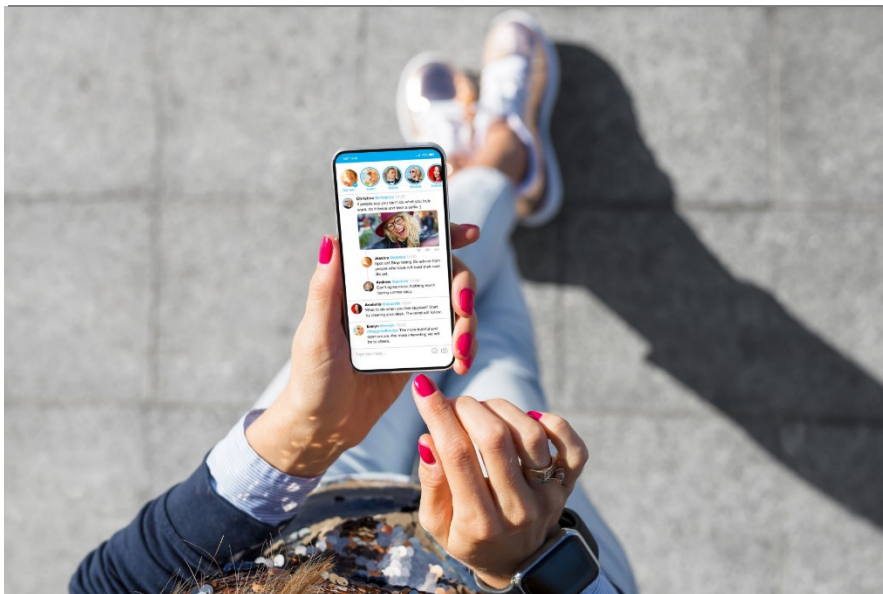


STUDY

Requested by the FEMM committee



The impact of the use of social media on women and girls



The impact of the use of social media on women and girls

Abstract

This study, commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the FEMM Committee, outlines and assesses the impacts of social media on women and girls, on gender equality, and on democracy and civic participation more generally. It further analyses whether social media are creating a bias in their treatment of women and men, and provides makers.

This document was requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Women's rights and Gender Equality.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DSA	Digital Services Act
EPRS	European Parliamentary Research Service
IBAS	Image Based Sexual Abuse
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
LGBTI+	Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Intersex/ other realities/identities
OGBV	Online Gender Based Violence
VLOP	Very Large Online Platforms

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

This study was commissioned by the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality of the European Parliament, in response to growing concerns about the scale of digitally mediated harms experienced by women and girls. Despite the numerous beneficial aspects of social media, academics, policy-makers and activists working in the area of gender have recently devoted increasing attention to the issue of gender-based and sexual digital harm, with various large-scale surveys indicating the alarming scale and intensity of this issue¹. In its resolution of 17 April 2018 on gender equality in the media sector², the European Parliament highlighted that violent and sexist media content is negatively affecting women and their participation in society, and that it may be causing psychological or physical damage to children and young people.

This study outlines and critically evaluates the impact of social media on women and girls, using available data, reports, studies and analyses from a wide range of sources from EU, national and international institutions. Issues covered include sexism and gender stereotypes in the content and algorithms of online advertising, the impact of pro-anorexia and thinspiration content (images and text promoting thinness), gender-based and sexual abuse and harassment online, including various forms of image-based sexual abuse (such as sending unsolicited nudes, non-consensual image sharing, and sextortion), technologically-facilitated coercive control, misogyny in gaming, targeted hate campaigns against female politicians, journalists and other professionals, algorithmic bias and radicalisation, the rise of male supremacism and pornography. While the study uses resources from a range of disciplines, the meta-analytical perspective is techno-social: it posits that the digital world cannot be understood as divorced from social, cultural, political, economic and legal contexts. For this reason, the lens of online misogyny is used to capture and analyse the range of harms inflicted on women and girls. This lens facilitates an in-depth understanding of the digital affordances of social media, but never in isolation from the broader power structures that dictate contemporary gender relations.

Objectives

The overall objective of the study is to outline and assess the impacts of social media on women and girls, on gender equality, and on democracy and civic participation more generally. It is based on concrete quantitative and qualitative evidence, and provides an overview of gendered patterns of social media usage in the EU. The study identifies key areas of gender inequality in terms of access, self-expression, stereotypes, body image and self-esteem, (self) censorship and targeted hate campaigns on different social media platforms. It also provides an overview of the position of the European Parliament and the European Commission and of existing legislation, programmes, guidelines or actions at EU and international level related to protection of women from negative impacts of social media. Finally, the study provides practical and policy recommendations for the most relevant actors (the decision makers, EU Institutions and Member States) and to the European Parliament, aimed at structurally improving the impact of the use of social media on women and girls in the EU.

¹ Ging, Debbie, and Eugenia Siapera, eds., *Gender Hate Online: Understanding the New Anti-Feminism*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland, 2019.

² European Parliament resolution of 17 April 2018 on gender equality in the media sector in the EU (2017/2210(INI)), available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0101_EN.html.

Main findings

- In the European Union, social media use is slightly higher among women than men across all age groups. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, WhatsApp and Pinterest are more popular among women, while Twitter, LinkedIn, Reddit, Discord, Twitch and Telegram are more popular among men.
- There are significant differences between women and men in types of social media usage. Men are more likely to share opinions, while women are generally more interested in maintaining strong social ties. Girls place more importance on popularity and positive social experiences and feel the impact of negative interactions with others more than boys.
- Boys and men are more likely than girls and women to engage in risky behaviours online (including sexting, sharing violent materials, online harassment, hacking and cyberfraud).
- Boys appear to have a higher level of confidence online and feel more resilient to negative actions from others. Women and girls are more conscious of privacy risks.
- More time spent on social media is associated with an increase in depressive symptoms for both boys and girls, but the effect is larger in girls. Factors include lack of high-quality sleep, online harassment, low self-esteem and negative body image.
- Gender is a major factor in targeted advertising on social media. However, inadequate details are available on how exactly these algorithms work. Gender is also a major factor in recommender functions, delivering different content to males and females. In this sense, social media reinforce and even amplify gender stereotypes.
- The emphasis on popularity and likes that is embedded in the platform affordances and algorithmic politics of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram exert a primarily gender-conservative effect on how users self-present.
- Girls and women are more likely than boys and men to experience negative body image and eating disorders in connection with their social media use.
- Girls and women are more likely to experience sexual and gender-based abuse on social media, including image-based sexual abuse (receiving unsolicited images, being asked to send nudes, having their images shared).
- Female politicians and journalists experience higher rates of online gender-based and sexual abuse and harassment than their male counterparts. Due to self-censorship and the 'chilling effect', attacks on female journalists and politicians exert a negative impact on professional and civic participation.
- The mainstreaming and normalisation of male-supremacist misogyny among youth poses a significant and urgent threat to women and girls on social media. In addition to this, girls report that easy access to violent pornography is impacting boys' understandings and expectations of sex.
- Social media can also be used to further the rights of women and girls through large-scale campaigns such as #MeToo and Everyday Sexism.
- The Digital Services Act promises to improve the safety of women and girls on social media platforms. However, the failure to include gender as a sensitive area of personal data represents a failure to adequately address the negative impacts of social media on women and girls.

Implementation of the DSA will require strong monitoring and evaluation to ensure that it effectively tackles issues of gendered harm.

Key recommendations

- Conduct a gender based harm focused review of the Digital Services Act after a 12 month period to ensure that it is functioning as intended and that social media companies are complying with their obligations in relation to access to data and algorithmic transparency.
- Complete the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and adopt the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence.
- Stricter content moderation and harsher sanctions by the social companies for instances of abuse, harassment and hate speech.
- Greater regulation of social media advertising, including the expansion of the Digital Services Act to include gender in restriction of targeted advertising.
- The development of campaigns, interventions and policies which encourage a shared vocabulary that would help social media users to identify acts of gender-based violence or abuse.
- The development of campaigns, interventions and policies which encourage social media literacy, by educating women and girls about unhealthy norms, image manipulation, and social media incentives.
- Encourage technological and social innovation at an EU level to develop state of the art approaches to challenging gender norms and reducing online gendered harm.
- Member States should review their educational curriculum to ensure that boys and girls receive relatable, evidence-based education around social media literacy, digital consent and digital ethics, image based sexual abuse, online gender-based violence and gender norms.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

In the past ten years, social media have become rapidly integrated in almost all aspects of human life and social organisation, from product marketing and political communication to health, fitness and dating. Like all technologies, however, social media are not neutral - they embody the dominant values and power structures of the societies and institutions that create them³. In addition to this, they facilitate and create new behaviours and modes of communication, for example by altering the rhythms of our daily lives or by networking like-minded individuals into 'echo chambers'. Gender - intersected with class, race, sexuality, ability, etc. - is a significant factor in the ownership and management of social media companies, in the development of platforms and algorithms, and in the ways in which social media are used and abused.

Despite the many positive affordances of social media (such as connectedness, community-building, and progressive social movements), it has become increasingly clear that women and girls experience both disproportionate levels and different types of harm on social media compared with boys and men. These include sexist stereotyping in online advertising content and algorithmic targeting, negative body image due to comparison with idealised images of women, misogyny and gender-based abuse online, technology-facilitated coercive control, economic and political marginalisation, and the indirect impacts caused by the dehumanisation and degradation of women in misogynistic pornography.

It is often difficult to prove or measure the impact of social media on users for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is important to clarify in each instance what is meant by impact or harm: is it physical, emotional, psychological, ideological, political or economic? Secondly, how can these harms be reliably identified or measured, given that users are often not aware of the impacts of their engagements with social media, which may be subconscious and work in complex constellations with offline factors? Thirdly, it is difficult to obtain data from social media companies on their algorithms, content moderation policies and responses to reporting. In 2021, whistle-blower Frances Haugen revealed⁴ that Meta's internal research had found that Instagram was having a negative impact on body image for one in three teenage girls, but the research had not been made public by Meta, presumably due to the negative repercussions that these findings would have for its reputation with the public, policymakers, and advertisers. Despite these challenges, a growing body of research has begun to document a range of gender-based, socially mediated harms using diverse methods from sociology, psychology, criminology and technology studies, including network analysis, content analysis, interviews, surveys, focus groups and statistical analysis of legal cases.

Taken together, this research points to significant problems in the social media landscape in relation to gender-based harms and threats to gender equality, which demand urgent action by governments, policy makers, educators and social media companies. Notwithstanding the positive aspects of social media for many women and girls, an unequal, frequently dangerous and inadequately regulated social media landscape poses a considerable threat to the inclusion of women and therefore to democracy.

³ Easter, B. "Feminist_brevity_in_light_of_masculine_long-windedness:" code, space, and online misogyny,' *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4. July 2018, pp. 675-685.

⁴ Wells, Georgia, Jeff Horwitz, and Deepa Seetharaman, "Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show", *Wall Street Journal*, September 14, 2021, sec. Tech., available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739>.

This study identifies and evaluates the key issues that affect women and girls' use of social media. It reviews current EU and international legislation and policies on this issue, and concludes with a set of recommendations for policymakers.

1.2. Objectives of the study

The overall objective of the study is to identify and assess the impacts of social media on women and girls, on gender equality, and on democracy and civic participation more generally. The study is based on concrete quantitative and qualitative evidence, and provides the following:

- The state of play of impact of social media on women and girls in the EU. This includes an analysis of algorithms and platform affordances, stereotypes and perception bias, gendered usage of social media, and impacts on mental health, body image and self-esteem.
- An overview of gender (in)equality in terms of access, self-expression, (self-) censorship and targeted hate campaigns on different social media platforms.
- The scale and nature of gender-based and sexual abuse and harassment online, and the role played by male-supremacist and other anti-progressive online formations in fostering a climate of misogyny in digital spaces.
- An overview of the position of the European Parliament and the European Commission and of existing legislation, programmes, guidelines or actions at EU and international level related to the protection of women from negative impacts of social media.
- Practical and policy recommendations for the most relevant actors (the decision makers, EU Institutions and Member States) and to the European Parliament, aimed at structurally improving the impact of the use of social media on women and girls in the EU.

1.3. Methodology

This study draws on research from disparate academic disciplines, which approach the research of social media in different ways. Cyber-psychology typically focuses on the individual, attempting to understand the attributes, qualities or psychological traits which predispose a user towards certain behaviours or activities online. By contrast, technological-determinist approaches prioritise the agency of technology, while underplaying the role of socio-economic and cultural factors. Finally, a sociological approach, which is more common in internet, media and gender studies, views individual behaviours and usage through the broader lens of how they intersect with society, technology, culture and economics.

A key concept in the analysis of social media impact is that offline and online contexts cannot be understood as separate spaces but must be considered as co-constitutive of one another⁵. Actions online are determined by people's lived experiences, and in turn impact on our emotional and material circumstances. For example, if girls are receiving unsolicited Snapchat messages or images from boys in their school, these incidents play out simultaneously on the social media platform and in the school and classroom environments in which they interact. If targeted harassment campaigns drive women offline, they may be unable to earn a living⁶. Importantly, therefore, social media do not merely have an affective impact on 'real life' but rather are part of 'real life'. This issue, therefore, cannot be treated

⁵ Massanari, Adrienne, "#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures", *New Media & Society*, Vol. 19, No. 3, March 2017, pp. 329–346.

⁶ Jane, E.A., 'Gendered Cyberhate as Workplace Harassment and Economic Vandalism', *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4, July 4, 2018, pp. 575–591.

in isolation as a problem restricted to the digital space: on the contrary, solutions must consider the wider social, political, technological, legal and economic contexts within which such issues occur.

This study relies on the concept of online misogyny to construct a broader understanding of the root issues underpinning harm to women and girls. This framing explains the range of interconnected risks and obstacles that women and girls face on social media platforms as well as the broader implications that these have, not only for individual women but also for the wider participation and wellbeing of women and girls in society. Online misogyny may or may not involve violence but it ‘almost always entails some form of harm; either directly in the form of psychological, professional, reputational, or, in some cases, physical harm; or indirectly, in the sense that it makes the internet a less equal, less safe, or less inclusive space for women and girls’⁷.

2. DIFFERENCES IN HOW MEN AND WOMEN USE SOCIAL MEDIA

This Chapter examines gender differences in both the use of social media and in the content seen by users, whether influenced through targeted advertisements or the algorithmic decision-making of platforms.

2.1. Gender differences in population use of social media

In the early days of the internet, online culture was dominated by men. This reflected the fact that both internet and computer access was limited, and those most likely to engage online were ‘primarily male scientists, mathematicians, and technologically sophisticated computer hackers’⁸. Over time, this gender disparity in internet use has lessened to the extent that, overall, women are now slightly more likely than men use the internet for social networking across the EU (Table 1). It is also notable that younger generations, irrespective of gender, use social networking sites at much higher rates, which heightens the potential impacts that gender bias or gendered harm may have on young people.

Table 1: Percentage of women and men participating in social networks (creating user profile, posting messages or other contributions to Facebook, Twitter, etc.) in the EU.

	Male 16-24	Female 16-24	Male 25-54	Female 25-54	Males 55-74	Females 55-74
European Union	82.86	86.28	64.93	70.47	31.91	33.8
Austria	90.96	95.79	68.34	76.19	31.26	31.68
Belgium	81.86	89.23	73.72	79.25	46.72	44.73
Bulgaria	89.21	88.95	75.37	77.22	32.35	37.01
Croatia	89.57	98.91	66.78	82.97	30.14	27.49
Cyprus	96.89	96.03	86.39	88.2	48.06	51.71

⁷ Ging, Debbie, and Eugenia Siapera, ‘Special Issue on Online Misogyny’, *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4, July 4, 2018, p. 516.

⁸ Morahan-Martin, Janet, “The Gender Gap in Internet Use: Why Men Use the Internet More Than Women—A Literature Review”, *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1998, pp. 3–10.

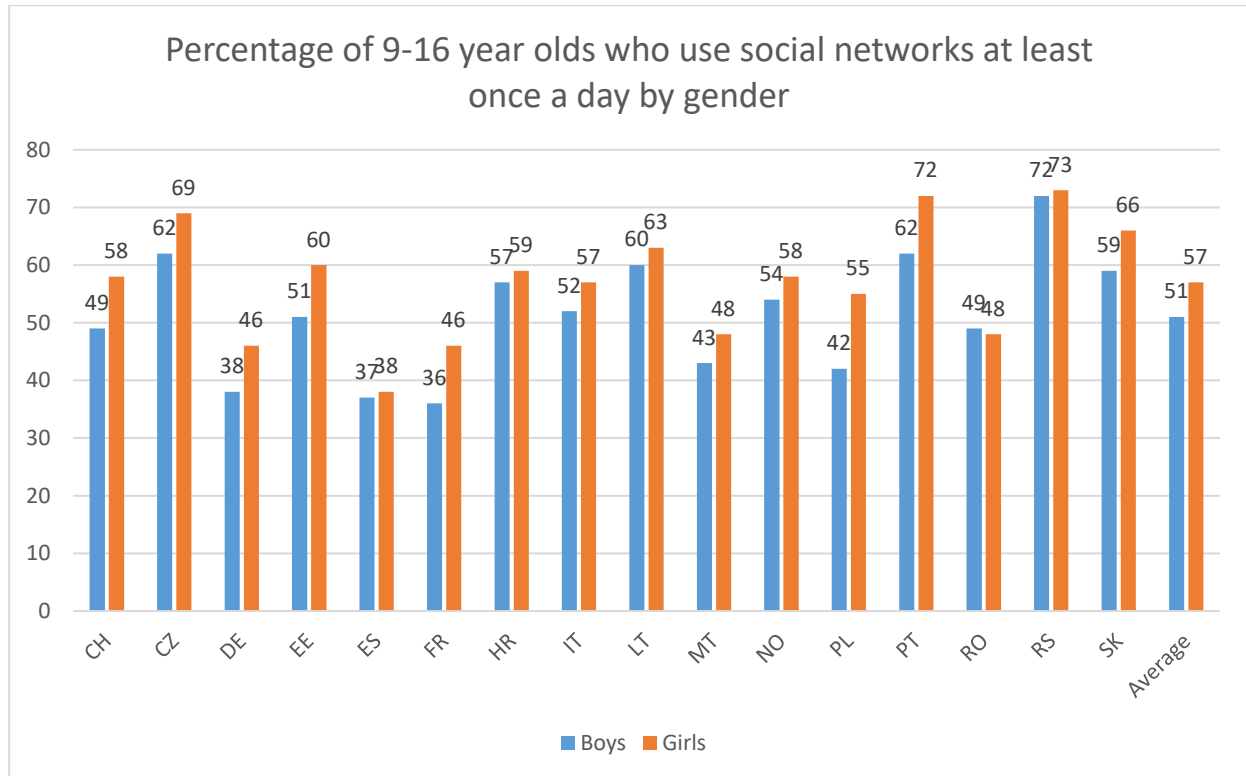
Czechia	96.99	95.58	75.43	81.99	25.62	29.8
Denmark	97.24	98.47	86.09	93.76	66.14	74.79
Estonia	89.43	95.51	72.4	84.41	28.47	41.32
Finland	88.03	97.56	81.3	91.48	44.85	61.22
France	73.12	73.36	47.07	55.2	21.02	23.58
Germany	74.34	78.92	56.95	58.94	23.84	23.22
Greece	93.66	92.95	74.82	78.6	32.25	33.72
Hungary	96.93	97.09	84.62	92.61	49.72	56.74
Italy	77.59	84.1	60.51	64.39	31.34	29.62
Latvia	93.34	95.88	77.59	88.9	35.57	52.02
Lithuania	95.03	88.29	74.46	85.14	32.8	44.99
Luxembourg	78.69	74.95	66.54	67.98	42.3	42.56
Malta	92.57	98.65	82.81	89.65	43.57	50.2
Netherlands	91.32	89.18	77.77	83.48	55.9	57.54
Poland	89.72	96.96	68.86	76.1	27.63	29.58
Portugal	93.9	97.24	77.64	79.38	34.74	40.62
Romania	88.08	86.1	76.65	78.34	43.12	46.39
Slovakia	78.85	81.68	67.03	67.77	31.95	31.19
Slovenia	84.08	97.23	72.89	80.77	30.46	36.49
Spain	91.28	94	67.24	74.85	36.85	39.7
Sweden	71.58	92.82	74.04	84.83	45.85	56.83

Source: Eurostat⁹

⁹ Eurostat, "ICT Usage in Households and by Individuals (Isoc_i)", 2023, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/metadata/en/isoc_i_esms.htm.

