#MeToo or #MenToo? Expressions of Backlash and Masculinity Politics in the #MeToo Era

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Abstract

Since #MeToo took the Internet by storm in 2017, it has had transnational social and legal ramifications. However, there has been little research on the repercussions of this movement for the ways in which masculinity has been politicized as questions around its meaning and place in gender relations were brought to the forefront of public discussions. Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from two Western Anglophone men's groups, one embracing and one opposing feminist ideas. Our findings demonstrate a qualitative shift in contemporary expressions of "backlash" and "masculinity politics" in the #MeToo era compared to their initial formulations in the wake of the women's and men's movements of the 1960s to 1980s, shaped by novel tropes and tactics.

Keywords

backlash, masculinity politics, feminism, men's rights, #MeToo

In 2017, the #MeToo hashtag erupted on the Twittersphere, sparking a global movement with ongoing ramifications. Intended as a platform to raise awareness around the prevalence of sexual violence, the scope of #MeToo has ranged from individual claims to organized responses across various professional sectors, with potential long-term legal and cultural impacts (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019). Predominantly employed by women to make accusations against male perpetrators, the movement has placed

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renewed spotlight on masculinity as an object of debate, and has been met with both praise and backlash.

Anti-feminist backlash can be conceived of as resistance to a threat, real, or perceived, to the *status quo* brought about by changes in gender relations generated by the feminist movement. This paper draws on the concepts of "backlash" (Faludi, 1993) and "masculinity politics"—defined as those instances where masculinity is actively brought into question and politicized in the face of discussions around its meaning and place in gender relations (Connell, 2005a)—to explore the following research question: What are the implications of #MeToo for understanding current expressions of backlash and masculinity politics?

Through thirteen in-depth interviews, this research examines and compares the narratives of two Anglophone men's groups involved in contrasting masculinity politics—"positive masculinity" advocates who seek to engage men in feminist efforts, and "men's rights" advocates engaged in defending men from the perceived harms of feminism. The research findings illustrate a qualitative shift in expressions of backlash and masculinity politics from their initial formulations in the wake of the women's liberation movement to the current context, epitomized by the #MeToo movement. This paper does not claim that #MeToo on its own *caused* such shifts to occur, but that these were amplified as they were brought to the forefront of public discussions in the wake of #MeToo. As such, this paper interprets #MeToo as a symbol or "moment"[1] which captured and enhanced contemporary expressions of feminism, backlash, and masculinity politics.

Masculinity Politics

Connell (2005a) defines "masculinity politics" as "those mobilizations and struggles where the meaning of masculine gender is at issue, and, with it, men's position in gender relations" (p. 205). Varying expressions of masculinity politics emerged in the 20th century in the form of a men's movement, "alongside, and often in response to the women's movement and feminism" (Flood, 2007, p. 418). Despite its misleading singular name, the men's movement soon splintered into a number of movements offering different sociopolitical interpretations of masculinity (Messner, 1998).[2]

As the women's liberation movement gained traction in the late 1960s to 1970s, a number of men started to question their own gendered positions. The men's liberation movement was thus born of the idea that the patriarchal structures which oppressed women also harmed men by confining them to the "male sex role", resulting in "alienating, unhealthy, and unfulfilling lives" (Messner, 1998, p. 260). The men's liberationist discourse however soon became marked by an ambiguous symmetry regarding the harms of male and female sex roles, and the second half of the 1970s and early 1980s saw a split in this movement, with a profeminist/anti-sexist movement on the one hand, and an anti-feminist men's rights movement (MRM) on the other (Messner, 1998). While the former saw men's hardships as the "costs" of patriarchal power, the latter viewed theories of patriarchy with suspicion, and instead maintained that "male privilege is a myth", and men in fact "have it worse than women" (Messner, 1998, p. 265).

The Men's Movement(s)

The MRM has continued to evolve since the 1980s, blaming men's issues primarily on feminism and claiming that women have made disproportionate gains at the expense of men (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012). Underlying the grievances of numerous men's rights groups is the perception that heterosexual white men are victims of "reverse discrimination" favoring women and racial and sexual minorities (Nicholas & Agius, 2018, p. 44). By placing blame on women, and more specifically feminism, the MRM provides a sounding board for the frustrations of these "angry white men" who feel stripped of the power allegedly provided by their racial and gendered privilege (Coston & Kimmel, 2013, pp. 377–378).

With the advent of the Internet, men's rights groups have created an online presence, with websites dedicated to exposing the "evils" of feminism and documenting the hardships of men, presented as "subjugated scapegoats and silenced victims of 'politically correct' coalitions and coercions" (Menzies, 2007, p. 68). These spaces offer a platform for views perceived as dangerous to hold in a feminist culture accused of inhibiting free speech, and form part of what some have termed the "manosphere", referring to a number of online communities converging around the rejection of feminism and the idea that men are underprivileged in society (Lilly, 2016). While these communities are often grouped together under the men's rights banner, conflating the more extreme ends of the manosphere with the MRM creates an inaccurate homogenization, rejected by members on either side alike (Digman & Rohlinger, 2019, p. 601). Further removed from the MRM, Incels ("Involuntary Celibates") claim to be unfairly genetically disadvantaged and rejected by women, and can be seen as waging "a campaign of revenge against women, 'social justice warriors' and the 'alpha males' who had deprived them of sexual success" (Ging, 2019, p. 3). In contrast to the "tropes of victimhood" and "aggrieved manhood" of Incel discourses (Ging, 2019, p. 1), Pick Up Artists (PUAs) initiate men in the "game" of seducing women, in a sense learning to become "alpha males" (Lilly, 2016, p. 48). Finally, Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) portrays itself as a "lifestyle community" characterized by a disengagement from women and Western society, seen as corrupted by feminist values (Lilly, 2016, pp. 46–48).

