

The Virtual Victim

An investigation into online hate and the production and reproduction of discourses by the media regarding female victimisation.

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“From the earliest year of the Internet era it became clear that the haters would be among the first to not only recognize the incredible potential of this technology, but successfully exploit it for their own ends”

(Foxman and Wolf, 2013: xi).

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1. Abstract

This paper has focused on an emerging area of criminological concern: online hate. More specifically, this study, looks closer at the ways in which female victims of online hate are discussed, described and represented in media content. By doing this, this paper aims to gain an understanding into how the media produces and reproduces discourses concerning female victimisation. By using a feminist victimological theory as the primary theoretical tool and by adopting a directed qualitative content analysis this study has identified three dominating themes, two of which can be connected to already existing discourses and one that this study suggests is an emerging discourse. The findings suggest that there are indications that certain discourses regarding female victims of online hate are being perpetuated, such as discourses relating to women's responsibility in terms of their own victimisation and that of a "second victimisation" through the contact with the criminal justice system. However, in conclusion, it appears that the material actually works to highlight the problematic aspect of these existing discourses concerning female victimisation and instead actively pushes the idea of online hate as a growing societal concern.

Keywords: online hate, victim, women, female victimisation, media, online victimisation, misogyny.

2. Introduction

In our society we generally refrain from expressing hatred face to face or carrying out violent acts due to the fact that we are aware that there is a system in place which potentially threatens legal action if incidents like that were to take place. This system, for the most part, works as a deterrence from attacking each other on the streets or openly and carelessly shouting derogative terms to one another in public (Bjurvald, 2013: 12). However, there is a place where this sense of deterrence collapses; a place where people can give voice to the purest forms of hatred and hide behind a veil of anonymity: racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, the list goes on. Hate, hate, hate, hate.

The internet. What an exciting place.

I have found that because the problem of hatred online is still a relatively new one, it has not received much attention in criminological or victimological research which is why I have chosen to focus on this area. In order to carry out the analysis I have adopted a directed qualitative content analysis. I chose this approach in order to be able to identify recurring themes throughout the articles chosen for the analysis but also to understand those themes in a wider social context.

This research does not deny that men, transgender, or for example disabled people are victims of the phenomenon of online hate. They are and, unfortunately, it is not uncommon. I have however, chosen to focus on women as victims due to the recent attention brought to this problem and the way the victimisation of women, whether it is online or in the non-virtual world, is sexualised in its nature which is generally not the case in the victimisation of the other groups (Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Berenblum, 2010: 74).

2.1 Disposition

The paper is divided into seven sections: the first one, *Context*, aims to provide just that, context; it will describe the debate surrounding the phenomenon of “online hate”, the issue of defining it, why this particular area of research is important and why it is of criminological relevance. The second section, *Theoretical Framework*, positions feminist victimological theory as the primary theoretical tool with which the analysis has been carried out; it further goes on to justify why a feminist victimological approach is more appropriate than any other victimological or criminological perspective in order to understand women’s victimisation through the phenomenon of online hate. *Previous Research*, the third section, is divided into

four research areas and discusses the contributions of research areas such as “The crime victim from a feminist perspective”, “Victims and the media”, “Online hate” and the emerging area of research: “Female victims of online hate” in which this project is positioned. This is to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research already carried out relating to the different themes included in this project and to demonstrate that there is currently a research gap to be filled when it comes to media constructions of female victims of online hate.

The fourth section, *Methodology and Material*, discusses the benefits of adopting a directed content analysis rather than any other form of content analysis and describes the steps taken throughout the analytical process. It also describes the material, how it was chosen and why media articles were appropriate to use in the process of this research project. *Ethical Considerations* will briefly highlight any ethical concerns that have arisen during the research process and the sixth section, *Analysis and Results*, will present the results of the research in the form of quotations which can be understood – with the help of the theoretical framework – in a wider societal context through existing or emerging discourses relating to female victimisation. The last section, *Concluding Remarks*, will discuss the criminological importance of this research project and the fact that it brings focus to an area of research that demands more attention and how future research concerning the phenomenon of online hate could develop.

3. Context

Online harassment. Internet victimisation. Viral hate. Online antagonism. Net-hate.

Online victimisation.

These are just a few of the terms that have been formulated in order to try to identify and label a phenomenon that is receiving more and more attention, not only in Sweden, but in other parts of the world as well. In Sweden, the phrase “näthat” is used. However, instead of using a direct translation of the Swedish term (“net-hate”) I have chosen to adopt one that I found was close to the Swedish term in terms of its shortness and conciseness in describing the phenomenon; it was also used consistently in an English context. The word “online” in relation to hatred on the internet re-appeared throughout the majority of the articles and books that have assisted me in the research for this project. Specifically, the term “online hate” was used consistently in the book *Viral Hate* (Foxman and Wolf, 2013: 4) and I considered it to be an appropriate term to use for this project.

What is it?

As was suggested by the initial quotation by Foxman and Wolf (2013: XI), it is important to understand that *hatred* as a phenomenon is far away from being a new phenomenon; what is relevant in relation to online hate and what is relevant for the purpose of this research is the *arena*, the form of expression that has emerged since the start of the internet era (Foxman and Wolf, 2013: 10).

So, is there a set definition that describes what this emerging form of expression entails? The answer is no; as was demonstrated in the first sentence of this section there are several labels for this “new” problem which is an indicator of the various ways it can be explained and defined. For example, Enarsson and Naartijärvi (2016: 2) describe it in the following way: “Online antagonism may constitute a serious violation of a person’s dignity, sense of security and freedom, as well as a violation of the private sphere”. In Sweden, the concept of “net-hate” is not a criminal offense in itself but is rather a collective label which refers to criminal offences such as unlawful threats, slander and unlawful persecution online (Sackemark and Schultz, 2015: 16). There are several reasons to why online hate is difficult to pin down and why it is difficult to come to an agreement of an encompassing definition, especially from a

legal standpoint; especially when it can take so many different shapes and where so many different people can become involved in the process.

Indeed, one of the core issues of online hate which characterises – not only the ongoing social debate but the legal debate as well – is the balancing act of people’s freedom to express themselves online and the problem of some people using that freedom to target other people with hatred in the form of racism, sexism, homophobia, antisemitism or islamophobia (Enarsson and Narttijärvi, 2016; Foxman and Wolf, 2013: 10). How does a society balance freedom of expression and protecting its citizens from discrimination and persecution (Bjurwald, 2013: 165)? Another issue of online hate is the opportunity to remain anonymous. It becomes harder, especially from a legal standpoint, to find someone to hold responsible when a person is not only hidden behind a computer in an unknown location but might be hiding behind an anonymous alias as well (Tanenbaum, 2015: 73-77; Foxman and Wolf, 2013: 10).

