

Gamers, Memes & Incels: A Review of Online Anti-Feminism and
Misogyny

by

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In the wake of what amounts to the biggest blow to feminist political activism in the 21st century, the overturning of Roe V. Wade, Americans are becoming increasingly divided on feminism; a 2022 poll found that 37% of respondents agreed with the statement that “Feminism has done more harm than good” and that a majority of men under fifty agreed with the statement (Miller 2022). This paper investigates the cultural attitudes that pervade the culture of these younger men, specifically in online circles. Through casual misogyny in the gaming community, online memes, and antifeminist political organizing, a negative caricature of feminism has been created in online discourse that has material outcomes for the treatment of women in online spaces. These misogynistic tropes can be traced through the Anti-feminist movements of the late 19th and 20th century and represent a continuation of imbedded cultural ideals of gender essentialism and patriarchy.

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Background

Growing up in the 2010s I, like so many other young people of my generation, had almost completely unrestricted access to the internet in its entirety, and since my earliest memories of watching my older sibling play games on their PlayStation 2 I had a love of video games. Both of these facts led a young me to spend a lot of time online. Drawing upon Cristo Sims' ethnographic study of a NYC middle school analyzing relationships between technology and gender in adolescent social circles, I reflect that as a middle schooler I was squarely situated in what they call the "geeky boys" clique (Sims 2014, p.851). Consistent with the geeky boys clique in the Sims study, we were mostly white and middle to upper class, didn't really care all that much about girls or sports, and focused instead on a shared love of video games and online activity. Our masculinity was not macho or athletic like the "cool boys" clique (Ibid), but it still embodied the negative traits that are associated with hypermasculinity and toxic masculinity, such as homophobia and misogyny. I remember words like "gay," the R-slur (the ableist slur) and the F-slur (the homophobic slur) being normalized pejoratives, and misogynistic language and sexist tropes was commonplace in our discourse. Violent language was also desensitized due to the violent content we consumed in popular video games like *Halo* and *Call of Duty*.

The misogynistic & homophobic language we used was reinforced by the discourse of the gaming community that we were consuming online on video sharing platforms like YouTube. I recall the YouTube algorithm recommending videos that I today recognize as increasingly right-wing, meaning pushing an explicitly conservative political ideology. Coming from video game content on YouTube, I remember being recommended videos from channels like "PragerU", a conservative media company that puts out short education videos about topics ranging from slavery to feminism. As a 12-year-old, I thought their flashy editing and snappy

argumentation was convincing, and so I continued down the rabbit-hole. The YouTube algorithm then began recommending me videos from right-wing pundits and content creators like Ben Shapiro and Steven Crowder where they would be “owning the left” in snippets of debate with college students about things like feminism or racism in America. Simultaneously, the algorithm also guided me to edited compilation videos of feminist activists being made out to look hysterical and cringeworthy. One video titled “FEMINIST CRINGE COMPIATION 2016” has accrued 9.3 million views since its original uploading in 2016, and features clips of feminist protestors screaming juxtaposed with men calmly and coolly using “facts and logic” to refute them (*FEMINIST CRINGE... 2016*).

I am not alone in experiencing this phenomenon, which has become known as an “alt-right Pipeline” where kids and teens, coming from gaming content, are recommended more and more alt-right content, getting more and more radical until they either get out like I did, or they wind up in extremist hate groups such as white supremacist organizations. This phenomenon has been documented anecdotally through the stories of people who experienced this radicalization, such as one user on YouTube whose story begins similarly to mine but goes much further down the rabbit hole (*How I fell Down... 2019*). Academia has also started to recognize this phenomenon, though it is admittedly difficult issue to study in higher education due to out-group distrust that exists in many of these online spaces, something we’ll examine more closely in chapter 1. A 2023 study in the *Journal for Cultural Research* argued that the misogynistic “edgy humor” (such as the humor of the “feminist cringe compilation”) of the alt-right was a weapon of political radicalization on YouTube, and similarly refers to it as a “right-wing pipeline” (Das 2023). This conclusion that will be supported in my look at anti-feminist memes in chapter 1.

The online discourse of edgy memes and anti-feminism that I grew up in fed me the idea that feminists, known as SJWs¹ were hysterical women who yelled ridiculous things like “kill all men!” and complained about a long since defeated patriarchy. Looking back on this perspective as someone about to finish their undergraduate degree in Political Science and Women’s Gender Sexuality Studies, I am baffled by the things that I used to believe about feminism without ever having engaged with any substantive feminist works or arguments. My goal for this project is to investigate this demonization of Feminism online, what allowed it to thrive in the online spaces I grew up in, and how it is connected with the anti-feminist movements of the past and present.

Informed by a feminist epistemology, it is also important in this section to acknowledge my position as a researcher related to the history and temporality of this subject. As someone born after the turn of the 21st century, there is an inclination within me towards assuming that what we are experiencing now is new, and the worst it’s ever been. This recency bias is certainly not unique to my generation; however, what is unique to my generation is that I have never lived in a world without cell phones, social media or even the internet, a fact that would not be true for someone even ten years older than me. My age, as is true with my whiteness and class background and whether I am aware of it or not, affects the way in which I perceive the world and produce knowledge, and it would be disingenuous to try and pretend that it doesn’t. As feminist philosopher Sandra Harding writes about objectivity in academia: “It is a delusion- and a historically identifiable one- to think that human thought could completely erase the fingerprints that reveal its production process” (Harding 1992, p.446).

¹ SJW (Social Justice Warrior) is a term that I encountered both as a young person online and in my research that is used to describe feminist activists in online spaces, typically with a negative or mocking connotation.

This epistemic framework will be useful throughout this paper when looking at the assumptions surrounding gender roles that are presumed to be scientifically objective, such as a study I will be critiquing in chapter 1 on sex as a determining factor in one's enjoyment of video games.

Terms Defined

Throughout this paper I will be engaging with various jargon heavy concepts related to both feminism & anti-feminism, so in order to make this research as accessible as possible I will begin by clearly defining some of the key terms and outlining how they are used in the scope of this paper. Misogyny refers to the manifestation of hostility towards women and any perceived femininity due to said femininity or identification as a woman. I draw upon Kim Barker and Olga Jurasz's delineation of online misogyny as "the manifestation of hostility towards women because they are women...through online platforms, particularly social media and other participatory environments" (Barker & Jurasz 2019, p.96). This hostility manifests in two forms: the direct harassment of women and feminine people through messaging and voice channels, and the general use of language that advocates gender-based violence or supports the idea that women are inferior in online discourse. In my analysis I will also be drawing upon Alerie Dickel and Giulia Evolvi's concept of networked misogyny, which they utilize to explore reactions to the #metoo movement in the manosphere, the loose network of men's-rights and anti-feminist organizations online that utilize similarly misogynistic ideas and language for the purpose of "spreading sexist narratives" (Dickel and Evolvi 2022, p.1395). The network framework is useful in connecting the misogynistic rhetoric that exists in different spaces yet draws upon similar concepts and tropes. These networks allow for similar ideas to pervade different communities, such as the red-pill philosophy, a metaphor that is utilized across the manosphere that I will be addressing in chapter 2.

