“Feminazis,” “libtards,” “snowflakes,” and “racists”: Trolling and the Spiral of Silence impact on women, LGBTQIA communities, and disability populations before and after the 2016 election

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Abstract

Using a Qualtrics survey of 338 Twitter and Facebook users, the authors explore the effect that the 2016 U.S. presidential election had on people’s political posts both before and after the election and whether or not people actually experienced harassment and threats during the election cycle. If trolling causes people—particularly women, LGBTQIA community members, and people who identify with a disability—to censor themselves because they feel their opinion is in the minority or that they will be attacked for speaking, then it would follow that trolling is changing our digital public sphere, which is affecting our political conversations.

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# Introduction

Trolling, or the practice of harassing or otherwise attacking a person through social media and other digital sources, seems to have been the catchword of the 2016 U.S. presidential election cycle (Green, 2016; Rashid, 2017; TrollBusters, n.d.). Mainstream news trend spotters published multiple articles both prior to and after the election with headlines pronouncing 2016 the year of the Internet trolls. These include such diverse sources as *The Washington Post’s* “The only true winners of this election are trolls,” *Time’s* “Welcome to the Troll Election,” *Esquire’s* “In 2016, the trolls finally escaped the internet,” *New York Magazine’s* “How Internet Trolls Won the 2016 Presidential Election,” *Vanity Fair’s* “2016: The Year the trolls won, by Monica Lewinsky,” *The Nation’s* “The President-Elect is an internet troll,” *The Atlantic’s* “Make trolling great again,” and *Salon’s* “‘The trolls won’: Donald Trump supporters, including Milo Yiannopoulos and Chuck C. Johnson, gloat about presidential win” (Aiken, 2016; Cogan; 2016; Dewey, 2016; Green, 2016; Lewinsky, 2016; Singal, 2016; Walsh, 2016).

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All these sources indicate that trolling is a recent phenomenon that has been exacerbated by the 2016 election campaign. On March 20, 2017, the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Teaching Tolerance project posted a teaching resource that argued, “The level of trolling has increased since the 2016 presidential campaign, as trolling is being amplified by the polarized and emotionally charged times” (Collier, 2017, para. 5). This article considers whether this claim is supported by people’s actual experiences with posting political content before and after the election, and if it is, what effect trolling has on the contemporary digital public sphere. In particular, the authors question whether the idea or actual experience of harassment and/or threats online pushes women, people who identify with the LGBTQIA community, and people with disabilities to censor their own posts and ideas in online conversations, thus creating a digital spiral of silence. Spiral of Silence theory, which was originally proposed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974), considers how people change their behavior when they perceive that their opinion is in the minority and how that behavior change affects public perceptions of the acceptability of a particular opinion.

Using a Qualtrics survey of 338 Twitter and Facebook users, the authors explore the effect that the 2016 election had on people who identify with a gender or sexual minority group, people with disabilities, and women. In particular, the authors explore the impact of the elections on people’s political posts both before and after the election and whether or not people experienced harassment and threats during the election cycle. This study considers whether people censored their political speech prior to and after the 2016 election in response to gender-, sexuality- or ability-based trolling or the threat of trolling. Although the mainstream media sources listed previously advance the idea that trolling led to a breakdown of democratic discourse in the digital public sphere in the 2016 election, this study considers whether that silencing, conformist effect occurred and what effect it may have had on the digital public sphere. If the Internet constitutes a digital public sphere, and if trolling causes people to keep themselves from disseminating their opinions because they feel they are in the minority or that they will be attacked for stating their ideas, then it would follow that trolling is changing the public sphere, which is affecting political conversations in a profound way.

# Trolled into silence

Spiral of Silence stresses that people become silent when they feel that their opinions are not in the majority (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Leading up to the 2016 presidential election the political temperature was high and it was not clear who would be the dominant or majority view until after the election. Understanding how and who may go silent informs dialogue about minority demographics that were attacked as part of the presidential election; the tracking of these messages allows for examination of current and future messages: what is heard and what is suppressed and what does this mean for marginalized groups? (Schreckinger, 2016).

