

FEMINISM IS FOR ANGRY WHITE WOMEN: EXPLORING IMAGES OF FEMINISM ON REDDIT.COM

Kelly Bergstrom
 York University

Introduction

Feminism is a movement with a reasonable goal: the economic, political, and social equality of the sexes. Third wave feminists will frequently speak of “feminisms” that makes room for a multitude of theoretical underpinnings, motivations, and action plans, and yet this plurality is something that often gets lost in discussions outside of explicitly feminist spaces. As Figure 1 demonstrates, entering the phrase “feminists are” to Google’s search engine returns auto completes expressing negative opinions about it. Rather than being associated with equality between the sexes, feminism is often depicted in popular culture and/or popular discourse as the superiority of women over men or to actively be seeking to diminish the rights of men. How is it that popular discussions of feminism have strayed so far from the dictionary definition of “advocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights of the female sex”?

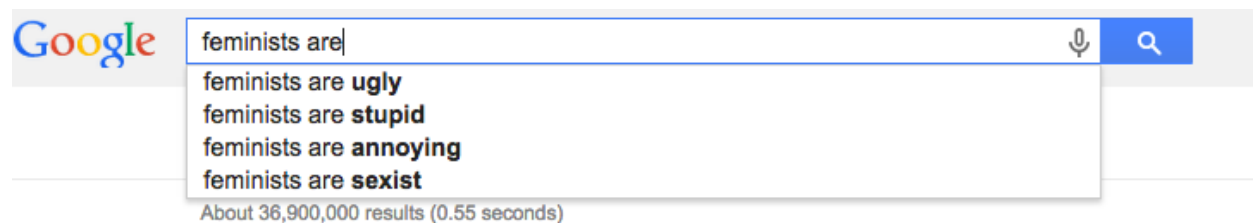


Figure 1: Screenshot by author taken on February 25, 2015.

To explore how feminism is portrayed in everyday contexts I present a case study about the use of “image macros” on Reddit.com (a popular news aggregate website) to discuss feminism. Image macros are a particular type of Internet meme where a short phrase is overlaid on top of a photo (Figure 2). They can be easily created on a variety of free to use meme generator websites (e.g. quickmeme.com) and often feature stock photography of animals or a person. A preexisting template can be modified with custom text, or users are able to upload their own image to create a new macro. Previous research on this type of meme has shown that the sharing of image macros has become a key part of online political dialogue and discussions (Milner, 2012), and

the creation of image macros are a way to demonstrate one's cultural literacy and reaffirm one's belongingness to a particular online community (Phillips, 2012).

Reddit.com was selected for this study as it is currently one of the most visited English-language sites according to Alexa.com. Its popularity has resulted in the ability to mobilize large groups of users, such as recent protests against the recent Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) (Rushe & Devereaux, 2012) or its (problematic) crowd sourced search for the Boston Marathon Bombers (Kaufman, 2013). Other investigations of Reddit include examinations of community norms (Bergstrom, 2011), the "playful" interactions between users (Massanari, 2013), and how breaking news is curated by the community (Leavitt & Clark, 2014). In this paper I argue that by analyzing the content of image macros posted to Reddit, it is possible to learn more about how feminism is understood in everyday contexts.



Figure 2: Example of an image macro using a stock photograph of a man at a computer. This sample image also illustrates "top text" and "bottom text", and the use of the Impact font, all frequent characteristics of an image macro.

Study Design

This paper draws on data collected as part of a larger network analysis of Reddit. Data collection began by scraping all posts on the Reddit.com servers since the site's launch in June 2005, to the end of March 2014. This resulted in over 60 million parent posts made across all sub-communities on Reddit.

Asking the question about how memes are used to comment about Feminism on Reddit, the follow criteria were used to select 230 individual images analyzed for this paper: the title of the post contained "feminism" or "feminist" and the body of the parent post contained a link to an image hosting site (e.g. quickmeme.com or imgur.com). This is not the sum of all discussions about feminism on this particular site (e.g. memes used in replies to the parent post have been excluded); the strict selection criteria was

intended to create a dataset serving as a preliminary case study that could still be hand-coded by the author.

Working from the list of posts matching these criteria, I visited each link to determine if it was still active, and if it was, save a copy of the image. The text superimposed on each image was transcribed, and a brief description of the image was also collected. I coded each image macro to determine if it had a positive, negative, neutral (contained both positive and negative sentiments or did not contain an overt value judgment), or unknown sentiment (not enough information to determine sentiment and/or text was nonsense) about feminism. I also conducted a second round of coding to determine if there were any patterns in the sorts of topics covered in these image macros, discussed below.