In light of this, it is understandable that the issue of online hate is a complex one. It is apparently complicated to formulate a *legal definition* in order to regulate and monitor without over-stepping the boundaries of freedom of speech, and anonymity is to some extent hindering the investigative process. Also, the fact that online hate takes so many different shapes and targets so many different groups of people or individuals makes it very hard to narrow online hate down to one “criminal act”, it is more complex than that (Sackemark and Schultz, 2013: 16). So, if no specific “crime” has been committed, can there be victims? It certainly appears so. Even though the legal framework has ways to go in order to make sure that people are held responsible for hating, threatening and harassing online there is no doubt that online hate has an impact on the people who suffer from it. This will be demonstrated by the media material that has been selected for this research project which suggests that people are intentionally victimised through targeted threats, abuse and psychological violence.

In addition to this, there are also arguments for online hate forming a bridge between the virtual and the non-virtual world, resulting in online hate taking physical form through the instigation to violence through the internet which inevitably produces victims:

“Thus, the impact of online hatred is real and measurable. In the United States, incidents of cyber-bullying, violence against women and homosexuals, and bombings of abortion clinics all have been facilitated by the Internet and often

have been inspired by content found on the Internet and encouraged by like-minded haters online” (Foxman and Wolf, 2013: 28).

It is then of criminological relevance and interest to explore this emerging arena of hatred and violence. Among other things, criminology needs to investigate how and why it happens. What does it mean for a society as a whole? Who are the perpetrators and who are the victims? As an emerging arena of potential and new criminal behaviour, criminology needs to concern itself with its presence and the issues attached to it.

The area of concern that I have chosen to tackle is that of the portrayal of female victims of online hate. This particular area has been receiving an increasing amount of attention in the media over the last few years since the airing of the Swedish documentary series *Uppdrag Granskning* (SVT.se, 2012) where the programme explored the issue of women being at the receiving end of a type of online hate which is generally exclusive to women: online hate characterised by sexual violence and sexual threats (Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Berenblum, 2010 :74). To tackle this issue I have chosen to look closer at a small section of articles because I understand media content to work as an active agent which produces and reproduces ideas of social and cultural phenomena, such as victims of crime for example (Nilsson, 2013: 137).

The purpose of this paper then is, not to look at the actual problem of female victimisation of online hate but rather how it is described and portrayed. To do this, I have analysed thirteen articles in order to investigate how media content can produce and reproduce discourses concerning female victims of online hate and in turn strive to understand how these discourses impact on our understanding of these victims; I have therefore developed the following research question:

How do media discourses surrounding online hate produce and reproduce ideas about female victimisation?

4. Previous Research

In this section, previous research regarding four areas will be considered important because of its influence on this research. The first section will discuss research concerning the crime victim from a feminist perspective and the second section will briefly discuss the emergence of a media perspective in relation to the victimological field. Thirdly, online hate will be highlighted as an emerging area of research and criticised for its currently narrow perspective. The last section discusses the area that my particular research project is focused on: female victims of online hate. This section importantly outlines the small amount of existing research on this particular topic which works to highlight the importance of further research, such as this one, in order to gain a fuller understanding of this phenomenon. The aim is to demonstrate the importance of already existing research and its influence on this project; however, it is also to demonstrate the lack of research concerning itself with combining victimology and online hate. This is to establish an existing gap in the research which I have attempted to fill by combining the two fields and some of their key findings in order to investigate the ways in which female victims of online hate are portrayed in the media and how that impacts on our general understanding of female victimisation of online hate.

4.1 The Crime Victim from a Feminist Perspective

The victimological perspective, as we recognise it today, grew out of a feminist critique of the criminological discipline itself and out of the ideas of feminist criminological thought which subsequently emerged. Smart (1990: 76), one of the key feminist critics of traditional and positivist criminology, argued that it was crucial for feminist work to engage with and, more importantly, challenge the core of criminology. For example, one of the key aspects of the emerging feminist criminology was feminist empiricism, which pointed out that “what has passed for science is in fact the world perceived from the perspective of men” and that “what looks like objectivity is really sexism and the kinds of questions social science has traditionally asked have systematically excluded women and the interests of women”. Criminology needed to acknowledge the experience of women in relation to crime and not

treat the male experience as the ontological reality (Ibid, 1990: 76). Also, this contributed to moving even further away from the idea of female criminals as biologically different from male, and instead treating female criminality as a social phenomenon in its own right (Smart, 2008: 9).

Due to the rise and building critique of criminology by feminist scholars and the increased attention drawn to the female experience of criminality this inevitably led to more focus, not just on women as perpetrators, but on women as *victims* of crime. “Women were, in short, constituted as victims generically and individually in the workings of patriarchy. And looming large, the first stirrings of victimology supplied an appropriate foil not only for contesting the meanings of victimisation, gender and power but also for establishing a countervailing feminist criminology” (Rock, 2007: 45).

The emergence of the victimological field has provided the criminological discipline with an increasing amount of research dedicated to the perspective of the victim of crime rather than that of the perpetrator (Heber, Tiby and Wikman, 2013: 18). Even if the change in research focus in criminology from the perpetrator to the victim of crime happened relatively recently there is a substantial, varied and influential amount of research relating to the concept of the crime victim; research that has been pivotal in changing the perception of the role of the victim and its importance in a social, cultural, legal and political context (Williams, 2009: 1). An example of this is the theoretical concept of the “ideal victim” and ideas concerning “undeserving” versus “deserving” victims which has been famously highlighted by Christie (1986).

From a feminist perspective this has meant that certain types of crimes, such as rape and men’s violence against women, have been highlighted due to the fact that they produce a majority of female victims. In turn, female victimisation has been highlighted and problematised which has led to a move beyond ingrained ideas about female victims; an example of these ideas is that women who fall victims of sexual crimes could have taken measures themselves in order to prevent the crime from happening in the first place and that they then, more often than not, are held responsible for their own victimisation (Davies, 2007: 180). A lot of the feminist-oriented victimological research has then been focused on problematising the term “victim” and how it is applied to women due to its connotations with passivity, weakness and resignation (Rock, 2007: 46).

Expanding on this, other types of important research within the feminist perspective of victimology is the focus on the female victim of crime as a “survivor” rather than a victim: “The link between passivity and powerlessness associated with being a victim and being female, does not for feminists capture how women routinely resist and manage they structural powerlessness, in other words, how they survive” (Walklate, 2007: 120).

4.2 Victims and the Media

Analysing the portrayal of crime victims in the media is an established concern of the victimological field. This has facilitated a critical discussion of the role that the media actually plays in the “making” of ideas about victimhood and their power to influence the public with those ideas (Nilsson, 2013: 137). The adoption of a media perspective when exploring ideas regarding victimhood has become an important contribution to the victimological field and because the majority of media stories of victimhood are connected to *female victimisation* this perspective has also become a very important tool in the feminist research analysis of victimisation (Lindgren and Lundström, 2010: 28).

One of the recurring themes in this field of research, i.e. how the crime victim is portrayed in the media, is the critical analysis of imagery and visualisation of victimhood. Photographs of victims of serious crimes are used as tools in order to create a more personal connection between the reader and the victim. They can also work to portray a particular victim as innocent and further humanise victims to make the story more real to the reader who in turn becomes more invested in the news story. The research into the power that the media has to create specific images and narratives in order to get people to read their content and the deconstruction of this process is an important theme within this field of research. It draws attention to the importance of imagery in media content in relation to victimhood and that “the potential to visualize a case can have a direct impact on its perceived newsworthiness” (Greer, 2007: 29-31).

