10 ‘I Wasn’t Chastised Properly’

On Trolls and Misogyny

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Abstract
The following chapter provides an insight into feminist activism by presenting reactions to a poster campaign conducted in 2017. The campaign aimed at finding out whether and why feminism is still needed in today’s society by asking people to share their reasons for why they need feminism on the poster printouts that were put up at a university campus. It documents and critically reflects on serious reasons people wrote down on the posters by means of semantic and statistical analysis. Furthermore, it discusses the offline vitriol the campaign received, such as the hateful treatment of the poster printouts and the misogynist comments on them, and thus demonstrates that trolling is a phenomenon that is not only limited to online social media platforms.

Keywords: feminism, feminist activism, vitriol, misogyny, trolls

Aranya Johar’s wake-up call ‘A Brown Girls’ Guide to Gender’ (2017), in which she publicly shares her personal experiences with the discrimination of Indian women, went viral on the Internet. A year before, during the United States presidential election, not only Donald Trump’s slogan ‘Make America Great Again’ was promoted by the media but also his discriminating statement from 2005 ‘Grab ’em by the pussy’ that accompanied the rest of his campaign. Aside from the by now old-fashioned argument that ‘feminism has reached its goals’, these contrasting examples show that there are new waves of misogyny as well as new radical intersectional forms of feminism arising. As a reaction to this polarized status quo, I conducted a poster campaign in 2017. It aimed at finding out whether and why feminism is still needed in today’s society by asking people to share their reasons for why

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they need feminism on the poster printouts. This chapter provides insight into one form of feminist activism and focuses on the vitriolic reactions that the campaign received. These reactions demonstrate that trolling is a phenomenon that is not only limited to online social media platforms. In addition to categorizing and evaluating people's reactions to the campaign by means of semantic and statistical analysis, the chapter furthermore focuses on the interrelation between trolling and misogyny[1].

Background

The 2017 campaign was inspired by a social media photo campaign conducted in 2012 by students at Duke University, Durham, NC called 'Who Needs Feminism?'. With this campaign, 16 female students 'decided to fight back against [...] popular misconceptions surrounding the feminist movement', such as the 'man-hating, bra-burning, whiny liberal', the 'Feminazi or slut'.[2] They state that

> [o]ur class was disturbed by what we perceive to be an overwhelmingly widespread belief that today's society no longer needs feminism. In order to change this perception, we have launched a PR campaign for feminism. We aim to challenge existing stereotypes surrounding feminists and assert the importance of feminism today.[3]

It is important to say that the initiators did not provide any definitions of feminism. On the contrary, they wanted to find out what people perceive feminism to be with their campaign. The students asked people to write down reasons for why they need feminism. A picture of each participant was taken while holding up a sign with their personal reason on it and then posted on the official campaign's blog.[4] The campaign itself was a huge success and quickly went viral on the Internet. The people taking part in the campaign gave a variety of different reasons for why they need feminism, including body shaming, inequality concerning their profession,

1 Sophie Schwarz is a pseudonym. I would like to thank Sara Polak and Greta Olson for inviting me to contribute my experiences to the discussion on which this book is based. Also, I would like to thank Maren Walinski for her helpful thoughts and comments on the campaign as well as Julia Sorokin for revising and Elaine Gurich for proofreading the chapter.

2 https://www.facebook.com/WhoNeedsFeminism.

3 Ibid.

4 https://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com/.

discrimination, misogyny as well as social, political or cultural reasons. The campaign conducted in 2017, however, differs in some ways from the original campaign, as is explained in the following section.

