Exploring the Re-Victimization of Women through Meme Culture within an Online Space

By

Brenna Parker

Simon Fraser University

Department of Communication Studies

Supervisor: Dr. Chris Jeschelnik

2025

Abstract

This thesis examines the relationship between the social media platforms YouTube, Reddit, and Instagram and memes that take part in the re-victimization of women who have been the targets of abuse and violence. This body of research examines the cases of Amanda Todd and Selene Delgado Lopez who have both been subjected to abusive behaviours online in the form of memes. By utilizing a quantitative approach, the data collected is used to analyze the subject matter within these memes along with the kinds of engagement each post receives. Findings show that certain platforms are more inclined to ban specific search terms but only for some subject matters. Findings also indicate that platforms such as Reddit allow for a more unmoderated stream of posts. Almost every meme that was posted reached an audience that was in favour of the content posted. This study contributes to the relatively small yet growing body of research for the topic of memes and meme culture.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Amanda Michelle Todd and Selene Delgado Lopez. May your stories continue to be told and continue to serve as an important reminder to lead life with empathy and compassion.

"May Justice Prevail"

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Chris Jeschelnik for his support and guidance throughout this research process. Your mentorship has assisted greatly in helping to grow my skills as a researcher. I could not have done this without you.

I would like to thank and share my gratitude towards my parents. Thank you both for fostering my love of learning and for giving me a strong sense of justice. I am forever grateful for your ongoing encouragement.

Table of Contents

Introduction…… 6

Literature Review…….10

Research Question……20

Methodology…….20

Results……...23

Subject Matter Within Memes……..23

Subject Matter Associated to Each Case Study…….....24

Acknowledgment of Victims…….....25

Overall Engagement with Memes…….....26

Discussion…….27

Limitations……32

Future Research Directions……...32

Conclusion…….....33

Citations…… 35

Introduction

With the rise of digital technologies and communication mediums online, the ability to retrieve information within seconds is quite literally at one's fingertips. When one has access to the world wide web, they have access to a plethora of content, online communities of like-minded individuals, and at times some incredibly dark parts of the internet. With online social media platforms and forums such as Reddit, 4Chan, 8Chan, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat offering anonymity and lack of regulations, those seeking to victimize others in these online spaces has grown dramatically. This study aims to discuss the conditions behind the growth of online misogyny and how online mediums of communication enable an environment that welcomes the re-victimization of women who have been victims of violence, harassment, and harm.

This study examines two cases involving the re-victimization of women within an online space. The first case is that of Selene Delgado Lopez who was a woman reported missing around the 2000's in Mexico City. She caught the attention of viewers after she was featured on a Mexican TV segment known as "Al servicio de la comunidad" which translates to "At the service of the community" (Winder, 2020). It was a segment that spread awareness for people who were reported missing in hopes that those watching may be able to provide information on their disappearances. The photo used for Selene was of very low quality and almost distorted which caught viewers off-guard. Due to the uncanny quality of her photo, Selene became the face of cruel memes, conspiracy theories, and online discussion surrounding her disappearance and suspected death.

Figure 1

The original photo of Selene featured on "Al Servicio De La Comunidad"

The second case is that of Amanda Todd who was a Canadian teenager that took her own life after relentless bullying, harassment, and blackmail. Even in death she was mocked and tortured through memes, online hate forums, and online discussions. After showing her breasts on an online chat forum, Amanda Todd was blackmailed with the photo that was captured. Amanda was then the victim of blackmail, bullying, and harassment from those both online and in person. After a long battle with anxiety, depression, and ongoing abuse, Amanda tragically took her own life on October 10th, 2012 (CBC, 2013). However, even in death Amanda was not able to escape her tormentors. Cruel memes circulated around the internet that often called her a "slut" and a "whore" along with mocking methods of suicide and self-harm. These memes were

especially popular among the depths of the internet that were riddled with misogynistic ideologies.

Figure 2

Image from Amanda Todds last YouTube Video

While both of these cases take place in different geographical locations, different timelines, and under different circumstances, the commonalities between them are rooted deep in systemic misogyny and a world that is chronically online. Both Selene and Amanda share the similarity of being victimized not once but twice at the hands of the internet and its use of memes, anonymous chat forums, and a network of like-minded people that do not have good intentions. The use of both case studies aims to examine the effects of online media, communication forums, and meme culture.

While meme culture in itself can be complex and at times subjective, a meme itself can be "identified as an image, lines of carefully formatted text, or photoshopped content" (Howard & Adan, 2022, p. 3). Memes themselves can often have widespread persuasion or influence and

can be thought of as being units of cultural transmission (Howard & Adan, 2022). They are appealing as “internet memes typically lack attribution” (Beskow et al. 2019, p. 3). This factor can be especially appealing to those who engage in malicious behaviour online, as content moves quick often leaving no trace of who was responsible for their creation behind. Memes are often “created with awareness of one another, and they require prior acquaintance for proper production and consumption (Gal, 2018, p. 2). This dynamic makes the culture behind memes distinct and unique from other internet phenomena previously observed.

Figure 3

Example of one of the first memes involving Selene

Figure 4

An example of an early meme referencing Amanda

Literature Review

When reviewing the current literature and peer reviewed sources regarding online spaces, media literacy, and the re-victimization of women, many academic journals and studies offer different insights and methodologies when it comes to this topic of study. While some studies focus on the victimization of women on the internet, other sources have a more specific focus on extremist hate groups towards women. These groups are known to identify as being involuntary celibate and often refer to themselves as "incels". With various political climates throughout cyber space, the one constant appears to be the harassment, victimization, and re-victimization of women. This victimization can often take place in the shape of memes, chat forums, and websites specifically engineered for exploitation and revenge porn.

This literature review aims to consider various studies and viewpoints in order to identify common themes, findings, gaps within the literature, and areas of potential growth. The literature discussed was found through the library database of Simon Fraser University which provides various scholarly articles, journals, and studies that have been verified and peer reviewed. When conducting searches for relevant literature, the keywords and phrases used were incel memes, re-victimization, femicide, Selene Delgado Lopez memes, Amanda Todd memes, harmful meme culture, and victimization of women via the internet.

