

'Not All Memes are Feminist Tools for Activism'

An analysis of the subversive potential of the feminist 'Not All Men' meme

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TABLE OF CONTENT

1. Introduction	2
2. Theoretical Framework	3
2.1 Participatory culture.....	3
2.2 Humour.....	5
2.3 Reletability.....	6
3. Methodology.....	6
4. Analysis.....	9
4.1 Gendered Violence.....	10
4.2 Fragile/Toxic Masculinity.....	13
4.3 The ‘Nice Guy’ Trope.....	16
5. Conclusion.....	18
6. Bibliography.....	20

1. INTRODUCTION

Due to new technologies and the recent development of a more participatory internet named 'Web 2.0', the ways in which feminist activism occurs has changed. Due to easier access and the ability to add, change, and remix things online we can now speak of a 'participatory culture' on the internet (Jenkins, 2006). Because it allows for an articulation of counter-movements and alternative voices, the internet is increasingly popular as a platform for activist purposes, where more people are reached, acceleration the the spread of feminist ideas. One way in which feminists do activism online, is through the generation and spread of feminist 'internet memes'. The term 'Internet meme' refers to the propagation of content items such as jokes, rumours, videos, or websites from one person to others via the Internet (Shifman, 2013). Shifman (2014) also states how these internet memes are "socially constructed public discourses in which different memetic variants represent diverse voices and perspectives" (p. 8). In other words, memes reflect on contemporary debates and discourses, refer to real world event and sometimes cover politics issues. Furthermore, because memes are almost entirely jokes, humour is an important tool within feminist meme making. But due to persistent misconception that feminists are joyless, bitter, humourless man haters, women have historically been discouraged to make jokes. As Merrill (1998) suggests, women's so-called 'lack of humour' is, in fact, a refusal to comply with the *premise* of a joke; that is, one that often uses women as targets. Feminist humour, on the other hand, affirms women's experience, rather than denigrating it, which can lead to a kind of digital community amongst women. As Smyth (2014) and Schuster (2013) note, "in this age of networked sociality, online activism is a key form of participation in feminism for many young women (qtd. In Breheny 2017, p. 37) The ability of feminist memes to propagate feminism in the very midst of the workings of current popular and digital culture online, while simultaneously debunking persistent misconceptions that feminists are humourless women, makes memes interesting artefacts for feminist enterprise, and an interesting topic to research (Trakilovic, 2013).

In this thesis, I want to show how memes, as a humorous image with a humorous text, can be subversive of certain contemporary dominant discourses that are problematic, and in this way function as a feminist enterprise. My research question is:

In what ways can feminist memes subvert contemporary dominant discourses that are problematic in western society?

Using feminist textual analysis, I analysed seven feminist memes that all were constructed around the ‘Not All Men’ meme template. ‘Not All Men’ has become a cliché response by (some) men, when a woman addresses topics like sexism, misogyny, violence, and feelings of being unsafe. By doing this, the real issue being discussed goes unacknowledged and untouched, contributing to the culture of silencing women by centering men in the debate and excluding themselves from any responsibility or blame. They make a statement about how they are not part of the system that oppresses women, while they in fact are part and even benefit from it (Connell, 1995) I retrieved these memes from the website *KnowYourMeme.com*, the largest and most frequently visited website that researches and documents Internet memes and viral content, and Ranker.com, a website that collects lists and opinion data by letting the audience answer debates. The memes I chose in my analysis criticises this defensive attitude that men have when they are encountered with criticism, but they also represent particular critiques of broader discourse. In this thesis I argue that humorous memes can be an activist tool for feminism, in the sense that they are a form of representational discourse that can subvert dominant discourses in western culture.

First, I will discuss participatory culture, humour and relatability, which are all key characteristics of memes which help me to proof how they can be subversive. Second, I will give an outline of the methods I used for my thesis. Third and lastly, I will analyse the memes I chose by linking them and see how they can be subversive while creating new meaning.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

While the internet meme remains a relatively understudied phenomenon, a growing field of literature indicates that in democratic societies, memes have implications for identity building, public discourse, and commentary in a participatory media environment (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2012; Miltner, 2011; Burgess, 2008; Kuipers, 2002; Huntington; 2013). I will now turn to the theories and concepts that I need to analyse the memes I chose and to eventually answer my research question.