Feminism is difficult to define due to the wide spectrum of political and social movements that have fallen under the label of feminism, but broadly it is an ideology and social movement that believes there has been a systemic devaluation and subordination of women and

theorizes the deconstruction of this system, oftentimes referred to as patriarchy. In the rhetoric of the online communities that this paper investigates, feminism is rarely defined and is used to refer to a variety of different ideas, but it usually is connotated as being associated with the political left and the women's movement. Anti-feminism too, is difficult to define due to the broad array of ideologies and movements that the term encompasses, but generally it is the ideological antithesis of feminism, supporting to various degrees of severity the traditional and essentialist gender roles that feminism has historically campaigned against. In the scope of this paper misogyny will act as an indicator of antifeminism, though many of the communities that I will be engaging with self-identify as anti-feminists. The "alt-right" or "far-right" are also concepts that will be engaged with, and generally refer to the US radical political right that is associated with a fascist and white supremacist ideology. Lastly I will be mobilizing the concept of the "trope" as way of connecting similar ideas and themes in different contexts. For example, one misogynistic trope that I point to across chapters is the portrayal of women as hysterical and overly emotional that is used to discredit feminist arguments.

Introduction

With the rise of the internet came new communities and digital cultures, and challenges for the feminist movement. In its early inception, the internet represented a potentially liberatory platform for some feminists, who theorized that it could be a digital space where people could either exist without gendered discrimination or could organize resistance against gender discrimination internationally (Schulte 2011, pp. 729-35). Early proponents of the internet leaned heavily into the mythology of the American frontier, postulating that cyberspace could be a *wild west* in which people could freely organize around shared interests without the interference of the state or geographic restrictions. With this frontier metaphor, however, came the same problems and masculine organization that organized American Westward expansion (Ibid, p.732). Stephanie Richer Schulte chronicles the development of cyberfeminism in her review article “Surfing Feminism's Online Wave: The Internet and the Future of Feminism” and argues that the internet by itself is neither inherently oppressive or emancipatory for women, but an invention that can be mobilized towards either extreme (Ibid, p.736). The internet does not exist in a vacuum, it is influenced by the systems of inequality that are deeply imbedded in American society. Cyberfeminism Donna Haraway writes that “male dominance of coding, computer and internet production, and design led to the masculinization of computing and computer networking” (Ibid p.379), leading to the internet being conceptualized as masculine. With this masculine conceptualization of the internet comes a digital misogyny that crosses digital borders and takes different forms in different spaces.

This digital misogyny that has entrenched itself in the gaming community, online memes, and antifeminist political organizing. Through the utilization of sexist tropes and networked misogyny a negative caricature of feminism has been created in online discourse that has

material outcomes for the treatment of women in online spaces. These misogynistic tropes can be traced through the Anti-feminist movements of the late 19th and 20th century and represent a continuation of imbedded cultural ideals of gender essentialism and patriarchy.

Chapter 1: Online Attitudes Towards Feminism

Gaming Culture

Over the last 30 years video games have gone from a niche pastime that could only be enjoyed in arcades, to a multibillion-dollar international industry that are played on just about any piece of technology around. The video game community certainly existed prior to the internet, but the internet allowed for gaming culture become ubiquitous within online culture. When referring to gaming culture, it is important to specify that the label of “gamer” is not just someone who plays video games, but instead an identity marker that signals participation in a specific community, the gaming community. At this point about half of all American adults play video games in some capacity, but most people don’t self-identify as a gamer (Duggan 2015). As of 2015 50% of US adult men and about 48 of US adult women reported that they played video games, and yet only 15% of US men and 6% of adult women described themselves as “gamers” (Ibid). There are several reasons for this discrepancy, one of which being the gaming community’s preference for console and PC games and aversion to mobile gaming, which makes up over half of the international gaming market (*The Games Market...2022*). The other phenomenon that could help explain why gaming has become cultural gendered as masculine is the casual misogyny that pervades gaming culture.

In American culture video games are culturally associated as boy’s toys and have a skewed gender ratio in their production that reinforces the cultural perception of gamers as men, despite the fact that an almost equal number of men and women actually play video games (Duggan 2015). Women are a minority in most large game development studios, and the culture reinforces this. One report found that across 10 of the most popular video game releases of their respective years, all had women representing less than 20% of the development roles, and less

than 30% of supporting roles (Bailey et al 2019). Along with this, video games have historically been marketed to men and boys through subject matters that are generally considered masculine like sports, hunting, and war. Video games target male demographics with typical masculine content, and as such gets marketed as a toy for boys, and a hobby for men. Video games for girls are considered a subcategory of video games, implying that video games themselves are made for boys (Drenten et al 2019). Although there is more visibility for this bias today than twenty years ago, video games are still primarily being created and culturally consumed through a masculine lens, which makes sense in the context of the internet and computer sciences as still being primarily masculine spaces. In opposition to this social explanation, there have been attempts at biologically justifying the gender disparity in gaming.

A 2008 study in the *Journal of Psychiatric Research* concluded that “gender differences may help explain why males are more attracted to, and more likely to become “hooked” on video games than females” (Hoeft et al. 2008) from an experiment that measured neurological activity in 22 young adults as they played a simple video game and found greater excitation in regions of the brain associated with reward in the mens’ brains than the women’s. From an overall small sample size of 22 college students, researchers made bold claims on sexual difference explaining men’s greater addiction to videos games. One of the researchers, Allan Reiss, was quoted as saying that these results were what they expected because “it’s fair to say that males tend to be more intrinsically territorial.... It doesn't take a genius to figure out who historically are the conquerors and tyrants of our species - they're the males” (Brandt 2008). The researchers went into the experiment with a preconceived notions of the results they would find: that men are geared towards conquest and leadership because of a biological difference. This study made the rounds in the news in 2008 and inspired dozens of headlines claiming some sort

of variation of “Men more likely to be addicted to Video games” or “Gender is key in Love of Video Games” (Cavalli 2008). Instead of reflecting on the myriad of confounding social variables for results of their experiment, such as the aforementioned social gendering of video games as masculine, the researchers jumped to confirming their own biases. This bias towards gender essentialism, the idea that social differences between men and women can be explained through sexual difference in biology, has historically been the basis for gendered discrimination and misogyny, and is an idea that is pervasive in the gaming community.

