



“You are not oppressed”

an argument analysis of anti-feminism on the internet

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Abstract

Social platforms on the internet become increasingly influential as a source of information and spreading of ideas for large masses. YouTube enables individuals to create and publish content for free and gather audiences all over the world. Some people use this opportunity to advocate socio-political ideas on a larger scale than would otherwise be possible. This study will focus on the topic of gender equality and analyse how YouTube activists argue in favour of anti-feminism. The aim is to deconstruct their argumentations in order to contextualise their message with academic research in the same area. This will enable us to understand the implications of their influence and how their discussions correlate to scholarly debate. The study will use a theoretical approach inspired by Raewyn Connell in order to establish a foundational understanding of gender and power relations. It will apply Stephen Toulmin's method of argumentation as a formula for deconstructing the study material and analysing the components that build each argument. In conclusion we will see that the selected anti-feminist arguments fail to provide a nuanced representation of the diversity in feminism and social, political and cultural processes involved in gender-based power structures in society.

Keywords: Gender, Power, Masculinity, Hegemony, Femininity, Feminism, Internet, Video, YouTube

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1. Introduction

The inspiration for this essay came out of my previous study which dealt with female objectification in video game narrative.¹ When researching that topic I came across the scholar Anita Sarkeesian who also analyses video games in order to identify recurring tropes of female objectification and sexualisation, stressing how this can have detrimental effects on equality in gender power structures. What makes her stand out is that she does not publish this research in academic forums but as video essays uploaded to the video sharing website YouTube under her channel *Feminist Frequency*.² This immediately makes her research accessible to a wider audience, not only in the sense that anyone has access to her material but since her arguments and discussion is vocal in video form with visual imagery as part of her presentation it makes it easier for more people to take part and understand her research rather than if she published it in essay form. Consequently, this drew the attention of critics who object to her views on feminism and how it should influence our culture. Some of these critics work in similar ways that she does, by making videos presenting arguments and motivations but instead advocating against feminism as a detriment to gender equality. Although in many of these cases they do not come from a scholarly background like Sarkeesian and therefore do not communicate under the same academic principles when presenting critique of an opposing viewpoint. Criticism of others work is an integral part of academic discussions but it is done with respect for the author, focusing on the publication itself and its weak points rather than resorting to personal attacks. Sarkeesian on the other hand is the subject of a notorious hate campaign on the internet. This brings up an interesting point where it is likely this would not have happened if she published the same research in written academic essays rather than on a public forum. Clearly scholarly theory transcended into a public medium will be received and redefined by speakers with completely different grounds for their authority compared to academics discussing a topic. YouTube is a forum where nearly anyone can gain an audience and become an

1 Sandberg, Ranchor; *Masculinity and Objectification: a Narrative Study on the Representation of Masculine Identity in Video Games*; Lund University, Department of Human Rights, 2015.

2 Feminist Frequency; Home [YouTube channel]; retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/user/feministfrequency?&ab_channel=feministfrequency [14-08-2017].

influential figure in a large-scale socio-political debate which is why it is important to understand how discussions on this platform work and what it means for public understanding of this subject.

1.1 Issue and Purpose

The issue at hand is how anti-feminist advocates motivate their stance and spread of ideas through argumentation and how these motivations relate to a scholarly understanding of gendered power structures in society. My aim is to put their arguments into a wider context of the academic field and discuss the implications how their perspectives are shaped with this understanding. I will strive to answer the questions: How do the subjects perceive social equality and empowerment between genders? How do the subjects define feminism for the purpose of their argumentation? How do they assert their knowledge of the issue? Can this be seen as problematic in the context of an academic perspective on the subject? If so, how? What do these problems imply for the spreading of their perspective?

1.2 Material and delimitations

YouTube is an internet video sharing website which allows any individual to create an account and upload content to the website, accessible to anyone. With an account you can also subscribe to other accounts in order to receive notifications when they have uploaded a new video, thus enabling a content creator to have a reliable viewer fan base. A YouTube account can synonymously be referred to as a YouTube channel, as it is a source of video content from a creator, and these two terms will be used interchangeably throughout this essay. While browsing videos, the website will offer recommendations for other videos based on if they have a similar topic, are uploaded by the same channel and have a substantial amount of collected view counts. This system of video recommendations have played a substantial part in my research to find relevant and appropriate channels and videos to use as material for this study.³

I have identified three major YouTube accounts which advocate anti-feminism. These were chosen based on an overview of the subject matter of their videos until their relevancy could be confirmed, as well as the amount of registered subscribers to each account in order to determine that they are sufficiently influential and therefore relevant for study. Out of these three YouTube channels I have selected one video from each which contain a clear and precise argument representing their beliefs against feminism. The argumentations from these three videos will provide the material which I intend to study. The first account is TJ Kirk (previously known as The Amazing Atheist) who has gained fame by addressing a multitude of different topics in his videos, from advocating atheism against religious beliefs to simply discussing his opinions on popular culture but also becoming known for his anti-feminist advocacy.⁴ I have selected the video titled *It's only sexist when men do it*⁵ as it bears direct correlation with the topic of feminism as counterproductive in achieving gender equality, as we will see in further detail during analysis. It is worth noting that this video is relatively old, published in 2011, but it is also short, concise and drives a strong argument which makes it highly appropriate to apply in this study. The second channel goes by Sargon

3 <https://www.youtube.com/intl/en-GB/yt/about/>
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/YouTube>

4 TJ Kirk; Home [YouTube channel]; retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/user/TheAmazingAtheist/featured> [14-08-2017].

5 YouTube; *It's only sexist when men do it*; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/4JA4EPRbWhQ> [14-08-2017].

of Akkad whose activities include an interest in ancient history, but primarily revolve around exposing feminism as anti-equality.⁶ His video *#MessageToFeminists* offers brief but surprisingly informative insight into his theoretical backdrop and motivations for his stance.⁷ The final channel is known as Thunderf00t who has a Ph.D. in chemistry and whose video topics advocate against creationism and pseudoscience as well as feminism. Note that he does have a background in high education, and presumably applies his knowledge in critical analysis in his videos, but not in a field relating to social sciences.⁸ I will use his video *Feminism, taking STUPIDITY to the next level* as it is highly relevant and provides interesting substance for the analysis.⁹ As a formality, these three content creators will not be addressed by their real or full names but by pseudonyms derived from their channel names. This is in reference to the platform itself where public persona plays a great part in connecting with an audience. In many cases a content creator's name can only be found through research, or is kept secret altogether, therefore pseudonyms become synonymous with their online identity.

6 Sargon of Akkad; Home [YouTube channel]; retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-yewGHQbNFpDrGM0diZOLA?&ab_channel=SargonofAkkad.

7 YouTube; *#MessageToFeminists*; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/jMNtad8qvpQ> [14-08-2017].

8 Thunderf00t; Home [YouTube channel]; retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/user/Thunderf00t.UOCHB>; retrieved from http://www.uochb.cz/web/structure/268.html?do%5BloadData%5D=1&itemKey=en_32 [14-08-2017].

9 YouTube; *Feminism, taking stupidity to the next level*; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/CPZtjJY6QfO> [14-08-2017].