The campaign

Unlike the original online campaign, the campaign in 2017 was designed to be an offline campaign.[5] This was for two reasons: First, the intention was to limit the campaign to an academic context, namely a university, since the students' opinions on feminism should be focused on. The underlying assumption was that students at the Humanities, in Cultural Studies in particular, are familiar with Gender Studies and Feminism, since a variety of lectures and seminars are offered in these fields and popular among students. Thus, it can be assumed that many students are reflective on issues such as discrimination or misogyny. An online campaign, on the other hand, would not have prevented the campaign from spreading throughout the Internet and, thus, would have left the academic context. Second, the campaign should be protected from trolls, as trolling is a common phenomenon that can mainly be seen on social media platforms on the Internet, which means sowing discord on the internet by starting quarrels or upsetting people, by posting inflammatory, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community with the intent of provoking readers into an emotional response or of otherwise disrupting normal, on-topic discussion.

For this reason, the 2017 campaign differs from the original campaign with regard to anonymity. While in the original campaign, people could decide whether or not to send in a picture of themselves holding up a sign with their reason on it, the students in the offline campaign were completely anonymous when filling out the poster printouts. Since trolling can be motivated by the opportunity to stay anonymous on the Internet in the sense of using fake accounts that do not reveal the troll's real life identity, it nonetheless cannot be ruled out that a similar type of behaviour can occur in the offline campaign as well. This assumption is represented by Gabriels and Lanzing and will be focused on in more detail in the analysis of the reactions to the offline campaign (see section 4). As the initiator of the campaign, I too decided to stay anonymous. In fact, several people had warned me of revealing my identity, as feminists and feminist activists are still being confronted with threats and insults, especially on the Internet, as the possibility of anonymity has

5 The campaign was initiated and conducted solely by Sophie Schwarz but was promoted by Greta Olson.

probably given more leeway to such expressions than there existed before. This is why I put the posters up secretly before the university had closed one evening before the summer semester started. As is shown in the analysis of the reactions, it was a wise decision to stay anonymous.

People who wanted to take part in the poster campaign had to complete the sentence 'I need Feminism because…'. Following the example of the original campaign, I did not provide any definitions of feminism on the posters. There were both English and German versions of the posters to make sure that both native speakers of German as well as students from abroad could take part in the campaign. The English version was printed on white paper, the German version on pink paper as a reference to the pink pussy hats worn at the Women's March on Washington in 2017 and also in the hope that the colour would raise more attention to the campaign. The posters contained links and QR codes to the original website of the campaign for further information. In addition, it also contained an e-mail address, created for the campaign, that could be used to send in reasons in case someone did not want to write down a reason on the poster in public.

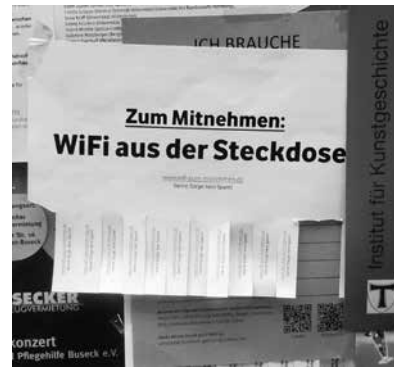
In total, 60 posters were put up at the Humanities department's building of the University of Giessen in the beginning of the summer semester 2017. The campaign lasted for one month. Another reason for this very limited space and time was the opportunity to control what was happening to the posters. It would have been impossible for me alone to supervise a campaign that was widely spread to different parts of campus, some of which are across town. However, it would have been interesting to see reactions from students of other departments such as sciences, business or law. What happened to the posters was regularly documented with a camera with the intention to analyze the comments by means of statistical and semantic analysis after the campaign had ended. The first poster that was put up had my very personal reason on it: '[I need feminism] because men keep telling me that feminism is not needed anymore in today's society! 'What else do you want?' is a question I have to hear too frequently when the topic switches to feminism'. After one month, the reactions to the campaign, the comments on the posters as well as the e-mails were analyzed in a data-driven, survey-like approach to collect opinions on feminism.

