Proposal to article on grievance articulation among TERF & Gender Critical communities on Twitter

Skye Kychenthal

Reed College

skychenthal@gmail.com

November 11, 2022

ABSTRACT

Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism (TERF) or Gender Critcial (GC) feminism is a form of radical feminism whose core values are antithetical to feminist ideology. It focuses on support of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Heterosexual individuals (particularly women) meanwhile actively excluding trans individuals and specifically trans-feminine individuals. Trans individuals have been defined as a sort of boogie-man within this sect of radical feminism, as is the case with other prominent anti-trans groups. TERF ideology holds a loud megaphone, with prominent TERF activists including J.K. Rowling, The BBC, The Guardian, Dave Chapelle, and the LGBAlliance. The hashtag #SexNotGender regularly trends on Twitter advocating lesbians, gay men, and bisexual individuals to be attracted to their preferred *sex* (the bimodal in which someone is born) not *gender* (how one would identify). This proposal and eventual article hopes to add to existing literature on the topic, by exploring the main grievances articulated by TERF and Gender Critical communities. Through scraping Twitter posts from Twitter's API of three prominent TERF and Gender Critical accounts, and subsequent analysis using LDA (Latent Dirichlet allocation), I will test the hypothesis that TERFs and Gender Critical individuals online are radicalized and further polarized through a few key thoughts and ideas:

1. A focus on reactions of disgust, fear, and anger.
2. A false belief in the 'silencing' of TERF voices as marginalized and an 'invasion' of women's spaces.
3. A perception there is a pervasiveness of trans women in societies' institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A TERF is a trans-exclusionary radical feminist who believes the concepts of woman-hood and man-hood are strictly a binary based on the sex someone is born as; a point contrary to decades of feminist scholarship [1], which serves to simplify the concept of *gendering*.

Martin 2001 [2] defines *gendering* or practicing gender "as a 'system of action' that is institutionalized and widely recognized but also is dynamic, emergent, local, variable, and shifting." Transgender individuals fall outside of institutionalized and widely recognized gender roles, and are part of an emergent, shifting, and more inclusive view of gender. A rigid view of *sex* as prioritized over *gender* is incorrect; however, understandable in many individuals as Gansen 2017 [3] finds heteronormativity and *gendered power* are learned in children as early as the age of three. With gendered power so widely learned among women, and widely fought against in the feminist movement; it is almost inevitable that a small subsection of the feminist movement who strictly adhere to binarized notions of *sex* rather than *gender* would view transgender women as a threat to feminist spaces.

TERF ideology inevitably centers on one point: *benevolent sexism* [4]. Primarily white women, in TERF ideology, are positioned as the weaker sex, and in need of protection from men [1]. It plays into the notions of female fragility; and in this viewpoint, giving assigned-male-at-birth trans-feminine individuals autonomy and self-determination poses a threat to cis women [1]. It creates a binarized notion of not just "male" and "female" but a dichotomy of "victims" and "aggressors." Many TERFs or Gender Critical individuals have been victims of *gendered power* such as sexual assault (which is incredibly common among women [5]) and can find comfort in this binarized view of aggressors versus those who are 'safe' [6].

YouTuber and investigative journalist CaelenConrad in their three part series *Gender Critical – Inside a Cult* goes over the three step process of how a TERF is created. One, they are indoctrinated into TERF ideology through the concepts of fear and disgust [7]. Two, they are convinced to practice their TERF beliefs, primarily through engaging in conversion therapy of their children or family members [8]. Three, they are encouraged to perpetuate TERF ideology [9].

The TERF and Gender Critical movements are a digitally networked public sphere [10] overlapping often with conservative and alt-right movements [11], existing for the purpose of silencing transgender individuals. A digitally networked public sphere is the public sphere which consists of the intersection of public real-world interactions alongside online digital interactions. A nuanced example of this might include JK Rowling, who often will have very publicized meals with other prominent members of TERF and GC movements, which will often have both online and offline consequences.

Online spaces such as Twitter or Reddit serve as a vector of political movements and protests [10] for all points on a political spectrum. Before it's banning on June 28, 2020, the description of r/GenderCritical, a prominent Reddit community housing 65,000 members, read as follows:

"Feminism is the movement to liberate women from patriarchy. We stand up for the rights of women to control our own bodies as individuals and to control women-only spaces as a class. Women are adult human females. We do not believe that men can become women by 'feeling' like women. We do not condone the erasure of females and female-only spaces, the silencing of critical thinking, the denial of biological reality and of sex-based oppression. We oppose … the pressure on lesbians to have sex with men." [12]

r/GenderCritical transphobia is justified by feminism. The group believes that, if trans women are simply men who 'feel' like women, then their inclusion into women's spaces constitutes an erasure of women's spaces – their only reprieve from patriarchal systems. This ignores the abundant challenges and marginalization trans individuals and trans women receive both socially and systemically [13]. These challenges are amplified by TERFs and Gender Critical individuals seeking to exclude trans women from women's spaces dedicated to the dismantling of the patriarchy.

