

**Affect, Identity, and Conceptualizations of Feminism and Feminists on
the Antifeminist r/MensRights Subreddit**

by

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B.A., The University of Victoria, 2018

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDY

(Interdisciplinary Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Okanagan)

September, 2020

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Affect, Identity, and Conceptualizations of Feminism and Feminists on the Antifeminist
r/MensRights Subreddit

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Abstract

This thesis explores identity, affect, and discourses within the antifeminist r/MensRights community. By focusing on the discursive and affective treatment of the 'feminist' within the men's rights movement, it identifies the ways in which the feminist movement is framed within men's rights discourses. Particular attention is paid to how members of the movement carefully construct a broad and highly skewed understanding of 'feminism' as a dangerous ideological force that can radicalize and corrupt those it comes in contact with. The thesis identifies the properties, roles and locations of feminists within the feminist movement, and in relation to the men's rights movement. By exploring the ways in which affective themes and utterances are made with reference to the men's rights movements conceptions of feminism and 'the feminist', it becomes possible to tease out the roles of these carefully constructed (mis)representations. This exploration then allows for this thesis to identify how this misrepresented 'feminist' subject serves to provide the men's rights movement with strategies that can be used to explain the anxieties the men of these movements are facing in relation to their own masculinities.

Lay Summary

This study explores how members of the antifeminist men's rights movement explore, understand, and demonstrate their own identities by examining how men's rights activists describe feminist women and compare and contrast themselves to those women. By exploring men's rights conversations around and descriptions of feminist women, we can see both how men's rights activists see themselves, form their understandings of the world around them and their own places within it, and justify their own beliefs and politics. This exploration has been done by looking at the ways in which members of the Men's Rights subreddit r/MensRights express emotions such as fear, anger, and disgust, when discussing and describing feminist women. This thesis works to more clearly identify the motivations, mechanisms, and justifications for both the virulent antifeminism (and subsequent campaigns of harassment by the movement against numerous feminist women) of the men's rights movement, and the (often overt) misogyny of many of the members of this (primarily) online community.

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Acknowledgements

My first acknowledgement is to my supervisor, Dr. Bonar Buffam, who has provided exceptional support throughout my degree, and permitted me a level of autonomy during this project that has been greatly appreciated. In addition to Dr. Buffam, I would also like to acknowledge the other two members of my committee, Dr. Sue Frohlick and Dr. Heather Latimer, whose feedback has been invaluable, as well as the wide group of other academics who have provided me with support, such as Dr. Edwin Hodge and Dr. Jessica Stites-Mor. I would also like to acknowledge and thank the various members of my graduate cohort with whom I have shared this journey, notably Ariel Pyett, Becca Campbell, Chea Eaton, Erica Thompson, and Kaylah Vrabic. Finally, I must also acknowledge and thank my family and friends, most notably Michelle Alexiu and Tamar Swartz, whose patience, support, and encouragement has been endless over the last two years.

1. Introduction, Concepts, Literature, & Methods

1.1 Introduction

The last half-decade has seen a dramatic rise in reactionary far-right movements and politics, most notably in the newly emerged and primarily online alt-right movement. The increasing presence of these reactionary politics across North America and Europe, in both political and cultural spheres, has drawn the attention of scholars and activists (Kimmel, 2013; Hodapp, 2017; Hodge & Hallgrimsdottir, 2019). While the alt-right is often considered a newly emergent movement in-and-of itself, substantial overlap both in terms of politics and membership has been observed between the alt-right and already established right-wing reactionary movements and groups (Hodge & Hallgrimsdottir, 2019). One of these groups is the Men's Rights Movement (MRM), a sub-community of the broader Men's Movement (MM), which is primarily made up of men known as Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) who position themselves as advocates for men in a world that (they argue) operates in ways that systemically disadvantage them (Kimmel, 2013). However, critics, particularly feminists, have noted that the movement frequently demonstrates and espouses virulently misogynistic and hateful politics and ideals (Hodapp, 2017). While this sub-community reaches back into the mid-twentieth century, the MRM has garnered relatively little mainstream attention. However, public awareness of the MRM has recently increased following violent and high-profile events such as the Toronto van attack in the spring of 2018 by a man who had strong connections with a radical sub-community within the MRM (Branson-Potts & Winton, 2018). This increased awareness has led to greater levels of attention falling upon this relatively obscure (but vocal) social movement, in particular.

While the MRM community attempts to present itself as a nonpartisan men's issues advocacy movement, it has been suggested that the central mobilizing politics of the MRM is focused upon opposing a number of progressive issues generally, and feminism and the

feminist movement specifically (Hodapp, 2017). Because of this, scholars who have researched the MRM have suggested that instead of mobilizing around men's issues, as the movement claims to do, its primary focus is an antifeminist politic. In addition to this, there is a notable lack of direct advocacy and activism from the movement itself, instead it is primarily limited to its various online community spaces. These online spaces, collectively known as 'the manosphere', are where MRAs congregate, interact, and engage in discourse, as well as read and share information. This study is specifically focused upon the r/MensRights subreddit, which is currently the largest and most active MRM community online.

It is my intention through this thesis to attempt to observe and identify the processes through which members of the MRM manage and communicate their identities on both an individual level, as well as in relation to the movement as a whole. To this end, I explore the ways in which the MRM community conceptualizes feminism and feminist spaces before moving into an exploration of the ways in which MRAs conceptualize, identify, and understand feminist women themselves. I argue that MRM constructions of 'feminism' serve as one side of a feminism/MRM dichotomy which is utilized by the MRM to identify, locate, and justify the social, ideological, and political goals, positions, identity of the movement and its members. To this end, I aim to demonstrate that the ways in which MRAs describe, conceptualize, discuss, and then contrast themselves against feminists and feminism, allows for an opportunity to observe the claims to identity being made within these discourses.

Existing academic literature on the MRM has repeatedly noted that emotion, and in particular the emotions of anger and anxiety, play a central role within the movement (Allen, 2016; Kimmel, 2016; Hodapp, 2017; Ging, 2019). Building upon this developing body of work, this thesis explores the role of emotions in the attribution of properties using affect theory, particularly the works of feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2004) and communications scholar Zizi Pappacharissi (2014, 2015), to conceptualize MRM representations of feminism and feminists

as highly affectively charged semiotic objects within MRM communities and discourses. In doing so, I suggest that the MRM 'feminist' is not a representation of any 'real' feminist woman, but a reduction of all feminist women into a selectively constructed and grossly negative stereotype. This reduction works to transform any 'real-world' feminist into a single, affectively charged 'object' comprised of the various semiotic signs and attributes assigned to feminists within MRM spaces. This object, I will argue, can then be universally assigned to any and all 'real' feminists by the MRM and MRAs, and in doing so, effectively strips from that 'real' feminist any semblance of individuality, complexity, or, indeed, humanity.

In utilizing Ahmed's approach to emotional affect, my aims are to identify the ways in which the 'feminist' as a semiotic object is constructed within the MRM and to identify and explore the affective properties assigned to this 'feminist' object. Through this exploration, we can identify the creation of both feminism and the 'feminist' as semiotic and affective objects that serve specific projects of in/out group borders creation, which assists in the establishment and maintenance of MRA and MRM identities. This functions on both a movement-wide and individual level and serves to connect the individual bodies and identities of MRAs to the broader MRM, locating and securing the positions of these MRAs as being within their communities. I will also argue that the same can be observed at an individual level, where MRAs also construct a 'feminist'/men's rights activist dyad. By observing the ways in which the feminist woman is constructed and treated within MRM discourses, we can observe MRAs making specific claims regarding their own identities, positions, and locations as individuals within the broader MRM community.

1.2 Self-Location

Theorists and scholars from feminist, anti-racist, and Indigenous schools of thought have criticized traditional Western pedagogies and methods of thought development, particularly as they relate to Cartesian notions of dualistic divides between the objective and subjective

(Mumby, Putnam, 1992; Smith, 1999; Bauman, 2003; de Boise, 2013). Critical portions of feminist, decolonization, and anti-racist thought emphasize the role of social, political, cultural, and individual influences on the development of thought, and challenge the notion that any form of knowledge or truth generation can be said to be objective (Gregg, 1987, Rigney, 1999). Instead, it is necessary to acknowledge and identify how the researcher or theorist is positioned relative to the object of study and recognize that this position is indelibly linked to and influenced by the epistemic roots of the thoughts, beliefs, and experiences of that researcher.

I was once both immersed in and engaged by the ideologies of the men's rights movement. During my late teens to my early twenties, I would openly espouse thoughts and beliefs instilled by the MRM, characterized mainly by a general distrust of feminism, a vague resentment of women, and a great level of concern for the many 'men's issues' frequently highlighted and discussed by the MRM. I did not, however, participate in the movement directly; I did not participate in (nor was I aware of) any online MRM communities. My engagement with the antifeminist ideologies of the MRM began when I read *The War Against Boys*, by Christina Hoff-Sommers (2000). Roughly five years later it neared its end when I was first introduced to academic feminist thought in a first-year sociology course, to which I largely attribute my decision to pursue a degree in sociology. This was followed by a process of unlearning that has taken many years, life experiences, and a great deal of patience and support from many friends (often feminist women themselves). This personal history has resulted in a sustained interest in this movement, its ideologies, and its members, as I am often able to see a part of myself within them. In particular, many of the 'men's issues' discussed by the MRM are still ones that I find deeply concerning, though I no longer accept or support the ways in which the MRM frame, understand, and approach them.

My interests lie in feminist and critical theory, particularly as they relate to gender and the study of men and masculinities. Because of this, I have worked to embed this paper within an

intersectional and feminist critical framework. The framework is partly committed to the inspection and deconstruction of the ideas and ideologies that exist and operate within various masculinities and masculine performances, which in this case can be identified as the hegemonically-aligned masculinities of MRM members, wherein the idealized and ‘proper’ masculinities of the MRM can be understood as aligning with the properties, attributes and positions that typically privilege and accrue patriarchal power for men (Connell, 1987).

Rather than claiming that this study is grounded in any position of objectivity, or undertaken from the ‘view from nowhere’ (Haraway, 1988, p. 589, Harding, 1987), this study has been performed within a particular social context and is informed by my own politics. My intent here is to contribute to the ongoing critiques of the men’s rights and related movements in order to support the feminist movement, with which I stand in solidarity¹. Many of the properties that members of the MRM value in their constructions of ideal masculinities are ones that I fundamentally disagree with and reject. This includes an emphasis on highly essentialized understandings of sex/gender; the valuing of ‘traditional’ and highly patriarchal enactments of gender roles, norms; and gendered, patriarchal power as a critical (and natural) aspect of masculine identities and social roles.

Knowledge is inherently political. Because academics should not be divorced from politics, I approach this from a feminist and anti-sexist angle, which is vitally important in an age in which violence by men is inflicted upon women, people of color, indigenous populations, and queer and trans folk at epidemic proportions (World Health Organization, 2017; Waters, 2016; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). The intents of critical

¹ I tend to identify myself as ‘pro-feminist’, primarily as a response to and in consideration of the many ongoing debates that exist around the role and place of men within the feminist movement. While I consider myself to be fully aligned with and trying to work towards the goals of what I will call ‘the feminist project’, I do not believe that it is necessarily appropriate for me to label myself as a feminist, as I think that such an identity must be, (particularly) as a highly privileged educated, heterosexual, white, able-bodied, cisgendered man, continually earned and demonstrated, rather than (perhaps presumptuously) claimed.

and feminist approaches are emancipatory, and work to identify, highlight, challenge, resist, and dismantle systems of oppression and violence; I have undertaken this study with this in mind.

1.3 Models of Sex/Gender, Masculine Hegemony, and Performative Identity

Formation

When identifying masculinity, it is important to outline two distinct approaches commonly adopted when attempting to understand gender roles and locate the sites within which these roles operate and are practiced: biological determinism/essentialism, and social/cultural constructionism. I highlight these two because the approach to masculinities and femininities utilized by the men's movement is predominantly essentialist (see Nathanson & Young, 2001, Farrell, 1993, or Allen, 2016; 37), while sociocultural constructionism typically stands in opposition to biologically-essentialist models; much of the theorization of gender and challenging of norms by feminist scholars has been based upon constructivist models, like that of Butler (1988).

The determinist model of sex/gender ascribes gendered attributes to the inherent essential and/or genetic properties of the bodies that are understood to normatively carry those properties. For example, rationality and aggression are identified as natural characteristics of men, while emotionality (hysteria) and passivity are configured as natural characteristics of women (Connell, 1987, Connell, 1995). This model requires the conflation of biological sex (the physical and genetic dispositions of bodies) and gender into a single construct, or an outright rejection of gender as a construct in and of itself in that masculinity and femininity are said to map neatly and discreetly and universally on to what we label male and female bodies. There are significant difficulties when it comes to substantiating this position, scientifically, theoretically, and historically. Attributes that are explained through essentialist models, such as masculine rationality or aggression, have been challenged by scholars as being at least in part a

result of cultural, social, or historical processes (Bjorkqvist, 2017; Ross-Smith & Kornberger, 2004). Researchers have also challenged the ubiquity of assumptions that gendered behaviours and other neurologically-based attributes are solely the result of sexual dimorphism (Jordan-Young & Rumati; 2011, Kaiser, Haller, Schmitz & Nitsch, 2009). The essentialist method of explaining sex/gender difference has derived from patriarchy, and continues to justify the political, cultural and economic advantages that men enjoy, and forms much of the basis upon which patriarchal power is built (Bauman, 2003). Such an approach values attributes and behaviours that are typically masculine (Connell, 1995), while also claiming they are an unavoidable or alterable result of sexual dimorphism. In short, the essentialist view positions masculinity as operating at and limited to the site of biological sex and uses this approach to explain, if not uphold, gendered power relations.

In contrast, social/cultural construction approaches position gender as a construct that is either primarily or entirely located at or influenced by the society/culture within which it is immersed. These approaches also vary in terms of how they conceptualize sex in relation to gender, with some theorists, such as Butler (1988), rejecting the notion of sex as a result of biology, while others suggest that sex may indeed have varying (but less significant or substantial) levels of impact upon the identities of individuals and sociocultural roles and norms. This means that the development of gender, and the associated behaviours and identities with femininities and masculinities, is conceptualized as operating through exposure to social and cultural practices and realities, through the enforcement of the practice of gender-specific attributes, through exposure to particular performative expectations (and the practicing of those performances), and through various other processes such as gendered socialization (de Beauvoir, 1949, Butler, 1988). According to Butler (1988):

Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed [sic] [as it is within the sex/gender-as-internally-sourced essentialist model]; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time... instituted through a stylized repetition of acts (519).

The social/ cultural constructionist model explores and identifies the ways in which gendered behaviours and traits are impressed upon individuals through various acts of social repetition and policing. Some of the more recognizable forms of this policing for men and boys can be seen within culturally common statements and attitudes expressed through such phrases as ‘boys don’t cry’, or ‘man up’, where boys and men are discouraged from expressing emotion, pain, or vulnerability by peers, parents, etc (Vogel, Heimerdinger-Edwards, Hammer, & Hubbard, 2011). These phrases impose upon men and boys a variety of gendered expectations regarding how they practice and express their experiences and lived realities.

In the case of masculinity, while social/cultural constructionist models do to some extent account for sex-gender interactions, they are more interested in how gender and masculinity operate within a social sphere. The construction of masculinity as a sociocultural category allows for the positioning and exploration of masculinity as a form of power discourse by scholars, theorists, and others. By adopting this model, the expressions and enactments of men’s gendered behavior can be observed and connected to the ways in which those enactments secure and accrue power and privilege for those who are more successfully able to practice and demonstrate them (Pascoe, 2012; Foucault, 1982). An approach such as this further allows for the identification and exploration of the construction of gender as a social and cultural process that is learned, performed, communicated, and connected to gendered and patriarchal power within various and diverse cultural and social settings (Foucault, 1982; Butler, 1988; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Masculinity becomes, therefore, the hegemonic embodiment of a normative cultural model instead of a specific individual location. Each individual practice of identity becomes part of a multitude of “*configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting*” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

A major implication of this theorization of gender is that it creates analytical space for the recognition of a multiplicity of masculinities practiced across cultures, ethnicities, social classes and other intersecting points of identity. Within this milieu we can observe the social/cultural evaluations of particular gendered performances, as well as the power dynamics that accompany them within and against different masculinities. This concept was first developed into a coherent theoretical structure by R.W. Connell, which she termed 'hegemonic masculinity' (1987) to denote the power dynamics that characterize some masculinities as more powerful and culturally desired than others; that is to say, "*all masculinities are not created equal*" (Kimmel, 1997). Instead, masculinity is made up of hierarchies, with the higher positions of the hegemonic hierarchy reflecting the ideal location within an intersectional network of power structures. This means that, within a Western colonial context, we might expect the hegemonic masculine figure to be male, white, upper/upper middle class, cisgendered (CIS), heterosexual, muscular, able-bodied, enfranchised, etc (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). It is also important to note that the body that theoretically occupies this position is also one that contains and expresses socially expected or normative masculine behaviors and attributes. Below this position exists a ladder of increasingly 'compromised' or non-hegemonic masculinities. These bodies are compromised when they fail to operate in the same location as the hegemonic ideal, and are therefore targeted by the power structures that are implicated within that compromised position: heteronormativity/homophobia, white supremacy/racism, class/classism, etc. It is also important to note that for Connell (1987), the whole of the hegemonic masculine construct exists in a position above femininity, as well as all other forms of subordinate masculinities.

This system of hegemonic power connects back to masculinity as a performative enactment and construct. Within a system of hegemonic hierarchies, the identity and position of hegemonic masculine figure cannot be attained or held in any stable fashion, but must instead be continually claimed, performed, and demonstrated. Masculinities assert their position within

the hegemonic hierarchy by defining/placing themselves in contrast or opposition to another (perceived to be) more compromised masculine group (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Even within compromised masculine groups, the 'ideal' features of masculinity are reproduced, re-emphasized, and reinforced. This may look like racism expressed by groups of white working-class men, or homophobia expressed by heterosexual black men.

However, it is important to note that in each case the most compromised, marginalized (Cheng, 2009), or subordinated (Messerschmidt, 2004) masculine identities are still typically positioned above (and therefore against) even the most privileged feminine identity (Connell, 1987)². For example, when a heterosexual man throws homophobic slurs against a homosexual man, or makes a homophobic joke to his friends, he is emphasizing, identifying, and practicing his heterosexual location by contrasting it against a subjugated homosexual one, and positioning that homosexual location in a feminized space, separate from the rest of masculinity (Dean, 2013). In other words, within hegemonic masculinity men not only dominate women, but also dominate other men by actively seeking to feminizing them as a means of demonstrating and asserting their own masculinities as closer to the hegemonic ideal. Masculinity, then, for those actively participating within such systems of hegemony, is an eternally unwinnable contest that continually pits men against one and other.

1.4 The 'Crisis of Masculinity'

A number of scholars and cultural critics have identified the presence of an ongoing 'crisis of masculinity' with contemporary Western culture (Hodapp, 2017; Brittan, 1989; Kimmel, 2013). This crisis has been sparked by pressures levied upon patriarchal masculine identities through a variety of social and economic changes that have occurred across the last half-

² This cannot, however, be said to be truly universal, as might be sometimes seen in the power imbalances between, for example, white women engaging in transnational sex tourism and the often poor and racialized men who 'serve' them (Frohlick, 2012).

century and have impacted the ways in which patriarchal power is recognized, maintained, and enacted. As the ever-increasing gains of second and (then) third wave feminist movements for gender equality and equity continue, men find their roles to be increasingly unstable and threatened. In the face of increasing economic hardships and inequality, such as the increasing non-viability of the male-oriented single-earning household (and the subsequently increasing entry of women into all sectors of the job market), men find themselves under ever-increasing pressure from a variety of fronts. These changes and challenges to masculine identities are largely driven by the ongoing pressures and processes imposed/driven by both globalization and neoliberalism within social, economic, and political spheres (Ngai, 2012). This has been interpreted by some commentators, scholars, and groups (Kimmel, 2013; Wong, 2018) as a 'loss of masculinity', as such roles as the masculine breadwinner become increasingly irrelevant and untenable, and society continues to shift and adapt.

Such pressures and anxieties surrounding the positions, roles, and power of men are, of course, nothing new (Kimmel, 2013). Cultural observers and critics, particularly within a white North American context, have long decried social pressures and changes that they have seen as causing the 'feminization of men' (p. 47), such as urbanization, the entry of women into the field of education, and other social phenomena. However, identifying and exploring the current 'crisis of masculinity' serves as a means of narrowing our contextual scope to contemporary settings, though scholars such as Kimmel have suggested that this crisis is not a newly emergent one, as much as it is the rebranding of an ongoing struggle around masculinity that reflects the current challenges to patriarchal power.

Critics have, of course, challenged the notion that the changing social norms and structures around gender constitute a crisis (Brittan, 1989). Such critics have rightfully noted that the framing of the ongoing decline of men's authority and power in both the public and private spheres as a crisis suggests that these shifting norms, as well as the gains achieved by

women and other marginalized identities, are inherently negative. Such framing suggests that it is instead good and proper for the aforementioned authority and power of men to not only be restored, but also remain unchallenged. As Brittan notes, it is '*remarkably self-indulgent to talk about the crisis of masculinity from the perspective of the oppressor*' (p. 188).

Indeed, the MRM itself has been theorized by scholars as a response or reaction to this supposed crisis of masculinity (Hodapp, 2017). Certainly, many MRM members themselves see masculinity³ as being under significant and increasing threat (particularly at the hands of feminists; see chapter 2). Whether or not observers or scholars accept that we are indeed experiencing an ongoing crisis of masculinity, reactionary masculinist movements, such as the MRM, likely believe it to be so, and are therefore likely to reject the arguments to the contrary. To those in the MRM, it is not just men, but also (hegemonic) masculinity itself which is under threat (Hodapp, 2017). This claim can be further supported through a more in-depth exploration of the history of the contemporary MRM, and how it has come to take its current shape.