This is based on the idea that the victim of crime is not an *objective category* but is instead a *construct* inevitably influenced by the media’s portrayal of crime victims, not only through words, but through images as well (Lindgren and Lundström, 2010: 12). Another important, critical approach is the deconstruction of the media content which highlights questions such as: What does the media include in its stories? What does it *exclude*? Further, another dominating theme within the research of the crime victim in the media is problematising the construct of the media itself; this is done by examining the ways in which the media is seen as

an independent pillar of society which produces “natural” and “true” stories, when in reality, the media produces content which they think will be of interest of the public in order to generate more sales, contradicting the view of the media as an independent source, presenting objective, information to the public (Nilsson 2013: 138-139; Chermak, 1995). Furthermore, Chermak (1995) argues that the crime victim, in particular, is used by the media in order to push its marketability and news value.

The research into the portrayal of victims in the media becomes especially important in relation to the gendered element of the ways in which the media depicts victims of crime. As mentioned previously, a large part of the stories that focus on victimisation in the media are stories of *female victimisation* and so therefore it is important to specifically pay attention to constructions of female victims in media content which is the purpose of this research project.

Research into gender, victimisation and the media focuses on the problematic aspects of how women as victims are described in the media. This type of research aims to, among other things, untangle the ways in which stories about female victims are structured; for example, female victims of sex crimes, in particular, are not uncommonly described as indirectly or directly responsible in the crime committed against them. Describing what the woman was wearing or specifically mentioning that she was out drinking and intoxicated at the time of the crime are not uncommon descriptions (Meloy and Miller, 2011: 70-71). There is also the question of who is writing the article; Meloy and Miller (2011) argue that “[w]hite males hold most of the high-level and high-visibility media positions, giving them the power to direct news agendas” (Ibid: 78) which suggests that the consideration of gender in this context is relevant and important to draw attention to. This particular field of research, a gendered perspective on media portrayals of crime victims, has contributed to the field by centralising the issue of patriarchal structures and its impact on media representations of women as victims and has been of particular help in understanding the results of my analysis.

4.3 Online Hate

With regards to the topic chosen for the research of this paper the amount of research goes down drastically. The concept of “online hate” is still an emerging area of concern and the academic attention paid to the issue of online hate is still in its early stages. Looking at the selection of books and articles delving into this particular area of research it becomes obvious that the scope of it is, although important, limited. Books such as *Näthat: Rättigheter och Möjligheter* by Sackemark and Schultz (2013) looks closer at the legal perspective of online

hate by discussing the balancing act between the issue of freedom of speech and online harassment. This appears to be a recurring theme when looking closer at the existing research on the concept of online-hate; it is concerned with the legal element of the problem and questions such as: What does freedom of speech actually mean? When does one cross the line into criminal behaviour?

The other concern frequently discussed in the existing research concerning online hate is that of racism; the book *Viral Hate: Containing its Spread on the Internet* discusses the expression of hatred, in the shape of racism, now located online, further facilitating and expanding the ways in which hatemongering targets people. By doing this the authors draw attention to the growing problem of, not only racism and xenophobia, but also the growing problem of it reaching and impacting an increasing number of people (Foxman and Wolf, 2013): This is also discussed in a Swedish context in the book *Skribordskrigarna* by Bjurwald (2013: 165) which explores the depths of extremism expressed through racism, antisemitism and xenophobia and the ways in which people utilise the internet in order to spread their ideologies of hatred. These are very important contributions to the area of concern that is online hate; this is because they discuss and highlight the internet as a very effective tool for spreading hatred in the efforts of trying to increase understanding of the reality of this problem.

4.4 Female Victims of Online Hate

This area of research is very small; even though there is an expanding amount of research dedicated to the complexities of the legalities of online hate there are very few dedicated to specifically investigating the impact online hate has on the people it targets. Even more specifically on the women it targets.

There is however an emerging selection of research that explores the concept outside a legal framework and touches upon ideas of victimhood and the consequences for the people who become subjected to hatred online. Books such as *I am not a slut: Slutshaming in the age of the Internet*, explores the concept of “slut-bashing” and “slut-shaming” on the internet and the author Tanenbaum (2015: IX) describes the internet as a “contradictory landscape on which females are applauded for sexual audacity when they’re not being humiliated and disgraced. New ideas about female sexual liberation clash with old stereotypes about ‘good girls’ and ‘sluts’”. The book critically investigates the sexual double standard that women are faced with

today, how that double standard takes shape online and the impact it has on the women targeted (Tanenbaum, 2015: 77).

Furthermore, academic articles such as “Is it all part of the game? Victim differentiation and the normative protection of victims of online antagonism under the European Convention on Human Rights” (Enarsson and Naarttijärvi, 2016) and “Panoptical Web: Internet and the Victimization of Women” (Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Berenblum, 2010) are two articles that have stood out during the process of this research project in terms of their combination of a victimological theoretical framework and victimisation online. Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Berenblum’s (2010: 69) article “investigates the internet use/abuse of women as embedded in the power structure and the ways it reshapes gender relations and re-constructs women's victimization”. Through their study they show that women who use the internet are exposed to “new venues for challenging power games” simultaneously as it exposes the women to a “space for new crimes, abuse and deprivations” (Ibid: 91), arguing that “cyber space” is a place where a combination of negotiation, resistance, empowerment and victimisation take place in the process of women’s use of the internet. They conclude that even though cyber spaces were used against Palestinian women in a “victimizing and gendered manner”, it was also used as a political tool to generate change and increase the ways in which women can manage information (Ibid: 91).

Enarsson and Naarttijärvi’s (2016: 1) article adopts a broader victimological perspective and “analyses the issue of online antagonism [...] and the positive obligations of states to counter such antagonism under the European Convention on Human Rights, from a legal and victimological perspective”. They argue that “democracy requires freedom of expression” (Ibid:136) but that it needs to be balanced with a functioning protection for victims of online hate so that the fear of being harassed online does not lead to people avoiding expressing their opinions in the virtual world, “leaving only the harshest voices to be heard” (Ibid: 136).

These are two very different perspectives on the problem of online hate but they are two important perspectives since they draw attention to the consequences of online hate on the people targeted and the structural and cultural factors involved in this particular phenomenon which is ultimately what this research project has tried to achieve.

5. Theoretical Framework

In general, a victimological perspective – an area of research that has grown out of the criminological field – focuses on victims of crime and their perspective and experiences rather than on the ones of the perpetrator which is usually the case in criminological studies (Newburn and Stanko, 2002: 262-263). There are, of course, different perspectives within the discipline itself; a few examples are positivist, radical or critical victimology. The victim of crime generally remains centred but the different perspectives differ in how they approach the idea of the victim of crime and what they deem to be their primary focus, such as micro-perspective versus a macro-perspective or vice versa (Heber, Tiby and Wikman, 2013: 20).