Although dated, the 2006 SpikeTV Video Game Awards are an excellent example of this kind of gender essentialism. The awards ran from 2003 to 2013 and serve as a time capsule for gamer culture of the era. Spike TV, the self-proclaimed “TV for Men” lived up to its name with the game awards, catering to a male demographic with segments focusing on wrestling, monster trucks, and hypersexualized female models. The 2006 award show, hosted by actor Samuel L. Jackson, had a segment where Jackson tackled the question of why men liked video games and women apparently didn’t. Jackson proclaimed that SpikeTV had conducted a scientific study that found that the male brain contained an “Awesome lobe,” whereas the female brain contained a *Nag-mygdilla*, *Boredom Oblongata*, and a *Complaint-abellum* (*Video Game awards... 2020*).

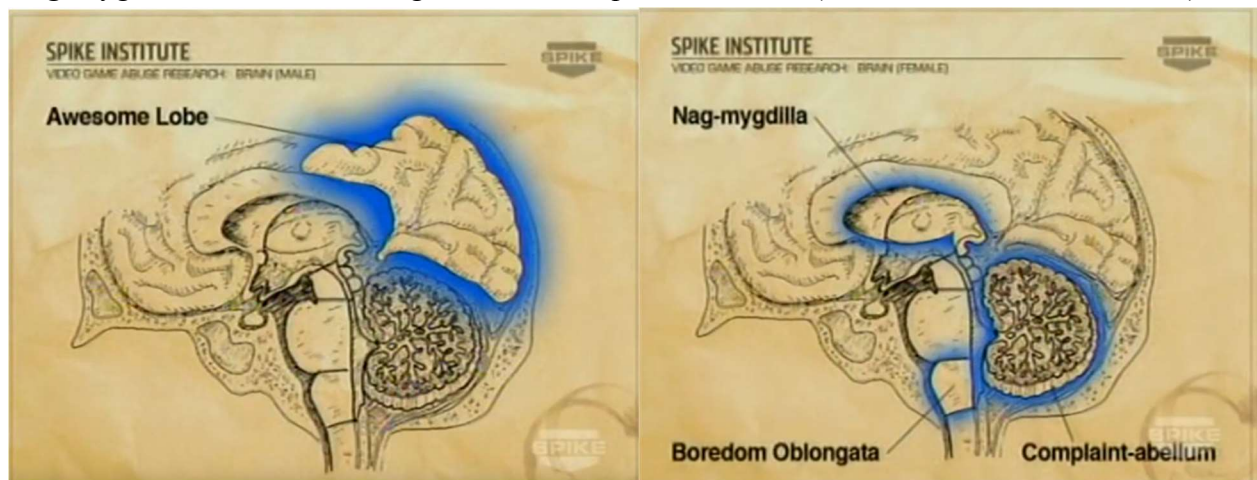


Figure 1: Spike TV “Male Brain“ & “Female Brain”

Although clearly supposed to be humorous, this sort of imagery reinforces the idea that video games being for men is a purely natural and biological phenomenon and reinforces the misogynistic tropes of women being inherently nagging and unable to enjoy video games. The misogyny of these awards is almost contradictory, women are simultaneously sexual objects to visually consume in these spaces, but they are also outsiders who clearly aren't welcome in the gaming community. These sort of messaging falls under misogyny without a direct target, but leads to specifically directed misogyny and harassment.

The result of the cultural belief that video games are naturally for men has led to the construction of a gaming environment that is downright hostile towards women. A 2013 study recorded over 200 matches of the online first-person shooter video game Halo 3 where the same subject would play prerecorded messages with either male or female sounding voices in the games voice channel as they played. They found that on average the female voice received three times as much negative feedback as the male, much of which included gendered slurs like “slut, whore, and bitch,” and even racial ones (Kuznekoff & Rose 2013, p.551). This harassment has real consequences on the gender and racial makeup of the gaming community, acting as Foucauldian disciplinary rhetoric that pushes women out of the digital space and reinforces the community's masculinization and heteronormativity. A 2017 article in the *Journal of New Media and Society* surveyed around 300 women on their experiences with harassment in online video games and found that the gendered and sexual harassment they consistently experienced led to high amounts of complete withdrawal (Fox & Tang 2017). A 2012 article examining the experiences of women of color in the Xbox gaming community found that Black and Latina Women in particular faced a heightened racism and sexism in gaming spaces, and as such were forced to segregate from the larger gaming community to create a safe environment for enjoying

video games (Gray 2012). Women, and to a further extent women of color, are treated like outsiders in the gaming community, and the harassment they face serves as policing to preserve the misogyny of gaming culture. We can see this policing in action during the events of GamerGate.

GamerGate

The 2014-2015 hashtag on Twitter #GamerGate was a loosely organized campaign of harassment against several women in the Video Game Industry over issues of video game representation in the media and a broader discontent in the gaming community with politically correct and SJW² content in video games. Although proponents of the movement claimed that the goal was to promote ethical video game journalism and that they were spurred into action by a series of articles attacking gamer culture, users operating under the Twitter hashtag and users of the Gamergate forum on the various “Chan” websites such as 4Chan and 8Chan perpetrated the intense online harassment of several women in the Industry, including game designer Zoe Quinn, game designer Briana Wu, and feminist cultural critic Anita Sarkeesian (Mortensen 2018) (*How Gamergate Became...* 2019). Zoe Quinn was initially targeted due to a rumor that she had slept with several game journalists in order to receive better coverage of her game, a common trope used to discredit the achievements of women in male dominated fields. Sarkeesian was particularly demonized and targeted for her feminist critique of misogynistic trends in gaming on

² “SJW” (Social Justice Warrior), “feminist” and “woke” are all thrown around fairly interchangeably during gamergate to signal which women should be harassed (Ohlheiser 2015).

her podcast “Feminist Frequencies.” This harassment including Doxing³ that led to violent threats of rape and murder, in Briana Wu’s own words:

“[The Harassment] was all the time. It was constant. You know, one of the weird things about being a woman in the tech industry is you gain a kind of dark ability to judge the seriousness of a death threat. So I got one yesterday of a man telling me he was going to stab me to death. That just - you don't take that seriously. The ones I got were very credible. They had my address. They had information about my family. They were very specific about the violence they were going to do to me. It was so serious that, actually, the FBI got involved” (Cornish 2019).⁴

The harassment was targeted, malicious, and the message was clear: stay out of our community.

