

WEBBED SPACE:
ONLINE FEMINIST DISCOURSE IN THE FOURTH WAVE

By

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the feminist online discourse community “A Practical Wedding” and identifies four characteristics that make it a model for feminist online interaction: 1. the connection of users’ online identities with their real-life selves; 2. the non-hierarchical structure of the community; 3. the productive exchanges between members; and 4. the site- and Internet-wide intertextuality. Technofeminist threads in rhetoric and composition in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s were mostly abandoned. They deserve renewed attention, with updating based on the existence and necessity of fourth-wave feminism today. The author first describes her own origin story that led to her interest in this research. She then applies a system of virtual critical discourse analysis and resultant coding schema to four representative posts and their comment sections. This thesis concludes with a call for the creation of more communitarian, feminist spaces on the Internet with similar models of engagement to those used in “A Practical Wedding.”

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To Thea,
who lovingly pressured me into going to graduate school.
Without you, I wouldn't be where or who I am,
and these words wouldn't exist.

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Chapter 1: Origins

I was 20 when I first came across it, I can't even remember how now. It's as though it materialized from the online ether in the moment I needed it.

You could say I've been interested in marriage since I started dating. You could say I've been obsessed with marriage since my parents got divorced when I was seven. I find that researchers do not do the research that seems the most Objectively Important. We do the research that we're called to, that we're fascinated by, that we're obsessed with. How else could we write 50+ pages about it? Toni Morrison said, "If there's a book you really want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it" (*Twitter*). I'm exploring the thing I've been exploring most in my mind and in my life, and, well, I'm not quite ready to write a book. Research is an extension and expression of the personal, for me at least.

Some backstory: My mom is a Charismatic Christian, that's the speaks-in-tongues-and-believes-demons-still-exist Christian, and she tried to raise her children in that same vein. She is an immigrant from Oradea, a village in Transylvania, the Hungarian part of Romania. It produced more than just vampire myths; it also produced my mother, and by extension, me. According to my mother and my Christian upbringing, sex was for after marriage, only. My brother was married at 19, my sister at 21, and my other sister is getting married this weekend, as of my sitting here in a coffee shop in Los Angeles writing this. We all internalized the marital-focused folk wisdom that was our Hungarian-Romanian legacy. My memoir piece "Woman in Relation: On Sisterhood,

Self, and Marriage” has been accepted for publication. In it, I trace my fascination with marriage, first as a form of escapism and later as a site of research, throughout my life.

I, like millions of girls and women I’m sure, enjoyed imagining my future wedding. According to the charismatic Christian Church, this would be the time that I would finally be a woman, and finally be able to have sex, and ascend into the status of matriarch. Also, weddings were really pretty. Wedding blogs and Pinterest gave me a daily dose of serotonin that school didn’t. All of my wedding and marriage knowledge came from my mother and from these sites. My mom’s advice came in the form of *Marry a Christian man and he’ll never cheat*, or *A boy won’t buy a cow once he’s already had the milk for free*, or *Marry a man, not a boy*, and others of the sort (and some other Romanian-isms that don’t directly translate into American English). Wedding sites seemed to say *If you buy a thousand fairy lights, you will have the most magical night of your life and that’s what matters*. It was pleasant to languidly melt into the consumerist world of pretty pictures and mason jars as liberation from everyday life, full of loneliness and the seemingly never-ending trudge of school. (To be fair, I suppose as a graduate student training to become a professor, school never did end for me.)

My mother moved us around a lot, mostly up and down California, and this time could be summed up in the following vignettes: young Naomi, eating lunch on the toilet in the bathroom stall at school so she didn’t have to approach strangers. Young Naomi, begging her older sister to let her spend lunch with the older school friends that she so easily made. Young Naomi, clinging to the first person who showed her attention, who she’d later find was ostracized from other social groups for being too mean, or too extra, and who eventually clung back just as hard when young Naomi tried to extricate herself.

Young Naomi, reading fantasy YA books in class instead of paying attention. Young Naomi, eternal teacher's pet, seeking the adult attention she didn't get at home. Young Naomi, caught in cycles she felt powerless to break out of. For me as it is for many, childhood isn't a time and place free from stress and responsibility. I felt I was my mother's connection to the outside world, and to feeling. My mother confided in me, told me about all the details of all my father's affairs, was completely honest and vulnerable with me. I felt like a dark well that could expand to contain the many drops of her emotional life. I felt special that she shared herself with me, though she was a shut-in. She—an adult, a real person—trusted me.

Our house was always messy, strewn with the detritus of our daily lives and the refuse of my mother's apathy. Messy may be too weak of a word. My mom didn't work much, but she wasn't exactly a stay-at-home mother, either. My brother once told me a story about inviting a friend back to our house for the first time. When the friend's mother came to pick him up and saw the woefully dirty state of our house, she disallowed her son from returning.

My siblings and I were flotsam floating in the dark waves of my mom's depression, among the trash and clothes and antique furniture that we weren't allowed to touch, the Austrian credenza that overflowed with ten pairs of scissors I could curiously never find, and mountains of half-empty, long-unsticky tape canisters. My siblings and I would ask my mother where something was, and as adults, we joke that the answer was always, "I have one somewhere. Check the garage." So we'd go to the store and buy one, because it was easier than finding it in the garage. The garage was in an even less penetrable state than the house. The house at least had desire lines

between the furniture and the clothes that allowed us to access our rooms or pre-packaged, microwavable sustenance in the kitchen. The garage was packed with floor-to-ceiling boxes. I'd have to climb teetering towers of boxes like a child mountaineer to attempt a rescue mission for a lost item. At the end of my journey, I'd have to throw a few boxes to the back to avoid breaking the line of the laser that kept the garage door from shutting if obstructed.

My brother's snake got out once and died in the garage. We found its corpse melted to a fake wig in a box, months later, while searching for something else lost to the labyrinth. For me, the young fantasy aficionado, the garage was the mouth of a cave strewn with bone and sinew and viscera, whose black depths probably held a monster eyeing me with dripping, salivating mouth. I avoided it whenever possible.

My childhood escapism was first sated through fantasy YA, then I moved into films, and then it all culminated in Achaea, a text-based online RPG (which means role-playing game, for the uninitiated). (It's like Warcraft, but with text descriptions instead of graphics. More like Terminal than Photoshop.) I typed up the description to craft a beautiful character to be my proxy and named her Alette. Beyond the draw of creating my own living worlds through my words, I kept coming back because of the relationships I formed with other characters/people. Other users often told me how articulate and mature I seemed for a thirteen-year-old, when they learned my age. After several months moving around in the world of Achaea, I eventually married an elf named Darkling in a ceremony we co-wrote in real time along with our Achaea friends. After that time, our profiles would tell any virtual onlookers that our characters were married. Darkling told me he was a 16-year-old boy living in Boston, who had a real-life

girlfriend. She knew about me, and supposedly didn't care. She probably didn't take seriously the emotional attachment Darkling and I shared, the late-night conversations, how much I ached for him as I attended classes and daydreamed about sitting down at the family desktop computer after I got home from school for a long night of emotional connection before homework. I started pretending I was sick so my mom would let me stay home and spend all eight hours on Achaea, hoping that Darkling would sign on.

When I grew out of Achaea, I transferred my need for escapism to picturing my future wedding. For many years, I'd added items to my "memory box," which was filled with all the souvenirs from my short life—movie tickets, pictures, a pompom—any physical token from a semi-important event. It was the only thing that moved with me to every new house and city. It was the one object I would run in to rescue if the house was consumed in a fire. I also made a separate box that I called my "future box," which contained magazine clippings from my collection of years' worth of subscriptions to wedding magazines, before wedding blogs were a thing. It wasn't the marriage I really looked forward to, but the ceremony. I couldn't conceptualize a happy, fulfilling marriage, having never witnessed one firsthand. I had relationship anxiety when I did try to date, elaborately imagining all the ways it could go wrong. I asked my best friend if she would consider dating a boy she knew she didn't want to marry. She said "Yeah," so nonchalantly, as if that was normal. "I never would," I declared, knowing how much more serious and adult that made me than her.

