Chapter 3

"Not the Real World": Exploring Experiences of Online Abuse, Digital Dualism, and Ontological Labor

Chandell Gosse

Abstract

Online environments have become a central part of our social, private, and economic life. The term for this is "digital existence," characterized as a new epoch in mediated experience. Over the last decade, there has been a growing interest in how online abuse impacts one's digital existence. Drawing on 15 interviews with women, this chapter demonstrates a type of labor—which I call "ontological labor"—that women exercise when processing their own experiences of online abuse, and when sharing their experiences with others. Ontological labor is the process of overcoming a denial of experience. In the case of online abuse, this denial stems partly from the treatment of online and offline life as separate and opposing. This division is known as digital dualism, which I argue is a discourse that denies women the space to have their experiences of online abuse recognized as such.

Keywords: Digital dualism; ontology; embodiment; discourse; online abuse; harm

Introduction

Online environments, such as social media, online games, email, and instant messaging, have become a central part of our existence. They are a principal mode through which people experience their social, personal, and economic lives. The term for this is "digital existence" (Lagerkvist, 2019), which captures an

important new epoch in mediated experience, but which also grows increasingly redundant as distinctions between the online and offline, the virtual and physical, collapse. In the last decade, much attention has been paid to the problems that technology-facilitated violence and abuse (TFVA for short, but henceforth referred to as "online abuse") raises for women's digital existence (Amnesty International, 2018; Barlow & Awan, 2016; Gosse & Burkell, 2020; Citron, 2014; Duggan, 2017; Hodson, Gosse, Veletsianos, & Houlden, 2018; Mantilla, 2015; Powell & Henry, 2017; West Coast LEAF, 2014). Despite the breadth of extant literature, online abuse remains a complex issue in need of further research.

This chapter aims to better understand experiences of online abuse in relation to digital existence by sharing findings from a set of interviews with 15 women. In particular, the central focus of this chapter is digital dualism, which is the process of making and thinking a distinction between online and offline life, experiences, spaces, and, most importantly for this study, harms (Jurgenson, 2011a). This distinction manifests in the treatment of offline life as *more real* than online life. The response to digital dualism is what I call "ontological labor," a form of effort exerted by women to convince others, and in some cases themselves, that the online abuse they experience, and the impact of that abuse, *is real*. This chapter also lends much needed evidence to the currently under-utilized concept and problem of digital dualism (Jurgenson, 2011a, b).

The first part of this chapter describes what digital dualism is, how distinctions between online and offline life have been addressed in academic literature, and ends with a description of how I use the term. The second part of this chapter focuses on findings from the interviews with women and offers an interpretation which demonstrates the impact of digital dualism vis-à-vis their experiences with online abuse. The final part of this chapter explores the concept of ontological labor and demonstrates how the women in this study engage in it.

Before moving forward, I want to note that it is necessary to differentiate linguistically between "online" and "offline" spaces in order to address the problem of digital dualism. By doing so, however, I am in some ways reinscribing the exact dichotomy I want to elide. There are, of course, reasons to use the language of "online" and "offline," particularly as they describe different modes of communication and mediation. So while this chapter relies on the argument that marking a distinction between online and offline makes almost no sense for many people whose lives and experiences in each are entwined, the fact remains that to talk about the enmeshed nature of experiences with and experiences without a screen, Wi-Fi connection, or device, we do require a reference point. I do not have a path out of this paradox, and so in this chapter, I rely on this linguistic distinction, but I wish to acknowledge it upfront so as not to undermine the arguments I make.

Digital Dualism

Media theorist Nathan Jurgenson (2011a,b) popularized the concept of "digital dualism" in a series of essays on *The Society Pages' Cyborgology* section. For Jurgenson (2011a), digital dualism is a bias that treats offline/physical life as *real* and online/digital life as virtual and somehow *less real*. Jurgenson points out that there is

a strong and unflattering proclivity in the literature around digital culture that relies on the argument, more or less, that "the problem with social media is that people are trading the rich, physical, and *real* nature of face-to-face contact for the digital, virtual, and trivial quality of Facebook" (Jurgenson, 2011a, para. 6). The bias, in this case, is in the preferential treatment given to offline forms of communication, mediation, and interaction.