The profeminist movement meanwhile faces a number of internal dilemmas, notably around its relation and accountability to the feminist movement. Profeminists have long grappled with the legitimacy of men calling themselves feminists, and some have shied away from this label, maintaining that it requires the experience of "sexist oppression", which men by definition cannot face (Sterba, 2007, pp. 505–506). Bolstered by the mainstream appeal of third-wave feminism, a younger generation of men who seek to side with anti-sexist politics have nonetheless embraced identities as feminist men. This approach has been welcomed by a number of feminist women "who tend to view women and men as feminist partners, rather than seeing women as the feminists, and men as their supportive "profeminist" allies" (Messner et al., 2015, p. 167). Whether the term *movement* can be applied to all (pro)feminist men's groups is therefore contested, as is the question of whether a men's "movement model" is a desirable one for a progressive masculinity politics (Connell, 2005a, p. 237).

Sociopolitical Interpretations of Masculinity

To accept different expressions of masculinity politics is to accept that masculinity is not a unitary, stable concept, but a shifting, multifaceted one (Connell 2005a, p. 205).[3] In this sense, the plural *masculinities* is now widely employed to refer to "socially constructed configurations of gender practice" which vary in shape and over time (Connell, 2005b, p. 1805). Of these configurations, Connell's concept of "hegemonic masculinity" captures the "currently accepted" most successful embodiment of masculinity sustaining men's dominant positions (Connell, 2005a, p. 77).

    The term "toxic masculinity" has surfaced in popular discourses in recent years to encompass the harmful dimensions of hegemonic or traditional norms of masculinity such as aggression and stoicism (Waling, 2019). Defined in opposition to toxic masculinity, the notion of "positive" or "healthy masculinity" calls for men and boys to "shed their problematic [patriarchal] engagements", notably by engaging in more "emotionally fulfilling relationships" with women and other men (Waling, 2019, p. 367). While this attempt to shape masculinity in healthier ways has proponents in some (pro)feminist and wider circles, terms such as toxic and healthy masculinity also raise critical questions regarding the current gender order. By establishing a superficial distinction between "good" and "bad men", critics have argued that these terms contribute to a reification of gender binaries, rather than the "refutation of masculinity" of a more political feminism (Messner et al., 2015, p. 138). This paper does not seek to evaluate the pertinence of concepts such as toxic or positive masculinity, but to explore the various ways in which masculinity is understood and politicized in feminist, backlash, and public discourses.

Feminism and Backlash

Masculinity politics can be conceptualized along a spectrum ranging from (pro)feminist to anti-feminist stances. While profeminist men embraced feminism, the MRM expressed a backlash against the perceived harms of feminist efforts. Backlash can thus be read as the flipside of feminism, arising in response to the (perceived) progress made by women (Faludi, 1993, p. 10). The notion of anti-feminist "backlash" was popularized by Faludi (1993), who identified the emergence of a backlash against the women's movement in the mid-1980s. This backlash, she argued, stemmed from a series of contradictory messages, starting with a celebration of women's alleged equality in the mid-1970s, to claims that feminism had made women more miserable dominating the media in the 1980s (Faludi, 1993, p. 90). Under the postfeminist discourse that women had achieved liberation, Faludi (1993) argued that this backlash arose not from "women's achievement of full equality but by the increased possibility that they might win it" (p. 14).

    In Faludi's (1993) thesis, the aim of the backlash is to "push women back into their 'acceptable' roles", thus undermining the gains made by the women's movement (p. 16). This view however, "tend[s] to suggest simply back and forth", painting an overly-simplistic picture of changes in social landscapes and gender relations (Walby,

1997, pp. 164–165). Following this line of thought, Chunn et al. (2007) argue for the contextualization of backlash, with the need to focus on changes in "content, form, and degree of resistance at specific moments and in particular arenas" (p. 11). In addition to the narratives described by Faludi, they identify another narrative characteristic of contemporary backlash according to which "women and other subordinated groups have received *more* than is their due", framing men as the victims of feminism's primary focus on women (p. 2). While Faludi's account lays important groundwork for backlash to be used as a theoretical framework, attempts to extrapolate this concept to the present day require careful attention to the ways in which feminist and backlash politics have evolved with changes in the fabric of society.

Digital Feminism and #MeToo

The Internet has enabled new forms of feminist activism to emerge, leading to (contested) claims of a fourth wave of feminism characterized by its digital presence (Munro, 2013). While hashtags used to denounce sexism and sexual violence are not new (e.g., #YesAllWomen, #BeenRapedNeverReported, #NotOkay), #MeToo has proved most successful in its outreach and persistence in public debate, bolstered by the celebrity status of many women bringing forth allegations against powerful men (Ohlheiser, 2018).

Originally coined by the activist Tarana Burke in 2006, the Me Too campaign was aimed at "survivors of sexual violence" from marginalized communities, whose voices often went unheard (Burke, 2018). The #MeToo hashtag as we know it now was first tweeted in October 2017 by actor Alyssa Milano in response to allegations involving Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, to "showcase the magnitude of the problem of sexual violence" (Milano, 2017), and has since spread to countries across the globe.

Attacks against feminist narratives of "rape culture" predate #MeToo, and the 1990s saw a pushback against what critics termed a "sexually correct form of feminism", seen as victimizing women by redefining "bad sex as rape" (Gotell & Dutton, 2016, p. 68). Paradoxically, such arguments also stoked claims of a "war on men" waged by feminists, which have appeared in academic and "popular polemical texts" since the 1980s, and are experiencing a resurgence (de Boise, 2019, p. 148), enhanced by renewed conversations around rape culture generated by #MeToo.