The results of this survey will be contextualized with two controlling ideas: trolling and a digital spiral of silence. While the word trolling has been bandied about widely, its definition is less clear, even to those people who were surveyed for this research project. Some people indicated that a person’s challenging another person’s opinion might be considered trolling, while other people shrugged at that behavior. The latter group of people indicated that trolling often included threats or vulgar name calling. NPR’s *Code Switch* defines trolls as people who “bait others for their own amusement” (Rashid, 2017, para. 1). As an example, NPR identified a movement of white supremacists’ creating fake Twitter accounts that purport to be black people to disrupt conversations on Black Twitter. An article on neo-Nazi site, *The Daily Stormer*, cited by NPR, says the spoof accounts were created specifically as revenge for Twitter’s blocking alt-right users’ accounts. The fake accounts would infiltrate conversations on Black Twitter streams by “pretending to know people they might be related to, calling people out on their drug dealing activities and accusing them of being Neo-Nazis using fake accounts” (Rashid, 2017, para. 6). *The Daily Stormer* writer declares, “We shall have our revenge. We shall become niggers [*sic*]. And we shall bring the entire system to its knees[[1]](#footnote-1)” (Anglin, 2016).

According to the *Atlantic’s* Emma Green (2016), trolling itself used to be a productive form of social critique. She said, “Trolling, or purposefully angering certain groups or individuals in order to make a point, is a phenomenon of the internet, but its spirit has long been alive in politics” (para. 3). Green wrote Equal Rights Amendment opponent and conservative mouthpiece Phyllis Schafly provoked feminist Betty Friedan “into threatening to burn her at the stake” to prove “how intemperate and un-feminine ERA advocates could be” (para. 3). Green added Gore Vidal’s provoking William F. Buckley into threats “exposed the worst of Buckley’s ideological shortcomings” (Green, 2016, para. 3). Researcher Jonathan Bishop (2014) wrote that Internet denizens of the early 1990s still identified this clear distinction of trolling speech as “simply provocative,” whereas “flaming” speech was meant to be abusive (p. 2). However, contemporary trolling has lost its political purpose and devolved into speech that is closer to flaming (p. 2). Contemporary trolling is “just offensive,” writes Green (2016, para. 5). Whitney Phillips, an assistant professor of literary studies and writing at Mercer University, agreed using the term trolls for much of the bullying behavior on the Internet allows people to frame themselves as the class clown rather than an actual abuser. She said when trolls, like those infiltrating Black Twitter, attack people because of their identity, then we need to “call it racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia. Calling it trolling just gives the person a rhetorical out” (Rashid, 2017, para. 17).

Inaccurate or not, and regardless of its impact on democracy, the term trolling is now used to indicate a type of mocking speech meant to infuriate or intimidate the receiver for the amusement of the sender, or, as it is sometimes called, the “lulz” (Dewey, 2016, para. 9). Lulz can be defined as “the sort of aloof, perverse pleasure one derives from getting someone else to get upset online” (Dewey, 2016, para. 9). Unlike Green’s view that contemporary trolling has been stripped of its political importance, analysts note that lulz, or contemporary trolling by another name, is inherently political. “Lulz are a worldview, an outlook, a political philosophy. They’re the deliberate foil of civic dialogue, rooted in cynicism, detachment, and outright misanthropy” (Dewey, 2016, para. 12). Contemporary trolling is political, but its politics are born of nihilism and disregard for humanity. Contemporary trolls find pain humorous and use it as a weapon from which they derive amusement and power at the expense of another person’s mental, physical, or emotional well-being. Trolling is a weapon that has physical, real-world consequences, a fact that *The Daily Stormer* recognized after the 2016 elections when it compiled and distributed a list of 50 Twitter users who said they were afraid of the outcome of the election. The site instructed its followers to troll those 50 people and provoke them into committing suicide (Chmielewski, 2016).

Trolling is invasive and pervasive, attacking a person’s sense of security and self-worth. A Women, Action, & The Media (2014) study of harassment on Twitter divided trolling attacks into several categories, including hate speech, doxxing, threats of violence, revenge porn, encouraging others to harass you, impersonation, and posting false information. Of the 317 reports of harassment submitted through WAM’s online form, 27% said they were experiencing hate speech, including sexist, racist and homophobic remarks, and another 22% said they had been doxxed, which is when a troll releases a target’s personal information, including phone numbers and addresses.

Trolling has become so pervasive that groups fighting trolls and protecting targeted people have sprung up, including Trolldor, “the global blacklist of Twitter trolls,” and TrollBusters, which provides “just-in-time rescue services to support women journalists, bloggers and publishers who are targets of cyber-harassment” (“This is Trolldor,” 2015, para. 1; TrollBusters, n.d., para. 3). While Trolldor attacks trolls by putting them on a public list to shame them, TrollBusters confronts trolls with a steady stream of positive messages that flood social media feeds that are under attack (TrollBusters, n.d.). These groups aim to counter the effects that trolling may be having on the digital public sphere by putting a face on the problem, as in the case of Trolldor, and fighting negativity with positivity, as in the case of TrollBusters.