The reactions

Although the poster campaign did not confirm any leading hypothesis or theory, it was rather motivated by current political events as described in

Figure 8 Reactions to the posters (a)

Figure 9 Reactions to the posters (b)

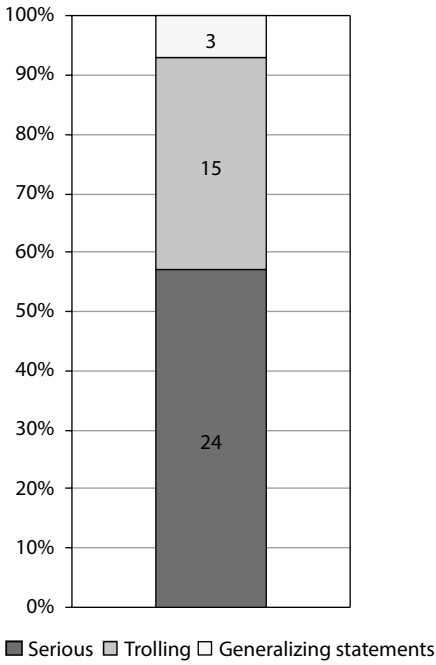


section 1; the reactions to the campaign were illuminating and shocking. They were illuminating because people's comments show the necessity of feminism in today's society and also provide insight into what people perceive feminism to be, and shocking because the campaign received a lot of aggressive and vitriolic reactions as well. Due to the complete anonymity that people were given when taking part in the offline campaign, the intention to protect the campaign from trolls failed.

Adding up the comments on the poster printouts that were documented (38 comments) and the comments received via e-mail (four e-mails), the campaign received 42 comments in total after one month. Out of the 60 posters that were put up in the beginning of the semester, only 12 posters were still hanging at the end of the month. All posters were checked on a daily basis. However, it was not possible to document each comment on the posters, as many of them were simply ripped off the wall. Some of them were pasted over by other posters, as is exemplified by Figures 8 and 9.

While it is common that posters are posted over during the course of a semester due to a lack of space in the humanities building, it is not common that posters are ripped down. Quite obviously, this was due to the topic of feminism that some people felt the need to physically 'delete' it. In fact, the posters with the troll comments on them were not the ones being ripped off, but rather the ones with serious reasons on them. For example, the poster in Figure 8 dealt with the pay gap between men and women. However, since the poster was ripped off, the comment could not be documented in its full length. The vitriolic reactions to the posters resulted not only in a physical attack on the posters; the hatred of feminism was also verbalized in many of the comments as is shown in the semantic analysis. What happened to the posters is not the default case and does not represent the attitude of every

Figure 10 Types of comments



student at the humanities department. Neither does it represent the attitude of the humanities department and the university in general. Seminars and lectures on gender studies and feminism are being attended with a high frequency and lots of interest. The University of Giessen promotes equality and stands up against any kind of discrimination, which is protected by an official university law.[6]

In a first step, all comments were categorized into three types (see Figure 10). All upcoming comments are presented as they were originally written down on the posters, meaning that the original spelling (capitals, crossed out parts, etc.) will be maintained. German comments are translated into English:

(a) generalizing statements ('FEMINISM IS INTERNATIONAL!')
(b) troll comments ('I am fat and need to blame it on someone other than me')
(c) serious comments ('genital mutilation is still being practiced')

Generalizing statements as in (a) did not complete the sentence 'I need feminism because…' but rather stated a general opinion. Hence, they missed

6 Gleichstellungskonzept der JLU Giessen: https://www.uni-giessen.de/org/admin/stab/bfc/dat/konzeptgleichstellung/view. Accessed 25 Augustus 2020.

the purpose of the posters but are still included in the statistics. Troll comments as in (b) did complete the sentence, however, the comments did not contain serious reasons for why feminism is needed. On the contrary, the trolls intentionally wrote about comments representing clichés surrounding the feminist movement, which were articulated in an assaulting and misogynist manner. Serious comments as in (c) completed the given sentence and also contained a reason for why feminism is needed. As Figure 10 shows, 57% of all the comments received were serious comments. However, 36% were troll comments, which is quite striking when considering the small amount of comments that were received in total. Only 7% of the comments were generalizing statements.

