Wikipedia is one of the most successful online communities in history, yet it struggles to attract and retain editors who are women—another example of the gender gap online. In a recent University of Washington study, researchers interviewed women "Wikipedians" to examine the lack of female and non-binary editors in Wikipedia. The team identified a common theme: safety.

"People can get harassed when they're editing content in Wikipedia," said co-author Wanda Pratt, a professor in the UW's Information School. "If you're constantly getting negative feedback for doing something, how often are you going to do it?"

The researchers presented their results May 9 at the 2019 ACM CHI conference on Human Fa ... in Computing Systems in Glasgow, Scotland. The video below includes some of the authors and participants in the study.

The team interviewed 25 well-established editors to find out their stories. The conversations revealed that many participants had their edits contested and that some participants felt unsafe within the community. "In the data we collected, it goes beyond trolling," said first author Amanda Menking, a doctoral student in the iSchool. "There's doxxing, which is exposing people's personal information and where to find them online or in physical space such as their address. Some of the women we talked to received death threats."

But participants also discussed how they managed their safety both conceptually and physically, and how they acted on this understanding to create safe spaces on and off Wikipedia. In order to navigate Wikipedia and related online communities—for example, Facebook groups—these women use sophisticated tactics for how they manage their online identities, boundaries and emotions.

The authors suggest solutions for future online environments that encourage equity, inclusivity and safety for historically marginalized users.

"Wikipedia says it's the sum of all human knowledge and it's the encyclopedia anyone can edit. That is a pretty big claim," Menking said. "There's also a responsibility to be held to those claims, that if you say you are the sum of all human knowledge then you need representative humans contributing that information."


Provided by University of Washington