TrollBusters particularly defends women, showing that gender is an important consideration in conversations about digital harassment. Multiple studies have found that women and sexual and gender minorities are particularly being targeted for harassment and threats online. A Pew Research Center study of cyber-harassment notes that young women “experience severe types of harassment at disproportionately high levels” (Duggan, 2014, para. 10). The Pew study found that “26% of these young women have been stalked online, and 25% were the target of online sexual harassment” (Duggan, 2014, para. 10). A February 2016 survey of Australian men and women’s experiences of digital harassment found that, although men and women experience online harassment in roughly the same percentages, twice as many women as men were attacked online because of their gender (“Norton study reveals,” 2016, para. 14). Women also were more likely to be targets for revenge porn and sextortion: “Revenge porn and sextortion were shockingly common experiences amongst younger women, where almost one-in-ten women under 30 experienced revenge porn and/or sextortion” (“Norton study shows,” 2016, para. 10). People who identify as LGBTQIA were frequent targets as well. The Norton survey of women revealed one-in-four women who identified as lesbian, bisexual, or transgender who had experienced digital harassment said they were targeted because of their sexual orientation (“Norton study shows,” 2016, para. 10). Twenty-three percent of gay, bisexual, and transgender men were targeted because of their sexuality, while only 7% of heterosexual men reported being targeted because of their sexuality (“Norton study reveals,” 2016, para. 4).

This survey also considers disabilities, which the Norton survey of Australia’s Internet-using public highlighted with gender and sexuality. The survey found that 14 percent of men with intellectual or physical disabilities reported being targeted because of their disabilities (“Norton study reveals,” 2016, para. 4). The same results were not discussed for women.

This study considers whether trolling can create a digital spiral of silence that leads to people’s censoring their own speech online if they perceive it to be unpopular, in the minority, or, in the case of trolling, under attack. Spiral of silence theory states that the more people perceive their political opinions are in the minority, the more they will change their speech and behavior to conform to the majority. Drawing on the bandwagon effect, which argues that people conform to the majority because they want to be on the winning team, the spiral of silence shows how people’s behavioral response to fear results in broad social change (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1944; Noelle-Neumann, 1993).

In line with previous work on digital discourse, this research presupposes that the Internet represents a contemporary form of the public sphere and that self-censoring behavior caused by trolling affects the discourse happening within the digital public sphere (Papacharissi, 2008, p. 231). This digital public sphere has implications for political discourses and the maintenance of a democratic society. Papacharissi (2002) noted that the constitution of a public sphere is different than a public space, although the Internet has potential for developing both: “As a public space, the internet provides yet another forum for political deliberation. As public sphere, the internet could facilitate discussion that promotes a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions. A virtual space enhances discussion; a virtual sphere enhances democracy” (p. 11). If the digital public sphere has democratic potential, then social media interactions have the potential to influence our mainstream media and political agendas, particularly around issues relevant to women and minority communities. As Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm argued in 1963, “The press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates” (p. 1). Social media are providing contemporary culture with a social and political space, and that virtual space has the potential to influence offline cultures.

If the purpose of a public sphere is to enhance democracy, is that sphere destabilized when external forces such as trolling undermine the freedom and openness of the conversations? Spiral of silence researchers answer, “yes.” Stoycheff (2016) found that Internet users who knew they were under government surveillance online were prompted to display “conformist behavior” in their online posts and interactions (p. 297). However, Stoycheff also found that this effect was not universal. Those people who were most convinced that government surveillance programs were unjustified were least susceptible to being silenced.

This last finding is important because it reveals how to combat a spiral of silence. Researchers argue “moral-laden issues,” such as LGBTQIA rights, abortion, or women’s rights, give “public opinion the power to exert its threat of isolation,” leading people to tailor their speech so that it conforms closer to public opinion on these issues or to choose not to speak at all (Gearhart & Zhang, 2014, pp. 22-23). However, the more important the person finds an issue, the more likely he or she is to speak out in all contexts (Gearhart & Zhang, 2014; Moy et al. 2001). Comfort in speaking out is significant when considering how to encourage people to engage in the digital public sphere as a part of a democratic process. Gearhart and Zhang (2014) argue, “The importance of issue concern indicates that positive forces (e.g., civic duty) rather than dark forces (e.g., willingness to self-censor) encourage people to engage in public discourse. Therefore, issue advocates may elevate perceptions of issue importance to defy the development of spiral of silence” (p. 32).