The specific language used under the Gamergate hashtag echoes the misogynistic rhetoric used against women in the community, and the purpose is similar, to gatekeep the community and punish those who speak out against the dominant masculine narrative of video games and the gaming community. This narrative of gamergate is portrayed within the community as another example of the “woke” media attempting to discredit a legitimate action, to them, gamergate was blown out of proportion and was justified by the actions of the women who were targeted. Similar to what happens in alt-right circles, any sort of reporting or academic writing about the community further reinforces the mentality of “fighting against the system,” it’s a cycle that is weaponized to further radicalize people and discredit any sort of negative reporting. Although the loosely organized gamergate cohort does not identify as alt-right, it certainly shares some of the language and attitudes that are typical of alt-right spaces.

³Doxxing refers to the intentional posting of someone’s personal information online often with the intent of enabling harassment.

⁴ Wu’s account is corroborated by the existence of a declassified, yet still partially redacted FBI report received detailing reported death threats against multiple individuals related to gamergate including bomb threats made against the university of Utah to prevent Anita Sarkeesian from speaking (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2014).

Similar to how many on the right continue to deny the results of the 2020 election⁵, the narrative of what gamergate really was is still contested within the community. Although many of the original spaces for gamergate have been shut down and their comments lost, one subreddit called “KotakuInAction” that self identifies as the “main hub for gamergate on reddit” is still active today and provides an anecdotal window into how gamergate is discussed outside of academia and the news. In a 2022 post asking for an explanation of what gamergate was there are a variety of explanations, many of which describe it as 1) a warranted response to corruption and malpractice in games journalism⁶ and 2) a media craze that was blown out of proportion.⁷ Even if we are to take what is being said in this forum at its best, that they were not the ones sending death threats, that game journalists were corrupt and were trying to undermine the consumer, that it was used to demonize gamers in the liberal media, the rhetoric is still explicitly misogynistic, often transphobic and racist, and echoes alt-right discourse in its discrediting of mainstream media and its creation of a leftist/feminist cabal working to undermine their community.

Gamergate is politically significant not for its short-term impact of ethics in games journalism or even in the harassment of women in the industry, but for the political shift it

⁵ Murray 2023 found that 3 in 10 Americans still believe that Biden only won the 2020 election due to fraud. This number goes up to 68% when just looking at republicans.

⁶ Quotes include: “its a complete shitshow brought on by unethical journalists who, instead of admitting they were wrong, chose instead to attack their audience” and “Gamers realizing that their media (review sites) got totally co-opted by extreme far left woke assholes that hate gaming and hate them” (“What the Fuck is GamerGate” 2022).

⁷ Quotes include: “[Gamergate] is basically almost nothing,” “[Gamergate was a] Series of events that got blown out of proportion by game journalists own overreaction” and “According to the mainstream media, Gamergate is an online mass rape campaign which started in 2014 with the rape and murder of multiple women in the gaming industry with the stated aim to elect Donald Trump as United States president with the help of Russian trolls” (“What the Fuck Is GamerGate” 2022).

caused in the gaming community, specifically against feminism. For gamergate, Anita Sarkeesian and her Feminist Frequencies videos represented a feminist political agenda against gamers, who are culturally coded as men, meaning feminism itself was demonized. In this context Gamergate should be understood as a political action, similar to other anti-feminist political actions. Whether or not Sarkeesian's critiques properly represent a feminist framework is irrelevant, feminism becomes the boogeyman.⁸ Another way that online anti-feminism can be more broadly understood is through popular memes.

(Meme)etic Warfare

Although academically memes are just starting to be taken seriously as a form of communication and cultural discourse, the research is relatively recent and encounters the difficulty of covering the broad span of memes that are constantly circulating online. It is difficult to quantify the popularity or reach of memes, so I'll be utilizing a more anecdotal and qualitative analysis of popular antifeminist memes and how they reinforce misogynistic tropes. All of the memes I'll be looking at are at least popular enough to warrant entries on the website "KnowYourMeme," an online dictionary that catalogues and gives context for popular internet memes. I argue that it is important to look at memes even though they may not communicate highbrow arguments or specific data, as they are illustrative of common sentiments being shared online; memes only get popular enough to be considered recognizable if they resonate with people enough to compel posting or sharing. Along with this there is a political need to take

⁸ We can see this mentality in action into the 2020s with the backlash that the game "The Last of Us Part 2" received for telling a narrative that was perceived by some as feminist. The creators and actors were violently harassed online and the game was review bombed online for being "too woke" or "ruined by feminism," with some even blaming Sarkeesian who was rumored to be minorly involved (Letizi 2023).

memes seriously, as there is an established trend of the alt-right embracing memes as political propaganda (Nagel 2020). Another factor to consider with memes is their high degree of variance, even just one meme format can have thousands of variations created by different people, and this is very much intentional. Serving as political propaganda memes aren't meant to provide a nuanced or fleshed out argument, but instead a mimetic barrage of a hyper simplified and recognizable argument.

