



Gendered discourses and pejorative language use: An analysis of YouTube comments on *We should all be feminists*

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ABSTRACT

Guided by Discourse and Ideology theory, this paper focuses on how authors of the YouTube comments on Chimamanda Adichie's talk '*We should all be feminists*' use pejoratives or insults to reinforce or challenge certain gender ideologies and practices. Since feminism is already a thorny issue, Chimamanda's call for *all* to be feminists is seen as controversial and, thus, a recipe for inflammatory language use. Under the protection of social media anonymity, some participants therefore attack her, gender groups (or characteristics) or individuals who oppose their views. Emerging themes include perceiving feminism as toxic and women's success as a potential threat to male ego, among others. The paper concludes that reducing the discussion of such important social issues to insults does not only reify the dichotomy between men and women, which feminism seeks to bridge, but it also waters down the value and relevance of the socio-cultural issues being discussed.

1. Introduction

Studies on gender as a social variable on internet (social media) usage abounds (see for example [Bamman et al., 2014](#); [Sun et al., 2015](#); [van Slyke et al., 2002](#); [Zhang et al., 2013](#)). Others have looked at the use of language in the social media along gender lines (e.g., [Bouvier, 2022](#); [Coates, 2019](#); [Felmlee et al., 2020](#); [Hosseini and Tammimy, 2015](#); [Nadim and Fladmoe, 2019](#)). These studies often focus on how men and women tend to use language in this space (e.g., [Hosseini and Tammimy, 2015](#)) or how men and, especially, women are targeted in specific gendered ways (e.g., [Felmlee et al., 2020](#); [KhosraviNik and Esposito, 2018](#); [Hardaker and McGlashan, 2016](#)). This study aims at contributing to the intersection between gender and language use in the social media space by analysing how the use of pejoratives (irrespective of whether they are used by a male or female) to insult gender groups, group characteristics, or individuals reflect, reinforce, or challenge certain gender ideologies and practices. This is done through an analysis of YouTube comments on Chimamanda Adichie's TEDx talk *We should all be feminists*. While the talk provides useful insights into gender norms and practices from Africa (an area which has received less attention), her call for *all* (both women *and* men) to be feminists is seen as controversial and, thus, a recipe for inflammatory language use. This is so because the issue of feminism is already a thorny-one, evidence of which is seen in how some participants attack her and other feminists merely based on the title without considering the content of the video.

It is worth noting how, according to [KhosraviNik and Esposito \(2018\)](#), institutions have failed to treat issues of gendered hostility as hate speech because of the popular assumption that gender equality has been substantively achieved (see also [Lazar, 2007](#)). As I shall discuss in [Section 6.1](#), this is, indeed, an assumption which in itself engenders pejorative language use. I use pejoratives (and insults interchangeably) in this study to mean linguistic and paralinguistic forms (e.g., upper-case) that have negative connotations or affect and are intended to denigrate, disparage, or belittle the target. This is similar to [KhosraviNik and Esposito's \(2018: 49\)](#) use of flaming as "usually characterized by profanity, insults, negative affect, and 'typographic energy' such as capital letters and exclamation marks" and which entails "swearing or using otherwise offensive language" (cf. [Jane, 2015](#)).

To properly contextualise the study, a brief background of Chimamanda and her TEDx talk is provided in [Section 2](#). [Section 3](#) provides additional context by situating the study within the literature on gender/sexuality and language and social media. [Section 4](#) focuses on van Dijk's theory of Discourse and Ideology as a useful framework for a study that does not only revolve around gender ideologies and practices, but also one in which the discussion of those ideologies becomes akin to conflicts, often creating an US/THEM dichotomy. Methods are presented in [Section 5](#), followed by the findings and discussion in [Section 6](#) and the conclusion in [Section 7](#).

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2. Background

TEDx is a grassroots initiative of TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) which aims at researching and discovering “ideas worth spreading” (<https://www.ted.com/about/programs-initiatives/tedx-program>). As a hallmark of TEDx, their speakers share ideas that spark conversations in their communities, including an online community. One of the speakers whose talk has generated a lot of discussion in the online community and beyond is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a renowned Nigerian novelist, a feminist, and a public speaker. Her works focus on issues of gender, race, and identity constructions generally.

With over 994,000 Facebook followers, and having received over 70 awards, honors and nominations from across the globe for her contribution to African literature and gender advocacy, Ms Adichie is perceived as one of the influential African women of today. Social media posts, either by her or on her by others, often generate a lot of debate. Indeed, her 2012 TEDx talk *We Should All Be Feminists*, which was later published as a book (Adichie, 2015), received critical acclaim and started a worldwide conversation about feminism (see also McLoughlin, 2021). The talk provides useful insights into an African perspective of feminism and how this runs counter to what ‘true’ feminism is or should be, and more importantly, why we should *all* be feminists. For instance, she attempts to correct a popular misconception that feminism is anti-men, ‘un-African’, and that it only describes a group of unhappy women who cannot find husbands (see also Atanga, 2013, for a discussion of what constitutes ‘African’ feminism). She, instead, reiterates the major tenet of feminism as encompassing the fight for equality between males and females. But Atanga (2013) provides a useful summary of how the so-called ‘Western’ feminism has often been criticized for over-emphasizing male privileges and female subordination – something which resonates with Chimamanda’s concern about how masculinity also constrains men (see Diabah, 2022). With several personal (and other) experiences of gender inequalities in Nigeria, she advocates for rethinking how girls and boys are socialized into thinking and behaving in certain gendered ways. Again, in addressing the issue of why we should *all* be feminists, she problematizes how masculinity has been conceptualized (e.g., by teaching men to be afraid of expressing fear, weakness, and vulnerability) and describes it as a ‘cage’ for men. Thus, pursuing gender equality should be of interest, not *only* for women, but *also* for men.

