is a process for ensuring greater reliability in qualitative studies; it involves isolating a portion of the sample after an initial coding, returning to that sample at the end of the coding process, and coding that
portion again for the purposes of comparison (Baxter and Jack, 2008). If the double coded results are similar, the reliability of the coding method is reinforced. Once the six articles were set aside, a final pool of 30 articles and 5,532 comments was established, of which 812 comments were selected for further analysis.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis producing the case studies was a recursive process. All comments from the 36 selected articles were read in their entirety to identify any examples of sexist rhetoric and women’s responses to sexist language use and imagery by other commentators. The comments identified as employing or responding to sexist rhetoric were then read a second time with the goal of identifying emergent themes and patterns within and across the comments sections at BuzzFeed, Fox News, and MSNBC. The second reading of the comments was used for a coding process where patterns, language choices, and methods of using and responding to sexist rhetoric were identified and described. Six articles were randomly set aside after the second reading for double-coding after the remaining analysis was completed.

Once the second reading was complete and relevant patterns had been named, the comments from all three websites were organized into major themes that emerged from the coding process. Themes were selected based on particular language choices appearing in the comments that identified a commentator as employing sexist rhetoric, as well as the rhetorical moves women made in response to sexist language. If applicable, examples of active and passive verbal and graphic harassment, as defined by Barbara Ritter (2014) were also assessed and analyzed. For example, active verbal harassment might include a direct sexist attack aimed at a woman, while passive verbal harassment might include a user name that involves a sexist comment or stereotype.
As themes were identified and comments grouped accordingly, representative examples for each theme were chosen to act as case studies for the purposes of in-depth analysis. Case study examples are described extensively as individual examples in and of themselves, but are also contextualized according to their relationship to other conversations within that particular theme. Cross-case analysis was also employed where particular examples of sexist rhetoric or responses to it demonstrated connections between themes.

If we define rhetoric as the use of symbols to communicate and persuade, then the use of sexist rhetoric can be seen as a symbolic attempt to persuade others (including a targeted individual) to accept the belief that women are inferior to men. The conversational interplay becomes both clearer and more complex when the rhetoric of sexism is understood as an individual’s attempt to convince or force others to accept a sexist worldview, particularly in a social context where sexism is already deeply ingrained and acceptable. Objectification is not just a way of harassing an individual woman, for example, but also a use of language that communicates to other commentators and readers what the person engaging in objectification thinks a woman’s role should be. The comment thus moves beyond the realm of annoyance or inappropriate behavior and acts as a stand-in for a larger set of beliefs about gender.

By the same token, women’s responses to the use of sexist rhetoric can be seen as a set of rhetorical moves that challenge, subvert, ignore, or accede to the worldview laid out by the commentator employing sexism. Women’s strategies for responding to sexist comments are not merely reactions to an imposed set of beliefs, but, equally, can be read as attempts to persuade others to their own point of view. The presence of sexist rhetoric thus becomes a catalyst for the display of competing worldviews and beliefs, expressed in the often-heated space provided by
comments sections. This framework was kept in mind during the reading and analysis of the comments identified as containing or responding to sexist rhetoric.

Cases were then developed within a framework of sociological and feminist rhetorical criticism. The language choices and rhetorical moves were described as moments of interpersonal communication occurring in particular environments and influenced by social factors like gender, race, class, sexuality, and more. Each rhetorical moment was evaluated in terms of the language choices made by the participants, the impact of those choices on the conversation, and how the rhetoric used functions in a context where gender is a highly relevant social and conversational factor. Conclusions drawn from those observations and analysis are discussed further in Chapter IV.

Summary

The present study is a qualitative examination of 812 comments drawn from 30 articles on feminism and women’s issues published by BuzzFeed, Fox News, and MSNBC in 2016. Close reading of the 812 comments was performed to identify themes, and emergent themes around sexist rhetoric and women’s responses to sexist rhetoric were analyzed using feminist and sociological rhetorical criticism.
CHAPTER IV. RESULTS

This chapter provides the results obtained from the study, which includes trends regarding sexist rhetoric and women’s responses to sexist rhetoric within the comments sections of articles on feminism and women’s issues on BuzzFeed, Fox News, and MSNBC. The results review themes identified while reviewing and coding comments, focusing on specific case examples that demonstrate larger patterns of behavior. Information collected for the purposes of analysis includes the article title, commentator names, type of comment (i.e. whether the article used sexist rhetoric or responded to the use of sexist rhetoric), and a thematic categorization of the comment text. After the full body of 36 articles were coded, six articles were randomly set
aside for double coding. The final pool of content for analysis thus includes 30 articles and 5,532 comments. Results from the analysis of the comments are included in the following sections.

**Instrument Validity and Reliability**

Double coding of the six articles set aside from the original pool of 36 articles demonstrated consistency from the first round of coding to the last. In the initial round of coding for those six articles, 66 comments containing sexist rhetoric were identified and 13 comments responding to sexist rhetoric were identified. In the second round of coding, 80 comments containing sexist rhetoric were identified and 12 comments responding to sexist rhetoric were identified. Out of a total of 763 comments for those six articles, the difference between coding results was minimal, suggesting stability in the parameters used for identifying sexist rhetoric and responses to sexist rhetoric from women. While a more formalized set of parameters may be useful for future studies on the topic, the contextual nature of sexist rhetoric and women’s responses makes the development of such standards challenging. Any interpretation of commentary will necessarily include some subjective elements.

**Websites**

Overall, 12.2 percent of comments across all three websites contain sexist rhetoric and 2.4 percent are women’s responses to sexist rhetoric. Table 1, below, provides an overview of the total comments from each site. A more detailed breakdown of each site is included in Appendix A.
Table 1

Breakdown of comments drawn from BuzzFeed, Fox News, and MSNBC.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Sexist Rhetoric</th>
<th>Women Responding to Sexist Rhetoric</th>
<th>Total Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BuzzFeed</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox News</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3,734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSNBC</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1,226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>676</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>5,532</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although it is useful to note the amount of sexist content on the websites, the purpose of this study is not simply to demonstrate that sexist rhetoric appears in the comments sections of news articles on feminism and women’s issues. That sexist rhetoric exists is usually considered common knowledge, and the notion that comments sections contain bigotry and bias is popularly understood. However, as noted in Chapters I and II, little existing scholarship has looked at what forms sexist rhetoric takes within the comments sections or how women respond to it. The goal of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of how sexist rhetoric functions, what forms it takes within the discourse communities provided by news websites, and how women respond to its ongoing presence.

As noted in Chapter I, the results of the study are also affected by the choice of websites, given that BuzzFeed, Fox News, and MSNBC have clear biases. While these biases have an effect on the population of commentators who appear on the websites and the types of sexist comments they leave, merely pointing that out is not the goal of this study. Of greater interest is that BuzzFeed, Fox News, and MSNBC have remarkably similar patterns of sexist rhetoric within the comments regardless of their ideologies, which is a result that can be used as a foundation for additional research on other news websites and discourse communities.

**BuzzFeed.** BuzzFeed has the smallest overall number of comments fitting the requirements for inclusion in the analysis (100 comments), and is also the only site to have more
comments left by women in response to sexist rhetoric (54) than comments employing sexist rhetoric (46). Four of the 10 articles selected for analysis have no comments employing either mode of discussion. The low number of overall comments and articles cannot be generalized to make any conclusions about BuzzFeed as a whole, but may reflect reluctance to leave comments attached to one’s Facebook profile, or a lower level of engagement on news articles than on other types of BuzzFeed content.

The BuzzFeed articles selected for the study often have an explicit feminist or anti-sexist bent, and sexist remarks on BuzzFeed are almost always met with a challenge from another commentator, typically a woman. The interactivity around sexism stands in contrast to both Fox News and MSNBC, where the number of challenges to sexism is much lower. The interactivity on BuzzFeed may be due in part to the lower number of comments; comments containing sexist rhetoric are fewer and more easily challenged than on sites like Fox News or MSNBC, where standalone sexist comments are common.

BuzzFeed provides the lowest initial barrier to engagement within the comments section, since the site automatically detects whether a reader is logged in to Facebook and enables them to comment using their account; registration is required on both Fox News and MSNBC. Despite the ease of commenting, BuzzFeed has the lowest overall number of comments fitting the criteria for inclusion in the current study. Whether this is due to individuals not wanting to comment using Facebook, not feeling the need to leave a response to a BuzzFeed article, or some other factor or combination of factors is outside the scope of the current study, but does create an opportunity for future research.

**Fox News.** Fox News has the highest overall number of comments (3,734). Not only that, Fox News has the highest number of comments employing sexist rhetoric (442) and the lowest
number of comments in which women respond to sexist rhetoric (33). More than 11 percent of the total comments on Fox News articles included in the study contain sexist rhetoric, and of the 475 comments selected for further analysis, 93 percent use some form of sexist rhetoric. All of the articles selected from Fox News have comments meeting the criteria for inclusion. While most of the 10 articles from Fox News have between 30 and 200 comments, three articles stood out in terms of volume. One article has over 500 comments, a second has 907, and a third has 1,700 comments. The 500- and 1,700-comment articles deal with abortion and Planned Parenthood. The article with 907 comments covers federal funding for university research. Despite the topic not being one obviously lending itself to sexist rhetoric, the framing of the article (“Study of Glaciers’ Varied Impact on Men, Women Cost Taxpayers Big Bucks”) makes it a target for sexist rhetoric and specific sexist stereotypes.

On Fox News, sexist comments commonly stand without response, or are met with approving sexist commentary from other commentators. Sexist rhetoric on BuzzFeed and occasionally on MSNBC is challenged somewhat more regularly; on Fox News, sexism is often made into an aspect of shared experience to be reinforced or mutually celebrated. Commentators on occasion return to an article multiple times to leave nearly identical comments, reusing sexist stereotypes several times in the comments section of a single article. Some commentators also shore up each other’s sexist rhetoric, affirming it and their own place in the conversation by participating in the mutual denigration of women. Although most prevalent on Fox News, repetition and affirmation of sexist rhetoric within the comments was by no means unique to the site, and the temptation to categorize sexist rhetoric as a problem limited to conservative-leaning news outlets disguises how common and how similar sexist comments are across the board.
Fox News also has lengthy conversations that do not include sexist rhetoric, but contribute to the combative nature of the comments section on the site. On the article about the anniversary of Planned Parenthood’s founding, debate over Christianity and evolution ranges across multiple threads and hundreds of comments. Despite occurring on an article about Planned Parenthood, relatively few comments on that article use sexist rhetoric; the religion vs. evolution conversation is a more powerful draw. Even with the lack of sexism in those comments, personal attacks and side debates are common across that and all topics on Fox News.

While personal insults are common on Fox News, commentator identity is more difficult to discern than on BuzzFeed, as user names can be vague and few commentators use an avatar. Commentators with avatars often use a celebrity photo, sports logo, generic illustration, or a picture with multiple people. As predicted, the difficulty of determining identity is lessened by contextual information. For example, commentators “Huey guy” and “Little Lindy” can be respectively assumed to be male and female. Other commentators offer gender-identifying information in their comments. One prolific commentator on Fox News goes by the name Blunderbuss, and has a profile picture featuring both a man and a woman. During conversation, Blunderbuss refers to herself as a woman and talks about her use of birth control. Other commentators orient to her as a female speaker, and her self-identification guides how her comments are read and interpreted by other commentators and for the study.

**MSNBC.** While there are fewer sexist comments on MSNBC than there are on Fox News, sexist rhetoric makes up a greater percentage of the total comments. The tenor of comments containing sexist rhetoric on MSNBC also differs noticeably from those on Fox News. On Fox News, an article covering federal funding for research grants has over 900 comments ranging from mockery to death threats. The only comparably hostile article on MSNBC covers
abortion and anti-gay legislation, and the majority of the sexist rhetoric on that article comes from a single individual rather than nearly 100 commentators, as is the case on Fox News. That particular commentator, “Punishabortionmoms” (user name unchanged), is notable, given that they are responsible for around 30 percent of all comments containing sexist rhetoric in the articles from MSNBC. The commentator is discussed in detail in the section on violent threats.

Like Fox News, MSNBC does not require real-name registration. As a result, user names like “Punishabortionmoms” and even “NBC_10197327” are common. As with Fox News, however, many users do select gendered user names, such as “AnthonyVillany” or “Donald Raab.” Where applicable, these users are identified with the gender indicated by their user name. Other user names are less clearly gendered, such as Romanadvoratrelundar; however, when people respond to a user as though a gender is consistently known (e.g. Romanadvoratrelundar, sometimes called “Romana” by other commentators), the gender they apparently possess is the one used for the purposes of coding any relevant discussions.