Given the history of women and minority groups’ silencing their voice from majority political opinion, the following exploratory research questions will guide our study:

RQ1: Will respondents with minority political views take actions to silence themselves following the election?

RQ2: Will respondents with disabilities indicate being attacked proportionately more than other respondents?

RQ3: Will female respondents indicate being attacked more frequently on social media than other respondents?

RQ4. Will LGBTQIA respondents indicate being attacked more frequently on social media than heterosexual respondents?

RQ5: Will marginalized groups connected to gender, disabilities, and sexual orientation censor their speech to avoid harassment?

# Method

We collected voluntary responses from February 1 until February 17using the online survey program Qualtrics. No incentive was provided for participating. The researchers wanted to conduct the survey 7 to 10 days following the inauguration, as marches and protests by marginalized groups dominated the national news.

Our survey included *N*=338 respondents. The survey contained only one forced response and that was indicating consent to participate. Not all respondents answered every question. Within our results, we indicate the total sample for each specific question we address. Since this survey focused on silence, we felt that respondents’ not answering one question compared to another might also provide us insight. For demographic questions, researchers went through the open-ended “other responses” and the responses with the same category name.

The majority of respondents are female (*n*=243). Respondents also included *n*=75 males. When looking at age, most respondents (*n*=68) were between the ages of 35 and 40. The majority of our respondents identified as heterosexual (*n*=284) with 19 respondents identifying as bisexual, nine as gay, three as lesbian, three as asexual, one as pansexual, and one as other. Twenty-seven respondents noted that they had disabilities. Respondents were able to select an exhaustive list of disabilities with 25 respondents listing a total of 38 disabilities; two respondents did not identify their disabilities. Researchers developed the list of disabilities based on IEPs or Individual Education Programs, a binding document provided to public schools to provide educational support and assessment of special needs students. The largest number of disabilities noted were “other health impairments” (*n*=12), outside of the IEP list we provided. Respondents also listed emotional disturbances (*n*=6), hearing impairment (*n*=5), multiple disabilities (*n*=4), visual impairments (*n*=4), traumatic brain injury (*n*=2), orthopedic impairments (*n*=3), autism spectrum (*n*=1) and specific learning disability (*n*=1).

Only 27 respondents noted their highest level of education. Most respondents noted a professional (*n*=10), 4-year (*n*=7), or doctoral degree (*n*=4). The majority of respondents were employed full-time (*n*=184); our sample’s additional largest employment categories included student (*n*=47), part-time (*n*=37), and self-employed (*n*=29). The majority of respondents identified geographically from the West (*n*=109), South (*n*=71), and Midwest (*n*=43). The two next largest region categories were North (*n*=38) and East (*n*=34). Parties respondents (*N*=322) identified with were primarily Democrat (*n*=207) followed by moderate (*n*=34) and Republican (*n*=28).

Respondents were able to indicate all social media/online platforms that they currently use. Most of our respondents used Facebook (*n*=306). The largest additional social media/online platforms used included Instagram (*n*=175), Twitter (*n*=174), YouTube (*n*=167), LinkedIn (*n*=161), Pinterest (*n*=120), and Snapchat (*n*=82). Other social media/online platforms used included Google+, Tumblr, Reddit, Research Gate, and WhatsApp.

To engage in conversations and to promote our survey on social media, we attempted to join online conversations connected to politics and marginalized groups; we reviewed hashtags trending and attempted to promote to large political online conversations. We also chose Facebook groups that were actively engaging in these conversations, even if they were private, such as Pantsuit Nation. We did not tweet or directly contact specific politicians, but we did tweet at political and media groups and include themes that were trending connected to the election. The Facebook pages that were selected and our tweets targeted entertainers, associations, and news organizations that were making headlines for gender, racial, environmental, and special needs advocacy. We shared twice on each social media platform, with a week in between each share. Researchers divided the two social media platforms and shared with groups mentioned and on their personal social media accounts. If a researcher shared on Facebook during the first week, the researcher then posted on Twitter the next week, and vice versa. Hashtags, groups, and individuals targeted on social media included Women’s Marches, NastyWomenEverywhere, PantSuit Nation, Nasty Women Volunteer, Binders Full of Women, the Geena Davis Institute, Viola Davis, Ryan Gosling, Meryl Streep, Shailene Woodley, Mark Ruffalo, Kids with Special Needs, minority journalists groups such as Native American Journalists Association and Unity Journalists of Color, American Association of University Women, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication’s “marginalized-focused” and larger groups (Minorities and Communication; Commission on the Status of Women; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer Interest Group; Mass Communication and Society) as well as *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Boston Globe,* and CNN.