Whereas some see her as a source of empowerment for women, others perceive her assertiveness and strong views on issues of gender and feminism as threats to sociocultural norms and values, and it is against this background that the participants make their arguments and counterarguments. This paper however looks at the pejoratives or insults (not necessarily directed at her) arising out of the various discussions generated by her talk.

3. Gendered discourses and the social media

Following Sunderland’s definition of ‘gendered’ to mean “gender is already a part of the ‘thing’ which gendered describes” (2004: 20–21), my use of ‘gendered discourses’ in this study refers to discourses that potentially constitute gendered social practices; or more broadly, when communication is influenced or shaped by gendered social practices (see Wodak, 2008; Litosseliti, 2006; Sunderland, 2004). In the words of Sunderland (2004), this suggests that “something to do with gender is going on” (p.21). Thus, Chimamanda’s talk about feminism and masculinities is already gendered, and so are the social media discussions (including the use of pejoratives or insults) unpacking the truth, or otherwise, of her claims. This also brings to the fore Herring and Stoerger’s (2014) question of whether computer mediated communication (CMC) alters deeply rooted cultural patterns of gender inequality, or whether such patterns are carried over into on-line communication, and the role of anonymity in these. They argue that “the body of evidence taken as a whole runs counter to the claim that gender is invisible

or irrelevant in CMC, or that CMC equalizes gender-based power and status differentials” (p. 568). For instance, with support from studies that report of the use of aggressive tactics by men towards women and participants suspected of being female (see Herring, 2003), they raise the question of how one can talk about a level-playing field (a blurring of gender boundaries) when indeed gender disparity persists even in an anonymous medium that allegedly renders gender invisible. But of course, the question of anonymity in online communication is complex because traces of identity can sometimes be found, e.g., through the linguistic forms employed and other modes of communication (Hosseini and Tammimy, 2015; Hardaker and McGlashan, 2016; see KhosraviNik and Esposito, 2018 for a discussion of online anonymity as also encompassing a mere perception of communication on virtual spaces, partly influenced by physical separation, as against face-to-face communication). Indeed, online anonymity has been widely recognized in the literature as one of the factors that boost online hostility (KhosraviNik and Esposito, 2018; Herring and Stoerger, 2014; Nadim and Fladmoe, 2019). Hardaker and McGlashan (2016), for instance, note how it is often abused for the purposes of causing others distress without repercussion, an example of which is online misogyny.

Almost a decade from Herring and Stoerger’s (2014) study, and right at the heart of talks about gender empowerment and activism, research on a popular Ghanaian quiz shows very stereotypical representation of the female contestants on various social media platforms (Agyepong and Diabah, 2021). Through the analysis of various linguistic and *para*-linguistic strategies, the authors show how the social media posts (from both males and females) represent women not just as unfit for science and math, but also as “usurpers who need to be kept where they ‘belong’”, i.e., the kitchen (Agyepong and Diabah, 2021: 287). The use of such gendered pejoratives was considered not only as demoralizing for the girls (as reported by the Chief Gender Officer for Gender Watch Ghana), but they also “spit in the face of the significant progress women have made over the years to break through the glass ceiling” (Agyepong and Diabah, 2021: 287). From their study on misogyny in the cybersphere, KhosraviNik and Esposito (2018) attribute online misogyny to women’s precarity in the cybersphere. This is linked to the argument that women’s participation in the cybersphere violates gendered social norms. In other words, “being less recognizable and, therefore, less powerful, their active participation in the online public sphere may easily translate into a non-compliance with the social norms of gender ideology, and trigger harmful, sexualized speech to restore the order” (p.53). The awareness of this precarity is largely achieved and maintained through harmful speech acts targeted at women. Felmlee et al (2020) similarly argue that online aggression toward women is aimed at reinforcing traditional feminine norms and stereotypes. Taking the stereotype on beauty norms, for instance, they indicate how tweets which enforce these stereotypes are particularly negative, since they “aim to promote traditional, cultural beliefs about femininity, such as beauty ideals, and they shame victims by accusing them of falling short of these standards” (202: 16). These messages suggest that there is a proper way of ‘doing gender’ (see West and Zimmerman, 1987), and women should therefore “align themselves with these traditional images of beauty, sweetness, and innocence” (Felmlee et al., 2020: 25). They also argue that gendered insults like ‘bitch’, ‘slut’, ‘whore’ reinforce feminine stereotypes and significantly inflate the negative sentiment of tweets.

On their part, Nadim and Fladmoe’s (2019) work on gender differences in online harassment experiences in Norway indicated that, contrary to popular expectations, more men experienced online harassment than women. They attribute this to men receiving more comments directed at their opinions and attitudes, although both men and women were equally exposed to harassment directed towards group characteristics. This and other studies such as Sánchez et al. (whose study shows a prevalence rate of 18.4 % males, as against 16.8 % females, being targets of Personal Sexual Cybervictimization; 2017: 177) suggest that both males and females (including group characteristics) can be targets of various kinds of abuses – examples of which can be found in my study.

All these can be attributed to how the social media provides large public platforms, which are largely unregulated for content, to circulate and perpetuate disparaging sexist comments. As rightly pointed out by Bouvier (2022), unlike in the past where the analysis of discourse patterns and ideologies revealed “ideologies in texts disseminated to a population in a ‘top-down’ manner by monolithic centralized media institutions” (p.179), the social media landscape provides space for tracing dominant ideologies from various angles. This is a pluridirectional space in which all users can participate in the creation and dissemination of content, and where content is more fragmented, moving in more complex and shifting ways (see also KhosraviNik and Esposito (2018)). I therefore agree with KhosraviNik and Esposito’s (2018) argument that the proliferation of the largely unregulated user-generated content has been one of the major drawbacks of social media, as it contributes to the increasing incidence of cyberhate. Such uncivil language creates polarizations considered as part of the perpetuation of the US/THEM dichotomy (Bouvier, 2022; see also Section 4).

