

The Incessancy of #gobacktothekitchen and Responses to Normalized Online Misogyny

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ABSTRACT

This research arose from the iVoices project collection of student technology experiences guiding research. In response to students being told to "go back to the kitchen" while gaming and reading as "female", our team analyzed TikTok for videos hashtagged #gobacktothekitchen and #backtothekitchen across a one-year period. We also performed deeper analysis on comeback appeals eliciting or offering suggestions of responses to "Go back to the kitchen" and related misogyny and their responses. We found videos were typically created by "girl gamers" toward whom "back to the kitchen" misogyny had been directed, and who tagged them to assign networked meanings to their experiences, encapsulate their struggles for broad publics, and find validation with users sharing similar experiences. A salient theme in comeback appeal posts was performing positions of power to gain leverage over aggressors, while comments frequently offered support from other "girl gamers" and reinforcement of misogynistic stereotypes by male-identified aggressors.

KEYWORDS

misogyny; media production; online games; video games; social media

INTRODUCTION

This pilot inquiry arose from a three-year project called iVoices Media Lab, in which faculty lead a team of students in collecting and producing stories based on students' social media experiences, to forge student-directed paths toward teaching, research, and advocacy around new media. The path of this research began with a 2021 iVoices story-turned-podcast episode by a student named Kierstin, a Rainbow Six Siege gamer whose encounters with misogyny from fellow players—exemplified by the phrase "Go back to the kitchen" incessantly directed at her and at other gamers who read as "female"—lowered her expectations around interpersonal in-game communication, enabling an unhealthy personal relationship with a troubled gamer. (Social Media & Ourselves, 2021.) Kierstin's story echoes those of other young women. "That's just how online is," according to one of numerous young women threatened and harassed by the Uvalde mass shooter online before he killed 21 people. Rather than serving as a crucial red flag toward violent intention, mistreatment of girls and women is normalized in popular online spaces.

SECTIONS

Background

Online misogyny is persistent, now new. Unchecked vitriol against those identified as girls and women online has been the focus of academic research and popular media, including focus on the "e-bile" often accompanying "Go back to the kitchen" in online harassment documented by Jane (2016), and dangers such communication poses for national security (Hunter & Jouenne, 2021). Misogynistic discourse on social networking sites has been found to present significant threats to democracy including the exclusion of women from public participation (Barker & Jurasz, 2019). Hatred for women and feminism is a core value of networked publics spreading disinformation and propaganda (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Yet despite its many troubling associations, misogyny in online spaces has historically been treated as a personal matter rather than a concern of government or threat to public security (Ging & Siaper, 2018). When we learned Kierstin's story, we recognized that "Go back to the kitchen" was emblematic of systems of abuse that young women face alone in male dominated spaces. This raised a new question: What strategies do young women deploy to remain in these spaces, even when challenged with repeated directives of exclusion?

Methods

Our team of researchers including Dr. Diana Daly, undergraduate student Maddie Rae Smith, and graduate student Duo Bao searched TikTok for videos hashtagged #gobacktothekitchen and #backtothekitchen across a one-year period, from July 25th 2021 to July 24th, 2022. We worked iteratively, first analyzing how many videos studied referenced misogyny, and then analyzing the most prominent type of content in these videos as a pilot subcategory.

We found 83 Tiktok videos tagged #gobacktokitchen or #backtothekitchen, and designated the 65 of these (78%) with misogyny-related content as our initial corpus. We used data visualization in the form of word clouds to analyze co-occurring hashtags in the corpus of 65 misogyny-related videos for patterns.

We also selected one salient trend of the 65 misogyny-related video posts to examine more closely through ten examples. This trend was what we called comeback appeals: users appearing or identifying as young women gamers, eliciting from or offering to their viewing publics suggestions of responses for when they encounter "Go back to the kitchen" and related misogyny. Following Shifman (2013), we coded this pilot corpus through the mimetic dimensions of Content (Asking for comeback suggestions, or Demonstrating comeback); Form (Gameplay demo; Lip-synching; Talking head; Enhanced onscreen messaging [such as talking through a sim avatar]; or Other); and Stance (Sincere/bothered; Humorous; Angry; Triumphant/not bothered; and Other). To get a sense of conversations branching from these posts, we also coded the two most liked comments per video and the one most liked reply to each of these comments as Offering comeback; Insulting or countercomeback; Supportive; or Other / Unclear.

Discussion

Videos in our corpus were typically created by gamers who read as young women and toward whom "back to the kitchen" had been directed. Hashtags they used included appeals for visibility in general (#viral), on TikTok (#fyp), and on gaming platforms (such as #callofduty, #valorant, #r6siege); identity pronouncements to signify belonging (#girlgamer and #femalestreamer); calling out systematic oppression (#feminism, #toxic) and defying it (#imjustgood, #staymad); and echoes of misogyny (#omgitsagirl and sequential tags like #thisgirl #isntgood and #not #her.) Use of these tags highlights creators' intentions to broadly share and assign networked meanings to their experiences, encapsulate their struggles for broad publics, and validate them through aggregation with users sharing similar experiences.

The comeback appeals content we analyzed had 5,222,900, 965,527 likes, and 17,685 comments. Our analysis of comeback appeals discourse found patterns and distinctive themes in the creative strategies those identifying as girls and women deploy to counter misogyny in their digital lives. Patterns included humor as the most prominent video stance, presented to elicit witty comebacks and to counterstrike their male-identified attackers. One common theme in these conversations was performing positions of power to gain leverage over an aggressor, through sexuality or through therapy positioning by diagnosing aggressors as having "daddy issues;" for example, in one video the creator uses audio from a different woman player recorded during gameplay in which she comes back with, "I'm going to fuck your dad and give him a child he actually loves;" this elicits supportive comments like "smooth and sharp as a brand new Knife Sis," empathy ("that's why I turn off the chat"), and critiques for not giving enough credit to the author of the sound. Power positioning also included interpretation of male aggression as a signifier of homosexuality, prompting both comments of support and condemnation of homophobia. We also found themes in counterattacks from what appeared to be male-identified users, including reinforcement of misogynistic stereotypes such as that women are not funny, or "tech bro mansplaining" that creators are using wrong equipment or gaming incorrectly or poorly.

CONCLUSION

This project will continue with full analysis of a broader corpus, production of iVoices media around outcomes, and direction of advocacy toward more inclusivity in online gaming. The persistence of a phrase as anachronistic as "Go back to the kitchen" today shows one the result when decades of misogyny are left unchallenged by those with the power to curtail it, including governments and the leadership and development teams of social networking sites and gaming platforms. We found that those facing harassment online appropriated the affordances of the TikTok platform for quickly posting, upvoting, and responding, to gather resources to weather anticipated future misogyny, and to build community around their continued struggles to participate safely and equally online. In the face of networked harassment, these gamers perform positions of power to gather networked resistance, to stay in the game and its associated social arenas.

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