Our theory, spiral of silence, was built on a survey of public opinion during a heightened political time in Germany (Stacks & Salwen, 1996). Since our sample size was skewed positively in terms of female gender and Democratic political affiliation, we focused on the differences between groups. We did this with an exploratory study not looking for Pearson’s Chi Square significance, but instead examining the frequencies within our sample. We conducted cross tabs to examine our discrete variables and percentage cross tabulations for each row and column associated with our research questions that we were exploring. Although surveys ask people to speak out on their opinion, we attempted to join large, online, marginalized groups to see if our online survey would show the frequency of what people felt comfortable discussing (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian; 2009; Knoke, Bohrnstedt, & Potter Mee, 2002; Stacks & Salwen, 1996).

# Results

## RQ1: Will respondents with minority political views take action to silence themselves following the election?

Using cross tabs, we examined political party censoring, avoiding and deactivating social media accounts, as well as negative feedback before and after the election.

For those who identify as Democrats, 53% (*n*= 107) of respondents said that they avoid posting about controversial topics, while 61% of Democrats reported censoring social media posts (*n*=118). A smaller Democratic group, 8% (*n*=15), reported deactivating accounts. Comparing before to after the election, among Democrats, 43.4% reported negative feedback prior to the election and 38.1% after the election.

Sixty-seven percent of Republican respondents (*n*=18) reported avoiding controversial topics; 58% (n=15) censored social media accounts and 8% (*n*=2) deactivated accounts. When comparing censoring from before and after the election, 25% of Republicans reported negative feedback on accounts compared to 31.8% after the election.

Sixty-three percent of moderates (*n*=21) avoid posting controversial topics, 72% (*n*=23) censor social media posts to avoid negative interaction, and 3% deactivated accounts (*n*=1). Forty-two percent of moderates reported negative feedback prior to the election compared to 37.5% after the election.

Fifty-five percent (*n*=5; *N*=12) of Libertarians avoid posting about controversial topics, 69% of Libertarians (*n*=9; *N*=13) censor their own social media posts to avoid negative interaction, and 0 reported deactivating accounts. Libertarians reported 64.3% of negative feedback before the election compared to 50% after the election.

Socialists report that 58% (*n*=7; *N*=12) avoid posting about controversial topics, 70% (*n*=7; *N*=10) avoid negative interactions, and 0 deactivated accounts. Fifty-eight percent of Socialist respondents reported negative feedback prior to the election compared to 50% after the election.

Fifty percent of Green Party respondents (*n*=2) avoid posting controversial topics; 75% (*n*=3) censor media posts to avoid negative interactions, and 0 deactivated accounts. Green Party respondents reported the same amount of negative feedback before and after the election, 25% within this party.

Sixty-six percent of Tea Party respondents (*n*=2) avoided posting controversial topics, 100% (*n*=3) censor posts for negative interactions, and 33% (*n*=1) deactivated accounts. Tea Party respondents reported the same amount of negative feedback before and after the election, 33% within their party.

Among those identifying as other parties 52% (*n*=17; *N*=29) avoid controversial topics, 52% (*n*=14; *N*=27) censor to avoid negative interactions, and 8% deactivated accounts (*n*=2). Other party groups indicated 50% negative feedback prior to the election and 34.6% after.

Our findings suggest a greater amount of censoring from non-winning parties. In almost all of the larger losing political party groups, negative feedback went down after the election, which may suggest censoring or silencing of thoughts and opinions.

## RQ2: Will respondents with disabilities indicate being attacked proportionately more than other respondents?

Although our sample size of those with disabilities was small, those with disabilities appeared to be proportionately more attacked. Of those with disabilities, 48.1% (*n*=13; *N*=27) said they were attacked on social media based on a demographic. This number is compared to the overall survey where 29% noted being attacked based on a demographic (*N*=98).

## RQ3: Will female respondents be attacked more frequently on social media than other respondents?

More female respondents reported attacks on social media than male respondents. However, we must note our sample size was primarily female, so this research question should be explored more closely with a large demographic of males participating in a survey. Close to 74% of all those who reported being attacked were female (*n*=72) and within females, nearly 32% indicated they were attacked based on a demographic. In comparison, 26% of those who noted being attacked were males (*n*=25).

