

“Just Questions”: Grievance articulation among Gender Critical communities on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism (TERF) or Gender Critical (GC) feminism is an anti-trans hate movement using the guise of radical feminism. 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 TERF and GC ideology, as is the case with other prominent anti-trans groups, and is the target of wide-spread delegitimization efforts. This article hopes to add to existing literature on the topic, by exploring the main grievances articulated by Gender Critical communities. Through gathering the Twitter posts of three prominent TERF and Gender Critical accounts from Twitter’s API, 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 (focus on reactions of disgust, fear, and anger; a false belief of GCs being silenced, a perception of a pervasiveness of trans women in societies institutions), and that these subsequent ideas are used to delegitimize trans individuals.

INTRODUCTION

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 and feminist ideology [1, f], serving to simplify the concept of *gendering*. There is a movement to call TERFs TES instead [f, g] or ‘Trans Exclusionary Separatists’ to devoid them of their feminist guise. TES is a more fit label, as ‘TERFs’ seek to separate feminism from the cause of serving everyone [f]. Meanwhile, GC ideology “[believes] transgender people are malicious actors attempting to deceive ... in order to receive certain social benefits, access gendered spaces, or enact sexual violence” [f]. In reframing TERFs as TES, the links and similarities between “Gender Critical” (an active delegitimization of trans individuals) and “TES” (an active separatist movement to delegitimize trans individuals) becomes, in that both are movements seeking to delegitimize trans individuals. As a result, TES and GC will be used interchangeably, and TERF will not be used throughout the rest of this paper.

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.

TES ideology inevitably centers on one point: *benevolent sexism* [4]. Primarily white women, in TES 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 TES 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 TES is created. One, they are indoctrinated into TES ideology through the concepts of fear and disgust [7]. Two, they are convinced to practice their TES beliefs, primarily through engaging in conversion therapy of their children or family members [8]. Three, they are encouraged to perpetuate TES ideology [9].

The TES 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 TES 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. They can also serve as a space for affirmation and unity within trans and minority communities [f]. 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 TES and Gender Critical individuals seeking to exclude trans women from women’s spaces dedicated to the dismantling of the patriarchy. To do this, though, many TES and GC groups align themselves with men's rights and other manosphere groups dedicated to enforcing the patriarchy [11].

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 audience is angered or disgusted; the second is a perceived pervasiveness of feminism throughout societies institutions [14]. Events such as #GamerGate led directly to an explosion of the Men's Rights movement and other manosphere communities, as they believe feminism acts as a sort of Orwellian Big Brother pervasive throughout the whole government and also video game industry [me!].

This article began as a replication of the r/MensRights article hoping to better explore and understand how this methodology can be applied to other extremist ideologies. Certain patterns are initially evident, primarily links to the perceived pervasiveness of trans people mirroring the perceived pervasiveness of feminism in societies institutions.

In Jessie Gender’s YouTube video analyzing the rhetoric of Daily Wire host Matt Walsh’s “What is a Woman?”, she overviews how right-wing and TES 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. TES or 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 (TES, GCs, conservatives). There is a perceived *pervasiveness* of trans people in society's institutions, and trans people use this to silence the 'truly marginalized,' (TES) despite TES holding the majority opinion that *gender* is primarily determined by *sex* [16]. As a result, TES have the popular support to silence online transgender rights activists on platforms like Twitter [10] and TES 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. TES are silenced because of their claim trans people are pervasive, when in reality this could not be further from the truth.

Preliminary research on this project, in regards to two public figure's posts regarding TES and GC ideology, showcased the concept of *concern* [p]. A large majority of discriminatory movements and conspiracies are framed from the perspective of *questions* and *concerns*. Rosenblum & Muirhead 2020 explain the concept of *conspiracy without the theory*. It is a type of conspiracy that seeks to perpetuate itself through sheer repetition for the sake of delegitimizing primarily political parties and information institutions (i.e. news institutions or universities) [22]. Though Rosenblum and Muirhead have received criticism, for example their hyperfixation on the present US moment leading to a blind spot of *new conspiracism* not particularly being *new* [C] or how they engage in a certain degree of ascribing intentionality to movements that likely are not intentionally created [D], *a lot of people are saying* does offer an incredibly insightful look into the dangers of repetition. In this regard, TES and GC ideology offers striking parallels to *new conspiracism*, which makes sense considering influential TES and GC speakers often align themselves with *new conspiratorial* figures in white supremacist and alt-right circles [11].