1.5 The Early Days: Men's Liberation, Sex Roles, and the Schism

The origins of the men's movement lie in the mid-1960s, when a coalition of men's groups came together to form a movement that paralleled the ambitions, aims, and work of second-wave feminists (Hodapp, 2017). This MLM sought to challenge the social roles and positions of men in (primarily) North American society, particularly in the United States and Canada. This movement was interested in developing a critique of masculinity in parallel to that of the feminist movement, largely inspired by the work of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which argued that there existed an oppressive gendered social order that was based

³ Often understood and conceptualized by members of the MRM as a nostalgic, prelapsarian masculinity largely reminiscent of the more 'traditional' masculinities of the mid-20th century; see chapter 3

upon an assumption that women could achieve fulfillment through (largely) domestic, emotional, and reproductive labour. Friedan developed a critique of these gendered roles and assumptions which challenged existing roles and power relations within which women (at the time, largely middle-class white women) were situated, and suggested that these relations denied women personal growth and imposed upon those women various forms of harm. Men's liberationists adopted sex role theory (Hefner, Rebecca, & Oleshansky, 1975) and attempted to develop and position the 'male sex role' as being similarly constrained and affected by gendered power structures, and in doing so develop their own emancipatory framework for men, based largely upon the work of many of the prominent feminist thinkers of the time (Messner, 1997).

This approach led to the development of critiques of various gender roles faced by men, such as that of the man as family breadwinner, which, according to the MLM, forced men to remove themselves and be separated from many of their social networks, robbed men of emotional and familial connections, supports, and experiences, and prevented them from truly being present as husbands and fathers within their families. While there is clearly (I believe) some merit within these ideas and arguments (much of which has, I think, been largely addressed by scholars such as Connell, Messerschmidt, and others) , this explanatory framework adopted/developed by the MLM was plagued by a number of foundational flaws. Most plainly apparent here is an obvious unwillingness to acknowledge or explore the ways in which patriarchal power and privilege impacted the lives and roles of men, and how those roles themselves worked to reproduce that privilege (Ehrlich, 1977).

However, while the men's liberation activists largely positioned themselves as existing in a parallel position to feminist positions and politics, tensions began to emerge within the movement. This is highlighted through critiques leveled against prominent figures within the MLM at the time, such as Warren Farrell, who has since become known as the 'father' of the men's rights movement (Hodapp, 2017). In 1977, during the height of the MLM, critiques of

Farrell by Anderson (1977) and Lamm (1977) pointed out that Farrell, and the liberation movement as a whole, did little to address the concerns of the feminist movement, instead focusing primarily on the development of a conceptualization of the masculine social role as itself being oppressive. The vast majority of MLM members were white, middle-class, heterosexual cisgendered (CIS) men who did not take any meaningful steps to challenge the privileges accrued from their social locations, and did not make any substantial efforts to include, engage, or advocate for queer or non-white men (Lamm, 1977, p. 154). This lack of challenge suggested that the position of the MLM was actually one that implicitly supported the 'status quo' of gendered power relationships (Anderson, 1977), positioning the emancipatory struggles of men and women as being largely parallel, and ignoring race and sexuality within its own discourses.

As feminist theory progressed and evolved, the centrality of sex role theory within men's liberation discourses came under increasing levels of strain (Messner, 1997, Hodapp, 2017). The aforementioned critiques from scholars and figures within the MLM, as well as from a feminist movement that was increasingly calling for men to take accountability for the ways in which they were implicated within patriarchy, lead to a rupture within the MLM referred to by some as 'the Schism' in the late 1970s/early 1980s. Under this pressure, the MLM fractured into three movements: the pro-feminist men's movement, the mythopoetic men's movement, and the MRM (Carrigan, Connell & Lee, 1987; Hodapp, 2017).

1.6 The Men's Rights Movement: Reformation and Refiguration

It is during this emergent period that the MRM makes a distinct turn away from scholarship and intellectualism. The MLM had been based upon the theoretical and intellectual work of the feminist movement and had adopted what was, at the time, a prominent intellectual theoretical foundation through the use of sex role theory. The new MRM, however, largely

severed its ties with feminist theory and academia. Though several prominent men's liberationist academics (such as Farrell) continued to work within and advocate for the movement, they did not significantly contribute to academic literature concerning gender and equality after this shift. In fact, scholars such as Messner (1997) have noted the tendency for the MRM to aggressively disregard the findings of economic, sociological, and psychological studies. Indeed, the majority of scholars who had positioned themselves within the MLM and served as its intellectual nucleus found themselves within the newly emergent pro-feminist men's movement following the schism (Carrigan *et al.* 1987).

This shift away from sex-role theory marked the development of the MRM as an aggressively anti-feminist movement (Hodapp, 2017; Messner, 1997). This can be observed through the ways in which the MRM viewed the position of men in relation to various systems of power; whereas men's liberationists had attempted to argue that men and women faced equivalent and comparable oppressions based upon the sex roles experienced by each, the MRM began to argue that men experienced overwhelming oppression at the hands of women, feminists, and a 'matriarchal gynocentric culture'⁴ (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Media and communications scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser observes that “[e]xpressions of popular misogyny [such as in the MRM] often rely on the idea that men have been injured by women: men are seen to be denied rights because women have gained them.” According to Banet-Weiser (2018), “Men’s rights organizations... dedicate themselves to restoring the capacity of men, the restoration and recuperation of a traditional heteronormative masculinity and of patriarchy itself” (p. 35).

⁴ ‘Matriarchal gynocentric culture’ is used within MRM discourses as an inversion of patriarchy as a concept, and is used to counter feminist critiques of male power by instead claiming that, both historically and within contemporary culture, power actually lies within the hands of women (thus ‘matriarchal’), who are, ultimately, served and supported by men. ‘Gynocentrism’, then, argues that societal values are centred upon women and femininity to the detriment of men (Hodapp, 2017, p 2), through such phenomena and processes as chivalry, all-male drafts, and the treatment of male bodies as inherently more disposable than those of women (p. 57).

Critics and scholars interested in the MRM also began identifying increasingly prominent levels of anger within the discourses of the MRM (Messner, 1997; Kimmel, 2013). Prominent members of the MRM began developing and releasing literature that celebrated 'traditional' masculinity and challenged feminist narratives. One of these was Farrell himself, who published *The Myth of Male Power* in 1993, which became an ideological touchstone for the MRM (Kimmel, 2013). Farrell (1993) argues that feminist critiques of patriarchal systems of power are built upon a variety of myths, positing instead that it is men who are oppressed both socially and economically, and whose bodies are considered disposable by societies and cultures both historically and contemporarily (as seen through the existence of the all-male draft, for example).

Following the Schism, the newly emerged MRM largely floundered for several decades, a fringe movement of far-flung and loosely associated groups and individuals with little ideological consistency or organizational cohesion (Kimmel, 2013; Hodapp, 2017). The MRM was, during this period, still largely situated within (white) North America, and was likely mainly limited to urban environments where enough MRAs to form such groups could connect and regularly congregate (this is, however, suppositional, as there appears to be little existing research on the MRM during this period). However, several social changes which occurred between the 1980s and the early 2000s propelled the movement into the position of relative prominence it resides in today. These shifts were, as noted by scholar Michael Kimmel (2013), the upward redistribution of wealth and the decline of an increasingly agitated and disenfranchised middle class, a growing discontent around issues of fatherhood, and, perhaps most significantly, the advent of the internet.

1.7 The Manosphere: The Digital Revolution and the Modern Men's Movement

The internet allowed for the coalescence of previously disparate individuals with similar ideologies and sympathies into virtual communities and organizations (Orton-Johnson & Prior, 2013); no longer constrained by distance and the small numbers of MRM-aligned men within various locales, members of the movement could now come together with increasing ease, as communications technologies became more advanced and accessible. As more and more MRM men connected and became active online, there formed a grouping of websites, forums, and blogs referred to as the 'manosphere' (Kimmel, 2013). It is here that the majority of the movement exists today, on websites such as *A Voice for Men* or *Return of Kings*, or on forums such as the /r/mensrights subreddit.

According to an internally conducted survey on the MensRights subreddit, one of the largest online MRM communities, the majority of contemporary men's rights activists are self-reported as white (84.7%), heterosexual (81.2%), men (89.5%) who are age 18-24 (44.3%) or 25-34 (30.8%). The main self-reported locations of MensRights users are the U.S. (57.2%), Canada (13.5%), and the UK (8.5%) (MRASurvey, 2014)⁵. It may also be worth noting here that the MRM has recently emerged in spaces outside of the three nations listed above, most significantly within India, which has over the past decade-and-a-half seen the development of a thriving MRM that has achieved much greater levels of perceived legitimacy and social impact than the primarily North American MRM (Naishadham, 2018). This Indian MRM, however, does not appear to share a substantial overlap with the North American-centered MRM, nor does it

⁵ While this independently conducted, non-academic survey is not itself a rigorous (and therefore independently acceptable) study or investigation, it does reflect the overall (though somewhat vague) academic and journalistic consensus regarding the demographic makeup of the MRA movement in the Americas (Kimmel, 2016, p. 112; Blake, 2014), indicating that it may serve as a rough description of the movement's followers.

appear to make up a significant proportion of the userbase of r/MensRights and is not a focus of this study.

The MRM has undergone another major turn over the last decade; the formation, consolidation, and growth of the MRM following their transition to the internet, alongside the relative (or perceived) anonymity allowed by the internet, meant that MRM men were increasingly able to engage in acts that, if performed in the real world, would carry the risk of severe social consequences (Ging, 2017; Kimmel, 2013). The internet provided a sort of safe space for MRM men from which they could voice their vitriolic ideologies and begin engaging in various forms of harassment and abuse, targeted at women in general, and feminists in particular (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Blake, 2015). This anonymity has also facilitated the ability for members to engage with fringe theories in greater depth, connect more easily with others who are doing the same, and share and spread disinformation with much greater ease (Mann, 2008). The result has been a wild increase in the adoption of conspiracy theories within the MRM, likely connected to the recent rise of the conspiracy-laden alt-right (which will be identified and outlined shortly), with which the MRM shares a substantial population overlap (Zuckerberg, 2018).

The MRM has historically not made any discernable effort to partner with, incorporate, or approach non-hegemonically aligned masculinity movements such as the Indigenous-focused Moose Hide campaign (THE ALBERTA NATIVE FRIENDSHIP CENTRES ASSOCIATION, 2015), the Black Fathers Exist movement, or other POC-led masculinity movements. Many (but not all⁶) of these movements are profeminist or otherwise feminist-aligned (White & Peretz, 2010), and therefore do not make for natural allies to the antifeminist MRM. In addition to this, MRM explorations of gender and masculinity tend to not consider the ways in which issues or

⁶ For a non-feminist aligned black masculine movement, see Demon Young's article on the Afrocentric & Black Nationalist 'Hotep'. <https://www.theroot.com/hotep-explained-1790854506>

implications of race may impact or influence the experiences of and issues faced by men (Hodapp, 2017). This, along with data from internal polling undertaken by members of the r/MensRights (MRASurvey, 2014; see above) subreddit, suggests that the majority of the subreddit's users identify as 'Caucasian', and indicates that the lens used by the MRM community is aligned with that of Reddit as a straight, white, and masculine space (Massanari, 2017).

Instead, the MRM is largely focused on a form of grievance and anxiety-based politics (Allen, 2016) that aligns with an idealization of white heterosexual masculinity, which closely aligns with "Western" hegemonic masculine ideals, and which focuses on specific anxieties that might be felt by such men in what is perceived by them as an increasingly progressive world. This focus precludes cooperation with masculinity movements that focus on men who fall outside of these ideals, as well as an inability to recognize and incorporate the ways in which identities and issues that do not relate directly to white, heterosexual masculinities may impact the lives of many men and the issues they may face. Indeed, scholars have noted that the political and analytical lenses that have been adopted by the MRM due to this positioning are fundamentally limited by their inability to observe and adopt more complex intersectional approaches when exploring issues of masculinity (Hodapp, 2017). The outcome of this is a largely universalistic ideological and interpretive worldview that lacks considerations of the intersecting and overlapping impacts of race, class, and sexuality (to name a few), and results in analyses that are necessarily shallow and ineffective when developed by the MRM (this will be explored more deeply in chapter 4).

1.8 Feminist Critiques of the MRM

While research focusing directly upon the MRM is limited, some scholarly work has been published, largely over the course of the last decade. Scholars such as Christa Hodapp (2017), and Michael Kimmel (2013) have published in-depth explorations of various aspects of the MRM

specifically. There is, however, a much broader range of work that has focused on and explored anti-feminism more generally, much of which may briefly refer to or be broadly related to the antifeminism of the MRM, while not focusing on or exploring this movement specifically. Many of these explorations identify practices, processes, and drivers of antifeminism that can be seen as aligning closely with, or providing explanations, both directly and indirectly, for the drivers and ideologies of the MRM itself (Anderson, 2015; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Swanson, 1999).

These explorations and critiques consistently identify and emphasize the presence (and, indeed, centrality) of misogyny, masculine entitlement, and patriarchal power within antifeminist phenomena, sentiments, movements, and ideologies (Anderson, 2015; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Hodapp, 2017; Kimmel, 2013; Swanson, 1999). Frequently highlighted here is the function of antifeminist sentiments and politics in working to re-assert and re-establish various facets of patriarchal power, particularly in the face of (largely) feminist-driven gains for the rights and equality of women, as well as progressive politics more generally (this will be explored more thoroughly and reaffirmed in chapter 3).

Outside of academic scholarship, numerous feminist writers, activists, and organizations have been engaging with, discussing, and opposing the MRM. Social and cultural critics, such as the popular YouTube commentators ContraPoints (Wynn, 2017; Wynn, 2018), and hbombguy (Brewis, 2016), as well as broad range of other journalists, activists, and commentators, have devoted much time and effort to projects involving the identification, deconstruction, and critiques of the MRM, the broader MM, and the online far-right more generally. These non-academic writers, activists, and figures, who are far too numerous to be individually named here, should be recognized as having undertaken the bulk of public-facing activism and awareness-raising regarding not only the MRM, but much of the broader milieu of the far-right in general.

1.9 Interconnections Between Far-Right Movements and the Politics of ‘Trolling’

Writing on online far-right movements, until recently uncommon, is quickly emerging as a focus of academics across the globe. This is due, in part, to the recent rise of the ‘alt-right’, which emerged and rose to a position of prominence during the 2016 United States presidential election (Hodge & Hallgrimsdottir, 2019). The Alt-right is a highly radicalized amalgam of far-right ideologies and politics known for its open espousal of virulent misogyny, homophobia, nationalism, and racism, which operates primarily online although it has been also been responsible for a number of violent protests, one of which resulted in the death of anti-racist protester Heather Heyer in 2017. For many, the alt-right has become one of the most recognizable faces of the online far-right, and the movement has drawn significant academic and media attention over the last few years.

The alt-right has been framed by some as a facilitating paramovement (Hodge & Hallgrimsdottir, 2019), where the alt-right operates as a framework and online network that allows for the softening of borders between a number of far-right movements through the introduction of reinterpreted cultural objects that can be utilized by a number of movements at once. For example, the MRM and white supremacist movements formerly had very little in common, both in terms of the conceptual objects used by each movement, as well as in terms of the politics of the movements. However, the alt-right has provided new conceptual objects that both now share, such as a disdain for ‘Cultural Marxism,’ which is a term that refers to a conspiracy theory that views leftist politics, as well as postmodern and critical theory, as part of an ongoing project aiming to dominate and destroy Western culture (Berkowitz, 2004). Concepts such as ‘Cultural Marxism,’ when broadly interpreted, are rendered intelligible and interacted with by both movements, creating a shared space between them and serving to bind them together. This has caused the politics of a variety of far-right movements to intermingle as members of find entrances into and explore the spaces, politics, and ideologies of the others.

This connection between MRM and the alt-right somewhat complicates things for researchers who intend to explore specific communities within the online far-right, as the alt-right has muddled the boundaries that may have previously existed more distinctly between these communities. However, scholars and critics have long suggested that there have already been substantial amounts of membership overlap between the MRM and other movements, and the frequently asked questions section of the r/MensRights subreddit stresses that it affirms the ‘right’ of free association for its community members, specifically in reference to the alt-right and other far-right communities. Scholars have, as previously noted, already observed the presence of virulent racism within the MRM, even if race is not an overt defining issue of the community and may not be as fervently supported or tolerated within its discourses as in other far-right spaces. It can, however, be argued that this may be in part a consequence of the previously mentioned lack of interest and focus upon race and the impact of racial identities upon various masculinities and masculine identities, and an overall assumption of the MRM as already being an implicitly ‘white’ identified and oriented movement.

I also feel that it may be necessary to preemptively respond to potential critiques of this thesis that suggest it is problematic to treat the MRM discourses as serious, when they may not have been intended as such by those who participated in those conversations. Trolling, or the creation and proliferation of content meant to provoke responses from target audiences, and the production of content ‘for the lulz’, or in jest, is a common theme within online communities, and the online far-right in particular (Greene, 2019; Wilson, 2017; Massanari, 2015). This presents a problem when exploring the discursive spaces of such a community: how do we know what is meant as serious, and what is said in jest? How do we differentiate and weigh the two? We cannot, and we should not. Without the ability to question the creators of each individual piece of content, it is difficult to determine what content carries earnest intent, and what does not. Therefore, my methodological approach is to treat each piece of content as serious, unless they

are explicitly identified to be otherwise. The intent of the original commenter is not the only perspective within a textual community. The readers of such content are able to engage with and interpret it in a variety of fashions; once a text has been published, its meanings are not necessarily those of the author any longer (Fish, 1980). It is, therefore, not a question of if content is meant as serious by the author, but if it can be *read* as serious by the audience.

Scholars, watch groups, and critics of the far-right have frequently observed the use of ironic, self-deprecating, or mocking humour and trolling within their discourses. This has been suggested by some scholars as being an intentional tactic to deploy humour in order to obfuscate hateful content and confuse those outside of far-right spaces who may not be familiar with its language or implicit symbology. This strategy also serves as a means of deflecting accusations of misogyny, racism, antisemitism, etc⁷ (Greene, 2019; Wilson, 2017). In either case, far-right humour and memes function as methods of actively spreading ideology and driving the radicalization of potential new members. Serious or not in intent, the *impacts* and *results* of far-right discourses are very real, and the far-right has frequently acknowledged this fact, actively and knowingly leaned into it, and often utilized humour and memes to recruit, radicalize, and direct its membership (Salazar, 2018, p. 138-139).

1.10 Digital Sociology and Researching the Virtual: Focus and Limitation

Much has been written on the theorization and study of digital technologies as they impact social movements, the sociological 'self', and social spaces and practices (Orton-Johnson & Prior, 2013; Lupton, 2015). The emerging sub-field of digital sociology has, in particular, focused on how technology has (or may potentially) dramatically impacted nearly

⁷ This is referred to in some far-right communities online as 'hiding your power level', where members are instructed to conceal their more socially unacceptable positions and beliefs from the public and avoid initially driving away potential new members, and instead carefully and intentionally express those beliefs within content that appears somewhat innocuous or is otherwise coded in ways that make that content readable only to specific and knowledgeable communities and in-groups (Wynn, 2017). For more information and examples, see [this reddit post](#) from the ContraPoints subreddit.

every aspect of the modern age. Certainly, digital technologies have played a critical role in the development and functioning of the MRM as a whole (as alluded to in section 1.7). Because of this, the approaches and theories of digital sociology appear to offer much promise in relation to the exploration and study of primarily online social movements such as the MRM.

However, the scope and projects of digital sociology frequently extend beyond that of the limits and aims of this thesis. This project, for instance, is not interested in the ways in which ‘big data’ and algorithmic technology impacts the MRM, a major focus of digital sociology (Lupton, 2015), though this could certainly be an area ripe for future research. Nor is this thesis concerned with the specific impacts of various technologies such as the smart-phone, which makes the discourses explored below instantly accessible to members of the MRM in ways that would not be possible within non-digitally mediated social groups and communities; such a topic would also provide an opportunity for important future research.

Put simply, the focus and goal of this thesis is to provide a broad exploration of MRM discourses and ideologies as they relate to feminism and the feminist woman (or ‘imagined feminist’ – see section 1.12). This means that I am adopting/developing something of an ‘inward-out’ approach to the data, wherein I am aiming to begin with and focus directly upon MRM discourse itself. This approach has been adopted so that I may extrapolate, interpret, and theorize outwards in an attempt to identify and explore the shapes and structures of MRM ideology and logic, rather than focus on the impacts of digital technologies therein. I am more interested here in the meso-level implications and structures of MRM ideology than I am with the more macro-level impacts of digital technologies upon the movement as a whole, or micro-level explorations of MRAs individually. It is my hope that this approach, and the resulting findings, might prove useful to researchers interested in delving more deeply into specific and more focused explorations and examinations of the MRM in the future.

1.11 Analyzing and Theorizing Virtual Communities

The online social media platform of Reddit provides a distinct and unique space for online social communication and interaction. It has been the focal point for a number of (primarily online) social movements and events. This is in part due to the somewhat unique structure and popularity of the platform. Billed by many, including Reddit itself, as the 'front page of the internet,' Reddit incorporates aspects of more traditional board-style forum structures, including sub-forums referred to as Subreddits (for a list and explanations of reddit-specific structural terminology, see appendix 1) and topic-post style structures, with crowd/user facilitated algorithmic organization of content (Massanari, 2017). Reddit users are able to post content to relevant 'Subreddits', where they and other users can comment and converse on the posted material, as well as 'up vote' and 'down vote' comments and content (see fig. 1). In addition to the registered userbase, the majority of reddit (including the r/MensRights subreddit) is publicly available, and non-registered/non-account holding users can freely browse most subreddits, access post content, and read comment sections, though they are unable to create posts and comments or participate in reddit's voting system.