The EU Kids Online 2020 survey¹⁰, which surveyed children ages 9-16 across 19 EU countries, finds a similar pattern, with girls on average 6 percentage points more likely to visit a social networking site at least once a day in comparison to boys (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage of boys and girls who visit a social networking site at least once a day across the EU.



Source: EU Kids Online Survey¹¹

2.2. Platform usage differences between men and women

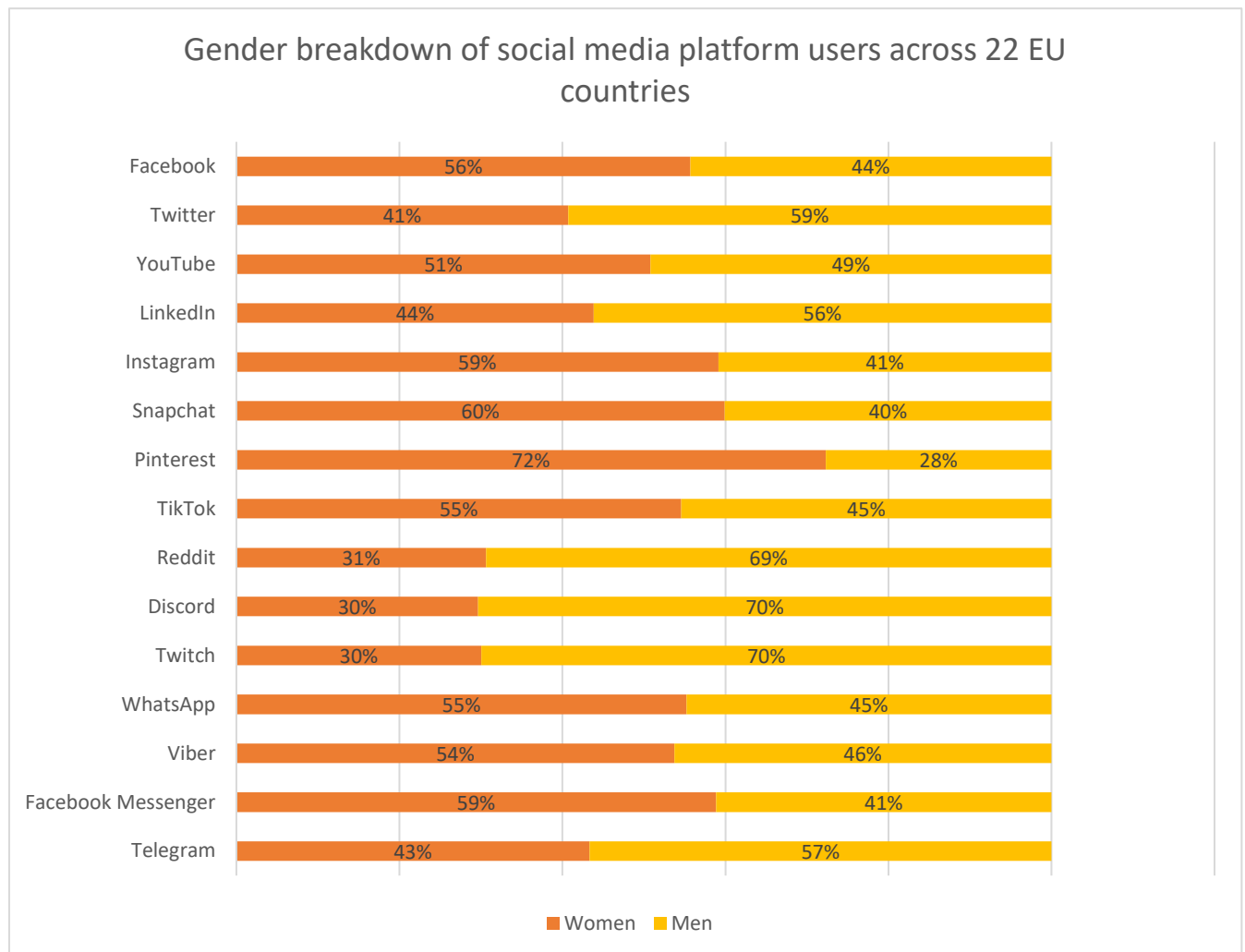
It is difficult to obtain reliable data on the gender usage of various social media platforms. The Reuters Digital News Report 2022¹² surveyed over 40 000 adults in 22 EU Member States using a representative sample to gain information about their news consumption habits. Of the 40 000 surveyed, 52% were women and 48% were men. While the survey does not focus on social media, it did ask respondents which social media platforms they use. Figure 2 shows the gender breakdown of reported use for each social media platform.

¹⁰ Smahel, David, Hana MacHackova, Giovanna Mascheroni, Lenka Dedkova, Elisabeth Staksrud, Kjartan Olafsson, Sonia Livingstone, and Uwe Hasebrink, EU Kids Online 2020: Survey Results from 19 Countries, London School of Economics, London, UK, 2020, available at: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/research/research-projects/eu-kids-online>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Newman, Nic, Richard Fletcher, Craig T. Robertson, Kirsten Eddy, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, n.d., available at: [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital News Report 2022.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital%20News%20Report%202022.pdf).

Figure 2: Gender breakdown of social media platform users across 22 EU Member States

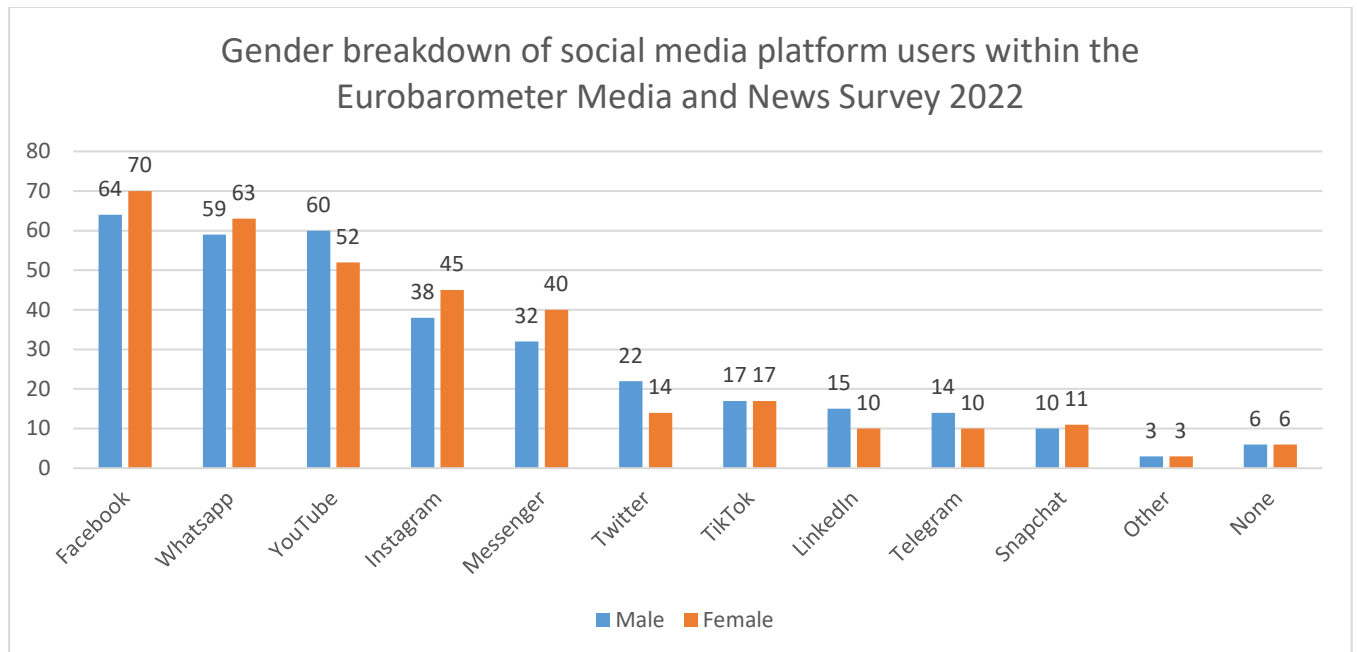


Source: Digital News Report 2022

In addition, the European Barometer Media and News Survey¹³ provides a more limited breakdown of how many men and women in their overall sample use each social media platform (Figure 3). This broadly corresponds to the proportions seen in Figure 2.

¹³ Eurobarometer, “Media & News Survey 2022”, 2022, available at: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2832>.

Figure 3: Gender breakdown of social media platform users within the Eurobarometer Media and News Survey 2022



Source: Flash Eurobarometer FL011EP–Media & News Survey 2022¹⁴

Based on this data, more men than women use Twitter, a platform associated with a high level of engagement and influence in both politics¹⁵ and news¹⁶, while more women than men use Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. Notably, the affordances of both Instagram and Snapchat encourage image-based sharing and engagement. Another image-based platform, Pinterest, shows the biggest gender gap with 72% of users being women. Pinterest is associated with a highly gendered user base and encourages sharing of more stereotypically feminine topics such as teaching, fashion and cooking tips¹⁷. LinkedIn, the professional networking and career development platform, also has more male than female users. Thus, men are in the majority on those platforms most strongly associated with news, politics and professional life.

The three platforms with the highest proportion of men (Figure 2) are Reddit (69%), Discord (70%) and Twitch (70%). Due to its 'design, algorithm, and platform politics'¹⁸, Reddit has long been studied as a site associated with hostile attitudes towards women. This is evidenced by the presence of various subreddits promoting anti-women ideas such as r/MensRights and r/BlackPillScience¹⁹, its association

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Jungherr, Andreas, "Twitter Use in Election Campaigns: A Systematic Literature Review", *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 1, January 2, 2016, pp. 72–91.

¹⁶ Orellana-Rodriguez, Claudia, and Mark T. Keane, "Attention to News and Its Dissemination on Twitter: A Survey", *Computer Science Review*, Vol. 29, August 1, 2018, pp. 74–94.

¹⁷ Friz, Amanda, and Robert W Gehl, "Pinning the Feminine User: Gender Scripts in Pinterest's Sign-up Interface", *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 38, No. 5, July 2016, pp. 686–703. And Hall, Catherine, and Michael Zarro, "Social Curation on the Website Pinterest.Com: Social Curation on the Website Pinterest.Com", *Proceedings of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, Vol. 49, No. 1, 2012, pp. 1–9.

¹⁸ Massanari, Adrienne, "#Gamergate and The Fapping: How Reddit's Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures", *New Media & Society*, Vol. 19, No. 3, March 2017, pp. 329–346.

¹⁹ Maxwell, December, Sarah R. Robinson, Jessica R. Williams, and Craig Keaton, "'A Short Story of a Lonely Guy': A Qualitative Thematic Analysis of Involuntary Celibacy Using Reddit", *Sexuality & Culture*, Vol. 24, No. 6, December 2020, pp. 1852–1874.

with the illegal leaking of celebrity nudes, the 'gamergate' backlash against women in gamer culture, and the presence of extreme language and misogyny across the platform²⁰. Although many of the more extreme anti-feminist subreddits, such as r/Incels, r/Braincels, r/MGTOW and r/TheRedPill have been banned or quarantined, Reddit maintains a large male user base. Both Twitch and Discord have their roots in the gaming community, which likely explains the large gender gap shown in Figure 2, as gaming culture is strongly associated with men. This is explored further in Section 2.3.

2.3. Gender differences in types of usage

There are significant differences between women and men in types of social media usage, resulting from gender-normative social roles, gendered peer-group cultures and the type of content, features and communicative styles afforded by different platforms. This Section explains how social roles shape stereotypes, which in turn impact on behaviour. It also demonstrates how challenging social roles can change gender differences, using online gaming as an example. Finally, it addresses what is known about various gender differences in social media usage.

As noted in Section 2.1, certain gender stereotypes are inevitably intertwined into discussions about why gender differences occur in how men and women use social media. For example, the presence of more feminine topics on Pinterest is used to explain its popularity among women. Such gendered differences are largely based on the socialisation of men and women based on social role expectations. At a societal level, these roles often reflect the division of labour which favours women as homemakers, primary carers, etc., thereby reinforcing a stereotype of women being better or more suited for care work. The development of social roles also begins at an early age. For example, toys marketed to girls encourage domesticity and a focus on appearance, while those targeted at boys promote action, competition, physicality and aggression²¹. The interplay of social roles and stereotypes helps to explain, therefore, many of the gender-based differences noted on social media.

To give a practical example of this process, research commissioned by the Interactive Software Federation of Europe finds that 48% of those who play video games in Europe are women and girls²² (similar to figures from the US), but the perception of the social role of 'gamer' online is typically male. Paaßen et al.²³ investigated the reasons behind this incongruence and found that because men more visibly identify and perform the identity of 'gamer', the expectation is that women are not or cannot be gamers. This has resulted in a gaming culture that can often be hostile to women, leading to fewer women gaming in online, social spaces. Additionally, a narrative literature review of 49 studies²⁴, 12 of which were based on countries in Europe, found that female characters in games are often over-sexualised and that women often face harassment when playing games online or encounter a perception from male players that they will be less competent. All of these factors act as barriers to women's participation in the gaming community. Thus, what at first may appear to be a simple

²⁰ Farrell, Tracie, Miriam Fernandez, Jakub Novotny, and Harith Alani, "Exploring Misogyny across the Manosphere in Reddit", Proceedings of the 10th ACM Conference on Web Science, ACM, Boston Massachusetts USA, 2019, pp. 87–96, available at: <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3292522.3326045>.

²¹ Whiting, Rebecca, "Gendered Marketing of Children's Toys and Clothing", Birbeck University of London, 2020, available at: <https://www.bbk.ac.uk/news/gendered-marketing-of-childrens-toys-and-clothes>.

²² ISFE, Key Facts from 2021: Video Games - a Force for Good, Interactive Software Federation of Europe, 2022, available at: <https://www.isfe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/FINAL-ISFE-EGDFKey-Facts-from-2021-about-Europe-video-games-sector-web.pdf>.

²³ Paaßen, Benjamin, Thekla Morgenroth, and Michelle Stratemeyer, "What Is a True Gamer? The Male Gamer Stereotype and the Marginalization of Women in Video Game Culture", *Sex Roles*, Vol. 76, No. 7–8, April 2017, pp. 421–435.

²⁴ Lopez-Fernandez, Olatz, A. Jess Williams, Mark D. Griffiths, and Daria J. Kuss, "Female Gaming, Gaming Addiction, and the Role of Women Within Gaming Culture: A Narrative Literature Review", *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, Vol. 10, July 10, 2019, p. 454.

gendered difference - fewer women than men play games online - can be understood through the social role expectation that men are more likely to be gamers. Consequently, the culture of online gaming has been tailored toward the stereotype of the male gamer. Countering these stereotypes would involve challenging the gendered social role of the gamer by creating safer spaces for women to participate, creating better depictions of female characters in games and increasing the visibility of women gamers.

The EU Kids Online 2020 survey²⁵ identified gendered differences in types of online usage:

- Boys are 5 percentage points more likely to watch videos online (69% vs 62% average).
- Boys are 30 percentage points more likely to play online games (59% vs 29% average).
- Girls were 19 percentage points more likely to feel upset after being mistreated by others online (89% vs 70% average).
- Boys were 8 percentage points more likely to report seeing sexual images online (37% vs 29% average) and girls were 25 percentage points more likely to feel upset by seeing sexual images (51% vs 26% average), which may suggest that boys are seeking out such content more than girls.
- Boys are 6 percentage points more likely to find it easier to be themselves online (64% vs 58% average).
- Boys are 6 percentage points more likely to ignore what parent/carer tells them about how to use the internet (49% vs 42% average).
- Boys are 9 percentage points more likely to feel safe online (70% vs 61% average).

These results indicate that, from an early age, boys appear to have a higher level of confidence online, engaging in more risky behaviours, and feeling more resilient to negative actions from others, while girls tend to be more cautious yet also feel less safe. A recent survey²⁶ which used a representative sample of 8 000 16-19 year-olds across the UK, France, Spain, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Romania, and Sweden and Norway also found that boys may take more risks online. The survey examined the prevalence of 20 risky or harmful behaviours, such as sexting, sharing violent materials, online harassment, hacking and cyberfraud. The researchers found that boys (73.6%) were more likely to engage in these behaviours compared to girls (64.6%). Only tracking, which they defined as to 'track what someone else was doing online without their knowing', was more common among girls than boys.

Differences are also found in the types of internet addiction that men and women may struggle with. A meta-analysis²⁷ of 82 440 adolescents and adults, 60% of whom were from Europe, found that men are more likely to become addicted to online gaming, while women are more likely to become addicted to social media and this effect size is higher in Europe. The prevalence of addiction disorders overall is

²⁵ Newman, Nic, Richard Fletcher, Craig T. Robertson, Kirsten Eddy, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, n.d., available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News-Report_2022.pdf.

²⁶ Davidson, Julia, Mary Aiken, Kirsty Phillips, and Ruby Farr, CC-DRIVER 2021 European Youth Survey, CC-DRIVER, 2022, available at: https://www.ccdriver-h2020.com/files/ugd/0ef83d_622d9f44dd7345cd80314333a92d74f1.pdf.

²⁷ Su, Wenliang, Xiaoli Han, Hanlu Yu, Yiling Wu, and Marc N. Potenza, "Do Men Become Addicted to Internet Gaming and Women to Social Media? A Meta-Analysis Examining Gender-Related Differences in Specific Internet Addiction", *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 113, December 2020, p. 106480.

low, but the gender differences noted reflect the usage patterns described above and indicate that men and women appear to be drawn towards different types of usage.

While these large-scale studies have attempted to examine broad differences in behaviour, smaller-scale studies have attempted to understand more nuanced differences in the motivations and reasons behind gendered behaviours online. For instance, while both men and women want to use social media to connect with others, a recent US based study²⁸ found that women are generally more interested in maintaining strong social ties and they are also more conscious of privacy risks when it comes to information sharing. Among Norwegian social media users, women are also more likely than men to take selfies and use image filters²⁹. Another study with a predominantly EU-based sample found that women are more likely than men to take into account social media content, particularly photos and videos, when making decisions around activities and travel planning³⁰.

The experiences that people have both online and offline also shape their behaviours and usage habits. For instance, men are more likely to share opinions online and post more frequently³¹. On the surface this may seem like a simple case of gendered difference in behaviour. However, research on linguistic differences among teens on social media has found that boys display more assertiveness, while girls focus more on pleasing social interactions which will appeal to boys³², suggesting that this behaviour is rooted in the way that men and women are socialised to behave. Additionally, gendered differences in levels of assertiveness and confidence in expressing opinions are not only due to socialisation: girls' and women's experiences of harassment and abuse online also have a substantial 'chilling effect'³³, which causes them to be more cautious about what opinions they express and how. These issues are further explored in Chapters 3 and 4.

2.4. Differences in exposure to content between men and women

This Section addresses the practical difficulties associated with gathering data on exposure to content, examines the practice of gender targeting in social media advertising, and underlines the need for greater transparency and access to data from social media platforms in order to undertake effective research in this area. It is important to note that there are substantial knowledge gaps in this area as data is not readily available. One of the reasons that the Digital Services Act addresses both researcher access to data and algorithmic transparency is because social media platforms currently operate in a way which makes it extremely difficult to accurately assess their potential impact and harms, particularly when it comes to the algorithms which social platforms use for content delivery.

