

‘Emasculation nation has arrived’: Sexism rearticulated in online responses to

Lose the Lads’ Mags campaign.

Feminist Media Studies 2015

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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 2013 a British feminist campaign sought to have men's magazines, such as *Zoo*, *Nuts* and *Loaded*, removed from the shelves of major retailers; arguing that they are sexist and objectify women. The campaign – known as Lose the Lads' Mags (LTLM) – received extensive media coverage and was the topic of considerable public debate. Working with a data corpus comprising 5,140 reader comments posted on news websites in response to reporting of LTLM, this paper explores the repeated focus on men and masculinity as 'attacked', 'under threat', 'victimised' or 'demonised' in what is depicted as a sinister new gender order. Drawing on a poststructuralist feminist discursive analysis, we show how these broad claims are underpinned by four interpretative repertoires that centre around: i) gendered double standards; ii) male (hetero)sexuality under threat; iii) the war on the 'normal bloke'; and iv) the notion of feminism as unconcerned with equality but rather 'out to get men'. This paper contributes to an understanding of (online) popular misogyny and changing modes of sexism.

KEYWORDS:

men's magazines; postfeminism; sexism; 'sexualisation'; new media

Emasculation nation has arrived, don't you ladies moan when you ask
where have all the real men gone (you destroyed us)
(huffingtonpost.co.uk)

This paper examines constructions of men and masculinity in online discussions about a feminist campaign to have men's magazines, such as *Zoo*, *Nuts* and *Loaded*, removed from the shelves of major retailers. The campaign, launched in the UK in 2013, sought to 'lose the lads' mags' (LTLM), arguing that they are pornographic and portray women as sex objects (losetheladsmags.org.uk). The research project of which this paper forms a part was designed to explore media reporting and public discussion of the campaign, both as an example of contemporary feminist activism and as a lens to understand public attitudes towards the complicated range of phenomena often given the shorthand 'sexualisation'. Therefore, our aim was not to weigh into the contestation about the lads' mags or 'sexualised' culture ourselves, but rather to examine how these topics are constructed in media and public discourse in order to provide a much-needed empirically-informed insight into the landscape of public discussion of 'sexualisation'.

Interestingly, our data reveals a stark contrast between the terms of academic debate and the key themes of online discussion. Ideas about freedom of speech, racialised and religious national identity, and the meaning of equality came to constitute the main contours of the debate, with a central focus on the erosion of men's rights. In this paper we examine the repeated depiction of men and masculinity variously as 'under threat', 'attacked', 'victimised' or 'demonised'. These notions constituted the most significant motif in the data corpus of over 5,000 comments on news websites, and it is worth considering them in detail, not simply in relation to this specific political

engagement, but as part of an emergent set of (both new and well-established) discourses about men's place in (what is presented as) a new gender order. We suggest that the volume of comments centred on threats to men may usefully be understood with respect to a postfeminist cultural sensibility, the resurgence and mainstreaming of 'laddism', and a renewed anti-feminist backlash against the current upsurge of visibility of popular feminism

The Lose the Lads' Mags campaign

In the spring of 2013 a campaign was launched in the UK to 'lose the lads' mags', a media genre criticised for its 'sexualisation' and 'objectification' of women. LTLM can be understood as part of a contemporary resurgence of interest in feminist ideas and activism which spans a continuum from the high visibility of bestselling books such as Lean In (Sandberg 2013) and Getting to 50/50 (Meers & Strober 2009) by successful 'corporate' feminists, to grassroots campaigns often using social media and creative forms of political intervention (e.g. Everyday Sexism Project, see everydaysexism.com). The newly invigorated feminism of the 2010s has been notable for focussing in particular on issues concerning the representation or treatment of women in the media and public space (Banyard 2010; Bates 2014; Walter 2010). Indeed, LTLM arose amid other British high-profile campaigns underscoring the idea that 'representations matter' (Gill 2007). These include No More Page Three (nomorepage3.org) and the campaign contesting the decision to replace the only female historical figure on English banknotes with a male face (see carolinecriadoperez.com). In the same period there was also a sustained outcry about 'trolling' and hate speech in social media, partly as an expression of public horror about the volume and sadism of

death and rape threats received by women in public life when they spoke out on such issues (e.g. Moore 2013).

LTLM exemplified the concerns of the day about women's representation in media and public space. Coordinated by national organisations for gender equality and human rights UK Feminista and Object, and supported by various lawyers, trade unions, anti-violence organizations, equality groups and shareholders, the campaign called on British high-street retailers to stop selling so-called lads' mags and papers with Page 3-style front cover images (e.g. *Midweek* and *Sunday Sport*). It argued these publications are misogynistic and portray women as sex objects, fuelling sexist behaviours and attitudes, and contributing to creating a conducive context for gender inequality and violence against women (losetheladsmags.org.uk). Focussing in a systematic way on supermarket giants such as Tesco, Morrisons and The Co-operative, retailers were told they could face legal action on the grounds of sex discrimination and/or sexual harassment under the Equality Act 2010. In a range of public communications, campaigners emphasised that the initiative did not aim for censorship, nor was it driven by stances that were anti-sex, anti-nudity or that were religious or moralistic, but rather a commitment to countering sexism.

LTLM was well-organised, carefully targeted and relatively successful, attracting an extraordinary amount of media attention – particularly by the standards of feminist campaigns. A striking feature was the extent to which it generated public and popular engagement. It was extensively discussed in newspapers, on radio and television, and was also the topic of considerable debate online; becoming part of a national conversation that was framed in terms of the representation of women in public space, along with ongoing concerns about 'sexualisation' and 'laddism'. These are discussed in turn below.