Paralleling its widespread visibility, the #MeToo movement has been met with "swift backlash and accusations of having gone 'too far'" (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019, p. 2). As women across the world took up the hashtag to relate their experiences of sexual violence, increased public attention turned to the over-representation of men among perpetrators, and to culturally-accepted patterns of masculine behaviors enabling violence against women. This critical examination of masculinity has led some to perceive a feminist offensive against men. However, little research to date has analyzed men's reactions to #MeToo, with notable exceptions including studies on the hashtags #HowIWillChange and #HimToo.

Initiated by Australian journalist Benjamin Law, #HowIWillChange prompted men to publicly commit to behavioral changes in the direction of "dismantling rape culture"

(PettyJohn et al., 2018, p. 3). The hashtag appeared on thousands of tweets following its inception, with some men taking Law's call seriously, while others reacted with varying degrees of hostility, ranging from defensive assertions that "not all men" are accountable for harassment, to "antifeminist backlash" and "hostile sexist attitudes" (PettyJohn et al., 2018). While the #HimToo hashtag was initially employed to raise awareness around male victims' experiences of sexual violence, it soon became a counter-hashtag to #MeToo, indicating "men's alleged vulnerability to (false) accusation" in light of Christine Blasey-Ford's testimony accusing Brett Kavanaugh of attempted rape (Boyle & Rathnayake, 2019, p. 3). Although engagement with these hashtags has dwindled, their messages remain key themes of conversations surrounding #MeToo, as illustrated by the current study.

While #MeToo has provided fertile grounds for analyses of contemporary feminist activism, there have been few efforts to link men's reactions of support or backlash to current expressions of masculinity politics; a gap which this research has sought to address. As a widespread and polarizing movement, we argue that #MeToo captures the facets of these contemporary dynamics, and how these have shifted since the men's movement of the 1970s to 1980s.

Data and Methods

This research explored the narratives of two groups holding diverging views—self-identified feminist and anti-feminist men—through thirteen semi-structured in-depth interviews, to gain insights into polarized masculinity politics in the #MeToo era. This form of "intensity sampling" allows for a comparison of views which differ "intensely, but not extremely" (Patton, 2002, p. 243). The data collection and analysis were carried out by Maricourt between October 2018 and September 2019. Participants were affiliated with two UK men's groups, although not all were based in the UK.

While not all the anti-feminist participants self-labeled as men's rights activists, all were sympathetic to the MRM and followed its content, and will therefore be referred to as men's rights *advocates* (MRAs; Fox, 2004). The (pro)feminist men were associated with an organization holding workshops for young men and boys around "positive masculinity"—defined as a "decision-making framework" for men to examine and challenge harmful traditionally-masculine behaviors (Paul)—so these participants will be referred to as positive masculinity advocates (PMAs).

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, whereby one leading member of each group acted as a gatekeeper in advertising the research, thus allowing participants to contact Maricourt if they wished to be interviewed. Gatekeepers were located based on online research into men's groups in the UK, and approached via email and during public events held by each group attended by Maricourt. The final sample consisted of six PMA and seven MRA participants.

All participants were white men of the following nationalities: English (4), Australian (1), and New-Zealander (1) in the PMA group, and English (4), Irish (1), Australian (1), and American (1) in the MRA group. All PMAs were based in the UK where they operated workshops, and four of the MRAs interviewed were UK-based, while all followed and had heard of the research through a UK-based men's rights

group. There was an age disparity between PMAs and MRAs, with average ages of 37 and 55 respectively.[4] Professions and education levels varied across the sample, with MRAs less likely to have a university education (MRA=4; PMA=6) and more likely to be retired (MRA=4; PMA=0). All participants gave informed consent to be interviewed and were assured confidentiality and anonymity, so are referred to using pseudonyms. Interviews were conducted in person or over internet calls.

As a woman holding feminist views, interviewing a sample composed exclusively of men, a sub-set of whom held anti-feminist views, was a delicate task for Maricourt. Accounts of interview-based research by women studying men have documented the gendered interactions and assumptions which can unfold throughout the research process (Lefkowich, 2019). Indeed, some MRA participants expressed critical opinions toward women on certain topics, placing Maricourt in a sensitive position. Given the research focus on men's pro- or anti-feminist stances however, Maricourt's own feminist views were scrutinized more heavily than her gender by several anti-feminist participants. While her opinions diverged from those of MRAs, her aim in conducting these interviews was to understand rather than assess the anti-feminist sentiment underlying the current backlash. Maricourt therefore sought to distance her views as much as possible from data collection and analysis, but opted for transparency when asked by participants what these were. While the influence of researcher positionality is thus an inevitable aspect of qualitative research, Maricourt engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process, noting her own observations and thoughts and engaging with these critically.

Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed via thematic analysis, coded through a semi-inductive approach bridging theoretical grounds with (to a greater extent) an inductive analysis generating themes from the data. Transcripts were coded until saturation was achieved, and five themes were developed through within- and between-transcript comparisons, moving from descriptive codes to analytical concepts (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 11–12).

Findings

As feminist ideas and manifestations have evolved with and influenced shifts in the fabric of society, so too have expressions of backlash, as masculinity is politicized in feminist and anti-feminist directions. Participant interviews revealed two themes pertaining to the current backlash: "political correctness versus free speech", and "the war on men", and three themes characteristic of contemporary masculinity politics: "toxic versus positive masculinity", "masculinity crisis", and "anti-feminism on the manosphere". These pre-empted and were enhanced in the wake of #MeToo, and while participant narratives were thus expressed and analyzed within this context, they did not always focus on the #MeToo movement per se.