What is relevant in noting the apparent gender of comments is not an attempt to determine the “true” offline gender of a commentator. Gender is an unstable concept that becomes even more mutable when expressed in online spaces, where obfuscation, projection, misdirection, and technological mediation of identity all come into play. A commentator’s offline gender may be impossible to determine and is ultimately irrelevant to the purposes of the present study, given that sexism is sexist regardless of its source. The importance of gender in terms of the results presented here is, therefore, an examination of how commentators orient towards gender as a relevant factor in the discourse environment of the comments sections, how commentators orient towards each other’s perceived gender within that discourse environment, and the role of sexism in shaping how discussions take place.
Sexist Rhetoric

Over 12 percent of comments on the 30 news articles contain sexist rhetoric. This section reviews major themes that emerged during coding and looks at answering the first research question, which asks what kinds of sexist rhetoric are used in the comments sections of news articles about women’s issues and feminism. The most common types of sexist rhetoric emerging from the comments are sexist stereotypes, objectification and remarks about appearance, sexism combined with other forms of bigotry, threats of violence, and women aligning with a sexist status quo. While transcribing the comments, I have left spelling, grammatical, and syntactical errors in place; any mistakes in quoted comments can be assumed to come from the original text.

Sexist Stereotypes. Of the 676 comments containing sexist rhetoric, 321 use a sexist stereotype. While many comments have sexist rhetoric categorized in multiple ways (for example, a single comment might have contained a sexist stereotype, objectifying remarks about a woman, and a threat of violence), sexist stereotypes are the single most abundant category of statements. As defined in Chapter I, sexist stereotypes include hostile sexism (gender-based insults or profanity) and benevolent sexism (gender-based stereotypes positing women as inferior but framing inferiority as a positive attribute). Both kinds of sexist stereotypes appear on all three websites, although they are the least common on BuzzFeed.

Hostile sexism often appears when women resist or appear to be resisting subordination to men, whether the women are featured in the article itself or are other commentators. On BuzzFeed, for example, a commentator named Albert Monk appears in two separate conversations on the article “A Canadian University Made This Blatantly Sexist Video Objectifying Female Professors.” The article describes a video intended to encourage people to wear sweaters instead of turning up the heat. The video shows a female professor letting her hair
down and putting a sweater on, at which point a male student stops in her doorway, leers at her, and comments on her appearance, causing her to giggle. In his first appearance within the comments, Monk commends commentator Sharon Anderson for saying she finds the sexual objectification to be complimentary, writing, “Someone with sense! Marry me!” Anderson is framed as having “sense” for writing that she, unlike other women, has a sense of humor and finds unsolicited sexual attention from men complimentary rather than off-putting or degrading. The compliment offered to a woman who meets Monk’s standards does not conceal the hostility he directs at women who don’t.

Several hours after his initial comment, Monk returns and leaves a comment on another conversation thread. In the second thread, commentator Arnessa Brixton points out that a male commentator might not the best person to decide whether or not something qualifies as sexist. Brixton’s comment reads, “Not your say, sir. This is far from a respectable ad towards female professors. There’re several ways to make a point, but not by reducing her into a giggling mess after a STUDENT compliments her damn sweater.” Monk enters the conversation in response to Brixton, writing, “It’s a fucking joke you bloody idiot! Christ get a goddamn fucking life!” The difference in how King responds to the two different women, Anderson and Brixton, is notable. Anderson is “someone with sense” and worthy of marrying for asserting sexual harassment is desirable; Brixton is a “bloody idiot” for arguing otherwise.

Through his comments, Monk argues women who object to being sexually harassed cannot take “a fucking joke.” The vehemence with which Monk defends sexist behavior brings research on uninhibited behavior to mind, and it is also not unlike a street harasser who goes from calling a woman sexy to hurling epithets at her as soon as he is rebuffed, as Megarry (2014) notes. The rejection of sexual harassment and Brixton’s challenge of a man’s comment seem to
be factors in escalating the hostility of Monk’s response. While Anderson’s acceptance of sexist
treatment means she is acceptably feminine, Brixton actively resists sexism and must therefore
be censured. Monk’s reaction shows how benevolent sexism and hostile sexism are two sides of
the same coin. Women are praised for meeting stereotypical expectations of femininity, and
attacked for any deviance. Similar patterns of hostile sexism occur on each website.

Hostile sexism also plays a role on the Fox News article “Study of Glaciers’ Varied
Impact on Men, Women Cost Taxpayers Big Bucks.” The article features a number of sexist
attacks on former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s appearance, despite the subject having no
obvious connection to her. On top of comments about Clinton’s appearance, there are also a
number of remarks calling her “frigid.” Clinton is not the only woman targeted with comments
about frigidity, however. Referring to women as glacial, cold, and frigid is a common type of
sexist rhetoric on the article, demonstrating how commentators make use of the kairotic moment
created by the topic of an article, the availability of the comments sections, and interactions with
other participants. Frigidity is framed as an amusingly topical response, given that the article
dealt with research on glaciers; nearly every one of the jokes about women being frigid is met
with supportive comments from other commentators.

Of the 143 comments containing sexist rhetoric on the article, 36 refer to women as
frigid—25.1 percent of the total sexist comments occurring in the comments on that article. The
most popular targets are commentators’ current or former girlfriends and wives. Some
commentators return to the article several times to leave new comments on the same topic, and
regularly affirm each other’s remarks. The commentator Montanagrass, for example, wrote the
following comments at different times: “Hillary is rather glacial,” “Some women move like
glaciers,” “Now we know where frigid women come from,” and “I know some women that are
as cold as ice, and resemble glaciers.” Several of these comments receive appreciative reactions from other commentators. One commentator even uses frigidity to make a veiled threat of sexual violence, writing that he has “met a few feminist glaciers that need a good thawing out.” The “if you know what I mean” is implied rather than spelled out, but the threat is clear. Corrective rape is often aimed at women who do not meet traditional expectations of femininity, and feminists in particular are often told getting raped or laid will end their feminist leanings.

Frigidity is a touchstone concept in the comments of the article, and the repetition shows that a certain amount of deliberation goes into connecting sexist comments with the topic of news articles. The outcome of the commentary is that women are repeatedly reframed as occupying a negatively stereotyped role in relation to men. Referring to women as frigid is a concept that is shared and spread among the commentators, who continue to propagate the stereotype across the comments section of the article and the idea of women as cold, cruel, or unloving is reinforced.

Calling women frigid in the comments on the article about glaciers also contrasts with how women are positioned when the topic changes. On articles dealing with abortion, birth control, and teen relationships, for example, sexist comments often imply women and teen girls are promiscuous and sexually irresponsible rather than frigid or unattractive. Repeated use of sexist stereotypes helps ensure the stereotypes remain a substantial part of the discussion within comments sections of the news articles, but the way the stereotypes are deployed changes depending on the context of the article. Although articles on abortion, Planned Parenthood, and relationships lack a touchstone meme as forceful as frigidity, patterns of contextually laden sexist rhetoric can be found throughout articles on BuzzFeed, Fox News, and MSNBC alike.
Context also influences the types of benevolent sexist stereotypes appearing in the comments sections of the articles. While hostile sexism often involves swearing, angry emotional affect like the use of text in all caps or sexist slurs, and negative generalizations about women, benevolent sexism takes a different turn. Where benevolent sexist rhetoric appears, it often puts forward reductive assumptions about women’s capabilities, such as assuming pregnancy and child-rearing are the ultimate act for women. Benevolent sexism is often expressed in condescending tones rather than angry ones, such as calling women “gals” or “hones” instead of “bitches” or “cunts.” Finally, benevolent sexism tends to reframe subordinate roles for women as privileged, or to remind women their rightful place is inside the home.

On an MSNBC article about rape prevention strategies aimed at college athletes, commentator Libfools writes, “Wouldn’t it be such a novel idea to not have sex while under the influence of any mind altering substance inside a frat house on any college campus…. Pants up, legs together…. It would sure be extremely emotionally beneficial for the young ladies.” Libfools repeats a common sexist phrase—variations of “keep your legs together” are used in the comments sections to blame women for everything from unintended pregnancy to rape to the downfall of civilization. Libfools’ argument that “young ladies” would benefit emotionally from “keeping their legs together” is a nicer-sounding example of the same victim-blaming arguments repeated in more hostile tones elsewhere. Although expressed in an almost convivial manner, Libfools’ post relies on sexist stereotypes about women’s culpability regarding rape. The result of comments like Libfools’ is a discourse environment where blaming women for having been sexually assaulted remains commonplace.

Another example of benevolent sexism appears on the BuzzFeed article “17 Badass Women You Probably Didn’t Hear About In 2016,” where commentator Hans Dirschberger left
a comment reliant on sexist and anti-Muslim stereotypes. Dirschberger writes that it would be “BAD ASS” for Muslim women to “stand up against being forced to wear a hijab or niqab.” Dirschberger appears to champion women’s right to choose their own garments and reject patriarchal control of women’s behavior. However, in arguing that “Muslim men force [Muslim women] to think it is” a requirement to dress a certain way, Dirschberger himself tells Muslim women what they should wear, how they should think, and what they should protest. Ultimately, Dirschberger ends up repeating the sexist behavior he accuses others of while positioning himself as an advocate for women. Comments like Dirschberger’s are a subtle example of benevolent sexism, which reinforce unequal gender roles and negative stereotypes about women and Muslims under the guise of offering advice.

Other examples of benevolent sexism limit women to the domestic sphere, motherhood, and specifically to being pregnant. On Fox News, commentators frequently use language emphasizing that a woman’s true purpose should be limited to the biological functions of pregnancy and childbirth. The hostile expression of this attitude is also common on Fox News, where it is frequently combined with anti-feminist comments. When expressed in its more benevolent form, however, the language shifts to praise. Commentator ByeUS1002, for example, uses both hostile and benevolent sexist rhetoric to outline their view of women’s place in the world. In one comment, ByeUS1002 argues feminists “think it is unfair in life that women have the ‘burden of reproduction.’” Here, ByeUS1002 frames pregnancy as something women should find joyful and desirable; women who regard “reproduction” as a “burden” are positioned as selfish complainers. In another discussion, ByeUS1002 accuses another commentator supporting birth control as attempting to “remove the beauty of the mother carrying a child,” shifting the language to one of praise for women who meet the expectations of childbearing. ByeUS1002 and
similar commentators praise women only within restricted boundaries, reflecting the narrow roles open to women who wish to avoid censure and abuse within the comments sections.

Blunderbuss, a prolific Fox News commentator, repeats a message similar to ByeUS1002’s. In a discussion about birth control, she says women should aspire to “get married and be faithful. Have a family on purpose, raise them well, and generally be a woman.” Blunderbuss’ framework only permits women to exist within the narrow confines of the home and the family. To “be a woman” means having children and fulfilling traditional stereotypes of domestic femininity; no other options are permissible, and a woman who steps outside those boundaries is, as Blunderbuss puts it elsewhere, a “selfish cunt.” Benevolent and hostile sexist stereotypes are often deeply intertwined, because praise for certain women requires making scapegoats of others. Praise for women who fit the mold created by benevolent sexism is often a cover for arguing that women who don’t are selfish, irresponsible, or otherwise flawed.

Appearance and Objectification. Sexist rhetoric places disproportionate emphasis on women’s appearance, and commentators use objectification to express dominance over or disdain for women. Objectification, for the purposes of this thesis, is defined as a remark reducing a woman to an object, most commonly a sex object. Some of the most common types of sexist rhetoric drawing on appearance and objectification involve minimizing women’s concerns about sexual harassment, making women’s appearance a major factor in whether a woman is worth listening to, and objectifying women and teen girls. The end result of objectifying language is to treat women’s actual voices and comments as irrelevant, which constrains women’s agency by making their appearance the focus of discussion, rather than what women say or do.
BuzzFeed has the least amount of appearance-driven and objectifying sexist rhetoric, but what does appear focuses heavily on minimizing women’s concerns about being objectified. On the article “A Canadian University Made This Blatantly Sexist Video Objectifying Female Professors,” there are attempts to minimize women’s concerns on the topic. Some commentators recast the objectifying video as either a joke or indicative of a compliment rather than sexual harassment. Although women engage in this type of sexist rhetoric, one clear example came from Andrew Green. Green writes, “Frankly, I don’t get it.... Was he being disrespectful by saying she looks nice in that sweater? … Is there really no world in which men and women cannot both respect each other and find each other attractive?” In his comment, Green sidesteps both the content of the video and concerns about how the student and professor are portrayed.