This bias also reinforces notions of online and offline life as separate and opposing. In the *Cyborgology* essays, Jurgenson (2011a) primarily critiques scholarly work and discussion for relying on such a tidy distinction between online and offline life. In particular, he critiques authors who continue to use now-outdated frameworks, such as Turkle's (1984) concept of the "second self," writing that "conceptually splitting so-called 'first' and 'second' selves creates a 'false binary' because 'people are enmeshing their physical and digital selves to the point where the distinction is becoming increasingly irrelevant'" (Jurgenson, 2011a, para. 5). This irrelevance is central to Jurgenson's critique, which he further develops – later describing digital dualism as not only a bias (2011a) but also a fallacy (2011b). Given the biased and fallacious nature of digital dualism, Jurgenson (2011a) advocates for an alternative perspective, which he calls "augmented reality" (para. 2). Augmented reality rests on the understanding that material reality and digital information influence and inform one another (Jurgenson, 2009).

Beyond Digital Dualism: IRL Fallacies, Embodiment, and Digital Ontology

Other scholars have articulated the limitations of conceptually separating online and offline spaces, but the concept of digital dualism has not yet been fully explored in academic literature. Instead, it is more common for scholars to engage with the concept of digital dualism without naming it as such. For example, Robinson (2015) writes about an "online-versus-'in real life' fallacy" (p. 80). In her article, she reflects on her experience with online abuse, which was an instance of "highly publicized violence against Black folks" (p. 80), and explains that her surprise over the adverse impacts the abuse caused was not a result of "two worlds [unexpectedly] colliding" (p. 80), but rather the very belief that there are two worlds (i.e., online and offline life) unraveling before her. Other important work that contributes to understanding the nuances involved with making and thinking a distinction between online and offline life include the use of embodiment theory by feminist scholars (Richard & Gray, 2018) and scholars who research TFVA (Powell & Henry, 2017), as well as scholars in the field of digital ontology (Lagerkvist, 2019; Schwartz, 2019).

Early internet research studies argued that a virtual presence can liberate individuals from the bodily constraints of gender, race, size, and ability/disability, to name only a few (Haraway, 1991; Turkle, 1984). This cyberutopian concept is a form of digital *dis*embodiment. Since then, feminist scholars have pushed back on this assumption and argued that the body – and bodily subjectivity – is central to the experience one has in online spaces (Pham, 2011; Richard & Gray, 2018). For example, as a way to nuance our understanding of how women operate online, Black cyberfeminists have adopted an intersectional framework that honors the complexity of identities "operating and existing in digital spaces" and argues that

individuals cannot "rid bodily identifiers in any realm" (Richard & Gray, 2018, p. 121). Thinking specifically about the erasure of race, Pham (2011) compares the rhetoric of digital disembodiment to the "neoliberal racial agenda of color-blindness" (p. 3). Disconnecting the body from the user is not only impossible, but Pham further points out that such utopian conceptions of bodily liberation wrongly assume that "the disappearance of the body in cyberspace would effect the disappearance of the desire to consume difference" (p. 3). This is to say that collapsing, erasing, or pretending to collapse and erase identities such as race and gender does not prevent individuals from having differential experiences based on their identity and social locations, but instead "conflates or ignores intragroup differences" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242) that are important to crafting open and equitable online spaces. Therefore, treating the body as necessarily tied to one's online experience provides room to think through the body as a site of power and struggle that shapes digital spaces.

Powell and Henry (2017) explain that embodiment theory has been underutilized particularly in cybercriminology. As a result, they advocate for an analytical framework that incorporates a theory of digital embodiment to better understand the consequences of drawing a dichotomy between online and offline life. For them, digital embodiment offers important avenues for thinking about the way digital life is lived through our bodies (Powell & Henry, 2017). Writing specifically about technology-facilitated sexual violence, they point out that dominant conceptions of violence and abuse as physical and bodily devalue online harms, many of which are "noncontact offenses" (Powell & Henry, 2017, p. 61). Digital embodiment, then, offers a connection between noncontact offenses and embodied harms.

Just as digital embodiment situates the body as central to the lived experience of digital culture, digital ontology demonstrates that vulnerability is a fundamental experience of being human whether that human experience is online or offline. It also recognizes that the philosophical tradition of ontology "has sought to eliminate or ignore the very embodied particularities that give vulnerability its shape and pull" (Schwartz, 2019, p. 82). This inclination to eliminate the body is heightened in socio-digital culture. Despite the appearance of being more technically connected than ever before, digital culture might actually be pulling us away from understanding ourselves as ontological beings who are interconnected with the world and with each other (Miller, 2019). Miller (2019) points out that the distanced and mediated nature of online interactions offers a new kind of omnipresent, metaphysical condition in time and space "which is beyond the body as we currently understand it" (p. 178).

In response to these inclinations, digital ontology repositions embodiment and vulnerability as central to any discussion about digital existence. Schwartz (2019) argues that digital existence is not at all disembodied, but instead creates new demands for care and "complex vulnerabilities" that require rethinking and reorienting our relationship to familiar binaries like "mind and machine or body and text" (p. 85). In fact, these complex vulnerabilities are omnipresent, no longer tied to time and space. As such, they give rise to new possibilities of what it means to experience embodied vulnerability (Lagerkvist, 2019).

