



Social media and hyper-masculine work cultures

Anna Maaranen | Janne Tienari

Department of Management and Organisation, Hanken School of Economics, Finland

Correspondence

Anna Maaranen, Department of Management and Organisation, Hanken School of Economics, P.O. Box 479, 00101 Helsinki, Finland.
Email: anna.maaranen@hanken.fi

In this article, we aim to contribute to research on social media as an arena for gender relations and inequality by elucidating how social media and hyper-masculine work cultures are interconnected. We focus empirically on the fiery social media commentary #MeToo sparked on Wall Street in New York. While the possibility of this movement backfiring has received relatively little research attention, we argue that online reactions illustrate the unpredictable nature of social media movements and their reception in organizations. Our analysis shows how they work to naturalize gender differences and polarize opinions, often with highly suspect humour. Focusing on interconnections of hyper-masculine work cultures, on the one hand, and popular misogyny gaining ground online, on the other, offers ways to critically explore the constitutive role of social media as a medium in shaping contemporary workplaces and society. More research on social relations and technology is needed in organizations that are less obviously hyper-masculine but deeply gendered nevertheless.

KEYWORDS

#MeToo, backlash, discourse, gender equality, social media, Wall Street

1 | INTRODUCTION

No more dinners with female colleagues. Don't sit next to them on flights. Book hotel rooms on different floors. Avoid one-on-one meetings. (Bloomberg Business, December 3, 2018)

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An article titled 'Wall Street Rule for the #MeToo Era: Avoid Women at All Cost' was published by Bloomberg Business on 3 December 2018. It presented findings of a survey conducted among more than 30 executives in the financial district of Wall Street in New York, focusing on their reactions towards the #MeToo movement. The article introduced strategies that men adopt in the '#MeToo era', many of which encourage avoiding women at the workplace and in work-related events.

Social media have become a key site on which social and societal issues are commented on today. One major discussion that has taken over social media platforms globally is that sparked by the #MeToo movement. The hashtag was first coined in 2006 by the civil rights activist Tarana Burke but gained global momentum when used in protest against sexual abuse in Hollywood in 2017. #MeToo raised discussions on harassment, segregation and gender inequality worldwide to the extent that it became one of the most high-profile examples of digital feminist activism (Mendes, Ringrose, & Killer, 2018). As Rubery (2019) argues, the way #MeToo took over social media by storm has made it clear that gender equality issues are far from being solved. However, not all social media commentary works in favour of the equality pursuits of #MeToo – in fact, the opposite, so much so that it may be igniting a new era of gender segregation.

A case in point is the heated social media commentary on the Bloomberg Business article and the 'Wall Street backlash'. The commentary was vivid, ranging from comments on sexual harassment and accusations of it to debates on inequality in the context of work and beyond. A sense of increased fear and resentment towards #MeToo and between men and women seems to persist among corporate decision-makers. Most notably, online commentary boils down to gender, and gender differences, as both the reason and the fix for whatever is perceived as the main issue, whether harassment, claims of it or unequal opportunities at work and beyond. Social media commenters tend to draw on an essentialist logic on gender and in such a harshly polarizing manner that some refer to the present condition as the new 'gender wars' (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016).

The 'Wall Street backlash' has brought to the fore something that has perhaps been boiling under the surface in western societies. While workplace sexual harassment has been discussed long before #MeToo (O'Leary-Kelly, Bowes-Sperry, Bates, & Lean, 2009; Zippel, 2006), the debate today seems particularly vitriolic in tone. Although Wall Street workplaces are known for their gendered hierarchies and hyper-masculine cultures in which sexuality and even its violent displays are evident (Fisher, 2010, 2012; Ho, 2009; McDowell, 1997; Roth, 2007), the extreme counter-reactions to #MeToo illustrate that there is something new going on. A hashtag movement apparently touched a painful nerve among Wall Street bankers, and it was also on social media where the reactions intensified. This suggests that the responses have to do, at least in part, with social media as a new stage for power struggles (Ems, 2014).

The important role of social media and hashtag movements such as #MeToo is recognized in feminist research (Bowles Eagle, 2015; Clark, 2014, 2016; Horeck, 2014; Khoja-Moolji, 2015; Meyer, 2014; Rentschler, 2015; Vacciani & Pullen, 2019; Williams, 2015). The utilization of online spaces and hashtags powerfully catalyses what Özkazanc-Pan (2018) calls collective feminist agency. However, also the pitfalls of social media are recognized by the growing research exploring misogynist culture and willingness to shut women up that flourishes online (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Bartlett, Norrie, Patel, Rumpel, & Wibberley, 2014; Jane, 2014, 2016, 2017; Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2019). It is thus evident that social media has a distinctly darker side where gender inequalities not only persist but are revived.

Motivated by a belief that the persistent struggles over inequality in the world of work and beyond are tightly interlinked to, and made newly visible by, commentary on social media, we set out to study the 'Wall Street backlash' to #MeToo. We find Wall Street illuminative of these interconnections as some of the anti-feminist discourses flourishing online seem to resonate with many aspects linked to the hyper-masculine Wall Street work culture. We adopt critical discourse analysis (CDA) as our methodological approach and conduct a reading on the commentary sparked by the Bloomberg article on two different social media platforms, Twitter and Reddit, to make sense of #MeToo and its effects.

In our analysis, we specify and illustrate discursive practices used in the social media commentary and consider what they tell us about two things: first, the increasingly complex relationship of gender, work and inequality and,

second, social media as a uniquely unfiltered, unpredictable and uncontrollable arena for anti-feminist sentiment. The social and the technological are fundamentally intertwined online, which makes social media a public sphere where technology plays a uniquely important role in shaping discourses and discursive practices. Drawing on feminist media studies as well as gender studies research on hyper-masculine work cultures, we offer a comprehensive critical analysis of how social media discourses are unique to the medium and powerfully participate in shaping perceptions of gender relations, and how they are impacted by, and have an impact on, the world of work.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Next, we discuss social media from the perspective of gender relations, address the hyper-masculine context of Wall Street, and outline our research design and analysis. We then specify and illustrate discursive practices in social media, discuss our findings, and offer conclusions and ideas for future research.