Like Lindsey Harding, who discusses the pressures of motherhood in the social media era in "Super Mom in a Box," I spent many hours on wedding blogs and later Pinterest, when it was established. I imagined a happy life with magazine-quality

furnishings, an illusion of productivity, an escape from the tedium of real life. Harding's "interactions with Pinterest," she writes, "pulled [her] into 'the omnipresence of postfeminist identity paradigms and defined [her] according to hyperdomestic, hyperfeminine, and hypermaternal responsibilities." She used Pinterest to plan a life she didn't have, as she was spending the moments of her actual life sitting at the computer, browsing Pinterest, rarely following through on the inspirational ideas she pinned. Pinterest's "conditions enable[d] meaning to be abstracted into a simplified representation that precludes messy, uncomfortable contradictions." I didn't dream of a professorship, or tenure, or a happy career. I didn't imagine a real relationship, with misunderstandings and growth and imperfect people. I didn't imagine myself unmarried past 24, childless past 26. I wanted to be a young wife and mother, rosy-cheeked and full of budding vitality, the picture of youth. Two or three kids, four or so bedrooms. My house would always be clean and magazine-ready. My perfect husband would never cheat on me, would understand me completely. He'd love to read. We'd marry in the middle of a forest, branches and needles dripping with twinkling lights. All our guests would sit at one long wooden table to dine, the ringing of laughter and chatter uniting in a din with the drone of late-summer cicadas.

Chapter 2: Questioning

Finding “A Practical Wedding”

I came across the site I will explore in depth throughout this piece in 2011, near the end of my undergraduate degree at the University of California at San Diego. I was slightly more woke as a twenty-year-old undergrad than I’d been as a wedding-obsessed preteen, but the site wouldn’t have called out to me at the time if it had not been branded under the wedding umbrella. I used wedding blogs as stress relief from school.

As I became more educated and my brain started finalizing itself into its adult form, I kept coming back to this one particular site not for its pictures or posts but for its community. I was reading feminist texts, but it was a tough transition to go from Green Wedding Shoes to Judith Butler. My seemingly uncontrollable marriage obsession grew into a curiosity for how real marriages worked in real women’s lives in the United States in the twenty-teens. Late-’60s political lesbianism made some ideological sense, but what about those women who were more attracted to men? I wondered, how could feminists enter heterosexual marriages, a social construct founded in patriarchal traditions? Beyond theory and academia, I was searching for practical, grassroots relationship knowledge. How did other people enact feminist ideals in an imperfect society? I couldn’t explore these questions in my family structure; I didn’t feel comfortable exploring them in class. I explored them online, by reading the comments from the women who were in the midst of it, the community members of APracticalWedding.com (APW, for short). APW describes itself as a website that is

. . . focused on creating a culture that supports laid-back, feminist weddings . . .

In addition, we are working to build a cultural conversation about what it means to be young(ish) and married right now, in this cultural moment. We're working to collectively build a positive egalitarian idea of what marriage can be in society, and what it can mean in our lives. Our marriage content is a mix of personal essays from both staff writers and readers on a whole variety of subjects around relationships. (About APW)

Why “A Practical Wedding”?

The site began as a form of escapism for Meg Keene, the site's creator-cum-Editor-in-Chief. She was planning a wedding and horrified by the quote unquote “traditional” “wedding-industrial-complex” that pressurized weddings in the United States (Keene). The average cost of an American wedding in 2016 was \$35,329 (The Knot). Supposed “traditions” that sprang up in the last 50 years were advertised as necessities: Save-the-Dates; invitations; table runners; wedding favors; new, matching outfits for the entire wedding party; a designer bridal gown; an enviable location. Keene created the blog as a space for her to destress and digest, to determine what she actually wanted from her wedding and what was just the trappings of capitalism. It turned out that many brides/wives needed the same sort of space.

Wedding blogs and image-accumulation sites like Pinterest serve a mostly female demographic. According to the Pew Research Center, 45% of all women online use Pinterest, compared to just 17% of men online. That's about *half* of *all* women online. APW's monthly readership extends to 1,333,950 users, making it one of the top-

five wedding content sites in the English language (APW Advertise). APW boasts, “Most wedding websites are all style and no substance, and these days we know most readers are just in it for their Pinterest fix. With us, it’s the reverse. People come from Pinterest for the helpful content and stay for the community and conversation” (APW Advertise). APW grew from a blog about Meg’s wedding planning frustrations into a lively website and forum for women to discuss issues about their partnerships, as well as the neoliberal, patriarchal, heteronormative society in which they subsisted. By centering on a topic that is mostly a female niche within a male-dominated Internet (Porter 239), and being the voice of “practicality” in a glutted online wedding industry, a microcosm was formed where articulate women could come to talk.

APW is seemingly, from the home page, geared towards the bride. Columns of clickable images with captions like “25+ Updo Hairstyles for Long and Medium Hair” and “Maybe What You Need Is a Photographer from the Matrix” run alongside sidebar ads featuring smiling lesbian and hetero couples. However, a look further into the site reveals that, after the wedding and the initial draw-in, brides often stick around as wives. The Advice & Etiquette section has a “Marriage Essays” tag that includes short posts from staff writers and contributors, which are followed by generally 20-120 comments. APW’s feminist bent is evident in not only the posts’ content, but in the way the community interacts in the forum beneath the posts. It’s in the comment section that this space’s distinctiveness comes into focus, as a case study in productive discourse, intertextuality, and the perpetuation of fourth-wave feminist ideals.

Why Marriage?

Each time I'd bring up my research with other people, I was embarrassed. I'd say I was writing about feminist discourse online and hope that my conversational partner wouldn't ask me about which space specifically. I was afraid of wearing my "girliness" on my sleeve as I shyly let the words "A Practical Wedding" escape. But I actually think that squirminess is one of the things that makes the space able to be what it is. It's a space most men or trolls won't want to enter. It draws in those who are not only interested in marriage, but interested in having a "practical" wedding. It's a microcosm (though with a large following of 1.3 million, now) of women interested in talking about marriage, where few men visibly enter ("Advertise"). It's an example of the "cultural feminist ideal of women's space, a counterculture refuge from the aggressive public world of the Internet" (Rhodes 124), that Jacqueline Rhodes somewhat sarcastically suggests many technofeminist scholars study.

Not every online user will follow even more explicitly feminist sites like *Bitch*, *Feministing*, or *Everyday Feminism*, but many women online will look for wedding sites. There's something to be said for the wider reach of feminism lite, moderate feminism, the widely appealing feminism of the Beyoncé sort.

Wedding websites often assert that ceremonies and receptions have to be expensive, hetero, whitewashed, and beautiful with their content and images. The women-commenters of APW and the posts themselves are evidence to the contrary. It's a space for women to disrupt the idea of a traditional wedding, yet still choose matrimony and most often monogamy. APW's posts don't often question the very idea of marriage, its capitalist, heteropatriarchal roots. Just like other wedding sites, it hosts

sponsored posts and sidebar ads. It's explicitly a for-profit site. It's not perfect feminism, an idea Roxane Gay argues in her book *Bad Feminist* doesn't exist anyway. It's not radical feminism.

It accepts marriage as an institution, engages with its issues, and works to rewrite what marriage can be in a way that is more egalitarian and feminist. Weddings and marriages are broadly accessible topics for women that can still bring into sharp relief the many issues that face women when choosing to partner, the societal and familial expectations, the reproductive expectations, the capitalist ones. The squirmy things.

I know I wouldn't have been drawn into the feminist fold without having found it. I'm doing this research because I cannot separate my thinking from the site that initiated it, the forum where these thoughts began to take shape.

The Fourth Wave

The expansiveness of the Internet has allowed many people worldwide to gain access to information they would not have been able to otherwise, whether they live under anti-intellectual authoritarian regimes, in geographically isolated places, or are simply precocious, loner contemporary preteens. The fourth wave of feminism supports this increased access, both to information and to marginalized groups. The fourth wave of feminism is demarcated as separate from the previous waves due to its commitment to intersectionality through the means of increasingly online-based activism (Cochrane Chapter 1). Online activism refers to the dissemination of social justice information and the organization and enactment of politicized action through online and social media

platforms, such as Twitter, Tumblr, and so on (“A Feminist Approach to Social Media”). Intersectionality is a term originally coined to refer to overlapping and intersecting social identities and how they relate to systems of oppression; it was used to bring light to the oppression of black women, and specifically how black feminist ideals could be applied to anti-discrimination law (Adewunmi). Today, the term is also commonly extended to marginalized social identities beyond race-based ones, like gender identities, sexual orientations, social classes, dis/abilities, and so on. After many decades of predominately white feminist issues and wins, intersectionality avows a more inclusive and matrixed understanding of social inequality and systems of oppression (*Cámara Retórica* Chapter 1).

Though the Internet has provided a more accessible platform for the fourth wave of feminism, the extensiveness of online spaces can also be to their detriment, re-enacting the same social injustices present in everyday life (Selfe 294). Comment forums on the Internet can be an unwelcoming place for marginalized groups, including and especially women (Selfe 306). Men participate in online discussions more than women, with 20% of men online participating compared to just 11% of women (*Pew Research Center*). Kira Cochrane writes, “While making feminism much more visible, the Internet has also brought to light deep strains of misogyny, a vicious opposition to female advancement that plays out on countless threads, which hums with threats of rape, death and mutilation” (Chapter 4). She continues, “The comments on any article about feminism justify feminism” (qtd. in Chapter 4). In other words, the misogynistic comment threads beneath articles on feminism illustrate just why we need those articles in the first place. We do not live in a post-gender society. There is a need for spaces

online in which women can speak without the fear of harassment, harm, or mansplaining.