A key argument within digital ontology is that online spaces and digital existence give rise to a misunderstanding of our ontological status that manifests

as a "heightened impression of invulnerability in online social encounters with others" (Miller, 2019, p. 178). This misunderstanding is an important characteristic of digital dualism and, as I later show, a leading cause as to why the women in this study engage in ontological labor.

A Binary of Habit: A Habit Born of Discourse

The central concern in this chapter is not with expanding and nuancing the concept of digital dualism, though that work must be done to understand the consequences that emerge from it. My interest rather is in the fallout that stems from digital dualism. Establishing that pathway requires an understanding of how digital dualism operates. Jurgenson's description of digital dualism as a bias (2011a) and a fallacy (2011b) is an important contribution and central to conceptualizing what I later show is a harmful distinction. However, I expand on Jurgenson's original understanding of digital dualism and add that it is also a discourse that produces a habit, in addition to a bias and a fallacy. Acknowledging the discursive elements of digital dualism is important because it helps demonstrate how power is exercised through the language we use to talk about online and offline life (Butler, 1997; Fairclough, 1989).

More specifically, Jurgenson's critique focuses specifically on the way some scholars discuss online and offline spaces. In order to extrapolate this to a larger public, who likely thinks less deliberately about their choice of language and position on such a topic, it is necessary to expand on Jurgenson's concept of digital dualism to more clearly account for the casualness and naturalization – or the "habit of" – digital dualist thinking. Fairclough (1989) writes that when discursive practices – ways of speaking, thinking, and being – are regularly deployed, the beliefs that fuel them can become "common sense" (p. 77). While digital dualist thinking might not be intentional, the tendency to speak in these terms is catchy – it spreads and becomes part of the socio-digital fabric. And once repeated often enough it becomes an existing convention that governs and legitimizes social relations (Fairclough, 1989). With these additions to the concept of digital dualism in mind, the remainder of the chapter addresses two questions: How do participants experience digital dualism in relation to online abuse? And what are the implications of these experiences for digital existence?

Methods

While anyone can be subjected to online abuse, research shows that women are more likely than men to be targeted (Duggan, 2017) and that women experience "a wider variety of online abuse, including more serious violations" (Lenhart, Ybarra, Zickuhr, & Price-Feeney, 2016, p. 4). The aim of this study was to better understand women's experiences with digital dualism in relation to online abuse. As such, findings in this chapter come from a set of interviews with 15 women who had experienced online abuse.[1] Recruitment posters containing a link to an online screening tool were distributed throughout a medium-sized city in Canada and were

shared on Twitter, Facebook, and through listservs from personal accounts and third-party organizations. An invitation to participate was extended to anyone who fit the study's inclusion criteria.[2] This process continued until clear themes began to emerge in the data, at which point recruitment stopped. The interviews took place from May to October 2018 over telephone and Skype. Each interview lasted between one and three hours and followed a semi-structured interview guide.

The majority of women in this study were from Canada ($n = 13$) and two were from the United States. They ranged between the ages of 21 and 44, with a mean age of 31. The experiences they discussed took place over a diverse range of online spaces including major social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube; email and text messaging services; dating platforms such as Tinder and Plenty of Fish; massive multiplayer online games like RuneScape and Star Wars Galaxies; personal blogs and forums such as Reddit and Tumblr; and older sites like MSN, ICQ, and MySpace. The types of abuse they experienced were far more wide-ranging than the sites on which they experienced them. For the safety and protection of the participants in this study, all names have been changed and cities, schools, and places of work have been removed.

Digital Dualism in Everyday Life: Findings

This section highlights interview data that were about "digital dualism." This includes any instance where participants mentioned a structural or conceptual separation between online and offline life. In total, the theme of digital dualism emerged in the data in three ways: as advice from others to turn off the computer, delete social media, and block users; as a denial of experiences *as real*; and as internalized by participants.

You Should Stop Using Social Media Altogether

A primary mode through which participants experienced the treatment of online and offline life as separate and opposing is in the advice they received from others when they shared their experiences of online abuse. For example, Ellie explained: "A big frustration for me is when I tell people about the problems I'm having and they say 'well, you should stop using social media altogether, you should delete your Instagram, you should delete your Facebook, you should just stop.'" For Ellie, this is not a possibility: "I hate when people say that to me. I'm like, this is my fucking job, like, I can't." Ellie made the point that even if she did "just stop," the consequences of not having an online presence would be disruptive and damaging to her career.

