

Networked Feminism in the Digital Field: A Case Study of Reddit's r/TwoXChromosomes

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Institute for Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities
Victoria University
November 2021

Abstract

Contemporary feminism is playing out in increasingly digitised ways as women utilise the Internet and social media to discuss, disseminate and debate key feminist ideas in women-centred dedicated spaces. The speed and scope of digital communications technologies has allowed for the mobilisation of individuals around issues of gender inequality on a global scale while simultaneously launching feminism into the cultural zeitgeist. The rapid pace of technological advancement, the seemingly endless integration of the Internet into our everyday lives, and the corporate colonisation of the digital sphere are all changing the ways in which people understand and interact with feminist thought. As such, the impact of the digital environment on the aims and ideologies of contemporary ‘networked’ feminist communities, and the politics of participation in networked social movements in general, require close scholarly interrogation. Using a case study approach, this research draws from the theoretical toolkit of Pierre Bourdieu in order to analyse the shape and nature of the largest networked feminist community on the social news website Reddit: r/TwoXChromosomes. Comment data collected directly from the 15 popular threads selected for analysis was enriched by moderation and administration guidelines framing the community and Reddit more broadly, providing a rich and multifaceted dataset on which a reflexive thematic content analysis was conducted. This study aims to contribute to understanding the challenges and advantages women face as they organise around feminist issues in the online spaces that are governed primarily by the motivation to accumulate profit. It reveals a number of critical tensions at the foundation of r/TwoXChromosomes as a contemporary networked feminist community.

Doctor of Philosophy Student Declaration

I, Amy Mowle, declare that the PhD thesis entitled *Networked Feminism in the Digital Field: A Case Study of Reddit's r/TwoXChromosomes* is no more than 80,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work. I have conducted my research in alignment with the **Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research** and **Victoria University's Higher Degree by Research Policy and Procedures**.

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the student's signature.

Signature

Date 26 April 2022

Acknowledgements

Foremost, I'd like to express my deepest appreciation to my wonderful supervisors, Dr Ivan Krisjansen and Dr Carmel Brown. Their vital contributions and insightful feedback played a decisive role in the completion of this thesis. While it wasn't always easy to hear, their constructive criticisms of my work constantly challenged me, sharpened my thinking and pushed me to improve.

I'd also like to extend my thanks to Dr Maree Keating, who believed in me when I barely believed in myself and played a pivotal role in my decision to pursue a doctoral degree. I'm grateful to Accredited Editor Dr Justine McNamara, for her exceptional efforts in editing this thesis for both clarity of expression and general grammatical cohesion. I'd also like to recognise my colleagues from a range of departments and Institutes across Victoria University for their professional and personal support over the last four years.

Of course, I'm deeply indebted to my family and friends for their ceaseless encouragement and unrelenting advocacy. I cannot overstate the role of my mother, Terri, and my father, Steve in this endeavour – their love, tolerance, and compassion held me together more times than I care to admit. Of course, my deepest appreciation and thanks go out to my wonderful husband, Tyler, whose sense of humour and quick wit have kept me sane over the last few years. Tyler has been here to applaud every high and ease every low of this extraordinary journey.

Finally, I'm grateful to all of my dear friends for providing both stimulating discussion and welcomed distractions throughout the years. Their insights and critiques contributed immensely to the development of my own perspectives and played a pivotal role in strengthening both my conviction and my confidence.

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Glossary of Terms from Reddit and Beyond

The following is a glossary of terms commonly used on Reddit and across the Internet. This list and the definitions of the terms were sourced from the r/TheoryofReddit wiki¹, and from personal experience with the site.

Term	Definition
/s	Shorthand for sarcasm.
Alt	Alternative user account; redditors will often use ‘alts’ to post controversial opinions or information that may lead to their identification.
AMA/IAMA/AMAA	Acronyms for ‘ask me anything,’ ‘I am ____ ask me anything,’ ‘ask me almost anything.’ AMA/IAMA may also refer to popular subreddits (r/AMA, r/IAMA).
Archived post	All submissions and comments made to Reddit are ‘archived’ once they are older than 180 days – this means they are no longer able to be commented on, voted on, replied to or reported.
Brigading	Encouraging individuals to swarm a subreddit with the aim of downvoting and trolling the participants of a conversation/in a sub.
Cakeday	‘Cakeday’ is the birthday of a user’s Reddit account. When posting from an account on that account’s cakeday, a small cake icon will appear next to the username and will remain there for all commentary posted during cakeday.
Cross-post	Cross-posting refers to the act of sharing the same content across various social media channels. In terms of Reddit, cross-posting refers to sharing the same content across various subreddits (or sharing something that was found in one subreddit on another).
Doxing	Doxing refers to the tracing, collection and publication of an individual’s personal, and usually identifying, information online.
Dumpster fire	A complete disaster, or something difficult that no-one wants to deal with; something that just gets progressively worse even when a person is sure it could not get worse.
ELI5	An acronym for ‘explain like I’m five’; it is usually used when requesting quick, easy and digestible explanations of topics. There is also a subreddit with the same name (ELI5).
ETA	Acronym for ‘edited to add.’ Generally added to an already-published post to indicate that the OP has made an edit to add more information.
Flair	Customisable images or text that appear next to usernames in certain subreddits.

¹ <https://www.reddit.com/r/TheoryOfReddit/wiki/glossary>

IIRC	An acronym for ‘if I recall correctly’ or ‘if I remember correctly.’
IMHO	An acronym for ‘in my honest opinion’ or ‘in my humble opinion’; usually used to clarify that a statement being made is opinion only and should not necessarily be taken as fact.
IRL	An acronym for ‘in real life.’
Karma	Reddit’s points system. Points are accumulated through receiving ‘upvotes’ on post and commentary submissions. Posts and comments are sorted by accumulated karma scores by default, increasing or decreasing visibility accordingly.
Karmawhore	Disparaging term for a user considered to be posting content only to accumulate karma.
Meta-sub	Communities dedicated to the discussion of Reddit or specific subreddits.
Moderators	Volunteer moderators who are often elected by members of a subreddit to moderate behaviour on that subreddit. Can be identified by the green crown that often accompanies their name.
NSFL	An acronym for ‘not safe for life.’ It refers to things a user probably should not open at all; often gore, images of real death, extreme pornography, etc.
NSFW	An acronym for ‘not safe for work’; things a user probably should not open if they are at work.
OC	An acronym for ‘original content,’ as opposed to a re-post.
OP	An acronym for ‘original poster.’. Redditors refer to the user who posted the thread topic they are commenting on as ‘OP.’ This is in common use on relatively anonymous parts of the internet, where ‘OP’ generally stands for ‘original publisher/poster.’ OPs are generally considered to be responsible for answering questions and providing evidence to support their stories.
OT	An acronym for ‘off topic.’
Pinned post	A post pinned to the front page of a subreddit. See also ‘stickied post.’
r/-	The prefix indicating a subreddit (i.e., r/TwoXChromosomes, r/Feminism, r/Science, etc.).
Reddiquette	Refers to Reddit’s tacit and implicit rules.
Redditor	A colloquial name for a Reddit user.
Re-post	Something that has been posted to Reddit before – often many times.
Shitpost	A deliberately inane, low quality or fatuous post made on Reddit or other Internet message board (can be used as noun or a verb, e.g., to be a ‘shitposter’ ‘to shitpost,’ or be in the act of ‘shitposting’)
Sidebar	The bar on the right-hand side of a subreddit that contains key information about that subreddit. Customisable by moderators.
SMH	An acronym for ‘shaking my head’; typically used when something is obvious, ridiculous or a disappointment.

Sockpuppet (also, socks)	A sockpuppet is an online identity used for deceptive purposes. Originally, a sockpuppet referred to a false identity assumed by a member of an online community in order for a user to speak to or about themselves within that community. Now, the term has expanded to include the deceptive use of online identities or personas with the purpose of praising, defending, supporting or disparaging certain people, organisations, businesses or products.
Stickied post	A post pinned to the front page of a subreddit. See also ‘pinned post.’
Sub	An abbreviation for ‘subreddit.’ See also ‘subreddit.’
Subreddit	A forum dedicated to a specific topic on Reddit
Throwaway	An account made to comment/post something that the user does not want linked to the rest of their comments/posts.
TIL	An acronym for ‘today I learned’; also a popular subreddit (r/TIL).
TL;DR	An acronym for ‘too long, didn’t read.’ It is considered Reddiquette to include a TL;DR at the end of a long and drawn out post. It is intended to be a summary of the post in one or two short sentences.
u/-	The prefix indicating a reddit user (i.e., u/user1 , u/user2 , u/user3 , etc.).
X-post	See ‘cross-post.’

Chapter 1: Introduction: Is Feminism Dead?

As we emerge into a new decade, the profound significance of the Internet and communications technologies, and their unqualified entanglement with almost every aspect of contemporary life, has become crystalline. The global situation arising from the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic serves only to strengthen our technological dependence, ushering in new ways of working, dating, eating, exercising, relaxing, socialising, entertaining and ‘being’ online. However, the repercussions of this compulsory fixation with technology naturally transcend the relatively mundane happenings of day-to-day life. Digital existence has become central to participation across the political spectrum, pointedly shifting the ways in which society thinks about and engages with political movements and ideologies. The focus of this thesis is one of the most divisive and provocative dimensions of contemporary progressivism: the feminist movement. In the context of this thesis, feminism is understood to encompass the political campaigns and ideological positions that promote the equality and wellbeing of women across all aspects and at all levels of society². As it manifests in the West, the contemporary feminist movement campaigns for reforms and awareness-raising on gendered issues seen to adversely affect the lived experiences and overall wellbeing of women. These issues include, but are not limited to, family violence, reproductive rights, sexual harassment, sexual violence and workplace (in)equality.

For decades, the concept of feminism has remained a steadfast component of the Western cultural zeitgeist, albeit taking many different forms. While defining key eras of the feminist movement in terms of ‘waves’ ‘was and remains a controversial endeavour’ (Schulte 2011, p. 727), delimiting key moments in the journey towards women’s liberation in the West in this way can assist with understanding the shift in feminist sensibilities, ideologies and praxis throughout the movement’s different moments of emergence. Through framing each wave within a historical lens, it becomes possible to locate and interpret the significance of social, political, cultural and economic forces at play in each era, contextualising feminist activity appropriately. In an attempt to understand feminist practice in an age so deeply entangled with digital media technologies,

² Of course, feminism is enacted and understood in many different ways across the world; however, my own exposure to feminist politics has been limited to the Western manifestation of the movement. As such, the focal point of this thesis is Western feminism, and it is this breed of feminism I am referring to throughout the rest of the thesis, unless otherwise stated.

conceptualising the feminist movement in terms of waves becomes particularly significant as feminist scholars work to understand the influence these technologies are having over the lived experiences of women, feminism, and the women's movement more broadly.

The 'first wave' of the feminist movement is considered to have emerged in the West in the late 19th and early 20th century, bringing with it a focus on educational and legal equality, the campaign for (some) women's right to the vote, and the birth of the suffragette movement. The 1960s saw the emergence of what is referred to as the second wave of the movement. This was a time of 'consciousness raising,' in which feminist scholars and activists, often starting with the home front (e.g., Hanisch 1969; Sarachild 2000), pivoted their focus to institutionalised patriarchy, critiquing and campaigning against the very structures thought to reproduce gendered oppression and subordination. The emergence of postmodernity is considered to be the primary driving force behind the third wave of the feminist movement, which emerged during the late 20th and early 21st century. The third wave of the feminist movement invested itself in overturning the 'regulatory power not simply of patriarchal elements of U.S society, but also the second wave of feminism' (Scanlon 2009, p.128). Third-wave feminists advocated not only for the emancipation of women, but also for freedom of thought and practice around issues of sexuality, gender, beauty and fashion. Where the second wave staunchly denounced the restrictive femininity and false beauty standards that were perpetuated by the mass media and capitalist marketing campaigns, the third wave rejected this position and instead began to view femininity, fashion and beauty as mechanisms for choice, play and gender experimentation. Indeed, the concept of 'choice' is significant here; whereas the second wave saw women's 'choice' as being curtailed by the structural limitations of a patriarchal society, the third wave inverted this perspective, instead focusing on the significance of choices made by individual women – without regard to the content of the choices being made – as being indicative of the capacity for autonomy and self-determination (Snyder-Hall 2010).

As the focus of the feminist movement began to include not only clearly defined, concrete goals, but also on philosophical questions, the continued relevance of the movement for a world in which women were considered to have come to share relative equality with their male counterparts was brought into question. In 1998, the cover of *Time* magazine asked the question, 'Is feminism dead?' The cover displayed the disembodied head of fictional television character Ally McBeal alongside those of feminist icons Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan and Susan B. Anthony (see Figure 1). The accompanying article³ was a cynical take on the feminism of the times in which the author,

³ Titled 'Feminism: It's all about me!', published in *Time* magazine on Monday 29 June 1998.

Gina Bellafante (1998, para. 7), mourned the loss of a movement ‘steeped in research and obsessed with social change.’ Bellafante suggested that the robust, intellectual feminism of the 1960s and 1970s had been deftly usurped by a movement ‘wed to the culture of celebrity and self-obsession’ and that the feminist icons of old had been supplanted by images of ‘frazzled, self-absorbed girls’ in the vein of the aforementioned McBeal, and Bridget Jones (Bellafante 1998).



Figure 1 – *Time* magazine cover from 1998 with the title ‘Is Feminism Dead?’

Yet this cynicism is almost as old as feminism itself, with the movement having been declared ‘dead’ with such regularity that the phenomenon was eventually termed ‘false feminism death syndrome’ (Pozner 2003). In fact, a takedown piece written in the same year as Bellafante’s article and published in the *New York Observer* claimed that there had been ‘no less than 119 articles in [Time] magazine sticking pins in feminism during the last 25 years’ (Jong 1998, para. 1). And while critics of feminism have been proclaiming its demise since as early as the 1970s, this cycle follows a logic that is common across social movements more broadly, as their practical intensity naturally ebbs and flows with the passage of time. Yet there is a crucial aspect of Bellafante’s polemic that is of central concern to this thesis: that the culture of the time is negatively impacting the shape and nature of contemporary feminism in ways that are being misrecognised and reabsorbed as markers of progression and empowerment. More specifically, the deep commodification and incessant reification that has come to colour our lived experience as a result of the obligatory social, cultural and economic engagement with the Internet presides over almost every facet of modern life. Contemporary feminism and those who advocate for it are, of course

not immune to the cultural turn that has characterised our increasing reliance on the Internet and on digital communications technologies. So, while the feminist movement is certainly very much alive, its contemporary manifestation exists in a world with entirely new and unique challenges. The proverbial tides of the women's movement have intensified once more in recent years, with the popularity of feminism as both concept and identity appearing to have grown. Indeed, a study conducted by the Pew Research Centre in 2020 found that up to 61% of young women consider themselves to be feminists (Horowitz & Igielnik 2020).

What is widely considered to be the 'fourth wave' of feminism is thought to have first gained traction at the turn of the millennium. For many scholars, the fourth wave is characterised primarily by the use of social networking platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to mobilise individuals around issues of gender (in)equality, discuss and disseminate feminist ideology, and stimulate a sense of a globalised women's movement (Cochrane 2013; Looft 2017; Zimmerman 2017). The broader feminist movement has historically been concerned with the possibilities for breaking down and subverting unbalanced and oppressive gendered power relations, challenging the prevailing categories of perception regarding femaleness, femininity and womanhood. While this perspective is maintained to some degree in the most recent iteration of feminist practice, the political and ideological underpinnings of the fourth wave have been predominantly shaped by the popularisation of intersectional feminist theory, also referred to as 'intersectionality' (Zimmerman 2017). Emerging from antiracist critiques of the feminist movement, which argued that the depth, breadth and differentiation of women's oppression cannot be captured in an analysis of gender alone, intersectional feminist theory urges its proponents to consider the ways in which 'women's lives are constructed by multiple, intersecting systems of oppression... that oppression is not a singular process or binary political relation' (Carastathis 2014, p.304). Such a perspective can be seen as a diversion from the more traditional focus of the feminist movement which dealt with systemic oppression stemming from the socialisation of women into what has long been considered a patriarchal society. While this perspective has undoubtably provided a lens through which women engaged with feminist thought and action are able to attain a level of reflexive clarity, it has also contributed to the unanticipated consequence of the feminist movement separating into a multitude of resistances and identities that may not always be productively compatible.

Despite this, the rapid spread of information and the capacity for instantaneous communication afforded by the Internet has created an environment in which communities grounded in feminist ideology and women's rights activism are able to flourish like never before. The spread of feminist ideology and identity has been further quickened by enthusiastic and unambiguous

endorsement from celebrity figures; a notable example is Beyoncé's 2014 MTV Video Music Awards performance, in which she 'came out' as a feminist in a very public fashion (Figure 2).



Figure 2 – Beyoncé's iconic performance at the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards⁴

Contemporary feminism is playing out in increasingly digitised ways as women from all over the world use the Internet and social media to discuss, disseminate and debate key feminist ideas in spaces dedicated to women's perspectives. The speed and scope of digital communications technologies has allowed for the mobilisation of individuals around issues of gender inequality on a global scale, while simultaneously relaunching the concept of feminism into the modern cultural zeitgeist. However, the seemingly endless integration of the Internet into our everyday lives paired with the corporate colonisation of the digital sphere has complicated the ways in which we are exposed to, understand and interact with feminist thought. While there is no question as to the significance of recent feminist victories such as the #MeToo movement and the Women's March, the unique situation we find ourselves in has problematised the democratic and diverse underpinnings of an ostensibly open and inclusive political movement. As such, the impact of the digital environment on the aims, ideologies and politics of participation in contemporary 'networked' feminist communities requires close scholarly interrogation. Using a case study approach, the research presented in this thesis draws from the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu in order to analyse the shape and nature of the largest networked feminist community on the social news website Reddit.

This study has specific focus on the prospects for radical, subversive politics within feminist movements that are entirely mediated by the market logic of social media platforms. Drawing on

⁴ LaVeris (2014)

the work of Pierre Bourdieu – particularly his theory of social reproduction – this project will focus on the ideological implications of digital participation, governed as it is by the logic of neoliberalism which places the responsibility of choice, failure, success and empowerment solely on the individual (Walkerdine, 2003). This thesis is concerned with the extent to which the Internet, subordinated as it is to this broader neoliberal rationality, works to reframe the concerns of contemporary feminism within the 2XC community, including who can (and who cannot) participate in networked feminist movements, and to what end. The specific questions and sub questions this research seeks to investigate are:

- To what extent are networked feminist communities such as 2XC and the ideologies they propagate shaped by a reliance on digital social media platforms?
 - To what extent does the nature of popular social media platforms influence the key values and the dominant forms of capital central to networked feminist movements, and what political agendas are at play?
 - What transformations of prevailing categories of social perception do networked feminist movements promote?
 - When introducing and promoting or resisting social or political change, what are the delimitations, and what patterns of thought and practice are being disqualified?

In order to address these questions, the thesis will take the following structure: in Chapter 2 the concept of networked feminism is located within the intersections of the relevant fields of inquiry, including digital media studies, contemporary feminist scholarship, and research into social movements. Following this, Chapter 3 provides an in-depth account of the methodological choices made in the design of this research, before an account of Bourdieu's theoretical framework is provided in Chapter 4. An in-depth analysis of the spontaneous discourse that comprises the main data set for this research takes place in Chapters 5 and 6, and concluding remarks are provided in Chapter 7.

Chapter 2: Background

2.1 Introduction

In order to fully grasp the implications of an increasingly digital feminist politics, it is necessary to first position the subject of networked feminism in relation to the areas of research interest with which it intersects. This chapter will introduce and outline the relevant literature, and accordingly, position the foregoing research within these broader bodies of work. The chapter introduces the shared nature and social characteristics of the participatory Internet, with a particular focus on its contemporary manifestation in relation to the broad power structures and normative pressures that govern digital practice. The cultural themes transition into an exploration of the forms of power that tend to inhabit and (re)produce modes of online practice, and accordingly, the tentative process of social media constituting itself in terms of political participation is problematised. Equally, the emergence of networked social movements is examined, and the changes in power relations and online social conduct that accompanies an increasing reliance on digital media for networked participation in progressive (or conservative) political action is mapped. A correlative analysis of contemporary academic perspectives on feminism and relevant feminist practice is also explored. In this digital register, Reddit – the platform at the centre of this research – is introduced, and a short history of the platform’s shifting power dynamics as it has moved towards a profitable business model is provided. The chapter closes with a brief exegesis of the principal community under investigation, namely: r/TwoXChromosomes (2XC).

2.2 The Evolution of the Participatory Internet

In 1996, one year following what is widely considered to have been the commercialisation of the Internet (Cunningham & Finn 1996), John Perry Barlow published his optimistic essay, *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, in which he envisioned the Internet as a new frontier, a veritable no-man’s-land existing beyond the stifling and oppressive confines of government or corporate control. Barlow’s essay described the Internet as ‘a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force or station of birth’ (Barlow 1996, para. 7). His vision of cyberspace embodied ‘a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity’ (Barlow 1996, para. 8). However, the rapidity with which technological advancement occurred following Barlow’s promissory essay would have been difficult to foresee, and by 2004, the participatory Internet had become ubiquitous, replacing the

more static digital environment that characterised its early iterations. The term Web 2.0 is often used to capture this transition and refers to ‘a perceived second generation of Web development and design that facilitates communications and secures information sharing, interoperability and collaboration on the World Wide Web’ (Harris & Rea 2009, p. 137). The technological foundations of Web 2.0 created the conditions for the proliferation of globally popular social media platforms which are primarily characterised by the opportunity they provide for users to upload, share, and engage with user-generated content. These participatory media are regularly championed as emancipatory, community-enhancing tools that have the capacity to encourage solidarity amongst oppressed minorities and give voice to the disenfranchised (Castells 2013, 2015; Jenkins 2006; Koskela 2004; Nemer & Freeman 2015). Indeed, Facebook – still one of the most popular and profitable social media companies in the world – claims in its mission statement that its aim is to ‘give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together’ (Facebook 2004).

The explosive popularity of social media sites was further augmented by the advent of smartphones and other portable digital communications devices, which saw the Internet become more deeply embedded in our social, political, cultural, and economic realities than ever before. One outcome of the extraordinary ubiquity of the Internet is what Boyd describes as ‘mediated sociality’, which allows individuals to transcend spatial and temporal barriers to communication and organisation and works to ‘collapse social contexts and change the rules about how people can and do behave’ (Boyd 2009, p.30). Online communities are often far more diverse and globalised than their offline counterparts, primarily due to the relative lack of temporal and spatial limitations imposed on access to digital networks, and the ability to rely less on pre-existing social connections in favour of connecting relatively disparate individuals via forums dedicated to specific interests and attitudes. Yet the nature of mediated sociality has also had a significant impact on the freedom and anonymity that were once so central to the digital experience⁵, as the sharing of identifying and even intimate information about oneself becomes increasingly commonplace. Now more than ever, our online and offline lives are interwoven; our digital avatars have become mutable and legitimate extensions of ourselves, and our experiences on the Internet have become ever more entangled with the conditions of our ‘real world’ existence. Marder et al. (2016, p.589) suggests that digital participation has become ‘profoundly intertwined with the knowledge that information about our offline activities may be communicated online,’

⁵ The perceived separation of online and offline that coloured the early days of the Internet is perhaps best captured in the well-known Peter Steiner cartoon published in 1993 (Figure 3), which proclaims that, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.”

and that the potential displeasure of an imagined audience can lead to the conscious modification of ‘real-life’ behaviours. Indeed, the structural factors of mediated sociality have the potential to (re)produce specific forms of control, ‘be it the male gaze or hegemonic cultural norms’ (Kedzior & Allen 2016, p. 1895). The control associated with the resultant effects of mediated sociality can be evidenced in the phenomenon of ‘cancel culture’. The subject of recent scholarly debate, (e.g., Bouvier 2020; Ng 2020) cancel culture is defined as ‘the withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic’ (Ng 2020, p. 623). While this novel cultural practice may have the capacity to encourage more thoughtful behaviours within a community, the threat of potential cancellation can also result in the perceived need for enhanced self-censorship to avoid attracting unwanted or overwhelmingly negative attention. The threat of ‘cancellation’ thus encourages individuals with even a relatively limited social media presence to present themselves according to an ever-decreasing range of acceptable behaviours, both online and offline. While scholars have long recognised the ‘chilling effect’ that the presence of an audience has on an individual’s behaviour in many different arenas of life (Dennis 2008; Foucault 1991; Winch 2015), recent research into the impact of social media on behavioural restraint suggests an extended chilling effect, in which the processes of online curation extend into the real world, as every moment of one’s life has the very real potential to be broadcast to a waiting audience (Marder et al. 2016).



Figure 3 – Cartoon by Peter Steiner, The New Yorker magazine (1993)

The blurring of the boundaries between our online and offline selves also registers concern regarding the implications of digital inequity and the digital divide. Today, a reliable Internet

connection has become a necessary component of political, economic, social, and cultural participation, and yet, this participation remains heavily predicated on the affordability and accessibility of digital communications technologies. Despite the growing digital divide that is produced because of such inequities in access, a lingering idealism remains in digital scholarship which often ignores not only the implications of unequal access to digital participation, but also the organising direction, legitimating protocols and introjected heteronomy that perpetuates corporate social and political control on the Internet. It is vital, then, that studies seeking to understand the use of social media for political participation must also draw attention to the ‘disparities in communicatory power, and the uses to which that power is put’ (Babe 2011, p. 353), as well as the inequalities that manifest as a result. Digital divide research that explores the impact of inequity on online political participation has found that those who dominate public discourse online are often reasonably well educated, middle-class individuals equipped with high-speed Internet and a workable understanding of contemporary political debates (Brodock, Joyce & Zaeck 2009; Fenton 2016). On the other hand, the voices of those on the fringes of digital access potentially remain sidelined or are altogether omitted from participation (Hindman 2008). As Pariser suggests, the Internet does not necessarily democratise communicative processes, as social media tends to privilege the voices of those members in possession of the most relevant capital, or those who have been elevated to a ‘micro-celebrity’ status within specific digital communities (Pariser 2011).

It follows that it is not enough to simply emphasise the ‘enabling and limiting potentials of the Internet,’ rather, it is ‘the actual distribution of advantages and disadvantages’ (re)produced through unequal access to digital participation that should be addressed (Fuchs 2013, pp. 26-27). As such, it is imperative that the implications of these inequalities are brought to the fore to understand the shape and nature of the contemporary feminist movement more clearly as it continues to migrate into online spaces (Crossley 2015; Schulte 2011; Schuster 2013). This demands that analysis move beyond a stocktake of who can and who cannot participate, and furthermore, to also interrogate the nature of the dominant discourses circulating in networked feminist communities to identify the tacit and explicit hierarchies of power and practice that shape political engagement in these spaces. To achieve this analysis, the prevailing mechanisms of power governing everyday life must be delineated. Through defining these mechanisms, it will be possible to more clearly locate the challenges and possibilities borne from the complex feedback loop that exists between online and offline engagement with contemporary progressive political activity and ideology – and potentially reveal the true beneficiaries of popular networked feminist discourses. In other words, through outlining the dominant social, political, and economic paradigms that shape our reality and cut across digital and ‘real-world’ contexts, the

actual liberatory potential of progressive political movements that are heavily reliant on the Internet and digital communications technologies can be more astutely explored.

2.2.1 Power and Practice in the Digital Age

Over two decades following the publication of the *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* (1996), the Internet as we know it has little in common with the utopic cyber-dream penned by Barlow during the digital genesis of the 1990s. Of course, it is now widely acknowledged that the aims and goals of popular social media platforms are first and foremost to generate profit through on-selling user data for the purpose of targeted advertising – an evolutionary outcome that has had extraordinary consequences for the shape and nature of the contemporary Internet. Today, almost every corner of the digital sphere has to some degree been colonised by corporations and their brands (Deuze 2008) – an observation that is unsurprising, given that media industries are, by their very nature, industries of capitalism, and, consequently, the production of media ‘is from the economic perspective of media companies a means for the socially accepted and legitimised goal of individual companies’ profit-maximisation’ (Knoche 2016, p. 21). The integration of the Internet and communication technologies into the ‘turbo-capitalist’ (Fehrmann 1999, cited in Knoche 2016) economic logic that characterises neoliberal policy has created fertile ground for the development of new forms of capital accumulation as media companies work to make profitable society’s ever-increasing dependence on the digital environment. As Knoche suggests, the assimilation of the participatory Internet into ‘capitalism and fields for capital activity created the preconditions for a multitude of further capital movements. This situation has been aggravated by the fact that the media industry, no matter if rightly or wrongly, is considered to be a profitable, future-oriented growth industry’ (Knoche 2016, p. 20).

The ubiquity of targeted advertising, the incessant collection and sorting of user data, and the algorithmic governance of online practice all feed back into the mechanisms that make possible the generation of astounding levels of profit, and this has dramatically altered the contemporary digital landscape. The potentially unanticipated consequences of these practices are concerning. For instance, research suggests that the state of the Internet and the nature of digital participation is contributing to the re-establishment and re-enforcement of cultural tribalism as users are exposed to an increasingly narrow range of information that is explicitly curated to beguile and attract our tastes, interests and digital social circles (Pariser 2011). In 2010, Eric Schmidt – then CEO of Google – made the claim that it was becoming ‘very hard for people to watch or consume something that has not in some sense been tailored for them’ (Deans 2010, para. 8). This contributes to the social sharing of ‘outraged and polarising moralised content’ that tends to

support pre-conceived opinions, perspectives, and ideologies, and can act both as an expression of in-group allegiance and a mechanism for punishing those perceived to belong to the out-group (Wilson et al. 2020). As we are exposed to an abundance of information that tends to support our worldview and a dearth of information that challenges it, political debate on social media tends to degrade rather quickly into a battle of binary positions (Snowden 2016). As Margaret Atwood points out, ‘in times of extremes, extremists win. Their ideology becomes a religion, anyone who doesn’t puppet their views is seen as an apostate, a heretic or a traitor, and moderates in the middle are annihilated’ (Atwood 2018).

Another consequence of the commodification of the digital sphere is evidenced in the normalisation of regulatory self-branding practices; users of social media tend to mimic ‘cultural meanings and images drawn from the narratives and visual codes of the mainstream cultural industries’ (Duffy 2017, p. 69) – industries that exist, above all else, to generate profit. This is particularly concerning regarding the representation of women, womanhood and femininity. Dubrofsky and Wood (2014) suggest that the constant, ‘coercive’ surveillance typical of social media produces an ever-decreasing range of regulated apposite behaviours that are contingent on the nature of the networks in which the users participate. These behaviours often constitute a technology of self that is neoliberal in style and are deeply entangled with the base values of individualism, competition and consumerism (Winch 2015). In turn, these behaviours are rewarded by the ‘attention economy,’ fuelling an uneasy tension in the struggle for recognition on social media platforms (Marwick 2015). Concerningly, these practices also contribute to an illusory perspective that positions social media platforms as neutral spaces in which all people may achieve similar results if certain conditions are met; this contributes to the perpetuation of the myth of potential universal success (Marshall 2014). The inverse outcome of this neoliberal mythology serves to palliate and obfuscate claims that individuals are ‘subject to pressures/constraints or even influence from the outside’ (Elias & Gill 2018 p. 64), indicating a psychosocial trend towards individual choice and responsibility as opposed to critical interrogation of the structures and didactic systems that shape and produce practice.

Of course, the neoliberal rationality argued to shape practice in the online environment is not unique to the digital sphere. In fact, it is widely accepted that the dominant social and political ideology of the West (informed by the doctrine of neoliberalism) enables and emboldens the economic machinations of advanced consumer capitalism (Lazzarato 2012; Phelan 2014; Saad-Filho & Johnston 2005). Neoliberalism is a political project characterised by the extreme reliance on material values and market forces, the implementation of free-market policies and widespread cuts to the welfare state (Bourdieu 1998; Saad-Filho & Johnston 2005). It has been argued that

this system of economic rationalism ultimately results in adverse social consequences that are felt most by groups already marginalised in society (Girling 2004). Neoliberalism, at its core, is a modified form of economic liberalism favouring free-market trade, deregulation, privatisation, and the dismantling of the welfare state. In multifarious ways it channels dissent into malleable forms and maintains an interlocking nexus with professional organisations, the judiciary, and the corporate sector. The neoliberal policy model extends far beyond the machinations of state and global economies. Bourdieu posits that the ‘neoliberal programme draws its social power from the political and economic power of those whose interests it expresses’ (Bourdieu 1998, para. 6) and is characterised by the central ideology of a ‘pure and perfect market’ (Bourdieu 1998, para. 5), which is enacted through a political regime of financial deregulation, individualisation, and competition. Significantly, ‘this competition is extended to individuals themselves’ (Bourdieu 1998, para. 8) through an ever more atomised approach to workplace practice and policy, in which ‘individuals are conceived of as the sole proprietors of their skills and owe nothing to society for them’ (Lynch 2008, p. 223). As neoliberal rationality comes to dominate much of Western society, so too do the values associated with such an enterprise come to dominate ‘all forms of conduct’ (Burchell 1993, p. 275).

This normalisation of the key principles of neoliberalism in social life has been further augmented by the insertion of the Internet and portable digital communications technologies into almost every facet of social, cultural, and economic participation (Hawkins 2019). Indeed, it has been suggested ‘the affective and psychic life of neoliberalism [is] an increasingly central means of governing and producing people’s desires, attachments and modes of “getting by”’ (Gill & Kanai 2018, p. 318), with such modes of ‘getting by’ deeply entangled not only in neoliberal rationality, but also in access to and use of hyperconnected digital technologies. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that it is not the technologies themselves that reproduce and reinforce the neoliberal project within society and thus constitute tools of oppression; it is, as Marcuse suggests, ‘the presence, in them, of the masters who determine their number, their lifespan, their power, their place in life, and the need for them’ (Marcuse 1973, p. 21). Before the Internet was a necessity in the day-to-day lives of those living in the West, Marcuse investigated and recognised this dialectic of modern technology. In *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse documented both the liberating potentials of the computer and the defeat of its revolutionary capacities through its application to the expansion of capitalism (Marcuse 1972), rendering it a tool for, among other things, the manipulation of needs. Indeed, since Marcuse, many scholars have been critically concerned with the dialectical nature of the Internet. Suarez-Villa (2009) notes that the technological innovations of social media technologies have largely been articulated by the drive toward profit, while Faucher suggests that ‘the heavily commercialized spaces of [social media platforms] appear to

favour a more capitalist, Anglocentric, and specifically neoliberal agenda' (Faucher 2014, p. 41). In other words, the Internet, and the social platforms it hosts are inherently imbued with the neoliberal rationality in which they were conceived, having been devised within a socio-political system that values and rewards competition, individualism, flexibility and entrepreneurial attitudes above all else.

The hegemony of neoliberalism and its culture of individualism has, in the West, 'overseen the transformation of the citizen into consumer' (Haiven 2007 p. 90). Indicators of social stratification across the West – including gender and class socialisation, the unequal distribution of capital, access to quality education, and enduring social and cultural ideologies – are deeply rooted in consumer culture. Identities are formed and mediated through consumptive practices, and consumer culture 'invokes, interrogates and inflames ontological tensions and charged cultural issues, including normative ideas about the body, gender, race and identity' (Borgerson & Schroeder 2018, p. 107), and thus 'plays an important role in meaningful psychological experiences such as the formation of self-identity, impression management and creating links and associations with others in the social milieu' (McDonald et al. 2017, p. 365). In other words, our sense of self has become deeply enmeshed with the consumption of goods and services; our bodies are reminiscent of advertisements, ornamented by the miscellany of individual consumer preferences. The universality of the Internet has allowed consumer culture to further flourish, having been afforded a centrality in cultural and social participation due to, among other things, the prevalence of hyper-visual social media platforms and the normalisation of laser-focused targeted advertising. The participatory Internet's shift into profitability is conceptualised as an extension of contemporary capitalist logic and emerges in what Zuboff (2019) has termed 'surveillance capitalism.' Surveillance capitalism refers to the commercialisation of the data rated by human interaction with the Internet through the collection, analysis and distribution of online behaviours for commercial purposes. Surveillance capitalism sees 'human experience as free raw material' fuelling the 'new global architecture of behavioural modification' (Zuboff 2019, p. 8). It is responsible for the rapid and unprecedented concentration of 'wealth, knowledge and power' and, as such, has the potential to replace political systems and democratic practice with a regime of 'group pressure and computational certainty' (Zuboff 2019, p. 21). For Zuboff, the significance of surveillance capitalism cannot be understated, as she asks us to 'consider that the internet has become essential for social participation, that the internet is now saturated with commerce, and that commerce is now subordinated to surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff 2019, p. 11).

One possible outcome of a social order defined by a regime of extreme surveillance capitalism and commodity fetishism is explored in the hit television program, *Black Mirror*. The possibilities

for social, cultural or political rebellion or reform under such a regime are melodramatically illustrated in an episode of this dystopic British science-fiction television series titled *Fifteen Million Merits*. Written by Charlie Brooker and Kanak Huq, the episode centres on the protagonist, Bing, as he and his peers spend their days surrounded by screens, riding power-generating stationary bikes in order to accumulate ‘merits’ (and, it would seem, electricity) (*Fifteen Million Merits* 2011). The bike riders in this instance represent the working class engaging in menial labour with limited reward for the benefit of the elites. Merits are accumulated to be spent on the screen-based entertainment and digital commodities that dominate everyday life. At the climax of the episode, the protagonist expresses his outrage at the oppressive system during an appearance on a live talent show, delivering a scathing polemic to the audience whilst threatening to harm himself with a shard of broken mirror held up against the exposed flesh of his neck. This act of rebellion, broadcast to the masses, is wildly successful and, as a result, it is ultimately absorbed and appropriated by the screen-based society in which this protagonist exists. The judges of the talent show offer him a weekly piece-to-camera in which he can deliver his venomous diatribes regarding the state of this society from the comfort of upper-class living. The rebellious action and any potential it may have possessed for structural upheaval is ultimately rendered banal through its appropriation by the system it sought to critique, as Bing submits to the judges’ offer, replacing his meagre existence with one infinitely more comfortable. This melodramatic illustration demonstrates the elasticity of the dominant socio-political arrangements, as the signs and signifiers that empower radical or subversive activity are ultimately absorbed by the spectacle of contemporary society and reified into the commodity form (Debord 2010). They become trapped in a web of preordained conventions and are enervated in an apparently inexorable natural order. The illusion of rebellion remains, yet the outcomes are predetermined in a pretence of representation and the hegemony is thus reasserted in a series of repressive exclusions. In turn, these doxic constraints impute their own value system to others and whilst giving shape to social life they remain imperceptible in their universality (Bourdieu 1998). The merging of the commercial and the socio-cultural renders banal the powerful movements and moments that might fuel a sense of genuine ferocity in contemporary, radical political positions (Adorno & Horkheimer 1997).

2.3 The Emergence of Networked Social Movements

The field of social movement research is as wide and varied as social movements themselves. To attempt an understanding of the complexities of contemporary networked feminism, it is necessary to first position the movement within the field of social movements more broadly. Glasberg and Shannon (2010, p. 150) define social movements as ‘organisational structures and strategies that may empower oppressed populations to mount effective challenges and resist the more powerful and advantaged elites.’ Yet such a conceptualisation fails to take into consideration the existence of reactionary social movements which emerge not in opposition to the oppression by powerful elites, but in response to an unwanted change in progressive social policy; an example is the anti-abortion movement. Given this, Diani’s (1992, p. 1) description necessarily broadens the scope, suggesting social movements are best defined as ‘networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities.’ Social movements, then, are organised, collective efforts that aim to either prevent or cause some degree of change – be it culturally, socially or politically. As to what motivates the formation of a social movement, there are a number of perspectives that remain central to the field of social movement research.

Three key social preconditions have historically been attributed to the emergence of social movements: relative deprivation, shared discontent, and rational choice (Muller & Weede 1994). Relative deprivation refers to the process through which individuals come to ‘compare themselves to those who are better off and conclude that their disadvantage is undeserved’ (Smith & Huo 2014, p. 232). Specifically, group relative deprivation (GRD) refers to the manifestation of this perspective in a collective of individuals, and research suggests the existence of GRD often predicts increased support for political protest and other forms of collective action (Walker & Mann 1987). Shared discontent, on the other hand, is generally triggered by a change in or deterioration of the political, cultural, economic and/or social fabric, prompting significant dissatisfaction amongst a group of individuals and creating a common thread of discontent around which political activity may emerge (Burean & Badescu 2014). Rational choice theory attempts to attribute more autonomy to the constituents of social movements, positing that individuals can be motivated into action on account of their ability to make decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis of potential courses of action, ultimately opting to take that which is considered most likely to maximise utility (Opp 2013).

Regardless of the social, cultural, political or economic mechanisms underpinning the formation of social movements and individuals’ participation in them, the fact remains that – to be effective

– social movements must be able to mobilise relatively large collectives around particular issues. Resource mobilisation theory suggests that, in isolation, the existence of shared grievances, relative deprivation or the rational decision making of individuals is not enough for the development of a productive social movement. Rather, social movements require a range of critical resources in order to support their formation and ensure their sustainability. Prior to the technological and societal advancements made possible by the connective power of the Internet, social movements relied, among other things, on expert organisation, astute resource mobilisation, effective leadership and defined goals or aims (Wang, Liu & Gao 2016). Significantly, social movements during this time were heavily reliant on the mass media (i.e., television, radio and print) in order to capture the attention of the general public and boost the signal of their messages (Gitlin 2003). This is demonstrated by Kielbowicz and Scherer's (1986, p. 72) proclamation that 'the modern mass media have become central to the life and death of social movements.' For instance, the mass media continues to play a central role in the prominence and power of environmental political movements despite the growing influence of the Internet and participatory media forms (Lester & Hutchins 2009). However, the advent of the participatory Internet generated radically new conditions for the organisation, dissemination and coordination of social movement activity. Contemporary social movements can be differentiated from their traditional counterparts in a number of ways, the foremost being that they rely heavily on the lowered resource mobilisation costs afforded by the Internet.

The emergence of these so-called *networked* social movements reflects a paradigm shift in broader society, triggered by the advent of the participatory Internet (Castells 2015; Juris 2004; Wang, Liu & Gao 2016). The participatory capacity of today's Internet allows for the engagement and mobilisation of global networks of individuals in a seemingly non-hierarchical, decentralised and widely accessible way, engendering what scholars have termed the *networked social movement* (Castells 2013; Wang Liu & Gao 2016; Wolfson 2013). Such technologies have provided a new avenue for the organisation and management of social movements and civic assemblies, amplifying the speed, reach and effectiveness of social movement-related communication and mobilisation efforts. Unlike the purely 'collective' action of their traditional predecessors, networked social movements rely on the logic of 'connective' action (the sharing of links and posting of content and commentary) to encourage, undo or resist social change (Bennett & Segerberg 2012).

The Internet and, by extension, social networking platforms, are still widely considered to have had a positive impact on social movements in general, with scholars often touting the 'democratic' potential of the technologies (Castells 2013, 2015; Jenkins 2006; Nemer & Freeman 2015; Shirky

2008). Indeed, Shirky (2008) argues that influential social movements are able to emerge online as a result of the Internet's capacity to empower participation, rendering obsolete the ordered management skills and measured expertise of leadership that was necessary for the success of social movements in the past. However, these proclamations made in relation to the promissory and progressive potential of the Internet (and its associated technologies, such as the numerous, ubiquitous social networking platforms) often fail to take into consideration the prevailing social conditions and mechanisms of power that interweave offline and online contexts (Page 2012). For instance, digital activists are more likely to be prosperous than not, raising questions as to the validity of the internet-as-democracy argument (Brodock, Joyce & Zaack 2009). Keen (2015) considers this empowerment of participation to be conducive to the development of the mob mentality, ultimately compounding our rage as opposed to improving general societal well-being, a sentiment shared by Dean, who argues that the 'expanded and enhanced communicability' afforded by the Internet, rather than creating the conditions for a unified political front, has led to a vast multiplication of separate resistances on the left wing of political participation. Dean suggests this process may hinder the potential for the development of strong counter-hegemonies, contributing both to a fragmentation of the left and what appears to be an amplification of a cohesive, extreme right-wing political voice (Dean 2009).

As argued by Kedzior & Allen (2016, p. 1895), emancipatory narratives that frame the Internet as a producer of empowered social agents often have a 'sole focus on individual perceptions with little consideration for structural factors which impact agency.' Dean (2009) suggests that any possibility for online protest or activism is inherently bound up in the capitalist structures that give shape to the Internet as we know it. The 'fantasy' of participation and democratic activity on the Internet is little more than a manifestation of our society's technological fetishism, in which 'technological innovation becomes a screen upon which all sorts of fantasies of political action are projected' (Dean 2009, p. 36). The inclination to conflate social media participation with fantasies of democratic idealism works to mystify the processes of cultural reproduction that ultimately maintain and reproduce the status quo, albeit in new ways. This is particularly true for research into networked feminist communities and women's rights activism on the Internet. For example, Clark (2016, p. 800) claims that 'the explosion of hashtag feminism in recent years has evidenced social media's unprecedented capacity' as a political tool. Clark (2016, p. 798) cites the ways in which feminist discourse emerging from platforms such as Twitter aims to 'deconstruct and implement alternatives to dominant discourse.' Similarly, Gabriel (2016, p. 1631) cites the effective ways in which Black British female bloggers are able to leverage their digital presence in order to defy 'negative representations of Black British female identity by sharing their everyday lived experiences as powerful counter-narratives.' Of course, these

perspectives are not without merit. However, as Mansell points out, ‘access to digital information does not provide the foundation for transforming digital information into empowering knowledge automatically’ (2014, p. 15).

Illustrating the pragmatic intertwining of orthodoxy and voluntary action, it has been argued that the structural design of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, can in and of itself contribute to reinforcing the pre-existing power relations and social cleavages that characterise our offline reality, including those that manifest through gender, race and class differentials (Owen 2014). An example of the way social media may amplify pre-existing tensions can be observed in the ongoing Myanmar crisis, in which the United Nations cited Facebook activity as a major contributor to the spreading of racial hatred towards the Rohingya people of the region, leading to a potential genocide (Miles 2018). This geopolitical crisis is illustrative of the potential for social media to not only mirror but also to intensify despotic social conditions. Critical approaches to the study of social media platforms acknowledge and analyse these power asymmetries in order to better understand the ways in which we are compelled to use such platforms and the impact our use has on our political activity.