Results

The majority of the image macros analyzed in this paper presented a negative message about feminism (Table 1). The content of the image macros was equally negative, with 123 containing blatant mischaracterizations of the feminist movement. Of particular note is that the number of image macros containing an accurate depiction of a feminist belief (n=10) was the same as the number that contained reference to the “double standard” that feminists still expect men to pay for their dinner (n=10). As described in the title of this abstract, according to this dataset of images, feminism is a label applied to angry hypocrites who celebrate misandry. Furthermore, it is the domain of angry **white** women; every image macro in this dataset that used a photograph uses a photograph of a white woman.

Sentiment (about Feminism)	Number of Image Macros
Negative	128
Positive	13
Neutral	62
Unknown	27
Total	230

Table 1: Summary of sentiment coding.

Finally, I draw attention to how the image macros share similarities with 20th century anti-suffragette postcards that used drawings and short phrases to disparage the campaign for women seeking voting rights (see Figures 3 and 4). Both rely on catchy slogans to strip away all nuance of political debate. It is not my claim that anti-suffragette postcards and anti-feminist image macros are interchangeable and/or equivalent in the specifics of their content, rather, I put forth the argument that both are examples of a way to minimize the voices and political desires of women through short memorable phrases and striking visual images. At best, the truncated messages result the nuances of a political debate being lost, and at worst, result in unflattering caricatures that perpetuate stereotypes, falsehoods, have historically (and currently) worked to undermine the efforts of those striving towards gender equality in both the 20th and the 21st centuries.

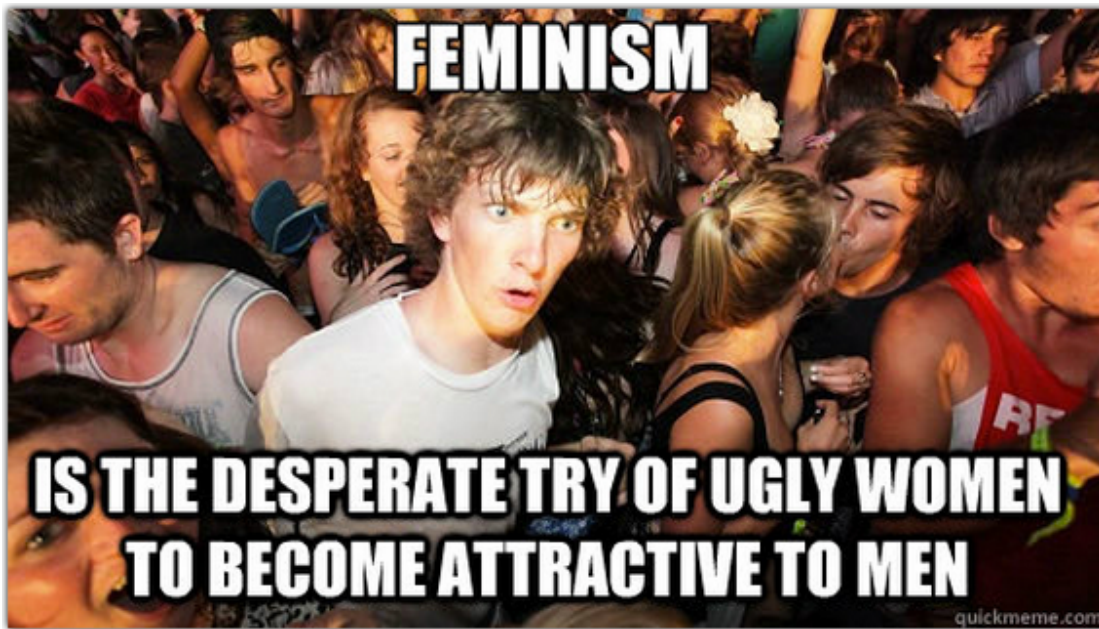


Figure 3: "Sudden Clarity Clarence", an image macro usually used to describe the author's sudden realization about something, used here to comment on the physical attractiveness (or lack thereof) of women who identify as feminist.



Figure 4: Similar to the image macro in fig. 3, suffragettes are depicted as not being physically attractive. "Suffragettes Who Have Never Been Kissed" (1910, United Kingdom). Available: <http://historyoffeminism.com/anti-suffragette-postcards-posters-cartoons/>

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