

Doing and denying sexism:

Online responses to a New Zealand feminist campaign against sexist advertising.

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Accepted for publication in *Feminist Media Studies*, please see the published version (2017, online first) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1367703> or contact the authors for a copy.

Abstract

In 2012 a New Zealand feminist group launched a campaign against a series of local beer advertisements they deemed “retro-sexist”. The campaign generated media coverage across a range of viewpoints, but drew a largely negative response from the online public. This article analyses a comprehensive corpus of 753 online comments responding to news of the campaign. We discuss the dominant discursive constructions of gender and of feminists, and the ways these were deployed to trivialize the campaign, demonize the feminist campaigners and depoliticize the issues. The comments overall, ironically, simultaneously disavow and perform sexism in this online public space. This imbrication of the denial and doing of sexism creates a hostile reception for public feminist voices, potentially dampening the field of possibility for action against sexism within mediated culture.

KEYWORDS: Sexism, feminism, online abuse, postfeminism, advertising, activism

In 2012 Auckland Feminist Action launched a short-lived campaign to persuade a New Zealand beer company to withdraw “retro-sexist” (Feminist Action 2012) television advertisements. The ads show the company’s (fictionalised) brewery, staffed entirely by sexually stylised women, being infiltrated by men to steal beer. In a press release and interviews with the media, the feminist campaign spokeswoman, Leonie Morris, argued that the advertisements “mimic tired old sexist attitudes in an ironic way,” and communicate “that men should judge women just on how they look, that women are stupid, and that it’s okay to laugh at them”. Further, Auckland Feminist Action argued, the ads contribute to a culture in which violence against women is common (Feminist Action 2012). The activist campaign generated media coverage across radio, print and online forums, from a range of viewpoints, including a few that supported and expanded on the campaign claims (e.g., Bridgeman 2012). Many of the online forums allowed users to respond to coverage by posting comments on the original report and on other users’ comments. These user comments were largely negative toward the campaigners, the campaign and its arguments. Many were hostile, vitriolic, and abusive.

This New Zealand campaign and the responses it generated sit within a wider resurgence of feminist activism against sexism in popular culture. Often harnessing new media to reach new audiences, feminists have been building broad-based campaigns (e.g., No More Page Three), disrupting stereotypes that undermine feminism (e.g., Jezebel) and documenting everyday occurrences of sexism (e.g., everydaysexism.com). But although the internet is facilitating a reenergised feminist presence in public debate, it is also being used to perpetuate vicious attacks on women who question the existence of gender equality (Best 2014; Holmes 2015; Moore 2013; Penny 2013; smith 2011). In one prominent example, feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian became the target of a massive online hate campaign when she launched a fundraising drive for a video series critiquing the limited and stereotyped

ways women are represented in video games (Sarkeesian 2012). Her social media accounts were flooded with threats of violence, rape and death, her Wikipedia profile was vandalized with pornographic imagery, depictions of her being raped and beaten were distributed, and she was subject to spamming, hacking and lobbying of service providers to close her accounts (TEDxTalks 2012). Sarkeesian's experience is not unique. Lucy-Anne Holmes, instigator of 'No More Page Three', a digital campaign to end British newspaper, *The Sun's* regular feature of topless women, has written about the unrelenting threats of death and sexual violence, sexual objectification and sexualised insults that she received during the campaign (Holmes 2015).

Online attacks against expressions of feminism have become so common that women have taken to using the internet itself to document and 'call-out' that abuse. One such example is the hashtag #mencallmethings which for a few months in 2011 became one of the most popular conversations on Twitter (Megarry 2014). With it, women demonstrated the hateful and violent harassment they were individually subjected to for voicing an opinion in online public space. Such abuse is not only directed at women critiquing sexism; many women have experienced harassment just for speaking at all (Megarry 2014; see also Beard 2015). As Laurie Penny (2011) has noted "a woman's opinion is the mini skirt of the internet." A growing body of feminist literature conceptualises this culture of vitriol and abuse of women online as fitting familiar patterns of silencing women and forcing disruptive women's voices out of the digital domain (e.g., Beard 2015; TEDxTalks 2012). Scholars have argued that such abuse operates as a form of sexist discrimination (Franks 2010), which is arguably harmful to social civility and democratic engagement (Jane 2014), and can limit women's economic and life opportunities (Megarry 2014).