TES' *conspiracy without the theory* serves not to delegitimize political institutions or information institutions, but to delegitimize a marginalized population. Matt Walsh and other right-wing or TES-adjacent groups frame attacks on trans individuals (including attacks on the Boston Children's hospital) in a *new conspiratorial* light: "we're just asking questions" [15]. They presuppose an answer to their questions, but the questions serve as an innuendo acting to delegitimize trans individual's autonomy and human rights. Verbal attacks such as that on Boston Children's hospital lead to the delegitimization of gender-affirming institutions through baseless claiming that toddlers are put on a path to sterilization and butchery [q]. As Rosenblum and Muirhead as well as Fockens point out, Twitter's relatively low barrier to entry leads to further repetition of *new conspiratorial* claims, and with an accumulation of countless Re-Tweets, claims such as *a lot of people are saying* gain more support. This is all despite many claims being entirely repetition without any self critical nature [f], and often despite these claims having no logic, consistency, coherency, or tie to reality [15].

Framing TES and GC ideology in this light frames TES and GC Twitter accounts as serving two higher purposes:

1. Delegitimizing trans individuals. Through baseless and repetitive claims, seeking to anger, disgust, and prey on fears, TES and GCs seek to delegitimize trans individuals in such a way that TES and GC groups don't distrust trans individuals, but believe they are a malignant question that needs a final solution.

2. Perpetuating TES and GC ideology. The baseless and repetitive claims need people to repeat them, so TES and GC organizations seek to perpetuate TES and GC ideology for the sake of more retweets and likes, therefore supporting the claims of *a lot of people are saying*.

Twitter and online platforms are vital to the repetition, reproduction, and perpetuation of TES and GC ideology, so this research hopes to strengthen already existing research on how to analyze and combat TES and GC ideology. It serves as framing TES and GC ideology in a unique light, as a sort of virus whose only purpose is to recreate itself and colonize the hearts and minds of individuals [m] in a way likely similar to that of an alt-right pipeline. And, like a virus, there is likely not one individual or shadowy group who controls this process, as is a pitfall Murahied and Rosenblum fall into [D]. Like a virus, there is likely no single brain, just an almost instinct to reproduce and perpetuate. This is what I hope to better explore and understand as a theory.

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, using Twitter's API, 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, alongside the amount of tweets collected (discounting RTs and QRTs).

Account	Reason	Tweets
@ALLIANCCELG B	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.	3235
@LGBFightBack	Grass-roots organization similar to the LGB Alliance with over 3,000 Twitter followers.	360
@Sexnotgender_	Website and Twitter profile focusing on the equality the <i>equality act</i> of 2010 proposing equality to be diametrically black and white (male or female). Over 4,000 Twitter followers.	3182

Figure 1. Twitter accounts used for the study with an explanation of why specific organizations and accounts were used alongside a count of how many tweets were scraped from each Twitter account. A total of 6,777 tweets were used across all three accounts.

All tweets made by these organizations, without RTs or QRTs, before November 5th, 2022 will be condensed into a text document of about 200,000 words for data analysis or 6,777 total tweets. Text will be cleaned to ignore hashtags, quotation marks, line breaks, hyperlinks, and non UTF-8 characters and emojis. The Gensim library will be used to split the tweets into sentences, then lemmatization of text will be done using the Spacy library, with added keywords and dog whistles specific to the TES community such as “GC”, “TERF”, “Womyn”, “Wombyn”, “TRA”, “TIW”, “TIM”, “Transgenderism”, “Radfem”, or “LGBA” to further prepare the text for analysis. Lemmatization of the text will include nouns (‘trans’, ‘transgender’), adjectives (‘personal’, ‘lawful’), and verbs (‘predate’, ‘harass’). This leaves the text with ____ words.

LDA [20] will then be used to gather the most prevalent topics among TES and GC communities alongside what keywords correlate. LDA is used to most accurately mirror the existing research done on r/MensRights [14]. The number of topics will be chosen based on a subjective balancing act of gathering the maximum amount of topics before topics begin repeating themselves.

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. 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.