4. Discourse and ideology

This paper generally follows a critical discourse analytic approach to the study of gender and language (see Lazar, 2005, 2007; Litosseliti, 2006). It is particularly guided by van Dijk’s (1995a, 1995b, 2004, 2006) theory of Discourse and Ideology, in which discourse analysis is seen as ideological analysis (van Dijk, 2004). Because discourses do ideological work (Fairclough et al., 2011), “ideologies are expressed and generally reproduced in the social practices of their members, and more particularly acquired, confirmed, changed and perpetuated through discourse” (van Dijk, 2006: 115). In other words, people communicate their beliefs, ideas, and values as members of a group through their speech or writing; and these beliefs, values etc. can be uncovered through a close reading of the text (either spoken or written) – bearing in mind the context of the text, including the social practices that give rise to the text (Fairclough, 1992). This is similar to Chandler and Munday’s (2011) description of ideological analysis in the Oxford Reference Dictionary of Media Communication as encompassing “the investigation of embedded values, beliefs, biases, and assumptions within a specific text, in some domain of discourse, or in social practices within a particular cultural context, and of the motivations and power relations underlying these” (2011: no page).

As van Dijk (1995a) rightly observes, ideologies show a polarizing structure between US (our group) and THEM (other groups) based on certain group interests (see also Bouvier, 2022). For example, feminists may see themselves as lacking equal rights in the family, access to education, among others; but anti-feminists and male chauvinists may think otherwise (something which is a recurring issue in my data). From this self-serving nature of ideologies, they become akin to questions of power, conflicts, competition, and social antagonisms (Persson and Neto, 2018). This means that ideologies are often involved in social conflicts between members of opposing groups (van Dijk, 1995a) and, as such, they create room for pejoratives or insults to be used. Language, therefore, becomes the domain of dispute “where ideological clashes, social struggles and structural contradictions take place” (Persson and Neto, 2018: 280; see also Lacerda, 2015). Because there is a ‘positive self’ and a ‘negative other’ perception (van Dijk, 2004), a speaker or writer is prone to using insulting language to represent the *Other* for opposing their views. While much of such pejoratives or insults may be geared towards groups or group characteristics (e.g., feminists or male chauvinists), there are others that target individuals for expressing opposing views or views considered to define them as members of the *Other* group. This approach is therefore useful in analysing the gendered pejoratives or insults in the YouTube discussion of Chimamanda’s talk *We should all be feminists* – considering that uncivil language can fester because the social media landscape provides space for all users to create and disseminate content in a *largely unregulated* manner (Bouvier, 2022). Indeed, the call in the title for *all* to be feminists is even enough to create

tension and anger (e.g., from anti-feminists); and as some of the participants rightly observe, some people begin their comments with insults without even watching the video to know Chimamanda’s line of argument.

5. Methods and analytical underpinning

Data for this study were sourced from YouTube comments on Chimamanda’s TEDx talk *We should all be feminists*, from May to September 2021. The talk, which was first posted by TEDx on YouTube on April 2013 (see Adichie, 2013), had generated a total of 21, 541 comments and over 7 million views by the end of September 2021 (note that this huge number for comments covers all entries, some of which are just emojis, tagging other people etc.). After reading through all comments, 59 comments which address my research aim (see Section 1) were purposively selected for further analysis (but 30 have been cited here as examples because the rest point to similar themes). These include gendered pejoratives or insults – where a gendered pejorative or insult here refers to a comment which is aimed at insulting Chimamanda, because she is a woman or because of her feminist views, or to someone (whether male or female) for expressing views considered to be gendered. I also considered comments targeted at women and men in general, as well as those targeted at specific gender groups or group characteristics (e.g., feminists, anti-feminists, male chauvinists). In other words, I considered all pejorative/insulting comments that targeted specific people and gender groups or group characteristics in ways that reinforce or challenge certain gender ideologies and practices.

While my focus was not to analyze posts from females vs posts from males, it is important to mention that some participants directly self-identified as male, female, feminist (e.g., ‘us women’) and others just aligned their views with particular gender groups (e.g., using words like ‘them’ [as against ‘us’] when referring to men in a discussion of male/female privileges suggests the person identifies as female; OR using sentences like ‘we fought the wars for *them* ... we make your house, everything around you was made by a *man*’ suggests the person identifies as male). These were useful in discussing the US-THEM dichotomy.

It is also worth noting that although Chimamanda’s talk was based on perspectives and experiences from Africa (but applicable to other contexts), I cannot claim that the comments are also African-centered because it was difficult to categorize them into those from Africans and those from non-Africans. It was only in few cases that participants clearly indicated where they come from (some of whom were Africans). However, some participants also made references to Africa (but it was not clear whether they themselves are Africans).

In addressing how certain gender ideologies, norms and stereotypes are reflected, reinforced, or challenged through the use of pejorative language, I considered discourse analysis as ideological analysis (van Dijk, 2004). As van Dijk rightly points out, “the point of ideological discourse analysis is not merely to discover underlying ideologies, but to systematically link structures of discourse with structures of ideologies” (1995a: 143). This can be done by analysing the expressions (including *para*-linguistic forms) that point to people’s opinions (e.g., about ‘Others’). It is often the case that ingroup members will choose (para-)linguistic forms that describe them positively and ‘Others’ (their ‘enemies’) negatively. In line with van Dijk’s (1995a, 1995b, 2004, 2006) approach, therefore, I offer an analysis of discourse structures and examine how they reinforce or challenge certain gender ideologies. I focus on (para-)linguistic forms and devices such as allusion, metaphor, simile, sarcasm, irony, rhetorical questions, capitalization, as well as discourse semantics properties like implication, presupposition, and lexicalization, which are useful for ideological discourse analysis.

The findings are discussed in the following section. Pseudonyms, consisting of the initials of participants, have been used.