In this paper, we examine online responses to news of the New Zealand feminist campaign against sexist beer advertising. Although not the focus of our analysis, it is important to know something about the television advertisements referred to by the campaign, as they are subsequently referenced in the online comments. The ads are set in the beer's iconic rural brewery that is shown to be staffed solely by women – which one of the ads explained was due to the fact men could not be trusted to resist drinking the beer during production – and shows small groups of men breaking in to steal beer. The contemporary “Brewery girls”, as the beer company refers to them, have been used in their advertising since 2005 (Jones, 2012), shown going about their work in the brewery as managers, scientists, labourers, and security – all in “skimpy clothes and sexualised poses” (Feminist Action 2012). In one ad, they are shown seductively bathing in the river that provides water for the nearby brewery, and as security guards patrolling in catwalk style. While the male beer thieves are depicted as “dorky”, according to Feminist Action (2012), they say the women are “depicted as more stupid” because these men are able to outwit them to steal beer. Nevertheless, the series is notable for portraying women not only as “gorgeous”, as one of the ads puts it, but also as (superficially at least) in control. In this way, they exemplify the trend observed by Judith Williamson (2003) towards “creating an implicitly post-feminist world in which women are powerful and men compliant” – a world that is disingenuously out of step with real world gender hierarchies. Williamson argues that this trend not only papers over the uncomfortable truth of ongoing gender inequality, but projects a fantasy version of the future that provides “an eroticised justification for [some men's] anger”.

The ads in this series draw on established brand collateral that makes use of irreverence, irony and nostalgia. The company's billboards are iconic with wide mainstream appeal in New Zealand culture, despite having long used sexist content to reach a niche of young masculinity (McCreanor et al. 2005). Responses to media reports of the feminist

campaign often blur the boundaries between the target advertisements and this wider body of brand advertising, sometimes also extending to the wider field of advertising in general.

In addition to an online petition and a Facebook campaign (Gillies 2012), Auckland Feminist Action issued press releases (e.g., Feminist Action 2012), and gave interviews on radio and to print journalists, leading to prominent coverage in traditional news media outlets, which in turn attracted many online comments. Because the campaign and resulting publicity were finite, we were able to collect a comprehensive corpus of these comments, allowing us to see how the issues were taken up and discussed among a wider public audience. In identifying patterns in language across this body of texts, we can see the dominant cultural resources that speakers have for interpreting the social world. These discursive constructions are significant because, from a feminist poststructuralist perspective (e.g., Gavey 1989), they are constitutive, helping to shape public understandings of what an object like “feminist” or “sexism” *is*, what it means, and how they in turn affect the ways social issues can be addressed. Patterns in the content and form of online comments are also significant because of the performative potential of language to *do* things. At the extreme end of the spectrum, in the case of Anita Sarkeesian and other high profile women subject to personalized direct threats of actual violence, there are powerful consequences even if physical violence is not carried out. Threats of this kind obviously have potential material effects for the woman targeted, such as fear, restriction of movement, and disruption of liberty. When circulating in wider social spaces or the public domain, they also have material consequences for other women. For instance, when the accumulation of such speech functions to normalise and reinforce acts of misogyny by other men, or to contribute to the legitimization of some men’s physical violence or coercive control. More subtly, when sexist public comments aggregate and prevail in a mediated space, the performative effect is arguably to defend and reinforce

men's privileged position within the gender hierarchy and potentially to exclude women from that space.

In this paper, our analysis focuses on how gender relations, sexism and feminism were discursively constructed through the comments; and how dominant messages across the corpus as a whole function simultaneously to 'do' and deny sexism.

Data and process of analysis

Our analysis is based on a comprehensive corpus of publically available online comments in response to the feminist campaign. Between March and September 2012, we systematically collected all such comments using keyword searches including the brand name of the beer, 'feminist', 'Auckland Feminist Action' and the name of the spokeswoman. We limited our searches to New Zealand domains and open-access forums, and did not collect content from social networking sites or similar personal platforms. We located thirty sources that featured reportage, commentary or discussion about the campaign. Twenty-one of those had user comment functions enabled and the 845 comments that make up the full corpus come from these. They include 8 news media sources, 12 blogs and 1 discussion board. The number of comments per source ranged from 1 to 214. The corpus contains many more negative comments than positive; only 92 (<11%) were interpreted by us as supportive of the campaign. The following analysis is based on the 753 comments we judged to be negative about the feminist campaign or its concerns. We have numbered the comments according to originating source, chronological order and, if relevant, the prior comments it responds to. For example, the number '5.38.1.1' indicates that the extract originated from source 5 and is the first reply to the first response of the 38th comment on that source. Comment quotations are reproduced verbatim, including typographical errors, except where the name of the beer brand has been removed. We decided not to name the brand because the company has

previously referenced and derided feminist critique, including “poking fun” at Auckland Feminist Action on billboards in this case (e.g., Gillies 2012). We wanted to minimize searchable terms that would provide easier access to material for that kind of promotion. (Although referring specifically to men’s rights activists, Gotell and Dutton [2016, 70] note how they “rely almost parasitically on feminist outrage”, and thus how scholarly attention can “have the unintended consequence of amplifying their messages”).