Examining differences in the content shown to men and women on social media is difficult, and this area remains under-researched due to practical constraints. Two factors make this type of research

²⁸ Lin, Xiaolin, and Xuequn Wang, "Examining Gender Differences in People's Information-Sharing Decisions on Social Networking Sites", *International Journal of Information Management*, Vol. 50, February 2020, pp. 45–56.

²⁹ Dhir, Amandeep, Ståle Pallesen, Torbjørn Torsheim, and Cecilie Schou Andreassen, "Do Age and Gender Differences Exist in Selfie-Related Behaviours?", *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 63, October 2016, pp. 549–555.

³⁰ Karatsoli, Maria, and Eftihia Nathanail, "Examining Gender Differences of Social Media Use for Activity Planning and Travel Choices", *European Transport Research Review*, Vol. 12, No. 1, December 2020.

³¹ Rollero, Chiara, Adriano Daniele, and Stefano Tartaglia, "Do Men Post and Women View? The Role of Gender, Personality and Emotions in Online Social Activity", *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, Vol. 13, No. 1, February 21, 2019, available at: <https://cyberpsychology.eu/article/view/11564>.

³² Herring, Susan C., and Sanja Kapidzic, "Teens, Gender, and Self-Presentation in Social Media", *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, Elsevier, 2015, pp. 146–152, available at: <https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/B9780080970868641089>.

³³ Ging, Debbie, and Eugenia Siapera, eds., *Gender Hate Online: Understanding the New Anti-Feminism*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland, 2019.

impractical. Firstly, unlike mass media formats such as television, radio or print where an audience is exposed to the same content, which has a clearly identified producer, users on social media are the audience, creators and curators of content. There is an element of user choice built into the delivery of content on social media as users on most platforms can elect to see content from other users through actions such as following or friending them. Content delivery is then based on both user selection. For example, content from accounts a user follows, and on the outputs from algorithmic systems which use machine learning and artificial intelligence to deliver content that the system believes will be of most interest to the user. For example, a user's Twitter feed will contain a combination of content from people they follow, content that people they follow have engaged with and content which the algorithm has identified as potentially being of interest.

The criteria these systems use may involve personal characteristics such as gender or age or they may be based on a user's previous interactions on the platform. For example, after a user 'likes' a video, they are then presented with another video popular among users who also liked the original video. Data points such as platform usage and engagement data may become associated with certain characteristics in the algorithm, meaning that the platform can infer a person's gender based on their behaviour, essentially stereotyping them based on how other people have interacted with the platform³⁴. To give a hypothetical example, the algorithm might learn that women are more interested than men in diet related topics, and therefore serve more diet related content to women. When another user, who has not told the platform their gender, engages with diet-related content, the algorithm may then consider that this user meets the profile of a woman for the purposes of tailoring their content and advertising delivery experience. It is known that this is how these systems work, but there is no reliable way of comprehensively examining what that looks like in practice, and how it may contribute towards gender bias or harm online. All of the above means that, even if it were possible to see the content that an individual social media user was exposed to in one day, it would be extremely difficult to determine how much of this content is attributable to individual choice and decisions, and how much is based on profiling that includes characteristics such as gender.

The second factor that makes such research difficult is the limited availability of platform data and information. Obtaining content from social media platforms for research purposes is difficult and obtaining individualised user data is typically not possible at all. Platforms do not reveal the algorithms which they use for content delivery, making it impossible to determine the exact reasons why a user is being shown a particular piece of content which they did not elect to view. For these reasons, media monitoring work that could assess gendered representations, such as we see in traditional media, or that which explores the role of personal characteristics in content delivery is not typically practised in social media research, with the exception of small-scale experiments which rely on donated user data or use fake accounts to observe differences in how user behaviour affects recommender systems. Additionally, the limited access to data makes it difficult to assess the impact of social media and its related harms, such as misinformation, manipulation or gender inequalities. As one study described it, the negative impacts of platforms 'cannot be understood and addressed when the only parties currently with the capability to possess a comprehensive view of personalization processes are the platforms themselves.'³⁵.

³⁴ Fosch-Villaronga, E., A. Poulsen, R.A. Søraa, and B.H.M. Custers, "A Little Bird Told Me Your Gender: Gender Inferences in Social Media", *Information Processing & Management*, Vol. 58, No. 3, May 2021, p. 102541.

³⁵ Gordon-Tapiero, Ayelet, Alexandra Wood, and Katrina Ligett, "The Case for Establishing a Collective Perspective to Address the Harms of Platform Personalization", *Proceedings of the 2022 Symposium on Computer Science and Law*, ACM, Washington DC USA, 2022, pp. 119–130. <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3511265.3550450>.

The Global Media Monitoring Project³⁶ monitors news coverage across the world on radio, television, newspapers, websites and news media tweets. In 2020, it found that in news media tweets, only 26% of those featured in news stories were women, the same percentage found in newspapers and television. Across all news coverage, women were underrepresented, although the issue of what news media outlets choose to publish is only one factor that feeds into social media representation of news, since social media users themselves decide what news they share and, consequently, what social media platforms will prioritise in social media news feeds. This can also have positive implications. For example, news coverage of sports has traditionally focused on men in sports and has been predominantly reported on by men. However, social media have allowed for a much more diverse conversation, where athletes themselves can post, and social media users can share their own updates and commentary. As Creedon³⁷, has noted, the news media often includes social media coverage in the production of news, which led to much more focus on gender in the coverage of the 2012 London Olympics due to engagement with events like the gold medal women's soccer match which generated 711646 tweets over two hours.

In contrast to ordinary content, it is possible to determine more about how gender is incorporated into advertising delivery on social media platforms. As most social media platforms are free to use, they typically depend on advertising as a main source of income, which means that the infrastructures of these platforms are built with the interests of advertisers in mind³⁸. Social media platforms act as intermediaries of advertisers, and demographic-targeted advertising is a key motivation for collecting data on gender, which is a mandatory part of the sign-up process for an account on many platforms³⁹. When advertisers place adverts on social media platforms, they can choose to target specific user demographics, for example 18-25 year-old women, or people with specific interests. This is in sharp contrast to traditional advertising, in which demographics might have been associated with certain publications, but advertisers could not choose to show adverts exclusively to readers based on gender.

There is a need for more research which focuses on gender role stereotypes in online advertising⁴⁰. The Advertising Standards Authority in the UK produced a report⁴¹ examining gender stereotypes in advertising - a key publication in advocating for stronger regulation around gender stereotypical advertising. The report identified six main stereotypes in advertising which have the potential to 'harm or offend':

- Roles - Occupations or positions usually associated with a specific gender,
- Characteristics - Attributes or behaviours associated with a specific gender,
- Mocking people for not conforming to stereotype - Making fun of someone for behaving or looking in a non-stereotypical way,
- Sexualisation - Portraying individuals in a highly sexualised manner,

³⁶ GMMP, Who Makes the News: 6th Global Media Monitoring Project, 2022, available at: https://whomakesthenews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/GMMP2020.ENG_FINAL.pdf.

³⁷ Creedon, Pam, "Women, Social Media, and Sport: Global Digital Communication Weaves a Web", *Television & New Media*, Vol. 15, No. 8, December 2014, pp. 711–716.

³⁸ van der Vlist, Fernando N, and Anne Helmond, "How Partners Mediate Platform Power: Mapping Business and Data Partnerships in the Social Media Ecosystem", *Big Data & Society*, Vol. 8, No. 1, January 2021, p. 205395172110250.

³⁹ Bivens, Rena, and Oliver L. Haimson, "Baking Gender Into Social Media Design: How Platforms Shape Categories for Users and Advertisers", *Social Media + Society*, Vol. 2, No. 4, October 2016, p. 205630511667248.

⁴⁰ Eisend, Martin, "Gender Roles", *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 48, No. 1, January 2019, pp. 72–80.

⁴¹ Advertising Standards Authority, *Depictions, Perceptions and Harm*, 2017, available at: <https://www.asa.org.uk/static/uploaded/e27718e5-7385-4f25-9f07b16070518574.pdf>.

- Objectification - Depicting someone in a way that focuses on their body or body parts,
- Body image - Depicting an unhealthy body image.

In addition to the user targeting conducted by advertisers, platforms themselves determine their own advert delivery process, optimising delivery according to their own algorithms, for example by determining whether an advert will be relevant to a particular user. One experiment based in the US⁴² created a number of Facebook adverts which were not targeted according to gender, meaning that the researchers did not specify whether men or women should be targeted. Despite this, the performance data, which shows how many men and women saw the adverts, indicated that the advert delivery skewed according to the topic and features of the advert, with a cosmetics advert delivered to over 90% women, while a bodybuilding advert was delivered to over 75% men. Delivery was also influenced by individual factors, with women more likely to see an advert that has a higher daily advertising budget. Another US based experiment⁴³ ran gender-neutral Facebook, Instagram and Twitter adverts regarding STEM job opportunities, and found that across all age groups, while women were more likely to click on the advert, the advert was displayed to more men than women. The authors found that women are a more expensive demographic because they are more likely to make purchasing decisions, and they are more likely to buy in response to online advertising. Consequently, the algorithm delivering the adverts was optimised for cost-efficiency, meaning that it delivered more adverts to the lower-priced audience of men. This is an example of how algorithmic decisions can inadvertently reinforce gender-based inequalities, in this case leading to a gender disparity in the display of STEM related job opportunities.

Much remains unknown regarding how algorithms treat men and women differently, and the potential consequences this may have. In contrast to traditional media adverts, there is little transparency or opportunity for researchers to observe whether discriminatory online advertising practices are taking place, as platforms do not provide sufficient access to data⁴⁴. Meta, for instance, shares a better pipeline of data with advertisers than it does with researchers, revealing where the priority lies in their advertising practices⁴⁵. Researchers have recommended that future research needs to examine the extent to which stereotypes in online advertising can perpetuate harmful societal ideas about gender, and that such work could be used by regulators to develop guidelines to help online advertisers make responsible choices regarding gender portrayals⁴⁶. Greater industry co-operation with independent researchers could also facilitate more evidence-driven and ethically sound design guidelines or interventions⁴⁷.

⁴² Ali, Muhammad, Piotr Sapiezynski, Miranda Bogen, Aleksandra Korolova, Alan Mislove, and Aaron Rieke, "Discrimination through Optimization: How Facebook's Ad Delivery Can Lead to Skewed Outcomes", 2019, available at: <https://arxiv.org/abs/1904.02095>.

⁴³ Lambrecht, Anja, and Catherine E. Tucker, "Algorithmic Bias? An Empirical Study into Apparent Gender-Based Discrimination in the Display of STEM Career Ads", SSRN Electronic Journal, 2016, available at: <http://www.ssrn.com/abstract=2852260>.

⁴⁴ Ali, Muhammad, Piotr Sapiezynski, Miranda Bogen, Aleksandra Korolova, Alan Mislove, and Aaron Rieke, "Discrimination through Optimization: How Facebook's Ad Delivery Can Lead to Skewed Outcomes", 2019, available at: <https://arxiv.org/abs/1904.02095>.

⁴⁵ Hegelich, Simon, "Facebook Needs to Share More with Researchers", *Nature*, Vol. 579, No. 7800, March 26, 2020, pp. 473–473.

⁴⁶ Roth-Cohen, Osnat, Halyna Sofiia Kanevska, and Martin Eisend, "Gender Roles in Online Advertising", *Journal of Gender Studies*, July 21, 2022, pp. 1–15.

⁴⁷ Montag, C., and S. Hegelich, 'Understanding Detrimental Aspects of Social Media Use: Will the Real Culprits Please Stand Up?', *Frontiers in Sociology*, Vol. 5, December 1, 2020, p. 599270.

3. INDIVIDUAL IMPACTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON WOMEN AND GIRLS

This Chapter presents key research about the known impacts of social media on individual women and girls. Much of the research cited refers to systematic reviews or influential studies that identify the mechanisms by which these impacts occur. Although these studies may not focus exclusively on Europe, they are nonetheless critical for understanding this issue.

3.1. General mental health

Identifying a causal relationship between social media usage and negative mental health impacts, such as depression or anxiety, is complex, even without considering gender. Much research focuses on adolescents, as the transition from childhood to adolescence is typically associated with an increased likelihood of both mental health issues and social media usage. This inevitably leads to concerns that there may be a causal relationship between the two. The research discussed in this section, while not focused on Europe specifically, addresses the relationship between social media and mental health concerns, as well as what factors may explain that relationship.

Kelly et al.⁴⁸ examined 10 000 14 year-olds from the UK Millenium Cohort Study⁴⁹ to establish the relationship between depressive symptoms and social media, including the pathways through which this effect may occur. Key findings include:

- More time spent on social media was associated with an increase in depressive symptoms for both boys and girls, but the effect was much larger in girls.
- In comparison to those who spent less than 3 hours per day on social media, there was a 26% increase in depressive symptoms among girls, and a 21% increase among boys who spent more than 3 hours but less than 5 hours. Among those who spent more than 5 hours, these figures rise to 50% for girls and 35% for boys.
- The strongest pathway to depressive symptoms was a lack of high-quality sleep caused by extensive time spent on social media. Other associations with depressive symptoms were online harassment, low self-esteem and negative body image.
- Online harassment negatively impacted on other pathways, leading to increased levels of poor sleep, low self-esteem and particularly negative body image.

This work corresponds with that found in other large-scale studies. A UK based-study using a longitudinal dataset of over 9000 young people⁵⁰ found that the level of social media interaction that girls engage in at age 10 acts as a predictor for the level of socio-emotional difficulties (emotional symptoms, conduct problems, relationship problems) that they face as they age, but this was not the case for boys. Twenge and Martin⁵¹ used a sample of over 220 000 adolescents in the US and UK, and

⁴⁸ Kelly, Yvonne, Afshin Zilanawala, Cara Booker, and Amanda Sacker, "Social Media Use and Adolescent Mental Health: Findings From the UK Millennium Cohort Study", *EClinicalMedicine*, Vol. 6, December 2018, pp. 59–68.

⁴⁹ The UK Millenium Cohort Study has been studying the lives of 19 000 UK young people since the year 2000 and as such provides a strong source of data for studying the impact of social media on mental health.

⁵⁰ Booker, Cara L., Yvonne J. Kelly, and Amanda Sacker, "Gender Differences in the Associations between Age Trends of Social Media Interaction and Well-Being among 10-15 Year Olds in the UK", *BMC Public Health*, Vol. 18, No. 1, December 2018, p. 321.

⁵¹ Twenge, Jean M., and Gabrielle N. Martin, "Gender Differences in Associations between Digital Media Use and Psychological Well-being: Evidence from Three Large Datasets", *Journal of Adolescence*, Vol. 79, No. 1, February 2020, pp. 91–102.

found that the relationship between social media use and mental health issues appears to be heightened for girls. They also noted that boys in their sample were more likely to engage in gaming, while girls were more likely to use social media.

Collectively, these studies highlight the presence of a significant relationship between social media and mental health, which disproportionately affects girls. However, they also point to the importance of types of usage and the need to identify why social media can have a negative mental health impact for girls. A valid critique of studies which focus on social media use is that they do not differentiate between the time spent and the types of social media use⁵². Social media is embedded into the lives of young people, acting as a way for them to socialise with others, and as such it is important to identify the specific mechanisms which may make girls more susceptible to negative mental health impacts in order to identify potential solutions or interventions.

One way of categorising use is active use, which involves actively engaging with social media through posting, interacting with content or interacting with people through commenting or direct messaging and passive use, which involves viewing content from others without interacting with it. Passive use has been associated with a decrease in wellbeing, while active use can actually aid wellbeing. The reasons for this are that passive use involves a greater likelihood of a person making comparisons between themselves and others, thus increasing feelings of isolation and inadequacy, while active use can lead to feeling more connected with others and increasing social capital⁵³. This touches on a broader issue, that the reasons why a person engages the way it does on social media makes a difference when it comes to examining the impact that social media has on wellbeing. Not all adolescents who engage in passive use of social media experience negative effects because of their usage, in fact only a small minority do⁵⁴, but some individuals are more susceptible to experiencing harm online. For example, a young person who is experiencing dissatisfaction with their body may passively browse posts from others which reinforce these feelings, while the same posts could be seen by another young person who will not view them through the same lens of negative social comparisons. Thus, social media can play a role in creating feelings of dissatisfaction, but is rarely the only factor.

Rather than focusing on large-scale effects that a platform may have across a population, it may be more helpful to focus on the specific mechanisms that impact some individuals. This is especially useful when considering appropriate interventions. For example, there is evidence that the societal pressure to conform to beauty standards causes girls to place more importance on popularity and positive social experiences⁵⁵. This aligns with the results from EU Kids Online Survey described in Section 2.3, which showed that girls appear to feel the impact of negative interactions with others much more than boys do. Those who compare themselves to others are also at greater risk of experiencing negative outcomes as a result of their social media usage⁵⁶. Additionally, cyberbullying may lead to more

⁵² Odgers, Candice L., and Michaeline R. Jensen, "Annual Research Review: Adolescent Mental Health in the Digital Age: Facts, Fears, and Future Directions", *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, Vol. 61, No. 3, March 2020, pp. 336–348.

⁵³ Verduyn, P., O. Ybarra, M. Résibois, J. Jonides, and E. Kross, 'Do Social Network Sites Enhance or Undermine Subjective Well-Being? A Critical Review: Do Social Network Sites Enhance or Undermine Subjective Well-Being?', *Social Issues and Policy Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1, January 2017, pp. 274–302.

⁵⁴ Beyens, Ine, J. Loes Pouwels, Irene I. van Driel, Loes Keijsers, and Patti M. Valkenburg, "The Effect of Social Media on Well-Being Differs from Adolescent to Adolescent", *Scientific Reports*, Vol. 10, No. 1, December 2020, p. 10763.

⁵⁵ Twenge, Jean M., and Gabrielle N. Martin, "Gender Differences in Associations between Digital Media Use and Psychological Well-being: Evidence from Three Large Datasets", *Journal of Adolescence*, Vol. 79, No. 1, February 2020, pp. 91–102.

⁵⁶ Vogel, Erin A., Jason P. Rose, Bradley M. Okdie, Katheryn Eckles, and Brittany Franz, "Who Compares and Despairs? The Effect of Social Comparison Orientation on Social Media Use and Its Outcomes", *Personality and Individual Differences*, Vol. 86, November 2015, pp. 249–256.

interpersonal stress experienced by girls online⁵⁷, as girls who are experiencing difficulties are more likely than boys to discuss the issues they are facing on social media and are, in turn, more likely to receive comments that express similar negative affect, leading to a process of co-rumination⁵⁸. These types of factors, which are more likely to impact girls, act as mechanisms through which social media can impact an individual's mental health. The remaining sections examine these mechanisms in more detail.

3.2. Body-related mental health

Research has consistently indicated a connection between issues relating to body image, eating disorders, and social media. A systematic review of 67 papers⁵⁹ concluded that there is ample evidence to support the claim that internet usage, particularly on image-based social media platforms, is associated with increased body image and eating concerns, and that adolescents appear to be particularly vulnerable to these effects. Another systematic review⁶⁰ covering both adolescents and adults found that social media use, and in particular photo sharing, is associated with disordered eating outcomes and negative body image, with appearance-based social comparison identified as a key factor in this process. Instagram use has been identified as a factor for depression, low self-esteem, appearance anxiety and body dissatisfaction among women, particularly when exposed to beauty and fitness images⁶¹. Women who shared selfies on social media were more likely to report disimproved mood and feeling unattractive⁶², and a 'drive for thinness' was identified among women who regularly view appearance-focused posts shared by models and fitness bloggers on Instagram⁶³.

A key explanation for why women are more drawn to image-based social media platforms, despite their propensity to induce body dissatisfaction, is objectification theory. According to objectification theory⁶⁴, growing up in a society where women's bodies are routinely sexualized and used as a gauge of their value by others, causes women to become more self-conscious of how they present themselves. This in turn leads to body surveillance, which is the habitual monitoring of one's appearance. Furthermore, life-course changes, such as puberty, are associated with higher mental health risks, such as eating disorders, because girls experiencing puberty become more aware that they

⁵⁷ Luby, Joan, and Sarah Kertz, "Increasing Suicide Rates in Early Adolescent Girls in the United States and the Equalization of Sex Disparity in Suicide: The Need to Investigate the Role of Social Media", *JAMA Network Open*, Vol. 2, No. 5, May 17, 2019, p. e193916.