For digital social movements, the most significant component of the organisational structure made possible by the Internet is the capacity for almost instantaneous communication. The ability to share personalised content across vast digital networks, communicate a movement’s key values rapidly and accessibly, and bring together constituents and supporters on a global scale is central to the manifestation of a movement, as well as ensuring its sustained relevance (Bennett & Segerberg 2012). As the facilitators of what and how we know, mass media organisations have historically been considered to set the agenda on the social, cultural and political issues of the time (McCombs & Shaw 1972), with the accompanying connotations of power (Herman & Chomsky 1988; McLuhan 1964). The shift to new modes of media consumption and participation continues to attract scholarly attention from across a range of disciplines. Despite the changing ways in which the media engages audiences, dependence on the media remains a crucial aspect of ensuring the existence of an informed citizenry within a democratic society. The mediatization of society refers to the ways in which the media industries have an increasingly significant influence over both institutional and individual engagement with society and culture. Stig Hjarvard explains that:

By the mediatization of culture and society we understand the process whereby culture and society to an increasing degree become dependent on the media and their logic. This process is characterised by a duality, in that the media have become integrated into the operations of other social institutions and cultural spheres, while also acquiring

the status of social institutions in their own right. As a consequence, social interaction – within the respective institutions, between institutions and in society at large – increasingly takes place via the media. (Hjarvard 2013, p. 17)

While Hjarvard's perspective provides a conceptual frame from which the influence of social media engagement over modes of participation in digital social movements can be analysed, the concept of the mediatisation of society is, in isolation, not necessarily problematic. However, when we locate the media industries within the social, political, economic and cultural contexts that shape reality more broadly the issue becomes substantially more complex.

Moreover, the production of content that tends to appeal to and reinforce the status quo has been shown to increase the chances that individuals might profit both socially and economically from their efforts at digital curation (Senft 2013). Attention and visibility have been shown to be key forms of capital in the field of social media and are vital for online success regardless of the preferred platform (Smith & Fischer 2021) – the unequal distribution of which considered to be a structural manifestation of the political economy of social media (Fuchs 2013). The burgeoning 'attention economy' is a result of the scarcity of attention in light of the apparently unlimited information and entertainment available on the Internet. This has pushed corporations and advertisers to continuously develop new and novel methods for data-driven profiteering through the use of neuromarketing, machine learning, psychographic profiling and behavioural manipulation (Gonzalez 2017; Levine, Marci & Kothuri 2017; Stanton, Sinnott-Armstrong & Huettel 2017). Thus, social movements using digital platforms to raise awareness or attract engagement are required to 'buy in' to the practices of corporate actors in order to attract or maintain attention in the digital environment. This appears to have fashioned a paradox for progressive social movements that endeavour to challenge hierarchies of power whilst being synchronously obligated to reinforce them.

As previously discussed, social media platforms do not exist in a vacuum, and the very same political, social and cultural pressures that govern practice in the offline world are present – if not amplified – in the online one. As the commodification of digital media participation intensifies, so too does the political field become increasingly shaped by and reduced to a commodity form. The problem of corporate saturation and commercial surveillance is central to understanding the trajectory of progressive political movements as they appear on social media. While the democratising potential of the digital age has brought many benefits to transnational social movements, the increased facilitation of social movements by social media businesses also engenders significant challenges. It is important to recognise that these platforms are positioned and arranged in ways that duplicate forms and relations of power within the context of globalised

capitalism and thus reinforce the relentless colonisation of the commodity form over all aspects of social, political and cultural life. The extent to which the aims, goals and actions of contemporary networked feminist communities are influenced by these social, cultural and economic forces are a central concern of this thesis, and it is to the literature grappling with these issues that we now turn.

2.4 Networked Feminism, Postfeminism and the Rise of the Fourth Wave

Contemporary feminism and its emergent manifestations have been widely conceptualised in the academic literature, and feminist scholars have taken a range of approaches to discussions and critiques of its modern iterations. Terms such as ‘choice feminism’ (Ferguson 2010; Snyder-Hall 2010), ‘popular feminism’ (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer 2017), ‘neoliberal feminism’ (Banet-Weiser, Gill & Rottenberg 2019; Rottenberg 2014), ‘postfeminism’ (Dobson 2015; Gill 2007), ‘fourth-wave feminism’ (Blevins 2018; Cochrane 2013; Zimmerman 2017) and ‘networked feminism’ (Fotopoulou 2016) have all been employed in different ways and at various points by scholars and writers attempting to capture the essence, reach and influence of the contemporary feminist movement.

Choice feminism broadly refers to the idea that any choice a woman makes – be it wearing makeup, consuming or participating in pornography or deciding not to have children – can and should be considered feminist practice so long as such choices are accompanied by ‘a political consciousness’ (Baumgardner & Richards 2000, pp. 56-57). Ferguson suggests that there are three significant features that shape what she refers to as the ‘orientation’ of choice feminism (Ferguson 2010). First, choice feminism equates women’s empowerment with the capacity for individual women to make choices, and thus considers the oppression of women to be intrinsically linked to the inability to make such choices. Second, as choice feminism considers the ability to choose to constitute a significant marker of women’s liberation, the individual choices women make should not be interrogated nor critiqued. Third, choice feminism considers the historical victories of the feminist movement as the reason for women’s freedom of choice in the present day. While this ostensibly appears to be ‘a way of celebrating the successes of an ongoing women’s movement,’ in reality ‘this narrative supports the view that we are now post-feminist... and women today are fully liberated’ (Ferguson 2010, p. 248).

The significance of individual choice is a central component of the ‘postfeminist’ milieu. Postfeminism has been described as a condition of the neoliberal project in which contemporary popular culture has come to simultaneously embrace and repudiate feminist politics and ideology (Elias & Gill 2018). Gill (2007) positions the cultural reality of postfeminism as a ‘sensibility’ in order to frame postfeminism (and its attendant media cultures) as a critical object of cultural analysis. This ‘postfeminist sensibility,’ while deeply contradictory in some respects, is characterised by a number of stable features:

the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (Gill 2007, p. 149)

Embedded in this postfeminist sensibility is the emergence of what Rottenberg (2014) has conceptualised as neoliberal feminism – a feminism deeply informed and reproduced by neoliberal market logic which is ‘predominantly concerned with instigating a feminist subject who epitomizes “self-responsibility”’ (Rottenberg 2014, p. 428). The neoliberal feminist subject embodies the postfeminist sensibility in that she operates under the assumption that the successes of the feminist movement have created the conditions for her individual success, and, as a result, the collective struggle for gender equality is considered obsolete and thus relegated to a ‘thing of the past’ (Rottenberg 2014, p. 428). Gill (2008, p. 443) insists that postfeminism is not simply a mutation of the feminist movement or an extension of feminist ideology, rather that it is imbued with a ‘sensibility that is at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas’ resulting in what McRobbie terms a *double entanglement* (McRobbie 2004). This double entanglement describes the way in which neoliberalism enables both the doing and the un-doing of feminism, as women are offered a specific form of individualised freedom in the place of widespread feminist political transformation. Central to this double entanglement of postfeminism is the concept of choice (Budgeon 2015), the veneration of which constitutes a key element of the neoliberal project. Women’s right to ‘choose’ has long been one of feminism’s central political claims, yet the concept of choice has shifted away from a focus on the structural constraints that have traditionally limited the potential for women to make ‘free’ choices. Postfeminism diverts the energy and attention of feminism away from such structural analyses, redirecting it towards celebratory narratives concerning the personal choices made by individual women, promoting individual actualisation over collective emancipation, and paradoxically rejecting intersectional perspectives which understand personal choice to be constrained by the

junctions of oppression that colour the lives and lived experiences of women from different backgrounds.

The centrality of women's individual choice in some forms of contemporary feminist thought and practice can also be at least partially attributed to the aforementioned expansion of consumer culture and the community form existing in many aspects of social and cultural life. Indeed, consumerism plays a significant role in the formation of the Western gendered subject, and so must be interrogated to avoid taking for granted the power imbalances and social hierarchies (re)produced by consumer culture. Of particular concern from a feminist perspective is the process of misrecognition by which consumer 'preferences' are repackaged as signifiers of female empowerment through cunning and repetitive marketing campaigns that appropriate and reframe feminist discourse, ultimately obscuring the power imbalances such consumer 'preferences' promote (Goldman, Heath & Smith 1991). For instance, the veneration of Beyoncé as a black feminist idol remains widely uncontested, even following allegations that her clothing label Ivy Park was being produced by underpaid female workers in Sri Lankan sweatshops (Figure 4). Beyoncé's position as an extremely wealthy, wildly famous, self-proclaimed feminist allows her to engage in and profit from the exploitative practices of advanced consumer capitalism – practices that disproportionately affect women with little to no access to transformational capital. What's more, her ability to do so is widely lauded and often staunchly defended, as it signifies her status as an 'empowered' woman. Beyoncé's capacity to perpetuate existing inequalities for personal profit is fervently defended as the outcome of her symbolic capital and empowered status and thus misrecognised as a marker of feminist accomplishment.



Figure 4 - A satirical depiction of Beyoncé's alleged exploitation of female workers⁶

⁶ Cartoon by political artist, Vini Oliveira.

It follows that individual economic freedom, participation in the workforce, financial independence, corporate success, and the capacity to emulate the consumer practices of the wealthy have become central to the motivations of 'popular' feminism (Banet-Weiser, Gill & Rottenberg 2019), as financial opportunity gives women the purchasing power to display their empowerment in the visual language to which consumer society has long been accustomed (Goldman, Heath & Smith 1991). This trend is further demonstrated by 'popular' feminism's strong ties to media circulation and capitalist ideology, followed by the prioritisation of campaigns for wage equality that benefit financially independent women, and the inclination to privilege the voices of the rich and famous at events such as the Women's March. The incorporation of symbolic power and socio-cultural values into consumption practices establishes consumer culture as a significant dimension of self-realisation. Indeed, for young women, consumer culture comprises the 'primary regime of truth,' devaluing more traditional social institutions as the ethics of competitive, narcissistic gendered individualism are positioned as being traits that are typical of the empowered, independent woman (McRobbie 2008, p. 545).

From such a standpoint, the impact of neoliberal governance on the psychic landscape of women becomes an ineffable signifier in particular, the institutionalisation of 'aspiration' and glorification of 'upward mobility' have an assiduous influence on women's self-realisation, particularly those without the available capital necessary to actualise the demands of a society driven by illusions of universal success (Allen 2014). Allen (2014, p. 763) posits that the 'celebratory and simplistic rhetoric of aspiration,' having been redefined as a process of individual self-enrichment, positions working-class women as having the 'wrong' aspirations and ultimately negates the broader inequalities of who is able to go where. The pressure on women to perform an idealised, middle-class, aspirational, and entrepreneurial femininity is further amplified as social and cultural reality becomes increasingly enmeshed with the digital world. Visually oriented social media platforms feed the compulsion to post self-enhancing depictions of the 'good life'; depictions of resilience, of entrepreneurship, of women taking charge of their future and all aspects of their lives. Further, the nature of social media platforms makes a competition of this compulsion, where worth is derived from 'likes,' 'follows' or 'friends' – a form of 'profile capital' that may only be enhanced by achieving success in the attention economy. In this context, 'proficiency' (one's online profile settings) acquire digital value, including commercial value. As such, the demands on the self in terms of ongoing commodification and constant reinvention within the neoliberal project become increasingly immense (Walkerdine 2003) as women are implored to 'lean in' and take control. That the concept of individual choice and the veneration of individual lived experience remain central to the contemporary manifestation of the feminist

movement (the fourth wave) is indicative of the pervasiveness and mystification of the neoliberal project throughout even progressive political activity.

Dobson (2015, p. 29) expands on the emergence of the postfeminist milieu by locating and defining four central conditions⁷ that define this cultural moment:

- 1) the continued and prominent objectification of female bodies in Western visual culture, now framed as ‘chosen/agentive’;
- 2) the prominence of ‘new femininities’ in culture and representations that construct and address girls and young women as strong, confident, capable and fun-loving subjects in contrast to earlier models of weak femininity;
- 3) highly publicised debates about the sexualisation of girls and young women in Western cultures, which have positioned girls and young women as in need of protection, surveillance and regulation;
- 4) the psychopathologisation of femininity and the institutionalisation of ‘gender melancholia.’

The first three conditions presented here by Dobson (2015) are deeply entangled with the omnipresence of radically visual social media platforms in almost every element of cultural practice. The intense popularity of these ultra-visible and highly accessible digital spaces has created fertile ground for the emergence of ‘a fourth wave of feminist practice’ (Guillard 2016, p. 609). While some debates continue as to whether the fourth wave constitutes a novel form of feminist practice, many scholars agree that the entanglement with digital media has created the conditions for a new form of the feminist movement to emerge. Indeed, fourth-wave feminism is often described in reference to this deep entanglement with social technologies. Zimmerman (2017, p. 54) suggests fourth-wave feminism is unique from prior iterations of the movement in that it ‘focuses on and takes up online technology,’ and makes the claim that social media platforms such as Twitter ‘provide an unprecedented means for solidarity and activism.’ Similarly, Peroni and Rodak (2020) propose that the fourth wave is characterised by ‘the global connection of this movement and its capacity for analytical, practical and symbolic elaboration, made possible thanks to the use of the web and, in particular, of social media by the new generations of women from all continents’ (Peroni & Rodak 2020, p. 5S).

⁷ Dobson refers to these points as ‘conditions’ in order to ‘invoke the notion of a particular climate that must be navigated’ (2015, p. 29).

Discourse around fourth-wave feminist politics generally positions the movement in a positive light, often citing the prioritisation of intersectionality as a significant ideological success of the movement (Zimmerman 2017). Fourth-wave feminism is often cited as a response to the ‘postfeminist sensibilities’ of modern culture which, as previously discussed, frequently relegate the movement to a historical moment, now left behind by society. Blevins (2018, p. 102) suggests that the increase in young people self-identifying as fourth-wave feminists on social media indicates a ‘fundamental shift in the approach to feminism.’ While Blevins does raise some concern regarding the limitations of relying on social media for engaging in feminist politics, her critique is limited to issues around platform content policies and the digital divide. Many conceptualisations of fourth-wave feminism fail to take into consideration the prevailing socio-political contexts that shape our everyday realities and – perhaps more significantly – shape the nature of the platforms that provide the digital spaces through which fourth-wave feminist politics emerge. Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg’s (2019) description of neoliberal and popular feminism as dependent on contemporary digital media platforms necessarily problematises this entanglement. They state that ‘these iterations of contemporary feminism do not critique or challenge the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism (or the media platforms that are co-constitutive with capitalism), but rather contribute to its normalisation’ (Banet-Weiser, Gill & Rottenberg 2019, p. 4). The same might be said for fourth-wave feminist perspectives that regularly obfuscate the influence of the digital media technologies and social platforms which constitute a central component of contemporary feminist practice.

While each iteration of contemporary feminism is unique, ‘it is important to identify commonalities among feminists in their motivations for new communicative practices, in order to more fully understand the relationship between networked media and activism for social change’ (Fotopoulou 2016, p. 990). It is precisely this ‘networked’ element of contemporary feminism that exists as a significant commonality between modern conceptualisations of the women’s movement. However, of great concern is the extent to which prevailing mechanisms of power shape practice in online spaces and enact a generative force over the ways feminist politics is able to play out in the digital sphere, as well as how effective this novel form of activism is. While it has been noted that networked feminist practice ‘is entangled in both liberatory politics and systems of oppression’ (Clark-Parsons 2021, p. 377), a critical consideration of the platform politics that govern practice and shape behaviours online is rarely explored. Networked feminism(s) utilise social media platforms, blogs and other Internet services in order to mobilise and coordinate women and other minority groups against perceived discriminatory acts and practices on a global scale. The mounting influence of networked feminist practice can be

observed in the sheer number of hashtags⁸ that have been operationalised on social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter over the past decade to publicise social and political issues that continue to impact the lives of women. An early example was #Fem2, launched in 2008, which aimed to reignite the spark of feminist activity by bringing attention to conversations and articles about the future of feminism. More recently, the launch of the #MeToo movement in 2017 was intended to raise awareness of sexual violence and sexual harassment. Across this spectrum, hashtags exist that represent a staggering range of voices, identities and aims within the wider feminist movement. Contrary to Dean's (2009) assertion that the capitalist architecture of social media platforms may undermine the liberatory potential of the technology, it has been argued that these dynamic, digital, alternative publics have the capacity to generate powerful discourses that can aid the struggle against the 'hegemony of dominant power' (Demirhan & Çakır-Demirhan 2015, p.309). However, such emancipatory narratives are problematised by the influence of postfeminist sensibilities over contemporary manifestations of feminist practice, reliant as they are on the Internet and digital media technologies.

In order to best capture the essence of contemporary feminist practice as it occurs within the 2XC community, two key terms will be operationalised throughout this thesis: networked feminism and fourth-wave feminism. Fourth-wave feminism captures the spectrum of conceptualisations of contemporary feminism as described above – all of which are cognisant of and reactive to the realities of the contemporary postfeminist milieu – and will be used to describe the ideological component of feminist practice as it plays out within the 2XC community. On the other hand, the term 'networked feminism' highlights the profound significance of digital communications technologies for the contemporary Western manifestations of the feminist movement. As such, this term will be employed to indicate the 'networked' element of what is considered to be the fourth wave of the feminist movement. It is this networked dimension of contemporary feminism, and how it plays out on Reddit's r/TwoXChromosomes, that is of great concern to this research.

2.5 'The Front Page of the Internet': Reddit's Primary Platform Affordances

The self-proclaimed 'front page of the Internet,' Reddit is a pseudonymous social media website geared towards discussion, the rating of web content, and news aggregation. Founded in 2005, the site initially launched with two distinct message boards, or subreddits: Reddit.com (the main

⁸ Words or phrases prefixed by '#' primarily used to frame discussions and debates.

link aggregate page) and r/NSFW⁹. At the time of writing, Reddit is host to over 130,000 active, volunteer-moderated subreddits, and thousands more are created by users of the site each day. Reddit's registered users (often referred to as 'redditors') can submit posts to topic-specific subreddits, usually in the form of original content (OC) (usually either image, text or video posts), reposts of previously shared content, or links to content hosted elsewhere on the web. The 'r/' prefix is used to denote a subreddit (e.g., r/TwoXChromosomes), while the 'u/' prefix is used to denote a user (e.g., u/spez). The subject matter of Reddit's communities is extremely varied, from particularly broad topics, such as r/Science (one of Reddit's most popular communities, with over 26.6 million members¹⁰), to the absurdly niche, including r/BreadStapledtoTrees (home to over 292,000 users¹¹ dedicated to sharing images of bread stapled to trees). Reddit simultaneously provides a platform for both the in-depth, serious discussions characteristic of dedicated web forums as well as the fleeting entertainment fix provided by the more dominant social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. Despite fast becoming one of the most popular social websites on the internet, Reddit has received significantly less academic attention than other socially oriented media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Nevertheless, over the last several years, scholars from a range of disciplines have turned their attention towards Reddit as a significant arena of digital practice (Glenski, Pennycuff & Weninger 2017; Massanari 2017, 2019; Panek, Harrison & Hou 2019; Park, Conway & Chen 2018; Shen & Rose 2019; Squirrel 2019; Zhan et al. 2019).

To understand the interactions and activities occurring on Reddit, it is paramount to gain an understanding of how the platform operates as a unique field of practice, contextualising it within the broader field of power, which is governed by the growing influence of consumer culture, surveillance capitalism and neoliberalism. This understanding must go beyond a simple description of platform design choices and instead interrogate the ways in which hierarchies are dismantled or maintained, power is distributed or accumulated, and dominant ideologies are preserved or rejected as a result of Reddit's platform design and algorithmic schematics. The first stage of such an analysis is to outline the features of Reddit in order to understand how they are employed by users of the site, as well as how users of the site are 'nudged' into certain patterns of behaviour as a result. Figure 5 details the 'anatomy' of a Reddit post, briefly demonstrating the functionality of the platform's user interface, as well as the ways in which various types of content are displayed and sorted by Reddit's algorithms.

⁹ An acronym used widely across the Internet that stands for 'not safe for work'.

¹⁰ As of August 2021.

¹¹ As of August 2021.

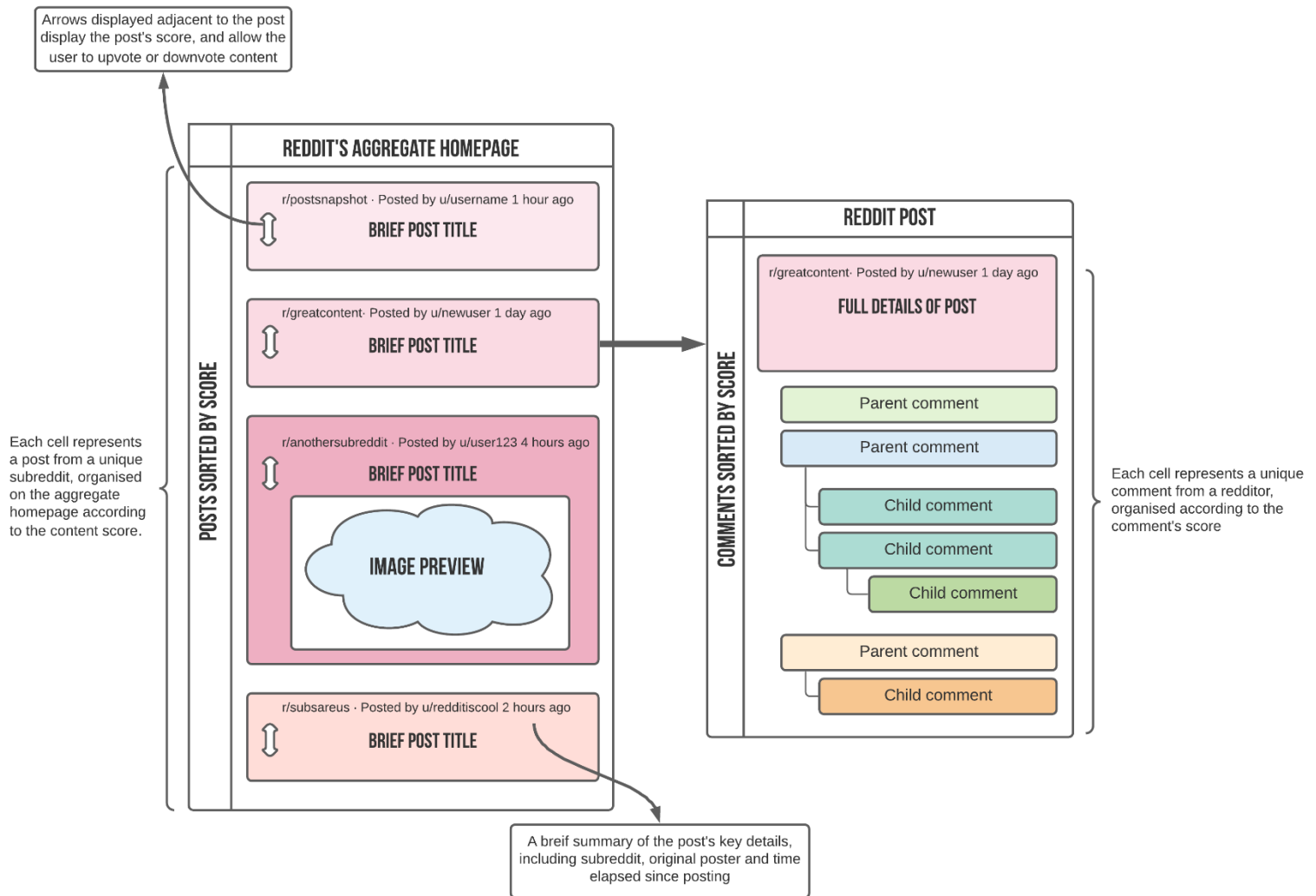


Figure 5 – Anatomy of a Reddit post

The concept of ‘affordance’ in its most basic form refers to the possibilities (and limitations) that engender potential action within a particular environment. Bucher and Helmond (2018) explore the evolution of the operationalisation of the term, mapping the trajectory of its use as an analytical tool through ecological psychology to design and useability research. Their approach to ‘platform-sensitive’ affordances is of most significance to this thesis. In social media research, the concept of affordance is operationalised in order to capture ‘the relationship between the materiality of media and human agency’ (Bucher & Helmond 2018, p. 239). The platform-sensitive approach to affordances ‘is meant to emphasise the specificity of platforms as a socio-technological environment that draw different users together and which orchestrate the relations between different platform users’ (Bucher & Helmond 2018, p. 250). Conceptualising Reddit’s features as affordances in this manner allows for an analysis of the possibilities and limitations

users of the platform experience. This provides a significant baseline for understanding networked feminist practice as it occurs on Reddit. For instance, the algorithms and platform design governing Reddit would have little impact or purpose if deprived of interaction with human users. Similarly, human users of Reddit require the platform's user interface and its algorithms in order to interact with user-generated content and, of course, with other users. The behaviour of users and their experience of the site is constrained and railroaded in many ways through interactions with non-human actors. Conceptualising the platform design and algorithmic workings in such a way helps to lend a certain concreteness to the ethereal reality of the Internet and its various environments, and aids in the understanding of the platform as a 'space' in which action and interaction are shaped and defined by both human and non-human actions and interactions. Further, recognising the function of affordances as features that 'may afford different things to various types of users, including end-users, developers and advertisers' lends perspective to the multitude of ways in which the platform affordances shape the experiences of different users, at different times, for different purposes (Bucher & Helmond 2018, p.250). The following section explores some of Reddit's most significant affordances and the possibilities and limitations for action engendered by these affordances.

Account Creation and Pseudonymity

Account creation on Reddit is very straightforward. At the time of writing, the process involves the optional provision of an email address, selection of a username, input of a password and completion of a CAPTCHA¹². Email verification is encouraged but unnecessary for users to access the full functionality of the platform. As such, users may use temporary 'spoof' email addresses that are not tied in any way to their identity¹³, or choose not to enter an email address at all. The lack of necessary identifying information for setting up a Reddit account means that the platform has historically lacked a strong user identity system. User 'profiles' consist of an amalgamation of a user's comment and post history, representing a departure from deeply curatable and visually oriented spaces such as Facebook and Instagram. While the site can be accessed without creating an account, being logged in to a Reddit account allows users to comment, post, and vote on content, as well as tailor their Reddit homepage to their interests by subscribing to particular subreddits. The affordances around account creation and user profiles create the environment of pseudonymity that sets Reddit apart from highly personalised social

¹² CAPTCHA is an acronym for 'Completely Automated Public Turing Test to tell Computers and Humans Apart'. CAPTCHAs are used by websites that wish to restrict usage or access by bots.

¹³ There are a number of websites that will provide temporary, throwaway email addresses that can be used in place of a legitimate email address during website sign-up processes.

media platforms linked to legitimate identities at one end of the spectrum, and completely anonymous web forums on the other. However, it must be noted that user profiles on Reddit were only announced in 2017, and so are a relatively new addition to the site. Since the beginning of this research project, Reddit has been continually implementing new features in order to further customise and personalise the user experience. This indicates that the site may be taking steps to move away from its pseudonymous roots and towards a more personalised platform, an inference supported by the platform's increasing concern with the capacity for Reddit to generate profit – a point I will revisit later in this section.

As it stands, 'Reddit does not foreground users' identities or levels of experience or expertise' (Panek, Harrison & Hou, 2019, para. 4), and so presently the site retains a degree of pseudonymity. It is rare for users to share the details of their account with others, even friends and family who may use the site. Still, when sharing deeply personal information or using the platform as a mechanism for confession, Reddit users will often create what are known as 'throwaway' accounts in order to post content and commentary that cannot be linked back to their main account. This practice indicates a level of curation that goes into the formation of user identities on the platform and an unwillingness to tarnish even a pseudonymous digital expression of the self through sharing controversial or embarrassing details that may be weaponised by other users at a later date¹⁴. As Miller (2020, pp. 39-40) suggests, 'confession-oriented threads operate in a manner different from most social networking sites, wherein users are tied to their offline identity and connected to those whose opinions they care about deeply.'

Commentary, Awards, Voting and Karma Accumulation

Each piece of content posted to one of the site's many subreddits comprises what is often referred to as a 'thread.' Within a thread, users will comment directly on the individual piece of content that has been shared. Reddit's users are able to comment on both the original posts and the commentary made by other users. Thus, users can post and reply to comments on almost every piece of visible content posted to the site. Comments made in direct response to the content posted are referred to as 'parent comments,' while all subsequent replies to parent comments are called 'child comments' (see Figure 5). User commentary adds dynamism to the content through the provision of extra information, humour and additional context. A key affordance of Reddit's platform design is the ability for users to upvote and downvote submissions and comments,

¹⁴ It is not uncommon for users engaged in conversation to look back through each other's post or comment history in order to weaponise perspectives or experiences previously shared across the site.

increasing or decreasing the visibility of the content accordingly. Reddit also has a relatively new rewards system, in which users can exchange real money for ‘Reddit coins,’ which can then be traded for awards. In a process referred to as ‘gilding,’ these awards can then be bestowed upon the submissions or commentary of other users on the site ‘as a way to show appreciation for an exceptional contribution to Reddit’ (Reddit.com n.d.). The cumulative score of the votes a submission or comment attracts is referred to as ‘karma.’ Karma scores accumulate for each individual user, contributing to their overall karma score on the website. According to Reddit, this overall score ‘reflects how much a user has contributed to the Reddit community by an approximate indication of the total votes a user has earned on their submissions (“post karma”) and comments (“comment karma”)’ (Reddit.com 2020b). Recently, Reddit has also introduced a mechanism which awards users karma points based on the awards they have received for their submissions or commentary. In an r/changelog¹⁵ post from September 2020, it was announced that after experimenting with the idea for a while, the decision had been made to implement karma accumulation based on the value and number of rewards a post or submission receives (u/plgmonedge 2020).

Significantly, the visibility of content and commentary is predicated on its karma score. For instance, a post that receives a high karma score will be more visible in the default sorting setting of subreddits (known as ‘hot’). In general, the ‘hot’ algorithm privileges newer content, as it takes into consideration the age of the submission and the accumulated karma score when sorting content. Posts from any subreddit that receive a high number of upvotes may make it to the ‘front page’ of Reddit (or r/all) – an aggregation of the most popular content from across the site. In terms of commentary, comments with the highest accumulated karma score will sit at the top of the comment thread and thus be the most visible, while those with a low or negative karma score will sink to the bottom. Though the reasons individual users may have for upvoting or downvoting content are extremely diverse and often dependent on context, the platform affordance of karma accumulation is significant given previous research which found that ‘positive social influence accumulates’ and has a substantial influence over ‘rating dynamics in systems designed to harness collective intelligence’ (Muchnik, Aral & Taylor 2013, p.650). For Reddit, this means that it is highly likely that a positive karma score on a comment made early on a post tends to snowball, as users upvote content that is already sitting at the top of the comment thread. Reddit’s official help guide suggests users follow ‘Reddiquette’ when voting, which is an informal expression of the values embodied by the ideal Reddit user. According to Reddiquette, users will ideally upvote

¹⁵ According to the subreddit’s ‘about community’ section, r/changelog provides ‘official information from Reddit, Inc. on minor updates, and bug fixes applied to Reddit’ (r/ChangeLog 2021)

content that is of a high quality, regardless of whether or not they agree with the original poster's sentiment:

Vote. If you think something contributes to conversation, upvote it. If you think it does not contribute to the subreddit or is off-topic in a particular community, downvote it.
(Reddit.com 2020a)

While the help forum's entry on Reddiquette outlines the intended use of the voting function on Reddit, there is a common consensus among users of the site that it is more common for users to downvote content and comments that express ideas or opinions that run contrary to their worldview. Thus, what comes to be regarded as the most popular commentary on Reddit is largely influenced by social 'herding effects' (Glenski & Weninger 2017), while the least popular commentary is rendered thus as a result of individual users' preconceptions and ideologies.

It is important to note that the very design of social networks and social media platforms influences the way users act and interact in the spaces they are provided, and a platform's 'defaults' are more than just technical necessities, they are ideological manoeuvrings (Dijck 2013). For instance, as noted earlier, Reddit users are able to 'upvote' or 'downvote' content and comments. The total sum of votes, known as karma, is what determines the relative rank of all content and comments published on the site. There is a certain level of prestige afforded to those users with a high karma count, and the quest for karma may encourage the user to post content that she believes will receive upvotes. Thus, the capacity to vote on content is levied as a social value, and so it has a direct impact on cultural practice, prolificity, and shaping the communicative repertoires of Reddit users.

Content Moderation

A particularly significant affordance of political organisation and facilitation on Reddit is the ability for volunteers to moderate the content and commentary of a community's constituents. A growing body of scholarship is concerned with issues around content moderation on Reddit (Gibson 2017; Shen & Rose 2019; Squirrell 2019). According to Reddit Help, a moderator 'is just a regular redditor... except they volunteer to perform a few humble duties within a particular community' (RedditHelp 2020). These duties include, but are not limited to, setting up the community, deciding on its subject, removing posts deemed to be questionable or off-topic, and banning users for spamming or posting abusive content. Further, Reddit's own guidance on volunteer moderation asks that users 'moderate on quality, not opinion. Well written and interesting content can be worthwhile, even if you disagree' (Reddit.com 2020a). When studying the communicative practices of any subreddit, the community's moderation policy provides a

contextualising framework to the online discourses that uphold and reflect the community's values (Gibson 2017). The moderation policies of autonomous communities and the affordances of volunteer moderators on Reddit act as influential aspects of a subreddit's culture, as the participation of users is shaped in direct response to the style and application of the moderation policy.

Practice on individual subreddits is ostensibly restricted by the site-wide rules, enforced by Reddit's paid administrators. Reddit's administrators take a laissez-faire approach when it comes to enforcing the site-wide policies in individual subreddits, due to both Reddit's 'free speech' policy as well as the sheer size of the platform. For the most part, the task of content control falls to the teams of volunteers responsible for moderation across individual subreddits, known colloquially as 'mods.' A study by Chandrasekharan et al. (2018) examined the enforceable norms that dictate moderation policy and behaviour across a large group of the top subreddits, identifying the norms that guide acceptable behaviours across Reddit. These 'hidden norms of the Internet' are not the site-wide rules enforced by paid administrators; rather they are established and maintained by mods. The study found three levels of community norms shaping the behaviour of users on the platform: 'macro' norms that are 'universal to most parts of reddit,' 'meso' norms which 'are shared across certain groups of subreddits' and 'micro' norms that 'are specific to individual, relatively unique subreddits' (Chandrasekharan et al. 2018, p. 32). The wide and varied nature of subreddits and the people who moderate them tend to produce different interpretations of what is considered 'unwelcome content' across the site, resulting in a lack of coherence in the enforcement of Reddit's content policy. At the time of writing, the site-wide content policy cites the following as 'unwelcome content':

- Illegal content
- Involuntary pornography
- Sexual or suggestive content involving minors
- Content that incites or encourages violence
- Content that threatens, harasses, bullies or encourages others to do so
- Content that exposes personal or confidential information
- Impersonating individuals in a misleading or deceptive manner
- Using Reddit to solicit or facilitate any transaction or gift involving certain goods and services
- Content considered to be spam (r/Reddit.com 2019).

Further, Reddit's content policy also prohibits certain user behaviours on Reddit, including engaging in vote manipulation, doing anything considered to interfere with the normal function

of the site, or bypassing punishment or restrictions by creating multiple accounts. Moderation policies go beyond these site-wide rules stipulated by Reddit's administrators, and are tailored to suit the tone, style and type of content desired by the specific subreddit for which they are developed. Moderation policies are generally designed to encourage cohesive communities, civil discussion and topical content. Given the massive discrepancy between the number of active users and the number of volunteer moderators on subreddits necessitates the use of several automated moderation tools built using Reddit's open application programming interface (API). The most significant tool at the moderators' disposal is known as 'Automoderator' (Automod). Automod is often programmed to curate the user-generated content submissions and commentary posted to a community, acting as a filtration system to ensure that content fits with the theme, tone and style of the subreddit. Some of the key actions performed by Automod are:

- enabling or disabling spam filters
- automatic removal of submissions/commentary that receive a certain number of reports
- removal of submissions/comments that contain certain words or phrases
- automatic reporting of submissions/comments containing certain words or phrases.

While Automod is one of the most widely used automated moderation tools, subreddits also regularly employ other third-party bots for assistance in regulating content. These third-party bots have the capacity to 'blanket-ban'¹⁶ or 'soft-ban'¹⁷ users based on their previous history of participation on the site. Automoderation tools with the capacity to blanket-ban or soft-ban users with perspectives that challenge a subreddit's dominant perspective may undermine the possibility for competing and complex narratives to emerge. Further, the concrete details of the use of automated moderation tools are rarely, if ever, shared with subreddit participants or the wider Reddit community. This practice is often justified by the concern that making these details freely available might encourage miscreants or antagonistic parties to bypass screening filters or other moderation practices.

¹⁶ Blanket-banning refers to the practice of banning all members of a certain group or class from participating in an activity. In terms of Reddit, an example of blanket-banning would be the moderators of one subreddit banning all users who participate in a different, often ideologically incompatible subreddit.

¹⁷ A soft-ban refers to a silent ban that is subreddit-specific and implemented by Automoderator. The ban is 'silent' because the user is not notified that they are banned, and the subreddit will function normally for them. However, none of the submissions or comments they post will be visible to other users of the subreddit.

2.5.1 Reddit's Road to Revenue

Understanding the impact of progressive social movement organisation on the Reddit platform requires a brief explanation of the platform's beginnings, and the ways in which it pivoted from a community-focused business model to one most attractive to potential advertisers. The changes to the Reddit model happened with relative swiftness, and while the perceptions of the platform remain largely unaltered, the underlying ideological mechanisms that govern the site are radically different from their original form. This perspective aids understanding the nature of moderation and of communities on the Reddit platform, as they tend to support an overarching advertising-friendly image that the company now prioritises over the user experience. The lore behind Reddit often frames the site as having somewhat humble beginnings, dreamt up in the college dormitories of the University of Virginia by roommates Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian (Lagoria-Chafkin 2012). Yet while there is a kernel of truth to this tale, the development of Reddit is in large part due to the support of Paul Graham and his seed money start-up accelerator company, YCombinator. Huffman and Ohanian had originally approached Graham with a pitch for an SMS messaging food delivery service which was ultimately rejected. However, it was this encounter that eventually led to a brainstorming session between the three men during which Graham raised the idea of developing the 'front page of the Internet' in a similar vein to 'news aggregation websites like Slashdot and bookmark sites like Delicious' (Taylor 2020). Huffman and Ohanian were tasked with the development of this idea, supported by a USD100,000 seed grant from YCombinator. In June 2005, Reddit was officially launched. Within 16 months of the site launching, it was acquired by Condé Nast Publications – a global mass media company.

The platform soon began exploding in popularity, and it was due to this rapid growth that Reddit began to seriously consider itself as a platform for advertisers. In early 2009, the Reddit team announced that they would begin trialling the implementation of sponsored links on the platform in order to experiment with potential avenues for generating income through advertising. In a blog post published in early 2009, co-founder Steve Huffman wrote about sponsored links:

This is a new method of advertising that we think is a better fit for reddit than other more traditional approaches. Sponsored Links will have a blue background colour and will say 'Sponsored Link' in the corner to make it clear the link was not submitted from the community. (Huffman 2009)

In the same post, Huffman indicated he was aware of the animosity users of the platform had towards advertisements but claimed 'they are a fact of life on the web' (Huffman 2009). Towards the end of the same year, the platform announced it was officially launching sponsored links as 'advertising by redditors, for redditors' (Reddit 2009). Sponsored links were designed in line with

the specifications outlined above – an approach known as ‘native advertising’ – and could be upvoted and downvoted in the same manner as all other content posted to the platform. According to the announcement, the first iteration of the sponsored link would not be able to target specific subreddits – but it was made clear that the team had ‘such an ability in mind for version 2’ (Reddit 2009). The post tags¹⁸ included ‘mo money mo problems,’ and ‘sell outs,’ indicating a level of casual self-awareness at the perception of introducing advertising onto the platform, as well as a degree of deference to the platform’s loyal user base. The tone and style of the 2009 blog post, as well as the claim that this was ‘advertising by redditors, for redditors,’ is revealing in terms of the platform’s prioritisation of the user experience over potential advertising profits.

The platform’s explosive growth showed no signs of slowing. In 2014, Reddit was attracting around 112 million unique visitors and approximately 5.4 billion page views each month (Isaac 2014). The potential for financial gain became clear, and during the same year serious discussions began when the company tasked two executives to deploy a profit strategy so as to monetise Reddit (Isaac 2014). In turn, Zuboff suggests that ‘new economic logics and their commercial models are discovered by people in a time and place and then perfected through trial and error’ (Zuboff 2019, p. 63). In the case of Reddit, clear avenues to profit had previously been established by digital giants such as Google. During this time, Reddit assiduously began travelling down the path forged by Google, in that the extremely valuable behavioural data generated as a result of users interacting with its product was first put to use to improve the user experience, before becoming the driving force behind its impending corporatisation. Much like Google, for whom advertising was sidelined during the company’s infancy, the pressure from investors and the lure of exponential profit proved to be the undoing of Reddit’s consumer-friendly attitude.

Advertisers and other market interests would have been, by this time, well aware of the extent of the valuable behavioural data generated by Reddit’s users. The problem remained that many of Reddit’s users were considered to behave in ways tended to counter the notion of their potential profitability – notoriously hostile to advertisers and generally suspicious of marketing activity on the site. At this time, Reddit still retained much of its original zeal, being known for users who were ‘highly engaged and cutting edge,’ and a loosely organised business model with a demonstrable commitment to the preservation of Internet autonomy and freedom of speech (Moses 2015, para. 1). Despite this, Steve Huffman (who had recently taken up the position of

¹⁸ Tags are akin to digital keywords that provide a taxonomy for the organisation of online content. When content is ‘tagged’ with a particular phrase, it is possible to click on that phrase (or tag) to see other content on that website that has been tagged in the same way.

CEO at the company) claimed that Reddit was ‘a very weak business model right now,’ signalling a shift in the sensibilities of Reddit’s leadership team during this period away from the experience of the user and towards the development of a sustainable – and more importantly profitable – business model (Moses 2015, para. 2). Reddit’s situation during this period was in stark contrast to the rampant monetisation of other social websites, such as Facebook, which saw record growth in advertising revenue in 2015. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg said at the time, ‘2015 was a great year for Facebook. Our community continued to grow and our business is thriving. We continue to invest in better serving our community, building our business and connecting the world’ (Facebook Investor Relations 2016, para. 2).

The team at Reddit appeared eager to make the most of the data their site generated, and in early 2015 Reddit hired ex-Google employee Zubair Jandali as the first Vice President of Sales, cementing the platform’s push towards becoming ‘advertiser friendly.’ Within three years of Jandali joining the company, Reddit’s branding team had expanded from eight to 90 people. According to Jandali at the time, this growth was the result of moves ‘to reach the company’s expansive audience, which has doubled in the past three years’ (Castillo 2018, para. 8). In order to better serve potential advertisers, the brand strategy team developed a ‘Reddit-friendly’ toolkit to help brands write relevant posts, in order to ensure sponsored posts were written with the right language for the appropriate subreddits in order to appeal to Reddit users and fit in with the platform (Peterson 2017). During this period, options were introduced for advertisers that went beyond the ability to purchase sponsored links or content, allowing them to take over the front page of a subreddit or the entire platform for a full day, as well as providing the option to purchase promoted advertisements and/or place banner ads on the top and side of the page (Castillo 2018).

Recent commentary regarding Reddit’s feasibility as a platform for advertisers has shifted dramatically from the earlier sentiments expressed about this, which suggested that Reddit was a wild, unpredictable place with a user base often hostile to marketing or advertising efforts. Indeed, a recent article described the platform as a ‘marketer’s dream’ due to its inherent diversity (Gotter 2019). In early 2019, Jandali moved to an advisory position with the company, and Shariq Rizvi was hired as Vice President of Ads Products and Engineering to usher in an intensified approach to branding and marketing. Rizvi had previously worked on leveraging Twitter’s advertising operation into ‘a multi-billion-dollar business,’ and was brought on at Reddit in order to ‘build out Reddit’s performance and direct response offerings for advertisers in 2019’ (u/thunderemoji 2019, para. 6). In 2020, the company stated its major goal for the year was to maximise ‘new and premium opportunities for brands’ (Reddit Staff 2020, para 12). In March 2020 the ‘trending takeover’ was introduced, an advertising affordance which – according to Reddit’s official blog

– is aimed at ‘brands looking to position themselves at the centre of discussion on reddit’ by providing access to ‘premium venues in two of the most commonly visited areas of the platform: Reddit’s Search tab and Popular feed’ (Reddit Staff 2020, para. 2).

Since 2015, Reddit has transformed from a community-focused platform to an advertiser-friendly space, prioritising above all the interests and investments of businesses seeking to market their products. Of course, such a transformation indicates the underlying motivations of the platform in its most contemporary manifestation: it is a vehicle for the accumulation of profit. Reddit, as a platform friendly to corporate interests, promotes the prohibitive exclusivity reserved for the largest and most profitable companies in possession of the means and purchasing power required to market their products in high-traffic digital spaces. Reddit thus guarantees ‘that power will remain in the same hands’ (Adorno & Horkheimer 1997, p. 162), contributing to the social and cultural reproduction of the status quo, reframing the digital community as yet another avenue for potential consumer access, and perpetuating a relatively singular perspective that favours industry above all else. Such a contextualisation is absolutely vital if we are to understand the ways in which Reddit as a platform is influencing the shape and nature of networked feminist ideology. The contemporary manifestation of Reddit and its influence are deeply informed by the corporate logics of neoliberalism; the extent to which this permeates into the values and discourse of networked feminist communities on the platform is a central concern of this thesis.

2.6 ‘You are the Community’: Reddit’s r/TwoXChromosomes

In the following section, I introduce Reddit’s r/TwoXChromosomes (2XC) community (the subreddit central to the research conducted in this thesis) and summarise its history, its core values and the current guidelines for participation as published by the 2XC moderation team. Named after the chromosomes that are responsible for the female sex, 2XC is a forum-style community home to approximately 13.1 million¹⁹ subscribers. It describes itself as ‘a subreddit for both serious and silly content, and intended for women’s perspectives’ (r/TwoXChromosomes 2021). The 2XC community was established in 2009, five years after Reddit launched. According to a 2012 interview with the Daily Dot on the subreddit’s third birthday, founder and moderator *u/HighFructoseCornFeces* claimed that, at the time, participation on Reddit was considered to be restricted to the ‘stereotypical redditor... a white male working in IT’ (Orsini 2012). According to the interview, *u/HighFructoseCornFeces* noticed users on the platform began to ‘confess’ that

¹⁹ As of 29 August 2021 (Subreddit Stats 2021).

they were women, and after a post was made to the r/AskReddit forum calling for the creation of a dedicated space on the platform for women, 2XC was created. Since that time, the popularity of the subreddit has continued to grow (Figure 6), and it is currently counted among the top 50 active subreddits on the platform. It is important to note that the sharp rise that can be observed around mid-2014 is a result of 2XC becoming a ‘default’ subreddit: these were the 50 subreddits that new users were automatically subscribed to when joining the site in order to pre-populate a new user’s front page with content. They could be unsubscribed from at any time. The plateau that occurs in early to mid-2017, as shown in Figure 6, coincides with the decision to abandon the default subreddit concept, meaning that new users would no longer be automatically subscribed to the 50 ‘cherry picked’ communities (u/simbawulf 2017a, 2017b). Instead, new users would land on a then new aggregate subreddit launched by Reddit called r/popular, a filtered feed of the most popular posts on Reddit. Despite this change, 2XC has retained many of the subscribers gained during its three-year period of being classified as a default subreddit and has continued to grow.