The ‘sexualisation’ of culture

The LTLM campaign resonated with a growing body of work in media and cultural studies that has focussed upon trying to make sense of a perceived ‘sexualisation of culture’. Among other things, this (contested) phrase is used to capture the growing sense of Western societies as saturated by sexual representations and discourses, in which pornography has become increasingly influential and porous, permeating ‘mainstream’ contemporary culture. Porn stars have emerged as celebrities and bestselling authors (e.g. Jenna Jameson); a ‘porno chic’ aesthetic can be seen in music videos and advertising (Paasonen et al. 2007); and practices once associated with the sex industry – e.g. lap and pole dancing – have become newly ‘respectabilised’, promoted as regular corporate entertainment or recreational activity (Donaghue et al. 2011).

Academic researchers have taken up widely divergent positions in relation to this putative sexualisation (see Attwood 2006; Duschinsky & Barker 2013; Egan 2013; Gill 2012 for useful discussions). Within feminist scholarship at least four positions can be identified: radical feminist perspectives reminiscent of second wave critiques of pornography (Dines 2010; Jeffreys 2009); third wave ‘sex-positive’ positions that offer more optimistic views of ‘sexualisation’ grounded in understandings of women as producers and consumers of ‘sexual’ material rather than victims (Attwood 2010; Smith 2007); ‘sex-critical’ approaches aiming to move beyond and complicate these polarised positions (Barker et al. 2015; Downing 2012); and attempts to locate ‘sexualisation’ within wider transformations associated with postfeminism, neoliberalism and late consumer capitalism (Harvey & Gill 2011; Evans & Riley, 2014).

One thing that is striking in relation to much contemporary discourse about ‘sexualization’ is how frequently ‘public opinion’ is invoked – often by people with diametrically opposed arguments. It can be called on to demand greater regulation of ‘sexual’ products (e.g. music videos) - or conversely to assert a greater tolerance, liberalism or permissiveness, and to repudiate the ‘nanny state’ (see Gill, 2012; Duschinsky & Barker, 2013). As Rosalind Gill (2012) has argued, it is instructive to treat claims about public opinion as performative or rhetorical rather than as true reflections of how the public feels about any issue. In fact, little is known about public views concerning the diverse phenomena grouped under the heading ‘sexualisation’. By exploring commentary about LTLM on mainstream news websites this study offers a small contribution to this – though necessarily a partial one that reflects the characteristics of those who comment online.

Laddism, postfeminism and contemporary masculinities

LTLM is one example of recent sustained critiques of the ‘new lad’. Concerns have also been voiced about the spread of ‘lad culture’ across multiple sites, notably within higher education institutions (Phipps & Young 2013) and city and financial workplace culture (Banyard 2010). Laddism has been a significant feature of British popular culture since the early 1990s, when the figure of the ‘new lad’ began to materialise as a distinctive articulation of masculinity in a variety of media. This included zoo radio, TV quizzes, comedy shows, and, importantly, a new generation of men’s magazines spearheaded by the launch of *Loaded* in 1994: the ‘lads’ mags’. Laddist culture emerged against the backdrop of anxieties about change and crisis in men’s lives, in the wake of the (partial) successes of feminism, and wider transformations in social and economic life. Research on the ‘new lad’ has highlighted the construction of this form of masculinity as

antithetical to femininity and homosexuality, defiantly predatory, located in the ‘heartlands’ of men’s assumed interests in ‘beer, football and shagging’; yet also sophisticated, self-deprecating and offering up its seemingly unreconstructed attitudes with a knowing wink (Beynon 2002; Crewe 2003). Some have interpreted this figure as a reactionary response to changes in gender relations effected by feminism, ‘a nostalgic revival of old patriarchy’ (Whelehan, 2000: 5); while others have interrogated the laddish sensibility making explicit connections to postfeminism (Benwell 2003; Gill 2014).

Whilst contested, the concept of postfeminism designates a sociocultural climate where gender equality is assumed to have been achieved, and in which a selectively defined feminism is simultaneously asserted as common sense and fiercely repudiated (McRobbie 2009). Building on these ideas, scholars have advanced an understanding of postfeminism as a sensibility intimately linked to neoliberalism and characterising large parts of contemporary culture (Gill 2007; Gill & Scharff 2011; Tasker & Negra 2007). In relation to men, key motifs of that – contradictory – sensibility include: the reassertion of notions of natural sexual difference and a reanimated sense of the ‘battle of the sexes’, boosted by evolutionary psychology; together with the identification of men as confused ‘victims’ or ‘losers’ of a new gender order, set within the context of an idea of ‘political correctness gone mad’ (Gill 2014). Focussing mostly on media fictional genres, studies additionally point to constructions of masculinity as displaced and/or wounded (Genz & Brabon 2009), deficient/dysfunctional (Negra 2006), and fallible, damaged and unheroic (Benwell 2003; Gill 2014; Hansen-Miller & Gill 2011). Indeed, both the scholarship on postfeminism and laddism have been dominated by humanities-oriented ‘readings’ of popular cultural texts, rather than social science research with men (but see Jackson et al. 2001; Horvath et al. 2012). Furthermore, as

Rachel O'Neill (2015) has problematised, there has been a reluctance of masculinities scholars to engage with postfeminism. The current paper takes steps in these directions – highlighting how postfeminist logics, laddishness and backlash rhetoric are mobilised to (re)assert and (re)secure male power and privilege in contemporary everyday public discourse.