Through an iterative process of close readings of the corpus we identified dominant patterns of meaning and common rhetorical strategies. This involved at least three distinct phases of analytic work: generative, systematic, and checking. Initially, through a collective process of brainstorming, we loosely familiarised ourselves with material across the corpus, and generated preliminary analytic ideas and discussed possible interpretations. Beyond our team, we also workshopped samples of comments with a wider research group and sought comments from other colleagues. After this process of familiarisation, identifying key features across the body of comments, and generating provisional analytic ideas, one team member undertook a systematic process of coding and thematically organising all of the comments in the corpus. During this process we continued to evolve our analytic ideas about which prominent features of the corpus seemed most interesting and how they related to each other and to wider debates about gender, sexism and feminism in the media. To strengthen our confidence in the relationship between our original organisation of the data and our evolving analytic ideas another team member repeated this systemic process of coding and organising the comments. For the final ‘checking’ part of our process a research assistant unfamiliar with the data then worked backwards to ensure that the corpus was well represented by the final thematic framework.

Discursive constructions of gender and feminists

Overall, the comments addressed two main, overlapping, discursive fields: (1) constructions of gender – including gender relations in New Zealand, and gender as represented in the advertisements – and (2) constructions of feminists – and the feminist campaigners in particular.

Constructions of gender

The state of gender relations in New Zealand was referenced by many of the comments, and functioned to construct the sociocultural playing field on which debates around sexism could take place. It is probably relevant to note that like many similar democracies, New Zealand has a formal legislative commitment to gender equality and to eliminating discrimination. Moreover, significant parts of New Zealand's 'gender story' include its status as the first self-governing country to grant women the right to vote in 1893 [see *Women and the Vote*, no date], and a period at the end of the twentieth century when women held all the top political positions (In the Driving Seat, 2017). While depictions in the comments varied widely, very few acknowledged any evidence of sexism in contemporary New Zealand society. Some invoked the notion of gender difference as natural to account for the sexualised gender dynamics of the ads and their appeal – sometimes justifying sexism in the process. Others acknowledged sexism as a problem, but in a way that refuted its contemporary local relevance. Instead, a postfeminist world was imagined in which women's choices and power were emphasised at the same time as men's diminishing power was bemoaned. The overall effect was to deny the existence of sexism.

Gender difference as natural: One vein of comments depicted the advertisements as accurately representing natural differences between men and women. Many accused feminists of being a threat to nature's (or less frequently, God's) design for men and women to be attractive to each other in order to perpetuate the species. This depiction undergirds the

claim that it is normal and healthy for men to enjoy looking at beautiful women, and right and proper for advertisers to take strategic advantage of this to sell their products: “Ultimately she's flying in the face of mother nature which requires women to be attractive to men, men to be attractive to women and the very old and well-established advertising paradigm that ‘sex sells’” [5.15]. Such heteronormative framings, which posit the biological necessity of heterosexual attraction, offer the rhetorical position of providing a ‘reality lesson’. For some, as in the comment above any dimension of power difference was ignored; for others, it provided a justification for sexism:

Completely getting rid of sexism is going to be impossible - because it is way deeper than just societal values [...] All life is about procreation - the perpetuation of your species [14.45]

Such evolutionary justifications of the advertisements were explicitly invoked by some comments – “DARWINS theory at work” [20.128] – to celebrate the sexualised representation of women in advertising, and by implication to portray feminist critique as a threat to the heteronormative order. Such naturalising assumptions further underpinned some complaints that feminist critique disparages men for their “natural urges” – in the following case perceiving an intertwined threat to gender and racial privilege:

I love to look at pretty women and that is a natural thing to do, I don't love being portrayed as a lesser being because of the natural urges I feel or simply because I have white skin and a penis [14.40]

Some contended that it was actually men who are exploited for this natural and normal disposition (a theme we explore in more detail further on):

The whole world is sexist ! Us blokes love looking at good looking sheilas and WE get exploited because of that [19.62]

Sexism as a problem, but not in New Zealand today: In another vein, some comments acknowledged sexism or gender inequality, but it was always elsewhere. For instance, some comments positively invoked the efforts of earlier feminists for their work against ‘real’ gender inequality in the past:

I do assume you've taken full advantage of what the ladies in the past fought so hard to achieve for us? Get busy with life and get over it [20.117]

The feminist movement back in the day, was about equal rights in jobs and pay etc.

Well the [beer brand] ads actually show Women in doing it all [20.50]

Such comments implied Auckland Feminist Action’s campaign was by contrast a waste of the hard fought for freedoms of the earlier women’s movement, and a failure to recognize that the ads themselves celebrated that freedom. Others trivialised the feminist campaign by drawing a stark contrast between its focus in relation to ‘real’ current day social problems:

Aren't there some real issues she could go and deal with which actually have a negative effect on woman's lives [11.5]

Really? This is the best they can come up to complain about? Go and do something about the real issues [19.75]

For goodness sake! What a waste of time [...] Get a real cause!!! [20.103]

Other comments invoked gender discrimination in other parts of the world to trivialise the issue of sexism in New Zealand advertising: “Try living in Saudi Arabia. Got a spare burka anyone?” [14.50], “If people think that woman have it hard here in New Zealand they should either see what its like overseas” [14.21].