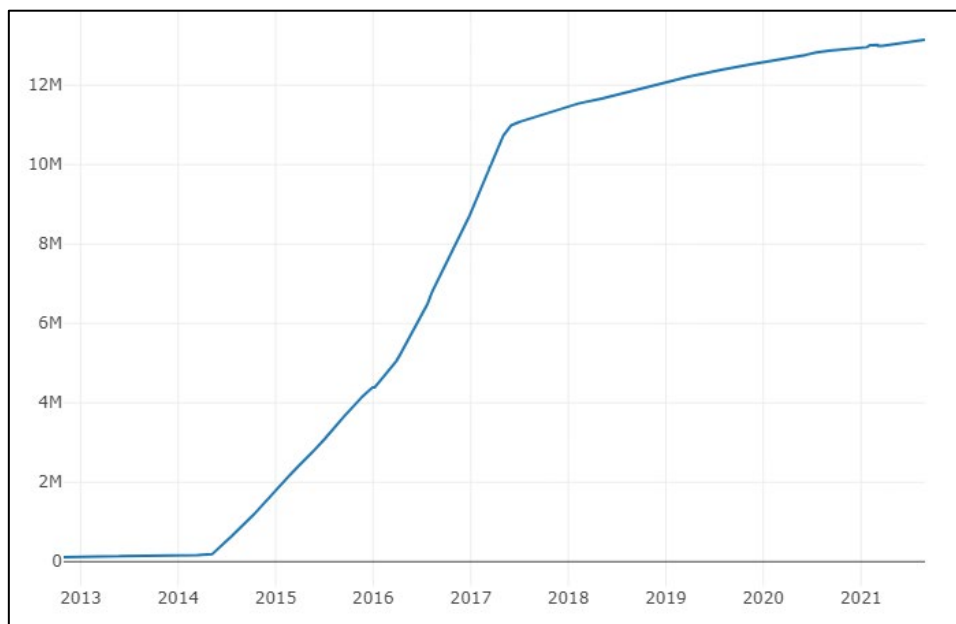


Figure 6 – Growth of 2XC subreddit subscribers from 2012 to 2021²⁰

Reddit has frequently been framed as a digital space hostile to feminism and social justice advocacy (Farrell et al. 2019; Massanari 2017, 2019). This framing is particularly common in scholarship focused on the ‘Gamergate’ phenomenon, a movement ostensibly concerned with ethics in videogame journalism that is better known for an organised resistance to progressive politics and the harassment of female and transgender videogame developers and critics

²⁰ Subreddit Stats (2021)

(Aghazadeh et al. 2018; Salter 2018). It has been argued that the platform politics governing Reddit are responsible for the production of ‘toxic technocultures’ (Massanari 2017). According to Massanari, ‘toxic technocultures’ reify ‘the desires of certain groups (often young, white, cis-gendered, heterosexual males’ while ignoring and marginalising others’ (Massanari 2017 p. 330). Massanari suggests that it is the governance, algorithms and culture of Reddit that ultimately engender these ‘toxic technocultures’ and give rise to what has been termed ‘geek masculinity’ (Massanari 2019). Further, she proposes that those who are ‘seen as harbouring “social justice” tendencies serve as potential threats to be silenced, harassed, or objectified,’ with ‘feminism in particular ... viewed negatively on the platform’ (Massanari 2019, p. 20). Such perspectives often frame the experiences of women online as being fraught with danger, and they fail to recognise the scale and reach of communities such as 2XC. Further, recent moves by Reddit appear to signal an attempt to move towards creating a more progressive platform, including an update to Reddit’s sitewide rules in August 2020. Specifically, the first rule of Reddit’s content policy was updated to include a focus on the prohibition of the promotion of hate based on identity or vulnerability²¹. Rule 1 now states:

Remember the human. Reddit is a place for creating community and belonging, not for attacking marginalised or vulnerable groups of people. Everyone has a right to use Reddit free of harassment, bullying, and threats of violence. Communities and users that incite violence or that promote hate based on identity or vulnerability will be banned. (Reddit Inc. n.d., para 7)

The updated rules led to the removal of over 7,000 ‘hateful’ subreddits, including a popular pro-Trump community called *r/TheDonald*. Thus, the extent to which Reddit continues to reproduce the ‘toxic technocultures’ described by Massanari (2017) should be revisited, as these criticisms may not be as salient as perhaps they once were. Indeed, as will be demonstrated, the research conducted for this thesis suggests that 2XC provides a safe space for not only women, but all people who share perspectives and behaviours that indicate a common ideological approach to contemporary feminism.

²¹ Prior to this update, the first rule of Reddit’s content policy stated: ‘Reddit is a platform for communities to discuss, connect, and share in an open environment, home to some of the most authentic content anywhere online. The nature of this content might be funny, serious, offensive, or anywhere in between. While participating, it’s important to keep in mind this value above all others: show enough respect to others so that we all may continue to enjoy Reddit for what it is’ (Reddit Inc. n.d., para. 1 [archived 2020]).

2.6.1 r/TwoXChromosomes Moderation Policy

The approach to moderation differs greatly between subreddits. As a result, individual moderation policies ‘act as an independent factor in the study of subreddit discourse,’ (Gibson 2019, p.6) as users’ practice is altered in response to the style of and changes to a community’s moderation policy. When studying the communicative and discursive practices of any subreddit, the community’s moderation policy must be analysed in order to understand why the tone, content and ideological leaning of the subreddit is geared in a particular direction. However, moderation policies can be far more extensive and far less consistent than they first appear, and they are often interpreted in a multitude of ways. Reddit communities will often fall into one of two styles of moderation: either encouraging ‘free speech’ or focusing on the development of a ‘safe space’ (Gibson 2019). Spaces promoting free speech are often as difficult to quantify as the concept of free speech itself, yet they often appear to occupy a politically antithetical position to safe spaces, with free speech often featuring as a central principle of conservative or right-leaning political communities. At its core, a community built on the principles of free speech offers the participant the protection of the ‘street corner speaker’; criticism and opinions are not silenced, and individuals are not muzzled in any way, regardless of their political opinions or position (Sunstein 1995). Conversely, the concept of safe spaces is considered to have its roots in the radical feminist communities of the 1970s as a means to provide an environment in which women could ‘speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance’ (Kenney 2001, p. 24).

‘Safe spaces’ have become increasingly popular over the past decade with the increased visibility of traditionally marginalised groups on the internet, particularly those falling outside of heteronormative ideas of gender and sexuality. The concept of a safe space is ‘premised on the idea that power relations are inherent within all structures, including speech interactions’ (Gibson 2017, p. 2351) and so are developed to encourage individuals within a safe space to consider the intersectional privileges bestowed upon them by their position within the social and cultural hierarchy. Safe space policies are most often implemented in left-leaning political communities. They are implemented in certain groups and organisations in order to provide a platform for the voices of traditionally marginalised people and prevent the exclusion of those most affected by structural discrimination (Shen & Rose 2019). To fully understand the nature of discourse on 2XC, it is important to consider the status of this community as a safe space, as this will directly impact practice within the community, including how users interact on the subreddit and what kind of content is posted. In defining 2XC as a safe space, a statement by the volunteer moderators makes it clear that it is not an environment that privileges free speech above the safety of its

constituents. This is addressed explicitly in the extended moderation policy of 2XC, which can be accessed through a link in the sidebar. It reads:

While all of reddit is a publicly accessible forum, it is a private corporation. 2XC, created and maintained by private, volunteer individuals, is an expression of those private, volunteer individuals' mission to foster a safe, respectable, reasonable space for women to discuss women-related issues. Just as your free speech rights are not triggered when a store security guard escorts you for disruption or disrespect, your free speech rights are not triggered here when and if the private, volunteer individuals who work hard to maintain this space decide you are too disruptive or disrespectful for their taste. You may always create your own space and bloviate there.
(r/TwoXChromosomes Moderation Policy 2020)

In the section of the moderation policy quoted above, the words 'bloviate there' are hyperlinked to a webcomic by digital artist xkcd, titled 'Free Speech' (Figure 7).

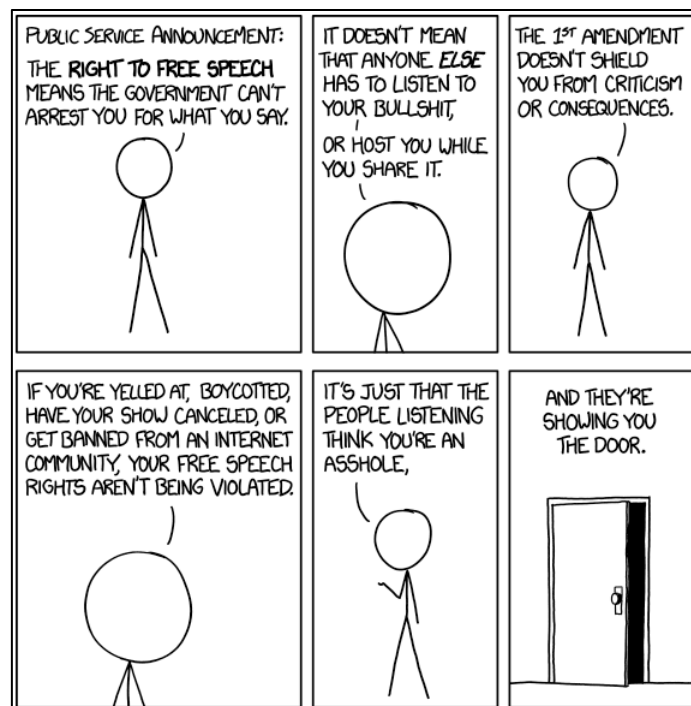


Figure 7 – 'Free Speech' webcomic by xkcd (<https://xkcd.com/1357/>)

The four overarching principles stated as guiding the moderation policy of 2XC are respect, equanimity, grace and relevance. Each point is expanded upon in the sidebar of the subreddit, as follows²²:

Respect: No hatred, bigotry, assholery, misogyny, misandry, transphobia, homophobia, racism or otherwise disrespectful commentary. Please follow reddiquette.

Equanimity: No drama-inducing crossposting of content found in other subreddits. Likewise, posts found to be direct odious influxes here will be removed.

Grace: No tactless posts generalising gender. We are a welcoming community. Rights of all genders are supported here.

Relevance: We ask that you keep this community awesome by submitting content that is relevant to our experiences as women, for women, or about women.
(r/TwoXChromosomes Moderation Policy 2020)

The specifics of these rules frame the community as a safe space for people of all genders to engage with women's issues. There is a strong indication of support for gender queer individuals, and this appears to be a central tenet of the community, with pinned posts at the top of the 2XC front page explicitly stating: 'You're welcome if you're trans, you're welcome if you're cis, you're welcome if you're a woman or a man or anything in between or outside. You are not welcome if you put down other people for their choices, their lives or their identities' (u/kallisti_gold 2020). Although not specifically referred to as such, the key rules and regulations governing the subreddit indicate a close alignment with contemporary feminist politics. In particular, the embodiment of some key fourth-wave feminist perspectives is explicit, including the veneration of choice and the prohibition of questioning an individual's choice, as well as clear support for gender diversity and a postmodern gender narrative. In closing, it is important to note that the practice and politics of 2XC are inseparable from the context (or field) in which they are produced. Reddit is host to its own normative rules, expectations and cultural practices that go on to shape the kinds of curated profiles and discourses that emerge from the 2XC community. While Reddit has previously been conceptualised as an anti-feminist platform deeply hostile to women (Massanari 2015), in recent years the site has been making concerted efforts to 'clean-up' its image. Such efforts have seen many of the other communities promoting anti-feminist and other

²² The 'sidebar' appears on every subreddit, and contains key information about that subreddit, including but not limited to the 'about community' section, a list of community moderators and distilled versions of key rules governing the subreddit.

anti-social justice perspectives banned from the site, and many users of these communities have left in search of less-regulated online forums (Copland 2020). Here, the analysis contributes to a lesser studied element in the networked feminist communities – in particular, that of the internal discourses at play within said communities themselves, and furthermore, what they might reveal about the impact of a deeply commodified internet in relation to the image of a frustrated feminist potential and the presence of an ambiguous liberation existing in the politics and practice of contemporary feminism(s).

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice will be introduced as the central theoretical framework guiding this research, and its suitability to this study of networked feminist communities such as 2XC will be demonstrated. In the final decade of the 20th century, Bourdieu (1930–2002) was one of the foremost theorists in the sociological field. His pre-eminent work and first major publication, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Bourdieu 2018), first published in 1977, was produced following his time spent conducting ethnographic research amongst the Kabyle, an ethnic minority in Algeria. In this work Bourdieu introduces the three interrelated concepts of *habitus*, *capital* and *field*, and in doing so famously attempts to resolve the major sociological tension that exists between understandings of agency and structure, and how one comes to shape (or be shaped by) the other. For Bourdieu, the interplay between lived experience, such as education levels and social origins, and the different social contexts in which we find ourselves create the conditions for subjectivities to emerge and practice to occur.

The boundless integration of the Internet, digital communications technologies and social media platforms into our day-to-day lives has had an impact on the ways we act and interact as social agents – and introduced an entirely novel social field in which practice takes place. Over the past two decades, Bourdieu's interrelated concepts of habitus, capital and field have informed the analysis of *digital sociology*, which refers to 'both research on the social aspects and impacts of digital communication technologies and to the application of digital technologies to research methodologies across the social sciences' (Ignatow & Robinson 2017, p. 952). Similarly, Bourdieu's work has been utilised by feminist scholars with some regularity, despite concerns regarding his lack of sociological interest in gender or feminism (Adkins 2004, p. 4). Many writings demonstrating the utility of Bourdieu's theoretical toolkit highlight the significance of his central concepts of habitus, capital and field in re-establishing a materialist analysis within feminist scholarship. For instance, Lovell (2000) explores the pertinence of Bourdieu's central theoretical concepts of habitus and cultural capital to contemporary feminist scholarship. In doing so, she determines that his work may be operationalised to 'reintegrate the concept of class, problematic though it remains, within the dominant discourses of feminist theory' (Lovell 2000, p. 26). Similarly, McCall (1992, p. 837) suggests that within Bourdieu's sociological contributions, a 'powerfully elaborate conceptual framework for understanding the role of gender in the social relations of modern capitalist society' can be located. In a critical reading of

Bourdieu's *Masculine Domination* (2001), Fowler echoes this sentiment, emphasising the 'extraordinary structural constancy, irrespective of mode of production' at the heart of the social reproduction of gender relations 'across different time periods, including that of capitalist modernity' (Fowler 2003, p. 470). Of course, these perspectives are not exhaustive, but are instead intended to demonstrate a general appreciation of Bourdieu's sociological contributions and their applicability to feminist research. The research detailed throughout this thesis is positioned somewhere in between these two major fields of inquiry. It draws on the work of Bourdieu in order to better understand the ways in which the unremitting incorporation of the Internet into everyday life is influencing the increasingly digitised nature of contemporary feminist thought and practice – specifically, within the 2XC community.

While a number of feminist scholars have drawn on Bourdieu's work in the past, there is a persistent concern that his theory is too deterministic and limited in terms of what it may suggest about personal agency and potential for change (Chambers 2005). In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu (2018) argues that the sphere of public and political discourse is divided between opinions that are 'orthodox' and those that are 'heterodox.' These opinions comprise the universe of potential discourse; in other words, that which we are aware of and may contest or discuss. Beyond this, hidden from view, is all that exists in the natural and social world that is completely self-evident, unquestioned and taken-for-granted. This is what Bourdieu terms the doxa, 'the point of view of the dominant, when it presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view' (Bourdieu 1994, p.15). The doxa serves to naturalise the conditions that maintain the dominant/dominated dichotomy and, in doing so, is a significant mechanisms in the reproduction of the status quo, obscuring the social inequalities that are produced as a result. However, the doxa does not remain static. What can be conceived as 'the primary experience of the world of common sense' exists as a result of the ongoing struggle between alternate visions – the 'dogged confrontations between dominant and dominated groups' – and such visions only become doxic to the extent that these struggles for legitimation are relegated 'to the unconscious' (Bourdieu 1994 p.15). This assertion that dominated groups are complicit in their own oppression appears at the outset to be naturally problematic for feminist thought, which 'appeals to women to be the agents of their own emancipation' (Hook 2005). However, although Bourdieu's work at times appears to suggest a somewhat consensual adoption of the social order, his theoretical framework has nonetheless been fruitfully applied to the analysis of participation in social movements and protest (Carfagna et al. 2014, Crossley 2003, Husu 2013, Phipps 2006, Schmitt 2016).

Within Bourdieu's theoretical framework, the potential for criticism and protest predominantly arises in times of crisis, what Zolberg calls 'moments of madness' (Zolberg 1972), when an

individual's perception of a field ceases to align with its actualities, and so they are 'shocked' out of the habitual acceptance of the rules of that field. This causes the doxic beliefs governing the field to be called into question, becoming visible, knowable and thus open for critique (Bourdieu 2018). Whilst this theoretical position is useful in understanding major events such as the Arab Spring or Occupy Wall Street, Bourdieu's work has not been widely utilised in attempts to understand the presence of durable social movements that engage in ongoing critique and resistance and that exist as a necessary facet of democratic society, such as the feminist movement or the environmental movement. Indeed, the doxic assumptions that (re)produce the domination of women in wider society are regularly elevated to the world of discourse by feminist researchers and activists in order to disrupt these assumptions and create opportunities in which they might be altered. However, the fact remains that 'there is a distinctive form of inequality directed at women as such, by virtue of their belonging to the class of people sexed female' (Brunskell-Evans 2020, p. 10). Thus, while there is no denying progress has been and continues to be made in the emancipation of women, masculine domination remains the norm, and thus the doxic notions that reproduce this domination remain intact. Indeed, women remain 'constrained by the realistic possibilities available to them' (Threadgold 2019, p. 37), and these possibilities are informed by a society within which patriarchy is the foremost organising principle. In this context, this thesis will attempt to understand the perspectives that are reproduced *within* the 2XC community in order to determine the extent to which these discourses have the capacity to challenge the dominant power dynamics and perspectives that give shape to social reality.

3.2 Understanding the Digital Field

The first concept this chapter will explore is that of the *field* (*champ*), Bourdieu's macro-sociological concept that is defined as 'a network or configuration of relations between social positions in which positions and their interrelations are determined by the distribution of economic, social and cultural capital' (Ignatow & Robinson 2017, p. 952). To fully make sense of an event, a series of interactions, or a social phenomenon, it is not enough to simply look at what was said, or what has happened. It is vital, according to Bourdieu, to first define and examine the social spaces in which such instances and interactions occur (Thompson 2008). Bourdieu's macro concept of the field serves as a way to demarcate distinct sectors of society in order to closely analyse the unique interactions and relationships that occur within them (Crossley, 2005). For Bourdieu, the social world is comprised of a number of distinct, overlapping fields, each serving as a specific arena of practice (Bourdieu 2018). For example, the mass media, politics and the education system can all be considered to comprise distinct, specific fields subject to their own discrete logic. Within these broad fields of practice there are often sub-fields, which are

constrained by the logic of the field in which they are situated, but also possess elements of practice and action that render them unique from other such sub-fields. An example of this distinction is easily located in the field of education, which includes the sub-fields of higher education and vocational training – each engendering logics unique from the other, while still operating in line with the logic set out to maintain practice in the field of education more broadly. Similarly, there are distinctive sub-fields that comprise contemporary feminist thought, such as liberal, radical or socialist feminism. Conceptualising the Internet, social media platforms and the communities that exist within these platforms as fields allows us to establish artificial boundaries within which particular forms of practice and strategies occur as agents struggle over capital and compete for dominance in these distinct social spaces (Schäfer 2014).

Bourdieu asserts that in order to conduct an adequate analysis of a field of practice, the researcher ‘must analyse the position of the field vis-à-vis the field of power’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 104). The field of power is defined as ‘an organising principle of differentiation and struggle throughout all fields’ (Swartz 2012, p. 136). Most notably, the political field and the economic field can be considered to exert organising principles universally within a society and can be conceptualised as generative forces of the ‘field of power.’ One’s position in a social hierarchy is often determined by the economic and political circumstances that govern one’s existence, and much of what can be achieved (or that one can imagine achieving) will be delimited by the external forces of the field of power. In this sense, the field of networked feminism can be conceptualised as a site of struggle located in and shaped by the broader field of power which, in the West, is deeply entangled in neoliberal rationality and a culture of consumerism. In order to understand the composition and definition of the field, it is also necessary to ‘map out the objective structure of the relations between the positions occupied by the agents or institutions who compete for the legitimate form of specific authority of which this field in [sic] the site’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 105).

In terms of the digital field, all platforms that make possible networked feminist practice, such as Twitter and Reddit, have their own specific sets of rules, regulations and guidelines (both tacit and implicit) that facilitate the inner workings on the platforms. Further to this, different manifestations of networked feminist communities are subordinated to the specificities of the platform they operate within, but are also distinguishable from one another due to, again, unique sets of tacit and implicit rules that shape practice within the distinct communities. For 2XC, the legitimacy of authority ultimately rests with Reddit more broadly, and all discourse within the community takes place within the parameters set out by the platform. At a more granular level, certain perspectives and ways of framing feminist issues are more valued than others within the

2XC community, and thus it can also be conceptualised as comprising a field of practice subordinate to, but unique from, that of Reddit. Moderators – in that they can remove any content deemed to be inappropriate for the community – have the authority to name and frame feminism and women’s issues in particular ways. Individual users who actively participate in the discussions within the 2XC community are then rewarded or punished depending on the content of their contributions. This occurs through the karma function: other users upvote submissions and commentary that support the broader narrative that is ultimately reproduced through selective moderation practices. On the other hand, those that fail to reproduce the narrative are downvoted, their commentary sinking into the detritus that accumulates at the bottom of the thread, unlikely to be seen by many users, or is removed all together. Such contextualising is a necessary step in understanding the parameters of the field and the nature and distribution of power within it.

3.2.1 Believing in the Game

Bourdieu draws upon the metaphor of the game (as in a game of sports) to illustrate how the concept of the field (as in the playing field), as well as the interrelated concepts of habitus and capital, operate together to produce social practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Whenever we enter a new field, we discover existing, already established and taken-for-granted systems of meaning and power – these are, to use Bourdieu’s metaphor, the ‘rules of the game’. These rules are not necessarily formalised; rather, they are inherent, implicit expectations internalised by agents and institutions within that field that contribute to an understanding of appropriate practice within a given field. Bourdieu refers to this acknowledgment and acquisition of interests and investments arranged through the field as the *illusio*, or the ‘belief in the game’ (Rowlands & Rawolle 2013). The *illusio* describes the necessary impression that the game is worth playing, and thus imbues these social games with an immutable value. This not only encourages agents to play the game, but to believe these social games are significant and worth taking seriously. For example, practice in the 2XC community is informed by a series of ideas and rules that have taken shape throughout the history of Internet forums, and further distilled to represent the interests and feminist direction of the community. These ideas shape the way users not only think about themselves and others within the community, but also shape the community in its entirety. They tend to offer legitimacy to certain forms of practice (serious engagement within the community) while deriding others that do not take seriously the game being played (e.g., shitposting²³). This also applies to the unstated expectations implicit in participating in the 2XC community. The 2XC

²³ ‘Shitposting’ refers to deliberately inane, low quality or fatuous contributions to social media or online forums.

field is unique in that it may be assumed that it is predominantly women making the rules that govern practice within the field, regardless of the male-dominated state of the tech industry and social reality more broadly. Our ability to interpret these rules is determined by our habitus or ‘feel for the game’, a concept explored in depth later in this chapter.

Individuals and institutions do not simply exist within a field but are positioned within that field based on differing levels of access to resources and capital (Crossley 2005). This unequal distribution of field-specific resources fuels the competition and struggle necessary for the field to remain cohesive. These power relations that create the dynamism of fields are engendered by the struggle for dominance between agents. Even within the field of 2XC, a struggle exists to acquire the unique resources and capital that are deemed legitimate within that field. Although fields are distinct, they are also dynamic. The differing interests, motivations and opinions of agents create conflicts and disagreements within a field. Bourdieu believes that it is precisely these conflicts, underwritten as they are by the tacit ‘rules of the game,’ that constitute the very nature of the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). As Walther points out, ‘It is the structure of objective relations ... between agents on a field that defines dominant and dominated positions’ (Walther 2014, p. 9). The boundaries of fields exist at the point where their corresponding ‘rules’ are no longer felt. Indeed, the privileging of women’s perspectives that is the mantra of 2XC is sets it apart from Reddit more broadly; outside this community, women’s perspectives are routinely overwritten by male participants. Indeed, that 2XC is a space specifically demarcated for women implies that outside of this space, users are assumed, by default, to be male. This indicates that the recognition of gender is a concept that is important and worth struggling over. Across other parts of Reddit, where the male is the default participant, there is no need to explicitly make space for them. So, although 2XC as a sub-field exists within a homologous cultural arena, very distinct boundaries exist between this community and Reddit more broadly. As there is no single set of rules that relates to all fields, but rather field-specific rules that determine what can and cannot be done in a specific social space, and by whom, Bourdieu contends that fields are fairly autonomous. However, this autonomy is relative to the wider social space in which they are embedded (Walther 2014).

Bourdieu used the metaphor of the game to illustrate the patterns of domination reproduced throughout the social structure, as games ‘obscure the conditions of their own playing through the very process of securing participation’ (Burawoy 2012, p. 189). In other words, in order to participate in the game, one must believe in the game without questioning the rules governing its existence. Just as a soccer player must believe in the rules of the game in order for it to play out smoothly for herself and the other players in a match, so too must we take seriously and abide by

the tacit and explicit rules governing particular social spaces. This does not mean that rules cannot be broken – in fact, quite the contrary. Rules can be broken, and often are, but this is not without consequence. The soccer player caught breaking the rules will be penalised accordingly, whether through a foul call, a caution or an expulsion from the field. The social ‘games’ played within Reddit’s subforums are similarly refereed. As users test the boundaries of acceptable behaviour or break the rules of the subreddit completely, their contributions may be removed from the discussion, or they may receive a short-term or permanent ban from participating in the community. In these instances, it is the community’s moderators who take on the role of referee and make decisions that impact how the game is played and what rules are enforced. As a result, the moderators occupy a clear position of power and authority within Reddit’s communities, determining and enforcing the limits of acceptable practice as well as the tone and ideological positioning of allowable content.

3.2.2 Fields of Power

As we have seen, fields of all types involve the unequal distribution of resources and capital which agents trade and compete for. Some fields are relatively small and isolated, and so the types of capital accrued in these fields have relatively little impact outside of the field. For example, the high value ostensibly attached to the perspectives of women in the 2XC does not necessarily translate to other, more influential fields. However, the economic or political fields have a considerable impact on the organisation of society more broadly and can have a significant impact on the opportunities – or lack thereof – afforded to social agents within the social space. These multiple, intersecting fields comprise what Bourdieu describes as the *field of power* (Benson 2006). The field of power is ‘an organising principle of differentiation and struggle throughout all fields,’ (Swartz, 2012, p. 136), and it contributes to the arrangement of all social fields along a hierarchy of power. The Internet and its associated communications technologies have not developed independent of the Western fields of power; rather, technological innovation has been shaped by its needs (Suarez-Villa 2009). The explosion of user-generated content that characterised the dawn of the participatory Internet (or Web 2.0) brought with it the widespread corporatisation of the Internet. As it stands, the online field is characterised primarily by an ever-increasing saturation of corporations and their brands (Deuze 2008). Social media platforms driven by user-generated content are among the most profitable publicly listed businesses in the world due. This is largely due to the business practice of on-selling valuable user data for the purposes of targeted advertising. The impact of neoliberalism on the nature of the participatory Internet will be discussed in more detail later in this thesis, but it is important to note that the corporate nature of the contemporary Internet has a definite influence over the unspoken rules

and regulations that shape, produce and govern practice on social networking sites and beyond. The online field is not a neutral space for participation, connection and unfettered self-expression, rather it is 'constrained by market forces and hierarchies of power that interweave online and offline contexts' (Page 2012, p. 182). When examining the online field as a site for the organisation and mobilisation of individuals resisting or enacting social change, the contextualising factor of the Internet's corporate colonisation and the resulting power asymmetries must be kept in mind.

Research into the social implications of the digital divide illustrates the pervasiveness of the field of power (Micheli 2015; Robinson 2009) and disrupts earlier, more optimistic narratives that espoused the democratising potential of the Internet (Castells 2013, 2015; Diamond 2010; Jenkins 2006). In a study on differing levels of Internet access, Robinson (2009) found that children from disadvantaged educational or economic backgrounds were engaging with the Internet and digital media technologies in a much more pragmatic way than those raised in more privileged households. Children born within relatively privileged settings reported using the Internet for 'unstructured information seeking,' as they considered the Internet a means to the acquisition of 'a greater body of global knowledge that further enhances learning' (Robinson 2009, p. 491). On the other hand, as a result of limited access to digital resources and relevant technology, less privileged children tended to develop what Robinson calls a 'taste for the necessary,' in that they were 'constrained to undertake a task-oriented approach to internet use' (Robinson 2009, p. 491). In other words, the ways in which one is able, or compelled, to interact with online forums and, particularly, to contribute to political discourse over the Internet are deeply entangled within the socio-economic realities that shape lived reality in the offline world. Consequently, those with unrestricted access to the Internet and communications technologies tend to experience a vastly different social landscape than those without, and the Internet 'may not only replicate offline inequalities, but also accentuate the impacts of disadvantage' (Robinson 2009, p. 505).

3.2.3 The Digital Field and Contemporary Political Participation

The desire to be involved with politics and activism is often culturally reproduced through familial ties, and participation in social movements tends to potentiate a set of field-specific skills and dispositions that encourage the continued involvement of the agent in a movement (Crossley 2003). However, participation in online social movements, driven primarily by the content creation and sharing characteristic of the participatory Internet, occurs in a far more casual, less focused manner than more traditional, offline organising. Rather than requiring individuals to invest their time into the processes involved with political organising and activism through

attending meetings, engaging in street-level consciousness-raising activities or participating in protest or marches, it is possible to participate in online activism remotely. In the case of key contemporary feminist moments, such as #MeToo or #TimesUp, while an astounding number of individuals joined the conversation about the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault, very little else was required from participants in such movements other than contributing and sharing information. It is possible to participate in and engage with networked feminist movements without the dedication and resource expenditure often anticipated when participating in more traditional forms of offline organising and activism.

The field of networked feminism – including 2XC – takes shape around the specific issues being addressed by the movement at the time as well as the relations of power that occur among individuals within the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). It is through the collective actions of agents that fields can take shape (Levina & Arriaga 2014). A shared interest in women's issues culminating in online engagement with these issues serves as the emergent field structure of networked feminist movements and communities. However, the fields of networked feminist movements are distinct from their more traditional counterparts in a number of ways. Foremost is the foundation these movements have in the spaces of user-generated content production and consumption: the participatory Internet and social media platforms. In essence, the fields of networked feminist movements are shaped by the production, distribution and consumption of media products circumscribed by the architecture of social media platforms.

Considering that the consumption and production of cultural goods comprise the heart of networked feminist movements, it is useful to draw upon Bourdieu's distinction between 'fields of large-scale production' and 'fields of restricted production' to better understand the dynamics of value and capital transmission within this in contentious online politics (Bourdieu 1985a). This distinction was introduced by Bourdieu to account for the discrepancies between 'the production of cultural goods destined for non-producers of cultural goods' (Bourdieu 1985a, p. 4) and the production of cultural goods for an audience comprised primarily of other producers. In other words, the field of large-scale cultural production is intended for the masses, while those operating in the field of restricted production are more concerned with 'a public of equals who are also competitors' (Bourdieu 1985a, p. 116). Individuals who engage with networked feminist movements may only be equals insofar as they are engaging with the same issue, but the issue of competition is an important one. However, for those participating in networked feminist communities or discourse online, the distinction between who comprises the 'public of equals' and who does not is complicated. While the process of sharing is central to all experiences and practice on social media, decisions about what to share are made with the awareness of the

presence of a crowd (Winch 2015). Proponents of a movement are thus likely more inclined to produce content explicitly intended for their specific community, reproducing narratives that are likely to attract a high amount of intracommunity approval and attention. Conversely, participants may be discouraged from sharing content which might challenge or disrupt a community's dominant discourses at the risk of generating backlash. A generative force behind this peer-inclined content production is the competition responsible for fuelling a field's characteristic dynamism. Indeed, it has been suggested that the integration of market logics into the architecture of social media platforms has amplified this propensity towards competition, as users tend to struggle for validation and recognition in the hyper-saturated attention economy (Amiradakis 2016; Fuchs 2013; Marwick 2015; Page 2012).

3.3 Cultural Reproduction and Acts of Distinction

Due to the highly visual nature of social media platforms, it is difficult to discuss the digital field without first exploring the processes of distinction and status production that engender the objective power relationships between agents within the field. The digital spaces of social media platforms are comprised of the varied motivations and contributions of users. On any given platform a plethora of unique digital communities exist, bringing individuals together through their pursuit of a shared interest. However, due to the relative pseudonymity of Reddit, there are few significant or obvious distinctive markers that can immediately elevate the perspective of one user over others participating within the field. The most apparent distinctive marker on the Reddit platform is a moderator badge; these badges operate as a form of symbolic capital, placing 'the speaker in a pre-eminent position' (Bourdieu 2019, p. 70). The authoritative credentials of Reddit moderators are highlighted through an arrangement of symbolic differentiation in order to allow these users to stand out amongst crowds of participants on a thread or feed. Rather than the plain black username of a common user, a comment from a moderator will appear underneath a lime green username in bold text, with a small lime green shield on the right-hand side. Such symbolic differentiation draws the eye, increasing the attention a certain post will receive and thus increasing its visibility and the reach and legitimacy of its message.

In his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (2010), originally published in 1979, Bourdieu proposed that rather than being an innate part of our unique disposition, our preferences and choices tend to be taught and instilled through our upbringing in a particular social position. As a result, these choices work to characterise and reinforce class fractions. What is easy, common and practical appears as unrefined or even vulgar, defining the individual as underprivileged or working class. On the other hand, anything rare, luxurious, or excessive is

considered to signal a more distinctive taste, representing wealth and higher social position. Although much has changed over the last 40 years, the theory at the core of this seminal text remains vital to understanding the social processes which continue to (re)produce class lines in contemporary society, both online and offline. When considering practice in networked feminist communities such as 2XC – aside from the aforementioned moderator badges – certain discursive acts may be operationalised as mechanisms for distinction. For example, a woman referring to herself as cisgendered in a conversation taking place within the field of 2XC may signify an attempt at demonstrating cultural competence within the field. This could serve to elevate the perspective of such a user, as this term generally signifies the adoption of the currently popular postmodern perspective that gender and sex are fluid concepts that lack any grounding in biological reality.

3.3.1 Cultural Reproduction

Bourdieu suggests that social structures are afforded relative stability through the transfer of cultural values and norms from generation to generation, a process he refers to as *cultural reproduction* (Bourdieu 1973). The concept of cultural reproduction is built on Marx's theory of social reproduction, in which it was argued that the ruling class, in controlling the means of material production, also controlled the means of 'mental production,' ensuring the necessary reproduction of the working class through the generational inheritance of a labourer's accumulation of skill (Marx et al. 2012). Taking Marx's theory as a point of departure, Bourdieu posits that the generational transmission of symbolic wealth (i.e., the volume and composition of 'legitimate' cultural and social capital) plays a significant role in an individual's potential for social mobility (Bourdieu 1973). This process is particularly evident in the socialising influence of major institutions. For example, Bourdieu suggests that schools are, in part, accountable for the 'reproduction of the structure of class relations' (Bourdieu 1973, p. 173) through their role in the replication of underlying social and cultural notions that tend to support the position of privilege held by the dominant class. The school system succeeds in reproducing the structure of class relations through presenting itself as a neutral space in which the cultural wealth obtainable through education is provided equally for all (Bourdieu 1973). In reality, children raised in middle-class homes are positioned to obtain greater benefit from the traditional education system, assuming they have inherited from their parents an appreciation for 'legitimate' culture and a proclivity for self-development.

It is useful to conceptualise the Internet in a similar way. The potential benefits a young person could secure from the educational and socially mobilising potentialities of the Internet has been

shown to be associated with the socio-economic situation of their parents (Robinson 2009). Beyond reliable home access to the Internet and a personal computer, young people growing up in more privileged households are also more likely to inherit from their parents a somewhat entrepreneurial attitude towards use of the Internet and its associated technologies. As a result, the Internet, much like the school system, could be seen to contribute to the imposition of class fractions (Schradié 2012), as some young people are better equipped to benefit from its ostensible neutrality than others. Of great significance to this research project is Bourdieu's observation that the educated middle class is more inclined towards, and better resourced for, engagement in the public sphere than other social classes, particularly the working class (Bourdieu 2010). This inclination tends to be culturally reproduced, generationally inherited through the family unit and bolstered through an individual's engagement with the education system and the digital sphere. Not only is the educated middle class more involved in the public sphere, but they possess the adequate cultural capital that is a prerequisite for effective involvement in political debate. In terms of networked feminism, this possible tendency towards privileged voices dominating online discourses concerned with the aims and goals of contemporary feminism may work to undermine the narrative of the democratisation of feminist activism in some respects (Chittal 2015; Powell & Monico 2018). It also raises questions regarding the exclusion of those most oppressed or bypassed by the issues the networked feminist movement ostensibly seeks to address.

3.3.2 Acts of Distinction

Social media platforms are driven by the creation, circulation and consumption of content by their users. While the user-generated contributions within an interest group serve to unify individuals within the field, the content we choose to post can also serve as an apparatus of distinction, contributing to the implicit power relations within a given community (Levina & Arriaga 2014). Acts of distinction, as they occur on social media platforms, very rarely produce relations of power that influence the whole platform. Instead, these distinctive acts function as an assertion of social identity 'asserted and defined through difference' (Bourdieu 2010, p. 172), and serve to form relations of influence from within the sub-fields of shared interests in which they take place. The affordances of social media platforms provide the means for users to acquire certain social distinctions, whether through likes, comments or views on specific content, or through the accumulation of 'friends' or followers (Levina & Arriaga 2014).

Beyond these clear status markers built into the architecture of popular social media platforms, acts of distinction can also be expressed through an individual's preferred sites, entertainment options and even search engines. For instance, with over 86 per cent of the global market share,

Google, is the world's most popular search engine (StatCounter 2021). While using Google may not indicate anything about an individual's social position or necessarily demonstrate a distinctive choice, making the decision to use an alternative search engine, such as DuckDuckGo, is demonstrative of an individual's accumulated capital and may be used to distinguish that user from others in the field, depending on the nature of the field in which they find themselves. DuckDuckGo is a search engine built for those who are concerned about issues of privacy, surveillance and advertising on the Internet. Having this concern is itself distinctive, indicating an advanced understanding of the implications of contemporary Internet access and, potentially, a relatively high degree of educational capital. A study on the Internet preferences of those who used DuckDuckGo as their primary search engine determined that these users tended to have a strong interest in programming communities and technology news, frequenting sites like GitHub and WhiteHatSec that serve a very specific niche of software developers and code writers (Southern 2016). Even something as banal as the choice of a search engine can become a distinctive act performed as a display of cultural capital, setting these individuals apart from those opting for the 'popular' or 'common' option.

3.4 The Forms of Capital

Bourdieu's concept of capital is intrinsically linked to his concept of the field. This conceptualisation of capital moves beyond the purely economic (how much wealth or assets one has access to) and includes two further forms of capital (social capital and cultural capital) which can be similarly accumulated, lost, invested, traded and distributed by individuals in social spaces (Anheier, Gerhards & Romo 1995). While financial status still plays a major role in determining the position one occupies in the social space, Bourdieu posits that it is the relationship between, and the accumulation of, cultural, social *and* economic capital that contribute to the determination of social status and the potential for social mobility in most fields. Crucially, social and cultural capital are valuable only to the extent that they are able to be converted to economic capital (Julien 2015). Bourdieu posits that various forms capital determine one's position in the social hierarchy, and the forms of capital that are contested and struggled over are contingent on the dominant values that shape and characterise particular fields within the social space (Bourdieu 1986). According to Bourdieu, 'capital is accumulated labour,' which makes the 'games of society – not least the economic game – something other than simple games of chance offering at every moment the possibility of a miracle' (Bourdieu 1986). Such an understanding of the power of capital serves as an antithesis to the 'myth of potential universal success' (Marshall 2014) that is often associated with social practice and popularity in online spaces, offering a theoretical explanation as to why some individuals enjoy more elevated and sustained social mobility online than others.

Further to the original three-part approach of economic, social and cultural capital, Bourdieu later introduced the concept of symbolic capital to explain the process of mutual recognition and validation of an agent's capital, which is instrumental in the struggle for dominance over any given field. Bourdieu's further contributions suggest the 'evolutionary potential' of his framework as well as its inherent flexibility, demonstrating its suitability for the analysis of any kind of unique social space (Walther 2014). For instance, the introduction of the concept of gender capital by feminist theorists has demonstrated the elasticity of Bourdieu's core forms of capital and has allowed the application of his theoretical framework to be more meaningfully utilised in feminist analysis (Bridges 2009; Huppatz 2009; McAdam, Harrison & Leitch 2018). Against this background, Bourdieu himself insists that 'acknowledging that capital can take a variety of forms is indispensable to explaining the structure and dynamics of different societies' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992).

3.4.1 Cultural Capital

Cultural capital serves as fundamental marker of distinction and is a determining factor in the production of an agent's status within a given social field (Walther 2014). It is the measure of one's 'linguistic and cultural competence' against the framework of the dominant culture (Dumais 2002). Cultural capital can be embodied in the durable dispositions of the body and mind, it can be objectified in the ownership of cultural goods and artefacts or institutionalised in one's professional or academic credentials (Bourdieu 1986). *Embodied cultural capital* primarily refers to the ways in which we hold ourselves, from our accent and posture to our skills, knowledge and competencies. It is strongly associated with Bourdieu's related concept of *habitus* (Emmison & Frow 1998), which is a corporeal reflection of the quantity and composition of an agent's cultural capital. Digitally, we might see embodied cultural capital in the choice to use – or refrain from using – common web-based abbreviations, such as 'lol' or 'omg.' The use of lesser-known Internet slang may also constitute a demonstration of embodied cultural capital through suggesting an affiliation with a particular subculture. Take, for example, the term 'monkaS,' which is used almost exclusively in the live chat on Twitch, a popular video-streaming platform, to express a feeling of high tension or anxiety during a livestream of a videogame. Outside of this niche community, the term 'monkaS' is rarely seen, its use indicating a clear affiliation with the online community of Twitch stream fans. Its use presupposes a considerable amount of time spent within that field developing the relevant cultural competence. Similarly, what is known as 'LOLspeak' or 'Chanspeak' is a subset of Internet slang almost exclusively used on anonymous imageboards such as 4chan. The use of 'LOLspeak' slang would indicate a user's familiarity with

and frequent exposure to these imageboards, as this language (embodied cultural capital) is necessary for effective participation on these sites.

Objectified cultural capital is the representation of the individual's cultural competence through the acquisition and display of physical cultural artefacts. The brands we choose to wear, the books we are seen to be reading, or the vinyl records we have been collecting are all examples of objectified cultural capital; the concept encompasses our taste in objects and aesthetics. In terms of information and communications technologies, computers and smart phones would be considered forms of objectified cultural capital, while the extent of an individual's technological literacy would be associated with their embodied cultural capital (Emmison & Frow 1998). Beyond merely owning a device that is capable of an Internet connection, the 'choice' of device that is offered to consumers also acts as a marker of distinction. The almost universal proliferation of the smart phone in Western countries has created a seemingly vast array of consumer choice. However, it is important to note that this concept of consumer choice is becoming increasingly superficial as consumer markets dominated by oligopolistic corporations produce similar products 'that differentiate themselves on the basis of their branding' (Hathaway 2015), creating the cycle of consumer demand central to the persistent reproduction of consumer society. The distinction of objectified cultural capital in this case is less concerned with the object itself and more about the perceived associations with the brand. A recent study claimed that 'no individual brand is as predictive of being high-income as owning an Apple iPhone' (Bertrand & Kamenica 2018, p. 20). The objectified cultural capital associated with the Apple brand tends to reflect in the user distinctive markers, including a high-income bracket, an appreciation for design and a penchant for creativity and innovation. Indeed, these associations with the Apple brand are a clear reflection of the values promoted by the company's marketing strategy.

The third key form of cultural capital is *institutionalised cultural capital* and is associated with the formal recognition of an individual's educational or professional qualifications; that is, it acts as 'a certificate of cultural competence which confers upon its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value' (Bourdieu 1986, p. 20). The difference between institutionalised cultural capital and other forms of objectified cultural capital is primarily based on the processes of official recognition used to bestow academic or professional credentials. While other forms of cultural capital must continuously prove their worth within the social field as trends and tastes inevitably evolve, an academic or professional accreditation retains relative autonomy from the fickle nature of fashion, and thus the resulting cultural capital bestowed upon the bearer is far more durable. In the online field, it appears that institutional recognition and accreditation have less of an impact in general than other forms of embodied or objectified cultural capital. However,

user-generated content platforms such as Quora, a question-and-answer site, or Wikipedia, a free online encyclopaedia, tend to favour the voices of those with academic qualifications over those without. Beyond this, having official recognition of one's academic or professional pursuits does not necessarily confer an advantage for users of the less anonymous social media platforms. While the value of any form of capital is relevant to the social field in which it is found, in an online context institutionalised cultural capital seems to be the most field-specific form, engendering definite advantages in some spaces on the Internet but producing no clear benefits in others. It is also important to note the symbolic element of cultural capital: that is, 'the capacity to define and legitimize cultural, moral, and artistic values, standards, and styles' (Anheier, Gerhards & Romo 1995, p. 862). In other words, the process of legitimisation or social recognition of a type of cultural capital is inherently relational, and it is only through the social recognition of forms of cultural capital that they become endowed with value.