2 Theory and Method

2.1 Gender and Power Structures

As stated before, the purpose of this study is essentially to investigate the topic of gender power relations as presented and discussed in an open public forum. It is worth noting that I am not looking for a self-appointed feminist scholar to simply counter the arguments of the material. Instead, the theoretical backdrop should offer a formalised understanding of gender-based social power structures to compare, contrast and give insight on the study material. Thus, I will draw on Raewyn Connell, who has performed extensive research on the topic of gender in society and social interactions, and her work as the theoretical foundation for this study.

Connell's observations begin with presenting the elements which define social power . She identifies it as the ability to define the common understanding of an event or phenomenon and the authority to define morality. In other words social power held by those who are able to assert a hegemony and define the societal mainstream perception on various issues.¹⁰ Connell defines the term “hegemony” as: “a social ascendancy achieved in a play of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute power into the organization of private life and cultural processes”¹¹. This definition establishes that hegemonic masculinity ascends over and subordinates femininities. There are traditionally enforced cultural ideals in femininity but these do not hold the same degree of social power, do not contain the same authoritative themes and do not seek to subvert alternative femininities to the same extent as masculinities. In other words, this “emphasised femininity” is defined in to hegemonic masculinity and does therefore not hold the qualities of a hegemony itself.¹² But to understand this hierarchy it is important to make clear that to enable the subordination of women it has to establish

10 Connell, Raewyn; *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*; Polity Press, 1987; p. 107.

11 Connell; *Gender and Power*; 1987; p. 184.

12 Ibid. pp. 186 – 188.

a gendered hierarchy among masculinities as well. The hierarchy forms under hegemonic masculinity, as the socially constructed ideal which is rarely embodied by anyone. Then there are conservative masculinities, which do not represent the driving force of the hierarchy but enable its perpetuation through complicity. Lastly, there are subordinated masculinities (e.g. homosexual men) which, like femininities, are maintained in cultural subordination rather than eliminating alternatives altogether.¹³ This hegemony is not embodied in the majority of males or even in society's ruling elite, but the image of a culturally ideal masculinity is maintained in collective collaboration by people in our society.¹⁴ It is also important to distinguish between global *macro*-relations and local *micro*-relations in power. Domestic power relations may differ from public façade which still enforces male authority. Gender-based power relations are not equal simply because of female authority in certain environments or actions. For example, a woman may hold higher authority in her household but not in public spaces. This does not prove a female based social hierarchy if the implicit message is that male authority is the accepted norm, while female authority is the exception and deemed unacceptable in general social situations.¹⁵

For clarity's sake, this study will focus on trying to identify these themes in the study material, based on Connell's theoretical approach:

- Demonstrating an authority to define their audience's understanding of gender-based power relations in order to support their own position.¹⁶
- Trends in argumentation where a rhetoric of “men versus women” is used, rather than recognising gender hegemony in society and the struggle between *masculinities* and *femininities*.¹⁷
- Arguments founded on the perception that masculinity and femininity are biologically static. A failure to understand gender as influenced by social norms and constructed by individuals, therefore unfixed by nature, and that structural gender norms determine possibilities for individual action accordingly.¹⁸

13 Connell; *Gender and Power*; 1987; pp. 110, 184.

14 Ibid. pp. 184 – 185.

15 Ibid. p. 111.

16 Ibid. p. 107.

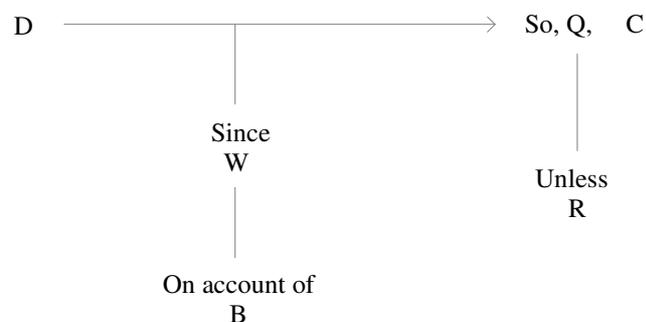
17 Ibid. pp. 110, 184, 186 – 188.

18 Connell, Raewyn; *Gender: in world perspective*; Polity Press, 2015; pp. 16, 19, 75.

2.2 Argumentation Analysis

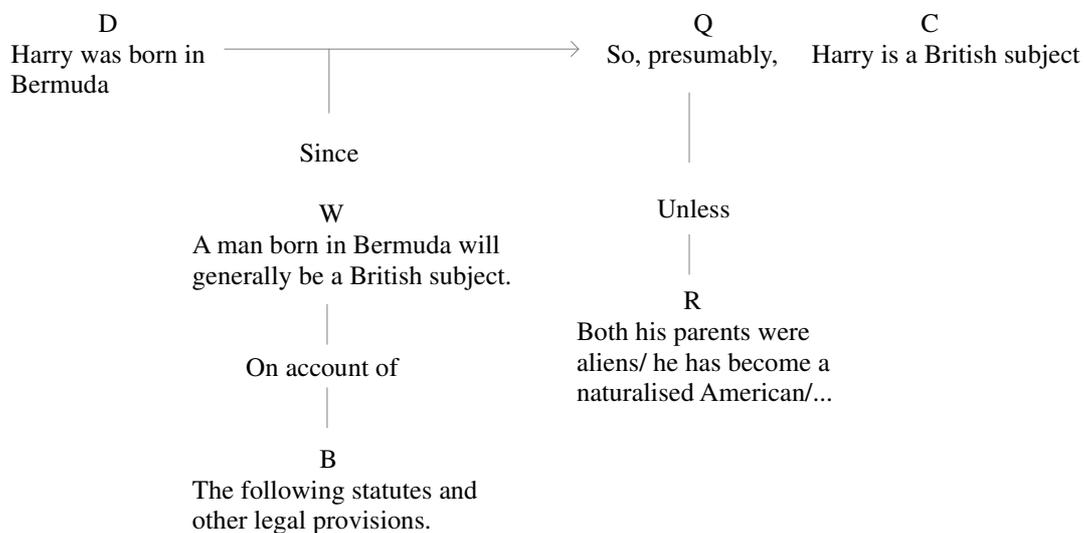
In *The Uses of Argument* Stephen Toulmin performs an extensive and dense theoretical examination of argument. His intention is to critically analyse the construct of traditional ways of understanding the functions of argument and thus propose an alternate perspective that Toulmin deems more appropriate. Even though this is the driving point of his book, taking a stance on the theoretical implications of the functions of argumentation is not relevant to this particular study. In the process of broadening our understanding of argumentation theory, Toulmin formalises a methodical approach to understanding the structural components of an argument. It is this portion of his work that I will draw on in the method of conducting my study.