2.1 Participatory culture

Web 2.0 brought us a new set of communication technologies, which allow broader engagement with the world: a louder voice, a longer reach. Web 2.0 refers to the major shift in the internet around 2004 to 2005, wherein new technologies and software enabled “audiences to access, create, share, and otherwise interact with websites and with other

people using those sites” (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant, & Kelly, 2009 qtd. In Hesse-Biber 2014, p. 271). The possibility to add media content, like YouTube video’s or Wikipedia pages, made it less easy to differentiate between those producing media and those consuming them. What’s different to Web 2.0 in comparison the so-called Web 1.0 is, in a word, ‘participation’ and the resulting participatory culture in which individuals and groups have the possibility to create their own media (Atton, 2004). These participatory media platforms are developing as a tool for broader public participation and function as a platform for individuals to speak their voice (Atton, 2004; Breheny, 2017). They provide us with needed sites of alternative engagement with public discourse (Breheny, 2017). Dahlgren (2009) sees digital media as a central facilitator of productive engagement with public life. To Dahlgren, the internet’s “ease and adaptability of use permit those with less relative social power to participate as citizens in political activities. They can more readily express their views, and counter those of the more powerful...expressed in the dominant mass media” (2009, p. 190). In this sense,

the internet represents a massive boost for the public sphere; it is making a positive difference in terms of political involvement. While increasingly meshing with the mainstream media, the internet is emerging as a clear factor in promoting participation. (pp. 169-170)

In other words, easy access to worldwide media making enables citizens to infiltrate and have direct involvement in both political processes and governance. As a result, activist movements have responded to this development by using media platforms as a channel for their protests. Web 2.0 provides unique opportunities for marginalized social groups, women included, to express their unique voice (Shifman & Lemish, 2010). Feminist scholars have argued that digital feminist activism is a departure from standard modes of doing feminist politics, which represents a new moment or a turning point in feminism in a number of ways. One key difference between online spaces and traditional modes of doing feminism, is that more and more online spaces are created, developed, and maintained by women for purposes of expression, exploration and connection (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Beginning with feminist blogs and zines, feminists have been using digital platforms as a means to spread feminist ideas, shaping new modes of discourse about gender and sexism, connecting to different politics, and allowing different ways of protest to emerge (Carstensen, 2013; Henrike & Lang, 2014). As Tracy Kennedy (2007) notes, self-expression, sharing, interaction and

dialogue are key characteristics of feminist virtual consciousness raising in blogging. These spaces often address women's issues in ways that other media overlook. These spaces enable participation, often bringing together women from around the world to collaborate on certain issues and missions, such as support and activism (Shade, 2002). Participation is tied closely to the inclusion of subversive voices in public discourse because "such media formations, through their very practice, will tend to critique notions of truth, reality and objectivity that we find at the heart of mainstream media practices" (Atton, 2004, p. 9 qtd. in Breheny 2017 p. 54).

Feminist internet memes, which provide a similar 'platform for feminist activism, as both an intimate and communal practice' have the ability to do the same (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015). The word 'Internet meme' is commonly applied to describe the propagation of content items such as jokes, rumours, videos, or websites from one person to others via the Internet (Shifman, 2013). Limor Shifman (2014) adds to this that internet memes are "socially constructed public discourses in which different memetic variants represent diverse voices and perspectives" (p. 8). Davison (2012, 122) defines an Internet meme as "a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission" Following from this definition, an Internet meme may spread in its original form, but it is often re-created by users who change its original form within the same context. Online participation through memes represents "a new arena of bottom-up expression that blends pop culture, politics, and participation, signalling a grassroots-identified practice of culture jamming¹ contemporary political speech" (Shifman, 2014b: 4; Rentschler & Thrift, 2015). In other words, memes could subvert ideas of mainstream media culture. Subversive means: tending to weaken or destroy something, especially an established political system, organization or authority. Thus, memes reflect, shape and construct the dominant ideas and discourses that are dominant in contemporary society.

2.2 *Humour*

This intertwining of popular culture and entertainment with political engagement often uses humour and satire. As Dahlgren (2009) argues, humorous commentary works to "strip away artifice, highlight inconsistencies, and generally challenge the authority of official political discourse" (p. 139). This is why jokes, and also memes, are often used to criticize political

¹ Cultural or political jamming is the strategy or symbolic action repertoire of various social and political movements that captures and subverts the ideas of mainstream media culture (Wettergren, 2013; Lievrouw, 2011; Breheny, 2017).