Cyber- and Technofeminist Threads

My cyber- and technofeminist forebears left traces of a trail for me to follow in the mid-to-late-'90s and early '00s. In 2003, Gesa E. Kirsch, et al., wrote, "I would have liked to see more essays by compositionists working at the intersections of feminism and technology. Electronic writing can contribute to many of the goals of feminism, but it cannot contribute in any way if feminists eschew the online world" (Introduction).

I'm sure that Kirsch is pleased that feminists have not eschewed the online world, but have in fact moved much of their activist efforts to it for a wider reach, engendering a new feminist wave. But that twenty-something-year-old trail's scent has started to go cold without fresh technofeminist blood to revive and tend to it in the field of rhetoric and composition.

Many scholars then expressed optimism about the Internet's potential for egalitarian discourse across genders (Bower, Sullivan, Gilligan, etc.). Other scholars exhibited pessimism about the possibility of reifying real-life essentialized gender roles in the online realm (Takayoshi, Selfe, Hawisher, Sullivan, Rhodes, and more). Judy Wajcman indicated a hesitant optimism that this pessimism would go largely unfounded (6).

This research has seen little follow-up. However, as evidenced by the forthcoming special issue of *Computers and Composition* on technofeminism, entitled

“Re(Generations) and Intersectional Futures” and edited by Dànielle DeVoss, Angela Haas, and Jacqueline Rhodes, there is renewed interest.

What’s been happening on the Internet in the years since technofeminism was an active presence in rhetoric and composition? What new feminist issues are occurring without scholarly attention and input? The research I am doing here serves as a continuation and revisitation of those threads, bringing them into 2017, a new wave of feminism, and the ways many women are using the Internet today.

Chapter 3: Methodology, Methods, & Findings

Research Question

Feminism is an expansive and slippery ideology, a moving mark, like a wave.

When you're in the roiling expanse of the ocean, it can be difficult to differentiate if you're on the crest of a wave or in between waves. I intend for this discussion of APW to serve as a moment of clarity within a shifting ideology. APW is a model for the intersectional, hypertextual, intertextual feminist spaces that technofeminists predicted in their moments of optimism.

The question that guided this research is: What characteristics make the comment forums in APW the productive, feminist spaces that they are?

To attempt an answer, I describe the APW community, as it exists in the here and now, and the moves that commenters make to create their honest ethos and act within the space's de facto rules of engagement. In the interest of time and space, I chose four representative posts and their comment threads for this research.

I argue that the following characteristics shape the space into a model of feminist online interaction:

1. the connection of users' online identities with their real-life selves,
2. the non-hierarchical structure of the community,
3. the productive exchanges between members, and
4. the site- and Internet-wide intertextuality.

By describing this space, I will revisit 20-year-old conversations surrounding technofeminism and apply them to an online forum working today, as well as connect them to more recent scholarship on the subject. I will provide a snapshot of how APW

functions, and imagine how it could be used as a model for other such online spaces in the Call-to-Action section. How can we—Internet users, site runners, forum commenters, social beings of the 21st century, fourth-wave feminists—emulate and foster such spaces?

As our Internet privacy is being rapidly degraded, as our highest elections are under cyber-attack from outside forces, as we're nearing twenty years since these discussions were prominent in rhetoric and composition, as the fourth wave progresses towards a crest, answers to the above questions are imperative.

Methodology

For this study, I selected four posts and their accompanying comments as representative of APW's marriage-oriented posts. Each post is tagged under "Marriage Essays" on APW's site.

I did not contact the editors or staff of the site, nor any of the commenters. Taking a cue from Tom Boellstorff in *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*, I conceptualized APW as a "virtual world." Boellstorff writes, "If one wants to study collective meaning and virtual worlds as collectivities that exist purely online, then studying them in their own terms is the appropriate methodology" (61). To contact the virtual users in the physical world, I would be connecting the virtual users to their physical selves. Although I assume each commenter has a body and the consciousness to type and interact with others, not to mention a gender and race, such identities are not evident from their comments unless the users decide to reveal such information about themselves in their username or comment.

Conceivably, a user could use a female avatar and female username, mention that they're female in a comment, but if we followed the cable lines from site to server to, say, Milwaukee, we could find an aging man tacking away at his keyboard. Such is the nature of the Internet. Within the context of the site, for the purposes of this piece, and accepting the limitations of an online environment, I will take each user at their word, a feminist act of trust. Online forums foster a potentiality for anonymity in a way the physical world most often does not, but it does not have to be taken up.

As for me, I'm what's called a "lurker" online. I had never commented on an APW post before beginning this study. I worried about being the much-maligned outsider/researcher. To gain an understanding of the process and feel of being a commenter on the site, I commented on a recent post. I did not identify myself as a researcher, nor attack the post with an aim to research. I thought back to the days before I started this project, when I was just a lurker with no deeper interest in the site. I also left the four posts that were the subjects of my research alone. I wanted those posts to be untouched by my prying typing fingers, so that they could be taken as online artifacts.

I myself have seen many design iterations of APW. The Internet is a slippery thing, constantly growing and changing. To preserve a post in amber as just a user would be an impossibility. Taking into account the mercurial nature of online forums and the Internet in general, I can only provide a snapshot of the posts and comments in their current state. Although I saved copies of the complete webpages—to the cloud, to my computer, to my external hard drives—these URLs could vanish in a few months or years. They could also look vastly different. APW could change management, design.

Comment forums could go the way of the dinosaurs, the way of many listservs and sites that existed when the technofeminists were writing. Talking about this space in its present state is an exercise in futility, in letting go, in an acceptance of—forgive me for the bout of Buddhism—the impermanence of all human creation. But that’s also what makes it important. If I don’t talk about this space, those who aren’t site users would never know what’s happening in it. And after it passes back into the online ether, even site users likely wouldn’t have access to it or reason to think of it.

Methods & Findings

After being an APW reader for going on seven years, I came to some understandings about how the space worked. I was impressed by the way APW seemed to attract a variety of voices, and the quality of the commenters’ replies. This wasn’t the comment section of a site like YouTube or Reddit, with short, often antagonistic or even misogynistic comments. These were well-thought out, lengthy, complex responses from women. But I wanted to come to better understandings about the space, to come up with a system to attempt to quantify it. I wanted to find a way to show what was happening, to begin to explain it.

I chose the following four posts to represent the site:

1. “Why Do Feminists End Up Stuck in Gendered Marriages?” by
Stephanie Kaloi;
2. “The Fight That Made Me Question Everything About My Marriage” by
Jessica Walker Boehm;

3. “Do I Have Cold Feet or a Chemical Imbalance?” by Liz Moorhead;
and
4. “What Happens When a Woman ‘Marries Down’” by Rachel Gabrys.

My criteria for selection included: marriage-oriented post subject matter, number and length of comments, recent date, different authors across posts, and personal interest in the subject matter. Each post is specifically about marriage as a unifying theme, as opposed to weddings or sponsored posts and their ilk. They are written by staff writers and guest contributors.

“Why Do Feminists End Up Stuck in Gendered Marriages?” is about the gendered expectations in marriages that often shackle women’s productivity and the emotional labor women take on when teaching husbands how to be feminists. This post had the most social engagement of all four articles, I believe because it is the most widely relatable. Within a patriarchal society in which women are socialized into the roles of wives long before men are socialized to be husbands, feminists must often teach their male spouses about women’s marginalization within society, and work against it on a personal, relational level within their marriages.

“The Fight That Made Me Question Everything About My Marriage” is about the risk involved in embarking into marriage, and the acceptance and appreciation of that risk.

“Do I Have Cold Feet or a Chemical Imbalance?” is part of an advice column series called “Ask A Practical Wedding.” The letter writer discusses the anxiety he/she feels at being engaged, and asks the columnist if it’s normal. The columnist enlists a

psychologist for help and quotes the provided advice, then encourages the letter writer to see a therapist and communicate with his/her partner.

“What Happens When a Woman ‘Marries Down’” tackles the gendered expectation that women marry male bread-winners. The writer shares her own experience with being engaged to someone who does “pink-collar” work in customer service, who earns less than her and is less educated.

The writers model a precedent for the comment sections that follow each post. They share intimate details of their lives, and discuss the societal and gendered expectations that caused them to write. The writers most often identify themselves (though there is the occasional anonymous post, especially in the “Ask A Practical Wedding” advice column). They also often perform many of the same actions that I coded for when analyzing the comment sections, as you will see in the coming chapters.