The way Toulmin identifies the layout or pattern of an argument focuses on how the *claim* (C) is supported by a compilation of facts or *data* (D). In order to explain why data (D) is related to the claim (C) one utilises a *warrant* (W) which simply provides a piece of background information to give the recipient a clearer understanding of the context of the argument. The warrant (W) can then be followed with an additional *backing* (B) which consists of additional contextual evidence to ensure that the validity of the warrant (W) will not be challenged. Additionally, the argument contains a *qualifier* (Q) which represents the the degree of which it is affirmative that the given data (D) and warrants (W) definitely lead to the claim (C). The qualifier (Q) may be a presumption or a necessary conclusion based on preceding components of the argument. Finally, the qualifier (Q) may be contradicted with a *rebuttal* (R) if any or all of the information given is found to be false or misleading.¹⁹ With all of these components in place we see the structure of an argument as such:



¹⁹ Toulmin, Stephen; *The Uses of Argument*; Cambridge University Press, 1958; pp. 99 – 105.

The best way to illustrate how these distinctions work in a practical sense is through an example argument. Toulmin presents the following example: Harry is a British subject (C), he was born in Bermuda (D), a man born in Bermuda will often be found to be a British subject (W), on account of the legal provisions of state and citizenship (B). But such provisions only work under certain conditions, meaning the qualifier (Q) can only presume its claim, which may be proven false if Harry's parents were not from Bermuda or he has changed his citizenship since (R). With all of these components in place, the diagram looks like this:²⁰

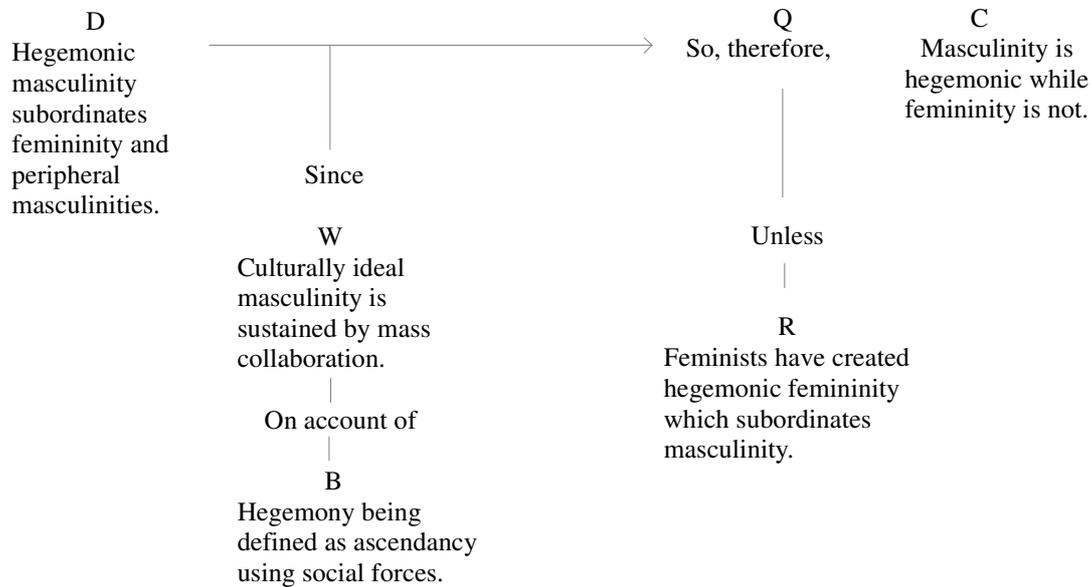


Again, we see how the warrant (W) and backing (B) provide the context which explains how Harry's birthplace correspond to his citizenship. But since the warrant is conditional, the qualifier (Q) can only *presume* that he is a British subject, which may then be proven false in the rebuttal (R).

In order to clarify further, in the context of this essay's topic, a second example argument will be given where I apply Connell's theory on masculine hegemony to the formula of argumentation. For the sake of demonstration I will also add a potential rebuttal, proposing that feminists advocate animosity toward natural masculine

²⁰ Toulmin; *The Uses of Argument*; 1958; pp. 104 – 105.

characteristics and have gained subsistent power in our society. This would subvert the backing of the argument and disqualify the claim. When we apply these components into the argument formula we may see something like this:



In this way, Toulmin's method will be applied to the subject matter of this essay, where components of an argument will be identified and put into its place in the structure of an argument. Take note that the analysing aspect of this essay is not simply to add a rebuttal (R) to each argument that is examined. The purpose of designing the method of analysis by such formal means is to establish structure to the material. While this can make analysis more complicated than necessary, a less formal identification of particular points of argument runs the risk of being too vaguely described and the analysis could be making too many assumptions for itself. Toulmin's method of identifying the structure of an argument lets us isolate each component of an argument and clarify which aspects in particular we see as problematic. While Toulmin's work continues to present a thesis on argumentation theory, this study will not associate with that but only draw on the method of analysis that he presents in his work.

3 Literature Review

I wanted to gain an understanding of the field of research that could fill multiple functions for conducting this study. Primarily I selected literature that discusses feminism from various perspectives, arguing for and against its validity as a method of achieving gender equality. It was necessary to have this academic backdrop to draw on during the analysis in order to fulfil the aim to place the material in context with academic discussions on the same topic. Additionally, as this essay deals with an internet forum I wanted to include research that gives insight on discussions on gender relations as they take shape online in order to give perspective to my own study.

When conducting background research for this study I found it necessary to understand and establish the academic foundation for a widespread distrust against the effectiveness and authenticity of feminism. The intention was to find scholarly work that could be related to the rise of opinions and activism we see in the material of study. One scholar I found to be relevant along these lines is Christina Hoff Sommers, who's work largely acknowledges the success of earlier feminist movements but that the movement has since lost its value. In my research I noticed her work being mentioned and praised by the YouTubers I intend to study, and she even took part in an online interview with Sargon of Akkad, linking her directly as an ideological influence on the primary material of this essay.²¹ In her book *Who Stole Feminism?: How Women Have Betrayed Women* Sommers explains and summarises quite extensively her perception on what has changed in the feminist movement and the state of it today to influence her, now, negative outlook on it. Earlier feminisms had clearer defined goals that mostly concerned fundamental judicial equality for women and was therefore practical and clearly justified.²² As those rights have been achieved feminisms shifted their approach to encompass vaguer, more abstract ideas of social justice, oppression and marginalisation. Under this new guise, the movement have taken an obsession with defining the state of women in society as victims of oppression under patriarchal social

21 YouTube; *Discussing Feminism with Christina Hoff Sommers*; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/jUnAF1InVR4> [08/08/2017].

22 Sommers, Christina Hoff; *Who Stole Feminism?: How Women Have Betrayed Women*; Simon & Schuster, 1994; p. 35.

structures. It is this “victim feminism” that Sommers opposes as it distorts and devalues the agency that women possess in modern society, and the progress that feminist movements have made thus far.²³ Large sections of her study is then dedicated toward shedding light on how a feminism based on paranoia against the patriarchy has given rise to animosity against men in society and an intolerance to criticism.²⁴ As previously stated, this book serves as a reference point to the objects of my study. YouTube activists may express themselves colloquially and unscientifically as they address a public audience and Sommers' work provides and academic backing and perspective on the issues being discussed. Although her book is relatively old at this point (published in 1994) I still find that it carries enough relevance to the material of this study to be used as a valid source of scholarly context.