Backlash

Political correctness and the attack on free speech. Contemporary articulations of backlash are inscribed within a wider trend toward deepening political polarization which

has marked the Western Anglosphere since the 1990s, with political correctness (PC) featuring at the center of this rift (Nicholas & Agius, 2018). In this context, anti-feminist participants argued that the social landscape had become "loaded to one side" (Robert, MRA) in favor of "left-wing feminism" (George, MRA), obliterating alternative views. While feminist ideas have increasingly entered mainstream discussions (Boyle, 2019), (pro)feminist participants pointed to the mounting anti-feminist sentiments appearing alongside those, enhanced by the media's role in fueling this polarization. The PMAs moreover blamed the media's "outrage culture" for disparaging feminism and #MeToo, associated with a range of other ideas holding negative connotations:

> . . .whether this is the fault of right-wing media or echo chambers on social media, is that #MeToo's just become a dog whistle for everything . . . there's that constellation of terms, like '#MeToo, snowflake, safe space, cultural appropriation, whining millennials' . . . and I think it becomes hard to extricate #MeToo from that circle of values. (Joe, PMA)

Contemporary feminist concepts such as "manspreading" (men dominating public space by sitting with their legs wide apart) and "mansplaining" (men explaining something to women in a condescending way) were indeed ridiculed by MRA participants, seen as another instance of the PC tendency to constantly "find something to be offended about" (Jim, MRA). PMAs furthermore deemed stereotypes such as "bra-burning crazy hippies in the seventies" (Joe, PMA) to be a barrier to men's identification with feminism, echoing views held by some of the older MRAs interviewed, who painted "crazy" feminists as "fat, ugly, and lesbians" (Kevin, MRA). While the stereotypical legacy of the second wave remains, PMAs pointed out attempts to rebrand contemporary feminism, with a number of celebrities publicly endorsing the label. If the erosion of negative stereotypes has been somewhat successful among young men however, PMAs were not convinced that this had led to widespread enthusiasm for the movement either:

> . . .we don't talk about feminism in our workshops, we definitely are . . . having conversations that . . . are rooted in feminist analyses, but we don't drop the F bomb as we say. (Scott, PMA)

Confounded with a "social justice warrior ideology" in the eyes of some MRAs, feminism and #MeToo were accused of "Orwellian attacks on free speech" (Lloyd, MRA). In this vein, feminism and other social justice ideas were seen as a threat to "objective truth", which many anti-feminists sought on the Intellectual Dark Web, a platform for scholars and commentators engaged in discussions likely to receive opprobrium in mainstream academic and media spaces (Intellectual Dark Web [IDW], n.d.). Championed as defenders of free speech, one of the most prominent figures on the IDW is Jordan Peterson, whose views on feminism and gender have made him a controversial character in public opinion. Standing in staunch opposition to "PC culture", Peterson's success, as one PMA participant put it, lies in his ability to "monetize

[the backlash against] social justice warriors", using these ideas as scapegoats for the frustration experienced by disaffected men:

> . . .you're feeling angry, here's the reason why . . . it's the leftists, it's the social justice warriors, it's feminism, target your anger and rage at them, rather than essentially the capitalist patriarchal structure that we live in that has put them in that position in the first place. (Nathan, PMA)

Peterson was a divisive figure among the two groups of participants, admired by most MRAs and disliked by most PMAs. His rational tone and recourse to science and statistics embody the "Enlightenment traditions" perceived by anti-feminist participants as "corrupted" by feminist thought (Lloyd, MRA). In contrast, PMAs saw this strategy of discarding structural explanations as dangerous, obscuring complex power relations with an authoritative language of "facts". In this polarized climate where anti-feminist backlash is couched in a wider "culture war" (Nathan, PMA) narrative, feminism is often tied to a conglomeration of politically-charged ideas, presented in opposition to free speech and "objectivity".

The war on men. According to Faludi (1993), the gains of second-wave feminism were met with an "undeclared war against women" (p. 14). The backlash narrative expressed by MRA participants however presents a different story—feminism is not under attack but is itself the offensive force.

> I want to point out that for me feminists and women are two different things: women are women, and as a man I love women. . . but feminists, they're the enemy. . . and they're waging war on men (George, MRA)

Careful to distance anti-feminist from misogynistic stances, the MRAs distinguished their views on women from their views on feminism—an "evil ideology" (Lloyd, MRA) accused of endangering men. This war narrative was rejected by PMAs, who maintained that feminism is not engaged in a "conspiracy" against men, but that men's engagement with feminism is key in achieving gender equality, with men and women working in tandem rather than against one another:

> . . .if you don't get men involved, you end up in what is kind of happening, is quite a polarized discussion, as if there's two different tribes of men versus women . . . a zero-sum game in which . . . men are being attacked and don't feel like they've done anything wrong, and we need to change that by talking to men or boys. (Scott, PMA)

Studies have outlined a number of areas brought up by the MRM to illustrate the claim that men and boys are underprivileged in contemporary Western society, ranging from fathers' custodial rights to high rates of homelessness and mortality, educational underachievement, and domestic and sexual violence against men (see Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Dragiewicz, 2011; Gotell & Dutton, 2016; Jordan, 2019; Menzies, 2007). These were mentioned in interviews with MRAs, sometimes rooted in their

own experiences. In this "war on men", feminism was seen as having the institutional upper hand by maintaining and exploiting the "myth" of men as perpetrators and women as victims. Given this "mantra", male victims were said to be disbelieved or mocked and female perpetrators rarely held accountable, opening up the possibility for false allegations to be used as a weapon against men. #MeToo was brandished as a prime example of this threat by MRA participants, seen as forgoing evidence in favor of women's claims:

> . . .with #MeToo, it's such a public witch-hunt that is using this language that is making out that women are under mass attack by men . . . just in the name, you know: me too me too me too!. . . and that is a moral panic, so to speak . . . it's like they've declared a war on men. (Adam, MRA)

A number of men's rights claims pertaining to #MeToo are reflected in mainstream discussions, resonating with a wider backlash against the idea of rape culture (Gotell & Dutton, 2016) and discussions around consent advanced by feminists, perceived by some as "indoctrinating" young men into thinking they are "potential rapists" (Michael, MRA). Anti-feminist participants viewed this as a danger to men in the workplace, who now avoided one-to-one interactions with female colleagues for fear of (unfounded) accusations of harassment which could jeopardize their careers. The fear of being labeled a harasser was similarly seen as debilitating for young men now navigating a dating scene riddled with uncertainty, afraid of complimenting women or initiating romantic interactions. The language of war was indeed paralleled by a language of victimization in these accounts. By playing into an ideology of victimhood, anti-feminists argued, feminism had brushed under the carpet the "real" victims—men. According to MRAs, #MeToo embodied this feminist "victimology" by labeling as harassment benign attempts at flirting and portraying all men as perpetrators. As Robert (MRA) put it: "flirtation is different from harassment . . . but now it's all got legalized and politicized, it's awful."

In contrast, PMAs saw this interpretation of #MeToo and consent as misleading and the blame on feminism misplaced. Rather than a war waged by feminists, men's unease was viewed as a necessary by-product of progressive shifts in gender relations:

> It's interesting really that the men are feeling ill-at-ease . . . because the rules for engagement in dating are being rewritten by women and girls who don't want to be part of that. Whereas forty years ago, I was not ill-at-ease, I was at ease, because of all the entitlement I had.. . . That's a curative correction. (Jake, PMA)

As "gatekeepers for gender equality" in considerable ways (Connell, 2005b), men, the PMAs maintained, were key agents in the fight against sexism, and their unease a consequence of having to relinquish some of their power. The MRAs on the other hand rejected notions of male privilege, and attributed men's anxieties to a feminist "war" against men.

Masculinity Politics

Toxic versus positive masculinity. Discussions around sexual violence sparked by #MeToo have placed renewed focus on the gendered power dynamics at play in sexual relations. Painted as a "system shock" which "unsettled what was settled" (Paul, PMA), PMA participants perceived #MeToo as a threat to the patriarchal *status quo* in which masculinity went unquestioned.

> I think part of what #MeToo did is it forced men to think about what masculinity is. I mean that's one of the advantages and luxuries of being in the dominant oppressive group, is that . . . your identity is invisibilized, and I think men . . . would never have discussed or even thought 'What is it to be a man, or what is masculinity?' (Joe, PMA)

In the midst of ongoing media and public attention generated by #MeToo, discussions around masculinity intensified with the release of an advert by Gillette in January 2019 with the opening line: "Bullying. Harassment. Is this the best a man can get?" (Gillette, 2019). The airing of this advert was inscribed within a wider trend, following the American Psychological Association's (2018) publication of guidelines to address the harms of "traditional masculinity" for men and boys. Framed as a denunciation of traditional or "toxic masculinity", the Gillette advert displayed sexist and aggressive behaviors such as cat-calling women or bullying, and presented men intervening to halt them, offering a more "positive" version of masculinity instead. While this advert was praised as progressive by a number of commentators, it also sparked an intense backlash, and therefore formed a key topic across interviews:

> . . .it's really important to know why that triggers people so much, why are people so fragile that when a razor asks you to stop . . . harassing people, you. . . have a tantrum and say it's unfair, you're getting picked on again. . . That's the really interesting thing, that reaction, because . . . what the ad asked people to give up, how is that . . . what you want being a man to be about? Like it's rubbish, it's the crap stuff. (Paul, PMA)

While the term toxic masculinity refers to certain traditionally-masculine traits (PettyJohn et al., 2018), anti-feminist participants read this expression as men themselves being labeled toxic, perceived as another instance of a "war on men". In the eyes of one participant, toxic masculinity was a form of "hate speech", akin to saying "toxic Black people or toxic Jewry" (Jim, MRA), and Gillette's advert was read as an instance of feminist "anti-male" politics:

> . . .the Gillette advert . . . seemed to try to brush men across the board as if we're all one and the same, and engaged in these behaviors, and treat us as if we're these toxic, bullying, misogynistic rapists in waiting, which I really didn't like. (Michael, MRA)

In contrast to the early men's liberationist language of "sex roles" (Messner, 1998), evolutionary perspectives have gained ground in masculinist justifications for naturally different and complementary gender roles (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012).

MRA participants thus viewed social-constructionist accounts as a harmful feminist trope denying scientific "facts" by positing that gendered behaviors could be "unlearned". The Gillette advert captures this point of tension, perceived as patronizing by several MRAs, who read it as an attempt to "feminize" men (Kevin, MRA). Traits such as aggression associated with toxic masculinity were seen as useful rather than harmful, the natural result of an evolved "healthy male instinct" to "protect and provide" (Adam, MRA).