structures. This makes it an interesting tool for feminists. Feminist memes deliver critique of societal norms using the “multimodality, intertextuality and reappropriation inherent to memes” (Milner, 2013b) to deconstruct and decenter dominant discourses (Breheny 2017). Rhetorical humour is frequently employed to make a point or persuade an audience about social or political issues, which is why memes sometimes cover political issues (Decker-Maurer, 2012; Milner 2012). This way, humour can be a subversive and an empowering tool for women and feminists in the battle to symbolically redefine gender roles, attitudes, and stereotypes. Furthermore, humour is significant in reflecting, perpetuating, or altering relationships of power and authority. Rose Laub Coser (1960) noted in her study on laughter, that the maker of a witticism, its target, and who laughs at it, were organized along hierarchical lines whereas the most powerful persons tell the vast majority of the jokes, and the target of these jokes are never higher in the hierarchy than the person making the joke. This might be one of the reasons that women have historically been discouraged from telling jokes. As Merrill (1998) suggests, women’s so-called ‘lack of humor’ is, in fact, a refusal to comply with the *premise* of a joke; that is, one that often uses women as targets. Feminist humour, on the other hand, affirms women’s experience, rather than denigrating it. Oppressive contexts and restrictive values would be ridiculed, rather than the characters who are struggling against such restrictions (Merrill, 1998). In addition, making use of humour and intertextuality to “call out” problematics; of memes as an accessible medium to reach audiences; and as polyvocal participatory objects, “feminist “memers” use the transgressive nature of the medium to critique and discuss” (Breheny, 2017). The act of joking would be an empowering tool as well.

2.3 Relatability

This humour works on the premise of ‘relatability’: “an ability to provoke a feeling of identification in the viewer” (Dean, 2016). Memes are conceptually linked to the French word *même*, which means “same”. Internet memes aim to engage with an audience by relying on the audience’s knowledge of the presented concepts, and therefore giving them a relatable factor. The use of humour in image memes serves their function as relatable content by relying on jokes which revolve around an audience’s familiarity with pop culture, politics and real-world events (Breheny, 2017). Internet jokes are constantly parodying, mimicking and recycling items from many cultural domains (Kuipers, 2002). These jokes are strongly embedded in the visual culture of commercials, movies, television, computer games and programmes, and the various entertainments of modern popular culture. For example, the

memes in figure 1 debunks various misconceptions and myths that are associated with feminism, while working with items from popular culture (the *Harry Potter* meme), criticizing the workings of power and hegemony (the *Lords of the Rings* meme) and the processes that have silenced women in traditionally male dominated spaces (the *Science* meme) (Trakilovic, 2013). Also, feminist memes use modes of this relatability to engage with others and form bonds. This is done through intertextuality. The user who creates user-generated content in the form of memes does not post them randomly but addresses a specific familiar crowd (Burgess, 2008; Breheny, 2017). Memes thus function as part of a culture, contributing to the set of ideas around which communities gather and act (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2015, p. 485)



Figure 1. Popular feminist memes retrieved from Tumblr and <https://dpi.studioxx.org/en/no/28-gendered-cultures-internet/hey-girl-who-needs-feminism-feminism-meme>: (Accessed June 15, 2018)

3. METHODOLOGY

In this thesis I will show how meaning is produced through the analysis of memes, and I will connect this meaning to the greater discourses that are dominant in society. Feminist media analysis offers me a rich and flexible way in which to examine the complexities and reveal the implications of power relationships as they are represented in memes (Hesse-Biber 2014, p. 267). As noted before, the emergence of Web 2.0 enabled the internet to become the creation and dissemination of an enormous range of communications and, in doing so, it has created new areas for feminist media analysis (Hesse-Biber, 2014 pp. 167). Feminist media research assesses the relations and expressions of power within texts while placing central focus to the lives of women and members of other marginalized groups (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Textual analysis is generally a type of qualitative analysis that, beyond the manifest content of media, focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text (Fürsich, 2009). A text can be word-based documents, still and moving images, and sounds found on the Internet, including blog posts, microblogs, discussion boards, social networking site posts,

podcasts and videos (Hesse-Biber, 281). According to Hesse-Biber, feminist media analysis begins with discourses. Stuart Hall (1997) defines discourse as

ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice: a cluster (or formation) of idea, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity, or institutional site in society. (p. 6)