⁵⁸ Ehrenreich, Samuel E., and Marion K. Underwood, "Adolescents' Internalizing Symptoms as Predictors of the Content of Their Facebook Communication and Responses Received from Peers.", *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*, Vol. 2, No. 3, September 2016, pp. 227–237.

⁵⁹ Rodgers, Rachel F., and Tiffany Melioli, "The Relationship Between Body Image Concerns, Eating Disorders and Internet Use, Part I: A Review of Empirical Support", *Adolescent Research Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, June 2016, pp. 95–119.

⁶⁰ Holland, Grace, and Marika Tiggemann, "A Systematic Review of the Impact of the Use of Social Networking Sites on Body Image and Disordered Eating Outcomes", *Body Image*, Vol. 17, June 2016, pp. 100–110.

⁶¹ Sherlock, Mary, and Danielle L. Wagstaff, "Exploring the Relationship between Frequency of Instagram Use, Exposure to Idealized Images, and Psychological Well-Being in Women.", *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, Vol. 8, No. 4, October 2019, pp. 482–490.

⁶² Mills, Jennifer S., Sarah Musto, Lindsay Williams, and Marika Tiggemann, "'Selfie' Harm: Effects on Mood and Body Image in Young Women", *Body Image*, Vol. 27, December 2018, pp. 86–92.

⁶³ Cohen, Rachel, Toby Newton-John, and Amy Slater, "The Relationship between Facebook and Instagram Appearance-Focused Activities and Body Image Concerns in Young Women", *Body Image*, Vol. 23, December 2017, pp. 183–187.

⁶⁴ Fredrickson, Barbara L., and Tomi-Ann Roberts, "Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks", *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 2, June 1997, pp. 173–206.

will be sexualised, leading to increased self-objectification. Girls are more at risk of experiencing body dissatisfaction because of three factors, which have been described as a 'perfect storm'⁶⁵:

1. Social media features (e.g. images of peers and the ability to elicit feedback).
2. Adolescence features (e.g. heightened importance of peer relationships and approval).
3. Gender socialisation features (e.g. a societal focus on appearances for women and girls).

Adolescence features are largely unchangeable. Certain social media features are also not practical to challenge, such as the ability to share images, while other more subtle features may be subject to review, such as the way in which a platform shares metrics about how other users have engaged with an individual's content. Gender socialisation features can be challenged, which is explored in more detail in Chapter 5.

Feltman and Szymanski⁶⁶ examined women's use of Instagram and identified factors which both lead to and protect from body surveillance, or a continual focus on self-appearance. They found that individuals who internalised cultural standards of beauty or compared themselves to those they felt were better looking, were more likely to engage in body surveillance. However, having strong feminist beliefs, measured as agreement with attitudes and beliefs which would further gender equality⁶⁷, acted as a protective factor, meaning that these women did not experience body surveillance behaviours despite their Instagram usage. These findings again highlight that body image issues do not result directly from engaging with photo-based media. Although image-based platforms such as Instagram have facilitated the circulation of pro-anorexia imagery, they also provide potentially useful insights into the types and causes of gendered distress experienced by many girls and young women⁶⁸. Thus, in addition to exposure to 'thinspiration' imagery, it is important to consider how external factors such as education, self-esteem and sociocultural beliefs about gender roles also determine whether users will experience body dissatisfaction.

Social media content can also be used to address issues relating to appearance anxiety. For example, exposure to body-positive content, such as images of women with diverse body types, can increase body or appearance satisfaction and body appreciation, which may help to mitigate harm⁶⁹. One study⁷⁰ ran an experiment in which young women were shown posts depicting attractive, thin women with either no comment attached, comments praising the women's appearances (e.g. 'you look so beautiful') and/or 'reality check' comments, which point out that images feature unrealistic or unattainable beauty standards (e.g. 'remember this is really posed'). The study found that, while all participants experienced increased body dissatisfaction in response to viewing the images, those who viewed the reality check comments experienced significantly less body dissatisfaction. The authors of

⁶⁵ Choukas-Bradley, Sophia, Savannah R. Roberts, Anne J. Maheux, and Jacqueline Nesi, "The Perfect Storm: A Developmental-Sociocultural Framework for the Role of Social Media in Adolescent Girls' Body Image Concerns and Mental Health", *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, Vol. 25, No. 4, December 2022, pp. 681–701.

⁶⁶ Feltman, Chandra E., and Dawn M. Szymanski, "Instagram Use and Self-Objectification: The Roles of Internalization, Comparison, Appearance Commentary, and Feminism", *Sex Roles*, Vol. 78, No. 5–6, March 2018, pp. 311–324.

⁶⁷ Validated scale of feminist attitudes from Henley, Nancy M., Karen Meng, Delores O'Brien, William J. McCarthy, and Robert J. Sockloskie, "Developing a Scale to Measure the Diversity of Feminist Attitudes", *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 3, September 1998, pp. 317–348.

⁶⁸ Ging, Debbie and Sarah Garvey. "Written in these scars are the stories I can't explain": A content analysis of pro-ana and thinspiration image sharing on Instagram." *New Media & Society* 20, no. 3 (2018): 1181-1200.

⁶⁹ Nelson, Sophie L., Jennifer A. Harriger, Cindy Miller-Perrin, and Steven V. Rouse, "The Effects of Body-Positive Instagram Posts on Body Image in Adult Women", *Body Image*, Vol. 42, September 2022, pp. 338–346.

⁷⁰ Tiggemann, Marika, and Vasiliki Georgia Velissaris, "The Effect of Viewing Challenging 'Reality Check' Instagram Comments on Women's Body Image", *Body Image*, Vol. 33, June 2020, pp. 257–263.

this study note that reality check comments are impactful because they do not simply come from a third party. Rather, they hold power because they are elicited by peers in response to images, which reinforces the need for peer relationships and approval underpinning social media usage by women and girls.

3.3. Cyberviolence against women and girls

The term gender-based cyberviolence has been used in an EU context to describe new types of violent acts which are mediated by online technology, for example, 'cyberbullying, online harassment, cyber dating abuse, revenge porn, and cyberstalking'⁷¹. There is no commonly accepted definition of gender-based cyberviolence, and similar terms have also been used to describe this phenomenon, such as online or technology-facilitated gender based violence or gender-based harassment online. A recent report by EIGE recommended the term 'cyber violence against women and girls'⁷². One broad definition is, 'action by one or more people that harms others based on their sexual or gender identity or by enforcing harmful gender norms. This action is carried out using the internet and/or mobile technology and includes stalking, bullying, sexual harassment, defamation, hate speech and exploitation'⁷³. While such actions occur online, the impacts of cyberviolence are felt offline too, leading to psychological distress, while some types of cyberviolence may also be a precursor to physical violence.

Sexual harassment online is also recognised as a form of cyberviolence and it encompasses a 'wide range of behaviours that use digital content (images, videos, posts, messages, pages) on a variety of different platforms (private or public) that can make a person feel threatened, exploited, coerced, humiliated, upset, sexualised or discriminated against'⁷⁴. While the effects of cyberviolence undoubtedly have an impact on the ways in which women and girls can equally participate online, which are discussed in Chapter 5, this Section addresses individual impacts, such as the psychological impact of cyberviolence and the pressures surrounding sexting and the risks of non-consensual image sharing.

The tactics used by perpetrators of cyberviolence can cover a wide range of hostile actions, as identified in the following quote:

'Common harassment tactics include doxing (sharing private information with malice); impersonation; hateful speech; extortion and intimidation; rape, lynching and death threats; photo manipulation (memes, non-consensual pornification and deep fakes); "revenge porn"; and non-consensual distribution of sexualized images. In extreme cases, videos of rapes in progress and other forms of violence are shared across private networks for the purpose of "warning" women not to speak or protest their treatment. In others, women are sent graphic rape depictions. All of these methods leverage offline threats, such as stalking, shaming, rape and intimate partner violence, and derive power

⁷¹ Backe, Emma Louise, Pamela Lilleston, and Jennifer McCleary-Sills, "Networked Individuals, Gendered Violence: A Literature Review of Cyberviolence", *Violence and Gender*, Vol. 5, No. 3, September 2018, pp. 135–146.

⁷² EIGE, *Combating Cyber Violence against Women and Girls*, European Institute on Gender Equality, 2022, available at: https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/combating_cyber_violence_against_women_and_girls.pdf.

⁷³ Hinson, L, J Mueller, L O'Brien-Milne, and N Wandera, *Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: What Is It, and How Do We Measure It?*, International Center for Research on Women, Washington, DC, 2018, available at: https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICRW_TFGBVMarketing_Brief_v8-Web.pdf.

⁷⁴ Project deSHAME, *Young People's Experiences of Online Sexual Harassment*, Project deSHAME, December 2017, available at: https://www.childnet.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Project_deSHAME_Dec_2017_Report.pdf.

from powerful and enduring legacies of historic discrimination, safety gaps and double standards'.⁷⁵

According to the EIGE⁷⁶ report, data on gendered cyberviolence in the EU is limited due to the data collection practices from Member States, which tend to cover only certain forms of cyberviolence and typically do not record the granular data, such as gender of victims and perpetrators. A more unified approach to data collection would help to better estimate the scale of the problem and allow for comparative analysis between countries.

A 2014 European Union Agency's for Fundamental Rights study of 42 000⁷⁷ women across the EU found that over 1-in-10 had received either inappropriate advances on social media or explicit emails or SMS messages, while 1-in-5 of those aged 18-29 had faced cyber harassment. The report also found that women aged 18-29 are at the higher risk of experiencing harassment online. Gendered differences in experiences of harassment online also begin at a young age. According to the EU Kids Online survey⁷⁸, when asked about experiences of hurtful or nasty behaviour online, girls were more likely to experience aggression online (25% of girls vs 22% of boys), and boys were most likely to be aggressors (16% boys vs 12% of girls). Girls were also 19 percentage points more likely to report being 'at least a little upset' after experiencing aggression online.

A review of a decade of cyberviolence literature⁷⁹ found that cyberviolence is associated with negative consequences in terms of mental health, but that it also has social repercussions, and is associated with an increased risk of violence offline. In a 2017 Amnesty International poll⁸⁰, which surveyed 4 000 women who described themselves as moderate to active internet users, 23% said that they had experienced online abuse or harassment at least once. This ranged from 16% in Italy to 33% in the United States. The psychological impact among those who had experienced online abuse was described as potentially devastating, with 61% saying it had negatively impacted their self-esteem and self-confidence, 55% said they had experienced stress, anxiety or panic attacks as a result, 63% stating this abuse had prevented them from sleeping and 56% reporting that the abuse had affected their ability to concentrate for prolonged periods of time. Laura Bates, founder of the Everyday Sexism Project, which collects women's daily experiences of gender inequality, explained that online abuse can affect women at any time, regardless of where they are:

'The psychological impact of reading through someone's really graphic thoughts about raping and murdering you is not necessarily acknowledged. You could be sitting at

⁷⁵ Chemaly, Soraya, "Foreword", in Debbie Ging and Eugenia Siapera (eds.), *Gender Hate Online: Understanding the New Anti-Feminism*, Springer International Publishing, Cham, 2019, available at: <http://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-319-96226-9>.

⁷⁶ EIGE, *Combating Cyber Violence against Women and Girls*, European Institute on Gender Equality, 2022, available at: https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/combating_cyber_violence_against_women_and_girls.pdf.

⁷⁷ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights., *Violence against Women: An EU Wide Survey: Main Results.*, Publications Office, LU, 2014. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c643da1a-a4a6-11e5-b528-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-282011739>.

⁷⁸ Newman, Nic, Richard Fletcher, Craig T. Robertson, Kirsten Eddy, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, n.d., available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News-Report_2022.pdf.

⁷⁹ Backe, Emma Louise, Pamela Lilleston, and Jennifer McCleary-Sills, "Networked Individuals, Gendered Violence: A Literature Review of Cyberviolence", *Violence and Gender*, Vol. 5, No. 3, September 2018, pp. 135–146.

⁸⁰ Amnesty International, "Amnesty Reveals Alarming Impact of Online Abuse against Women", Amnesty International, November 20, 2017, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2017/11/amnesty-reveals-alarming-impact-of-online-abuse-against-women/>.

*home in your living room, outside of working hours, and suddenly someone is able to send you an incredibly graphic rape threat right into the palm of your hand.*⁸¹

Sexting, or the sharing of sexual videos, imagery or text through technology, is another area which can entail risk of cyberviolence. Sexting behaviour is commonplace: a meta-analysis⁸² of sexting prevalence across men and women in 28 studies, 16 of which were based in Europe, found pooled prevalence rates of 19.3% sending sexts, 34.8% receiving and 14.5% forwarding sexts without consent. Sexting is also common among those aged 18-29, with non-consensual sharing of sexual images noted as a significant issue affecting this age group (one in seven have either forwarded sexual content without consent or have experienced non-consensual sharing of their own images).⁸³

A recent report based on the EU Kids Online data⁸⁴ examined experiences of sending and receiving sexual messages among 12-16 year olds and found:

- Girls (19%) were 5 percentage points more likely than boys (14%) to receive unwanted requests for sexual information. A logistic regression of the data found that gender differences rise with age, with a 16 year-old girl having a 31% chance of unwanted requests compared to 21% for boys.
- In a question asked in Estonia, Finland, Flanders, Italy, Norway and Poland, girls are 20 percentage points more likely to say they are fairly or very upset at receiving sexual messages (29% vs 9%), while boys are 35 percentage points more likely to report that they are happy to receive sexual messages (48% vs 13%).

The gendered differences noted above may be further understood through research on sexual abuse in schools, which found that girls reported that feeling pressure to share sexual images or videos, or having images and videos shared with others without consent were common, while boys generally did not see this behaviour as widespread, and did not see it as an issue⁸⁵. Girls also reported that boys were persistent when requesting images, for example by not taking 'no' for an answer, or creating multiple accounts to evade being blocked.

Both receiving unwanted sexts or sexting under coercion have been associated with higher levels of psychological distress⁸⁶. A systematic review⁸⁷ also found that sexting among adolescents, particularly in younger age groups, is associated with both problematic sexual behaviours and mental health

⁸¹ Amnesty International "More than a Quarter of UK Women Experiencing Online Abuse and Harassment Receive Threats of Physical or Sexual Assault", Amnesty International, 2017.

⁸² Mori, Camille, Julianna Park, Jeff R. Temple, and Sheri Madigan, "Are Youth Sexting Rates Still on the Rise? A Meta-Analytic Update", *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol. 70, No. 4, April 2022, pp. 531–539.

⁸³ Mori, Camille, Jessica E. Cooke, Jeff R. Temple, Anh Ly, Yu Lu, Nina Anderson, Christina Rash, and Sheri Madigan, "The Prevalence of Sexting Behaviors Among Emerging Adults: A Meta-Analysis", *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, Vol. 49, No. 4, May 2020, pp. 1103–1119.

⁸⁴ Barbovschi, M, N Ní Bhroin, D Chronaki, L Ciboci, L Farrugia, M.A Lauri, A Ševčíková, E Staksrud, L Tsaliki, and A Velicu, *Young People's Experiences with Sexual Messages Online. Prevalence, Types of Sexting and Emotional Responses across European Countries.*, EU Kids Online and the Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo., 2021, available at: https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/88679/2021_SexualMessages_Online.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y.

⁸⁵ OFSTED, "Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools and Colleges", GOV.UK, 2021, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges>.

⁸⁶ Klettke, Bianca, David J. Hallford, Elizabeth Clancy, David J. Mellor, and John W. Toumbourou, "Sexting and Psychological Distress: The Role of Unwanted and Coerced Sexts", *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, Vol. 22, No. 4, April 2019, pp. 237–242.

⁸⁷ Mori, C., J.R. Temple, D. Browne, and S. Madigan, 'Association of Sexting With Sexual Behaviors and Mental Health Among Adolescents: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis', *JAMA Pediatrics*, Vol. 173, No. 8, August 1, 2019, p. 770.

issues. Girls may simultaneously feel pressure to share sexualised images for the approval of boys, yet such behaviour can result in punishment from same-gendered peers, who use derogatory language (e.g. slut, whore), which perpetuates gender stereotypes and reinforces sexual double standards⁸⁸.

Finally, ground-breaking work in the UK⁸⁹ has shown that sexual and gender-based abuse are a growing problem in schools, occurring across a range of interrelated online and offline contexts. This work points to the unequal power dynamics in youth image sharing, the persistence of a sexual double-standard and a tendency toward victim-blaming in both public discourse and educational interventions⁹⁰. Perhaps most importantly, this work highlights the paucity and inadequacy of educational interventions for young people around image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), and calls for a shift of focus away from the cybersafety paradigm toward a framework of digital rights, ethics and citizenship⁹¹. This means that instead of placing the emphasis on victims of online abuse by encouraging them to block, self-censor, report and delete, as well as to take primary responsibility for images of themselves that are shared without consent, interventions should focus on educating and holding to account the perpetrators of such trust violations and abuse. Such a paradigm shift would also enable educators to tackle the causes as well as the symptoms of digital sexual and gender-based abuse.

4. SOCIETAL IMPACTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON WOMEN AND GIRLS

This Chapter examines the impacts of social media which shape public opinion and social attitudes towards women and girls. Although it is more difficult to identify and quantify such impacts, as social media interact in complex ways with a variety of offline factors, there is a growing body of research which addresses these broader societal issues. Given that social media not only reflect but also shape public opinion, it is important to consider how they facilitate and reinforce perception bias with regard to gender stereotypes and normative beauty standards, as well as in the context of sexual consent and women's sexual autonomy. This Chapter addresses gender norms, civic participation, cultural stereotyping and the impact of the mansphere and pornography on women and girls.

4.1. Reinforcement of gendered norms

While Section 3.2 discussed the impact of social media on body-related mental health concerns, these impacts also extend to broader social expectations and norms about how women should look and behave. The visual nature of many social media platforms means that young people are being exposed to more images of women's bodies than ever before, many of which are edited to accentuate certain

⁸⁸ Daniels, Elizabeth A., and Eileen L. Zurbriggen, "It's Not the Right Way to Do Stuff on Facebook: An Investigation of Adolescent Girls' and Young Women's Attitudes Toward Sexualized Photos on Social Media", *Sexuality & Culture*, Vol. 20, No. 4, December 2016, pp. 936–964.

⁸⁹ Ringrose, J., K. Regehr, and B. Milne, *Understanding and Combatting Youth Experiences of Image-Based Sexual Harassment and Abuse*, Report, Department of Education, Practice and Society, UCL Institute of Education: London, UK., Department of Education, Practice and Society, UCL Institute of Education, London, UK, December 6, 2021, available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/departments/education-practice-and-society>.

⁹⁰ Setty, Emily, Jessica Ringrose, and Kaitlyn Regehr, "Digital Sexual Violence and the Gendered Constraints of Consent in Youth Image Sharing", by Miranda A. H. Horvath and Jennifer M. Brown, *Rape*, 2nd ed., Routledge, London, 2022, pp. 45–61, available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781003163800/chapters/10.4324/9781003163800-6>.