2 | SOCIAL MEDIA: FEMINIST ACTIVISM AND POPULAR MISOGYNY

Media are among the most important cultural carriers in the (re)production of gender relations (Krefting, 2002; Macdonald, 1995, 2003). Today, social media platforms have gained a prominent role as the new, digital public sphere. Gendered images and 'doing' gender related to management, organizations and work have been studied on the arena of mass media and the business press (Achtenhagen & Welter, 2011; Kelan, 2013; Krefting, 2002; Lämsä & Tiensuu, 2002; Lang & Rybnikova, 2016; Tienari, Holgersson, Meriläinen, & Höök, 2009) as well as in online media (Tienari & Ahonen, 2016; Vanhala, Pesonen, & Nokkonen, 2010). According to Tienari and Ahonen (2016), online commentary serves to produce portrayals of gender and particularly those that naturalize gender differences, thereby justifying inequalities.

While social media commentary shares some of the characteristics of other online media such as digital access and lack of geographical boundaries, its concept uniquely differs from other spaces such as online journals with edited content and comment boards, which are meant for reacting to that content rather than producing it. Kosut (2012) describes social media as a defining characteristic of the 'Web 2.0': it allows the individual user to control both the flow and production of information online. Social media platforms allow users to take control over content and form. However, the form is often limited in terms of the length and form of messages, which has led to a culture of distinct brevity that is different from mass media (see Brock, 2012).

Feminist media studies have acknowledged the potential of the new, proactive online sphere as an arena for discussing gender inequality and sexual harassment. Feminist scholars have recognized social media as a globally accessible and visible arena for feminist activism (Baer, 2016; Carter Olson, 2016; Crossley, 2015; Drüeke & Zobl, 2016; Keller, 2012, 2015; Keller et al., 2018; Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018; Phipps, Ringrose, Renold, & Jackson, 2018; Rodino-Colocino, 2014). Vachhani and Pullen (2019) argue that feminist movements are experiencing a vibrant, fuelled resurgence on social media where people can connect and get organized globally. 'Hashtag feminism' that works to counter gender inequalities with social media hashtags such as #MeToo, #mencallmethings, #YesAllWomen, #NotOk and #EveryDaySexism, has become a widely recognized phenomenon within feminist research (Bowles Eagle, 2015; Clark, 2014, 2016; Horeck, 2014; Khoja-Moolji, 2015; Meyer, 2014; Rentschler, 2014, 2015; Williams, 2015). Clark-Parsons (2019) argues that the key potential of hashtag feminism lies in its transformative politics of visibility: networking through a shared tag makes it possible to illustrate the systemic nature of social injustice on a global (social) media stage. Thereby, hashtag feminism can at times spark 'real' social change instead of being mere virtue signalling online (Clark-Parsons, 2019).

Movements such as #MeToo have also encouraged women to speak up collectively in traditional media against gendered violence and sexual harassment. Alvinus and Holmberg (2019) analyse a collective call for an end to violence and harassment in the Swedish military, signed by 1768 women employed there, and published in a major daily newspaper. Alvinus and Holmberg analysed this call as a public resistance effort against the military, which they termed the 'last bastion of masculinity'. These authors concluded that #MeToo challenges the norms of the hyper-

masculine military organization, making resistance towards it visible, and thereby resists the practices of sexual harassment and lack of responsibility.

However, social media also has a darker side. Due to its unfiltered nature and, in the case of many platforms the lure of anonymity, social media are often characterized by a toxic tone and gendertrolling (Cole, 2015; Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002; Lumsden & Morgan, 2017; Mantilla, 2013, 2015). It is characterized by a rhetoric so vulgar that Jane (2014) calls it e-bile. Social media commentary is not independent of 'irl' (real life) inequalities. While online bullying and other pitfalls of social media affect some men as well, research consistently shows that women are subject to more bullying, abuse, hateful language and threats online (Bartlett et al., 2014).

A particularly prominent instance of gender-based exclusion and hatred is the culture of misogyny translated into online spaces (Bartlett et al., 2014; Jane, 2014, 2016). Sometimes referred to as 'popular misogyny' (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016), this is a 'basic anti-female violent expression that circulates to wide audiences on popular media platforms' (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016, p. 172). The term implies a counterforce to 'popular feminism', an umbrella term used for such movements as 'hashtag feminism'. What makes popular misogyny so powerful is that it reaches large audiences quickly and has become a visible culture of its own. Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016) argue that characteristic to popular misogyny is not only opposing feminist beliefs but also men having a sense of being attacked by feminism. According to these authors, some men articulate that their very maleness is threatened. They point out that the fear seems to be that some men perceive that their rightful place in the social hierarchy is questioned. As such, popular misogyny and the strong juxtaposition of women and men, and women's and men's rights, powerfully stir up resentment, polarization of opinion and resistance to feminist pursuits.

Popular misogyny often intertwines with 'lad culture' that is a collective mentality and a hyper-masculine culture, which favours male bonding and tends to dismiss women as sexualized objects. In the extreme, it is linked to rape culture, which associates sexuality with violence and naturalizes sexual assault (Phipps et al., 2018). While lad culture is evident in offline contexts (Phipps & Young, 2013, 2015), it increasingly thrives on social media and illustrates the toxic forms of anti-feminism gaining ground on online 'manospheres' (Farrell, Fernandez, Novotny, & Alani, 2019; Ging, 2019; Gotell & Dutton, 2016; Marwick & Caplan, 2018). A case in point is the gaming industry where what became known as 'GamerGate' brought to the surface anti-feminist and hyper-masculine attitudes but also their counterforces (Just, 2019).