The victimological discipline pushes to develop scientific ways in which it can carry out critical and independent research which highlights the importance of power relations and issues of societal distribution in relation to social exclusion, resources and ultimately, victimhood (Heber, Tiby and Wikman, 2013: 20). Because my research assumes that the ways in which female victims of online hate are represented by the media is intricately intertwined with power relations in the shape of patriarchy, the general framework of victimology seems appropriate.

This research adopts a *feminist* victimological framework. It will follow the theoretical perspective as outlined by Claire Renzetti (2009) in *The Preager Handbook of Victimology*.

By using a *feminist* theoretical approach in victimology I am focusing on the ideas of patriarchal structures and the impact that has on the media representation of female victims of

online hate. However, there are several perspectives even within the feminist victimological approach, such as standpoint feminism, multicultural feminism or postmodern feminism; despite their disagreements on, for example, the type of activism that is appropriate in order to highlight the issue and generate change, they generally agree on a few core ideas which are the ones that I have chosen to use as my theoretical background when approaching my material. This is described by Renzetti (2009: 96-97) in the following quotation:

“First, feminist victimologists maintain that gender [...] is a central organizing component of social life. In other words, gender and gender relations order social life and social institutions in particular ways. Consequently, when one studies any aspect of social life, including victimization, one must consider in what ways it is gendered”.

So, in order to better understand victimisation one must highlight the importance of gender. Also, the fact that social life, and therefore victimisation, is gendered, highlights the importance to consider patriarchy as an important factor in the ways in which gender is constructed and subsequently how social life is organised and the consequences that has for women and their experiences of victimisation (Renzetti, 2009: 96; Chesney-Lind, 2006: 9). For example: “Feminist victimologists have drawn on research that shows how traditional gender norms reinforce and reward male dominance and control over women and how patriarchal societies such as our own privilege males over females and often blame women for their own victimization” (Renzetti, 2009: 97).

This approach becomes crucial in order to firstly, understand “reality” and society as a construction; this enables us to critically view society and its structures, in this case patriarchal structures, and gain some understanding into why female victimisation and the responses to it is shaped the way it is (Ibid: 97). Secondly, it helps us analyse the collected media material which thirdly, contributes to answering the research question: *How do media discourses surrounding online hate produce and reproduce ideas about female victimisation?*

We start to understand that the victimisation of women online is not the result of a few “rotten apples” but can instead be understood as a phenomenon shaped by social structures characterised by patriarchal ideas (Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Berenblum, 2010: 74).

Feminist victimology strives to encompass both men and women when approaching and problematising the idea of victimhood (Renzetti, 2009: 97), however, there are certain risks of this particular perspective. By adopting a feminist victimological framework where the

critical focus is set on patriarchal structures there is a risk of assuming that all men, just through the fact that they are *men*, benefit from patriarchy (Newburn and Stanko, 2002: 262; 266). This means that feminist victimology risk reinforcing or maintaining the binary ideas of the “ideal victim” and the “ideal perpetrator” instead of problematising those stereotypes and deconstruct them. This can, in turn, lead to women staying trapped in the classification of victims while men remain the epitome of the criminal which means that men’s victimisation is continuously rendered invisible (Heber, 2012: 172; Walklate, 2003: 33).

In addition to this, Walklate (2003: 36) argues that a feminist victimology contradicts itself by recognising the label ‘victim’ by adopting the ideas of victimology while, at the same time, distancing themselves from that same label and strongly opposing it in the process by pushing for the label ‘survivor’ which is perceived as the “active resistance to oppression” (Ibid: 36) rather than the passivity and powerlessness often ascribed to the victim-label. So, can one justify adopting a feminist victimology in order to further understand female victimisation if the approach cannot reconcile with the label ‘victim’? Arguably, the two terms do not have to work in opposition to one another but can both be considered in order to highlight different aspects of the issues regarding female victimisation: “Indeed an argument can be mounted which presents these concepts as capturing different elements of the same process” (Ibid: 36).

In light of this, I can see some of the limitations of this theoretical approach and the problematic aspects of focusing on one group’s victimisation while actively excluding another’s in the process. As mentioned previously, however, female victimisation is not a new phenomenon; the form of expression – the arena – might be new, but the issue still remains that the group predominantly subjected to sexually characterised hate online are *women* (Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Berenblum, 2010 :74). It has also become clear that the issue of victimisation of women in various ways has now also cemented itself in the virtual world. And even though feminist victimology has some ways to go in order to become an even more nuanced theoretical approach it contributes to the realisation and understanding that a structure exists behind the type of victimisation that we are talking about, not just in the virtual world, but in the non-virtual world as well.

6. Methods and Material

6.1 Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how media content produce and reproduce discourses of female victims of online hate and how those discourses influence general societal ideas regarding those same victims.

I have therefore decided to carry out a directed qualitative content analysis. A qualitative content analysis can be carried out through three different approaches: directed, conventional or summative. I have chosen to adopt a directed approach since I already have a theoretical framework in place; a feminist victimological framework that has guided me in the process of carrying out the analysis through its theoretical concepts and themes (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1281-1283). The themes that have been identified through the content analysis are interpreted as representative of wider debates in society regarding female victimisation of online hate. These themes will therefore be discussed in the context of existing and emerging discourses on that same topic. Also, a qualitative content analysis rather than a quantitative approach is appropriate since my focus is on identifying and interpreting meaning in the articles chosen. A quantitative approach focuses, instead, on quantifying the content by for example counting words (Bergström and Boréus, 2012: 49-51, 80-81).

The coding process was oriented by feminist victimological theory which meant that it was characterised by a deductive approach due to the theoretical framework already being in place. Even though the content analysis was influenced by feminist victimological theory I

did not have a set of codes in place before the actual analysis; instead, I attempted to perform a type of systematic coding by trying to identify as many themes and keywords as possible, only to select and reduce them at a later stage. This was to try and avoid limiting the coding process initially in order to collect as much information from the material as possible. However, the selection process that came later was inevitable which meant that I had to make active decisions as to what was relevant and what was not (David and Sutton, 2004: 204-206).

One of the main criticisms with regards to content analysis, even a qualitative one, is the danger of applying codes to texts which can lead to meanings being fragmented and coded segments being abstracted from the context which gives the text its meaning. Practitioners of discourse analysis are, for example, particularly adamant about this problem of content analysis (David and Sutton, 2004: 203). It can also be said that a directed qualitative content analysis is limited by the fact that it is already influenced by the choice of theory. This, in turn, narrows the scope of the analysis in terms of deciding prior to the analysis what is important and what is not. The risk then is that the researcher only sees what the theory influences him or her to see. It can, however, also be seen as a strength to have a theoretical framework already in place since the purpose of a directed qualitative content analysis is to find out how theory interacts with research material (Bengtsson, 2000: 38-39).

A directed qualitative content analysis seems appropriate then since the purpose of this research project is to interpret the material through the theoretical lens of a feminist victimological framework rather than discovering an “objective” truth. Furthermore, this choice of method enables me to identify various constructions of female victims of online hate through the themes present in the chosen material. The themes identified in the content analysis could subsequently be understood as parts of a wider surrounding social context where some assumptions about female victims of crime are more dominant than others (Bergström and Boréus, 2012: 34, 39).