Another participant, Candice, expressed a similar sentiment, noting that the advice she received tended to overlook the fact that online interactions are embedded in offline social contexts:

> People are like, "why don't you turn it off [...] but like, if you have
> a shitty situation at work why don't you just stop? Leave your job,

and never come back?" Like that's what people seem to kind of think, that you have total control.

Candice pointed out that online spaces are not necessarily independent from other aspects of people's lives, and that there is an unreasonable expectation that you can ignore online abuse – "that you have total control."

Abigail explained that in her experience people have also assumed that she had "total control." In her case, the assumption was coupled with the expectation that perpetrators of her abuse were unknown and anonymous, but as she pointed out, that is not always the case:

> The obvious response is always, well just block them. And that hasn't changed, it was true ten years ago and it's true now [... but] these interactions were embedded in social contexts, they weren't just like these random people that I could just block and never hear from again. It doesn't work like that.

Melody was also encouraged to "just block" her stalker when he began contacting her on different mobile apps:

> Originally [my friends] recommended that I just block him off everything, like including I block his number. And the reason I didn't do that was because I wanted to see what kind of messages he was sending so that I would have a record if I ever needed to report him or something.

Melody pointed out that blocking her stalker was not an option, despite her friends' recommendation, because doing so would limit her ability to keep a record of his harassing behavior and potentially her ability to report him and protect herself. This is a stark reminder of the inadequacy of advice to "get offline," because not seeing the abuse does not render the abuse any less harmful.

Having received the same advice so often has made some participants reluctant to seek support. For instance, Ellie explained: "There are some people I love and care about who I don't talk to about what's going on in my life because I don't want to hear them say, 'oh, just get offline.'"

These Aren't "Real Social Phenomena"

Participants in this study described encountering situations where the *very real* nature of their abuse was doubted, downplayed, or ignored. For example, during her undergraduate degree Maya wanted to write a paper exploring online abuse as a way to think through her own experiences. Her professor at the time rejected the topic, telling her that online abuse was not a *"real* social phenomena" and nothing she had described was "*real* and had happened because it hadn't happened in a face-to-face space." Her professor instead asked why she did not instead focus on "the elements of the virtual in face-to-face space."

The women I spoke to expressed the belief that online abuse is generally devalued and taken less seriously than other kinds of abuse, such as physical abuse. For instance, Maya sought therapy during the height of her abuse only to have those experiences dismissed:

> I would end up talking to counselors about this and there certainly was a lot of not understanding that stuff that goes on online can and will hurt you [...] [There was one] counselor, she listened, she was very nice. She still had the tendency to say "oh don't you think you're giving this person power?" So there was a little bit of victim-blaming going on where I think she still struggled to see anything experienced online as *real*.

At other times, she wanted – but was hesitant – to reach out:

> There's been times where I thought about calling a distress center just to be like, "I'm experiencing some stuff, like PTSD [...] and [it would be great] to be able to actually share that this was an online thing" and not have someone say like, "oh honey, don't you know that that's not *real*?"

Ellie explained that she was concerned that the onus would be on her to try to convince the therapist that the negative impact it has had on her is *real*: "[One reason for not seeking therapy] is that I think it would be more emotionally taxing for me to have to explain to someone what online abuse is." Expressing a similar sentiment, Fiona explained that the abuse itself left her with little energy to justify or explain the harm she had experienced. For this reason, Fiona did not seek support from law enforcement out of anticipation that her abuse would not be taken seriously: "At the time there was nothing [no laws or legal avenues of support]. And if I had to sit down with like, some 60-year-old cop and try to explain to him what Twitter was? Forget it." The concern here is twofold: first, that as targets of abuse you will have to explain (and re-explain) what online abuse is, how it manifests, and how it hurts; and second, after giving all of that emotional energy, you will be misunderstood or dismissed. This barrier to seeking support is amplified for certain communities where there is a history of state violence and tension with law enforcement.

The text-based and verbal nature of online abuse was also used as a way to deny women's experiences of harm. Fiona explained: "Online abuse is seen as something that is in the ether. Like it's just words. Actually, a couple of weeks ago I had a conversation about this with one of my coworkers. He doesn't think that words hurt." Maya explained that her therapist demonstrated the same attitude as Fiona's coworker, but focused on the online nature of those words – singling out the source of words as determinants of their impact: "Very often people's harsh words do become part of your self-talk [...] So [it was hurtful] for somebody who had the expertise to be able to say, yes, words matter. Oh, but not when they are said online."

