

# “Completely incapable of logical thought” Delegitimizing the MeToo Movement in YouTube comment sections

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While the MeToo Movement has generally been accepted as a legitimate response to what was considered endemic sexual harassment and discrimination in Hollywood, its goals and values have nonetheless been questioned and undermined. This study examines the comment sections of two YouTube videos produced by major broadcasting corporations in which the MeToo Movement in Europe is discussed. The comment sections are analysed in terms of expressions of attitude and evaluation, using the Appraisal framework. Through this analysis it is revealed that attitudes expressed in the comments legitimate and normalise anti-feminist ideologies through discursive construction of social norms. Conversely, feminism, as well as immigration, are delegitimized. Commenters delegitimize the MeToo Movement by construing its goals and values as misdirected or insincere. These attitudes are furthermore expressed through dialogically contractive comments, thus constructing them as accepted and matter-of-fact, rather than ideological.

**Keywords:** Appraisal framework, Critical Discourse Analysis, (de)legitimation, gender, ideologies, YouTube comments

## 1. Introduction

When the hashtag #MeToo began trending on Twitter in October 2017, it was widely accepted as a legitimate response to what was considered endemic sexual harassment and discrimination in Hollywood. The MeToo Movement, as it became known, soon spread to other industries, and was used across society to denote support for, and identification with, efforts to expose inequity faced by women in the workplace and elsewhere. As the Movement became global, variations of the hashtag appeared, such as the Spanish #*YoTambién* and the French

#*BalanceTonPorc* ('Denounce your pig'), and numerous lawsuits, resignations, and protests relating to gender-based discrimination occurred. However, as the Movement grew, so too did its critics; media outlets such as *The Guardian* (Kipnis 2018) and *The New York Times* (Merkin 2018) debated whether the movement had gone too far or had not gone far enough, and such arguments soon overflowed into social media. This study is concerned with such online discussions and particularly how the motivations behind the MeToo Movement, and feminism as a whole, could be discursively undermined and delegitimated within them.

Taking the comment sections of two English-language news documentaries posted on YouTube as its data, the study analyses how misogynistic and anti-feminist discourses can be latent in ostensibly benign online communication, particularly through the discursive undermining of feminism. The comment sections of the two documentaries are primarily in English and were posted in September 2018 and April 2019, with the data being collected in October 2019. The videos were posted by major news corporations to public YouTube channels, meaning anyone with access to the site can view and comment on the material.

The documentaries each cover a domestic event related to the MeToo Movement in France and Spain respectively. The first of these documentaries focuses on French attitudes to gender-based harassment following the publication of the infamous *Le Monde* letter. The letter, which among other things defended men's 'right to bother,' was signed by one hundred prominent French women as an act of resistance to the MeToo Movement (Kipnis 2018). The second documentary was produced in the aftermath of a Spanish criminal trial. Known as the *La Manada* rape case, the initial trial was widely criticised due to the court's treatment of the victim and acquittal of the five men accused, which led to unrest across Spain and elsewhere. The MeToo Movement came shortly after the 2015 European migrant crisis, which contributed to a rise in populist parties throughout Europe. As politics became increasingly polarised, progressive policies and agendas (including those related to gender equality) came under heightened scrutiny by conservatives. It was within this socio-political climate that the comments analysed were made.

The study examines how certain linguistic devices discursively delegitimate the motivations of the MeToo Movement in order to rationalise anti-feminist (and anti-immigration) stances. The study is principally concerned with how anti-feminism is reproduced in such a way as to normalise it, and contrastively to delegitimate feminism, particularly in an online space which is not explicitly misogynistic, such as YouTube. As such, it asks the following questions:

1. How are attitudes indexing gender (or other) ideologies discursively constructed in the comment sections?

## 2. How are these attitudes (de)legitimated in the discourse?

In order to illuminate the processes through which gender ideologies are discursively constructed, the comment sections are analysed for features of Appraisal. The Appraisal framework (Martin and White 2005) aims to uncover the implicit subjectivity in writing (and reading) of texts. Appraisal has been applied to the online context in order to examine the interpersonal construction of meaning (Zappavigna 2012, 2017). As a feature of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Appraisal considers meaning as being constructed through the choices made among various “systematic oppositions” (Martin 2018: 3). In choosing one feature of language over another, commenters share information about themselves and their attitudes in context. Appraisal therefore reveals how commenters’ language choices construct anti-feminism and other ideologies as “normal,” in the sense that they adhere to traditional concepts of gender. The construction of ideologies in the discourse is also analysed using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach (Fairclough 1989; van Dijk 1998, 2008; Weiss and Wodak 2003). This study is concerned with how the feminist motivations of the MeToo Movement are (de)legitimated in the discourse. van Dijk’s strategies of (de)legitimation (1998: 234–240) are used to demonstrate how commenters discursively construct the rationales and goals of the MeToo Movement in a negative light and furthermore normalise their own ideological stances. Through examination of the discourse using the Appraisal framework, it is possible to reveal how gender ideologies are (de)legitimated in the comment sections.

## 2. Feminism and anti-feminism in online spaces

Social media has long been recognised for its effectiveness in raising awareness of women’s issues and feminist causes to wider audiences. While feminist activism online has many forms, for example the trolling or ridicule of misogynists (e.g., Dynel 2020), it is hashtags (online labels using the symbol #) which have proven the most popular means spreading a message (Clark 2016). This type of activism, known as “hashtag feminism,” is considered a peaceful yet powerful discursive practice. Hashtags have been recognised for their usefulness in sharing and bonding on social media (Zappavigna 2021). They are considered important in particular for discourse surrounding violence against women and the societal instruments which enable and permit “a culture in which sexual violence is accepted as part of the norm” (Clark 2016: 789). The MeToo Movement is among the best known examples of hashtag feminism, having been successful in enacting real-world changes. However, while the MeToo Movement has empowered many,

it has simultaneously made others feel disenfranchised or fearful. As such, it has led to counter-movements in the online sphere in which men enact their rights and fight against what they see as the oppression of males.