⁹¹ Albury, Kath, Nina Funnell, and Estelle Noonan, "The Politics of Sexting: Young People, Self-representation and Citizenship", Published in *Proceedings of the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association Conference: Media, Democracy and Change*, Old Parliament House, 2010, pp. 1–13. And Ging, Debbie, and Ricardo Castellini da Silva, *Young People's Experiences of Sexual and Gender-Based Harassment and Abuse during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Ireland: Incidence, Intervention and Recommendations*, DCU Anti-Bullying Centre, Dublin City University, Dublin, October 2022, available at: <https://antibullyingcentre.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Young-Peoples-Experiences.pdf>.

features and hide imperfections. This has contributed to a 'pedagogy of defect'⁹², wherein young women are encouraged to scrutinise themselves, leading to a new generational practice of 'nano-surveillance'⁹³. Young women in particular are made to feel insecure about an ever-increasing catalogue of physical features such as pore size and thigh circumference, which are regularly manipulated on social media⁹⁴. These pressures have been found to be directly related to targeted advertisements on social media promoting cosmetic surgeries and drinks and supplements for hair, skin, and nails, along with 'clean' living⁹⁵. A large American study shows that terms such as 'Snapchat Dysmorphia' and 'Selfie Dysmorphia' have entered the popular lexicon, reflecting the increasingly incongruent experiences of young women between how they view themselves through these 'beauty filters' and how they view their unedited faces and bodies⁹⁶. The EU Kids Online⁹⁷ survey suggests that this process can begin at a young age, with girls more likely to see content depicting 'ways to be very thin', although the overall exposure levels were low for both genders.

Thus, although social media have the potential to allow users to express themselves more freely, and to experiment with online identities in a new environment, in reality, digital settings often replicate, reinforce and sometimes even amplify the gender norms of the offline world. For example, in a study conducted by Rose et al.⁹⁸ of 300 self-selected Facebook profile pictures, the researchers found marked differences in terms of how women and men presented themselves: while men were more likely to present as active and independent, women emphasised dependence, attractiveness and sentimentality. Similarly, in an international study of 500 Facebook profile photos, Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz⁹⁹ found that males' profile photos accentuated status and risk taking, whereas females' profile photos accentuated familial relations and emotional expression. More recently, Butkowski et al.¹⁰⁰ also found that exaggerated gender-stereotypical displays in selfies were associated with a higher level of positive feedback in the form of likes and comments, which in turn reinforce women's expectations regarding ideal body image. Taken together, these findings suggest that, despite early predictions that the internet might liberate users from restrictive gender identities and norms, the emphasis on popularity and likes that is embedded in the platform affordances and algorithmic politics of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram exert a primarily gender-conservative effect on how users self-present.

Conversely, alternative platform design choices can positively influence this process. For example, Instagram recently undertook a pilot initiative, which involved hiding users' Likes, with a view to making the platform less pressurised and competitive. In this trial, users could see their own Likes but

⁹² Gill, Rosalind, *Changing the Perfect Picture: Smartphones, Social Media and Appearance Pressures*, City University of London, 2021.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Lin, Xiaolin, and Xuequn Wang, "Examining Gender Differences in People's Information-Sharing Decisions on Social Networking Sites", *International Journal of Information Management*, Vol. 50, February 2020, pp. 45–56.

⁹⁷ Newman, Nic, Richard Fletcher, Craig T. Robertson, Kirsten Eddy, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, n.d., available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News-Report_2022.pdf.

⁹⁸ Rose, Jessica, Susan Mackey-Kallis, Len Shyles, Kelly Barry, Danielle Biagini, Colleen Hart, and Lauren Jack, "Face It: The Impact of Gender on Social Media Images", *Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 5, November 2012, pp. 588–607.

⁹⁹ Tifferet, Sigal, and Iris Vilnai-Yavetz, "Gender Differences in Facebook Self-Presentation: An International Randomized Study", *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 35, June 2014, pp. 388–399.

¹⁰⁰ Butkowski, Chelsea P, Travis L Dixon, Kristopher R Weeks, and Marisa A Smith, "Quantifying the Feminine Self(ie): Gender Display and Social Media Feedback in Young Women's Instagram Selfies", *New Media & Society*, Vol. 22, No. 5, May 2020, pp. 817–837.

their followers could not see how many Likes their post received. In a survey-based study conducted by Wallace and Buil¹⁰¹, the researchers found that this initiative was associated with a positive change in wellbeing, particularly in terms of users' feelings of loneliness. This suggests that subtle platform changes can be used to challenge certain - albeit possibly unintentional - harms that reinforce gender inequalities and contribute to user anxiety and unhappiness. Similarly, Taylor et al.¹⁰² developed design interventions, including 'empathy nudges', aimed at increasing accountability and empathy among bystanders in instances of online bullying. Their results indicate that increased social transparency on social media encouraged greater accountability and empathy, thus improving bystander behaviour. However, they found that 'empathy nudges' did not have a significant effect. More work is needed to pilot alternative designs and affordances aimed at promoting prosocial behaviours.

4.2. Impact of harassment on professional and civic participation

Online misogynistic abuse has been found to impact personal, political and professional spheres, with effects that can last long after the individual has logged off. The 2017 Amnesty International report¹⁰³ identified a silencing effect caused by the abuse and harassment young women receive online, with 76% of respondents saying online abuse influenced how they used social media, and 32% saying it had forced them to give up posting entirely. Women's self-censorship and refusal to engage in certain conversations were motivated not only by fears for their own privacy and safety, but also for that of their families, with 24% of respondents saying the abuse they received made them fear for their families' safety.

Harassment in politics has a particularly negative impact on the participation of women. Highly visible women in politics attract a higher rate of uncivil comments on social media¹⁰⁴, and it has been demonstrated in the context of the US 2016 Presidential elections that misogynistic hate speech online had a tangible chilling effect on women's self-expression and political participation¹⁰⁵. Similarly, Bode¹⁰⁶ found that women deliberately make themselves less visible and are less outspoken about politics on social media as a strategy to avoid hostile reactions. Koc-Michalska et al.¹⁰⁷ have noted a larger difference in the gender gap on Twitter compared to Facebook when it comes to discussing politics, finding that the experience of 'mansplaining' (men explaining topics to women from an

¹⁰¹ Wallace, Elaine, and Isabel Buil, "Hiding Instagram Likes: Effects on Negative Affect and Loneliness", *Personality and Individual Differences*, Vol. 170, February 2021, p. 110509.

¹⁰² Taylor, Samuel Hardman, Dominic DiFranzo, Yoon Hyung Choi, Shruti Sannon, and Natalya N. Bazarova, "Accountability and Empathy by Design: Encouraging Bystander Intervention to Cyberbullying on Social Media", *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, Vol. 3, No. CSCW, November 7, 2019, pp. 1–26.

¹⁰³ Amnesty International "More than a Quarter of UK Women Experiencing Online Abuse and Harassment Receive Threats of Physical or Sexual Assault", Amnesty International, 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Southern, Rosalynd, and Emily Harmer, "Othering Political Women: Online Misogyny, Racism and Ableism Towards Women in Public Life", in Karen Lumsden and Emily Harmer (eds.), *Online Othering*, Springer International Publishing, Cham, 2019, pp. 187–210. http://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-030-12633-9_8, Rheault, Ludovic, Erica Rayment, and Andreea Musulan, "Politicians in the Line of Fire: Incivility and the Treatment of Women on Social Media", *Research & Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 1, January 2019, p. 205316801881622., and Esposito, Eleonora, and Sole Alba Zollo, "How Dare You Call Her a Pig, I Know Several Pigs Who Would Be Upset If They Knew*": A Multimodal Critical Discursive Approach to Online Misogyny against UK MPs on YouTube", *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, Vol. 9, No. 1, April 23, 2021, pp. 47–75.

¹⁰⁵ Carlson, Caitlin R. "Misogynistic Hate Speech and its Chilling Effect on Women's Free Expression during the 2016 US Presidential Campaign." *J. Hate Stud.* 14, 2017, pp. 97-111.

¹⁰⁶ Bode, Leticia, "Closing the Gap: Gender Parity in Political Engagement on Social Media", *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 20, No. 4, April 3, 2017, pp. 587–603.

¹⁰⁷ Koc-Michalska, Karolina, Anya Schiffrin, Anamaria Lopez, Shelley Boulianne, and Bruce Bimber, "From Online Political Posting to *Mansplaining*: The Gender Gap and Social Media in Political Discussion", *Social Science Computer Review*, Vol. 39, No. 2, April 2021, pp. 197–210.

assumed position of greater knowledge) is especially prevalent on Twitter (54% of female participants said they had experienced it). The researchers suggest that this difference in men's behaviour on Twitter acts as a disincentive for women to discuss politics on the platform.

The targeting of female journalists has also had a detrimental impact on journalism workplaces as well as a chilling effect on public discourse. In addition to personal harm, therefore, attacks on female journalists also exert a negative impact on professional and civic participation. In a large-scale study of below-the-line comments in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Becky Gardiner¹⁰⁸ found that out of the ten most targeted journalists, eight were women. This finding is especially significant, considering that only 28% of *Guardian* writers are women. People of colour were also disproportionately targeted. Online harassment against journalists also disproportionately affects women who are more visible in the news¹⁰⁹, and the targeting of female politicians and journalists often focuses on their looks and physical attributes¹¹⁰. Thus, visibility may deter women from taking up prominent positions. This is supported by Adams¹¹¹, who notes that women writing about technology are particular targets for abuse, and that many have disguised their identity to avoid it.

According to Binns¹¹², women are more likely than men to report receiving insults or threats and also have stronger emotional reactions to abuse. In this study, many reported that fear of abuse had negatively impacted their careers, including leaving jobs and self-censoring. Adams¹¹³ found that female journalists are more likely than male journalists to use avoidance strategies, including hiding their identity, as a reaction to online attacks. These strategies of mitigation, prevention and avoidance also require considerable amounts of emotional labour, thus adding to the workloads and stress levels of female journalists¹¹⁴. A study across five countries, including Hungary and Italy, found that online harassment and abuse is often used as a tactic to silence women and discourage participation. Women interviewed for the study, which included participants like politicians, activists and human rights lawyers, expressed that some of the most extreme abuse they encountered came in response to their work which focused on improving the lives and rights of women, particularly refugees and minorities. Crucially, the study identified that this abuse can be coordinated by authoritarian actors and politician regimes to silence dissent and in some instances, it has links to foreign interference and disinformation campaigns.¹¹⁵ Ultimately, experiences of harassment or aggressive interactions not only have the effect of silencing individual women; they also serve as a warning to other women of the consequences of online participation and self-expression. The resulting 'chilling effect' poses a substantial threat to

¹⁰⁸ Gardiner, Becky, "It's a Terrible Way to Go to Work: What 70 Million Readers' Comments on the Guardian Revealed about Hostility to Women and Minorities Online", *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4, July 4, 2018, pp. 592–608.

¹⁰⁹ Lewis, Seth C., Rodrigo Zamith, and Mark Coddington, "Online Harassment and Its Implications for the Journalist–Audience Relationship", *Digital Journalism*, Vol. 8, No. 8, September 13, 2020, pp. 1047–1067.

¹¹⁰ Pain, Paromita, and Victoria Chen, "This Reporter Is so Ugly, How Can She Appear on TV?: Negotiating Gender Online and Offline in Taiwanese Media", *Journalism Practice*, Vol. 13, No. 2, February 7, 2019, pp. 140–158.

¹¹¹ Adams, Catherine, "They Go for Gender First: The Nature and Effect of Sexist Abuse of Female Technology Journalists", *Journalism Practice*, Vol. 12, No. 7, August 9, 2018, pp. 850–869.

¹¹² Binns, Amy, "Fair Game? Journalists' Experiences of Online Abuse", *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2, June 1, 2017, pp. 183–206.

¹¹³ Adams, Catherine, "They Go for Gender First: The Nature and Effect of Sexist Abuse of Female Technology Journalists", *Journalism Practice*, Vol. 12, No. 7, August 9, 2018, pp. 850–869.

¹¹⁴ Miller, Kaitlin C., and Seth C. Lewis. "Journalists, harassment, and emotional labor: The case of women in on-air roles at US local television stations." *Journalism* 23, no. 1, 2022, pp. 79-97.

¹¹⁵ Di Meco, L., *Monetizing Misogyny: Gendered Disinformation and the Undermining of Women's Rights and Democracy Globally*, #shepersisted, February 2023, available at: https://shepersisted.org/wpcontent/uploads/2023/02/ShePersisted_MonetizingMisogyny.pdf.

democratic processes. As Ging¹¹⁶ contends, ‘if women cannot work, represent themselves, or articulate gender-political opinion online without fear of hate speech or harassment, the outlook for gender equality and democracy generally is bleak’. According to Martin¹¹⁷, gendered online violence against journalists now needs to be tackled as a multilevel online governance issue rather than an issue of personal safety, with improved support from peers, employers and legal and political institutions.

Finally, it is not only high-profile professionals who are subjected to this type of online abuse but rather any women whose livelihoods depend on social media. For example, Instagram influencers face a uniquely gendered ‘authenticity bind’, whereby they are expected to be visible, vulnerable and authentic, but at the same time are frequently critiqued for being too real and candid, or in some cases, are criticised for “performing” authenticity and so not being real enough¹¹⁸. Male influencers do not have to strike this balance, but also tend to receive more money per post than female influencers, and are generally asked to promote a broader range of products and services¹¹⁹. An Australian case study¹²⁰ of 15 instances in which cyber abuse had a direct impact on women’s livelihoods, noted the lack of protections that exist to support women who work online. Online abuse, the author argues, constitutes a form of workplace harassment, but due to the blurring of the lines between personal and professional contexts online, cyber abuse is not covered by existing workplace protections. Jane uses the term ‘economic vandalism’ to describe this new, insidious form of online abuse. The use of the word ‘vandalism’ is important, as it signifies deliberate intent to besmirch reputations, derail careers, and sabotage livelihoods. Moreover, the responsibility to protect individuals from gendered cyberhate often falls on the targets themselves. Finally, Jane’s¹²¹ research with ordinary women is important because it challenges the idea that this kind of abuse is limited to women with public profiles such as politicians, journalists, or outspoken feminist activists.

4.3. Cultural stereotyping and participation

The technological affordances of different platforms foster different communicative cultures which, over time, are taken up by and transformed by users in specifically gendered ways. For example, Koc-Michalska et al.¹²² found that women are less likely to be active on Twitter than men, which they suggest may be attributable to the fact that Twitter networks are composed largely of weak-tie relations, whereas Facebook networks tend to be built upon stronger ties. Thus, while Twitter is characterised by interaction with strangers, who are often anonymous, and is more public and outward-facing, Facebook interactions typically occur among friends and family, which discourages uncivil behaviour, while privacy settings facilitate more protected, less public communication. Consequently, Twitter strengthens the gender gap, as women are more reluctant than men to enter into conflict, whereas this gap is less visible on Facebook¹²³.

¹¹⁶ Ging, Debbie, “Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere”, *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 22, No. 4, October 2019, pp. 638–657, pg. 653.

¹¹⁷ Martin, Fiona, “Tackling Gendered Violence Online: Evaluating Digital Safety Strategies for Women Journalists”, *Australian Journalism Review*, Vol. 40, No. 2, December 2018, pp. 73–89.

¹¹⁸ Duffy, Brooke Erin, and Emily Hund, “Gendered Visibility on Social Media: Navigating Instagram’s Authenticity Bind”, *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 13, No. 0, September 22, 2019, p. 20.

¹¹⁹ Garlick, Hattie, “Why Gender Stereotypes Are Perpetuated on Instagram”, *Financial Times*, March 13, 2020.

¹²⁰ Jane, Emma A., “Gendered Cyberhate as Workplace Harassment and Economic Vandalism”, *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4, July 4, 2018, pp. 575–591.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Koc-Michalska, Karolina, Anya Schiffrin, Anamaria Lopez, Shelley Boulianne, and Bruce Bimber, “From Online Political Posting to Mansplaining: The Gender Gap and Social Media in Political Discussion”, *Social Science Computer Review*, Vol. 39, No. 2, April 2021, pp. 197–210.

¹²³ Ibid.

Recommender algorithms also work to suggest radically different content to different users along lines of age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and previous activity. As a result, users experience platforms such as YouTube and TikTok in significantly different ways. For example, a recent experiment conducted by Reset Australia¹²⁴ created fake accounts under young male aliases and monitored the differences in recommendations between those who followed extremist accounts and those who followed mainstream content. They found that all the accounts received recommendations of manosphere and anti-feminist content as the algorithms appeared to target this content towards men in general, irrespective of their usage patterns. As a result, the gender breakdown on certain platforms may be relatively equal in terms of platform usage, but substantially different in terms of the type of content users are consuming and uploading and the ways in which they are interacting. For example, Facebook groups may be used to share illegally leaked nudes, to organise feminist protests or to provide bereavement support. Beyond comparing subscription account data, counting followers, likes and retweets, or qualitatively analysing threads, pages, hashtags or groups, it is extremely difficult in such cases to determine whether women get an equal voice, as it is impossible to capture, measure or assess the vast quantities of customised content and interaction that are taking place on a particular platform at any given time in their entirety.

Despite this, some studies have attempted to assess the extent to which women and men experience equality of access and visibility on social media. For example, Nilizadeh et al.¹²⁵ examined over 94 000 Twitter users to investigate the association between perceived gender and measures of online visibility, namely how often Twitter users are followed, assigned to lists, and retweeted. The results showed an overall weak disadvantage towards perceived female users, as well as a 'glass-ceiling' effect, where perceived female users were strongly disadvantaged in a similar way to the barrier women face in attaining higher positions in companies. Studies on image search engines¹²⁶ and Wikipedia¹²⁷ also indicate persistent gender stereotypes and disparities between male and female users.

In some cases, the gender gap is especially extreme and therefore more evident. For example, certain male-dominated platforms such as Discord and 4/chan actively exclude women both through harassment and due to the explicitly male-oriented content (in particular pornography) and mode of address that dominates these sites. 'There are no girls on the internet' is a notorious rule and meme of the 4/chan imageboard site¹²⁸, and women who participate in these communities must perform multiple negotiations in order to 'get by'¹²⁹. On Reddit, subreddits which are dedicated to incels (for more on involuntary celibates see Section 4.4) and men's rights (e.g. r/MensRights and r/TheRedPillStories), are also typically hostile to women, and attempts by women to engage are frequently shut down by regular users, who are heavily invested in protecting these spaces from female

¹²⁴ Reset Australia, Algorithms as a Weapon against Women: How Youtube Lures Boys and Young Men into the "Manosphere", April 2022, available at: <https://au.reset.tech/uploads/algorithms-as-a-weapon-against-women-reset-australia.pdf>.

¹²⁵ Nilizadeh, Shirin, Anne Groggel, Peter Lista, Srijita Das, Yong-Yeol Ahn, Apu Kapadia, and Fabio Rojas, "Twitter's Glass Ceiling: The Effect of Perceived Gender on Online Visibility", Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media, Vol. 10, No. 1, August 4, 2021, pp. 289–298.

¹²⁶ Kay, Matthew, Cynthia Matuszek, and Sean A. Munson, "Unequal Representation and Gender Stereotypes in Image Search Results for Occupations", Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, ACM, Seoul Republic of Korea, 2015, pp. 3819–3828, available at: <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/2702123.2702520>.

¹²⁷ Wagner, Claudia, David Garcia, Mohsen Jadidi, and Markus Strohmaier, "It's a Man's Wikipedia? Assessing Gender Inequality in an Online Encyclopedia", 2015. <https://arxiv.org/abs/1501.06307>.

¹²⁸ Nagle, Angela, "An Investigation into Contemporary Online Anti-Feminist Movements", Nagle, Angela (2015) An Investigation into Contemporary Online Anti-Feminist Movements. PhD Thesis, Dublin City University., Doctoral, Dublin City University. School of Communications, 2015, available at: <https://doras.dcu.ie/22385/>.

¹²⁹ Fathallah, Judith, "BEING A FANGIRL OF A SERIAL KILLER IS NOT OK: Gatekeeping Reddit's True Crime Community", New Media & Society, November 24, 2022, p. 146144482211387.

intrusion¹³⁰. These subcultural communities are characterised by high levels of in-group self-knowingness, and attacks against out-groups such as women are frequently violent or sexual in nature. This is especially common on 4Chan/b and 4Chan/pol, where misogynistic humour is used to police membership and reinforce rightful 'ownership' of these online spaces¹³¹.