When examining current and past studies, an academic article by Sharma et al. describes social media content as being "multimodal, combining text, images, and videos" (2022, p. 1). Sharma et al. goes on to state that the designs and themes used within online memes often take a humorous form but can be harmful. They then make the point that "misogyny and sexism against women have grown a foothold within social media communities, reinvigorating age-old

patriarchal establishments of baseless name-calling, objectifying appearances, and stereotyping gender roles" (Sharma et al., 2022, p. 2). Similarly, a book by Lisa Sugiura which focuses predominantly on the study of incel culture makes a similar point by stating that "women have always experienced both contact and non-contact sexual violations, but digital technologies have merely extended the repertoire of non-contact forms of harm" (2021, p. 99). Suguira elaborates further on incel culture by saying, "the term incel is a portmanteau of the words involuntary celibate, and those who adopt the name view themselves as unsuccessful in obtaining sex and romantic relationships with those they desire" (Sugiura, 2021, p. 4).

When reviewing various studies and academic literature, the rise of the incel community has played a large part in the victimization and re-victimization of women within a cyber space. Sugiura further discusses her findings by stating that incel behaviour is often "exacerbated and enabled by digital technologies" (2021, p. 117) and that "without digital technologies and internet culture, incel as an identity would not exist" (2021, p. 118). In a recent study by Helm et al., the ideologies behind incel culture and victimization were further examined using empirical research methods to determine what content among incel forums received the most attention and likes. The purpose of examining this highly liked content was to "explore what makes it unique in relation to other comments" (Helm et al., 2022, p. 30). A specific web crawler software was developed which reviewed 1.4 million comments made by 45,000 different authors between January 2014 and November 2017. There were two sets of comments sampled which were either highly upvoted or a random set. The comments were examined using a thematic analysis which then categorized the comments into dominant themes.

Findings concluded that the four main dominant themes were incel perspectives, propensity for change, conflict, and deviance. Incel topics covered subjects such as what it

means to be a “true” incel, blaming women for their issues, and the hyper sexualization of women. However, at the same time the topic of propensity for change shed light on potential aspects of hope for those who consider themselves to be incels including emotional expressions of frustration but also some form of optimism that those involved in the community could one day find love. The final two topics within the study involve conflict and deviance with conflict involving discussions of opposing worldviews, philosophy and more mundane subject matter. When it comes to the topic if deviance, the subject matter takes a darker turn. Many comments surrounding deviance contained blatant homophobia, misogyny, transphobia, xenophobia, and racism. Often, the discussions involved minimizing sexual violence and the abuse of women. One individual said, “if I was more attractive, I could get away with rape” (Helm et al.,2022, p. 38). Another common subject within the theme of deviant comments were discussions surrounding how women deserve to be beaten to death and executed. These comments began to reveal that even young girls were not safe with another self-identified incel stating that if he was able to be with a woman sexually and romantically, then maybe he would stop wanting to be sexually and romantically involved with a child (Helm et al., 2022). While difficult to hear and comprehend, this study is merely a glimpse into how deep-rooted the issues of misogyny are within an online space. Within this study, the point was made that “mainstream social platforms such as Reddit are both highly accessible and can be a tool for exchange of radical ideas and beliefs on a global scale” (Helm et al., 2022, p. 28) which shows how easy it is for those with similar mindsets to find each other.

In another study conducted by Alessia Tranchese and Lisa Sugiura, a similar idea was stated with both scholars saying that “digital technologies have created a new way for hatred to advance and disseminate in unprecedented ways” (2021, p. 2715). In their study, Tranchese and

Sugiura utilize an interdisciplinary approach involving a linguistic analysis of data from the Reddit forum. This method was used as it allows themes to rise gradually within the collection of data. Within the study, both scholars talked about how "digital technologies are embedded in our everyday lives due to the symbiotic relationship between technology and society" (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021, p. 2715) and because of this, "deep rooted misogyny is enabled and exacerbated by digital technologies" (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021, p. 2710). This study is based on a comparison between two data sets: study corpus and reference corpus. The content examined contained 688 subreddits, 89,385 posts, and 55 million words. In their study, Tranchese and Sugiura found that within cyber space some of the most common attributes directed towards women were "whores" and "sluts" (2021). These findings are congruent with another academic evaluation by Dupre et al. where it was found that in an online space "women are discussed using dehumanizing language and are seen as objects rather than people" (2023, p. 2). However, when examining this topic, Tranchese and Sugiura note that it is important to consider that "the real and the virtual are not separate experiential realms" (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021, p. 2714). When viewing the experience and victimization of women on online platforms, it is crucial to recognize that the online world and the physical world are interconnected in their misogynistic structures hence the enabling of online behaviours.

Online misogynistic structures and real-world systemic issues often go hand-in-hand. This is evident when speaking about the case of Selene Delgado Lopez, and the epidemic of women that have gone missing in Mexico. It can be theorized that those disparaging Selene feel enabled and emboldened due to the current political climate surrounding gender inequality, and the overall message that the lives of Mexican women and girls are not as valuable. Another article discusses that "Mexico remains one of the countries with highest rates of violence towards

women (Avellaneda & Torres, 2023, p. 56). In a study examining the rates of missing women within Mexico, it is discussed that Mexico is currently in a forensic emergency involving missing persons and that violence is often present within these cases (Quinto-Sanchez & Huerta-Pacheco, 2023).

In a similar academic article, Emily Acevedo discusses how "misogynistic attitudes contribute to the poor enforcement of laws that promotes a culture of impunity" (2023, p. 42). Acevedo then continues to discuss the brutal case of Ingrid Escamilla. Ingrid was a young woman who was violently murdered by her boyfriend and when reporting on her death, social media and newspapers posted photos of her body that had been mutilated. Ingrid's death was not only senseless but also sparked outrage when the photos of her body were leaked online (Acevedo, 2023). The case of Ingrid triggered a conversation of how victims of femicide are often re-victimized in their deaths and that "specific laws and initiatives have done little to change the cultural patterns that devalue women and consider them disposable" (Acevedo, 2023, p. 46).