Much research has been done into the male-dominated websites which are almost entirely devoted to the derision of women, collectively known as the 'manosphere' (Marwick and Caplan 2018; Krendel 2020). Several studies have also explored online misogyny in terms of overt practices such as rape threats (Hardaker and McGlashan 2016), hate speech (Lewis and Marwick 2017), trolling (Jane 2017; Krushek 2019) and speed seduction (Rüdiger and Dayter 2020; Wright 2020). Some of the studies which have looked at the language of anti-feminists online have noted that there is a tendency towards undermining or downplaying the value of feminism to society. Krushek (2019) has shown that discourse used by anti-feminists to undermine the social value of feminism has changed, shifting from Judeo-Christian arguments to claims of misandry. These same claims of misandry and the mistreatment of men have been reported on by Venäläinen (2021), who shows that in online discussions of violence against women, participants often redirect the conversation by raising questions about men's rights. As such, commenters are discursively constructing those whom they oppose as not having the right to voice their opinion in the first place.

Despite the existence of the 'manosphere,' online anti-feminism and misogyny are not restricted to certain websites, but rather are seen across the online space, including on YouTube. As a public platform, videos posted on YouTube may be viewed and commented upon by anyone with uncensored internet access. This means that a video which espouses support for feminist causes can reach wider audiences, but also social groups its creator may prefer it not to reach. However, the nature of YouTube means that these social groups cannot be considered to be intruding or imposing when they view and comment on shared content (Dynel 2014: 42). The result of this is that anti-feminists often turn up in the comment sections of feminist media. This phenomenon, identified by the journalist Helen Lewis when she tweeted that "the comments on any article about feminism justify feminism," has become known as Lewis' Law (Krushek 2019). Therefore, although YouTube comments may relate to the videos they comment on, they need not agree with the attitudes of the creators.

The success and appropriateness of social media for sharing gender ideologies has been recognised by both feminists and anti-feminists. While this dynamic has been explored in some of the research noted above, this study presents an analysis of how attitudes towards gender are constructed and legitimated in online discourse.

### 3. Theoretical framework

Analysing ideology in discourse requires a consideration of the variability in language (Verschueren 2011: 52). The Appraisal framework, in its analysis of ideology, is predominantly concerned with the choice of language made in discourse, deliberate or otherwise. Traditionally, both Appraisal and CDA have been used in the examination of implicit (re)productions of power in official discourse. Appraisal has been useful in showing that subjective evaluations exist in news media (Martin and White 2005; Bednarek 2008; White 2012), while CDA examined more broadly discourses of power in media (Fairclough 1989; Weiss and Wodak 2003). This study considers how the reproduction of power occurs in informal online comment sections.

#### 3.1 Appraisal framework

The Appraisal framework, as developed by Martin and White (2005), is a branch of Systemic Functional Linguistics particularly concerned with the interpersonal modes of meaning within an utterance. The framework offers a description of resources available for the analysis of evaluation in English and is an “interpersonal discourse semantic system of special relevance to interpersonal lexicogrammar” (Martin 2018:12). Features of the Appraisal framework have been developed for specifically analysing evaluation and affiliation in social media contexts (Zappavigna 2012, 2017, 2021). The three main categories in the Appraisal framework, ENGAGEMENT, ATTITUDE, and GRADUATION (Figure 1), will be discussed further in relation to the data below.

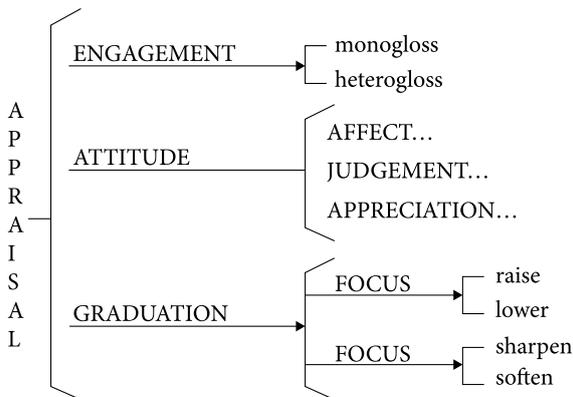


Figure 1. Appraisal framework (Martin and White 2005: 38)

Martin and White (2005) divide expressions of ATTITUDE into three interacting domains: AFFECT, which is related to emotions, JUDGEMENT, which is related to behaviour and social esteem, and APPRECIATION, related to value. While all three categories within ATTITUDE appear in the data, as we shall see in the analysis below, the most salient was found to be JUDGEMENT. JUDGEMENT relates to how speakers/writers express attitudes towards behaviour and it has been argued that it is the most important of the three domains (Hoffmann 2018: 61). These attitudes fall under two subheadings, Social Esteem and Social Sanction, which are further divided into five categories of types of JUDGEMENT: Normality, Capacity, Tenacity, Veracity, and Propriety (Examples of these are underlined in Table 1). JUDGEMENTS are inherently tied to proposals about how one should be or should act, and such proposals can, over time, become formalised as rules and regulations for behaviour.