Online gaming is playing an increasingly prominent role in how young people socialise and interact with one another, as well as an increasingly popular spectator sport. However, the impact of gendered expectations on women's participation is particularly evident in this area¹³². Women and men play games in relatively equal numbers: 45% of all European video game players are female and women represent 51% of all mobile and tablet video game players¹³³. Interestingly, girls who play video games are three times more likely to study for a STEM degree than girls who don't play video games¹³⁴. That girls and women play digital games at an almost equal rate to boys and men is also supported by the international literature¹³⁵.

However, the game genres favoured by men and women tend to be heavily gendered. This is accentuated by the strictly gendered way in which games are marketed, the extreme representations of gender within games themselves and the male-dominated nature of gaming culture. Game-genre related stereotypes thus tend to exert a particularly strong influence in terms of preventing players from following their actual individual preferences¹³⁶. In addition to this, women gamers are more likely to experience harassment, sexism, and gender-based violence and objectification than their male peers and, as a result, many hold back from disclosing their gender online, and in some cases, gaming at all. Many women gamers are consequently marginalised or excluded from these online spaces. A study of the social game-streaming platform Twitch analysed 1.2 billion chat messages posted in 927247 channels by 6716014 viewers, and found that female streamers tend to receive significantly more objectifying comments, compared to their male peers, whose comments are more commonly related to the game being played¹³⁷. Again, such behaviours may contribute to reduced participation of women gamers in such spaces, with gaming culture itself appearing particularly hostile towards women¹³⁸.

4.4. The mansphere: anti-feminist and male supremacist groups online

Much of the misogyny experienced by women online originates in the mansphere. This is a loose network of anti-feminist and male-supremacist men's rights groups and communities, which has

¹³⁰ Miltner, Kate M., "There's No Place for Lulz on LOLCats": The Role of Genre, Gender, and Group Identity in the Interpretation and Enjoyment of an Internet Meme', *First Monday*, August 1, 2014.

¹³¹ Drakett, J., B. Rickett, K. Day, and K. Milnes, 'Old Jokes, New Media – Online Sexism and Constructions of Gender in Internet Memes', *Feminism & Psychology*, Vol. 28, No. 1, February 2018, pp. 109–127.

¹³² Jenson, J., and S. De Castell, 'Tipping Points: Marginality, Misogyny and Videogames', *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2013.

¹³³ Europe's Video Games Industry: Key Facts 2020. ISFE, available at: <https://www.isfe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ISFE-final-1.pdf>.

¹³⁴ GameTrack data, provided by IPSOS MORI and commissioned by ISFE (HOSEIN Anesa, "Girls' gaming behaviour and undergraduate degree selection: A secondary data analysis approach", *Computers in Human Behaviour*, vol. 91, February 2019, pp. 226-235, University of Surrey).

¹³⁵ Paaßen, B., Morgenroth, T. and Stratemeyer, M., 2017. What is a true gamer? The male gamer stereotype and the marginalization of women in video game culture. *Sex Roles*, 76, pp.421-435.

¹³⁶ Lange, B.P., Wühr, P. and Schwarz, S., 2021. Of Time Gals and Mega Men: Empirical findings on gender differences in digital game genre preferences and the accuracy of respective gender stereotypes. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, p.657430.

¹³⁷ Nakandala, S., G.L. Ciampaglia, N.M. Su, and Y.-Y. Ahn, 'Gendered Conversation in a Social Game-Streaming Platform', 2016.

¹³⁸ Lopez-Fernandez, O., A.J. Williams, M.D. Griffiths, and D.J. Kuss, 'Female Gaming, Gaming Addiction, and the Role of Women Within Gaming Culture: A Narrative Literature Review', *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, Vol. 10, July 10, 2019, p. 454.

flourished thanks to the technological affordances of social media¹³⁹. The manosphere includes a range of groups and gender-political ideologies, including Pick-Up Artists (PUAs), MGTOWs (Men Going Their Own Way), TradCons (Traditional Conservatives) and incels (Involuntary Celibates). Pick-Up Artists (PUAs) are dedicated to teaching heterosexual men the art of sexual conquest. Seduction 'experts' have devised a range of controversial techniques and vocabularies based on principles derived from evolutionary psychology such as negging (giving a back-handed compliment) and kino escalation (gradually increasing physical contact). These tactics have become widely available through the self-help industry, and are the subject of numerous seduction seminars, training events, instructional guidebooks and video tutorials¹⁴⁰. MGTOWs are men who have decided to cut ties with women altogether, although some advocate relations with sex workers and women from non-western countries, who have not been influenced by feminism. TradCons typically espouse values of heterosexual marriage, patriotism and anti-abortion, while incels are men who believe they are denied sex due to feminism, their looks and women's biologically-prescribed desire for alpha males. Some incels attribute their 'fate' as virgins to genetic misfortune and are characterised by articulations of despair, self-loathing and suicidal ideation. Incels are often immersed in online technolibertarian and gaming spaces of the internet, and sometimes overlap with other – alt-right, transphobic, disinformation and conspiracy theory – agendas.

Although they differ on a number of issues, the disparate strands of the manosphere share a common belief that the current 'liberal' world order is biased toward women and disadvantages men. This unifying philosophy posits that men need to become enlightened to feminism's gynocentric conspiracy and to regain male sovereignty through the assertion of alpha masculinity and the subordination of women. There is a clear link, therefore, between the growing levels of online abuse and toxicity experienced by women and girls, and the recent rise and mainstreaming of anti-feminist and manosphere ideologies in social media spaces. Unlike earlier, pre-internet men's rights groups, which focussed predominantly on fathers' rights, divorce cases and male suicide and depression, the new male supremacist networks are concerned primarily with issues of sexual selection and entitlement derived from evolutionary psychology, extreme misogyny, and orchestrated attacks on individual women¹⁴¹. Using platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, high-profile 'thought leader' influencers¹⁴² have been able to spread their messages of 'self-improvement' and 'enlightenment' to millions of boys and men, frequently serving as a gateway into more extreme male-supremacist and alt-right spaces¹⁴³.

The manosphere and its adjacent male and white supremacist formations exploit the affordances of social media, not only to spread their gender-political beliefs but also to attack, threaten and harass women, people of colour and LGBTQ+ people. In addition to verbal harassment, many also use technology for purposes of stalking, image-based sexual abuse (including deepfakes), sextortion, doxxing, hacking and coordinated 'pile-ons'. In an age of widely available and free pornography, the involvement of these groups in high-profile nude leaks demonstrates that the transactional value of female nudes is less about sexual gratification than it is about the public exposure, shaming and control

¹³⁹ Ging, Debbie, "Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere", *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 22, No. 4, October 2019, pp. 638–657, pg. 653.

¹⁴⁰ O'Neill, Rachel. *Seduction: Men, masculinity and mediated intimacy*. John Wiley & Sons, 2018.

¹⁴¹ Marwick, Alice E., and Robyn Caplan. "Drinking male tears: Language, the manosphere, and networked harassment." *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 543-559.

¹⁴² Bujalka, E., Rich, T. and Bender, S., 2022. The Manosphere as an Online Protection Racket: How the Red Pill Monetizes Male Need for Security in Modern Society. *Fast Capitalism*, 19(1).

¹⁴³ Ging D, Murphy S. Tracking the Pilling Pipeline: Limitations, Challenges and a Call for New Methodological Frameworks in Incel and Manosphere Research. AolR Selected Papers of Internet Research. 2021 Sep 15.

of women. As recent research in the UK¹⁴⁴ has demonstrated, images that involve the highest degree of trust and privacy violation are the most sought after. Men's rights groups also rely on tech-facilitated phenomena such as brigading (gaming a vote by grouping together to boost or decrease ratings artificially), herding (aligning attitudes or behaviours without centralised coordination) and astroturfing (the use of fake grassroots efforts aimed at influencing public opinion) to help spread false-flag campaigns as well as to maximise the reach of propaganda. They also tend to be well versed in rhetorical strategies such as sealioning (trolling that involves persistent requests for evidence or basic information), gaslighting and strawman fallacies (refuting a mischaracterisation of an argument which gives the appearance that the original argument has been refuted).

For women and girls, therefore, the threat of exposure and shaming is constant, and is continuously being increased by new technological features. As Renold and Ringrose¹⁴⁵ have shown, practices of 'phallic tagging' - boys tagging themselves in girls' selfies, tagging their friends in non-consensually shared nudes of girls, asking girls to send photos of body parts with their (the boys') names written on them and tagging photos of random female body parts with girls' names - facilitate new formations of sexual objectification, shaming and control. Similarly, features such as Airdrop facilitate the intimidation of women in public spaces (by allowing 'dick pics' to be sent to nearby mobile phones), while deepfake technology enhances the potential for sextortion and various forms of image-based sexual abuse.

While it is difficult to determine the precise size or influence of the manosphere, research indicates that male-supremacist ideas and followings are growing. A recent report¹⁴⁶ reveals that there has been a six-fold increase in web traffic to UK websites promoting incel ideology, with a surge from 114 420 monthly visits to 638 505, from March to November 2021. Ribeiro et al.¹⁴⁷ show that MGTOW, incels and the Red Pill are now the largest communities, having received significant migratory influxes from older ones, and that these newer communities are considerably more toxic and misogynistic. Although incels or involuntary celibates have received the most media attention due to a number of high-profile mass killings in the US, Canada, Germany and the UK, the more mainstream neo-masculinist influencers and groups are arguably more harmful in terms of their reach and impact. Manosphere ideology has spread rapidly from the US to other countries, and has also been mainstreamed through popular platforms¹⁴⁸. Before his arrest by Romanian authorities, TikTok influencer Andrew Tate's videos were watched more than 12 billion times¹⁴⁹ (Das, 2022). The mainstreaming and normalisation of male-supremacist misogyny among youth thus poses a significant and urgent threat to women and girls on social media.

4.5. Pornography

In addition to the rise of male supremacism, there has been a huge rise in the quantity of pornographic material available online in the past ten years. Although the majority of online pornography is hosted

¹⁴⁴ Ringrose, J., K. Regehr, and S. Whitehead, 'Teen Girls' Experiences Negotiating the Ubiquitous Dick Pic: Sexual Double Standards and the Normalization of Image Based Sexual Harassment', *Sex Roles*, Vol. 85, No. 9–10, November 2021, pp. 558–576.

¹⁴⁵ Renold, Emma, and Jessica Ringrose. "Selfies, rellies and phallic tagging: Posthuman participations in teen digital sexuality assemblages." In *From 'Aggressive Masculinity' to 'Rape Culture'*, pp. 182-201. Routledge, 2018.

¹⁴⁶ The Incelosphere: Exposing pathways into incel communities and the harms they pose to women and children'. Centre for Countering Digital Hate, 2022.

¹⁴⁷ Ribeiro MH, Blackburn J, Bradlyn B, De Cristofaro E, Stringhini G, Long S, Greenberg S, Zannettou S. The evolution of the manosphere across the web. In Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media 2021 May 22, Vol. 15, pp. 196-207.

¹⁴⁸ Ging, D., T. Lynn, and P. Rosati, 'Neologising Misogyny: Urban Dictionary's Folksonomies of Sexual Abuse', *New Media & Society*, Vol. 22, No. 5, May 2020, pp. 838–856.

¹⁴⁹ Das S. Inside the violent, misogynistic world of TikTok's new star, Andrew Tate. The Guardian. 2022.

on dedicated websites such as Pornhub (47 billion visits in 2021), the dissemination of pornographic content is widely facilitated by social media platforms such as Instagram, SnapChat and WhatsApp. In addition to this, subscription-based social media platforms such as OnlyFans enable direct-to-consumer sale of self-shot footage. In brief, the porn industry has been radically reshaped by new technologies and by social media, enabling the rapid production and distribution of both commercial and 'home-made' pornography across social networks.

Media and feminist scholars are deeply divided on the issue of pornography harm. While 'sex-positive' sexuality and gender scholars maintain that pornography remains strictly within the domain of fantasy, much sociological and psychological work involving users of and those impacted by pornography indicates that it encourages lack of intimacy and boundary setting, the subjugation of women and the prioritisation of male pleasure^{150 151 152}. According to psychology researchers, engagement with pornography releases dopamine in the brain¹⁵³, causing users to seek out ever more extreme material in order to sustain continued dopamine 'hits'. Evidence of pornography's affective, physiological impacts challenge the notion that a clear line can be drawn between fantasy and reality, or between the physical and psychological self.

Key concerns relating to socially mediated pornography revolve around its widespread availability and the increasing levels of extreme violence against women found in mainstream content¹⁵⁴. Compared with the pre-internet era, pornography consumption is now widely accessible, affordable and anonymous. Pornography sites get more visitors per month than Netflix, Amazon and Twitter combined, and almost all mainstream pornographic content now involves violence against women¹⁵⁵. According to a study that analysed porn titles alone, one out of every eight titles that are suggested to first-time visitors to porn sites promoted acts of explicit sexual violence¹⁵⁶.

While effects are notoriously difficult to quantify, there is growing evidence that pornography consumption is directly impacting levels of sexual harassment experienced by women and girls¹⁵⁷. A recent study involving five European countries demonstrated the relationship between regular viewing of online pornography, sexual coercion and abuse, and the sending and receiving of sexual images and messages¹⁵⁸. The study found that boys' perpetration of sexual coercion and abuse was significantly associated with regular viewing of online pornography. Viewing online pornography was also associated with increased probability of boys having sent sexual images or messages in nearly all

¹⁵⁰ Bridges, Ana J. "Methodological considerations in mapping pornography content." In *Everyday pornography*, pp. 46-61. Routledge, 2010.

¹⁵¹ Sun, Chyng, Ana Bridges, Jennifer A. Johnson, and Matthew B. Ezzell. "Pornography and the male sexual script: An analysis of consumption and sexual relations." *Archives of sexual behavior* 45, no. 4, 2016, pp: 983-994.

¹⁵² Vera-Gray, Fiona, Clare McGlynn, Ibad Kureshi, and Kate Butterby. "Sexual violence as a sexual script in mainstream online pornography." *The British Journal of Criminology* 61, no. 5, 2021, pp 1243-1260.

¹⁵³ Hall, Paula. "A biopsychosocial view of sex addiction." *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 26, no. 3, 2011, pp 217-228.

¹⁵⁴ Shor, Eran, and Kimberly Seida. "'Harder and harder'? Is mainstream pornography becoming increasingly violent and do viewers prefer violent content?." *The Journal of Sex Research* 56, no. 1, 2019, pp 16-28.

¹⁵⁵ Dines, Gail. "Growing up with porn: The developmental and societal impact of pornography on children." *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence* 2, no. 3, 2017, pp 1-9.

¹⁵⁶ Vera-Gray, Fiona, Clare McGlynn, Ibad Kureshi, and Kate Butterby. "Sexual violence as a sexual script in mainstream online pornography." *The British Journal of Criminology* 61, no. 5, 2021, pp 1243-1260.

¹⁵⁷ Alexandraki, Kyriaki, Vasileios Stavropoulos, Emma Anderson, Mohammad Q. Latifi, and Rapson Gomez. "Adolescent pornography use: A systematic literature review of research trends 2000-2017." *Current Psychiatry Reviews* 14, no. 1 (2018): 47-58.

¹⁵⁸ Stanley, Nicky, Christine Barter, Marsha Wood, Nadia Aghtaie, Cath Larkins, Alba Lanau, and Carolina Överlien. "Pornography, sexual coercion and abuse and sexting in young people's intimate relationships: A European study." *Journal of interpersonal violence* 33, no. 19 (2018): 2919-2944.

countries. Boys who regularly watched online pornography were also significantly more likely to hold negative gender attitudes.

The results of a recent national representative survey in Ireland indicate that the majority of Irish people believe that pornography is contributing to gender inequality, sexist double standards, unrealistic sexual expectations, normalisation of requests for sexual images including among children, and coercion and violence against women and girls, including image-based sexual abuse¹⁵⁹. The study found that almost two thirds of people (63%) believe that pornography leads to increased sexual violence in society, while 65% of people believe that pornography undermines men's respect for women and one in two people (57%) believe that pornography increases inequality between men and women. 76% of all young people surveyed (age 18- 25) were concerned about the harm to society of current availability and prevalence of pornography, and 81% agree that pornography increases men's interest in trying rough or violent sex. While the majority of men (60%) agree that pornography is harmful to society, the level of concern is significantly higher among women (82%). Given that the average age for exposure to pornography among boys is between 8 and 11¹⁶⁰ and that most relationships and sexuality education curricula in schools do not address pornography, this an issue of significant global concern regarding the wellbeing of women and girls.

5. PREVENTATIVE AND PROTECTIVE APPROACHES

This Chapter explores some of the projects and approaches which have been used across Europe and internationally to challenge gender stereotypes by using online tools or with a view to promoting positive change regarding gender equality on social media. It begins by discussing the potential for social media to elevate conversations surrounding issues relating to women and concludes with examples of educational initiatives which counter online gender based harms.

5.1. Opportunities through social media

While Chapter 4 highlighted some of the ways in which hostility on social media can stifle the voices of women, online spaces can also act as opportunities to share experiences and develop broader cultural movements that have the potential to counter sexual harassment and gender-based harms. An analysis of 50 million tweets referencing Covid-19 found that domestic violence was a top topic referenced in discussions about women¹⁶¹, while a study of over 3 million Covid-19 related tweets also found that women were more likely to discuss issues such as family, social distancing and healthcare, while men put a greater focus on the pandemic's impact on sports, political reactions and the spread of the virus¹⁶². Social media can also be used to counter experiences of sexism. A study of 20000 tweets examining the hashtags #maninterruption, #manspreading, and #mansplaining found that women use these hashtags to highlight behaviour from men which they found unacceptable, allowing them to

¹⁵⁹ It's Time to Talk about Porn: Irish attitudes on the links between pornography, sexual development, gender inequality and violence against women and girls. Women's Aid. November, 2022, available at: https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/its_time_to_talk_about_porn_report_womens_aid_november_2022.pdf.

¹⁶⁰ Dines, Gail. "Growing up with porn: The developmental and societal impact of pornography on children." *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence* 2, no. 3, 2017, pp 1-9.

¹⁶¹ Al-Rawi, Ahmed, Karen Grepin, Xiaosu Li, Rosemary Morgan, Clare Wenham, and Julia Smith. "Investigating public discourses around gender and COVID-19: a social media analysis of Twitter data." *Journal of Healthcare Informatics Research* 5, 2021, pp 249-269.

¹⁶² Thelwall, Mike, and Jonathan M. Levitt. "Retweeting Covid-19 disability issues: Risks, support and outrage." *El profesional de la información (EPI)* 29, no. 2 (2020).

articulate their beliefs and share them with other women¹⁶³. These studies highlight the potential of social media as spaces for facilitating communication networks among women and highlighting women's issues.

Social media have also proved to be a powerful vehicle for bringing women's rights issues to the attention of a wider public. Hashtag activism has helped to mobilise public attention on women's rights and issues by increasing the credibility of those issues which are not properly highlighted in mainstream media. For example, the Everyday Sexism project, founded in 2012 by British feminist Laura Bates, enables women from all over the world to document their experiences of sexism, highlighting the severity and widespread nature of the issue. Similarly, the UN Women's #HeForShe campaign focuses on the potential of social media to attract large audiences. The campaign engaged more than 1.2 billion users, stressing the need to engage men and boys in efforts to achieve gender equality. The #MeToo campaign - an international movement against sexual harassment and assault - has become one of the largest trending topics on Twitter and Facebook. It spread virally in October 2017 as a hashtag to help demonstrate widespread prevalence of sexual assault, and became a turning point in contemporary feminist politics. According to Mendes and Ringrose (2019) #MeToo 'has enabled mass participation, connectivity and consciousness raising', making it 'part of the combat and battle that chips away at normative gender and sexual power relations offering new possibilities'¹⁶⁴.

While less well known than #MeToo, the Everyone's Invited¹⁶⁵ project in the UK is another recent example of how social media can be used to raise awareness in a way which encourages an official response. The project started in 2020 as a series of Instagram posts in which a university student shared her experiences of rape culture and encouraged others to anonymously do the same. The response led to the development of an online website for sharing anonymous stories which received over 50 000 entries, many from school aged participants. This partially prompted a government review into experiences of sexual abuse in UK schools and colleges, and the Everyone's Invited project itself now focuses on education, offering workshops, trainings and talks to schools¹⁶⁶.