6.2 The Material

The material for this research has been sourced from a website called *Mediarkivet* (The Media Archive) which I have been able to access through the library website of Stockholm University. The search was carried out on 2016-04-20 and was limited to a particular period of time:

2013-02-06 to 2016-04-04.

The start of this particular time period has been chosen because of a ground-breaking programme that aired on Swedish National Television (SVT) in February 2013. The aim? To scrutinise the phenomenon of “online hate” (*näthat*). The programme called “Män som näthatar kvinnor” (*Men who abuse women online*) focused on 12 female public figures who read excerpts from emails that they had received, containing explicit threats and comments about them which, more often than not, were of a violent sexual nature. The programme received a lot of attention and became the starting point of a growing debate surrounding the increasing phenomenon of online hate (SVT.se, 2012). I have therefore assumed that there would be an increased amount of articles relating to the area of interest – namely online hate – to choose from which is why I chose to limit my search between these particular dates. I made an additional search to see if this was the case and used the same search words that produced 99 hits (see below) between the dates **2013/02/06** and **2016/04/04** but used the time period three years before the airing of the programme: **2010/02/08** to **2013/01/31** and the search only came up with 15 hits. Therefore, I would like to argue that the programme became an important catalyst for the debate on online hate, indicating that the time period I based my search on was appropriate.

I limited the search to daily and evening newspapers produced in larger Swedish cities (*Storstadspress*) and the Swedish Web (*Svensk Webb*). Because the search has been carried out in a Swedish context all the search words have been Swedish. In order to narrow the search down I tried different combinations in order to see how many results they produced but more importantly what kind of content it provided.

“<i>näthat</i>” (“online hate”)	8050 hits.
“<i>näthat</i>” AND “<i>kvinnor</i>” (“online hate” AND “women”)	1565 hits.
“<i>näthat</i>”, “<i>offer</i>” AND “<i>kvinnor</i>” (“online hate”, “victims” AND “women”)	99 hits.

The selection process consisted of a few core criteria which made the actual selection of relevant newspaper articles easier. The search for articles containing online hate (*näthat*) was the first criterion to take into consideration. Subsequently, I approached the articles with a victimological perspective and was actively searching for articles which included “victims” or “victim” in its content. These were then examined further to see if the articles focused on “women” or “woman” as the *victim* which meant that I excluded articles that discussed men as victims of online hate.

The 13 articles that have been chosen are articles that all contain descriptions of “women” as “victims” of “online hate” which meant that the articles chosen were taken from results that the last search produced, based on the search words: “näthat”, “offer” and “kvinnor” (“online hate”, “victims” AND “women”) (See articles under *Internet Sources*, pp. 37).

It is worth drawing attention to the fact that out of 99 articles found through the search based on the words “online hate”, “victim” and “women”, only 13 articles make up the material that has been analysed. This small number of articles is a drastic cut from the 99 articles that the search originally produced and needs to be discussed further.

The reason for this significant cut in the material used in the analysis is the fact that I was looking for something more specific than just articles containing these particular search words. The choice of articles was also influenced by the fact that I wanted articles that not just discussed the core criteria mentioned above, but that also discussed them in relation to a *larger societal structure*. Being influenced by the feminist theoretical approach, used in this research overall, I also actively looked for articles that also mentioned or discussed concepts such as “patriarchy” (patriarkat), oppression (förtryck) and “rights” (rättigheter) in relation to the other relevant criteria.

Through the process of going through the 99 articles it became apparent that the majority of articles, even though they contained the right search words, did not demonstrate a clear connection between the phenomenon of online hate and women as victims of this phenomenon. Instead, the majority of articles were articles either focused on women as victims but only discussing online hate in passing or articles where online hate was central but were discussed, for example, in relation to racism or a legal framework rather than in relation to women as victims. In addition to this, some articles were articles written on the same topic, only published in different media outlets. For example, an article on the visit of Monica Lewinsky appeared in both GT and Expressen. Also, the release of a book concerning the phenomenon of online hate appeared twice in the search results. Other examples of articles excluded were texts introducing new books or films relating to either women as victims or online hate.

Since the quotations included to demonstrate the results of the analysis were originally published in Swedish, it was necessary for me to translate these quotations into English for the purposes of this project. The process of translation can be awkward; translations are

seldom perfect. As such, I received help from a native English speaker who is also a graduate student in English Literature in order ensure that the translations were as accurate as possible

6.3 Media content

For the purpose of this research project I wanted to look closer at representations and more specifically, descriptions of female victims of online hate in order to attempt to understand how those representations could possibly influence the public's ideas of those victims. By looking at media content, as opposed to other types of textual documents, I was able to identify some of the recurring themes and therefore gain a better understanding of the existing dominant ideas regarding female victims of online hate.

Because the material chosen for the analysis only consisted of a limited amount of articles it is important to acknowledge that it cannot be deemed representative of the Swedish media overall; for that to be the case, research with a much larger corpus of material would have to be carried out in order to provide a more representative reflection of the ways in which the Swedish media constructs female victims of online hate in general. However, by actively choosing to use media content I was able to identify the production and reproduction of specific discourses relating to female victimisation on a smaller scale which facilitated the discussion concerning constructions of female victims of online hate and how they influence society's general understanding of those victims (Nilsson, 2013: 140).

7. Ethical Considerations

When carrying out qualitative work within the field of criminology or other areas of the social sciences you, more often than not, get close to topics that can be sensitive and very personal to the people you are including in your research. Interviewing people about past criminal behaviour or victimisation can be hard for the people involved so it is very important to constantly be aware of the research process, how you handle the people involved in your research and more importantly, how you handle the information that they share with you since the ultimate goal is for that information to form the basis of your paper (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002: 7).

In the case of my research I am discussing a sensitive area, namely that of victimisation through sexual and violent harassment online. In my case, however, I have chosen not to conduct any interviews, group discussions or surveys to be filled out. I have chosen to only

work with second-hand material, that is, already existing material: printed articles in the Swedish media.

This means that I do not require permission from anyone to use the material since they have already permitted their stories to be publically distributed through the media when doing the interviews. Therefore, the women interviewed in the various articles have agreed to have their names printed which means that their consent is not needed (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002: 9). This also means that my research does not pose any potential risks or negative consequences for the individuals included in the articles (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002: 5). In light of this I do not consider my research process to violate any of the ethical considerations outlined by Vetenskapsrådet (2002) and feel confident that my research is ethically sound.

8. Analysis and Results

This analysis has been carried out through a directed qualitative content analysis (Bergström and Boréus, 2012: 356) and a feminist victimological theoretical perspective has been applied to the chosen material. A directed qualitative content analysis has assisted me in identifying some of those constructions through themes in the material which I have been able to understand further through a feminist victimological framework and its critical focus on societal structures and how those structures inevitably shape our idea and understanding of certain social phenomena (Bergström and Boréus, 2012: 356,373; Renzetti, 2009: 96).