Research on the Reddit forum r/MensRights centered around the Men's Rights movement, a movement antithetical to feminist ideology by prioritizing men in society and on men's problems rather than a focus on general equality, shows there are two patterns to posts widely shared on the website. The first is online posts on Reddit gain more traction (such as upvotes or comments) when the audance is angered or disgusted; the second is a perceived pervasiveness of feminism throughout societies institutions [14].

In Jessie Gender's video analyzing the rhetoric of Matt Walsh's "What is a Woman?", she overviews how right-wing and TERF talking heads distort reality to make it seem as if trans women have power in society [15]. Among the included evidence is a clip from Tucker Carlson where a guest claims, "the way you can tell who holds all the power in society, is by who you can't make fun of;" which encapsulates two important points: Trans people hold "all the power" and you cannot "make fun of" trans people. TERFs, GCs, and conservatives perpetuate the idea that trans individuals hold vast amounts of power, and among that power is the ability to silence dissenting voices (TERFs, GCs, conservatives). There is a perceived *pervasiveness* of trans people in society's institutions, and trans people use this to silence the 'truly marginalized,' (TERFs) despite TERFs holding the majority opinion that *gender* is primarily determined by *sex* [16]. As a result, TERFs have the popular support to silence online transgender rights activists on platforms like Twitter [10] and TERFs ability to claim silencing only shows they are not silenced [17]. These ideas of pervasiveness and silencing go hand-in-hand, and one cannot exist without the other. TERFs are silenced because of their claim trans people are pervasive, when in reality this could not be further from the truth.

METHODOLOGY

An analysis will be conducted using the Twitter platform to ascertain the prominence of certain TERF and GC concerns and grievances. An algorithm will scrape all Tweets, Re-Tweets (RT), Quote-Tweet (QRT), and Replies made by three separate Twitter accounts. Figure 1 describes what accounts will be used, and for what reasons. In regards to ethics, individual users online generally don't realize their online information can be used by researchers, [18] often think their actions online are "moderately sensitive", and prefer explicit consent before having their tweets used [19]. As a result, this research will primarily look at political organizations, such as the LBGAlliance, who openly seek to influence public opinion and political decisions. Works from individuals used in this preliminary methodology (JK Rowling and Susanna Rustin) will also be public figures who seek to change public opinion and political decision. QRTs and RTs these organizations make will not be used, as these may violate the privacy of individual users. Twitter will be the focus of this research, instead of Reddit, due to the banning of r/GenderCritical on June 29, 2020.

@ALLIANCELGB	LGBA is regularly trending on Twitter, with The LGB Alliance (particularly the British branch with a total of over 50,000 followers) at the head.
@LGBFightBack	Grass-roots organization similar to the LGB Alliance with over 3,000 Twitter followers.
@Sexnotgender_	Website and Twitter profile focusing on the equality the *equality act* of 2010 proposing equality to be diametrically black and white (male or female). Over 4,000 Twitter followers.

Figure 1. Twitter accounts used for the study with an explanation of why specific organizations and accounts were used.

Based on the research done on men's rights [14], these accounts will be scraped and then organized by community support. Compared to research done on Reddit, research done on Twitter has more options to explore in terms of categorizing community support. On Twitter, the two focuses will be *likes* and *quote re-tweets*. Likes are typically done by people to support a post's engagement. Meanwhile, quote re-tweets are used by people who wish to add nuance, context, or refutation to an original post, and are often done by people who are against the views of the poster. This way, two avenues can be explored: a ranking of how much community support a topic receives, and how much backlash a topic receives.

Posts will be added an arbitrary value of *support* and *criticism*, where *support* is the amount of likes out of the pool of all likes an account has received and criticism is the amount of quote re-tweets out of the pool of all quote re-tweets for an account. Based on this categorization, a tweet will never have more than 1 criticism or support, as all tweets by an account added together will add to 1. Using LDA (Latent Dirichlet Analysis) [20] as in the research done on r/mensrights [14], a table of topics with correlated keywords will be gathered. This can then be

used to predict the main topic of any individual tweet; and finally this can be categorized in order to gather the prevalence of each argument.