Acevedo's case study sheds light on an often-taboo topic of intimate partner violence in addition to gender-based violence and shows how Ingrid was not only harmed once but twice. First when she was murdered, and twice when the media circulated her mutilated remains. In a similar study, scholar Brandi Chartier discusses how "the laws regarding the protection of women's rights are more symbolic than substantive (2023, p. 174). This further supports the point that the harm of women, whether it be in everyday life or within the media, is often enabled and ignored. In a recent study by Ahmed Al-Rawi, he talks about how memes hold power and that "gender remains a high point of contention in memes" (2021, p. 139) often fueling the online war on women.

When it comes to the ongoing culture of misogyny taking place on the internet, Sugiura states that “misogyny endures because it is collaborative” (2021, p. 99). This was similar to the point Sugiura made in her study with Tranchese as they spoke about how misogyny is something that is networked. This can be equated to the fact that “the structure of the internet with its searching capabilities, algorithmic politics – which prioritizes the interest of straight, white males – and other affordances such as anonymity and a myriad of topics and communities, have made it easy to find others with similar interests and/or belief systems” (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021. p. 2715). This then relates further to their point of how “online communities and virtual platforms have provided means for collective animosity to advance on an exponential scale” (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021, p. 2715) which continues to prove to be problematic. In another study by Ahmed Al-Rawi of Simon Frasier University, he stated that “memetic exchanges are rooted in intricate social dynamics; they operate in a decentralized and seemingly chaotic sphere yet are often associated with an intense coordinated online community and pervasive mimicry” (2021, p. 139). This can be related back to Gal’s point regarding how memes require “prior acquaintance for proper production and consumption” (2018, p. 2).

For the case of Amanda Todd, not only was she the victim of bullying, harassment, and blackmail, but even after her tragic death she continued to be the subject of cruel memes, jokes, and discussions often blaming her for the circulation of her intimate images. Even in death Amanda Todd was the target of violence and harm. She was especially targeted by those within the incel community and groups of misogynists who to this day still blame her for her own death. Amanda Todd was blackmailed as a teenager with her intimate images. At thirteen-years-old she was coerced into showing her breasts on an online chat room by an adult male living in the Netherlands. The photo was promptly screenshotted and circulated on Facebook to Amanda’s

family and friends. From that day forward, Amanda endured relentless online bullying, torment, and harassment. The pressure and emotional toll eventually became far too much and sadly Amanda died by suicide on October 10th, 2012.

While Amandas story sparked a movement and conversation surrounding anti-bullying and online protection for youth, it unfortunately also triggered hate from the incel community and other users on the internet. Those that blame Amanda for her death and those who spread hateful rhetoric claim that she is responsible for what happened to her and that she is deserving of the hate. These online communities consisted of the discourse that Amanda should not have shown her breasts if she did not want to be harassed and blackmailed. This mindset is evident of the ignorance and lack of media literacy within an online space as this narrative quickly spread from those who identify as incels to other branches of the internet. In a study regarding online media literacy by Cho et al, media literacy is defined as "the ability to access, analyze, and produce information" (2022, p. 942). Regarding the case of Amanda Todd, there was an abundance of misinformation surrounding the circumstance of her situation, therefore those within incel communities were able to easily manipulate the information through chat rooms, forums, and memes. Cho et al. give insight into this issue by stating that "the proliferation of misinformation, in part, reflects lack of responsibility in active production by lay individuals and groups" (2022, p. 946).

Many of the memes that were circulated regarding Amanda and her death were shocking, cruel and disturbing, however people, even those not associated with the incel community, were willing to repost the meme with just a click of a button. This then brings up another point made by Cho et al. about how social media users can understand their own online behaviours as "reflecting on their own values and those of other content producers in their social media

environment may help users understand the influence of the reality they co-construct" (Cho et al., 2022, p. 954). Amanda Todd's mother, Carol Todd, spoke about the importance of understanding the discourse of memes and how it may affect those involved. Carol talked about how memes are often another tool to help fuel negativity along with trolling behaviours and that change will not happen if these situations are not discussed and understood (Burgmann, 2016). The study of memes and their impact is a topic that is still being developed however there is a selection of literature that has approached the subject.

In a study specifically examining content within Incel spaces, memes were found to be the most frequent means of communication within the communities (Aulia & Rosida, 2022). The method of study predominantly consisted of visual analysis to identify patterns in radical masculinity. This analysis included looking at the structure of the memes that were being circulated including the image itself, production, circulation, and what audiences it was reaching (Aulia & Rosida, 2022). Similarly, Tonelli states a similar idea within their study as they discuss how circulation for this kind of content is often non-linear allowing any individual to be a medium of communication when it comes to what they share online (2023). Visual analysis and discourse analysis can be a strong research method regarding the examination of meme culture in relation to the victimization of women as so much of modern-day media is visual and can be decoded by consumers in a multitude of ways. In a study by Halder and Jaishankar, they discuss how women are often victimized online in different patterns (2009). This point is congruent with the rationale behind using discourse analysis and visual analysis to examine memes, as this format of online content often presents itself in tailored algorithms to individual users. Often, "the self on social media is in mutual causation with the choices it makes about what content to

consume and engage with as well as what networks to build, modify, and maintain on differing platforms" (Cho et al., 2022, p. 953).

Understanding an individual's relationship to the online word can be complex, especially for those who engage in producing harmful rhetoric but an academic article by Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Berenblum discusses how "a closer look at the power that can be attained through the access to the internet affords us a fuller grasp of the nature of power, enabling us to comprehend more deeply the effect of this power on women's victimization" (2010, p. 72). Truly stepping into the world of cyber space can allow for further exploration and understanding of new structures and hierarchies online. While many scholars have similar views when it comes to this kind of exploration, it is also important to examine differences in points of view and how various research can be expanded upon.