Data, Methods and Approach

The analysis presented in this paper is based upon a rigorous examination of online reader comments to news coverage of the LTLM campaign and retailer responses to it. In particular, we focus on reporting of the decision by the Co-operative Group – one of Britain's largest magazine retailers – to only sell lads' mags delivered to stores in individually sealed bags concealing the covers. We considered public reactions and discussions revolving around this announcement (July 28 and 29, 2013) and final implementation (September 9, 2013), as they were widely covered by the media and stirred extensive public debate across online spaces.

The corpus of data on which the analysis draws was generated through three queries on the google.co.uk search engine (performed October 10, 2013). The search phrase 'Lads' mags Co-op' followed by each of the aforementioned key dates in the campaign's history was entered. In light of the large amount of potential data these searches yielded, the survey for relevant web pages was restricted to the first twenty obtained results or 'hits'. Sixteen articles from thirteen different mainstream UK news sites and all the accompanying reader comments were gathered. This amounted to a total of 5,140 posts; with those posted on the *BBC* and *Yahoo News* accounting for more than half of the data corpus (56%). The material was gathered from publicly accessible readers' comments sections allowing the use of pseudonyms, here removed for further

de-identification (for an account of our ethical decision-making see Authors, forthcoming).

The discourse analytic approach employed here draws upon the method and perspective elaborated by Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter (1992) in the social sciences, as well as the research programme of feminist critical discourse analysis; notably its commitment to feminist politics, ‘analytical activism’ and ideology critique (Lazar 2007: 145; Litosseliti 2006). This fits with our broadly poststructuralist Foucaultian-influenced approach, which places emphasis upon the material-discursive effects of power, rather than on a distinction between ideology and truth. In terms of the discursive analytic strategy, we utilise the ‘interpretative repertoire’ (Potter & Wetherell 1987), which refers to ‘a recognizable routine of arguments, descriptions and evaluations distinguished by familiar clichés, common places, tropes and characterizations of actors and situations’ that become evident through repetition across a corpus (Edley & Wetherell 2001: 443). This unit of analysis allows researchers to go beyond individual expressions to begin to identify patterns across and between texts, and to connect these to wider contexts and social formations (Hall, 1986).

The collected material was uploaded to NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Aiming to ascertain the diversity of discussion around LTLM, we used an inductive coding method. This involved several close readings of the whole data corpus and reorganisations of various data-driven codes before we identified a stable set of broad, distinct but interconnected, discursive patterns. Three emerged as extremely pervasive: Islamophobia and nationalism, abjection of feminism, and ‘men as victims’. Here we focus on comments – by far the majority in our corpus – relating to the victimization of men.

Unpacking Emasculation Nation

The remainder of this paper explores the construction of men as vulnerable, discriminated against, oppressed, under threat and attack in/by a feminist-dominated society. In particular, we unpack the discursive formation we call ‘emasculaton nation’ (inspired by a post from our data), organised around the idea of men as the ‘new victims’ or ‘newly oppressed’ specifically in the UK. We examine four key interpretative repertoires deployed by members of the public in their posts:

1. ‘gendered double standards’ in the campaign, media and public life;
2. ‘male sexuality under threat’, pertaining particularly to heterosexual desire;
3. ‘the war on the normal bloke’, which constructs white British straight men and their way of life as hated and under siege; and
4. ‘feminist tyranny’, where feminism is advanced as a looming menace for both men particularly and the UK more broadly.

Spelling and grammar is retained from original posts.

Gendered double standards

In this first repertoire, there are a number of strong patterns organised around the claim that men are losing out from a society currently marked by gendered double standards. The data is suffused with comments critiquing the LTLM campaign as biased for focussing on the ‘lad mags’ but not targeting other types of magazines that also contain pictures of semi-clothed bodies. These include men’s bodybuilding publications, but primarily women’s magazines and those targeting gay men. For example:

- (1) Are we going to ban Vogue and Ok magazines when they have bikini clad women on them? Or the bodybuilding mags that have all those guys in

nothing more than posing pouches? It seems as if it's one rule for men and one rule for women. (huffingtonpost.co.uk)

(2) i could accept this more if they were banning gay magazines such as Attitude too. It is frankly barmy to ban semi naked images of the fairer sex while not banning the same of semi naked men. It is double standards and hypocrisy and sexism. (theboltonnews.co.uk)

There are also a series of claims about double standards in relation to images of bodies in other media. During the past three decades, sexualised representations of the male body have become a feature of mainstream popular culture. However, in addition to the more familiar (albeit contestable and problematic) notion that men are 'equally objectified' (Gill 2011a), in our data processes of sexual objectification in the media are also presented as having been reversed – with men currently being the main target of this practice of sexism. The concept of bias is underscored through the assertion that an equivalent representation of women does not exist, and if it did, feminists would not allow it – as in the following comment:

(3) If men had their own version of the Diet coke ad there would be thousands of feminists screaming out about how shockingly sexist it is. The problem with all this PC and equality stuff is it only works one way. (bbc.co.uk)

Pervading our data, since the mid-1980s the designation 'political correctness' (PC) has become a common device to deny and disparage efforts against discrimination while

‘keeping face’. Ideological accusations of PC are often linked to claims of ‘reverse discrimination’, and are a typical feature of racist (van Dijk 1992) and postfeminist discourse (McRobbie 2009).

Contributors also depict the contemporary British media and cultural sphere in general as marked by sexism against men:

(4) If you want to address sexism directly, start with simple, obvious things.