A discourse functions as a system of meanings created by a combination of texts and the social practices that inform them (Hesse-Biber, 2017). This way, researchers are able to examine and questions these images and meaning that might otherwise go unexamined, “and thus better to understand how power operates through ideas and representations” (Hesse-Biber, 2017. pp. 265). In my thesis, I argue how participatory humorous media artefacts such as memes, are able to subvert dominant discourses that are problematic. Through careful critical examination of these discourses “[W]e can enquire into the structural conditions which make certain discourses possible and rule out others” (Milestone & Meyer, 2012 p. 23; qtd. in Hesse-Biber 2014 p. 266). I chose to analyse the meme template ‘Not All Men’ which pays particular attention to women, women’s stories and women's issues. I retrieved these images from the website *KnowYourMeme.com* – the largest and most frequently visited website that researches and documents Internet memes and viral content –, and *Ranker.com*, a website that collects lists and opinion data by letting the audience answer debates on topics including pop culture, sports, politics, brands and lifestyle. Some stood out at addressing particular smaller debates within the bigger debate. I chose four themes that represent smaller discourses within the bigger discourse in which ‘Not All Men’ positions itself, which I will further explain in the analysis section. I will explain how that image and the text work together to respond to a contemporary debate around women’s issues and connect the memes to the greater contemporary discourses there.

4. ANALYSIS

The first time ‘Not All Men’ became an object of mockery – or meme – was a tweet sent out by Shafiqah Hudson (@sassycrass on Twitter) in February 2013:



Figure 2 Screenshot from Twitter.com (Accessed May 28, 2018)

The tweet got retweeted a thousand of times and encouraged women to tell stories about their own personal experience with similar situations. As a result, other people took over the text ‘not all men’ and placed it in different contexts and visual images, reproducing it as a meme. The tweet in figure 2 criticizes this culture of men aggressively silencing women while centering themselves in the debate without contributing to it. The current and long-standing power dynamics between men and women put men above women in society, more often allowing men a voice. When men avoid validating these stories, that only perpetuates the systematic oppression of women (Klingbeil, 2016). In her article about mansplaining, Anna-Grace Kidd (2017) argues how interrupting women is a manner of social domination, because “men dominate the public sphere and interrupt women because they perceive their voices as less valued than men’s” (p. 2). Kidd adds that women often experience a fear of being interrupted – and ultimately violence –, which confines women to a place of silence and submission: “Though *all men do not* mansplain, every woman can recall a time when she has been mansplained” (p. 9). This can be linked back to the twitter hashtags and meme #notallmen and #yesallwomen (#YesAllWomen 2016). The hashtag #YesAllWomen was introduced on Twitter, which reflected a grassroots campaign in which individuals shared their personal stories about harassment, violence and discrimination (Grinberg, 2014). This was to point out that though, *not all men* harass women, all women have experienced discrimination or have been harassed by men at some point in their lives. After several sexual

harassment allegations against powerful men in 2017, the hashtag #MeToo spread virally on social media, to help demonstrate the widespread prevalence of sexual assault and harassment and shed a light on rape culture that is a present danger to women all over the world. Rape culture is a global trend where women and men internalize sexual violence as normal and interminable. Hashtags as #MeToo, #YesAllWomen and #NotAllMen all show how women today are still perceived as inferior to men, and how seemingly small acts such as mansplaining or saying ‘not all men’ reinforces this culture that silences women subtly accepts the omnipresence of rape. The following memes all show criticise this culture, and how it is connected to other discourses about women’s oppression.

Gendered violence



Figure 3 Popular Memes retrieved from Ranker.com ‘List of the Best “Not All Men” Memes (Accessed June 9, 2018)

The first theme includes three memes that evolve around danger or inflicting gendered violence. The first image is a screenshot from the franchise film *Alien* (1979). *Alien* has a whole history of feminists respond, because the Ridley Scott film can be read in a feminist, or patriarchal, way. For example, the protagonist Ellen Ripley became one of the first iconic female action heroes and was, as Laura Mulvey (1975) termed it, the first “final girl”: a resourceful young female who survives the serial attacker and usually ends the threat. The film is also feminist in the way it deals with body and sexual politics, and touches upon debates that relate around agency of the female body, rape culture, motherhood and abortion. The scary alien impregnates humans by inserting its proboscis down their throats or forcing humans to play host to a baby. All these elements that are at play in *Alien* can be linked to what it means to be a woman in contemporary western society. In the first meme, an Alien baby bursts from a person's' chest which draws heavily upon feminist debates about motherhood. The image examines the corruption, monstrous nature, purity, and negligence of motherhood that is present throughout the film (Smith, n.d.). It relates to the feeling of carrying life inside you and the fear this brings to women: having your body carry another