One of the debates among scholars regarding online activity and memes is how and if it can be compared to the structure and functions of how mass media is distributed and circulated. In the study by Cho et al., online content is discussed as being personalized where those sharing beliefs and values can congregate in a way that is not possible through mass media (2022). However, Tonelli takes a different approach by discussing how mass media and online content are in an almost co-dependent relationship as online social networks jump to mass media and mass media jumps to online social networks (2023). While different, these are both important points as they help to build a foundation for exploring the interconnectedness of various forms of media and the toll that is takes on women solely existing in an online space. Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Berenblum talk about how the very foundation and structure of digitization and cyber politics is driven by real-life gendered power relations (2010). These gendered power relations are often perpetuated by mass media as "understanding the economy of the virtual world and

space requires an in-depth understanding of global and local power" (Shalhoub-Kevorkian & Berenblum, 2010).

These various standpoints show an area of study that could be expanded upon in relation to how the online world functions alongside the physical world. Often, these two spaces are discussed in separate contexts, however broadening research on their coordinated functions could potentially aid in explaining the misogyny and victimization that is re-produced on chat forums, social media, and websites. Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Berenblum make a similar point by saying that "one could argue that technology and its use are associated with diverse human behaviours that affect and are affected by institutional forms and structures of power" (2010, p. 72).

While most of the literature discusses the victimization of women online, there is less academic research discussing how women are re-victimized. Women who have been harmed within a real-world context are often made to be a spectacle for those on social media. Memes, chat forums, and online posts have, in the past, targeted women who have already received some form of media attention for being victims of a crime, abuse, or harassment. This would be an interesting direction to take a topic of research, especially since study methods regarding memes and established online communities are not as talked about. Dupre et al. discusses the barriers this could present when conducting research as "empirical research on the incel population presents numerous methodological difficulties, the first being the online nature of the incel community itself as internet research in general has required the development of novel research techniques because traditional sampling techniques no longer suffice" (2022, p. 2). This is something to consider when especially when examining memes as there is room for potential bias and subjectivity. Dupre et al. also make the point of how "the potential for relatively rapid growth and evolution of a group over time also must be considered when attempting to

understand an internet-based group" (2022, p. 2). Content being circulated and produced online tends to always be changing, therefore it is important to have a strong direction of methodology to ensure accurate and well-gathered data.

Overall, the content within the literature discussed has shown the importance of developing research in relation to online spaces and their contribution to the victimization of women. While the topic of re-victimizing women online is not as widely examined, it is still an important area to be built upon as it is incredibly relevant to the current political climate taking place online. While there is much to be explored on this topic and this area of research is fairly new in terms of academia, it is critical to expand upon as the epidemic of victimizing women online does not appear to be slowing or coming to an end anytime soon.

Research Question

How do memes and meme culture contribute to the re-victimization of women within an online space?

Methodology

The methodology used for this study utilizes a quantitative approach to meme analysis which involves the two case studies of Selene Delgado Lopes and Amanda Todd. There are various elements being examined for this quantitative research. A meme analysis will be conducted that will look at the subject matter within the memes, the platforms in which these memes are posted, any acknowledgments made by those posting, and the overall engagement with the memes themselves. The hope in using this method of analysis and method of study is to gain a greater understanding behind the discourse and underlying messages within online memes that a qualitative method of study may not have been able to achieve.

Both case studies featured have a wide array of memes associated to their names with various portrayals of both women. The memes examined in this study are selected at random. The memes are selected from three social media platforms. These platforms are Reddit, Instagram, and YouTube. The memes selected will use a mix of imagery and text to convey their message. A total of 120 memes will be extracted and evaluated with 60 being allotted to each case study. The goal of extracting these memes at random is to allow for unbiased approach regarding the analysis of their content. Memes will be extracted and reviewed manually.

Each meme will be examined using a thematic analysis. The thematic analysis will be utilized to evaluate the characters and roles they play within the meme showcasing potential power dynamics and hierarchies. The thematic analysis will also be used to evaluate the story that is being portrayed within the meme allowing for discussion surrounding meme culture itself, how women who have been victimized are perceived by parts of society, and what the meme is trying to achieve through its portrayal of these individuals.

The second part of this study involves examining whether those who have posted the meme acknowledge the victim and their story along with examining the overall response from the audience . This analysis will be utilized to explore the various cultures surrounding different social media platforms by examining the behaviour and commentary of its users. This data will assist in giving insight into the communication systems manifested within each individual platform, allowing for greater exploration of the how re-victimization of women occurs and is enabled.

When it comes to ethical considerations, all data collected will be done so in a way that does not involve interacting with the posts or their comments. All posts and comments will simply be observed and noted. During the research process, all content that is noted and collected

will be done in a manner that holds the utmost respect for the victims and their families. All usernames and online personas of those who have posted or interacted with the memes will be kept confidential. There will be no record of the identities of any user on Reddit, Instagram, and YouTube.

For the potential implications of this research, it is important to consider that meme culture is something that has developed in more recent years and therefore previous studies on them are somewhat limited. Due to the fact that memes are a fairly new phenomenon compared to other fields of study, the research methods used to evaluate meme culture and discourse are still being developed, however a study by Heidi Huntington approached the subject using a methodology of evaluating visual rhetoric within memes which "combines elements of the semiotic and discursive approaches to analyze the persuasive elements of visual texts" (2013, p.2). The rationale behind this method of analysis was that "memes have implications for identity building, public discourse, and commentary in a participatory media environment" (Huntington, 2013, p. 1). A similar point was made in another study by Julian Tonelli, whose research had a specific focus on the online discourse surrounding Selene Delgado Lopez. In regard to the memes being circulated at Selene's' expense, Tonelli discussed how when memes are circulated and altered they turn into a collaborative space and community (2023). This can often give power to those who have formed like-minded communities online.

When going forward with this research, ethics and implications will be considered to avoid any potential bias, any skewing of the data collected, and to improve how the data will be looked at and evaluated.

Results

Subject Matter within the Memes

The results in table 1 show the relationship between the codes designated to the subject matter of each meme and the 3 social media platforms examined. The code C1 signifies that the meme is presenting the victim as someone to be feared. This code could present as the victim's face being distorted to look "uncanny". C2 signifies that the meme is presenting content on victim blaming. This code could present as a meme that discusses what the victim was wearing as the reason behind their abuse. C3 signifies a meme that is presenting content on suicide and self-harm. An example of this code could be a meme that mocks a victim's suicide attempt. C4 signifies a meme presenting sexual content. An example of this code could present as a meme making comments that are sexual in nature regarding the victim's body. C7 signifies a meme making light of the victims' situation through humour. This could present as a photo of the victim being posted to inappropriate music or a photo of the victim being altered through photoshop.