## RQ4: Will LGBTQIA respondents indicate being attacked more frequently on social media than heterosexual respondents?

In terms of sexuality, 31% of those who were heterosexual indicated being attacked (*N*=83), while 69% noted that they were heterosexual but not attacked. Sixty-seven percent of those who are lesbian said they had been attacked on social media (*n*=2); close to 42% of bisexual respondents (*n*=7; *N*=17) noted being attacked; 45% of gay respondents were attacked (*n*=4) and 50% of those who were genderqueer (*n*=1) said he/she was attacked based on a demographic. Although the majority of our respondents were heterosexual, it appeared proportionately more LGBTQIA participants were attacked, but we would need to conduct a survey with a larger number of LGBTQIA participants to determine if this finding is truly supported.

## RQ5: Will marginalized groups connected to gender, disabilities, and sexual orientation censor their speech to avoid harassment?

Nearly 64% (*n*=143) of females reported censoring social media to avoid negative interactions in comparison to 34.2% (*n*=25) of males. More than 60% of heterosexual respondents reported (*n*=161) censoring speech to avoid negative social media interactions. Nearly 53% of those who reported to be bisexual censored their posts (*n*=9), 56% (*n*=5) of gay respondents censored speech, 67% of lesbians (*n*=2), and all gender queer respondents (*n*=2) reported censoring speech. More than 59% of our respondents with disabilities censored their social media posts (*n*=16; *N*=27), which made up close to 9% of all the respondents who noted censoring speech.

The majority of our respondents who were female were also heterosexual; however, when considering female as a marginalized group, our survey indicated that proportionately marginalized groups were attacked more.

# Discussion

Our study is not generalizable to an entire population due to its small sample size. However, this survey does provide insight into select groups who we targeted during the 2016 Presidential election, and it highlights the spiral of silence that can occur among marginalized groups when Internet trolling is prominent. Most significantly, this survey reinforced that harassment or the threat of harassment caused women, people who identify as LGBTQIA, and people in the disability community to censor or completely silence their online interactions. Our survey universally upheld that women, people with disabilities, and people who identify as LGBTQIA reported higher levels of harassment than men, and particularly white, heterosexual men without a disability. The survey also supported the tenet that people who felt their ideas were in the minority, whether that was because they were not part of the winning party or because they were part of a targeted demographic, would censor themselves online, leading to a spiral of silence that reinforced the winning political party’s ideas. When marginalized groups remove their voices from the democratic public sphere, the entire dialogue skews toward ideologies that do not necessarily reflect the broader conversation.

The higher levels of harassment of women is perhaps not a surprising result when considering previous research. Many of our female respondents, in both previous interviews we conducted and this survey, seemed to assume that they would be threatened or harassed on social media at some point in time. An interviewee from our work with 45 male and female academics noted, “That’s [harassment] something I fully anticipate eventually will happen. Considering [I am] somebody who studies issues of gender, I anticipate that will unfortunately happen.” The idea that these kinds of attacks are usual is perhaps demonstrated by the few open-ended responses we received from anti-feminists. For example, one respondent felt the need to write, “Third wave, man-hating feminism is a cancer to our society. Milo Yiannopoulos[[2]](#footnote-2) has all the answers,” in response to “Is there anything else you think we should know?”

In response to an open-ended survey question asking people to elaborate on what kind of attacks they were receiving on social media, 34 respondents indicated that they had received gender-based attacks. This number was more than any of the other responses to any of our other categories. However, this number may be skewed because people chose to write their responses to open-ended questions about feedback to their political posts before and after the elections rather than responding to this question. Multiple survey respondents framed gender-based harassment against women as normative. One wrote, “The usual stuff a woman gets: slut, moocher, ugly.” Another simply said the harassment she received was because she is, “female. Duh.” A third wrote, “Being a woman—that in itself seems like a crime!” A fourth woman found her dual identities as a woman from a Middle Eastern family drew digital fury. She wrote, “Being a female and of middle eastern decent makes me a target- mainly just angry words, no threats.”