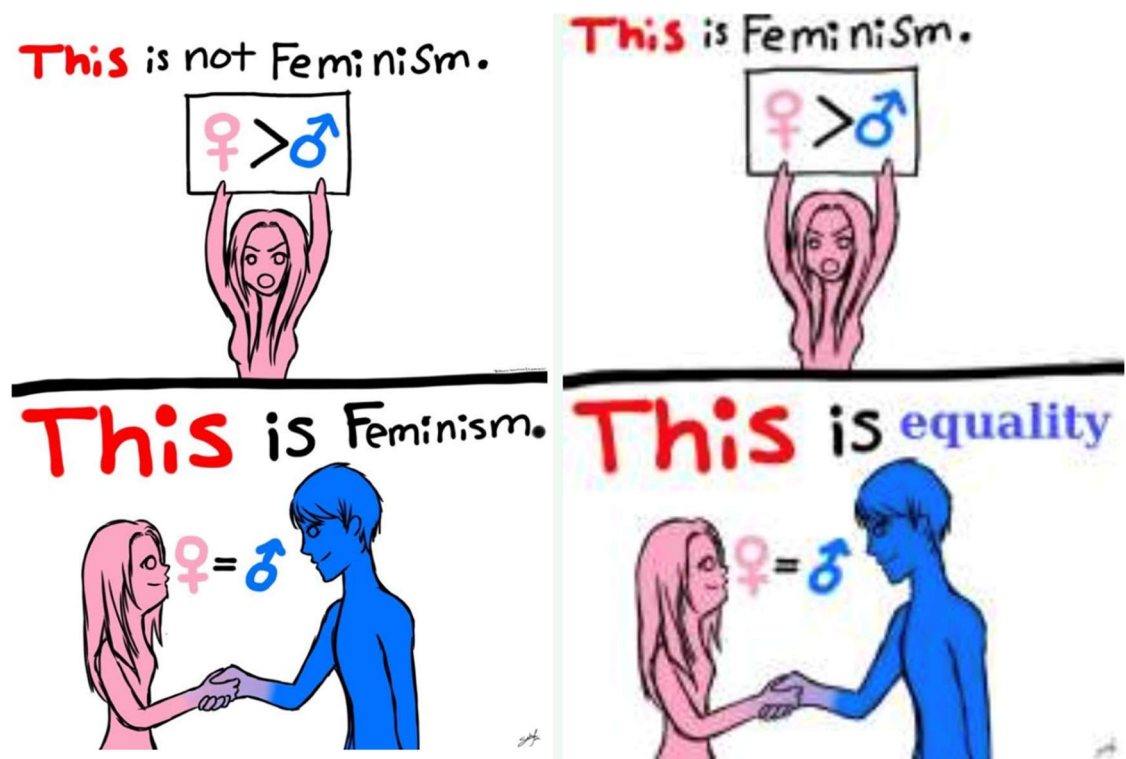


Figure 2: “This is Feminism” meme

Firstly, we have the “This is Feminism” meme, which came from a 2013 webcomic posted on Tumblr that showed a woman saying that feminism is not the belief that women are better than men, but rather belief that women are equal to men. This original post was then edited and popularized on 4Chan to say that that feminism was the belief that women are better than men and that *equality* was the belief that men are equal to men (“This is Feminism” 2018). The I

argue that both of these images are harmful for online perceptions of feminism. The first is attempting to be pro-feminist by saying that feminism is about equality, but still simplifies feminism into just being the pursuit of equality between binary sexes, a common trope in discussions of feminism online. The second is more obviously anti-feminist, promoting a common argument in anti-feminist spaces, that feminism is a female supremacist movement and anti-men.



Figure 3: “Triggered Comics” meme

Secondly, we have the “Triggered” meme, which came from a picture of photographer Melody Hensley that was used in an article where she talked about the PTSD she suffered after experiencing extreme online harassment (“Triggered Comics” 2016). The original image, pictured on the bottom right, was combined with the phrase “Triggered” in an attempt to undercut and make fun of Hensley’s experiences, playing into the misogynistic trope accounting

women’s experiences as overly emotional and hysterical. There are dozens of variations of the meme, some are innocuous, but many of which are explicitly anti-feminist and transphobic. The comic on the left makes fun of feminism and utilizes anti-feminists tropes including: the cosmetic edits to the man in the original comic to make him look like an exaggerated feminist, the items added to the bedroom to indicate to the viewer that he is a feminist including “I heart Tumblr”, the implication that feminists are all anti-free-speech”, and the term “triggered” itself is purposely utilized to communicate to the viewer that the feminist is irrational. Similarly, the image on the right is a meme that implies that the statement “Boys have a penis and girls have a vagina” is always true, and arguing against that fact makes you a triggered and irrational feminist. This argument of the meme purposely erases the existence of transgender and intersex individuals and falsely equates gender expression with sex.



Figure 4: “Anita Sarkeesian” meme

Next, there is an entire entry on KnowYourMeme.com devoted to Anita Sarkeesian, the feminist cultural commentator who became the face of feminism for many in the gaming community during the aforementioned gamergate. The most recent addition to the page was made in November of 2023, an entire 8 years after the events of gamergate (“Anita Sarkeesian”

2013). The meme on the left employs the common anti-feminist trope of claiming that Feminists will call anything and everything misogyny. This argument works to discredit anyone who attempts to call out legitimate misogyny. If Sarkeesian is portrayed as someone who calls “literally anything” misogyny, then her arguments can be dismissed within the gaming community without ever needing a proper response. The meme on the right manages to be both antifeminist, implying that Sarkeesian is a malicious actor and outsider to the gaming community who is “trying to take away your⁹ games,” and antisemitic as it parodies an antisemitic meme used on 4chan and 8chan known as “the Happy Merchant” (“Happy Merchant” 2011).

While all of these memes may be politically disconnected from one another, they subtly work together through shared misogynistic tropes to create a strawman of Feminist theory that is much easier to interact with and subsequently dismiss online. When an entire canon of theory, organizing, and lived experience is boiled down to a couple recognizable images and taglines to laugh at in a meme, there isn’t a genuine or good faith engagement happening, but a mimetic discourse reinforcing the idea that feminism is something to laugh at, and that feminists aren’t to be taken seriously or shown any respect. That is the power of mimetic rhetoric, it is simplistic and allows for the diffusion of arguments that fall apart under academic scrutiny, such as the “Boys have a penis and girls have a vagina” meme. An individual meme making fun of feminism doesn’t accomplish this, but the thousands being posted every day on websites like Reddit, 4Chan, and Twitter do, and anti-feminist activists know this.

In Debbie Ging’s article “Bros v. Hoes: Postfeminism, Anti-feminism and the Toxic Turn in Digital Gender Politics” and MacKenzie Cockerill’s article “Convergence on Common

⁹ This use of “Your” in the meme works to reinforce the intended audience of the meme not just as people who play video games, but specifically “gamers,” the specific self-labeled identity group, the archetypical member being a cisgender heterosexual white man.

Ground: MRAs, Memes and Transcultural Contexts of Digital Misogyny” in the book *Gender Hate Online: Understanding the New Anti-Feminism* the authors point out that Men’s Rights Groups have purposely weaponized Meme culture as a way to spread their influence online. Cockrill specifically globalizes the problem of online misogyny by looking at the memes produced by Indian Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs) compared to American MRAs and finds a convergence of political messaging across cultural lines:

MRA communities use memes like advertisements or propaganda, presenting their worldview with polarizing language intended to catch the attention of men who already see themselves as put-upon and disadvantaged... The MRA community in India parallels this method of using memes as a vehicle for its peculiar brand of activism: Indian MRA Facebook pages and websites are full of cryptic and bizarre memes intended to make their ideology more accessible to a wider audience... MRAs in the West and India express similar priorities in their memes— generalizing and controlling women, promoting violence, justifying rape—and their memes appear in nearly identical digital spaces across their communities (Ging & Siapera 2019, p. 89).