3.4.2 Social Capital

The final form of capital in the triad of capitals is *social capital* which refers to the realm of social relationships; that is, to the networks, connections or contacts an agent may call upon to realise particular ambitions or achieve certain goals. It is 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources' that are linked to an agent's social or professional relationships or tied to membership in an explicit group (Bourdieu 1989, p. 21). The value of social capital comes from the maintenance and reciprocity of social ties, as well as the ensuing exchange of resources between members of a group that provides either material or symbolic wealth (Julien 2015). For example, social capital may enhance our status, increase our influence, give us access to shared knowledge or provide us with communal resources to draw from. In other words, social capital is produced 'through social interactions and the expectations of future social resources they engender' (Ellison et al. 2014, p. 856). Putnam (2000) distinguishes between 'bridging' and 'bonding' social capital to account for the varying depth of social relationships, and the different social resources they provide. According to Putnam, social capital is, by 'choice or necessity, inward looking,' and tends to 'reinforce exclusive identities and homogenous groups' (Putnam 2000, p. 22). On the other hand, bridging social capital is 'outward looking,' and tends to encompass 'people across diverse social cleavages' (Putnam 2000, p. 22) This conceptual distinction, while necessary, should be viewed as a continuum rather than a dichotomy, as many groups exhibit both bridging and bonding tendencies (Norris 2002).

3.4.3 Symbolic Capital

Finally, *symbolic capital* is the form taken by these different types of capital as they appear together and have been observed and accepted as legitimate; thus, the power of symbolic capital rests on recognition (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Although conceptualised as distinct forms, the different forms of capital intersect and are very closely linked, serving as forms of currency to be exchanged (Bourdieu 1986). For example, one might exchange economic capital for tertiary education, accruing cultural capital in exchange, or the tertiary qualification may result in a high-paying job, thus exchanging (institutionalised) cultural capital for economic capital. For Bourdieu, power follows from the ability to mobilise capital (Bourdieu 2010). Success in the digital field is dependent on the composition and amount of an individual's capital as well as the nature of the social field individuals occupy. Engagement with the digital field produces very different experiences for those well-endowed with the appropriate cultural, social and economic capital than it does for those with restricted access to the capitals necessary to thrive in the digital environment.

3.4.4 Digital Capital

Almost two decades ago, Cees Hamelink introduced a fourth conceptual tool to Bourdieu's forms of capital in order to better understand the new skills, materials, networks and dispositions that materialised as a result of the dawn of the information age. He argued that the category of *information capital* should be added to Bourdieu's original forms of capital (Hamelink 2000). Information capital was introduced as a means to conceptualise the financial capacity to pay for network usage and information services, the technical ability to handle network infrastructures and the intellectual capacity to filter and evaluate information, but also the motivation to actively search for information and the ability to translate information into social practice (Hamelink 2000, p. 91). Like the other forms of capital, the unequal distribution of information capital across society reproduces social inequality, and in some cases even amplifies it. Hamelink observed that simply having a computer and an Internet connection does not automatically equate to the possession of information capital (Hamelink 2000). The concept of *digital capital* is similar to Hamelink's information capital in as much as it encompasses an individual's financial capacity to acquire the necessary communications devices and network connections. However, the ability to seek, understand and utilise information, while significant, is not the only integral feature of digital capital. The radical increase in worldwide Internet users since the year 2000, phenomenal advancements in communications technologies and the explosive popularity of user-generated content and social media platforms has radically altered the way we interact with the digital world

and, by proxy, with the offline world. Thus, the utilisation and navigation of information no longer represents the pinnacle of digital experience.

Digital capital could be considered to be an amalgamation of the digitally specific forms of social, cultural and economic capital that produce opportunity and mobility both online and offline. The function of digital capital can perhaps most vividly be observed in the case of the social media micro-celebrity or ‘influencer.’ The importance of social capital for the micro-celebrity is evident in the necessity to access and interact with large networks of individuals. The number of followers accrued by a micro-celebrity can lend credibility to the influencer’s position on any number of topics (Khamis, Ang & Welling 2017). This influence is illuminated as a novel and valuable commodity when the ‘poverty of attention’ (Simon 1971) that exists as a result of the oversaturation of information characteristic of the digital landscape is considered. Thus, this form of social capital can be exchanged for economic capital in the form of corporate sponsorship or payments for product promotion. Nevertheless, the investment required for the accrual of such remarkable levels of social capital must occur concomitantly with other digital practices, including the production and publication of original content and the ongoing management of the personal brand. In order to do this, existing economic capital must first be invested in order to attain the technology (the objectified cultural capital) required for the production of user-generated content, as well as the technological know-how (the embodied cultural capital) necessary to be able to produce high-quality content. A distinct understanding of the cultural practices within a community is also vitally important to ensure the production of field-relevant material. The blossoming micro-celebrity should be positioned to engage in ‘serious play,’ synchronising recreational activity with the accrual of the social and cultural capital necessary to succeed in the attention economy (Robinson 2009).

Much as the outcomes associated with gender capital are influenced by an individual’s class position – the amount and composition of capital they have acquired and have access to – so too is access to digital capital subject to the distinctive markers and forms of capital positioning individuals in the social sphere. The ‘virtuosi’ comprise a category of young adults from upper-middle-class backgrounds for whom the Internet is a fundamental aspect of everyday life (Meyen et al. 2010). This naturalised citizenship of the virtual world allows the virtuosi ‘to satisfy every possible (actual) need and to establish their ambitions for the future’ (Meyen et al. 2010, p. 877). The accrual and investment of the virtuosi’s digital capital is likely to afford them far greater opportunities for social mobility than those occupying less privileged positions within the social hierarchy, as a result of their inherited class distinction. Much of the current research in the field is concerned with the implications of a society increasingly dependent on technology, and the

resulting *digital divide*. Simply put, the digital divide describes the socio-economic rift that exists between those who have access to computers and the Internet, and those who do not (Van Dijk 2006). Seale et al. (2015) used a ‘digital capital framework’ to explore social and cultural resources required for the successful utilisation of technology by higher education (HE) students with disabilities. They found that while most disabled HE students had access to the necessary technologies as well as social and cultural resources, this did not necessarily generate the ‘right’ kind of digital capital required to succeed in a university environment (Seale et al. 2015). Findings such as these point to the nuanced nature of digital capital, and the need to better understand this concept through a Bourdieusian analysis are clear. It is not only studies of digital inequalities that can benefit from a fuller understanding of the complexities of digital capital; all Internet research can benefit from a full understanding of this form of capital, as it is the driving force behind social mobility in a digital environment.

For more traditional social movements, the management and mobilisation of resources have been necessary in order to sustain the momentum of the movement. The acquisition of relevant economic, social and cultural capitals often poses a significant challenge, particularly for grassroots movements that may lack the funding and reach of larger social movement organisations. The nature of Internet activism tends to negate much of the traditional capital required for the successful mobilisation of social movements, allowing more individuals to participate more frequently in a wider range of political activity without requiring the ongoing investment of resources. This is not to say that online social movements require no capital at all to function successfully. An abundance of digital capital seems to be necessary for the successful proliferation of an online social movement, and such capital must be possessed in some degree for individuals to engage in online political activity, activism, resistance or protest. This has been observed in the relative ease with which individuals are able to participate in online feminism and the modern feminist movement, with one journalist claiming that ‘social media democratised feminist activism, opening up participation to anyone with a Twitter account and a desire to fight the patriarchy’ (Chittal 2015, para. 3). However, due to the nature of the online field, this thesis conceptualises digital capital as an amalgamation of cultural and social capital, rather than a subtype of either. This approach allows for developing an understanding of the significance of digital capital agents’ social mobility in an increasingly Internet-dependent world.

3.5 Habitus and the Digital Field

Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* is the final interrelated element of his theory of practice. Habitus refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills and dispositions that are accumulated and naturalised

through our life experiences. Habitus refers to the embodiment of one's cultural capital in the form of an arrangement of mental and corporeal dispositions; it stems from one's position in a field or in the social space more broadly. The habitus not only provides a way of evaluating oneself but is also used to evaluate the social position of others. A user's level of 'success' on social media has been shown to be linked to their 'informational habitus' (Robinson 2009). Building on the traditional Bourdieusian concept of habitus, *informational habitus* is the cluster of interchangeable dispositions one brings into the online field, determining one's position within the many sub-fields that exist online. For those with unrestricted access to the Internet and related information resources, the nature of the social environment is significantly transformed, becoming a fertile source of advantage and capital benefit.

Although using social media provides a new way for social agents to accumulate social and cultural capital, a Bourdieusian framework allows us to recognise how differently situated individuals perceive, interact with and benefit from the Internet and communications technologies. In her study on digital inequality, Robinson (2009) found that there are two principal forms of informational habitus that inform how social agents from socio-economically diverse backgrounds utilise digital communication technologies. Those with no or low-quality Internet access tend to adopt a 'taste for the necessary,' in which the Internet and communications technologies are viewed in more pragmatic terms, with diminished levels of access resulting in a more task-oriented approach to Internet use (Robinson 2009). In contrast, those with the high-quality home Internet access that is common in middle-income families tend to towards a 'playful or exploratory stance towards online information seeking' (Robinson 2009, p. 492), which ultimately results in the development of skills and behaviours that pay off socially and economically in the long run. In line with Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, this 'serious play' exhibited by young people from middle-income homes has been shown to reflect parental opinions regarding the Internet as a tool for personal betterment (Micheli 2015). In this sense, if one of the primary functions of a social media presence is the accrual of social and cultural capital, the informational habitus of the social agent will be a determining factor in not only how and where time is spent in online spaces, but also in how the agent will benefit from a presence in these spaces.

3.5.1 Symbolic and Structural Violence

In 1969, sociologist Johan Galtung coined the phrase *structural violence*, referring to the ways in which systemic, invisible and intersectional forces within social structures and institutions have the potential to inflict harm through preventing individuals from meeting their fundamental needs,

and thus protracting and reproducing social inequalities (Galtung 1969). At the level of the agent, Bourdieu posits that rather than individuals being implicitly aware of the structural violence that produces the dichotomy of the dominant and the dominated and which shapes our social space, this violence is reproduced and naturalised to the point that the agent becomes complicit in her own domination (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Bourdieu refers to this process as symbolic violence. While Bourdieu's analysis of the reproduction of masculine domination tends to suggest women are a homogenous group, submissive to power (Bourdieu 2001), it provides a point of reference to identify the mechanisms of female subordination that are culturally and strategically normalised. The concept of symbolic violence is a valuable tool in the critical analysis of gendered power relations as they occur both within and outside of networked feminist movements; its use can assist in the effort to demystify the often-oppressive unquestioned truths that comprise the doxa and can help unpack the internalisation of the status quo.

It is vital to acknowledge the structural tensions inherent in the architecture of the Internet, particularly with reference to the growing dependence on and faith in algorithms that are perpetually learning from the data we feed them. Algorithms are a key structural component of the Internet, with much of our digital communication and consumption mediated by automated algorithmic processes (Just & Latzer 2017). Beyond this, algorithmic systems are at work across a range of digital, social, economic and political fields, undertaking vital work and making life-altering decisions. Among other things, there are algorithms intended to 'automatically and intelligently ... place ads on websites, buy and sell stock, detect suspicious behaviour in CCTV footage, identify potential terrorists at the border, decide who gets parole, design buildings, and soon drive our cars' (Matzner 2017, p. 27). Relations between the sexes provides a paradigmatic case study for the operation of symbolic violence, and, for Bourdieu, serves as the primary feature of masculine domination (Bourdieu 2001). The privileging of the male sex, and the hierarchy between 'sex classes' produces a slew of inequalities that are, for the most part, anchored so deeply in our subconscious that it is difficult to even perceive them. Indeed, even machine-learning algorithms tend to reproduce the biases towards sexed bodies that continue to sustain masculine domination in contemporary society. For example, after training a machine-learning algorithm on Google News articles, a research team ran the algorithm through a number of analogy puzzles styled as 'He is to X as She is to Y.' The algorithm returned many common-sense analogies (He is to Brother as She is to Sister; He is to King as She is to Queen). However, it also returned results that reflected and reinforced pre-existing gender biases, such as 'He is to Doctor as She is to Nurse,' and, 'He is to Computer Programmer as She is to Homemaker' (Bolukbasi et al. 2016).

The growing significance of algorithms and their impact on society has been widely acknowledged (Bakshy, Messing & Adamic 2015; Beer 2017; Berman & Katona 2018; Just & Latzer 2017; Matzner 2017), and they continue to be a focal point for research taking place across a range of fields. The algorithms that mediate our interactions with the Internet and social media and which influence our subjectivities are guided by the same political, economic and social systems that shape our offline realities (Fuchs 2013). Thus, they have the potential to reproduce the same power asymmetries and inequalities. For example, an algorithmic tool called COMPAS (Correctional Offender Management Profiling or Alternative Sanctions) is designed to predict recidivism and is used widely across the United States in pretrial, sentencing and parole decisions. In an analysis of 7,000 COMPAS-assigned risk scores, it was found that the algorithm appeared to favour White individuals over Black individuals, prompting concern over racial bias in the algorithm, even though the data used by COMPAS does not include specific information about an individual's race (Angwin et al. 2016). Further, a 2017 study into the risk-assessment tool found that the predictions made by COMPAS are no more accurate, nor fair, than those made by individuals with little or no criminal justice experience (Dressel & Farid 2018). A study on the power of the Internet as a tool for social change would not be complete without considering the influence of algorithms over ourselves and our society. Algorithms can be seen to enhance the function of symbolic violence by reproducing and reinforcing structural assumptions about gender and race from the perspective of both the dominant and the dominated.

In *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse documented both the liberating potentials of the computer and the defeat of its revolutionary capacities through its application to the expansion of capitalism (Marcuse 1972), rendering it a tool for, among other things, the reproduction of social inequality. As we can see, the structural inequalities perpetuated by racial or gender biases that exist in our physical institutions and social structures are not only perpetuated but may even be amplified by the online environment. Bourdieu's central concepts of habitus, capital and field, and the attendant processes of cultural reproduction, acts of distinction and symbolic violence are well equipped to surface the mechanisms of power and control that shape practice in online environments. Crucially, while they have been presented here as relatively disparate, these concepts are deeply entangled and interdependent. Consequently, a methodology that adequately accounts for each of the interrelated elements becomes a necessary analytic fulcrum.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The changing nature of political engagement resulting from society's digital entanglement continues to attract scholarly attention (Fotopoulou 2016; Powell & Monico 2018; Pruchniewska & Duffy 2017; Rand 2016; Schuster 2013) yet the celerity of technological advancements demands an almost continual re-analysis of these cultural phenomena. This research aims to contribute to understanding the extent to which the Internet and its associated technologies – developed as they are from within the logic of contemporary capitalist markets – work to enable or constrain progressive feminist discourse within Reddit's 2XC community. The ways in which contemporary feminist ideology and action manifest and proliferate in the online environment differ significantly from the more traditional and often localised methods of organising and information sharing that characterised first-, second- and even third-wave feminist activity. The near-universal uptake of the participatory Internet and mobile communications technologies has afforded the contemporary feminist movement radically new ways of promoting action, spreading awareness and recruiting allies, and ushered in feminism's fourth wave. Yet one of the most significant differences between the fourth wave of feminism and those that rose before is this almost absolute reliance on digital communications technologies, almost all of which are, at their core, products which exist primarily to generate profit for their corporate owners. This research delves into data collected from one of the Internet's largest networked feminist communities, 2XC, aiming to illustrate how the growing dependence on the digital environment may be influencing the motivations, attitudes, values and discourses that give shape to the novel feminist perspectives constituting the fourth wave.

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the methodological approach employed by this thesis, beginning with an outline of the dominant research paradigm that has broadly informed the research. Next, the suitability of case study research to the topic at hand is discussed before the rationale for selecting 2XC as the primary case is posited. An outline of the criterion that guided the decision to analyse this community to the exclusion of others is provided. The chapter then moves to the data collection methods before introducing thematic analysis as the primary analytical mechanism of this thesis. A discussion of the suitability of this methodological approach for this project as well as a detailed description of the way it was implemented is provided. Finally, the chapter ends with a discussion regarding the limitations of the methodological decisions and the anticipated impact they may have on the results of the research,

as well as a brief discussion regarding the ethical issues and general limitations that are inherently part of conducting research into online communities.

4.2 Knowing the World: Philosophical Assumptions of the Research

Throughout our lives we are guided by sets of underlying principles and assumptions that help us make sense of the world and our place within it. For researchers, these principles and assumptions have a direct impact on how and why research is conducted and comprise what is referred to as the research paradigm. Among other things, this paradigm informs the objectives of the research, determines the ways in which the research is conducted and influences the interpretation of the data. Broadly speaking, the research paradigm is comprised of the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the research; it is a vital part of the development of a robust methodological position. Blaikie (2000, p. 8) describes ontological claims as ‘claims and assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other. In short, ontological assumptions are concerned with what we believe constitutes social reality.’ Broadly speaking, epistemology is a branch of philosophy concerned with the constitution of knowledge, or ‘the possible ways of gaining knowledge of social reality, whatever it is understood to be’ (Blaikie 2000, p.8). In order to apply Bourdieu’s theoretical framework most effectively, this thesis is guided by philosophical principles similar to his own. Bourdieu suggests that, while agents are capable of constructing their own vision of the world, their ability to do so remains constrained by the structures of society more broadly (Bourdieu 1989, p. 18),

As this research endeavours to understand the nature of the 2XC community through close analysis of the interactions of its participants, acknowledging the subjective experience and perspectives of these individuals as generative sites of legitimate knowledge. However, this research understands the experiences and perspectives of 2XC community members to be shaped by the political, cultural and social mechanisms of everyday life. Indeed, it is not the individual nor the particular perspectives themselves that are of the greatest interest to this research, but the extent to which these perspectives and experiences are informed by the field of practice in which they occur. This research follows Bourdieu in viewing the most fundamentally productive source of social reality as the relations *between* entities, rather than the entities themselves (Lee 2019). Bourdieu asserts that ‘what exists in the social world are relations – not interactions between agents or intersubjective ties between individuals, but objective relations’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 97). Bourdieu’s claim that ‘the real is the relational’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 97) indicates the philosophical assumption that ostensibly unrelated social phenomena are in fact

deeply entangled and work to inform one another (Ignatow & Robinson 2017). For example, the social practice analysed within the 2XC community does not exist outside of the structural influences of the community itself, or Reddit more broadly. Indeed, social practice within 2XC can be attributed to the objective relations between agents themselves, and agents and the field.

Attempts to understand the nature of networked feminism as it occurs within this community would prove fruitless without relating an analysis back to an understanding of the relationship between entities that comprise the field: between community members and the subreddit, between the subreddit and Reddit more broadly, between Reddit and other Internet forums, between community members themselves, and so on. Bourdieu's concept of doxa refers to the 'adherence to relations of order which because they structure inseparably both the real world and the thought world, are accepted as self-evident' (Bourdieu 2010, p. 473). That which 'goes without saying because it comes without saying,' petrifies the universe of conceivable discourses (Bourdieu 1977, p. 167). The way in which doxa works to potentially constrict the contemporary feminist imagination is a central concern of this research. Through bringing into view the cultural phenomenon of networked feminist activity, this research aims to critique the aspects of online activism and practice that may work against the successes of a collective feminist project.

4.2.1 A Critical Feminist Paradigm

Research conducted from within a critical feminist paradigm encourages 'the reflection on social injustice by way of gender analysis, to transform, and not simply explain the social order' (Ackerly & True 2010, p. 2). Heavily dependent on the 'feminist research ethic,' the critical feminist paradigm 'encourages scholars to conceptualise their research question from the perspective of concrete and located experiences, including the experiences of the powerless' (Ackerly & True 2010, p. 94). Such a position works to expose those inequalities firmly anchored in our unconscious social practices, with a particular focus on gendered inequalities, allowing for a serious engagement with feminist questions, and feminism itself, through a deep scepticism towards our seemingly natural everyday online practices (Ackerly & True 2010). However, there is a further distinction to be made between a feminist and a critical feminist research paradigm, as the contemporary conception of feminism becomes increasingly entwined with the neoliberal discourse that venerates the notion of personal choice (Scruton 2018). As feminism is '[re]framed by ideologies of possessive individualism' (Goldman, Heath & Smith 1991, p. 336), which further mystifies oppressive social conditions and power arrangements, the emancipatory goals that once characterised the movement become fragmented and unclear. Thus, the feminist movement itself also requires critical interrogation. The social, economic and cultural power asymmetries that lie

at the heart of our understanding of contemporary feminism are targeted directly through the application of a critical feminist paradigm, which works to demystify those aspects of the movement that are somewhat taken for granted and seemingly above reproach.

4.3 Research Design: A Case Study Approach

This research project uses a qualitative case study methodology in order to interrogate contemporary networked feminist practice as it emerges from the spontaneous discourse occurring within Reddit's 2XC community. Specifically, this thesis draws on Yin's (2009) case study methodology as outlined in the widely cited text *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Case study methodologies are widely implemented across a broad range of disciplines, from the social sciences to economics, and are also utilised in more practice-based fields, such as medicine, architecture, environmental studies and education, among others (Johansson 2007). Case study research 'allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events' (Yin 2009, p. 4), and often involves the use of multiple data sources, 'a strategy which also enhances data credibility' (Baxter & Jack 2008, p. 554). There are a number of situational elements that predicate the use of a case study for research. For instance, the nature of the research question and the extent to which the researcher may exert control over the behaviours of the participants can influence whether a case study approach will be an effective mechanism for the development of knowledge. Case study methods are well suited to exploratory questions that do not necessarily require control of behavioural events and that are seeking answers in contemporaneous settings (Yin 2009). Further, case study inquiry is particularly appropriate when research seeks to understand 'a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context' (Yin 2009, p.18). The current study is focused on understanding a contemporary phenomenon (a networked feminist community on Reddit) as it occurs within a complex social, cultural and political milieu (the contemporary digital environment). In essence, this research is asking a 'how' question in that it is seeking to understand how the broader context and the digital environment are influencing practice and participation within the 2XC community. Given the complex ways in which practice takes place online, a case study approach is well suited to studying the nature of digital communities from within the context in which they manifest.

One of the first stages in case study design is delineating what constitutes the 'case' in a research project. This element of case study research complements a central aspect of the Bourdieusian theoretical framework – that is, defining the boundaries of the field of practice. Bourdieu suggests that 'the question of the limits of the field is a very difficult one,' as the limits of the field are in a constant state of flux due to the processes of differentiation and competition between the

participants within the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 100). Similarly, one may encounter difficulties in defining what constitutes a ‘case’ in case study research, as it is often not clear when setting out what constitutes the unit of analysis – a pivotal design element of this methodological approach (Yin 2009). Fortunately, as Reddit is siloed into community forums, the boundaries of both the field of practice and unit of analysis are more easily drawn than they may be in offline environments. This research project specifically focuses on the field of 2XC as a site of networked feminist practice, with the spontaneous discourse that occurs within this community comprising the unit of analysis (i.e., the social relations between actors in the field, and what they reveal about contemporary networked feminism). In terms of the specific dialogues selected for analysis, the most popular threads each fortnight were catalogued throughout a 6-month time period. The decision to focus on the most popular threads in the community was made because these threads are where the majority of intracommunity interaction takes place – both active participation, through commentary, and passive interaction, through upvoting. Given the popularity of a thread is predicated on the amount of engagement it receives in the form of upvotes, pulling popular threads in this manner also ensured that the content in the threads reflected the key values and positions of 2XC community members.

4.3.1 r/TwoXChromosomes: A Research Rationale

The methodological decision to focus on a single community, and thus a single case, was based on the position of 2XC as Reddit’s most popular networked feminist community. As with most qualitative approaches, it was paramount that the selection of the community for analysis was conducted in a considered and methodological fashion. In case study research, the process of screening potential cases for viability is common. In some circumstances where a number of cases are found to be suitable, a pilot process may be undertaken to ascertain the most appropriate case (Yin 2009). In order to systematically select an appropriate networked feminist community on Reddit for this study, parameters for inclusion were established. The parameters used in this instance were guided by Kozinets’s (2002) work on marketing research in online consumer communities, which was adapted in order to address the nature of this research project. In his widely cited paper, Kozinets delimits five criteria that can be used to ensure the online community selected for study is suitable for investigation:

Communities should be preferred that have (1) a more focused and research question-relevant segment, topic or group; (2) higher ‘traffic’ postings; (3) larger numbers of discrete message posters; (4) more detailed or descriptively rich data; and (5) more between-member interactions of the type required by the research question. (Kozinets 2002, p. 63)

To ensure that the community selected for this case study would constitute a meaningful site from which research into networked feminism could be conducted in a way that might produce generalisable results, the adapted criteria for inclusion were as follows:

1. The community should be organised around contemporary feminism(s) and networked feminist activity.
2. The community should facilitate a high level of traffic in relation to other subreddits of a similar nature, with frequent and plentiful activity and posts by members.
3. There should be a high number of discrete and active users compared to other subreddits of a similar nature.
4. The data generated by the users within the community should be descriptively rich and detailed.
5. The community should directly facilitate a high degree of between-member interactions²⁴.

In essence, to be considered for this research project, potential networked feminist subreddits had to be relatively popular; they had to directly engage with the discussion of feminism or women's issues; and it had to be possible to locate them through Reddit's inbuilt search function using the keyword, 'feminism.' Further, to be selected as the primary focus of this thesis, the community had to be freely accessible – not requiring moderator approval before users were able to comment or post within the community. In the initial scoping of the potential communities, four unique subreddits were identified: r/TwoXChromosomes, r/WitchesVsPatriarchy, r/Feminism and r/Feminisms. After careful consideration of these major feminist subreddits in relation to the parameters listed above, the decision to focus on r/TwoXChromosomes (2XC) was made. While no piloting process was conducted to select this community to the exclusion of others, a number of significant contextual factors were taken into consideration.

The largest networked feminist community on Reddit by a tremendous margin, 2XC has over 13 million subscribers at the time of writing and is currently among the 'top 50' subreddits on the site (Table 1). It also satisfied each of the five selection criteria initially employed when analysing potential sites for research, including having a consistently high level of engagement (i.e., unique posters/commenters) within the community. A final factor taken into consideration when making the decision to focus solely on 2XC was the gap in the research that has previously been conducted

²⁴ In the case of Reddit, most subreddits do not restrict interaction between members. However, some subreddits, such as r/FeMRAd debates require posters and commenters to be approved by moderators before being given access to engage within the community. Such subreddits have been excluded from this study.

into the subreddit as a space for feminist organising, consciousness-raising and activism. Despite the enormous popularity of the platform, research into the platform politics of Reddit is relatively scarce. However, a number of scholars have written in depth about 2XC, and such academic attention to the community allowed me to position this research relative to pre-existing perspectives. Finally, it should be noted that the unit of analysis for this research project is not simply the 2XC community as a whole, but the discursive practices of the participants within that community, and what they reveal about the influence of digital mediation and participation on the nature of contemporary feminism (Yin 2009, pp. 28-30).

Table 1 – TwoXChromosomes data collected from Subreddit Stats on 29 August 2021²⁵

Total Subscribers	Subreddit Rank	Comments per Day
13,145,673	47	4090

4.3.2 The Significance of Context in Case Study Digital Research

One of the primary factors suggesting that case study research design might be appropriate for a project is that the researcher is interested in understanding the influence of the wider contextual factors over the phenomenon being studied. 2XC does not exist within a vacuum; as discussed in Chapter 3, Bourdieu's concept of the field, among other functions, highlights the hierarchised levels of field aggregation within which social practice occurs. For example, the whole of Reddit can be conceptualised as constituting a specific field, within which there are underlying sets of doxic assumptions, discursive elements, design choices and platform affordances distinguishing this platform from social media and networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter. Within this, the totality of feminist subreddits can be considered to constitute a field of practice occurring within, and subject to, many of the organising principles of Reddit itself, whilst also developing and reproducing cultural norms that work to distinguish practice within this field from other interest groups on the site. Each of the distinct networked feminist communities active on Reddit can then be conceptualised as constituting further defined and delineated fields, as each maintains a set of tacit and implicit rules that govern practice and engender culture in the community.

In order to make sense of practice within a distinct field, these levels of aggregation must be analysed in relation to one another in order to provide the appropriate contextualisation necessary

²⁵ (Subreddit Stats 2021).

for the production of quality research. Contextualising the research is a significant aspect of a case study approach, as ‘the phenomenon is not isolated from its context (as in positivist research) rather it is of interest precisely because of its relation with the context’ (Rashid et al. 2019, p. 5). As discussed in Chapter 3, from a field theory perspective the nature of the field of power informs practice in each level of aggregation. Understanding the relationship between the 2XC community as a specific field of practice influenced as it is by the field of power more broadly is of great concern to this thesis and deeply relevant for case study research. Using this logic, this project not only delineates a specific field of practice on which to base a case study, but also addresses the contextualising factors that hold significant relevance when considering the case in question (i.e., the influence of the Internet and digital communications technologies in the contemporary manifestations of the feminist movement).

4.4 Data Collection Procedures

The advent of the participatory Internet and the widespread use of social media platforms has created a ‘new data collection paradigm for social science research’ (McCormick et al. 2017, p.391). As a result, the ways in which researchers choose to collect, analyse and represent data have been radically transformed (Markham 2005). While case study research often involves the collection of questionnaire or survey data, the wealth of knowledge and interaction that takes place on the Internet’s public sphere has created the conditions wherein a researcher may more readily assume a ‘fly-on-the-wall’ position to gather data and observe social interactions. Indeed, as Yin himself claims, technological advancements have made it possible to ‘do a valid and high-quality case study without ever leaving the telephone or Internet, depending upon the topic being studied’ (Yin 2009, p. 15). It is not uncommon for case study research seeking to understand the ways in which discursive practices unfold in mediated digital environments to rely solely on the information generated in publicly accessible forums as the primary source of data (for example, see Madini & Nooy 2013 and Westerlund, Hadlaczký & Wasserman 2015). There are a number of significant benefits to using the data generated in online forums for social scientific research. In particular, ‘forums constitute a kind of unmoderated virtual focus group, in which members of a community discuss topics without a researcher interfering and possibly influencing the expression of thoughts’ (Holtz, Kronberger & Wagner 2012, p. 56). As such, data generated in these communities is considered to constitute ‘relatively authentic natural data’ (Holtz, Kronberger & Wagner 2012, p. 56) and thus free from the influence that may be exerted by a potentially intrusive presence such as a researcher.

4.4.1 Collecting Digital Artefacts and Documents

In order to gain a better insight into the shape and nature of the networked feminist movement as it manifests in the 2XC community, two primary forms of data were collected. First, computer-mediated communications between community members and the original content in the form of comments and comment replies were scraped directly from the subreddit using a Python-based²⁶ tool that directly queried Reddit's application programming interface (API). Web scraping is a term that refers to the automatic extraction of data from a website, while API, in its most basic sense, refers to 'a set of definitions and protocols for building and integrating application software' (Red Hat 2017). For this research, the Reddit scraper was run once per week over a period of 15 weeks. In order to locate the top thread each week, the 2XC landing page was accessed and the threads were sorted by 'Top,' with the timeframe set to 'This Week,' using the inbuilt Reddit sorting function (Figure 8).



Figure 8 – Reddit's graphical user interface (GUI) showing the parameters for sorting content by 'Top' and 'This Week'

The 'top' thread from that week was then accessed, and the URL was pasted into the aforementioned Python-based scraping tool. The tool then extracted the top 100 parent comments, and all of the subsequent child comments, from the thread (see Figure 5). These were imported directly into a Microsoft Word document and were structured in a way that would make clear the parent comments, and any subsequent replies (child comments). This documentation was then securely stored before being copied into the digital qualitative analysis tool, NVivo.

Second, documentation pertaining to the rules, regulations and moderation policy of the 2XC community and Reddit more broadly were collected, archived and analysed. This also included, when necessary, relevant discussions and posts from elsewhere on Reddit that provided further context relevant to the research. Web-based tools such as SubredditStats.com were also used in

²⁶ Python is a multi-purpose programming language.

order to provide contextual information about the 2XC community, including subscription numbers, community size, participation rates and active commenter metrics. Whenever data were collected from these web-based tools, the links were archived in order to retain the evidence for future analysis. Such empirical data assisted with understanding the reach of the 2XC community, and ultimately bolstered the ‘complete observer’ approach taken throughout the thesis and discussed further below.

4.4.2 The Complete Observer

The decision to use data collected through direct observation techniques (Tellis 1997), in which the researcher occupies a ‘fly-on-the-wall’ position in order to unobtrusively obtain data, was made in order to preserve the ideological and political perspectives as they played out within the 2XC community. The role of the complete observer ‘avoids influencing the observed activities, keeping a distance to the observed interactions’ (Nørskov & Rask 2011, section 3.4). Also referred to as *covert nonparticipant observation*, this data collection method is particularly useful for researchers attempting to gain a direct understanding of a phenomenon as it occurs in its natural context (Liu & Maitlis 2010) and is thus well suited to a case study approach. While the role of the complete observer has the potential to encourage a more ‘objective’ interpretation of field observations, such a position may also intensify the risk of ethnocentrism through the lack of engagement with the study’s participants (Nørskov & Rask 2011). However, this risk is mitigated by the very nature of engagement with online communities such as 2XC, where the vast majority of community members will never directly participate in discussion. Thus, the process of covert nonparticipant observation is not unusual in a digital context such as this. Indeed, such a position is common in research that is conducted in the absence of interviews and is well suited to the study of digital populations as they engage with and on publicly accessible forums. In this case, occupying the position of the complete observer was of great benefit to this research, as the digital communities could be observed in their entirety without input from the researcher, and there was an abundance of manifest content to draw on without the need for more intrusive research processes.

Indeed, the sheer amount of data generated by the communities under study, paired with the ability to observe these communities 24 hours a day, seven days a week, informed the decision to avoid the use of interviews and opt for less invasive forms of data collection. Another reason for avoiding interviews in this case was the relative anonymity users of Reddit enjoy compared to more visually geared social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Such anonymity could possibly be compromised through a direct engagement with interview participants, and for

women engaging in public discourse on the Internet, the exposure of potentially identifying details can lead to doxing²⁷, death threats or violence (Aghazadeh et al. 2018; Poland 2016; Salter 2018). By using the direct observation technique, it was possible to observe the behaviours of participants within the 2XC community without directly influencing their discussions and opinions, while also ensuring the anonymity of those engaging in this community was protected.

4.5 Thematic Analysis

In order to fully understand the extent to which the nature of the digital field shapes the ways in which networked feminist community members participate in progressive online social movements, and the key ideas and values these movements come to represent, a thematic analysis (TA) was conducted on the collated data retrieved directly from the 2XC community, made up of post content and subsequent commentary. In light of Yin's (2009, p.129) observation that 'the analysis of case study evidence is one of the least developed and most difficult aspects of doing case studies,' the decision was made to employ the well-developed and widely used approach of TA in order to work with the data in a systemic fashion. TA is an analytical tool that is frequently 'used as part of the meaning-making process of many methods, including case study research' (Lapadat 2012, p. 926). At its core, TA is a theoretically flexible qualitative data analysis method that involves identifying and analysing patterns embedded in the dataset. This analysis is conducted through a close reading and coding of the dataset. The codes produced at this stage are then critically examined for underlying thematic similarities; the *themes* produced as a result comprise the object of the analysis. TA is defined as 'a method for systematically identifying, organising and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set' (Braun & Clarke 2012, p. 57). By searching for meaning across the dataset, the researcher is able to identify and comprehend the experiences and meaning-making processes on a collective level.

This research follows the *reflexive* TA approach laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006). The reflexive 'school' of TA is a 'fully qualitative approach' that emphasises 'the active role of the researcher in the knowledge production process' (Braun et al. 2019, p. 848). The process of reflexive TA is deeply analytical and requires close and consistent examination of the dataset in order to explore both semantic and latent meaning-based patterns that appear across and throughout the data. Rather than occurring through the development and application of a

²⁷ 'Doxing' refers to the tracing, collection and publication of an individual's personal, and usually identifying, information online.

codebook, the coding process is iterative, and it is dependent on the researcher's interpretation of the data. As a result, the codes (what is produced as a result of the coding process) have the capacity to metamorphose throughout the analytic process as the researcher becomes intimately familiar with the dataset and the meanings held within it. As described by Braun et al. (2019, p. 849), the aim of reflexive TA is to 'provide a coherent and compelling *interpretation* of the data, grounded in the data.' Reflexive TA is often relied on by researchers seeking a method which may give voice to the disenfranchised, or it can be used for 'a more radical agenda of social critique and change' (Braun et al. 2019, p. 849). Considering the political underpinnings of the reflexive TA approach, it is well suited to the application of a Bourdieusian theoretical framework. Bourdieu himself had experience as a public intellectual and activist, particularly with France's anti-globalisation movement in the late 1990s, which is testament to his own political motivations. An application of his framework in this study allowed for a theoretically robust interpretation of the themes found throughout the reflexive TA analysis.

Following the reflexive TA approach, this research adopted a somewhat hybridised approach to the coding stage, relying on both inductive and deductive processes to identify meaning and code accordingly. Inductive (or *data-driven*) coding refers to a process through which data are coded 'in order to best represent meaning as communicated by participants' (Byrne 2021, section 3.1.3). On the other hand, deductive (or *analyst-driven*) coding approaches tend to prioritise the theoretical or conceptual frameworks informing the research in the analytic phase. This research relied predominantly on an inductive approach to coding, allowing for the depth of meaning within the dataset to be found through a reciprocal process of familiarisation and conceptualisation. However, both the theoretical framework employed by this thesis and the direction of the research particularly informed the later stages of the analysis, as codes were synthesised into themes that could be meaningfully analysed within the scope of this research project. In conducting the reflexive TA, this thesis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis, which are outlined below. However, it is important to note that, due to the recursive nature of reflexive TA, 'it is rare that a researcher would follow a linear path through the six phases' (Byrne 2021, section 3.2.2). Indeed, as the coding process evolves, so too does the researcher's understanding of the implicit and explicit meanings contained within the data. As such, it is often necessary to revisit earlier understandings as the nature of the data and the questions being asked of it evolve with the researcher's understanding of the subject.

Familiarisation With the Data

Becoming intimately familiar with the dataset as a whole is the first step in the data analysis process. To achieve deep immersion in the dataset for this study, the data was read and re-read multiple times before the coding process began. During this time, notes about initial impressions of the dataset were taken, and these notes would prove vital in informing the development of the analytical reading of the data. Indeed, the process of notetaking is a key element of this initial phase of data analysis, encouraging the researcher to ‘read the data as data,’ not simply ‘absorbing the surface meaning of the words,’ but rather ‘reading the words analytically, and critically’ (Braun & Clarke 2012, p. 61). This process was regularly conducted throughout the data analysis phase as the researcher learnt more about the dataset and new possible meanings and motivations behind participation were conceptualised.

Generating Initial Codes

The process of ‘coding’ refers to the production of ‘succinct, shorthand descriptive or interpretive labels for pieces of information that may be of relevance to the research question(s)’ (Byrne 2021, section 3.2.2). This process was conducted using the qualitative analysis software, NVivo. New nodes were created each time a new ‘code’ was generated. As time progressed, the data associated with some codes was reassessed as new understandings emerged from the analysis, and codes were ‘split’ into two more relevant descriptors. Other times, the similarities between information across two or more codes justified a ‘merging’ of codes into a single representative code. This process happened consistently throughout the analysis as new patterns emerged. Significantly, contextualising information from the commentary and threads was also taken into account in terms of the significance afforded to some commentary. For example, the ‘karma score’ of a single comment often indicated to the researcher that there was a degree (or not) of intracommunity support for a statement, perspective or way of thinking. Codes sometimes covered ‘chunks’ of commentary, and sometimes only partial comments, and some data was associated with two or more different codes when deemed necessary. Table 2 provides an example of a few initial codes that were developed from interacting with the data, and comments that were coded against them.

Table 2 – Example of either partial or full commentary across four initial codes

Code	Example Commentary
Expressions of anger and frustration	... I swear, the generation who preached to me “if you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all,” had no idea what the fuck they were trying to say.
Negative generalisations of male behaviour	An example of old fashioned man manners that should go away.
Narratives of vengeance	I would have left him hanging since he’s an evil moron with boundary issues. Let him shake.
Cynicism and sarcasm	I’m so done with all of these institutions protecting rapists. It would seem the more socially “respectable” an institution or organisation is the more likely it will be harbouring criminals. But hey, since it’s just women, who cares /s ²⁸

When analysing the coded data for themes, it was necessary to take into consideration not only the frequency with which certain discursive acts occurred, but also the amount of support the commentary had received from the wider community (in the form of upvotes).

Searching for Themes

Once all the data had been thoroughly coded, the codes themselves were analysed to determine whether or not there were shared meanings or thematic similarities between them. Codes sharing thematic similarities were sometimes collapsed into an overarching theme, and sometimes a code would be promoted to the theme itself, absorbing codes similar in nature. Figure 9 represents a non-exhaustive example of several codes that came together to comprise the major theme, ‘Moral outrage, outrageous content,’ that is analysed in depth in the next chapter. A theme ‘captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set’ (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 82). This phase is an active process, in which the codes are reviewed with the intention of locating similar emerging themes. During this process, it is important to keep in mind the relationships that exist between the emerging themes that will ultimately tie them together into a ‘meaningful and lucid picture of your data’ (Braun & Clarke 2012, p. 65). When drawing themes out of the data, consideration was given not only to the frequency with which certain thematic discourses occurred, but also how these discourses were received by the general population of 2XC. This process was informed by the importance of ‘karma’ within Reddit communities, in that

²⁸ ‘/s’ is shorthand for sarcasm; see the glossary for more information.

commentary with a high number of upvotes was afforded more significance in the dataset as it reflected a degree of approval from the wider 2XC community. Once the dataset had been coded, the codes were organised into categories that reflected the nature of the communicative practices captured in the dataset, or that revealed something of the ideological underpinnings of the community.

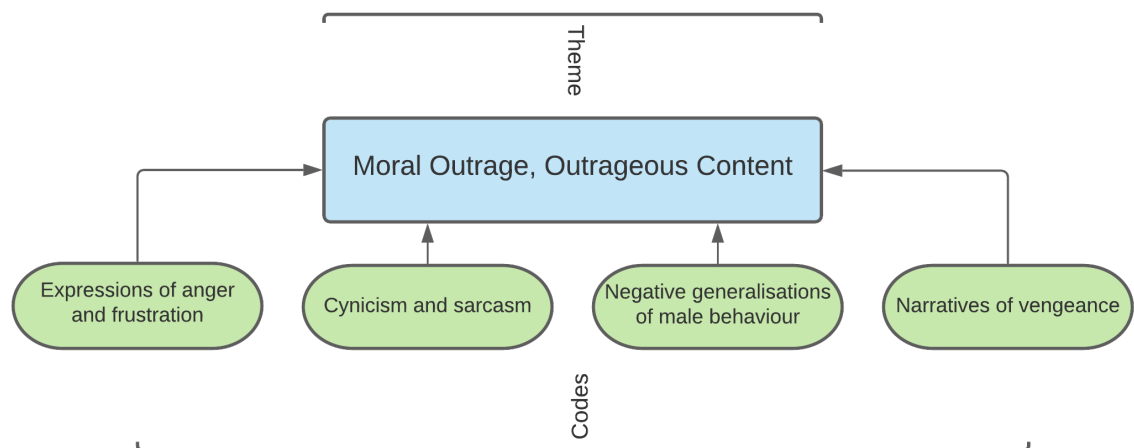


Figure 9 – An example of how final codes were merged into an overarching theme

Reviewing Potential Themes

This phase involved a review of each identified theme and its relationship to the rest of the suite of themes and to the dataset more broadly. This phase followed Braun and Clarke’s (2012, p. 65) ‘key questions’ to ask of each theme, to ensure logical and practical coherence across all themes:

- Is it a theme (it could just be a code)?
- If it is a theme, what is the quality of this theme (does it tell me something useful about the data set and my research question)?
- What are the boundaries of this theme (what does it include and exclude)?
- Are there enough (meaningful) data to support this theme (is the theme too *thin* or too *thick*)?
- Are the data too diverse and wide ranging (does the theme lack coherence)?

Once the final list of themes was found to adequately address these key concerns, each theme was checked against the extracts of data contained within it in order to confirm that the theme adequately represented the data. Where this was not the case, data was sometimes recoded, or else the boundaries of the theme redrawn in order to locate appropriate meaning within particular data extracts. During this process, the relationships between themes were also mapped in order to begin

shaping the covert narrative held by the data. At the close of this phase of the research, four major themes had been identified for further analysis.

Defining and Naming Themes

At this point of the thematic analysis, the defining features of each theme were recognised. In order for themes to be as descriptive as possible, it is important that they have a singular focus, are related but not repetitive, and directly address the research question (Braun & Clarke 2012). Ideally, themes should build upon and develop the themes set out before them in order for the data to begin to take shape into an overall linear story. The four major themes that comprise the analysis and discussion component of this thesis (presented in Chapter 6 and 7) are as follows:

Moral Outrage, Outrageous Content: Explores the common responses of outrage to the sharing of content potentially intended to trigger such responses. Highlights the naturalisation of this form of communication within the 2XC community to a range of stimuli. This theme raises questions as to the mechanisms of anger and outrage online, and the extent to which this practice benefits the feminist movement.

Legitimate Perspectives: Is the Personal Still Political? This theme captures the common tendency for users to engage their own experiences as a leverage point for entering conversation and explores the extent to which digital media encourages a more individualised political practice, as well as the potential associated implications.

Social Reproduction of Affective Polarisation: This theme captures the ways in which the discursive environment of 2XC normalises and even rewards emotionally charged responses to contentious political topics, ultimately reproducing a wider social trend towards affective polarisation between left-wing and right-wing political ideologies.

Fourth-Wave Feminist Sensibilities: The final theme outlines the key fourth-wave feminist sensibilities reproduced within the 2XC environment and demonstrates the entanglement of these sensibilities with the mechanisms of power and control that shape our wider social reality.

Producing the Report

The purpose of the report is to connect the central tenets of the research themes logically and meaningfully to form a consistent, coherent and balanced account. Further, this account must make an argument in relation to the proposed research question(s) (Braun & Clarke 2006). In this study, the process of writing occurred concurrently with the analysis phase because the two are inextricably entwined in qualitative research. This phase was undertaken as the final step in

making sense of the data using thematic analysis. Using the analytic process of thematic analysis to capture the communicative practices within networked feminist communities is vital to better understand which feminist discourses are produced, absorbed and rejected within these digital communities, as this may prove illuminating in terms of the popular values, attitudes and concerns of the feminist movement more broadly.