5.2. Preventative interventions

Schools have been identified as an important intervention site when it comes to challenging gendered social norms and raising awareness about issues such as online gender-based violence. A recent study in Ireland investigated young people's experiences with gender based abuse and harassment throughout the Covid-19 pandemic in Ireland and explored the role of school based workshops in educating around the topic¹⁶⁷. The study, which was part of a larger cross-national project with University College London, delivered two workshops to students aged 15-17. These workshops were developed in collaboration with the School of Sexuality Education in London, and focused on gender-based and sexual harassment and abuse, and activating for change. The researchers observed delivery of the workshops and subsequently conducted focus groups with the students. The study also involved

¹⁶³ Lutzky, Ursula, and Robert Lawson. "Gender politics and discourses of# mansplaining,# manspreading, and# maninterruption on Twitter." *Social Media+ Society* 5, no. 3, 2019, pp 2056305119861807.

¹⁶⁴ Mendes, Kaitlynn, and Jessica Ringrose. "Digital feminist activism:# MeToo and the everyday experiences of challenging rape culture." # *MeToo and the politics of social change* (2019): 37-51.

¹⁶⁵ <https://www.everyonesinvited.uk>.

¹⁶⁶ <https://www.everyonesinvited.uk/education>.

¹⁶⁷ Ging, Debbie and Castellini da Silva, Ricardo. *Young People's Experiences of Sexual and Gender-Based Harassment and Abuse during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Ireland: Incidence, Intervention and Recommendations*, DCU Anti-Bullying Centre, Dublin City University, Dublin, October 2022.

a survey with 185 students to investigate their social media use and experiences of sexual and gender-based abuse.

The study found that social media use increased significantly among young people during the Covid-19 pandemic. It also found that the pandemic had a greater negative impact on girls and LGBTI+ students, with 58% of girls and 64% of LGBTI+ students reporting that social distancing measures had significantly impacted on their mental health, compared with 30% of boys and 39% of heterosexual students. Girls also experienced more online harms than boys, and the majority of these harms had also increased more for girls than boys since the pandemic started. Girls experienced more digital harassment of a sexual nature than boys with approximately twice as many girls (33%) as boys (17%) receiving unwanted sexual photos. 15% of boys and 32% of girls were asked to send sexual photos or videos of themselves online, with 37% of girls and 20% of boys saying this had increased since Covid-19 started.

In the focus groups, female students reported that receiving unsolicited 'dick pics', pressure to send nudes and being rated on one's appearance online had become almost entirely normalised. They were grateful that the workshops 'denormalised' these behaviours, with 100% of girls and 90% of boys saying the workshops had improved their knowledge of what sexual violence was. Students also reported that the workshops had given them a vocabulary and definitions with which to understand sexual and gender-based violence. In line with the international literature, students reported high levels of dissatisfaction with the content and provision of relationships and sexuality education, with many reporting that the country's Relationship Sexuality Education curriculum does not adequately address the realities of mediated intimacy, digital abuse or gender inequality, nor is it sufficiently inclusive of LGBTI+ perspectives.

A growing body of research worldwide points to the urgent need for relationships and sexuality education which is relatable, and based on young people's needs and lived experiences. This is particularly important in relation to the complexities and unequal power dynamics of their digital lives. However, insufficient training and resources are allocated to this subject, with teachers lacking adequate support on content, materials and methods to deliver effective education on sexism, consent, digital ethics and gender-based abuse and harassment¹⁶⁸.

Considering the blending online/offline reality of young people's lives, strategies that work to address social norms offline are likely to work online too¹⁶⁹. A focus-group based study in Australia found that many young people were already using the internet as a resource to educate and support themselves and others¹⁷⁰. Effective insights that helped to challenge gendered norms were far more likely to come from engaging with peers about their experiences, or viewing content shared by influential figures who discussed these issues. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that interventions aimed at preventing gender-based harassment need to be culturally accessible and speak directly to the experiences of young people. Similar to Ging and Castellini da Silva (2022), a key finding of Molnar's study was that young people were particularly interested in discussions about everyday misogynistic behaviours that are taken for granted and could contribute to 'violence supportive behaviours' among their peers. Creating online spaces where young people can have these kinds of conversations, and

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Odgers, Candice L., and Michaeline R. Jensen. "Annual research review: Adolescent mental health in the digital age: Facts, fears, and future directions." *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 61, no. 3, 2020, pp 336-348.

¹⁷⁰ Molnar, Lena Ida. "'I Didn't Have the Language': Young People Learning to Challenge Gender-Based Violence through Consumption of Social Media." *Youth* 2, no. 3, 2022, pp 318-338.

developing a vocabulary to identify them, were key in enabling them to challenge problematic behaviours.¹⁷¹

Videogames are also a means through which gender-stereotyping, sexism and consent can be addressed. A meta-analysis of 83 different studies found that playing pro-social games, that is games which encourage actions to benefit others, can increase pro-social behaviours such as empathy and decrease aggression¹⁷². GenTOPIA¹⁷³ is a recent example of a pro-social videogame designed to tackle sexism and gender-based abuse. Developed by the GeGame consortium and co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union, the game is aimed at students aged 14–16 and involves a number of interactive activities based on realistic scenarios. It addresses issues such as gender stereotypes, consent, digital safety, street harassment, coercive control, non-consensual image sharing, and homophobic bullying. Crossing Boundaries¹⁷⁴ is another pro-social video game, produced by the non-profit charity Jennifer Ann Groups' 'Gaming Against Violence' program. The game aims to educate teenagers through mini-games and a narrative underpinned by the theme of consent. The American feminist artist, Angela Washko's 'The Game'¹⁷⁵ is an educational intervention aimed at adults. The Game uses instructional materials created by Pick Up Artists (PUA), known for their attempts to manipulate women into sex, to create a game that allows the player to experience the attempts that various PUAs use to try and seduce the player. As well as exposing the techniques and practices of members of the PUA community, the Game also aims to create a feeling of empathy in the players as they get to experience, first-hand, the difficulties of navigating the world as a woman.

Developing social media literacy has also been identified as a potential intervention when it comes to addressing body dissatisfaction and body image concerns for girls who use social media. One randomised control trial of a school-based programme which taught students to critique social media posts in Australia in the areas of 'body image, dieting, and wellbeing' found few effects for boys who participated, but positive differences in dietary restraint and depressive symptoms at a 6-month follow up for girls who completed the program compared to those who did not¹⁷⁶. Another randomised trial in Australia, which focused specifically on increasing media literacy around targeted advertising and image editing on social media, found that the programme led to significant improvements in the areas of body image and disordered eating as well as reduced pressure to conform to ideals around body image and greater scepticism about social media in general¹⁷⁷. The researchers concluded by calling for a combined media literacy–peer influence approach, noting that interactions with peers, and the highly visual nature of social media, are both important parts of why young people use social media, but also have the potential to contribute to increased appearance pressures.

Drawing on communication and social psychological theories, it has been suggested that social media based interventions can be useful for addressing body image concerns among women and girls, particularly when the interventions involve first-hand testimony from women who have overcome

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Greitemeyer, T., and D.O. Mügge, 'Video Games Do Affect Social Outcomes: A Meta-Analytic Review of the Effects of Violent and Prosocial Video Game Play', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 40, No. 5, May 2014, pp. 578–589.

¹⁷³ <https://www.gegame.eu/>.

¹⁷⁴ <https://jag.itch.io/crossing-boundaries>.

¹⁷⁵ <https://angelawashko.com/section/437138-The%20Game%3A%20The%20Game.html>.

¹⁷⁶ Gordon, C.S., H.K. Jarman, R.F. Rodgers, S.A. McLean, A. Slater, M. Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, and S.J. Paxton, 'Outcomes of a Cluster Randomized Controlled Trial of the SoMe Social Media Literacy Program for Improving Body Image-Related Outcomes in Adolescent Boys and Girls', *Nutrients*, Vol. 13, No. 11, October 27, 2021, p. 3825.

¹⁷⁷ McLean, S.A., E.H. Wertheim, J. Masters, and S.J. Paxton, 'A Pilot Evaluation of a Social Media Literacy Intervention to Reduce Risk Factors for Eating Disorders: McLEAN et Al.', *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, Vol. 50, No. 7, July 2017, pp. 847–851.

problems in this area, focus on the damaging nature of unhealthy body norms which idealise thinness, promote social media content that rejects outdated and unhealthy ideals, and champion healthier and more inclusive norms¹⁷⁸. The author concludes by explaining that these types of interventions are suited to both mass media and social media, although their effects will likely be particularly salient on social media as this is increasingly where lessons are learned and norms are solidified for young people today.

Recognising that networked gatekeepers online are playing an increasingly important role in influencing users, Matias et al. (2017) developed a pilot intervention called FollowBias, which allowed Twitter users to assess the gender balance among those they follow to investigate whether technological interventions can help individuals recognise biases and promote equality¹⁷⁹. They found that users consistently underestimated the percentage of women they follow. In most cases, participants responded to the intervention by expressing a desire to be more conscious of who they follow online and to take efforts to address inequalities. While the intervention only led to a very small increase in following women, the authors argue that changes such as being encouraged to join groups, track changes, or subscribe to specific relevant accounts or publications could bring about cumulative, lasting change. While technological interventions are often limited due to the nature of platforms, this example demonstrates that even subtle changes can help raise awareness of gender bias online and promote behavioural change.

6. CURRENT EU AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

This Chapter presents an overview of existing legislation, programmes, guidelines and actions at EU and International level, and the position of the European Parliament related to the protection of women and girls from negative impacts of social media.

6.1. The Digital Services Act

The Digital Services Act entered into force on 16 November 2022¹⁸⁰. It is a broad regulatory mechanism which aims to regulate online platforms by way of the creation of new obligations to curb content and practices which harm users. The DSA, along with the Digital Markets Act, were created with two main aims:

1. to create a safer digital space in which the fundamental rights of all users of digital services are protected,
2. to establish a level playing field to foster innovation, growth, and competitiveness, both in the European Single Market and globally.¹⁸¹

The DSA follows the e-Commerce Directive in expanding upon core principles which apply to intermediary information services, and is a response to the pressing need for a change in such principles to respond to emerging issues. The DSA represents an attempt to clearly enact a framework

¹⁷⁸ Perloff, Richard M. "Social media effects on young women's body image concerns: Theoretical perspectives and an agenda for research." *Sex roles* 71, no. 11-12, 2014, pp 363-377.

¹⁷⁹ Matias, J.N., S. Szalavitz, and E. Zuckerman, 'FollowBias: Supporting Behavior Change toward Gender Equality by Networked Gatekeepers on Social Media', *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing*, ACM, Portland Oregon USA, 2017, pp. 1082–1095.

¹⁸⁰ Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act), available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32022R2065>.

¹⁸¹ European Commission, The Digital Services Act package (Digital Services Act hereinafter), available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package>.

which balances the encouragement of innovation in the single market, while controlling the actions of platforms which are judged to be unjustly harmful to the users of digital services. It treats these platforms as information intermediaries and imposes a minimum standard of conduct which, it is expected, will help to curb the impact of harm on users generally. The pressing need for this was described by the European Commission as a result of the 'rapid and widespread development of digital services ... at the heart of the digital changes that impact our lives.'¹⁸²

The Digital Services Act focuses on all intermediary services and distinguishes 'platform' from 'very large online platforms' (VLOPs), which is defined as 'online platforms which reach a number of average monthly active recipients of the service in the European union equal to or higher than 45 million'. The DSA increases transparency for users as to how they (and their data) are treated by platforms.

6.1.1. Obligations in relation to online harm

The Digital Services Act places an obligation on platforms to remove illegal content promptly upon acquiring actual knowledge of its existence¹⁸³. This, when properly implemented by platforms, will aim to curb illegal content, which includes the issue of non-consensual sharing of private images, which is further discussed below.

The role of profiling is especially relevant to the protection of women and girls against negative impacts of social media. As this study has outlined, harm online is often experienced disproportionately by women, particularly in relation to many issues including eating disorders. This has been acknowledged internally by Meta¹⁸⁴, and the company recently issued an apology for the part Instagram content may have played in a 14-year-old taking her own life in the UK¹⁸⁵.

The DSA expands the obligations of platforms. In the case of adverts, users must be given 'meaningful information about the main parameters' which were used to target them, i.e. the profiling data which resulted in the advert being shown to them. In the context of VLOPs, they must create a public repository of advertisements on their platform for one year after its last appearance. This repository must include the same information as platforms generally, but also must include all groups of users targeted and the total number of users reached, as well as the total number of targeted users 'where applicable'. Under Article 24¹⁸⁶, certain types of targeted advertising are also banned, such as targeting minors or certain categories of sensitive personal data as defined in the General Data Protection Regulation. Included here are race, political opinions, religious belief, trade union membership or health related information, but algorithms may still target based on the user's gender in advertising. The failure to include gender as a sensitive area of personal data represents a failure to adequately address the negative impacts of social media on women and girls.

Further to this, platforms utilise 'recommender systems' in selecting and displaying content to users, through the matching process previously described. VLOPs are required to comply with further obligations due to their influence¹⁸⁷. While they may still profile their audience and target them with advertising and content through recommender systems, they must provide users with an alternative

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Article 5(3) DSA.

¹⁸⁴ Bikales, Meta knew its apps harm teens' mental health, families allege in suits, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/06/10/meta-faces-lawsuits-mental-health/%20>.

¹⁸⁵ Mellor, After a 14-year-old Instagram user's suicide, Meta apologizes for (some of) the self-harm and suicide content she saw, available at: <https://fortune.com/2022/09/27/meta-apologizes-instagram-suicide-molly-russell-self-harm-depression-anxiety/>.

¹⁸⁶ Article 24, Digital Services Act.

¹⁸⁷ Chapter 3, Digital Services Act.

which is not based on profiling, as well as with transparent information on how they use algorithms. They must also explain the parameters of such systems to users.

The DSA does not, however, meaningfully grant the user control of this transparency¹⁸⁸. As discussed, if platforms are disproportionately harming women and girls as a result of targeting, the opportunity for users to control how they are targeted, such as opting out of weight loss/fitness/eating content, may provide a strong means of avoiding such harm. While this, it could be suggested, is an attempt to balance the goal of fostering ‘innovation, growth, and competitiveness’ with protection, it also potentially constitutes an imbalance towards the platforms, which could result in a large degree of harm as a result of processing and targeting. The European Data Protection Supervisor recommended that this ought to have been altered in three key ways:

1. to replace the wording ‘main parameters’ - as in the context of online ad transparency - with ‘parameters’ or ‘all parameters’ and in any case include clarifications as to what could amount to ‘meaningful information’;
2. the option not based on profiling should be the default one, and profiling should only influence the systems where users have opted-in.
3. information on the recommender systems should not be incorporated in the already complex terms and conditions, but should be offered separately for increased transparency and control.¹⁸⁹

Included in the DSA is, however, an exemption for smaller platforms from such obligations. ‘Micro or small enterprises’ are given an exemption from Chapter III Section 3 obligations, in an attempt ‘to avoid disproportionate burdens’¹⁹⁰. This speaks to an attempt to balance harm and innovation, and to avoid supposed burdens being placed on platforms discouraging entrepreneurship and innovation. From a risk of harm perspective, however, the decision to include it remains questionable. The framing of harm avoidance obligations as a ‘burden’ in the balancing of innovation with protection of fundamental rights speaks to an imbalance in this approach from its inception.

While the DSA does give regard for the scalability of platforms and the potential for rapid growth, reactive regulation of growth would potentially only come in the wake of harm negatively impacting users. Secondly, while the DSA comes in the wake of rapid growth of online platforms, the scale of harm does not feature in its primary goals and there is a need for a minimum standard of conduct for all platforms in order to create a minimum standard of protection.

VLOPs must also assess and review ‘system risks’ or put simply, ways by which their automated systems may be manipulated or abused to amplify harmful content. VLOPs must mitigate against risks, including the threat of cyber violence against women, or harms to minors online. These measures must be carefully balanced against restrictions of freedom of expression, and are subject to independent audits. Such risks include, but are not limited to, non-consensual sharing or manipulation of intimate material, cyberstalking and cyber harassment.

6.1.2. Researcher access to platform data

In order to adequately understand online harm generally and in the context of harm disproportionately impacting women and girls, there is a need for further research. In order for such understanding to be

¹⁸⁸ Article 29, Digital Services Act.

¹⁸⁹ EDPS opinion on the DSA, p. 17; BEUC position paper on the DSA, p. 26; Amnesty international position paper on the DSA, p. 12; EDRI position paper on the DSA.

¹⁹⁰ Article 19, Digital Services Act.

reached, it is crucial that academics and other researchers have access to the data related to social media platforms and the relationship between content and users, and more crucially the role platforms play in orchestrating this relationship. The DSA provides a framework for academics and obligations on platforms to provide such information and data.

The framework for accessing data is set out in Article 40 of the Digital Services Act¹⁹¹. Vetted researchers who are affiliated to a research organisation may make a request to an online platform for access to data. This access must be proportionate and balanced with protection of user data in the platform as per data protection principles as well as trade secrets and other platform concerns. This balancing act ought to not encourage refusal however, or be used as a shield to deny access. Instead, it ought to encourage platforms to rethink how their data is stored, in that it should be stored in preparation for access, by putting in place technical protections to protect against such concerns, such as data vaults. The bar is also much lower for access to publicly accessible data, such as engagement, impression or reaction data, as platforms ought to assist researchers in accessing compilations of such data. Providers and researchers ought to give regard to protection of personal data in all actions taken both in granting access and use of data which is supplied to researchers.

The impact of the DSA will be reliant upon how well it is implemented by platforms. Monitoring associated with the recently strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation¹⁹², containing self-regulatory standards to fight disinformation to which relevant players in the industry agreed, has highlighted that attempts to regulate may not always lead to the desired outcomes and that the quality of results also depends upon the quality of the efforts made by platforms¹⁹³. Thus, while the DSA shows a lot of promise, its implementation will require strong monitoring and evaluation to ensure that it effectively tackles issues of gendered harm.

6.2. Other international and EU legislation

6.2.1. Violence against women and the Istanbul Convention

In its Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025¹⁹⁴ the Commission made clear that online violence targeting women has become pervasive with specific, vicious consequences and is an unacceptable barrier to women's participation in public life. Bullying, harassment and abuse on social media have far-reaching effects on women's and girls' daily lives. The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), which was adopted in 2011 and came into force in 2014, is the first legally binding international instrument that comprehensively addresses different forms of violence against women, such as psychological violence, stalking, physical violence, sexual violence and sexual harassment. It is described in the strategy as 'the benchmark for international standards' in 'preventing and combating violence against women'¹⁹⁵. As of December 2022, the Convention has been signed by all EU Member States, and ratified by 21. The Convention also provides for EU accession, to the extent of its competences. The EU signed the

¹⁹¹ Article 40, Digital Services Act.

¹⁹² European Commission, The 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation, available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation>.

¹⁹³ Culloty, E., K. Park, T. Feenane, C. Papaevangelou, A. Conroy, and J. Suiter, Covidcheck: Assessing the Implementation of EU Code of Practice on Disinformation in Relation to Covid-19., Broadcasting Authority of Ireland and FuJo, September 16, 2021.

¹⁹⁴ European Commission, A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, COM(2020) 152 final, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0152&from=EN>.

¹⁹⁵ European Commission, Gender Equality Strategy, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-equality-strategy_en.

Convention on 13 June 2017¹⁹⁶. While the Istanbul Convention has been ratified by most Member States, it has not been ratified by the EU as 6 Member States have not completed their national ratification process, although the EU can proceed with ratification based on a decision from the European Court of Justice¹⁹⁷.