The themes will not only find support in quotations from the empirical material provided through a selection of 13 articles but will also find support and be lent credence by the theoretical framework of choice. The first two themes that emerged and turned into analytical concepts were *Responsibility* and *Secondary Victimisation*, both of which were formulated through the feminist victimological framework; the third one *Social Problem*, does not have the same, clear connections to the theoretical framework but has instead been identified as a

theme throughout the material through the directed qualitative content analysis and subsequently understood further, through the gaze of a feminist victimological approach, as an emerging discourse regarding female victims of online hate. The theme *Epidemic*, briefly discussed towards the end of the analysis, was not formulated based on the theoretical framework but was rather identified as a theme in the articles. *Normalisation*, however, also discussed at the end of the analysis is informed by the feminist victimological framework rather than by the material.

8.1 Responsibility

The theme *Responsibility* jumped out of the material pretty early on in the analysis. The patterns that emerged and ran consistently through the articles consisted mostly of the fact that female victims of online hate were depicted as describing themselves as being indirectly blamed for receiving hate and threats online and subsequently told to accept their circumstances since they had chosen them themselves:

”An anti-racist, a politician, a woman, and in addition to this: brown-skinned. Unfortunately, factors leading to a life unavoidably characterised by hatred and threats, especially of the sexual kind” (KIT, 2015).

”A police officer compared the internet to a park, implying that one shouldn’t go there by themselves meaning that I had myself to blame because I provoked to begin with. It’s sick” (SvD, 2016).

This suggests that to make the choice to become a public figure, especially if you are a woman, will automatically trigger hateful responses. It also suggests that other factors such as ethnicity or political stance will contribute to the victimisation which is something the woman is herself described as *responsible* for. This particular point is demonstrated by the first excerpt. Furthermore, the active choice made by a woman to speak out in a public arena such as the internet is inevitably going to lead to strong reactions online which could have been avoided if the woman had not said what she did, implying that the blame and the *responsibility* lay with her and not the aggressor which is exactly what is described in the second excerpt.

The two excerpts demonstrate the underlying sense of acceptance which the women are encouraged to adopt because of their choice of lifestyle. Another example of this is a comment included later in the second article mentioned above. It is described as having been made by a police officer involved in responding to one woman’s reports of hatred and threats

directed at her online, to which he claimed that she would have to “learn to live with it as a public figure” (KIT, 2015).

This theme, which was identified through the directed qualitative content analysis and informed by the feminist victimological framework, can be connected to one of the more dominating discourses regarding female victims of crime. The idea of the “ideal victim” is a well-known concept within the victimological field and means that, in order to fulfil the “legitimacy” of a victim of crime, one needs to meet certain criteria. This means, among other things, that the victimised woman in this case, needs to be considered “innocent” which means that she should not have done anything to bring about the incident or have placed herself in a situation where victimisation could have been “expected” (Christie, 1986). This type of discourse is still dominant in rape – or sexual assault – cases against women and has had an impact, not only on the societal view of women as victims, but it has also led to female victims being blamed and treated as partly responsible in their own assault, especially by the police and in courtrooms; who is not familiar with the notorious question “What were you wearing?” aimed at the female victim during a rape trial? (Walklate 2007: 43; Lindgren and Lundström, 2010: 65). This is originally known as “victim-precipitation” as introduced by Mendelsohn (1963: 241) and further developed by Von Hentig, but is also known as – from a feminist theoretical point of view – ‘victim-blaming’ (Rock, 2007: 45; Walklate 2007: 43).

8.2 Secondary Victimization

Secondary Victimization is a concept that is directly linked to the feminist victimological framework and can concisely be described as “the victimization that occurs as a result of involvement in the criminal justice system” (Walklate, 2007: 111). The pattern I was able to identify concerned the reports of disbelief that women were met with after they had reported incidents of hate, threats or harassment online. *Secondary Victimization* became an appropriate analytical tool due to the fact that the majority of the articles described how the women were questioned through the initial contact with police and how they felt humiliated a second time by the people they thought would help them:

”Julia gathers the courage and has the opportunity to speak to an administrator at the police station [...] One week later a letter arrives which informs her that the case has been discontinued” (SvD, 2016 [1]).

The description of humiliation in relation to the process of reporting to the police, not being believed and having this be galvanised through the discontinuation of police investigations appears to legitimise my choice of theme and the use of the theoretical concept *Secondary*

victimisation. In the first excerpt, for example, it is highlighted that Julia “gathers the courage” to then receive the letter of discontinuation which implies that the process of reporting her experienced victimisation was an uncomfortable process.

”So, she locked herself into her sister’s bedroom to call and report it to the police. A process which, as usual, was generally humiliating due to the fact that it was obvious that the police did not take the threats seriously [...] Two weeks later the usual letter arrived: the police investigation had been discontinued” (KT, 2015).

This second excerpt specifically draws attention to the “general humiliation” the woman feels when reporting the online hate to the police and the fact that this is not the first time she is experiencing this. She knows that they will not take the threats seriously, a feeling that is then legitimised by the discontinuation of the investigation.

”She has filed reports several times but she feels that the police are not doing enough in order to get to the bottom of the hatred she’s received” (GT, 2016).

This third excerpt describes the fact that the woman in question does not feel that the police are really on her side and that they do not care enough to “get to the bottom of the hatred she’s received”, a feeling brought on by the fact that she has reported online hate previously which did not result in anything. It is not rare that aspects of the official response to crimes committed against women, like for example, domestic abuse or sexually oriented crimes, are characterised by mistrust and disrespect. These types of crimes are generally not treated with the same urgency as perhaps street violence or theft and are not considered as serious which has led to a more indifferent and accusing attitude (Davies, 2003: 112).

”Swedish courts are, to say the least, bewildered. Very few cases make it to trial and the relevant knowledge and experience is missing in cases like these” (SvD, 2016).

This fourth excerpt focuses on the description of the Swedish criminal justice system as not developed enough to handle cases involving women being victimised through online hate which leads to cases regularly being dropped and rarely making it to trial. This becomes particularly important when women who report crimes of a sexual nature already feel vulnerable and exposed which can lead to their victimisation being reinforced by the way they are treated by official agencies (Davies, 2003: 104-105). This theme is reinforced by the fact that the women were described as not being taken seriously as victims which, more often than not, resulted in several discontinued police investigations.

This theme could also be connected to the discourse of *Responsibility* discussed in the previous section. From a feminist victimological point of view it can be argued that the idea of the female victim – whether it is of rape or online hate – having themselves to blame to

some extent has unfortunately led to women having difficulties fulfilling the criteria of an “ideal victim” and therefore failing to gain credibility or sympathy (Green, 2007: 91). It also means that they are consistently questioned and responded to as being less of a victim, or not even a victim at all, which is the inevitable product of living in a patriarchal society (Renzetti, 2009: 96; Jordan, 2009: 93): ”These types of identity constructions are, in a wider sense, also parts of a discursive system where women and girls are ascribed subject positions characterised by patriarchal rules on how to act and behave” (Lindgren and Lundström, 2010: 65).

This has inevitably led to what one could interpret as a discursive practice which means that dominating ideas surrounding female victims of crime have had negative and direct consequences on how we treat female victims, especially within official institutions such as the criminal justice system (Walklate, 2007: 45).