As such, the issue of sexual harassment and #MeToo as a movement demonstrates the paradoxical nature of social media. While recognizing its potential, feminist scholars have discussed social media as a new and forceful medium for sexual harassment in itself (Citron, 2014; Megarry, 2014). While harassment online lacks face-to-face interaction, its bases are similar. Megarry (2014) argues that harassment in social media takes place through consistent utilization of stereotypical ideas of femininity in a derogatory manner as well as aggressive attacks on the female body. The sexually saturated female body (Acker, 1990; Butler, 1990) appears to be as vulnerable to harassment online as 'in real life'. The main function of online sexual harassment, according to Megarry (2014), is to preserve male social control in digital spaces. Hence it seems that while social media serve as spaces for speaking up and challenging inequalities, they are also used to perpetuate the deeply rooted patriarchal structures and misogyny of the 'irl'.

Finally, the gendered realities of social media are made even more complex by algorithms. Built in the way social media platforms function, algorithms are software which often go unnoticed but largely determine access, visibility and prioritization of content on a given platform (Tufekci, 2017). They not only shape an individual user's experience but also play a role in determining what kind of content and discourse gets promoted and what suppressed. As more and more evidence of gendered algorithmic bias – that is, discriminatory algorithmic outcomes such as being excluded from seeing certain content or being offered certain content based on one's (assumed) gender – emerges (Datta, Tschantz, & Datta, 2015; Lambrecht & Tucker, 2019), it is evident that seemingly uncontrolled social media platforms are often subtly yet forcefully orchestrated by a gendered logic, which reproduces assumptions, conventions and inequalities of visibility and access.

Overall, then, there is a polarization taking place on social media. While feminists are taking over online spaces to challenge the *status quo*, misogyny and gendertrolling flourish (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Connell, 2019; Mendes et al., 2019). A particular type of macho male resistance to women's power is evident (Cox, 2018) and it seems that, as Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, existing hegemonic masculinities are not only reasserted on social media but new, potentially even more toxic ones are created. The paradoxical nature of social media, combined with their unquestionable prominence today, calls for research to understand this forceful new public sphere. This is especially the case as the polarization taking place online is not unique to questions of gender equality. Anti-racist hashtag movements (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Campbell, 2019; Carney, 2016; De Choudhury, Jhaver, Sugar, & Weber, 2016; Yang, 2016) and flourishing racism (Shafer, 2017; Jakubowicz, 2017; Jakubowicz et al., 2017; Klein, 2017) demonstrate similar dynamics online. These observations suggest that it is the new, digital public sphere itself that needs to be taken seriously.

3 | GENDER AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE HYPER-MASCULINE CULTURE OF WALL STREET

Social media and its movements and countermovements are connected to the world of organizations and work. The hyper-masculine culture of Wall Street and other financial centres across the world demonstrates the implications of #MeToo. The world of finance has long been heavily male dominated and deeply gendered (Assassi, 2009; De Goede, 2005; Fisher, 2010, 2012; Ho, 2009; McDowell, 1997; Roth, 2004a, 2004b, 2007; Zaloom, 2006). New York's financial district Wall Street in Manhattan is a case in point. According to Fraser (2005), when established in the late 18th century Wall Street was regarded as a place for men to make money. A strong ethos of maleness – and a pointedly macho maleness in particular – was characteristic to its culture from the start. While Wall Street is no longer exclusive to men and there are some women in top positions, the image as well as reality of a particular kind of male prototype that dominates the uppermost echelons of financial firms persists (Ho, 2009). According to Ho (2009), the 'Wall Street man' is embodied in a competitive, driven, hard-working white male professional. Similar portrayals are drawn in a number of studies that focus on the hyper-competitive and hyper-masculine culture of Wall Street and other hot spots of the financial world, most notably the City of London (Fisher, 2010; Fraser, 2005; McDowell, 1997; McDowell & Court, 1994; Roth, 2004a, 2004b, 2007; Zaloom, 2006).

The hyper-competitive and hyper-masculine culture of finance has become hard to challenge as it consistently conflates a particular kind of masculinity with competence and success, naturalizing the dominance of particular kinds of men in positions of power. Women (as well as men who do not fit the narrow ideal of masculinity) are deemed outsiders who lack the traits required for fulfilling the role of the ideal finance professional, and they are marginalized and excluded (Fisher, 2010; McDowell, 1997). While women can decide to adopt traits and behaviour perceived as masculine, they are still at risk of the double bind – that is, they are not regarded as 'real' women (Gherardi & Poggio, 2001). Moreover, traits and characteristics perceived as female seem to be regarded as downright harmful on Wall Street. De Goede (2005, 2009) argues that throughout history financial crises and their causes have been associated with female fickleness and promiscuity as well as irrationality and irresponsibility symbolized through female figures. These portrayals are essentialist and polarizing, and they categorically value traits associated with the masculine over those associated with the feminine (Knights & Tullberg, 2012). As a result, gender has become to define the hierarchical order on Wall Street. This is demonstrated in Ho's (2009) observation that Wall Street jobs, pay and work are deeply segregated and structured by gender (as well as race and class) on all levels ranging from recruitment to promotions and dress codes to work schedules.

Moreover, the gendered hierarchy on Wall Street and other financial centres is reinforced by a heightened, sexually laden focus on the female body. Ho (2009) and McDowell (1997) argue that in the hyper-masculine culture of finance, monetary success and male heterosexuality are tightly interlinked, even to the point that men's success is interpreted in terms of women's subordination. Roth (2007) explains the historical context of these sexualized power

relations, arguing that as recently as the 1980s Wall Street women were reduced to roles as secretaries and sex objects and the connections of their subordination at work and in terms of sexual relations were highlighted.

Such hyper-masculine organizations tend to be prone to sexual harassment. McDowell (1997) shows in the case of the City of London that emphasized sexuality marginalizes, derogates and even abuses female bodies. Empirical research suggests that such abuse continues to take place on Wall Street as the number of harassment charges remains high (Roth, 2007). According to Roth (2007), Wall Street continues to be a hostile working environment for anyone else than a white male because of the 'sexually-charged macho atmosphere' and work culture.

Based on insights from extant research we ask the question: what do fiery online reactions to #MeToo on Wall Street tell us about gender relations today in social media and at workplaces?