life can lead to the feeling that your body does not belong to you anymore. There also the fear of giving birth: mothers see the nine months of pregnancy as a glorious moment, but it will eventually lead to a very painful experience. *Alien* explores this fear that both men and women have of women, of a “strange and beautiful creative power, a power that through fear regulates women to a lesser role in society” (Smith, n.d.). This regulation of women is done by reducing women to their bodily function, i.e. sex and giving birth. If women and motherhood is constrained and regulated, patriarchal culture can be reproduced; something it cannot without mothers (Berenstein, 1990). An example of another patriarchal measure to constrain women's bodies is through the regulation, or illegalization of abortion. This way, the meme criticises both this defensive attitude ‘Not All Men’, while subconsciously reflecting upon discourses around patriarchal oppression and regulation of women’s bodies. The meme also draws heavily upon the discourse around rape culture, and men inflicting violence on women’s bodies against their will. It can be assumed that the alien in this image represents a man. It is a man inflicting violence to a woman’s body, while saying ‘not all men inflict violence’. Rape culture is defined as “a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women [and girls], a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent, and a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women [and girls] and presents it as the norm” (Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth 2005, xi; qtd. in Franco 2015, p.8).

The second meme is a screenshot from the film *The Shining* (1980). The film tells the story of Jack Torrance, an aspiring writer and recovering alcoholic who accepts a position as the off-season caretaker of a hotel where he lives with his wife Wendy and their son. The hotel had a previous winter caretaker who went crazy and killed his wife, two daughters and himself. Throughout the film, Wendy is at the mercy of Jack and suffers emotional and physical abuse, which escalates when Jack turns into a hostile abusive, alcoholic patriarch. The meme is a still from the infamous “Here’s Johnny!” scene, where Jack glares through a door he just slammed with an axe while Wendy hides in the corner of the bathroom screaming out of fear. The meme draws upon contemporary debates around men’s violence against women, in particular domestic violence. Domestic violence is a proper subject of public discourse or political intervention (Davis, 2000). The statement ‘not all men’ refers to the patriarchy that derails attention from the real problem (men’s violence against women) and delegitimize the experience and feelings of people who have been subjected to abuse by men, who are represented by Wendy. The image implies how women cannot comment on the

domestic violence crisis without some form of aggression hurled her way, thereby ignoring the problem.

The third image, a scene from the movie *Jaws* (1975), depicts a shark attacking a boat with two individuals on board. The contrast between the small, fragile looking boat and the size of the shark depicts some kind of power dynamics. Physically overruling the two and with no invitation, the shark enters the boat and the conversation they were having. He obviously knows he has more power and uses this power to legitimize the interruption. He wants them to know that although he could easily attack them, and other sharks probably will, he is not part of that problem. This image, as well as all other two images in figure 3, reflect on how the statement ‘Not All Men’ is actually an act of violence: it contributes to a culture in which violence against women is valued less important than the seemingly ‘innocence’ of a man. Moreover, saying not all men are rapists or misogynists, you acknowledge the existence of those men who are, but without making that a problem. And while men say they are not part of the problem, the majority of violent acts against women are committed by men. Global estimates published by World Health Organization (2017) indicate that about 1 in 3 (35%) of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. Most of this violence is intimate partner violence. Worldwide, almost one third (30%) of women who have been in a relationship report that they have experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner in their lifetime. Globally, as many as 38% of murders of women are committed by a male intimate partner. And with the recent events that have surrounded the #MeToo movement, it is obvious that a ton of people are affected by sexual assaults that occurred at the hands of men. Using the phrase “not all men” as a defence only adds to the delegitimization of these people and their experiences. As Suzannah Weiss (2016) writes, “these types of people do exist, and we don't know whether or not you're one of them because there's no way of telling”. In other words, while saying not all men, women live in fear because we don't know what men will and what men won't.



Figure 4 Images retrieved from Ranker.com 'List of the Best "Not All Men" Memes' (Accessed June 12, 2018)

The next two memes touch upon the feminist debate around hegemonic (white) masculinity, in particular its alleged fragility. Hegemonic masculinity is the social dominant and cultural idealised version of masculinity; that is, the masculinity that at that time and place is associated with authority and social power most (Buikema & Plate, 2015). Men are being socialized to abide by values of control and dominance – thus power. They are taught from a young age that anger, aggression and competitiveness amongst their male peers are masculine traits. But on the other side, western male socialization discourages the expression of vulnerability and emotions. Because we link masculinity as part of the identity of men, men can feel discouraged from their sensitivity, and that they have to cultivate this emotionless, macho persona. The fragility of masculinity is exposed when men feel afraid to show a vulnerable side, thus not fully representing men in parenthood, sensitivity, and household work because those are usually associated with femininity and women (Bugho, 2017). Because women are seen as inferior, this association with 'feminine' traits is unwanted. I will not elaborate on the negative effects of masculinity – as it is constructed by patriarchal structures and socialization – on men. This, because the phrase 'the patriarchy hurts men too' is, like 'Not All Men', a silencing or derailing tactic which basic motif is to draw attention from the original topic to men's issues in feminist discussion.