Even though our survey specifically targeted political posts and harassment, several of the women who responded to the survey still indicated that the responses they received were highly sexualized and violent. Some of those trolling responses simply referred to a person’s appearance or her ability to obtain a romantic partner. One respondent said, “I was told that I'm a shrill, whiny, liberal bitch and called an angry lesbian. Told that I'm ‘undatable,’ (from several individuals who I would never consider dating).” Other attacks were more explicit and violent. One woman wrote:

I was attacked once over a comment I made on a rape case at Baylor, in which a female trainer was raped by the football team she worked for. I made a comment about how I, too, work at a job in which I am widely outnumbered by men and the reply made to me was, “You should not hold that job. Women are a nuisance and a distraction in the workplace and then they wonder why they get raped.”

Although this survey did not explicitly ask for people’s responses to attacks, other studies have found that trolling such as the kind reported by our respondents has real effects on people’s emotional and physical well-being. The Pew Research Center found that 38% of women found their most recent experience of harassment extremely or very upsetting (Duggan, 2014, para. 21). The Norton survey of Australian men and women found that 1 in 5 women felt depressed and 1 in 10 women needed to seek professional help for depression and anxiety because of digital harassment. Five percent felt suicidal (“Norton study shows,” 2016, para. 12).

In support of the idea that these attacks cause women to remove their voices from their digital public sphere, one person reported, “Because I'm a woman people feel comfortable sexualizing me, which is one of the main reasons I deleted Facebook.” Facebook is the most-used social media site in the world, with 2 billion monthly users (Constine, 2017, para. 1). The choice to not use Facebook represents a decision to remove an individual’s voice from the most-used site in the international digital public sphere. Other women simply noted they were more careful about what they posted to avoid negative interactions. One woman said:

I have posted comments on Facebook or Twitter threads (news articles, etc.) and have received sexist comments degrading my intelligence and perspective as a female. I consider myself feminist and have been called a “feminazi” for views that are not extreme. As a liberal, I have also been degraded, called a “special snowflake” for caring about issues such as diversity and arguing that racism and sexism are very real issues facing modern society. This has happened significantly more in the last year, since the election heated up. Overall, these comments have made me much more reserved in my posting.

Even though all women may not delete their accounts altogether, many censor ideas that may bring them negative feedback, which, again, can reinforce a spiral of silence around women’s voices in the digital public sphere. Fewer voices within the digital sphere, especially those directly impacted by an election, may cause the majority voice to appear stronger, decreasing the opportunity for digital media to reflect a democratic stew of thoughts. Dropping out of digital political discourse further marginalizes already sidelined voices, as studies show that in general, “media elites still produce the most politically relevant information,” and “young, well-educated males are the most likely to use the medium” (Placek, 2017, p. 634). Research demonstrates that by not participating, women and other people from marginalized groups disenfranchise themselves, in effect sidelining themselves into silence. As Placek (2017) notes, the Internet may have “actually expanded the differences between the political haves and have-nots as gaps in knowledge and engagement are prominent” (p. 634). By not participating, marginalized groups are both eliding their own voices *and* missing out on information being broadly distributed among the dominant groups in digital discussions.

Mentioning LGBT rights or belonging to the LGBTQIA public also was mentioned as a reason for some of our respondents to receive harassment. One person noted, “I was told that I did not support President Trump because I’m gay.” Another person wrote, “I posted something relating to LGBT issues, someone said we have more important things to deal with and he just started attacking me about how homosexuals are freaks, etc.” Four of our respondents mentioned gay marriage and LGBT issues as being too controversial to post on social media, meaning that any ideas that were pertinent to gender and sexual minorities should not be spoken about in the first place. However, a 2015 American Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau reports 858,896 same sex couples in the United States, with a potential stated error of 7,790 (“Household characteristics of,” 2015). A Gallup Daily tracking poll that asks people, “Do you, personally, identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender?” found that 3.8% of the 58,000 answered, “yes.” Removing issues of importance to the LGBTQIA community from the digital public sphere would seem to reinforce heteronormativity and the idea that LGBTQIA lifestyles are abnormal.