In response to publications like Sommers', we have scholars like Alyson Cole and Dawn McCaffrey who strive to problematise and challenge such views that they define as “anti-victim feminism”. In her study “*There Are No Victims in This Class*” Cole explains how Anti-Victim Feminists (abbreviated as: “AVFers”) perceive victim feminism as an attempt to control the populace through scare tactics and “brainwashing” by fabricating the image of women as victims of constant abuse and thus giving them the authority to wield a greater influence of society out of respect for martyrdom.²⁵ AVFers associate separate masculine and feminine selves that they believe should be adhered to by women, separately, in the public and private spheres respectively. The idea of total equality and that personalities should not have to conform to any gender norm is frowned upon (and referred to as “radical egalitarianism”).²⁶ During the course of Cole's analysis she brings up critical counterarguments to the AVF rhetoric, such as how conceptual leaps and rushed conclusions are drawn while classifying the theories they argue against²⁷ and the self-identification as minority feminists standing up against the overwhelming majority within their field effectively leads them to victimise themselves and draw on the same tactics they in fact condemn.²⁸ She concludes that the AVF rhetoric is right in that female emancipation can not be fulfilled if the image of women is perpetually portrayed as a victim, but that they are

23 Sommers; *Who Stole Feminism?*; 1994; pp. 244 – 246.

24 Ibid. pp. 24, 52, 95 – 98, 103, 108.

25 Cole, Alyson; “*There are no Victims in This Class*”: *On Female Suffering and Anti-Victim Feminism*; NWSA Journal, Spring99, Vol. 11 Issue 1; 1999; pp. 74 – 76.

26 Cole; “*There are no Victims in This Class*”; 1999; p. 81.

27 Ibid. pp. 77 – 78.

28 Ibid. p. 90.

wrong in ignoring and cloaking marginalisation of women that is still prevalent in our society.²⁹ On a similar note McCaffrey determines the validity of anti-victim feminists' claim that victim feminists use their status as a mode of power to control and oppress society. She refers to Foucault's perception that power is in fact a productive force as it is exercised to reproduce social relationships when in a state of resistance toward an opposition.³⁰ These theoretical approaches are then compared with accounts from interviews with women who have suffered various forms of abuse. McCaffrey finally argues that victims of abuse are not powerless since they exercise power through producing stronger characteristics and engagement in spreading knowledge and understanding of abuse toward women.³¹ The similarities with Cole's and McCaffrey's research is that they perform a deconstruction of a collection of arguments and shed light on their faults. This bears some similarities to my study but where they deal with academic discourse I deal with how it is translated to a public forum, and where they specifically aim to counter the arguments of their study material I aim to contextualise and discuss the implications of multiple viewpoints. Cole and McCaffrey fill a double purpose of giving nuance to applying Sommers' work in my analysis, as well as putting my study in perspective amongst the field of research.

To give further perspective on this debate, in *Conceptualizing Backlash: (UK) Men's Rights Groups, Anti-Feminism and Postfeminism*, Ana Jordan seeks to conceptualise and differentiate what is referred to as *backlash* against feminism and a *post-feminist* perspective on the debate. Identifying dissent against feminist theory is problematic as it disregards any criticism as simply as backlash founded in hostility toward women.³² Post-feminism on the other hand is a continuation of feminist movements which Jordan defines as in a state of ambivalence, acknowledging aspects of feminist values while abandoning others.³³ As the two concepts have differing implications and values, it would be narrow-minded to disregard debate against feminists as backlash when there can be much to learn and gain from treating nuanced post-feminist discourse with respect for their intentions.³⁴ Jordan's approach gives a valuable analytical perspective on scholars like Sommers and responses like Cole's and

29 Cole; "There are no Victims in This Class"; 1999; p. 90.

30 McCaffrey, Dawn; *Victim Feminism/Victim Activism*; Taylor and Francis, *Sociological Spectrum*, 18: 263 – 284, 1998; pp. 268 – 269.

31 McCaffrey; *Victim Feminism/Victim Activism*; 1998; pp. 281 – 282.

32 Jordan, Ana; *Conceptualizing Backlash: (UK) Men's Rights Groups, Anti-Feminism and Postfeminism*; *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, Vol. 28, No. 1, April 2016; p. 24.

33 Ibid. p. 25.

34 Ibid. pp. 42 – 44.

McCaffrey's. It reminds us that the discussion is not black or white but that it takes insight in the intentions and reasoning behind additions in the debate and an understanding of the circumstances and implications of ideas that are being spread. Jordan's ideas give a sense of purpose to conducting my study and can add another dimension to the application of Sommers, Cole and McCaffrey in my analysis.

Turning our attention to studies that deals with the perceptions on the state of feminism and sexualisation in media and public forums: *Femi-Nazis and Bra Burning Crazies: A Qualitative Evaluation of Contemporary Beliefs about Feminism* investigates the reasoning behind women not wanting to associate with the term "feminism". The authors, Swirsky & Angelone, found what they identified as stigma surrounding the movement and misled perceptions that feminism is obsolete in today's society. Lacking belief in the credibility of female subordination as an effect of social structures perpetuates such structures. Ultimately feminist ideas are pluralistic and unfixed and increased knowledge and awareness would be more beneficial than a widespread denial of feminist principles.³⁵ Maria Juliao conducts a study spanning newspaper articles to even YouTube videos and their comments. The purpose of hers study is to highlight that female objectification in media is not only perpetrated by men but also by women. This makes for a larger comment on feminist theory which should not exclusively conclude that only men oppress women, but that female participation in sexualisation and objectification is a vital part in it as well and should not be disregarded.³⁶ This can be interpreted to support the idea that when feminists advocate and identify as struggling for female emancipation, they are not engaging in a conflict of *women* (or specifically *feminists*) in opposition to *men*, but as *people* opposing the socially constructed *patriarchy* that affects all regardless of gender. On the same topic, in her short paper *The Internet Is Full of Jerks Because the World Is Full of Jerks: What Feminist Theory Teaches Us About the Internet* Adrienne Shaw writes about what social functions that cause sexism to be normalised on public internet forums, as well as in physical spaces. She compares it to racism and states that they both hold similar qualities, that people are not only sexist (or racist) while anonymous on the internet, but simply when there are no repercussions for it. Racism and sexism are made possible due to the historical circumstances that create a culture built on certain groups in society

35 Swirsky, Jill M. & Angelone, D. J.; *Femi-Nazis and Bra Burning Crazies: A Qualitative Analysis of Contemporary Beliefs about Feminism*; Springer Science+Business Media; 2014; p. 241 – 243.

36 Juliao, Maria; *Understanding Female Objectification and Sexualization in the Media*; Conference Papers -- American Sociological Association; 2015; pp. 4, 29 – 30.

possessing a higher privilege, and acting on that. This culture was not created on the internet but is enabled and spread by its communicative potential. Shaw stresses that feminist theory is always applicable, and should be applied, to any media studies as it sheds light on intersectionality and structural marginalisation, and it challenges and contextualises the methods of study in any given field.³⁷

What we can conclude from this assessment of the field of research is that there is a significant amount of material discussing the credibility of feminist theory. Most of these studies pertain to academic discussion and not as much relating to public impressions, interpretation and application of academic theory and how public online forums enable access to mass communicative authority. My essay stands out in this field as it directly addresses influential persona's on an internet forum and analyses their argumentations related to gender equality in the context of scholarly perspectives on the topic. I would like to see more research that applies directly to content creators taking part in mass communication on the internet in order to understand the processes involved and the extent of which these individuals are able to affect public consciousness on societal issues.