“Womans’ Hour”; “Loose Women”. (bbc.co.uk)

(5) I say NAME AND SHAME! That’s right let’s publicly shame all the sycophants and hypocrites out there that pander to the sexist and discriminatory Feminist agenda - the media, who show adverts depicting males as incompetents or of male strippers being oggled by women; the councils who allow Penis Puppetry in their theatres; the female tv presenters who constantly say “He’s ripped”...etc, etc! (bbc.co.uk)

There are additionally claims about (supposedly) manifold double standards which privilege women and disadvantage men in other social arenas, for instance sport and politics. As in (7), this can be accompanied by appeals to men to reflect upon such unfair state of affairs:

(6) “The age of ‘equality for all’ has finally arrived” Not quite. We still have women only days at swilling pools and other sporting venues. We still have the laughable spectacle of women tennis players being paid the same as men

after playing two fewer sets. We still have the spectre of women only shortlists in political circles. Can I go on? No, not enough space... (bbc.co.uk)

(7) Come on men, what about us? Why does the womens Wimbledon champion get the same prize money as the mens? Not fair or equitable. (bbc.co.uk)

A final theme entails general expressions of feminism as profoundly biased (8, 9), with calls for a Minister to protect men's allegedly neglected rights 'in all areas of life' (10):

(8) It cracks me up this feminism malarkey

Moan about women = Sexism

Moan about men = OK

Scantily clad women = Sexism

Scantily clad Men = OK

(bbc.co.uk)

(9) Where's the feminists pushing for all equality...oh yeah when it powers women that's fine, when it empowers men they have no interest. Usual double standards... [Follow-up by another commenter] No if it empowers men they scream sexism and misogyny! (huffingtonpost.co.uk)

(10) Time for a Minister for Men! For too long Feminism has switched from something moderate (and reasonable) to something far more extreme. Contemporary Feminism seeks double standards, it seeks the oppress Men in

all areas of life, Employment, Culture, Health, Education, Sport.

(dailymail.co.uk)

Generally speaking, contributors depict the relative success of) LTLM as demonstrating ‘what a sexist society we are in favour of females’ (dailymail.co.uk). This repertoire is notable for the repetitive use of the same examples to illustrate the purportedly sweeping double standards men are suffering from in contemporary UK: Diet Coke advertisements, Loose Women and Woman’s Hour, along with women-only sports clubs and equal pay in professional tennis were mentioned repeatedly (the latter perhaps explained by the temporal proximity to Wimbledon). Double standards against men are highlighted whilst those instances in which women might be disadvantaged are rendered invisible.

Male sexuality under threat

Coexisting alongside ‘gendered double standards’ is a second interpretative repertoire based on the idea that male (hetero)sexuality is under threat – being currently exploited, demonised and assailed by a range of social actors, particularly feminists. As such, it is here where the notion of emasculation is most explicitly voiced.

A recurrent theme pertains to the claim that men are sexually exploited by the female models working for the magazines. The critical gaze in the sexual objectification debate is accordingly turned away from men and toward women, where there is a strong sense of blame:

(11) All these wimmin going on about the objectification of the female form - who do you think is posing in these things? Women! Women who are getting paid

money to show off what they want. Who is being exploited? Them or the men who buy the mags? (bbc.co.uk)

(12) It is about Sexism, it is about Women using their bodies to exploit men into parting with their cash. These women should be vilified as extortionists. (uk.news.yahoo.com)

These claims are informed by the culturally pervasive construction of men as driven by a constant and uncontrollable biological necessity for (hetero)sex, which models are then supposedly exploiting. Building on this same logic, the sexual objectification of women is attributed to inherent forces beyond men's control (e.g. 'basic instincts'), which works to reduce the hearability of sexism or misogyny:

(13) Male objectification of women is pretty much a basic instinct. (bbc.co.uk)

In a powerful rhetorical move, feminists can thus be positioned as attacking the (bio)existential rights of men:

(14) These lobbying groups are seeking to deny men's right to act in accordance with their biology and genes. I suspect that they will not stop until men are fully emasculated and, preferably, surgically castrated. (bbc.co.uk)

Underlying these statements is the implication that men are threatened not simply by an ordinary political organisation, but by a movement seeking nothing less than to overturn (male) human nature itself (see also Gill 2000). Moreover, some comments (e.g.14

above) portray feminists as so inhuman and moved by such male-hatred that they wish to literally castrate men. This theme, which revolves around a fixed, innate male sexuality (under serious threat by feminism), neatly maps onto a broader postfeminist sensibility that has reinvigorated sexual essentialism (and repudiates feminism) (García-Favaro, Forthcoming). It operates not only to exorcize any form of blame from men, but also to position male sexuality as not open for debate, and thus any related discussion – let alone calls for change – becomes seen as intrinsically coercive.

The campaign to remove lads' mags is depicted as a part of a wider demonization of male sexuality in UK society generally, spearheaded by feminists. Some comments additionally point to 'traditionalists' or evoke religion as the force behind this perceived attack:

(15) There seems to be a war on men's sexuality. (uk.news.yahoo.com)

(16) This campaign is just another in the re-he-he-he-he-ly long and proud tradition of Feminists and Traditionalists teaming up to attempt to further demonise male sexuality. (Places hands behind head) (theguardian.com)

(17) These harridens [...] won't be happy till men go around the streets in big long lines all chained together, covered in ashes and whipping themselves.
(uk.news.yahoo.com)

This image of religious penance and mortification powerfully accentuates notions of strict morality, suspicion of the body, and, specifically, of (out-dated) repression of (male) sexuality. In evoking practices associated with conservative Catholic orders (e.g.

self-flagellation), post (17) also positions the supposedly tyrannical regime of feminist puritanism as 'foreign other' to 'our' British values/way of life.