Based on my understanding of intersectional feminism and this online space, I developed a system of critical discourse analysis for the project, to attempt to answer my research question. This is exemplified in the following coding schema:

Table 1: Coding Schema

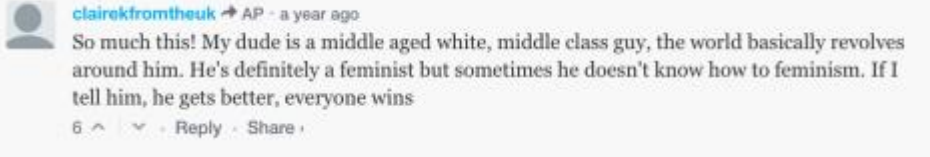
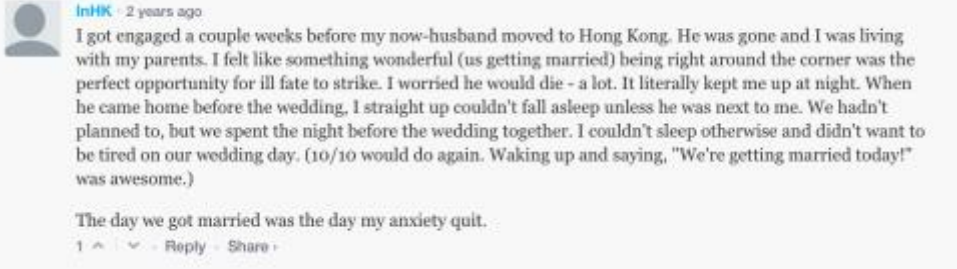
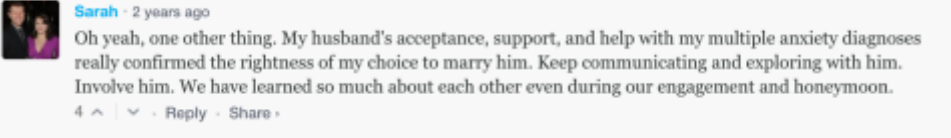
Code	Description	Example	Combined instances in all four articles
Identity marker	Mentions of commenters' or their family members' gender/race/education/sexual orientation/location/marital status/ability/etc.	 <p>clairekfromtheuk · AP · a year ago</p> <p>So much this! My dude is a middle aged white, middle class guy, the world basically revolves around him. He's definitely a feminist but sometimes he doesn't know how to feminism. If I tell him, he gets better, everyone wins</p> <p>6 ^ v · Reply · Share ·</p>	50
Sharing own experience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specific Non-specific 	Moments in which commenters discuss details/stories related to experiences in their lives outside APW	<p><i>Specific</i></p>  <p>InHK · 2 years ago</p> <p>I got engaged a couple weeks before my now-husband moved to Hong Kong. He was gone and I was living with my parents. I felt like something wonderful (us getting married) being right around the corner was the perfect opportunity for ill fate to strike. I worried he would die - a lot. It literally kept me up at night. When he came home before the wedding, I straight up couldn't fall asleep unless he was next to me. We hadn't planned to, but we spent the night before the wedding together. I couldn't sleep otherwise and didn't want to be tired on our wedding day. (10/10 would do again. Waking up and saying, "We're getting married today!" was awesome.)</p> <p>The day we got married was the day my anxiety quit.</p> <p>1 ^ v · Reply · Share ·</p> <p><i>Non-specific</i></p>  <p>Sarah · 2 years ago</p> <p>Oh yeah, one other thing. My husband's acceptance, support, and help with my multiple anxiety diagnoses really confirmed the rightness of my choice to marry him. Keep communicating and exploring with him. Involve him. We have learned so much about each other even during our engagement and honeymoon.</p> <p>4 ^ v · Reply · Share ·</p>	<p><i>Specific:</i> 230</p> <p><i>Non-specific:</i> 51</p>

Table 1 (cont'd)

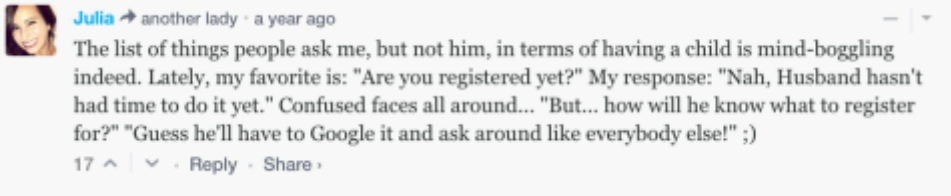

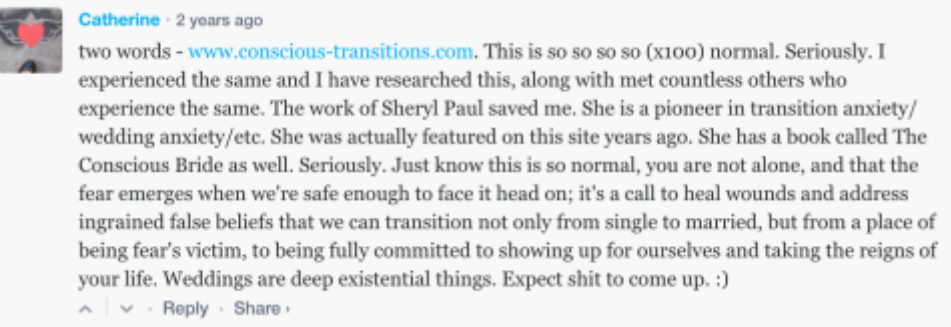
<p>Sharing issues with real-life people</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Unspecified gender</i> • <i>Women</i> • <i>Men</i> 	<p>Moments in which commenters discuss issues they have with family members, friends, or other people in their lives outside APW</p>	 <p>Julia → another lady · a year ago</p> <p>The list of things people ask me, but not him, in terms of having a child is mind-boggling indeed. Lately, my favorite is: "Are you registered yet?" My response: "Nah, Husband hasn't had time to do it yet." Confused faces all around... "But... how will he know what to register for?" "Guess he'll have to Google it and ask around like everybody else!" ;)</p> <p>17 ^ v · Reply · Share ·</p>	<p><i>Unspecified gender: 33</i> <i>Women: 21</i> <i>Men: 64</i></p>
<p>Drawing attention to societal issue</p>	<p>Moments in which commenters point out larger societal issues, in contrast to individual experiences</p>	 <p>Greenish → Cellistec · a year ago</p> <p>This is so sad, and an example of how the patriarchy screws over EVERYONE, not just women.</p> <p>2 ^ v · Reply · Share ·</p>	<p>78</p>
<p>Referencing other (re)sources</p>	<p>References to any other websites, posts, or literature that commenters recommend or refer to</p>	 <p>Catherine · 2 years ago</p> <p>two words - www.conscious-transitions.com. This is so so so so (x100) normal. Seriously. I experienced the same and I have researched this, along with met countless others who experience the same. The work of Sheryl Paul saved me. She is a pioneer in transition anxiety/ wedding anxiety/etc. She was actually featured on this site years ago. She has a book called The Conscious Bride as well. Seriously. Just know this is so normal, you are not alone, and that the fear emerges when we're safe enough to face it head on; it's a call to heal wounds and address ingrained false beliefs that we can transition not only from single to married, but from a place of being fear's victim, to being fully committed to showing up for ourselves and taking the reigns of your life. Weddings are deep existential things. Expect shit to come up. :)</p> <p>^ v · Reply · Share ·</p>	<p>35</p>

Table 1 (cont'd)








Quoting	Quoting or citing the post/commenter above	 <p>JC · 8 months ago</p> <p>"If you asked me now, I'm not sure I even know what "this" was." This is the most truthful and most terrifying part of this essay, for me. I know I have had these moments-- with my family, with my professors, etc. And I remember the aftermath, the huge wounds they created and the blessed (and sometimes not so blessed) process of healing from them. But I also don't always remember what caused them, and that is a terrifying thing when looking forward to decades of a relationship. If I could predict what would cause the meltdown, I could do the hard work right now, while things are good, to make sure that they never happen. I would like to be able to predict the future and engineer it so that I can avoid that pain at all costs. But of course I can't, of course those moments are going to happen, and of course they've happened before and I've come out ok. But I can't be the only one who prays for just an ounce more control over the situation, just one little insight to lessen the impact.</p> <p>4 ^ v · Reply · Share ·</p>	68
Agreement	Moments in which a commenter agrees with the post, a parent comment, or a previous comment in the thread	 <p>Jenny → Julia · a year ago</p> <p>YES, drives me crazy with the gendered stuff and parenting!! I mean fuck, I didn't get a "this is what you need to have to keep a baby alive list" download into my brain at conception. We fucking talked to people and bought the Baby bargains book and googled and determined what we'd need given our apt and lifestyle.</p> <p>7 ^ v · Reply · Share ·</p>  <p>CMT → Julia · a year ago</p> <p>Because women who haven't ever been parents before magically know everything new parents need??? Ugh! How do people not see or understand the flaws in logic like this?</p> <p>1 ^ v · Reply · Share ·</p>  <p>another lady → Julia · a year ago</p> <p>Right! I like that answer!</p> <p>1 ^ v · Reply · Share ·</p>	71