**Table 1.** Examples of JUDGEMENT (Martin and White 2005) in the data

	JUDGEMENT	Positive	Negative
Social Esteem	Normality	<i>'at least France still lives by <u>natural</u> women man relationships'</i> (ABC)	<i>'<u>Backwards</u> country needs to join the modern world and treat woman and animals with respect'</i> (BBC)
	Capacity	<i>'In my experience, Spanish women are beautiful, <u>intelligent</u> and loyal'</i> (BBC)	<i>'I hope the <u>stupid</u> girl with the tattoos isn't the future of France'</i> (ABC)
	Tenacity	<i>'And believe me women are <u>brave</u>'</i> (ABC)	<i>'...down the shoot he goes to the cheering of feminists and <u>cowardly</u> manginas'</i> (ABC)
Social Sanction	Veracity	<i>'French people in general [...] are more polite/<u>straightforward</u> than other Europeans...'</i> (ABC)	<i>'Most Women are <u>manipulative</u> and <u>good liars</u>'</i> (BBC)
	Propriety	<i>'we have a legal system so people can have a <u>fair</u> judgement without the emotional part of it being involved'</i> (BBC)	<i>'The <u>evil</u> E.U must fall and fall soon'</i> (BBC)

The Appraisal framework furthermore measures expressions of ATTITUDE in terms of how much the speaker/writer engages with other voices. Speakers/writers may dialogically expand or contract the discourse and, in doing so, are inviting in or shutting out the voices of their audience, or indeed more abstractly of other ideas, spoken or not. Martin and White (2005) categorise the means of engagement and these themselves are graduated. For instance, lexico-grammatical fea-

tures which counter (e.g., ‘Thank you for your suggestions although I’m not really into men or animals,’ ABC comments) are considered slightly more dialogically expansive than those which deny (e.g., ‘I never asked you if you were Spanish,’ BBC comments).

In relation to the third element of the Appraisal framework, GRADUATION, Martin and White (2005: 136) suggest ATTITUDE and ENGAGEMENT could be seen as “domains of graduation which differ according to the nature of the meanings being scaled.” The key word here is scaled, as GRADUATION measures higher to lower degrees of attitudinal meanings and/or engagement values. GRADUATION is communicated lexico-grammatically in the data in various manners. For instance, quantification may be both non-figurative (e.g., ‘...he sees a demonstration of a crowd of women and he runs away...,’ BBC comments) or figurative (e.g., ‘...worrying about going into certain areas avoids discussing the flood of male immigrants into France,’ ABC comments). The analysis employs all three elements of the Appraisal framework.

### 3.2 Identifying discourses of (de)legitimation

The Appraisal framework is applied in this study using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach (Fairclough 1989; van Dijk 1998; Weiss and Wodak 2003). CDA allows the language analysed to be viewed in light of broader structures of power, affording itself to an examination of the ways in which ideologies and stereotypes are reproduced through language, notably those related to gender (Sunderland 2004; Lazar 2005) and nation/race (van Dijk 2008). Of particular significance in the study are the ways in which certain groups and ideologies are discursively normalised in the data. These were examined as discourses of (de)legitimation, as developed by van Dijk (1998, 2008).

Discourses of legitimation are an important process in terms of establishing and maintaining social orders and ideologies, while delegitimation involves ‘negative other-presentation’ (van Dijk 1998: 238). Van Dijk (1998: 237) suggests categories of ideological schema of which one or more can be used in discourses of (de)legitimation; these are: membership criteria, typical activities, overall aims, norms and values, social position, and access to resources. In engaging in discourses of (de)legitimation, commenters are presupposing their own values and norms as those of upstanding members of a moral and just society (Martín-Rojo and van Dijk 1997). The implication that they are speaking from within the accepted in-group therefore increases the symbolic efficacy and authority of the words they are using.

(De)legitimation may be linked to evaluations and expressions of attitudes which establish and renegotiate ideologies in online discourse. Language is used

to create interpersonal meanings which at once strengthen certain social bonds and weaken others. Commenters may question the rights of another to speak and engage through processes of undermining their social position, for example by calling an individual's identity into question because their language use does not meet the ideological standards of others. Such standards can be implemented not only by users of a language against other users (Lee and Su 2019; Lim, Chen and Hiramoto 2021) but also by non-users who have made ideological associations with that language (Tarnarutckaia and Ensslin 2020). These processes of denaturalisation weaken the target's claims to membership.

In their analysis of media discourse in the UK and Germany, Jaworska and Krishnamurthy (2012) found that the goals of feminism were often downplayed as outdated and having already been achieved. This is exactly the process van Dijk (1998: 237) describes as delegitimation of aims or goals, stating that if "the goal is to end patriarchy or sexism, this goal may be delegitimated by denying that gender inequality is a major problem in society." (De)legitimation is ultimately concerned with the management and reproduction of power (Martín-Rojo and van Dijk 1997). In the data, this power is associated with gender and nation.

A combination of Appraisal and CDA approaches has been applied broadly and effectively to explore how ideologies are discursively reproduced by parties with a vested interest, such as in corporate apologies (Meadows and Sayer 2013), political manifestos (Ho and Crosthwaite 2018), and politicians' tweets (Ross and Caldwell 2020). This study builds on this by using a combination of Appraisal and CDA approaches to examine how the discursive construction of ideologies also occurs in online comment sections.

## 4. Materials and methods

### 4.1 YouTube videos

The videos used in this study were selected through a YouTube search for content related to the MeToo Movement. The two videos detailed below were ultimately chosen because of the volume of comments they had received. At time of collection, October 2019, the two videos combined had received 3,172 comments comprising 133,903 words (see Table 2). The first video, produced by the Australia Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) was published on 10 September 2018. It had been viewed 68,676 times and had received 1,164 comments (63,076 words). The second video was published by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). It was first published on 4 April 2019 and had 246,299 views on YouTube. The BBC video had 2,008 comments totalling 70,827 words.

**Table 2.** Overview of Videos 1 and 2

	Video 1	Video 2
Production Company	Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)	British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)
Location	Paris, France	Various locations, Spain
Reporter	Woman, forties, Anglophone	Woman, thirties, Bilingual (English and Spanish)
Language(s)	English, French	English, Spanish
Publication Date	10 September 2018	4 April 2019
Views	68,676	246,299
Comments	1,164 (63,076 words)	2,008 (70,827 words)
Topic	The MeToo Movement in France, particularly in relation to the <i>Le Monde</i> letter	The MeToo Movement in Spain, particularly in relation to the <i>La Manada</i> criminal trial
Content	Interviews with individuals who have experienced sexual harassment or assault, politicians, activists, journalists, medical professionals, and passers-by on the street	Interviews with individuals who have experienced sexual harassment or assault, politicians, activists, and journalists
Tone	Informative, formal yet casual, cautiously optimistic, contemplative, serious though occasionally entertaining	Informative, formal yet casual, cautiously optimistic, investigative, serious

The similarity in topic, content, and tone of the two videos also led to their selection (Table 2) as this allowed for patterns within the comment sections to be revealed individually as well as more generally.