Going further, several contributors portray the emasculation of men as an actual social reality rather than simply a threat:

(18) This is just another example of the emasculation of men in our society.

(bbc.co.uk)

(19) So the government bans half of the internet, the feminists ban lads mags and men can't talk to women these days without being called a pervert.....

Emasculation nation has arrived, don't you ladies moan when you ask where have all the real men gone (you destroyed us) (huffingtonpost.co.uk)

A central theme in this repertoire concerns the representation of feminism as attacking (male) heterosexuality (or 'real men' as articulated in 19 above), and, indeed, promoting homosexuality or celibacy; ideas closely associated with the tenacious construction of feminists as anti-sex.

(20) If these were 'gay' pictorial magazines the pc brigade would be quick to defend their right to show their front covers. Isn't this yet another assault on heterosexuality? (uk.news.yahoo.com)

(21) Modern day feminists are recruiting Sergeants for male homosexuality or celibacy! (bbc.co.uk)

In addition to weaving a general affective texture of threat, the repeated use of military metaphors (e.g. ‘brigade’, ‘recruiting sergeants’) effectively works to mobilise the notion of a current (feminist) war on (heterosexual) men, as explored in the following subsection.

The war on the ‘normal bloke’

While the posts discussed thus far have centred on double standards or specifically on male sexuality, the patterned repertoire we have dubbed ‘the war on the normal bloke’ presents men in general, as a hated, demonized and attacked social group. The discussion of this repertoire first examines various claims about a perceived war on men in/by British society, and then moves on to consider how contemporary feminism is depicted as a man-hating movement.

Contributors present the Co-Op’s decision to sell magazines in ‘modesty bags’ as an example of a continued (‘another’, ‘endless’) social erosion of men’s rights, freedoms, and subjection to sexism. A sense of ‘fatigue’ at such alleged injustices is pervasive:

(22) Another erosion of mens rights. (bbc.co.uk)

(23) Men loose all rights of freedom! (bbc.co.uk)

(24) Why this endless sexism..? (independent.co.uk)

What is more, there is the assertion that men are demonised in present-day British society ‘at every possible moment’ (25). The use of the lexical item ‘boys’ to refer to

men and the allusion to male children effectively work to accentuate the sense of men as vulnerable and innocent victims:

(25) This just shows the status of Boys in this country. Demonised at every possible moment. (dailymail.co.uk)

(26) Men: Welcome to 'democratic' Britain: you are being demonized and discriminated against. Your sons are next. (bbc.co.uk)

As noted earlier, not all men are considered to be under threat and attack, and indeed there are distinctive classed and racialised themes here, as well as explicit claims that gay men are enjoying a favourable treatment. Below a focus on the war on the straight male and 'reverse sexism' is combined with discourses of 'inverted racism' (van Dijk, 1992) and xenophobia:

(27) Of course, the war on heterosexual white men continues. (dailymail.co.uk)

(28) Ten years ago, an old boy in the pub said to me "you know the worst thing to be in this country? Male, Caucasian and British" I thought he was a lunatic, but as time goes on i'm starting to think he wasn't quite as nuts as he seemed. (bbc.co.uk)

(29) Feminists would be quite happy if all the single white anglo saxon hetro men are left unemployed and postiviely descriminated against, so they are and their partners can get all the jobs. (bbc.co.uk)

Another theme in this repertoire builds on the idea that, as one contributor puts it, ‘men are not allowed to be men’ (bbc.co.uk), to construct a contemporaneous reality where everything related to and enjoyed by men is being banned. As is the case with most posts comprising our data, the following extract is characterised by its emotional immediacy, and anger¹. A heterosexist dichotomy is established between gay people and ‘normal blokes’:

(30)#\$\$ k the lefties. Shoot the lot of them! after gay marriage the government has not got any morals they are just trying to kill off normal bloke stuff.
(uk.news.yahoo.com)

(31)And once again it comes down to this...anything that men enjoy is outlawed.
(uk.news.yahoo.com)

Deployed repeatedly in this repertoire is the extreme case formulation (Pomerantz 1986) that feminists hate, attack and aim to ban ‘every male pleasure’ (33), and, moreover, attack ‘anything to do with men’ (uk.news.yahoo.com) (our emphasis). This theme is notable for the stereotypical – almost caricatured – association of men and masculinity with a narrow range of consumer products (cars, heterosexual pornography), interests (sports) and behaviours (gambling, drinking, smoking):

(32)Joyless women, who gargle with vinegar want to spoil it for everyone [...] want page 3 banned along with everything else that men enjoy.
(huffingtonpost.co.uk)

(33) Every male pleasure is attacked by these hypocritical holy willies: gambling, drinking, smoking, even eating are all sneered at, sport has been sanitized and now the mildest of sexual images must be hidden, what they really can't stand is the thought of working men enjoying themselves! (bbc.co.uk)

(34) The radical feminists and the PC brigade are on another social engineering campaigning against some harmless magazines for young men. I wonderer what their agenda is may be its to destroy what it is to be a heterosexual male are sports and car mags next on the list? (dailymail.co.uk)

This idea is taken further with the portrayal of feminism as an unequivocally 'anti-men' movement or 'politicised misandry'. Likewise, participants state that a hidden agenda of hatred of men lies behind feminist claims about equality. Comments such as the following are littered throughout the material analysed:

(35) Feminism = Anti-men. (uk.news.yahoo.com)

(36) Boobs and bums are not harmful to children - politicised misandry is.
(bbc.co.uk)

(37) Feminists aren't interested in equality, they just hate Men. (bbc.co.uk)