Table 1 (cont'd)

Discord	Moments in which a commenter disagrees with the post, a parent comment, or a previous comment in the thread	<div data-bbox="751 272 1692 555">  Mrrpaderp → NotMotherTheresa · 7 months ago Good point about the wage gap. I know some power couples, but they're all at a salary level that they can afford to outsource everything. With your middle income level jobs - the jobs where you make enough to support a family, but not so much that you can afford to hire 24/7 help - the burden generally falls to the woman to pick up the slack, with the resulting damage to her career prospects. And "middle income" is a category that increases drastically when you include student loans. You can have 2 biglaw associates making \$200k/yr each, but if they also have \$200k student loans each, then they probably can't afford round the clock childcare and all the other things they have to outsource to make their lives work. 1 ^ v · Reply · Share › </div> <div data-bbox="814 587 1692 734">  Amy March → Mrrpaderp · 7 months ago Sorry, totes my pet peeve, but middle income on no planet includes two people making \$200k a year- absolutely, how much you can afford on that income varies depending on things like student loans and housing costs, but it isn't any sort of middle income. 7 ^ v · Reply · Share › </div>	35
Giving advice	Moments in which a commenter provides advice to the poster, a parent commenter, or a previous commenter in the thread	<div data-bbox="751 808 1692 1286">  Amanda → QUEER · a year ago I also think this is a lot of a people thing. It might be gendered in circumstances of men who had maids for moms & expect wives to take up that role, but in college, I definitely roomed with some messy girls. Any advice column about roommates & chore charts echoes this too. I don't remember the last time I washed a dish. But wow, can J's clutter get out of hand for my peace of mind. And then there's the ongoing made or messy bed "fight" (i'm pro-knotted sheets, he likes them smooth and tightly tucked). Ultimately, though, we have very, very, very similar values about what clean means. I think it's important to partner with someone who shares your Cleanliness IQ. Hey, if you're both slob, enjoy it. If you're both neat freaks, go forth. I never wanted to have the fights my parents did about my dad leaving the house a mess. They'd both just be better off if they married someone who a) didn't leave their dirty socks in the living room or b) didn't care if dirty socks were in the living room. ^ v · Reply · Share › </div>	61

These codes aligned with the broad strokes of what I saw happening in the space, which allowed for both commenters' digital identity formation as well as a communal space with some shared values and de facto rules of engagement.

Coding these comments was an often frustrating experience. Most comments had multiple codes that applied to them. Sometimes I'd code a long series of comments before realizing I'd only been counting instances of one code, excited by a narrative thread I was following. I'd go back and start over, coding for all the others. APW commenters are rhetorically savvy women, making many feminist moves within even just one comment.

I had to make several judgment calls about which codes applied to comments, mostly during the coding process for the first article I coded, "Why Do Feminists End Up Stuck in Gendered Marriages?". If I coded a comment as quoting, could I also code it as agreement (See Figure 1)? (I decided, yes, sometimes it's doing both.)

Figure 1: Example of Quoting and Agreement



Would a comment count as discord if the commenters were discussing it reasonably? (Yes, that's how nearly all of them ended up occurring, as it's a feature of

the site I will discuss in the Productive Discord section.) Could a comment be coded as both agreement and discord? (Yes, if both instances occurred at different points in the same comment.) Could a comment both be referencing a (re)source and giving advice? (Yes.) There are many discursive layers that complicated this process.

I coded “Why Do Feminists End Up Stuck in Gendered Marriages?” first as it had the most comments, but my coding schema at the start looked a tad different. I added “unspecified gender” as a designation under sharing issues with real-life people, and “specific” and “non-specific” as designations under sharing their own experience, as I realized commenters didn’t always use identity markers or gendered pronouns for themselves or others.

Sometimes commenters would individualize experiences, while other times they would magnify them to discuss societal issues. I decided to add “drawing attention to societal issues” as separate from “sharing issues with real-life people” near the end of the article’s coding process and thus had to go over all 361 comments again. Some stories were not about specifically identified people, but were still from the commenters’ individual experience. Others were more obviously about issues within patriarchal society as a whole and not just individuals, necessitating its own code.

Whenever commenters share their own experiences, they humanize themselves and their experiences, allowing other users to see similarities on an everyday, practical basis, and providing one story towards what amalgamates into an understanding of the processes of socialization and marginalization. Whenever commenters draw attention to societal issues, they link all those experiences together to discuss trends and

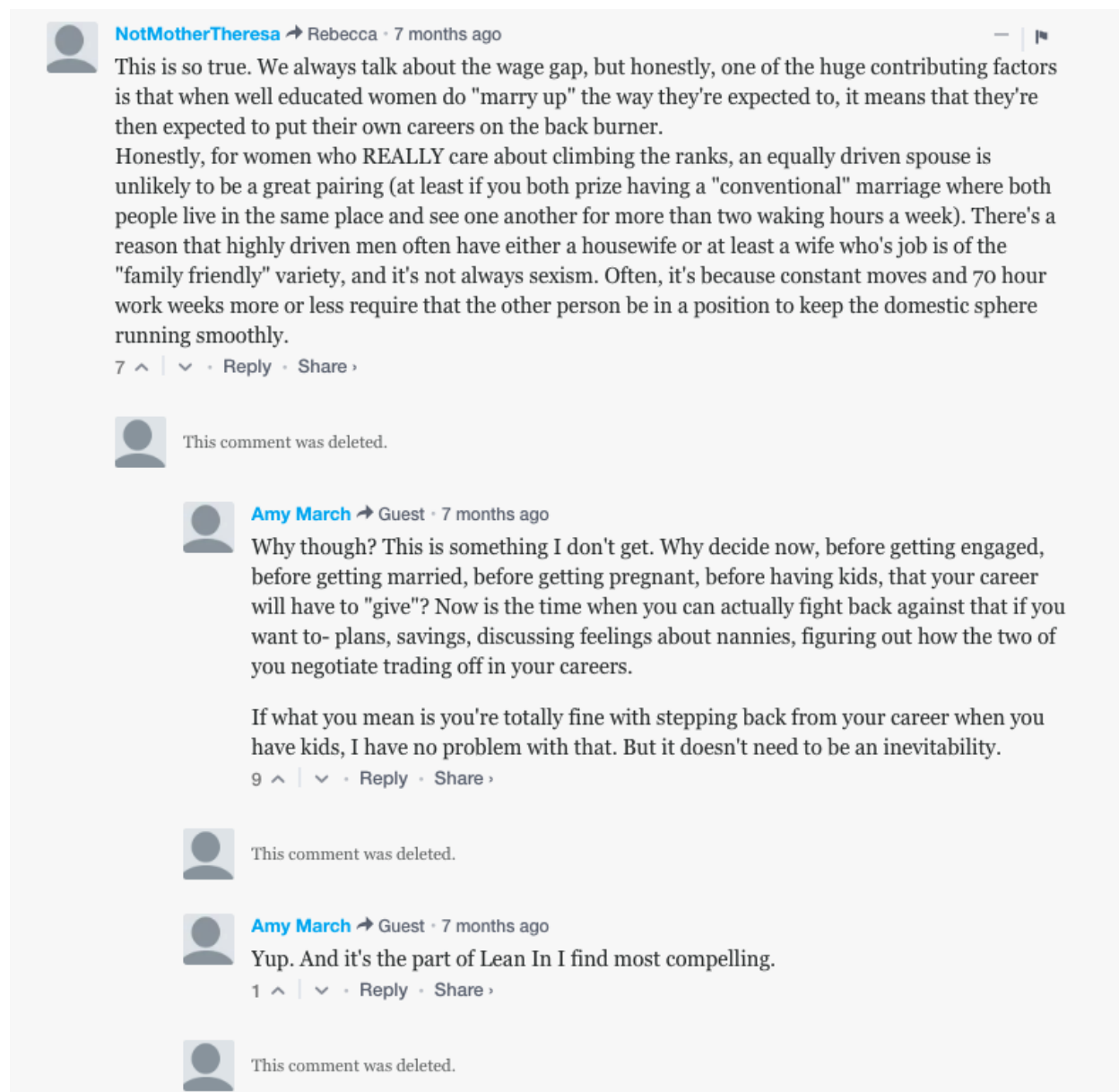
socialization practices that ultimately require movements like intersectional feminism to address.