4 | RESEARCH DESIGN

Authors of the article titled 'Wall Street Rule for the #MeToo Era: Avoid Women at All Cost', published by Bloomberg Business on 3 December 2018, noted that men's strategies to reduce the risk of being (falsely) accused of sexual harassment were starting to isolate women on Wall Street. Although some of the men interviewed offered less extreme solutions for dealing with the situation, such as '*Just try not to be an asshole*', the general attitude of those surveyed was characterized by distress caused by a sense of '*walking on eggshells*', as one interviewee put it. The authors listed the scarcity of women in top positions and Wall Street culture, known for avoiding scandals at all costs, as potential reasons for these reactions. The key message was that the #MeToo era has sparked a strong reaction in the field of finance, with implications in terms of gender segregation.

The Bloomberg article implied that #MeToo was counterproductively harming the progress of women at work. The article triggered a number of reactions on various social media platforms. The commentary was vivid and quickly moved beyond sexual harassment to discuss gender, work and (in)equality more generally. The article was commented on in several social media platforms in the weeks after it was published. We focus on two different platforms, Twitter and Reddit. Twitter is an online news and networking service where users post, share and comment on messages known as 'tweets', limited to 280 characters (formerly 140 characters) in length, with a public profile. Reddit is a social platform where users anonymously share content and start discussion threads. Both sites originate from the United States but are globally used by hundreds of millions of people monthly (Social Media Today, 2018).

On Twitter, we analysed the commentary on Bloomberg's own channels where the article was shared. On Reddit, we focused on threads on different Wall Street and finance communities. The Bloomberg article was shared multiple times on both Twitter and Reddit in December 2018, and we did not study every thread of commentary it sparked – rather, we focused on seven threads to be able to conduct a detailed reading of each. Most comments on all these threads were posted during December 2018, shortly after the article was shared. By the time we collected our data in early 2019, some comments had been deleted, hidden or become unavailable in the discussion and thus were not included in our final sample of 382 comments on Twitter and 1086 comments on Reddit.

We only used data that was publicly available online at the time of our data collection. However, challenged by one of the reviewers for this article about the ethics of using public social media data without informed consent (Williams, Burnap, & Sloan, 2017), we took precautions to protect the anonymity of the commenters in the Twitter and Reddit threads studied. We chose not to directly quote comments and instead, anonymized and masked those few comments that we use as examples. In these cases, we convey the message and give indication of the language used, while protecting the identity of the commenter.

Studying two different platforms – one anonymous and one with public user profiles; one meant for sharing short tweets and one where comments are not limited in length – gave us an overview on the different ways in which social media serves as an arena for commenting on social and societal phenomena. Different reactions that arose illustrated how commentary sparked by the Bloomberg article took different directions and adopted different rhetoric and yet, how some of the same arguments and underlying assumptions of gender, (in)equality and their

relations with work seemed to cut across platforms. These persistent arguments and assumptions present on both platforms constituted the core discourses in the commentary. Some differences between commentary on Twitter and Reddit, however, illustrated how different technological affordances, specifically anonymity, of different social media platforms impact upon discourses and discursive practices online.

We focused on Wall Street that is perhaps an extreme example of a hyper-masculine work culture in western societies. Connections between offline work cultures and online commentary in social media may be particularly evident in this context. Our analysis can thus elucidate something that is present but not as explicit in other spaces and organizations, and thereby take forward discussions on social media as an arena for gender relations and inequality in contemporary society also more generally.

We used CDA to make sense of the discursive constructions of gender, (in)equality and their connections to organizations and work in social media. Adopting the view of Norman Fairclough (1989, 2003), we regarded discourses as both reflective and constitutive of social realities. We embraced the critical stance of CDA in order to study the discursive construction of social power and domination (Van Dijk, 1993, 2001). Drawing on feminist CDA, we focused on the taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and power asymmetries, which are discursively constructed, maintained and challenged online (Lazar, 2014). In the tradition of feminist CDA, we sought to elucidate both overt and more subtle discursive manifestations of gendered power and resistance. Our goal was to analyse how social media commentary echoes (and amplifies) particular assumptions about gender and inequality – but also how it offers an arena for new discourses and discursive practices to arise, ones that potentially translate into workplace realities and contribute to broader societal shifts.

We explored how social media discourses on #MeToo make use of underlying assumptions of gender relations, and how these assumptions were used to legitimate and sustain a variety of inclusions, exclusions and hierarchies. We also considered discourses that question or resist the taken-for-granted assumptions. By observing how conflicting discourses were (re)constructed – some becoming dominant and some being marginalized and silenced – we aimed at making visible power dynamics in the commentary. We followed Fairclough's (2003) suggestion that discourses are analysed on textual, discursive practice and societal practice levels. We considered the role of textual level elements in constituting discursive practices and we conducted all our readings bearing in mind the broader context: #MeToo as a global phenomenon, Wall Street as a cultural environment, social media as a unique arena for public discussion and the turbulent political climate in the United States in which the gender inequality discussion takes place.

Our analysis proceeded in two main stages. First, we familiarized ourselves with the data set and focused on the most recurrent themes in the commentary. Interestingly, only some commenters focused on discussing sexual harassment, accusations of it, and the related policies and practices in workplaces and in the judiciary system. Perhaps due to the way the Bloomberg article framed the issue – contrasting men's and women's perspectives and interests – most commenters seemed to be interested in men, women and their different behaviour at work as potential explanations for both harassment and accusations of it. Their key arguments centred around specific gendered and sexed assumptions, stereotypes and explanations. Arguments that drew on such explanations were so prominent and the ones that questioned this logic so few – and so quickly dismissed – that the commentary was characterized by a sense of coercive gendering and sexualizing.

While most of the commenters seemed to agree on the existence of some fundamental differences between men and women, there was little consensus on what exactly these differences are and, most importantly, what are their implications for organizational life. Differing ideas resulted in a divided debate on the interrelations of gender, work and inequality as well as on the effects of #MeToo. Many also made linkages beyond work and organizations, either relating the topics discussed to personal life such as dating or referring to wider societal discussions such as US party politics and feminism as a social movement. It was evident that #MeToo and sexual harassment were assumed to cut across realms of the personal, organizational and societal. On the anonymous Reddit threads personal anecdotes were particularly prominent, as were discussions of politics and political views. It seems that the mask of anonymity encourages commenters to share particularly sensitive information and opinions.