While none of our survey respondents with disabilities chose to detail what kind of harassment they received on social media because of their disability in our open-ended questions, the fact that 48.1 % of our respondents with disabilities reported some harassment is notable. The invisibility of disability rights and harassment online is revealed by language used against other demographics. Multiple respondents (*n*=5) reported being called a “libtard.” Libtard is a mash-up of “liberal” and “retard” (an outdated, negative term referring to people with mental processing delays that has been broadly rejected by the disability community). One respondent reported being called a moron, and four reported being called idiots. By using outdated words associated with disabilities—mental disabilities in each of these cases—the speakers are stigmatizing people with disabilities further, even as they are not actually talking to people with disabilities. As disability scholar Ben-Moshe (2005) argues, “When we use terms like ‘retarded,’ ‘lame,’ or ‘blind’—even if we are referring to acts or ideas and not to people at all—we perpetuate the stigma associated with disability” (p. 108). Ben-Moshe (2005) notes that some people argue that these terms are not offensive if they are not used to refer specifically to an individual with a disability. However, Ben-Moshe (2005) writes, “Using disability as an analogy not only offends certain individuals, but it also impedes clear communication, perpetuates false beliefs about disability and creates an environment of unease and exclusion” (p. 107). By perpetuating the use of negative terminology associated with the disability community, the users of terms such as “libtard,” “moron,” and “idiot” are further silencing and negating the voices of people with disabilities.

Interestingly, even though the results of RQ1 found people who were not in the winning political party were more likely to censor or silence their opinions online, a handful of our respondents who voted for Trump reported feeling attacked online. One wrote:

I'm a white conservative believer, and I'm tired of being belittled for it all the time on social media. No one's brave enough to talk about ideas anymore, but they have just enough bravado to spout off about their opinions and assume everyone else espouses them. Trump didn't win because he reached racists, sexists or Islamophobes—he won because good people are tired of being called those names.

Another said, “Immediately after the election Republicans were angry at being called racist, etc.” Some of the conservative responses to digital harassment based on political ideology turned into long diatribes, such as this one, which was been edited for space:

I voted for Obama twice but had to vote my honest conscience for Trump, I've never seen so much hate, ignorance & misunderstanding from the general ‘left,’ towards myself & many other Trump voters. … I myself protested the Tea Party big time back in the day, But this anti Trump vitriol is something else entirely, and I feel my voice in support of him is inadvertently silenced many times by those I care about the most. I have 2 bachelor's degrees & am 2/3 done with my Masters & consider myself as open minded as the next, but it's getting ridiculous to point where I see too many losing the rights they so espouse, through their own actions. Not to mention preventing others such as blocking traffic in streets, airports, etc. wearing offensive pink pushy [*sic*] hats which I consider hate speech upon myself. I know for a fact if I wore a Trump hat around I'd be castigated & worse. I thought we were living in America. …Just keep it peaceful people & realize county by county Trump won in unprecedented landslide.

These statements show that whether real or perceived, individuals from all parts of the political spectrum felt some form of silencing around the 2016 election. The difference explored here, though, was whether the silencing was imposed by outside sources or by the individual upon him or herself. This distinction is essential as one represents a force placed on someone to restrict herself/himself that is in alignment with abuse and the other is self-restriction, what one assumes is her/his role. Our findings support the idea that women, LGBTQIA community members, and people with disabilities may have censored their own postings more often than those with the majority or winning ideologies to avoid harassments and threats.

# Conclusion

To better understand the effects of trolling on some of these groups, including people with disabilities and people in the LGBTQIA community, targeted surveys for those communities, and larger sample sizes are needed. Future research should query whether that behavior was replicated in the 2016 election or if people were more likely to retreat from a conversation because of the contentious nature of the 2016 political cycle.

Within our sample, some groups did not answer all questions. This pattern of selective response is apparent in our results as our sample size changes depending on the questions being asked. Even within political in-groups, some chose to answer a question, while others did not. Future research should explore a larger sample size evaluating these questions as well as focus groups to understand the context behind the questions asked. This research does reinforce the idea that people who perceive themselves to be on the losing side of the political aisle will censor their speech and that women, people with disabilities, and people from the LGBTQIA community have been disproportionately trolled more both before and after the 2016 elections. As trolling has emerged as a political tactic during the 2016 election cycle, the troubling implications of this study’s findings that trolling leads to silencing and that those silences may affect the democratic nature of the digital public sphere cannot be overestimated.

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1. This comment from *The Daily Stormer* was taken down from its server after some controversy. The authors were unable to locate the exact paragraph number as a result. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Milo Yiannopoulos is a British media personality and author who has been heavily associated with the alt-right. His rhetoric is known for being inflammatory, with a heavy emphasis on trolling women, people of color, and other marginalized groups. His Facebook page self-describes him as, “the most fabulous New York Times Best Selling supervillain on the internet,” showing how much he revels in the notoriety he gets from being an internet troll. He has named his current speaking tour “Troll Academy,” and he sells merchandise on his website branding the wearer as a graduate of the Troll Academy. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)