8.3 Social Problem

A theme that ran consistently through the various articles was the description of online hate towards women as a *Social Problem*. Interestingly, this discovery appeared to be indicative of an emerging discourse concerning female victims of online hate rather than that of an existing one. This is also where it becomes apparent that the media content chosen for the analysis demonstrate a feminist perspective in its depictions and constructions of female victims of online hate:

”Online threats force women to be scared of men. Threats of sexual violence are the utmost expression of female oppression [...] The threat of sexual violence is the ultimate way for men to control and oppress women” (Aftonbladet, 2015).

”Online hate is a form of violence, in this case it’s about men’s violence against women. The purpose is the world’s oldest: to silence women. Lessen their influence, oppress them. Remove their right to voice their opinions” (Expressen, 2013).

These two excerpts are particularly interesting since they have been identified in two of Sweden’s bestselling daily newspapers. The first one specifically highlights “sexual violence” as a way for men to “control and oppress women”. This idea can be connected to a radical feminist perspective which considers male violence as the “key vehicle” for oppressing women and considers for example, rape, domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking as a few of many examples of the various forms of violation of a patriarchal structure which fuel women’s continued oppression (Walklate, 2007: 119;127). The second excerpt explicitly

describes online hate as “men’s violence against women” and further constructs female victimisation of online hate as social problem due to patriarchal structures.

”Their (men’s) blinders are very effective. Not only is a stream of aggressive sexism dismissed, but in addition to this, the possibility to discuss online hate as the extension of misogyny has disappeared” (ETC, 2015).

This other excerpt continues to demonstrate the feminist analysis present in the media content chosen for the material; it highlights the problem of the fact that men, in particular, are unwilling to talk about the real issues of online hate geared specifically towards women. It also draws attention to how limited Swedish society is when it comes to, not only talking about the problem of online hate, but also discussing it as a problem rooted in misogyny.

”Unfortunately, this has revealed and demonstrated a big social problem; one that affects many girls, and boys for that matter: ‘rape culture’” [...]. ”In some way online hate and rape culture are connected. Louise is not the only girl to fall victim of this. Thousands of women testify to their daily experiences of a variety of disgusting forms of abuse online” (Nyheter24, 2015).

Here, online hate is described as an expression of “rape culture” and is constructed as a problem much greater than one only happening to a small group of people. Again, the focus is moved from online hate as an *individual* problem to that of a much wider *social problem* and also demonstrates a similar feminist analysis by highlighting this issue as gendered.

”Is online hate a sign of the internet becoming a patriarchy?” (Expressen, 2013).

Here is another example of one of Sweden’s bestselling newspapers expressing concern as to what the cause of online hate really is and drawing attention to the issues of patriarchal structures in relation to female victimisation of online hate.

The fact that female victims of online hate are represented as a product of a much larger social problem rather than that of an individual one is particularly interesting because of the dominating discourses that already exist concerning female victims. Female victims, especially of sexually motivated crimes, have in many cases, over a long period of time (as discussed previously), been treated as lesser victims due to surrounding circumstances. This has meant that female victimisation is, more often than not, discussed and portrayed as an individual problem rather than the product of misogyny or patriarchy (Hindelang, 2009: 34-35; Walklate, 2003: 32-33). The underlying sexism of this particular discourse is something that feminist victimological theory focuses on particularly: “This differential valuing of genders is called sexism, and feminist victimologists maintain that understanding sexism is

fundamental to understanding the gendered nature of victimization experiences and both formal and informal responses to victimization” (Renzetti, 2009: 96).

This becomes important because this is the theme that stands out. It contends with the other discourses but differs in the sense that it does not portray female victims of online hate as that of lesser victims or the result of individual circumstances. They are represented as a product of a patriarchal society characterised by misogyny which not only differs from the other themes identified through the analysis but from any existing dominant discourse concerning female victims. The excerpts included above demonstrate the force and clarity with which this theme emerged from the analysis. This illuminates that this theme can be established in all of them.

Since this material has been approached with a feminist victimological framework, this finding is particularly exciting. The experiences of these women are represented as *gendered*: the quotations all demonstrate a combination of words and expressions such as “sexism”, “oppression”, “misogyny” and “sexual violence” in relation to the phenomenon of online hate towards women. Hence, the feminist victimological framework becomes an appropriate tool to analyse and understand the material since the core belief of feminist victimology is that victimisation, in general, needs to be understood and problematised through gender relations and patriarchy (Renzetti, 2009: 96-97). It is also interesting since it indicates a shift in the way the media represents the female victim and demonstrates that the media can move beyond some of the existing discourses concerning female victims.

8.3.1 Epidemic

In connection to the theme of a *Social problem* there is an additional aspect which reinforced the representation of female victims of online hate as a social problem. Throughout the articles, alongside the discussion of the phenomenon of online hate, another theme emerged: there are also descriptions of this problem as a rapidly growing one, an *Epidemic*:

”It’s even worse to know that Emma is a mere drop in the sea. This happens to thousands of children every day” (GT, 2016).

It is also described as a threat that is everywhere, both hidden and in plain sight:

”Additional victims can be found just anywhere, that’s how the internet works” (Aftonbladet, 2013).

”And for every established name there are hundreds of additional victims...” (ETC, 2015).

This theme is interesting in connection to *Social Problem* as a discourse because it can contribute to understanding the process of *Social Problem* as an emerging discourse and media content working as an active agent in the process of shaping that discourse (Nilsson, 2013: 137). The description of online hate as a growing problem and the increase in alarming coverage throughout various media outlets could perhaps be interpreted as displaying signs of a moral panic. A moral panic can briefly be described as a type of “behaviour” or a group of persons that emerges as a threat to the interests and values of society and this emerging phenomenon is generally highlighted by the media in a sensationalistic, simplistic and exaggerated manner (Cohen, 2002: 1).

Online hate is perceived as a relatively new phenomenon and is consistently described in the material as a *threat* to the well-being of *society*, or more specifically, to *women* (Cohen, 2002: vii-viii). The first excerpt identified in the material suggests that there are elements of moral panic since it displays a mother’s fear and worry of, not only her child’s victimisation, but that of thousands of other which she sees as a fact.

According to Cohen (2002: viii) a moral panic highlights the damage a certain type of behaviour can do but it can, more importantly, also be interpreted as a warning sign of a “real, much deeper and more prevalent condition”, which is what is suggested in the three excerpts above. Also, the material suggests that the issue of online hate against women is indicative of a much bigger more urgent *social problem*: patriarchy and misogyny. The idea of an *epidemic* and the elements of a moral panic present reinforce and support the idea of online hate as a *Social Problem* as an emerging discourse.

8.3.2 Normalisation

Interestingly, this theme was not a prominent one but caught my eye nonetheless. This particular point could not be identified as an overarching theme but was instead only discussed in one of the thirteen articles chosen for the analysis and formulated with the help of the feminist victimological framework:

”I have become hardened, at the same time as I have a feeling of resignation” [...] “I now see it as normal” (SvD[2], 2016).