The debate revolves around the idea that masculinity is in 'crisis', something feminism has been blamed for by many. This crisis rhetoric masks what is at stake; that is, the perseverance of white male privilege: the benefits that accrue to them on the basis of ethnicity and gender, and the preservation of this inequality (Buikema & Plate, 2015). Because feminists have argued how breaking down the masculine identity promotes equality and encourages men to speak out more and be more in touch with their emotions, feminism is sometimes perceived as a threat for masculinity. Mila Salander writes how "Fragile men who

are offended by the discussion of sexism or confrontation by women who stand on their own without surrender to male egos, not only demonstrate their privilege, but also their fear.” (2017) This is in turn a fertile source of feminist jokes. In the first meme, we see how a scary looking tyrannosaurus approaches a person, accompanied with the text #notallmen. The meme could refer to a moment earlier in the film, where one of the main characters Dr. Ian Malcolm says how "God creates dinosaurs, God destroys dinosaurs. God creates Man, man destroys God. Man creates dinosaurs" (Kennedy and Molen & Spielberg, 1993). Character Dr. Ellie Sattler, who sits next to him, responds by saying, "Dinosaurs eat man... Woman inherits the earth" (Kennedy and Molen & Spielberg, 1993). The meme could refer to this scene, implying that no matter what follows after the word 'men' in a sentence, a man always feels attacked on his masculinity a personal level – even when what follows concerns the creation of dinosaurs or who dinosaurs eat. Therefore, the dinosaur wants to reassure his masculinity by making itself big and scary. The idea that men easily feel attacked when a woman speaks, is further reinforced by -presumably- male YouTube users, in the comment section below the Jurassic Park clip I described above. YouTube user ONCEfineapplanus (2018) commented: “Thus feminism becomes the new fascism.” llamaswithouthats (2017) commented “feminism = the beginning of human extinction.”, Johnnybomb1 (2014) commented: “Women can’t live without men because there wouldn’t be anyone to bitch about.”, and finally, Thiago Dias (2014) commented by saying: “misandric bitch lol”. These comments are examples of negative sentiments regarding Dr. Ellie Sattler who made a feminist statement about ‘man’. Some psychologists explain that masculinity is hard to achieve and maintain, which causes aggressive behaviour. In addition, aggressive behaviour and display of power could be used to reassure masculinity after someone (a woman) tries to break it down. It is these factors that contribute to the sustention of rape culture.

The second image shows a still from the film *Godzilla* (2014). The monster represents a man who exaggerates his masculine² appearance and has to prove his masculinity. One could imagine it only uses ‘men’ shampoo because he otherwise risks being perceived as less of a man. The monster is under attack by feminism or a woman who addresses the patriarchal system, which in his mind equates to condemnation of all men as evil and sexist. The supremacy of maleness is threatened, and his self-image is fractured, which made him feel compelled to defend themselves from what they interpret as a personal attack, screaming

² The gender of the monster in *Godzilla* has sparked debate among fans and film critics. Human characters often use male pronouns to refer to the monster, and the gender is inflected in the title of the 1956 version of the film: *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*. Also, the monster is fighting and at war, which could be perceived as a typically masculine enterprise (Tobach, 2008). This is why I assume the monster represents masculinity.,