By narrowing his focus to a compliment stripped of all context and applying the compliment to all possible situations instead of the specific video in question, Green avoids acknowledging the problems the video creates. The issue with the video is not the dialogue, but the inappropriate nature of a student leering at an instructor, and an instructor portrayed as giddy and hyper-feminine once she puts on a pink sweater, but stern and unattractive beforehand. Green’s comment ignores the social and gendered issues of power and respect, reframing concerns as sensitivity about compliments. Green concludes by treating the problem of objectification as irrelevant, instead asking if “men and women” alike are even allowed to find one another attractive. Although not an overt example of objectification, Green reinforces an environment where women’s problems with the video and objectification are ignored. The ongoing undermining of women’s objections to sexist treatment helps pave the way for more direct examples of degrading language and behavior.
On Fox News and MSNBC, objectification and appearance-based sexist rhetoric are both more common and more straightforward than on BuzzFeed. On the Fox News article “Hillary Clinton, Gloria Steinem, Madeleine Albright and the Sad Sound of Feminist Desperation,” the women’s appearance is a primary target of commentary. Commentator Frankh observes that he is “so blessed to be married to a sweet, unselfish, (and physically beautiful as well) woman,” in contrast to the feminists mentioned in the article, who we are left to assume must be bitter, selfish, and physically unattractive. Others, like commentator Toolazy, went a more sarcastic route, writing, “these liberal gals are certainly hotties.” Describing feminist and liberal women as ugly and placing them in contrast with anti-feminist, conservative, and therefore attractive women is a common strategy on Fox News. The reverse occurs on MSNBC, where conservative women are made the target of appearance-based attacks. During a discussion of the relative physical merits of conservative women on Fox News, commentator FlyBird notes that feminists “don’t tan under all that body hair,” and fail to “trim their toe nails,” although he does not explain how he came by this bit of trivia. Associating a woman’s worth with her appearance, and her appearance with her political leanings, is a relatively common rhetorical move across many articles, where women who agree with the commentators are positioned as inherently more physically attractive. Similar to the divide between hostile and benevolent sexism, women’s alignment with a particular political outlook is used as a litmus test for perceived attractiveness and women’s worth as sex objects.

Hillary Clinton in particular comes in for attacks on her appearance, with Fox News commentators rewriting her name to epithets like “Hillabeast” or speculating that her appearance is what drove Bill Clinton to infidelity. One commentator, Hot Air Hillary (user name unchanged), uses a profile picture in which Hillary Clinton’s nose is stretched out to look like
Pinocchio’s after a lie, and the commentator refers to her as “the corrupt Dem cow.” Another commentator, USFreedom, left a comment about groups being “pitted…against each other,” including “Women against Men, Whites against Blacks, Hillary against Dogs. Arf Arf Arf.” The frequent and intensely derogatory focus on Hillary Clinton’s appearance shows how scrutiny of women’s bodies applies to random commentators as well as politicians.

The connection of appearance and politics is rooted in sexism, and many commentators make women’s appearance a factor in their responses to women they disagree with. During a discussion on Fox News, the previously-mentioned commentator Blunderbuss left a slut-shaming comment to voice her opposition to abortion. In response, commentator Wisbob66 writes, “She’s not that bright. Add that to her looks and you have a recipe for bitterness.” Ugliness and a lack of intelligence are used as reasons Blunderbuss must be “bitter” and can be dismissed. Rather than responding in a substantive way to Blunderbuss’ comment, Wisbob66 employs a sexist mode of dismissal common to both Fox News and MSNBC’s comments sections.

Women’s voices are regularly made secondary to women’s status as sex objects. While overt objectification is not a factor in the BuzzFeed comments, it is common on both MSNBC and Fox News. Women are regularly reduced to whether or not they are worth having sex with, and discussed in terms of their bodies rather than their words or actions. Objectification serves to silence women by making their bodies the focus of conversation and ignoring any other salient factors of discussion. One example of this type of sexist rhetoric appears on the MSNBC article “Why Rumored Beyoncé Biopic of Saartjie Baartman Riled Some Critics.” The article deals with the objectification of Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman sold into slavery and made a paid attraction due to her physical proportions. Some historians were dismayed at the prospect of Beyoncé’s involvement with a film about Baartman, citing worries about additional objectification of
Baartman. Commentator Frannie engages in her own form of objectification, writing about Beyoncé, “I see a boob job. God knows she can afford the very best, still you can see today what was not there yesterday…. I suppose there is no substitute for education, as it makes you secure and independent…Poor B …… dropping out at the 8th grade …. can she read and write ? barely I expect but she can sign her name on those big checks.” Beyoncé is portrayed as insecure and barely literate, with enough money but not enough sense to get a boob job subtle enough to impress Frannie. The perception of Beyoncé as under-educated and over-sexualized adds objectification to the discussion of an article already covering the issue.

Objectifying women is also common on Fox News, particularly in the comments section of an article about why women fake orgasms. A number of commentators leave remarks about not caring whether a woman enjoys sex, or encourage men to “bend her over like the dog she is.” One commentator, Fubar, provides a quite literal example of objectification, which received a supportive reply. Fubar writes, “Ever see the movie Cherry 2000? That day is almost here.” “Cherry 2000” is a 1987 post-apocalyptic film in which the protagonist has a titular robot “wife.” Cherry 2000 shorts out, kicking off the protagonist’s quest for a new body for Cherry 2000. The reduction of women to sexy robots who exist to serve men’s physical and emotional desires is a glaring example of objectification. Fubar is not the only man to bring up sex robots, either—on an MSNBC article about the 2016 U.S. presidential election, commentator Gary-89000 refers to Kellyanne Conway as a “fembot.” His comment is one among many implying Conway’s services to President Trump are both servile and sexual. Several self-identified feminists use objectification as a substitute for criticizing Conway’s actions. Many of the comments insist no woman would work for Trump unless she is also providing sexual services to him, which is a form of sexist criticism often aimed at highly placed women, regardless of what their role is.
As common as the objectification of adult women is across Fox News and MSNBC, teen girls are not spared sexualized attention. On the article “What Teen Girls Really Want From Relationships (Hint: It’s Not Just Sex)” on Fox News, a number of commentators fantasize about sex with underage girls, or describe the kinds of sex they image teen girls having. In a response to a comment about girls being psychologically damaged by feminism, commentator ArizoninEBL writes, “Hope they keep harming them because they sure give good h--d.” Similarly, Jim T. opines, “The girls with the super-religious parents are always the ones who put out early, often, and freaky as the day is long.” Another commentator, Hburrito, admonishes mothers to “take a look in the mirror” if their “12 yo daughter is deep-throating.” Although frank conversations about sexual activity are important for teenagers, it’s hard to imagine a teen girl comfortably participating in a comments section where adult commentators are writing about the kinds of sex they like to have with teens. No comments from self-identified teenagers appear, making the comments section a space where objectification of the population in question is permissible, but feedback from that group is not. Objectification reduces women to voiceless caricatures onto which fears, desires, and anger can be projected, while limiting the likelihood that women will be present in a discourse environment where such projection happens.

**Racism, Homophobia, and Transphobia.** Sexist comments do not stand alone within the discussions occurring beneath the articles. Intersecting factors of identity are made into points of attack, resulting in comments sections where remarks frequently combine sexism with racism, homophobia, and transphobia. Nearly 100 of the 676 comments including sexist rhetoric involve an element of identity beyond gender. On Fox News, for example, commentator Donny Doe writes that Michelle Obama had not spoken at an event “because it was not a transexual rally!” Comments employing multiple forms of bias demonstrate the plethora of factors that
affect the kinds of rhetoric appearing in the comments. While gender is the primary focus of attack in the majority of articles focusing on feminism and women’s issues, this is to be expected; articles focusing on particular groups of women, people of color, or other marginalized people would likely have a different emphasis in the comments sections.

Gender is also inextricable from other facets of identity, and these facets often mingle within a single comment. Commentator RWLDx2, for example, on the Fox News article “Why Women Fake Orgasms,” combines racism and objectification. RWLDx2 writes, “So far all the Filipino LBFMs I have had have been sincere. One after I had finished and laid back jump on top and said ‘You no throw I get mine now,’ man did she ever.” In this comment, RWLDx2 refers to Filipina women as “little brown fuck machines,” and recounts a sexual encounter complete with his partner’s supposedly broken English. The comment engages in objectification and racism simultaneously, by reducing a woman of color to a sex object while mocking her speech.

Sexist and racist rhetoric about non-white women did not cease at objectification, either. Commentator MayorofPoundTown (user name unchanged) writes, “For every Bristol you have a 1000 liberally controlled Shanequa’s giving birth before their 13th birthday!”

MayorofPoundTown combines sexist and racist stereotypes, including mocking black names and assuming black women and girls are hypersexual and “controlled” by Democrats or welfare. MayorofPoundTown also does not note any contradiction between the sexual activity implied by his user name and his decision to condemn the supposed sexual activity of black women and girls. In another comment, MayorofPoundTown doubles down on his mockery of black names and African-American vernacular English, writing, “Not too many conservative Barcheviuus and Shanequa’s! …. 100% of the ghettos in the red states vote for their free democrat handout in exchange for da vote!” The sexist and racist rhetoric in MayorofPoundTown’s comments frame
black women as ignorant, hypersexual, and dependent on the state—old stereotypes living on in the comments sections. MayorOfPoundTown makes the comments sections into a space where there are racist, sexist obstacles to participation, in contrast to McCluskey and Hmielowski’s (2011) suggestion that comments sections make participation easier for marginalized groups.

Although the majority of racist comments appear on Fox News, all three websites have one or more examples of anti-Muslim sentiment within their comments. On MSNBC, commentator Sickmim writes, “Don’t be so sensitive now women. There is more to worry about than abortion rights. Lets worry about the Muslims invading us as you worry about the small crap. Otherwise GET A LIFE!!!!!” Sickmim minimizes women’s concerns as “small crap,” and tells women worried about sexist legislation to “get a life.” At the same time, Sickmim attempts to stir up fears about a Muslim “invasion,” which serves as a distraction from issues likely to affect women’s lives. Telling women their concerns are invalid because of some other, often xenophobic or racist, issue is a common expression of both sexist and racist rhetoric. Invalidating women’s legitimate concerns creates an environment where expressing those concerns becomes more challenging, and provides justification for refusing to engage with women’s points.

Race, however, is not the only additional focus of bigotry within the comments. Fears about and condemnation of gay people and lesbians in particular are prominent on Fox News and MSNBC, although absent from BuzzFeed. Women in politics, feminist women, and women who reject traditional standards of femininity are targeted with homophobic content in the comments sections of the news websites. On Fox News, commentator City Inlaws describes Hillary Clinton, Gloria Steinem, and Madeleine Albright as “3 angry lesbians.” There are several comments referring to Clinton as a lesbian and accusing her of having had affairs with women. In addition to speculation about Clinton, two commentators on the Fox News article “Study of
Glaciers’ Varied Impact on Men, Women Cost Taxpayers Big Bucks” refer to “the study on ‘Why gay women are fatter’” (Handsome Jack and Tony Marriott M). The association of fatness with unattractiveness is frequently linked with lesbians and used as a reason for dismissing women’s opinions. Sexist rhetoric asserting women are lesbians serves a form of objectification; many comments employing homophobic sexist rhetoric frame women as worthless or non-human because commentators do not want to or are not invited to have sex with them. This form of objectification again asserts women are only worth valuing in terms of sexual availability.

The same type of rhetoric appears on MSNBC, where commentator TommyTiger41 observes, “the photo heading your report looks like a lesbian convention, little chance of them getting pregnant.” Numerous commentators on the same article, “Amid Backlash to Anti-Gay Bills, Abortion Rights Falter,” speculated, “usually the radical one issue woman who push for more and more abortions are lesbians. Go figure,” as C5183 put it. None of the commentators assuming lesbians are the primary supporters of abortion access provide their reasoning. We can guess the tendency to associate feminism and lesbianism is a contributing factor, however. Given that feminists support pro-choice legislation and people employing sexist rhetoric are fond of calling feminists lesbians, as seen throughout the comments, the connection seems clear.

Additionally, by connecting support for abortion with lesbians, commentators like C5183 dismiss pro-choice stances as absurd, since they also argue lesbians never get pregnant. Using sexism and homophobia as a tool for dismissing women’s protests and denying women bodily autonomy contributes to a discourse environment where women’s comments are also dismissed.

In addition to using homophobia as an attack on women who step outside of proscribed gender roles, transphobia is a common tool of attack within the comments sections. On both MSNBC and Fox News, self-identified men who leave comments interpreted as being pro-
woman in some way are accused of being closeted transgender women—the implication being that “real” men seek to dominate women. On MSNBC, for example, TommyTiger41 responds to Matthew Barnaby’s comment with, “Spoken like the true man woman you are!” after Barnaby expressed support for birth control. On Fox News, commentator Tony Marriott M writes, of a male professor co-authoring a study of glaciers, “He is a frigid woman,” combining both transphobia and a sexist stereotype. Elsewhere in the comments on the same article, BasicLiberty comments, “This guy must be a candidate for transgender surgery.” Within the framework sexist rhetoric creates, men who respect women as people apart from their function as sex objects are so lacking in masculinity they must secretly be women. Masculinity and sexist treatment of women are linked together, using transgender women as the punch line.