4.5.1 The Significance of Reflexive Practice

When conducting research using reflexive TA, Braun et al. (2019) suggest researchers should ‘own their perspectives,’ as this approach positions the researcher as ‘a *storyteller*, actively engaged in interpreting data through the lens of their own cultural membership and social positionings, their theoretical assumptions and ideological commitments, as well as their scholarly knowledge’ (Braun et al, pp.898-849). This perspective is what provides the ‘reflexive’ element to this brand of TA. Reflexivity refers to the ways in which methodological choices, as well as the values and beliefs of the researcher, ultimately influence research outcomes (Nadin & Cassell 2006). The form of reflexivity espoused by Braun and Clarke is known as ‘enacted reflexivity,’ which involves ‘*autobiographical reflection*, comprising a brief narrative of the author’s journey to the research’ (Maton 2003, p. 55). While there is great value in the reflexive approach for judging the validity of knowledge claims made by practitioners of TA, there are limitations associated with this form of reflexivity. This is particularly so when utilising a Bourdieusian theoretical framework, in that the researcher’s statement of their relationship to the object of analysis does not necessarily work to challenge the doxic assumptions of the researcher; the approach also tends to operate as a safety mechanism, so the ideas presented in the research cannot be validly challenged.

In contrast to the many reflexive research practices that ‘represent good research practices rather than revelatory bases for knowledge claims’ (Maton 2003, p. 55), the practice of epistemic reflexivity espoused by Bourdieu attempts to overcome the shortcomings in the approaches to reflexivity that are popular within the social sciences today (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). In a thorough and informative paper on the subject, Maton (2003) clarifies Bourdieu’s ‘distinctive contribution’ to the concept of reflexivity through conceptualising knowledge claims as three separate yet reciprocal relations: the social relation, the epistemic relation and the objectifying relation (see Figure 10).

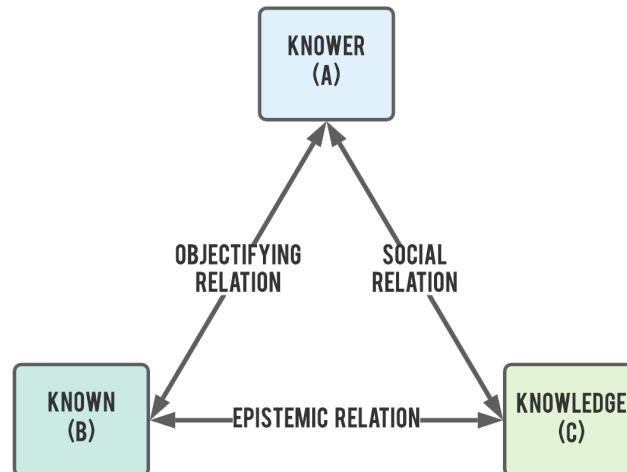


Figure 10 – ‘Three Relations of Knowledge Claims,’ adapted from Maton (2003)

Common sociological reflexive practice tends to focus on the social relation between knowledge (C) and the knower (A). In other words, such reflexive practice tends to do little more than suggest that the life of the researcher as a ‘private person’, or the knower, inevitably impacts on the knowledge claims the researcher will make. Maton (2003) suggests that this ‘autobiographical reflection,’ in which the researcher is compelled to briefly outline their background in the name of reflexive practice, is rarely related back to the context of the ‘object, methodology, methods, data or analysis’ featured in the research (Maton 2003, p. 54). Further, Maton (2003, p. 62) notes that ‘the conditions for progress in social science are ... not only to be found in the social field and habituses of knowers, but also in the structuring of knowledge itself.’ Thus, to be effectively reflexive, the researcher must ruminate on how this autobiographical reflection influences the design and conduct of the research process. Further, the ‘social and intellectual unconscious’ that are ‘embedded’ in the analytic tools utilised by a research project must also be interrogated (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 36). Indeed, Bourdieu & Wacquant posit that reflexivity is not the ‘burden of the lone researcher’, but rather it should be considered a ‘collective enterprise’ which aims to strengthen the epistemological conviction of sociology (Bourdieu & Wacquant 2002, p. 36).

4.6 Final Methodological Considerations

4.6.1 Data Management

Although the Internet is an invaluable source of data for scholars across every discipline, the use of Internet-based resources is associated with specific logistical concerns. The relative impermanence of Internet-based resources can impact the validity and replicability of research, as a citation's website of origin may be removed, relocated or altered at any time following publication. Indeed, an article published in *Science* found that 13 per cent of Internet references cited in published research were completely inactive 27 months after publication (Dellavalle et al. 2003). This concern has been directly mitigated throughout this thesis by archiving any digital content drawn from the Internet via web archiving services. Such services ensure that digital objects, such as websites and forum posts, are available in the long term and are thus more appropriate for scholarly purposes. There are a number of archival resources available online that allow an Internet user to take a 'snapshot' of a specific website. This snapshot is then saved to a dedicated server to ensure the data can be retrieved at a later date. This project primarily made use of an archival service known as archive.today, and each Internet-based reference appearing in the thesis reference list includes both the original URL and an archived version.

In addition to archiving all web-based sources, conducting research with digital tools requires a consideration of the safe storage of data and documents related to the research. This project relied on both hard-copy data, in the form of notes and memos, and digital data, including records of computer-mediated communication, spreadsheets, word documents, NVivo files, EndNote libraries and so on. The protection of data is paramount for its 'possible future use in verifying research findings, setting priorities, or reanalysing' (Lin 2009, p. 135). The minimum data retention period for Victoria University is five years. During the span of this project, I have relied on a number of digital storage utilities for the retention of research data, including the hard drive of my personal computer (which is regularly backed up), the OneDrive cloud storage attached to my Victoria University Office 365 account, as well as a physically separate hard drive that is kept in a lockable filing cabinet. All hard-copy data was scanned and transferred to the three digital locations, and the originals were kept with the portable hard drive in the filing cabinet.

4.6.2 Limitations of the Research

In terms of research conducted on digital communities and Internet forums, Holtz, Kronberger and Wagner (2012) outline four significant issues that should be taken into consideration:

anonymity, deindividuation, privacy and representativeness. Privacy is taken into consideration in the discussion about the ethical considerations of social media data collection in the next section, but the remaining three concerns provide a useful starting point for understanding the limitations of this kind of research.

Anonymity can prove a limiting factor for some research that uses data drawn from Internet forums due to the relatively pseudonymous nature of such spaces – and, as discussed previously, one of Reddit’s key affordances is its pseudonymous nature. This means that demographic information about users may be unavailable or incorrect, and so making assumptions about individual users is complicated. However, ‘it is possible to characterise the social group organising and using the forum but taking into account background information such as mission statements or introductory pages’ (Holtz, Kronberger & Wagner 2012, p. 56). The current study, in fact, is less concerned with the practice of individuals, and more concerned with how the relations between individuals is indicative of the orthodox social practice within 2XC as distinct field of practice. Given this focus, the lack of identifying information does not present a limitation in this particular study.

The concept of deindividuation has its roots in the domain of psychology; it refers to a phenomenon that is frequently witnessed in the gathering of crowds, where ‘individual identity is lost in the mass and ... this results in a loss of behavioural control’ (Reicher, Spears & Postmes 1995, p. 164). In terms of sociological and psychological studies about phenomena associated with digital communications technologies, deindividuation is operationalised to describe the way in which some individuals are predisposed to make more aggressive, insulting, extreme or offensive statements online than they would in face-to-face situations (Holtz, Kronberger & Wagner 2012). The nature of aggressiveness or anger expression and the extent to which it occurs within 2XC community is of interest to this research project, as the naturalisation of this form of expression could reveal much about the value of some forms of discourse over others.

Representativeness refers to the idea that the individuals participating in an online space can’t be considered to represent the entirety of a social group or perspective (Holtz, Kronberger & Wagner 2012). Even in a community as large as 2XC, the number of participating members only comprises a fraction of those subscribed to the subreddit. In order to mitigate issues associated with representativeness, data were considered alongside contemporary scholarship and journalism in order to validate the major themes emerging from the dataset with issues that are raised with some regularity in feminist circles more broadly.

As is the case with any methodological choice, there are a number of limitations associated with utilising a case study approach to research, as well as thematic analysis as an analytical tool. The major limitation associated with case study research is concerned with construct validity (i.e., the methodological rigour of the research, the researcher's subjectivity and concerns regarding external validity). Yin (2009, p. 14) explains that the disdain for case study research expressed by some scholars is often a product of sloppy investigative practices on the part of the researcher, the lack of systematic procedures implemented during the research process, or the extent to which the researcher imparts her own biases into the production of the research. In terms of the methodological dimension of these concerns, certain practices can be implemented in order to mitigate these legitimate concerns pertaining to construct validity. Throughout the conduct of this research, the methodological decisions made were documented and ruminated on wherever possible. Prior to conducting the research, I made a concerted effort to read widely about case study methodology, including the key literature on this topic, thus ensuring I had a grasp on the advantages and common pitfalls of the method. Certainly, the decision to implement a thematic analysis framework for the analytical component of the thesis was fostered by Yin's (2009) observation that the analysis of case study evidence is regularly underdeveloped.

However, thematic analysis itself is not without limitations; the most prominent of these involves 'a failure to adequately describe the assumptions that underlie the analysis' (Kiger & Varpio 2020, p.8). In this study, this concern was directly mitigated by clearly delineating not only a clear and pre-defined theoretical framework, but also closely engaging with the philosophical assumptions about reality made throughout this research. Like case study research methods, thematic analysis is also regularly criticised for a perceived lack of replicability and reliability. Indeed, such criticisms are often extended to qualitative research more broadly. Demonstrating methodological rigour through the application and documentation of a robust research strategy can work to overcome some of these concerns. However, King, Keohane & Verba's (1994) observation is of great significance here; they state that 'in all social science and all prediction, it is important that we be as explicit as possible about the degree of uncertainty that accompanies our prediction' (King, Keohane & Verba 1994, p. 212). The observations and predictions presented within this thesis, having been formulated from within a methodologically robust framework, remain products of not only my subjective understanding of the object of research, but my complex position within social and cultural reality more broadly, as well as my level of education and training as a researcher.

4.6.3 Ethical Considerations of Social Media Data Collection

In the online environment, political engagement and activism is primarily facilitated by social media platforms. The colossal user bases of contemporary social media platforms are responsible for generating an unfathomable amount of data, providing social researchers with the ‘capacity to collect and analyse data with an unprecedented breadth and depth and scale’ (Lazer et al. 2009, p. 722). From an analytical perspective, the massive quantity of data that is tracked, stored and measured is unproductive in the absence of the guiding elements of philosophical inquiry. However, the 2018 Cambridge Analytica data scandal²⁹ involving Facebook users illustrated the ineluctable consequences of such large quantities of freely available data. While Facebook is not a site of data extraction in this thesis, the event serves as a cautionary tale for all researchers using social media data. The lessons learned from this unprecedented privacy breach were taken into consideration in the design of this research with regard to maintaining the privacy of 2XC community members throughout this study.

As such, privacy was at the forefront of the ethical considerations that shaped the design of this research. From an ethical standpoint, it can be argued that communication that takes place within Internet forums could be considered to be private communication and thus should not be used for scientific analysis without first obtaining the informed consent of forum participants. However, as Rodham and Gavin (2006, p. 93) point out, ‘the ‘public-ness’ (both acknowledged and perceived) will vary for different [online] environments and will therefore have different implications for the issue of gaining informed consent.’ Due to Reddit’s position (albeit self-described) as ‘the front page of the Internet,’ it can be inferred that participants in open and popular subreddits such as 2XC understand that their data is publicly available. As previously discussed, the pseudonymous nature of Reddit provides a level of anonymity and privacy that is not afforded to more standard social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram. Thus, the ‘individual contributions to the message board can therefore be considered in the same way as individual naturalistic observations in a public space’ (Rodham & Gavin 2006, p. 94). However, in order to retain the privacy and anonymity of the users whose data comprised the object of analysis in this research, a two significant decisions were made. First, identifying information regarding the 15 threads selected for analysis was not disclosed in order to protect the anonymity of the community members. By excluding the titles of these threads, it becomes significantly more difficult to locate the users who contributed to them. Second, a decision was made not to include

²⁹ Beginning in 2013, the data of millions of Facebook users was collected without consent to be used in political advertising campaigns by British consulting firm, Cambridge Analytica.

any usernames from the participants of 2XC whose commentary featured in this analysis. Direct references to usernames were only included when referencing publicly available administrator or moderator posts, as the nature of these users as community leaders and the publicity associated with posts required direct attribution. These steps echo Rodham and Gavin's observation regarding the protection of users' privacy in online forums:

as long as researchers maintain the confidentiality of the individuals who have 'posted' and record data in a manner that would not cause personal identification, it is not necessary to seek consent of individuals using open message boards because ethical boundaries are not crossed. (Rodham & Gavin 2006, pp. 94-95)

Thus, as a result of this consensus from the scholarly community regarding the use of publicly available data, ethical clearance was deemed to not be required for this research project. In closing this chapter, all possible steps were taken to protect the anonymity of the users whose contributions to 2XC comprised the data set used in this research.

4.6.4 Relationship to the Research

In-keeping with my brief discussion of the significance of reflexivity in sociological research, I have attempted to reconcile both positions on reflexivity that have framed the design of this research by not only positioning my own experience in relation to the topic, but also attempting to describe how this has influenced the selection of methods and approaches that I have made. My own position as a researcher is directly informed by my lived experience as a woman, which drove my interest in understanding the mechanisms of feminism in an increasingly digitised world. Further, I grew up as a 'digital native,' and have had an inherent interest in the Internet and social media platforms from an early age. My position as a first-of-family university student has encouraged me to consider the shortcomings in progressive politics as they occur with great regularity on the Internet. My investment in radically different fields of practice result from my university education and reinforce the conviction that some peers and family members lacked the necessary composition and amount of capital to be able to engage with the complexities of rapidly evolving progressive political perspectives, let alone participate meaningfully within them.

There were many moments of self-reflection that coloured my research journey, and such moments of self-reflection ultimately saw the focus of my thesis shift from a celebratory narrative of the benefits of a globalised feminism to a more critical account of political participation, wed as it is to digital access and literacy. The conduct of sound research demands a consistent reflection on the most effective methods that may be used to answer the questions asked. While I endeavoured to achieve this, my research design was deeply predicated on methods I was already

familiar with, and, as a result, was relatively comfortable when being operationalised. Still, each step of the data collection and analysis was considered and reconsidered based on advantages, pitfalls, viability, and the extent to which it illuminated the field of research in meaningful ways; the research design evolved during this process. By assessing the veracity of the research methodology in this manner, many opportunities for improvement were identified; this will thus inform my future research endeavours, ultimately contributing to the ‘collective scientific unconscious’ (Maton 2003, p. 58). The nature of the analysis presented in the following section is thus deeply informed by the philosophical positions, approaches, designs, and methods that guided each step of this research project.

Chapter 5: Outrage and Experience

5.1 Introduction

In-keeping with Bourdieu's theoretical framework, this chapter begins by briefly establishing the nature of the 'field of power' – that is, the generative forces within a society that govern social practice in everyday life, serving as 'an organising principle of differentiation and struggle throughout all fields' (Swartz 2013, p. 136). In order to understand the nature of participation in a specific 'field of practice,' it is necessary to identify the nature of relations *between* fields, as well as the degree of autonomy experienced by the field in relation to the wider field of power. This discussion is an essential component of this thesis, as Bourdieu's spatial metaphor of the 'field' is central to understanding the 'structure of the distribution of those kinds of capital (or power) whose possession governs the obtaining of specific profits' (Bourdieu 1986, p. 231). This provides the necessary context for the in-depth analysis provided in the next section of the chapter; that is, an exploration of the forms of capital most valued within 2XC. Bourdieu defines the field of power as 'a field of forces structurally determined by the state of relations among various forms of power, or different forms of capital' (Bourdieu 1998, p. 264). It represents the space in which 'agents and institutions possessing enough specific capital' to occupy dominant positions within their respective fields 'confront each other using strategies aimed at preserving or transforming' the dominant social paradigm (Bourdieu 1998, pp. 264-265). If we are to accurately locate and analyse the internal hierarchisation mechanisms at play within 2XC as a distinct field of practice, we must also delineate the social, economic and/or political forces characterising the field of power more broadly. Accordingly, the first stage of this analysis must be to address the primary forces at work within the field of power to provide a 'starting point for the analysis of the interdependent power relations at work both within and between fields' (Schmitz et al., 2017, p. 51).

In the West, it is widely accepted that the most dominant social and political ideology is informed by the doctrine of neoliberalism (Lazzarato 2012; Phelan 2014; Saad-Filho & Johnston 2005), with the attendant economic logic of advanced consumer capitalism working to reframe citizen into consumer. These dominant social, political, and economic processes are thus knotted together in a tapestry of power and influence. There are no solid lines to be drawn between them. They blur together into a mass of generative force, along with extensive individualism and competition. As consumerism is a central tenet of neoliberal governmentality, it is through consumerism that individuals can communicate to the world the abundance (or lack thereof) of symbolic and

economic capital they possess – it is an advertisement for the skill with which a person has been able to ‘play the game.’ Such distinctive cultural mechanisms are bolstered by the development of a consumer culture that permeates almost every aspect of daily life; this culture allows us to recognise inequality, disparity, the rich from the poor, and particular themes and anxieties arising from the ‘cultured’ and from the ‘uncultured’. Surveillance capitalism represents the locus of various exchanges involving our digital profiles, interests and inclinations, turning them into a commodity, to be refashioned and refurbished into forms of symbolic capital and symbolic power, thus complicating the relationship between autonomy, independence and our digital selves.

Of great concern to this thesis is the extent to which existing power relations that are internalised and misrecognised in the digital sphere have the potential to hinder the efforts of a feminist movement working to overcome restrictive conceptions of gendered prolificity, femaleness and womanhood, and the axes of possibility for improved conditions for women in society more broadly. Thus, research into the influence of popular social media platforms must address the tension existing in the practice of contemporary social movements to better understand the extent to which they shape the aims, ideologies and activities of networked feminist movements. The research presented in this thesis seeks to analyse the online manifestation of the feminist movement mediated by an Internet that is not a neutral space for unrestricted self-expression and connection, but rather constitutes a highly commodified social environment subject to the demands of the field of power – that is, the broad generative field governed primarily by the tenants of neoliberal rationality and the logic of advanced consumer capitalism. To determine the efficacy of the Internet and social media platforms as tools for a widespread and resilient feminist politics, we need to understand the ways in which the contemporary manifestation of the movement can navigate structural tensions when engaging with feminist politics from within the current socio-political context.

5.1.1 The Form and Function of Capital

As discussed in Chapter 3, understanding the form and function of capital within a field of practice constitutes a significant aspect of Bourdieu’s theoretical framework. This chapter seeks to illuminate the composition and function of the three dominant forms of capital (economic, cultural and social) that are operationalised by agents within the 2XC community and contribute to the process of social hierarchisation. All forms of capital have the capacity to be acquired, accumulated, lost, traded, invested and distributed between agents in a given field. Crucially, the composition and operationalisation of accumulated capital, as well as its value in the field more broadly, contributes to an agent’s position and opportunities for mobility within the field and

provides the groundwork for the agent's *habitus* to emerge. Thus, the natural competition between agents in the field for legitimate forms of capital gives rise to the organisational logic of the field which 'positions actors relative to each other according to the overall amounts and relative combinations of capital available to them' (Anheier, Gerhards & Romo 1995, p. 860). Different fields are dominated by different forms of specific capital, and so an analysis of dominant forms of capital in a given field can illuminate what kinds of ideologies, activities and behaviours are valued or rejected by actors within that field. For example, in the field of large-scale cultural production, economic success is a dominant form of capital as 'writers compete as producers in a market to seek financial returns first and foremost' (Anheier, Gerhards & Romo 1995, p. 863). In contrast, in the field of restricted cultural production, 'economic success is secondary to symbolic value, and writers compete for cultural capital in the form of recognition, reputation, and legitimacy rather than for monetary rewards' (Anheier, Gerhards & Romo 1995, p. 863). This observation contextualises the analysis that takes place throughout this chapter.

The field of networked feminism is unique in terms of the forms of capital that are dominant within it, and it is through a close analysis of these forms of capital that it is possible to make inferences as to the shape and nature of the feminist movement as it occurs online. A key limitation of the capacity to locate, interrogate and analyse evidence of economic and social capital in the 2XC community became clear during the collection and analysis of data. This primarily related to the pseudonymous nature of Reddit as a platform, resulting in a lack of identifying demographic information relevant to the participants within the community. Without clear indicators of the socio-economic status of community members or identifying information that could be used to draw out connections, it is difficult to make methodologically robust inferences as to the economic and social capital of the participants of 2XC, including the ways in which these forms of capital and their subtypes are operationalised within the field of networked feminism. On the other hand, the vast majority of the data points analysed throughout this research project were acutely relevant to an analysis of cultural capital and the forms it takes within the 2XC community. While Bourdieu (1986) conceptualises cultural capital as existing in three states – *embodied*, *objectified* and *institutionalised* – the nature of this research project and the data collected allows primarily for a comprehensive analysis of cultural capital in its embodied state (*forme incorporée*). This is largely a result of the nature of the communicative medium which comprised the object of analysis – Reddit – within which the spontaneous discursive practices of participants are almost entirely text-based and conversational. So, while previous research into the demographic factors (i.e., social and economic capital) that often contribute to an individual's likelihood to participate in political discourse in online forums (Robinson 2009) were taken into consideration throughout this analysis, it is only possible to provide a detailed account of the

forms of cultural capital that dominate the field. The limitations of the analysis presented in this thesis in terms of its contribution to understanding the impact of an agent's social and/or economic capital on their participation in online political communities highlights a need for further scholarly interrogation of these concepts.

As stated previously, the spontaneous discourse that makes up the majority of the data captured in this research project allows for a targeted analysis of the embodied element of cultural capital that is *language* (Bourdieu 1986). Language is an expression of embodied cultural capital, which refers to the durable, corporeal dispositions of the individual incorporated into the body and mind. This process of incorporation refers to 'one's culture or cultivation that presupposes a process of embodiment as it implies a time-intensive labour of inculcation and assimilation' (Walther 2014, p. 10). In other words, the more time spent in each field, the more likely an individual is to develop cultural competency that is unique to practice within that field; in doing so, the individual is then better positioned to exert symbolic power over others within the field, having absorbed the tacit and implicit cultural norms that are valued or rejected within the given social space. This is reflected in the value placed on 'lurking,' a term popularised in Internet culture which refers to a behaviour in which members of online communities spend time observing what is taking place without – or before – directly participating. The impact of time invested in online communities on the accumulation of embodied cultural capital (i.e., time spent 'lurking') is deftly addressed in an interview conducted with two founders of Internet culture conference, ROFLcon:

TH: It seems like you can't be a good producer without being a really good consumer of this stuff. Even the most popular people on the internet don't appear to be master artists... I think the most successful people on the internet, and the most successful platforms on the internet, just have this constant ingestion and exertion of different things. I think maybe there's a community norm that knowing what has happened and what is happening on the internet is a prerequisite to then playing a role in it.

CX: Lurk more. (Hwang & Xu 2014, pp. 386-387)

It can be assumed that those who capably demonstrate their understanding of the perspectives and communicative styles valued in the 2XC community – and indeed Reddit more broadly – have developed the relevant cultural competency through a significant investment of time spent within the field. In this light, it is reasonable to conceptualise time itself as a form of capital in the digital field, as the more time available to spend freely in digital communities presupposes a lifestyle that is able to support this time investment (time-as-capital).

Of great significance to this chapter is the nature of linguistic capital – conceptualised as a subtype of cultural capital – and its symbolic exchange on the linguistic marketplace of 2XC. Bourdieu conceptualises language and discourse as ‘a symbolic asset which can receive different values depending on the market on which it is offered’ (Bourdieu 1977, p. 651). Linguistic capital refers to an agent’s capacity to produce discursive expressions and utterances for a particular market. Linguistic capital is deeply linked to the *embodied* state of cultural capital and is embedded in an individual’s self-presentation and communicative practices. The capacity to understand, utilise and replicate the acceptable style, tone and nature of language within the 2XC community indicates a level of linguistic competence, which, ‘(like any other cultural competence) functions as linguistic capital in relationship with a certain market’ (Bourdieu 1977, p. 651). In other words, linguistic capital can be operationalised in order to place the speaker in a pre-eminent position, empowering them with an opportunity to demonstrate their cultural competence within the field and thus distinguishing themselves from their peers.

The habitus of individuals able to successfully engage with feminist practice in the 2XC community is likely to reflect an inculcation and normalisation of values which enable the individual to feel at home in the field as the field becomes ‘embodied’ by them. Linguistic capital – and cultural capital more broadly – affords prodigious contributions to the development of the individual’s naturalised dispositions. The site of an individual’s body is accorded a centrality in Bourdieu’s theory, and it is through the body that the *hexis* emerges – the ‘physical attitudes and dispositions which emerge in individuals as a result of the relationships between particular fields and individuals’ habitus’ (Webb, Schirato & Danaher, p. x). The bodily hexis is the point at which the individual and the social converge as social practice becomes a reflection of the dominant values and cultural legitimacy within the field. The site of the body carries the classificatory schemes of culture in which it exists, and which work to position all participants in the social space through taken-for-granted processes of recognition and validation (Inghilleri 2005). This observation is valuable in understanding how and why some forms of commentary dominate the conversations taking place within the community while other perspectives are overlooked or altogether rejected.

5.1.2 Chapter Outline

Analysing relevance to practice within the community and how posts contribute to the generation of capital within this community, this chapter explores two major themes which emerged from a close analysis of the spontaneous discourse between participants of the 2XC community in response to 15 original posts. As discussed in Chapter 4, each week throughout the data collection

period the most popular thread according to Reddit’s ‘top’ algorithm was selected for analysis. Once all the threads and their associated commentary had been collected, the threads themselves were organised into broad thematic categories based on the nature of the content shared in the original post. These categories and a brief description of the subject matter are described in Table 3.

Table 3 – An outline of the themes addressed in the 15 Reddit threads analysed in this study

Subject	Occurrences in the Dataset	Description
Sexual violence and harassment towards women	7	Broad themes of stalking, harassment, domestic and sexual violence committed against women
Women’s accomplishments	3	Light-hearted posts dedicated to celebrating the achievements of everyday women
Women and the American political system	2	Discussions pertaining to American politics that are relevant to women’s experience
Just for fun	2	Light-hearted posts detailing positive, wholesome or apolitical subjects
Reproductive justice	1	Posts dealing with reproductive justice and reproductive rights of women

Table 3 provides some context for a discussion of the commentary that emerged throughout this analysis, and broadly captures the nature of the threads that were analysed. It is clear from the table that conversations around ‘sexual violence and harassment towards women’ dominated the dataset, while more light-hearted contributions (such as ‘women’s accomplishments’ or ‘just for fun’) were less common. Such contextualisation is necessary given the nature of the commentary analysed within the threads and the frequency with which some discursive acts occurred.

Throughout this chapter, two major thematic dimensions of linguistic cultural capital in the field of 2XC will be explored. They are as follows:

1. moral outrage and outrageous content
2. the value of authentic lived experience.

Both themes represent a way in which cultural capital manifests and might be accumulated in this specific community, and were drawn from the data using thematic analysis, as outlined in the methodology section of this thesis. Further, both themes represent discursive acts that appeared with great regularity throughout the dataset. Finally, throughout this chapter, Canetti’s pivotal

work *Crowds and Power* (1981) will be drawn on to clearly illustrate the ways in which the 2XC community reacts to certain stimuli. While the definition of a *digital community* supplied by the *Cambridge Dictionary* appropriately describes the congregation of individuals within this specific Reddit community³⁰, it fails to adequately describe the *behaviours* of this group of people. Thus, to effectively capture and describe the essence of the behaviours of this community, Canetti's work is invaluable.

5.2 Moral Outrage, Outrageous Content

The first major theme to be explored in this chapter is *moral outrage and outrageous content*. While the concept of moral outrage is not novel in and of itself, the changes to the ways in which we express and utilise moral outrage in the digital age are significant. Moral outrage is defined by Crockett as 'a powerful emotion that motivates people to shame and punish wrongdoers,' that is 'triggered by stimuli that call attention to moral norm violations' (Crockett 2017, p. 769). Following Crockett, the research in this thesis points to online stimuli that will be conceptualised as *outrageous content*, understood as separate from but intrinsically linked to the reaction of *moral outrage* some users have to this content. Research into the frequency with which we observe moral norm violations suggests that while it is rare to directly witness or encounter immoral acts offline, it is a frequent occurrence in online spaces (Hofmann et al. 2014). Research on virality shows that people are more likely to share content that elicits moral emotions such as outrage. Because outrageous content generates more revenue through viral sharing, natural selection-like forces may favour "supernormal" stimuli that trigger much stronger outrage responses than do transgressions we typically encounter in everyday life... These observations suggest that digital media transforms moral outrage by changing both the nature and prevalence of the stimuli that trigger it' (Crockett 2017, p. 769).

Expressions of moral outrage in the 2XC community were categorised into many different overarching emotional forms, including *expressions of anger and frustration*, *narratives of vengeance, cynicism and sarcasm* and *negative generalisations of male behaviour* (see Figure 9). These categories were then combined into this theme – moral outrage and outrageous content – due to both the nature of the affective discourse and the stimuli that generally preceded it (in the

³⁰ Digital community is defined as follows: 'on social media, a group of people who have similar interests or who want to achieve something together' (*Cambridge Online Dictionary* 2021, community entry).

form of the original posts). As demonstrated in Table 3, the significance of instances of moral outrage throughout the dataset was directly related to the dominance of outrageous content in the 15 threads analysed. As discussed in detail in the methodology chapter, the most popular 2XC thread from each week during data collection period was selected for analysis. As such, the overrepresentation of outrageous content in the dataset suggests these kinds of posts were regularly among the most popular in the community, attracting the highest amount of upvotes and generating a substantial amount of discursive activity. Further, the significance of this theme across the dataset was not only due to the frequency with which it emerged during the analysis but also that instances of moral outrage, as expressed through commentary, regularly attracted a very high amount of intracommunity support. Such support was quantifiable through both the ‘voting’ function and the amount of participatory activity these expressions generated in the form of comment replies. However, in the two threads that were categorised as ‘just for fun’ in Table 3, the vast majority of the commentary was relatively innocuous; in these cases, those comments expressing positive sentiment in the form of praise or support performed very well. Of the data analysed, however, these instances were in the minority.

5.2.1 Outrage as Orthodoxy

Expressions of moral outrage often attracted a much higher engagement rate than commentary that attempted to critically engage with instances of outrageous content shared in the 15 original threads analysed. This was demonstrated in the comments outlined in Table 4, below, that were replies on a post sharing a news report that detailed a steep increase in domestic violence cases in Utah County since the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the news article, Utah County is ‘88.1% Mormon and one of the most religiously homogenous counties’ in the USA. Many comments expressed a marked cynicism towards the treatment of women in organised religion, particularly Mormonism. Weaving through much of the commentary was a palpable frustration and apposite disgust at the ongoing subjugation and abuse of women at the hands of their intimate partners, an observation that was particularly pertinent in several of the top scoring parent comments on the thread, as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4 – Commentary expressing outrage over the increasing rates of domestic violence in Utah County

Comment Number	Comment Karma	Comment Text
4.1	5643	Man that's a steep increase. Not a good sign. Just so people know, if you know someone who does this, call the fucking cops. Ostracize that person. Spousal/partner abuse is honestly never okay, I don't care who you are.
4.2	3639	I currently live in one of the biggest cities in Utah county and it's been night and day since this started [...] I've lost track of how many fathers are yelling and screaming because their kids dropped the ball or don't want to play the game with the family. I haven't seen a single woman yell at the children. I think the fathers are suddenly having to spend more than an hour or so a day with the kids and they are realizing it was a bad idea to have five or more children [...] Every father I've talked to about it is losing their minds and wishing they had stopped at two or three children or hadn't had any at all. I'm really surprised no one has ended up dead yet.
4.3	3546	I wish this was a surprise.
4.4	2255	No shit. I bet any area with a high population of religious fundamentalists and whackjob cultists is going to see skyrocketing rates of spousal and child abuse. Because, and I know it must come as a shock, religious fundamentalists don't view women and children as anything other than property.
4.5	2598	What actually surprises me is that women are actually strong enough to make these calls. From my (admittedly limited) understanding, I saw Utah as one of those communities where religion, police, and local governments were all intertwined to the point that domestic violence wasn't something that women were encouraged to speak about or report.
4.6	1447	Grew up there. Grew up Mormon. Colour me unsurprised.

As demonstrated in Table 4, a number of the top scoring comments on this thread expressed some form of outrage. Interestingly, the expression of moral outrage was often paired with commentary sharing anecdotal experiences of domestic violence, the Mormon faith, or life in Utah. Of the 120 comments that were scraped³¹ from this thread for analysis, there were 10 parent comments³² that voiced concern over what some users considered to be a 'sensationalised' news headline, which directly associated the dramatic percentage increase in domestic violence with the Mormon faith. The commentary outlined in Table 5 details some examples of instances in which thread

³¹ 'Scraping' refers to the automated extraction of data from a website which is collated and exported into a manageable format. See the discussion on data collection and analysis in Chapter 3 for more information.

³² 'Parent comment' refers to a comment made in direct response to a thread. Replies made to these comments are referred to as 'child comments.'

participants raised questions as to what the statistics represented in terms of the actual numbers of domestic violence calls made prior to and since the COVID-19 outbreak. Commentary of this nature is demonstrative of a significant tension that arises in the community when members contribute heterodox commentary in an attempt to engage in a process of critical reflection. This practice is often seen as a bad faith attempt to derail the conversation. Some assume it is a form of ‘concern trolling’; that is, individuals with competing ideologies couching care and concern in the shape of statements or questions which harbour disingenuous interest and surreptitiously seek to undermine, derail, or disrupt intracommunity discussion. Further, the orthodox, often reactionary, moral outrage expressed by some community members on the one hand stands at odds with the critical contributions by others that appear to be seeking to better understand the intricacies of the issues presented.

Table 5 – Commentary questioning the validity of the data used to calculate the sharp increase in domestic violence incidences in Utah County

Comment Number	Comment Karma	Comment Text
5.1	711	How many do they normally get?
5.2	368	I don't not want to minimise this *but* 75% of what? This is important. An increase of 75% means it's now 175% of what it was before, which sounds huge, but was the original number? 175% of 3 is just over 5. That's not to say domestic violence is ok, it isn't, and it's important that the victims are supported and cared for, but when the numbers are very small then small increases look like a huge percentage increase.
5.3	204	Without actual numbers, we can't know if this is sensationalist headlines or something to truly be worried about. To be clear, any increase is bad, but if the numbers went from 10 to 17, it's just a sensationalist headline.
5.4	119	While concerning, this could be an incredibly misleading and sensationalized headline. How much exactly is the 75% increase? What was the original demographic of the usual domestic violence cases like? What is the demographic of the numbers that's part of the 75% increase? etc. etc.

While it is clear from the accumulated karma scores that the examples of commentary outlined in Table 5 generated a reasonable amount of interest and support from the wider community, this was in no way comparable to the karma scores attracted through expressions of moral outrage as outlined in Table 4. The commentary provided in Table 5 comprised the top scoring parent comments that reflected critically on the numbers represented in the headline and the way in which the Mormon faith was directly conflated with domestic violence. As demonstrated by comments 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3, some of the community members making these comments were concerned that their questions might be mistaken as ‘concern trolling’ or constitute some other

effort to derail the discussion (e.g., ‘I don’t want to minimise this...,’ ‘To be clear, any increase is bad...,’ ‘While concerning...’). Despite this, other participants appeared to view these contributions as reactionary. For example, in a response to comment 5.2, another user stated that ‘this OP [original poster] posts in r/latterdaysaints³³ FYI.³⁴’ This commenter used an ad hominem response to raise questions as to the ulterior motives of commenter 5.2 by suggesting that the headline was being targeted as potentially misleading solely because the ‘OP’ themselves adhered to the Mormon faith. Calling into question the motives of the user behind comment 5.2 due to their participation in a subreddit dedicated to discussing the Mormon faith can be conceptualised as a mechanism of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1991). That the contributions of this user were so effortlessly disavowed due to their external religious affiliations, the rejection of this assumed religious perspective appears to have become naturalised within the 2XC community. Further, this ad hominem response would not be possible without the requisite know-how to locate and dig through another user’s post history in order to weaponise their previous interactions against their current contributions. This indicates that the responding user had inculcated the cultural competency necessary to engage within this community actively and purposefully. This behaviour reflects a broader observation that the kinds of outrageous content that gain traction within 2XC tend to call into question the morality of an incompatible community or political ideology.

Aside from those outlined in Table 5, there were a further six comments in this thread that expressed concern over the misleading nature of the headline. However, these comments attracted a karma score of less than 40 and, as a result, were buried towards the bottom of the thread. This suggests that such heterodox commentary, in failing to attract a high enough positive karma score, will be less likely to be seen and engaged with by other community members. It is likely that this practice of disincentivising critical reflexivity in the 2XC community hampers the instances in which it occurs and encourages users instead to react with expressions of moral outrage, as this is the behaviour most likely to be rewarded. Such a process is indicative of the processes of cultural reproduction present in the field, wherein the individuals active in a field, having developed the relevant cultural competency to be successful within that field, recognise that certain practices are afforded more value than others. This contributes to the maintenance of the *illusio* that shapes appropriate practice within the field and, resulting in certain perspectives and discourses rising above others. *Illusio* is defined by Bourdieu as being ‘invested, taken in by the game. To be interested is to accord a social game that what happens in it matters, that its stakes are important... and worth pursuing’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 116). In order to maintain the *illusio* in this

³³ r/latterdaysaints is the subreddit dedicated to discussion of the Mormon faith.

³⁴ FYI is an acronym for ‘for your information.’

instance, users must adhere to the *rules of the game* as they exist within the 2XC community. These rules work to tacitly prohibit critical interrogation of information and instead encourage ‘appropriate’ responses to such instances of outrageous content. The *illusio* produces a kind of mainstream doxic lacuna in terms of critical thinking about the rules of the game. In the above example, this involves unreflexively expressing a sense of moral outrage – positioned as the appropriate feminist response in this instance – while simultaneously undermining and thus discouraging acts of critical reflexivity that challenge feminist metanarratives in the field that dictate the rules of the game.

This comparison reveals that expressing emotional reactivity when confronted with outrageous content is highly valued as a mechanism of cultural engagement in the 2XC community, particularly when that content utilises loaded language, provocative imagery and unbalanced reporting to stimulate such responses. It is through these reactions that participants demonstrate their cultural competency by playing along with the rules of the game as they exist for 2XC and also accrue a form of digital cultural capital highly valued on the Reddit platform more broadly; that is, karma points and post engagement. While there is no denying that domestic violence towards women absolutely constitutes a legitimate concerning and enduring social issue, the mentality involved in rallying around expressions of reactionary outrage in response to terrifying and upsetting information is reminiscent of what Canetti describes as the ‘baiting crowd’ (Canetti 1981). Canetti describes in concrete terms the conception of the baiting crowd as one which:

forms with reference to a quickly attainable goal. The goal is known and clearly marked. This crowd is out for killing and it knows whom it wants to kill. It heads for the goal with a unique determination and cannot be cheated of it. The proclaiming of the goal, the spreading about of who it is that is to peris, is enough to make the crowd form. (Canetti 1981, p. 55)

However, in abstracting this conception, the presence of the baiting crowd within the 2XC community forms around exposure to such outrageous content – which manifests an illusory oppressive threat – against which the crowd can enable itself and act in a communal fashion. This process works to bolster and normalise responses of reactionary outrage as the baiting crowd attempts to transfer the threat of potential elimination posed by this manifestation back on the illusory aggressor. Such behaviours are then encouraged by the very architecture of social media platforms; the rules of the game that exist within the 2XC community normalises such practice. On the other hand, this practice has the potential to obscure and, in some ways, undermine productive conversations about the social structures and mechanisms of power that continue to produce such conditions for women. The punitive threat of the baiting crowd is pervasive,

looming over those fostering heterodox perspectives and disincentivising the practices of expressing dissent or polarising perspectives on these sensitive topics.

In appropriating the moral sensibility existing in the consciousness of the culture of fourth-wave feminism, the sharing of outrageous content, and the ways in which community members are conditioned to respond to it, appears to undermine discussions around potential solutions. This creates the conditions for community members to succumb to cyclical expressions of moral outrage while simultaneously suppressing possibilities for critical reflexivity. This is further exemplified by some of the replies made to the commentary outlined in Table 3, which suggested that any increase in the numbers of domestic violence reports filed should be viewed as abhorrent, and so even raising questions as to the validity of the data about this particular increase should be avoided. For example, in response to comment 3.1 a user questioned, ‘Does it really matter? That’s a huge increase and its innocent people being abused.’ Raising the issue of innocence in this manner suggests an anti-utilitarian perspective that works to frame commenter 3.1 as someone who cares little for the victims of abuse, signifying that the impact on innocence should never be questioned. Another commenter agreed with this sentiment, stating, ‘Right?? Why does the increase have to be outwardly impressive or ridiculously substantial in order to be worth discussing or changing?’ Such commentary works to disrupt critical conversations seeking to better understand the extent of the issue. It also works to frame the users making the critical commentary (Table 3) as unsympathetic to the plight of domestic abuse victims. Interactions such as these highlight the discursive potential to demonstrate one’s feminist distinction through a symbolic demonstration of what could be considered as the ‘correct’ way of thinking and behaving when faced with such information. These commenters achieve this through suggesting ways in which the users making the heterodox comments *should* be reacting to news of such events; that is, in a way that does not involve critically interrogating outrageous content.

5.2.2 Outrage in the Attention Economy

The links between digital outrage and the attention economy are well established. Indeed, it is the very architecture of social media platforms that facilitates and even encourages the dissemination and consumption of outrageous content, as ‘people are more likely to share content that elicits moral emotions such as outrage’ (Crockett 2017, p. 769). Sharing outrageous content and, when appropriate, responding with moral expressions of outrage, appears to be at least partially triggered by the Internet’s dominant economic logic of attention. In this analysis, many instances of moral outrage that were coded as such often contained ‘threads’ of commentary including more than one unique instance of interaction. While the majority of instances of generally positive

commentary ‘stood alone’ from other comments, comments expressing moral outrage in any of its many forms often attracted interaction from other community members in the form of comment replies. For example, in a high scoring comment on a post about an alleged sexual assault against a young woman, a user expressed anger and disbelief at the situation before heatedly and hypothetically asking what was wrong with the individuals complicit in the sexual assault allegations. In response to this, users made a number of cynical and darkly humorous comments that implied there were so many things wrong with these individuals that a list would be impossible to collate. The first response was coded individually and the set of replies to the parent comment were coded as a group:

(159³⁵): Did you want the long list or the short list? In alphabetical order, or by severity?

(10): long alphabetical please

(20): Lemme get right on that.

Estimated time to completion: on or about the date of solar death.

(17): “THERE IS AS YET INSUFFICIENT DATA FOR A MEANINGFUL ANSWER.”

(7): Short, by severity then, please!

(30): Christian Dominionism and evangelism; Anti-intellectualism; the Southern Strategy; the myth of the “Lost Cause,”; a hyperactive disgust response³⁶; American exceptionalism; conflation of jingoism with patriotism; generational mediocrity...all resulting in a cornucopia of bigotry (with a special focus on misogyny), stultifying stupidity, and unfathomable impotent rage.

Aside from the need to code data in this way to preserve contextual relevance, such discursive events are also very revealing in terms of the kind of interactivity associated with expressions of moral outrage within the 2XC community, supporting previous research suggesting moral outrage

³⁵ The number in parentheses is the karma score of each comment displayed in this manner.

³⁶ In the original comment, ‘a hyperactive disgust response’ was hyperlinked to a *New Scientist* article titled, ‘Left or right-wing? Brains disgust response tells all’ (Jones 2014).

attracts more attention and engagement than other forms of communication (Crockett 2017; Van't Riet, Schaap & Kleemans 2018). The data demonstrated the frequency with which commentary relying on the signifiers of moral outrage frequently attracted a high amount of both passive and active interaction in the form of upvotes and comment replies. This observation indicates that moral outrage as a form of cultural capital is highly valued within this particular community in terms of legitimate perspectives and responses, yet there is more to the communicability of this discursive expression than simply the movement and legitimization of capital as contained within 2XC.

An explanation for the explosive potential of moral outrage in online communities can once again be attributed to Canetti's 'baiting crowd' in that there is a great power in sharing content that provokes feelings of moral outrage in community members. What forms in the wake of such practice is a moment in which community participants flock together momentarily in order to 'strike a blow' at an effigy erected in the name of a moral transgression before dispersing again into digital obscurity (Canetti 1981). In this instance, the effigy is represented by the religious and/or conservative 'other' that is seen to have been complacent in the young woman's sexual assault. The baiting crowd 'forms with reference to a quickly attainable goal,' (Canetti 1981, p. 49) – that is, expressing outrage towards the 'other' – and provides a safe, rapid and gratifying conduit for righteous aggression while simultaneously fortifying an atmosphere of community as participants come together en masse to denounce and denigrate a common enemy. The communal aspect of the baiting crowd normalises such practice in the collective catharsis that is produced as a result, creating of the individuals a distinct yet fleeting community rallied around a shared hatred for a common enemy.

Yet the prevalence of moral outrage also requires contextualisation insofar as understanding the nature of the subject matter posted within the community. Of the 15 threads analysed throughout the research project, 10 dealt with content that could be considered 'outrageous' in that it directly triggered responses of moral outrage from the community, and it was in response to these threads that many participants expressed their rage and indignation at the perceived social situation of women and girls. Doxic assumptions that compel the action of 2XC community members play a role in the domination of instances of moral outrage in the commentary dataset and in the rate at which outrageous content is posted within the community. The sharing of outrageous content is intrinsically linked to the experience of moral outrage in the online environment. Expressions of moral outrage are particularly pertinent in threads that detail or document the treatment of women at the hands of men, and seven of the 15 threads analysed were concerned with sexual violence, abuse and harassment committed against women. A thread exemplifying this observation featured

an article from the women-centred news publication *The Lily* which detailed the expulsion of a young woman from a school in the US for ‘sexual impropriety’ following an alleged sexual assault. There were several extremely high scoring parent comments in this thread expressing outrage towards the situation whilst simultaneously signalling the failures of the educational institution responsible for the young woman’s expulsion, and the legal system more broadly (Table 6).

Table 6 – Commentary expressing outrage at an alleged sexual assault of a young woman

Comment Number	Comment Karma	Comment Text
6.1	5402	lol when you’re blaming teenage girls for their own sexual assault maybe you’re the asshole.. The fuck is wrong with these people.
6.2	2149	*“But why don’t women report their rapes?”*
6.3	3322	There were 2 girls at my catholic high school who were raped by the same boy. Neither the principal nor the dean of students reported it because they thought “the police already knew”... Such a fucking joke and the school did NOTHING to protect those girls.
6.4	607	And “if it actually happened then they would have said something earlier” No. Just no. Fuck off.