Against this somewhat messy backdrop of claims that heteronormative gender difference is natural and that sexism does not exist in New Zealand today, two dominant interpretative themes worked to elaborate the overall denial of sexism. One cohered around the reification of women's choice (to act in the ads) and emphasised their roles in the advertisement(s) as a sign, not of sexism, but of women's empowerment. The other main interpretive theme drew attention to the place of men within the advertisements or within the field of gender relations more generally – arguing that they are the real victims.

It's all about women's choice and empowerment

Almost all comments refuted an interpretation of the advertisements as sexist in either representation or effect. Rather, they were overwhelmingly read as providing evidence of women's empowerment. One ad in the series showed women “doing it all” – working as labourers, scientists, managers and so on – at the same time as they were referred to as “gorgeous women” and styled in sexually imbued clothing, poses, and so on. In many ways this seems to reflect a “postfeminist sensibility” (Gill, 2007a; 2007b) par excellence. As Rosalind Gill (2007a; 2007b; 2008) has noted, a “sexy body” has become the primary source of women's identity and capital in this style of advertising, where women are depicted as knowingly in possession of, and deploying, their sexual power. Also central to the postfeminist sensibility is a valorization of individual choice. Many of the comments drew on this postfeminist fixation on individual women's choice and empowerment to deny the advertisements were sexist, and to dismiss the feminist critiques and campaigners.

Many comments focussed on the choice of the female actors to appear in the advertisements and used this, directly or by implication, as evidence of the general absence of sexism or gender discrimination in New Zealand. In some comments, the actors' choices

were highlighted through reference to the apparent pleasures of self-sexualisation alongside the absence of force:

We all need a bit of fun and humour in life,i dont see the see the girls forced into doing the adverts.they look as if they are enjoying it [19.81]

The girls making those ad's were not forced to. They probably enjoyed it [20.169]

Other comments went further to accuse the Auckland Feminist Action spokeswoman of wanting to take away the 'right' to, and the rewards for, such pleasures:

None of the actress are forced to appear in the advert but clearly Leonie wants to take this freedom of choice away from them. Thats real liberation [20.137]

Shame on Leonie and the gang . Those women werent forced to do those advertisements they were paid for it [20.39]

In one case, a comment acknowledged that the actors were highly sexualised, to the degree that the advertisement may not be suitable for public broadcasting. Yet the notion of choice was simultaneously deployed to deny that any issue relevant to feminism exists: "Yes; the ads probably aren't suitable for television. No; it isn't a matter of feminism when the actresses CHOSE to do it" [20.184]. This kind of absolutist framing of choice was repeated frequently across the corpus: if some kind of choice is presumed to exist, with no regard to context, constraint, or consequence, then this was taken as proof of women's empowerment and a definitive refutation of the feminist critique.

At the same time, the female actors were portrayed as the ideal postfeminist, neoliberal woman – beautiful, smart, rational and responsible. For instance:

I have met the woman who acts in the [brand] beer ad. Not only is she physically attractive, she also appears to be intelligent and to have a good work ethic. Surely it is

her choice to portray herself as she does in the ad? Bras were burnt in the '60s to ensure women such liberation and freedom of choice. Perhaps this is a case of 'be careful what you wish for'? [14.17]

In credentialing its claims by reference to the actual woman in question, this comment conflated her choice to take an acting job with the choice of character portrayal, and then disarticulated the relevance of feminism. As McRobbie (2004, 2009) argues in her discussion of postfeminism, elements of feminism have become part of our shared common sense, but in ways that are individualised and disarticulated from feminism as a movement for collective change. Part of her notion of a 'double entanglement' refers to the way that feminism can be taken into account in some ways, at the same time as it is "also fiercely repudiated, indeed almost hated" (2004, 256). In the comments above, a decontextualized focus on the individual choice of the female actors allows (elements of) feminist logic to be deployed to accuse the feminist campaigners of the most un-feminist act of stifling a woman's choices. Juxtaposed with this is their "ostensibly pro-woman" position and its postfeminist "'feel good' femininity" (Lazar 2014, 222).

Other comments linked the notion of choice with market economics and its rational, choosing, self-serving individuals. These comments focused on the ability of the female actors to sell their beauty and their bodies, and the advantage it gives them in the competitive modern marketplace:

The models who do the job are well paid for looking good [20.86]

They want to be in these ads, they exercise hard and beautify themselves as that's what they have to trade in the market...and when they do well and get these ad jobs they rake in the payoff. The [beer brand] ads exploit Men and their sexual interests to sell beer.