Commenters sharing their own experiences is the obvious forerunner in what's happening in the space, with 230 specific instances and 51 non-specific. Kristine Blair, et al., write, "The personal is a necessary part of cyberfeminist practice" (4). *The personal is political*, that oft-heard rallying cry of feminist activists and writers, unsurprisingly holds true in online spaces.

Comment Moderation

There were two anomalous deleted comment threads within the four articles, a graveyard of some discussion that had come before (See Figure 2). Did another user flag it? Did the moderators decide it violated the comment policy? Although unlikely, did several users decide to delete their comments? It is impossible to tell.

Figure 2: Example of Partially Deleted Comment Thread



In a take-it-as-it-is methodology, it's not possible to know for sure. Likewise, for commenters, they're forced to trust that APW has the community's interests in mind. Its comment policy reads as follows: "APW is a moderated web community. We encourage debate and disagreement, and but [*sic*] will moderate to keep things civil." It continues:

“We are not going to dedicate space on the site to discussing the comment policy or editorial choices, but if you feel you’ve been unfairly moderated, or simply have a question about comment moderation, you are welcome to email the team.” This vague, opaque really, comment policy leaves the editorial power in the keyboards of the APW staff.

However, if the users trust the moderators, as they seem to, this leaves the tedious editorial work of moderating comments to the paid staff. Trust is a main feature of the space—Commenters build trust by entrusting their identity markers to the other readers, moderators build trust by participating in the space, and I trust that commenters are being honest about who they are in their personal accounts and identity markers.

The APW comment forums are, I argue, working in a social-communitarian model. While the rest of the Internet is an often hostile space, APW commenters work within their own electronic community to create different rules of engagement. James E. Porter argues that “the social-communitarian position posits that rights and responsibilities originate in communities and that ‘what is good for the community’ should ultimately take precedence over individual rights in matters of tough ethical decision making” (241). What is good for the community is prized over that “god-term” free speech (232). In other words, relationships, productive discourse, trust, and the community are prized over individuals’ rights to hate speech and the like, a tenet known as relational feminism.

Chapter 4: Site Characteristics

APW is a community of kind, smart women who share their experiences and understandings to help others. Together, they work through relationship and social issues to better comprehend our patriarchal society and the humans it's made up of. It was a complex process sorting out just *how* these rhetorically adept women make APW the communitarian, feminist, webbed space that it is. You've seen the data, you've got the stats—there's a lot going on.

I argue that the following characteristics shape APW into a model of feminist online interaction:

1. the connection of users' online identities with their real-life selves,
2. the non-hierarchical structure of the community,
3. the productive exchanges between members, and
4. the site- and Internet-wide intertextuality.

I chose these four not because they are the only things occurring in the space, but because they stood out to me from the many multiples of codes within comments as ways that this space differs from many others online. In this chapter, I outline these four factors as well as some related anomalies.

Identity Markers

When I posted a comment, I found that before posting, commenters have to log in with Disqus, the comment platform, or a linked social media account. They have to verify their email address, but their posts display immediately. They can either link it to their personal sites or remain anonymous.

Commenters often include their full names in their usernames, photos in their avatars, links to their personal sites, and user profiles managed by Disqus. They also identify aspects of themselves or their family members while telling stories about their lives, such as their age, race, location, and so on. Although online spaces allow for anonymity in ways the real world doesn't, many APW commenters forego anonymity in the interest of telling their stories. (As outlined in the Methodology section, I assume they are being honest about their positionality and that their online selves correspond with their real-life identities.) Commenters include identifying information necessary to detail their explanations and contribute to their honest ethos, in which their online selves are a projection of their real-life selves.

In discussing women's blogs, Deborah S. Bowen writes:

In the virtual reality of the Internet . . . women can articulate bodies of knowledge based on their own experiences and perceptions, and in so doing, subvert and redefine extant discourses. The formation of autobiography leads to the creation of 'women-space,' a merging of public and private spheres resulting in the creation of this entirely new spatial reality (Zalis, 2003). (311)

APW is, I argue, just this sort of "women-space."

Commenters' identity markers often correlate with them sharing their own experiences or sharing issues with real-life people. This gives the reader an image of the people involved in their stories, an indication of why they act the way and say the things they do, and a window into the commenter's life and mind.

For example, in “Why Do Feminists End Up Stuck in Gendered Marriages?”, commenters describe their husbands in various ways: “my dear white middle class husband”; “middle aged white, middle class guy”; “my sweetie is a trans man”; “my husband is older than me, and was married once before (he’s 37, I’m 24)”; “my husband...slips into white male obliviousness from time to time...It’s my job as a mixed race woman to remind him what’s up sometimes.” Of the 50 total instances of textual identity markers in all four articles, 24 of them take place in this article. With 361 comments, this post has the most interaction of all the ones I studied. One can assume that APW users have much to say, share, and discuss related to how they and women like them negotiate gendered expectations in their marriages.

By identifying themselves and sharing their stories, commenters build intimacy with other site users. They do not hide behind their computer screens, bashing each other under the veil of anonymity. They build trust and community.

Moderators as Commenters


I originally coded for staff moderation and discussion of staff members by commenters, but did not include it in my final schema as the numbers for the four articles were negligible. Staff members did not enter the discussion to moderate, but to join the conversation, modeling a feminist move as they did so. In *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch expand the notion of the feminist rhetorician beyond just researchers in rhetoric and composition to those women working in such diverse locales as “local garden clubs and community organizations...in parenting groups...or in

social circle of quilters and needle workers” (101). Meg Keene, the site creator and editor-in-chief of APW, explicitly calls herself a feminist (“About APW”). Feminist rhetoricians in positions of power, according to Royster and Kirsch, do not have “the authority, privilege, and entitlement to write or write over the presence of others” (144).

In the example below, Meg is the first commenter on the post “Do I Have Cold Feet or a Chemical Imbalance?” She identifies herself as having generalized anxiety disorder and ends the comment with advice, similar moves to the other commenters. The only thing that visibilizes her separate identity within the site is the “Mod” tag near her (user)name.

She proceeds to get into a civil moment of Discord with another user, when Meg misunderstands the characteristics of cognitive behavioral therapy and the user corrects her (partially excerpted above). In this example, Meg effectively breaks down a difference or hierarchy between commenters and moderators. Gesa Kirsch writes that feminists with relative power must allow diverse “voices, visions, and experiences” to speak, and that these feminists must speak *with* these diverse peoples rather than “only for or about them” (Kirsch 4). Although Meg has more power within the space, as she controls nearly every aspect of its presentation, she also acts within it as a participant, subject to the same rules of engagement and making similar rhetorical moves. By decentralizing authority (at least, visibly) and breaking down an online hierarchy, Meg makes a feminist move (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: Editor-in-Chief and Moderator Meg Keene Joins the Discussion


**Meg Keene** Mod · 2 years ago

Aw, LIZ. As someone with generalized anxiety disorder (that you know, sometimes is fine and doesn't impact my life at all, and sometimes is super destructive) the final answer made me tear up. Because it's so rare for people to acknowledge that having an anxiety disorder is just part of NORMAL for some of us, no shame. And the no shame thing makes it a lot easier to cope with and get help.

And to the letter writer: when I'm really under stress I assume EVERYTHING is a huge mistake. My first pregnancy was a goddamn disaster because of it (also, by the end of a pregnancy, unlike an engagement, you can't really call it off, so lack of options makes the whole cycle even worse). Anyway, guess what: having a kid wasn't a mistake, my brain is just a little miswired. Now, that said, I had panic attacks in a job I needed to leave, so it's not like they're always wrong. But I can't make DECISIONS based on panic attacks. I have to treat them and get it all under control and clear enough space that I can make decisions with my rational mind. My "gut", so to speak, is sort of a mess in that way.


AND, for anyone wondering if it's worth getting treatment for the anxiety they've always dealt with and tried to white knuckle through... yeah... it REALLY REALLY IS WORTH IT.

18 ^ | v · Reply · Share ·

**Anony-nony** → Meg Keene · 2 years ago


Indeed, therapy was a god-send for me, and it wasn't this scary monolith I had made it out to be. A few months of weekly sessions was enough for me to learn the skills I needed to cope. It didn't make my anxiety magically disappear, because that's just who I am, but it taught me how to function happily, and how to decipher "real" anxiety from my disorder.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ·

**Meg Keene** Mod → Anony-nony · 2 years ago


Yeah, cognitive behavioral therapy doesn't do wonders for lots of conditions (say, depression), but it's totally amazing for anxiety. And, lets be honest, so are meds. Everyone in my household less the children take meds that work on anxiety, and diminished panic attacks and ongoing anxiety issues really contribute to good functioning over here.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ·

**Caitlin** → Meg Keene · 2 years ago


CBT is pretty good for depression too! It's as effective at treating depression as medication, except with a lower chance of relapse. If you mean the success rate is lower than when treating anxiety, then that is accurate. However, it is arguably the most effective way to treat depression. (My fiance is a depression treatment researcher).