“Not All Men!” in an attempt to shut down criticism. This idea of masculinity and what counts as being a ‘real man’ can be linked to a contemporary debate around rape culture. As noted before, the #MeToo movement often resulted in men saying how “real men do not rape”. In other words, men do not need to rape to express or prove their masculinity. This however, unintentionally insinuates that men who conform to the dominant masculinity are incapable of rape and that we can’t be raped by people we know. This complies to the so called ‘Monster myth’: we want to feel comfortable around the people we know, and for that reason, we’re likely to believe that knowing someone means that they’re less likely to assault you. The idea behind the Monster Myth is that western society believes that rapists are abnormal, strange, weird men, and that men who are “normal” do not rape. Phrases like “real men do not rape” inadvertently perpetuate this myth (Ferguson, 2015). By saying ‘not all men’ or ‘real men do not rape you perpetuate a culture where rape is subtly accepted, partly because the actual problem is ignored, and the man does not check himself.’ In the end, all men have been socialized in a culture that view women as lesser beings in which men have been taught to objectify or underestimate women at some point. This socialization process is depicted in both memes by appearance of the ‘man’ (represented by the creatures) who says ‘not all men’ (monstrous looking). Linking this to the monster myth, all men look like monsters because of what they learned in society, therefore no distinction can be perceived between monsters and ‘normal’ men. This subverts the monster myth in which it is believed that there is a (physical and mental) difference between men who rape and men who do not rape. What more is that in our current narrow framework of masculinity, self-examination is almost universally discouraged (Meagher, 2014), leaving men to think they are the exception and the “good guy”. The phenomenon of the innocent man who does not need to examine himself because he is not like all others, is reflected in the third theme.

The 'Nice Guy' trope



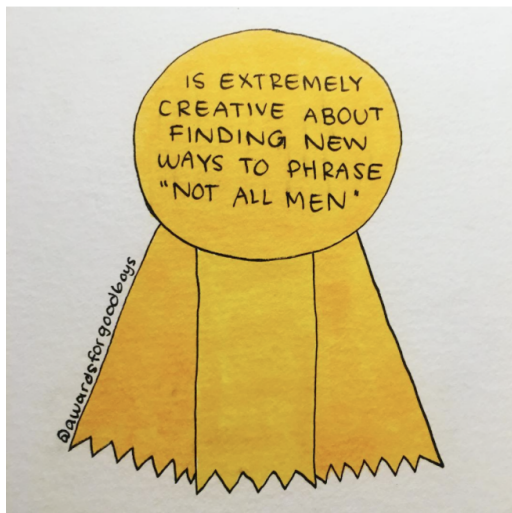
Figure 5 “Dawson Crying” Retrieved from KnowYourMeme.com (Accessed May 14, 2018)

The meme in figure depicts a spell card that can be played against another person and says: “Activate this card when your opponent calls out sexism. Instantly absolves you from any responsibility”. This implies that the card can be played by a man to distance himself from any responsibility to examine his own privilege. *Knowyourmeme.com* named it the ‘Dawson Crying’ meme, and it features Dawson Leery, a lead character from the teen drama television series *Dawson’s Creek* (1998). In the series, Dawson is notoriously sincere and sentimental, his niceness practically defines him, “forming an identity that sticks with him throughout the series, regardless of how many times he acts like, in his own words, ‘a puke’” (Luban, 2018) He is called the “nice guy who gets the girl after all” and the “fair-haired embodiment of perfection.” The meme can be read in a feminist way, where Dawson exemplifies the ‘Nice Guy’ persona: a self-identified sensitive man “who perceives himself as morally superior to and passed over in favor of their more stereotypically masculine peers” (Luban, 2018). While the Nice Guy does not actually care for the feeling or desires of the female of his interest, he declares himself to be nice, and expects women to give him positive attention and ultimately get rewarded with sex, because he believes women do or should reward niceness with sex. Moreover, the Nice Guy persona often says he is a feminist ally, congratulating himself on very basic feminist behaviour and human decency – while he does nothing to actually combat

systematic oppression of women and minorities – only to get feminist cookies³. When he does not get positive and sexual attention, he feels wronged. The meme criticizes this culture in which boys and men view basic feats of human decency and kindness as currency that can be directly exchanged for sexual gratification, because it reveals a sense of entitlement over women’s bodies.

Another example of a feminist meme that criticizes and mocks the ‘Nice Guy’-persona, is exemplified from the Instagram account @awardsforgoodboys by the artist Shelby Lorman. She draws awards for men who did the absolute minimum. Her art unpacks the double standards of subconscious sexism while simultaneously making women laugh and potentially get men to recognize when they marginalize women, intentionally or not. The meme in figure says, “Is extremely creative about finding new ways to phrase ‘Not All Men’” and deploys that the man who does this thinks he deserves a cookie for that. The images make you consider what really is a good boy, and makes you realise that a man who does good does not always has the right intentions.

The ‘Nice Guy’ trope can again be linked to the #MeToo movement, because it revolves around the entitlement men feel around women’s bodies. Again, this touches upon the #MeToo movement in which women undertook massive amounts of emotional labour and relived personal trauma in sharing their stories of sexual violence under the hashtag #MeToo.