And these Women are laughing all the way to the bank [9.3.1.1]

In these comments, financial reward to individually empowered actors excludes the possibility of sexism in media representation. For Lazar (2006), a discourse of “empowered beauty” is core to the articulation of what she (following Naomi Wolf) has described as “power femininity”. She argues that the marketing of beauty products has explicitly re-signified the emancipation project of second wave feminism so that “the pursuit of beauty becomes an extension of the feminist empowerment project” (Lazar 2006, 507). Thus these comments claim that rather than being discriminated against, the female actors are at the height of what it means to be an empowered woman in contemporary society:

Lets face it the girls look great. And as for being feminist or detrimental to the female population - try a different spin - well what I see is great looking, confident girls who are in control of a big business [20.103]

Can't you see the ad in its real form?? The women as gorgeous and confident as they are in control here. They work and run the brewery, they are managers, artisans and absolutely stunning [6.12]

This portrayal of the female characters in the advertisement(s) as beautiful, in control, commercially viable and sexually desirable is offered as a positive representation of women (see also Lazar 2014), and evidence of social and personal empowerment. It implies that if (some) women have the freedom to trade on their beauty in the marketplace, then no discrimination can exist, and feminist critique is misguided. As one comment put it: “The Woman in the ads are portrayed as confident, fit, sexually secure athletic uber females anyway [...] Just whats your beef?” [6.1].

Men are the real victims

This imagined postfeminist world, in which women are choosing and empowered, sometimes tipped over into an imagined world in which women are *too* powerful. Another dominant

thread of comments construed men as the real victims of sexist advertising, gender discrimination and feminism (see also García-Favaro and Gill 2015, Williamson 2003). For example:

Who is being sexist? Is it those who obviously enjoy (and get paid for) flaunting their gorgeous looks all in order to get a poor schmo like me to buy [brand] beer? [19.47]

Many such comments pointed to stereotyped depictions of men in advertising more generally, typically either idealised sports-star models of masculinity: “So will they also make a stand against those Dan Carter [All Black] undie adverts that objectify men?” [1.7], or pejorative representations of “dumb”, bumbling or ineffectual men: “But the ads showing the dumb husband like the Glade one is ok?” [1.5]. The following comment suggests men are subject to a double whammy of sexism through the traditional stereotyping of men’s interests and such depictions of male domestic incompetence:

Standard Ad model

Selling a product to a man?

- use girls, sport and blokishness

Selling a product to a woman?

- Man is doing something dumb
- Woman walks in and does something the correct way using the advertisers product/service
- Man looks like idiot
- Woman buys product

That is sexist. [11.7]

Some comments appeared to claim that the existence of advertising that typecasts men nullifies claims of sexism against women in advertising. Others actually claimed that demeaning representations of men are more common than those of women:

The reverse sexist adds denigrating men out number these 10 to 1, about time men said enough of those - yeah right ! [20.12]

None of the comments that focussed on demeaning and limiting representations of men in advertising called for collaborative advocacy against all gender stereotyping in media representations. Instead, comments in this vein repeatedly depicted feminism as the primary perpetrator of sexism and men as the primary victims of sexism/feminism. Some portrayed feminism as having an inherent gender bias that prevents it from seeing the 'real' sexism in advertising:

How an they talk of sexists? Feminists are by definition sexist [19.124]

In the comment below, this sentiment was given weight by contrast against the postfeminist portrayal of women actors as idealised and empowered:

You femmies need to look with your eyes open, here there are beautiful and obviously brainy women operating a complicated brewery. When you watch the ads properly the males are really shown as quite dumb in the way they chase after the beer [19.26]

Some comments portrayed feminism as having captured the world to such a degree that men are now the victims of both systemic gender discrimination and sexist abuse. This was portrayed as playing out both in the ads and in the real world:

In the [beer brand] ad [the women] run the factory. Years ago it would have been men. Now men are so demeaned they have to sneak in to steal beer as women run the country and the beer making facilities. It's an appalling abuse of men [14.57]

I cant understand why Woman are still playing the victim in this day & age [...] I believe that woman are treated far more fairly than what men are [...] its disgusting. So, please, before you attack men again, think twice & look at the realty of the situation. [14.18].

Many such comments claimed that sexist double standards privilege women at the cost of men. A number went as far as to suggest that the campaign was part of a wider feminist conspiracy to oppress men to the benefit of women: “These people do not want equality, they want domination” [20.4]. What emerges is a “bleak and hostile version” (Gill 2008, 54) of gender relations and a distorted rendition of feminism – one that appears “at odds with a genuine concern with gender equality” (Calder-Dawe & Gavey 2016, 494), and hence unreasonable.

Dismissive and demonizing constructions of feminists

Not only did comments argue against the substance of the feminist claims, largely by denying that sexism (against women) exists, many functioned in a more ad hominem way to dismiss and/or demonize the feminist campaigners themselves.

Feminist killjoys are at it again

Given Auckland Feminist Action’s campaign challenged the purportedly ironic sexism of the beer advertisements, it is not surprising that reference to (and attempts at) humour and irony were prominent ways that comments defended the advertisements from charges of sexism and, at the same time, undermined the feminist critics. The full marketing approach for the beer brand includes a well-known billboard promotion featuring statements about politics and society that are then ironized with the catch-line ‘Yeah right!’. Some

comments mimicked the billboard catch-line to dismiss the feminist critique: “Misogynistic and denigrating to women? Yeah right!” [15.2] Others asserted a singularity to the humour in the advertisements, framing them merely as innocent fun: “For God's sake [...] it's just A BIT OF FUN!!!!!!” [19.125]. As Stevenson et al. (2000, 381) have suggested, with regard to 1990s men’s lifestyle magazines, “irony is used as an ideological defence” against criticism – “only the most humourless do not get the joke”. The assertion of mere fun enables the trivialisation of both the critique and the campaigners: “Some people worry about trivial things these days. I do not think too much of the ad, but I like the billboards, make me laugh, so what, they're funny” [20.61]. In this and other comments, the advertisements are conflated with the brand’s popular billboards.