Based on the research done on r/MensRights [14], these tweets will then be categorized by complaint or grievance, 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 *retweets*. *Quote-retweets* or comments could be used to denote criticism of a complaint, however, Twitter's API gatekeeps these metrics to enterprise and premium members.

Posts will be given two arbitrary values of *support*. They are the amount of likes and retweets out of the pool of all likes and retweets an account has received. Based on this categorization, a tweet will never have more than 1 support in the likes or retweets category, as all tweets by an account added together will add to 1.

RESULTS

LDA results were scored by two factors: log likelihood and perplexity. Higher log likelihoods and lower perplexities are considered to be more accurate models. Early in the process of training LDA, one thing became evident: the number of components used with LDA could not be a single number. LDA was considered most accurate when the number of topics were 3 or 4, yet, 3 or 4 topics is not enough to categorize TES ideologies. Therefore, two numbers of components would be decided, one for *broad* topics and one for *narrow* topics. Figure 2 represents the number of topics LDA found most efficient for *narrow* and *broad* topics. Figure 3 represents the specific topics alongside their key words for both *narrow* and *broad* topics. Figure 4 is a representation of the assumed concerns for each topic.

As some of the *narrow* topics are almost identical to each other or to *broad* topics, and because many of the *narrow* topics can be categorized as extensions of, or subcategories of *broad* topics, a chart (Figure 5) was created in order to better visualize the prevalence of certain categories. It is a visual representation of how *broad* topics act as umbrella topics for various *narrow* topics. This representation of broad vs. narrow as umbrella categories can better help dissect TES arguments.

	# of topics	Log Likelihood	Perplexity	Decay	Offset	DF
Narrow	8	-67975	235	0.8	130	15
Broad	4	-67150	248	0.8	152	15

Figure 2. The number of topics chosen for *broad* and *narrow* topics. The vectorized data fed to LDA a minimum character length of 4. DF is the amount of times a word needs to appear to be included, log likelihood is the score given to each topic, decay is the learning decay or kappa, offset is the learning offset where early iterations are devalued, and iter is the number of iterations done [u]. As topics get narrower, the offset and DF grow smaller. Once a number of topics, df, decay, and offset were found, they were inputted into LDA once more with an iteration value of 100 and a batch size of 256 to find the Log Likelihood and topics for the final combination. This process was tried with a third category of broad topics with a number of topics at 12, however, many topics were repetitions of both *broad* and *narrow* topics, so a third number would not be necessary.

Topic	Keywords
Topic #1	Thank, respond, conference, support, time, year, therapy, make, point, report, people, today, conversion, review, correct
Topic #2	Gender, people, right, lesbian, woman, identity, appear, young, issue, good, trans, child, sexual, body, bisexual
Topic #3	Equality, process, duty, public, information, term, rely, monitoring, datum, application, employer, vital, provide, gender, note
Topic #4	Characteristic, protect, gender, female, male, define, discriminate, datum, note, information, option, personal, reassignment, term, like
Topic #5	Conference, great, year, today, hear, want, come, speak, debate, happy, event, consider, wish, join, issue
Topic #6	Lesbian, gender, people, young, child, therapy, woman, body, bisexual, conversion, change, homophobia, homophobic, need, identity
Topic #7	Thank, support, make, point, people, time, help, raise, need, look, feel, love, view, know, good
Topic #8	Right, people, woman, information, state, good, transgender, follow, person, status, trans, confusion, access, prevent, category
Topic #9	Protect, characteristic, gender, define, identity, reassignment, list, sexual, orientation, term, different, issue, option, information, possible
Topic #10	Equality, datum, discriminate, note, process, personal, report, characteristic, application, employer, duty, discrimination, collect, protect, information
Topic #11	Female, male, vital, recruitment, option, word, applicant, important, public, gather, birth, term, datum, require, aware
Topic #12	Respond, term, rely, question, concept, role, review, correct, wish, ensure, gender, policy, report, sure, relate

Figure 3. Each topic picked by LDA. Topics 1 through 4 are the *broad* topics meanwhile topics 5 through 12 are the *narrow* topics.