The high amount of community approval these statements attracted is reflected in their scores, indicating not only that there is a wide acceptance of *what* is being said, but also *how* the users are saying it. Rather than encouraging constructive or analytical dialogue exploring the shortcomings that created the conditions for such a situation to manifest, the popular orthodox commentary highlighted above instead relies on profoundly anthropocentric expressions of moral outrage that prioritise the experience of the individual at the expense of social reflexivity, ultimately contributing little to a transformative dialogue. On the other hand, heterodox commentary pointing out that the male student had also been expelled attracted very little attention, likely because it challenged the absolute narrative of female victimisation and male aggression that is propagated and normalised as an element of the baiting crowd sensibility prevalent in morally outrageous content shared by users of the 2XC community.

(7): Did the boy get suspended too? I didn't see it in the article.

(9): He was expelled

(389): Hold up. Even if they believed everything was consensual, why didn't they suspend/expel the guy? He was part of the act as well. You can't use the zero tolerance policy and then expel one student but not the other when a sexual act takes two to tango. Even if one is on the receiving end, they're still doing something they shouldn't on school grounds.

(213): As a white male with a well-connected family: he was a good boy with so much potential and a great future ahead of him, maybe some athletic ability because we all know that makes you superior, so it would be really really damaging to the young lad to drag him through a trial for the rape he committed and label him a sexual predator for some romp with a no-name harlot.

(60): But it could ruin his whole life and the swim team needs him!

(56): He did get expelled as well.

Such patterns of moral outrage were established across all instances of outrageous content that were analysed. In a post that detailed the alleged rape of a young female tourist in Cyprus, and subsequent release of revenge pornography, a comment that attracted a score of 337 at the time of data collection reads:

Alright, fuck everything about this. Fuck the fucking rapists. Fuck the judge. Fuck Cyprus. Fuck the police in Cyprus. Fuck the fucking journalists that perpetuated the sharing of the revenge porn video by acknowledging its existence so sick fucking fucks can beat their meat to what is essentially the precursor to rape. Fuck the medical examiner. Fuck the rapists' parents. Fuck the prosecutor. Fuck the defense lawyer. Fuck the Cyprus police again, because fuck 'em sideways, that's why.

The user then goes on to edit their comment, adding, 'And a special fuck you to the fucking fucks *in this fucking thread* trying to victim blame, victim shame, downplay or in any fucking way make this seem any less than the horrible fucking scandal that it is. Fuck all o' y'all.' The case in question culminated in the prosecution of the young woman for falsifying the allegations, with the comment above indicating that those who would question or 'downplay' the woman's story should be considered to be as deplorable as their perspectives. Such an observation demonstrates the competency of the participant in not only a key sensibility of fourth-wave feminism – that of always believing the victim – but also indicates the level of animosity held towards those that might threaten the stability of the grand narrative perpetuated through the consistent sharing of such outrageous content: that women are destined to exist in a state of potential perpetual victimisation, with men occupying the role of potential eternal aggressor. This, in turn, creates an atmosphere wherein participants may encounter a sense of cognitive dissonance when attempting to perceive women as individuals in possession of some degree of autonomy, just as capable of making mistakes or poor decisions as anyone else. Such intensely defended perspectives

complicate the capacity for women to hold other women accountable for their actions and derail the difficult but necessary conversations pertaining to false accusations which must be addressed in order to engage with issues of sexual violence and its associated phenomena adequately and holistically from a critically reflexive feminist perspective.

Consciously or not, commentary of this nature serves to reinforce a double crowd mentality within the community, in which women and their lived experiences occupy one side of the binary with men on the other. The strength of this antagonism emerges from the existence of the opposition itself and creates in the concept of men a common enemy around which women must band together as ‘the tension between the two groups exerts its pressure on everyone belonging to either’ (Canetti 1981, p.73). The relatively high score of this comment and others in the thread displayed above demonstrates the cultural competency of these users within a contemporary feminist ideological framework, indicating that they are in possession of enough relevant cultural capital to understand – even subconsciously – that this form of practice is highly valued and thus associated with power and mobility within the 2XC community. Thus, cultural capital as it manifests in expressions of moral outrage serves two parallel functions. First, members engaging in discursive acts such as these ultimately reproduce and sustain the double crowd mentality – the perpetual binary opposition – through a process of symbolic violence which alienates, demonises and ‘others’ those who seek to critique or challenge the group position. This process of symbolic violence serves to maintain the ideological and cultural parameters of acceptable discourse within the community, simultaneously perpetuating the status quo and stifling potentially transformative and considered discourse. Second, the individuals expressing their moral outrage by reproducing the feminist narrative that dominates the realm of potential discourse within the community accumulate capital in the form of karma while simultaneously reproducing and reinforcing the narrative. The accumulated karma score itself – shown next to each unique instance of commentary posted to the thread – also acts as a distinctive marker, signalling the appreciation (or lack thereof, in cases of a negative karma score) for the perspectives and discursive style of the user, and constitutes another function of reproduction within the social field, ensuring the maintenance of a singular and unchallenged feminist narrative.

The algorithmic sorting of commentary on Reddit threads will show the top scoring parent comments by default. Given this, attracting a high score through a demonstration of cultural competency in this field will increase the visibility of this commentary, thus increasing the likelihood of attracting more upvotes, and so on. This process contributes to a mechanism of social reproduction as moral outrage as a discursive practice and its associated ideologies within the community become exceedingly frequent, and the numbers of community members exposed

to such perspectives are increased. This contributes to and reinforces the normalisation of moral outrage and sharing outrageous content in the community, enhancing the doxic assumption that sharing one's personal feelings of anger, aggression or cynicism is not only permitted, but in fact encouraged as a form of legitimate feminist practice. Thus, the prevalence of moral outrage as a significant spontaneous discourse within the community is indicative of its value as a resource on the linguistic marketplace of 2XC. The data suggests that participants within the community are likely to rely on, and indeed favour, expressions of moral outrage rather than non-emotional (dis)agreement to communicate opinions and ideological positions.

The expression of moral outrage appears to have several functions within the 2XC community. First, it is often used as an act of distinction, as some members jostle for superiority over others through a display of moral outrage that explicitly targets the opinions or positions of others in an often negative and derisive way. This serves to elevate the status of the person expressing outrage over the person committing the outrageous behaviour, as moral outrage tends to signal one's commitment to and understanding of the ideological parameters of contemporary feminism. The extent to which people are outraged over content also seems to dissuade potential detractors from partaking in the conversation, solidifying the ideological filter bubbles that encapsulate these fairly insular communities and contributing to the continued affect-fuelled ostracization of those who think differently. This, in turn, likely contributes to the enhancement of social cleavages such as partisan divides, while potentially obscuring others, such as class. Also, the expression of moral outrage seems to solidify feelings of a community among users, as is the case with the 'baiting crowd.' Moral outrage has a far lower risk-cost benefit than real-world outrage, and people are more likely to express outrage in front of an audience than when there is no-one watching them (Crockett 2017).

A reliance on moral outrage as a significant spontaneous discourse in the 2XC community is further supported by the rejuvenated legitimacy of anger and aggression within the fourth-wave feminist movement. Discussions pertaining to the realities, limitations and forms of women's anger have long been occurring within the field of feminist scholarship and women's studies. Yet it was not until around 2018 that the conversations around the potential political potency of women's anger appeared to reach a zenith following the explosive popularity of the #MeToo movement the year before. The absorption of the archetypical 'angry woman' into the feminist cultural imagination was solidified by the release of a number of books on the subject, including *Rage Becomes Her* (Chemaly 2018), *Good and Mad* (Traister 2018), and *Eloquent Rage* (Cooper 2018), all of which were released to approving audiences. Articles extolling the power and potency of women's anger were circulated in a range of different fashionable publications (Cep

2018; Collins 2018; Pascoe 2016), and academics were interrogating the modern implications, possibilities and limitations of feminist rage (Kay & Banet-Weiser 2019). Despite the caricature of the ‘angry feminist’ having been a staple in the pop-cultural landscape of progressive political activity for many years, the fourth wave of the movement appears to have reclaimed it.

The significance of moral outrage within the 2XC community is thus an active reflection of fourth-wave, popular feminist politics and can be considered to constitute a form of cultural capital within the 2XC community. Highly valued, as indicated by the karma scores associated with expressions of moral outrage, these discursive acts are privileged over less emotionally charged content, ultimately manifesting in a discursive hierarchy that encourages other users to behave in similar ways. Further, through attracting a higher amount of engagement and ‘click-through’ rates, this process also contributes to the viability and profitability of Reddit as a platform. Thus, the social media corporatocracy is the legitimate beneficiary of women’s rage in this circumstance, and the doxic manifestation of outrage-as-capital reinforces this structure. This is particularly salient given that, while outrage has been shown to effectively mobilise groups around specific issues, ‘it may also make collective action less effective in fulfilling long-term group goals’ (Brady & Crockett 2019, p. 1). In order to achieve effective action, ‘both a motivation to act and the ability to act strategically’ (Brady & Crockett 2019, p. 1) must be present, yet outrage tends to impair the capacity for strategic decision making. Rather than acting as a conduit for social change, ‘the architecture of social media,’ as indicated by Brady and Crockett (2019, p.2), ‘may instead amplify the downsides of outrage, limiting the effectiveness of collective action aimed toward social progress and the participation of marginalised groups.’ Thus, the operant conditioning that favours the demonstration of outrage over other forms of self-expression may indicate a form of behavioural manipulation designed to enhance some social cleavages while obscuring others in order to extend the power of the corporate owners of social media who are the ultimate beneficiaries of this behaviour.

5.3 Legitimate Perspectives: Is the Personal Still Political?

The sharing of personal experiences is certainly not a novel trend, yet the advent of digital media has transformed this process into a phenomenon that extends beyond the human motivation for connection and community that is at least partially responsible for this inclination. The nature of the participatory Internet facilitates a process of *oversharing*, by which individuals ‘divulge more of their inner feelings, opinions, and sexuality than they would in person, or even over the phone’ (Agger 2015, p. 12). Within the 2XC community, this phenomenon appears to extend beyond thoughts and feelings to the affective oversharing of personal anecdotal experiences, often in

response to content of an outrageous nature. The value of personal experience has been central to contemporary understandings of the feminist movement, evidenced by the continuing relevance of the now iconic phrase, *the personal is political*. While the origins of the phrase remain uncertain, it was popularised with the publication of Carol Hanisch's 1969 essay, 'The Personal is Political,' which argued from an openly anthropocentric stance that the personal experiences of women are deeply rooted in the political implications of gender inequality and are thus a valuable source of information that contributes to understanding the extent to which subjugation permeates every aspect of women's lives (Hanisch 1969). In her original paper, Hanisch outlines a transformative process through which personal experiences were shared amongst a group before being collectively summarised and analysed in an attempt to locate the significant threads of women's subjugation and oppression that penetrate the private sphere:

We have not done much trying to solve immediate personal problems of women in this group. We've mostly picked topics by two methods: In a small group, it is possible for us to take turns bringing questions to the meeting... then we go around the room answering the questions from our personal experiences. Everybody talks that way. At the end of the meeting we try to sum up and generalise from what's been said and make connections (Hanisch 1969, para. 3).

The extent to which Hanisch's proclamation that the 'personal is political' continues to inform contemporary feminist practice is evident in this analysis of the spontaneous discourse driving participation within the 2XC community, albeit in ways deeply influenced by the nature of digital media and communications technologies. Indeed, a number of scholars have suggested that the uptake of the Internet and digital communications technologies has contributed to a dissolution of the boundaries between the public and private spheres, illuminating actions that have traditionally occurred behind closed doors (Ford 2011; Ravn, Barnwell & Barbosa Neves 2020). It is important, then, to understand the motivations that drive members of the 2XC community to share individualised experiences with great regularity. Effusive self-disclosure has emerged as a kind of mandatory participation on many social media platforms. This practice is predominantly driven by the reward systems built into the attention economy of social media platforms. Moreover, is it a symptom of the growing cultural and social normalisation of venerated individualism that has resulted from the implementation of the neoliberal project in Western society. Finally, such practice points to a feminist impetus driving community members to illuminate the realities of gendered oppression as it occurs in the modern day through the abundant sharing of personal anecdotes and experiences. These narratives offer women different roles as political agents and the momentary performative action of fixing these roles in a sense of righteousness that calls for a register of outrage and condemnation.

Early in the analysis of the data, the predominance of highly personal and affective anecdotal content posted by users to the subreddit became apparent, both in the form of the original posts and the subsequent comments on submissions. An overwhelming amount of content posted within the community – both original posts and commentary – detailed the lived, first-person experiences of participants in relation to the topic at hand. Moreover, highly affective self-disclosure posts detailing personal experiences were also often paired with a significant amount of inter-community approval, as indicated by the associated karma scores and by engagement through comment replies. The data organised into this theme was comprised of two main categories. First was *the value of lived experience*, which relates to commentary that detailed an intimate familiarity with the subject matter raised in the original thread though a response sharing a personal, anecdotal experience. Second was a category capturing the inclination for users to rely on *appeals to personal authority*, which refers to users predicating commentary with a statement implying their competence to speak on a given topic.

5.3.1 The Value of Individual Experience

The value of lived experience and, by extension, its implications for participation in the 2XC community, was clearly demonstrated in the commentary analysed. Responses to original posts that in some way involved self-disclosure or personal anecdotes accounted for almost one quarter (n=399) of the total number of comments analysed (n=1636). Furthermore, over half of the original posts that were analysed in this study reflect this trend, with confessional and/or anecdotal posts making up 8 of the 15 posts analysed in this study (Table 7).

Table 7 – Outline of the nature of the content shared in the 15 Reddit threads analysed

Post Type	Occurrences in the Dataset	Description
Text/image post outlining personal experience	8	Text or image posts by community participants that detail a lived experience or personal anecdote
Link to external news source	7	Links to external news or other publication about an issue that directly affects women

Self-disclosure in online spaces is a ubiquitous phenomenon and, as such, has been widely researched (Davis 2012; Krasnova, Kolesnikova & Guenther 2009; Luo & Hancock 2020; Masur 2018; Suler 2004). The motivations for sharing personal information – as well as the types of

personal information shared – are often influenced by the nature of the community in which the self-disclosure practices are taking place. For example, Miller’s (2020, p. 54) work on Reddit’s confessional communities (r/confession, r/offmychest, r/trueoffmychest) demonstrates that ‘the social but distant nature of the site facilitates the sharing of personal information in the form of “confession” posts, or posts with the sole purpose of being confessional in a way that posters seemingly cannot offline.’ A form of confessional subjectivity is installed as a habitual frame of reference; this develops into the predominant discursive practice, which engages nearly every region of the platform. While self-disclosure is not unique to Reddit’s 2XC, the nature and frequency of self-disclosure posts within this community deserves interrogation. The preponderance of self-disclosure in the dataset is most often communicated through anecdotes that directly relate to the subject matter raised by the original post. This suggests that for some topics of conversation, active engagement within the community is often predicated on having personally experienced the issues driving participation on the subreddit. Indeed, self-disclosure commentary was most often associated with original posts that also detailed a user’s personal experience. On the other hand, two of the original posts analysed in this study shared links to news stories covering the US presidential race that was underway during 2020. These threads tended to yield far less self-disclosure commentary, with users instead expressing their political opinions in a range of ways, but seldom relating these opinions back to personal experience.

Nevertheless, the posts that dealt with outrageous content tended to elicit deeply affective self-disclosure responses from community participants and appeared to serve as a mechanism that works to demonstrate a commenter’s intimate understanding of the issues detailed in the original post. However, as the data suggests, even the relatively mundane experiences of women appear to attract an astounding amount of interaction in this manner. This observation is well illustrated by a post in which the OP shares a photograph of her DIY bathroom renovation with a caption explaining that although her father was not a feminist, he had taught her the value of doing things for herself. A number of comments attracting a range of scores were congratulatory while simultaneously sharing their own experiences with bathroom renovations (Table 8).

Table 8 – Commentary sharing personal experiences with bathroom renovation

Comment Number	Comment Karma	Comment Text
8.1	1773	I paid someone to tile my shower and it doesn't look as good as yours. Congrats!
8.2	654	As someone who grew up with parents like this... Sometimes it's just better to pay a professional. Good job though!.
8.3	39	Nice work! I was also super proud when i tiled my own bathroom but I chose HUGE tiles to make the job easier and that was tricky. I can appreciate the level of effort that cutting and lining up all those tiny tiles must have taken - well done! It looks amazing!
8.4	30	Great job! I am also a YouTube fan for fixing things. I repaired a 25 year old refrigerator door that wouldn't close, fixed my 25 year old lawn mower, made plumbing repairs, and recently have been replacing broken sash cords on my 100 year old windows, all from YouTube videos.
8.5	3	Hell fucking yeah girl! I just wired in my entire kitchen! First time doing electrical and it felt like such a breeze! Gonna start tiling backsplash/floors for the kitchen next week. Was a tradesperson professionally for 6 years, honestly working with your hands is so rewarding, I miss it! Dad should be proud of you!

In a comment on the same post, a thread participant expressed the perceived validity of their perspective in response to a comment questioning the relationship of the OP's renovation to feminism, stating:

When it comes to ripping up floors and doing fairly involved things at home, dads are *far* more likely to pull their sons in to help/teach them than their daughters. My dad had me helping him fix up the house and work on the cars but not my twin sister. I'm pretty confident my anecdotal experience is at the very least semi-valid.

The perceived validity of the user's anecdotal experience appears to be a product of a deeply ingrained gender heuristic which their experience supports – and these women are, due to their gender, less likely to engage in physical labour or develop skills that support independence and autonomy. The OP and the replies by men and women alike indicate a shared cognitive bias in this manner, positioning the OP's accomplishment in her renovation as one unusual for a woman and thus worthy of praise, yet ultimately reinforcing the restrictive and oppressive binary that creates these conditions for perception in the first place. Indeed, one commenter suggested that 'it's a feminist attitude to suggest that women should attempt home improvement DIYs, despite the stereotype that they are not good at it.' Such feminist practice, rather than destabilising the mechanisms and systems of oppression that colour the lived experiences of women, will inadvertently contribute to their reproduction through promoting discursive acts of individual

resistance that remain deeply entangled in gendered essentialism. The entrepreneurial action espoused in the self-congratulatory promotion of one's own bathroom renovation is reminiscent of the 'successfully individualised and "empowered" femininity' which has come to dominate popular conceptions of contemporary feminism (Budgeon 2015, p. 312). The enthusiastic acceptance of posts such as these is indicative of the growing political impotence of contemporary, popular feminism as the movement pivots 'away from critique of the dominant political order in favour of subscribing to choice as a form of freedom' (Budgeon 2015, p.313).

That the wider community of 2XC supports such expressions of individualised, 'empowered' femininity, divorced as they are from critical conversations about repressive structural inequalities, is largely representative of the tedious banality that has come to characterise this form of popular feminism. Possessing the physical capacity and necessary skill to undertake the renovation of a bathroom is certainly impressive, but conflating feminism with one's capacity to undertake 'typically' masculine activities contributes little to progressive social change. In fact, such a position may inadvertently serve to ideologically anchor feminism and the practice of femininity to archaic conceptions of womanhood. Thus, heterogeneity is reabsorbed into the monolithic patriarchal standard. Equally, maintaining the position that women engaging in traditionally 'masculine' activities is remarkable enough to warrant celebratory advertisement on this subreddit suggests that even the most mundane experiences resulting from the choices made by individual women can be (re)framed as significant feminist victories. Of course, it is not only at the level of the mundane that instances of affective oversharing and self-disclosure occur. An original post detailing an uncomfortable breakup grounded in grievous sexual incompatibility prompted a generous number of replies by community members, describing their own, similar experiences, often in great detail (Table 9).

Table 9 – Commentary sharing personal experiences of sexual harassment and assault

Comment Number	Comment Karma	Comment Text
9.1	1856	<p>Even I had to learn how to be OK with saying "No" when I didn't want to do something, be it a request in bed or someone asking me for something or to do something for them. I was afraid to disappoint or upset them.</p> <p>And the times when my people-pleaser nature tries to override my need or desire to say No, I remind myself that I've been told No by many people, for many reasons and I've lived through it. The person *you're* saying No to will live through it, too.</p>
9.2	252	Knew a guy who would be so shitty to people for no reason, mostly when drunk. One of those former military guys, who ALWAYS treated people like shit because "they weren't there". Anyway constantly treating people like dog shit, then he gets

		the same treatment. All the sudden his feelings are hurt. And they were degrading him, and they need to apologize to him. Blah blah. Shits crazy.
9.3	117	I'm the victim of child abuse and I have a terrible time saying no. I was once groped in public and all I could do was freeze. I felt terrible afterwards that I didn't say anything, but freezing is something of a default setting for those who have been abused.
9.4	42	Was his name Brian? Jesus holy flash back. Was in that relationship for 7 months too long. It led up to coersive [sic] rape/anal rape right about 2 months in... I didn't leave... Finally did leave though... thank my body for that. I ended up in the hospital from the stress or something... couldn't breathe [...] Part of the reason I didn't leave was because he had pictures and video of me and us. I still have moments.... sorry for hijacking this post. I'm so very glad you got out.
9.5	34	Gay guy here. I asked a guy over text why he turns every one of our conversations sexual? It's kind of strange. He replied, "all my friends are open about sex and there is nothing wrong with that". He obviously doesn't understand how inappropriate he's being, and now I feel that I'm the asshole for bringing it up. How dare I offend him by calling him out.

As shown in the commentary outlined in Table 9, the users work to relate to the original poster by sharing their own, similar experiences. Interestingly, in these examples, the users did little to directly address the self-disclosure shared by the original poster, instead engaging in a sort of cyclical confessional, whereby the original content compels them to share their own experiences while offering little in the way of constructive discourse about the issues raised in the original post. Previous research suggests that there are a range of factors and situations that may motivate individuals to share intimate and personal experiences online. For instance, Kornfield and Toma (2020) posit that there are therapeutic effects associated with digital self-disclosure by linking the practice to the expressive writing paradigm; they identify the foremost of these effects as establishing and nurturing a sense of social connection. Further, the compulsion or *want* to share similar experiences 'need not be contingent on *liking* those shared experiences' (Jolly et al. 2019, p. 2). Responding to self-disclosure posts depicting traumatic events with personal anecdotes may work to establish a sympathetic perspective between 2XC users, contributing to a sense of community among strangers and generating 'a unifying force to bring people together' similar to that which occurs in group treatment settings for survivors of traumatic events (Drozdek et al. 2007, p. 336). While the sharing of similar personal, lived experiences appears to be driven by an anthropocentric desire for human social connection, research suggests that such interactions may produce unanticipated consequences. 'Communicating with others about a topic can fundamentally alter the communicator's memory, judgement and impressions about that topic' (Jolly et al. 2019, p. 16), and this is significant when the nature of the discourse that occurs within the 2XC community is taken into consideration. Many of the anecdotal experiences shared as original posts on 2XC deal with difficult topics such as sexual harassment, assault and violence –

indeed, out of the 15 posts analysed in this study, nine either directly or indirectly dealt with these issues. The frequency with which these matters are raised on the platform is germane to the high number of replies made on these posts, which often detail a user's similarly intimate lived experiences with such topics. This may contribute to creating a situation whereby users of the forum are exposed to a particular logic of belief: that is, a distilled and consistent perception of sexual violence as being an inevitable experience of contemporary womanhood which emerges as a by-product of the frequency with which such traumatic personal anecdotes are shared.

Notwithstanding the online attention afforded to such self-disclosure posts and the frequency with which they appear, it is possible that this practice contributes to the construction of an illusionary discursive environment which may obscure the true extent of the issue at hand. A prominent example of this process can be found in commentary made on an original post that shared an opinion piece published in *The New York Times*, titled, 'I Had a Late-Term Abortion. I am Not a Monster.'³⁷ The piece details a woman's decision to terminate her pregnancy late-term after learning of devastating congenital abnormalities. A great number of comments detailed personal experiences of individuals who had either lived through losing pregnancy themselves or had been close to others that had. The following set of comments details the experiences of three users who claimed to have had personally experienced triploid pregnancies.

(441): My husband and I lost our daughter to triploidy at 20 weeks. Its [sic] an incredibly rare condition, about 1 in 250,000, and even more rare as she was a girl and they are rarely girls (Chromosome possibilities [sic] are XXX, XXY, AND XYY). She passed away naturally and I listened to her heart as it started to fail. It went from 154, to 74, to stop.

(56): Our daughter passed 4 years ago at 22 weeks due to complex Triploidy. We had that decision to make as she was already hugely under developed and clinically the consultant was certain she would not go to term. Just waiting for her to die inside my wife's body, whilst she could still grow and create complexities putting my wife at risk was not an option. We decided on the medical termination for the sake of our daughter as well as my wife, both physically and mental state.

(35): I also had a triploid pregnancy, but it ended at 12.5 weeks as a missed miscarriage and two D&C's. I'm sorry you had to go through that. I'm glad mine ended early.

³⁷ Original article published online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/19/opinion/sunday/late-term-abortion.html> and archived here <https://archive.is/m0OHU> for posterity.

The number and frequency of comments about personal experiences with extremely rare congenital abnormalities creates the conditions wherein what is known as an availability heuristic may develop in the minds of the participants, making the likelihood of such cases appear, by virtue of their number, more common than they actually are. Exposure to information in this way may hyperbolise the actual extent of the issue and contribute to the establishment of the availability heuristic in the minds of the community members (Tversky & Kahneman 1973). The availability heuristic was first conceptualised in 1973 by Tversky and Kahneman; it refers to a common shortcut in human thinking in which individuals make a judgement as to the likelihood of an outcome based on the number of available examples of that outcome that are immediately available in their minds (Tversky & Kahneman 1973). Significantly, the concept of ‘availability is also affected by various factors which are unrelated to actual frequency,’ and so, ‘the availability heuristic leads to systematic biases’ (Tversky & Kahneman 1973, p. 209). One such factor these authors explored was the propensity for individuals to become preoccupied with certain outcomes:

Continued preoccupation with an outcome may increase its availability, and hence its perceived likelihood. People are preoccupied with highly desirable outcomes, such as winning the sweepstakes, or with highly undesirable outcomes, such as an airplane crash. Consequently, availability provides a mechanism by which occurrences of extreme utility (or disutility) may appear more likely than they actually are. (Tversky & Kahneman 1973, p. 230)

Limited by a finite capacity to store and retrieve relevant memories, human beings rely on heuristics to process information quickly and easily in order to make decisions, determinations or assumptions about the world and our place within it. Kahneman suggests that ‘the availability heuristic helps explain why some issues are highly salient in the public’s mind while others are neglected. People tend to assess the relative importance of issues by the ease with which they are retrieved from memory – and this is largely determined by the extent of coverage in the media’ (Kahneman 2011). This is significant given the previous points raised in this chapter pertaining to the abundance of outrageous content, and the rewards received by community members for sharing such content. In other words, outrageous content at the frequency with which it is shared may contribute to the development of the worldview of 2XC participants.

This observation provides an explanation for broadly supported instances of feminist cynicism that arose at various points throughout the dataset, examples of which are outlined in Table 10. For example, on an original post that shared a picture of free female sanitary products left in a communal bathroom, one user commented that ‘all it takes is one greedy jerk to empty that basket

out into her purse, ruining it for everyone else.’ Another commenter took this sentiment further, stating ‘or some funny-ass boys thinking it’d be THE FUNNIEST FUCKING THING in the world to throw them away.’ With this, the positive post quickly turned cynical as users drew on worst-case-scenario situations, likely fed by the consistent stream of outrageous content and the development of an availability heuristic that embraces this.

Table 10 – Instances of normalised cynicism across the dataset

Comment Number	Comment Karma	Comment Text
10.1	4084	And hopefully corrupt men get held accountable for their actions too, not just boys, but that’s wishful thinking at this point.
10.2	1511	So sweet and whoever put this out is obviously an angel. But all it takes is one greedy jerk to empty out that basket into her purse, ruining it for everyone else.
10.3	222	Or some funny-ass boys thinking it’d be THE FUNNIEST FUCKING THING in the world to throw them away.
10.4	84	He will definitely try this again. It might be a less strong and confident woman he has nudes of, it might be a passed out drunk, it might be someone who came home with him when she shouldn’t have.
10.5	48	Should have messaged it to his mum anyway, but let’s be honest, if he behaves like that, she probably just thinks “boys will be boys”.

Thus, the availability heuristic is entangled with the worldview embodied by contemporary feminism. This is particularly true for the orthodox perspective within the 2XC community that works to position the nature of men as universal potential aggressors, and women as universal potential victims in contemporary society. In this instance, the availability heuristic both contributes to and is a result of the value placed on certain feminist perspectives to the exclusion of others in the 2XC community. In turn, these feminist perspectives represent certain types of cultural capital whose value is bolstered through the platform affordances and interactions engendered by the field, such as accumulated karma scores and interaction through commentary. Posts increasingly become indentured to a particular internal online orthodoxy. As users spend time within the field, they begin to internalise the value of such expressions of cultural competency through a process of in situ socialisation. This process of socialisation contributes to the development of the contemporary feminist habitus – that is, the ‘system of durable transposable dispositions’ that determine an individual’s ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu 1990,

p. 53). Community members who engage with 2XC deeply and regularly develop a habitus unique to that field and are then better equipped to act and interact with the community in particular ways. These behaviours are then reinforced through the reward systems built into the Reddit platform and reproduced as cultural mechanisms.

On close analysis of the dataset, it became apparent much commentary of this nature was predicated on an individual having direct or indirect experience with the topic(s) raised in the original post. There are probably two main reasons for this. First, this practice is likely due to the provision of an appropriate and safe space in which women's personal experiences are legitimised. Second, the frequency with which personal experience is shared on 2XC is bolstered by the positive response from the wider community towards such discursive practices. As indicated by the accumulated karma scores, those with lived experience are often rewarded for their contributions with intracommunity approval through upvotes and comment replies. The support for this communicative practice is likely a result of the fourth-wave feminist sensibility that brings into question who it is that is permitted to speak on behalf of whom (Ang 2020). The intersectional climate of contemporary feminism increasingly insists that it is not possible to speak on behalf of all women and that there is no universality to the female experience. Of course, considering women do not constitute a static, homogenous, ahistorical group, such inferences are intellectually robust and relevant to an increasingly interconnected and globalised feminist movement. The contemporary political, economic, social and cultural intersections that inform the lived experiences of women have created significantly different conditions through which gender inequalities manifest. Such perspectives are salient in criticisms of the racial disparity within contemporary feminism that conceptualise 'white women as architects and defenders of feminism in the digital era' (Daniels 2016, p.4). These criticisms generally contend that 'white privilege does not have to do necessarily with overt or explicit forms of racism, but with a much more normalised and insidious set of assumptions which disremember the structural advantage of being white, and which generalise specifically white cultural practices and ways of seeing and being in the world as normal' (Ang 2020, p. 194).

A potentially unintended consequence of this feminist rationality is the increasingly individualised perspectives women take on their experiences, as evidenced by this research. The normalisation of this individualistic feminism is thus embodied by the users, and the logic of individualism and its relationship to the collective politics of feminism is absorbed into the political habitus. This assumption is supported by Budgeon's analysis of choice feminism, in which she suggests that the social cleavages which shape the lived reality of women have come to be seen as 'so immense that feminism can only remain relevant to women's differences by

validating not the *content* but the *act* of choice, thereby diverting attention away from normative demands of gender' (Budgeon 2015, p. 309). The broader ideological acceptance of this misrecognised intersectional perspective may contribute to the development of doxic assumptions that position the individual experience as the only logical and allowable point of inquiry, as extrapolating one's own experiences in order to interrogate feminist issues from a universal perspective becomes increasingly untenable. This trend is particularly evident on 2XC, where participants engage with feminist politics through sharing individualised experiences rather than via a collective approach that demands a structural or critical analysis of the issue.

The anthropocentric perspectives which emerge from acts of self-disclosure by the community's constituents is also demonstrative of the doxic assumptions that underpin practice within the community. Table 11 details a number of comments made on an original post which implored people to congratulate nurses for their hard work and selfless dedication to helping others throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic have been felt globally, and many people the world over have an intensely personal connection to the fallout associated with the pandemic. Yet while the original post urged community members to consider the frontline hospital workers, specifically nurses, who are working tirelessly in the face of this international disaster, many of the replies commandeered the post in order to speak on their own experiences, often indicating that they felt underappreciated in their work or efforts during the pandemic. Some members used the opportunity to share their experiences while also expressing thanks to medical staff, as is the case in comment 11.1. Others – like comments 11.2, 11.3 and 11.4 – expressed varying degrees of cynicism towards the post, with commentary framed by their own personal experiences as medical staff during the pandemic. Such commentary was relatively well-received by the community – as indicated by the comment scores – which suggests this practice is generally accepted and, indeed, encouraged by the wider community through upvoting and engagement via comment replies. That these anthropocentric perspectives appear with some regularity even in the face of a deeply collective issue is indicative of the extent to which the constituents of 2XC more closely resemble a fragmented collection of individuals as opposed to an interconnected and deeply bonded community.

Table 11 – Personal experience and the COVID-19 pandemic

Comment Number	Comment Karma	Comment Text
11.1	889	Getting in on the thanks. My Dad was hospitalized last night and ripped out his IV this morning (searching for lost hearing aid). My Dad is a horrible patient. Thank you to all who have to deal with those like him!
11.2	379	Male nurse checking in. It's nice to see our profession getting the plaudits it deserves. Sad that it has to take a global pandemic to make it happen, but good on all of you, especially in the hospital ICU/telemetry areas for doing your job when everyone else is depending on you.
11.3	320	As a medical scientist I feel extremely overlooked in the medical field. I deal with EVERY PATIENT and all of their samples and run all of the tests and... I don't know. I just feel overlooked. I worked 15 hours and processed +100 flu's to help rule out for covid-19 until the UTM shortage. Just don't forget the lab rats in the basement please.
11.4	156	Except that at my hospital, admin(aka me) are being put on the front lines and have to take temps and screen people before they can get into the building. So we're being forced to suddenly come in contact with thousands. I work in a non-patient care(animal research) dept. This is way outside my wheelhouse! Everyone wants to praise nurses and doctors, but admin is in just as much danger and would appreciate not being passed over IMO. We need to not bully or guilt anyone working inside of hospitals. We're all on the front lines. We are not at home isolated.

5.3.2 Experience as Evidence

Closely linked to the previous discussion pertaining to the *value of lived experience* is the discursive practice in which 2XC community members rely on *appeals to personal experience* in order to accentuate and operationalise their symbolic capital to lend weight to their positions and opinions. A number of examples taken from multiple threads throughout the dataset demonstrate the way in which appeals to personal experience are leveraged as a mechanism to persuade others of a certain perspective (Table 12). It is the intention of such performative and discursive acts (e.g., 'as a childfree woman,' 'as a medical scientist,' etc.) to garner authority and credibility so that the commenter has a mechanism that privileges and affirms perspectives or opinions that ostensibly possess a higher degree of validity or authority.

Table 12 – Appeals to personal experience

Comment Number	Comment Karma	Comment Text
12.1	353	...As an Israeli American woman, I want to say most if not all women I know here feel pain for the girl and disgusted by the men's actions...
12.2	320	As a medical scientist I feel extremely overlooked in the medical field...
12.3	133	As a childfree woman with poor access to abortion services living in a regressive South Asian country, I assure you that's not true.
12.4	105	As a radiologic technologist that took chest x-rays on 20 possible COVID patients last night, I see and appreciate you...
12.5	89	As a doctor, let me just say we work our asses off...
12.6	83	As someone who has panic attacks when I see needles, IVs are the worst...
12.7	39	...as a non-administration hospital worker our administration has been excellent...
12.8	22	As a tiler myself it's a bit rough, but better than one would expect with no experience

In these instances, agents are observed operationalising their cultural capital (i.e., their qualifications, lived experiences, etc.) as distinctive markers to elevate themselves above others in the field with lesser claim to cultural or discursive power. It may be that the intention of divulging relevant personal information is to elevate their perspectives within the hierarchy of discourse. In a thread about the media representation of women who purchase pregnancy tests, the original poster suggested that rather than the traditional depiction of a heterosexual couple thrilled by the double lines present on a positive pregnancy test, there should also be an alternative image: that of a single woman in a studio apartment crying tears of joy that her pregnancy test was negative. This thread generated discussion about who buys pregnancy tests, and why it is that marketers continue to use the familiar scene of the happy heterosexual couple in their marketing campaigns. One user suggested that the logic behind such advertising is directly related to the likelihood that most women buying pregnancy tests are doing so hoping for a positive result. In response to this, commenter 12.3 makes the claim that, as per her lived experience as a woman living in a 'regressive South Asian country,' this interpretation could not possibly be accurate, as she herself only ever purchases pregnancy tests hoping for a negative result. Her choice and experience in this instance position her own perspective as legitimate. Similar appeals, ethnically and socially connected to personal authority, are made throughout the dataset, dealing with a range of different issues.

The compulsion users feel to call upon their own experience as assurance against the validity of certain claims is indicative of the value individuals place on such experience and illuminates the tendency towards a form of anthropocentrism that drives practice amongst users of this forum. This practice is bolstered by the intracommunity support for sharing personal anecdotes and appealing to one's own authority, as demonstrated via the number of upvotes these comments attract. Users are largely dismissive of the extent to which choice is influenced and impacted by various sociological influences: class, race, age or even the mounting influence of the pervasive and all-encompassing logic of the algorithms that emerge from our society's entanglement with big data. An example of the latter point may be witnessed in Angelina Jolie's decision to undertake both a double mastectomy and hysterectomy several years apart despite being, at the time, completely healthy. The surgery was performed after genetic testing revealed she was carrying a mutation that put her at an elevated risk of developing breast and/or ovarian cancer. Big data analytics calculated this elevated risk, and her decision was made based on the algorithms and mechanisms responsible for processing and communicating this data. Yet, her decision to undergo these radical surgeries is rarely linked to the influence of algorithmic schemata. Rather, it is seen to be indicative of her immanent 'personal choice.' In other words, comments posted to 2XC that appeal to one's personal authority are seldom positioned or contextually connected within a broader critique of social or cultural settings and tend to contribute little in terms of the broader canvassed issues familiar to feminist politics. Indeed, the normalisation of the valorisation of the individual's experience of social life through feminist discussions may ultimately work to obscure the power structures embedded in authoritative hierarchies (and, indeed, algorithmic datasets) that tend to (re)produce masculine domination in a patriarchal society.

Drawing attention to one's own credentials in a pseudonymous digital forum such as Reddit can also be operationalised as a distinctive marker, in that these are curated, digital manifestations of our social standing. Acts of self-disclosure in which users operationalise their credentials or experience are both a product and a demonstration of social positioning (Bourdieu 1986). This is particularly relevant for acts of self-disclosure that appeal to personal experience as a form of authority, as demonstrated in the examples in Table 12. Indeed, this practice suggests these users consider themselves to be 'competent, in the full sense of the word, that is, socially recognised as entitled to deal with political affairs, to express an opinion about them or even modify their course (Bourdieu 2010, p. 400). This feeling of competence to talk with authority in certain situations, as Bourdieu suggests, likely correlates with a level of social recognition that both ascribes and is ascribed by status and station in the offline world.

5.3.3 Male Authority and the Digital Double Crowd

Another practice entangled within the discursive act of self-disclosure in the 2XC community is a tendency for male commenters to make known their gender before sharing their opinions. The urge to disclose male gender may be interpreted as registering experiential value and suggests that the male participants of 2XC are highly conscious of what Canetti (1981) termed the *double crowd*. The presence of this double crowd is responsible for a relative communal antagonism towards men, around which women are expected to, and indeed often do, unify. Canetti introduces the concept of the double crowd as a phenomenon in which '[p]eople are in physical proximity to their own kind and acting within a familiar and natural unit. All their curiosity and expectation, meanwhile, is directed towards a second body of men divided from them by a clearly defined distance' (Canetti 1981, p. 63). In this case, the community of 2XC, intended as it is for discussion which privileges the perspectives of women, constitutes the familiar and natural unit within which women, in this instance, find themselves congregated. Seeking to participate in this community, men find themselves divided and othered by virtue of the distance between the social construction of gender and gender expectations. Male participants are reminded of this separation during moments of casual antagonism towards men that appear in some examples of the commentary peppered throughout the dataset:

(5): ... dumb masculinity and all that.

(278): ...men need to hold themselves to a higher standard.

(10): ...most [men] don't know how to turn a woman on in the first place.

(2): If a feminist makes a comment about dudes, and a man doesn't respond with "Uh ACKSHUALLY it's EVERYONE!", did that feminist actually make a comment?

(3)...more guys know what sexual assault is than they care to let on, essentially.

The commentary outlined in Table 13 details some examples of contributions in which male participants divulge their gender identity as something of a caveat to their perspectives or opinions. Some of this commentary reveals an internalisation of the double crowd mentality as participants seek to distance themselves from the quixotic male image perpetuated throughout the cultural imaginary of the 2XC community. Comment 13.1, for example, takes an empathic stance towards the treatment of women and ensures the community that he knows 'that a lot of guys feel that it's natural for guys to force women into doing what men want.' He then moves to distance himself from this malevolent image of men and masculinity by condemning the behaviour of his brethren when he sternly suggests that such behaviour is 'unacceptable and should not be tolerated.'

Table 13 – Examples of male self-disclosure across the dataset

Comment Number	Comment Karma	Comment Text
13.1	1481	Bravo OP. I applaud your ability to see red flags and not ignore them. As a guy, I know that a lot of guys feel that it's natural for guys to force women into doing what men want. It's unacceptable and should not be tolerated.
13.2	345	As a gay man, there's no such thing as too much lube. Any pain means more lube and you should ask for it...
13.3	20	I'm a 32 year old dude and one of my greatest fears is still disappointing my mom after she worked so hard to try and raise me right.
13.4	35	As a guy, I wish you would have just gone to the cops with the chat.. Guys like this make us all look bad and we don't want them around any more than you do. He knew that what he was doing was wrong, he knew that he was being manipulative.
13.5	2	As a guy who enjoys receiving nudes of partners, I think dudes like that ruin it for the rest of us...
13.6	11	I'm a male (just clarifying because I know this is a sub directed for women) but holy crap, may I chime in and say that I envy you, your resolve is something I could only dream...
13.7	145	As a grown dude that's really messed up and I'm sorry for anyone that's happened to.
13.8	271	As a guy, I feel like the average guy just thinks "obviously I would never sexually assault someone" but they are thinking about the whole violent assault, not about what constitutes an actual assault.

Comments 13.4 and 13.5 take a different approach in attempting to persuade the wider community (who are assumed or are generally assumed, by virtue of the subreddit, to be women), expressing shame towards the behaviour of some men, and encouraging the wider community to look past these examples of bad behaviour, as they are not accurate universal representations of the male population (i.e., comment 13.4 'guys like this make us all look bad' and comment 13.5 'I think dudes like that ruin it for the rest of us'). Following Bourdieu's analysis of the reproduction of masculine domination, Kraus (1993, p. 170) asserts that 'gender identity is a deeply rooted, bodily dimension of an agent's habitus, it affects the individual in the most "natural" parts of his or her identity.' The compulsion for some men to announce their presence in a safe space that privileges women's perspectives may indicate a preconscious understanding that, due to their deeply rooted gender identity, they are interlopers in this field of practice. This is despite the post pinned to the top of the 2XC community that clarifies that 'any user who can follow the rules is welcome here. Women, men, nonbinary, agender, genderqueer, cis folks and trans folks, everybody.'

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has explored two major discursive practices within the 2XC community – the expression of moral outrage and sharing of outrageous content – as well as the proclivity of many forum users to disclose personal information and experience. Expressions of moral outrage in response to outrageous stimuli in the online environment is a common phenomenon, and the frequency with which expressions of moral outrage occurred throughout the dataset correlated with the number of threads classified as ‘outrageous content.’ While such an over-representation of outrageous content in the threads analysed could indicate a methodological shortcoming, as the posts were only collected over a 15-week span, this is unlikely. The threads that were collected for analysis were the ‘top’ threads – meaning, the most popular threads – that had appeared in the 2XC community during each week of data collection. In other words, each thread selected for analysis had received the highest karma score, and thus the highest intracommunity approval, in a given week. This indicates that the dominance of outrageous content (and thus moral outrage) in the dataset is likely due to such content being commonplace, well received by the 2XC community, and likely to generate a significant amount of interaction. Outrageous content, then, creates the conditions for the emergence of the ‘baiting crowd,’ which emerges with great rapidity as there is no risk involved for the participants because the crowd has ‘immense superiority on their side’ (Canetti 1981, p. 55). In a flurry, they rush to be part of the very public crucifixion of a theoretical enemy. It has been argued that the propensity towards emotion-led sharing (in particular, sharing expressions of moral outrage) in online political communities is indicative of ‘the rise of personality politics, triumphant of affect over argumentation and reduction of the democratic project to media(tised) performance’ (KhosraviNik 2018, p. 428). This observation is well supported by this research project.

Interestingly, the types of instances of outrage operationalised in these threads follow a similar pattern to those identified in populist-nationalist discourses, which ‘pivot around a real or constructed problem in the social, economic and political status quo,’ and generally involve the ‘discursive construction of a homogenously perceived self, e.g., Us... versus a homogenously perceived other, e.g., Them’ (KhosraviNik 2018, p. 430). This binary construction is reminiscent of Canetti’s double crowd, in that 2XC community members occupy a binary position that is sustained by the existence of the ‘other’ – in this case, men. This ‘second body of men’ captures the illusory existence of the aphoristic ‘other,’ a mutable mass comprised of those assumed to present a threat to the coherence of the feminist narrative reproduced within the community, the face of which is liable to change with the topics raised in the community. The outrageous content shared within the 2XC community appears to encourage this dichotomy through eliciting affective

responses against perceived threats from community members, encouraging and normalising expressions of moral outrage in response. Yet research suggests that anger and expressions of outrage in online spaces ‘may reduce the effectiveness of collective action and limit participation in the public square’ (Brady & Crockett 2019, p. 1).

The proliferation and significance of feminist rage is reflected in the linguistic marketplace of 2XC, in which these fleeting moments of appropriate displays of anger or outrage are given value through Reddit’s upvote function. Women feel comfortable expressing their anger with men and the systems of oppression that govern their day-to-day lives, and the 2XC community provides a comfortable and safe place to do this. Yet the outrage generated appears to construct little more than a paper tiger, easily swept away by the rapid currents of a 24-hour news cycle. If we consider popular social media platforms such as Reddit to be heavily influenced by the wider logic of the field of power, then it follows that the primary motivation of these platforms is the dogged pursuit of profit. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, Reddit has been increasingly pursuing a more profitable business model. Thus, as a business, the platform would want to maximise user engagement in order to make the platform a more attractive option for advertisers and marketers. As such, the reliance on anger expression as a form of communication within the community may also be indicative of a larger social trend towards what some are terming the ‘outrage-industrial complex,’ which refers to the theoretical understanding of increased instances of anger and aggression on social media as products of the profit motive that drives these businesses (Ford 2019). In other words, the moral outrage in the digital field may can be at least partially attributed to behavioural manipulation for profit accumulation by social media businesses, as outrage keeps people engaged and encourages interactivity. This concept raises significant questions about the influence of social media over the way individuals engage with contentious politics in online spaces. As users are enthralled and corralled into patterns of behaviour that are more likely to generate intracommunity interaction when participating on social websites, expressions of moral outrage are more likely to attract attention and engagement from the community, and so are more frequently employed. Further, social media platforms, in vying for the finite resource that is human attention in order to generate advertising revenue, utilise algorithms that ‘promote content that is most likely to be shared, regardless of whether it benefits those who share it – or is even true’ (Crockett 2017, p. 769). Thus, expressions of moral outrage come to represent a significant form of capital within the 2XC community as users within the community compete for the finite resource of attention through emulating discursive acts which attract the most upvotes.