Men's Rights :: Advocating for the social and legal equality of men and boys since 2008

r/MensRights

Posts Hot New Rising Controversial Men's Rights Wiki

Create Post

Hot New Top

82 ↑ ↓ "The equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights is a mandatory and immediate obligation of States parties." - Resources for activism. 19

869 ↑ ↓ Again, with this nonsense argument. Feminist policies have worked against male rape victims and abuse (look up the Duluth model) when MRAs bring up these topics, feminists protest them. Feminists only talk about nonsensical things such as the wage gap MYTH. 141

3.9k ↑ ↓ "Women are so oppressed" 275

226 ↑ ↓ Boy shaming allowed but slut shaming isn't 7

128 ↑ ↓ This is all it took. "Please don't be sexist" is essentially all I said but within 30 seconds I was slapped with a ban. Freespe is not tolerated in r/feminism I guess. Am I going to consider this the views of all feminists? Fuck no I'm better than those mods. 89

309 ↑ ↓ This says a lot about society 13

50 ↑ ↓ A Mens Rights issue where the comments from normal redditors aren't awful! 9

110 ↑ ↓ Telling a guy to "man up" is the same as telling a woman to "get back in the kitchen". 37

About Community

At the most basic level, men's rights are the legal rights that are granted to men. However, any issue that pertains to men's relationship to society is also a topic suitable for this subreddit. Men's rights are influenced by the way men are perceived by others.

273k Members 891 Online

Created Mar 19, 2008

CREATE POST

COMMUNITY OPTIONS

New To r/MensRights?

Check out these links first!

- Frequently Asked Questions
- Reference book of Men's Issues
- On the differences between the Feminist Movement and the Men's Rights Movement

Figure 1. The 'front page' of the r/MensRights subreddit (07/23/2020). Each item in the presented list is an expandable post/topic with a dedicated web address and discussion section. Upvote & downvote buttons and vote totals can be seen on the left side, the number of comments for each post to the right. The user who posted the topic (often referred to as 'OP' – original poster), the age of the topic, the topic title, and the external link connected to the post are located within the main body of each listed item.

This voting system is then used by reddit algorithms to organize and present posted content and comments hierarchically based on vote totals, the number of comments on each post, and the age of each post. These algorithms push content that has been highly positively voted, has generated a large number of comments, or has a strong, positive upvote to downvote ratio to the top of subreddit pages (and therefore into positions of high visibility), and well-received comments to the top of conversation sections, while relegating 'downvoted', or unpopular posts and comments downwards (and therefore, out of positions of visibility). Users are able to either visit specific subreddits, where they are able to browse the content of that subreddit specifically, or they can browse the Reddit 'front page'; a more general feed that displays the most highly upvoted and commented posts from across all of reddit. For viewers

who are not logged in to reddit, the 'front page' feed is curated to exclude subreddits that may contain pornographic, offensive, or highly niche content, though most of these subreddits are still accessible to these users should they choose to access them directly. For account holders, the front page can be curated by the users themselves by subscribing to and unsubscribing from various subreddits so that their front-page feed might more directly reflect their own interests.

Reddit administrators have adopted something of a laissez faire-like approach to the content and communities on the Reddit platform, generally not intervening in the online communities that exist within the platform, and usually only intervening when certain rules are broken. More specifically, administrative intervention tends to focus almost entirely on cases where personal and identifying information (doxxing) or sexualized images of minors have been posted, users are distributing spam, cases where users may be interfering with the functionality of the platform, or when users are manipulating the content voting systems (reddit.com, 2020).

Reddit relies heavily on the contributions of users in ways that extend far beyond simple contributions of content. The moderation of more general rules, or rules that may be subreddit specific, are left to the moderators of those specific spaces. These moderators are volunteer members of their subreddit communities – or the creators of the subreddits – who are tasked with the enforcement of the policies of both reddit and their own subreddit communities. This has led to further criticisms of reddit, wherein they are accused of frequently allowing or enabling their subreddit moderators to selectively enforce or police these rules, such as in the case of the largest Canadian subreddit, r/Canada, which has been accused of supporting white nationalism and having white nationalist sympathizers on its moderation team (Milton, 2018).

These policies have changed a little in recent years, with the site intervening and either quarantining⁸ or banning some subreddits, such as when Reddit administrators banned r/FatPeopleHate in 2015. This intervention triggered an uproar across the site as users accused Reddit of censoring content and suppressing free speech, and ultimately lead to the resignation of then-interim Reddit CEO Ellen Pao, who faced a large-scale backlash and harassment campaign from much of the reddit community (Abad-Santos, 2015). Following the banning of this subreddit, among others, over concerns of harassment by its members, numerous replacements, or proxy subreddits, emerged to take their place, many of which remain in operation to this day. In addition to this, Reddit received criticism for selectively banning some subreddits, while others were allowed to remain in operation for several years beyond that point. The ease with which users can circumvent bans by opening new accounts, which require only an email address to create, as well as users' ability to easily and quickly create new subreddits, has led the widespread proliferation of alt-right, racist, misogynistic hate communities. For this reason, direct intervention by Reddit administration itself is often seen as ineffective, in the few cases where Reddit deigns to intervene at all (Massanari, 2017).

This means that, beyond the facilitative and algorithmic organizational structure of Reddit, the cultural shape of Reddit and its communities is primarily user driven. Users create and post on subreddits, share and discuss content, and participate in the voting system that organizes and dictates the visibility of user contributions and the viability of various forms of content-sharing and discourse. Discourse is largely shaped by community consensus, and is therefore likely to reflect the positions, identities, and experiences of the dominant (or most active) demographic groups that participate on the site and its many communities. This does not prevent more marginalized populations from creating communities of their own. It suggests,

⁸ Restricting access to users who have accounts and preventing quarantined subreddits from appearing on the Reddit frontpage.

however, that outside of their own community spaces, their voices are likely to be muted, hidden, or erased by both the active intervention of larger communities and populations, as well as through the algorithmic voting system utilized by reddit, where the posts, positions, and voices of ‘dissenting’ or different and marginalized populations may be, as it is put in Reddit terms, ‘downvoted into oblivion’. In addition to this, many marginalized communities within the reddit platform are vulnerable to ‘brigading,’ wherein larger subreddit communities target smaller ones and inundate them with disruptive or harassing comments and posts, while simultaneously using their larger user bases to manipulate the voting algorithms of the smaller community to disrupt its operation.

Communications scholars such as Massanari (2017) and sociologists such as Maloney, Roberts, and Graham (2019), have noted that, as a cultural space, the dominant discourses that make up many of Reddit’s most popular communities are primarily focused on and reflect ‘geek culture’ (p. 331-332). This ‘geek culture’ is typically centralized around white, CIS, heterosexual masculinity. In contrast, subreddits focusing on, populated by, or catering to other populations, such as people of color, women, or queer communities, are typically quite small in contrast to many of the more popular or populated subreddits⁹. Reddit administration attempted to address this in 2014 when they added the largest ‘female-centric’ subreddit, r/twoxchromosomes, to the list of default subreddits new user accounts were subscribed to when they are created. This sparked a large backlash from the broader reddit community, as well as an influx of disruptive, combative, or harassing commenters ‘brigading’ the r/twoxchromosomes subreddit itself (Stortz, 2016).

⁹ For example, as of April 9, 2020, the largest feminist subreddit, r/feminism, lists 170k subscribed community members, whereas r/mensrights is listed as having 257k subscribed members, reflecting what is likely an inversion of those populations offline, where feminist activists appear to significantly outnumber MRAs, and public awareness of feminism dwarfs that of the MRM.

In particular, Massarani (2017) and Buyukozturk, Gaulden, and Dowd-Arrow (2018) have noted that reddit's organizational structure, moderation policies, and administrative strategies heavily contribute to the development of what Massanari has dubbed 'toxic technocultures' (2017). These toxic technocultures frequently coalesce around specific issues, events, or identities, but are distinguished from other forms of online publics due to their reliance on '*heavily or explicit harassment of others*' (p. 333). These toxic technocultures frequently oppose progressive issues related to such things as gender identity, progressivism, or gender or racial equality. Massanari further notes that

... the larger discourse which characterizes a "toxic technoculture" often relies on an **[sic]** Othering of those perceived as outside the culture, reliance on outmoded and poorly understood applications of evolutionary psychology, and a valorization of masculinity masquerading as a peculiar form of "rationality" (p. 333).

In other words, these toxic technocultures frequently draw their identities from the implicit or explicit positioning of those identified as being in opposition to those cultures, and are highly and often aggressively antagonistic in nature.

1.12 Affect and Emotion: Emotional Publics

The men's movement has already been placed under an affective lens, wherein the MRM is explored as a highly emotional environment. Allen's (2016) study on the affective nature of fear within the MRM focuses primarily on the anxiety that has been generated by feelings of loss of power that he connects to an underlying castration anxiety stemming from the perceived losses of power experienced by the men of the MRM. The study notes and affirms that emotionality plays a significant role within the movement, and describes the men who are involved as being "*overwhelmed by affective responses to the apparent crises they are forced to endure*" (p. 37). This indicates that the MRM is highly affective in nature and might constitute what Papacharissi (2015) describes as an 'affective public,' which is the process through which publics and communities form around shared displays of affect (Papacharissi, 2015, pp. 308).

The MRM constitutes an affective public through the circulation of signifiers, narratives and sentiments that are able to “*discursively call into being public formations*” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 310). Individuals engage and organize with one another through their shared connections with the affective representations and objects that come to form the core of these communities and networks. Online environments, and social media platforms in particular, are crucial components of these emergent publics, as they are able to facilitate the formation of networks of shared affect. This is supported through the algorithmic structures upon which much of the world’s social media is based; algorithms that present content to users do so by filtering out material, media, and discourse that the user dislikes, or does not engage with, and directs them towards spaces, medias, and discourses that they demonstrate interest in. This creates new and dramatically streamlined networking opportunities that are able to reflect even the most marginalized or radical sociocultural expressions or experiences (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 119).

Affective publics operate within media and platforms that “*invite affective attunement, support affective investment, and propagate affectively charged expression*” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 308). These communities and spaces are often driven by affective and highly emotional discourses that blend sentiment, opinion, and fact “*into one effusive stream to the point [where] it is difficult to discern one variety of expression from the other*” (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 129). Because of this blending, the connections between affectively driven communities and the political entities that would, theoretically, be reacting and responding to these communities, can often be both volatile and strained (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 115). This can be seen in the ways that MRAs often struggle to interact and work with policy makers and large social institutions when attempting to move beyond the highly self-contained discursive spaces that make up their communities (Mann, 2008).

Instead, affective communities such as those of the MRM are largely insular, and the ways through which they interact with the world outside of their own spaces is frequently either

indirect, such as through the circulation and posting of flyers (Ferrerias, 2012), or unidirectional, such as with MRM harassment campaigns against various feminists, feminist organizations, or feminist spaces. More direct actions may occasionally occur as boots-on-the-ground activism, such as with infrequent and oft poorly-attended protests, but are generally seen as being highly limited and frequently ineffective. Most MRM activity, therefore, occurs within their own community spaces, and MRM, and more specifically MRM communities, are largely shaped by the affective content and properties that circulate within them. It is therefore important, when attempting to approach and understand the MRM community, to explore the properties, functions, and impacts of affect within those spaces. To do this, it is critical that we find ways to approach, conceptualize, and interpret this affect.

In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Sara Ahmed conceptualizes emotional affect as being external to the bodies experiencing it; emotional affect neither resides within nor originates from the body, but instead exists within circulatory systems, ‘sticking’ to and ‘sliding’ across bodies when they come in contact with other bodies and objects that carry affect upon their surfaces (p. 89). Ahmed also links emotions “*not with individuals, and their interior states and characters, not with the quality of objects, but with ‘signs’ and how they work on and in relation to bodies*” (Ahmed, 2004; p. 194). This indicates that emotions are not individual, but instead communal; they travel across bodies and objects, gaining intensity or significance as they travel by connecting the bodies that share those emotional experiences (p. 10-11). This intensity shapes not only the individual, but also the collective; “*The ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others*” (p. 10). Bodies are not producers of, but instead react to and are shaped by, the emotions with which they come into contact. Ahmed refers to Butler here (1993; p. 9), and suggests that “*boundary, fixity, and surface*” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 12) are produced through the repetition of norms. Ahmed further argues that these norms are reified through affective networks of emotional intensity. Emotions

play a role in the establishment of hierarchies, the creation of collective identities, and the establishment of boundaries between the self and the 'other'.

This conceptual approach suggests that affect and emotion exist as forces within communities and between bodies, which shape the ways in which bodies and communities are impacted by and experience exposure to various affective carriers. This aligns with the conceptualization of online MRM communities as affective publics and allows for the recognition of affective circulation as the cohesive center of these spaces. This affect is located at the center of the MRM as an affective public, which is a means of establishing, communicating and imparting the norms held by the MRM upon its members. Affective objects not only bring members of the MRM together within their communities, but also tell them *who* they are, and *how* they feel in relation to that identity and its associated affective attachments.

As the MRM has been identified by numerous scholars as being primarily anti-feminist in nature, it is reasonable to assume that one of these affectively charged objects is that of the 'feminist'. It is my aim, then, to focus specifically on the ways in which feminist women are approached, conceptualized, framed, and constructed within MRM discourses. To do this, I will identify and explore the ways in which representations of feminist women within MRM discourse are presented and reacted to by MRM community members. Within MRM spaces, the 'feminist' operates, as I show in the rest of the thesis, not as any individual feminist. Instead, by drawing from critical media theory and Ahmed's (2004) feminist affect theory, I will argue that the MRM 'feminist' exists within their community spaces and discourses as an affective semiotic object. This 'object' will hereinafter be referred to using the term 'imagined feminist' to identify and differentiate the MRM-constructed 'feminist' from any 'real' feminist individuals, identities, and bodies. Therefore, I aim to demonstrate that the imagined feminist serves as a widely shared and understood representation of an artificially constructed, generalized, and highly affectively-

charged representation of the broader anxieties and grievances of the MRM, and a microcosmic representation of the affective economies of the MRM itself.

It may also be useful here to note that for the MRM, the imagined feminist appears to be located in what the MRM might unconsciously accept as a ‘normal’, or ‘invisible’ intersectional or hegemonic location; I think here of the way in which whiteness is not seen as a racial identity by many white people, but instead implicitly understood as a neutral or default identity. Likewise, it is also worth noting that when MRAs discuss men in the feminist movement within this data set, they clearly and consistently refer to those men as ‘feminist men’, or otherwise explicitly indicate that they are speaking about pro/feminist men. Likewise, the few references to or mentions of trans-identified feminists are similarly and consistently identified as such and qualified. Because of this, when MRAs are discussing ‘feminists’ without more specific qualifications regarding the genders of those feminists, they are almost always referring to feminist women in particular. The term imagined feminist, then, as I am choosing to develop and utilize it within this thesis, should thus be understood to be referring to the MRM conception of the ‘default’ feminist, broadly understood to be a white CIS woman (this is explored in chapter 3).

1.13 Ethics in Researching Online Public Spaces

The comments and conversations of users within the r/MensRights community are posted anonymously and publicly. They do not necessarily warrant the kinds of ethical considerations that may be involved when conducting similar forms of research in spaces that are protected by barriers, such as with online spaces that require account registration to access, or require either an application or invitation to join (Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Rüdiger & Dayter, 2017). Thus, the conversations collected and analyzed within this research can reasonably be considered as being drawn from a public record (Stevens, O'Donnell & Williams, 2015), mitigating the need for institutional ethics approval.

However, that an online discursive space is public is not in and of itself grounds for the *carte blanche* collection, interpretation, use, and publishing of the content (either in part or in whole) therein. It is also important here to consider the vulnerability of the populations represented and active within those public spaces, which might itself constitute grounds for additional ethical considerations and approaches (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). There are many communities, even within reddit itself, that can be seen as being primarily composed of vulnerable populations, such as with subreddits that may be tailored more towards youth, or other at-risk groups. This is not, however, generally true of the r/MensRights subreddit, as the broad demographic makeup appears (and often openly claims) to be comprised of populations that are not understood to be vulnerable, and, in fact, can be frequently framed as being inherently privileged within an intersectional framework.

Additionally, while there may be participants within the r/MensRights subreddit who are individually members of marginalized or vulnerable communities, they are unlikely to be readily or easily identified as such. In the cases where comments do identify users as members of vulnerable populations (such as - potentially – youth, trans-identifying individuals, or survivors of domestic abuse), those comments (and, more importantly, users and usernames) are not included as excerpts within this thesis, and efforts have been made to avoid including specific information or references that may allow for the identification of these user accounts.

Beyond the protection of research subjects, the position and safety of researchers exploring and analyzing the online far-right also requires further consideration (Vera-Gray, 2017). The MRM has been frequently associated with or drivers of aggressive campaigns of harassments against public and private figures that have been identified by the community as a significant oppositional figure (Vera-Gray, 2017; Romano, 2013). These campaigns of harassment have been known to involve the doxing of their chosen targets, the releasing of personal identifying information, as well as threats of violence (frequently sexual violence) and

death. Because of this, any research critical of the MRM poses a potential risk to the researcher(s) involved, as there exists the possibility that, upon the publication of their research, they may become a target for such a harassment campaign. For this reason, a research strategy that limits the potential exposure of the researcher to the awareness of the MRM may constitute a valuable safety precaution in and of itself. It is, however, worth noting that these potential threats are more likely to impact researchers who identify (or might be identified by the MRM) as women, as these campaigns of harassment appear to target women more frequently and with more intensity (Romano, 2013).

Finally, it must be considered that the active participation of researcher within an online community may impact or affect results, particularly when the focus of that research is on intra-community discourses (as this thesis is). In particular, the anti-intellectualism and anti-progressivism of movements and groups such as the MRM, and their subsequent suspicions of figures and academics which can be seen as being related to progressive schools of thought, may influence discursive generation and data collection in ways that may not be possible to anticipate or take into account (Rüdiger & Dayter, 2017). Certainly, the known presence of an observing researcher would impact the selected and collected discourses within a resulting data set. Such an issue could substantially undermine the validity of a research project (such as this one) that aims to explore in-group discourses as they ‘naturally’ occur within the various community spaces of the movement in question. In short, just as researcher bias may impact or affect a research project (as discussed in section 1.2), so too can the biases of the research subjects in question, should they become aware of that project as it is being undertaken.

1.14 Methods

My data collection and analysis broadly make use of the inductive analytical approaches utilized by grounded theory (Dey, 1999). I felt that this approach offered a level of depth and

flexibility that would allow for analysis that could simultaneously focus on the specific comments within the data set and their content, as well as the overall themes that I expected to emerge from the larger contextual settings within which those comments were set. A grounded theory approach also made possible a multileveled analysis that allowed for the inductive and intuitive generation of coding that would allow me to explore the discourses within the data set as they related to the individual commenters, as well as how they were located within the movement as a whole. In addition to these benefits, I also felt that this methodological blueprint allowed for a more holistic framework for developing data collection strategies, providing me with the opportunity to adjust my sampling on the fly as I explored and better identified the properties and characteristics of online MRM spaces.

While the MRM exists and operates across a wide range of spaces, both online and offline, a large portion of the movement exists and operates on the Reddit subforum r/MensRights (Ellis, 2019; Massanari, 2015; Coulling, 2019). Initially, I had planned to draw data from Reddit while supplementing from a number of other online MRM spaces. I initially selected a number of websites identified as holding positions of prominence in the men's rights movement by watch-groups such as the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC, 2012), watch-blogs such as *We Hunted the Mammoth*, informal conversations with academics and activists whose work involves the online men's movement, and suggested links posted on prominent MRM spaces themselves (specifically, r/MensRights and avoiceformen.com).

I constructed a purposive sampling strategy which I used to filter out sites that were unlikely to be directly connected to or implicated as being positioned within the MRM, as well as sites that, while being explicitly pro-MRM, did not support or hold a substantial readership base. This strategy was largely holistic and intuitive. I filtered out sites that allowed commenting on posts but did not accrue large numbers of comments relative to other sites linked in the aggregating blog, did not appear to be intentionally oriented towards the MRM (including sites

focused on masculine pastimes, fashion or DIY projects, for example), or were judged to be more strongly affiliated with other far-right movements (such as websites focusing more on white supremacy). In addition to this, attempts were made to limit the data set to sites that explicitly stated their primary affiliation as being to the MRM, focused primarily on 'men's issues, and contained active comment sections. Finally, I looked at web-traffic information available for each site and removed all sites that did not draw a significant portion (>10%) of its readership base via referrals from other MRM-affiliated websites and social media sources. I did this with the aim of attempting to mainly include data that was more widely discussed than on a single site in the manosphere, and to avoid potential outliers that may misrepresent the MRM.

However, once I began searching for potential data sources and utilizing web-analytic software to identify which sites appeared to be major spaces within the movement, I found that the vast majority of web traffic within the online MRM sphere was centered around and located upon Reddit itself. The r/MensRights subreddit appears, at the time of this project, to be the largest MRM community both on Reddit, and online, receiving more web traffic than any other major MRM-affiliated website such as Paul Elam's AVoiceForMen¹⁰, or popular MRM blogs such as Toy Soldiers¹¹. For this reason, I have decided to focus my research solely upon the Reddit MRM community.