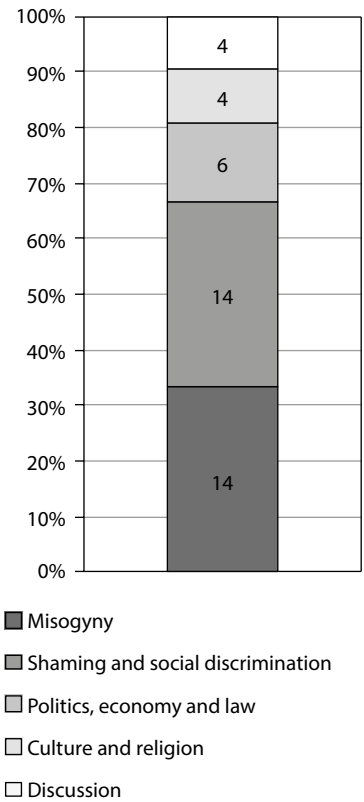
Having categorized the comments into three types in the first step, it was then possible to categorize all of them in terms of their specific content. Since the comments touched on a variety of topics, it seemed necessary to come up with rather broad categories to avoid an unnecessary amount of categories with less than three comments. Concerning their content, the comments were classified into five subcategories: I. discussion, II. culture and religion, III. politics, economy and law, IV. shaming and social discrimination, V. misogyny.

There is no clear cut boundary between the categories, as they are connected to each other in certain aspects (except for category I.). However, the comments that were sorted into the categories contained specific keywords (e.g. 'honour killing' or 'pay gap'), which can be seen as misogynist and discriminating; still, honour killing is a practice that is mainly performed in a religious context, while the pay gap mainly belongs to the field of politics and economy. The categories are, of course, debatable. Nonetheless, in this specific analysis, they fulfil their purpose of providing an insight into the many fields that were referred to in the comments.

As can be seen in Figure 11, 10% were replies to the comments on the posters, which belong to the category of discussion and were not separately analyzed by the means of semantics. Only 10% of all comments named cultural and religious reasons for why feminism is needed; comments concerning politics, economy and law are represented with 14%. Most comments concern the topic of shaming and social discrimination as well as misogyny, which are equally represented with 33%.

When compared to the first categorization of types of comments in Figure 10, it is striking that – except for one comment ('I don't need feminism') – the troll comments match the misogynist comments in Figure 10, meaning that 14 out of 15 comments were not only troll comments but also insulting and misogynist ones.

Figure 11 Semantic categorization



To give examples, a selection of two comments per category are listed below. Since I am focusing on the vitriolic aspect in this chapter, this category is represented by ten misogynist comments, including e-mails. Due to the limited space of this chapter, not every single comment can be mentioned.

Discussion

In four cases, people actively engaged and replied to comments on the posters. The comments in Figures 12 and 13 refer to troll comments:

The troll comment in Figure 12 refers to the cliché of feminists being over-weight by saying: 'I am fat and need to blame it on someone other than me'. Another person marked the comment that s/he was referring to and asked the troll to look up the meaning of feminism on the Internet: 'seriously? google "feminism" please.'

Figure 12 Reply to a troll comment (a)

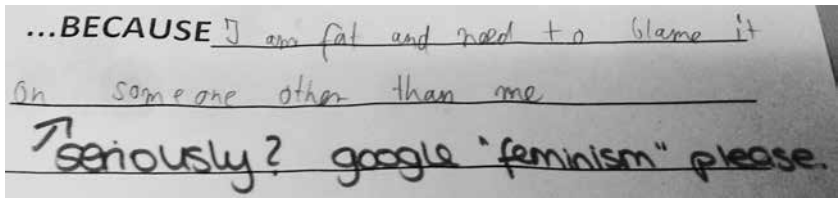
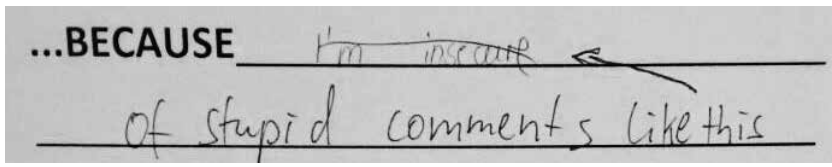