6. Results and discussion

This paper set out to investigate how the use of certain pejoratives or insults (including para-linguistic strategies) reflects, reinforces, or challenges certain gender ideologies and practices. The emerging themes are discussed below.

6.1. Tensions with gender (in)equality

Key among the YouTube comments on the TEDx talk *We should all be feminists* (Adichie, 2013) is the feminist ideology of gender inequality. Indeed, this forms the basis for the talk – hence, a call for equal rights and treatment. But as already indicated, because ideologies show a polarizing structure between US and THEM (e.g., whereas feminists may see themselves as lacking equal rights in the family, anti-feminists may think otherwise), they often become akin to conflicts and social antagonisms between members of opposing groups or people with opposing views (van Dijk, 1995a; Persson and Neto, 2018). This, therefore, creates room for insults and other pejoratives to be used, examples of which are discussed below (see Adichie, 2013 for the data):

Example 1

- a. CS: We need equality. Not female privilege. Not male privilege. Equality.
- b. AC: Where is my female privilege? lmao I want it
- c. CVA: @AC... **Observe a little bit and reflect with your tiny brain, if you are capable to do so.** Then you will find your privilege.
- d. FR: @CVA. **Pathetic little patriarchal dwarf!** Do you feel better minimizing other people? Do feel bigger then? Your comment is just a very fine example for **toxic masculinity**. Congratulation!

Example 2

- a. DS: **The reason why men are so hostile towards feminism is because feminism seeks the end of male supremacy and male privilege.** When you have privilege, you don't want to give it up ... The realization that **we benefit from the structural oppression of women is too much for many of us to handle ... I'm proud to be a feminist** and to stand with women as they continue the fight for equality.
- b. JC: @DS If you think women don't have a ton of privileges that men don't then, **you're a fucking fool.** I think there are privileges associated with both sexes why focus on just the ones that men have?

Comments in both Examples (1) and (2) touch on the issue of gender inequality, the major ideology that drives the feminist movement (or so we are expected to believe). Lazar (2007) argues that there is an “ideological structure of gender that privileges men as a social group, giving them what Connell (1995) terms a ‘patriarchal dividend’, in terms of access to symbolic, social, political, and economic capital” (p.146). It is in line with these understandings that CS, for instance, reiterates the core mandate of feminism Chimamanda talked about (1a). However, because the feminist ideology of inequality is a contested one, it creates room for inflammatory language use. AC's sarcastic rhetorical question (“where is my female privilege?”), 1b) in response to CS' comment generates more direct personal attacks and counterattacks from other participants (see 1c and 1d). Through her use of “lmao” (an acronym for the slang ‘laughing my ass off’), AC considers the existence of a female privilege ridiculous. In other words, it is non-existent. By this she aligns herself with and reinforces the feminist ideology of gender inequality - something which underscores an US/THEM dichotomy between females and males. It is her alliance with this view that makes CVA attack her intelligence (1c). CVA's statement may superficially mean “if you pay more attention, then you will see your female privileges”, suggesting that feminism has probably outlived its relevance (KhosraviNik and Esposito, 2018; Gamble, 2006). Lazar (2005), for

instance, expresses the fear that “once certain equality indicators are [believed to have been] achieved by women, feminism is considered to have outlived its purposes and ceases to be of relevance” (p.17), despite the fact that there is still “subtle sexism” (p.20). KhosraviNik and Esposito (2018: 52) similarly argue that this widespread assumption that gender equality has been substantively *achieved* leaves a *residue* of sexism in popular culture, and this may account for the reluctance to discuss sexist speech in terms of hate speech.

The depth of CVA's insult is, however, seen when we consider together the description of AC's brain as “tiny” and the conditional clause “if you are capable to do so”. Note that the condition for the realization of the proposition expressed in the main clause (“you will find your privilege”) is AC's ability to observe a little and reflect – but will her “tiny brain” be able to do that? In other words, CVA's sarcasm implies that because AC has a tiny brain, she is incapable of observing and reflecting on the fact that women have privileges, an argument which does not only challenge the ideology of gender inequality, but also blurs the lines between US and THEM. The counterattack from FR (“pathetic little patriarchal dwarf!”; 1d) positions her as supporting the feminist ideology of gender inequality. By describing CVA as a “patriarchal dwarf”, FR indirectly argues that CVA's views are suggestive of male supremacy, something which is at the heart of the feminist quest for equal rights and treatment. However, considering that the word ‘dwarf’ already entails ‘short’, ‘small’ or ‘little’, describing CVA further as little and pathetic diminishes his status as a man, and likewise his views.

In Example (2a), DS (who identifies as a male and a feminist) attempts an explanation of why male chauvinists detest equality – the desire to keep holding on to their privileges. This, therefore, makes the discourses against women's quest for equality part of a male conspiracy or ploy to keep the gender order in place because it favours them. JC's insult “you're a fucking fool” (2b) is however intended to discredit DS' accusation because he believes “there are privileges associated with both sexes”. These tensions or “struggles” (cf. Fairclough, 1989, p. 28)) which either reify or blur the US/THEM gender dichotomy are indeed always part of competing gender ideologies in any society (Bouvier, 2022). They also reflect how social media content moves in complex and shifting ways (Bouvier, 2022).

In a similar example, a comment from someone (who identifies as a male) which supports feminist ideologies attracts various comments, some of which criticize him for his views. The comment is reproduced in Example (3a), with some responses in (b) and (c).