The use of this subreddit also boasts a level of relative stability compared to other spaces across the manosphere and on Reddit, with a consistently-increasing user-base and number of page-views (see fig 2), higher levels of user engagement and retention, and a lower likelihood that it will close or be closed. It should be noted, however, that less stable spaces tend to be associated with more radical factions of the MM, which frequently experience de-platforming as the various web hosts they utilize react to and close these spaces. Some

¹⁰ <https://avoiceformen.com/>

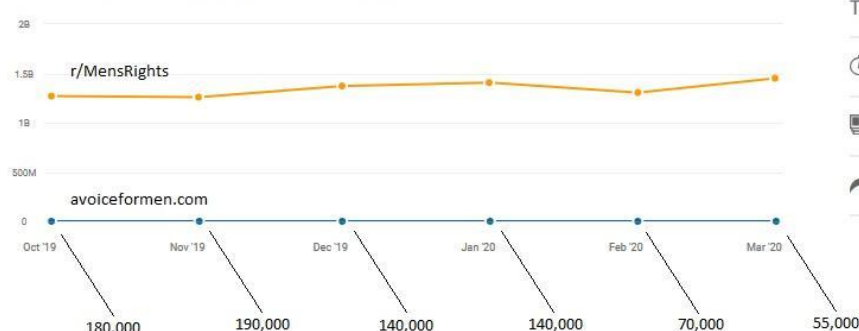
¹¹ <https://toysoldier.wordpress.com/>

examples of this can be seen in the incel community¹², which was banned from reddit in 2017 (Hauser, 2017). Since their banning, the incel community has been frequently forced to change web addresses as hosts respond to complaints about the community and discontinue service. Many other MM-affiliated subreddit communities are likewise less stable, such as with the subreddits for r/TheRedPill or r/MGTOW, which have been quarantined by reddit, and, while still accessible, are no longer so without reddit accounts, and cannot be directly subscribed to.

Traffic Overview ^①

Total Visits ^①

On desktop & mobile web, in the last 6 months



Engagement

Total Visits	54.44K	1.45B
Avg. Visit Duration	00:01:25	00:10:02
Pages per Visit	1.9	7.8
Bounce Rate	73.74%	38.86%

Figure 2: Similarweb analytics for avoiceformen.com and r/MensRights

While there are numerous men's movements (MM) affiliated communities that exist within the Reddit platform, I narrowed my selection to subreddits that are specifically oriented to the men's rights activism faction of the MM, excluding other large and active subreddits such as the previously mentioned r/TheRedPill or r/MGTOW, whose ideologies and politics are somewhat distinct from the MRM community. I selected the most active and populated MRM

¹² The 'incel', or involuntary celibate community is a highly radical subfaction of the MM, in which the users share an identity based on their inability to find sexual or romantic partners. This community is significantly more misogynistic and violent than other MM communities and have been directly linked to numerous mass killings by community members seeking to 'punish' anyone outside of the community, particularly women (Witt, 2020).

community on Reddit, r/MensRights. Due to the large amount of content being regularly generated on this subreddit, I opted to focus upon it specifically, not drawing from other, smaller MM-oriented subreddits. In addition to this, the activity on r/MensRights outpaces that of both other MRM-affiliated subreddits, as well as other popular MRM websites and communities online (see figs. 2 & 3).

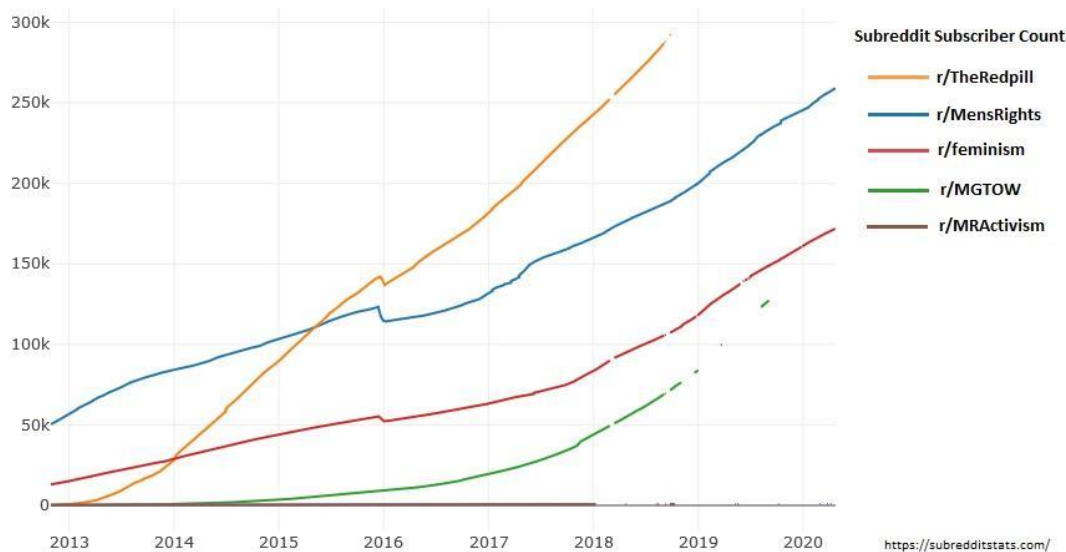


Figure 3 - Subreddit subscriber count, created using <https://subredditstats.com/>

I then collected data by selecting posts that either directly related to feminism, feminists, or feminist activism, or that contained discussions specifically surrounding feminists and feminist women. This included direct references to feminists or feminist women, threads specifically related to issues, advocacy or phenomena closely connected to feminism (such as pay inequality), related to feminist concepts (such as threads about ‘manspreading’), or threads that had been tagged with the ‘feminism’ flair¹³. From these threads, I further narrowed down the pool of selected content by focusing on threads that contained posts that had generated large numbers of comments relative to the size of the subreddit and had received a large number of

¹³ ‘Flair’ is a customizable, subreddit-specific set of tags that can be used to label and/or organize posts within subreddits and is assigned to posts by subreddit moderators.

“upvotes” within the subreddit. I also made use of my web-browser’s ‘find’ function to search for the presence of relevant terms (‘feminism & feminist’) within each post’s comment section to confirm that there was, indeed, the presence of substantial discourse involving feminists. This was necessary for the inclusion of posts that outwardly appeared to be more tangentially related or connected to feminism or feminists. The data collection period spanned several days but was limited to posts that had been created within six weeks of the collection period, which concluded mid-August 2019. Once these threads were selected, I generated PDF documents from each one. This resulted in the collection of 69 posts, and, collectively, approximately 7574 comments spanning 1535 pages of forum-style discussion threads.

Once this data was collected, I began my analysis and coding phase, which spanned several months. My analysis was undertaken using two simultaneous approaches. First, using QDAlite data-mining software I set about identifying and isolating comments that directly or indirectly discussed feminists, feminism, or feminist women. I had initially begun this using Dedoose but moved away from it due to its paid-subscription model and concerns regarding its user interface and general stability. This resulted in a secondary data set consisting of approximately 800 comments that were then coded to separate and distinguish identity assignments and claims relating to feminists/feminist women, non-feminist women, feminist men, non-feminist/non-MRA men, and MRA men. Additionally, a group that contained emotionally coded language was also created.

It is important to note, however, that this comment selection and excerpt creation process had the additional effect of stripping each piece of data from the overall contexts and discourses within which they are situated. In response to this, I also engaged in a broader analytical exploration of the content in a more holistic fashion, exploring not only the relevant comments themselves, but also the conversations and contexts they emerged from and which they sat in relation. I did this by identifying the locations from which the excerpts were initially

pulled, and reading these conversations repeatedly, allowing for broader observations and trends to emerge more naturally. This did not involve repeated readings of the initial data set in its entirety, as a large proportion of the comments within this set are entirely unrelated to feminists and feminism.

This methodology resulted in the development of two connected but distinct sites of initial analysis: First, focusing on the ways in which the MRM community conceptualizes, interacts with, frames, and understands feminism as a broad movement and a system of beliefs and ideologies; and second, focusing on the bodies and identities of feminist women themselves, and how these feminist are reduced to the imagined feminist object within MRM imaginations and discourses. These analyses were then used as a foundation for a theoretical discussion exploring the properties, functions, and impacts of affect and emotion in relation to MRM understandings and positionings of feminism, feminists, 'feminism' and the imagined feminist.

2. Analysis Part 1: The MRM and Feminism

2.1 Wherein Themes Emerge from Code

My holistic/immersive approach to generating and applying coding structures resulted in two top-level codes, each with their own sub-code families. These two groups are *Identity Claims*, and *Affective Language*. *Identity Claims* focuses on descriptive content drawn from the comments within the data set and is the main focus of this chapter. The second code family, *Affective Language*, identified passages within comments that used explicitly emotionally coded affective language, and will be addressed later (see chapters 3 & 4).

I initially organized the *Identity Claims* code group by focusing on subject-positionality within each coded excerpt. This led to the following sub-codes: *Feminists/Feminist Women*, *Men (not explicitly MRA)*, *Non-Feminist Women*, and *MRAs*. While this provided a rich pool of data, a number of major discursive themes began to emerge from within, as well as between, the different sub-code groups. These thematic sub-groupings offer strong microcosmic examples of larger tensions and trends represented within the data set.

I have separated a number of these major themes into two main categories: the first is made up of thematically-grouped instances of MRM discussions of feminists and feminism wherein there is a substantial lack of consensus around the focal topic, or where the positions and approaches of users and discussions varied dramatically between different posts. I have labelled this thematic category/grouping as 'inconsistent'. The second focuses on thematically grouped comments and discussions wherein the majority of posters agreed upon a consistent interpretation of each subject at hand, both within individual post comment sections, as well as between different posts where the same or similar conversations occurred. Each type of overall thematic grouping, inconsistent and consistent, can tell us something about the MRM community through an exploration of how and why the themes within each group appear to

have emerged. By exploring these groupings, and exploring what MRAs agree or disagree on within their more common topics of discussion, we can see the emergence of core thematic and ideological foundations shared by the majority of MRAs within the community, as well as areas in which the framing and discursive strategies used by MRAs to conceptualize and interpret feminism and feminists leads to underlying tensions within the movement.

This chapter, then, is largely focused on the ways in which MRAs conceptualize, discuss, understand, and frame feminism as a social movement, and feminists as a social group. This exploration will also lay the contextual groundwork for the expansion of future chapters into the ways in which MRAs assign affective properties to the bodies of feminist women, both in relation to the body-identities of MRA men, as well as through the positioning of those feminists within the larger 'feminist movement'.

2.2 Inconsistencies

Within the 'inconsistent' thematic grouping, two major themes have emerged as being both frequently occurring areas of MRA user-interest, and common focal points for MRM discussion and disagreement. These themes are masculine emotional expression and feminists, and historical consensus on value of feminism/suffrage. Explorations of these major inconsistent themes can be used to highlight specific inter and intra-group tensions within the MRM community, gesturing to the notable heterogeneity within MRM spaces.

2.2.1 Should Men be Emotional? Identifying Ideological and Positional Diversity Within the MRM, and what Feminists Have to do with it All.

The first of these tensions lies in the 'movement-demographic' makeup of the subreddit itself. As previously discussed, the greater 'men's movement' (MM) is composed of numerous sub-factions and communities, each with different (but often somewhat overlapping) ideological and political positions and understandings. While the MRM is understood by many of its

members as its own distinct community within the manosphere and greater MM, the boundaries between the MRM community and other MM communities and subcultures are not well-defined. Instead, these boundaries are highly porous, and some participants in MRM spaces such as /r/MensRights frequently bring the politics and ideas of other MRM communities with them (Ging, 2019; Marwick & Caplan, 2019). Because of this, /r/MensRights exists as a somewhat ideologically contested space, simultaneously claiming its own distinct identity while serving as a space where members of other, typically more distinct MRM communities, also frequently come together to participate in discussions and interact with each other.

Indeed, within the data set, the ideological positions and politics of other MRM sub-groups such as those of the redpill and incel communities are occasionally brought forward and discussed by users within various posts and discussion threads. This leads to a number of inconsistencies and tensions both within and between various posts and comment threads, where users with different approaches to the issues or topics being explored may have discussions with each other or may clash with each other. The theme involving masculine emotional expression and feminism¹⁴ is a prime example of this, with the discussions and approaches to the topic of masculine emotional expression varying dramatically both between and within posts.

Within /r/MensRights the opinions and positions of commenters regarding men's emotionality cover a wide range, spanning from enthusiastic support to overt rejection. Numerous comment sections contain extended conversations between users discussing their struggles with their own emotional literacies, where users will encourage each other to continue developing and practicing emotional skills and discuss the social pressures that make difficult their efforts to do so. As /u/Rockmanxx laments:

¹⁴ ... and, by extension, femininity, though the ways in which the MRM conceptualize the femininity of the feminist subject/object makes this somewhat more complex: this is explored further in chapter 3.

When men try to share their feelings to the cold, unforgiving society it tells us to 'grow up' and shuts us down. Its **[sic]** not that men have a hard time sharing their feelings, its **[sic]** that there is no point in doing so.

In a similar vein, /u/Bman0001 argues that “*Men are supposed to be silent, tireless machines, not human beings.*” Such approaches and interpretations harken back to the early days of the MRM, where (soon to become MRA) men’s liberationists decried the alienating social and gender roles that relegated men to the workplace and separated them from their families and extended support networks.

Other users approach the subject with more caution. /u/Masterdebator300 suggests that “*every emotion has its place in MODERATION*”, while others discuss the need to maintain a careful balance between emotion and ‘logic.’ This emphasizes a trend within these more moderate commenters wherein emotion and masculine emotionality is not dismissed, but is treated as a property that, for men, may have some value but is potentially dangerous or harmful if not carefully controlled or policed. For these commenters, emotionality is a tool in much the same manner as logic. Numerous commenters emphasize the importance of one not succumbing to emotion; /u/AskingToFeminists says “*Too much emotions without enough logic and you end up doing many things like feminism does.*” Indeed, giving in to emotion still holds the risk of potential emasculation. Additionally, I see here a framing device commonly observed within the online far-right, where the undervaluing of such things as emotion is used to dismiss and disregard oppositional positions.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, many users reject such approaches outright. In response to a conversation around the validity of allowing boys to cry without being shamed for such an act, /u/Me_ADC_Me_SMASH comments: “*Stop trying to breed weak boys. Why the fuck is this sub full of soyboys?*,”¹⁵ while u/uMissionfortruth argues that “[g]iving into emotions

¹⁵ ‘Soyboy’ is a term initially developed and popularized by the alt-right and is used as a pejorative to refer to or identify primarily left-wing men that are considered non-masculine or effeminate. The term is based upon the conspiratorial belief within some far-right spaces that the consumption of soy has a feminizing

isn't something you should teach your boy." These users frequently push back against less masculine-conservative approaches, arguing that;

Feminists don't want men to be strong, masculine and stoic. They want them to be emotional, coddled, and feminine... boys should be taught to be disciplined and strong... getting your child into the cycle of crying over everything and rewarding them with cuddles will ruin them. (/u/WingsofWongs).

This pushback is almost universally centered around the idea that encouraging men to be more emotionally aware and expressive is simply another facet of a broad feminist agenda to feminize and emasculate men.

The relationship between the topic of masculine emotionality and feminism, too, is quite convoluted. While users who reject emotionality as the result of ongoing feminist efforts frame feminists as malicious or dangerous opponents, so too do the more moderate and accepting MRM users frame feminists as oppositional to their own positions and goals, albeit in different ways. MRA commenters who openly approach emotion frequently frame feminists as cruel, uncaring, and uninterested in the emotional wellbeing and expression of men. /u/Rethgil asks his fellow commenters: "... *what do you think the feminists' whole 'drink male tears' thing was? It's to mock, laugh and sneer at all and any male suffering*", while /u/kluger19 argues that "*it's mostly women and feminists shaming boys for expressing themselves and showing emotion.*"

Such discussions around men, boys and emotion are common within the data set, indicating that this is a topic of some importance to the MRM community. Many users encourage the exploration of emotions, either without conditions, or as a means of experiencing and developing a 'masculine emotionality', distinct from the emotional 'set' attributed to women but free of what many users see as the emotionally suppressive social shackles placed upon men and boys. Some commenters instead appear cautious when considering their own

influence upon men due to the presence of phytoestrogens within soy and soy products, which (apparently) left-wing men are more likely to consume (this may be connected to the perception of vegetarianism and veganism as a left-wing dietary trend).

emotionality, stressing the need for balance and warning against the feminizing potential that succumbing to emotions may bring. Others adopt a more absolutist approach; that emotionality, particularly forms of emotionality that suggest or imply vulnerability, will lead to nothing short of the direct feminization of men, and a clear threat to masculinity itself.

There is a clearly identifiable underlying point of agreement between all three approaches: that of feminism as an encroaching/threatening 'other'. However, specific understandings of the properties, intentions, and characteristics of the feminist as 'other' are themselves hotly contested within the MRM.

2.2.2 Do MRAs Accurately or Sufficiently Understand Feminism? Exploring the Historical Validity of the Feminist Project.

The second major tension lies in the highly inconsistent and contested presentations and framings of feminist activism, theory, and ideology within MRM discussions. The ways in which feminists are presented and described varies wildly both between the comment sections of various posts, as well as within those comment sections themselves. MRA users present conflicting accounts of feminists and feminism, and often accuse other posters of 'spreading feminist propaganda'. This is founded in a clear lack of understanding of, exposure to, or willingness to engage directly with feminist literature and discourses. The vast majority of posts depicting (and therefore representing) feminists appear to be selected because of their extreme or inconsistent natures. This is largely the result of three major projects or strategies at work within the selection, presentation, and explorations of these examples by MRAs: 'nutpicking', context stripping, and misinterpretation.

Coined by journalist Kevin Drum in 2006, nutpicking is a neologism that refers to a combination of the straw-man and ad hominem fallacies, wherein one intentionally seeks out extreme and non-representative examples of members of an opposing group or ideology and

present them as representative of that group. Many of the posts within the /r/MensRights subreddit appear to be selected, posted, and upvoted using this strategy. Numerous screenshots of Facebook, twitter, and Tumblr posts are filtered onto the front page of the subreddit depicting what appear to be irrational, hateful, or hypocritical expressions of 'feminist' thought (see fig. 4).

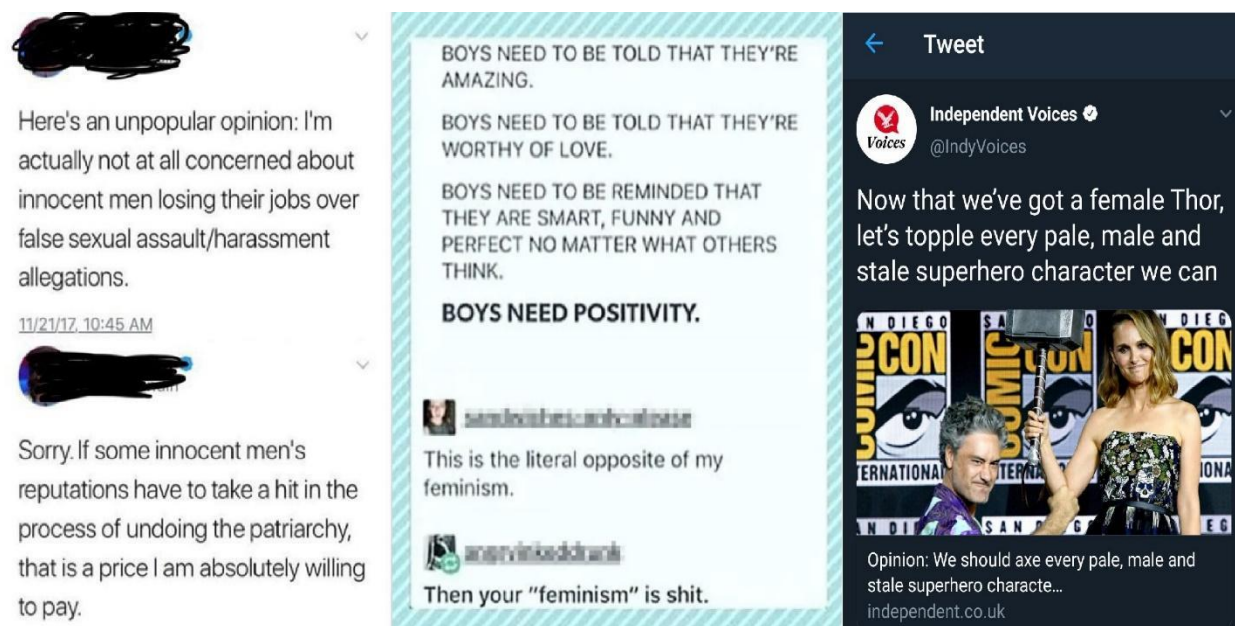


Figure 4. Examples of posts from the data set: post titles from left to right: 'Because feminism', 'Your feminism is shit', 'Feminists show their real face again, they want each male to be axed'

In conjunction with this nutpicking selective strategy, representations of feminists are also often stripped of any contexts from which they may have been pulled. This allows MRAs to apply their own meanings and interpretations upon such images and texts without considering the background of the text, the setting in which it was developed and presented, what such texts may be in relation to, or the theoretical and philosophical foundations that would help ground and clarify what the original writer may have been attempting to communicate. This allows MRAs to further utilize such posts in the construction of a straw-feminist figure.

MRAs also often misread or misinterpret feminist thought, ideas, theory, and ideology. This can take several forms; many commenters appear to simply not have any real exposure to or

understanding of feminist thought, and therefore their interpretations of feminist representations seem to be mediated by the interpretations and discourses already existing within MRM spaces. Other MRAs engage with feminist representations by actively reaching for interpretations that are able to confirm their already existing worldview (see the last image in figure 1, and the related post title in the caption). In yet other instances, commenters may claim to have studied or read feminist literature and offer their own interpretations and summaries of such works. In these cases, commenters consistently offer reviews of feminist theory that range from grossly inaccurate to the deliberate misreading of those texts (Marwick & Caplan, 2019). An example of this can be seen in the following highly-upvoted comment by /u/LedLeplin1602, who is commenting on a post linking to the summary of an article on domestic violence framing strategies in a feminist academic journal. In this comment, we can directly see how the feminist text in question (italicized for clarity) is ‘translated’ (bolded for clarity) by /u/LedLeplin1602 to better align with MRM understandings of feminism and feminists:

It concludes that broadly understanding women’s use of strength, power, coercion, control, and violence, even illegitimate uses, can be framed consistent with feminist goals

Translation: Being an abuser is feminist

This binary was an essential starting point to defining and responding to domestic violence

No it wasn’t it was one-sided and restrictive

This strategy includes bringing male victims of domestic violence within existing services, monitoring exaggerations and misstatements about the extent of women’s violence.