37 Shaw, Adrienne; *The Internet Is Full of Jerks Because the World Is Full of Jerks: What Feminist Theory Teaches Us About the Internet*; Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies Vol. 11, No. 3, pp. 273–277 September 2014; p. 274 – 276.

4 Analysis and discussion

4.1 Analysis

It's only sexist when men do it

Kirk begins by telling about a television show called *The Talk* featuring a group of women discussing seemingly a variety of topics. Apparently during one of its episodes a case was brought up where a woman had intentionally severed her husband's genitalia after he had filed for divorce. During their conversation many of the women jokingly praise this act of mutilation stating: "I don't know why he filed for divorce (...) however, I do think it's quite fabulous"³⁸. In another instance Kirk witnessed an episode of *Forensic Files* documenting real criminal cases and their court procedures. This particular episode followed a case where a woman was found to have murdered her husband, but declared in court "he abused me, mentally and physically"³⁹ which led to her being freed from punishment (presumably found to have acted in self defence). The third and final story that is relayed to us by Kirk describes a story spread online about an event in Russia where a man was robbing a business when he was apprehended by a the female owner. According to his telling of the story she "tied him up in the back, kept him as a sex slave for three days. Basically, you know, raped him."⁴⁰. As the story gained notoriety comments on message boards were allegedly praising the actions of this woman, "a bunch of people are talking about how great this is, how she empowers women"⁴¹. At this point he reaches his concluding statements where he finds that public acceptance toward acts of violence against men is a trend caused by feminist ideals gaining stronger ground with people around the world. As people supposedly advocate increased rights and equality for women has the

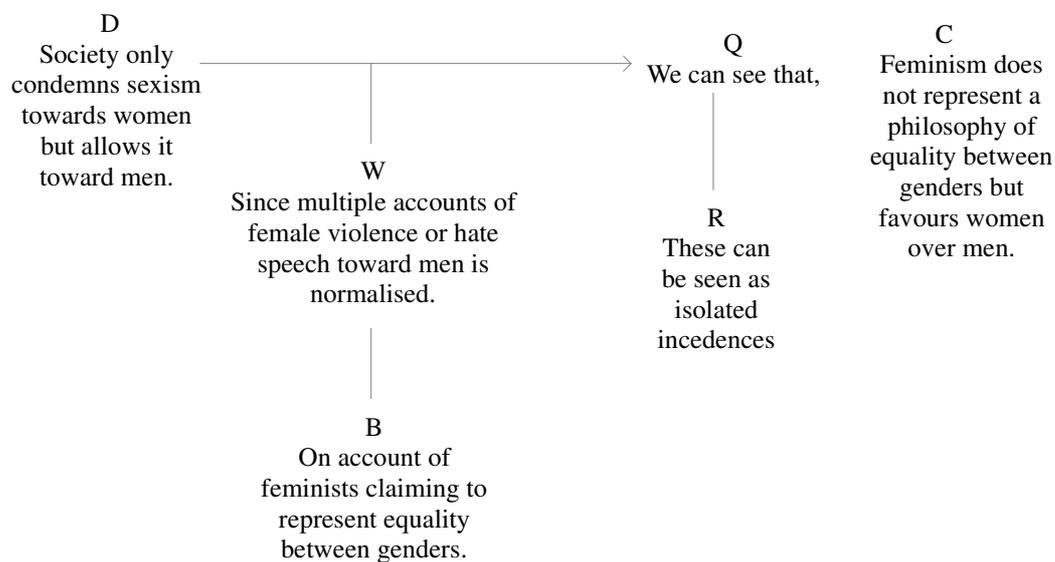
38 YouTube; *It's only sexist when men do it*; 0:38; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/4JA4EPRbWhQ> [14-08-2017].

39 Ibid. 2:42; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/4JA4EPRbWhQ> [14-08-2017].

40 Ibid. 3:21; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/4JA4EPRbWhQ> [14-08-2017].

41 Ibid. 3:42; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/4JA4EPRbWhQ> [14-08-2017].

detrimental effects of instigating violence or simply a greater oversight to violence against men. He does point out a counterargument where one could criticise him for drawing broad conclusions based on isolated incidences. He proceeds to discredit such an argument by stating “It's not an isolated incident when an entire audience of women are all laughing (...) when the reverse would never fucking happen.”⁴². In other words he uses the counterargument as a rhetorical device to strengthen his point, but could still be considered a rebuttal (R) as part of his larger argument. With all of this compiled we can map out a rendition of his argument as such:



Kirk deals very heavily in the narrative of conflict between *feminists* and *men*, a perspective he seems to share with Christina Hoff Sommers. She describes a shift in feminist values after a degree of equality had been achieved. It is recognised that women achieved legislative freedoms but consequently turned their attention toward politicising gender and engaging in a struggle against the patriarchy. This change in principles, according to Hoff Sommers, has made feminists isolated among their own community and hostile to men in society in what she calls “a gynocentric turn”.⁴³ This perspective works in comparison with Kirk's experience

42 YouTube; *It's only sexist when men do it*; 4:17; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/4JA4EPRbWhQ> [14-08-2017].

43 Sommers; *Who Stole Feminism?*; 1994; pp. 23 – 24.

of feminism creating an unfair “double standard”⁴⁴ where it has suddenly become acceptable to endorse hostility toward males while the same treatment of women would be frowned upon. As Hoff Sommers points out, discriminating boys (or men) from females in order to teach them the lesson to respect women promotes a non-inclusive attitude between genders. If males are disciplined on no further grounds than for being male and therefore must answer for gender disparities it seems they are not being punished for any personal action, but for their masculinity itself.⁴⁵ Much of Kirk's authority as a political activist stems from the concept that he sees a fault in society and stands up against it, representing men as a marginalised group. This viewpoint is confirmed by Hoff Sommers as she describes the state of academia today as its legitimacy has declined since the rise of new-wave feminism. Her impression of “the feminist classroom” has devolved into something comparable to an authoritarian state where college-level students are not taught objectivity and that critiquing feminist theory is met with animosity, or disregard at best, rather than civil debate.⁴⁶

Despite stating that his findings are not from isolated incidences, all the examples that Kirk gives are stories he himself happened to come across in his personal life. He does not use scientific research and analysis to come to his conclusion, but simply presents three examples of events and continues to make broad statements on a changing society. “A room full of people” or an undetermined amount of comments of internet message boards would not be considered reliable in a study pertaining to scientific accuracy. On the same topic, along with his presentation of data he only supplements with a single citation linking the viewer to a video of the discussion on *The Talk*, no other citations are presented and we therefore are forced to accept his description of these events. When he describes the case of a woman being freed in court due to her appeal that she was being abused by her husband, leading her to murder him. He then continues to denounce the verdict, criticising that her actions were deemed fine because “he was an asshole”⁴⁷. This not only trivialises the severity of mental and physical abuse in a relationship, but also fails to give us enough context to

44 YouTube; *It's only sexist when men do it*; TIMESTAMP; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/4JA4EPRbWhQ> [14-08-2017].