The world would be a better place if we all recognised a joke when we drove past.

[15.30]

[Beer brand] billboards are hilarious and that is a fact. Complainers please keep it to yourself, I'm sure the rest of the country doesn't want to hear what you have to say.

[15.1]

The humour of these billboards was taken for granted as an implicit cultural given; therefore any other experience or interpretation of them is a failure on the part of the individual observer. The campaign’s critique then, is taken as evidence of the feminist activists’ inability to recognise and enjoy the (implicitly universal) humour through some fault or flaw which inheres in them. This is unsurprising in relation to Sara Ahmed’s (2010c, 66) observation of a general “desire to believe that that women become feminists *because* they are unhappy”.

I am a confident, self respecting woman....AND I find the [beer brand] Ads amusing, clever, even funny, ie I enjoy watching them. I see them as being about humor.....rather

than out to "put women down" as some sour and embittered women may choose to interpret them. Those women who do interpret these ads as demeaning, offensive, etc etc etc, need to [look] at themselves ...that's where- in the problem lies. [20.82]

In the vast majority of cases, offense is taken rather than given. People make a conscious choice to take offense from something so they can have something to whine and moan about [15.54]

As we see here, the feminists' critiques were read as being about their own underlying unhappiness, rather than what they are unhappy about (Ahmed 2010b, 2010c).

Ironic sexism within alcohol advertising is powerful because it can appeal to the values of a traditional masculine audience under cover of the defensive claim that any criticism results from a failure to properly 'get' the humour. As McCreanor et al. (2005, 258) have noted in relation to this brand's billboards, the messaging "creates an oppositional inner circle of meaning and identity". While that inner circle of shared understanding is arguably no longer oppositional (given the billboards' apparently wider appeal), it nevertheless still works to other those who fail to appreciate the humour. Through an "us versus them' duality" (Bemiller and Schneider 2010, 463), any critique can be deflected by insinuating the outsider status of the critics:

Do you people ever laugh....ever? Such cold soulless automatons [8.1]

dour old bag should find a life under some rock where her cave man sits [20.163]

Similarly, the familiar exhortation to "lighten up", which was abundant in our corpus, negatively positions the critic as an outsider, who is out of touch with everyone else: "Lighten up! It's just an ad and who really cares!" [19.56]. Or, even more directly: "Lighten up, what planet do these people come from?????" [19.6].

What is striking about many of these statements is the way they simultaneously *perform* sexism in the attempt to deny it. Clichéd gendered put downs cast the critics as bags and whiners who are exhorted to retreat from public speech (“keep it to yourself”, “find a life under some rock”). As Mary Beard (2015) has argued, such admonitions against women speaking in public have a very long history. In some cases – such as, “Fking feminazis need to lighten the fk up” [5.5.1] (and other examples that follow) – the performance of this sexist exclusion is also blatantly hostile and aggressive.

Ahmed (2010c, 65) has noted that “feminists are typically represented as grumpy and humorless, often as a way of protecting the right to certain forms of social bonding or holding onto whatever is perceived to be under threat.” The affective tone of these comments on the humourlessness of feminists varied, with different implied speaking positions. While some conveyed an amused detachment, others suggested a position of agitated threat. For the latter, the campaign threatened to ruin everybody else’s fun: “Narrow minded people really need to get a life. Please don’t force your views on us and in doing so kill the little bit of joy that comes with so few ads on TV” [1.2]. The anxious sense of threat conveyed in the comment above – that feminists threaten to take away the pleasures and freedoms associated with masculine privilege and heteronormative alignment – is similarly conveyed in comments that explicitly refer to feminists as “killjoys” and the “PC [politically correct] brigade”:

The kill joys are at it again, cant we have a bit of fun in this world witout the PC brigade getting hot under the collar (armpits) plse let live and loosen up a bit, let the world be a better place by having a bit of FUN [20.69]

All too often these days, having fun and being entertained is made impossible by the killjoy, wowser brigade [15.54]

As Ahmed's (2010b, c) argument would suggest, the figure of the killjoy is reviled not only for her own lack of humour and happiness, but for the effect this has in spoiling the happiness – or what the comments mostly refer to as fun – of others; in part perhaps through disturbing the fantasy that sexism does not exist. Such references to killjoys were closely related to references to “political correctness”, which was construed by comments as the policing and sanitising of public discourse in order to avoid offending sanctimonious minority groups who too easily take offence:

Their [beer brand] billboards are outstanding and a pleasant change to all the other PC correct nonsense we have to endure on a daily basis from every second bleeding heart liberal greenie shouting out their opinions from the moral high ground [15.46]

One comment asked, “If we start censoring humour well...what’s next...freedom of speech?” [4.5], invoking what is deemed to be at stake– the joyful innocence of humour, the threat of censorship, the breach of a fundamental right – in order to appease the “feminazis”. However, this claim and the threat it warns of actually work to simultaneously invert and hide the silencing effect. That is, while the audience imagined by the comments is ostensibly threatened with being silenced, the effect of this speech is arguably to discredit critics and silence *their* critique (Calder-Dawe 2015; Donaghue 2015; Jane 2014). In an irony that seemingly goes unnoticed, the freedom of speech of feminists is denied while the privilege to denigrate and offend others is defended, provided it is done in the name of humour: “Anyone can be offended about anything and satire is always potentially offensive to someone. It’s your right to be offended and my right to tell you to get stuffed” [15.35.1].

Feminists as abnormal others

Many of the comments that referenced the Auckland Feminist Action campaigners as cultural outsiders, explicitly applied this to “feminists” more generally. Not appreciating the

humour of the advertisements rendered them as people beyond the margins of ‘normal’: “For goodness sakes!! Those ads are for NORMAL people to look at and have a light hearted laugh WITH each other!” [19.131]. As Worth et al. (2016) also noted in media discussions of Julia Gillard’s 2012 sexism and misogyny speech, background sexism was normalised, and it was those who spoke out against it who were represented as abnormal. Through this othering of feminists in particular, comments tended to address each other as fellow constituents of the sensible majority defending the rights of everyone against a marginal minority:

Feminist groups just say what we are all thinking....yeah right [19.9]

Feminists are cool...Yeah whatever [19.97]

Feminists are broad minded individuals and their thoughts represent those of all rational women – Yeah Right! [19.37]

In drawing on the familiar trope of a beleaguered “silent majority”, some called upon this imagined community to stand united against this troublesome minority and “shut them up”:

the MAJORITY rule and if your in the minority thats your tuff luck get used to it, the majority are sick and tired of listening to people like this we have sat back and let them have their say, for far to long so if you think your one of the silent majority have your say every time these people raise there heads and shut them up.United we stand.

[20.136]

Notably, some comments credentialed the writers as women, who represented themselves as not only part of the normal majority but also as “real” women, in opposition to feminists who are depicted as immature and petty-minded:

Grow up, ladies! You may not worry about making fools of yourselves, but please stop making fools of the rest of us real life women [20.135]

as a woman i think [...] these woman need to get a real life and stop whinging about something so small..lifes to short to constantly moan [20.51]

These invocations of the real and the normal, supported and reinforced a large number of comments that ridiculed members of the feminist group as being abnormal and defective in character. Claims that the campaigners were crazy, stupid and silly abound in the corpus. For example:

What - are these women completely mad or self absorbed or just plain insecure. The ads are amusing and a bit of fun. Rise up ordinary women like me and show these overbearing psychotic and insecure women what they are missing [19.58]

Other women are complaining about your apparent lack of humour Leonie, while us blokes just think that you're a silly feminist cow [19.34]

it annoys me when complaining nagging woman give the rest of us a bad name. Its an ad and I bet if they looked half as hot they wouldn't be complaining about it. instead they should shave there mo's get married and nagg at their husbands instead! [20.75]

As noted in earlier examples, these comments disparage feminists with clichéd sexist put-downs as nags, silly cows, and mad – in effect, ironically, doing sexism in the service of denying it.

Many comments like this attributed the feminist campaigners' motivations to their lack of (hetero)feminine attractiveness: "I guarantee they're ugly, hairy and fat and [...] probably also lesbians too" [13.1.1.1.1], "The fat, hairy-legged, garlic-breathed, lesbian feminists again showing their envy of decent, lovely-looking, desirable, real women" [20.188]. In these kinds of exaggerated portrayal, the feminist campaigners were ridiculed as inferior women who fail to approximate (hetero)feminine ideals – allowing their critiques of sexism to be undermined as motivated by jealousy towards "real women" (ironically, represented by the glamourized

model). Depictions of feminists as unfeminine, man-hating lesbians are not new (see Rhode, 1995; Scharff, 2010, 2012). These stereotypes are powerful, according to Scharff (2012) because they challenge the heteronormative order. For (particularly heterosexual) women this can be uncomfortable, and helps explain some women's repudiation of feminism. Distancing oneself from feminism may help to affirm heterofemininity. While the reiteration of these stereotypes 'does sexism', the stereotypes themselves simultaneously operate as a sign of the threat of feminism to men with a stake in the heteronormative arrangement of gender. This helps explain why feminists are so pejoratively othered in the comments, as a repudiation of this threat.