PMAs on the other hand viewed the advert in a positive light, encouraging men to do away with behaviors harmful to themselves and others. When considering Gillette's corporate motives, some were positive that the decision to release this controversial advert reflected societal trends in the direction of the values it advocated; an advertising strategy appealing to a new generation of liberal consumers. While MRAs pointed to the company's sales loss following the release of this video as evidence of widespread discontent with the message it conveyed, some PMAs hypothesized that Gillette had "fomented the backlash" to get publicity and distance itself from "old-fashioned clean-cut American patriarchal associations":

> . . .if you want to get the hipster men of the future interested in your brand . . . you could have a man shaving saying 'Wow Gillette, it's a really good brand!' and think 'Oh he's hip, I'll be like him'. But even better to enrage exactly that sector of your client group that represents the people that the hipsters won't like. (Jake, PMA)

This corporate strategy was received with mixed feelings by (pro)feminist participants, some of whom were suspicious of the "commercialization" of the message, packaged as a "commodity" (Frank, PMA) rather than an opportunity for change and action.

Some PMAs moreover expressed skepticism toward the advert's depiction of men simply "calling out" other men, rather than encouraging self-reflection, "like 'Don't do that mate or you'll get into trouble', rather than 'Don't do that, that's disrespectful to that girl'" (Jake, PMA). The defensive response "not all men" is often evoked to counter perceived attacks to men's identities (Nicholas & Agius, 2018), and PMAs mentioned similar deflections of personal blame by workshop attendants, quick to respond with "not me" when confronted with sexual violence statistics. Rather than isolated incidents perpetuated by a few "bad men", PMAs pointed to a "culture of masculinity" (Joe, PMA) paving the way for such "toxic" behaviors to be normalized.

Inspired by feminist consciousness-raising, male-only discussion groups have been an important tool of men's anti-sexist activism since the 1970s (Flood, 2007, p. 419). Similarly, PMA workshops were organized in the form of male "safe spaces" where men could confront the impacts of their practices. Introspection, reflection, and discussion were thus key aspects of the masculinity politics around which PMA workshops revolved, with the aim of questioning traditional masculine norms and working toward positive masculinity:

> . . .starting from the place where it all begins, inside yourself as a man, I would love to see a change in masculinity where men are more reflective about the things they do,

think, and say that are maybe not very good . . . that's the biggest change that would I think then affect the end product. (Frank, PMA)

Following the footsteps of #MeToo, the public reception of Gillette's advert encapsulates the polarized nature of recent debates around men and masculinity. This divide was reflected among the two groups in this study, who politicized masculinity by focusing on the potential for progressive change (PMAs), or the idea of a "natural" identity under threat (MRAs).

Masculinity crisis. Underlying the MRA narratives was the perception that by focusing on women, feminism disadvantages men by ignoring and/or stripping them of their "rights". In contrast to the "preferential treatment" (Jim, MRA) which women were seen to benefit from, anti-feminist participants maintained that men faced real issues, plunging them into a state of crisis.

> . . .there's a crisis across the whole male world right now. . . men are dying like flies, we're falling behind in every area, it's a very hostile world for us. (Lloyd, MRA)

The idea of a "masculinity crisis" has been a recurring theme in media and political discourses, fueled by societal changes such as a decline in traditionally-masculine industrial work and women entering the workforce in increasing numbers (Roberts, 2014). While some PMAs acknowledged that such changes could diminish certain men's "senses of personhood" (Paul, PMA), others expressed skepticism toward such sensationalist crisis discourses. Rather than a crisis, the progressive erosion of traditional norms was seen as an opportunity for men to gain new ways of doing masculinity through more "positive" avenues:

> . . .some people think of it as being . . . men have to lose power so that women can gain power, and actually the idea that you're losing by gaining all these other ways of being a guy, that's not losing, that's . . . actually a great way that men could have a way more wholesome, fulfilling, and happy life, without having to play into very traditional notions. (Scott, PMA)

Conversely, the MRA crisis narrative was marked by perceptions of a threatened identity, enhanced by #MeToo and discussions around toxic masculinity, read by anti-feminist participants as a misandrist discourse devaluing all things masculine. It is notable that the term toxic masculinity originated in mythopoetic circles, presented as the result of the feminization of society and absent or emotionally-distant father figures (Harrington, 2020).[5] Although contemporary uses of this term were seen as contributing to, rather than diagnosing men's crisis, the grievances expressed by MRA participants resonate with mythopoetic ideas, calling for a "revaluing of the identity 'man'" (Schwalbe, 2007, p. 451).

Elements of this narrative can be identified in Jordan Peterson's assertions, brought up by several MRA participants, that "the West has lost faith in the idea of

masculinity", thus signaling a crisis for men who no longer find meaning in a society which "denigrates" them (Peterson, interviewed by Rebel Wisdom, 2018). Indeed, some anti-feminist participants saw Peterson as a "spokesman" (Robert, MRA), standing up for men in a society which they perceived as misandrist. While the PMAs did not support his ideas, participants in both groups linked Peterson's success to the "hope" he provided in response to the masculinity crisis he proclaimed, filling a "hole where all these young disaffected men were going" (Joe, PMA). Through self-help advice and theories explaining men's unease in contemporary Western society, Peterson thus offered these men the emotional support of a "father figure" coupled with self-improvement strategies rooted in "traditional masculine structures" (Joe, PMA).

While most PMAs rejected the actuality of a masculinity crisis, a number of MRAs saw truth in this statement, urging men to defend themselves against the dangers posed by feminism, implying that a peak in the backlash was yet to come:

> I think masculinity is about to undergo something of a. . . I don't know if revolution is the word, but a fight-back. (Robert, MRA)

As "the experience of being a man is subject to questioning and acute fracturing" (Hearn, 1999, p. 151), perceptions of a masculinity crisis can be understood as a "breaking point" edging toward an "explosion" (Nathan, PMA). Against a backdrop of "popular feminism", recent debates problematizing men and masculinity have fueled notions of a masculinity crisis in anti-feminist circles, enhanced and brought to light in the wake of #MeToo.