45 Sommers; *Who Stole Feminism?*; 1994; 155 – 156.

46 Ibid. pp. 95 – 98, 103, 108.

47 YouTube; *It's only sexist when men do it*; TIMESTAMP; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/4JA4EPRbWhQ> [14-08-2017].

understand the reasons behind the court's decision and his own disapproval. The conclusion of his argument rests on the presupposition that all the events he describes have a direct relation to feminism. To make such a claim would require some evidence that shows a common theme between feminist theory and encouragement of violence toward men, but he does not offer such a warrant. Yes, his warrant and backing does point out, in the Russian case, that people remark on it like an act of female empowerment and thus he relates the event to a social movement of female superiority. But ultimately, from the perspective of Connell's research, Kirk is describing micro-relations of female violence toward men, but does not present an understanding of macro-relations on the subject. He does not reflect on hegemonic gender structures in society but expands on the cases he has experienced to create his own. He clearly perceives a threat posed by an anti-male sentiment in society and claims that the cause lies with *feminists* but does not provide enough information to connect his accusation to *feminism*. The difference lies in understanding the plurality of a social movement seeking to combat unequal gendered power structures in society and instead throwing the blame on individuals who make unrelated statements based on widely differing opinions on gender relations and female empowerment. This misrepresentation of feminism as heterogeneous and inherently antagonistic demonstrates a misuse of his authority as a public figure, playing on a defensive hostility toward feminism that is likely already present in his audience. Like Connell teaches us, Kirk takes part in a structure of gendered power relations reacting against the threat of losing a position in the social hierarchy, therefore taking liberty to define the state of the social climate in order to attain support.⁴⁸

48 Connell; *Gender and Power*; 1987; p. 107.

#MessageToFeminists

Sargon begins the video addressing feminists and directly establishing his data that “You're not being oppressed”⁴⁹. He continues to warrant his argument by drawing the assumption that most feminists have been able to receive higher education and come from a general background of wealth. It would seem that feminists have in fact been “born into privilege, and now you need to, kind of, project that onto everyone else.”⁵⁰. He continues to call feminists “hateful”, referring to statements endorsing violence against men, that “men are to blame” and “the patriarchy is everywhere”, ridiculing them for being “paranoid conspiracy theorists”⁵¹. He clarifies intentions that feminists should “take some responsibility for your own choices in your own life”⁵². In other words, feminist criticism against patriarchal structures in society enabling marginalisation against women and other groups, is in fact a means of projecting responsibility onto society. Sargon claims that feminists are motivated by entitlement for society to cater to their needs, without wanting to do the necessary work to deserve that fulfilment. He ends the video with the concluding line “Basically, I'm saying, you need to grow up.”⁵³. To summarise the basic outline of his argument, his point of departure is based on that feminists are not in fact under a state of oppression. Western feminists attribute their struggles to the socially constructed “patriarchy” since they would rather not have to acknowledge that they are responsible for the choices they make in life that may lead to a lacking economical standing for example. This shows that feminists only blame structural patriarchy because they feel the need to project their own personal issues onto society and blame something out of their control, for personal comfort.

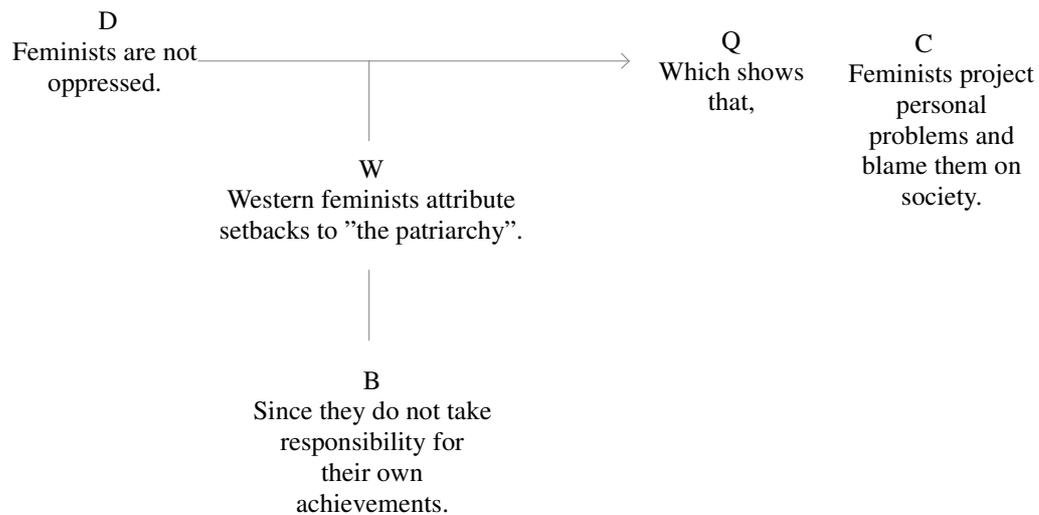
49 YouTube; *#MessageToFeminists*; 0:08; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/jMNtad8qvpQ> [14-08-2017].

50 Ibid. 0:31; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/jMNtad8qvpQ> [14-08-2017].

51 Ibid. 0:46; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/jMNtad8qvpQ> [14-08-2017].

52 Ibid. 1:02; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/jMNtad8qvpQ> [14-08-2017].

53 Ibid. 1:47; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/jMNtad8qvpQ> [14-08-2017].



In *Who Stole Feminism?* Sommers describes the events surrounding a college survey trying to determine the extent of sexual harassment suffered by girls in schools. Unfortunately the study seems to have been very poorly carried out, with a self-selecting poll facilitating a highly biased response the survey, in Sommers' opinion, does not offer a correct representation of the population and is therefore highly unscientific.⁵⁴ The survey did however gain notoriety and succeeded in perpetuating an increase gender-bias in society. It is cases like this that proves Sommers' point, that endorsement of feminism is only accrued due to fallacious arguments backed by unscientific conduct managing to convince people with an uncritical perspective.⁵⁵ In a similar manner, Sommers calls out feminist scholars like Susan Faludi and Naomi Wolf for using misleading statistical findings to support claims on gendered wage disparities. It encourages a culture of uneducated opinions for the sake of gaining support for what is, in Sommers' opinion, a hegemonic feminism now built on fallacy.⁵⁶ This is interesting to correlate with Sargon's argument as it contextualises his perception of destructive feminism being caused by projecting responsibility onto society. The claim in his argument rests on that support for feminist theory is not based on anything realistic and would therefore need fallacy and misinformation to gather further

54 Sommers; *Who Stole Feminism?*; 1994; pp. 181 – 185.

55 Ibid. pp. 186 – 187.

56 Ibid. pp. 239 – 242.

support.

As a reminder, Sargon establishes in his data that feminists are no longer oppressed since they have access to education and enough wealth for a comfortable state of living. While he does not state it explicitly, he could be interpreted to imply that this is a result of progress throughout history. As we learn from Ana Jordan, there is an important distinction between anti-feminist backlash and holding some acknowledgement for the achievements of earlier movements.⁵⁷ Sargon's viewpoints can be categorised as some form of post-feminist philosophy as he does not oppose the state of gender equality but simply follows the understanding that modern feminism is obsolete and unnecessary.