Transphobia also takes more direct forms, with commentators on Fox News and MSNBC mentioning which bathrooms they think people should use. As Lincolnhw put it on MSNBC, “I believe in equal rights for everybody but I don’t believe that should include using the shared bathroom of your choice as that impugns on the rights of others to have privacy.” Most bathroom-related stereotypes about transgender people are aimed at transgender women, who are positioned as men attempting to gain access to women’s spaces. Racist, homophobic, and transphobic rhetoric in conjunction with sexism provide a revealing glance at how sexist rhetoric describes the world and the perception of women’s place in it. Attacking people on multiple fronts allows those employing sexist rhetoric to denigrate many groups of people at once, and describe a particular view of those groups of people in a short amount of space. Commentators use multiple forms of identity to recreate and reinforce negative stereotypes within the discussions, contributing to discourse communities where it is permissible to attack other commentators on the basis of their perceived connection to those stereotypes.
**Threats of Violence.** As with homophobia and transphobia, there are no threats of violence on any of the BuzzFeed articles. The same cannot be said for Fox News or MSNBC, which have a combined total of 41 violent threats in their comments sections. A handful of those threats are aimed at individual women; the majority, however, are more indirect and targeted at women generally or at specific groups of women. As with objectification, threats serve to restrict women’s agency within the comments and function as calls to restrict women’s agency more broadly. Nearly all threats in the comments are framed as a form of punishment for women, and abortion is the subject most likely to result in threats. On MSNBC, for example, commentator Pennies suggests a prison sentence for women who procure abortions. Pennies writes, “Change is coming sweetheart. Extended stay cells for you and your fellow gals. If your lucky that’s the worst case.” In his comment, Pennies uses diminutive language to refer to a specific woman while leveling a threat of imprisonment as a best case future scenario. The role of punitive violence is clear in Pennies’ comment, and the condescending use of terms like “sweetheart” and “gals” serve to soften the tone of the threat while emphasizing the inferior role women receive. The sexist rhetoric both diminishes women and sends a clear message about what Pennies hopes will happen to them.

On Fox News, commentator Bible31 returned to the article “Planned Parenthood at 100: Growing the Abortion Business and Lawlessness” three separate times to leave an identical and threatening comment. Bible31 writes, “Abortion, would you view it differently if it were performed with a gun?” Although not a direct threat aimed at a particular woman, the presence of comments asking if shooting pregnant women is preferable to standard abortion procedures creates an impression of violence as an acceptable rhetorical move within the comments. Bible31
could be describing abortion itself as an act of violence, but the brevity of the remark and lack of any other context means the comments are just repeated proposals to shoot women.

Although less overt, another commentator on the same article proposes a scenario demonstrating disregard for women’s autonomy and the lengths commentators are willing to go to control and punish women. Commentator Perry Smith writes,

I’ve heard that one Republican idea is to create ‘pregnancy police’ who will test women at random to see if they are pregnant, then monitor them to make sure they don't have an abortion. They could do this at your home or at work. Fines or jail time would be used for those who don't cooperate. It was inspired by much prayer. Trump/Pence 2016!

The casually proposed invasion of women’s privacy and bodies is framed as desirable rather than violent, and, like Bible31’s comments, creates a rhetorical environment where women are a dehumanized class not permitted to make their own health decisions if they wish to avoid bodily harm. Smith’s proposal is reminiscent of Margaret Atwood’s book *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in which women are also seen as mere vessels for pregnancy and are at the mercy of a religious state. Corrective violence and violence as a deterrent are two of the most common forms of threatening sexist rhetoric on both Fox News and MSNBC.

Among the threats of violence appearing within the comments sections, the previously mentioned commentator Punishabortionmoms stands out. Punishabortionmoms left a total of 57 comments on the article “Amid Backlash to Anti-Gay Bills, Abortion Rights Falter,” 16 of which contain threats against women and gay people. On MSNBC, comments are divided up into separate groups, including the General Discussion group MSNBC provides for every article to groups created by commentators. The article Punishabortionmoms targets has 16 groups, and Punishabortionmoms is in nearly all of them.
The rhetorical style Punishabortionmoms uses fits even the vaguest definition of uninhibited behavior in online spaces. Punishabortionmoms frequently begins or punctuates comments with “BWHAAHAHAAHAHA” and variations thereof, a construction occurring upwards of 25 times. Comments often have random ellipses throughout the sentences, and words like “DUH” appear frequently, along with diminutive references to women like “honey” and “gal,” similar to the threatening comment left by Pennies. The tone of most of Punishabortionmoms’ comments indicates rage expressed as mockery, with numerous comparisons of Democrats to Nazis and comments punctuated by “LOL” and “DUH.”

Punishabortionmoms’ comments focus on imprisoning or killing women who have abortions, along with killing gay people. These threats involve references to God or the Bible, such as, “don’t blame the messenger honey … it is God who says that gays should be put to death along with other crimes of sexual perversions,” including abortion.

The threats against women who have abortions are the most blatant of any from the entire body of comments, not least because of the volume. “If women murder babies they should either be put to death like they did the baby or serve long jail terms … Plain and simple Women who murder their babies should be treated like any murderer” is a standard comment from Punishabortionmoms, although some stretch out to hundreds of words. While many comments are copied and pasted in several places, Punishabortionmoms also responds conversationally. Commentator Teddybarexxx (user name unchanged) leaves a number of vehement comments about the “CRIMES OF FORNICATION AND ADULTERY,” to the approval of Punishabortionmoms. As with MayorofPoundTown, discussed earlier, the contrast between Teddybarexxx’s user name and the text of his comments is apparently unremarkable.
Punishabortionmoms leaves calm, simple comments in response to agreement (“Amen, brother!” being a common one), reserving more intense tones for delivering threats.

One commentator challenges Punishabortionmoms on those threats, pointing out the incompatibility of wanting to kill people with a pro-life stance. Punishabortionmoms responds with an open admission of a desire to punish women:

   DUH that answer is so easy honey … I did not say I was pro-life … Innocent … defenseless babies who are murdered by their mothers and whoever is involved are criminals. Thus those who murder babies should be punished including taking it as far as being put to the criminals to death … as God allows … Duh they are criminals who murder and destroy society.

Although Punishabortionmoms occasionally says it is not for them to decide whether women should be put to death or merely imprisoned, Punishabortionmoms also “sanctions” capital punishment. Punishabortionmoms’ violent sexist rhetoric makes up nearly 10 percent of the total comments on the article. The discussion frequently shifts from another angle of discussion to disgusted reactions to Punishabortionmoms’ screeds. As a result of the prominence of Punishabortionmoms in the comments sections, women have almost no room for conversation free from violent sexist comments.

The outcome of violent rhetoric, whether from Punishabortionmoms or other commentators, is an environment where women must navigate threatening sexist language to be able to participate, and where women’s conversations are repeatedly interrupted by violence, which prevents them from continuing the original discussion. The rhetorical landscape of the comments section shifts when threats are introduced, as commentators respond to the threats or cease participating entirely.
Aligning with a Sexist Status Quo. Although sexist rhetoric is almost always used in conjunction with the association of maleness and superiority, the use of specific types of sexist rhetoric by self-identified women also occurs. A total of 26 comments appear in which commentators perform what I term “aligning with a sexist status quo.” When using this type of sexist rhetoric, women position themselves as supporting sexist stereotypes or describe themselves as being unlike other women (typically in opposition to supposedly humorless, unfeminine, or feminist women). Comments like these often garner approving comments praising the good sense and femininity of the woman who left the comment, reaffirming sexist stereotypes and implying male approval is something women should strive for within the comments sections and elsewhere. The outcome of this type of rhetorical alignment is to create an environment where commentators are expected to repeat and support sexist stereotypes, which are met with praise, thus making it more difficult for conversations challenging sexist language to gain traction.

Comments from people presenting themselves as women and aligning themselves with a sexist status quo occur on all three websites. Commentators employing it often use hostile sexist stereotypes aimed at women they disapprove of. On a Fox News article, for example, commentator Tink87 writes, “Women not managing the home is half of what has caused the problems in this country. It takes a STRONG woman to manage her home, raise and teach her children, encourage and uplift her husband, as well as all the other things women tackle. Going to work every day is a cop out.” Tink87 relies on sexist stereotypes about the domestic sphere as the appropriate location for women, praising women who fulfill their duties there and blaming the nation’s problems on women who have the temerity to work outside the home. Rather than supporting women or acknowledging the various priorities and experiences women can have,
Tink87 pits women against each other while championing a narrow vision of acceptable womanhood. The combination of hostile and benevolent sexism is used to justify negative stereotypes about other women.

Another commentator tells women to “Get over” sexual harassment, using language similar to the “get a life” comments often employed. On the BuzzFeed article about the Canadian university’s video, commentator Mackenzie Johnson responds to a sexist comment, writing, “Well said! All I could think was…. why are people so sensitive these days? Frumpy teacher lets down her hair and gets a compliment, is pleased with it. Get over it!” Johnson, like the previously mentioned commentator Andrew Green, strips the video of social and cultural issues of gender and power, and ignores that a video does not capture a genuine interaction but represents a particular view of the world. According to Johnson’s comment, “frumpy” women should make an effort to receive “compliments” by conforming to stereotypical femininity, and pervasive portrayals of sexual harassment are something other women need to “get over.”

Through her remarks, Johnson informs male commentators that she is not one of those “sensitive” women who takes offense to sexist behavior. The creation of a hierarchy among women, in which women who support sexist stereotypes are perceived as friendly and sensible, is similar to the use of women’s political beliefs as a measurement of attractiveness.

Aligning with a sexist status quo positions women as constantly in competition with one another for male approval. The metric for such approval tends to be how closely a woman is willing to hew to limited and limiting stereotypes about womanhood, and how strenuously she will differentiate herself from women who fail or refuse to meet those standards. Women employing this type of rhetoric rarely respond to other women unless directly challenged, and tend to orient their comments towards specific male commentators or men generally. The end
result of this kind of sexist rhetoric is one in which women’s comments are seen as less valuable contributions to a conversation and sexist evaluations of women’s worth are desirable.

Women’s Responses to Sexist Rhetoric

In contrast to comments containing sexist rhetoric, which made up more than 10 percent of the total comments, women’s responses to sexist rhetoric made up only 2.4 percent of the comments. This section reviews the major themes that emerged during the coding process and looks specifically at answering the second research question, which asks how women respond to the use of sexist rhetoric in the comments sections of news articles about women’s issues and feminism. Women respond to the use of sexist rhetoric in multiple ways, as hypothesized; these include explaining the problem, employing sarcasm, identifying sexist rhetoric, using a variety of other strategies, and falling silent.

Explanation of the Problem. The most common strategy women employ in responding to sexist rhetoric within the comments sections is a simple explanation of the problem. In using an explanation, a woman points out the problem with a sexist stereotype another commentator made, or redirects focus to an actual problem related to sexism. Women use this strategy 56 of the 136 times they respond to sexist rhetoric within the comments of the selected articles. The tone of these comments varies widely: some women write straightforward, matter-of-fact comments, while others take a blunter tone, using emphatic language, swearing, and sometimes personal attacks, accommodating themselves to the more hostile norms of the discussions they participated in. The key feature of an explanation of the problem is identification of an issue resulting from or connected to the sexist rhetoric appearing in another comment.

On the BuzzFeed article “This Teen Says She Experienced Rape Threats And Serious Injury While Playing Boys Hockey,” the commentator Sara McLean starts a discussion by
writing, “There are an abundance of girl’s hockey teams” the victim could have joined instead if she didn’t want to put up with abuse. Two women, Sally Temple and Nicky Samson, explain the problems in McLean’s comments. Temple writes, in response to McLean’s first comment, “She shouldn’t have to play female hockey if she doesn’t want to. It is coed hockey and a lot of female programs are not as strong as u may think.” Suggesting the subject of the article should give up on her chosen arena of hockey is not sufficient for Temple, given that the team is coed and all-female teams may not have worked for that particular player. McLean then reverses the source of the problem, asking why boys aren’t “entitled to a space of their own,” and writing that there’s no way the teen girl was “so good that she can’t find women’s hockey competitive enough.”

Samson enters the discussion, writing, “if someone talks about facing violence and harassment on the ice, the solution isn’t to tell them to just play somewhere else. Even if a girl ‘good’ enough, as you’ve put it, came to play on a men’s team came, the violence and sexual harassment that this girl faced would still be there. These things shouldn’t go unaddressed when boys are in their own spaces, because it never deals with the underlying issue.” Samson lays out the flaw of placing the onus for solving this problem on the victim, since removing one target doesn’t do anything to change sexist attitudes. While Temple returns with another comment signaling her agreement with Samson’s argument, McLean does not reply. After the explanation from Samson, the conversation ends. The result of an explanation of the problem is rarely a productive discussion with the original commentator; most double down on their initial statement when challenged. However, explanations of the problem provide an alternate approach to the issue in question and do not allow sexist rhetoric to stand unchallenged.