Topic	Assumed Concern
Topic #1	Gratitude from organizations to the TES and GC community and the recruitment of new members
Topic #2	Gender identity as an “issue” impacting on lesbians, children, and “women’s rights.”
Topic #3	Equality and monitoring: TES and GC individuals are “portrayed badly” by the media, are fired from jobs, etc. and organizations are attempting to monitor “discrimination” against TES.
Topic #4	Dichotomies: sex as a binary of male and female, of abuser and victim, of protector and protected with trans individuals falling in as an anomaly.
Topic #5	Same as topic #1
Topic #6	Trans people as “having a mental illness”, predators on lesbians, and as needing of therapy and change, plus defence of this ideology (which is, to be clear, conversion therapy) as not homophobic.
Topic #7	Same as topic #1
Topic #8	Gatekeeping of female identities
Topic #9	Protecting people from gender reassignment surgeries
Topic #10	Focus on employers, statistics, and “equality.”
Topic #11	Spreading public awareness of TES and GC ideology.
Topic #12	Spreading public awareness of TES and GC ideology.

Figure 4. The topics picked by LDA, categorized manually. Topics 1 through 4 are the *broad* topics meanwhile topics 5 through 12 are the *narrow* topics. Some *narrow* topics repeat almost identically *broad* topics or to other *narrow* topics.

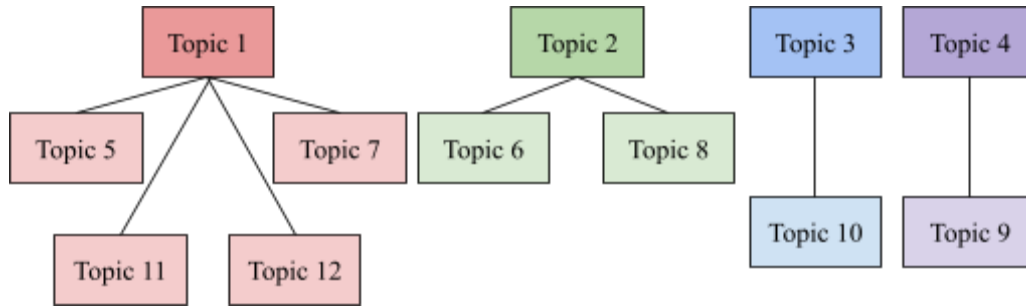


Figure 5. The topics are split into four *broad* umbrella topics. Topic #1 (red), topic #2 (green), topic #3 (blue), topic #4 (purple). The majority of repeats are either *narrow* topics identical to topic 1 or very similar to topic 1. Topics 10 and 9 can be considered extensions or sub-categories of topics 3 or 4.

NEXT STEPS:

CATEGORIZE ALL TWEETS BY THESE TOPICS

DISCUSSION

It can be concluded from Figure 5 that there are four primary goals of these accounts:

1. To perpetuate themselves through conferences and meetings.
2. To pose trans individuals as an “issue” or to delegitimize trans individuals. There is a presupposition there that trans individuals are prevalent enough in society to pose a threat to any other marginalized communities.
3. To monitor discrimination and harassment against the TES and GC community. This serves to protect against their perceived silencing.
4. To enforce the dichotomy between male and female. This focuses on emotions of anger, disgust, and fear to perpetuate TES and GC ideology.

In terms of new conspiracism, there are two methods existing within these four topics. The first is perpetuation and repetition. Topics one and three serve to perpetuate anti-trans sentiments through encouraging the consistent repetition of anti-trans new conspiratorial claims. The second is to delegitimize. Topics two and four feed off anger, disgust, a fear of silencing, and more in order to delegitimize the voices and personhood of trans individuals.

CONCLUSION

This research is meant simply to explain a social phenomenon for the sake of better understanding it, for providing further reference, and for hopefully combatting TES and GC ideology as it serves to only harm. *New conspiratorial* claims do not replace the existing agenda with a new one, they only serve to delegitimize and harm []. But, they open up the door for malicious actors who hope to capitalize off of *new conspiratorial* claims *a lot of people are saying* and *we're just asking questions* to offer a final solution [23]. As many point out, conservatives, TES and GC groups are already gearing up and continuing a path of holocaust [R]. Bathroom bills, the debate on women's sports, attacks on healthcare at the end of the day serve to delegitimize trans individuals as a group, all for the sake of presupposing the answer to the *question* is *extermination*.

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APPENDIX A

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

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