If we look at Sargon's warrant he depicts feminists' conflict with the patriarchy to be motivated by it oppresses *them* (i.e. feminists). His perception is restricted to feminists advocating against a personal struggle rather than a structural one that reflects on society, larger than any individual person. When put in context with our theoretical backdrop, our culture is defined by a hegemonic masculinity which takes shape by how the population constructs gender ideals. No one particular group is the sole victim of this power structure, it subordinates all women and all alternative masculinities which do not adhere to the largely unattainable cultural ideal.⁵⁸ When Sommers presents a few fallacious surveys they do not conclusively disprove that a patriarchal structure in society does not exist, only that these particular studies were inconclusive after scrutiny. We learn from Swirsky & Angelone that denouncing feminism due to a stigmatic understanding of its goals is detrimental to the progression toward gender equality.⁵⁹ With that being said, we can see that Sargon is taking a position of definitive authority, able to dictate his audience's understanding of the topic, before he draws conclusive statements on it. Surely there are people who publicly express a desire to “kill all men” and the like, but it does not seem justified to portray such statements as representative of all feminism. Feminist theory opposes the hyper-masculine structures that facilitate marginalisation, not as a conflict between genders but against destructive gender constructs.

57 Jordan; *Conceptualizing Backlash*; 2016; pp. 24 – 25, 42 – 44.

58 Connell; *Gender and Power*; 1987; pp. 184 – 188.

59 Swirsky & Angelone; *Femi-Nazis and Bra Burning Crazyies*; 2014; p. 241 – 243.

Feminism, taking STUPIDITY to the next level

Early in the video Thunderf00t comments on how certain topics leave different feminists with conflicting opinions. So in order to make a strong argument for his cause he means to address a topic that is universal to all feminists. The issue, as he describes it, “that they all agree on is just how evil it is that straight males like sexy women or even worse, that women chose to be sexually appealing to men”⁶⁰. He goes on to feminist narrative saying: “your sexuality is problematic. *Your* sexuality is just a social construct that oppresses women”⁶¹. The video includes a multitude of cut-in clips of various feminist activists, mostly other YouTubers, as they talk about sexualised imagery of women. Some of their quotes include, “women's bodies used as sexy background accessories”⁶², “using women's bodies to sell everything from A to Z”⁶³, “women are very often portrayed as something pretty to look at, something to try to have sex with. Turn on almost any sitcom on TV and you're going to see this normalised”⁶⁴. These are the kinds of statements that Thunderf00t seeks to debunk in his argument, “you wouldn't find this hot if you weren't 'normalised' to it”⁶⁵. His arguments revolve around that male heterosexuality is not “normalised” or socially constructed since it is a naturally occurring phenomenon imperative to reproduction, and therefore the species' survival. At one point he presents a feminist who explains the distinction between sexual *attraction* and sexual *objectification*, “[sexual attraction] is a natural part of life right? But what's not natural, and is very much manufactured, is constantly portraying women as sex objects for male pleasure”⁶⁶. This distinction does not convince Thunderf00t and in order to prove its fallacy he references a feminist scholar explaining objectification with the following clip, “when another woman is valued for being a sex object, it actually makes us feel bad about ourselves”⁶⁷. Thunderf00t dismissal of this statement is based on the interpretation that feminist claims of opposing sexual objectification is actually just “bitching about the sexy

60 YouTube; *Feminism, taking STUPIDITY to the next level*; 0:41; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/CPZtjJY6QfQ> [14-08-2017].

61 Ibid. 2:12; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/CPZtjJY6QfQ> [14-08-2017].

62 Ibid. 1:00; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/CPZtjJY6QfQ> [14-08-2017].

63 Ibid. 1:40; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/CPZtjJY6QfQ> [14-08-2017].

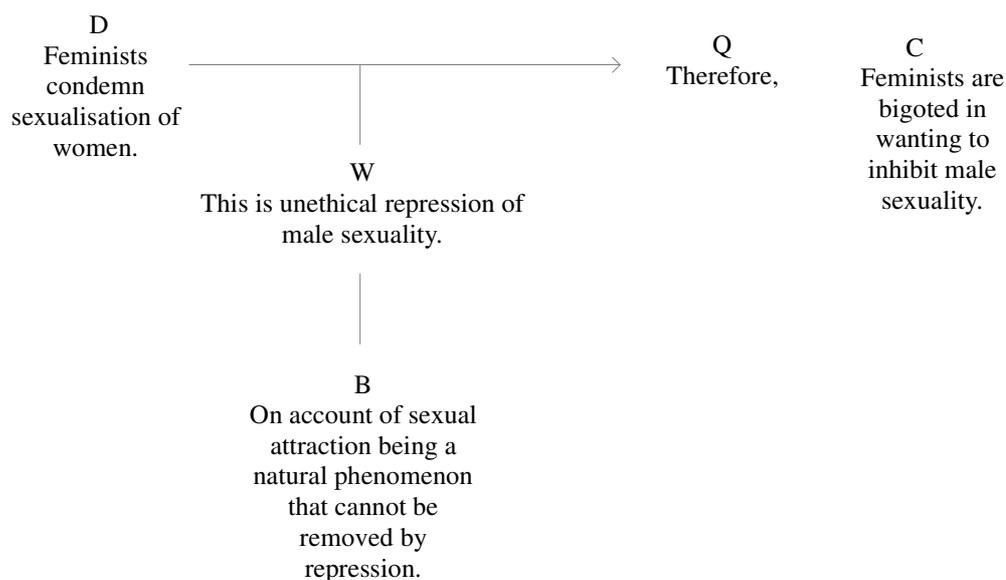
64 Ibid. 2:25; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/CPZtjJY6QfQ> [14-08-2017].

65 Ibid. 2:29; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/CPZtjJY6QfQ> [14-08-2017].

66 Ibid. 3:17; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/CPZtjJY6QfQ> [14-08-2017].

67 Ibid. 3:36; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/CPZtjJY6QfQ> [14-08-2017].

girls”⁶⁸. He explains that when women cannot measure up to their competition, and other women are simply more attractive, the project the issue by denouncing an integral part of male heterosexuality. One of the main selling points in backing his argument is drawing a comparison between heterosexuality and homosexuality. He presumes that feminists are not also inherently homophobic, arguing that “if you don't think that you can educate a homosexual man out of what they find sexy, then what (...) makes you think that you can do it or a heterosexual man”⁶⁹. He also brings up the fallacy of abstinence-only sex education, as sex is a natural biological desire, and that feminists fall in the same category when trying to inhibit male heterosexual desire. Among the concluding statements he sums up the essence of his claim that “feminism is to straight men, what fundamentalist Christians are to gays”⁷⁰. If we map out of his primary argument in this video, we see it structured as such:



Like we have seen before, Sommers, to a certain extent, confirms the narrative that feminism targets and punishes males. The difference here is that Sommers deals with attacks on gender while Thunderf00t discusses sexuality. Although that is as far as differences go. Imperative to their arguments is the understanding that

68 YouTube; *Feminism, taking STUPIDITY to the next level*; 3:42; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/CPZtjJY6QfQ> [14-08-2017].