Men often responded to the movement by saying that they have never harassed or raped women. Kirsty Strickland (2017) states about this ‘argument’: “To ask us to hand out cookies and ‘Well Done For Not Raping Anybody’ badges to men who rush to tell us #NotAllMen, is unreasonable at best, and insulting at worst.” Thus, the memes are subversive of this discourse of the Nice Guy in the way it encourages both men and women to rethink what it means to be ‘nice’.

Figure 6 Screenshot retrieved from the Instagram account @awardsforgoodboys

³ A feminist cookie is the term for the reward some men seem to be seeking for saying or doing something feminist.

I have now analysed seven ‘Not All Men’ memes that all reflect upon debates within feminism, commenting on it with a humorous text. That is, the memes are funny for an audience that is already somewhat familiar with debates within feminism or has had experiences with these situations. This can lead to a feeling of connectedness between women online, or even a feeling of belonging to a community, through collective laughter, which can lead to a stronger digital network of women. The memes also encourage men to recognize when they marginalize women, intentionally or not. As Lorman (qtd. In Lambert 2018, n.d.) notes, “When you’re laughing, your guard is down, and when your guard is down, sentiments can seep in”. This way, some topics that are pushed away because it was too hard to think about them, can be reframed as a nonthreatening way to think about behaviour. Furthermore, all memes depict an image from popular culture, relying on the audience’s knowledge of the presented concepts. The memes in figure 4 and 3 are all memes coming from violent movies, and all literally depict some kind of violence towards women. This creates new meaning to the meme, connecting it with negative connotations like danger and violence. Linking the phrase ‘Not All Men’ to an act of violence can make people who use it rethink the meaning and impacts such words can have.

5. CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I researched the different ways in which feminist memes can be subversive of dominant discourses by referring to and criticizing contemporary debates about women’s oppression. I asked the question ‘In what ways can feminist memes subvert contemporary dominant discourses that are problematic in western society?’

I came to the conclusion that feminist memes can be subversive of dominant discourses in several ways, but mostly because they create new meaning and encourage men to rethink the topics that are addressed. Because the memes are funny and not ‘angry’ in nature, they create a feeling of belonging amongst female audience which can lead to a stronger digital network of women.

I have shown how the participatory nature of Web 2.0 enabled feminists to spread ideas faster and with a longer reach, providing us with needed sites of alternative engagement with public discourse. Internet memes, which resulted from this digital development, are a medium (and the measure) of political debates because memes reflect discourses that are dominant in contemporary society and have the ability to influence political attitudes and behaviour. This makes it an interesting artefact for feminist, because through the use of humour, dominant

discourses can be subverted. Making use of humour and intertextuality to “call out” problematics; of memes as an accessible medium to reach audiences; and as polyvocal participatory objects, feminist “memers” critique and discuss certain discourses. Feminist ‘memers’ generate feminist memes to propagate feminism in the very midst of the workings of current popular and digital culture online, while simultaneously debunking persistent misconceptions that feminists are joyless, humourless, man hating women (Trakilovic, 2013). In my analysis I explained how an image text work together to respond to discourses around women’s issues and connect the memes to the greater contemporary debates there. I noticed how all of these discourses initially referred to men’s feeling of superiority over women in today’s society, and how that superiority is expressed in, whether or not physical, violence.

Due to limitations of time and space I did not include notions of intersectionality in this thesis. The relevance of intersectionality in contemporary feminist theory can be linked to usage of new media. Digitalisation and globalisation have broadened the opportunities for communication to transgress physical divides and enable pluralistic and transparent conversations on social and political issues. While this creates new opportunities for feminist networking it simultaneously recreates old forms of exclusion and division within feminism (Hamilton, 2009, p. 86) As Aria Dean (2016) notes, the internet extends and exacerbates the same old offline relations and reinforces appropriation of black culture by white people. She notes how

memes move like blackness itself, and the meme’s tactical similarity to historical black cultural forms makes them – predictably – vulnerable to appropriation and capture. (...) The meme seems open to appropriation and interpretation by whoever possesses it for a moment (...). (n.d.)

In other words, the cultural and affective labour of black individuals online largely goes unrecognized and un(der)compensated. Furthermore, for many people – women, people with disabilities, people of colour, queer people, the poor – mainstream cultural representations are often simply missing from the picture. In my analysis, I talk about women’s oppression while not taking in consideration all the different intersections of an individual’s identities and the intersecting nature of different systems of oppression. Women and femmes are not a homogenous category who experience the topics I address addressing women’s oppression

and sexism in the same way. This asks for further research on this topic, perhaps with the inclusion of more intersectional memes.

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