In response to explanations, commentators tend to engage in additional sexist commentary or pivot away from the challenge to the remark originally made. During an
extended exchange in an MSNBC comment group, commentator Pennies left a number of sexist remarks about women who seek abortions, writing, “Wrap it up ladies, then you don’t have to abort, simple.” Commentator Flowergrrl responds by asking, “Wrap what up? Are you insisting that women are responsible for men wearing a condom too? Do men have any responsibility for themselves? BTW, do you have any concept of the failure rate of condoms? Sheesh…” Flowergrrl’s response points out several flaws in Pennies’ comment, including the failure to account for men’s role in sex, men’s share of responsibility, and the ineffectiveness of Pennies’ proposed solution. Pennies, like McLean, fails to respond to the challenge to his argument, although he does not leave the conversation entirely. Instead, he starts a new comment thread and proclaims his victory over the other commentators due to his status as a “nice guy.” An explanation of the problem often serves to rebut a sexist remark, not just to the individual who made it in the first place, but also to other readers and commentators.

Flowergrrl is one of the more prolific users of explanation as a response to sexist rhetoric. Her explanations almost always employ hyperbole, emphatic language, or swearing when addressing commentators who are perceived to be men. Almost across the board, women swear less and use less emphatic language when explaining an issue to commentators they believe to be other women, unless the women they respond to swore initially. When responding to commentators who are self-presenting or identified as men, as Flowergrrl does, the tone is almost universally more combative. As Flowergrrl writes to Rob Carmike-22748188, “If you intend to ‘push a point,’ it would behoove you to have some understanding of human biology. Once you get that done, it couldn’t hurt for you to review family dynamics and get a freaking clue that many women that have abortions already HAVE children AND a mate…” Flowergrrl challenges the assertion “that women want to end the life of a weaker human” in her response to Rob
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Carmike-22748188, the aggressive tone of her comment increasing as it goes on. Commentators often use context clues like user names to determine each other’s genders; some, like Pennies, will ask their interlocutors their gender and respond differently depending on whether they say they are men or women. Although, as noted, determining the gender of another commentator is always an uncertain enterprise, the role of perceived gender in shaping conversational dynamics remains clear.

Gender also remains a salient explanatory point for commentators who want to establish an ethos as women to challenge sexist rhetoric. The commentator OldGrandma, for example, writes a response to commentators who say women, including OldGrandma, are wrong or lying about their experiences with miscarriage and abortion. As OldGrandma puts it, “Yes, there was grief, you unfeeling, dense ..man! You are a prime example of how pompous know it all men think they can tell women what to do.” In examples like this, commentators orient towards gender as a relevant factor in evaluating how seriously to take statements. The gender of a commentator becomes relevant insofar as it shapes how other commentators perceive what their experience would have been with regards to issues like pregnancy, miscarriage, or abortion. Having had that experience becomes a source of authority within the conversation, and allows commentators like OldGrandma to respond to sexist rhetoric with dismissal.

Sarcasm. When an explanation of the problem is not sufficient to either end the discussion or move it in a more productive direction, sarcasm becomes another mode of response. A sarcastic comment is often marked at the start with, “Yes,” “Yeah,” or “Yah,” followed by an exaggerated parody of a sexist comment, and sometimes ends with a more serious remark (e.g. “yah bra, who cares about sexual discrimination and rape culture? its so funny. why dont you get real on facts and statistics before entering a grown up conversation,” as
one commentator wrote on BuzzFeed). Sarcasm serves multiple functions as a response to sexist rhetoric. It allows women to express their frustration with sexism, provides an opportunity to highlight the absurdity of a sexist stereotype, and enables women to deliver a parting shot as they exit a conversation. Herring (1999) observes increased aggression in women’s conversational styles as a response to sexist aggression; sarcasm functions similarly in the comments sections. Women who enter a conversation with an explanation of the problem or a neutral remark tend to use sarcasm after commentators continue using sexist rhetoric, while some commentators use sarcasm preemptively, assuming the comments are always already a space where combative language will be more effective.

In one of the few examples of women challenging sexism on Fox News, for example, commentator Lightning6 uses sarcasm to communicate their irritation with a sexist joke left by another commentator. The commentator ZeroPolitics writes, “Hey wait a second…Prof. Carey might be onto something…women have periods and glaciers have periods too!…. (Ok to stop laughing now?)” Lightning6 responds with a sarcastic observation, writing, “Well, I would stop laughing, except, I have not started yet. Still trying to find something funny in what you wrote.” The use of sarcasm assists in Lightning6’s rejection of sexist humor. As is common in comments where sexist rhetoric has been challenged, the original commentator doubles down on his sexism, writing, “You must be on your period. Prof. Carey and I totally understand.” Although Lightning6 registers frustration with the initial sexist comment, they offer no reply to the second use of sexist rhetoric when it comes as a direct attack. Women tend to fall silent after offering a challenge to a sexist remark. While sarcasm helps point out the sexism in another comment, it does not often lead to further conversation.
Using sarcasm as a way of demonstrating annoyance with sexist rhetoric is not limited to the Fox News comments sections. On the MSNBC article “Trump Eyes the End of the Roe v. Wade Era,” Lloyd Barr writes, “There is NO need for any kind of abortion. If a woman wants sex for pleasure then visit the drugstore first. Period. There are at least 5 ways to prevent pregnancy as a result of sex. Educate and use them. The pill, IUE, abstinence, condoms and the after action pill. They work.” Although she does not point out the unavailability of IUDs or abstinence at most pharmacies, commentator Tina-698608 responds sarcastically to Barr’s double standard, writing, “Why does the WOMAN have to go to the drugstore? Answer - males are too stupid to do so. Your comment just proved that point.” Tina-698608 reminds Barr that women do not get pregnant alone, and expresses her frustration with a comment positioning women as solely responsible for preventing unwanted pregnancy. Sarcasm enables Tina-698608 to highlight the issues with Barr’s comment without treating his double standard as worthy of ongoing debate.

Sarcasm is effective for both pointing out such double standards and underscoring the absurdity of the sexist assumptions being made by another commentator. On the BuzzFeed article “Maryland Just Made Birth Control, Plan B, And Vasectomies Free,” commentator Kristy Williams writes that women should be “embarrassed” to have contraception covered through government programs, concluding, “we’re not even able to manage our own fertility without handouts from taxpayers via the ‘man.’” In response, Jen Strand writes

Yo girl, I’m really happy that you’re able to will away pregnancies on your own without the help of a medical intervention, but those of us mortals over here who are tired of shelling out every month because our medical necessity is considered a luxury are gonna go ahead and be stoked that our needs are being taken seriously.
Here, Strand uses sarcasm to challenge Williams’ statement about fertility management. The humorous suggestion that Williams, in contrast to “those of us mortals over here,” is able to control her fertility through force of will provides contrast to the real issue the article covers, which is that contraception will no longer be a luxury medical option. Sarcasm serves a useful function in this conversation by both mocking a sexist stereotype and redirecting the discussion to a more relevant point.

In addition to redirecting discussion, commentators frequently employ sarcasm as a method of ending a discussion or signaling their exit from it. On the Fox News article “Why Women Fake Orgasms,” commentator Degirljones observes some women might fake orgasms “because we’re bored and it helps men finish faster.” Commentator Jack54 replied, “Is that why you turned to women to satisfy you?” Degirljones shut down the discussion with her deadpan reply, “Only part time.” Her reply acknowledges the homophobic nature of Jack54’s comment by playing it up, leaving him with little room to continue the discussion. In this instance, sarcasm simultaneously ends the discussion and presents a challenge to the homophobic sexism Jack54 employed against Degirljones. A sarcastic remark again indicates there is no need for further discussion, and succeeds in stopping the conversation.

Some women also enter discussions sarcastically, positioning the comments sections as a place where sexist responses are inevitable. On Buzzfeed, one woman bookends her explanation of a problem with sarcasm, starting off with, “I’ll be the dope who draws fire” and concluding with, “I’m out. Flame on.” Sarcasm becomes anticipatory self-defense, since the commentator suspects she will be targeted solely for raising an objection to sexism. Opening and closing her comment with sarcasm allows her to build a buffer around the text while still making her point, both acknowledging and preparing for the perceived hostility of the comments sections.
Women’s sarcastic comments thus represent an accommodation to the more confrontational style of conversation typically accompanying sexist rhetoric. Entering a discussion already anticipating that challenging sexist rhetoric will be an act that “draws fire” indicates that the perception of the comments sections as sexist is pervasive, and that some women respond to sexist rhetoric by accommodating that environmental hazard while finding ways to make themselves heard.

**Identifying Sexist Rhetoric.** Women also use the identification of sexist rhetoric as a response to sexism. Identifying sexist rhetoric enables commentators to point out the biases shaping the comments, often by explicitly noting what language was sexist. Commentators responding to sexism use this strategy 23.7 percent of the time, making it one of the more common ways women approach sexist rhetoric within the discourse environment. Using this strategy enables self-identified women to name sexism and sexist stereotypes rather than attempting to debate or disprove them, thus acknowledging the limitations placed on them by sexism as those limitations are simultaneously subverted.

On the Fox News article “Most Americans Favor Late-Term Abortion if Zika Harms Fetus, STAT-Harvard Poll Finds,” commentator KTN369 expresses a familiar desire for medical and political overreach into women’s lives, writing, “I want to see a poll that identifies how many Americans think pregnant women who go to countries with a large risk of Zika should or should not be allowed back in the U.S. before being cleared of the disease.” Commentator NeverTrolling asks, “Why should we put these restrictions only on pregnant women? Anyone can carry the virus so anyone who travels to these countries is just as much of a risk to others as pregnant women.” As many sexist commentators do, KTN369 puts the entire onus of dealing with the problem on people who are or can become pregnant and calls for punitive solutions.
NeverTrolling’s response reminds him that pregnant women are not the only ones who can become infected, so limiting restrictions to pregnant women is therefore more about interfering with the autonomy of women than controlling Zika.

Another conversation on Fox News involves a more explicit identification of sexist rhetoric. The commentator HypocritesRBad (user name unchanged), in response to a woman arguing with men about abortion, writes, “1 Timothy 2:11-12 - Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.” The use of Bible quotes as a method of arguing with conservative commentators is common on Fox News, often to highlight a flaw or contradiction in another commentator’s stance. HypocritesRBad posts the verse from Timothy several other times in the comments of the same article. Commentator Melody Fisher responds, “Sounds sexist to me,” noting that HypocritesRBad is employing sexism against a woman while defending abortion access. As noted previously, many otherwise progressive men employ sexism against women they disagree with. Pointing out the hypocrisy of HypocritesRBad using sexism to challenge sexism is an especially recursive example of how identifying sexist rhetoric can make bias explicit, although it is far from the only one.

On MSNBC, commentator Ocib challenges Rawdoginyou (user name unchanged) for attacking women, given the sexism implied by the user name. Commentator Rawdoginyou discounts research on the problem of rape on college campuses and suggests women lie about assault. In response, Ocib writes, “Only a sexual predator like yourself would lie, not source anything, and use such a disgusting handle implying a refusal to have safe sex and expect to be believed. You disgust me and the majority of those reading your horrid comment…” The identification of passive verbal harassment, as defined by Ritter (2014), allows Ocib to draw a
connection between the sexism of the user name and the sexism within the comment. Ocib reveals the difficulty of establishing a good ethos if a commentator uses a display name that undermines their reliability and moral standing within the discourse community of the comments section. As Biber et al (2002) also observe, written sexism carries with it the implication of forethought and deliberation; Ocib makes a similar connection by noting how Rawdoginyou’s “disgusting handle” affects the general reaction to that commentator’s remarks.

Elsewhere on MSNBC, commentator Marina points out to a male commentator that telling women what to do while not sharing women’s experiences comes across as sexist. Similar to OldGrandma, as described in the section on explanations of the problem, Marina frames gender as a relevant factor in determining how another commentator’s remarks should be perceived. The previously mentioned commentator Lloyd Barr left a comment about there being “NO need” for abortion if women would use contraception. In response, Marina writes, “The day you can become pregnant is the day your opinion is maybe worth taking seriously.” Gender becomes a relevant factor in how Marina rejects the sexist rhetoric left by Barr, as she indicates that maleness prevents men from having a worthwhile opinion on women’s choices. In her comment, Marina argues that someone outside the group in question should refrain from giving instructions to that group. As she frames herself and is responded to by others as a female commentator, Marina has established an ethos that allows her to identify the sexism in Barr’s comment and offer a rebuttal to it. Commenting from a self-identified woman’s perspective is regularly used as justification for identifying and rejecting sexist rhetoric within the comments sections.