While it might be relatively easy to shrug off the occasional insult, the repetition of injurious speech (Butler, 1997) is dangerous. As Maya explained:

> Human beings connect through conversation and we do tremendously great things, but we can [also] do really evil things [...]. People talk each other out of suicidal states, and they've talked each other into it. [...] I think when we discount that, we're literally discounting part of what it means to be human.

Such speech constructs subject through a process of "violating interpellation" (Butler, 1996, p. 204) that shapes and limits one's understanding of themselves. This process involves more than just the harmful language spoken in that moment – it also invokes "a community and history" (Butler, 1996, p. 204) of words and speakers which represent larger structures of limitation, oppression, and marginality. For example, Wendy, who described herself as able to dismiss much of what is said to her online, explained that the cumulative nature of online abuse "gets to you after a while."

The denial of online abuse as a *real* experience also came from perpetrators. Participants described how perpetrators shirked responsibility and downplayed the impact of their actions. For example, Trish explained that after confronting a man who shared her image without consent, the perpetrator became defensive: "He was like 'go think of something in the *real world*' and I was like, 'just because it's online doesn't mean it's not the *real world*'... he said something like 'stop telling yourself that' to get away with it." Reflecting on this problem, Lilly pointed out:

> It doesn't matter if they say it to your face or they say it to you online, you are damaged by this abuse, and you shouldn't be able to say "oh well it was just on Facebook" or hide behind the fact that you are on a keyboard.

Ellie described comments she has received in which perpetrators tried to deny her the space and context to understand their actions *as* violent or abusive by redirecting the harm: "One time a guy threatened to lock me up in Guantanamo, or like, one time they talked about flying me to Somalia so that I could experience what *real* violence was like."[3]

Perpetrators' belief that online abuse is less injurious and less consequential to those targeted is self-serving. It works to detract from the harm perpetrators cause and allows them to deflect responsibility. However, it also reflects a wider hierarchy of harm that has long circulated in offline spaces, where forms of abuse without physical markers are invisibilized and lack what little protection actually exits (Sims, 2008).

"Real Life," "Real World": Internalizing Discourses

The phrases "real world" and "real life" were frequently adopted by participants in this study (used by 13 out of 15 participants). Participants sometimes knowingly

used the term. For example, Ellie said: "I think obviously online abuse is *real life*, you know, quote unquote 'real-life abuse,' because obviously online is *real life*." She also pointed out that she uses the language "'IRL [*in real life*] abuse' and 'digital abuse'" in gaming contexts. But most often participants unknowingly and casually used this language to mark a distinction between online and offline experiences. For example, Lilly used the term to point out that perpetrators of online abuse should face the same consequences as they would with other kinds of abuse: "I feel like they deserve to be treated just as if they had hurt me physically, like in *real life*." Jane used the term to talk about the limitations of escaping online abuse: "There's less control you can have online because there's no way of really running, you're running around within the construct of the internet, but in *real life* you can literally run anywhere." And Abigail used the term to point out that the comments said to her would likely not have been said offline: "I didn't know how to respond to it because I don't think he ever would have said those things to me in *real life*."

Although participants use the terms "real world" and "real life" to mark a difference between online and offline abuse, by virtue of their experience, many participants do not have the benefit of fully engaging with this online/offline divide. To use Robinson's (2015) point, online abuse unravels the perception that online life and offline life are distinct from one another. While participants might discursively engage with distinctions between online and offline life, their position as targets of online abuse pulls them away from fully engaging in this divide and instead returns them to a place where online life and offline life are completely enmeshed. This "returning" occurs in two ways: through the impact of abuse (i.e., the way experiences of online abuse permeate a target's emotions and embodied vulnerability) and through the content of the abuse they receive, which makes them think about "what […] it's like for [other] women in *real life*" (Candice). For example, Kate described being sent "booby traps" in the form of links to videos she was told to watch. When she followed the link it would lead to a woman being humiliated in a sexually violent way: "Even when someone would say like, Google 'goatse' or 'two girls one cup',[4] those were pictures of real people, right? Like in *real life* situations and so it always forced your hand to think about *real world* violence" (Kate).

Participants also drew on similarities between online and offline abuse to contextualize their experiences, for example, by comparing them to other instances of street harassment and catcalling. Lilly explained: "For me it falls under the same realm as when I was 16 and I'd walk down the street and people would grab my butt or catcall at me." Kate described online abuse as her first experience with verbal harassment:

> I remember my first catcall not being person to person, but just online [...] The graphic "I'm going to suck your tits and have sex with you and whatever," it actually predated the first time I was yelled at in public.

The offline abuse and harassment women are regularly subjected to acts as another reminder that there is no difference between the consequences and embodied impact of abuse online and abuse offline.