While Cockerill and Ging examined memes created directly by MRAs as a form of propaganda, the memes antifeminist memes so far discussed perform the same role: they prey upon men, particularly gamers, that feel targeted and downtrodden and plant political seeds of radicalization. They push gamers further right by painting the “feminist left” as working against their literal interest, gaming. We saw this in action with the 2016 election, which immediately followed Gamergate and was when the memes we’ve looked at thus far were in peak circulation online. White men voted almost 2-1 for Trump (“An Examination of... 2018), and much of Trumps rhetoric around feminism and women utilizes the same tropes being used to describe feminism in the aforementioned memes.

In their book “Make America Meme Again: The Rhetoric of the Alt-Right,” Kelly Williams Nagel comes to a similar conclusion, arguing that memes were purposely utilized for alt-right recruitment online in the 2016 election, and made to provoke outrage and backlash which reinforced their messaging (Williams-Nagel 2020).

Chapter 2: Antifeminist Organizing Online

Anti-feminist organizing online takes a variety of different forms. More traditional and hierarchical organizations typically engage in political activism and legal advocacy, with older organization like *The National Coalition for Men* having websites with a list of their political issues and a public facing board of directors that can be contacted and held accountable (“NCFM National Board...” 2013). More modern and politically decentralized online networks loosely organize around shared sentiments of discontent and misogyny. Purely digital spaces such as the “Politically Incorrect” Forum, known as /POL, are decentralized, pop up on different platforms whenever one forum gets shut down, and are hard to access since posts are unorganized and temporary. These online networks represent an academic challenge as there is evidence of their existence, but their exact size and influence is difficult to conclude. This sort of underground anti-feminist organizing certainly existed before social media and online forums, but the move online inherently changed how people were able to engage with these networks. As opposed to in-person gatherings where one had to physically out themselves in order to engage with anti-feminist organizing, digital gatherings can remain entirely anonymous, and one doesn’t even have engage in an online forum, they can just lurk, read, and internalize the messaging they are consuming. To understand how we got here, we can begin by looking at the modern history of Men’s Rights Organizing.

Men’s Rights Organizations

Modern MROs (Men’s Rights Organizations) come into popularity in the United States in the early eighties, right in the middle of what is generally considered to be second wave Feminism. The precursor to the Men’s Rights movement was the Men’s liberation movement, which operated parallel to the feminist movement at the time and was mostly focused on the

effect that sexism had on men. Many of the works attributed to the movement focused on the psychological ramifications of sexism on men and emphasized how the “male role” in society was harmful to men.¹⁰ Although the movement wasn’t explicitly anti-feminist, it often falsely equated the oppression faced by men and women under patriarchy. In the late seventies the movement began to shift away from liberation towards a more explicitly anti-feminist stance.

“By the late 1970s and early 1980s, men’s rights discourse had all but eliminated the gender symmetry of men’s liberation from their discourse, in favor of a more overt and angry antifeminist backlash. Feminism was viewed as a plot to cover up the reality that is actually women who have the power and men who are most oppressed by current gender arrangements.” (Messner 1997, p.41)

This sort of political mindset is where MROs position themselves today. By the ‘80s the sympathy for feminism that had existed in the Men Liberation movement was gone, and MROs began to argue that men are **the** socially disadvantaged sex and argued amongst other things that: “men are the true victims of prostitution, pornography, dating rituals, sexist media conversations, divorce settlements, false rape accusations, sexual harassment, and even domestic violence” (Messner 1997, p.42). We can see many of these arguments present in the rhetoric of post 2000 MROs.

Although there is still legal and political advocacy coming from MROs, the main focus seems to have shifted towards a strategy of cultural warfare through a combination of in-person rallies and online propaganda. It’s difficult to exactly quantify which of these groups are the most influential as there is no official data on membership or outreach, but *A Voice For Men* is a great example of what modern MRO websites look like: a collection of articles, self-help guides,

¹⁰ In his book “Politics of Masculinities: Men in Movements,” Dr. Michael Messner writes extensively on the history of self-proclaimed “Men’s Movements” in America and covers the political transition from “Men’s liberation” to “Men’s Rights.” Messner, Michael A. *Politics of Masculinities: Men in Movements*. Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications, Inc, 1997.

and political pieces that run headlines such as “Mass Hysteria, Madness and Feminism,” “Feminism, a self-cancelling Project,” and “This New Study Makes Women look SO BAD” (“A Voice For Men”).¹¹ The main arguments in these articles fall into one of three main categories that are popular in Men’s Rights Rhetoric. 1) Feminism is the *false* belief that women are oppressed in American society by men and has become the mainstream ideology of American Society. 2) Women¹² are the societally privileged sex in America due to a social prioritization of women’s lives over men, leading to the oppression of men. 3) What feminists call “Patriarchy” is actually the just the result of essential differences between men and women.¹³

Firstly, we can see a correlation between argument #1 and the underlying messaging in the anti-feminist memes looked at in chapter one: they both straw-man feminism into being solely about “men oppressing women,” purposely choosing not to engage with anything other than the most simplified interpretation of feminist politics, and simply ignoring the systemic arguments made in feminist theory that patriarchy is not “women are oppressed by men,” but instead the systemic enforcement of gender roles on both men and women and the enactment of a gendered violence that is rooted in heteronormativity and whiteness. Argument #2 fails to see how the social prioritization of women is not incompatible with patriarchy, but in fact a result of women being perceived as inherently physically weaker and in need of protection by men.

Argument #3 most often manifested as a justification for blatant sexism, such the argument that

¹¹ All of these headlines were featured on the front page of the A Voice for Men Website as of 2/8/24.

¹² MROs almost exclusively use “women” and “men” to refer solely to cisgender men and women, purposely ignoring the transgender and intersex populations as they do not fit within their essentialist framework of sex and gender, which they use interchangeably.

¹³ Paul Elam, the outspoken founder of “A Voice For Men” claims in “The Red Pill” that the gender gap in US politics is due to the fact that politics is actually a masochistic career and there are just more men than women who’re willing to put up with it. (The Red Pill, 30-31min)

women are inherently less rational than men in “Mass Hysteria, Madness and Feminism.” It is also important to note that in my extensive consumption of Men’s Rights rhetoric across websites and time periods, I did not come across any significant mention or acknowledgment of race in any capacity, for men’s and women's oppression, meaning that they do not utilize any sort of intersectional frameworks¹⁴ when discussing the oppression men face, universalizing the experiences of white men, nor did they engage with any sort of feminist rhetoric or theorizing that centers any experiences other than a cisgender, heterosexual, and most importantly white, woman.