Commentators rely on the role of gender to identify and challenge sexist stereotypes in other ways, as well. On BuzzFeed, for example, Nicky Samson points out harmful stereotypes
about boys and men in a discussion about abuse of a female player during coed hockey games. Commentator Zeke Main offers a series of sexist comments about the victim the article covers, arguing, “This could all have been avoided” if she played on an all-girls league, and, “u would have to be living in a fantasy world to think nothing would happen to the one girl.” Samson challenges Main’s line of thinking, asking, “What makes you think [the abusive male hockey players] treat girls any differently off the ice? … Telling girls that they should expect and anticipate violence if they want to play with boys is a disgusting attitude to have that fosters that kind of behavior.” Samson identifies the “boys will be boys” attitude underpinning Main’s remarks, and points out that beliefs about the inherent violence of boys and men create environments where abuse is tolerable and where victims are made responsible for avoiding it. Identifying sexist rhetoric gives women an opportunity to unpack stereotypes appearing in the comments sections and to push for discussions based on real arguments rather than bias. Although identifying sexist rhetoric is not often persuasive as a response to the commentators employing it, the strategy creates room for women to acknowledge and challenge the problems with how women are framed in the comments sections and in conversation more broadly.

**Other Strategies.** While explaining the problem, using sarcasm, and identifying sexist rhetoric are dominant ways women respond to sexist rhetoric, a variety of other strategies also come into play. While sexist rhetoric itself is often stereotypical and predictable, reactions to it follow less well-defined pathways. From the remaining comments not relying on the previously discussed methods of response, two patterns began to emerge. While less prominent and clearly-defined than explaining the problem, sarcasm, or identifying sexist rhetoric, these patterns are observable on BuzzFeed, Fox News, and MSNBC, and are a potential area for further study. The patterns include supporting other women and rejecting and resisting sexist rhetoric.
Supporting other commentators who are perceived and responded to as women within the comments sections takes several different forms. Reaffirming the need for feminism, for example, is one way many women express support for each other. On the BuzzFeed article “This Woman Got Abuse On Facebook For Wearing A Feminist Shirt,” a number of women argue the responses demonstrate the need for women to advocate for themselves and each other. On both MSNBC and BuzzFeed, women respond to each other, ignoring sexist commentators or avoiding responding to sexism by making other women the focus of their comments. On BuzzFeed, for example, Sahra Noor responds, “Bravo, girl,” to Jen Strand’s previously mentioned sarcastic response to a sexist comment, but does not address Kristy Williams’ sexist comment directly. Supporting other women allows commentators to remark on sexism without having to engage the people using sexist rhetoric, perhaps as a way of reducing the likelihood they will be attacked themselves. The act of supporting other women within the comments sections can challenge the idea of the comments section as solely a space of hostility and harassment, although it is rare within the body of comments currently under consideration.

Supporting women can also occur implicitly, simply through the presence of an initial challenge to a comment containing sexist rhetoric. On BuzzFeed, for example, Hans Dirschberger’s comment about Muslim women is met with not one but seven comments from women who challenge the stereotypes and assumptions in his original statement. The commentators challenging sexism tend to repeat and reaffirm one another’s arguments while also adding new angles to the discussion, engaging in amplification as they continue to engage one another. While Dirschberger was challenged by Muslim women who mentioned the inaccuracy of his belief that they are forced to wear a hijab, for example, other women brought up the history of religious head coverings for women, as well as the “habits and wimples” worn by
Catholic nuns. Although there is too little information to make any generalization about this particular pattern of responding to sexist rhetoric, it seems possible that the appearance of one commentator resisting and responding to sexist rhetoric may act as a catalyst for multiple women to leave comments.

Resisting and rejecting attempts to use sexist rhetoric are additional modes of response women use. On a Fox News article, Wendy Rainer writes, “No one has to get your permission for a valid reason for a legal medical procedure” in response to a comment about whether or not women have legitimate reasons for seeking abortions. Rainer does not mention gender in her reply, but emphasizes the fact that other individuals have no say over someone else’s right to medical care. Resisting the imposition of a self-identified man’s directions on women’s activity is one way women respond to sexist rhetoric within the comments sections. Another example of rejecting sexist rhetoric occurs in response to what I term a “reversal,” in which a commentator switches the genders of a male aggressor and a female victim, and then asks if the situation would still be sexist. In response, commentators often point out the failure of such examples to take factors like social context, cultural values, gender, and power into account. One commentator reframes sexual harassment as a compliment, and asks, “So what happens when a female compliments a male?” In response, commentator Meg Childress writes, “We’ll get back to you on that when women are in the place of power in society and objectifying males is commonplace.” Although all objectification is harmful, Childress points out that there are still gender inequalities in existence that mean simply swapping the genders of the people in question is not a valid comparison; she also rejects the framework of objectification as complimentary, acknowledging that it is an act that causes harm. Resisting and rejecting sexist premises allows
women to dismiss bad arguments in a short amount of space, rather than legitimizing the stereotypes by treating them as worthy of serious consideration.

Strategies like supporting other women and resisting sexist rhetoric give women ways to disagree with damaging remarks about women and avoid giving such remarks any credence. Supporting other women who have observed and challenged sexism reduces the appearance of the comments section as a place where women’s voices are unwelcome, and resisting and rejecting arguments based in sexist stereotypes enables women to participate in conversations without having to debate their own rights and humanity.

**Silence.** Women’s silence is, for obvious reasons, the most difficult category to fully conceptualize. It is impossible to quantify contributions that are never made to the discussions occurring in the comments sections, because it would require insight into the mind of every potential female commentator who saw the articles in question and decided not to engage. Although determining why someone decides to comment or not comment on an article is a rich area for potential future research, at present we are left with only observation of what evidence does exist and educated guesses as to what is likely missing. Women’s silence in the comments sections, despite the difficulty of describing such silence fully, nevertheless speaks loudly.

As noted earlier, on the Fox News article about what teen girls want from relationships, there is not a single comment from anyone self-identifying as a teen girl. In fact, of the 159 total comments on the article, only five come from commentators who self-identify or are treated as women at all. While many articles, especially on BuzzFeed, have less dramatic absences of women, it is not uncommon to read through the comments on an article about feminism or women’s issues and find the discussion dominated almost entirely by commentators who present themselves and are responded to as if they are men. The absence of any clear inclusion of
women’s perspectives in conversations dealing specifically with women’s lives means men are often left to determine how people respond to articles, what topics are worth discussing, and the tenor of the ensuing conversations.

There are many reasons women may choose to not leave a comment on a news article, and we can surmise that sexism is a contributing factor. On BuzzFeed, where sexist comments are fewer and usually challenged, more women participate in discussions—including conversations that are not responses to sexist rhetoric. BuzzFeed, which explicitly promotes feminist views, has created an environment where more women feel comfortable commenting; however, even though sexist rhetoric is slightly less prominent than challenges to it, sexism remains an issue within the comments. On Fox News, contributions from women at all are few, and are often vague remarks or a disavowal of feminism when they do appear. Women aligning with a sexist status quo is most common on Fox News, and direct challenges to sexism are minimal and often garner sexist harassment from male commentators not involved in the initial exchange. More women participate in MSNBC comment groups than comment on Fox News, although conversations on MSNBC tend to be populated mostly by men, who are more likely to start their own comment groups and respond to one another than to a woman. Although these specific results are not surprising, given the ideological environment of each website’s comments section, there is a general and consistent thread of sexist rhetoric and the exclusion of women’s voices across the board. Women rarely participate for more than a few comments at a time on any of the three websites.

Commentators like Flowergrrl and Trudy6890, who appear on MSNBC, and Blunderbuss, who left numerous comments Fox News, stand out precisely because they do not fall silent after a comment or two. The majority of women who respond to sexist rhetoric within
the comments sections do not participate for a lengthy period of time, often leaving a single comment accommodating the more aggressive nature of the discussion, and then falling silent. It is also worth noting that while Flowergrrl, Trudy6890, and Blunderbuss leave between 10 and 30 comments each, they also continually engage in combative discussions. The norms of the discourse communities within the comments sections appears to leave few other options for women who wish to participate. Commentators who are regarded as women will either be driven away or carve out a niche for themselves in the discussion by matching the aggressive tenor of the comments. That so few women in comparison to men decide to remain in that environment, and that the discourse community is so unwelcoming to other modes of speech, results in significant loss of women’s perspectives on articles dealing with feminism and women’s issues.

The risk of essentializing conversational styles by gender when considering silence is great, as the conclusion that women simply cannot handle or do not enjoy the “Wild West” of online comments sections seems like an easy one to reach for. As Sussman and Tyson (2000) note, however, socialization plays a significant role in determining who speaks and what they say. Sexism already affects the social status of potential participants long before they scroll down to the comments sections of an article, which will in turn affect who decides to participate. Additionally, as James and Drakich (1993) found, men tend to be granted more power in social situations, and are thus likely to contribute more in the majority of discourse environments. Women’s silence is not merely the result of fundamentally different communication styles, but emerges from ongoing and recursive processes of socialization that determine whose voices are likely to be heard.

The overall impression of the comments sections is, like many others, that of a cacophony of male voices where women’s responses appear infrequently and briefly before
being drowned out once more. Women take up the least amount of space in response to articles about feminism and women’s issues, whether in response to sexist rhetoric or not, and face multiple hurdles when they attempt to join the discussion in any capacity. Entering a space already heavily dominated by men, where more than one in 10 comments will likely contain sexist rhetoric, is a daunting prospect. It seems likely that many women consider the potential cost and decide the risk of harassment outweighs the benefit of entering the conversation.

Summary

The analysis of the comments sections focuses on the forms and patterns of sexist rhetoric when it appears in the comments sections of news articles on feminism and women’s issues, and the ways women respond to the appearance of sexist rhetoric. Sexist rhetoric was found on all three of the websites under consideration, and takes various forms that are influenced by the context of the conversation, the article, and the news websites themselves. Common forms of sexist rhetoric include sexist stereotypes, objectification and remarks about appearance, combinations of sexism with other factors of identity, threats of violence, and women aligning with a sexist status quo. Similarly, women’s responses to sexist rhetoric appear on all three websites and are influenced by context. The most common responses from women are an explanation of the problem, sarcasm, identifying sexist rhetoric, supporting other women, rejecting sexism, and falling silent. Silence from women remains a primary element in the comments sections, although silence is difficult to quantify. Further discussion of the results and conclusions are provided in Chapter V.
CHAPTER V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The current study examines two primary questions: what sexist rhetoric appears within the comments sections of news articles about feminism and women’s issues, and how do women respond to sexist rhetoric in those spaces? Thirty articles were selected from BuzzFeed, Fox News, and MSNBC, and 812 comments were chosen for analysis. The comments were coded according to themes emerging from close readings of the text. Representative examples were assessed from the perspective of feminist and sociological rhetorical criticism, focusing on the behaviors, circumstances, and social outcome, with a particular emphasis on how participants orient towards gender. Results of the study are included in Chapter IV. This chapter provides further discussion of the results as they pertain to the two research questions. Limitations of the study are included, along with recommendations for future research and final conclusions.

The results of the study confirmed the first hypothesis and partially confirmed the second, and offer a number of interesting implications for future research. Hypothesis one predicted that sexist rhetoric will include the use of hostile and benevolent sexism, gender-based and sexual harassment, and implied or overt threats of violence, all of which were observed within the comments. Hypothesis two predicted that women’s responses will take the form of passive language and stances, accommodating aggressive conversational norms, or ceasing to participate. While some passive language and stances were observed, these were not common enough to confirm that portion of the hypothesis; however, accommodating aggressive conversational norms and ceasing to participate, among other responses, were common. The results and implications of the study are discussed further in the following sections.
Websites

All three websites had slightly different expressions of sexist rhetoric, which are likely related to ideological characteristics of the sites themselves, the composition of the audiences, and the ways participants leave comments (i.e. through a Facebook profile or in a quasi-anonymous fashion). Despite the differences, sexist rhetoric is prevalent in the comments sections of all three. Regardless of any other factors, sexism as a rhetorical feature of discussions about feminism and women’s issues remains common.

**BuzzFeed.** BuzzFeed was the only website to have more comments challenging sexist rhetoric than comments employing it. The site also lacked homophobic comments and threats of violence, which appear on both MSNBC and Fox News; comments employing sexism in conjunction with racism do appear on BuzzFeed. While BuzzFeed takes an explicitly feminist approach to how it frames and reports on news stories, their branding as a feminist news organization is complicated by articles that run counter to that image.

It seems likely that BuzzFeed’s commentator population is shaped by the site’s reputation as well as the fact that all comments must be left through one’s Facebook account. Despite the bias of the site, however, sexism still appears regularly within the comments sections, and follows markedly similar patterns to the types of sexism appearing on Fox News and MSNBC. No matter what direction a site leans politically, it seems that sexism is inescapable.

**Fox News.** Fox News had the highest number of comments, as well as the highest number of comments containing sexist rhetoric and the smallest number of women responding to sexist rhetoric. As a result, comments employing sexist rhetoric often stand without any challenge from other commentators; many receive supportive feedback. The site’s ideological leaning and framing of articles shape how commentators engage within the comments sections.
Although it is easy to assume Fox News is unique in terms of sexist rhetoric due to the association of conservative politics and sexism, MSNBC in reality has a higher percentage of comments containing sexist rhetoric, and all three sites have predictable patterns of sexist rhetoric. The factors that lead to Fox News having a more active commentator population are outside the current study, but an understanding of how Fox News encourages more engagement than either other site represents an area of potential future research.