Translation: Men make it all up and we’re gonna do our best to dismiss them when they come forward, also hashtag believe all women

noting the troublesome line between perpetrator/victim for women

Translation: When we find female perpetrators we’ll dig into her past and present to find something that happened to her to class her as a victim to then justify her actions against her victim.

These goals included retaining domestic violence’s central and iconic framing as a women’s issue, preserving critical funding sources and infrastructure to serve victims, and thwarting obstructionist political challenges largely waged by men’s rights groups.

Translation: Domestic Abuse must be seen as a women’s issue and any attempts at helping all victims equally must be prevented.

this Article considers whether the strategy of containment is too myopic and reactive to endure... "

Translation: We're gonna appear to consider changing our myopic ways but with our previous dismissive statements it's clear where we stand

As a result of these strategies, MRAs are free to construct and interpret 'feminism' without being bound by the constraints of actual representations of feminist thought, feminist activism, and feminist women. This means that the construction of 'feminism' can be molded and constantly reshaped to suit the ideological needs of the MRM community, through continued presentations of carefully chosen extreme and decontextualized representations of feminists, as well as through ongoing processes of interpretations/misinterpretation.

This strategy of misinterpretation appears to allow for (or perhaps causes) the reduction of feminism and its wide, complex, and diverse range of positions, ideologies, and demographic makeups into the largely uniform and monolithic 'feminism', as understood by the MRM. When discussing or referring to the work of feminist theorists such as bell hooks, for example, no attempts are made to identify or acknowledge the schools of feminist thought within which those theorists exist and operate. This is unsurprising, since, as we have seen already, the MRM bases a great deal of its epistemic beliefs upon largely universalistic understandings of sex, gender, and social/cultural norms and the ignoring of the implications of intersectional thought. Such an epistemic approach is thus likely to necessarily lead to and require the development of an understanding of feminism that does not consider such complexities. It should be noted, however, that while this appears to be broadly borne out within the data set, there is evidence that a few specific feminist communities and spaces are identified as distinct by some MRAs, though such attempts to do so are almost always contested to some extent. For example, when, in one post, discussion turns to the feminists and feminism of the r/gendercritical subreddit, a reddit community based around 'gender critical', or trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERF), u/ExcellentTraffic123 points out that:

r/gendercritical is a subreddit for people who call themselves "gender critical feminists". Their *raison d'être* is that they hate m [sic] and they hate transgender people. They have nothing to do with the

mainstream of feminism, and they actually make feminis [sic] look bad by presenting raw hate and prejudice as feminism.

Other commenters, however, reject such distinctions, or, as is the case with the above comment, suggest that this is either the expression of ‘normal’ feminist infighting, or that the more radical and internally controversial feminist communities are merely political tools of the broader feminist movement:

Radical feminists have been around for a LONG time. Bombing, burning, threatening, trying to assassinate, writing works Once time passes, they will be reabsorbed and accepted. Radical feminism does the dirty work and pushes the limits while the rest claim plausible [sic] deniability. (u/Historybuffman)

This lack of interpretive coherence and agreement around ‘feminism’, however, presents a significant challenge for the MRM community. The MRM’s understanding of ‘feminism’, through these strategies, can constantly be cast and recast, and its diversities of thought, politics, ideologies, and activism can be largely ignored. Because of this, MRAs are fundamentally prevented from actively and fully engaging with and properly understanding feminist thought. Instead, feminism becomes an inconsistent, amorphous phenomena with little to connect to and engage with beyond the overarching ‘feminism is bad, feminists hate men’ theme generally accepted by the MRM. Because of this, actual specific properties, values, and purposes of the feminist movement remain contested by MRAs. This can be seen in the frequent and ongoing MRM debates around the historical valuing and importance of the feminist movement.

Historical feminism, particularly suffrage, is a hotly contested topic within MRM discussions represented within the data set. While the vast majority of MRA commenters agree that contemporary feminism (referred to by MRAs as third-wave feminism or, occasionally, postfeminism) is harmful, toxic, or hateful, some posters will qualify that feminism may not have always been so bad, and will, in particular, cite the value of ‘first-wave feminism’ (suffrage) and the work of early feminist figures in fighting for the right for women to vote. These commenters

will frequently argue that feminism was of value when there were ‘real’ rights for women to fight for, but have since lost their way and descended into their modern state as they adopted less important or valuable causes, typically those relating to identity politics or trans rights¹⁶. For these commenters, feminism is framed as something that, historically, was justifiably necessary, but is no longer so.

In contrast, those who argue that feminism has never been historically valid or useful commonly take a much more hardline approach to women and gender roles, making additional arguments that feminism has not had a positive impact on women, either historically or in the present day. These arguments frequently use the same framing strategies of suffrage that many MRAs use to describe and understand contemporary feminism. These MRA commenters describe historical feminist movements such as suffrage not as a struggle for basic rights, but instead as feminists reaching for power and privilege without the costs that men have had to pay for them. Commenters refer here, once again, to such things as the all-male draft and the historical roles of men as soldiers (while ignoring how war impacts non-combatant/civilian populations, as well as the historical opposition of many feminists to the draft, particularly in the United States; MacLean, 1980), or the role of men as breadwinners at that time (again ignoring, obviously, the idea that women during suffrage may have also wished for greater entry into broader workforces);

What those older feminists (which we very much can hate, especially for this is) DID do was make it so you had all the benefits of men without any of the accountability or hindrances men faced for being able to have the lawful right to vote (/u/ArioDeWitt).

These discussions of historical feminism are usually embedded within or emerge out of discussions of the perceived intentions and purposes of contemporary feminist activism and

¹⁶ As with many topics within the MRM, the trans identities and trans rights are frequently discussed and contested, though the general position of the majority of MRA commenters is dismissive in regards to the validity of trans identities, framing trans folk and trans rights as a further example of the undermining of traditional, ‘natural’, and more ‘proper’ gender roles by the ‘left’ generally, and feminism more specifically.

politics. Users who argue in favour of the historical importance of early feminism also often frame modern feminism and feminists in a somewhat more sympathetic light. These users suggest that while the feminism of today is indeed toxic and harmful, this does not necessarily mean that it is intentionally so, suggesting that many modern feminists are simply indoctrinated or misguided instead of openly malicious. These commenters will frequently suggest that it is important to separate feminism from feminists, arguing that while feminism itself (as well as many feminists) is a project that is detrimental to men (either intentionally or unintentionally), there are still 'good' feminists, or at the very least, good people who identify as feminists because they are misinformed, lied to, or have been the victims of feminist indoctrination. These discussions are often supported by, or are developed in reaction to, examples of feminists offering or voicing support for men, and being swiftly policed or punished for doing so by other feminists (See figure 5 for a /r/mensrights post from the data set that serves as an example of this).



Figure 5. Post title: 'What happens when a reasonable feminism account posts something supporting men in the slightest.'

More hardline users reject the gains and activism of early feminists; they are also much more likely to reject the work of current feminists in significantly more hostile and uncompromising ways. These users will describe feminism as a malicious project of 'misandristic'¹⁷ supremacy; to these users, feminism is and has always been pursued for the purposes of disenfranchising, oppressing, and victimizing men and masculinity. There are, according to these commenters, no 'good' feminists, and feminists are, at best, simply

¹⁷ 'Misandristic' is a term which is frequently used within MRA spaces and serves as an antonym for misogyny – it is typically used when describing the motivations and ideologies of feminism and feminists.

uninterested in men and the issues faced by men and are willing to cause further harm to men in the pursuit of their own agendas.

Users who express less direct hostility to feminism are also much more likely to indicate their commitment to gender equality as a whole, usually adding the qualification that while they are interested in equality more generally, their focus is more specifically directed towards the issues faced by men. These users will also lament the inability of feminists to engage with and work alongside MRAs, often arguing that feminist spaces are ideological echo chambers that make such communications and collaborations all but impossible. This again highlights the separation, for these users, between feminism and feminists, where the possibility of 'good' feminists remains open, but such feminists are prevented from working with MRAs by other, more hostile and misandristic feminists. The potential for some feminists to be 'good' is further inhibited by the ideological properties of feminist echo chambers that prevent and suppress any expression of support for men, as such expressions contravene the ideological and discursive dogma of those spaces and are quickly and aggressively suppressed.

2.3 Consistencies

2.3.1 Can MRAs Even Talk to Feminists? 'Logic', Dogma, and Blame in Between-Movement Discourses.

There is little evidence of earnest engagement with feminists themselves within the MRM discussions of them. One selected post by /u/Hypocritical_Midget, titled 'I posted this to r/Feminism and I got banned' (see figure 6 for post content) offers a good example of this.

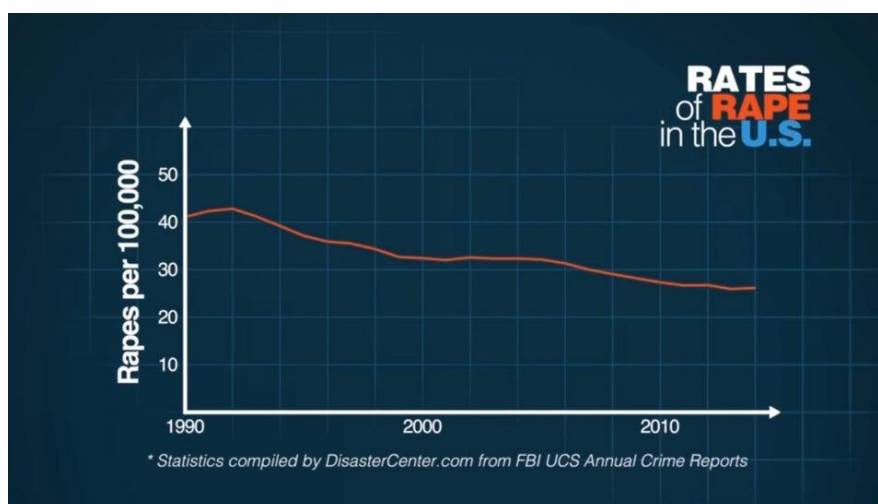


Figure 6. Post title: 'I posted this to r/Feminism and I got banned'

Discussions and comments within this post discuss the inability for feminists to honestly engage in discussions with MRAs, instead opting to immediately ban users who, according to the commenters, disagree with or contradict feminist dogma. However, when explored more contextually, it becomes clear that the post that resulted in the banning of /u/Hypocritical_Midget from /r/Feminism was not necessarily a simple presentation of counter-dogmatic 'fact.' The title of the original post is relevant here; when figure 6 was posted in /r/Feminism, it was accompanied by the post title "*There is no rape culture – Change my mind*", which contains overt far-right dogwhistles that are quite recognizable within progressive and leftist spaces¹⁸. Indeed, a small minority of commenters within this post point this out, arguing that the original phrasing of the post was unnecessarily provocative and was what likely led to /u/Hypocritical_Midget's ban. This is not, then, the banning of a user in reaction to the

¹⁸ 'Change my mind' references alt-right personality and provocateur Steven Crowder, who is known within the left-wing political activism sphere for such things as setting up a table with the sign '*Male Privilege is a Myth- Change my Mind*' on a University Campus, harassing left-wing journalists and activists (Mackey, 2012; Rosenberg, 2019), and selling merchandise sporting phrases such as 'Free Helicopter Rides' – ostensibly referencing the extrajudicial 'death flight' killings of leftists by the Pinochet regime in Chile (Caffier, 2017).

presentation of inconvenient ‘facts,’ but a reaction to an intentionally antagonistic post from a user who likely already had a history of antagonistic engagement with /r/Feminism and its users.

/u/Hypothetical_Midget’s post offers a typical example of how MRAs frame ‘honest’ MRA attempts to engage with feminists. Uses of right-wing dog-whistles by MRAs (such as ‘Change my mind’), or the antagonistic or provocative approaches used by MRAs while ignoring, often blatantly, the contextual settings of these engagements within such attempts, is itself a frequent occurrence within the data set. Users will discuss the inability or unwillingness of feminists to interact with MRAs, often providing personal examples, while ignoring their own roles within such interactions, as well as the ways in which the consistent harassment of feminists by some MRAs may contribute to such tensions (Mann, 2008). Instead, this communication breakdown is framed as being a result of the fundamental inability of feminists to engage with ‘facts’ and ‘evidence’; as /u/zeerust2000 states:

I'm banned from there too. I've worked out that what really matters to them is that you signal to them that you are part of their 'tribe'. A true member of the tribe would never post anything like this, and it doesn't matter at all how accurate the information is.

This strategy of misrepresentation is, in turn, frequently used to frame feminist discourse overall as entirely ideological and dogmatic, and therefore easily dismissible, and the failure of communicative discourse between MRAs and Feminists are almost entirely on the shoulders of feminists. By reframing and reinterpreting feminist discourse, the MRM is able to further widen the discursive and knowledge gap bordering the spaces between the MRM and its members, and feminists/feminism. Perhaps MRM members have a clear understanding of feminism (so say MRAs), perhaps not. For many MRAs, it is feminism itself that makes communication and understanding between the two almost impossible, for across that border lies a realm of echo chambers and rigid ideological doctrine, while their side exists as a bastion of logic, and reason.

2.3.2 Logic/Dogma: Establishing Border and Boundary Through Dichotomy

The framing of the discursive divide between MRAs and feminists is a clear example of an ongoing project of 'boundary work' (Lamont & Molnár, 2002), where the relationship between MRAs and feminists is identified through a dichotomy of logic/dogma. Such a dichotomy clearly establishes, identifies, and locates a strong boundary separating the MRM and feminist movements, as it functions as a claim to and judgement of value that positions the MRM as inherently more valid, and therefore superior to feminism.

This boundary aligns with broader dominant culturally gendered narratives around sex and gender, wherein the conceptualizations of cognitive and emotional capacities and properties of gendered bodies are split along something of a Cartesian divide; 'logic', 'objectivity', and 'reason' are broadly positioned as inherently masculine traits (McElhinny, 2016), and emotionality as inherently feminine. This split is utilized, both culturally as well as more specifically and directly within MRM spaces, to devalue, dismiss, and diminish the positions and contributions of women as less valuable, further reifying and strengthening the border between the MRM and feminism as a border between value and non-value, and reaffirming broader socio-cultural narratives that are actively being challenged by many feminist activists and scholars (de Boise & Hearn, 2017).

The MRM/feminism boundary/border is not particularly porous, either, or at least not unidirectionally. MRM discourses frame feminist spaces as powerful ideological echo chambers, and present carefully selected and interpreted examples of feminists who dare to voice support for men being aggressively policed and attacked by other feminists (again, see figure 5). Through these framing strategies and presentations, MRM discourses establish that if there are and 'good feminists' they are unable to advocate for or engage with the MRM community. Indeed, entire threads and whole posts are dedicated to the topic of men and women (mostly

men) who have 'escaped' the abusive clutches of feminism and found sanctuary within the MRM community.

In contrast, accounts of MRAs travelling across the MRM/Feminist border in the other direction, and becoming feminists themselves, are entirely absent from the discussions contained within this data set. The closest references to such a repositioning are seen in discussions of male feminists or men's liberationists, who are framed as brainwashed victims of feminist propaganda, as traitors to masculinity, as 'weak' men who are engaged in a desperate (and futile) attempt to gain back the privileges stripped from men by feminists, or as (also 'weak') men who adopt the guise of male feminist in an attempt to gain sexual access to feminists. The latter strategy, according to MRM commenters, is self-defeating, as /u/killcat points out:

... female feminists find non-feminists and even misogynists more attractive than male feminists. All of that is confirmed by studies and polls. This could be cause rather than effect, that is unattractive men becoming feminist because they think it will get them laid.

Through these framings of boundary/border crossings between feminism and the MRM by (mainly) formerly feminist-aligned men, the value of the in-group (MRAs) is again affirmed, and the presence of men within the out-group is dismissed through narratives of victimization and marginalization, particularly through the framing of their feminism-adjacency or participation as an indication of weakness (and therefore emasculation).

2.3.3 Affective Communities: The Issue of Heterogeneity, and Feminism as Threat

However, there remains an issue within the established borders of the MRM; when it comes to many of the subjects and issues facing men that MRM members discuss, there is, quite frequently, a notable level of ideological discordance, as can be seen in the above examples of masculine emotionality and historical feminism. Indeed, it would seem likely that in a space that is frequently observed actively misrepresenting or misinterpreting much of the

content being posted, and actively using such content to build or support an ideological worldview, such inconsistencies are almost certain to be quite common, as there remains a notable lack of a stable and well-supported foundation of knowledge for such positions. This means that when approaching a variety of ideological and political subjects by MRAs within their community spaces, there exists a notable lack of common ground regarding many of the facets of those subjects.

The previously outlined tensions around masculinity and emotion, for example, suggest the presence of several different approaches to and expressions of masculinity competing within MRM spaces. Users who advocate for increased and more dynamic forms of masculine emotional expression appear to be developing forms of masculine identity more in line with contemporary descriptions of hybrid masculinities (Bridges, 2014; Demetriou, 2002). Hybrid masculinities are enacted by privileged men who work to distance themselves from traditional masculine norms, while also reinforcing and reproducing hegemonic masculinity through their expressions of their now more 'evolved' masculinities. In contrast, the detractors of this position appear to be vehemently and aggressively adhering to and attempting to reify more traditional hegemonically-accepted representations and practices of masculinity. Such resistance is not entirely surprising, as other studies of MM communities have also identified notable ideological heterogeneity within moderately enclosed community spaces, particularly within the 'incel' movement (Jaki, et al. 2019).

But this heterogeneity presents a significant issue in relation to the overall coherence and stability of the MRM community. Many different voices and positions exist within this MRM community and inhabit a wide ideological range. Because of this, MRM commenters frequently find themselves in direct opposition to one and other when approaching some of the core issues and topics that exist within and are commonly discussed within MRM spaces. How then, can

this movement find enough common ground to achieve some relative level of coherence and unity?

To answer this, we must explore the most consistent and omni-present theme that has emerged from this data set: feminism as 'bad'. The interrogation of this theme must, to some degree, be separated from the content and positions brought forward by individual MRAs themselves, and instead approached more broadly. As with many other oft-discussed topics within MRM spaces, there remains a great deal of disagreement and uncertainty around the specific properties and intentions of feminism as a movement. Such uncertainty can be seen in the diverse and occasionally conflicting representations of feminism within MRM conversations/threads that directly address feminism as an ideology, movement, or issue. This can (and has) be demonstrated within the previously explored subjects of masculine emotionality and historical feminism (see above). MRAs appear to be fundamentally unable to agree on what feminism is and does. Underlying this contested ideological heterogeneity, however, is a broad agreement that feminism is a force that, intentionally or not, causes harm and presents a clear threat to MRAs, men, and masculinity broadly.

To further explore this theme, and its broader implications within the MRM, it is helpful to approach and frame the MRM as what communications scholar Zizi Papacharissi describes as an 'affective public' (2014). Papacharissi describes these publics as networks and/or communities that cohere around shared displays of affect through the circulation of signifiers, narratives and sentiments that are able to "*discursively call into being public formations*" (2015, p. 310). These communities are formed as individuals come together and connect through shared affective representations and objects, which themselves form the cores of such spaces. Within these communities, sentiment, opinion, and fact are "*blended into one effusive stream to the point [where] it is difficult to discern one variety of expression from the other*" (Papacharissi,

2014, p. 129). Indeed, this rings true of the MRM and its discourses, where the lines between ‘fact’, opinion, and feeling are often more than a little blurred.

The omni-presence of feminism, and its consistent negative framing, serves as such a core for the MRM community. While MRAs appear to disagree about most of their main topics, all MRAs find common ground with one and other through discussions and (mis)framings of feminism as a threat to themselves and men. Certainly, too, there are other affective commonality-cores within the MRM community, such as that of a broader anxiety that is deeply rooted within masculinity, privilege and status, but none of these other ‘cores’ emerge with such directness and awareness as that of feminism.

The use of affective commonality-cores has also been observed more broadly within the contemporary alt-right sphere. In their explorations of alt-right discourses online, sociologists Edwin Hodge & Helga Hallgrimsdottir (2019) found that within far-right and alt-right associated spaces (of which the MRM is one), cultural objects, phrases, and signifiers carry a variety of meanings that allow like-minded individuals to recognize and operate within their communities. Such an approach means that a *“person can identify with the alt-right without, for example, accepting the increasingly common claims of the “QAnon” conspiracy theory; so long as they continue to accept the shared lexicon they can claim membership without issue.”* This means that community members do not necessarily need to hold the same interpretations and politics as others within that community’s spaces, as long as they have a shared lexical suite and a similar *enough* ideological approach to the cultural objects that are centrally located within those spaces to engage with one and other.

For some MRAs, feminism may have once been an important movement, back when suffrage fought for the right for women to vote, and perhaps not. For others, there are ‘good’ feminists, trapped behind the ideological iron curtain of feminist ideology and echo chambers. While these subjects, and more, are contested within MRM spaces, MRAs are able to find a

central meeting point through their overall conceptualization of ‘feminism’ as a broad, monolithic, irrational/dogmatic ideological entity that, at best, cares little for the plights of MRAs and men and therefore often tramples those men under its boot, and, at worst, exists as a malicious and insidious movement aimed at disenfranchising, marginalizing, and perhaps even fully exterminating men and masculinity. Common to all the discussions and themes presented here is an agreement of affect; feminism, as it exists currently, is a dangerous threat to men and masculinity, and lies in direct opposition to the MRM. The framing of feminism as threat by the MRM draws upon and evokes the anxieties observed by scholars such as Allen (2016) and serves as an affective driver within the community (see analysis Ch. 3), evoking feelings of fear, anger, and disgust.