(38) The feminist want men banned full stop. (huffingtonpost.co.uk)

One key feature of the postfeminist regime of gender power is to disarticulate the field of sexual politics. As McRobbie (2009: 26) observes, an important way disarticulation operates is ‘through the widespread dissemination of values which typecast feminism as having been fuelled by anger and hostility to men’. In our data, this representation is not only reproduced repeatedly and with particular intensity, but contributors also go beyond to depict men as the victims of relentless and ongoing vilification, attack and bullying by feminists. Indeed, a sense of desperation and what we might call ‘abuse fatigue’ is evoked with expressions such as ‘when will it end’ in (40) (see also 24 above):

(39) Disgraceful behaviour by the feminists groups. This has nothing to do with equality or fairness and everything to do with them continuing the vilification of men. (uk.news.yahoo.com)

(40) Another vicious feminist bullying attack on males when will it end?
(dailymail.co.uk)

(41) We live in a Feminist society with nothing but hate towards the Male population. (dailymail.co.uk)

This idea of male victimhood and feminist tyranny is further intensified with the representation of a society in which men are under siege from a feminism close to establishing a totalitarian state. It is to this final repertoire that we now turn.

Feminist tyranny

This last repertoire is organised around the suggestion that feminist claims about equality are spurious and hiding a more sinister agenda, with expressions of fear about the seemingly bleak future of men, as well as the general public, democracy and British society more broadly.

Commenters create a clear dichotomy between ‘(gender) equality’, standing for that which is acceptable and even desirable, and ‘feminism’, described as an insidious, tyrannical menace, threatening both men and democracy. Using a well-established rhetorical formula, they establish a polarization between Us, concerned with equality and maintaining a ‘free and open society’ (44), and Them, ‘extremists’ (43) ‘imposing their will on the general public’ (42), and so on:

(42) Equality is fine but feminism is something far more insidious - a minority of men haters with a personal agenda (hang-ups) imposing their will on the general public. (bbc.co.uk)

(43) Feminists have nothing to do with equality. They are extremists who take things too far. (bbc.co.uk)

(44) Militant Lesbians are trying to impose their world view on our free and open society. They are a menace. (uk.news.yahoo.com)

Characterising feminists as extremists achieves an important rhetorical effect in a socio-cultural context where the concept of extremism stands as near-synonym for unacceptability. Other people posting likewise speak of ‘fanatics’, ‘bigots’ or ‘zealots’. This is by no means novel, but what does seem to be new is depicting all feminists in

this way. Previous studies have observed how the figure of the extremist or militant feminist is sometimes utilised to simultaneously invoke its counterpoint: namely the rational, judicious, reasonable and moderate ‘feminism of equality’ (Edley & Wetherell 2001; Gough 1998). In our data, however, this acceptable pro-equality form of feminism is relegated to the past (see also 10 above). In contrast, all ‘Contemporary Feminism’ (10) or ‘Modern day feminists’ (21) are construed as disinterested in equality and rather seeking absolute social power and control, along with revenge and superiority over men. For example:

(45) If feminists actually practiced equality for everyone - i.e. Campaigned to stop aspects of the sexualisation of men as well as women, instead of trying to ‘turn the tables’ in some sort of obscene gesture of ‘revenge’ then they would get more support. (bbc.co.uk)

(46) Feminists stopped campaigning for equality a long time ago. Now it’s about superiority. (bbc.co.uk)

Accentuating even more the rhetoric of extremism, feminists are also often recast as ‘fascists’, ‘Stalinist’ or ‘feminazis’. Alongside this naming, there are comments that draw on potent images to conjure an attack on fundamental freedoms, such as book burning:

(47) At first its the books that are burned how long before the dissenters follow. (bbc.co.uk)

Invoking totalitarianism is perhaps the most powerful cultural resource available in Western democracies for conveying threat, and the use of language like this to characterise feminist ideas and activism is certainly not new (Gill 2000). For instance, the term ‘feminazi’ has been in circulation since the early 1990s, popularised by right wing US commentators and ‘shock jocks’ like Howard Stern and Rush Limbaugh. The imagery these notions conjure is so potent that it does not appear to need any explanation or justification. Indeed, much of their force lies in their very vagueness. However, through constant repetition these linguistic choices gain rhetorical force and powerfully work to evoke ideas of a chilling all-encompassing threat, as well as to make the figure of the ‘man-hating fascist feminist’ acquire affective power as an apparently real entity.

People posting also make references to ‘Big Brother’ to suggest feminist omnipresent control and totalitarian power, with its perceived policing of thought and behaviour. Note the use of capitalisation to intensify the sense of threat from this purported Orwellian feminism:

(48)BIG SISTER IS WATCHING YOU. (uk.news.yahoo.com)

Relatedly, drawing on another well-documented rhetorical strategy of opposition, participants also attack feminists by characterising their ideas as ‘ideologies’. Used in this context the concept implies a rigid, distorted conception of reality, along with authoritarian prescription, and stands in opposition to the average, moderate, reasonable person.

(49) These sexist idiots want to socially engineer an entire nation towards their ideology. (bbc.co.uk)

The phrase ‘socially engineer’ (seen also in 34 above) accomplishes considerable rhetorical work here, imbued as it is with negative connotations, due to its association with authoritarian states, and a cold actor willingly exerting coercive and/or deceptive manipulation. In the context of discussion of (feminist) supremacism, the concept further works to reinforce the implication of fascist tendencies, powerfully evoking images of Nazi eugenics or human re-engineering programmes (Gill 2000). Moreover, in a society steeped in the liberal democratic tradition this accusation becomes particularly grave – with feminists accordingly emerging as a threat to democracy, indeed to Britishness itself.