Anti-feminism on the manosphere. (Pro)feminist participants furthermore linked the popularity of figures such as Jordan Peterson on the manosphere to a "downward spiral" of radicalization (Nathan, PMA), fueled by online echo chambers and algorithms leading vulnerable men into Incel communities. Online masculinist forums were viewed as a spectrum of anti-feminist backlash, all sharing the (misguided) view that women and/or feminism presented a threat to men. Rife with misogynistic sentiments (Ging, 2019), PMAs saw these communities as stemming from feelings of alienation and pain, retrospectively rationalized by finding external blame. Recent discussions around masculinity were furthermore seen as contributing to perceptions of a crisis, leading some men to seek guidance and validation on the Internet:

> . . .so many disaffected young men . . . really feel that . . . these discussions around masculinity and all of these issues have left them feeling really lost, and feeling unmoored from an identity. So they go online . . . and YouTube's algorithms lead them to progressively more radical videos. (Joe, PMA)

While these male cyber-communities converge around a deep mistrust of feminism, MRA participants sought to distance themselves from the more extreme and misogynistic fringes of the manosphere. Drawing on examples of infamous Incels and Pick

Up Artists, one participant expressed anger toward the mislabeling of such individuals as MRAs, pointing out that neither side endorsed the other:

> One of the most heinous [accusations] being how people like to refer to Elliot Rodger[6] as an MRA . . . he is now the poster boy of the Men's Rights Movement, as far as the feminist lot on the internet are concerned.. . . It's like: no he f***ing wasn't, he was rejected by any pro-men's group or forum, or anywhere on the Internet. He never ascribed himself to that movement, he never supported the labels. (Michael, MRA)

While MRA participants expressed dislike for such communities, whose frequent association with men's rights was seen as tarnishing the movement's reputation, MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way) was viewed more sympathetically; as a tragic outcome of a deepening masculinity crisis stemming from valid perceptions of injustice, albeit translated in "unhealthy" ways:

> MGTOW . . . is . . . a necessary evil, it's a precursor to being able to . . . healthily express your disagreement with the mainstream way that men are treated in society. I find that MGTOW people tend to be very angry, I would say justifiably . . . they felt cheated by the system. (Adam, MRA)

At one end of the backlash, these "radicalized" communities express an anti-feminist masculinity politics rooted in deep-seated pain and anger. Whilst acknowledging the feelings of distress driving vulnerable men into these communities, participants in both groups disapproved of the ways in which such feelings were translated, and offered alternative solutions to men's grievances. Rather than women being the object of antagonism, the MRAs directed their opprobrium toward feminism, which the PMAs conversely presented as beneficial to men. While the more "extreme" communities of the manosphere remain less mainstream than the anti-feminist discourses found in men's rights and wider audiences, studies have warned of the increasing reach and influence of this form of "networked misogyny" (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016).

Discussion

The women's liberation movement of the 1960s marked a key turning point for men, bringing into question their gendered positions and identities, and culminating in various expressions of masculinity politics. As these men's movements evolved with the changing tides of feminist waves, the #MeToo "moment" has been marked by a renewed questioning of masculinity. While some men have taken this opportunity to reflect critically on their gendered practices, others have expressed a backlash in reaction to the perceived threat to their masculine identities.

As this research illustrates, both contemporary feminist and anti-feminist sentiments have found online platforms, allowing for widespread visibility of their ideas. While the #MeToo movement attests to the potential of "hashtag feminism" (Mendes

et al., 2019), its successful outreach has been matched by a mounting anti-feminist backlash on the manosphere and other corners of the Internet, embedded in wider "anti-PC" sentiments. These new digital tactics have contributed to the mainstreaming of feminism and anti-feminism, more accessible than the organized activism of the women's and men's movements of the 1960s to 1980s. Indeed, organized expressions of masculinity politics appear to have declined in recent decades (Clatterbaugh, 2007), in favor of looser advocacy. The MRM's online visibility relative to its limited movement membership illustrates this, exemplified by the MRA participants in this study, most of whom saw themselves as MRM "followers" rather than "activists". This may reflect the dynamics of online activism, whereby individuals can support and engage with a movement's ideas anonymously and with minimal commitment (Rafail & Freitas, 2019).

Meanwhile, the profeminist movement has increasingly moved toward feminist "professional networks" seeking to engage men in anti-violence work in educational, workplace, and community settings (Messner et al., 2015, p. 180). The PMA group under study can be seen as following this professionalized model, and participants alluded to the difficulty of delivering (pro)feminist messages to broader male audiences without alienating those who might be skeptical of feminism. This highlights a dilemma in men's anti-violence work, between meeting men on their own terms, and challenging them to reflect on their gendered positions. While some violence prevention campaigns appeal to men's investments in traditionally-masculine traits such as strength and courage (Flood, 2019), the PMA group's positive masculinity framework encouraged men to redefine masculinity, notably by embracing traditionally-feminine traits such as caring.

The #MeToo era moreover captures a thematic shift in questions around the "meaning of masculine gender" (Connell, 2005a, p. 205). In the early men's liberation movement, "traditional masculinity" was depicted as the sum of harmful societal roles ascribed to men. However, this research illustrates a different reading of this concept in contemporary MRA circles, where it was portrayed as a set of evolved traits complementing traditionally-feminine traits and enabling the smooth functioning of society. The increased popularity of and resistance to the term "toxic masculinity" in relation to traditional masculinity furthermore capture the polarization of masculinity politics in the #MeToo era, observed in the heated response to Gillette's controversial advert.