Through the framing strategies utilized by the MRM community we can see how feminism is reinterpreted and misrepresented, reducing all of feminist thought; a diverse movement (or collection of largely interlinking movements) fighting for a wide range of complex political and ideological goals into a monolithic, corrupting, irrational, and hateful ideological force. Through these interpretive and (mis)representational strategies, the MRM is able to reframe feminism and feminist thought as something that is not only worth intellectually dismissing by the MRM community, but actively poses a threat to both men and women, while simultaneously erasing the broad range of feminist politics, ideologies, theories, and goals, and reducing them into a single, MRM-conceived ‘feminism’. Feminism, then, is not only a social movement and ideology, as viewed and conceptualized by the MRM, but also is something akin to a virus that threatens to contaminate all it touches.

With the introduction of the idea of ‘feminism’ as being something akin to a virus or disease, it becomes necessary to shift my analytical focus towards the primary sites at which feminism-as-virus is seen by MRAs as operating: feminist women. Now that I have established the broader positionality and framing of feminism in relation to and by the MRM, it is necessary

to examine the specific framings and flavors of this affect through an exploration of the presentations and conceptualizations of these 'infected' feminists and feminist bodies themselves within MRM discourses.

Chapter 3 – Feminists from Feminism

3.1 Exploring the Emergence from and Placement of Feminist Women in Movement/Ideology

In this chapter I will discuss the conceptualization of feminists as bodies and objects by and within MRM discourses. The reduction of ‘real’ feminist peoples to the more passive body/object is not being done as a dismissal of individual feminists themselves, because, as I will argue shortly, the individual ‘feminist’ within MRM discourses does not seem to be a representation of any clearly identified or understood feminist ‘person’. Instead, like ‘feminism’, the imagined feminist is a symbolic, affective, and semiotic construct that has been created through MRM discourses.

This discussion will focus on specific code groups within the data set, namely the codes used to group responses related ‘feminism/feminist’, and ‘affective language’. This necessitates the separation of discussions on ‘feminism’ from imagined feminist, as ‘feminism’ as a movement and symbolic object has been explored using thematic rather than coded groupings. The following chapter, therefore, is drawn from the ‘feminist’ sub-code, and its overlap with the ‘affective’ language code group. Such a focus will allow for a more in-depth exploration of the ways in which feminist women and their bodies are positioned within the affective discourses of the MRM, and how specific affective properties are identified and assigned to those feminist bodies. Before this can be achieved, however, it is important to outline the distinction between ‘feminism’ and the imagined feminist within MRM discourses, both in terms of their conceptualization of the two, as well as the kinds of relationships MRAs have with each.

The relationship between an MRA individual and ‘feminism’ (which is a relationship between an individual and an ideology) is different from the relationship between the MRA and *the* ‘feminist’ (a relationship between one subject/body and another), both imagined and not. As seen in the previous chapter, while many MRAs make a distinction between feminism and

feminists, they do not make any particularly substantial efforts to separate themselves from MRM ideology. Instead, MRAs internalize their own ideologies as a natural part of their own selves, an inherent 'rightness' that is framed and justified through discourses and understandings concerning the inherent 'logic' and 'objectivity' of MRA thought. As 'feminism' is broadly understood by MRAs as an ideological framework or movement, the relationship between the MRA and 'feminism' is a relationship between the MRA subject and a set of ideas, beliefs, and/or 'feelings'.

Feminist women, however, have bodies; and unlike the disconnected and disembodied conceptualization of 'feminism' within the MRM, these bodies have appearances, can be affected and impacted in more direct ways, and have a more directly and clearly established relationship and history with men, masculinities, and the bodies of men (and MRAs). It is still important to note that the ways in which the imagined feminist is approached, framed, and discussed differs in subtle but significant ways from 'feminism', but the location of these women (and their bodies) is still embedded within and emerges from 'feminism'. Understandings of the imagined feminist are founded within the contextual understandings of 'feminism' within the MRM community, but the abstract physicality of bodies that comes with discussing the 'feminist' as an individual is a critical point of divergence between MRM understandings of feminism and feminists.

3.2 People to Bodies: MRM Essentialism, Dehumanization, and Objectifying

Feminists

The absence of any acknowledgements of race, class, or the many other locations that may form, impact, or affect the identities of feminist women, suggests that the imagined feminist may be positioned by members of the MRM as a 'normal' or 'neutral' default figure (which is to say, white, CIS, etc., and as we shall soon see, potentially desirable reproductive 'subjects').

The exceptions to this are sexuality, as some MRAs will suggest, both implicitly and explicitly, that feminist women may be lesbians¹⁹, and dis/ability, which will be explored shortly.

MRM members very rarely discuss specific feminists, and in the rare instances that they do such discussions appear to be based on highly simplified or anecdotal understandings of those individuals. When they occur, these more focused discussions around specific individuals are often built around nut-picked examples of feminists. This is usually limited to images of twitter, blog posts or quotes, (mis)representations of famous (or controversial) feminist figures or are based on “this one feminist I know/knew”. Such discussions lack any in-depth information of the individual in question. Instead, discussions around ‘feminists’ are typically broader assertions about or descriptions of an unspecified feminist ‘other’.

As such, conceptualizations of specific feminists are themselves still, to some extent, abstractions. While separable from ‘feminism’ as an ideology due to the apparent physicality of feminist bodies, such bodies remain, within MRM discourses, somewhat unreal. Imagined feminists are, therefore, not individual agents, but instead exist as a monolithic and semiotic object, even as individuals or members of various and oft-differing collectives. It is perhaps more fitting, then, to describe feminists, as understood and engaged with by MRAs as the imagined feminist; the stereotyping of feminists through MRM discursive ideology makes the feminist individual itself abstract, or even erases it entirely, by reducing ‘the feminist’ into a set of common core attributes and traits that are understood by the MRM as typically shared by all feminist ‘subjects/bodies’.

It is worth returning, briefly, to the central role of biological essentialism within the ideologies of the MRM. For the MRM, gender, and its associated behaviors, social roles, and norms, are themselves inherent expressions of naturalistic biological properties and functions.

¹⁹ This connection appears to be in part linked to the lesbian movements and communities of the second wave of feminism.

Identity, individuality, and body must, it should then follow, be intimately connected with one and other. To the MRA/MRM, the body, then, *is* the individual (or, at the very least, their sexes, genders, and behaviours), and the two are, to some extent, one and the same.

The imagined feminist is, therefore, both an identity as well as a bodily location, indicating that the imagined feminist, as a semiotic object within MRM ideologies and discourses, itself holds an abstract property of 'body' within itself that is then resolved into a state of corporeality when transposed onto the bodies of feminist women when encountered more directly by MRAs. However, one cannot impose an identity, with its own set of behaviors, beliefs, motivations, and attributes, upon an individual/subject that already has a distinct and very real identity of their own. Instead, those individuals must be stripped away from the bodies they inhabit to make room for that which the MRM is assigning to them. In this way, the utilization and application of the imagined feminist by the MRM necessarily involves the violent dehumanization²⁰, erasure, and objectification of feminist women, reducing them to (for the MRM) mere body/objects, existing in a liminal, tabula-rasa-like state until the MRM or individual MRAs turn their attention upon them and apply to those objectified bodies the imagined feminist. It is ironic, here, that this process of dehumanization for the purposes of applying an essentialist identity as a replacement fundamentally undercuts any possibility that that essentialism is, in any way valid; the very fact that the MRA can, albeit almost certainly unconsciously, strip (from their own perspective) an identity from a body indicates that there *cannot be* an unbreakable and natural connection between the two.

²⁰ As observed by many scholars and thinkers, dehumanization might itself be seen as an act of violence against those being targeted by it, and often serves as a means of justifying and facilitating violence against people and populations (Bevens & Loughnan, 2019, Mathot-Jones, Book, & Gauthier, 2019).

3.3 Bodies, Power, & ‘Good Women’

MRAs often differentiate between feminist and non-feminist women, both implicitly and explicitly. /u/tableender points out that “*Most women are good women. That's why active man abusing feminists ... are less than 10% of women*”. In another post /u/Deydrania argues that “*Women are willing to pay the price of men's lives getting ruined to accomplish their goals? ... Women who think like this are lower class humans*”. In the latter example, u/uDeydrania makes a clear distinction between women who hold misandristic ideological characteristics attributed to feminists by MRAs, and, ostensibly, women who do not (and are therefore not feminist ‘lower class’ humans). This indicates that feminist women are not really ‘women’ or are, at the very least, a subset of women who are ‘lower class humans’ and not ‘good’ or proper women. Therefore, to explore and analyze the MRM construction of the ‘feminist’, particularly the feminist woman, I first establish how non-feminist, ‘good women’ are constructed, imagined, and conceptualized by the MRM community.

Within the data set when MRAs discuss non-feminist women, those women are typically identified and approached through their potential (and imagined) relation to feminism, or as an individual or social group that is impacted by (or at risk of being impacted by) feminism. Such an approach is, of course, expected, as the data collection has been tailored to focus specifically on MRM discourses on feminism and feminists, and thus the roles and impacts of feminists and feminism may be overrepresented in these discourses if compared to broader MRM conversations and discussions. However, through an exploration of the ways in which non-feminist women are presented through these relations and impacts, the ways in which ‘good women’ are framed in contrast to feminist women become apparent.

While MRAs frame and understand men and masculinity as being under attack or under threat by feminism, they also frequently present similar narratives when it comes to women and femininity. These parallel threats often align through arguments that feminism is an intentional

project with the (often) explicit purpose of undermining and destroying the ‘family’. As /u/Bluffernaut094 argues, “[Feminism] *was birthed to destroy the nuclear family and family values*”. It is worth noting, here, that while there are subsets of feminism and feminist thought that have and/or do, indeed, call for the abolition of the family (Coontz, 1992), they are nowhere referred to within the data set, either directly or (it would appear) indirectly. Instead, the goal of the ‘destruction of the family’ is attributed to all feminists and feminism as a whole. While it is possible that these commenters do indeed know enough about feminism and/or these subsets of feminist thought to be referring to these streams of feminist thought, it is highly unlikely, as that knowledge would likely be utilized and referred to within their discourses (in, as observed in chapter 2, what would likely be a highly selective and/or dishonest fashion) as ‘concrete’ and ‘direct’ evidence of the malicious intent of the ‘feminist movement’.

A purported breakdown of the ‘traditional’ nuclear family, and the gender roles inherent within a heteronormative structure, is presented as one of numerous sites where feminism is causing harm to not only men, but women as well; /u/diretodozap suggests that women

... should hate feminism for what it has done to women. Women these days are alone, miserable, work two jobs, have less money and don't have families. It has ended chivalry and made men avoid mentoring women in the workplace. Feminism has destroyed everything women had.

Such claims strongly indicate a broad rejection of social (and particularly gender) progressivism, and frequently allude to an ideal, prelapsarian set of social and cultural values that are often highly traditionalist.

The value of conservatism and traditionalism are frequently affirmed within these discourses, particularly in relation to gender. These affirmations often refer or allude to what appears to be a highly idealized set of ‘traditional’ gender roles that one might observe in TV shows such as in the early seasons of *Mad Men* (Weiner, 2008), were one not watching it too closely or for too long. Indeed, Jon Hamm’s portrayal of the assertive, confident, familial patriarch Don Draper in the show’s first season appears to fit quite neatly into the ideal

‘traditional’ expressions of masculinity and gender roles broadly outlined within many of the traditionalist affirmations within this data set. It is also worth noting here that these references to traditional values might also be seen as being (broadly) in alignment with those of more conservative Christian cultural beliefs and norms surrounding gender roles, expressions and identities. The MRM does not, however, explicitly identify itself as being religiously driven, oriented, or aligned.

However, some users push back, albeit weakly, against suggestions that the MRM movement is inherently traditionalist or conservative. Such statements of challenge generally include acknowledgements that the community does indeed lean towards conservative/traditional values but suggest that the community has members that span a wide political and ideological spectrum. These statements are further challenged by the frequent downvoting of more left-leaning comments and the frequent contestation of progressive politics. Again, the heterogeneity of the MRM community can be seen here, though perhaps the depth of this particular pool is not quite as substantial as it appears, or as claimed by MRAs.

This does not mean that, according to the MRM community, all non-feminist women are ‘good women’. MRAs frequently discuss examples of non-feminist women who are perceived by the community to be deviant in ways that are not inherently related to feminism. For example, the sexual predation of young boys by women has been highlighted by prominent MRM figures (Hodapp; 2017, p. 141), and are frequently popular topics on the /r/MensRights subreddit. These representations of sexually predatory older women are, however, often still related to feminism by MRAs in various ways; while these women may not be feminists themselves, many of the negative characteristics of ‘not-good women’ are attributed to the broader social influences of feminism, which, according to these users, has created a social environment that facilitates and enhances the capacity of women to act improperly or maliciously; /u/Lethn suggests under the current feminist regime, men “*are not allowed to disagree with women and*

especially you are not allowed to disagree with feminists who think they speak for them, that's sexism in their eyes". Not every woman who has used the 'unfair' legal system to gain unequal custody of a child or levy unfair child support fees on men is necessarily a feminist, but, according to MRAs, feminism is at fault for creating settings and systems which allow these allegedly abusive actions and tactics to occur. Women who apparently cheat the system in the interest of parenting are also consistently identified as 'not good' due to their relationships, attitudes, and actions(frequently identified as abusive or violent) involving men, which consistently involve an inversion of the patriarchal social, economic, and institutional power dynamics and uses of violence that are typically used by men against the women.

For example, the MRM has identified inequalities within custody courts, inequalities related to child-support laws, and a variety of other issues concerning 'fathers rights' as one of the most prominent and pressing issues being tackled by the movement (Kimmel, 2013, p. 137). To support these claims, the MRM will frequently cite statistics that show that following divorces, children overwhelmingly end up in the custody of their mothers. These statistics are taken by the MRM as 'proof' that women are offered systemic advantages within, or are able to take advantage of, the legal system as it relates to child custody disputes. However, while this evidence does indicate a dramatic difference between maternal and paternal custody rates, it is not indicative of custody cases themselves. The statistics presented by the MRM show overall custody rates, of which over 90% are instances where custody arrangements have been mutually agreed upon by both parties. The actual instances of custody cases that involve the legal system amount to just two percent of these overall cases, and do not mirror broader custody trends (Kimmel, 2013).

Also left unacknowledged by the MRM are how factors other than the mere gender of the involved parties, such as histories of domestic abuse, which far more frequently perpetrated by men (some scholars have estimated that up to 90% of contested custody cases involve an

abusive father; Ancis, 2017), impact legal custody cases. In fact, cases involving abusive fathers are *still* more frequently awarded to abusive fathers than 'protective mothers' (Kimmel, 2013, p. 160). Furthermore, in instances when one or both parties are assessed as having some form of risk factor that would impact the child(ren) in question, mothers are significantly more severely and negatively impacted by them than fathers (p. 160). Still, the MRM shows a clear discomfort and anxiety when faced with the suggestion that women may experience success over men within custody courts, despite this not being the norm; such successes, despite often representing mothers overcoming systemic legal inequality, are seen instead by the MRM as that system privileging women broadly.

The actions of these 'not good' women, and their purported lack of accountability are also described within the data set in ways that are consistently reminiscent of the kinds of violence and abuse levied against women both historically and currently. Discussions of men engaging in abusive or violent actions are either absent or approached in drastically different and (often) more sympathetic ways than with women. For example, while posts, topics, and references to women who have committed acts of rape are condemned, men who may have done so are almost exclusively presented as victims of 'false accusations'. This is particularly relevant when considering that the gender roles and ideal social order of the MRM is highly reminiscent of that of the mid-20th century, when men were implicitly seen by the MRM as being able to engage much more actively and openly in the same sorts of actions that MRAs condemn in 'not good' women, such as with punitive or directive domestic abuse that might be utilized by husbands and fathers to control and exert power over their families. The contrast between MRM treatments of masculine violence and abuse towards women in comparison to violence inflicted upon men and boys by women is not discussed, nor do members of the MRM appear to be interested in acknowledging or addressing that this is the case. This suggests a level of disinterest, or even defensiveness, by the MRM when men engage in gendered violence (as

seen in MRM framings of alleged male rapists), but a great deal of anxiety and concern when women do so, despite the fact that such forms of violence occur at drastically disproportionate rates between men and women. Furthermore, these differential treatments of abuse suggest that the anxieties of the MRM are, at least in part, driven by the perception of a loss of patriarchal power.

The identity of the MRAs 'good woman' becomes apparent through contrasts that highlight the properties of 'not good' women, and through the consistent affirmations of traditionalism, particularly in relation to gender roles and the ways in which essentialism is used to explain and justify it. Good women are most frequently (positively) described as loving and supporting partners, wives, mothers, and daughters, highlighting the importance of their relationality to men. 'Good women' also reject the dogma of feminism and progressive politics and make no use of the "unfair" social and structural advantages that have been made accessible to them by feminism. They are all that feminists are not.

The 'good woman' is also available, both physically and emotionally, and accessible to men, as men have nothing to fear from a woman who will not reject his 'chivalry'. The qualities and attributes of the MRA communities 'good woman' closely align with those of emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987; Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerchmidt, 2005), a form of femininity which *"focus[es] on compliance to patriarchy" (p. 848), and is 'the pattern of femininity which is given the most cultural and ideological support... patterns such as sociability... compliance... [and] sexual receptivity [to men]' (Connell 1987, 24)"* (Currier, 2013).

This understanding of "true" femininity as sexual availability for men as well as for reproduction and motherhood by the MRM is particularly important when approaching the imagined feministas a body/object. The bodies of women are frequently socially and culturally identified as existing for the purposes of men's use, consumption, or control (Morris,

Goldenberg, Boyd, 2018; Amy-Chinn, 2006). Feminism, however, upsets this dynamic by challenging prevailing cultural norms that grant men access to the bodies of women by pushing for increased autonomy, both sexually and otherwise (Hodapp, 2017, p. 17). Feminism frequently complicates and disrupts the ability for men to approach and treat women as objects by both pushing for the autonomy and agency of women as well as all subjugated persons and living entities (Collins, 1991; Ahmed, 2017). Feminism also highlights and challenges the positioning of women as objects for the use and consumption by men. This reframing lies in direct contrast to the moral positioning of the 'good' femininity of the MRA's ideal woman. An object, after all, should not have agency of its own, and should be readily available for use; objects cannot challenge the agency or power of the person that is making use of them.

3.4 Feminist Women: The 'Ugliness' of Resistant, Unavailable, & Challenging Bodies

'Feminism' is not typically framed by the MRM as an inherent or inevitable product or property of women. For the MRM, 'feminism' itself is not a baseline property held by those who are also identified by women, but an additional attribute attached to only some women. Numerous discussions within the data set revolve around the apparent rejection of feminism by younger generations, usually by the children of commenters, or presented by commenters who claim to be in secondary school systems. Instead, feminism is seen by MRAs as an ideological force that turns potentially 'good women' into 'feminists'. Feminist women are not just women, but [women + feminism], an articulation of something different and distinct from 'women' as a category or grouping, with layers of additional meaning, signifiers, and affect layered upon them.

Feminist women hold the attributes that may be applied or assigned to 'not good' women. However, while these 'not good' women may hold any number of negative attributes, feminists are typically presented as holding all of them, simultaneously and continuously. This

makes sense, as the capacity for ‘good women’ to become ‘not good women’ is attributed to the social impacts and influences of feminism; it follows then, that feminists are the epitome of the ‘not good woman’. Feminists, however, are more than just (very) ‘not good women’; whereas ‘not good women’ are labeled as such because of what they do, feminist women are assigned consistent and inherent properties that extend beyond their own actions and agency, and are instead framed as a part of the very bodies of feminist women themselves.

Beyond more vague attributions of the ‘badness’ of the feminist individual is that of the body of the feminist woman as inherently disgusting to the MRA. MRM discourses are rife with descriptions or assertions of the feminist body as ugly, or repulsive; in one thread, /u/jbslol suggests that “[f]eminism is an ugly contest”, while, in a discussion about media figure Lena Dunham, /u/hotromeoforyou reacts to an image of her by exclaiming “Ogre !!! Yuck.... she looks yuck typical feminist”. Feminist bodies are framed as holding an inherent ‘ugliness’, and their bodies “lack any kind of feminine grace or modesty and they behave like overgrown children” (/u/RockmannXX). Once again, this is a highly gendered approach to the framing of bodies as inherently worth less (or worthless) due to their lack of desirability for men, which targets the capacities and physical properties of bodies themselves much more directly than is done when discussing non-feminist women. Feminists do not, according to some MRAs, even have bodies that are ‘fully functional’; as /u/rahsoft identifies feminist as “... *the crazy women ... who have no place in society since they are not fertile or likely to produce defective children*”. Feminist bodies are unattractive, broken, ‘unfeminized’ and ‘failed’ bodies, and thus not worthy of the desires of MRM men, though, again, it is not clear just whose standards are being failed. Feminist bodies are non-re-productive, as a woman’s body should be, non-desirable under the standards of hegemonic masculinity, and feminist women are often framed as having chosen feminism as a strategy of compensation due to these physical ‘defects.’

MRAs, of course, don't want to partner with feminists anyways, despite the fact that, as has been previously highlighted (see chapter 2), they believe feminists find misogynists and MRAs more attractive than the feminist men who would seemingly align more with their 'ideal' models of masculinity. How this might occur or be known is somewhat unclear, since MRM men cannot speak to or interact with feminist women, as the dogma of feminism prevent this from happening, according to MRA men. It is, of course, not possible within the bounds of this study and data set to establish just how much contact MRM community members actually have with feminist women beyond the selective representations of them within the /r/MensRights subreddit. It can be assumed, however, that many members have encountered women who are considered culturally 'attractive,' under hegemonic standards, and also identify as feminists, even if only online. Prominent feminist celebrities such as Emma Watson and Jennifer Lawrence, for example, are frequently featured and admired throughout various reddit communities for successfully embodying hegemonic western standards of celebrity femininity, as both were victims of #thefappening in 2015, when stolen and sexually explicit images of the actresses were released and shared widely across the reddit platform (Massanari, 2017).