Figure 13 Reply to a troll comment (b)



In Figure 13, the troll claimed that people needed feminism because they are insecure. Another person crossed out the troll's comment ('~~I'm insecure~~') and stated that feminism is needed because 'of stupid comments like this'.

Culture and religion

In this category, participants showed their concern about cultural and religious practices that violate a woman's body. For example, they claimed that feminism is needed because 'it is still acted on a woman's 'virtue' which can, if it is violated, in the worst case result in murder ('honour killing')' and because 'genital mutilation is still being practiced'.

Politics, economy and law

Besides mentioning Donald Trump as a reason for why our society needs feminism, it was also stated that 'there is still a huge pay gap in many professions although the same work is being done'. Additionally, participants mentioned the lack of rights for homosexuals: 'homosexuals still don't have the same rights as heterosexuals.' When the campaign was conducted, same-sex marriage had not yet been legalized. Only later, in June 2017, did the German parliament announce that same-sex marriage will be legalized.

Shaming and social discrimination

When it comes to shaming and social discrimination, participants mostly mentioned that feminism is needed because 'women are still being discriminated internationally' but also claimed to 'Stop body shaming!'. Furthermore, someone stated that feminism is needed because 'bullying in school is very often triggered by sexism (for example slut-shaming) → see the series 13 reasons why! ~~and~~'. Apparently, the writer of the comment contemplated an additional comment, however, the 'and' was crossed out and the comment was not finished.

Misogyny

In addition to the troll comments that were already listed in I. that claimed that women need feminism because they are 'fat' and 'insecure', another troll referenced the cliché of the supposedly sexually frustrated feminist by saying: 'I want some dick!'. The comments get even more disturbing on a poster that was written by only one person (as can be seen by the handwriting) who can be named the biggest troll of the campaign (see Figure 14):[7]

I need feminism because…

- 'I was hit by the ugly stick'
- 'because I'm hoping for a forced distribution of men so that I can have one too for once'
- 'I don't have anything else except for type II diabetes'
- 'a common concept of the enemy strengthens the society's solidarity'
- 'I wasn't chastised properly'
- 'because real problems like poverty or war are too complex for my brain.'

This was the only case in which a troll took the time to fill out a whole poster. As the comments show, the person came up with nearly every cliché about feminism: women are ugly, women desperately seek for a man in their life (with the underlying premise that every woman is heterosexual), women are fat, women see men as the enemy (while at the same time they want one in their life), women need to be chastised, women are stupid (with the premise that fighting for feminism is of no concern, while poverty and war are).

During the time the campaign was conducted, four e-mails were sent in on the same day. All of them were troll e-mails and three of them referred to

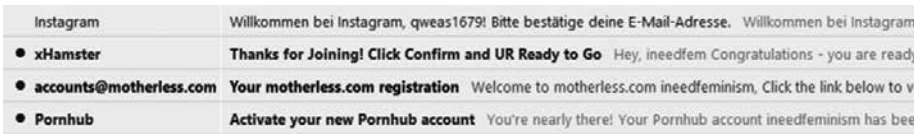
7 For further information on online and offline violence, see Gabriels and Lanzing 'Ethical Implications of Onlife Vitriol'.

Figure 14 Misogynist comments

the cliché of the sexually frustrated woman, as can be seen on the screenshot of the inbox (see Figure 15).

