

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 Critical 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, although occupying a small portion of feminist ideology [cite], 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. 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 'silencing' of marginalized voices and an 'invasion' of women's spaces.
3. 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. Many TERFs or Gender Critical individuals have been victims of *gendered power* such as sexual assault (which is incredibly common among women [o]) and can find comfort in this binarized view of aggressors versus those who are 'safe' [n], therefore simplifying the idea of *gendering*.

Martin 2001 [f] 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 if institutionalized and widely recognized gender roles, and are part of an emergent and shifting more inclusive view of gender. A rigid view of *sex* as prioritized over *gender* is incorrect; however, understandable in many individuals as Gansen 2017 [g] finds heteronormativity and *gendered power* is learned in children as early as the age of three. With this *gendered power* so widely learned amongst 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.

Youtuber and investigative journalist Caelen Conrad 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 [k]. Two, they are convinced to practice their TERF beliefs, primarily through engaging in conversion therapy of their children or family members [l]. Three, they are encouraged to perpetuate TERF ideology [m].

TERF and Gender Critical ideology → Benevolent vs. Hostile sexism, discuss w. Abby
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15205436.2018.1547833>

The TERF and Gender Critical movements are a digitally networked public sphere [b] overlapping often with conservative and alt-right movements [e], 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 [b] 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 'cotton ceiling' and the pressure on lesbians to have sex with men.” [c]

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 women receive both socially and systemically [d]. These challenges are amplified, as TERFs and Gender Critical individuals seek 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 posts are more often shared when a user’s emotions of anger, disgust, and powerlessness; the second is a pervasiveness of feminism throughout societies institutions. [a]

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. [j] 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 *pervasiveness* of trans people in societies institutions, and they use that to silence the ‘truly marginalized.’

‘They Have the Real Power’

POSSIBLY READ THROUGH:

- TERF Wars
- The Transsexual Empire??? (do I really want to subject myself to that?)

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, Quote-Tweet (content), and Replies made by three separate Twitter accounts. Figure 1 describes what accounts will be used, and for what reasons. Only organizations will be used to limit the scope of the research, so no individuals will be listed and no hashtags will be listed. 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 <i>equality act</i> 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 [a], these accounts will be scraped and then organized by community support. Each account will be treated as a separate entity; so a minimal amount will be used. 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 people who wish to add nuance to an argument, and are typically 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 Derelict Analysis) [h] as in the research done on r/mensrights [a], 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 [i] alongside three Gender Critical articles from *The Guardian* written by Susanna Rustin. 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, just a general idea of if LDA can be applicable 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. Five specific topics or IDs were found by LDA to be of importance alongside a list of relevant keywords. Based on the contents of J.K. Rowling’s blog post, *assumed concern* is an explanation of what those specific keywords signify within J.K. Rowling’s blog post.

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 silencing or canceling of TERFs who openly espouse their ideologies (topic 2), and finally, a *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,	Reproductive rights and the taking away of women’s rights.

	people, reproductive, legal, freedom, activist, world, body, example	
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. Three specific topics or IDs were found by LDA to be of importance alongside a list of relevant keywords. Based on the combined contents of three Susanna Rustin articles from The Guardian.

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.

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.

CONCLUSION

The most concerning topic brought up within this proposal is *topic 3* or the simple idea of *concern*. A large majority of discriminatory movements are framed from the perspective of *questions* and *concerns*. The holocaust began because of the Jewish question; 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."

APPENDIX A

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

BIBLIOGRAPHY

[a] 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.

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

[c] *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>)

[d] 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>)

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

[f] 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.

[g] 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.

[h] 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>)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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