The repudiation of feminism is a defining feature of our corpus. While it is important to note that there were relatively few comments that contained direct violent threats (of the kind discussed in the introduction, faced by prominent women in the United Kingdom and the United States), there were some comments suggestive of a violent enforcement of a heteronormative order:

I'd treat Miss Morris like a sexual object if you know what I mean [5.19]

Maybe, just maybe, what you need is a jolly good shag. Extra lube also needed. You'll be tight as [19.34]

Corrective Rape hahaha [5.9.3]

Through joking and innuendo, the spectral threat of rape and sexual domination is invoked without the delivery of direct and explicit threats. While this allows any violent intent and effect of such comments to be dismissed and trivialized as 'just joking', they land in a sociocultural landscape where the fear of rape is a significant issue for many women. As feminist scholars have argued, this normative fear in itself curtails the everyday freedoms of women (e.g., see Riger and Gordon 1981; see also Gavey 2005).

Toward a conclusion: Doing and denying sexism

I mean, who sits down and thinks ‘I know what will make feminist writing look unnecessary - huge sexist comment threads under every article’?
(PennyRed 2013)

We began this paper with reference to cyber-harassment of women, and particularly feminists, speaking in public. Well documented cases highlight extreme forms of sexist abuse that threaten to obliterate or silence women – including direct threats of rape and murder. Beard (2015) has argued that there is an ancient and gendered history to the way that women’s voices are heard in western culture. She traces the connection between classical norms around public speech in which not only did women not engage in “public speaking and oratory”, but these “were exclusive practices and skills that defined masculinity as a gender” (812). In contemporary culture, she observes, the responses to women’s public voices fit with the old patterns of exclusion. The silencing impulse within a lot of current day abuse includes the direct, almost mundane, ““Shut up you bitch”” (816) as well as violent threats and recommendations to cut off women’s head and tongues. Even when the effect of such silencing rhetoric is not entirely successful, women “still have to pay a very high price for being heard” (Beard 2015, 810).

In our case example, of one short-lived discrete feminist campaign against well-known local beer advertisements, the online responses we collected contained relatively few instances of the extreme kinds of violent abuse reported by individual women with high public profiles – probably because the comments in our corpus were mostly obtained from public sites that were likely moderated. Yet, in this comprehensive corpus in which over 90% of all online comments were negative towards the feminist campaign, what struck us was the

overall impact of the pervasive repetition of dismissive, trivializing and othering responses. To show some sense of this, we have reproduced many examples.

A powerful feature of the corpus overall, was the simultaneous ‘doing’ and denying of sexism. Consistent with Angela McRobbie’s observations about the erosion of feminist gains post the 1970s and 1980s, a dominant way in which the sexism of the advertisements was denied was through the espousal of postfeminist values around individual choice and empowerment. Almost without exception, the responses interpreted the feminist critique of the advertisements through a focus on the individual women actors, and failed to draw any connection between their ostensive choices (which the comments tended to laud and defend) and the wider impact of such narrow sexually stereotyped representations of women. As feminists were demonized through familiar tropes as crazy, ugly, killjoy, lesbian threats, and dismissed as out-of-touch ‘others’ beyond the bounds of a normal majority, caring about sexism was rendered as extreme and/or passé. Yet, ironically, in the process of denying that sexism was a problem, many of the comments performed sexism through recycling sexist denigrations and in some cases sexually aggressive abuse.

Hostility and abuse towards women speaking out in public places is of course nothing new (Beard 2015). What is relatively new are the affordances of the internet---immediacy, anonymity, audience, absence of accountability---that enable what Franks (2010, 3) identifies as the “amplification, aggregation and permanence of harm” that add weight to sexist and misogynist censure. As she argues, broadcasting sexist views on the public spaces of the internet, whether or not it is aimed at particular people, sends a message to all women about the potential to experience derision and vitriol should they challenge gender stereotypes and masculine heteronormative privileges, or otherwise endorse feminist views. The mundane public sexism of our corpus– which imbricates both postfeminist denials of sexism and

denigrating and demonizing sexist representations of feminists – shows a hostile reception for women voicing feminist concerns at this time. While Leonie Morris, the spokeswoman for Auckland Feminist Action, who was directly targeted in some of the comments, is a seasoned campaigner who has continued to speak in public, it is notable that the campaign did not at the time garner wide and outspoken public support. We argue that the cumulative effect of this sort of visible sexist response to campaigns like this plays a role in suppressing other feminist voices. Thus even for women who have not directly been targeted by online abuse, it could be seen to operate as a warning that limits the field of possibility for challenging sexism within mediated culture.

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Helen Madden for assistance with data analysis and feedback on an earlier version of the paper, Grace Single for assistance with data coding, Anna Gatland for help with data collection, Ginny Braun and Margie Wetherell for comments on elements of the data; and members of the School of Psychology's Psychology and Social Issues group, and in particular Octavia Calder-Dawe, for helpful discussions around the data and analysis in progress. This study was supported in part by the Marsden Fund Council from New Zealand Government funding, administered by the Royal Society of New Zealand, and by the University of Auckland.