Lastly, much of the evidence used to justify the claims made by MROs is dependent upon fallaciously assuming causality from correlation. For example, in the propaganda documentary “The Red Pill,” Men’s Rights leaders Paul Elam and Warren Farrell argue that men are an oppressed class, and they defend this point by pointing to statistics about men staying in their parents’ homes for too long, men having pornography and video game addictions, men having higher suicide and mortality rates and men being more likely to be sent to prison (Jaye 2017). Rhetorically this argument falls apart when you point out that there are a variety of social factors that are causing these problems, but they want the reader to assume causality in order to support their claim despite providing no evidence specifically linking these statistics to any sort of gendered oppression towards men. MROs represent anti-feminist organizing at their most organized, and even still their arguments are consistently built upon rhetorical fallacies and poor data analysis.

¹⁴ Intersectional frameworks in this context refers to Kimberly Crenshaw’s legal framework of Intersectionality which is important to identify unique or otherwise invisible oppression that exist on the avenues of intersecting identities, such as gender and race.

The Incel Community

One of the most well-known online anti-feminist spaces is the “Incelosphere” (Brace 2023), better known as the Incel community. Incels, a shortening of “involuntary celibates”, are an online community of mostly straight men who share a sense of discontent over not being able to date or sleep with women. The rhetoric in the Incel community contains many of the tropes found within the messaging of MROs: that women hold more social power than men, that accepting this fact makes you “red pill,”¹⁵ and that feminism is a part of a larger conspiracy to oppress men. One aspect in which Incel rhetoric differs however is the hierarchy of male gender roles that exist in the Incels worldview, specifically the creation of a dichotomy between what they see as “Chads,” typically attractive, wealthy and athletic “alpha” men who are successful in dating women, and “Betas,” the traditionally unattractive men who are unsuccessful in dating women. Chads are at the top, Betas are at the bottom, and then “blue pill normies” encompass everyone in-between (Brace 2023). The resentment for other men in these spaces is certainly present, but the violent rhetoric is mostly targeted towards women.

A security 2023 report on the Incel community found in 4 different digital spaces that were self-proclaimed to be a part of the Incelosphere, there has been a statistically significant uptick in violent extremist language measured between 2016 and 2021, typically targeted towards women (Brace 2023). This violence isn’t just rhetorical unfortunately, it has empowered extremist Incels to go out into the world and perpetrate mass killings, which are then hailed in

¹⁵ The “Red Pilled” or “Blue Pilled” tropes are a reference to the iconic scene in the film *The Matrix* where protagonist Neo is faced with the decision to either take a blue pill and have things go back to the way they were, or take a red pill and learn the real truth about the world. In the Incelosphere, taking the Blue Pill is accepting the lie that we’re told by Feminism that women are oppressed, whereas taking the red pill is learning that men are the real oppressed class.

the Incel community as heroic acts of martyrdom.¹⁶ This subset of the Incel community is known as “Black Pilled,” which’s the acceptance of the “Red Pilled” worldview and belief that all women choose their sexual partners based solely on physical attractiveness, implying that being an Incel is genetically determined, meaning there is nothing that can be done to stop being an Incel (Kelly et al 2021). Violence then, both to the self and others, becomes the only actionable solution. Incels are for the most part antifeminists, but not all antifeminists are Incels.

Networks of Misogyny

Although these modern antifeminist organization are broadly nonhierarchical and hard to pin-down, we can trace the networked misogyny that connects them. As utilized by Valerie Dickel and Giulia Evolvi, networked Misogyny refers to the misogynist rhetoric that pervades posts, responses, memes, tweets, etc. that flood online platforms to drown out feminist rhetoric. What makes it specifically *networked* are the shared terms and tropes that reinforce an anti-feminist political message, such as the tropes previously looked at in antifeminist memes. In the same vein, networked misogyny is apart of the previously discussed mimetic discourse of memes: it is about the repetition of certain phrases and images that become devoid of actual substance in order to signal an anti-feminist affiliation and provoke an emotional reaction. The tropes are utilized in different communities that may otherwise have nothing to do with each other but are connected through this network that is pushing the same anti-feminist ideology. This framework is important for tying what may otherwise seem like unaffiliated events into

¹⁶ The 2014 La Vista Shooting and the 2018 Toronto & Tallahassee killings were all carried out by men who identified as Incels and posted about their motivations online before carrying out their terrorist attacks. The Toronto perpetrator who killed 10 and injured 15 even claimed online that “the Incels Rebellion had already begun.” (Scaptura & Boyle 2020).

what is larger cultural movement. Although MROs, Incels, unaffiliated sexist tweets, gaming culture and memes all occupy the contemporary digital landscape, it is imperative that we connect them to the larger historical trend of backlash against feminist gains and cultural change.

Chapter 3: History of Feminist Backlash

The mainstream American feminist movement has been categorized broadly into waves, the first of which is generally thought of as encompassing the end of the 19th century into the 1920s, the second taking place from the 1960s into 1980s, and the third taking place from the 1990s to the present. The “wave” metaphor, despite being deeply culturally entrenched even amongst feminists who recognize its shortcomings, simplifies a complicated history into a singular, “discursive” narrative (Reger 2017). The wave metaphor privileges a white historical narrative, and relegates Black, Chicana, Marxist, etc. feminist movements to the third wave, when in reality they have been around just as long as the mainstream movement. The use of the “waves” metaphor in the scope of this chapter is to contextualize what sort of mainstream feminism was being pushing against, and by who. There was certainly pushback against first wave and second wave feminism from the left for its centering of middle-class white women, but the backlash this chapter will be focusing on is from the political right, as this backlash is where modern MROs and antifeminists trace their lineage. This being acknowledged, let us start with first wave backlash.

Feminism of the 19th and early 20th century, the advancement women’s socioeconomic status, went in direct opposition to the deeply ingrained gender roles of American society; men’s role was in the public sphere, as politicians and breadwinners, and women were confined solely to the domestic sphere, as mothers and homemakers. Unlike today, there was no question of who held the power during the first wave, the question was whether this status quo was good, or even able to change. As French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir points out in her book *The Second Sex*, western society has for most of history held up men as the default state of humanity, which inherently relegates women into a position that is subservient to men (Beauvoir 1953). Marriage,

property law, and voting rights have all been institutions where this gender hierarchy is codified. It wasn't just men who upheld this status quo however, women like Catherine Beecher argued against the social reform of early feminists by instead advocating for *domestic* reform, pushing that women should instead seek power within the domestic sphere and not fight against the "Divine Economy" of gender roles (Beecher 1845). The religious connotations of the argument in favor of traditional gender roles works to solidify them as natural, and I argue is an early form of the biological essentialism that we see today. Work of early feminists would eventually culminate in the passage of the 19th amendment in 1920, granting all women the right to vote, but not necessary enabling all women to vote.