The person interviewed describes herself as “resigned” and refers to the presence of online hate in her life when she says “I now see it as normal”. Even though the idea of normalisation was not consistently reported throughout the material it becomes interesting from a feminist victimological perspective. The fact that this woman describes online hate as normal in her

life going forward is indicative of a discursive pattern that runs through the themes *Responsibility* and *Second Victimisation* previously discussed in this analysis. One of the dominating ideas surrounding female victimisation is, as previously discussed, that women are held either partly or fully *responsible* for their victimisation (Davies, 2007: 180). The women described in the material have all been victimised online through sexual threats or sexual harassment and have been described as partly responsible for the fact that they have been exposed to online hate. In these type of situations it is not uncommon for women to fear re-victimisation which in most cases have an impact on the way they continue to lead their lives (Bunch and Clay-Warner, 2009: 94). Fear of victimisation is intertwined with the concepts of internalising and normalising specific types of behaviour; women are forced to adapt to an environment now characterised by fear and might change their habits, assess risk in different aspects of their lives and adapt accordingly. This change in behaviour could be interpreted as a process of *normalisation* (Nilsson, 2003: 61). One example of this is that the women will perhaps be hesitant about posting comments online or being vocal about their political views, because if they did not avoid it, it could lead to them receiving more hate online: “Women fear, perceive and deal with risk and experiences via different day-to-day coping strategies and support networks” (Davies, 2007: 182).

The idea of normalisation then, is perhaps not the most central tenet of this analysis and even though it was only demonstrated in one of the articles, it is, I think, still an important theme formulated through the feminist victimological framework. This is because it could be argued that the process of normalisation is a result of how female victims of online hate (and other crimes targeting women) are represented in discourse reinforced by the media, as demonstrated by the preceding themes of *Responsibility* and *Secondary Victimisation*.

9. Concluding Remarks

The phenomenon of online hate has been receiving attention worldwide and in the Swedish context, the catalyst for this debate was the programme *Uppdrag Granskning* in February 2013. This programme had us listen to a fraction of some of the threats, harassment and hatred that women can be at the receiving end of online and became the starting point for the formation of an emerging debate and discourse: that of online hate towards women as a *social problem*. Therefore, the aim of this research project was to gain understanding into how media representations of female victims of online hate influence discourse formations of those victims and how that impact on society’s general understanding of those same victims. The results of the research can be described as multifaceted and in some aspects, contradictory.

As a result of the analysis it has been made evident that media content plays an important role in the representation of female victims of online hate. What is interesting, however, is that it can be argued that the way the articles included in the analysis discuss female victimisation contribute to highlighting the problem of some of the existing discourses surrounding female victimisation. So, rather than reinforcing certain discourses such as *Responsibility* and *Second Victimisation* through their reporting they illuminate the *problem* of these discourses; by doing this they play an active role in the production of the emerging discourse of online hate as a *social problem*.

On the other hand, it can be argued that by highlighting certain discourses, just by repetition, for example that women are somehow responsible for their own victimisation, there is a risk that this particular discourse is perpetuated.; this reinforce the idea, then, of female victims as partly or fully responsible for their own victimisation and that the maltreatment of female victims of crimes of a sexual nature is then somehow acceptable (Walklate 2007: 43; Lindgren and Lundström, 2010: 65). This could impact further on how society and its formal institutions understand female victims and subsequently treat them, for example, by not taking them seriously or by treating them with disrespect and mistrust during the criminal justice process (Davies, 2003: 112).

Despite this argument however, I would argue that the important discovery here is that the analysis shows that the material demonstrates a critical perspective by drawing attention to the problematic aspects of the ways in which female victims of online hate are treated and therefore describing these victims as part of a much larger societal problem rather than describing them as having themselves to blame. Furthermore, it can be argued that the articles, not only the smaller, web-based, sources but even Sweden's bestselling newspapers, display a feminist analysis in their descriptions of female victimisation of online hate. They do this by describing female victimisation of online hate as "male violence against women" and describes how online hate becomes a tool for men to "oppress women" and "silence women". As discussed above, in the analysis, this description of female victims of online hate demonstrates a radical feminist perspective.

The fact that the media content chosen for the analysis problematises some of the existing discourses surrounding female victimisation rather than actively perpetuating them was exhibited consistently through the material, and is certainly a note-worthy development. By establishing the emergence of a newer discourse as demonstrated through the theme *Social Problem* it shows that the active agency of media content can also be responsible for the

production of a new discourse. The identification of the theme *Social Problem* and its connection to the emerging discourse concerning female victims of online hate testifies to a shift in representation and a transfer of the idea of responsibility and blame from the individual female victim to the surrounding social structures and its patriarchal elements (Lindgren and Lundström, 2010: 65).

The findings of this study has suggested then that the media is a double-edged sword and plays a very important role in how it contributes to influencing and shaping ideas of a specific phenomenon. Media content can also be an important game-changer by challenging already existing dominating discourses and moving beyond the individual in terms of blame and responsibility and suggests that online hate targeting women is the result of a patriarchal society characterised by misogyny.

So, is this a sign of a development in how we think about and understand female victimisation in general?

Understanding how media constructions of female victims impact on our understanding of those victims can shine important light on why society and its formal institutions treat them negatively. By highlighting these ideas of female victims they can be deconstructed and society can hopefully move towards a better understanding of the victimisation of women and therefore improve the way they are discussed and subsequently treated.

One cannot deny the importance of research into the ways in which Swedish society can strengthen its criminal justice system and try and develop ways that we can monitor and regulate hate-oriented internet activity. There was however a need for the academic gaze to turn towards the issues of *victimisation* online, and so, the purpose of this project has then been to highlight and draw attention to the increasing problem of female victimisation online, and more specifically, the constructions of those female victims and how those constructions impact on our general understanding of female victimisation of online hate.

Because this area of research is still a relatively new one, my research has only explored one aspect of this phenomenon as a growing concern. Suggestions would be to analyse a larger corpus of material in order to gain an even fuller and nuanced understanding of the ways in which the media portrays female victims of online hate and what possible impact it has on our understanding of those victims. Another suggestion would be to carry out a research oriented by mixed methods, providing not only an in-depth analysis from a qualitative approach but could expand the research by analysing and counting specific keywords in order to

complement the qualitative aspect of the research. Since this research project has selected Swedish material only, another idea would be to carry out a comparative piece of research where one investigate the differences and similarities in media content between countries. This could be of particular interest and bring some needed nuance to the debate, since there are various ways in which the problem of online hate is presented; In the U.K and in the U.S, for example, the debate surrounding online hate has been specifically focused on discussing the issue of slut-shaming and revenge porn (Tanenbaum, 2015: xx) which differs from the focus of the current Swedish debate online hate.

With a rapidly developing technological world, people find new ways of targeting people with hate, internet being the prominent place to do that. And the internet is not going anywhere. This suggests that this is an area which should not only be of increased interests for the victimological field but also for the criminological field in general. Criminology needs to address the grey zones of online hate and the impact it has on society and its citizens; even more so since it is taking place in an arena where the majority of our society interact with each other. So even though it has proven problematic to monitor and regulate, further criminological research into the issue of online hate would be productive since it would conceptualise and highlight a problem that the whole of society should be concerned about.

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