69 Ibid. 4:56; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/CPZtjJY6QfQ> [14-08-2017].

70 Ibid. 8:14; retrieved from <https://youtu.be/CPZtjJY6QfQ> [14-08-2017].

feminists prey on aspects that define masculinity or natural male behaviour.⁷¹ Thunderf00t does not comment on the state of women's equality in relation to men, or in relation to men's sexuality. As we see clearly in his backing, the kind of expression of men's sexuality that feminists oppose is a natural state of biological factors which are inherently unchangeable. Unlike others who might admit that gender equality has progressed over time, possibly due to earlier feminist movements, Thunderf00t does not make room for such viewpoints in his argumentation (at least not in this video). According to Jordan's principles, we can identify a pattern which relates to an anti-feminist backlash argument, rather than post-feminist debate, since he seems to support the idea that feminism in no way functions to further equality between genders.⁷²

What should be apparent from viewing of the video is that Thunderf00t makes no distinction between sexual attraction and sexual objectification whatsoever. Indeed he embraces this position, asserting that it constitutes his high ground on the issue. He identifies the kind of sexuality expressed with prominent sexualised portrayals of women in media as an integral part of masculine sexuality. We can therefore interpret from the warrant and backing of his argument that gender and sexual expression are largely intertwined under his principle of masculinity. He is quite clear on that feminists “target” heterosexual *men*, inherently he is arguing against a transgression on something that he perceives to be biologically masculine, hence a conflict of gender expressed through sexuality. The problem with Thunderf00t's definition of gender identity, as we learn from Connell, is that gender is not static but is in a constant state of construction, partly affected by societal influence but also as individuals reacting to positions in the gender order.⁷³ Sexuality expressed through sexual objectification is not a fixed biological function but is in fact imposed by a social structure, with the effect of enabling a gendered hierarchy which exerts dominance over women.⁷⁴ Thunderf00t wants to portray feminist activists as unjustifiably antagonising heterosexual males for their sexuality when they are actually addressing a completely different phenomenon. In this understanding of feminist motives he further endorses a stigmatised image of its ideals. As seen

71 Sommers; *Who Stole Feminism?*; 1994; pp. 24, 155 - 156.

72 Jordan; *Conceptualizing Backlash*; 2016; p. 20.

73 Connell; *Gender: in world perspective*; 2015; pp. 16, 19.

74 Ibid. p. 17, 75.

with Swirsky & Angelone, this can have detrimental effects on the awareness of inequalities in gendered power structures and hamper efforts to counteract these structures.

4.2 Discussion

The idea to perform this study was influenced by already having come into contact with these anti-feminist advocates and the material they produce. Because of this, I had a somewhat preconceived idea of the topics this essay would be likely to discuss. The unknown factor would be which perspective would be brought by the theoretical backdrop and how it would affect analysis of the material, as well as how the analytical process would take shape due to the choice of method. During the analysis we can see instances where application of academic theory can take some speculation of the motives behind certain arguments. Sometimes they intend to disprove one concept by attacking another, often with a sensibility intent on pointing out its absurdity when it seems too radical in a way they are not familiar with, resorting to ridicule with a minimalistic approach to analytical deconstruction. In other words, comparing the arguments of anti-feminists with academic theory of gender and power structures can be complicated as they are not necessarily communicating on the same grounds, with the same foundation of knowledge or understanding of social structures and their implications in a larger societal context.

After compiling our findings from the analysis we can compare and contrast the different subjects and identify common trends in their viewpoints. Ultimately they all seek to discredit the existence of male hegemony defining our society by proving the existence of female hegemony. This is represented by feminist activism, and while they may differ in nuance whether feminism has beneficial aspects or has held credibility in the past, they are all convinced that modern feminism is counteractive of true gender equality as it subordinates masculinity. In some ways these YouTuber anti-feminist activists seem more apt to leaning to a more radical backlash approach than their post-feminist counterparts in the academic world. Since they have so little recognition for feminism as beneficial they also present their argumentation from a very biased position without including opposing arguments with a degree of respect. This can easily render any debate circular, where each participant is prone to discredit the other simply based on that they support the opposing position. The intention of this study was to avoid such a stalemate and approach the debate with respect for all parties and discern on which points these anti-feminists' arguments may lack sufficient substance. In all the presented cases, these three activists draw on

situations where people who advocate feminism have disparaged males and masculinity, often with acts of aggression, violence or general animosity. While there is little point in claiming that these events are fabrications or distortions of the truth, the question is to which extent such examples can and should be used as evidence against academic feminist theory in a sophisticated debate. In some regards, the topic of this study has been about the problematic nature of presenting extreme opinions and taking on the authority to define them as representative of the ideology one is opposed to. The rise of social platforms on the internet have made possible for nearly any individual to spread their opinions and accumulate a substantial audience with little to no requirements for resources to enable those opportunities. People who may or may not have an educated background in a relevant area now are able to present themselves to a mass audience and assert an authority to define social conditions in order to suit their narrative. These content creators build a following from appealing to their audience. Rather than gaining recognition for their scholarly knowledge and application in peer-reviewed research, some will only have to argue in confirmation of opinions already present with their audience, rather than adding nuance to the discussion in their field. An indication of this can be seen in the comment section of any video where feminism is being criticised, nearly all viewer input shows complete support rather than sparking nuanced discussion. This is exactly why it is so important to study these kinds of forums and the authoritative voices who make themselves heard. These mass audiences take part in the information and ideas that are spread on platforms like YouTube and apply them to our society in daily life. It should be in the interest of academia to study these phenomena in order to understand the changing landscape of our society, how information is spread, from which sources, on which grounds they assert authority on the subject and how it affects the public's understanding of social and political theory. This study has contextualised arguments that advocate anti-feminism and thus give us insight into how online discussions on the topic tend to work, what they draw on to gain pathos and how that compares to scholarly discussion on gendered power structures. It stands out as it does not revolve around internet communications in general terms, discussing general social theoretical concepts, but identifies key speakers on an influential platform and addresses them directly. Future studies can go in the same direction and analyse in further detail to which extent scholarly research may or may not influence online activism and what it means for the integrity of such discussions. They could also provide more extensive research in the correlation of trends in online activist ideals

affecting public opinions and changes in the political landscape.

In this essay we sought to understand the implications of argumentation in a public forum and focused on the topic of anti-feminist advocates. The aim was to analyse argumentative videos from three YouTube channels advocating anti-feminism and deconstruct their arguments in order to clarify the components that their argumentation rest on, and hence their authority as a public speaker. We then compared them in context with scholarly theory on gender and power structures, as well as other research debating feminism as a credible method of achieving gender equality. What we have seen during analysis is that their argumentations seem to lack credibility in proving the existence of widespread male subordination under a feminist induced female hegemony. Instead they tend to draw on personal experiences they share to some extent with their audience and thus gain further support. They fail to offer a nuanced discussion, keeping their audience informed of the differences in the field of pluralistic feminist theory. As a result, they also fail to provide credible addition to the debate and instead perpetuate misinformed perspectives and opinions affecting people in our society. This study shows that we need a more scientific approach in online debate on gender equality that can provide audiences with a full contextual understanding of the topic and thus make the discussion productive in reaching conclusive statements.

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