The person abused the official campaign's e-mail address and used it to create three accounts on porn websites by using the names 'ineedfem' and 'ineedfeminism'. A search on Google showed that one of the websites even promotes rape, abuse and child pornography. The information on this

Figure 15 Troll e-mails



website was simply taken from Google entries that appear when typing the name of the website into the Google search bar. Clicking on any of those entries might not have been legal. Thus, no further information on this website is provided. Since the person used the official campaign's e-mail address to register on the websites and did not send any e-mail by using his or her personal e-mail account, there is no personal data to trace the person. Additionally, the troll created an Instagram account. Since the person who created the account is not the owner of the e-mail address, the account could not be verified and no pictures could be uploaded. The number in the username 'qweas1679' does not seem to be chosen randomly and might refer to § 1679 of the Civil Code of Germany of 1896 that says: 'The parental violence of the father ends when he is found dead'.[8] This possible reference – if it really was intended by the troll – fits the comment on the poster 'I wasn't chastised properly' perfectly. Since the person already put effort into filling out a whole poster, it might be possible that it is the same person who also created the accounts on the porn websites. However, these assumptions remain unverified. The troll comments listed above are now being focused on more closely.

All in all, the trolls portray feminists in a negative and nasty way. To them, feminists are fat, ugly, stupid, insecure and sexually frustrated women who need to be chastised. Emma A. Jane uses the concept of 'e-bile' to describe these '[…] extravagant invective, the sexualized threats of violence, and the *recreational nastiness* that have come to constitute a dominant tenor of Internet discourse'.[9] In her analysis of vitriolic communication on the Internet, Jane found out that '[e]-bile targeting women commonly includes charges of unintelligence, hysteria, and ugliness' and furthermore that '[f]emale targets are dismissed as both unacceptably unattractive man haters and hypersexual sluts who are inviting sexual attention or sexual

8 Civil Code of Germany [my translation].

9 Jane, "Your a Ugly, Whorish, Slut…", p. 2.

attacks'.[10] This definition describes the trolls' vitriolic behaviour in the offline campaign perfectly.[11]

Instead of staying silent, the trolls were triggered and decided to demonstrate their hatred, although it seems that there was no need for them to participate in the campaign because it looks like they apparently do not need feminism. With every comment, they completely ignored the fact that many women do need feminism as they (still) suffer from discrimination, assault or the lack of rights. Thus, the trolls did not show any empathy at all. On the contrary, they intentionally ignored the 'rules' of the campaign (to write down a reason for why feminism is needed) and rather wrote down comments with the intention to insult, provoke and upset possible readers. They did not give any serious reasons for why feminism is needed; neither did they use rational arguments to explain why they think it is not needed. Therefore, they did not deem it worthy of consideration. In addition, they did not comment on any of the serious comments written down on the posters and thus refused to take part in a serious discussion altogether. This phenomenon is also mentioned by Jane who is stating that '[e]-bile episodes may be triggered by disagreements over divisive subjects [...] but participants rarely engage substantively with each other's positions'.[12]

Moreover, the trolls did not only refuse to take part in the discussion but also avoided that other people could take part in the campaign by ripping off the posters from the walls and, thus, making feminism disappear. This is where an offline campaign differs from an online campaign: while it is possible to comment on posts on the Internet (e.g. on Twitter), it is not possible to simply edit or delete an original post from another person (unless the account is hacked or the name and password of the account are shared with another person), since editing and deleting requires administrative rights. Yet, on some platforms it is possible to report or downvote someone else's post, which may also impact their visibility and appearance. Participants of the offline campaign, on the other hand, had the chance to edit comments and 'delete' the posters. Therefore, by conducting an offline campaign, I unintentionally provided participants with even more opportunities to troll, which they made use of: not only did they insult women on the posters but they also silenced those who wrote down a serious comment and made sure their voice could not be heard.