Most memes were coded as C1 at 40% of all 120 memes analyzed. The majority of memes coded as C1 were found on Instagram (45%), with Reddit (40%) and YouTube (35%) following. The second largest category to be coded was C3 at 30.83% out of 120 memes. Most memes coded as C3 were found on Reddit (37.50%) followed by YouTube (30%) and Instagram (25%). The third largest category to be coded was C7 at 19.17% of total memes examined. Most of the memes coded as C7 were found on YouTube (22.50%) followed by Instagram (20%) and Reddit (15%). The least coded content was C2 at 4.17% and C4 at 5.83%.

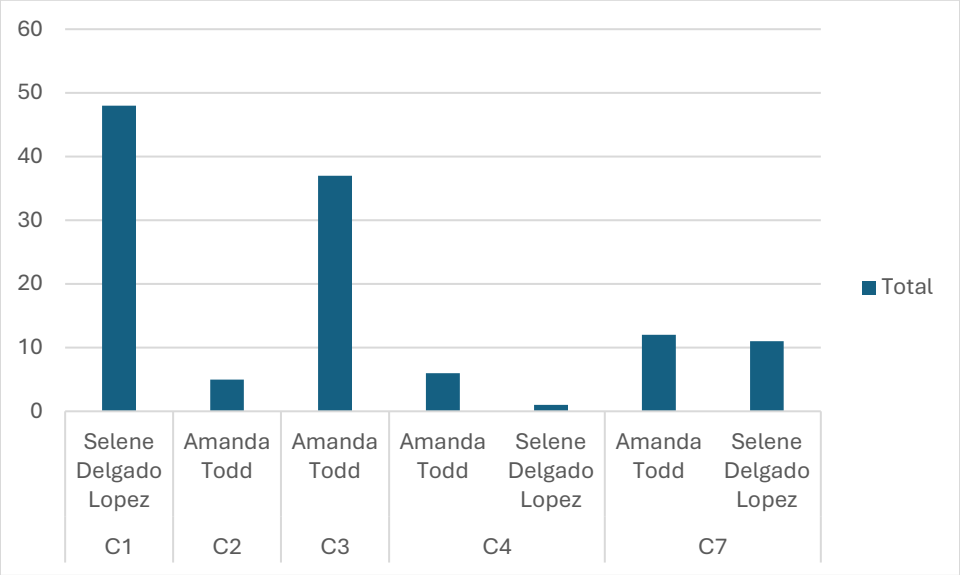
Table 1

Count of Social Media Platform	Code Type					
Social Media Platform	**C1**	**C2**	**C3**	**C4**	**C7**	**Grand Total**
Instagram	45.00%	2.50 %	25.00 %	7.50 %	20.00 %	100.00%
YouTube	35.00%	7.50 %	30.00 %	5.00 %	22.50 %	100.00%
Reddit	40.00%	2.50 %	37.50 %	5.00 %	15.00 %	100.00%
Grand Total	**40.00%**	**4.17 %**	**30.83 %**	**5.83 %**	**19.17 %**	**100.00%**

Subject Matter Associated to Each Case Study

The results shown in figure 5 show which codes are associated with each case study. All C1 coding is associated with Selene Delgado Lopez while C2 and C3 are associated with Amanda Todd. The code C4 is predominantly associated with Amanda Todd while C7 has a nearly equal association between both Amanda Todd and Selene Delgado Lopez. In figure 5, the differences in subject matter between the case studies are evident. Memes associated with Selene Delgado Lopez are dominated by the subject of fear and unease, while memes associated with Amanda Todd are dominated by the subject of self-harm and victim blaming. These results highlight the discrepancies and dominant narratives surrounding each case.

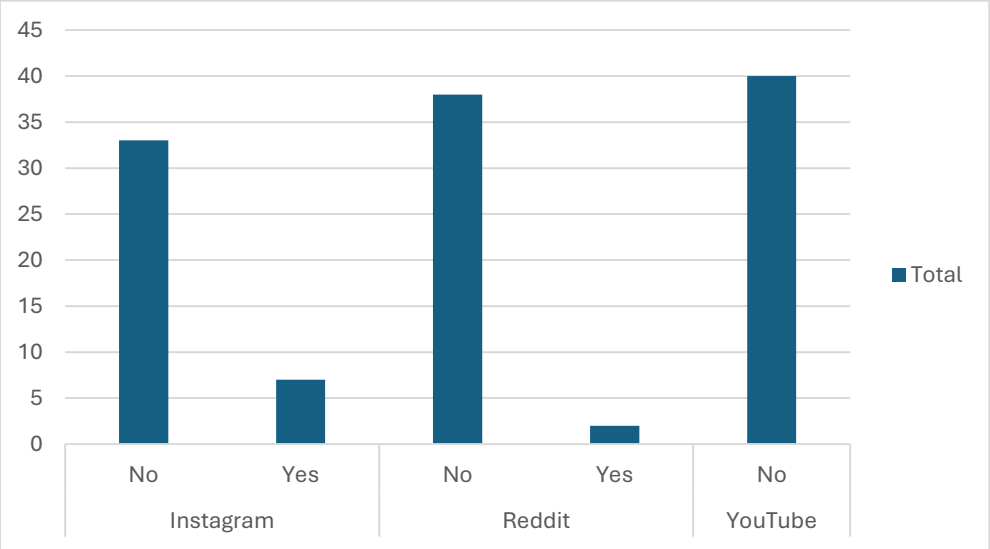
Figure 5



Acknowledgment of Victims

The results shown in figure 6 display the relationship between each social media platform and if each of the memes examined acknowledged the victims and their stories. An example of an acknowledgment would be the caption of the meme explaining the backstories of Selene or Amanda such as stating that Selene Delgado Lopez is an active missing person or that Amanda Todd was a victim of cyberbullying. While a meme may still be re-victimizing each case, the acknowledgment takes into account if the original user who posts the meme has knowledge of the true story behind each of the victims. Figure 6 shows that an acknowledgment was rarely given and when an acknowledgment was given, it was drastically outnumbered by memes that had no mention of the stories of Selene Delgado Lopez or Amanda Todd. The platform with the most acknowledgments was Instagram which was then followed by Reddit. YouTube displayed no acknowledgments.