**MSNBC.** MSNBC has fewer overall comments than Fox News, but a higher percentage of comments that contain sexist rhetoric when compared to either Fox News or BuzzFeed. Comments on MSNBC tended to involve more benevolent sexist stereotypes than hostile sexist stereotypes, although commentator Punishabortionmoms dramatically skewed those results given the sheer volume of comments they left on a single article.

As with BuzzFeed, a left-leaning bias does not exempt MSNBC from having sexist rhetoric within the comments sections. Comments on MSNBC also demonstrated that the language of sexist stereotypes remains consistent across political ideologies. With all three sites viewed as a group, it seems likely that any site, regardless of bias, will have some measure of sexist commentary within its discussion group.

**Sexist Rhetoric**

While the study does demonstrate that sexism is inevitable, it is also important to consider what forms that sexist rhetoric takes, how sexist rhetoric is shaped by context, and examine its consistencies and differences across websites and audiences. The present study is not intended to merely confirm what most readers of online news already assume about sexism appearing in the comments sections, but to deepen our understanding of how that sexist rhetoric functions within those spaces. The results may also challenge assumptions about where such
rhetoric is most likely to appear. The sexist rhetoric itself is not a surprise, and the study helps begin to close gaps in research on the comments sections themselves, where sexism has not yet been examined.

**Sexist Stereotypes.** Sexist stereotypes are often used in conjunction with other forms of sexist rhetoric, such as objectification, and tend to take shape in response to the topic of the article. Sexist stereotypes remain the most common form of sexist rhetoric across BuzzFeed, Fox News, and MSNBC. Although Fox News had the highest overall amount of sexist comments, BuzzFeed and MSNBC both have sexist stereotypes prominently featured in their comments sections. Sexist stereotypes are contextual; for example, an article about funding glacier research has a high percentage of comments about “frigid women,” while articles about pregnancy or birth control have more comments disparaging women who have sex for pleasure.

Sexist stereotypes function by repeatedly making women into a marginalized class of people. Women’s humanity is collapsed into limited forms, and then judged based on whether individual women manage to fit into those molds. Benevolent sexist rhetoric rewards and praises women who do, and provides justification for the deployment of hostile sexist rhetoric against women who reject or otherwise fail to meet those standards. McCluskey and Hmielowski (2011) write that the comments sections are a safer conversational environment for marginalized participants, particularly women, because of the reduction of formal gatekeepers, but the sexist stereotyping of women is an online barrier that impedes women’s participation. The presence of sexist rhetoric challenges any notion of the comments sections being a level playing field, and the prevalence of sexist stereotypes across all three websites is a reminder that sexism is a deeply rooted social phenomenon not limited to one particular ideology.
Appearance and Objectification. After sexist stereotypes, comments reducing women to sex objects and evaluation their worth based on their appearance are the second most common type of sexist remarks within the comments sections studied. Whether a woman is considered attractive is often explicitly linked to her political beliefs, which is a form of sexism employed by both right- and left-leaning commentators. Comments on articles criticizing objectification even contained examples of objectifying commentary. The comments sections on all three websites included in the present study had a disproportionate focus on women’s bodies and appearance over their words and actions.

As Herring (1999) observed, sexual objectification and sexual harassment remain major features of online discourse, even when the interlocutors do not actually know what the targeted woman looks like. Objectification functions by making women into a secondary and dehumanized class whose purpose is limited to pleasing male onlookers. Focusing on appearance over the content of a woman’s comments makes her words irrelevant before they even appear, and may be a contributor in making the comments sections of news articles unwelcoming to women. Basing a woman’s worth on her appearance reinforces the sexist stereotypes that also appear in the comments, and creates discourse communities where women’s contributions will occur against a preexisting backdrop of dismissal, or, at best, unasked-for physical evaluation and attention.

Racism, Homophobia, and Transphobia. Around one in seven comments containing sexist rhetoric also drew on another factor of a target’s identity, such as race, sexuality, or whether someone is or might be transgender. Comments invoking racist stereotypes often frame women of color as hypersexual, while remarks about sexuality are used to criticize women framed as lesbians for not being sexually available or for being perceived as unattractive. Attacks
on commentators perceived as men often involved an element of transphobia. In that context, transphobia functioned as a method of denying other men access to masculinity, which is often implicitly connected to hatred of women. The stereotypes associated with racism, homophobia, and transphobia are common within the comments sections.

Given that comments combining gender and other factors of identity are prevalent across BuzzFeed, Fox News, and MSNBC articles, it seems likely that articles focusing on race, sexuality, or gender as a primary topic will have comments focusing primarily on those axes of identity as well. Negative commentary about marginalized groups is a universal feature of the comments sections, which can make the comments particularly fraught discursive territory for members of those groups. Participation in the comments sections forces people to navigate a discourse environment where they may be attacked on multiple fronts, and, as Jane (2014) points out, the knowledge that one is likely to be confronted with harassment contributes to keeping people from engaging in the first place.

**Threats of Violence.** Although absent from BuzzFeed’s comments sections, threats of violence aimed at women appear on both Fox News and MSNBC. Women who support and seek abortions are most frequently made the target of such threats. Violence within the comments is often framed as a justifiable deterrent and punitive measure for women who do not meet certain expectations of stereotypical femininity. One commentator, Punishabortionmoms, was responsible for leaving nearly 50 percent of the total threats; women who have abortions and gay and lesbian people were the primary targets of Punishabortionmoms’ comments.

Threats of violence again position women as second-class citizens, especially when threats are leveled in response to the idea of women exercising bodily autonomy. The presence of threats in the comments also makes it impossible for comments sections containing them to
meet the criteria Ruiz et al (2011) lay out for a space to produce democratic discourse. Threats of violence make it impossible for all commentators to safely express their “opinions, desires, and needs,” as Ruiz et al put it, which they describe as an important component of productive conversation (466). A threat of violence also fails to meet their criteria for only introducing relevant topics of discussion, since the result of threats and acts of violence is ending speech. The ongoing appearance of sexist threats in the comments sections of news articles thus presents a serious challenge to any conceptualization of these discourse communities as democratic or lacking in barriers to women’s engagement. As with harassment around issues of identity, the knowledge that one will face violent language within the comments sections likely contributes to reducing women’s participation.

**Aligning with a Sexist Status Quo.** Within the comments sections of all three websites, women leave comments expressing support for a status quo that limits women’s rights. Although describing these comments as coming from women is inherently open to challenges based on the instability of gender in online spaces, comments aligning with a sexist status quo frequently come from people who present themselves as and are responded to as if they are women. Such comments represent an extreme accommodation to sexist conversational norms and expectations, and typically glorify women who stay within the domestic sphere while vilifying women who work outside the home. The comments also tend to position women who challenge sexist treatment as humorless and unattractive.

As noted, whether the people leaving such comments are “really” women is both impossible to determine and ultimately irrelevant. Of greater interest is how other commentators perceive and respond to those comments, as well as how those interactions reinforce the appearance of the comments sections as space where sexism is tolerated. Commentators who are
regarded as women and who accept or celebrate sexist treatment receive very different responses than commentators who are regarded as women and who reject or challenge sexist treatment. Gender remains a salient factor in how commentators interact with each other, and sexism continues to play a major role in that process. Herring (1999) observes similar behavior in her study, where a commentator with indeterminate gender received more cautious treatment, while more obviously gendered participants received either harassment (if they were women) or respectful engagement (if they were men). The ongoing disparity in how women are treated within the comments sections likely affects who chooses to enter the discussion and how they present themselves.

Women’s Responses to Sexist Rhetoric

Compared to the overall volume of comments and the volume of comments containing sexist rhetoric, women’s responses to sexist rhetoric are few and far between. Despite their scarcity, however, a number of interesting patterns emerge when we pay close attention to what responses women give to sexist rhetoric and when we start to look for what we do not see in terms of women’s participation. These patterns include, as reviewed in Chapter IV, explaining the problem, using sarcasm, identifying sexist rhetoric, using a variety of other strategies, and falling silent.

Explanation of the Problem. The most common approach women take to sexist rhetoric is an explanation of the problem. This form of response serves to redirect discussions towards the original topic of the article or to a relevant explanation of why an act or statement is sexist. An explanation sometimes includes multiple additional comments from women, who contribute their own experiences or perspectives to the discussion. Responses from the original commentator
who left the sexist remark are rare; those who do reply usually escalate the aggression of the discussion or double down on the sexism.

Explanations serve a valuable function within the comments by preventing a sexist comment from going unchallenged, and signaling that some spaces are safe for women’s responses. It seems possible that this is why women’s explanatory reactions tend to cluster around a particular comment, as it may involve an awareness of safety in numbers. Certain characteristics of the sexist rhetoric may also play a role in who decides to respond and why. The presence of any challenges to sexist rhetoric help make the comments sections at least somewhat more welcoming to women’s participation, although that participation is often still focused on sexism rather than women’s own discussions.

**Sarcasm.** Sarcastic responses to sexist rhetoric are the second most common reaction within the comments sections. Sarcasm is often used in a way that highlights a particular sexist remark or stereotype, and is often followed by a more serious observation. Commentators also use sarcasm as a way of signaling their exit from a particular discussion, and to frame the comments sections as always already hostile to the challenge to sexism they are about to make. Sarcasm thus allows women to acknowledge that they are entering or leaving a conversation with full awareness of likely reactions.

The use of sarcasm frequently signals an accommodation to more aggressive conversational norms, as women either begin a discussion with a more neutral remark and escalate the tone of a reply after encountering sexism, or respond to overt sexism by matching its tenor through sarcasm. Given the number of sarcastic responses to sexist rhetoric, it seems likely that women do not expect substantive interactions within the comments sections, but still look for ways they can make their points heard. The low rate of interactivity in conversations
involving sarcasm seems to align with Weber’s (2014) finding that comments sections generally do not produce extensive discussions between commentators.

**Identifying Sexist Rhetoric.** In addition to explaining the problem, a number of commentators explicitly identify sexist rhetoric as such. How commentators position their own gender and the gender of other commentators is a relevant factor in these scenarios, as women tend to use womanhood to establish an ethos that allows them to name and call attention to sexist rhetoric. Identifying sexist rhetoric as sexist helps some women push for more relevant forms of discussion within the comments sections.

Gender and power are, as Sussman and Tyson (2000) and James and Drakich (1993) also found, intertwined and relevant in determining who talks, how much, and what they can say. Self-identifying as women and challenging sexist rhetoric by positioning womanhood as a source of authority is one way commentators use gender to shape the direction of discussion within the comments sections. The “real” gender of commentators again becomes less relevant than the gendered interplay of how individuals engage with each other and with sexist language in the comments sections of news articles. Identifying and challenging sexist rhetoric helps create spaces within the comments where sexism is rejected on the basis of its harmful nature, rather than having sexist stereotypes debated on their own merit.

**Other Strategies.** Women’s other strategies for responding to sexist rhetoric take many forms, which can be broadly conceptualized as supporting other women and resisting and rejecting sexism. Supporting other women often takes the form of a woman leaving a response to a comment challenging sexist rhetoric, but not directly addressing the original comment or commentator. Resisting and rejecting sexism tends to involve an identification of sexist rhetoric and a refusal to accept the premise on which it is based.
Although fewer in number than the preceding types of responses, these two patterns indicate some of the additional ways women’s presence in the comments sections takes shape. Supporting other women may be a way for women to engage in discussion without directly engaging a sexist commentator. It also helps make the comments sections, however briefly, into a space where women are able to engage with and support one another, which sexist stereotypes make more difficult. Resisting and rejecting sexist rhetoric takes a more active approach, and also helps prevent sexist stereotypes and language from standing unchallenged within the comments. Both methods of responding model alternative pathways women can follow when considering entering a discussion.

**Silence.** As noted in Chapter IV, women’s silence within the comments sections is the most difficult response to quantify, because measuring an absence is outside the realm of possibility. However, it is easier to observe silence by comparing it to what is present. Within the results obtained for the current study, few women comment at all, fewer still respond to sexist rhetoric, and the vast majority of women stop participating after a comment or two. While few commentators employing sexist rhetoric leave a large number of comments, there are also observable patterns of multiple men on each of the three websites returning time and again to leave sexist comments. The volume of sexist rhetoric also outpaces women’s responses to it on both Fox News and MSNBC.