Second, we proceeded to a more detailed analysis focused on detecting the main discursive practices that the comments were built on. We identified three key discursive practices around which most comments in both Twitter and Reddit seemed to revolve. We call these naturalizing, polarizing and humourizing. Naturalizing was the most common practice: a notable number of the comments built on gendered and sexed explanations and they were typically used to either blame or justify women's (or men's) behaviour. Polarizing was also characteristic to the commentary throughout. It was used to emphasize the naturalized differences and create confrontation between women and men as well as between different priorities and worldviews. This discursive practice made use of opposites, extremes and insurmountable divides. Finally, the comments in which humour was used as a discursive practice built on both naturalizing and polarizing. Humourizing caricatured and exaggerated gender differences. While masked in jokes and humorous language, many of the comments were harshly degrading towards women. This discursive practice was particularly prominent in the anonymous Reddit platform where many commenters used characteristically vulgar language and nasty humour.

In the following, we specify and illustrate the three discursive practices. We focus on the ways these practices participate in maintaining and challenging assumptions of gender differences and inequality and, consequently, how they shift (or cement) gendered power asymmetries brought under scrutiny by #MeToo.

5 | NATURALIZING

The most common discursive practice in the comments was what we call naturalizing. Throughout the commentary, gender and gender differences were naturalized as something fixed in biology in order to make sense of the situation on Wall Street. These naturalizations were not merely used to explain what is going on, but they were often used in a way that categorically put the blame on women and justified men's actions. While not all comments followed this logic, it was evident throughout the commentary to the extent that it became to characterize the whole discussion and its accusatory, defensive and conflicting tone. At times, it resembled popular misogynistic discourse characterized by a strong sense of men wanting to maintain what they perceive as their rightful place in the social hierarchy (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016). Biologically rooted explanations were used as a means to maintain gendered hierarchies and silence the efforts of #MeToo.

Naturalizing was used to blame women in different ways, all of which were based on the assumption that women as a group naturally possess some characteristics that determine the way they are, feel and act. Many commenters portrayed women as naturally untrustworthy liars who fabricate accusations. One commenter believed that being dishonest comes naturally and instinctually to women, arguing that they become deceitful early on as they learn to lie to each other. Others took a different route, depicting women as naive and incapable of understanding the consequences of their actions. One commenter argued that it is women's lack of self-awareness that is to blame for igniting the battles. It was evident that the stereotypes used as a basis for argumentation were not at all coherent. What they had in common was that they ended up blaming women's 'natural' characteristics for what was going on.

Some commenters questioned women's compatibility with the Wall Street work culture altogether. This was based on the assumption that women are fundamentally different (from men) in their biology, needs and ways of doing things. Such comments tended to push accusations of harassment aside and argue that the real issue is trying to make women fit Wall Street and its 'naturally' masculine culture. They reinforced the idea of female characteristics being harmful in finance (De Goede, 2005). Such comments also questioned campaigns such as #MeToo as undesired attempts to disregard the 'natural' order of people and things.

Finally, the most extreme and derogative way of blaming women was the argument that women fabricate accusations based on their own sexual desire and disappointment. This argument sought to naturalize sexual approaches towards women at work and suggested that women who come up with accusations of harassment are merely disappointed in the person by whom they are harassed — or by not being sexually approached at all. One commenter

believed that women only accuse unattractive men of harassment because they are upset that such men would dare to approach them. According to another commenter, women only start coming up with accusations when they are no longer sexually approached. A third one suggested that women fabricate claims just for the sake of seeking attention.

While many commenters used stereotypes about women to put blame on them, stereotypes of men were used to justify their actions, whether it was sexual harassment or the precautions men were taking to avoid the risk of being accused. Naturalizing particular forms of sexuality and validating a specific dynamic of sexual relations in the workplace played a major part in these justifications. These comments built on the persistent idea of women's bodies being sexually available for men (Ho, 2009; McDowell, 1997). While women were portrayed to welcome sexual approaches (as long as it is from someone attractive), men were depicted as having natural urges towards women, which they should be allowed to act on. This, too, built on the idea typical to hyper-masculine work cultures that sexual virility is linked to competence at work (Ho, 2009). It also reinforced the stereotype of women as temptresses and men as easily tempted that, as Martin (2003) argues, persists in some workplaces. One commenter explained that men just cannot keep their hands to themselves and not comment on women's bodies, a view which was agreed on by many others. While most commenters seemed to use such rationale as a means for justifying sexualized comments and flirtatious behaviour, some bluntly naturalized men reacting sexually to women at work with 'erections'.

Similar arguments were used to blame men on allegedly rampant sexual harassment on Wall Street. These, too, made use of essentialist beliefs that all men are similar and act in similar ways. Such comments seemed to ignore the complex issues of harassment, inequality and the process of handling claims as they suggested that men controlling their natural urges would solve all problems. These 'common sense' arguments had a tendency to simplify a complex issue and discourage further discussion on the underlying problems. One commenter asked: is it really that difficult to not sexually assault a colleague? Such comments leaned on a simplistic assumption that, like many commenters put it, men 'not being assholes' would solve the problem.

Men were also contrasted to women in portraying them as rational risk thinkers who naturally fit the Wall Street work culture as they always prioritize business. These arguments reinforce the gendered hierarchy typical to Wall Street (Ho, 2009). If men need to disregard such things as equality by not recruiting women or interacting with them at work, it is a justified decision from a business perspective – like one commenter argued, just having men to do the work is the easiest solution. This commenter added that 'girls' can surely find other jobs. Such comments were particularly effective in silencing all other voices and concerns over equality and fairness because they maintained that on the Street, everything revolves around risk and reward.