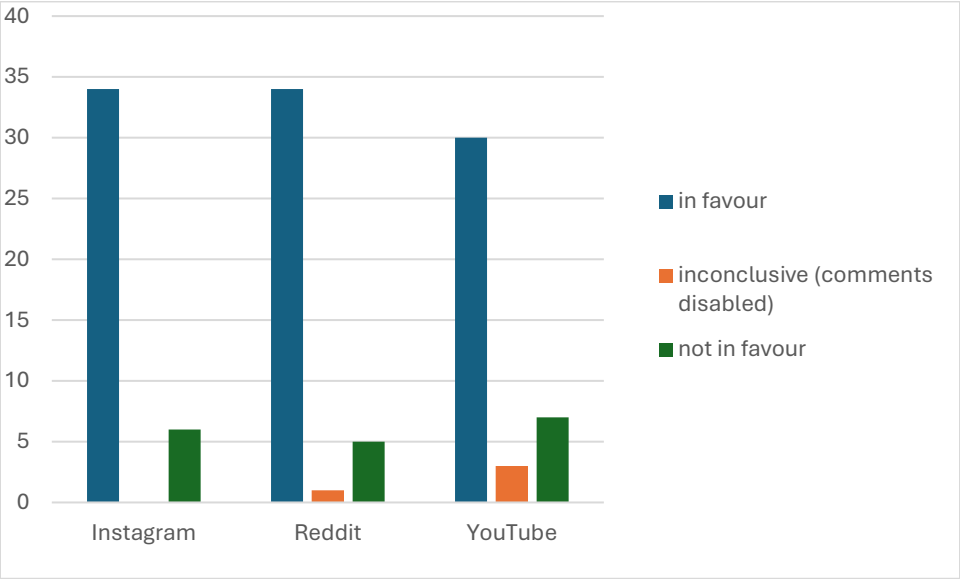
Figure 6



Overall Engagement with the Memes

The results expressed in figure 7 show the relationship between each social media platform and whether those who were engaging with each meme post were in favour of the content being shared. Comments were analyzed to conclude whether the majority of those who interacted with each meme were either in support of the post or not in support of the post. Results show that the overwhelming majority of engagement was in favour of the memes across all 3 social media platforms. Reddit had the most supportive audience with Instagram following closely behind. Comments that were not in favour of the memes had very little variation across each platform, however YouTube had the most disagreement followed by Instagram then Reddit. YouTube and Reddit both had posts where overall engagement was inconclusive due to comments being disabled, therefore partial data was not able to be collected potentially effecting the numerical variation between Instagram, Reddit, and YouTube.

Figure 7



Discussion

Regarding the findings of the research, multiple variables can contribute to various conclusions found while conducting this study. The research process itself provided insight into the content and algorithms obtained by each platform observed. This provided a foundation for the types of subject matter extracted and the discrepancies between them.

During the process of searching on social media, the initial search terms were the victims' names. If a total of 60 memes could not be located based on names for each case study alone, then another popular search term related to the victim was chosen. For Amanda Todd, the search terms used were "Amanda Todd", "Amanda Todd bleach", "Amanda Todd funny", "Amanda Todd suicide", and "Amanda Todd meme". These search terms were conducted on each platform with the exception of Instagram. For Instagram, only "Amanda Todd" was able to be searched. Any other search term was banned or filtered. It took a significantly longer amount

of time to locate memes for Amanda Todd then it did for Selene Delgado Lopez. There were only 3 search terms utilized for the case of Selene Delgado Lopez and those were “Selene Delgado Lopez”, “Selene Delgado”, and “Selene Delgado Lopez meme”. All platforms allowed for any searches related to Selene to be conducted.

Instagram appears to be a platform that is more inclined to protect its users from content regarding self-harm and suicide. However, this inclination seems to be more for the sake of the audience rather than those who have been victims themselves as memes disparaging Amanda Todd were still able to be found. While Reddit and YouTube did contain and allow content related to self-harm and suicide, finding these memes in relation to Amanda took a considerably longer amount of time than it did for Selene. These differences between both case studies can possibly be attributed to the fact that Amanda Todd has received more media attention and advocacy. As scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser states in her book regarding popular misogyny “in a media context if you are visible you matter” (2018, p. 10). While this isn’t to say that Amanda has not been brutally re-victimized at the hands of memes and meme culture, perhaps the dominant narratives surrounding each case study shape the way in which media platforms prioritize who receives more protection and who does not.

Within recent years, much of Western society particularly in the United States and Canada, have become more comfortable with topics surrounding mental health and for the most part have come to the mutual consensus that it is not acceptable to make humour at the expense of someone’s struggles. However, the topic of missing and murdered women of colour, particularly those of lower socio-economic status have yet to have the same grace afforded to them. As discussed by Banet-Weiser “this is how networks work: they allow for different spaces of expression simultaneously in that they function through rapid and asynchronous

communication; they decentralize power even as they remain loyal to hegemonic institutions" (2018, p.35) .