Example 3

- a. JJ: Frankly, I feel ashamed because I, being a man, did a lot of those things that she mentioned. Now I cannot change the society, but I can definitely change myself. At least, I will try to. And I will raise my son and daughter appropriately, as individuals.
- b. CM: You shouldn't listen to them, we fought the wars for them ... we make your house, everything around you was made by a man. **AND YOU FEEL BAD FOR THEM, shame on you!**
- c. RA: RL if one man making one comment about how he will raise his children makes you ashamed he is man like you then **your sense of self must be fragile like a tiny little hollowed egg shell.**

By arguing that he feels ashamed for behaving in ways that undercut the spirit of gender equality, JJ was vilified by CM (“shame on you!”), b) because he (CM) believes in male supremacy – “everything around you was made by a man” (b). Also worth noting is how CM dichotomizes the relationship between men and women in ways that set them against each other (men equals US, positive self-representation; women equals THEM, negative other-representation; see van Dijk, 1995a). He does so through the use of pronouns such as “we” (men) and “them” (women, feminists), and as Bouvier (2022) rightly observes from a feminist critical discourse studies perspective, such pronouns are very commonly used in CDA to express and manipulate social relations. Although it is

not clear if RA's comment in (c) is a direct response to CM's comment (there was no name with the initials 'RL' in the thread), this attack is still worth considering because it castigates men (like CM) who criticize JJ for his comments. The depth of the insult is seen in the use of the simile "your sense of self must be fragile *like* a tiny little hollowed egg shell" (c). The target's ego or self-esteem is compared to not just an eggshell, but one that is tiny, little and hollow. Indeed, putting the synonyms *tiny* and *little* together creates a vivid image of something that is almost non-existent (note that in Examples 1c and 1d, CVA and FR also use the diminutives *tiny* and *little* to belittle their targets, something which is common in social media flaming, [KhosraviNik and Esposito, 2018](#); [Jane, 2015](#)). Additionally, this eggshell, which is already fragile, is considered hollow, which can make breaking it much easier. This therefore reinforces the image of this man's alleged low self-esteem. By this insult, RA upholds the feminist ideology of inequality that Chimamanda raises in her talk. Through the discourse semantics property of implications (see [van Dijk, 1995b](#)), a deeper understanding of RA's insult can be arrived at by juxtaposing it with the discourses around insecure masculinity (see [Diabah, 2020](#)), where a man feels threatened by women's independence (see [Section 6.4](#) for further discussion). By raising girls and boys equally, there will be no male supremacy, and as such, men who depend on this "patriarchal dividend" ([Connell, 2005: 79](#)) for their survival or to boost their egos will have them (egos) easily maimed like breaking "a tiny little hollowed egg shell".

6.2. Feminism as a toxic movement?

People, especially in social media spaces, often make a distinction between true feminism (the advocacy of women's rights based on the equality of the sexes) and toxic feminism (creating a false perception of feminism, e.g., through discriminatory attitudes or hostility towards men) - see [Atanga \(2013\)](#) for some reviews. But there are others who also believe that everything feminism is toxic, and as such, a call for *all* to be feminists is a recipe for gendered pejoratives. This anti-feminist discourse is captured in the following comments in Example 4:

Example 4

- FM: We should all be part of a **toxic movement** that has lied its way all throughout history till now? Wow what a **"brilliant" idea**.
- TSV: The **misandry** in this video is **insane**.
- AP: **a bunch of betas** in this comment section, **feminism is satanic**. If you say you disagree and you're a man, you're trying to **get laid**.
- TV: This woman Ngozi Adichie is **a total Lunatic**, - and all the many pure **nonsensical statements** she makes in this Presentation are absurd and astounding.
- SS: "We should all be **apes**"

Without considering the contents of the video, some participants in the comments section attack the notion of feminism and those who support it (a, c, e). For instance, FM describes feminism as toxic and therefore questions the call for *all* to get involved (his use of a rhetorical question here is important). The sarcasm in his comment is highlighted through his ironic statement "what a 'brilliant' idea" (also note the use of the scare quotes). It is obviously not a brilliant idea to be part of a movement that is considered "toxic". The so-called toxicity of feminism is also seen in how TSV describes Chimamanda's views about feminism as "misandry" (i.e., anti-men), hence a reflection of insanity (b) – this is similar to Geisler's (2004) argument that 'Western' feminism focusses on "fighting against men" (p. 9, cited in [Atanga, 2013: 303](#)). TV expresses similar concerns in a much stronger way, and with more derogatory terms, when he describes Chimamanda as "a total lunatic" for making "pure nonsensical statements" (d). By their comments, these participants use pejoratives to challenge the feminist ideology of inequality.

On his part, AP does not only perceive feminism as satanic (implying that it is evil), but he also sees its supporters as "a bunch of betas" (i.e.,

second-class citizens or inferior, c), something which befits women – the reason why any man who disagrees with his comment is described as "trying to get laid". Worth noting here is the passivity of the construction. Thus, this is a denigrating comment that suggests unmanliness or inferiority. SS, on the other hand, substitutes being a feminist (what is stated in Chimamanda's title) with being an ape in his disparaging comment in (e). By this metaphor, SS suggests that feminists are less human (and since apes are closer to humans than any other animal, I believe it makes this pejorative even more painful, i.e., *almost* human). This indirectly questions Chimamanda's call for all to be feminists and provides a reason for it not to be complied with.

In all, these comments align with [van Dijk's \(1995a, 2004\)](#) argument about positive self and negative other representations – representations which perpetuate an anti-men discourse. AP, for instance, uses insulting language (both directly and indirectly) to represent the 'Other' in a negative light. While much of these insults are geared towards the feminist group and/or its characteristics, there are others that target individuals for expressing opposing views or views considered to define them as members of the 'Other' (feminist) group, just as AP sees men who disagree with the view that feminism is satanic as "trying to get laid".

6.3. Women and decency in dressing

Decency in dressing is one of the ideals of femininity in many cultures. While it is expected of everyone (whether male or female) to show some decency in their appearance, it is practically perceived as though it is a requirement for women. In Ghana, for example, when someone is referred to as a responsible girl, this includes the feminine ideals of hard-work, submissiveness, engaging in domestic duties (like cooking, cleaning etc) and *dressing properly* (see [Fiaveh et al., 2015](#) for similar comments). Indeed, some research on sexual violence have shown the perpetuation of a 'blame-the-victim' discourse in which female rape victims are accused of indecent dressing, which may have lured 'innocent' men into committing the act (see [Clark, 1998](#); [Diabah, 2013](#)).