Overall, the dominance of naturalizing in the commentary illustrates how persistent the essentialist gender logic is in the context of Wall Street and in social media discourse. Explaining the issues at hand – harassment, accusations and precautions – based on gender or sex left little room for debate over things such as culture, practices and processes as well as the assumptions underlying gender stereotypes. Many commenters seemed to agree on an 'easy fix': organizing according to gender, in one way or another, instead of looking for and solving the root issue of harassment and making processes for dealing with accusations fairer. Such logic created a fruitful ground for a hyper-masculine culture to 'rightfully' remain intact and for renewed gender segregation to flourish. It offered a seemingly simple way to restore the *status quo*: many commenters seemed to agree that maybe women and men are better off segregated due to their natural and different gender roles.

6 | POLARIZING

Another discursive practice frequently used in the commentary was what we call polarizing. This practice emphasizes and valorizes naturalized differences, creates confrontation, and makes use of rhetoric of opposites, extremes and insurmountable divides. It is particularly endemic to social media as a medium as the culture of brevity, lack of filters and relative anonymity offer a fruitful ground for such discourses to flourish.

By far the most common polarization was that between men and women. This division built on the essentialist assumptions about gender and was characteristically hierarchical, reflecting the reality of many Wall Street workplaces as described by Ho (2009). Men and women were not only portrayed as different but there was also a hierarchy implied in the difference, which legitimizes Wall Street to remain male dominated. One commenter concluded that men function at a higher cognitive level than women. Some rare commenters took the opposite stance and suggested an all-female Wall Street where replacing men with women would guarantee better results for everyone. Albeit sometimes made with what seemed like a heavy dose of sarcasm, these comments, too, tended to reinforce the idea of men and women being better off segregated.

Divides were also built among women. Feminism and feminist women were blamed for the currently backfired situation. These comments seemed to intentionally create confrontation and resentment, potentially in order to shift the focus away from the issue of sexual harassment. This was a result of the overall war-like setting of the commentary. Commenters accused feminists of igniting a war against men and shooting other women 'in the foot'. One believed that instead of hating the 'imaginary' patriarchy, feminists hate men altogether and are purposefully attacking them. The rhetoric of many of these comments was harsh and accusatory and seemed to purposefully turn the blame on feminists who, as one commenter argued, had betrayed other women.

Another polarization was that between business and gender equality. These were portrayed as polar opposites in many comments, claiming that they cannot be prioritized simultaneously. Ensuring that business runs smoothly at the expense of issues such as equal recruitment and development opportunities was justified. One commenter believed that it is acceptable not to hire women if they do not 'fit' the team and 'upset' the order of the company. This commenter emphasized that the fact that they are women has nothing to do with it.

Such comments were frequent and serve as examples of how harassment, #MeToo and their linkages to work were understood by many in the context of Wall Street. Some commenters argued that the Wall Street way of doing things is institutionalized, arguing that Wall Street bankers are characterized by unchangeable qualities that make them act in a certain way. This again disregarded history, practices and socially constructed hierarchies and power relations, and put the blame on 'Wall Streeters being Wall Streeters'. One commenter argued with some irony that 'being a dick' is business as usual.

However, some polarizing cut across wider societal realms and drew linkages to party politics and the US political landscape. It was evident that larger dichotomizations at play were perceived as interlinked to #MeToo and the question of harassment. Often, feminist attempts at greater gender equality were associated with the (far) left and the idea of segregation with the (far) right. The debate that drew on political divides was particularly vitriolic and accusatory in tone and seemed to carry frustrations that reached beyond the discussion on Wall Street. Many commenters turned the blame on progressive liberals who they believed were ruining the society, while some (and considerably fewer) were determined that right-wing politics was to blame.

This tendency of the comments to meander beyond the original topic shows how in social media platforms the direction of the discussion cannot be controlled. This is why it was impossible to detect which battles were directly sparked by the Bloomberg article and which were ignited by other disagreements, such as those on US politics. On social media, different power struggles such as over business, on the one hand, and politics, on the other, tend to overlap. What was evident, however, was that this particular topic attracted a lot of commentary that was divided and inflamed. Many of the comments focused on emphasizing and aggravating differences rather than suggesting solutions, and a form of 'gender war', as described by Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016), was constructed. Some commenters tapped on this, arguing that the discussion became so polarized, war-like and concerned with finding culprits that it might be oblivious of the reality and dismissive of finding a middle ground.

Finally, what stood out in the polarizing commentary were the extremes to which many commenters seemed to take their reactions. There were comments on attaching cameras and microphones to clothing to record all interactions with women in case they should come up with accusations. This was particularly visible in the Reddit threads in which a lot of personal anecdotes and experiences were shared, probably due to the anonymity offered by the platform. The Reddit commentary confirmed the specific type of macho male resistance taking place online (Cox, 2018).

These comments capture the lengths to which the fear and resentment over being falsely accused is taken by some. It illustrates vividly how real the risk of new gender segregation is. Most notably, it illustrates how social media commentary can easily spiral into and aggravate a sense of extremity.

7 | HUMOURIZING

What we call humourizing was another recurring discursive practice, which built on both naturalizing and polarizing. Comments that made use of humour caricatured and exaggerated gender differences. While masked in jokes and humorous language, many were harshly degrading and aggressive towards women as is typical of misogynist discourse and gendertrolling online (Mantilla, 2013, 2015). In addition to naturalizing gender differences and polarizing the commentary, humour as a discursive practice was used so much that it bordered on harassment itself. It became a form of exercising power and suppression (Plesner, 2015). As Mantilla (2015) puts it, gendertrolling is seldom done 'for the lulz' but rather in order to deliberately threaten women and drive them out of public online spaces. While by no means all humour used in the commentary could be described as gendertrolling, a particularly toxic tone of voice was characteristic throughout.

Perhaps the most common way of using humour was through sarcasm over how #MeToo plays out on Wall Street and the backlash it has caused. These comments seemed to belittle feminist attempts for equality, invalidate them and link them to 'feminine naivety'. They also shifted the blame on #MeToo and pursuits of equality, blaming irrational feminists for making a mess of Wall Street and society in general. They downplayed focal issues such as sexual harassment. Some commenters joked that feminism has recreated the 'boys' club' and others sarcastically pointed out that surely every rational person could see the backlash coming. Commenters belittled the struggles women were facing and gloated over the turn #MeToo had taken on Wall Street.