This is made explicit also in the many broad, vague lamentations regarding the damage feminists are causing to British society. This includes comments conjuring a sense of nostalgic sadness, along with expressions of concern about the future:

(50) Feminists are slowly ruining everything. (dailymail.co.uk)

(51) This country is becoming a nightmare to live in. (bbc.co.uk)

(52) I fear for British society. It is heading down a dangerous road. (bbc.co.uk)

(53) Feminists will do this Country no good. (bbc.co.uk)

(54) Who knows what change they will think of next? (bbc.co.uk)

As well as the nightmarish present and doomed future of British society generally, contributors turn their attention to the seemingly brutally bleak (near) future of men now that ‘the tide has turned’:

(55) The tide has turned boys soon we will all just be a sterile sex slave underclass ruled by our women masters and their ovarian demands. (bbc.co.uk)

(56) When reality dawns and men come to realise the true scale of the scheming, conniving and manipulation that has taken place in recent years, when they find themselves living in a world dominated by ‘what women want’ and massively outnumbered in the work-place, what has up to now been a ‘phoney’ sex war could turn very nasty indeed. (bbc.co.uk)

(57) Give the Thought Police a few more years and any male not reading the Guardian and eating low fat cereal bars in biodegradable wrappers which they take them home with them on the electric bus will be arrested. The sisterhood will of course ensure that for wimmin’, anything is acceptable. (bbc.co.uk)

In sum, this repertoire constructs feminist/female supremacism as a political project only moments away from seizing absolute social power, with dire consequences for the whole British nation, and expressly heterosexual men.

Sexism rearticulated

By focussing on online responses to mainstream news reporting of the British Lose the Lads' Mags campaign, we sought to offer an insight into public discussion about 'sexualisation' and contemporary feminist activism. What emerged as most significant from this study was the evidence of a powerful and pervasive discursive formation centred around the construction of men as victims of a new gender order, and stressing danger and threats to men, masculinity and 'our whole way of life'. This paper has shown how this set of ideas circulated repeatedly and in a remarkably patterned manner, unpacking four key constitutive interpretative repertoires. The first highlighted 'double standards' seen (by people posting) increasingly to operate in public life in such a way as to privilege women and disadvantage men. Next we discussed posts that constructed male sexuality – particularly heterosexual desire – as being under attack, increasingly vilified and pathologised in contemporary culture. The third repertoire extended this set of meanings to suggest that not only male sexuality, but the 'normal bloke' himself was in fact being threatened – the victim of a full-scale 'war' against 'regular guys'. Finally, the fourth repertoire brought to a crescendo the sense of male victimisation, depicting feminism as a totalitarian movement seeking nothing less than the all-out destruction of men and liberal democracy itself.

In concluding, we want to consider how this construction of male victimisation may be situated within a broader understanding of contemporary culture. How might we read this remarkably patterned and consistent set of findings? How should we make sense of this outpouring of anger? It is banal and easily recognisable, yet this popular everyday misogyny remains under-theorised – almost as if its very familiarity and ordinariness has exempted it from serious critique. It sometimes becomes dubbed 'hate speech' or located as a phenomenon that has more to do with particular technologies or media (e.g. the 'twitter mob') than with new modalities of sexism or changing

ideological formations. There is a tendency to reach for technical solutions (e.g. better reporting buttons) or to treat these views as purely an artefact of a highly specific minority – an angry male-dominated commentariat – thus enabling the sentiments and ideas expressed to be easily dismissed (for a call for research on gendered ‘e-bile’, see Jane 2014). This paper seeks to challenge such views by highlighting the fact that these findings come not from minority interest websites but from mainstream news outlets such as *BBC* and *Yahoo News*. Whilst they may not be ‘representative’ of the wider population in any formal sense, we argue that they constitute a widespread discursive formation – a popular, patterned misogyny – that seems to be gaining traction within contemporary Britain. ‘Emasculation nation’ as a discursive formation elaborates a re-articulated form of sexism for a new moment of contradictory tendencies: a revitalised field of feminist activism set against a taken for granted postfeminist sensibility, together with a mainstreaming of ‘laddism’ beyond the sites and genres that have garnered critical attention (e.g. magazines).

Our analysis is not the first to highlight discourses of male victimisation. During the 1990s a number of critics pointed to a growing public sense of men as victims – particularly of feminism and political correctness (Edley & Wetherell 2001; Faludi 1991; Gill 2000; Gough 1998; Gough & Peace 2000). Indeed, the popular idea of ‘masculinity in crisis’ was to a large extent a dominant iteration of this view, pulling together diverse social phenomena – e.g. the growing objectification of the male body, the increase in IVF, the collapse of traditionally male jobs in manufacturing, etc. – to convey an idea of men as an increasingly endangered species. As John Beynon (2002) noted, at a particular point during the 1990s whenever you heard the word ‘masculinity’, you knew the word ‘crisis’ would not be far behind. Critical accounts frequently conceived such claims about masculinity as examples of a ‘backlash’ against feminism

or a kind of ‘retro sexism’ (Faludi 1991; Whelehan 2000). This offered an incisive form of ideological critique that connected changing everyday talk about gender with a wider cultural movement.