Women not only do not reply to sexist comments frequently, with BuzzFeed being a notable exception, but women’s responses more generally are outnumbered. Although outside the scope of the current study, that observation is in line with Sussman and Tyson’s (2000) findings, which showed that “men had much more to say than women irrespective of sex-typed topic” (390). Even on the subjects of feminism and women’s issues, the comments sections tend
to lack input from women, whether or not they are responding to sexist rhetoric. As a result, discussions happening in the comments sections fail to include or reflect the perspectives of the people being reported on. Even with women’s responses to sexism in place, the comments sections appear to be a space where sexist rhetoric is entrenched. Silence can also be conceptualized in terms of the fact that women respond to sexist rhetoric and fall silent. Sexist rhetoric thus consumes women’s attention and contributions, eliminating alternate commentary and perspectives that might have been added to the discussion if not for the presence of comments that demean women. Sexist rhetoric causes a double silencing, then, both by making the comments unsafe for many women to enter at all, and by changing the shape of what conversations do eventually happen.

**Limitations**

Although a useful first step, the current study does have a number of limitations that prevent generalized conclusions from being drawn. Four main limitations emerged during the course of the study that should be addressed as research into the comments sections continues. Limitations include the mutable nature of gender in online spaces, the importance of discussions not dealing with sexist rhetoric, the biases of the selected websites, and the small number of responses from women.

As discussed at several points throughout the thesis, the issue of the gender of commentators can be a limiting factor when it comes to analyzing the discussions occurring within the comments sections. Gender online is an unstable construct, and one that is open to interpretation on the part of the person constructing their online identity, the interpretation of other participants in a particular discourse environment, and the interpretation of outside observers. There is no simple way of reconciling those interpretations into a definitive statement
about identity, and my decision to take gender as it was represented or responded to at face value represents only a partial solution.

Online spaces like the comments sections can and do lend themselves to obfuscation and misdirection, and people may present themselves as a member of another gender for a variety of reasons, including sowing discord, avoiding harassment, engaging in a form of role play, or as an expression of gender unavailable to them in offline spaces. Attempting to discern and label a commentator’s “true” identity may be a gross invasion of privacy as well as a waste of time, precisely because of the ways online spaces promote multiple and changeable expressions of gender. The other risk of such an attempt is the potential to get caught in a hall of mirrors where identity is eternally reflected and refracted, and where the actual issue of analysis can easily become lost. Keeping the fluidity of gender in mind during analysis is important, but should not overwhelm other focal points.

Another limitation of the study is the lack of attention I was able to give to women’s overall presence within the comments sections. Although women’s other comments were observed anecdotally, they remained outside the scope of the current study. A more holistic approach to women’s presence within comments sections of news websites would, however, provide additional insight into how and how much women participate. While the focus of this study is primarily on how women respond to sexist rhetoric specifically, future research that provides additional points of comparison will be valuable.

The websites chosen for the study can be perceived as a limitation, as mentioned in Chapter I. Given that each of the three sites has a clear ideological bias affecting the shape and tenor of its comments sections, there is the temptation to simply conclude that the study addresses what we already expected about the comments. A thorough reading of the results of
the study should challenge that assumption; however, additional research on a wider variety of news sources can also help expand our understanding of how the patterns observed in this study play out in other rhetorical environments with different biases.

The small number of responses from women also present a challenge when attempting to describe patterns. A larger initial sampling of comments taken from a longer period of time than a single year may be helpful in developing a more quantitative understanding of how often and how much women respond to sexist rhetoric, as well as in more reliably identifying patterns from which representative examples and singular case studies can be drawn. As an initial study of women’s responses, the present work provides some insight, but there is additional work to be done on the subject.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

While the present study represents an initial attempt to connect previously disparate areas of research, there are a number of ways to productively expand on the discussion. Future research should include a broader sampling of news websites, surveys of women who read news online, and using the framework provided by this study to examine how other intersections of identity interact within the comments sections.

Repeating this study on wider groups of websites will be one way to get insight into how and whether the patterns observed on BuzzFeed, Fox News, and MSNBC occur in spaces where there is less obvious or different editorial and audience bias. The present study and anecdotal observation suggest that the kinds of sexism observed in Chapter IV will be a common feature in the comments sections of news articles about feminism and women’s issues, but a sample set of other news sources will provide valuable information on the comments sections in general.
A better understanding of the factors leading to women’s decision-making process around commenting on news websites or remaining silent would also provide useful information on the kinds of rhetorical environments created by news websites. As this project does not consider intentionality but focuses on impact, the motivation behind commenting or not was outside the scope of the research. However, hearing directly from women on what motivates them to comment, to respond to sexist comments or focus their attention elsewhere, and to not comment at all, as well as what online identity they wish to project in any of those scenarios, will help paint a fuller picture of how women perceive and engage with the comments sections.

Research expanding on the brief examples around intersections of identity can likewise help increase our understanding of how commentators orient themselves towards and draw on various aspects of identity within the comments sections. Although, as with gender and sexism, it seems obvious that articles dealing with race will have racist comments, studying how perceptions of identity shape the comments sections remains scarce. If we intend to treat participation in the comments sections as “the most common form of participation in contemporary news use,” as Weber (2014) puts it, then it is imperative we understand who is participating, what that participation looks like, and that we base our understanding on more than what we already assume to be true about those spaces.

Conclusions

The present study represents an attempt to connect disparate threads of research in a way that adds to our understanding of sexist rhetoric and digital communications occurring within the comments sections. Prior research has examined uninhibited behavior and flaming, comments sections, sexism, or women’s participation in conversation, but has not put those topics into conversation with each other. By bringing the subjects together, this study offers a fuller look at
the role of sexism in shaping the discourse communities created by the comments sections of
news websites. The main conclusions drawn from the study are that sexist rhetoric within
comments sections continues to make women into a marginalized class, that gender remains a
fluid concept online but also a salient factor in how commentators engage with each other, that
women adopt a variety of strategies for participating within the comments sections, and that
silence remains a prominent issue.

Earlier scholarship on uninhibited behavior and flaming as well as the comments sections
neglected the role of sexism in shaping online interactions. However, sexist rhetoric is apparently
unavoidable within the comments sections. The current study thus acknowledges sexism as a
rhetorical feature in online hostility, in contrast to scholars like Lee (2005) and Lapidot-Lefler
and Barak (2012), who recorded examples of sexist rhetoric in research on flaming, but did not
note it as such. The study also challenges assumptions about the rarity of online hostility made
by scholars like Lange (2006) and the assumption made by scholars like McCluskey and
Hmielowski (2011) that the comments sections represent spaces of democratic discourse. While
sexism takes a variety of shapes, as demonstrated in Chapter IV, the use of hostile sexist
stereotypes is common, and sexism remains a significant barrier to women’s participation in
discourse. The role of sexist rhetoric continues to be the repeated marginalization of women and
of women’s contributions to discussion. Sexist rhetoric appears regardless of ideology, reflecting
that harmful beliefs about and treatment of women continue to remain a factor of social
engagement, including in online spaces. As digital technology and the Internet become more
integrated with daily life, considering how sexist bias will affect who can fully participate in
online life becomes crucial.
Bias also continues to shape how gender is perceived and discussed in digital spaces like the comments sections of news articles. The construction of identity online is a fragmented and unstable process, but sexist stereotypes and language remain remarkably predictable, as Herring (1999), Megarry (2014), and Jane (2014, 2015) also observe. As the present study demonstrates, sexist rhetoric is shaped by how gender is presented within the articles themselves; likewise, gender and bias continue to shape how commentators interact with each other. Any attempt to discuss or change the comments sections must be approached with an understanding of how gender and sexism function as rhetorical attributes within those spaces. Gender online is mutable, but it still shapes how people interact with each other, and the present study adds to our understanding of that phenomenon in a space not previously given scholarly attention.

When it comes to women’s responses to sexist rhetoric and participation within the comments sections, it is also important to acknowledge the various forms such responses take. It is easy to assume that women do not succeed rhetorically because the commentator employing sexist rhetoric is not often persuaded to adopt another viewpoint or even acknowledge the sexism in their original remark. As Herring (1999) describes online interactions, women “tend to participate less, introduce fewer successful topics of discussion, and receive fewer public responses than men,” which was observed within the present study (152). Rhetorical success can be framed in other ways, however. Challenging sexism publicly, using sarcasm to buffer an argument, and engaging with other women all represent potential avenues of success by ensuring women are present in the comments sections and that alternatives to sexist rhetoric are offered. While women’s responses are frequently constructed in a way that accommodates the more aggressive conversational norms associated with sexist rhetoric, that such responses exist at all remains an important challenge to complete sexist domination of the comments sections.
It is, however, against a larger backdrop of silence from women that women’s responses to sexism appear. Silence continues to be a feature of the comments sections, whether women are silenced by the desire to avoid engaging in spaces where sexism and threats are common, by the experience of being targeted with sexist rhetoric if they do engage in discussion, or by having their discussions disrupted and consumed by sexism, the overarching impression of the comments sections is one where women’s voices are rare and quickly quieted. Sussman and Tyson (2000) observe that women talk less than men in online spaces regardless of topic, and Jane (2014, 2015) notes the role of sexism in chilling women’s speech. This study finds both observations confirmed again in the comments sections of news websites. As debates about the comments sections, reader participation, and free speech continue, we must make room to consider what perspectives are going unheard in the comments sections.

The present study reveals a great deal about the current state of discourse within the comments sections of news articles, applying a feminist and sociological lens to areas that have not previously been considered. Although the results are valuable, the Internet is always evolving. Comments sections, which have historically been regarded as indispensable sources of discussion for news websites, are increasingly being eliminated because of concerns about harassment and the difficulty of moderation. Applying the lessons of this and future studies to the changing shape of comments sections will be important not just to ensure women are able to participate, but to maintain an Internet where discourse is possible at all.
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APPENDIX A: Total Comments on Selected Websites and Articles

*Total comments on articles selected from BuzzFeed*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of Article</th>
<th>Total Comments</th>
<th>Sexist Rhetoric</th>
<th>Women Responding to Sexist Rhetoric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Canadian University Made This Blatantly Sexist Video Objectifying Female Professors</td>
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<td>19</td>
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<td>This Woman Got Abuse On Facebook For Wearing A Feminist Shirt</td>
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<td>Florida Woman Calls Governor An Asshole At Starbucks</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Maryland Just Made Birth Control, Plan B, And Vasectomies Free</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supreme Court Strikes Down Texas Abortion Restrictions</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Teen Says She Experienced Rape Threats And Serious Injury While Playing Boys Hockey</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Here’s What You Need To Know About The Rape Accusations Against Nate Parker</td>
<td>52</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>This Is What Happens When You Forget To Take Your Birth Control</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>Donald Trump Is “Carrying The Weight Of The World On His Shoulders,” His Son Says</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Badass Women You Probably Didn’t Hear About In 2016</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<td><strong>46</strong></td>
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### Total comments on articles selected from Fox News

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of Article</th>
<th>Total Comments</th>
<th>Sexist Rhetoric</th>
<th>Women Responding to Sexist Rhetoric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Frank Luntz: Will Republicans (and Democrats) listen to what voters are telling us?</td>
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<td>Hillary Clinton, Gloria Steinem, Madeleine Albright &amp; the sad sound of feminist desperation</td>
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<td>39</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study of glaciers’ varied impact on men, women cost taxpayers big bucks</td>
<td>907</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abortion uproar: How the media are painting Trump as anti-woman</td>
<td>501</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>What teen girls really want from relationships (hint: it's not just sex)</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Britain's next prime minister will be female. Suddenly it’s women who rule (or may)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>Most Americans favor late-term abortion if Zika harms fetus, STAT-Harvard poll finds</td>
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<td>Planned Parenthood at 100: Growing the abortion business and lawlessness</td>
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<td>99</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>The 2016 Election and women</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why women fake orgasms</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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### Total comments on articles selected from MSNBC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of Article</th>
<th>Total Comments</th>
<th>Sexist Rhetoric</th>
<th>Women Responding to Sexist Rhetoric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why rumored Beyoncé biopic of Saartjie Baartman riled some critics</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fan influx hasn’t bridged soccer’s alleged gender wage gap</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amid backlash to anti-gay bills, abortion rights falter</td>
<td>613</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behind Supreme Court’s non-decision on contraception, one man waffles</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activist takes anti-violence message into men’s locker rooms</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trump shares the stage with an ally from across the pond</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillary Clinton takes aim at increases in drug prices</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Trump wants to debate the nuances of ‘sexual assault’</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trump eyes the end of the Roe v. Wade era</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Trump boasts his win ‘shattered the glass ceiling for women’</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,226</strong></td>
<td><strong>189</strong></td>
<td><strong>48</strong></td>
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APPENDIX B: Comments Sections for Buzzfeed, Fox News, and MSNBC

Sample Buzzfeed Comments Section from “Maryland Just Made Birth Control, Plan B, and Vasectomies Free”
Sample Fox News Comments Section from “Study of glaciers’ varied impact on men, women cost taxpayers big bucks”
Sample MSNBC Comments Section from “Amid backlash to anti-gay bills, abortion rights falter”
Amid backlash to anti-gay bills, abortion rights falter

[Article content]

Add your comment

What do you think?

[Comment: granylady]

A friend got the very bad news that the fetus she

Eagle Awenro 3/3/2016