The harshest use of humour was found in comments that made degrading jokes about women. These were heavily sexualized and demeaning. They reproduced the idea of female bodies as sex objects, which characterizes hyper-masculine work cultures (Roth, 2007). While the goal of these comments, often loosely connected to the overall discussion, was sometimes unclear, they had some clear implications. First, sexuality and availability of women for being viewed and commented on sexually was naturalized, so much so that some commenters seemed to portray sexual harassment as an integral element of Wall Street work culture. One commenter asked what is the point of being an executive if one cannot have sex with one's subordinates.

Some jokes turned into offensive attacks on women, either to emphasize the perceived role of women as sex objects or as a means of online harassment and silencing. These comments were vitriolic, hostile and used nasty language when making fun of women. This enabled commenters to shift the blame on women, like the one who stated that 'you asked for it' and went on to joke about vibrator costs going up.

Further, 'humorous' attacks were not geared solely towards women but also gay and trans people. These comments, although few in the overall commentary, were a reminder of the fact that hyper-masculine notions of the Wall Street work culture, or culture of misogyny in general, are not exclusively targeted at women but also others whose gender or sexuality do not fit the central masculine ideals.

Humour was used in the commentary both to reinforce and legitimate the '*status quo*' and to make the issue of sexual harassment seem less serious. Humour was used to downplay the significance of harassment or to cope with discussing a sensitive phenomenon that is considered as something of a taboo by many in US society. Hyper-sexualizing everything and at the same time making sex a taboo likely results in 'weird' discussions, one commenter pointed out.

Overall, the offensive nature of humour and the major role sexualized banter plays in the commentary on Reddit in particular were major reasons for why the discussion became vitriolic. The discussion on #MeToo and gender equality at work is not free from gendertrolling and other aspects of misogynist online culture. These were particularly visible on the anonymous threads of Reddit where the commentary at times exemplified what Jane (2017) calls

e-bile. The nasty humour on Reddit often combined sexist and racist remarks, and seemed to carry frustrations far beyond #MeToo.

8 | DISCUSSION

In this article, we have analysed the 'Wall Street backlash' to the #MeToo movement through online commentary and elucidated how social media plays out as an arena for gender relations and inequality. Strong reactions and friction caused by #MeToo is not a unique or new phenomenon. It is well documented throughout the history of feminism that movements for gender equality spark counter-reactions (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Mendes, 2011; Mendes et al., 2019). The precautions taken to avoid being accused of sexual harassment are not unique to the #MeToo era either (Martin, 2003). However, social media seems to offer a particularly fruitful environment for a backlash. Discussion on gender equality has become increasingly polarized to the extent that Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016, p. 171) call it the new 'gender wars'. We believe that the social media movement causing commotion in the world of work is a symptom of something fundamental in contemporary society and an example of its new socio-technical assemblages (Ems, 2014).

What is new is the impact the era of 'gender wars' is igniting in the context of work as well as on various social media platforms. As the Bloomberg article and the commentary we analysed shows, the dramatic reaction towards #MeToo on Wall Street indicates that something deeply problematic about gender equality has begun to unravel. This backwards progress is alarming and needs to be studied critically. We have used CDA to grasp online commentary about the 'effects' of #MeToo. Our aim has been to understand both what is (not) said, but also how it is (not) said, and to make sense of the phenomenon itself, the social media commentary and its discourse as a particular context for gender inequality.

We have analysed threads of comments to the Bloomberg article on two social media platforms and found some overarching themes and recurring discursive practices. First, the commentary categorically boiled down to naturalizing gendered assumptions and explanations. Second, it was divided and full of polarizing, which made the discussion heated and hostile. Third, while many commenters seemed to be rather serious about the topic, humourizing was frequently resorted to. Harsh humour was used to reinforce gender stereotypes, to justify the *status quo*, and to blame women through sarcasm and irony. All these routinely happen in organizations (Plesner, 2015), and on social media humour is used to purposefully ignite fires between commenters.

We believe that these findings reveal something essential not only about Wall Street but about social media as an arena for commenting on gender inequality. #MeToo touched a painful nerve on Wall Street, and this reveals how social media movements have an ability to impact offline spaces and make visible their issues in newly intense ways. The financial services industry is forced to reconsider a work culture that has institutionalized some of the very things #MeToo is standing up against (De Goede, 2005; Fisher, 2012; Ho, 2009; McDowell, 1997; Roth, 2007). As Alvinus and Holmberg's (2019) study in the military context shows, #MeToo challenges the norms of hyper-masculine cultures. It is a case in point of the ability of hashtag feminism to ignite social change (Clark-Parsons, 2019).

However, this does not explain the reaction of Wall Street that dials back progress of equality and reinforces gender differences and segregation. Some explanations are offered by misogyny and toxic anti-feminism that flourish on social media (Bartlett et al., 2014; Farrell et al., 2019; Ging, 2019; Gotell & Dutton, 2016; Jane, 2014, 2016; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Phipps et al., 2018). Hyper-masculinity and online 'manospheres' are rooted in the same gendered, hierarchical and sexualizing assumptions that Wall Street work culture routinely reproduces, actively countering #MeToo and other movements (Keller et al., 2018). Popular misogynist discourse online also tends to give birth to new, more extremist forms of masculinity in addition to shoring up the 'irl' ones (Banet-Weiser, 2018). As social media blurs the boundaries of online and offline, the reinvigorated anti-feminist sentiment on social media encourages and potentially even amplifies anti-feminist actions in real life, especially in

organizations where the culture of male-centricity and objectification of women resonates well with the powers that be (Plesner, 2015).