For Melody, the gravity of her situation began to sink in only once she labeled her abuser's behavior in relation to its offline counterpart: "He started messaging me on there and that's when I was like, that's just gone overboard, this is almost stalking, well I guess not almost, he's a cyberstalker, essentially." Like Melody, Ellie drew on the offline equivalent of the behavior to understand the significance and seriousness of her abuse:

> When someone makes a two-hour video about you, like, the *real life* equivalent of that is someone holding a lecture to a lecture hall of tens of thousands of people talking about how you're a horrible person and you need to be stopped.

Participants commonly connected the online abuse they encountered to other types of offline abuse that they have experienced. This is a reminder that online abuse is not a distinct and separate form of abuse, but instead is part of a spectrum, or continuum, of abuse and violence (Kelly, 1987). Drawing on this continuum, participants also relied on similarities between online and offline abuse as a way to justify and account for the harm they experienced.

Digital Dualism in Everyday Life: Interpretation

The separation of online and offline life came from participants themselves, the perpetrators of abuse, and from others with whom they shared their experiences. These findings are symptomatic of a culture that privileges face-to-face communication over digital communication (Jurgenson, 2011a) and where discursive practices of drawing a distinction between online and offline life govern and influence the way we speak, think, and act toward digital culture. For example, recommending that participants turn off their computer, sign out of social media, or remove themselves from online spaces, stems in large part from the digital dualist belief that online and offline life is separate and opposing. Specifically, digital dualism operates here in two ways: first, it implicitly treats targets of online abuse as less vulnerable; and second, it relies on digital disembodiment.

The type of advice participants received implies that individuals can stop the harm associated with abuse by simply cutting off communication. These strategies, however, cannot be realized because digital life is *real life* and you cannot just "sign out" of life. Furthermore, this type of advice demonstrates a misunderstanding of a core tenet to our ontological status: that we are profoundly vulnerable. It assumes that people are somehow less vulnerable as humans in online spaces and can thus easily protect themselves from harm and abuse. The consequence of normalizing this type of advice – or, of treating it as common sense (Fairclough, 1989) – is that it implants in individuals, and their support networks, a sense of false control over the repercussions of online abuse. This type of advice also assumes that the abuse, and the harm that it causes, can be turned off as easily as the devices themselves, as if the

abuse is localized to the screen before us, rather than something that sits with us – that we carry affectively throughout our day.

Powell and Henry (2017) use Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence to demonstrate how "dominant conception[s] of 'real' violence [...] hide or render invisible forms of non-physical violence" (p. 50). What they are pointing to here is a long history of physical abuse being considered more dangerous and certainly more worthy of attention than emotional, verbal, and psychological abuse. Online abuse has been treated in similar ways, which I argue is a product of digital dualist thinking. It also reflects wider attitudes toward gendered violence generally, where targets and victim-survivors are responsible for avoiding abuse and the harm they experience is erased or minimized. Online abuse becomes another example of these noncontact offenses and thus adopts a similar fate in terms of the (lack of) urgency and care it is given.

In particular, the textual basis through which much of the online abuse occurs is used against targets as a way to try and convince them that the abuse, and thus their feelings, is not legitimate.[5] Perpetrators also embody this digital dualist tendency and use it as a way to avoid responsibility and downplay the impact of their actions. In fact, perpetrators are susceptible to the same digital dualist habits as the families and friends' participants rely on for support. The difference, however, is that for perpetrators, drawing that distinction between offline as *real* and online as *un*real is overtly self-serving.

Despite perpetrators' attempts to downplay their abusive actions, participants were clear that what is said, shown, and shared online produces the same effect as it would if these actions occurred offline. However, digital existence is full of contradictions and many of the participants in this study continue to use language like "real life" or the "real world" despite an expressed concern for others doing and thinking the same thing.

The casualness with which participants used the language of the "real world" and "real life" demonstrates the power of digital dualist thinking. As Fairclough (1989) explains, when discursive practices are repeated enough, they begin acting like common sense. In other words, the use of this language – "real world" and "real life" – reflects a system of hegemonic domination that participants are simultaneously critical of and participating in.

Importantly, when participants use the phrase "in real life" they are not doing it to belittle experiences or downplay their abuse or emotions, and to be clear, their friends and family are not necessarily doing so either. Digital dualist frameworks are widely accepted and naturalized in socio-digital culture and the casualness and banality of this reference point – *the real world* – is indicative of this. It is, however, important to try and move beyond these casual references because the way we talk about the interconnectedness of online and offline life influences the way we treat and act toward said connection. A person's thoughts, actions, and choices are shaped by social conditions. Discursive practices, like those found in digital dualism, create social conditions that can too often limit possibilities for social existence (Butler, 1997), such as how individuals see themselves in relation to others and to the wider public sphere.