The prominence of these celebrity feminists across reddit means that the widespread dismissal of feminists as unattractive is something of a facile position within these communities. I assume that most of these MRM commenters have encountered hegemonically 'attractive' feminist bodies. MRM conceptualizations and understandings of feminist bodies as disgusting are not 'honest' or 'objective' assessments of the physical properties and appearances of feminist women. My argument is that feminist bodies, as understood and imagined by the MRM community (white, CIS, etc.) are instead disgusting to MRAs because they are unavailable bodies; whereas 'not-good women' may, at times, use their own agency to defy and resist patriarchal control over them, feminists overtly, directly, and consciously reject the influences and controlling forces of men. This means that the bodies of feminist women are not only

unavailable to MRAs but are also engaged in active resistance against and opposition to the various vectors of access and control that MRA men desire.

For MRAs, however, this level of resistance to patriarchal norms is not acceptable. MRA's conceptualization of the 'proper' relationships and dynamics between men and women do not allow for these resistant or defiant feminine bodies. For MRAs, the relationships and power dynamics between men and women are, after all, natural and inevitable, and commenters frequently frame more 'traditional' and patriarchal systems of gender and power as being the result of natural processes, as well as being fairly static throughout time. For MRAs, men have had power over women not because of the 'myth of patriarchy', but because that is simply the natural way of things; feminism is seeking to disrupt or destroy what is seen by MRAs as something of a biological and historical constant. The very existence of feminist women poses a direct challenge to this ideological conception of "natural" bodies, identities, roles, and power throughout time. How can the emergence of these defiant bodies be reconciled with such a broad and over-arching 'natural' and 'historical' structure? How can these be women at all, if their actions and beliefs are so inherently unnatural?

3.5 "*Feminism is cancer*": Viral Ideologies and Infected Bodies

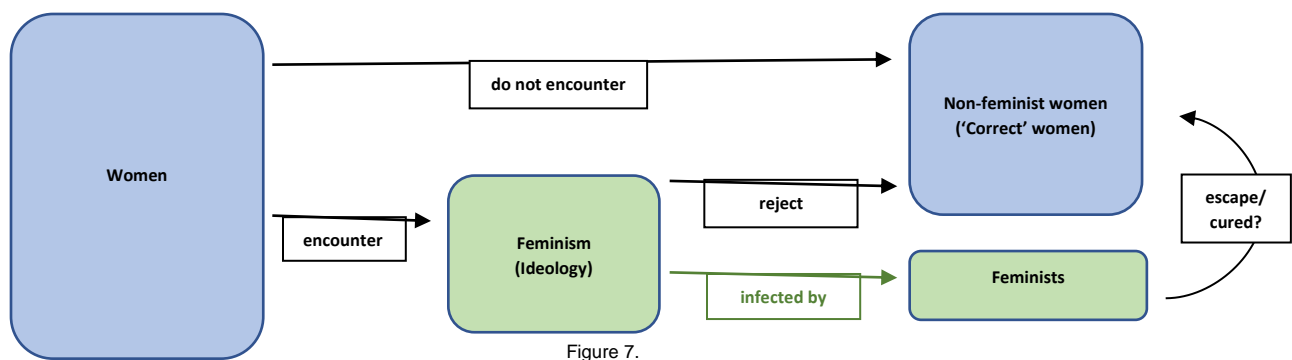
Because feminists and feminist bodies inherently challenge the 'naturalness' of gender roles/behaviours as understood by MRAs, MRAs must frame these bodies as being distinctly separated from the bodies of 'good' or 'proper' women. Through the layering of disgust and the attachment of ugliness/brokenness to the imagined feminist body/object, MRAs can separate feminist women from the broader categorical grouping of 'women', and instead frame them as deviant. Returning to the MRM conceptualization of feminists as 'lower class humans' is useful here, as it indicates a clear separation of feminists from a broader grouping of more 'appropriate' or 'normative' human bodies, both masculine and feminine.

There is something of a causal dilemma that arises here: do these bodies become broken through their exposure to feminism, or do they enter into the sphere of feminist ideology because they are broken? This is indirectly addressed within MRM discourses. Again, there is the presence of some limited heterogeneity here; certainly, there are instances where MRAs indicate that some bodies seek out and adopt feminism as a method of compensating for an inherent flaw, weakness, or brokenness. This can also be seen in the ways in which feminist men are dismissed as ‘failed’ men, who adopt the guise of feminism in a desperate (and apparently futile) attempt to access women. The major consensus, however, is that feminism is a force or phenomenon that seeks out, traps, and infects and kills bodies, particularly women.

The most common way that this is described within the data set is through the description/narrative of feminism as ‘cancer’. The very phrase *‘feminism is cancer’* occurs frequently throughout the data set, and is overtly linked to narratives of health, threat, and decline. Some users will occasionally argue that “[p]eople constantly say *“Feminism is Cancer”*, but it’s a joke” (/u/mausbar99), but the term is frequently deployed in highly vitriolic contexts, and other users argue, sometimes vehemently, that this is not the case. For instance, in response to another user suggesting that the phrase is used in jest, /u/Cannon1 says, *“Feminism is cancer” is noting how the concept has deteriorated the health and body of society. It’s not meant to be funny, it is pointing out that it is harmful and needs to be removed before it metastasizes*”. It is also worth repeating here that the online far-right, as discussed above (see Concepts and Literature – Interconnections Between Far-Right Movements and the Politics of ‘Trolling’) frequently uses humour and the claim ‘it’s just a joke’ to argue to those outside their community spaces that various language, memes, and other content should not be taken seriously, and deflect attempts by outsiders to analyze, criticize, or address issues emerging from those communities. The use of ‘disgusted’ language used by MRAs when describing bodies of women following their exposure to (and enactment of) feminism indicates that, as

/u/Cannon argues, the likening of feminism to cancer by MRAs is more serious than not. MRAs frequently describe feminists and feminism as sickening. Feminism is cancer – it infects, spreads, corrupts, and makes bodies broken/disgusting and dying. It is the disease that alters, excludes and separates bodies from the norms of society.

However, something of a distinction must be made here between feminists and feminism. While similar to the ways in which a plague is conceptualized differs from ‘plagued’ bodies, the use of ‘cancer’ here operates in somewhat different ways between feminism and feminists. Feminism is a more conceptual ‘cancer’ as ‘diseasing’ force/phenomenon/ideology, which imparts upon feminists a physical, individual infliction that impacts and alters bodies. Feminism-as-disease is a vague and amorphous conceptual object, a cloud of ideology that bodies encounter and either become ideologically infected through exposure or reject and remain clean and healthy (see fig. 7). Feminism is the poison that takes the ‘good’ women from the lives of men, and/or renders them inaccessible.



3.6 Disgusting Exposures; Affect, Proximal Anxieties, and the Politics of Exclusion

The framing of feminism as ‘disgusting’ and ‘cancerous’ is a central element of the affective anxieties of the MRM and MRAs. According to Sara Ahmed (2014), feelings of disgust

and fears of contamination are intimately linked together (p. 82-83). It is the proximity of and potential to be exposed to that-which-disgusts, and the level to which it poses the threat of contamination to the body that most viscerally evokes the relevant affective responses of those bodies. It is therefore dependent on the contact of that which is disgusting, and body/objects that are not (p. 85). In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed describes this as the 'stickiness' of disgust. She argues that the affect carried by objects that are disgusting is also, in a sense, sticky, connecting to the surfaces of those objects and spreading affective bonds between those objects that carry the stickiness of disgust, and the objects and surfaces that become exposed to them (p. 89), and when other objects (in this case bodies) encounter or are exposed to them they may become stuck to them, adopting the various forms of affective disgust that make those bodies themselves also sticky. In this case, it is not that the bodies of women are sticky or disgusting as an inherent property, it is the 'disease' of feminism that may make them so. Feminism carries upon itself the stickiness of disgust, gaining the capacity for that affect to not only stick to and form bonds between itself and other bodies, but those bodies also then inherit those sticky, affective associations with disgust. In this way, feminists are also the carriers of feminism-as-disease. Even if conceptualized as separate from the primary threat of feminism, they still exist as threatening bodies due to their capacity to expose and infect new bodies as the attachments themselves become exposed to new bodies and propagate outward as they carry out the malicious and dangerous projects of feminism, which pose a continuing and present threat to men and masculinity. They serve as the primary vectors for subsequent infections and the replication of feminism-as-disease.

Indeed, accounts within the data set from users, both men and women, who claim to have been feminists often use language that invokes or suggests the 'curing of' or 'escape from' feminism:

Jfc, go back to whatever cucktown you came from, you clearly don't know what it's generally like for men out here lmao. Stop taking feminists seriously, it's only going to get worse for you. I was a

feminist for a while and trust me that the earlier you start de-brainwashing yourself from their toxic ideas about men, the better. (/u/srmfep21)

These comments articulate, as Ahmed (2014) puts it, a ‘turning away’ from feminism as an object of disgust and fear to a new position of alignment with the MRM community. Such accounts of ‘turning away’ work to confirm that these bodies were once diseased and affirms the ‘rightness’ of MRM thought. In a sense, these bodies have been washed clean of the stickiness of feminism, and users who identify themselves as reformed feminists frequently work to indicate their direct acceptance of and support for the politics, goals, and ideologies of the MRM community. These accounts, then, affirm and intensify the need for MRM bodies to ‘pull away from’ and separate themselves feminism and feminist bodies.

However, Ahmed (2014) also suggests that disgust itself involves a desire for that which is disgusting (p. 84). Perhaps this is why feminist bodies are, in turn, overtly sexualized by MRM community members, even if that sexualization is enacted through a politic/demonstration of rejection. In one thread, /u/PutridMeatPuppet responds to a post containing a screenshot of a feminist repeating “*STOP KILLING WOMEN BECAUSE THEY DON’T WANT YOU*” with a comment repeatedly stating: “*I don’t wanna to fuck you*”. This user is not responding to sexual overtures from that feminist themselves and is not replying to any other comments that involve sexuality. Nor is there any apparent reason for the MRAs commenting on the unattractiveness of feminist women to do so. There is desire here, of a kind: a desire to police feminist women, to bring them back into the fold, and make them once again acceptable and properly desirable for (and desirous of) MRM men.

Contingent within this ‘cancerous’ framing of feminism is the idea of a ‘proper’, or ‘natural’ body. Indeed, MRM conceptions of bodies, particularly in relation to sex and gender, are highly essentialist and rely heavily on interpretations and uses of outmoded medical, psychological, and sociological approaches to bodies and gender. This is affirmed both by the

work of other scholars exploring this movement (Hodapp; 2017, p. 65-66), as well as through the discourses represented within the data set itself; /u/Leth suggests that one issue with feminists is that “*they are in a perpetual battle with their biology compared to what their ideology dictates*”. This biological battle is, of course, referring to and drawing from the essentialist approaches to sex and gender utilized by the MRM community and MRM, and further describes feminism as an attempt to challenge or subvert the natural and ‘good’ norms outlined through biological essentialism and its connections to the emphasized forms of femininity valued by the MRM.

3.7 Useful Signifiers & Affective Borders

‘Feminism’, as it is understood within MRM discourses, is loaded with affective and semiotic signifiers, and become attached to the ‘imagined feminist’. According to MRAs these signifiers then infect and corrupt the feminist body. Through this assignation, the imagined feminist is affixed with implicit signifiers, becoming readable as ugly, delusional, and hateful to the MRM, and the affective properties they carry become deeply interconnected with and entwined with the bodies and identities of those imagined feminist women. Through this process, the natural body becomes something unnatural, and threatening, while simultaneously stripping the feminist of agency. It is not the feminist that is challenging the MRA (or, rather, the MRA is not being challenged by a woman), but the ideology, acting through the feminist.

4. Discussion

4.1 Affective Language, and the Utility of Fear, Hate, and Disgust

This chapter steps away from direct analysis to focus on theory, largely building upon observations already established in the previous chapters of analysis. Within their community spaces, r/MensRights community members frequently deployed affectively charged language when discussing and conceptualizing feminist women. As I previously explained, language that invokes fear, anger, and/or disgust can be frequently observed within discussions regarding feminist women. Each of these themes of emotional affect serves both distinct and interconnected functions within the MRM community. These emotional currents initially emerge from the fear and anxiety around which the community is shaped. These affective streams, as well as how and why they are adopted, utilized, and deployed, can be explored and identified through an analysis of the ways in which MRAs engage in the strategic deployment of language, semiotic forms, and affective objects. This affect and its roles can be further interrogated through an exploration of the limitations and challenges posed to MRM ideology and thought through their adoption and use of biological essentialism in their understandings of sex, gender, and their related social roles.

4.2 Power, Identity, and Anxiety: The Instability of Fear as an Affective Core

According to theories of affect and emotion, underlying MRM discourse is an anxiety and fear held by the members of the community in relation to their understandings of and relationships with both their own masculinities, and the larger placement and roles of masculinity within 'Western' culture. This anxiety is affirmed not only through the discourses of threat within this data set, but through numerous observations and studies of MRM communities (Allen, 2016; Kimmel, 2013; Hodapp, 2018), which identify feelings of loss felt by MRAs in relation to masculine roles and power. The anxiety of the MRM community stems from a fear of

loss of power and the possibility of masculine inadequacy that may follow, as outlined by scholars such as Kimmel (2013) Allen (2016), and Hodapp (2017). This anxiety and fear operate as the central and initial affective core within the community, around which it coheres. Members congregate around these shared feelings of threat and anxiety, and frequently indicate that these experiences have brought them to MRM ideologies and spaces. However, the position of fear as a central affective object of coherence presents a number of issues for the MRM community.

In her exploration of the affective roles and properties of fear, Ahmed (2004) notes that fear is an anticipatory response to the approach of threat. In this case, this threat takes the form of ever-increasing encroachments upon and challenges to masculinity by other, non-masculine (or non-hegemonic masculine) identities. This process occurs through the steady gains of progressive social politics and norms as traditional gender roles, such as the patriarchal breadwinner within families, become increasingly untenable. The threatening nature of these social politics are indicated through community discourses that affirm the value of traditional gender roles while simultaneously decrying the destruction of the nuclear family, as stated by u/rodvanmechelen:

Feminism is part of the Cultural Marxist²¹ effort to destroy classical liberalism and replace it with socialist totalitarianism. The part feminism plays, is to destroy the nuclear family by destroying marriage, and to destroy marriage by destroying men.

MRAs recognize that masculinity, and therefore themselves, are under the threat of destruction as feminists seek to deliberately undermine traditional (and therefore ‘proper’) institutions through the destruction of men. It is also worth highlighting that this user positions the destruction of masculinity as a facet of a larger project or conspiracy that aims to dismantle the liberal and democratic culture of ‘the west’ and replace it with a socialist regime, a position

²¹ The use of the term ‘Cultural Marxist’ invokes a far-right conspiracy theory that stems from the anti-Semitic propaganda campaigns of the Nazis and is indicative of the connections and overlaps between the MRA community and the alt-right. For more information on this, see [this](#) description and summary from the Southern Poverty Law Center (Berkowitz, 2003).

that is not held by all members of the MRM community, but is also not uncommon. This shared narrative surrounding the ‘destruction of the West’ further highlights possible overlaps between some members of the MRM community and the alt-right (as also seen through u/rodvanmechelen’s reference to ‘Cultural Marxism’).

Any attempts to explore or identify this broad cultural and social threat to the ‘West’, masculinity, and the family (to name a few) by the MRM community, however, are fundamentally restricted by the essentialist bases of MRM ideology. Essentialist views of gender must necessarily remain somewhat stable; if gendered identities are natural and innate properties of bodies, they should not change, or, at least, should not change at a particularly rapid rate. This stability applies not only to the social and performative properties of individual bodies themselves, but also to society much more broadly. If the ‘traditional’ roles and positions of bodies are the result of the physical properties and realities of those bodies, as essentialist positions suggest, then society must emerge from and be shaped by those roles. The pressures and anxieties that MRAs are experiencing must, then, be driven by an unnatural driver of some form, as is affirmed through the previously identified MRM framing of feminist thought and bodies as unnatural and corrupting. MRM-developed interpretations, then, are more or less limited to bodies, and cannot account for broader social phenomena. This inability is further compounded by the valuing of individualism within MRM communities (Kimmel, 2013; and Hodapp, 2017). Such adherence to ideas and ideologies based upon individualism can be seen in the data set through discussions around issues such as income and wage equality, which are themselves frequently affirmations of essentialist realities:

Let’s say you have 2 workers who load boxes onto trucks, one male and one female. The male is almost always going to load more boxes in a given time than the female, simply because men are biologically stronger by nature. This, to pay both equally would be unfair to the man, because he is getting more work done than the woman. (/u/hgrys)

The limitations of this analytical approach mean that MRAs must exclude the incorporation of factors that do not fall in line with essentialist and individualist approaches, such

as that of class, and are limited further through a broad lack of the inclusion of race, (dis)ability, etc., into their discourses. Such an approach, which centers around gender and biology as the sole and central tenants of MRM thought, thus precludes the emergence of complex explanations and analyses. Indeed, the anxieties experienced by the MRM community do not emerge solely from the pressures levied upon men by the feminist movement. Instead, they can be seen as being the result of a wide range of social and economic trends and phenomena, which cannot be addressed through the explanations developed by MRM communities, such as the impacts of neoliberal austerity upon an ever-diminishing middle-class. Instead, the MRM must develop highly unstable and flawed explanations for broad social pressures and trends. This poses a major issue for the positions and beliefs held by the MRM community, as they can often be easily challenged by critics with contradictory evidence, or through critiques of their structural logic.

In addition to this, the presence and centrality of fear in discourses of masculinity within MRM spaces poses a major challenge to the masculinities of MRM members. MRM models of masculinity necessitate a number of prescriptive properties that should be held by the 'proper' masculine subject. However, fear is not itself a particularly masculine property (de Boise & Hearn, 2017; Kimmel, 1994), and in a movement that adheres to traditionalist, essentialist, and ultimately hegemonic masculine ideals, fear cannot then be the overt emotional tone or theme of the MRM. Indeed, such models of masculinity are frequently noted by critical masculinity and gender theorists as being somewhat limited in terms of what is seen as acceptable displays of emotionality. In a movement that adheres to and advocates for such masculinities, the fear that forms the basis for the MRM identity is somewhat antithetical in relation to those 'proper' masculinities. If 'proper' masculine bodies are powerful, they should not fear, and that they do fear presents something of a contradiction within MRM spaces and discourses. Such an

emotional presence implies an unacceptable level of vulnerability within models of idealized hegemonic masculine identities.

Indeed, as noted by Ahmed (2004), bodies that fear are often also bodies that are vulnerable (p. 68-69). Such vulnerability is connected with the openness of those bodies to the threats posed to them as those threats approach and encroach upon them. While not all bodies that fear are vulnerable, those that are exposed to or impacted by threat are. This is where MRM community members exist; that which invokes fear and anxiety in the community is not seen as an abstract or distant threat, but as one that is currently and constantly impacting and affecting men. This encroachment and impact can be seen in the ways that MRAs describe the losses experienced by men and masculinity as a whole. Institutions, 'rights', and norms that they relate to natural and 'proper' expressions of sex and gender are frequently identified, discussed, and lamented, and are identified as compromised and in need of reclamation or reassertion.

The use of essentialist models of sex and gender once again pose a major issue for MRM thought. If masculinity and its associated roles and traits are based on fundamental and shared biological realities, all men must, to some extent, be the same. This means that if some men are vulnerable (or, at least, a large enough population of men that they cannot be dismissed as outliers, as are feminist/pro-feminist men), then all men must therefore be at risk. The susceptibility of some men to being affected and impacted by these threats indicates that all must be seen as inherently susceptible. MRM men must thus be positioned as being vulnerable themselves, even if they have not (yet) been exposed to or affected by these threats, as their own bodies are framed, though essentialism, as being necessarily the same as all other men. MRM bodies must be seen as also vulnerable, given the interconnected nature of identities and bodies within the ideologies of the movement. This again highlights a contradiction within the ideological frameworks of MRM thought, as the masculinity that is centered and practiced within the community is simultaneously powerful and vulnerable.

In addition to these issues and contradictions, it should also be noted that fear is not necessarily a particularly strong driver for a social movement such as that of the MRM community. As noted by Ahmed (2004), fear involves a 'retreating', or a 'running away' from that which threatens (p. 67). Such a response is not conducive to the mobilization of a social movement or an effective means of building and maintaining momentum. For MRAs, who seek to re-assert and re-establish masculine and patriarchal power, fear cannot then be used as a driver for social or political action/activism. Though it has been noted that the MRM fundamentally operates in defense of such power and norms, it often does not appear to outwardly do so, as much of the 'activism' of the community expresses itself in ways that are frequently hyper-aggressive, as will be explored below.

4.3 Anger: Stability Through Momentum, Action, and Redirection

For the MRM community, fear must be couched in another driver that can be used to redirect the affective intensity of fear into something that can be more readily and easily utilized by the community. This redirection is done through the ways in which MRAs adopt and utilize anger and hate to both mask and obscure the presence of fear within their discourses that drives their community. Expressions and indications of anger and hate are present throughout the discourses within the data set, and anger has been noted as a common emotional theme and property of the MRM community by scholars such as Kimmel (2013) and Hodapp (2017). The expressions of anger, however, are somewhat distinct from those of fear or anxiety. While narratives and discussions that indicate fear or anxiety are usually internally-focused, and frequently identify, explore, and lament the losses experienced by MRM men and masculinity as a whole, anger is almost always directed outwards, against specific targets that have been identified as the causes or drivers of such loss: feminism and feminists.