Yet, one of the feminist ideologies is independence – including that of women's bodies and what they do with them ([Ampofo et al., 2004](#); see also [Jewkes and Morrell, 2010](#)), aspects of which may be in contradiction of cultural prescriptions of decency. An example of this was echoed in Chimamanda's talk, and this generated a lot of discussion. Among the comments were pejoratives that either reinforce or challenge the notions of 'keeping oneself' (i.e., fidelity) and 'decent' dressing as ideals of femininity (note that Chimamanda has been criticized by McLoughlin [2021] for allegedly asserting some connection between feminism and appearance by foregrounding makeup wearing and fashion, among others, as conditions for women's fulfilment). KE quotes Chimamanda's comment in Example (5a), which generates the responses in (b-d):

Example 5

- KE: ... "close your legs! cover yourself! we make them (girls) feel as though by being born female they're already guilty of something" WOW
- RL: Shouldn't you cover your legs though? **Isn't that common sense?** And yes, **if you don't use your common sense, you ARE guilty.**
- KE: @RL. Hello! Are you implying that **men are animals with no self-control that have to JUMP on a "prey" because her legs aren't covered?** I hope not.
- PA: @KE. Teach your daughters to exercise their open leg rights well. They'll bring you a lot of medals they'll win. You can as well leave your doors open since the thief has no right to steal, **"wise woman."**

In response to KE's original post in (a), RL (b) draws on what may be considered as a common-sense ideology discourse – it is common sense for someone not to expose sensitive parts of her (or his) body. This view

of what constitutes common sense aligns with the interpretation of 'common sense' associated with Gramsci (see for instance Hall et al., 1978). According to van Dijk, the notion of 'common sense' associated with Gramsci encompasses "what social members 'take for granted'" (1995b: 245). This also aligns with the principles of hegemony – that hegemonic beliefs are common-sensical (cf. Gramsci). From a Feminist Critical Discourse Perspective, Lazar (2007) expresses a similar view when she argues that:

Gender ideology is hegemonic in that it often does not appear as domination at all, appearing instead as largely consensual and acceptable to most in a community. The winning of consent and the perpetuation of the otherwise tenuous relation of dominance (Gramsci, 1971) are largely accomplished through discursive means, especially in the ways ideological assumptions are constantly re-enacted and circulated through discourse as commonsensical and natural. The taken-for-grantedness and normalcy of such knowledge is what mystifies or obscures the power differential and inequality at work (Lazar, 2007: 147)

This common-sense ideology makes the quest for women to "cover up" appear unquestionable as it emphasizes cherished values. It is based on this common-sense ideology that defaulting women "ARE guilty" (note RL's use of upper-case for emphasis, what Jane [2015] refers to as "typographic energy", p.66). This aligns with van Dijk's argument that "the most fundamental way of establishing a distinction between THEM and US is not only to describe ourselves in benevolent terms and them in negative terms, but to emphasize that the Others violate the very norms and values we hold dear" (1995a: 156; my emphasis).

Like McLoughlin (2021), KE deconstructs RL's text, by problematizing that which is passed off as 'common sense' (Lazar, 2007 also argues that irrespective of the hegemonic nature of prevailing gender ideologies, they are contestable). That is, KE questions this common-sense ideology by highlighting the feminist ideology of equal human rights (c). She believes that women have the right to their bodies and to how they dress. Through a combination of linguistic and paralinguistic strategies like indirection, metaphor, and rhetorical questions (which work together as a form of a gendered pejorative), she constructs men as people with no self-control. For instance, her question in (c) can best be interpreted as a rhetorical question because the answer is embedded in the question. Her use of the verb 'JUMP' (including the upper-case for emphasis or prominence, what Bouvier calls "shouting", 2022: 191) to describe the action of such men and the noun 'prey' (vulnerable and defenseless) for the women/girls indeed suggests that she sees such men (and men in general) as not only lacking self-control, but they are metaphorically seen as 'animals'. That is, it is only an 'animal', with no self-control, that can "JUMP" on a vulnerable or defenseless person. Her rhetorical question and the following statement ("I hope not") function as a form of indirection which can let her off the hook for using gendered pejoratives – after all, she is only asking whether they are animals, and she hopes it is not what she suspects. These tie in with the heteronormative ideology around sex which assumes that women are passive sex objects and potential victims, while men are active sex agents (driven by sexual urges) and potential predators (see Diabah, 2020). But Diabah (2020) also emphasizes the "power of the vagina" which can "make and unmake men" (p.114), an indication of the post-structuralist understanding of diverse subject positionings (Baxter, 2008).

In response to KE's comment in Example (c), PA also makes a comment which is loaded with a lot of linguistic forms and strategies such as metaphor, sarcasm, irony, presupposition, implication, and analogy. First, PA alludes to the feminist ideology of women's rights to their bodies by advising KE to teach her daughters to "exercise their open leg rights" (d). This advice is indeed sarcastic, especially when it is interpreted in the light of the subsequent sentences. For instance, the consequence of exercising this "open leg rights" could be unwanted pregnancy, rape or even contracting sexually transmitted diseases. Ironically, PA sees these as "medals" (which are supposed to be rewards

for great and positive achievements). He also draws on the discourse semantics property of implications and a common-sense ideology when he makes an analogy between women's so-called rights to their bodies and stealing. The implication of his statement is that although the thief has no right to take what does not belong to him, even if it is exposed (which may be the right of the owner), they do it anyway. So common sense should tell people not to always insist on their rights.