Figure 8

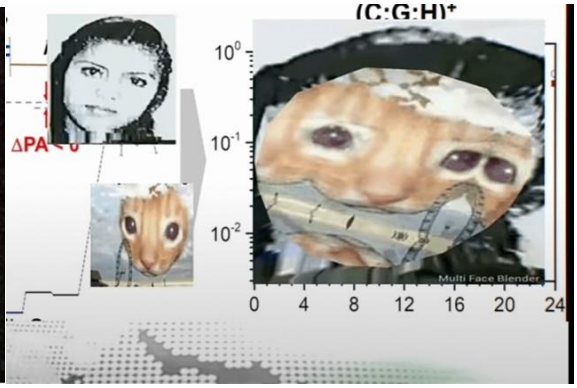


Image depicting Selene's image as distorted *An example of a meme involving Selene.*

When looking at figure 1in the results section, Instagram was shown to have the most memes associated to the code C1 which was then only associated to Selene. The codes C2 and C3 which were only shown as being associated to Amanda, were least prevalent on Instagram. The data collected shows that Instagram may have a certain bias towards what terms and content they consider to be harmful. However, when looking at the operations of Instagram compared to Reddit, the contrast is worth considering.

Reddit stands out as being a platform that allows for more "free" conversation surrounding topics such as suicide, self-harm, and victim blaming all of which are coded as being associated to Amanda. Reddit is also unique in that its functions utilizing "subreddits", which are individual communities within reddit itself, often makes it easier for users to hide away from more public streams of posts. Users with like-minded ideologies and beliefs are able to find each other with ease due to the vast connectivity of the online world. Not only do

subreddits allow for those with like-minded views to congregate, it also allows users to feel more emboldened to share these views as they know they will most likely receive support.

While memes about Selene were also found, Reddit and its users did not shy away from disparaging Amanda Todd in posts and in commentary. While content on both case studies were easily found on Reddit, the communities and audiences that they reached were different depending on the victim yet still existing under the same umbrella of misogyny. As Banet-Weiser expresses in her research, "a networked misogyny means that the concept itself is constantly moving from one node to another, emerging in different spaces, with varied manifestations" (2018, p. 34). Similarly. Dr.Ahmed Al-Rawi states an observation found in his research that describes the "dominance of internet memes as a male space" (2021, p. 139) and that "gender remains a high point of contention in memes" (2021, p. 139).

Figure 9

Memes from Reddit referencing Amanda Todds suicide attempt

When examining the data and results taken from YouTube, the popular video streaming site had the highest percentage of memes coded as C7 which was associated to both Amanda and Selene. While YouTube had the highest number of memes associated to humour and "making light" of the victims' situations, it also allowed for quite a significant number of memes that were coded as content containing self-harm and suicide. While YouTube was the only platform that had no acknowledgments towards the victims, it did have the highest percentage of engagement that was not in favour of the content posted. Reddit and Instagram differed from YouTube in that they both had acknowledgments but also had the highest percentage of users that were in favour of the memes posted.

While it is hard to pinpoint the exact demographic and audience each application appeals to, a potential explanation for why there is such high approval for these harmful images is the way abusive behaviours towards women are discussed in media and society. When misogyny is viewed as an issue that stands at an individual level and not a systemic one, it often becomes a matter of minimizing online behaviours down to simply being a fringe minority. Over a period of time, those who frequent online spaces become desensitized to seeing these harmful behaviours where they then fail to see the true impact of a much greater problem. Banet-Weiser touches on this concept by saying that "if misogyny were acknowledged as a social, political, economic and cultural structure, then it could be subjected to criticism and challenged in a way that individual expressions, often dismissed as anomalous and insignificant, cannot be" (2018, p. 35). Al-Rawi makes a similar point by discussing how memes serve as tools that push gender stereotypes further reinforcing a gendered power-imbalance (2021). The data collected and percentages themselves, appear to support these concepts and ideas by scholars, which creates a fascinating yet important point of discussion for the ongoing injustices of women.

Limitations

In regard to limitations within this study, there are key points to be addressed including sample size, case studies, scope of social media platforms and the utilization of a quantitative approach. The sample size for memes was 120 which is relatively small compared to larger and more elaborate research that typically takes place involving an entire research team. While the data collected within the 120-meme sample size was strong, a larger sample size would be able to offer that much more information and an opportunity for a broader analysis. This study was also limited to three social media platforms and two case studies which also contributed to the smaller scope of analysis within this study. Expanding not only the sample size but the platforms and case studies as well would be of great benefit to future research directions of meme analysis. Lastly, utilizing a quantitative approach as opposed to a mixed-methods approach could be viewed as a limitation due to only one kind of data being collected and therefore only one kind of data being analyzed. Expanding the methods of data collection could also be of great benefit for future research initiatives.

Future Research Directions

While this study looked at two relevant case studies and explored three popular social media platforms, research on the topic of re-victimization and meme culture can be expanded in various areas. Beyond increasing the sample size and scope of online platforms analyzed, the kinds of case studies and subject matter of the memes observed could be expanded upon. While Amanda Todd and Selene Delgado Lopez were both strong case studies in regard to being re-victimized through online spaces, the circumstances surrounding their re-victimization are just

two examples out of a much larger scale of issues surrounding re-victimization. Future research could explore the dynamics of re-victimization when it comes to which demographics it potentially disproportionately affects. This could be analyzing more case studies involving women of colour, women who are victims of intimate partner violence, women of lower socio-economic status, women who are involved in sex work and women who are from outside of North America.

Additionally, with research of memes being still very much in its infancy, further studies could expand upon meme culture within more cross-cultural contexts. Perhaps future research could examine how different cultures define the idea of re-victimization and how it potentially manifests online. With these ideas in mind, the growth of research in regard to memes and online culture can be expanded upon substantially, which would further enrich our knowledge of the way memes function in a society that is constantly connected by the internet.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between the social media platforms of Reddit, YouTube, and Instagram and how they contribute to and enable the re-victimization of women who have been victims of crime and abuse. The two cases of Amanda Todd and Selene Delgado Lopez were used as a point of exploration for how their situations were manifested among various communities and social media apps in the form of memes. Findings showed that a majority of memes presented content on making humour out of the victims' situations, suicide and self-harm, victim blaming, and showing the victim as someone to be afraid of.