Testing for this methodology was done through a small scale implementation using J.K. Rowling's June 10, 2020 article on TERF ideology on her website jkrowling.com [21] alongside three Gender Critical articles from *The Guardian* written by Susanna Rustin. All articles used are publicly available, and no edits have been made to miss-characterize these individual's positions. J.K. Rowling and Susanna Rustin are both public figures and openly comment on TERF and Gender Critical feminism. J.K. Rowling's blog post is only 3,600 words and the articles combined total to 4,000 words; so strictly accurate results are not relevant. These initial tests will discern if LDA can be applied towards analyzing Gender Critical and TERF movements. Figure 2 holds the results from LDA used to analyze J.K. Rowling's blog post.

	Topic Keywords	Assumed grievance
1	Gender, activist, child, transgender, social, trans, dysphoria, time, way, kind	Trans individuals and trans supports as **activists** who use or 'trans' children – ie. "rapid onset gender dysphoria."
2	Violence, man, language, book, twitter, child, year, way, time, threat	"Cancel culture" and the **silencing** of TERFs
3	Trans, people, gender, issue, activism, woman, youth, concern, reason, sex	"**Concern**"
4	Woman, sexual, assault, thing, majority, abuse, survivor, threat, violence, concern	Concern of women as likely to be survivors of sexual assault, abuse, physical or verbal violence; and trans individuals as possible perpetrators. **Benevolent sexism**.
5	Woman, trans, man, right, young, gay, political, movement, sex, huge	Trans acceptance seen as a **political movement to replace sex with gender.**

Figure 2. Based on the contents of J.K. Rowling's blog post, *topic keywords* are the keywords assigned by LDA to a topic, and *assumed concern* is an explanation of what those specific keywords signify within J.K. Rowling's blog post. The number of LDA topics were chosen based on the maximum amount to make separate and distinct topics. Two or three topics are preferred by LDA, yet do not have nuanced differences. Seven or more topics become incomprehensible and non-distinct.

J.K. Rowling's blog post is an incredibly small sample size for LDA to work with, yet provides salient results nonetheless. I believe this methodology of analysis and the same code with minor edits, could be used to analyze thousands of tweets to list and rank concerns by TERF and

Gender Critical individuals. Even within this test-case, multiple patterns from my hypothesis begin to show: focuses on anger and disgust of trans people as possible predators (topic 1 & 4), a perceived silencing or canceling of TERFs who openly espouse their ideologies (topic 2), and finally, a perceived *pervasiveness* of trans people in all institutions (topic 1 & 5).

For the second small-scale test on articles from *The Guardian*, the articles used were:

- Trying to erase the biological definition of sex isn't just misguided – it's dangerous (2022)
- My hope for a more open discussion of women's and trans rights is fading (2021)
- Feminists like me aren't anti-trans – we just can't discard the idea of 'sex' (2020)

This will demonstrate two key points: how does LDA handle multiple articles (relevant as LDA needs to handle thousands of tweets) and how does LDA handle a topic evolving over two years. All three articles combined add up to approximately just under 4,000 words; roughly the length of J.K. Rowling's blog post. Using the same algorithm, figure 3 shows the main concerns.

	Topic Keywords	Assumed grievance
1	Sex, woman, right, way, trans, abortion, public, people, reproductive, legal, freedom, activist, world, body, example	Reproductive rights and the taking away of **women's rights**.
2	Feminist, gender, project, view, political, woman, identity, trans, body, belief, critical , year, life, recent, law	Gender identity and transness as a new and recent political belief or view to be critical of rather than as an inherent fact. **Gender critical; Concern.**
3	People, gender, sex, legal, transgender, male, law, female, sexual, human, feminist, reproductive, process, way, clear	Legislation, **political movement**, and activism **replacing sex with gender.**

Figure 3. Based on the combined contents of three Susanna Rustin articles from The Guardian, three specific topics or IDs were used, as these articles focused on a smaller array of grievances compared to JK Rowling's blog post.

This seems to back up some of the grievances made by J.K. Rowling. Rustin Topic 2 overlaps with Rowling Topic 5 (political movement replacing sex with gender). Rustin Topic 2 has some overlap with Rowling Topic 3. And Rustin introduces a new topic in Topic 1 of women's rights being actively attacked by trans rights activists.

CONCLUSION

What is not tested in this proposal is the prediction and ranking mechanisms. For each individual Twitter profile listed, a program will manually categorize each tweet on a topic, and tally the total *support* and *criticism* for each topic. If time becomes a major constraint, this part of the project may be cut for an initial version of this paper.