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share ·

**Violet** → Caitlin · 2 years ago

Yes. Also, I think Mayberg's study in JAMA Psychiatry found some interesting brain biomarkers that indicate some people might do better with meds and others with CBT, depending on which areas of their brain showed specific patterns of activation prior to treatment. <http://archpsyc.jamanetwork...>

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ·

**Meg Keene** Mod → Caitlin · 2 years ago

I personally haven't found it effective at all for depression, but it's good to know it works for some people. Anxiety on the other hand, is more directly tied to behaviors, at least for me, so it's super helpful.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ·

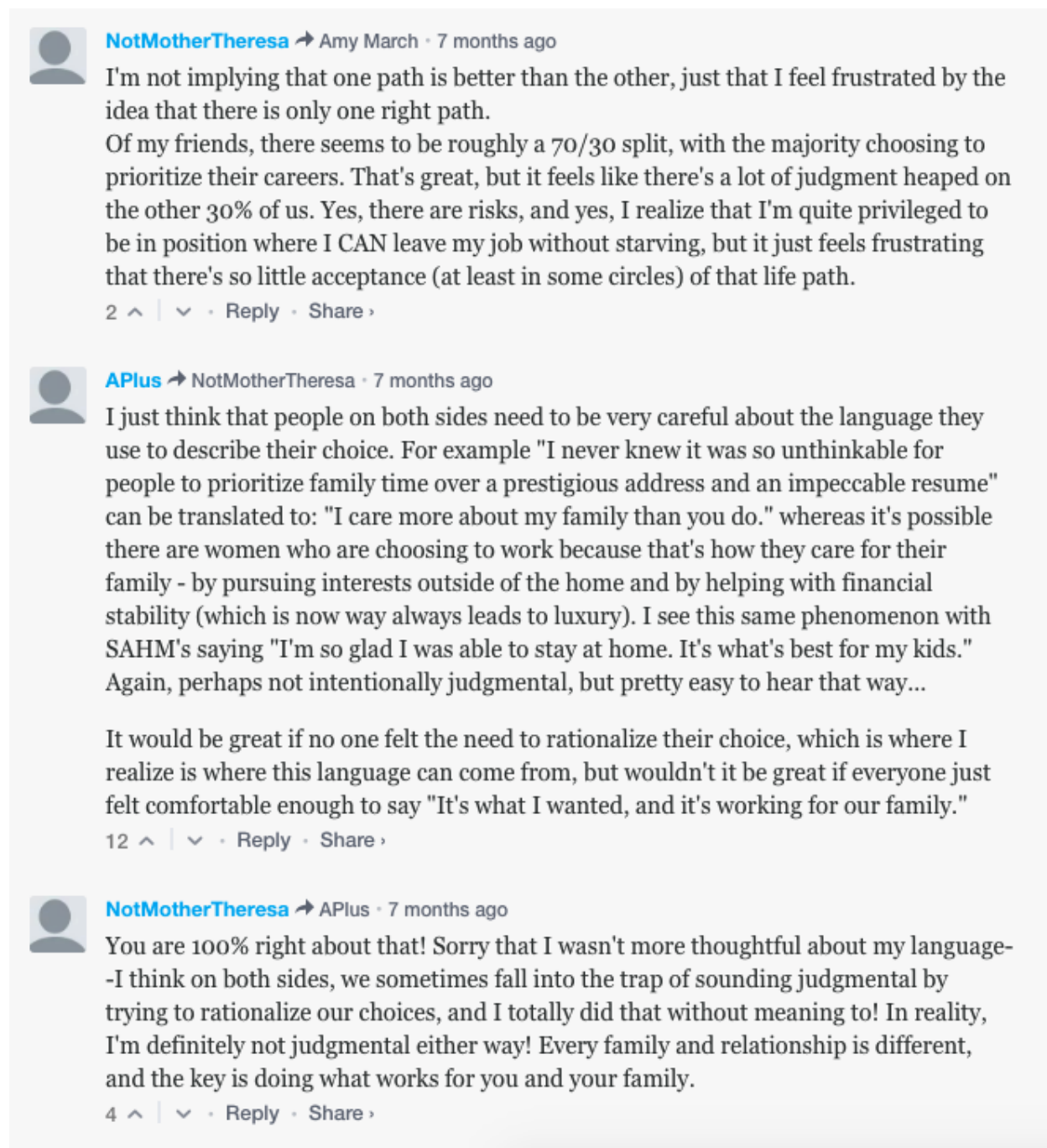
Productive Discord

The lively comment forums under APW's posts serve as a foil to what most Internet users have come to expect from other public arenas. There were just 35 moments of Discord in the four articles, compared to 71 moments of Agreement. When the exchange was discordant, users wrote with mutual respect and often talked through what amounted to a misunderstanding or benign ignorance, which I term "productive discord."

Female homosocial interactions have a bad rap for being "catty," yet APW interactions stay almost entirely productive. The following conversation is a representative example of how discord is handled, in contrast, in APW.

Users NotMotherTheresa and APlus discuss word usage and the power of language when discussing career choices. They quote each other and argue about semantic differences. APlus does not enact an ad hominem attack upon NotMotherTheresa, with whom she is disagreeing. She argues against her point and outlines her thinking, focusing on the societal issue. NotMotherTheresa then quickly apologizes, realizing her mistake, and seems to have broadened her views on the subject at hand (See Figure 4).

Figure 4: Moment of Discord in Which Commenters Discuss Word Choice

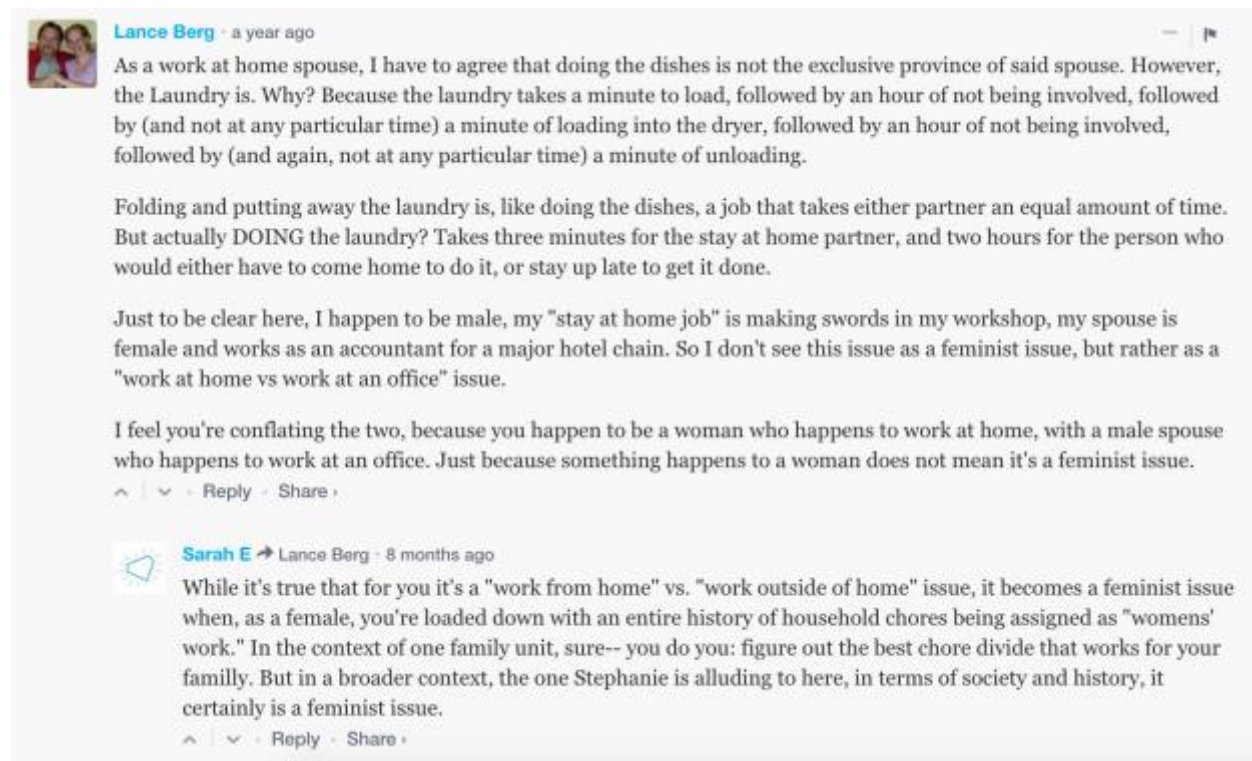


Rhodes writes that feminists “have claimed hypertext’s malleability for their own, drawing connections between the constructive, unhierarchical ‘web’ of the Internet and

the ‘web-thinking’ that marks women’s moral development” (119). In this webbed space, women’s “web-thinking” allows them to maintain composure during disagreements, quote one another, and relate amicably in a mostly unhierarchal platform.

