

PERSISTENCE OF SEXISM IN SITUATIONS OF ANONYMITY

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Summary

This study shows that a substantial number of people will express misogynist views about feminist issues when they can be assured of some degree of anonymity.

Introduction

A new generation of feminists – the “fourth wave” – are campaigning on multiple gender inequality issues that are still pervasive nowadays, using the internet as the most effective way to get their message across and to involve as many people as possible in their campaigns. A recurring motif in these campaigns is resistance to objectification because of the adverse effect it has on women’s lives, creating mental health problems such as self-objectification, habitual body monitoring, eating disorders and sexual dysfunction.

On everydaysexism.org people can recount instances of sexism, whether it be a traumatic event in their lives, or a small, easily-disregarded comment by passers-by. Losethelad-mags.org.uk is a campaign to cover “lad” mags with black “modesty bags”, so that the front-cover pictures of half-naked women cannot be seen on the shop shelves. Another is nomorepage3.org, which encourages people to sign a petition asking the editor of the popular *Sun* newspaper to remove its Page Three pictures of bare-breasted young women.

Many people are against these campaigns, and see no need for any changes. To explore the reasoning behind this attitude, comments left on newspaper websites discussing these campaigns were examined. The expectation is that these comments are likely to express the true views and feelings of those writing them, because of the degree of anonymity on the internet.



Fig. 1: The new “Jane Austen” banknote.



Fig. 2: “No More Page Three” publicity image

Method and materials

Two campaigns were chosen for research. The first was a straightforward campaign for [equal status for women](#), demanding that more women be represented on banknotes – the most popular choice being highly-regarded author, Jane Austen (Figure 1). The second campaign focusses directly on the [objectification of women](#), demanding that Page Three topless models be removed from the *Sun* (Figure 2). Three national newspapers – the *Daily Mail*, the *Telegraph* and the *Guardian* – were chosen to give a reasonable sample of differing classes, political attitudes and beliefs. Similar reports about an event in each campaign was selected from each newspaper (with the exception that an analogous Page Three story could not be found in the *Telegraph*).

All comments on the stories were read and those deemed in any way disparaging were recorded. All other comments were categorised as non-offensive. Disparaging comments were then categorised by two independent observers based on the language used:

Category	Operationalisation
<i>Objectification</i>	mentioned women’s bodies in a degrading manner
<i>Inferiority of women</i>	claimed women were useless, or that they had not achieved or contributed much to society
<i>Anti-feminist</i>	explicitly used the word “feminist” and openly insulted feminism
<i>Trivialisation</i>	complained that there were more important things in the world to be agitating for
<i>Illusion of Equality</i> (Banknote only)	referred to the Queen being a prominent female who is on every banknote, meaning that the campaign has no validity
<i>Freedom of Choice</i> (Page Three only)	it is a sign of women’s empowerment that they can choose any job they want, including using their sexuality to improve their income
<i>Willfully being offended</i> (Page Three only)	people should not look if they don’t like it, nor should they stop others from enjoying something just because they don’t

The two categories *Inferiority of Women* and *Objectification* were defined as sexist or misogynistic, since they contained the most extreme language.

“If you have a chick on the notes, at least have a hot one.” “Men earn the money, so men should be on the money.” “British women have achieved very little in history.” “Why is it always ugly women who don’t want Page Three?” “It’s only the fat and old that will agree with this.” “Nothing wrong with a bit of morning tit.”

Results

There were 989 comments in total:

Campaign	Daily Mail	Guardian	Telegraph	Total
Banknote	164	240	135	539
Page Three	296	154	—	450

Overall, there were 284 (29%) disparaging comments and 705 (71%) non-offensive comments (Figure 3). The most frequent categories in each of the three newspapers were *Inferiority of women* and *Objectification* (Figure 4).

Newspaper	Campaign	Total	Disparaging (% of total)	Sexist (% of disparaging)	Sexist (% of total)
Daily Mail	Banknote	164	76 (46%)	30 (39%)	30 (18%)
	Page Three	296	127 (43%)	55 (43%)	55 (19%)
	Total	460	203 (44%)	85 (42%)	85 (18%)
Guardian	Banknote	240	34 (14%)	14 (41%)	14 (6%)
	Page Three	154	30 (19%)	17 (57%)	17 (11%)
	Total	394	64 (16%)	31 (48%)	31 (8%)
Telegraph	Banknote	135	17 (13%)	12 (71%)	12 (9%)

(The following analysis omits the *Telegraph* data, since it contained no matching Page Three story.) Within both campaigns, type of newspaper and number of disparaging comments are associated, with more disparaging comments in the *Daily Mail* than in the *Guardian*:

$$\text{Banknote: } \chi^2 (1, N=404) = 50.90, p < .001$$

$$\text{Page Three: } \chi^2 (1, N=450) = 24.47, p < .001$$

Type of campaign was also significantly associated with number of disparaging comments, with more in the Page Three campaign than in the Banknote campaign:

$$\chi^2 (1, N=854) = 5.81, p < .05$$

Type of newspaper and number of sexist comments are associated, with more sexist comments on each campaign in the *Daily Mail* than in the *Guardian*:

$$\text{Banknote: } \chi^2 (1, N=404) = 15.58, p < .001$$

$$\text{Page Three: } \chi^2 (1, N=450) = 4.29, p < .05$$

Type of campaign was also significantly associated with number of sexist comments, with more in the Page Three campaign than in the Banknote campaign:

$$\chi^2 (1, N=854) = 4.73, p < .05$$

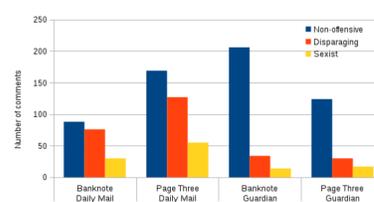


Fig. 3: Comment type by newspaper and campaign

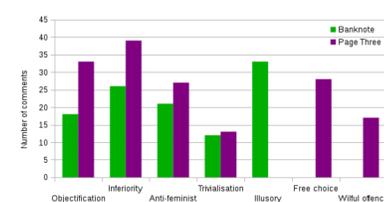


Fig. 4: Disparaging comment categories by campaign

Discussion

This study has shown that sexist comments are common in an online setting that guarantees a degree of anonymity, with around 45% of disparaging comments about each campaign being misogynistic. Comments that are generally disparaging or openly sexist are correlated with the type of newspaper, and also with the nature of the campaign.

A greater number of sexist comments were made on the Page Three campaign than on the Banknote campaign. This may be because the latter is a more general “equal status” campaign, or it may suggest that sexist comments are more likely in relation to changing an existing situation (Page Three already exists, whereas the Banknote campaign is about the future representation of women). The high number of objectification comments may mean that some people do not see objectification as sexism, but simply as a “normal” way of representing women (models are used extensively in advertisements for a wide range of products, and TV series such as *Secret Diary of a Call-Girl* romanticise the sex industry).

The results suggest that there is still a reluctance to treat women on an equal basis to men, and that some people will dismiss campaigns for equality in an openly misogynistic way. Future research might investigate comments in a wider range of papers and campaigns and examine the possible impact of the phenomenon called “trolling” (where people post reactionary messages with the sole purpose of upsetting and infuriating others).