The first video, produced and uploaded to YouTube by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), is part of a popular documentary series on the network. The reporter is seen moving through the streets of Paris, using interviews and observations to assess the climate of the city in relation to MeToo. The video is specifically interested in a controversial letter signed by one hundred prominent French women who accused the MeToo Movement of being censorious and ‘puritanical’ (Kipnis 2018). The video considers how the national French “psyche” aligns with MeToo, in particular how it conflates it with its belief that it is a sexually liberated country, where men and women are equal and so all encounters of a flirtatious and sexual nature implicitly have consent from both parties.

The second video was produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and was posted onto their YouTube channel. Like the ABC video, it uses a female reporter and a mixture of talking heads, interviews, and video clips to discuss the situation of the MeToo Movement in Spain. The BBC video deals more specifically with women's legal rights in Spain in the aftermath of a criminal trial in Spain in which five men were accused of gang-raping a 19-year old woman. The attack took place in the northern city of Pamplona amidst the famous 'running of the bulls' festival. The men, who called themselves '*La Manada*' ('the Pack'- sometimes reported as 'the Wolfpack'), were acquitted despite video evidence, and the trial gained worldwide attention. The video also discusses the rise of the right-wing populist party *Vox* in Spain, particularly their regressive policies on female reproductive rights (Madden 2019).

## 4.2 Coding ideologies

Before beginning the analytical process, it was first necessary to identify and abstract comments which contained attitudes indexing ideologies. For this, inductive coding was initially employed, as this allows themes within the data to reveal themselves. Although the study set out to analyse specifically gender ideologies, any and all instances of ideological utterances were coded using the qualitative analysis software *Nvivo* (QSR International 2017). As discourses of power often related to more than one power dynamic, it was felt inductive coding of all ideologies, rather than just gender, was appropriate. This required a working definition of what could be deemed an ideological comment, which is outlined below.

Although it can be said that ideologies are discursively (re)produced in interactions, exactly what constitutes an ideology is much less easily defined (van Dijk 1998; Weiss and Wodak 2003). Ideologies can be viewed as both a means of regimenting how individuals make sense of the world around them (Irvine 2009) and of establishing and maintaining power relations and imbalances within that world (Silverstein 1976; Fairclough 1989; Weiss and Wodak 2003). In terms of gender, imbalances are constructed and maintained through the linguistic choices of both the oppressor and the oppressed, and, therefore, as a fundamental social category, gender is reproduced in all interaction (Cameron 1985). This explains why, in some critical studies on gender in language, the terms 'ideology' and 'discourse' are given shared meaning (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003; Sunderland 2004). When social relations and positions are communicated interactively between participants, they become ideologically relevant within that interaction (van Dijk 1998). As such, any interaction in which gender is made salient, including online discussions on gender discrimination, can be seen as discursively reproducing gender ideologies. Taking these complexities into account, it is decided that com-

ments to be deemed to be ideological in nature are those which indicate the commenter holds a viewpoint or principles which likely affects their entire worldview (van Dijk 1998). In Example (1), for instance, the commenter expresses the opinion that female politicians are incapable of governing and unscrupulous in their demand for equality. Moreover, they assert the view that feminism has led to worsened conditions for men, a commonly-held opinion amongst men’s rights groups (Venäläinen 2021). The commenters’ views about gender relations colour their understanding of society and thus the comment is deemed ideological.

- (1) since women got elected everything turned into shit... demanding rights? you already have a lot of rights, even more than men (BBC)

It should be stated that there were certain occasions when it cannot be certain whether a comment was ideological or not. For instance, it may not be clear whether the commenter is using sarcasm to ridicule an ideology or is actually aligning themselves with this ideology. In Example (2), the commenter may be reflecting on their perceived male privilege, or may be ridiculing an interviewee in the ABC video who states that women have to put more thought into what they wear each day due to unwelcome harassment. To avoid confusion, comments such as these are excluded from the analysis. However, comments which require some available context, such as cultural references or references to the source videos, are included.

- (2) It’s refreshing to be reminded that all I have on my mind to worry about, as a man, is what the weather will be. (ABC)

The ideological comments are then categorised into groups and subgroups. The seven main ideological categories identified through coding besides Gender are: Language, Nation, Politics, Sexuality, Race, and Religion. These have been further subcategorised according to the ideologies expressed in the data. Several of the subcategories are titled Anti-[...]; here, the use of ‘anti-’ refers to ideologies or attitudes whose aim is to suppress or undermine specific groups or ideas. Conversely, category titles which contain the term Pro-[...] are those which aim to promote certain groups or ideas.

It was found that 1,712 of the 3,172 comments make ideological references categorised under Gender. Furthermore, the category of Nation is referenced in 735 comments; as this is almost twice the number of references made relative to the next most common category (Politics, with 317), further investigation of the category Nation, alongside Gender, is deemed useful. In order to limit analysis to only the more significant trends in the comment sections, the subcategories of Gender with less than 80 examples are excluded from further analysis. Thus, there

remains a total of 1,489 comments within the six remaining subcategories of Gender to be analysed (Table 3).

Worth noting at this point is that all unconventional spellings and punctuation have been left as they appear in the data at the time of collection, in order to retain the original character of the comment.