In the four posts I studied, there are only two comments apparently made by men. One of them is made by a user named “Matthew” who does not explicitly state he’s male, so it is not suitable for discussion here. The other is by user Lance Berg, who writes he “happen[s] to be male” in a comment (See Figure 5).

Figure 5: Discord between Male and Possibly Female Commenter



In a discussion about chores, he argues that the previous commenter is not discussing a “feminist issue, but rather . . . a ‘work at home vs work at an office’ issue.” In a reply, user Sarah E. strongly disagrees but explains her reasoning calmly. She doesn’t verbally eject him from the space, or even point to his gender as the reason for him misnaming the issue.

She corrects him, writing, “It becomes a feminist issue when, as a female, you’re loaded down with an entire history of household chores being assigned as ‘women’s work’ . . . in a broader context, the one Stephanie is alluding to here, in terms of society and history, it certainly is a feminist issue.”

Men are subject to the same productive debate as the female commenters of APW. As Jacqueline Jones Royster says, “You don’t have to be female to take on the values, principles, and practices of feminism and rhetoric” (qtd. in *Cámara Retórica* Chapter 1). It is as important for men to be feminists as it is women, being 50% of the world’s population. Although men aren’t apparent active members of APW, they are not scorned either.

Intertextuality

By citing others and joining an Internet-wide conversation, APW users become larger than themselves, entering into a webbed literary history. APW is one model of the polyvocal, hypertextual, intertextual feminist online spaces once theorized by technofeminists.

In the four articles, commenters provide 35 references to (re)sources, so-called because although sometimes they link to where they got an idea, they more often link to useful information to help the original poster or parent comment. They refer users to other APW posts, taking advantage of this webbed space and its allowance for linking across time and space. They also refer users to other websites, other stories and articles that live online, as well as to real-life resources like non-hormonal birth control methods and types of therapy.

Deborah Bowen coins the term for the webbed online writing that women do “e-*criture feminine*,” a play on words and update to Hélène Cixous’s concept of *écriture féminine*, French for “women’s writing.” Bowen writes:

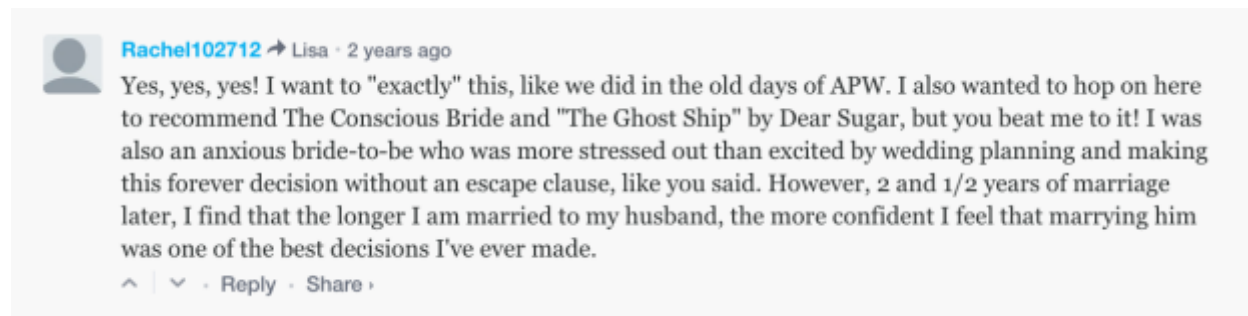
Hyperlinking or hypertextuality is a hallmark of postmodernism and of *écriture féminine*. Since the first example of Web publication, the concept of hypertext has challenged the once two-dimensional structure of 'writing.' The World Wide Web is itself a series of interlinked and interlocking media . . . paralleling what Lippard calls 'a certain antilogical, antilinear approach also common to many women's work . . . fragments, networks, everything about everything' (cited in Cixous, 1990, p. 81). (318)

In APW, women quote each other, link to outside resources, and insert themselves into a webbed network of thought and theory that corresponds with the type of "webbed thinking" women are known for, according to Rhodes, Bowen, and other technofeminists.

In a former design iteration of APW, users had the option to click "Exactly!" on a comment. This worked similarly to a Facebook reaction. It allowed users to see how many other users strongly agreed with a post. By making this a feature of the site, the APW staff set a precedent for agreement. There was no feature called "Absolutely not!" The term "Exactly!" implies enthusiastic agreement.

In the comment section for "Do I Have Cold Feet or a Chemical Imbalance?", user Rachel102712 writes, "Yes, yes, yes! I want to 'exactly' this, like we did in the old days of APW." Rachel102712 demonstrates that she has former knowledge of the site and creates a sense of being a part of the community and understanding the way it functions and its history (See Figure 6).

Figure 6: Commenter Rachel102712 Demonstrates Prior Knowledge of Space



She is in conversation not just with the commenter and comment she is replying to, but with the other users who have been a part of the site since its early days. (Rachel102712 also offers a resource, shares her own experience, and uses identity markers. Explore how I coded multiple coding categories within one comment described earlier in the Methods & Findings section.)

In the current design, users often quote each other instead, even if their comment is already formatted as a reply. There were 68 instances of quoting, and 71 of agreement. There are sentences commenters apparently want to directly quote, to provide credit for an original idea and/or to point out wording or an idea they especially appreciate or want to productively critique.

Many APW users stick around the site as active commenters for years, lending to a feeling of community, of users with similar knowledge and understanding interacting within the space.

Commenters re-enact academic and feminist conventions, assigning credit to previous commenters whenever due. They also provide one another with (re)sources

and advice, bringing women and writers across the web into hypertextual, webbed conversation.

Chapter 5: Call-to-Action

As of 2016, 87% of Americans use the Internet (*Pew Research Center*). The Internet once seemed like a vast resource, where a user could find or do anything. Today, we receive daily news updates on our smartphones about the degradation of Internet privacy and the increase of online surveillance. Social media platforms tailor and skew newsfeeds to fit our politics and points of view. Our email services, social media, and search engines track our searches and market their wares to us. We read comment forums rife with insults and vulgarities. Cyberbullying is an epidemic. In many ways, the Internet is catching up with and emulating the ills of our capitalistic society—neoliberal, social-libertarian, patriarchal, dog-eat-dog, racist, heteronormative, gendered—just as many technofeminists feared might become the case (Takayoshi, Selfe, Hawisher, Sullivan, Romano, Rhodes).

The English-language Internet reifies the individualistic society which begat it. There is a need for online spaces, communities, and organizations that safeguard the voices, rights, and relations of the marginalized. These voices need protection from the hate speech of the hegemony. One of my regrets during the course of this research is not including a post by a person of color. While searching for suitable posts when I first started this research a year and a half ago, all of the ones I came across by PoC had few, short comments, making them unsuitable for my purposes. However, a little over a year ago, APW hired a writing fellow who is black, Jareesa Tucker McClure. Her recent posts have had significant traction. An extension to this piece would include a post written by her, as any intersectional feminist space should include voices from people of many sexual orientations, gender identities, and ethnicities.

I believe that the betterment of humanity and our respective communities, and the protection of marginalized peoples, serves a larger purpose than the protection of individual rights online. Porter contrasts the majority liberal, individualistic Internet-related public policy to a potential social-communitarian model, exemplified by spaces like APW. He writes, “[Villa-Vicencio] argues for including the community as an important (and currently missing) feature of human rights legislation—and I would agree that the notions of ‘community’ and ‘forum’ (Porter, *Audience and Rhetoric*) are important constructs currently missing from most discussions of public policy on electronic networks” (244). Communitarian, feminist models of Internet-related public policy and site creation are necessary in such a climate. Further research that focuses on applying this ideology specifically to public policy would benefit online citizens.

Although of course needs vary across sites, APW can be used as a model for site-runners, an example of how to create spaces that foster and moderate for productive discourse. Practically, beyond just hate speech, non-productive discord should not be tolerated. Moderation is of course a labor-intensive endeavor; at the base level, comment policies should at least be explicit about the rules of engagement. In a space that exhibits vulnerability, intimacy, trust, mutual respect, community, and the breaking down of hierarchies in its site policy pages, its posts, and its comments—like APW—users are more likely to respond in kind.

My hope for this research is that it can serve as a model of what the Internet can be for all of us doing Internet research, especially for scholars within the field of rhetoric and composition, and for those non-academics whose primary work is Internet-related. It can also serve as an example for any social being who engages in online activity or

community. We need more social-communitarian spaces like APW online, and more research in the academy, to fight the tide. The web is the fourth wave's battlefield. One can sink into hopelessness, or one can organize. I, and many of my feminist counterparts, choose the latter.

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