On the back of this discussion, calling her a "wise woman" is ironic and insulting. It presupposes that it is only a fool who will expose her body and argue that it is her right when the dangers are glaring. van Dijk (1995b: 273) notes that because presuppositions "pertain to knowledge or other beliefs that are not asserted, but simply assumed to be true by the speaker, they are able to 'introduce' ideological propositions whose truth is not uncontroversial at all". In this case, PA introduces an anti-feminist discourse whose 'truth' is unquestionable. Indeed, both implications and presuppositions "allow speakers or writers to make claims without actually asserting them" and, presuppositions, in particular, "take specific beliefs for granted although they might not be" (van Dijk, 1995b: 273). This creates room for the perpetuation of ideologies about social norms, values, group rights and interests.

6.4. Women's success as a potential threat to the male ego

One of Chimamanda's statements in the talk which has become a popular quote in the YouTube conversation thread is "we teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller, we say to girls you can have ambition- but not too much, you should aim to be successful but not too successful otherwise you will threaten the man ... a man who would be intimidated by me is exactly the kind of man that I would have no interest in". In one of the conversation threads, CC shares her personal experience in the light of Chimamanda's comments above (see Example 6a). This generates the responses in (b-d), some of which are gendered pejoratives.

Example 6

- a. CC: I've been told a lot of times by my teachers and mentors that I'm too ambitious and I will not get married because no man will have me under their roof. Today my career has been all about growth and I'm married. The modern man will love an ambitious woman for all she stands for. Don't ever let your ambition be disregarded because people believe you shouldn't be as successful as your counterpart. Thanks Chimamanda for speaking out!
- b. KJ: ... She [CC] might be married, but her husband is a **feminine man**. Not on the outside but within. This lady is **full boss**, in her relationship. **That's not equality, but rather greed**.
- c. ET: A modern man wants a woman who can live by her own money.
- d. IM: @ET A modern man wants a **mommy-wife** who provides for him because he symbolically **gets stuck in the nurturing womb for ever**. **Men today are not men anymore**.

In response to someone's comment thanking CC for sharing her experience, KJ castigates CC in Example (b). In his view, a married woman who is able to fulfil her ambitions and becomes successful can better be described as a "full boss" in her relationship, thereby emasculating her husband. Using the gendered pejorative "feminine man", KJ constructs CC's husband as unmanly for accommodating the ambitions of his wife. Indeed, such comments reiterate Chimamanda's argument because the reason why CC's husband has been emasculated by KJ is because he has *allowed* his wife to fulfil her ambition and become successful – which contradicts traditional gender norms/practices. This aligns with feminist critical studies which have suggested that "deviations from gender-appropriate norms are policed and contained in the presence of a prevailing discourse of heteronormativity" (Lazar, 2007: 148). Since no man wants to feel emasculated, a woman's success is a potential threat to the male ego. But the discussion here also references the post-structuralist understanding of diverse (and sometimes

complex) subject positionings (Baxter, 2008).

With reference to KJ's interpretation of being ambitious as a sign of greed in women, it may be argued that KJ alludes to the gendered traditional role of men as the breadwinners. If the man is the breadwinner, then a woman's ambition in relation to career progression or success can be interpreted as greediness – after all, it is the man's responsibility to take care of her material needs. Contrary to this implied assertion by KJ, ET argues that “a modern man wants a woman who can live by her own money” (c). Although IM's comments in (d) appear to support ET's argument (which is intended to discredit Chimamanda's argument that men get threatened or emasculated by women's ambitions and success), a critical analysis of the sarcasm in these comments shows otherwise. IM reinforces the gender stereotype that men are the breadwinners. They are therefore not expected to depend on their wives, like a child will depend on his mother for nurturing (but perhaps more conspicuous is the stereotype that women or mothers are nurturers). In other words, what makes a man is his ability to provide for his wife (and family), and not the other way round – note the use of the phrase “a mommy-wife” to suggest that the wife is also playing the role of a mother, the reason why “men today are not men anymore”. So, yes, IM agrees with ET that men of today do not have a problem letting their wives shine or become successful; but that, in fact, is the problem. The problem with letting women follow their passion and become successful is that such men are weaklings who only want “mommy-wives”, instead of fulfilling societal expectations of them as *men*. These comments denigrate not only such ‘liberal’ men, but modern men in general. It positions them not only as babies but also as irresponsible. Bouvier (2022) refers to such language use as ‘hate speech’, in that “it dehumanizes a whole group of people by attributing to them certain fundamental qualities given as inherent to all”, an example of which is “moral and intellectual inferiority or criminality” (p.190). This “aims at the affective level to foster clear polarizations” (Bouvier, 2022: 190), which are evidence of the US vs THEM dichotomy (van Dijk, 1995a). By their pejorative language use, these participants reinforce certain gender norms and stereotypes: men as breadwinners/women as dependents; men as heads of the family/women as subordinates; women as nurturers or providers (an allusion to women's dyadic power in the family).

In Example (7a), MO also quotes an aspect of Chimamanda's argument above. This generates many responses, some of which are captured in (b-i).

Example 7

- a. MO: a man who will be intimidated by me is exactly the kind of man I'd have no interest in.
- b. BB: Maybe it's not that they're “intimidated”. Maybe it's just that **you're an arrogant narcissist with an ego the size of Jupiter.**
- c. PE: They are not intimidated. They are just not interested. **Men prefer young, pretty and fertile women.**
- d. DN: After reading all these comments I think her point is perfectly proven. You can't attack the accuracy of her theory, so it comes down to who want to date her!!! All you persons are just **weak, pathetic, scared and afraid**
- e. RSM: women who think men are threatened by women (for any reason), are **delusional**. you need to watch Kevin Samuels. **Men don't like the arrogance of women who make more money than they do.** Men are not intimidated or threatened by any women for any reason
- f. GA:@RSM isn't it just the male ego that misinterpret and misunderstand the women and call it arrogance? Just because A man feels it's arrogance doesn't necessarily mean so, it might be from bias
- g. IM: @GA Stop projecting! It is us women who cannot respect a man who earns less than us. No woman truly respects a man who is beneath her. Men are not threatened. **It is us women who get totally crazy when men are not superior. Because deep down inside, we cannot stand that equality lie at all.**