**Table 3.** Subcategories of Gender, with frequency and examples

Gender	No.	Example
Anti-feminist	506	<i>'The core feminist agenda all along has been the destruction of marriage, the persecution of men, the killing of unborn children, gratuitous self-victimization and entitling a massive welfare state.'</i> (ABC)
Anti-men	91	<i>'this wouldnt be necessary if men behaved honorably in the first place, these laws came into existance because of the direct result of masogenistic behaviour'</i> (BBC)
Anti-women/misogynist	350	<i>'This is what happens when you give women rights. They turn everything to shit because they're giant children who have no concept of responsibility.'</i> (ABC)
Feminist	303	<i>'She mentions that she can pay for herself on dates, and he can pay for himself. That's an even playing field, which feminism is actually about'</i> (ABC)
Pro-gender equality	100	<i>'Well, I do agree that all violence should be treated equally.... I find it astonishing that a law where women have such an advantage has actually passed...'</i> (BBC)
Pro-men's rights	139	<i>'It is female centric, female oriented and female dominated where men have no rights at all. Time for men to organise and fight back'</i> (ABC)

The subcategories within the category of Nation with less than 40 examples are also not used for the next stage of analysis. However, the subcategory of Anti-West has been further demarcated as several of the subcategories within it have over 40 references in themselves. This leaves a total of 586 references in 6 subcategories of Nation to be further analysed (Table 4).

There is, of course, overlap of ideologies within the comments. For example, the Anti-France comment in Table 4 is deriding France for its immigration policies, and so can also be coded as Anti-immigration, and likewise the Anti-USA comment can also be coded as Anti-feminist. After accounting for these overlaps, the total number of comments to be analysed is 1,548.

**Table 4.** Subcategories of Nation, with frequency and examples

Nation	No.	Example
Anti-East/South	102	<i>'from what I have heard <u>it is the africians and arabs who harass women</u> [...] in Paris'</i> (ABC)
Anti-immigration	104	<i>'Maybe if Spain stopped importing <u>rapists (migrants)</u> maybe things could improve'</i> (BBC)
Anti-France	42	<i>'<u>I don't like French people</u> they obviously <u>have no pride</u> that they turned their country into a ghetto <u>like idiots</u>'</i> (ABC)
Anti-West	127	<i>'<u>Spain is still backwards!</u> They are mentally and subconsciously stuck in the Franco era'</i> (BBC)
Anti-UK	44	<i>'BBC is <u>biased!</u> [...] And I'm not surprised, <u>what can you expect from UK? ??</u>'</i> (BBC)
Anti-USA	106	<i>'<u>What the American #metoo tends to forget is that even women can also be the ones who harass other women</u>'</i> (ABC)
Nationalism	61	<i>'<u>Make Spain great again!</u> Trump great influence.'</i> (BBC)

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Research question 1

The following section addresses the first research question, which asks: How are attitudes indexing gender (or other) ideologies discursively constructed in the comment sections? Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal framework is applied to the data to explore how interpersonal meaning and attitudes are constructed in the discourse. Unless otherwise stated, expressions of ATTITUDE are underlined in the examples, while ENGAGEMENT is marked with italics.

#### 5.1.1 Attitude

In the data, expressions of ATTITUDE in a comment most often fall under the category of JUDGEMENT, primarily negative judgements of Capacity or of Normality. In the analysed comments, expressions of JUDGEMENT are found to be both explicit and implicit. In Example (3), the judgement of Capacity is overt, while the judgement of Normality is more implicit. The infused judgement of feminism is that it is a toxic pollutant which causes members of a society to become 'idiots.' Metaphors relating to pollution or poison alongside insinuations that those who ascribe to feminist beliefs have been mentally corrupted are seen elsewhere in the data (See Section 4.2.3).

- (3) But it's not a few idiots [JUDGEMENT: –Capacity] anymore. This toxic feminism has polluted [JUDGEMENT: –Normality] societies where men and women relations are largely, positive. (BBC)

A negative judgement of Capacity expresses an attitude that an individual or group of individuals is somehow weak or incompetent, or otherwise not fit for purpose. In expressing such a view, a commenter is implicitly framing themselves as more able, as judgements are made from positions of perceived higher standing. Judgements of Capacity are predominantly found in comments coded as Anti-feminist or Anti-women, but also in those coded as Anti-immigration. More implicit judgements of Capacity may initially appear as something more benign, and the language may appear to be coming from a place of affective appraisal. In Example (4), the commenter represents their dissatisfaction with immigration policies as apprehension over what it might mean for Western men and women. Although 'shake my head' (underline italics) is an expression of AFFECT, namely dissatisfaction, it implies a level of judgement of negative capacity against the commenter's peers.

- (4) I'm a Western woman, and I have to shake my head [AFFECT: – (dis)satisfaction] at a lot of the women around me in terms of how they feel about immigration. [JUDGEMENT: –Capacity] (ABC)

Judgements of Normality place the unfamiliar or peculiar in a negative light, while stability and predictability are positively assessed. In the data, tradition and convention are looked upon positively and actions or beliefs which disrupt those are criticised. The object of negative judgements of Normality is most noticeable in comments coded as Anti-feminist, as well as in those coded as Anti-immigration and Anti-USA.

Infused judgements of Normality play into ideas of assault and corruption both corporally and institutionally. Terms relating to invasions and warfare, such as in Examples (5) and (6), construct an idea of a (national) stronghold which is being forcefully overrun by outsiders. In Example (5) the objects of the judgement are 'Africans or Muslims,' whereas in Examples (6) and (7) the object is the MeToo Movement and feminism. Furthermore, ideologies are described in the data as infections, cancers, and other illness, such as in Examples (6) and (7). As such, their unfamiliarity is discursively constructed as something hostile to the self.

- (5) Don't blame Spanish men when most of this violence is done by Africans or Muslim invaders! [JUDGEMENT: –Normality] (BBC)
- (6) I'm glad the madness of MeToo hasn't invaded [JUDGEMENT: –Normality] France and I pity that young generation of women infected [JUDGEMENT: –Normality] by the worst of American culture. (ABC)

- (7) feminism is cancer [JUDGEMENT: –Normality] and will be the downfall of western society. (BBC)

Judgements are intensified through provoked metaphor. In Example (8), the negative judgement of Normality against feminists likens them to a supernatural creature, Frankenstein’s Monster. Thus, feminism is constructed as utterly abnormal. Likewise, in Example (9), the commenter suggests that a result of immigration is that Western society will not only regress, but back to the Dark Ages, a time out of living memory associated with obscurity and ignorance.