The emotional shift from fear to anger occurs as MRAs work to contextualize and identify the cause for the losses they experience as the result of active and intentional projects and

politics that directly target men and masculinity and masculine power. This is also in part attributable to the ways in which feminism is viewed by MRAs as making the bodies of women unavailable to them (as explored in chapter 3). It further demonstrates Kimmel's (2013) suggestion of an 'aggrieved entitlement' held by men in movements such as the MRM community. Indeed, MRM anger is based upon that which the community perceives as having lost, or as risk of losing, in relation to the positions and privileges that should be accorded to them as men. As Kimmel points out,

Angry White Men look to the past for their imagined and desired future. They believe that the system is stacked against them. Theirs is the anger of the entitled: we are entitled to those jobs, to those positions of unchallenged dominance. (p. 21).

As previously explored and identified, MRM discussions focusing on or featuring feminism and/or feminists commonly includes vitriolic language and sentiment, and feminists are clearly identified as being located in an oppositional position to that held by the MRM community. Anger is frequently paired with language that includes calls for mobilization, or affirmations of the need for an MRM to challenge and stop feminism and feminists:

If any of these dumb shitheads are stupid enough to try and invade the sub and pretend they know everything about MRAs and what people here believe call their bluff guys. Don't let them get away with posting blatant lies, the fact that they're bitching about this communities success shows we're winning. (/u/Lethn)

EXACTLY, this is why everyone should attack the very basis of Feminism. The Patriarchy Conspiracy theory... Its kind of like how Neo-Nazis keep using "Terrorists" as a synonymy for "Brown Skin People". This is the same kind of tactic used by Fem-Nazis, they label Masculinity, Male interest groups, Hobbies(gaming, sports, movies etc) as "TOXIC" its male hatred by PROXY... Fem-Nazis Hate everything attached to men, but they pretend like that it isn't male hatred but emancipation of women. "Emancipation" via hatred. (/U/rOCKMANNxx)

Feminism has been about man hating since the Declaration of Sentiments at Seneca Falls. Its only now, after over a 100 years of gender based legal and social warfare that men (and some women) are putting their feet down and saying enough is enough (/u/KDulius)

The emotional shift from fear to anger is frequently justified through the projection of malicious and hateful (or at the very least, greedy or uncaring) intent of feminists regarding men and masculinity. Such attributive projections are, according to Ahmed (2004), a form of

relational negotiation between bodies and that which they hate, whereby '*the self projects all that is undesirable onto the other, while concealing any traces of that projection, so that the other comes to appear as a being with a life of its own*' (p.49). To the MRA, it is the feminist that lies and misrepresents, or misinterprets data to suit their own ideological positions, despite a wide range of evidence that demonstrates that such strategies are key parts of MRM discourse. Likewise, it is the feminist that hates MRAs and men, and who seeks to attack and undermine the positions and rights of men. That many MRAs themselves hate feminists and feminism therefore becomes justifiable, as MRAs are then only responding and reacting to the hatred being heaped upon them.

The role of anger as an affective force that, by virtue of its intensity, drives and motivates bodies into motion, distinguishes it from fear within MRM spaces. The anger of MRAs emerges from and is shaped by the fears and anxieties that form a foundation for the coherence of the MRM community, but can, unlike fear, be much more easily used to develop and motivate calls to action within the movement, as anger can be used to motivate and direct the masculine aggression the community values. This suggests that MRM anger is not cohesive, as fear is, but directive, and used to propel and stabilize the community. Anger also frequently affects that action itself; as previously noted, MRAs frequently embark upon campaigns of harassment against those seen as enemies of or threats to the community, campaigns which have reached such levels of virulence and intensity that the targets of MRM wrath have been driven into hiding, as they are deluged with threats of violence, rape, and death (Romano, 2013). As noted by Massarani (2017), harassment, both implicit and explicit, is relied upon heavily by online communities such as that of the MRM when it attempts to coalesce around events and issues (p. 333). Such campaigns of harassment serve as an example of the ways in which the MRM community utilizes anger to assert power over others, particularly feminists who are seen as a

hateful and hated enemy. Anger overcomes the desire to withdraw or retreat from threat posed by fear, replacing it with a need or desire to challenge and attack.

MRM anger, however, does little to address the issue of the vulnerability faced by MRA men outlined above. To attack a threat is to engage with it and be potentially exposed to it. So too does anger require (a) a clearly defined and identified enemy, and (b) clearly defined borders between the MRA self and the threatening feminist other. Anger, then, must be mediated in ways that allow for aggression while still shielding the MRM community and its members from those threats to which they are vulnerable, and by identifying and establishing concrete borders between the MRM and feminist communities and ideologies.

4.4 Inhuman Bodies and Disgusting Borders

When MRAs do direct their attention towards feminists and feminism, engagement is unidirectional; MRAs appear unwilling to engage in good-faith dialogue, and campaigns of harassment do not often pay mind to those they are targeting. Thus, the MRM is unwilling to listen to feminists themselves. And why would they listen? As previously established in chapter 2, the MRA sees feminist thought as invalid and not worth listening to, as it contains no rationality or truth in the eyes of the MRA. In this way, feminist thought becomes a form of 'unthought': invalid in content and structure, and unworthy of consideration. By utilizing this framing strategy, even those who are well-versed in the issues and dogma of the MRM movement, and who might be able to form and communicate challenging ideas to MRM ideology and thought in ways that are more palatable to the community, can be easily dismissed. This can be seen in the ways in which individuals that shift from one ideological or political position to the other are discussed (or not discussed). Numerous discussions within the data set contain both anecdotal and first-hand accounts of men and women who have cast off feminist ideology and joined the MRM community. Such community members are often framed as having escaped from feminism, rather than through more neutral descriptions of such

possible transitions. In addition to this, many of the first-hand accounts discuss how such an ideological shift made them 'better,' and use language that invokes processes of 'healing' from the damages of feminism, facilitated by MRM ideology.

Feminist bodies become something less than human, and are seen as diseased and corrupted. Such bodies pose a threat to the health and safety of the social whole. As seen in chapter 3, MRM discourses that utilize the language of infection and disease, and compare feminism to cancer, work to both attach a disgusting property to the feminist body. To the MRM community, the feminist body is a disgusting, tainted, and dangerous body, and any exposure experienced by MRAs (or anyone else, for that matter), poses the risk of contamination if not responded to properly. For MRAs, this means that such bodies must be approached and handled with a form of protection or care that minimizes or eliminates the risk of contamination; protection, in this case, is the ideological beliefs and defenses of the MRM when considering and conceptualizing feminist thought (see chapter 2).

These discourses affectively prime the MRA to respond to the MRA/feminist border with disgust whenever exposed to it. When encountering feminist thought or feminist 'bodies', the ways in which the MRM responds to them are pre-emptively mediated through their exposure to the feminist bodies and objects, upon the surfaces of which the MRM has affixed the 'disgusting' affective properties assigned to 'feminism' the 'imagined feminist'. This grants the MRA/feminist border a repulsive property; the risk of exposure necessitates a certain distancing from it, as well as a great deal of guardedness and care for those who must encounter it. Bodies may, then, strike across this border, but not fully cross it themselves, as they are then repelled from it by the irritability caused through exposure to that-which-is-disgusting. This can be seen through examples such as the one presented in chapter 2, where MRA engagements with feminists and their incursions into feminist spaces is tempered by MRM ideology, and allows for the MRA individual involved to begin such encounters with a pre-established and presupposed dismissal

of the validity and value of feminist thought. Approaching the border that separates the MRA and the feminist requires a withdrawal from it. In this way, MRA bodies are shielded from the stickiness of feminism as they hold a repellant form of affect upon their own surfaces.

MRM ideology is, then, an inoculation of sorts against the feminist disease, a means through which MRAs can gain a form of immunity against the cancerous nature of feminism, as well as a means of further justifying MRM ideologies and politics. By understanding and being versed in the 'truths' of MRM thought, community members engage with a discursive flow of affect that creates clear and identifiable borders, such that they become easy for the MRA to avoid. The establishment of such borders further allows the MRM to enact non-reciprocal engagements with (or directed towards) feminists and feminism in the form of one-sided and unidirectional campaigns of harassment and trolling, within which feminists are not given the opportunity to participate or respond, and are not expected to do so. Disgust creates, identifies, and intensifies the borders between MRM communities and ideologies and feminist communities and ideologies.

4.5 Disgust Back to Fear: Cyclical Affirmations of Affect and the Feminist Object

While fear can be identified as something of an affective starting point for the community, as it serves as the basis for the formation of the community itself, it should be noted that fear, anger, and disgust serve necessarily interlocking roles within MRM discourse and ideology. Each on their own, or any combination of the two, are not enough to maintain the MRM community. Without fear, there is no central core to the MRM, nor is there a justification or target for anger. Without anger, the community lacks direction and momentum, and cannot effectively engage with and enact their politics. Without disgust, the borders and boundaries between MRAs and Feminists cannot be clearly defined or justified, and community members remain at risk when 'exposed' to feminist bodies, ideologies, and evidence, as evidenced by the

necessary interpretation of essentialist thought that must position the bodies of men as inherently susceptible to feminist infection.

These streams of emotional affect are also cyclical and self-reinforcing, each one working to support, justify, and intensify the others. Each of these prominent emotional and affective themes necessitates a reliance on the next 'layer' of affect to provide some stabilization (and disgust makes this somewhat cyclical). Within these affective discourses, feminism and feminists serve as a target and scapegoat used by the community to explain their experiences and anxieties. Without the ability to develop complex analyses that would allow the MRM community to more accurately identify and explore the causes of their anxieties, MRAs focus on feminism, as they present an easy explanation and target of MRM attention, due to the feminist challenges of patriarchal masculinity and patriarchal power, as well as the pushing by feminists for the increasing autonomy of women (and thus decreasing power of men and masculinity).

5. Conclusion

5.1 Limitations

Online communities, particularly reactionary movements such as the MRM, are highly adaptive and dynamic. While the underlying ideologies and narratives of the MRM community appear to be fairly stable, particularly in relation to feminism and feminists, the MRM frequently appears to adopt and discard new language (often influenced by the broader alt-right), and shifts its focus between cultural events and phenomena as they emerge (such as gamergate, or the fappening; Massnari, 2015). This means that a range of the identity properties noted here may be subject to change as the movement shifts to respond to new pressures or anxieties. A more long-term study would likely prove to be more effective when attempting to identify features of masculinity that may be more static than others and would allow for the observation of the formation and abandonment of less central identities.

Another potentially minor limitation lies in the sample size and scope. This study focuses on the discourses of community members themselves and does not include the potential impacts and influences of other online MRM spaces and the prominent members of the community, such as *A Voice for Men's* editor Paul Elam or *The Myth of Male Power* author Warren Farrell (1993), who are both notable voices within the MRM (Hodapp, 2017). Again, because of the limited possible scope of this study, the sample size remained relatively small. Expanding to include an analysis of the influences of prominent manosphere publications could provide a broader and more expansive variety of data. Yet, it is also worth mentioning that, within the data set collected, saturation was reached quite rapidly, and an expanded sample size may simply replicate my conclusions.

5.2 Future Research

Throughout the course of conducting this study, as well as in response to the limitations listed above, I have identified several potential pathways which could be undertaken as future research into this area.

A deeper inspection of the platforms (websites) that host the MRM themselves, more specifically, the history of who made them, of how they came to their present ideological positions, and of why they chose to construct and use those platforms. Such spaces would include MM subreddits, as well as more MRM focused spaces such as A Voice For Men. I would be interested in investigating the possibility that those individuals developed ideologically within an environment that resembles Ahmed's economies, and how immersion/involvement within such economies may have influenced the ways in which they have worked to the communities and platforms of the MRM. Such an exploration would, I suspect, help to better understand the ways in which the MRM has been, in part, actively and intentionally shaped by the movement's 'thought leaders', both past and current.

Another potential area for future research might be a more thorough inspection of the connection between the MRM and other movements like alt-right, white supremacy and neo-Nazi groups. While I have noted the substantial presence of white supremacist ideologies within the data, it should be noted that many MRM members deny that an overlap between antifeminism and white supremacy exists. This may warrant further exploration, particularly in the face of the emergent alt-right movement, which works to substantially blur the lines between misogyny/patriarchy, racism/white supremacy, pro-Christian/Islamophobic /anti-Semitic, and other right-wing and nativist groups and ideologies, while often operating under the guise of a non-partisan, agent-provocateur movement.

Given the now-expanding pool of academic writing focusing on MRM, it may be fruitful to undertake a larger meta-analysis of the existing pool of research focusing on the MRM community. This would allow for the incorporation of other studies of affect within the MRM, of research focusing on the aforementioned thought-leaders (both past and contemporary; Hodapp, 2017), and of work that focuses on and interacts with the community in an offline forum (Kimmel, 2014). This approach would allow for a broader analysis of the MRM, and might provide common themes and trends between the many websites and communities within the manosphere, and help develop more thorough mappings of the social and ideological spaces and networks of the movement.

Finally, I strongly suspect that it would be fruitful to pursue a study that explores the MM more broadly, and works to identify the commonalities and differences between different factions and communities that are broadly understood to be a part of the wider ideological diaspora of the MRM, such as the MRM community, the Red Pill, Pick-up artists, Men Going Their Own Way, the incel community, and others. By focusing on the similarities and differences between these movements, their ideologies, and the roots of their divisions, I think it likely that interesting observations could be made regarding the political aims of these spaces, as well as regarding how members might both enter into these movements, and pass between them as they become increasingly radicalized.

5.3 The ‘Feminist’ and the MRA: Constructing Bodies and Identities Through Difference

Despite being identified as a reactionary antifeminist movement, the MRM community does not appear to interact directly with feminists or feminism themselves outside of largely unidirectional campaigns of harassment or trolling of feminist individuals, organizations and spaces. Instead, most of the interactions that the community has with ‘feminism’ and ‘feminists’

occur through discussions and discourses that centralize a carefully constructed and ideologically mediated 'feminist' object, which primarily exists within these discussions and spaces. This object is constructed and conceptualized in ways that allow the community to rationalize, explain, and justify the lack of two-way discourses and interactions between feminist and MRM communities, and which positions the feminist movement as a radical ideological echo chamber that contrasts to the 'rational' and 'facts and logic' based MRM movement. This binary occurs through selective and carefully presented examples of feminists and feminism, which allows the community to impose its own interpretations and conceptualizations upon the presented subjects, and which allows the MRM community to broadly define and understand the feminist movement on their own terms.

In a sense, the MRA *creates* the feminist, at least within his own world. Unfettered by the need to engage with or analyze feminist logic and text directly, the MRM is free to create a representational icon he can label 'the feminist', and attribute to it what he likes. Because of this, the MRM can easily create a semiotic caricature of the feminist, drawn from carefully chosen and selectively interpreted examples, as well as his own imagination and suppositions. The feminist, then is not a real person at all, but instead is all that the MRA may hate and fear. The semiotic icon of the 'imagined -feminist' is then transposed onto the real-life feminist, who in reality may vary wildly in terms of politics, beliefs, action. In this way, the real-life feminist is reduced to that of the "imaginary -feminist, despite any ways in which that feminist may be, or demonstrate themselves to be, something other than this MRM construction. In turn, expressions of feminist knowledge or belief can be easily interpreted as dishonest, manipulative, or duplicitous, simply an expression of feminist 'unthought'. The affect-laden properties of the 'imagined feminist' are imposed upon the bodies and identities of feminist women. Therefore, 'imagined feminist' is a stand-in for broader frustrations and anxieties felt by the MRM community, though feminism itself is intimately linked with many of these feelings.

These broader anxieties, driven by progressive social change, by the economic insecurity and instability being experienced by members of the MRM community (as well as everyone else), and by increasingly successful and vocal challenges towards patriarchal power, form the basis of a shared experience of affect that serves as the core of the MRM community. This core brings MRAs together as they share, acknowledge and develop a sense of solidarity in relation to their interpretations of threat-induced anxiety.

This shared anxiety poses an issue, however, for the overall structural stability of the community. Fear is a poor motivator for social action and activism, ostensibly the movement's purpose, particularly when that movement works to aspire and reify hegemonic masculine identities that position the bodies, identities, and social locations of men as powerful, confident, aggressive, assertive, etc. There is also the previously noted issues of heterogeneity within the MRM community and its discourses concerning what 'real' and 'proper' masculinity looks like, even within the predominantly traditionalist, hegemonic, and patriarchal models widely embraced. Anger, then, is useful in directing and motivating both momentum and action within the movement and provides a means through which MRM members can re-frame and reinterpret their anxiety, as well as the anxiety of the movement as a whole, into a more aggressive and masculine form of affect and identity.

This reinterpretation occurs via the framing of feminism and feminists as an adversary or threat that deserves the anger and hatred of the MRM community, and is achieved and practiced through the use of affective disgust within the community, when applied or assigned to feminism and feminists. The bodies of feminist women are bodies that have been 'poisoned' and/or 'corrupted' by the ideological disease of feminism, a process through which the bodies of women who might otherwise be worthy of the desires of MRA men (and exist as bodies that MRA men are able to impose gendered power upon) are transformed into bodies that are disgusting, irrational, and unattractive. This positioning of feminism as disease, and feminists as

infected, allows for a means of protective and repulsive boundary work that allows for and justifies more direct contact with feminists, while still reinforcing the boundaries and borders between the two movements. While anxiety and fear inherently involve a reflexive drawing-away-from or retreating from that which threatens (in this case, feminism and feminists), disgust allows for the introduction of more proactive projects and campaigns directed towards that which disgusts.

The members of the MRM community largely see themselves as everything that feminists are not. Where feminists are irrational, MRAs are rational; where feminism is made up of cult-like echo chambers, MRM spaces are forums for reasonable engagement and honest debate; where feminism is a challenge to the natural and proper order of gender and society, MRAs are working to protect that which is proper and innate. This is, of course, wildly inaccurate in almost every sense; the MRM lacks the kinds of well-thought out and supported philosophical and intellectual foundations that ground much of the feminist movement, and while there are indeed hateful feminist spaces, particularly online, they make up a small minority of the overall movement, unlike the MRM community, where vitriol and hatred are intimately interwoven into their discourses and ideologies.

The MRA-constructed feminist, then, is a means of obfuscating accountability and responsibility for the MRAs changing place in the world, as well as a means through which the MRA may hide from progressive social change by lashing out against a self-created 'bogeywoman' of sorts that represents all that he is afraid of acknowledging or recognizing. Instead of being located in a socially constructed position as a 'man' in 'Western culture', the MRA is a 'natural' and 'proper' body standing in the path of (and in opposition to) 'unnatural' and unwanted change, which challenges his patriarchal power and privilege. The MRA body is an inherently and 'naturally' privileged body that MRAs fight to maintain, pitted against the diseased

and malicious feminist body that he has adopted as an explanator of all his woes. In this way, the MRA is defined by the 'feminist' he has constructed, as it represents all that he is not.

This constitutes a small tragedy, of sorts; many of the issues highlighted by the MRM community concerning the lives and experiences of men are indeed significant and pressing. The MRM community, as noted by scholars such as Kimmel (2013) and Hodapp (2017) identify issues that do, indeed, warrant concern. It is possible, even likely, that many members of the community may indeed care deeply about the lives and experiences of men, and wish to work on and address their concerns more effectively, as I and others have, as former members of the community. But the MRM is, inevitably, unable to develop meaningful analyses of or explanations for these issues, limited as they are by their ideological positions. Instead, they blame feminists, who themselves are frequently working to address the very issues opined by the MRM. Until these limitations are addressed, and the MRM community can reconcile the differences between the feminist and the 'imagined feminist', the movement will remain as it is; hostile, vitriolic, entitled, misguided, and ineffective. While it is likely that the vast majority of the MRM community would not be interested in engaging in this form of change, as they ultimately seek to fight in defense of the forms of patriarchal power and masculinity that lie at the roots of many of their signature issues. However, this community, as we have seen through the construction and treatment of the feminist, is constructed in such a way as to make this impossible.

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Appendix

Appendix i. – Reddit formatting/structural language

i.1 - 'Subreddit' – specific sub-forums within reddit – /r/MensRights is one such subreddit. An individual subreddit may also be referred to as; 'sub', 'board', or (rarely) as a 'forum'. Many subreddits are publicly available without an account, though others are 'quarantined' and require a reddit account to access, are hidden behind simply age-verification pages, or are 'private', or 'invite only'.

i.2 - 'Posts' – the initial post submitted to and posted on the main subreddit page. Each post has a title and (often) content such as a linked article, a picture or meme, or text written by the user who submitted the post. A post functions similarly to what is referred to as a 'topic' within more traditional forum structures.

i.3 - 'Comment' – An individual comment on the post. Users cannot comment on the main subreddit page itself but must instead go to the comment section of a post.

i.4 – 'Thread' – Each post serves as its own page, where users can discuss the main post and have discussions with each other. While users can comment on the post itself, they can also reply to each other and have discussions, creating a tiered series of consecutive comments, each replying to the previous post in the discussion chain. This chain/discussion is referred to as a 'thread', discussion thread', or 'comment thread', and allows users to identify the order in which each comment has been submitted, and its relationship to the comment it is replying to.

i.5 – '/r/' and '/u/' – To go to a specific subreddit, one would type 'www.reddit.com/[/r/](#)[name of subreddit]'. The same is true of individual reddit users (using [/u/](#)[username]). Because of this, when identifying subreddits or naming individual users, redditors (reddit users) frequently add these as prefixes for clarity. Ex. When discussing feminism, redditors will type 'feminism'. When referring to the feminism subreddit, they will instead type /r/Feminism or r/Feminism.

i.6 – 'Upvoting' and 'Downvoting' – Refers to a system of 'voting' within reddit. Each user can either 'up' or 'down' vote comments and/or posts once. Upvoting usually expresses approval, and downvoting expresses disapproval. Posts and comments which receive higher amounts of upvotes are automatically placed higher up in their subreddits (for posts) or comment sections (for comments on posts), while downvoted posts are sorted downwards, or automatically hidden if they reach a certain negative point threshold. The overall number of votes (# upvotes minus # downvotes) are publicly displayed beside comments and posts.