The notion of backlash certainly offers some purchase in making sense of the current tenacity and pervasiveness (as well as specificity) of this set of ideas. Yet one problem with ‘backlash’ theorising is its tendency to imply a static model of battles won and lost (Tasker & Negra 2007) which may not capture the complexity of ideological struggle and fluidity of contemporary contestation around gender. The resurgence of both feminist thinking, writing and acting, *and* of discourses highlighting male victimisation evidences this dynamism. Is it helpful simply to label every reaction a backlash, and, if so, would we want to periodise and at least consider this a new backlash - temporally (and perhaps also ideologically) distinct from the one identified in the early 1990s? A further problem is the emphasis on turning backwards, which may, as Rosalind Gill (2007) argues, miss what is new and distinctive about current argumentation: not so much a harking backwards to a simpler, more patriarchal order, as fighting over present-day and future gender relations. As Angela McRobbie (2009: 57) maintains about postfeminism more broadly: ‘it’s not so much turning the clock back as turning it forward to secure a postfeminist gender settlement, a new sexual contract’.

Consequently, we want to suggest thinking about the discursive formation ‘emasculating nation’ not simply as a backlash but as a distinct modality of postfeminist sexism. Naturally it shares features with other earlier backlash discourses, but it is also tailored to a new political moment: one where a postfeminist sensibility has powerfully taken hold, and, moreover, in which the ‘lad culture’ that emerged in the 1990s is no longer located at the margins of culture or in specific ‘lad productions’ but suffuses sites

as varied as Universities, political discourse, workplaces, popular fiction and film, news media, television comedy, and many more. That the LTLM campaign would generate such strong and voluminous responses is indicative of this mainstreaming. The anger evident in our data can thus be partly understood in terms of loss of men's (power and) privilege, materialised as a challenge to the right to 'enjoy' women's bodies in the way they have come to expect through lad culture.

A well-documented feature of the postfeminist sensibility has been the erasure of a language speaking about structural inequality – notably sexism. Gill (2011b) argues that inequalities are becoming 'unspeakable' and Christina Scharff (forthcoming) underscores the tendency for inequality to be disavowed or repudiated in settings like workplaces. Sara Ahmed (2012) and Elisabeth Kelan (2009) have discussed the affective dimensions of this – when feminism becomes a 'yawn', always-already disenfranchised by the pre-knowledge of its existence or (in a perverse way) by its obviousness. We are existing, Kelan argues, in a state of permanent 'gender fatigue'. What 'emasculating nation' does, however, is strikingly to interrupt this dynamic: far from gender inequality being disavowed, repudiated or rendered unspeakable, it is repeatedly formulated, exemplified and forensically deconstructed – but this gender inequality is that focussed exclusively on men.

Substantively this formation involves the claim that masculinity is a site of omnipresent injury and oppression, and that the 'normal bloke' (read: white heterosexual man) is being terrorised by feminists whose total social control is depicted as imminent. Sally Robinson (2000) reminds us that taking up the discursive position of subject-in-crisis can be a tactical way to (re)gain power by strategically capitalising on the logics of victimisation or oppression. Further, as Imogen Tyler (2008) notes, accounts of injury by relatively privileged groups recall Wendy Brown's contention that

access to political power is increasingly premised on the ability to define oneself as injured. Yet only some groups are able to claim injury convincingly – and increasingly those groups may not be those judged objectively to be more socially disadvantaged – vis the proliferation of claims of injury by the middle classes, white people, and men.

This dynamic involves something more than McRobbie's (2009) idea of the 'double entanglement' in which feminism is taken into account yet repudiated. 'Emasculation nation' colonises the very architecture and style of feminist argumentation so that it can be turned against feminism to suggest that it is men – not women – who are losers in contemporary society. It presses beyond the basic postfeminist premise of gender equality having been achieved, to present a topsy-turvy gender order in which the tables have been turned: women rather than men are the most powerful social group, and feminism is motivated not by equality but by a desire for tyranny and totalitarian control. In reversing feminist argumentation whilst claiming to be victimised by it, it thereby works to evade challenge or critique. The identified postfeminist (disarticulated and) rearticulated discursive terrain of gender politics entails a further crucial ideological effect: namely to silence feminists and, moreover, to position feminism as dangerous.

The examples cited in this paper are moderate/d, yet clearly steeped in anger. Reading these posts across different news websites was a sobering and challenging experience for us. We were not always prepared for the vitriol directed at feminists, nor for how far the debate could spin away from the relatively focussed demands of the LTLM campaign to conjure palpable feelings of threat and hatred. Yet the patterned nature of the argumentation, and the repeated use of similar strategies, tropes and even examples, underscored the sense of 'tapping in' to a fundamental part of the anti/post-feminist zeitgeist. Whilst there is much more that could be said about this discursive

formation – not least its connections to resurgent nationalism, Islamophobia, austerity, and neoliberalism – we hope to have illuminated how claims of male victimisation operate as part of a wider postfeminist sexism that enjoys an all too chilling presence in the comments sections of mainstream news outlets.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Rachel O’Neill and the anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments and suggestions.

Notes

1. When working with our data we have kept keep in mind that the (relative) anonymity of the internet induces a level of freedom of expression inhibited in other spaces, and that this often means that online discussion fora are highly affectively charged spaces. At the same time, on the basis of our continued observation of reader commentary on news websites, we contend that the specific issue at hand – namely the success of a feminist campaign – provoked a especially intense and highly affective response; which became particularly pronounced and virulent when constituting-discussing (postfeminism’s) ‘abject others’, notably feminists and Muslim people. As a case in point, the BBC decided to pre-moderate reader commentary on articles about the campaign, removing eight per cent of the posts for breaking the house rules (thus not included in our corpus). Contributors often posted again to complain, for example: ‘Censorship. I posted a very relevant video link on how man is emasculated in society and it is removed. Feminist moderator?’ (bbc.co.uk).

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