- (8) Men need to be aware of not only their rights, but also of the fact that feminists are like Frankenstein Monsters [JUDGEMENT: –Normality] who will devour their own creator one day (ABC)
- (9) Middle east and third world country people will put Western men and especially Western women back into the dark ages [JUDGEMENT: –Normality], where we had no rights, much less viewed as equal. (ABC)

Commenters therefore index their attitudes through both explicit and implicit judgements. In expressing judgements of Normality and Capacity, commenters are simultaneously implying their own social status as above those they pass judgement on. As such, commenters are discursively constructing a societal standard or status quo.

### 5.1.2 Engagement

Commenters constrain discussion and debate around their ideological expressions through dialogically contractive features. Applying the Appraisal framework’s ENGAGEMENT system, these examples of dialogic contraction in the data include features of Contraction including Disclaim (Deny, Counter) and Proclaim (Concur: Affirm/Concede, Pronounce, Endorse).

The domain of Disclaim involves invoking another voice or position in order to reject or replace it (Martin and White 2005:118). To deny the other voice is to contract the dialogue through rejection of their invoked position. In Example (10), the commenter uses several devices in order to challenge feminism. In using the pronouns ‘you’ and ‘we,’ the commenter is ostensibly addressing all women on behalf of all men. From this position, the comment rejects unspoken utterances attributed to women, insinuating their misfortune was brought upon them by their own actions or wishes.

- (10) Men and women are “Equal” now, *so no, you can’t* [CONTRACT: DISCLAIM: DENY] take our turn, ad we also don’t hold doors for you. *Don’t complain* [CONTRACT: DISCLAIM: DENY], because that is what you wanted. (ABC)

The other element of Disclaim, besides Deny, is Counter. This involves invoking another voice in order to challenge or replace it. Generally, countering is associated with the use of contrast conjunctions and in the data, it is often used to replace arguments surrounding gender discrimination with ones which are tenuously related or unequivocal. For example, countering occurs in comments coded as Anti-immigration in order to scapegoat migrants as a more worthwhile target of the MeToo Movement. Likewise, Pro-men's Rights comments use countering to imply that there is in fact systemic injustice for men rather than women.

Commenters also employ features of Proclaim, which is arguably a less overt manner of contracting dialogue than Disclaim. It often involves conjuring up other voices in order to concur with them, such as through Endorsement. However, Proclaim also includes Pronouncement, which, as in Example (11), constructs opinion or ideology as irrefutable fact.

- (11) One of the big problem is that women are great liars and they'll manipulate anyone by what is fabricated stories [CONTRACT: PROCLAIM: PRONOUNCE].

Endorsement is regularly used in the comments analysed, likely because of its usefulness in the online context. Endorsement allows commenters to refer to external sources, verified or otherwise, in order to support their own opinions and attitudes. In Example (12), the commenter is referring to the judge in the Pamplona trial, endorsing their authority on the matter of whether rape occurred or not. In Example (13), the commenter is endorsing a report from an academic study. This type of Endorsement, referencing studies and statistics, features prominently, helping to construct an ideological statement as possessing an element of scientific rigour.

- (12) If the judge has evaluated the video and there is no force or violence then it is not a rap3, *that means it was consensual* [CONTRACT: PROCLAIM: ENDORSE].  
(BBC)
- (13) *The report showed conclusively* [CONTRACT: PROCLAIM: ENDORSE] that women who worked were more dissatisfied with their husbands than those who stayed at home. (ABC)

Another feature of Engagement, Concede, features most often in relation to discussions of sexual harassment. Commenters concede that sexual harassment or abuse is morally wrong, but contract the dialogue around the issue by stating that it is not as common as it is made out to be or, as in Example (14), that when it does occur the victim has the law on their side.

- (14) *Look if you really do feel that* [CONTRACT: PROCLAIM: CONCEDE] someone did some of the horrible acts on you, YOU SHOULD GO TO POLICE.

Through the use of dialogically contractive remarks, commenters may express ideological judgments as matter-of-fact. In this way, societal expectations of gender norms and values are constructed as *prima facie* truths.

## 5.2 Research question 2

This section addresses the second research question, which asks: How are these attitudes (de)legitimated in the discourse? Again, unless otherwise stated, *ATTITUDE* is marked with underline and *ENGAGEMENT* is marked with italics.

### 5.2.1 Scapegoating

A common device used in undermining the MeToo Movement is to delegitimize its objective. In particular, the commonplace gender discrimination and sexual harassment which propelled the Movement is minimised in order to maximise the role of migrant men in sexual assaults in Europe. Of 104 comments which are coded as Nation: Anti-immigration, 30 are also coded as Gender: Anti-feminist.

Commenters link immigration and feminism with increased sexual assaults and moreover imply that feminists have a strong desire for more migrants to come to their countries. Many of these comments index that the connection is somehow entertaining (e.g., ‘this is just hilarious,’ ‘HAHAHA...’). This sense of *Schadenfreude* surrounding the situation is seen repeatedly in the comment sections, inferring that feminists have shot themselves in the proverbial foot as commenters express amusement at their apparent suffering. Example (15) gives a sense of this *Schadenfreude*, as the lexical combination ‘rape parties’ (underlined italics) is an example of infused figurative quantification (Martin and White 2005), simultaneously amplifying and making light of a number of sexual assaults which took place during New Year celebrations in Cologne, Germany.

- (15) [...] *But* [**CONTRACT: DISCLAIM: COUNTER**] women are the main supporters of more migration. [**CONTRACT: PROCLAIM: PRONOUNCE**] They chanted “They are not all like that!!”, even after the rape parties on new year’s eve a couple of years ago in Cologne. [...] So put on your burka, ad *stop complaining*. [**CONTRACT: DISCLAIM: DENY**] (ABC comments)

By implicitly connecting increased immigration and sexual assault cases, commenters deflect culpability from Western men in positions of authority and thus undermine the MeToo Movement’s original motivations.