Additional findings showed that a very limited number of memes acknowledged the stories of the victims and that even when there was an acknowledgment, the majority of audience

engagement was deemed to be in favour of the content posted. While it was difficult to determine the kinds of audiences these memes were reaching, examining the way audience participation and those who created posts worked alongside the different dynamics and cultures of social media apps provided insight into the role misogyny plays in an online space. The systemic roots of misogyny are so engrained within society that acts of re-victimization are often dismissed as being a small minority therefore it is viewed as not having a significant impact. Throughout the research process a clear distinction between each case study was observed with Amanda Todd having more filtered content associated to her name and it taking significantly more time to find memes related to Amanda as opposed to Selene. While this observation was not predicted, it provided a vision into potential research directions moving forward including differences in media attention among different demographics and looking further into why some social media apps are more inclined to censor certain content over others.

While memes as a topic of study are still very much in their infancy, they are becoming an increasingly relevant topic due to their rapid circulation and adaptations. When we are able to view misogyny and the act of re-victimization as something systemically engrained in our society, we are then able to understand the motivations and messaging behind meme culture. Memes themselves are no longer a simple post containing text or an image, but a new language and mode of communication that has yet to be fully understood.

Citations

Acevedo, E. (2023). Gender-based violence and femicide in Mexico. *International Responses to Gendered-Based Domestic Violence*, 39–50. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003264040-5

Al-Rawi, A. (2021). Political memes and fake news discourses on Instagram. *Media and Communication*, *9*(1), 276–290. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i1.3533

Al-Rawi, A., Siddiqi, M., Li, X., Vandan, N., & Grepin, K. (2021). A thematic analysis of Instagram's gendered memes on COVID-19. *Journal of Visual Communication in Medicine*, *44*(4), 137–150. https://doi.org/10.1080/17453054.2021.1941808

Amanda Todd's anti-bullying legacy, 1 year on. (2013). *CBC*. Retrieved 2025,.

Aulia, M. P., & Rosida, I. (2022). The phenomenon of involuntary celibates (incels) in internet meme culture: A reflection of masculine domination. *International Journal of Media and Information Literacy*, *7*(1). https://doi.org/10.13187/ijmil.2022.1.4

Avellaneda, F., & Torres, L. R. (2023). Violence against women in Mexico City. *International Responses to Gendered-Based Domestic Violence*, 51–57. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003264040-6

Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Duke University Press.

Beskow, D. M., Kumar, S., & Carley, K. M. (2020). The evolution of political memes: Detecting and characterizing internet memes with multi-modal Deep learning. *Information Processing & Management*, *57*(2), 102170. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ipm.2019.102170

Burgmann, T. (2016). Interent Meme for "Suicide Squad" Film Ridicules Death of Amanda Todd's Death, Mom Says. *CBC*. Retrieved 2024, from https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/suicide-squad-amanda-todd-1.3712615.

Chartier, B. (2023). Femicide in Mexico. *Perspectives on Justice, Indigeneity, Gender, and Security in Human Rights Research*, 171–183. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-1930-7_9

Cho, H., Cannon, J., Lopez, R., & Li, W. (2022). Social Media Literacy: A conceptual framework. *New Media & Society*, *26*(2), 941–960. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211068530

Dupré, J. K., Tastenhoye, C. A., Ross, N. E., Bodnar, T. V., & Hatters Friedman, S. (2023). From reddit to manifestos: Forensic evaluation of incel online activity. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, *42*(2), 115–129. https://doi.org/10.1002/bsl.2648

Gale, N. (2018). Internet memes . *The SAGE Encyclopedia of the Internet*. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473960367.n151

Halder, D., & Jaishankar, K. (2009). Cyber socializing and victimization of women. *Temida*, *12*(3), 5–26. https://doi.org/10.2298/tem0903005h

Helm, B., Scrivens, R., Holt, T. J., Chermak, S., & Frank, R. (2022). Examining incel subculture on reddit. *Journal of Crime and Justice*, *47*(1), 27–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/0735648x.2022.2074867

Howard, V., & Adan, A. (2022). "the end justifies the memes": A feminist relational discourse analysis of the role of macro memes in facilitating supportive discussions for victim-survivors of narcissistic abuse. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, *16*(4). https://doi.org/10.5817/cp2022-4-10

Huntington, H. E. (2013). Subversive Memes: Internet Memes As a Form of Visual Rhetoric. *Selected Papers of Internet Research*.

Quinto-Sanchez, M., & Huerta-Pacheco, N. S. (2023). Missing persons patterns from Mexico: Evidence of a forensic emergency crisis. *Forensic Sciences Research*, *8*(4), 288–294. https://doi.org/10.1093/fsr/owad026

Shalhoub-Kevorkian, N., & Berenblum, T. (2010). Panoptical web: Internet and victimization of women. *International Review of Victimology*, *17*(1), 69–95. https://doi.org/10.1177/026975801001700105

Sharma, S., Alam, F., Akhtar, Md. S., Dimitrov, D., Da San Martino, G., Firooz, H., Halevy, A., Silvestri, F., Nakov, P., & Chakraborty, T. (2022). Detecting and understanding harmful memes: A survey. *Proceedings of the Thirty-First International Joint Conference on Artificial Intelligence*, 5597–5606. https://doi.org/10.24963/ijcai.2022/781

Sugiura, L. (n.d.-a). An Introduction to Incel. In *The Incel Rebellion: The Rise of the Manosphere and the Virtual War Against Women*. essay, Emerald Publishing Limited. Retrieved 2024,.

Sugiura, L. (n.d.-b). Conclusion. In *The Incel Rebellion: The Rise of the Manosphere and the Virtual War Against Women*. essay, Emerald Publishing Limited. Retrieved 2024,.

Sugiura, L. (n.d.-c). Legitimising Misogyny. In *The Incel Rebellion: The Rise of the Manosphere and the Virtual War Against Women*. essay, Emerald Publishing Limited. Retrieved 2024,.

Tonelli, J. (2023). Joana Lopez and Selene Delgado's Disappearances: Two Hypermedia Circulation Cases. *Neata*.

Tranchese, A., & Sugiura, L. (2021). "I don't hate all women, just those stuck-up bitches": How incels and mainstream pornography speak the same *extreme* language of misogyny. *Violence Against Women, 27*(14), 2709–2734. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801221996453

Winder, D. (2020). Who Is Selene Delgado Lopez? As Facebook Warning Goes Viral, Here's What We Know So Far. *Forbes*.