Although content visibility on Reddit is heavily informed by the amount of upvotes content receives, it can be assumed that much of the content that is actively shared on Reddit has been

found on other social media sites which rely on algorithms to prioritise the visibility of outrageous content in order to support advertising revenue. Further, the wider logic of practice that constitutes individual experience on the Internet is unlikely to be radically differentiated across different social media platforms. What results is a process of social reproduction wherein users of 2XC are compelled to express themselves in ways that are likely to attract positive reinforcement from the wider community, and thus certain modes of practice and ideological perspectives are reinforced as being appropriate and valued within the community. This finding supports previous research into the culture of outrage online, which proposes that, ‘in a highly satiated media environment, forcefully expressed and emotive statements will likely receive higher ratings and higher click-through rates than relatively bland expressions of (dis)agreement’ (Van’t Riet, Schaap & Kleemans 2018, p. 103). In other words, as evidenced by the high degree of community appreciation for posts expressing moral outrage in these instances, ‘the arms which actually do the hitting count for most’ (Canetti 1981, p. 49). On the other hand, heterodox commentary that seeks to critically engage with the content shared within the community is disincentivised through reduced levels of intracommunity interaction, or actively rejected through downvoting. Community constituents are rewarded for reproducing certain perspectives that ultimately drive participation within the community and thus generate a profit margin for Reddit as a company. Therefore, in answering the first sub-question of this research project, the wider neoliberal project and the associated profiteering of Reddit has substantial influence over the key values and dominant forms of capital central to the 2XC community.

The second major point demonstrated throughout this chapter is the inclination for participants to utilise personal experience as a mechanism for lending validity to their perspectives. Commentary that involves sharing personal anecdotes or linking discussion back to personal experience occurs with such regularity that the reasons for such mechanisms of self-expression demand to be further explored. Feminist scholars have long discussed the potential for the sharing of personal experiences, particularly since it can be traced back to a privileged mode of practice deeply embedded in the feminist project of consciousness raising. Sharing in these spaces has the capacity to intensify the development of an enduring sense of community. The exercise and distribution of power in this space may work to galvanise, enable and centre marginalised voices. While this has historically most certainly been the case, the validity of this argument is challenged by the broader social, cultural and political climate in which this practice occurs in the 2XC community. Indeed, many of the personal experiences shared by constituents of 2XC lack a necessary element of consciousness raising in the feminist sense – namely, relating personal experiences back to the structural mechanisms of power and oppression that shape the lives of women in an effort to dismantle them. This manner of sharing that takes place within the 2XC

community represents a significant departure from Hanisch's (1969) original embodiment of the 'personal is political' principles. As outlined above, Hanisch detailed a process through which personal anecdotes are shared as a mechanism to understand sex-based oppression and thus inform a critique of the status quo of the time, highlighting the structures of domination and oppression that were naturalised as a result of the patriarchal organisation of society. When anecdotes are shared by 2XC community members, rarely is there a process through which these anecdotes are synthesised or leveraged in support of a broader feminist social critique.

An alternative explanation for the regularity with which 2XC community members share their personal experiences is that such behaviour is a product of the neoliberal reframing of the individual as the fundamental element of political, cultural, social and economic life. The individual is the central focus of the community – until the group of individuals congregates into a social media crowd, at which point certain collective actions occur akin to Canetti's theory of crowds and power (i.e., the 'baiting' crowd, and the 'double' crowd – mentalities that appear reactive and offer little in the way of critical feminist analysis). As opposed to a relatively cohesive community working towards a common goal and sharing common ground, 2XC members are a wide range of individuals privileging their own perspectives and experiences over those of their peers. The data suggests that only when faced with a common enemy can these individuals cohere against a common goal. The neoliberal project has eroded the collective force of relations that constitute social life, replacing it instead with consumer identities born out of a culture of individualism. Such a culture works to fragment collective political groups into mere collections of individuals, undermining the strengths embodied by interconnected and deeply bonded communities. As such, the community becomes enervated, and members activities become enclosed within the activities, artifices and asymmetry that exists on Reddit as a media site. Instead of becoming a powerful collective, members are consumed by the online logic which establishes and reproduces the prevailing patterns of domination. This observation is supported by the data, in that discourse within the 2XC community is heavily skewed in favour of sharing depoliticised personal experiences as opposed to engaging in critical, and often difficult, discussions regarding the lived experiences of women as a group historically oppressed by virtue of their sex. This propensity is echoed by Sørensen (2017, p. 297), who claims that '[t]he strong emphasis on individual choice is often interpreted as a signifier of a neoliberal culture, in which the political discourse of neoliberalism extends the rationality of the market to all institutions and social action.'

Usually depicted as a form of emotive outrage, anecdotal offerings which impute participants' 'feeling state' to others are a significant communicative act within the 2XC community. The field

reproduces a doctrine of gender relations in which participants construct a homogenously perceived self (women) versus a homogenously perceived other (men). Within this construction, women are regularly discursively framed as prospective and perpetual victims, with the narratives expressing a kind of emotive outrage that largely channels substantial and critical dissent into malleable forms. Critique is silenced through processes of exclusion and symbolic violence. Networked constructions of female experience contribute to the development of an irretrievably self-serving availability heuristic, in which personal anecdotes regarding the victimisation of women are shared with such regularity that they begin to appear prophetic and inescapable. Paradoxically, these anecdotes appear to reproduce forms of social and cultural relations that reinforce the structures of masculine domination, trapping women in a web of conventions, and serving only to palliate the repressive rationality of patriarchal society. Further, sharing anecdotes regularly attracts further anecdotal commentary, providing more personal experience and emotive outrage, rather than stimulating full-bodied consciousness-raising debate and discussions that condemn and resist the structural realities and introjected heteronomy of patriarchal social and political power. On the other hand, from the discursive framing of men as the universal potential aggressors, a doxic constraint emerges: an implicit rule that shapes the behaviour and discursive acts of the men who wish to take part in the community dialogue. Male participants within the community appear to be at once aware of their presence as interlopers while simultaneously compelled to reveal their sex-identity in an attempt to disavow an inherently masculine species of paternalism. In these instances, men appear to attempt to establish their position of 'allyship' with women and the feminist cause. However, such communicative practices tend to act as distinctive markers, lending legitimacy to their independent personal opinions and perspectives.

As this chapter has demonstrated, the dominant forms of capital within the 2XC community are deeply entangled with the sensibilities reproduced by the wider field of power. In particular, neoliberal rationality as the dominant legitimate socio-political doctrine of the West emerges from the spontaneous discourse of 2XC community participants through a reliance on reactive expressions of moral outrage and the sharing of anecdotal experiences that are rarely operationalised in ways that attempt to critique the overarching structures of power shaping the lived reality of women in this community. Further, these communicative practices represent normative cultural discourse in this networked feminist community; as such, they are at once an expression of and means to accumulate the relevant cultural capital within 2XC. They constitute an expression of cultural capital insofar as the community members who utilise these discursive mechanisms have, by virtue of time spent in the field, embodied the appropriate cultural competency to be able to successfully engage with this brand of feminist practice and move through the field with ease. Similarly, in demonstrating their cultural competency within this

community, these participants are rewarded with intracommunity recognition, made quantifiable through engagement metrics such as replies and upvotes. In isolation, such discursive acts may provide a great deal of catharsis to the individual or create the conditions for critique to emerge. However, when considering the ultimate beneficiaries of feminist practice in the online environment, it appears that the normalisation of such behaviours contributes little to the demystification of the structures of power and domination that continue to stand as barriers to the legitimate emancipation of women.

Chapter 6: Fourth-Wave Feminism in the 2XC Community

6.1 Introduction

The observations outlined in Chapter 6 dealt with *how* certain perspectives are communicated within the 2XC community and provides the necessary contextualisation for the analysis that takes place within this chapter – namely, the reproduction of fourth-wave feminist discourse (*what* is being communicated). As demonstrated in Chapter 6, the normalisation of moral outrage within the 2XC community mirrors a reclamation of women’s rage by popular feminist writers espousing the inherent value in, and necessity of, emotional reactivity. The proud reclamation of the caricature of the ‘angry feminist’ identity coincides with the most recent resurgence in the popularity of feminism. This resurgence is inherently tied to the Internet and digital participation and conceptualised throughout this thesis as the ‘fourth wave’ of feminism. The regularity with which moral outrage is expressed within the 2XC community signals its value within fourth-wave feminist discourse; however, this observation is complicated by the demonstrated ties such outrage has to the profitability of social media platforms. This chapter seeks to contribute to understanding the extent to which the nature of social media platforms driven primarily by a profit motive and operating within a wider social and political context informed primarily by neoliberal rationality, is contributing to the construction and social reproduction of key fourth-wave feminist discourses.

This chapter is concerned with teasing out the fourth-wave feminist political perspectives and ideologies that are promulgated by the 2XC community and contextualising them within the broader social, political and cultural realities from which they emerge. This examination reveals some key tensions that emerge in the praxis of a fourth-wave feminist politics that is shaped by a neoliberal socio-political environment. This interrogation beings by exploring the ways in which constituents of the 2XC community contribute to a growing culture of affective polarisation through reproducing certain vitriolic discourses that work to ‘other’ those assumed to be in possession of contrary political opinions. Rather than take the political position of contemporary feminist communities for granted, this section seeks to disentangle the performance of left-wing politics from the feminist practice within this community in order to problematise the naturalisation of this association. Indeed, the reflexivity demanded in an application of Bourdieu’s theoretical framework requires that these doxic assumptions (that feminism equals progressivism

which, in turn, equals allegiance to ‘left-wing’ political parties) be interrogated in order to fully realise the mechanisms of control and hierarchies of power that frame the possibilities of discourse within the 2XC community. Thus, the impact and performance of affective polarisation on and within the 2XC community is examined, and the processes of selective indoctrination of left-wing political perspectives and the relationship of these perspectives to the networked environment in which they are espoused is problematised.

This discussion sets the stage for an exploration of the key fourth-wave feminist sensibilities that shape the 2XC community; in particular, intersectionality and sex positivity. Perspectives which emerged from the dataset that can be attributed to shaping contemporary fourth-wave feminist ideology are examined, and the extent to which these perspectives are deeply embedded in and reproduced by the field of power more broadly is demonstrated. The ‘networked’ element of the fourth wave and some of its inflated conceptions are woven throughout the chapter, demonstrating the extent to which the networked element of fourth-wave feminist politics – indeed, some of the defining features of this movement’s collectively derived characteristics – may hinder the emergence of a subversive and critically reflexive feminist politics.

6.2 Social Reproduction of Affective Polarisation

The nature of 2XC as a feminist community – by virtue of its inherent focus on the lives and experiences of women – suggests an alignment with progressive political ideology. Political ideology is understood here to comprise the ‘attitudes and values about the proper goals of society and how they should be achieved’ (Becker 2020, p. 6). Throughout this analysis, progressive political ideology is conceptualised to motivate individuals toward practice that promotes social change, while conservative ideology describes the motivation for individuals to engage in activism that maintains the status quo (Becker 2020, p. 6). The posts and commentary from 2XC serve to frame and reinforce what is ‘politically thinkable’ within this community, and the diverse trajectory of events, discourses and practices are deeply embedded within progressive political ideology. This liberatory model is configured through both the vocal support for progressivism together with an affective rejection of conservatism. Thus, the ‘legitimate problematic’³⁸ at the forefront of the contemporary feminist consciousness is a discursive move that seeks to reference

³⁸ Bourdieu (1996, p. 206) defines the legitimate problematic as ‘the space of the possibilities bequeathed by previous struggles, a space which tends to give direction to the search for solutions and, consequently, influences the present and future of production.’

potential areas of change in contemporary society. It is characterised and deeply informed by the intense partisan divide existing between adherents of conservative and progressive political perspectives. In other words, the partisan divide that influences practice in the field of power more broadly gives shape to the ways in which feminist practice emerges in the online environment. However, recent research suggests the growing partisan divide is becoming increasingly motivated by *affective polarisation*. Affective polarisation refers to ‘the extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked out-group’ (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes 2012, p. 2) and indicates the emergence of a relatively novel phenomenon in which ‘emotional reactions to party identifications’ have ‘shifted from mild negativity to outright hostility’ (Garrett et al. 2014, p. 309).

As a result of the dominance of American users on the site, the dataset makes visible tensions existing between Republicans and Democrats and traverses the extreme incitements found at the progressive/conservative boundary. The implications are significant for all Western democratic nations, which are increasingly exposed to political perspectives mediated by social media platforms and the digital environment. Beyond the contentions that exist between progressivism and conservatism, this section will demonstrate how the culture and affordances of the Internet have contributed to turning the very concept of feminism into an abstruse symbol of the hyper-partisanship colouring the political climate of the West. Feminism as a political movement has come to represent a white-hot point of contention between those championing the progressive ideologies of the ‘liberal left’ and those advocating for the conservative principles of the ‘right.’ The ‘politically thinkable’ within feminist politics is becoming increasingly restricted to a singular ‘progressive’ political perspective advocated for in ways which often discourage critical acumen. Given the reach of 2XC as a networked feminist community and the ideological perspectives it advocates for (and, in turn, disavows), this trend towards an increasingly and affectively polarised feminist politics ultimately undermines the possibility for vigorous debate from a multitude of perspectives – a key platform in any healthy democratic system. As a result, this pivotal signifier of contemporary feminist politics requires a sustained critical scrutiny.

Of the 15 original posts analysed within this study, two threads dealt explicitly with current political news from the United States, with one directly linked to the 2020 US presidential race which was occurring at the time. Both threads linked to mainstream news articles that were current at the time they were posted, and which were sourced from two different media organisations:

Newsweek and *Associated Press* (AP). According to Media Bias/Fact Check (MBFC)³⁹, *Newsweek* is rated as having a left-centre bias, ‘based on editorial positions that slightly favour the left’ (MBFC 2021a), while AP is rated as being borderline left-centre biased ‘due to left-leaning editorialising’ (MBFC 2021b). However, in the case of AP, MBFC also considers the organisation to be ‘least-biased’ overall by virtue of ‘balanced story selection’ (MBFC 2021a). The preference for sharing left-leaning media in a feminist forum is not surprising but is significant, and, as such, should be interrogated. Research suggests that prolonged exposure to partisan media reinforces negative dispositions of the ‘out-group’ – in this instance, conservative pundits and politicians (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes 2012, p. 407). The fact that these threads were upvoted enough to be the ‘top’ thread in a week in which data collection took place indicates the widespread support for the political perspectives put forward in these articles and suggests that posting articles that support the ideological narrative espoused by the community is normal practice. While both *Newsweek* and AP are considered to be highly factual, the left-leaning editorialising that occurs in both media organisations likely contributes to the development of acceptable parameters of discourse within the 2XC community. Through this, it contributes to the often-vitriolic critique of the perspectives of conservatism and assumed adherents to conservative political ideology that emerged from the spontaneous discourse analysed throughout this study.

6.2.1 Discursive Construction of Conservatism

A significant point that emerged from the data was the deep entanglement of networked feminism with left-wing political perspectives, shaped not only by support for progressive parties and politicians but also by the acerbic discourse directed toward Republican politicians and assumed supporters of conservative political positions. Indeed, expressions of ‘principled’ dislike of the other side of the partisan divide were regularly met with strong intracommunity support. The value of such positions was indicated not only by the appearance of discursive cohesion throughout the threads reinforcing partisan division, but also by the karma scores that perspectives espousing such positions attracted. As discussed in the previous chapter, through rewarding certain perspectives and disincentivising others, certain discourses are (re)produced as the demonstration of one’s ideological alignment represents an opportunity for the accumulation and demonstration of cultural capital. Cultural capital in this instance is conceptualised as the potential for attracting attention and support through karma points, and the karma score represents one of the benefits participants can attract through the performative demonstration of a political identity

³⁹ MBFC is an independently operated website that utilises a comprehensive methodology in order to determine the ‘bias, factual accuracy and credibility of media sources’ (MBFC 2021c).

that is considered ‘appropriate’ within the 2XC community. Indeed, as a result of the affordances built into the Reddit platform – in particular, the voting function – 2XC users are ‘nudged’ into certain patterns of thought. As a result, they are encouraged to reiterate the ‘appropriate’ beliefs held in esteem by the wider community. On the other hand, those holding opposing or critical views are discouraged from sharing them within the community, as such commentary may attract the presence of the ‘baiting crowd’ (Canetti 1981). The holder of the contrary perspective becomes the embodiment of the ‘other’ in the partisan divide. This indicates a process of hostile pedantry and symbolic violence at work within the community, wherein the power structures within the community that reproduce affective partisanship are internalised and legitimised by the constituents. As such, thread participants are corralled into ‘appropriate’ pedantic patterns of thought and behaviour so as to earn recognition and valorisation of their cultural capital from the wider digital crowd.

Table 14 outlines commentary from a thread revolving around a scandal which erupted in 2019, when a photograph of seven young, white men wearing ‘Team Mitch’ T-shirts (supporters of Republican politician Mitch McConnell) behaving inappropriately with a cardboard cut-out of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) went viral. The vast majority of commentary made on this thread simultaneously demonstrated support for AOC while condemning the actions of the young men in question, and Mitch McConnell and Republican politicians more broadly.

Table 14 – Comments made on a news story about a photograph of young, male Republican party supporters with a cardboard cut-out of AOC⁴⁰

Comment Number	Comment Karma	Comment Text
14.1	4084	And hopefully corrupt men get held accountable for their actions too, not just boys, but that’s wishful thinking at this point.
14.2	1714	I really hope McConnell will be held accountable for his evil in the 2020 election.
14.3	241	This is a normalization of hate. Minor? Yes. In the context of recent MAGA shootings/bomber and the surge in death threats AOC et al get? No, this is not minor.
14.4	84	Boy, just look at that photo of the LCA students - a wholesome bunch of future ~~date rapists~~ republican politicians in the making.

⁴⁰ Common acronym for American politician and activist, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

According to the *Newsweek* article that was shared to 2XC, AOC posted a tweet that questioned whether the young men were on McConnell's payroll, and asked, 'are you paying for young men to practice groping & choking members of Congress w/ your payroll, or is this just the standard culture of #TeamMitch? (Ocasio-Cortez 2019)' AOC's tweet highlighted the extent to which the affective performance of politics emerges on both sides of the political binary and implies that supporters of McConnell (and thus, all Republicans) are likely complicit in behaviours that demean, harass and undermine women. This sentiment is then echoed by comment 14.4, which sarcastically conflates Republican politicians with date rapists. Such discursive acts serve to reinforce the affective nature of the partisan divide and normalise this framing of the 'other' as being universally reprehensible. Given that this user demonstrated their progressive political perspective not through vocal support for AOC but through positioning supporters of Republican politicians as deplorable is significant. Indeed, the demonstration of a progressive political stance is maintained through the absolute rejection of conservatism. First, it supports the findings of the previous chapter, in that such discursive acts are normalised and even venerated in the culture of moral outrage that exists within the 2XC community. Second, the commentary mirrors the loaded and affectively driven language used by AOC herself in her tweet (that groping and choking women is standard culture in McConnell's political party). Rather than engaging in conversations about the structural inequalities that continue to prompt unacceptable behaviours in young men, commentary such as this (and, indeed, AOC's tweet) shifts the register towards an attack on the individuals complicit in the behaviour. Indeed, ad hominem arguments that frame conservatives negatively (such as *corrupt* – comment 4.1, or *evil* – comment 4.2) are not limited to discussions about male political figures. During a disagreement between two users on a thread that detailed high rates of sexual assault on the university campus, the term 'right-winger' was employed as an insult by one of the participants in their attempt to offend and undermine the perspective of the other:

User A: Crime analyst? Is that just a fancy name for a police officer trainee? Or just another example of right-winger dishonesty?

User B: A crime analyst is a position title. The skills vary per analyst... I'm not right wing. And you have no idea what you're talking about.

The second-highest scoring comment detailed in Table 14 (comment 14.2) generated an interesting thread of commentary revealing a tension within the community between the one-dimensional and often emotionally charged construction of the progressive/conservative binary, and the political necessity for a considered and judicious approach to partisan discourse. In response to comment 14.2, a user expressed their discomfort with the promotion of perspectives

that work to negatively frame those holding conservative political opinions, urging the community to consider the adverse implications of what they referred to as ‘the horrid partisanship and ultra-binary politics’ that has come to characterise the American political landscape:

(1358): To be completely honest, as a very liberal person, I have no issue with Republican policies in isolation. I don’t agree with them, but I hope that when someone proposes policy X that they believe it’s for the better good. Instead, what we’re getting is horrid partisanship and ultra binary politics (it’s all Republican vs Democrat now)...

(6): Refreshing to read this. I don’t think most people want to do harm to our country and there’s a lot of middle ground. Problem is that it is difficult to have a dialogue nowadays about our political differences and similarities.

(6): \^This.I have no problem with healthy debate and differences of opinion on most policies. Traditional conservatives want low taxes, strong military, smaller government, and free trade? Sure, let’s debate all that and none of that is offensive to the point of total castigation and social shunning... There is a rhetoric problem though that does goes too far on the right ... I don’t agree with most conservative positions, but I don’t have a consuming problem with them, either. I have a problem with extremism and extremism becoming more mainstreamed than extreme. THAT is the danger. When healthy debate falls to fear-mongering, hatred, racism, xenophobia, name calling, and a win-at-all-costs attitude, then that is when we have to take notice and move to guard the health and future existence of our republic.

Another user agreed with this sentiment – adding that it was ‘refreshing’ to see this on 2XC, indicating that such perspectives are uncommon within the community. This user felt it was ‘difficult to have a dialogue today about our political differences and similarities.’ This interaction and the significant karma score accumulated by the initial comment indicates that such a perspective is not uncommon within the 2XC community, and that there are participants who consider the impacts of an intensifying bipartisanship to be detrimental to the health of politics in their country. However, the final comment in this thread, while ostensibly agreeing with the sentiment expressed by the two preceding contributions, goes on to express the commenter’s belief that conservative political perspectives are a danger to ‘the health and future existence of [the] republic.’ The comment ultimately contributes to the discursive construction of conservatism as being the problematic part of the equation in the commenter’s claim that there is ‘a rhetoric problem that does goes [sic] too far on the right,’ insinuating that it is due to the behaviour of conservatives that ‘healthy debate falls to fear-mongering, hatred, racism, xenophobia, name calling and a win-at-all-costs attitude.’ This user, while ostensibly

demonstrating their recognition of the toxicity of a growing partisan divide, in fact associates the negative elements of affective partisanship with those on the right wing of politics. The ascribed point of view demonstrates a failure to recognise that the pundits and politicians alike on both sides of the binary are responsible for generating a negative image of the out-group.

Further, this interaction illuminates a significant role played by the central media⁴¹ in shaping the perspectives and opinions of those engaging with political discourse on social media. The central media can be conceptualised as playing a significant role in the reproduction of dominant discourses generated within the contemporary field of power. Indeed, the central media has the means to ‘classify social space as a whole, over and above the details of particular fields’ (Couldry 2003, p. 7). This is a product of the complex feedback loop that characterises the contemporary central media, as social reality shapes central media production, and central media then holds the power to generate and distribute ideologically motivated representations of our social reality. The role of participatory media may ostensibly appear to problematise this relationship, as those engaged in political discourse on social media might bypass the generative power of the central media and, through meaningful conversation, work to construct a more nuanced and balanced understanding of social, political, cultural and economic realities. However, as demonstrated by the nature of the articles shared in the 2XC community, the central media plays a significant role in shaping perspectives within this community, highlighting the symbolic power of the central media even in participatory media spaces. In this instance, the *Newsweek* article positions AOC as the victim of a horrendous attack and grants a centrality to her perspective of McConnell’s campaign as morally repugnant. This reporting judiciously generates affective responses from 2XC participants, and they mirror the subtext of the article, circulating the outrageous stimuli, and thus ultimately reproducing the problematic affective partisanship, contributing to the widening partisan divide evidenced in prior research (Westfall et al. 2015) and entrenching the expected visceral yet shallow response towards conservatism within the community members.

On close analysis of the data, it became apparent that the discursive construction of conservatism as morally reprehensible was also extended to perspectives on religion. Indeed, religious sentiment is often conflated with conservative ideology. This correlation is supported by the Religious Landscape Study authored by the Pew Research Centre (2020), which found that people who hold conservative political opinions are over-represented in Christian religions (including

⁴¹ The term ‘central media’ is borrowed from Couldry and is used to refer to what is sometimes called the ‘traditional’ or ‘mass’ media; ‘television, radio and the press – that is, our central means of access to society’s reality and its “centre”’ (Couldry 2003, p. 2).

Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, Latter-Day Saints and Jehovah’s Witnesses). It is likely that the persistent anti-religious sentiment and heretical views which emerged from the dataset (see examples in Table 15) are informed primarily by this correlation.

Table 15 – Expressions of anti-religious sentiment

Comment Number	Comment Karma	Comment Text
15.1	2255	No shit. I bet any area with a high population of religious fundamentalists and whackjob cultists is going to see skyrocketing rates of spousal and child abuse. Because, and I know it must come as a shock, religious fundamentalists don’t view women and children as anything other than property.
15.2	1100	I think for Mormons specifically though it’s different. For conservative Christian types in America, the rules are you have lots of children and your wife is the one who raises them for you. They aren’t really having children because they want to be fathers, so much as being fathers makes them feel like bigger men as long as they don’t have to do a father’s work.
15.3	119	Women are second class citizens in the Bible Belt. That’s what’s wrong.

The common deployment of aggressive and cynical commentary related to Christian religions per se and to those who ascribe to Christian tenets in general is widely accepted within the community. The comments outlined in Table 15 were made on a thread detailing the increase in cases of domestic violence in Utah County, a region in the United States with an overwhelmingly Mormon population. Each comment, likely due to the fact that the article dealt with the horrors of domestic violence, raised the incompatibilities of religions like Mormonism with the goals of feminism – namely, the emancipation of women. Nevertheless, this critique of organised religion was not extended to other faith-based practices notoriously considered to be detrimental to the lives of women. One commenter recognised this antimony, stating that there are ‘fundamental flaws in Islam we can’t talk about, but at least we’re not ignoring our very own extremist tendencies here.’ This interesting conundrum is indicative of the self-imposed limitation on discourse that exists within the community. It illuminates a tension between participation in a seemingly globalised women’s movement made possible via the Internet and the discomfort in extending critiques outside of one’s own enclosed frame of reference.

The anti-religious sentiment expressed in this commentary was broadly echoed across the dataset, and it appears that such perspectives are commonplace within the Reddit community. In the following interaction, a user shows an awareness that the audience is inherently anti-religion, and thus that the thread participants are likely to find this user ‘guilty by association’:

(154): Two kids isn't unreasonable. It's actually kinda ideal in a way. More than that and you start to run into trouble though.

(39): Are you also Mormon?

(48): Nope, different equally awful religion.

(60): If you find your religion awful, why do you follow it?

(253): Lol, awful by Reddit standards (catholic), my reasons for my religious beliefs are complicated. Though many of you will find me guilty by association [....] This got long, commence downvoting!

Between their concern that they will be found 'guilty by association' and their statement that their comment 'got long,' the user seeks to justify their religious beliefs and to reassure other participants that their Catholicism is practiced in a positive and productive way. The predictive end comment – 'commence downvoting' – signals their expectation of a negative reaction from others in the thread. Their anticipated low karma score is born out of the overt inculcation of anti-religious cultural values and competencies that shape practice within the community. Indeed, this anticipation suggests this user has embodied a degree of cultural competence and understands at a tacit level the types of perspectives and discourses that are accepted and rejected within the 2XC community. Nevertheless, the comment attracted a relatively high karma score, and so, in this instance, it appears the user's fears were unfounded. Although uncommon, it is likely that the self-awareness of this user dissuaded others from downvoting the post, and instead it triggered supportive responses from other participants in the community. Again, this behaviour could be conceptualised as a demonstration of the relevant cultural competence – and thus, a well-suited habitus – that assists this user in successfully participating not only in the 2XC community, but in Reddit more broadly. By anticipating and mitigating the potential negative reaction towards their religious beliefs, this user demonstrates that they can understand the point of view of those who hold anti-religious sentiments, and thus positions himself more favourably in order to successfully communicate his position.

6.2.2 Progressivism in the 2XC Community

While the conservative side of the partisan divide was constructed as immoral, evil or corrupt, constituents of the 2XC community passionately demonstrated support for and alignment with progressive political ideology. The intracommunity support received by commentary and submissions that lionised contemporary 'progressive' political perspectives indicates that, for

members of 2XC, this position is highly valued within the community. Participation in threads championing progressive political figures is indicative of a demonstration of an individual's relevant cultural capital within this community, as these users reveal their cultural competency as a 2XC constituent through an understanding of the acceptable parameters of political discourse. In doing so, they also demonstrate their political competency – a distinctive act that works to elevate the opinions of those who are able to exercise their informed perspectives in ways that illuminate their knowledge of the topic of politics. In the aforementioned thread regarding the cardboard cut-out of AOC, there were a number of statements that echoed the sentiment of the following commentary, referring to AOC herself:

(1057) I admire this woman so damn much. I hope she's in Washington for a long, long time.

(237): She needs to run for president in 2028.

These contributions attracted a significant amount of intracommunity support, as indicated by the accumulated karma score. This suggests that this is a commonly held perspective within the community. However, this sentiment towards Democratic candidates appears to be heavily dependent on the pre-existing perceptions of the candidates themselves as opposed to their official party affiliation. Michael Bloomberg began his presidential bid in 2019 after registering as a Democratic candidate. In one of the threads analysed, a user linked an AP article detailing Bloomberg's refusal to release women previously in his employment from non-disclosure agreements. Table 16 demonstrates examples of commentary that represent the general consensus amongst the 2XC community in this thread, namely that Bloomberg had 'bought his way' into the presidential race. Indeed, Bloomberg's presidential bid appears to cause a moment of hysteresis in the Bourdieusian sense, as Bloomberg fails to fit the constructed image of the archetypical Democrat and is thus rejected from his claims to that political alignment by the Democratic voters within the 2XC community. As a result, Bloomberg's position as a Democratic candidate was rejected by the community, thus maintaining the doxic construction of reality in the field of 2XC. As well as rejecting Bloomberg's claim to the Democratic candidacy, the tone and delivery of the commentary in Table 16 also signifies the underlying affective polarisation that shapes the perspectives of the participating users. For instance, 16.1 submits that Bloomberg is 'a loon,' while 16.2 laments that '[h]e is so awful' and 'gross.'

Table 16 – Negative perspectives of Bloomberg’s presidential bid

Comment Number	Comment Karma	Comment Text
16.1	3512	The guy’s a loon. He bought his way there tonight.
16.2	1903	He is so awful. Fuck the DNC for allowing him to buy his way into the election and into the debate tonight. And he’s gross. Warren was right on with her opening comments about him.
16.3	1127	If you believe in Bloomberg after tonight, I honestly pity you.
16.4	289	The only reason that he’s in the race is that the Democratic elite are afraid that Biden is fading, and that Sanders could win the nomination. A republican should not be able to buy the democratic nomination. Bloomberg needs to go.
16.5	257	Well let’s not forget he’s a Republican too. He also bought his way into the debates tonight.
16.6	119	I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, he is literally just Trump with a brain. I actually think he might be more dangerous then Trump.

Despite spending only six years with the Republican party, there was a widely held belief amongst the participants in this thread that Bloomberg was deeply affiliated with the Republican party and should not have been allowed to run for the Democratic candidacy – a sentiment expressed outright in comments 16.2 and 16.5. However, the reality of the situation is more complicated than is expressed by the participants in this thread. Bloomberg was a lifelong ‘staunch Democrat’ until 2001, when he ran for Mayor of New York on the Republican ticket (Gordon 2001, para. 15). He then spent the next six years registered as a Republican, before changing his affiliation to Independent in 2007 (Packer 2007). In 2012, in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, Bloomberg himself wrote of his growing concerns around climate change, and threw his support behind Obama’s presidential bid, claiming that, ‘over the past four years, President Barack Obama has taken major steps to reduce our carbon consumption’ (Bloomberg 2012, para. 5). In the same op-ed, he states his support for pro-choice abortion policies, marriage equality and universal healthcare – all major Democratic talking points. Bloomberg also supported Clinton’s 2016 bid for presidency, and publicly expressed his ‘dismay’ over the potential for a Trump presidency (Burns 2016). However, many liberal publications have cited his ‘gross history of racism and sexism’ (Katch 2020), his ‘contempt for core Democratic constituencies (young nonwhite people, professional women, the poor and labor unions’ (Levitz 2020, para. 3) and, of course, the fact that he paid for his campaign with merely a fraction of his own personal fortune as reasons that his Democratic bid should have been prohibited. The lack of critical acumen witnessed in the 2XC community regarding Bloomberg’s presidential bid is indicative of the power of community

discourse to (re)produce certain perspectives that support a singular framing of what legitimate Democratic candidates should embody. Indeed, none of the commentary analysed in this thread posed a challenge to the coherence of this narrative, thus reinforcing its dominance.

Issues around Bloomberg's personal financial contributions to his campaign were raised with great regularity throughout the thread. Comment 16.1 and 16.2 are two examples of such commentary, raising questions as to the ethical complexities of this method of politicking. In response to a comment that voiced these concerns, the following interaction took place:

(73): No more billionaires as President, no more millionaires for President. Our government is supposed to be of the people for the people. The wealthy aren't "of the people"

(147): Bernie Sanders is a millionaire.

(27): I'll settle for mandatory public financing of elections. No special interest, private money or self funding allowed. The only reason people like Steyer and Bloomberg have a shot is because they can keep throwing money at the wall. As we saw tonight, when the ultra wealthy are held to the fire on their policy positions, they melt.

(6): Millionaires are chill provided that they actually worked to become millionaires.

While his fortune is not comparable to that of Bloomberg's, the second comment outlined in the thread above clarifies that candidate Bernie Sanders is, in fact, a millionaire. Despite this fact, community participants do not appear to change their opinion on Sanders. One of the participants argues that it is not the possession of such an abundance of economic capital that is the issue, 'provided that they actually worked to become millionaires.' This casual comment is interesting for a number of reasons. First, there is a significant cognitive dissonance in the respective perceptions of Sanders as a legitimate Democratic candidate despite his financial position, indicating the perception of him as a politician that is 'of the people for the people.' On the other hand, the construction of Bloomberg by virtue of his wealth sees him positioned as a counterfeit. Second, the commentary signifies a deeply embedded neoliberal rationality regarding the naturalisation of upward mobility by attributing the attainment of millionaire status to simple 'hard work.'

It can be assumed that conflicting opinions are devalued to the point of being discouraged, and this may explain the lack of contentious perspectives on this topic located within the dataset.

Further, the symbolic capital that is demonstrated by reiterating the ‘correct’ opinion creates the conditions where this singular narrative can flourish unchallenged. The point here is that a setting devoid of conflicting opinions can work to encourage ad hominem attacks on those who think differently, or at least generate conditions where, in the face of overwhelming support for a particular point of view, users self-censor to avoid becoming the target of an imagined baiting crowd. Such instances of actual and self-surveillance work to establish an ‘echo-chamber,’ defined as the limited ‘exposure to diverse perspectives [that] favour the formation of groups of like-minded users framing and reinforcing a shared narrative (Cinelli et al. 2021, p. 1). While homophily – the ‘tendency to surround ourselves with others who share our perspective’ (Gillani et al. 2018, p. 823) – is recognised as a universal human trait, the extent to which it limits productive discourse within colossal online communities that deal with politics and cultural issues is complicated. Bernie Sanders’s wealth is not an impediment to his social standing, because he is a Democratic favourite, while Bloomberg’s or even Donald Trump’s personal wealth are seen as evidence of poor character. Such perspectives are not challenged, and so are relentlessly reproduced, thus disincentivising the critical contributions from community members that are necessary in order to move beyond surface level evaluations of our political and cultural reality. Further, the echo-chamber effect serves to mystify larger issues of economic and/or social media interference in politics by solely attributing such behaviour to those on the ‘wrong side’ of politics. Of course, these issues engender significant challenges to contemporary democracy, and should trigger concern, or at least critique, regardless of the party colours. Such a marked lack of critical insight and reflection into the conscientious reproduction of particular singular narratives within the 2XC community raises concerns as to the transformational power of contemporary networked feminist practice.

6.3 Fourth Wave Feminist Discourses in the 2XC Community

As discussed in Chapter 2, the concept of the ‘fourth wave’ of feminism is used throughout this thesis as a means to capture the diversity of articulations of contemporary feminist practice. Arguably the most significant and influential feature of the fourth wave is the use of digital media platforms to disseminate feminist practice and mobilise individuals around the issues affecting women on a global scale. Aside from being acutely immersed in networked practice, there are a number of other key features of fourth-wave feminism that represent a divergence from previous iterations of the feminist movement. These divergent features are made apparent in the commonalities existing across a variety of classifications of the movement. Maloney (2017, p. 49) describes the fourth wave as ‘sex-positive, trans-accepting, and body-positive,’ while Kaba et al. (2014, para. 17) credit social media platforms with providing ‘women of colour, queer women,

working class women, transgender women’ opportunities to insert themselves into the feminist conversation. In turn, Looft (2017, p. 894) suggests that the fourth wave is working ‘with the understanding that intersectionality is the common thread between the different communities and groups that link under the term “feminism”’. In a critique of the Women’s Marches that occurred in 2017 and 2018, Moni (2019, p. 10) highlights the centrality of intersectionality to the fourth wave of feminism, arguing that the symbolism of the ‘pink pussy hats’ worn by march attendees ‘are not representative of all women’s anatomies or identities, they exclude women of colour, non-binary, and trans women.’

In terms of this contemporary iteration of the feminist movement, the intersectional, gender diverse and sex-positive aspects of the fourth wave dominate the academic discourse. However, the data suggests that rather than challenging the prevailing categories of perception that serve to maintain the persistent class divisions between the sexes, and thus the status-quo of masculine domination throughout the West (Bourdieu 2010), much of the discourse presented in this chapter instead appears to reinforce such categories. While on the surface, these moments of discourse appear to present a challenge to dominant modes of thought, close analysis reveals that such discourse appears to be informed by internal cognitive structures that ultimately replicate the ‘objective structures of the social world’. In other words, it appears that, through a process of misrecognition, the contributions from the 2XC community actually serves to, in some cases, reinforce the cognitive structures that maintain women’s status as the dominated class (Bourdieu 2010). Considering these significant features, the analysis below is concerned with the relationship between the digital nature of the 2XC community and the reproduction of fourth-wave feminist discourses.

6.3.1 Intersectionality and Gender Diversity

As previously discussed, the concept of intersectionality is regularly associated with the ideological motivations and practices of fourth wave feminism and is considered to be the overriding principle among today’s feminists, ‘manifest by theorising tweets and hashtags on Twitter’ (Zimmerman 2017, p. 54). Intersectionality provides a lens through which feminists are able to conceptualise ‘the relation between systems of oppression which construct our multiple identities and our social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege’ (Carastathis 2014, p. 304) by drawing attention to the inequities reproduced by differences in race, class, ability or sexuality.

The moments in which constituents of 2XC were observed engaging with intersectional perspectives within the field generally appeared to be reactive. As such, these discursive acts

appear to function more as a distinctive markers, with some community participants taking the opportunity to demonstrate their enhanced feminist literacy and thus distinguish themselves from others in the field. A submission that provides a salient example of this process contained a photograph of a young woman attending a parade to celebrate 150 years of women’s suffrage in the state of Wyoming, USA. The photograph is a ‘selfie,’ and depicts the original poster – a young, slim, conventionally attractive, and stylish young woman – smiling into the camera, wearing a white blouse and a large straw hat, with a yellow, white and purple sash across her chest that reads ‘votes for women.’ The post was wildly popular, attracting over 24,000 upvotes and making it to the aggregated r/all front page of the website. The positive, glowing nature of the post and its high score indicated a widespread celebratory reception of this historic triumph of feminism. Yet while the majority of the comments analysed from this thread praised the OP through supportive and congratulatory language, there were also several comments drawing attention to the fact that the OP had failed to recognise the racially segregated nature of this historical feminist breakthrough (Table 17).

Table 17 – Comments indicating intersectional perspectives

Comment Number	Comment Karma	Comment Text
17.1	254	This is great! But I think it’s also worth noting that it was 150 years of suffrage, but not for all women.
17.2	84	Wyoming gave women the right to vote in order to undermine black votes ⁴²
17.3	64	White women* ⁴³
17.4	7	Didn’t you know? Reddit only supports white women...

On one hand, this commentary serves to highlight the racial inequalities that have marred the feminist movement since the first wave, and which remain a significant point of contention in contemporary feminist debates. Such commentary could be considered as consciousness-raising attempts, contributed to the discussion in order educate other members of the community about

⁴² The comment as it originally appeared was hyperlinked to a source explaining this position: (<https://www.wyohistory.org/encyclopedia/right-choice-wrong-reasons-wyoming-women-win-right-vote>).

⁴³ The asterisk is often used in digital communication to indicate a word or phrase has been misspelled. In this context, the commenter is indicating that the original post’s title should read, ‘I marched in a parade celebrating [white] women’s suffrage...’

this shortcoming. By correcting the positive and uncritical input of other participants with this commentary, the commentary featured in Table 17 demonstrates an understanding of the relevance of intersectionality in fourth-wave feminist perspectives. However, the tone and delivery of these comments – aside from comment 17.1 – and the lack of contextualising information within the comments makes it difficult to fully grasp the implications of these historical claims. Further, the opportunity to educate others in the field about the issues and implications that emerged from women securing the vote Wyoming. Instead, short, sharp and/or – in the case of comment 17.4 – sarcastic commentary was favoured. So, rather than genuine attempts at reconciling the shortcomings of feminist history through the application of intersectional critique and discussion, this process of calling into question the input of other subreddit participants can be considered to function as a symbolic demonstration of one's accumulated cultural capital that is at once a product and a demonstration of a relatively privileged social positioning (Bourdieu 1986).

As intersectionality has gained traction within feminist scholarship, so too has the meaning of the term expanded to encompass the changing nature of society and culture. The concept of gender diversity, which refers not only to efforts to create equitable representation of men and women, but the recognition and acceptance of individuals whose identities exist outside of the confines of a 'heteronormative' gender binary, is a significant aspect of contemporary intersectional feminist practice. Gender diversity has come to encompass the multiplicity of gender identities that exist within the contemporary lexicon and signifies a recognition of 'the extent to which a person's gender identity, role or expression differs from the cultural norms prescribed for people of a particular sex' (American Psychological Association 2015, p. 20). The ideological underpinnings of fourth-wave feminism are deeply informed by the 'disruption and confusion of categories of gender' promoted by poststructuralist perspectives that have come to shape contemporary Western culture (Day & Wray 2018). Much of the disruption of prevailing categories of thought around gender has been attributed to the contributions of Butler, who offered a deconstruction of what she considered to be biologically essentialist perceptions of binary gender as an explicit reflection of one's biological sex. Butler makes the claim that gender is *performative* and suggests that there is 'no reason to assume that gender also ought to remain as two. The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a memetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it' (Butler 1990, p. 10).

The position of the 2XC subreddit on issues pertaining to gender diversity and gender identity is made blatantly clear in a pinned moderator post on the community's front page: a 'mini-FAQ' which lists responses to four common questions. The response to a question about who is allowed

to participate in the community reads: ‘Any user who can follow the rules is welcome here. Women, men, nonbinary, agender, genderqueer, cis folks and trans folks, everybody. If you’re not on board with that, you can fuck right off’ (u/kallisti_gold 2020). The post goes on to clarify that transgender people are also welcome to participate, and the response states ‘[t]rans women are women. TERFs⁴⁴ can fuck right off’ (u/kallisti_gold 2020). Despite the centrality afforded to diverse gender presentations in this and other official moderation communications, the acceptance and normalisation of gender diversity within the 2XC community is infrequently evidenced throughout the dataset. However, the instances in which inclusive language is used often occur in a casual, off-handed manner, suggesting a deep inculcation of this poststructuralist ideological framing of gender amongst community members. The instances of inclusive language that were observed within the 2XC community revolved around the use of the prefixes ‘cis’ and ‘trans’ to distinguish between individuals who identify as transgender, and those who do not. In Table 18, examples of instances of gender-inclusive language are provided.

Table 18 – Gender-inclusive language

Comment Number	Comment Karma	Comment Text
18.1	48	Women don’t have a prostate though (unless they’re trans.)
18.2	16	... you don’t know when someone who identifies as trans will be around...
18.3	15	It makes sense that a cis man would want to...
18.4	3	I’m a trans dude...
18.5	1	Hi. I’m a cislady...

There were no instances of disagreement or discomfort with the normalisation of gender diverse, intersectional perspectives within the dataset, and this absence itself is significant but perhaps not surprising. Indeed, the mini-FAQ, larger FAQ and moderation policy published by the 2XC moderation team explicitly rejects what have come to be known as ‘gender critical’ feminist perspectives by suggesting that ‘TERFs’ can ‘fuck right off.’ Gender critical feminists – also sometimes referred to as radical feminists – are best defined by the insistence that gender must be abolished, rather than reframed:

Radical feminist theorists do not seek to make gender a bit more flexible, but to eliminate it. They are gender abolitionists, and understand gender to provide the

⁴⁴ TERF is an acronym for ‘transgender-exclusive radical feminist’.

framework and rationale for male dominance. In the radical feminist approach, masculinity is the behaviour of the male ruling class and femininity is the behaviour of the subordinate class of women. Thus gender can have no place in the egalitarian future that feminism aims to create. (Jeffreys & Gottschalk 2014, p. 42)

The outright rejection of radical or gender critical perspectives in the 2XC community signifies a conscious determination of the allowable discourses that may circulate within the community. Indeed, as the moderation policy suggests, heterodox commentary that challenges the ironically static postmodern position on sex and gender is not only discouraged but raises concerns regarding this potentially problematic reframing of gender, sex roles, and the relationship between the two which may result in an outright ban from the community. It appears that, rather than a rejection of the grand narrative that is characteristic of postmodernism, one set of universal perspectives (i.e., the existence of a causal relationship between one's biological sex and gender presentation) has been replaced by another equally rigid and immovable ideology that rejects the existence of a causal relationship between sexed bodies and gender presentation, and, following Butler, construes sex not as 'a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but as a cultural norm which governs the materialisation of bodies' (Butler 1993, p. 2-3). Ironically, this perception of gender and sex appears to work to reinforce the doxic, cognitive structures of thought that frame the performance of femininity as something enacted by women, and the performance of masculinity as something enacted by men. Thus, that a male-sexed person engaging in an overt performance of femininity should now be affirmed as a 'woman' (in the event they are choosing to 'identify' as one) can be seen as contributing to the reinforcement of a sex-based class system that works to keep women subordinate to men. The poststructuralist rejection of the materiality of one's sex, rather than being used as a mechanism to challenge or subvert the oppressive elements of contemporary gender presentation, thus appears to work to reinforce it. The lack of these 'radical' perspectives within the dataset, combined with the absolute rejection of those feminists that hold such perspectives in the FAQ's and moderation policy, require further critical interrogation.