Commenters exploit nationalistic ideologies of homogenous societies to distance European men from sexual assault allegations. Thus, there is an implied judgement of Normality in simply being European. For instance, the ABC video features a vignette about a woman who was attacked by a man on a busy Paris

street. In the corresponding comment section, attention is drawn to the perpetrator's first name, which is Arabic in origin (Example (16)). Likewise, in the BBC comments, discussion of sexual harassment figures in Spain leads to critical observations of the given names of perpetrators (Example (17)).

- (16) this apparently *insane* [JUDGEMENT: –Capacity] man with an Arabic name is being held aloft as representative of all French men [JUDGEMENT: +Normality] (ABC)
- (17) Take a look at the last name and see if he's a Spaniard [JUDGEMENT: +Normality] (BBC)

These nationalistic undertones question whether the statistics on sexual assault are accurate or are skewed by those who are not ethnically European. Consequently, sexual violence against women in Europe is reconfigured as an issue of immigration, rather than sexism. Commenters insinuate that a “feminist agenda” is causing the media to manipulate the truth and that such crimes are not committed by European men. This then delegitimizes the social position of feminists, construing their cause as misdirected and false.

In Example (18), the ideological testimony that ‘migrant culture’ firstly entails rape and forced marriage, and secondly is being ‘misconstrued as native French culture’ is strengthened through the use of endorsement. Moreover, by suggesting that those who think otherwise are mistaken, there is an implicit judgement of Capacity; an insinuation that they simply do not see the truth as the commenter does, or do not want to. The subsequent pronouncement that the issues are as a result of increased migration consequently appears to be built on fact rather than ideology.

- (18) [...] *It is amazing how* [CONTRACT: PROCLAIM: ENDORSE] migrant culture (rape, forced marriage) is misconstrued as native [JUDGEMENT: +Normality] French culture. *These are issues that have* [CONTRACT: PROCLAIM: PRO- NOUNCE] migrated with populations from Muslims countries. [...] (ABC)

By placing limitations on what constitutes a French or Spanish male, commenters discursively construct an out-group which can easily be used as a scapegoat for sexual assault statistics. As such, anti-immigration ideologies are construed as legitimate. Furthermore, they delegitimize the goals of the MeToo Movement through the insinuation that gender discrimination and sexual harassment at the hands of those in power is not the primary or even a serious problem.

### 5.2.2 Denaturalisation

Another common claim for commenters to make is that the MeToo Movement stems from issues in the USA which simply do not apply in Europe. Of 71 com-

ments coded as Gender: Anti-feminist, 26 are also coded as Nation: Anti-USA. Commenters on the one hand suggest the US is ‘puritanical’ and ‘sex-negative,’ while others claim that US women are ‘over-sexed’ and Europeans have been led into a ‘Hollywood promiscuous lifestyle.’ Especially in the ABC comments, references to France’s culture of flirtation and seduction suggest that accusations are merely a result of cultural misunderstanding. The MeToo Movement and feminism are discursively constructed as invasive and corrupting forces coming from the US; sometimes, as in Example (19), such an attitude is explicitly expressed by the commenter.

- (19) *The last thing France need* [CONTRACT: PROCLAIM: PRONOUNCE] is having toxic [JUDGEMENT: –Normality] #metoo feminazism imported [JUDGEMENT: –Normality] from the US. (ABC)

Much discussion in the ABC data centres around one particular interviewee, an actor and YouTube star identified in the video as an anti-harassment campaigner (henceforth AHC). Commenters concentrate attention on her proficient English and slight American twang which, they posit, suggest that she has been educated in the United States and/or other Anglophone nations; this education, they suggest, has led to her indoctrination into feminist ideology. One commenter remarks that AHC ‘doesn’t seem to be native French,’ while another suggests her American accent means she attended a ‘brainwashing and programming’ American university course. In Example (20), the use of the term ‘triggered’ in this comment references the popular meme “the triggered feminist,” which insinuates that feminists have needlessly emotional responses to benign situations on par with someone suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Hence, although it could be categorised as AFFECT, the term ‘triggered’ must be taken in context to construe its true attitudinal meaning (Martin and White 2005: 52). From context it can be seen that it is more likely coming from a place of JUDGEMENT. In deeming AHC incapable of having a measured response to a situation, again there is an implication of inherent emotionality and diminished Capacity.

- (20) That french girl has an american twang to her English.. *no wander* [CONTRACT: PROCLAIM: CONCUR: AFFIRM] she’s so triggered [JUDGEMENT: –Capacity] by men. (ABC)

Through such processes of denaturalisation, the norms and values of feminism are delegitimated as culturally at odds with European societal norms, simultaneously legitimating xenophobic ideologies. The motivations behind the MeToo Movement are undermined as not being a European problem, and those that suggest otherwise are simply not authentic members of European society.

### 5.2.3 Corruption

The values and goals of feminism are frequently doubted in the comments analysed. Many of these comments include conspiratorial elements and contain insinuation that there are larger external powers at play manipulating the social structure in order to advance their own agenda. Of 61 comments coded as Nation: Nationalist, 16 are coded as Gender: Anti-feminist, 12 as Gender: Anti-women, and 3 as Gender: Pro-men's rights. Echoes of anti-communist sentiment are seen in accusations of schools as 'social engineering camps,' while universities 'train' women to be feminists. Feminism, as well as mainstream media, liberal politics, access to education, and various other factors associated with progressiveness, are relayed as possible corruptors of "normal" European women. In Example (21), the imagery of feminism as an infection is again used, this time within the Spanish education system.