Ontological Labor

Citron (2009) writes that "the online harassment of women exemplifies twenty-first century behavior that profoundly harms women yet too often remains overlooked and even trivialized" (p. 373). Part of that trivialization stems from the digital dualist discourse that dismisses online spaces as merely virtual and *less real* and gives the "impression of a lack of embodied vulnerability" (Miller, 2019, p. 172).

But perhaps the most dangerous aspect of digital dualism is that those who tend to subscribe to the dichotomy fail to recognize that they do so. This is precisely Fairclough's (1989) point about the way discourse becomes naturalized, appearing as "common sense" and making the power relations enacted through it difficult to identify. In the case of digital dualism, the power relations prioritize the physical over the virtual and the atom over the digit. Without acknowledging the practice of digital dualism, or the power relations that give it strength, it is impossible for individuals to understand the harm it causes. It is "a violence which is wielded precisely inasmuch as one does not perceive it as such" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2004, p. 272).

When digital dualism is naturalized and invisibilized, it further erases the harm of online abuse because it hijacks an important process of recognition. Recognition is about being seen, heard, and having a framework to make meaning of and understand one's experience. As Langois (2014) points out, defining oneself and one's experiences involves an element of recognition that requires "patterns and rhythms of relationality" which are granted by others (p. 142). Drawing on Crossley (2001), Lumsden and Morgan (2017) explain that symbolic violence systematically denies some people a "degree of recognition enjoyed by others" and represents "the felt and/or lived suffering" of those who are "denied a basic level of recognition by their wider society" (p. 930). If digital dualism denies or hijacks recognition, then ontological labor is a response that encourages the process of recognition to continue and it necessitates the consideration of embodied vulnerability in online spaces. Ontological labor also has a deeply political and historical lineage that demonstrates women's struggle to have the violence and abuse they face taken seriously.

Ontological labor is the term I give to the process of overcoming what amounts to a denial of experience. The reactions and advice women receive about their online abuse – like being told to stop using social media altogether – and the way perpetrators claim they do not cause harm, for example, by telling women to "lighten up" because whatever said or shared was "just online," are evidence of this denial. Ontological labor, then, involves dismantling other people's perceptions of online spaces as *less real* and of online abuse as *less harmful.*

The practice of ontological labor is not exactly new. Women have long had their experiences of abuse rendered invisible, dismissed as unimportant, or had the onus of proof and persuasion rest solely with them (Price, 2005). If there is a difference between the ontological labor women engage in as a result of online abuse, it is one of circumstance and not of measure. Ontological labor is different from other forms of negation women face in social life. Unlike gaslighting, the

process of emotionally manipulating someone into questioning their own sanity, the abuse women experience is not necessarily questioned, largely because textual and photographic evidence is abundant in these circumstances. In online abuse cases, it is the effect of/affect caused by the abuse which is called into question. In other words, ontological labor is not about trying to show that something occurred, it is about trying to show others that it had a *real* impact.

The need to engage in ontological labor stems from a complex set of factors: the trivialization of women's experiences, the treatment of noncontact offenses as less serious, and the common disbelief surrounding victim-survivors' experiences of violence and abuse, to name a few. These factors are compounded in online contexts by digital dualism. Focusing specifically on this online component, ontological labor then comes from (1) a widespread treatment and deep-seated understanding of online and offline life as separate and opposing; and (2) perceptions of vulnerability as primarily physical (which also involves a disconnect between social, physical, and psychical states of being). For the participants in this study, ontological labor is a gendered process performed in three key ways: demonstrating to others that one's online life is not distinct from their offline life; convincing others that words are hurtful; and constructing frameworks for exploring and understanding online abuse.

First, participants explain that being a target of online abuse means to be constantly demonstrating that online spaces are not distinct from other aspects of their lives. In Ellie's experience, she found she had to explain to people that social media is part of her job, and thus disconnecting is not that simple. In Candice and Abigail's experience, they found themselves having to reorient people's conception of online abuse so that it includes already established social relations; relations that cannot be neatly separated as either online or offline. This work is exhausting and requires that targets of online abuse take it upon themselves to convince others why their experiences matter.

Second, participants perform ontological labor in the work they do to convince others that online abuse causes (embodied) harm. This involves disregarding perpetrators' attempts to downplay or devalue the harm they cause and advocating for themselves by insisting that online abuse is *real*. This advocacy is quiet, and it emerges in conversations with friends, family, and therapists. Maya explained that she is practiced in trying to convince others that online abuse *is real*:

> So I'll tell them, "okay, it's not *real*?" [They say] "Right, nothing that happens online is *real*." And I'll ask them, "are you saying that in good faith?" [They say] "Well I mean if it was *real*, you would actually show that you were really suffering." "Ok […] so nothing that happens online is *real*?" [They say] "Correct." "Could you give me your credit card for a minute?" and then [they say] "woah, woah, woah!"