Aside from the examples listed above, no further substantial instances of intersectional feminist perspectives were located within the dataset. In one comment denouncing Bloomberg's presidential bid, a user frames their commentary with their lived experience as a Black person, but this comment is not made with reference to intersectional critique. It is more akin to a process of operationalising lived experience as a mechanism for validating the user's perspective, much like the processes of using experience as evidence outlined in Chapter 6. Throughout the dataset, no mention is made of the significant intersections of class or ability as a major sites of social hierarchisation in the lived experiences of women. However, this marked lack of intersectional

feminist discourses in the dataset could be attributed to the way in which threads were selected for analysis and does not preclude the possibility that such discourses occur elsewhere within the community. Nevertheless, the limited operationalisation of intersectional feminist critique may also indicate a narrow understanding of the concept of intersectionality and its ongoing relevance to contemporary feminist practice. On the other hand, this lack of intersectional perspectives may signify a lack of diversity amongst the active participants of 2XC. Further research into the demographic composition of the community would be required to better understand this finding. The lack of discussion around gender identity and diversity is perhaps a particularly striking deficit, given that gender identity appears to occupy a central position in the 2XC discursive environment, as evidenced through the pinned post mentioned above, the FAQs and the moderation policy, which regularly and explicitly refer to the community's status as welcoming to a diverse range of gender identities. However, it is also likely the vitriolic framing of the acceptable parameters of sex and gender politics within the FAQs works to discourage individuals with conflicting opinions to participate.

6.3.2 Sex-positivity

The notion of sex-positivity was introduced through the third wave of Western feminism (Wrye 2009), and, as this research demonstrates, the concept remains deeply entangled with the perspectives that comprise the fourth-wave feminist movement. However, there appears to have been a departure from the sex-positive discourses that emerged during the third wave, which were deeply embedded in political thought (see Hite 2006) as sex-positive fourth-wave discourses appear to be embedded in and informed by neoliberal individualism. Queen and Comella (2018, p. 278) describe sex-positivity as 'the cultural philosophy that understands sexuality as a potentially positive force in one's life... sex positivity allows for and in fact celebrates sexual diversity, differing desires and relationship structures, and individual choices based on consent.' Baumgardner suggests that the fourth wave builds upon feminist movements of the past through a politics of inclusivity that supports, among other things, women's 'choice' to enter into prostitution as a valid form of work (2011, p. 251). After explicitly linking the emergence of sex-positive feminism with the emergence of the fourth wave, Mosher claims that 'sex-positive feminists embraced pornography, polyamory, kink and prostitution as a means of challenging patriarchal constructs of sexuality... moreover, they centred sex and sexuality within equal rights discourse' (Mosher 2017, p. 493), thus operationalising sex-positivity as a political mechanism. In Mosher's view, the concept of sex-positivity encourages an epistemic shift from a traditional focus on the 'negative, risk-related' factors of sexuality to acknowledge 'positive, growth-inducing factors,' which, she argues, 'necessitates an inclusive definition of sex and sexuality,

whereby definitions of sexuality move beyond monogamous, procreation-focused sexual behaviours' (Mosher 2017, p. 488). In other words, sex-positivity implores us to consider all forms of consensual human sexuality potentially salubrious and constructive.

The data emerging from this analysis suggests that sex-positivity is a key element of the performance and practice of fourth-wave feminist politics within the 2XC community. Discourse around sex and sexuality appeared throughout the dataset in response to a range of stimuli. In one thread, a user posts about her experience with an ex-partner who had threatened to share her 'nudes'⁴⁵ (which she had sent him throughout their relationship) to her friends, family and co-workers unless she agreed to meet with him for sex. After she told him that she would be taking the conversation to the authorities, as well as contacting his family with screenshots of the conversation, he backed down and promised to delete the images, apologising profusely for his objectively reprehensible behaviour. Interestingly, the user felt compelled to include a caveat at the beginning of her post stating that she knows sending nudes was a 'dumb idea,' and that she does not need to hear the opinions of other users as to the risks involved with the practice⁴⁶. Perhaps contrary to this user's expectations, a number of comments, attracting both high and low karma scores, suggested that the act of sending nudes is a normal expression of sexuality, and that this user should not feel shame for doing so (Table 19). Indeed, comment 19.1 attracted an extremely high karma score of 6101 and explicitly linked the sharing of these images to an expression and celebration of sexuality, while other commenters made clear their opinions that sending nude photographs is not 'dumb.' The unequivocal support for sending nude or lewd photographs via digital communications technologies suggests the practice is a fairly normalised sexual behaviour.

⁴⁵ In this context, the term 'nudes' generally refers to sending 'a partially or fully nude photo or video in a text message' (Bonilla et al. 2020, p. 1099).

⁴⁶ It is important to note that the behaviour of the male perpetrator in this incident is deplorable, and by critically examining the discourse in this instance, there is in no way an intention to downplay or disregard the woman's story in this instance.

Table 19 – Commentary rejecting assumed criticism of sending ‘nudes’ to intimate partners

Comment Number	Comment Karma	Comment Text
19.1	6101	...Sending intimate photos isn't shameful and you should celebrate your sexuality however you want to...
19.2	211	And don't believe stuff like 'I know that sending nudes is a dumb idea.' Fuck that noise. Most places have rules against revenge porn...not that nude selfies are porn. They're just treated the same by the law.
19.3	4	Sending nudes is not a dumb idea. This is not at all your responsibility.
19.4	3	Sending nudes isn't dumb. You trusted and loved your ex. You are not to blame for loving someone.

This process of sharing intimate, erotic or suggestive images over the Internet is often referred to in the media or academic literature as ‘sexting’ (Bonilla, McGinley & Lamb 2020; Dobson 2018). This term encompasses not only the sending or receiving of sexually suggestive images or videos, but also sexualised text messages. However, ‘[t]he term “sexting” itself is mostly used in media coverage and scholarly discourse, but young adults themselves refer to it as “taking selfies” or “sending nudes”’ (Van Ouytsel et al. 2020, p. 55). It is for this reason that the term *nudes* will be employed here as it is not only a more accurate description of the practice but also appears to hold discursive significance within the 2XC community in a way that ‘sexting’ does not. This is important, as the difference in the discursive weight of certain terms is illuminated by comment 19.2 in the table above, in which the user points out the existence of revenge pornography laws before clarifying, ‘not that nude selfies are porn.’ Indeed, throughout all of the comments analysed in this thread, no user referred to these images as pornography. While revenge pornography *laws* are referred to throughout the threads several times, when referencing the OP’s experience, the sexually suggestive images are referred to as either ‘nudes,’ or simply ‘pics,’ or ‘pictures.’ This linguistic mechanism indicates a clear distinction in the assumptions and conceptualisations of what does and does not constitute pornography in the 2XC community – that such nude or lewd images only become pornography when they are weaponised. Critical perspectives on the practice of sending nudes were, from the outset, discouraged by the OP, and the tone and nature of the comments that mentioned the practice of sending nudes throughout the thread demonstrated the extent to which this practice has become normalised and absorbed into ‘young adults’ repertoire of sexual behaviours’ (Bonilla et al. 2021, p. 1099). Indeed, through both distancing the act of sending intimate photos over the Internet from the practice of ‘pornography’, and the position that such acts are nothing more than an expression of female sexuality, the 2XC community works to

normalise and even encourage the practice. To some degree, this discursive framing works to position this practice as a marker of female empowerment.

In another thread, a user details her experience of an uncomfortable breakup that was embedded in sexual incompatibility. In response to this thread, several conversations occur in which women appear compelled to not only self-disclose their own sexual practices in a public forum, but also justify their sexual preferences and experiences in a casual and explicit manner. In the original post, the user makes an edit⁴⁷ to the original body of text. This edit reads:

I just want to clarify. I have a high sex drive. I would like sex once or twice a day. I like everything that comes from sex. I like blow jobs. I like anal. But when I'm not in the mood for something, I'm not going to do it. A past invitation will not get you into a different party.

That the user who posted in the original thread felt the need to clarify her position as a sexually charged woman who enjoys all matter of sexual activities is perhaps indicative of the tacit pressure exerted through participation in fourth-wave feminist politics to perform the ideal of the empowered feminist woman, highly sexual and adventurous, eager to please, but only on her own terms. This compulsion to publicly defend her sexual appetite against potential misconceptions demonstrates a distinct repugnance towards being perceived as overly puritanical, which is thus positioned through this clarification as being somewhat antithetical to the empowered, sexually liberated woman. Thus, it can be argued that sex-positivity is akin to a level of *performative wokeness*, a tacit and normative practice in networked feminist communities that embodies the sensibilities of the fourth wave. To perform otherwise tends to be interpreted as a sort of stuffy puritanism, restrictive and boring, void of the liberty and freedom adumbrated by the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s. Throughout this thread – and in response to the topic being raised in the original post – many thread participants pursued the subject of anal sex, which the OP had raised in their original submission, and the extent to which this sexual act can be considered to be pleasurable for women (Table 20).

⁴⁷ It is a common practice on Reddit and other Internet forums to indicate 'edits' to an original post. This is often done as a courtesy to those who have commented on the post, as an edit indicates that the perspective shared in this manner may not have been there when the post was first shared.

Table 20 – Disclosure of sexual preferences and practices

Comment Number	Comment Karma	Comment Text
20.1	209	I'm a girl, and I absolutely positively love everything about anal. Everyone is different!
20.2	94	It feels good. It's dirty and slutty and a nice middle aged school teacher such as myself shouldn't be acting like a filthy whore in bed. That's why I like it - I don't know about other women.
20.3	37	As a woman I have to say when done right anal is fun and you can orgasm that way surprisingly, but if you don't like it don't do it, we're allowed to have preferences.
20.4	13	Anal most definitely stimulates a woman's g-spot, but (no pun intended) from a different angle. I find anal to be mind blowing, personally.
20.5	9	Today you also learned as a woman I fucked a guy in the ass with my strap on shiiiiit

In response to a comment that suggested women are unlikely to derive much sexual pleasure from anal sex due to the lack of a prostate, the following conversation unfolded:

User A: then you, friendo, are doing it wrong. Getting fucked in the butt *correctly* feels **amazing**.

User B: Maybe for men it does because of the prostate. There are very few women who get physical pleasure from anal sex alone, although they do exist. It's just not common.

User A: Hi. I'm a cislady, and I get SIGNIFICANT pleasure from good anal. I posit that Good Anal is less common than cisladies who enjoy it.

User B: This is exactly my point. You're an anomaly. Whenever this discussion pops up, a woman who actually enjoys anal (physically NOT psychologically) chimes in. It's wonderful that you do, but it is not common. The exception does not disprove the rule. I will agree that a lot of people are doing anal wrong, but even when done right it will not feel good for most females.

User A: What I'm hearing: "I do anal wrong and don't know how to respectfully disagree with a woman."

User B: I don't engage in anal sex at all. I also am not arguing that you do or don't enjoy anal sex. I am simply stating that women who get physical

pleasure from anal sex alone w/o vaginal or clitoral stimulation are a small minority, whether it's "good" anal or not. And FWIW⁴⁸ I am also a woman...

The assumption that User A is a man, on account of her disagreeing with User B, signifies that there is a potential underlying perception that the women actively participating in this thread at 2XC more generally are followers of the fourth-wave doctrine that demands women accept and even celebrate risky sexual behaviours. This ties into User A's primary point – that the only reason a woman would not enjoy anal sex is because she has not had 'good anal,' rather than taking into consideration the biological realities of the female sex, or the critical interpretation of a sexual practice that is often considered to be predominantly pleasurable for a male. This perspective works to invert the discourse around sexual empowerment, reframing these celebratory perspectives of sex and sexuality as central to the empowerment of women while simultaneously aligning the rejection of this sex-positive position as 'out of touch.' While the promotion and acceptance of sexually liberated women is not problematic in and of itself, such liberation nevertheless occurs within the confines of a patriarchal society where heterosexual men remain the ultimate beneficiaries of women's sexual practice. This is true not only for individual sexual behaviours, such as sending nudes or engaging in certain male-oriented sex acts, but also in the normalisation and veneration of prostitution and pornography within contemporary feminist discourses. Indeed, the indiscriminate acceptance of the sex-positive discourse within the fourth-wave feminist movement points to the reproduction of postfeminist sensibilities that may undermine efforts by feminist activists – both past and present – to overcome the realities of male domination through structural analyses of sex and sexuality.

Despite the ideological dominance of sex-positivity throughout the 2XC community, much of the spontaneous discourse that appeared in the comments also revealed moments of significant tension emerging from the disclosure of the traumatic sexual relations that continue to colour the lived experiences of women. One user disclosed that she works in the pornography industry before lamenting that 'the amount of men that think I'm some sex crazed sex doll and live my entire life around pleasing men and will do anything any time is fucking insane.' This user's sense of masculine sentiment is not an isolated comment; another user suggests that that 'a lot of people dont [sic] know that many, many women will subject themselves to all sorts of sexual indignities for the sake of trying to keep a man happy.' Though infrequent, such commentary represents the

⁴⁸ FWIW is an acronym for 'for what it's worth.'

antimonies and complicated realities of women's emergent sexual empowerment, bounded as it is within the rationality of an inherently patriarchal society. Indeed, as the following comment suggests, the pressure to conform with sex-positive, progressive discourses can also result in individuals being ostracised by a community of peers for calling into question certain inappropriate sexual behaviours:

I reported a man for sexual assault, inappropriate behavior in front of minors, and predatory behavior towards a barely legal high school student in Seattle in 2017 and lost my community and most of my friends. That was in a supposedly sex-positive group in a supposedly progressive community, with supposed adults.

The push towards sex-positivity within the 2XC community, and thus the mainstream, fourth-wave feminist movement more broadly, mirrors a shift in the perceptions of sexuality and prostitution that have been occurring in society more broadly. Following the trajectory of the Internet, the sex industry too has proliferated to a previously unimagined extent, and as a result, has created the conditions for a slew of new ways to commodify women's bodies. For instance, over the past two decades, the connectivity of the Internet has created the conditions for a range of inherently exploitative sexual industries to emerge and proliferate basically unchecked (Norma 2016). These include, but are not limited to, the global promotion of sex-tourism, the increased reach and accessibility of 'mail order bride agencies', and the generation of new forms of digital prostitution like 'camming' or 'sugar baby' websites (Norma 2016, p.2577). The fourth-wave feminist discursive positioning of sexuality and prostitution as avenues to empowerment ignores the exploitation and oppression of women that exists at the heart of the contemporary sex trade.

6.4 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter explored some of the key political underpinnings of the 2XC community and interrogated the extent to which the community – as a digital feminist platform – embodies some of the central features of fourth-wave feminism. Analysis of the data illuminates the reproduction of a political echo chamber within the community that both fuels and is fuelled by a process of affective polarisation. Much of this debate was framed within American political discourse as a result of the dominance of American users on the site, and the fact that during data collection the most recent United States presidential race was occurring. Nevertheless, it is possible to extrapolate the observations made in this chapter to other comparable democratic societies in the West. Through the discursive framing of conservative politicians and political positions as morally reprehensible, 2XC participants are corralled into patterns of behaviour that work to

reproduce and encourage a static and uncritical association with progressive political parties. The subtext of many of the comments provided as examples of moral outrage within the dataset were also indicative of the embeddedness of progressivism in the community, as users were found to reproduce ‘legitimate’ political perspectives with great regularity. Beyond a strong and shared distaste for conservative political figures, vehement criticism of traditional forms of authority, social institutions, religion and the legal system was common across the dataset, indicating a strong progressive political alignment that transcends a focused feminist perspective. The absolute normalisation of this singular, binary perspective of political legitimacy contributes to the development of an ‘echo-chamber’ effect, wherein intracommunity support for displays of contempt towards those considered to hold conservative beliefs discourages a diversity of opinion and perspective within the community. This lack of diversity then works to further cement the singular allowable perspective that is reproduced within the community, and thus opportunities for critical reflection are further obstructed. This observation supports previous research that demonstrates the extent to which the reproduction of strong political perspectives can lead to ‘conflict, misinformation and a reluctance to engage with people and ideas beyond one’s echo chamber’ (Shi et al. 2019, p. 329). While it is highly probable that this process is negatively impacting the diversity that is necessary for a durable and grounded feminist politics to emerge, the extent to which this phenomenon is influencing the diversity of feminist thought requires further, targeted examination. Ultimately, the contribution of the 2XC community to fuelling the toxic partisanship colouring the contemporary political landscape in the West begs the question as to who the ultimate beneficiaries of such an emotionally driven division between the populace might be.

Also associated with the emergence of the fourth wave of feminist practice is the centrality afforded to intersectional perspectives. It must be noted that this centrality is largely expressed in the 2XC moderation guidelines, pinned posts and other community framing tools rather than in the commentary that comprised the primary object of analysis throughout this research. Indeed, the commentary engaging with intersectional politics was considerably limited, especially when compared to the number of instances of prosaic self-disclosure, yet there were several key moments from which intersectional perspectives emerged. The relatively casual nature with which many of these instances of critique were inserted into the commentary suggests a normalisation of intersectionality as an ideological mechanism that informs contemporary feminism in the 2XC community. However, as this chapter demonstrates, most of the commentary that might be conceptualised as intersectional critique was limited to casual discussions pertaining to poststructuralist understandings of gender diversity. An exception to this was the few comments outlined in Table 17 that raised issues about the racially segregated nature of

Wyoming's women's suffrage movement. The overall paucity of intersectional critique may be indicative of a potential disconnect between the awareness of intersectional perspectives and the capacity to put such critique into practice.

The ways in which perspectives on sex and gender were communicated in both the commentary and the community framing tools suggest a rejection of previous feminist conceptualisations of sex and gender as the primary mechanism for women's continued oppression within a male-dominated society. The trend towards this perspective in contemporary feminist practice remains point of concern amongst some feminist scholars who view the deconstruction of gender and sex as contributing to the obfuscation of 'the material and sex-based nature of women's oppression' (Brunskell-Evans 2020, p. 21-22). Indeed, in the pinned post discussed above, individuals who hold such views are explicitly told they are not welcome to participate within the 2XC community. The existence of this substantial division in feminist thought and practice requires attention. The use of the term 'TERF' in the community's pinned post has been operationalised across the Internet with great frequency as a mechanism to silence feminists critical of contemporary gender rhetoric. As Jeffrey's suggests, the term TERF is frequently used to 'vilify women, principally lesbian feminists, who refuse [male] demands' (Jeffreys 2018, p. 192). Alarming, instances where TERF is used on social media platforms such as Twitter are regularly accompanied by hateful, abusive and violent language directed towards those who support gender critical or radical feminist perspectives – a cohort almost entirely comprised of women. By utilising the same language that is regularly included in public social media statements such as 'somebody slap this TERF cunt across the face,' 'petition for mass genocide on TERFs,' and 'All TERFs deserve to be shot in the head,'⁴⁹ the moderators of 2XC – consciously or not – appear to condone such threats of violence towards women. Considering the sheer size of the 2XC community, the significance of this observation and its implications for diverse feminist practice are deeply concerning. However, the dogmatic acceptance of certain modes of thought was not limited to gender diversity and were also observed in the conversations that occurred around ideas of sex-positivity within the community.

The second-wave feminist discourse that positioned women as victims of the male gaze has ostensibly been inverted, with the sexual liberation of women now posited as a major contributor to the 'freedom' and 'empowerment' of contemporary women (Ringrose 2011). The widespread

⁴⁹ These examples are taken from a website dedicated to documenting instances of abuse towards proponents of radical feminist or gender critical ideology, a cohort almost exclusively comprised of women. A snapshot of the website can be accessed at <https://archive.ph/1FshV>.

normalisation of sharing sexually suggestive images of oneself on the Internet obscures the very real risks involved with this practice and discourages critical interrogation into the reasons behind the sharing of intimate images – in particular, who is the ultimate beneficiary of this behaviour. Further, the risks involved impact women more than men, and regularly reproduce idealistic sexuality for a masculine audience. This also de-problematizes and obscures the power differentials and risks involved with certain expressions of love and sexuality, including the sharing of sexually explicit, lewd or erotic imagery with a romantic partner. Such practices are widely accepted in the modern cultural milieu and rarely challenged or questioned, as they fall into the category of ‘women’s choice,’ and thus are legitimised as an expression of feminist empowerment. This position is reminiscent of the cultural conditions that are produced by and reproduce postfeminist sensibilities, in particular ‘the continued and prominent objectification of female bodies in Western visual culture, now framed as “chosen/agentive”’ (Dobson 2015, p. 29).

At the risk of moralising or reproducing the protectionist discourses that frequently emerge from critiques of a postfeminist culture of female sexuality (Dobson 2015), it is not the behaviour in and of itself that is being problematised in this chapter, but rather the ways in which it is potentially tied to and partially responsible for the (re)production of a culture of masculine domination that continues to characterise social and cultural life. It is through a process of misrecognition that these acts become ‘owned’ by women, and a sexuality that is imagined from within a consciousness shaped by the tacit, preconscious perception of the dominated ultimately remains a sexuality that benefits the dominant. Bourdieu suggests that ‘[t]o those who may object that many women have now broken with the traditional norms and forms of restraint and who see the scope now available for the controlled exhibition of the body as an index of “liberation”, it only has to be pointed out that this use of the body remains very obviously subordinated to the male point of view’ (Bourdieu 2001, p. 29). The tension between the misrecognition of sexuality that is framed within a society organised along patriarchal lines, and the performance of an idealistic, free and fun femininity that is sexually empowered and liberated through personal choice is significant, and it is indicative of a need for further scholarly interrogation.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This research project contributes to an understanding of the constitutive means by which the contemporary Internet shapes both practice and politics within networked feminist communities such as Reddit's r/TwoXChromosomes (2XC). As is demonstrated in Chapter 2, this 'networked' iteration of feminist practice represents a digital manifestation of the 'fourth-wave' of the feminist movement, which 'considers social media... an indispensable and essential tool and... strongly resists separating the online from the offline' (Zimmerman 2017, p. 55). Thus, the fourth wave is inherently and inseparably tied to the digital environments from which it has emerged. This thesis demonstrates the extent to which the digital environment has become subordinated to the logic of neoliberal rationality, and thus argues that this subordination has significant implications of the feminist practice in online spaces. This neoliberal logic and its implications for contemporary political participation are investigated and analysed, and the extent to which it informs the canon of fourth-wave feminism is demonstrated. A substantial regulatory practice that gives structure to networked feminist participation on social media platforms is the mediation of feminist practice by this neoliberal rationality, which is shown to be a significant conduit for the accumulation of profit. Upon close analysis, this rationality informs an ordered system of significance that is reproduced through and embodied by the practice and politics that give shape to networked feminist communities such as 2XC. Thus, this project illuminates a grave tension that exists within the very foundations of the networked feminist communities such as 2XC, namely, a grievous misalignment between the emancipatory goals of feminism and the inherently anti-feminist logic of neoliberalism.

7.1.1 Research Design

This study emerged from the intersection of several specialist academic fields: social movements, social media platforms, and feminist theory. Literature pertaining to each was interrogated and presented in Chapter 2. This literature both positioned the research project and informed the development of the central research problems that this thesis seeks to address, that is; the extent to which networked feminist communities such as 2XC and the ideologies they propagate are shaped by a reliance on digital social media platforms; the influence of social media platforms over both the key values and dominant forms of capital central to networked feminist movements, and the political agendas that are at play; the kinds of transformations of prevailing categories of

social perception that are endorsed by networked feminist communities; and the patterns of thought and practice that are incorporated or disqualified when introducing, promoting or resisting social or political change within networked feminist communities.

A case study was conducted on Reddit's 2XC community, as discussed in Chapter 3. This methodology was selected to enable an in-depth interrogation and subsequent identification of the broad contextual influences that give shape to both Reddit and 2XC. To analyse the data collected in the case study, a reflexive thematic analysis was conducted on popular 2XC threads collected from the community over 15 weeks. The threads were methodologically analysed, and several key themes identified. These themes were subsequently organised into two chapters that broadly explored *how* 2XC community members engaged in the space (Chapter 6), and *what* was being said (Chapter 7).

The analytical component of this thesis was theoretically informed by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, principally, his interlinking concepts of field, capital, and habitus (Chapter 4). Bourdieu's theoretical toolkit provided effective mechanisms for exploring the processes by which dominant power structures are misrecognised, reframed, and reproduced by subordinated groups within society. As the data was comprised primarily of text-based interactions between community members, particular consideration was given to the social and cultural reproduction of certain discourses within 2XC. Following Bourdieu, the study of these discourses was framed by conceptualising 2XC as a unique field of practice that is subordinated by the wider field of power. The findings from this research are thus synthesised and summarised with reference to the aforementioned research, and the problems this thesis seeks to address.

7.2 Participation in the Digital Field

Reddit's 2XC is, at the time of writing, one of the Internet's largest networked feminist communities. Much like all major social media platforms, Reddit has its own unique tacit and implicit rules that govern practice on the site. This thesis argues, in Bourdieusian terms, that the rules are shaped by the social, cultural, and economic frameworks that characterise the contemporary Internet more broadly. The Internet itself is one element of the digital field, which is conceptualised as an amalgamation of technologies and infrastructure which converge to create a unique field of practice that is at once subordinate to and a reproducer of the underlying principles informing the field of power. As the logic of neoliberalism is considered to dominate the field of power, the digital field is thus shaped by a neoliberal rationality that glorifies the values of consumerism, individualism, and competition. The widespread normalisation of

surveillance that has become a central component of contemporary digital experience further amplifies the effects of this rationality. The subordination of the digital field and the shifting forms in which political power has come to bear upon subjects influences neoliberal digital culture. In this site of consciousness and judgement, the 'self' is accorded the forms of self-monitoring, will and emotion befitting a neoliberal rationality. Neoliberal digital culture reproduces this political habitus of individuality wherein the individual experience is heralded as paramount, and narratives of empowerment and disempowerment are continuously reformed and reframed.

Previous research suggests that engagement in feminist practice online requires a negotiation of the consistent and deliberated self-branding practices that are fuelled by the neoliberal digital culture (Pruchniewska & Duffy 2017). Feminist scholars have identified several dialectical features that frame the experiences of women online and require negotiation, including tensions existing empowerment and exploitation (Kedzior & Allen 2016), individualism and collectivism (Pruchniewska and Duffy 2017), and feminism and post-feminism (Dobson 2015). It thus appears that a matrix of heterogeneity and division characterise the experiences of women navigating the complex terrain of digital self-representation and political participation. The process of sharing is central to all forms of participatory social media, yet all information shared is influenced by the assumed presence of a potential, omnipresent crowd (Marder et al. 2016). The 'chilling effect' engendered by this subconscious awareness can temper necessarily subversive political contributions as individuals produce content that is most likely to be well-received by the intended community. The ostensibly fun, and 'friend-oriented' nature of social media participation (McRobbie 2015) further disguises the potential for de-politicization social media platforms engender. Social media participation also encourages the naturalisation of consumer values, as practices of consumption become central in shaping and performing an acceptable, visually recognisable identity in the online environment. Ubiquitous digital surveillance paired with the internalisation of consumer values has been shown to endorse a gendered demarcation of bodies, which (re)produces the acceptable parameters for the formation and performance of feminine and masculine identities in the online environment (Winch 2015). For women, oppressive expressions of femininity that were once challenged by previous iterations of the feminist movement have become misrecognised as a signpost for empowerment in the digital age. The obligation to participate in the consumption of an ever-changing array of beauty and fashion products in order to develop one's 'personal brand' is obscured by the centrality of the concept of 'choice', where the choice is not whether to participate, but what product to buy.

Ironically, many existing approaches to the study of feminist politics online tend to focus on these fourth-wave narratives of empowerment and choice, celebrating the visibility of women in digital

spaces and highlighting the scope of their achievements (Horeck 2014; Nemer & Freeman 2015; Rand 2016). Scholars have noted that social media platforms have the capacity to assist feminists in altering the material conditions that keep women subjugated through the collective creation and dissemination of discourses that work to challenge dominant narratives of gender and sexuality (Korn & Kneese 2015). However, emancipatory narratives such as these fail to critically locate networked feminist practice in relation to the neoliberal digital culture that gives shape to the digital field. Indeed, the implications for progressive political practice in an increasingly digitised world should be a central concern for scholars in this space. The popularity of these narratives that celebrate empowerment and choice contributes to the growing social pressures that demand the constant reinvention and commodification of the self (Walkerdine, 2003). Paradoxically, such narratives tend to support the neoliberal idea that success – or a lack thereof – is wholly the responsibility of the individual. This trend works to mystify the structural asymmetries that result in unequal access to the forms of capital (and thus, power) necessary for obtaining ‘success’ in fields governed by such logic. Without this critical analysis, women that lack the necessary capitals to effectively participate in networked feminist communities are sidelined. Collectively, these elements address the primary focus of this research, i.e., to what extent are networked feminist communities such as 2XC and the ideologies they propagate shaped by a reliance on digital social media platforms?

7.3 Acquisition of Capitals and the Reproduction of Values

The capacity to be able to communicate effectively in the 2XC community demands of the user a significant investment of time (i.e., time-as-capital) in order to develop the necessary cultural capital (i.e., competence) for effective participation in the field. Further, this time investment presupposes the user’s access to a substantial measure of economic capital, as it requires a stable Internet connection, and a device capable of accessing Reddit. Similarly, the users of 2XC who are best positioned to succeed in the community often possess the linguistic capital necessary to produce the discursive expressions and utterances deemed acceptable for this particular market. In some cases, the activation of linguistic capital within 2XC also illuminates the assumed political competence of the community’s participants. For Bourdieu, the fact that users engage in political discourse online demonstrates that they consider themselves to be ‘competent, in the full sense of the word, that is, socially recognised as entitled to deal with political affairs, to express an opinion about them or even modify their course’ (Bourdieu 2010, p.400). As such, the very act of engaging in political discourse online belies a level of distinction or refinement that those participating believe they hold. This feeling of competence, as Bourdieu suggests, likely correlates with a level of social recognition that both ascribes and is ascribed by status. This

observation is bolstered by previous research into digital political participation that suggests engaging in political discussions on the Internet presupposes a habitus shaped by the possession of relevant economic, cultural and social capitals (Robinson 2009). Social movement participation has also been attributed to the possession of such capitals. Schmitt (2016, p. 62-63) suggests that ‘social movements and their members at least in the “Western world” possess above all cultural capital, are relatively well educated, and located between the upper and the working class.’ It can be inferred that the participants of 2XC are likely to be in possession of relatively adequate levels of both social and economic capital, as successful participation in both digital environments and social movements West is predicated on this. These observations indicate that, far from being a tool that might ‘level the playing field,’ access to and participation in these communities remains limited to those in possession of the social, cultural, and economic capitals required to access and successfully navigate these spaces. While participation is not limited to those in possession of the appropriate composition and measure of capitals, it is correlatively clear that those best positioned to succeed in these communities are well-educated, middle-class individuals with enough free time to invest in learning, understanding, and reacting to the political content shared in such digital environments. This baseline level of capital accumulation informs the participants’ capacity to negotiate the doxic constraints of the community, as well as acquire and successfully demonstrate a possession of capitals that are unique to 2XC.

This research revealed that one form of cultural capital afforded significant value within the 2XC community is the sharing of outrageous content and subsequent expressions of moral outrage. Often functioning as a marker of distinction in a Bourdieusian sense, expressions of moral outrage were associated with two central functions. First, these expressions attracted significant intercommunity support in the form of upvotes – a form of tangible digital capital on Reddit – and second, they were utilised as a means to demonstrate the cultural competence of the user (i.e., their accumulated cultural capital) to respond appropriately to matters concerning contemporary feminism. Indeed, expressions of moral outrage, and posts dealing with outrageous content, tended to dominate the dataset. However, expressions of outrage were rarely paired with critical or structural analyses, and often appeared to constitute little more than performative indignation, signalling a tendency towards political impotence. Given the centrality of these expressions to participation in the 2XC community and the amount of interaction they generate through upvotes and commentary, the question must be asked as to who it is that benefits from such an abundance of online outrage? The profitability of online outrage has been widely acknowledged both within and outside of the academic literature (Berry & Sobieraj 2016; Holiday 2018; Ford 2019). For social media platforms, content that sparks controversy and triggers outrage leads to increases in web traffic and encourages users to engage in profitable behaviours in the form of likes, shares

and comments. Research has shown that social media companies employ algorithms to populate their users' feeds with personalised content that is likely to trigger extreme emotional reactions as a means to increase the length and intensity of engagement (Crockett 2019). Whether or not the frequency of outrageous content and moral outrage across the dataset is the result of similar algorithmic intervention cannot be determined in the scope of this research project. However, it can be stated with certainty that whatever the reason for the predominance of this discursive practice in the 2XC community, the propensity for outrage ultimately contributes to Reddit's ostensibly aggressive accumulation of economic capital.

The tendency for users to share personal experiences and anecdotes in response to content was also shown to be highly lucrative in terms of the acquisition of digital capital. This process of sharing personal experiences is often referred to as 'consciousness raising' and has occupied a central position within the arsenal of feminist analyses throughout the decades. However, as this research demonstrated, these accounts of personal experiences and modes of self-evaluation shared by the constituents of 2XC are rarely linked back to structural critique as was the case with the original forms of feminist consciousness raising. Critical acumen is wanting and often entirely absent. Anecdotes that attract high levels of intercommunity approval do little to critically deconstruct prevailing mechanisms of power and authority as they exist in a gendered society. Instead, the vast majority of these contributions work to re-centre the individual experience as an autochthonal event in the face of inherently collective issues. The frequency and popularity of these posts throughout the dataset implies that this form of participation is culturally acceptable and even encouraged. This sort of individualised exposition is highly valued within the 2XC community is indicative of the pervasiveness of an individualised neoliberal digital culture working to reposition the inviolability of the individual over the collective. This recasting of the subject in a monotonous monochrome of self-affirmation is, as Harvey (2005) discerns, a signification which truncates political discourse through prioritising the individual in relation to social democratic reflection:

'Undoubtedly, the neoliberal insistence upon the individual as the foundational element in political economic life opens the door to individual rights activism. But by focusing on those rights rather than on the creation or re-creation of substantive and open democratic governance structures, the opposition cultivates methods that cannot escape the neoliberal frame. Neoliberal concern for the individual trumps any social democratic concern for equality, democracy and social solidarities.' (Harvey 2005, 176)

Thus, the logic of neoliberalism has situated fourth-wave feminism as a form of colonised individual rights activism: hereby, in a digital network, individualism emerges in a unified

arrangement, establishing a hierarchy of purpose that transcends feminist collectivism. This kind of practice in the 2XC community converges to generate a kind of abstruse, uncritical, and short-sighted anthropocentricity which offers little in the way of radical structural criticism or transformative action.

7.4 The Politics and Practice of Fourth-Wave Feminism

The observation that the 2XC community is deeply aligned with progressive political ideologies is unsurprising. However, the extent to which the broader political alignment of the community is enforced through processes of affective polarisation is concerning. Usually, where political disclosure appeared in the dataset, there were observed forms of disparagement for the ‘out-group’ rather than vocalised support for the ‘in-group’. Conservative opinion and those seen to subscribe to it were regularly ostracised and demonised, and while there were moments of concern over such displays of ‘toxic partisanship,’ these were extremely limited in comparison to the expressions of moral outrage that regularly appeared alongside content describing Conservatives behaving badly. Contributing to the development of what Canetti (1981) terms ‘the double crowd,’ the mechanism of affective polarisation further complicates the capacity for those within the 2XC community to challenge the power structures and hierarchies inherent in all forms of politics. An illustration of this observation can be found in the community’s widespread, vitriolic condemnation of Bloomberg’s presidential bid with the Democratic party. Rather than criticising Bloomberg on account of his policy positions, users primarily criticised his bid using ad hominem arguments such as his prior affiliation with the Republican party, and his vast personal wealth. Meanwhile, Sanders’ millionaire status was ignored or defended, with one user disingenuously suggesting that vast sums of personal wealth are appropriate for those who ‘work hard’. This kind of hypocrisy validates prior scholarship that has found ‘dislike of the other side is so strong... that even when partisans have reservations about their own party’s candidate, they are very reluctant to cross party lines’ (Abramowitz & McCoy 2019, p. 147).

Research into the political underpinnings of 2XC suggest that progressivism constitutes the legitimate problematic within fourth-wave feminism, informing the direction of the political struggles that emerge from this iteration of the movement. The presence of the double crowd – in this case, between progressivism and conservatism – tacitly nudges 2XC members to reproduce the dominant discourses around these political positions without critically reflecting on them. Thus, progressive political allegiance is enshrined as the legitimate mode of perception within the community (Bourdieu 1985b), and the broad spectrum of political thought is replaced with binary positions. Discourse seen to challenge these dominant narratives is discouraged through a process

of symbolic violence, wherein the threat of backlash from community constituents deters potential genuine contributions that may reveal a more rounded and realistic representation of the political spectrum. The social reproduction of this political dichotomy has concerning implications that radiate beyond the 2XC community or the fourth-wave feminist movement more broadly. Indeed, the implications of this ever-intensifying disparagement of the ‘out-group’ engendered by the ongoing pernicious polarisation can be witnessed in the violent political clashes that have erupted between competing groups in the United States (Abramowitz & McCoy 2019).

Emergent fourth wave feminist discourses that were identified throughout the dataset are thus informed by the establishment of this singular political perspective in the 2XC community. Interestingly, these discourses were relatively few compared to the aforementioned instances of prosaic self-disclosure or expressions of moral outrage that offered little in the way of feminist critique. Intersectionality and sex-positivity were the two dominant fourth-wave discourses identified in the dataset. There was one instance wherein several comments addressed the intersection of race and feminism, highlighting the complicated, racially segregated history of women’s suffrage. Beyond this, there were no further discussions about intersectionality in relation to racial disparities, and both class and (dis)ability were ignored all together. On the other hand, almost all the data that spoke to intersectional politics to some degree, addressed the diversity of gender identity. These discursive events were in and around discussions about sex, in which some participants provided clarification when commenting about sex acts and anatomy by using the terms ‘trans’ and ‘cis.’ In the field of identity, that sustains the casual use of these terms, and suggests that the linguistic habitus of the users has developed to reflect the fourth-wave’s preoccupation with gender politics. The use of these terms operates as a distinctive marker, bestowing upon the participant a degree of status attributed to an assumed cognizance of the highly complex debates that have framed contemporary perspectives on the relationship of gender to biological sex.

As discussed in Chapter 7, the community’s moderation policies, moderator communications and FAQs all contribute to framing gender-diversity as a central political focus in the 2XC community. Much of this documentation positions the 2XC community as a safe space for people of all genders, explicitly forbidding the participation of those whom the moderators deem to be TERFs – an acronym for trans-exclusionary radical feminists and/or those who ascribe to be TERFs – an acronym for trans-exclusionary radical feminists and/or those who ascribe to ‘gender critical’ perspectives. The use of the term TERF as a slur to silence natal women critical of the expansion of transgender body politics has been widely documented, and is frequently paired with threats of assault, rape, or murder. Considering this, the use of this term in the 2XC moderation

policies and communiques serves several purposes. First, this signals to potential participants that, within this taxonomic space, the terms of sex and gender exist in a limiting and conditional position, that is, there is an insistent unity, a recognised and legitimate perspective that designates a singular perspective on the complex. This perspective makes the claim that neither sex nor gender are inherently related to biological reality, and there is a diversity in the experiences of both. Second, by using the term TERF (particularly in stating that ‘TERFs can fuck right off’) the moderators subtly contribute to the normalisation of this term as a means to dehumanise the women that publicly challenge this singular narrative, thus legitimising efforts to silence such women through threats, hostility and aggression. Finally, the use of TERF supports mechanism of symbolic violence that deters the exploration of competing perspectives by community members, ensuring the social reproduction of this singular legitimate perspective. The unambiguous prohibition of gender critical perspectives in the 2XC community thus explicitly disqualifies any patterns of thought and modes of practice that work to challenge the community’s dominant narratives concerning gender and sex.

Finally, the position taken by the 2XC community on sex-positivity was made clear in several of the threads analysed. The discourse emerging from these threads pointed to a misrecognition of sexual performativity in which risky sexual behaviours are reframed as markers of expression and empowerment for women. Human sexuality is inherently tied to the reproduction of enduring doxic cognitive categories of perception that maintain the position of men as dominant, and women as dominated (Bourdieu 2010). However, much of the discourse analysed worked to invert this relationship through suggesting that women might assume the position of the dominant through choosing to express their sexuality. These discourses do not account for the production of sexuality within a patriarchal society that subordinates the experiences of women to the desires of men. The links between the reproduction of these normative discourses of sexuality and sexualisation as empowerment and the socio-cultural context of neoliberal individualism are clear. This framing of sexual empowerment as inherently tied to personal choice negates opportunities for critique, particularly when the centrality of women’s ‘choice’ in fourth-wave feminism is taken into consideration. These elements obscure the mechanisms of control and hierarchies of power that continue to shape the lived experiences of women, bringing about a ‘political stagnation as discussion, debate and critical judgement of the actions of others are discouraged in the face of being deemed unsupportive and a ‘bad’ feminist’ (Thwaites 2017, p. 55). Beyond this, the ‘sex-positive’ perspectives of the fourth wave also have the potential to undermine moves towards true intersectionality in feminist thought, particularly considering the attendant normalisation of prostitution and other forms of sex-based labour. By repositioning prostitution as a legitimate form of work, and thus an avenue for the empowerment of women,

the sexual exploitation of society's most disenfranchised women is eclipsed. For example, the disproportionate impact of the sex trade on women of Asian descent, particularly in the ever expanding 'sex-tourism' industry (Street & Norma 2016), demands intersectional feminist intervention and action. Crucially, as prostitution and other forms of sex-based labour become increasingly normalised, the sex trade and those who profit from it are increasingly protected from criticism. Thus, concerns about the sexual exploitation of vulnerable populations are sidelined as it becomes less clear where the problem ultimately lies. Thus, the misrecognition of sexual exploitation as a marker of female empowerment ultimately works to reproduce and, in some cases, even reinforce the status quo.

7.5 Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research

One of the key affordances of Reddit as a social media platform lies in the pseudonymity of its users. While the benefits and boundaries for research in pseudonymous communities were explored in-depth in Chapter 4, a limitation experienced in this research project emerged from the lack of demographic data about participants. Understanding the demographic composition of the 2XC community may reveal certain trends that would help to contextualise the findings. For instance, the age range of the participants may indicate generational discrepancies in feminist practice, or the location of the participants could reveal new insights into the way certain discourses are geographically distributed. Thus, novel insights into the findings presented in this thesis may be found through an exploration of the demographic composition of popular online feminist communities such as 2XC. In keeping with this theme of Reddit's affordances, a further limitation of this research is present in the lack of insight into the impact of moderation on the nature of the dataset. Reddit's communities are heavily moderated, with commentary and posts removed by both human moderators and automated moderation tools. This means that the data that comprised the object of analysis in this research was already heavily sanitised by moderation, with any contentious, offensive or unfavourable commentary removed. In light of this, future research into the nature of the commentary that is *removed* through moderator intervention may reveal discrepancies in the cohesive narrative moderators of the 2XC community seek to maintain.

While the single case study approach taken in this thesis was well-suited to the nature of the research, comparative studies exploring the similarities and differences in the dominant discourses of major networked feminist communities may provide further insights into the impact the field of power has over the shape and nature of contemporary feminist practice. There are a number of popular networked feminist communities active on Reddit, providing further potential for investigating the cohesion of feminist narratives as they are produced across Reddit more

broadly. Similar studies exploring the nature of networked feminist communities on other social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter may also be revealing in terms of discursive similarities or differences engendered by specific platform affordances and politics. A final major limitation of this research can be located at the central point of inquiry – that of the impact of neoliberalism over contemporary fourth-wave feminist practice. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ‘free market’ logic of contemporary capitalist societies cannot be understated, as proponents of neoliberal capitalism rush to ‘plead for unlimited public spending in order to save private initiative’ (Saad-Filho 2020, p. 478). However, while the veracity of the neoliberal project is brought under scrutiny, its social and cultural manifestations remain. It may be that as the world adjusts to new ways of being following the pandemic, so too will cultural and social realities begin to shift, and the ways in which the digital environment impacts progressive politics too may begin to take on new shapes.

7.6 Concluding Remarks

While some argue that contemporary feminist action occurring in the West continues to create the groundwork for meaningful progressive political change (e.g., Baer 2016; Thelandersson 2014), such claims remain problematic. The emergence of the neoliberal digital culture, with its profound emphasis on individualism, consumerism, and competition, has brought with it new challenges to the networked feminist communities riding the crest of the movement’s fourth wave. The dominant values at the heart of fourth-wave feminism are deeply entangled with the rationality of neoliberalism. Practice in the 2XC community reveals that users embodying these values are rewarded through intercommunity support, further encouraging their internalisation. This process culminates in the reproduction of modes of thought that encourage a persistent misrecognition of the power structures and mechanisms of domination that perpetuate the subordination of women. Through internalising the fourth wave doctrines disseminated by communities such as 2XC that paradoxically work to maintain the status quo, women are encouraged into patterns of thought and practice that produce complicity in their continued oppression (Bourdieu 2010). Far from challenging the prevailing categories of perception that maintain the position of women as the dominated class, this research suggests that in many ways, fourth-wave feminist practice in communities like 2XC may actually contribute to reinforcing them.

This research makes clear the need for further investigation into the ways in which this paradigm shift in feminist thought is impacting the actual lived experiences of women. It is crucial that scholars continue to map patterns of participation and practice in contemporary networked feminist communities in order to better understand the challenges faced by political movements

mediated by corporate digital media platforms. The growing dependence on digital media platforms for political participation and the extent to which these platforms have become embedded in everyday life is deeply concerning, and research that works to disentangle their influence from the politics of social transformation is of critical significance. Efforts must be made to instigate effective strategies that encourage the proliferation of transformative, inclusive and critically reflexive networked feminist movements.

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