6.2.2. Directive on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence

The European Parliament has repeatedly asked the Commission to propose legislation on violence against women and domestic violence, as well as on gender-based cyber-violence. Parliament has adopted two legislative initiative reports calling on the Commission to (i) bring forward proposals on combating gender-based violence and cyber-violence and (ii) the addition of gender-based violence as a new area of crime listed in Article 83(1) TFEU.

(i) European Parliament resolution of 16 September 2021 with recommendations to the Commission on identifying gender-based violence as a new area of crime listed in Article 83(1) TFEU¹⁹⁸

This resolution highlighted the importance of providing a broad and all-encompassing definition of gender-based violence including cyber-violence. Parliament asked the Commission to submit, on the basis of Article 83(1), third subparagraph, of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, a proposal for a Council decision identifying gender-based violence as a new area of serious crime with a cross-border dimension. Parliament invited the Commission to propose a comprehensive directive to prevent and combat all forms of gender-based violence, both online and offline that implements the standards of the Istanbul Convention and other international standards. Parliament also called for the appointment of a coordinator against violence against women and other forms of gender-based violence.

(ii) European Parliament resolution of 14 December 2021 with recommendations to the Commission on combating gender-based violence: cyberviolence¹⁹⁹

On 14 December 2021, the European Parliament adopted a legislative-initiative resolution, recommending that the European Commission use its forthcoming proposal for a directive on combating gender-based violence to criminalise gender-based cyber-violence, as a cornerstone for the harmonisation of existing and future legal acts.

On 8 March 2022 the European Commission has responded to Parliament's requests through an EU-wide proposal for a directive on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.²⁰⁰ The proposed directive would criminalise specific forms of cyber-violence, namely, cyber-stalking, cyber-harassment, non-consensual sharing of intimate images and cyber incitement to hatred and violence. Victims of cyber-violence would also be entitled to adequate support, including advice

¹⁹⁶ European Commission, Press release, 13 June 2017, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/items/80397>.

¹⁹⁷ Istanbul Convention: do not delay EU accession any longer, available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230123IPR68621/istanbul-convention-do-not-delay-eu-accession-any-longer%20>.

¹⁹⁸ European Parliament resolution of 16 September 2021 with recommendations to the Commission on identifying gender-based violence as a new area of crime listed in Article 83(1) TFEU (2021/2035(INL)), available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0388_EN.html.

¹⁹⁹ European Parliament resolution of 14 December 2021 with recommendations to the Commission on combating gender-based violence: cyberviolence (2020/2035(INL)), available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0489_EN.html.

²⁰⁰ Proposal for a Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence, COM/2022/105 final, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022PC0105>.

on how to seek legal help and how to remove online content. This proposal ties together other bodies of EU law into one all-encompassing directive on combating gendered violence both online and offline.

The Commission's 2022 proposal for a directive on violence against women and domestic violence has been referred to Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) and Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE). Most recently, the FEMM Committee, along with the LIBE committee debated the draft report on the directive²⁰¹. The implementation of the Istanbul Convention, and building on its preventative and protective measures ought to amount to a meaningful change to combating gendered harm. In regards to the issue of online harm and the report on the Directive, it highlights the significance of considering the source of harm in relation to the harm itself, and emphasizes the importance of taking into account the context in which harm takes place when collecting data on online harm.²⁰² Regard is also paid to the growing emergence of online gendered harm due to the growing fact that 'people's social lives have shifted online'²⁰³.

6.2.3. Victim's Rights Directive

The EU Victims' Rights Directive²⁰⁴, adopted in 2012, establishes minimum standards on the rights, protection and support of victims of crime in the EU, and makes specific reference to victims of gender-based violence, victims of sexual violence and victims of violence in a close relationship. The purpose of such a Directive is to establish minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime and ensure that persons who have fallen victim to crime are recognised and treated with respect.²⁰⁵

On 28 June 2022, the European Commission adopted its evaluation of the Victims' Rights Directive²⁰⁶. The evaluation found that its implementation had greatly helped the quality of life of victims within the Union, but shortcomings were identified in relation to victims' access to information, victims' access to support services and to protection in accordance with each victim's individual needs²⁰⁷. In the context of online harm, the evaluation found that 'the Directive is silent on digitally enabled offences such as online harassment' and that 'Stakeholders' consultations indicate that there is room for improvement in relation to the role that both the digital space and the use of communication technology could play'. The evaluation concludes, in the context of the applicability of the Directive to online conduct, that it 'may also not adequately address the needs of victims of online crime or of crime enabled by new technology.'

²⁰¹ European Parliament, Combating violence against women and domestic violence - 12.1., available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/combating-violence-against-women-and-dom/product-details/20230110CAN68336>.

²⁰² Draft Report on the proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council Combating violence against women and domestic violence (COM(2022)0105 - C9-0058/2022 - 2022/0066(COD)), available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CJ01-PR-739730_EN.pdf.

²⁰³ Ibid, explanatory statement.

²⁰⁴ Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2001/220/JHA, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1421925131614&uri=CELEX:32012L0029>.

²⁰⁵ European Commission, Victims' rights in the EU, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/criminal-justice/protecting-victims-rights/victims-rights-eu_en.

²⁰⁶ Wahl, T, 'Commission Tabled Evaluation of Victims' Rights Directive', available at: <https://eucri.eu/news/commission-tabled-evaluation-of-victims-rights-directive/>.

²⁰⁷ Commission Staff Working Document Evaluation of Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FR/TXT/?uri=SWD:2022:179:FIN>.

In 2020, the Commission published the first ever EU Strategy on victims' rights (2020-2025)²⁰⁸ which sets out the revision of the Victims' Rights Directive.

6.2.4. Image based sexual abuse regulation in EU Law

An emerging issue which regulators in Member States such as Ireland, for example, have turned attention to image based sexual abuse. While national regulation has been put in place in Ireland²⁰⁹, the approach taken by EU regulators has been described as 'fragmented'²¹⁰. IBSA is an issue which disproportionately affects women and requires strong regulation to meaningfully put an end to it. While Member States laws, such as Ireland's 'Coco's law'²¹¹ have focused on prosecution of persons who share such content both with and without intent to cause harm, the DSA focuses on regulating platforms to ensure they remove such offending content.

Under the Digital Services Act, platforms are obliged to remove illegal content²¹². Such a definition of illegal content includes 'the unlawful non-consensual sharing of private images'. This inclusion is in line with the European Parliament resolution of 16 September 2021 with recommendations to the Commission on identifying gender-based violence as a new area of crime listed in Article 83(1) TFEU²¹³ and Parliament's position on the DSA²¹⁴. This speaks to the perceived urgency to address such an issue.

The goals of the DSA to 'create a safer digital space' must extend to a clearly gendered issue in order to adequately harmonise its approach, whether that be within the text of the Digital Services Act or through a further Directive. The exclusion of such an issue, which a third of women in the EU fear may impact them²¹⁵, speaks to a clear lack of protection for women against a harm which is prevalent in online spaces. Just as the DSA attempted to 'limit the normative fragmentation from the initiatives undertaken at the national level', in online regulation as previously mentioned, the failure of leadership at a European level could risk similar fragmentation in deviated approaches at national level.

6.3. Positions of the European Parliament

The European Parliament strongly advocates for gender equality in the digital world and protection of women and girls from digitally mediated harms .

1. European Parliament resolution of 17 April 2018 on gender equality in the media sector²¹⁶

In the resolution of 17 April 2018 on gender equality in the media sector, the European Parliament highlighted that violent and sexist media content is negatively affecting women and their participation in society and it may be causing psychological or physical damage to children and young people.

²⁰⁸ European Commission, COM(2020) 258 final, 24.6.2020, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0258>.

²⁰⁹ Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020.

²¹⁰ The human cost of the EU's fragmented approach to tackling image-based sexual abuse, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/digital/opinion/the-human-cost-of-the-eus-fragmented-approach-to-tackling-image-based-sexual-abuse/>.

²¹¹ Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020.

²¹² Articles 6 and 9, Digital Services Act.

²¹³ European Parliament, European Parliament resolution of 16 September 2021 with recommendations to the Commission on identifying gender-based violence as a new area of crime listed in Article 83(1) TFEU, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0388_EN.html.

²¹⁴ European Parliament, Amendments adopted by the European Parliament on 20 January 2022, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0014_EN.html.

²¹⁵ HateAid Report, available at: https://hateaid.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/HateAid-Report-2021_EN.pdf.

²¹⁶ European Parliament resolution of 17 April 2018 on gender equality in the media sector in the EU (2017/2210(INI)), available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0101_EN.html.

Members called on the Member States to promote content on gender equality in public media. The relevant stakeholders and authorities are urged to address the issue of advertising that indirectly encourages eating disorders such as anorexia, and to take other steps to protect particularly vulnerable persons, including girls and young women, against such content. Parliament recommended that regulations put in place by the competent authorities set criteria to ensure non-stereotypical portrayal of women and girls, and provide for the possibility of removing or suspending offensive content. Member States must ensure that the media, including online and social media, as well as advertising, is free from any incitement to violence or hatred directed against any person or group of persons. Parliament called on the Member States to conduct regular information and awareness-raising campaigns aimed at detecting discriminatory content and to present regular reports on gender equality trends in the media.

2. European Parliament resolution of 21 January 2021 on closing the digital gender gap: women's participation in the digital economy²¹⁷

This resolution highlights the growing issue of cyberviolence, but also its impact on digital inclusion as a result of women's limited use of digital tools and lower activity on social platforms resulting from cyber violence. Parliament called for funds and campaigns to raise awareness and educate women on how to secure their accounts and communications to protect themselves online. These campaigns should combat gender-based violence and gender stereotypes, educate men on how to behave towards women online, and ensure women's freedom of expression and meaningful participation in public discourse.

Parliament urged Member States to facilitate reporting channels and support the development of training tools for the police, the justice system and the digital sector to empower law enforcement authorities to effectively investigate and prosecute malicious attackers and to support victims of online harassment and violence.

3. European Parliament resolution of 16 December 2021 on MeToo and harassment – the consequences for the EU institutions²¹⁸

The resolution in response to #MeToo and the increasing vocal condemnations of harassment called for the Council to urgently conclude the EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention. The resolution emphasises the need for 'prevention, achieved by providing information, raising awareness and promoting zero-harassment campaigns and policies', as well as improving structures for reporting such issues in the workplace.

4. European Parliament resolution of 15 September 2022 on the situation of fundamental rights in the European Union in 2020 and 2021²¹⁹

This review of fundamental rights included regard for cyberviolence as a growing issue both in terms of scale and exposure. Parliament stressed the importance of combating gender-based violence in all its forms, welcomed the Commission proposal of 8 March 2022 for a directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence, and reiterated its call on the Commission to add gender-based

²¹⁷ European Parliament resolution of 21 January 2021 on closing the digital gender gap: women's participation in the digital economy (2019/2168(INI)), available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0026_EN.html%20.

²¹⁸ European Parliament resolution of 16 December 2021 on MeToo and harassment – the consequences for the EU institutions (2021/2986(RSP)), available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0514_EN.html.

²¹⁹ European Parliament resolution of 15 September 2022 on the situation of fundamental rights in the European Union in 2020 and 2021 (2021/2186(INI)), available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0325_EN.html.

violence to the list of particularly serious crimes enshrined in Article 83(1) TFEU. It also urged the Council to conclude the Union's ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention) and welcomed the actions of both the Parliament and the Commission in addressing issues related to gendered harm as well as gendered cyberviolence.

6.4. Strategies and policies

The EU gender equality strategy 2020-2025 sets out the EU policy objectives and key actions for the 2020-2025 period²²⁰. This strategy aims to 'eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality' as per Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. The strategy contains six key areas, with the first listed as ending gender-based violence. Key to this is online violence, which acts as a 'barrier to women's participation in life'. As well as highlighting the DSA, the Strategy also discusses the need for users to be able 'to counter other types of harmful and abusive content'. Further to the DSA, the Commission is working to 'facilitate the development of a new framework for cooperation between internet platforms'²²¹.

In the Gender Equality Strategy the Commission also called on the Council to 'conclude the EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention and ensure swift EU Ratification', as well as called on Member States to 'ratify and implement the Istanbul Convention... ratify and implement the ILO Convention and implement the Victims' Rights Directive, the Child Sexual Abuse Directive and other relevant EU law protecting victims of gender-based violence', as well as to implement better data collection and general steps related to gender-based violence.

The updated European strategy for a better internet for kids²²² was adopted in May 2022. This strategy aims to build action around three pillars, namely,

1. 'safe digital experiences to protect children from harmful and illegal online content',
2. 'digital empowerment' and
3. 'active participation, respecting children by giving them a say in the digital environment'.

Included here is the need for 'rapid assessment of illegal and harmful content', which will deliver 'concrete solutions for better and healthy use of the internet for children and young people'. Key to the success of such a programme will be the inclusion of research such as this to ensure that this strategy takes into account the gendered nature of harm, otherwise the aim that 'no one left behind' cannot be met.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While social media provides many opportunities for personal, professional and cultural engagement and empowerment, there is a strong body of evidence to suggest that women and girls are disadvantaged in these spaces due to online misogyny, leading to direct impacts in terms of psychological health and wellbeing as well as societal impacts which limit the participation and thereby benefits which women and girls can access online.

²²⁰ European Commission, Gender Equality Strategy, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-equality-strategy_en%20.

²²¹ Based on cooperation under the EU Internet Forum, which led to the adoption of the EU Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online, as per Gender Equality Strategy.

²²² European Commission, European Strategy for better internet for kids, available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/strategy-better-internet-kids>.

As this study has highlighted, social media use in the European Union is influenced by gender. Women use social media more than men across all age groups, with variations in platform preferences. Women prioritize maintaining strong social ties, while men are more likely to share opinions. Boys and men often display confidence online and they are more likely to engage in risky behaviours or share opinions, while girls and women are more aware of privacy risks and are more affected by negative experiences they experience online. Social media use is associated with an increase in depressive symptoms, particularly in girls, due to factors such as online harassment and negative body image.

Gender is a major factor in targeted advertising and recommender functions, which can reinforce and amplify gender stereotypes. Girls and women are more likely to experience negative body image and eating disorders in response to social media use as well as facing an increased risk of sexual and gender-based abuse on social media. Women politicians and journalists also face higher rates of online gender-based and sexual abuse and harassment, which can negatively impact their professional and civic participation. The mainstreaming and normalisation of male-supremacist misogyny among youth poses a significant and urgent threat to women and girls on social media.

The negative impacts of social media on women and girls are co-constituted through the design and governance decisions of platforms, decisions made by advertisers, gender stereotypes and gender socialisation, individual user behaviours, and the wider context of online misogyny which shapes online spaces.

However, social media can also be a tool for addressing gender inequality, as evidenced by campaigns such as #MeToo and Everyday Sexism. Both offline and online education initiatives can challenge gender stereotypes and help young people to be more aware and considerate of gendered online harms while research, improved policies and design changes can help to ensure platforms are safer and provide equal participatory spaces for women and girls. The Digital Services Act is expected to improve the safety of women and girls on social media, but it will require careful monitoring and evaluation to ensure it effectively addresses gendered harm.

The recommendations below address each of these areas.

7.1. Recommendations relating to regulation

1. Complete the ratification of the Istanbul Convention by the EU and adopt the Directive on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

There is an urgent need to ratify the Istanbul convention at an EU level and to adopt the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence which gives regard to the growing issue of online harm.

2. Review the DSA after a 12-month period to ensure that it is functioning as intended, that platforms are meeting their obligations and that issues which impact on gender equality such as gendered mental health risks, online gender-based violence or gendered targeting of advertising, algorithmic transparency as well as researcher access to data for these issues, are being adequately addressed by the platforms under the DSA.

While the scope of the DSA includes tackling gendered harm, it is not its sole focus and there is the potential that other forms of systemic risk are prioritised by platforms when dealing with the DSA. For this reason, a review which focuses on gendered risks would ensure that the DSA is functioning as intended within this area.

3. Review the exemption from obligations for small platforms in the regulation of online harms under the DSA.

If the EU is to appropriately address online harms and gendered violence, online standards ought to be applied evenly in order to proactively cultivate an online environment which does not tolerate such harms, irrespective of scale.

4. Expand the restriction of targeted advertising within the DSA to include targeting by gender.

While gender-targeted advertising is profitable for platforms and desirable to advertisers, it carries considerable risks of harm and for this reason targeting should be restricted based on the same rationale that other forms of targeting based on personal sensitive data are restricted under the DSA.

7.2. Recommendations relating to platforms

5. Social media platforms should implement stricter content moderation practices and enforce harsher sanctions against gender-based instances of abuse, harassment and hate speech.

While platforms have their own community standards which prohibit abusive or harmful actions against other users, instances of online harassment and abuse directed at women and girls are still prevalent and impact upon their participation and wellbeing which indicates that platforms need to take a stronger role in keeping their services safe.

6. Platforms should provide researchers with transparent details on policy and algorithmic design as well as access to data to assess the nature of personalisation driven harms. This should also include advertising data, such as details of gender-based targeting and the content of adverts, so that further research can establish whether social media advertising reinforces gender bias.

While there are provisions for research access within the DSA, platforms can and should take their own initiative to work with researchers and to provide useful data access.

7. Policymakers should consider methods of incentivising social media platforms to partner with researchers in discovering technological solutions that would increase subjective wellbeing, encourage participation and reduce the risks of online gender-based violence for women and girls.

While the DSA focuses on prevention of harm through assessing risk and holding platforms accountable for that risk, there is scope for initiatives and policies which encourage platforms to take a more active role in safeguarding their systems through participation with the research community.

8. Advertising regulators should consider the development of either regulation or guidelines addressing the use of gender targeting and gender stereotypes within social media advertising. This would assist advertisers with making ethical decisions which avoid unintended negative consequences resulting from their choices.

There is a need for greater regulation or guidance for online advertisers to ensure that social media advertising is not perpetuating stereotypes in its content or exacerbating inequality through targeted delivery practices.

7.3. Recommendations relating to challenging online misogyny

9. Member States in conjunction with researchers, social media companies and NGOs should develop campaigns, interventions and policies which encourage a shared vocabulary that would help social media users to identify acts of gender-based violence or abuse.

The normalisation of online misogyny serves to reinforce the idea that behaviours which harm women and girls are acceptable. As explored in Chapter 6, interventions can provide awareness of what constitutes harm by offering a shared understanding of what actions constitute harm and are therefore societally unacceptable, and in some instances, illegal.

10. Member States in conjunction with researchers, departments of education and educational organisations should develop campaigns, interventions and policies which encourage social media literacy, by educating women and girls about unhealthy norms, image manipulation, and social media incentives.

To combat the pervasive nature of body-related mental health issues which stem from image based social media usage, policymakers should draw from the range of literature used throughout the study which support the use of interventions that provide some measure of protection. Such initiatives should consider the findings of Section 4.2 and Chapter 6 such as encouraging content that includes testimonies of those with first-hand experience of the issues being discussed (e.g. people who have recovered from eating disorders), which are likely to be more persuasive than medical experts or promoting social media content that draws attention to the potential damages of certain societal norms (such as the thin-ideal body), while promoting healthier attitudes and behaviours.

11. Encourage technological and social innovation at an EU level to develop state of the art approaches to challenging gender norms and reducing online gendered harm.

A research and innovation stream which focuses specifically on innovative approaches to tackling gendered online harms would encourage collaboration across Member States and foster further development of pioneering approaches such as the use of video games, social media tools, or online peer networks.

12. Member States should review their educational curriculum to ensure that boys and girls receive education around social media literacy, digital consent and digital ethics, image based sexual abuse, online gender-based violence and gender norms.

While individual interventions have been shown to be effective, schools are a significant site for tackling gender inequality and it would be valuable for Member States to conduct their own individual reviews into the adequacy of school curricula in preparing young people for the realities of interacting online, equipping them to identify online harms and fostering a positive sense of digital citizenship.

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This study, commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the FEMM Committee, at the request of the FEMM Committee, outlines and assesses the impacts of social media on women and girls, on gender equality, and on democracy and civic participation more generally. It further analyses whether social media are creating a bias in their treatment of women and men, and provides recommendations to policy makers.

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