Most importantly, we believe that social media as a medium plays a key role in creating such an inflamed discussion today. As the discursive practices we have identified illustrate, social media commentary can become characteristically essentialist, polarized and vitriolic in tone. We believe that the lack of editorial control, lure of anonymity, culture of impetuosity, gendertrolling and popular misogyny are some potential reasons for this. These are all an outcome of a combination of technological properties, social and societal phenomena, and changing dynamics of interaction. In social media research, the inseparable links between technology and its users is often understood in terms of social media affordances. These affordances are both socio-technological and socio-material (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Social media is a medium that both intensifies social forces and discourses and changes the material arena in which they play out (Ems, 2014). The social and the technological are fundamentally intertwined.

These interconnections are so integral to social media that they make it a unique public sphere where technology plays a role in every discussion, discourse and discursive shift. The implications of this role for discussing gender equality are many. On the one hand, the commentary we analysed illustrates how technology and technological affordances shape discursive practices of social media users who discuss gender-related issues. On the other, the impact of social media technologies can be more subtle and complex, like the example of algorithms and algorithmic bias shows (Lambrecht & Tucker, 2019). Finally, the major role of technology today raises questions of power and voice: alongside algorithmic logic, users' access to and knowledge of using social media technologies can determine which discussions and discourses get promoted in the digital public sphere. For example, research on social media as a public sphere indicates that being skilled in engaging with new technologies can assist in gaining power over public discourse (Carney, 2016). In this light, the attempts of gendertrolls to drive women out of the Internet are especially alarming.

The intertwined, mutually reinforcing reactions to #MeToo on Wall Street *and* online elucidate how the social and the technological intertwine and result in new – or newly inflamed – gender wars (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016). Although the 'Wall Street backlash' was pronounced due to the reasons above, other workplaces and industries may resort to similar strategies in the face of feminist movements. While social media is not solely to blame, gender and equality discourses being repeated and reshaped on its platforms warrant critical research attention that takes into account both its social and technological aspects. Social media gains ground as a global and powerful arena for public discussion, and our study shows that its commentary on gender (in)equality can be deeply problematic. Gendered ideas sit tight, and most importantly, divides are likely to become harsher. There is a tendency for extremism on social media, which needs to be taken seriously and studied further.

9 | CONCLUSION

In this article, we have aimed to contribute to research on social media as an arena for gender relations and inequality. We have focused on Wall Street reactions to #MeToo and the fiery social media commentary it sparked, elucidating how hyper-masculine work cultures and social media are interconnected in today's world. We have argued that the studied comments illustrate the unpredictable nature of both social media movements and their reception offline. The possibility of a movement such as #MeToo backfiring is a twist so new that it has received relatively little research attention. Analysing the interconnections of a hyper-masculine culture in workplaces and 'popular misogyny' and anti-feminist 'manospheres' gaining ground online offers a way forward for critical research. Social media as a new medium of which technology and technological affordances are an integral part plays a unique role in how discourses get shaped, translated and circulated across spaces. More research is needed in how this takes place in organizations that are less obviously hyper-masculine than Wall Street but deeply gendered nevertheless.

For example, future research could focus on how gendered discourses generated in online spaces are transferred to offline discussions, as well as on the reasons for their increased popularity. Our study sheds light on a particular

example but it is limited by a focus on an industry where a hyper-masculine culture is pronounced and connections to toxic anti-feminist pursuits online are visible. We hope to see future studies on gender, work and organization tackle these issues in other industry and societal contexts. Specifically, we hope to see more research that recognizes the blurring boundaries between digital and 'real-life' spheres and explores the imprints social media phenomena and discourses leave on offline realities in workplaces. The world of sports and sports organizations is an interesting example as it illustrates how complex these impacts can be: social media presentation has been found to both reinforce and challenge the persistently masculine culture and gender inequalities in sports institutions (Thorpe, Toffoletti, & Bruce, 2017). More research is also needed on gendered humour in online spaces and their connections to workplaces. We must critically scrutinize forms, uses and implications of humour in sustaining patriarchy and misogyny in organizations and in society. We also hope to see future research focus on how hyper-masculinities, whether online or 'irl', exclude not only women but also others such as gay and trans people who do not fit in work cultures that draw from them.

Finally, we suggest that critical and gender studies scholars continue to discuss the ethics of social media research. Specifically, the question of publishing original materials from public social media platforms in academic research reports warrants constructive conversation. One of the reviewers of this article challenged us on this, asking us to consult the article by Williams et al. (2017). For ethical reasons, these authors argue, researchers are advised to ask for informed consent of the users of public platforms such as Twitter – or at least anonymize the data they use. The reason is that the inclusion of comments has 'the potential to make sensitive personal information identifiable beyond the context it was intended for, and under some conditions, the publication of these data may expose users to harm' (Williams et al., 2017, p. 1150). This seems to be a reasonable assertion on a general level. Since gaining informed consent of all commenters in Twitter and Reddit was not possible in our case, we decided not to include any direct examples from the original comments in our article. However, for us this raises questions of policy and principle. Social media is gaining ground as the new public sphere, and we believe it is intrinsically important to be able to conduct research where an increasing amount of human interaction takes place – yet, the nature of social media data often makes it impossible to seek consent. Not sharing direct quotes may also prove problematic in presenting findings of analyses focused on how language is used online. The ethics of social media research is a complex question that must be discussed further, perhaps revisiting and revising debates on academic freedom.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

None declared.

ORCID

Anna Maaranen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0627-3427>

Janne Tienari  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2605-2760>

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Anna Maaranen is a PhD student in Management and Organisation at Hanken School of Economics, Finland. Her research focuses on the expanding role of social media in contemporary organizations and society.

Janne Tienari is Professor of Management and Organization at Hanken School of Economics, Finland. His research and teaching interests include gender and diversity, feminist theory, strategy work, managing multinational corporations, mergers and acquisitions, branding and media, and changing academia from a critical perspective. Tienari's work has been published in leading organization and management studies journals such as *Academy of Management Review*, *Organization Science*, *Organization Studies*, *Organization*, *Human Relations*, *Journal of Management Studies*, and *Gender, Work and Organization*. jtienari@hanken.fi

How to cite this article: Maaranen A, Tienari J. Social media and hyper-masculine work cultures. *Gender Work Organ*. 2020;1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12450>