Disagreements over the nature and directions of masculinity can moreover be identified in debates surrounding the relevance and accuracy of "masculinity crisis" discourses. As a "watershed moment", #MeToo acted as a catalyst for the eruption into the public sphere of discussions around sexual violence, gender relations, and (toxic) masculinity (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019, p. 11), and spurred alongside this a revival of masculinity-crisis narratives in anti-feminist circles. This was a central theme in interviews with MRAs, who perceived such discussions as evidence of a "war on men" waged by feminists.

The empirical basis of masculinity crises has been contested on multiple fronts (e.g., Jordan, 2019; Roberts, 2014), voiced by the PMAs in this study. From a conceptual standpoint, critics have pointed out the dangers of such a narrative in

essentializing the category men by painting it as a stable identity under threat (Jordan, 2019, p. 111). As Connell (2005a) has theorized, rather than a crisis in masculinity, the entire "gender order" can be said to be subject to "crisis tendencies", revealing the unstable nature of masculinity and the gender order within which it is configured (p. 84). This paper has thus examined the masculinity crisis as rhetoric rather than established fact, which warrants attention as a central narrative of current expressions of anti-feminist masculinity politics.

Indeed, Flood (2004) has pointed out that MRAs "have been far more effective than profeminist men in speaking to [. . .] the pain, confusion, and powerlessness which many men experience" (p. 275). This shortcoming was brought up by PMA participants, who pondered how best to engage men in feminism as a solution rather than a source of the issues raised by MRAs. Contrasting understandings of themes such as masculinity crisis, toxic and positive masculinity between these groups are made additionally complex by the lack of consensus regarding the value and definitions of those terms in wider activist and academic circles. This highlights the need for further conceptual development and clarity to better understand and respond to concerns raised in feminist, anti-feminist, and mainstream discussions.

While some of the debates generated in the wake of #MeToo share overlaps with public anxieties of previous decades surrounding masculinity, the research findings point to a distinctive qualitative shift in expressions of backlash and masculinity politics in the present day. Understanding such changes allows for richer theorizing around the evolving nature of men's politics in relation to feminism; a vital task given that men remain "in significant ways gatekeepers for gender equality" (Connell, 2005b, p. 1802).

On the one hand, the increased questioning of masculinity prompted by #MeToo could indicate men's greater willingness to change, and to contribute toward dismantling the patriarchy "from within". However, with the mainstreaming of anti-feminist ideas on the manosphere and beyond, the backlash may also be growing in size and influence in unprecedented ways. In line with the trend toward deepening partisan and affective polarization in the Western Anglosphere (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2019), the tensions between pro- and anti-feminist stances seem to be becoming increasingly heated, as feminist movements bring men's violence—and by extension, masculinity—into question with growing impact. It remains to be seen where these tensions will lead, which depends in part on how men choose to respond to the social shifts underpinning them.

Conclusion

As a movement which sent ripples through society, #MeToo captures the *zeitgeist* of contemporary discussions around feminism and gender relations. By focusing on the role of male perpetrators, the movement has furthermore led to enhanced questionings of normative constructions of masculinity, sparking a resurgence of backlash narratives. As such, #MeToo can be seen as a moment of rupture, revealing emergent feminist and anti-feminist concerns which were given a visible avenue through this movement. Analyzing backlash and masculinity politics in this context sheds light on the contemporary facets of

these narratives, and how they have evolved since the women's liberation movement and initial men's movement of the 1960s to 1980s. By delving into the gender politics of men situated at two ends of a spectrum ranging from (pro)feminist to anti-feminist stances, this research demonstrates the continued importance of the concepts of masculinity politics and backlash in the #MeToo era, and points to qualitative shifts in how these are expressed by men's groups, marked by novel tropes (such as toxic vs. positive masculinity) and tactics (such as the increased significance of online networks). This opens up questions about what longer-term implications the #MeToo "moment" might have for gender relations and struggles over what it means to be a man.

Acknowledgments

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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Notes

1. Although Burke (2018) has emphasized that Me Too is a movement rather than a "moment", there is analytical value in distinguishing between Me Too as a movement, built on activist work, and #MeToo as a "moment" or "discourse" to reflect the widespread ways in which #MeToo has been mediatized and consumed in public discussions (Boyle, 2019, pp. 7–8).
2. While the men's movement surfaced in the Global North, it is imperative to acknowledge that regional expressions of masculinity politics have emerged as feminist and anti-feminist formations have spread transnationally. However, as "Western and especially US understandings have a global influence" (Flood, 2007, p. 421), these were the focus of this research.
3. Queer theories of masculinity have emphasized the fluid nature of sex and gender, calling for a reading of masculinity encompassing non-cis-male identities (Allan, 2019). This paper however focuses on gender- and heteronormative understandings of masculinity politics to reflect participants' narratives.
4. While the generational gap between (and to a lesser extent within) both groups revealed different references to and engagement with the feminist and men's movements, all

    participants closely followed current discussions surrounding contemporary feminism and anti-feminism.

5.   The mythopoetic movement emerged alongside other strands of the men's movement in the 1980s, with the therapeutic goal of reconnecting men with their inner masculine energy (Schwalbe, 2007). Painting itself as a "pro-male" movement (Fox, 2004, p. 103), its masculinity politics can be characterized as non-feminist rather than anti-feminist.

6.   Incel-identified Elliot Rodger perpetrated the 2014 Isla Vista killings, justifying his acts as "retribution" for numerous rejections by women (New York Times, 2014).

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