- h. IM: @RSM Exactly. It is us women who are so arrogant whenever we feel superior to men. It is us who lose total respect for men when we feel they are beneath us. **The Western woman is the epitome of arrogance and rebellion.**

In Example (b), BB responds to MO by describing her not only as arrogant but also as a narcissist who is too full of herself, giving herself more credit than she deserves. This is further strengthened through hyperbole, as BB metaphorically compares MO's ego to Jupiter (the fifth planet from the sun and the largest in the solar system). Other pejoratives (both direct and indirect) have also been used to reinforce this so-called arrogance associated with feminists and successful women (e, g, h) – something which challenges the traditional gender expectation of women's submission to men. For instance, people who believe that men feel intimidated by women's success instead of viewing it as a source of arrogance are described as delusional (e). IM also believes that because women are unable to stand the “equality lie” (implying women are not really interested in equality but in sustaining the gender order), they become “crazy” (arrogant) when they have a little taste of power or superiority – more like misplaced power (g); and the western woman is the prototypical example of such arrogance and rebellion (h).

On his part, PE casts insinuations that imply that feminists or these so-called successful women are some old, ugly and infertile women who cannot get men for themselves (c). In fact, this alludes to one of the popular perceptions or myths that feminists are a bunch of frustrated women who cannot get husbands, or feminists who simply hate men (see chapter 3 of Anderson, 2020).¹ But of course, this is a perception that people like DN disagree with, as she describes such people as “weak, pathetic, scared and afraid” (d). By these adjectives, DN reinforces Chimamanda's and MO's argument that some men feel intimidated by women's achievements.

From the responses to MO's quotation, women's success (and independence) is generally perceived as making them arrogant and bossy, which is what men detest and not that they feel intimidated or threatened. However, men detest such arrogance and bossiness because these challenge their authority, e.g., as heads of the family. If that is the case, then the question is whether that is not, indeed, a feeling of intimidation or threat? Whilst this may be true, we must also not lose sight of the other perspective – that the so-called arrogance stems from the fact that most women feel uncomfortable when they are seen in the eyes of society as more successful than their husbands (see IM's comment in Example g). IM's use of the US/THEM (women/men) dichotomy in both examples (g) and (h) also highlights what she sees as a deeply entrenched gender belief or unequal power relations between women and men, thus seeing the fight for equality as a “lie” (g). These arguments are reflections of the traditional gender order, the unquestionable and taken-for-granted superiority of men and the subordination of women (see also Lazar, 2005, 2007) – which is also in line with the notions of hegemonic masculinity and femininity (Connell, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Schippers, 2007).

7. Conclusion

This paper set out to analyze gendered discourses and the use of insults and other pejoratives in social media spaces, focusing on YouTube comments on Chimamanda's *We should all be feminists*. The findings show that, by their pejorative language use, participants reinforce as well as challenge certain gender ideologies and practices, often using an “US” vs ‘THEM’ framework (van Dijk, 1995a, 2004; Bouvier, 2022).

¹ For examples, among the myths about feminism are the following quotations: “Feminists are just angry because they can't get laid/boyfriends”, “Feminists are fat/ugly/hairy/lesbians” (See https://geekfeminism.wikia.org/wiki/Myths_about_feminism; <https://medium.com/@beckyroe8400/5-myths-about-feminists-d6fa3dcab732>).

That is, a gender ideology may be reinforced or challenged depending on which side of the US/THEM dichotomy-one belongs. For instance, by supporting Chimamanda's argument against socio-cultural constraints on girls' ambition and success, some participants who support the feminist ideology of gender inequality and the quest for equality challenge the notion of women's subordination to men or their dependence on men. On the other hand, others (subtly) reinforce male superiority by interpreting women's success (or independence) as making them arrogant and rebellious. It must be noted, however, that much of the discussion is tilted towards (subtly) reinforcing gender stereotypes and practices, as well as keeping the gender order and power relations in place: men as breadwinners/women as dependents; men as heads of the family/women as subordinates; women as nurturers, the expectation of women to be 'covered up' in their dressing and be submissive to their male partners. The role of insults and other pejoratives in all these is, of course, to be expected because in the title of the talk (*We should all be feminists*) is a call for all to be part of something that has been viewed negatively – a challenge to gender norms and practices, which have hitherto been part of our common-sense. And social media provides more fertile grounds for such insults to fester (KhosraviNik and Esposito, 2018; Hardaker and McGlashan, 2016; Bouvier, 2022). Because of the anonymity the social media provides, and the fact that it is less regulated for content, people use language to injure the feelings of others in ways that they would ordinarily not be able to do in face-to-face conversations or before Web 2.0. Indeed, Hardaker and McGlashan (2016: 82) rightly note that "users may experience a sense of disinhibition such that they become willing to express opinions online that they would never voice if they knew that those opinions could be attributed to them offline".

Herring and Stoerger (2014) argue that while anonymity (or its close relative, pseudonymity) is often claimed to promote gender equality, this claim is problematic for various reasons. For example, anonymity "reduces social accountability, making it easier for harassers to engage in hostile, aggressive acts" (Herring and Stoerger, 2014: 576). This is shown in how both males and females in this study freely use pejoratives or insults targeted at gender groups, group characteristics, and individuals who oppose their views. Reducing the discussion of such important socio-cultural issues to insults does not only reify the dichotomy between men and women which feminism seeks to bridge, but it also waters down the value or the relevance of the socio-cultural issues being discussed. A more effective way of addressing the issue of gender imbalances in the society (or the lack of it, as argued by some participants) is not by throwing words at each other, but by accommodating, and even encouraging, opposing views in a more civil way. This is key to unearthing deeply-rooted gender ideologies so they can be addressed holistically.

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