10 Ibid., p. 3.

11 For further information on how to deal with personal vitriolic attacks, see Kemekenidou, 'r/ChokeABitch'.

12 Jane, "Your a Ugly, Whorish, Slut...", p. 3.

As the results of my offline campaign show, trolling (including vitriolic communication and actions) is not only limited to online social media platforms; the trolls show a similar behaviour offline as they do online. Thus, the trolls' offline behaviour can furthermore be connected to the concept of 'onlife violence', which, as Gabriels and Lanzing propose in chapter 9, means that 'online and offline violence are deeply interconnected, hence "*onlife*". According to this assumption, violence is defined as 'the intentional physical or psychological (including reputational) harm inflicted on a person and/or their property', which describes the troll's behaviour in the offline campaign perfectly, as they intentionally tried to cause psychological harm by insulting participants with their hateful comments as well as by abusing the official e-mail-address; additionally, they physically destroyed the poster printouts.

By analyzing the form of the troll comments, it is quite striking that every comment begins with 'I'. Apparently, the trolls adapted to the structure of the given sentence on the posters 'I need feminism because' and took the perspective of a woman to complete the sentence, pretending to give a real reason for why they need feminism. What the trolls are really saying is: if women were chastised properly, they would not need feminism; if women were intelligent enough, they would not need feminism; if women had enough sex or a man in their life, they would not need feminism. According to the trolls, feminism is not needed at all and they see feminism as an excuse for women to blame their alleged problems or discontent on someone else. While the trolls seem to have found the solution for each of these alleged problems, they ignore the fact that many women suffer from being chastised, assaulted or abused; that many women still have no access to education; that not every woman is heterosexual and does not need a man in her life. Only one troll spoke for himself or herself by saying 'I don't need feminism'. In contrast to the trolls, participants who wrote down serious comments mainly used the passive or the third person rather than the first person and thus did not only speak for themselves but spoke in a more generalizing societal manner.

It seems that anonymity and affect are important when it comes to trolling. It is unlikely that the trolls ripped off the posters or wrote down troll comments if the posters were supervised by a video camera and if they knew that they were being filmed. However, this was not the case and the given anonymity made them feel safe, so that they could happily enjoy their trolling without it having any consequences. The fact that the trolls did not use rational arguments to discuss feminism but rather expressed

their feelings (mainly hatred) towards feminism in a vitriolic manner shows that they got triggered and acted in the heat of the moment.[13]

Conclusion

What started out as a simple idea to find out whether and why feminism is still needed in today's society resulted in a both illuminating and shocking way. It was illuminating because the analysis of the serious comments provides an insight into what people believe feminism to be and also what kind of topics they associate with it; the participants did not only point out the discrimination of women in particular but also the discrimination of homosexuals in general that is still being practiced in many fields, ranging from culture and religion to politics, economy and law. It was shocking because the vitriolic reactions to the campaign prove that feminism is still a divisive topic that raises the attention of trolls. The analysis of the troll comments shows that they use existing stereotypes to insult women in a misogynist manner while at the same time they avoid dealing with feminism in a serious way. By ripping the posters off the walls, they did not only keep people from taking part in the campaign but also silenced those who stated their opinion. While the given anonymity prevented participants from personal confrontations or threats when writing down serious reasons on the poster printouts, it also allowed people to troll without it having any consequences.

It is naive to think that trolling is a phenomenon that is only limited to online social media platforms. Be it online or offline, there is no place that is safe from trolls; not even the humanities department of a university, in which critical thinking, tolerance and the freedom of speech are highly valued. Becoming an activist taught me that even in today's society it can still be dangerous to out yourself as a feminist or to contribute to feminism in any way, even if it is only putting up posters to collect opinions. This is why I salute every feminist activist who is not afraid of personal confrontations or threats and has the courage to publicly fight against sexism and all sorts of discrimination. In conclusion, the results of the campaign, including both the serious comments as well as the troll comments and especially the vitriolic reactions, prove that feminism is still needed in today's society.

13 For further information on affect, see Greta Olson, 'Love and Hate Online'.

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