Third, participants' performance of ontological labor includes an effort to create a framework and a space to understand online abuse as such. As I have demonstrated, participants had a tendency to make sense of their experiences by

pointing out the similarities they have with other forms of physical and/or offline abuse (e.g., when Ellie explained how outrageous the YouTube videos made about her are), or by relating them to their analogue counterparts (e.g., when Melody made sense of her experience by comparing cyberstalking with stalking more broadly). Participants were aware that some of the abuse they experienced would have been considered more serious and treated differently if it had occurred in an offline context. As mentioned earlier, physical abuse is treated as more serious than emotional and verbal forms of abuse, and emotional and verbal forms of abuse displayed online are further trivialized. Following this logic, it is understandable that participants try to show that one harm, online harm, is similar to other, offline harms that tend to carry more weight. The act of relating online abuse to other types of abuse, which have established frameworks for processing the transgression, is a fundamental aspect of ontological labor. Comparing online abuse with offline abuse is a way for participants to rationalize their feelings and contextualize the harm in ways that are familiar to them precisely because there is no common framework for understanding online abuse in its own right. In some ways, then, comparing different forms of abuse is a way to create a framework and carve out a social existence for online abuse.

Ontological labor also involves an enormous cognitive burden that comes from the emotional toll that retelling experiences of abuse – any kind of abuse – has on an individual. Couple that emotional exhaustion with the likelihood of not having one's abuse seen as abuse in the first place, and the strength of digital dualism as a barrier begins to take shape. While also adding to the labor women already perform to keep themselves safe (e.g., avoid walking alone, dress "with discretion," Gardner, 1990), this ontological negation and undermining of experience denies them permission from themselves or from others to feel the impact of such abuse. It is more important to understand that treating online and offline life as separate is itself a form of harm and barrier to support. Whether or not there is a difference between online and offline life, treating them as though there is no difference can help individuals, like the women in this study, feel supported throughout what is undoubtedly a difficult and harmful experience.

Not all women will experience ontological labor in the same way. Depending on their intersecting identities, their labor maybe be more onerous. As Sexwale (1994) explains, "although many forms of violence against women are common across the board, some forms and/or their incidence are strictly related to one's positioning in terms of the diversity of our realities" (p. 200). These same realities influence the level of ontological labor that targets engage in. Not only are the bodies we inhabit tied to the lives we live through online spaces, but when confronted with online abuse, those bodies become barriers to access in online and offline spaces: religion, race, sexuality, and gender become factors, among many others, that complicate support seeking and being believed.

Conclusion

This chapter expands on the original concept of digital dualism as a bias (Jurgenson, 2011a) and fallacy (Jurgenson, 2011b), and demonstrates the way it

operates as a discourse and a habit. As a discursive practice, digital dualism denies women who experience online abuse the space they deserve to have that abuse seen, interpreted, and treated *as real* and embodied. For participants, this applies to other social media users (i.e., the perpetrators of abuse) and people and institutions on whom the women have leaned for support (such as therapists, friends, and family). Ontological labor, as a response to digital dualism, focuses on validating experiences of online abuse *as real* and requires women to go above and beyond already expected and practiced safety work to keep spaces of sociality – such as social media, mobile communication apps, and online game sites – accessible and safe. Hence collapsing the online/offline divide becomes an important step toward supporting targets of online abuse, because having the space and capacity to experience phenomena *as real* is a core element of one's existence, digital or otherwise.

Notes

1. This study was trans-inclusive. The digital and analogue recruitment posters for this study indicated that anyone who identified as a woman was welcome to participate. No further demographic information on gender was collected. Given the gendered nature of online abuse (Mantilla, 2015), further iterations of this project ought to include non-binary individuals, as well. For now, this remains a limitation of the project.
2. Participants were required to be 18 or older, identify as a woman, and have been the target of online abuse.
3. This comment points to the intersection of sexism, misogyny, and colonialism. In addition to the misogynistic intent and denial of harm embedded in this comment, there is also a reproduction of damaging stereotypes born out of colonial sexism, which assumes that women in the Global-South are treated worse than women in North America.
4. Goatse is an internet shock site that operated in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Two girls one cup is the nickname for a Brasilian fetish pornographic video that circulated widely in the mid 2000s.
5. Not all online abuse is text based, of course. Harms involving image-based abuse, control over the Internet of Things (IoT), and some forms of cyberstalking do not necessarily involve text.

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