Based on only the blog posts and articles analyzed, totaling only four different points of data and only 8,000 words, some of the trends hypothesized based on literature review started appearing. Preliminary data-scraping from Twitter's API shows all tweets from these three accounts (not including QRTs or RTs) total almost 200,000 words. This analysis of thousands of tweets would likely shed even more light on this topic, and a ranking of *support* and *criticism* will be helpful in examining which TERF arguments are the most pressing to address.

The most concerning topic brought up within this proposal is Rowling Topic 3 or the simple idea of *concern*. A large majority of discriminatory movements and concpiracies are framed from the perspective of *questions* and *concerns*. A prime example, is the holocaust. The holocaust began because of the Jewish question [22]; and, currently anti-trans activists on the right such as Matt Walsh are framing attacks on trans individuals in this similar light: "we're just asking questions."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

APPENDIX A

All code for the proposal and eventual project can be found at:
https://github.com/SkyMocha/TERF-LDA

BIBLIOGRAPHY

[1] Pearce, Ruth, Sonja Erikainen, and Ben Vincent. 2020. "TERF Wars: An Introduction." *The Sociological Review* 68(4):677–98. doi: 10.1177/0038026120934713.

[2] Martin, Patricia Yancey. 2003. "'Said and Done' Versus 'Saying and Doing': Gendering Practices, Practicing Gender at Work." *Gender & Society* 17(3):342–66. doi: 10.1177/0891243203017003002.

[3] Gansen, Heidi M. 2017. "Reproducing (and Disrupting) Heteronormativity: Gendered Sexual Socialization in Preschool Classrooms." *Sociology of Education* 90(3):255–72. doi: 10.1177/0038040717720981.

[4] Blumell, Lindsey Erin, Jennifer Huemmer, and Miglena Sternadori. 2019. "Protecting the Ladies: Benevolent Sexism, Heteronormativity, and Partisanship in Online Discussions of Gender-Neutral Bathrooms." *Mass Communication and Society* 22(3):365–88. doi: 10.1080/15205436.2018.1547833.

[5] RAINN. "Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics." www.rainn.org. Accessed 10/26/2022 (https://www.rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence)

[6] Wynn Natalie. 2019. "Gender Critical | ContraPoints." YouTube.

[7] CaelenConrad. 2022. "Inside a Cult – Gender Critical (Part One: Recruitment)." YouTube.

[8] CaelenConrad. 2022. "Inside a Cult – Gender Critical (Part Two: Conversion Therapy)." YouTube.

[9] CaelenConrad. 2022. "Inside a Cult – Gender Critical (Part One: Mask Off)." YouTube.

[10] Tufekci, Zeynep. 2017. *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. New Haven London: Yale University Press.

[11] Shaun. 2022. *JK Rowling's New Friends.* YouTube.

[12] *r/GenderCritical* subreddit accessed through the WayBack machine's June 28, 2022 snapshot. Retrieved (https://web.archive.org/web/20200628100957/www.reddit.com/r/GenderCritical)

[13] UN OHCHR. *The struggle of trans and gender-diverse persons.* United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Accessed 10/25/2022. Retrieved (https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/ie-sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity/struggle-trans-and-gender-diverse-persons)

[14] Rafail, Patrick, and Isaac Freitas. 2019. "Grievance Articulation and Community Reactions in the Men's Rights Movement Online." *Social Media + Society* 5(2):205630511984138. doi: 10.1177/2056305119841387.

[15] Earl Jessie. 2022. *The Unending Lies of Matt Walsh*. YouTube.

[16] "Americans' Complex Views on Gender Identity and Transgender Issues." June 28, 2022. Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.

[17] Gwenffrewi, Gina. 2022. "J. K. Rowling and the Echo Chamber of Secrets." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9(3):507–16. doi: 10.1215/23289252-9836176.

[18] Fiesler, Casey, and Nicholas Proferes. 2018. "'Participant' Perceptions of Twitter Research Ethics." Social Media + Society 4(1):205630511876336. doi: 10.1177/2056305118763366.

[19] Hemphill, Libby, Angela Schöpke-Gonzalez, and Anmol Panda. 2022. "Comparative Sensitivity of Social Media Data and Their Acceptable Use in Research." Scientific Data 9(1):643. doi: 10.1038/s41597-022-01773-w.

[20] Chen Y. 2018. *How to generate an LDA Topic Model for Text Analysis*. Medium. Retrieved (https://yanlinc.medium.com/how-to-build-a-lda-topic-model-using-from-text-601cdcbfd3a6)

[21] Rowling Joanne. 2020. *J.K. Rowling Writes about Her Reasons for Speaking out on Sex and Gender Issues*. www.jkrowling.com

[22] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "The 'Jewish Question.'" Holocaust Encyclopia. Retrieved 11/1/2022 (https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-jewish-question)