From the end of first wave feminism in the '20s to the reinvigorated feminist movement of the '60s and '70s there was a lull in large scale feminist organizing, at least in terms of the mainstream movement. During WWII women start joining the workforce en-mass to contribute to the war effort, however after the war there is a rise of social conservatism fueled by the anti-communist sentiments of the cold war that leads to the rise of the "Nuclear family" and the prevailing role of many American Woman becomes that of the housewife, a return to women being confined to the domestic sphere (Fox 2013). Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* points out that there was a broad trend of unhappiness and social death among American housewives of the '50s and labels it the "problem with no name" (Friedan 1963). Within this context of continued gender repression and social conservatism, the second wave of feminism begins in the mid '60s and carries through the '70s. Even though it was originally introduced in 1923, one of the larger mainstream efforts of the second wave was the attempted passage of the ERA (the Equal Rights Amendment), a constitutional amendment that would federally ban legal

discrimination based on sex. The backlash to the attempted passage of the ERA would come to define the modern anti-feminist movement.

The ERA would fail to make it into the national constitution, and although a majority of woman supported the ERA (Burriss 1983), the most successful anti-ERA crusader and avowed anti-feminist was a woman named Phylliss Schlafly. The antifeminist movement to kill the ERA represents one of the most successful above-ground¹⁷ antifeminist campaigns in recent American history. Phylliss Schlafly, who was an active voice in American conservative politics until her death in 2016, used grassroots organizing to form an antifeminist coalition around pushing back against the gains of second wave feminism and “Embraced weaponized housewifery based in [the] racialized logics of white womanhood” to do so (Calahane 2022). This is to say that Schlafly utilized the cultural imagery of a pure and domestic white femininity in order to defend and mobilize housewives, and framed the ERA as a leftist attack on traditional womanhood that would force white women to go into a hostile and unnatural workplace. This rhetoric took advantage of existing cultural insecurities about women entering the workforce en-mass, but mostly appealed to white demographics as a vast majority of non-white Americans continued to support the ERA (Burriss 1983). Just as second wave feminism centered white woman, so too did the antifeminists. Schlafly’s rhetoric follows a similar line of reasoning as Catherine Beecher: that the essential differences between Men and Women (only referring to cisgender men and women) dictate a natural order of gender roles.

To recap: the Antifeminists of the first wave argued that women were not naturally politically astute, and thus would not make informed decisions with the vote. They argued that

¹⁷ The distinction of “Above ground” is necessary to distinguish the anti-ERA campaign from other successful antifeminist campaigns that operated behind closed doors, such as the 30-year conservative campaign to overturn *Roe vs. Wade*.

women's real power is within the domestic sphere, and to expand past that would be to the detriment of Women's natural role as mothers. The Antifeminists of the second wave argued that feminism harmed natural femininity, led to moral degeneracy, and threatened the housewife way of life in suburban America. The second wave is also when antifeminists explicitly align themselves with the political right, supporting other conservative issues such as border control and evangelical Christianity. The antifeminists advocacy networks of the second wave, such as Schlafly's Eagle Forum, are still operating to this day, but they now focus on a wider array of conservative political issues, the same being true for a lot of modern feminists organizing which has begun working towards a more holistic vision of liberation. The antifeminists of the third wave (from the late '80s to the present) frame themselves as not just "anti-feminism" but as being "pro-men:" they argued that men are actually the societally disadvantaged sex due to feminist victories.

Conclusion

There has never been one lone voice that speaks for the entire ideological spectrum of feminism, but today especially, “feminism” does not describe one singular ideology, and therefore cannot be refuted by a singular approach. There are certainly subsets of the broad “feminism” label such as the black feminist tradition, Chicana feminism, and Marxist feminism that are movements that can be specifically addressed, but they are still far from being monoliths. Interesting, throughout this research I’ve found very few of these specific feminist movements critically engaged with by anti-feminists, today or throughout the 20th century: the backlash continues to center “white feminism,” the non-intersectional feminist ideology that centers the experiences and problems faced by white middleclass woman. White feminism has repeatedly appropriated concepts that come from the black feminist tradition, with phrases like #MeToo, identity politics, and Intersectionality brought into the mainstream by white feminism and losing their specificity and context (Borah 2023). The backlash then only responds to the concepts once they are academically watered down, allowing for straw man arguments against concepts like identity politics to pervade the political mainstream.

Because a rigid and traditional gender essentialism is one of the key concepts that connect the networks of misogyny that makeup anti-feminism online, it is important to note that the movement is often also homophobic and transphobic. Historically, feminists have often been called “Lesbians” and “Dykes” as a way of disparaging them and reinforcing patriarchal control by labeling them as unnatural or unwoman-like (Borah 2023). The anti-feminist movement does not validate the existence of transgender people and portrays them as unnatural and monstrous because gender fluidity and transgenderism are conceptually incompatible with the rigid gender roles that inform the anti-feminist worldview. Because of this transgender people have become a

primary target for anti-feminist organizations, such as the aforementioned Eagle Forum that has put out dozens of articles attacking transgender people and calling for the passage of legislation restricting the legal and medical rights of genderqueer people (“A Transgender Flood” 2024).

Papers of this nature often struggle with the question of what come next? We can talk all we want about theoretical concepts explaining feminism, or the systematic resistance to it, but at the end of the day this is not a problem that can be solved within the ivory tower. It is certainly important to connect seemingly disconnected incidents of misogyny to the tropes that tie them together in the networked misogyny framework, but Anti-feminist pundits have time and time again proven that they have no interest in debating feminism at its most academic or theoretically coherent. Misogynistic rhetoric, as was the case during GamerGate, is for the most part distrustful of any academia that is perceived as leftist or feminist. Grassroots work is outside the scope of an undergraduate paper such as this but is nevertheless necessary to actually mitigate any of the harms outlined in academic works. On the ground education, such as consciousness raising, is what actually combats misogyny, and helps people, such as my younger self, to become more aware of the beliefs that were instilled in them by antifeminist propaganda.

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