- (21) [...] The type of feminism that has infected [JUDGEMENT: -Normality] the education system; [...]  
(BBC)

Lexico-grammatical features used to describe feminists are suggestive of individuals who are a danger to themselves and others (e.g., 'unhinged,' 'hysterical,' 'crazy,' 'howling,' 'toxic,' 'immoral,' and 'irrational'). The implication therefore is that traditional systems of male hegemony are in fact beneficial for those that are oppressed. Furthermore, it suggests that feminism is associated with, or perhaps causes, unreasonableness in women; this in turn provides an argument against engaging with them. In Example (22), as in Examples (3), (5)–(7), (19), and (21), feminism is metaphorically linked to a substance which causes physical harm, such as poison or infection.

- (22) [...] *But* [CONTRACT: DISCLAIM: COUNTER] too many women bought the feminist poison [JUDGEMENT: -Normality] and consumed it, sip by sip, over their entire lives.  
(ABC)

The insinuation that feminism somehow dulls a woman's intellect is exemplified in Example (23), in which the commenter minimises their own ideological input by stating that they 'find it interesting' that feminism would render women 'incapable of logical thought.' Moreover, the judgement is intensified through the term 'completely' (bold italics), as though any hope for coherent debate or discussion with feminists is lost. Through such features, the commenter is framing the idea that feminism causes fatuity as fact which they merely endorse.

- (23) *I find it interesting how* [CONTRACT: PROCLAIM: ENDORSE] feminism makes women ***completely incapable*** [JUDGEMENT: -Capacity] of logical thought. [...]  
(BBC comments)

The figurative construction of feminism and the MeToo Movement as an infectious and/or debilitating ideology in itself constrains dialogue surrounding it; the implication that those who ascribe to or support such ideologies are fundamentally distorted weakens any argument for engaging in discussion with them. Feminism is thus delegitimated as a harmful rather than empowering force.

## 6. Discussion

The study shows that the motivations behind the MeToo Movement are delegitimated in the comment section through discourse which undermines the motivations and goals of feminism. Commenters employ JUDGEMENT and dialogically contracting features of ENGAGEMENT in order to discursively construct societal norms which can be used to undermine the feminist motivations of the MeToo Movement. It was found that commenters frequently emphasise the possible disruption of such perceived societal norms. In construing immigration, the USA, and/or feminism as corrupting “normal” European society, ideologies which oppose them can be seen as protecting and maintaining the status quo. Furthermore, by suggesting there is an inability for women and non-Europeans to regulate themselves, there is a greater argument against feminism and immigration.

Of the comments analysed, those which feature ideological attitudes are frequently dialogically contractive, covertly suggesting that the ideas which support them have at some other point been proven as fact. This discursive commendation of a certain normality, combined with vilification of otherness, is common practice in the establishment and reproduction of hegemony in society (van Dijk 2008). The inherent link between JUDGEMENT and perceived norms can lead proposals or standards for behaviour to become rules and regulations in society.

The study furthermore shows that the values and goals of the MeToo Movement are often discursively constructed as misdirected or illegitimate. Although the primary motivations behind the MeToo Movement relate to sexual harassment and assault by Western men in positions of authority and continued gender discrimination in the workplace, commenters instead scapegoat migrant men in Europe as a much more worthwhile target. Commenters construct gender relations and societal norms in Europe as unproblematic, with “normal” European men always being respectful of women’s boundaries and “normal” European women as understanding this and enjoying flirtation. Anti-feminist comments analysed tend to portray feminism as an ideology based on issues in the USA, not suited to European society. Furthermore, these comments denaturalised European feminists by insinuating they have been overly influenced by US culture, and that European women who do not understand and enjoy that “flirtation” is a fea-

ture of European culture have evidently been indoctrinated by American feminism. Feminism is therefore constructed as a contaminating external force which corrupts both the mind and body.

In analysing this discourse, it is important to understand how all social relations and subject positions are “embedded in institutions and can be called into play by historical, cultural, and ideological forces that reach beyond the moment of interaction” (Irvine 2009: 55). As such, the judgement of a feminist interviewee as lacking Capacity due to her American accent must be understood in terms of a general distrust of feminism by conservative individuals. It must also be seen in terms of the history of the US, especially cultural centres such as New York and Hollywood, being seen as a depraving force. Likewise, the suggestion that the increase of migration to Europe is the root cause of the increase in sexual assaults, and the associated proposal that this should be the main focus of the MeToo Movement, must be recognised in terms of historical conceptions of Western men as being the guardians of civil society and generally racist foreign policies.

Due to the limited size and scope of the dataset, broader conclusions about ideologies in comment sections cannot be reached. However, a larger corpus analysis of discussions of the MeToo Movement could test if the findings are upheld more generally. When using data taken from social media platforms, there is also a need to acknowledge the role of algorithms in search results. The effect of this was reduced somewhat by selecting mainstream media videos which would be more likely recommended to a wider audience. While the interpretation of what constituted ideological language in the comment sections is the author's own, the utmost care has been taken to be reflective and to limit any biases held, while accepting that analysis will naturally be affected by the author's position.

## 7. Conclusion

Delegitimation of the MeToo Movement in the comment sections involves discursively constructing ideas of standards or norms in European society. Judgements of Normality and Capacity construct feminism (and immigration) as disrupting perceived social norms. Furthermore, the ideological comments in the data are overwhelmingly dialogically contractive; thus, the ideas represented are attributed to some unnamed other. The attribution of the statements to others serves not only to restrict potential dialogue about the ideologies, but also to construe them as matter-of-fact. Commenters also delegitimize the MeToo Movement by discursively constructing its goals as misdirected, through suggestion that immigration is the actual cause of sexual harassment in Europe. Furthermore, the val-

ues of the MeToo Movement are constructed as illegitimate through insinuations that it is a US import not compatible with European culture, or through the more abstract idea of feminism as a corrupting or infectious force. The language used to challenge and undermine the goals of feminism is often more dispassionate than inflammatory. In such ways, the motivations of the MeToo Movement are delegitimated through strategies which appear rational rather than emotional and therefore any opposition can be framed as denial of reason. Through such processes, expressions of anti-feminist ideologies become more robust.

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