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“Come for the period comics. Stay for the cultural awareness”: reclaiming the troll identity through feminist humor on Reddit’s /r/TrollXChromosomes

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ABSTRACT

/r/TrollXChromosomes is a women-focused humor subreddit on the community site Reddit.com. This essay presents the findings of a thematic content analysis of TrollX’s top-ranked postings. Several themes emerge: that TrollX is a space for networked affective content, that postings often concern women’s embodiment and sexuality, and that they suggest feminist perspectives. These themes are all linked by the image of the troll: a remixed version of the negative, antisocial identity that disrupts and often harasses communities. The TrollX troll invokes a spirit of self-deprecation to revel in the absurdities of life and collectively celebrate women’s everyday experiences. However, this research also argues that the TrollX version of the feminist troll is only partially realized, as it tends to express ambivalence in regards to systemic, intersectional oppression.

Introduction

Networked environments have long been criticized for their potential hostility towards women, people of color, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersexual, Asexual (LGBTQIA) individuals. As Lisa Nakamura (2007) astutely noted, the “default setting” in most spaces is assumed to be white male, and this is reflected in their discourse, culture, and politics. However, we also know that networked publics (danah boyd 2011) can be powerful sites for feminist and anti-racist activism (Alicia Garza 2016). In between these two spaces—those that are explicitly progressive/activist and those that are explicitly hostile to feminists—are myriad other communities where the work of everyday feminism occurs.

/r/TrollXChromosomes, a public subreddit (community) on Reddit.com, represents such a space. While the content of /r/TrollXChromosomes (hereafter, TrollX) is not, in itself, unique—with reaction GIFs and memes being the norm—its location on Reddit is. Other work has demonstrated that Reddit can be hostile to both women and other marginalized communities, as they are viewed as interlopers and/or potential threats (Adrienne L. Massanari 2015a). In this article, I discuss how TrollX challenges the dominant discourse present on the most visible areas of Reddit, and how the image of the “troll,” stripped from its antisocial origins, has been reclaimed as a symbol of the community’s embodied, affective, everyday (but not necessarily explicitly political or intersectional) feminist experience.
First, I begin with a brief overview of Reddit, and then discuss networked feminism, trolling, and feminist humor. Next, I explain the results of a descriptive thematic content analysis of the subreddit’s top-ranked postings. This analysis demonstrates that humor, and specifically networked humor, becomes a way for the TrollX community to remain relatively shielded from the toxic atmosphere that characterizes much of the rest of Reddit. I argue that TrollX postings mirror aspects of the humorous discourse that characterizes other Reddit conversations, making it remain somewhat hidden in plain sight. I also contend that TrollX has a complicated relationship with intersectional feminism, often relying on a particular kind of white (post-) feminism rather than engaging in structural or institutional critiques of gender and race.

The geek masculinity of Reddit

Reddit is a pseudonymous social media platform. Reddit’s open-source status allows anyone to create and moderate a community of interest (subreddit); members can curate their front pages by subscribing to subreddits, as well as upvote or downvote material. This can create a sense that Reddit is what you make of it, in that your experience on the site is completely dependent on the subreddits to which you subscribe. However, prior scholarship argues that the dominant culture of Reddit reflects an ethos that typically reflects the values of young, White, heterosexual, middle class, cis-males, who are technologically savvy/STEM-oriented, and libertarian-minded. Humor, particular that which reflects a kind of “geek masculinity” is the lingua franca of much of the platform’s most popular communities (Adrienne L. Massanari 2015b). In other words, Reddit’s discursive patterns serve to frame the site as a space for “brogrammers” (Joseph Reagle 2012). Particular corners of the platform also demonstrate what Laurie Penny (2013) has referred to as “the fallacy of persecution” and Michael Kimmel (2013) calls “aggrieved entitlement.” From this perspective, women, people of color, LGBTQIA folks, and anyone else potentially seen as harboring “social justice” tendencies serve as potential threats to be silenced, harassed, or objectified. This impacts the tenor of the community’s overall conversations, the kinds of links and comments that are upvoted, and the sorts of inside jokes and memes that serve as a kind of cultural currency for Reddit members as a whole. Feminism in particular is viewed negatively on the platform, with memes demonstrating antipathy towards feminists, who are often portrayed as angry white women (Kelly Bergstrom 2015).

However problematic much of the discourse that populates the most visible parts of Reddit is, there are also pockets of progressivism and resistance. These are equally important communities to examine, I would argue, because they suggest that it is not inevitable that a platform’s policies and design choices will always result in “networked misogyny” (Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kate M. Miltner 2016). That being said, the ways in which feminist, LGBTQIA, and anti-racist communities exist in a space that is largely hostile to their presence means that they must engage in particular tactics and bricolage (Michel de Certeau 1984) that remix and reassemble, rather than directly challenge, normative discourse on Reddit.

(Post-)Feminism and networked tactics

Scholars have increasingly noted the way feminism has become accepted after second-wave feminist activism, which resulted in large gains with regards to reproductive rights, educational and employment opportunities, and sexual assault awareness. While strong third-wave
feminist activism focuses on issues of intersectionality (Kimberle Crenshaw 1991) and broadens the critique of feminists from simply “having more choices” to actively challenging the institutions and structures that serve to oppress (R. Claire Snyder 2008), popular discourse often suggests that feminism is no longer needed. By this logic, we are post-feminist.

Post-feminism is feminism “taken into account” (Angela McRobbie 2009). Post-feminism posits consumption as empowerment; girls and women become “media-savvy interactive subjects” who produce, consume, and interact with networked media to create and brand a “self” which is then mirrored back to them though these same media platforms (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2012, 56). Feminism’s work is therefore viewed as passé or unnecessary, as women are cast as individualized subjects whose successes or failures are a result of their particular choices, rather than structural privileges or barriers. Contrary to images of third-wave feminism, where identity is conceived of as intersectional, complex, and fluid, the post-feminist subject is post-racial and post-gendered (Snyder 2008). This works to place cis-gendered, white, straight, middle-class, college-educated women as the center of post-feminist culture.

I argue that TrollX is an example of what Carrie A. Rentschler and Samantha C. Thrift (2015) call “doing feminism in the network” (331). Networked content such as memes, reaction GIFs, and tweets can serve to coalesce sentiment and do the everyday, affective work of feminism. Communities like TrollX are important to analyze as they represent the mundane, day-to-day experiences through which feminism is shared and enacted. As Melissa Gregg (2004) argues, it is critical to take the everyday practices of individuals seriously, for “it is at the level of the mundane that political interests ultimately land” (379). It is also within and between these moments where resistance can occur, as Michel de Certeau’s (1984) work reminds us. Tactics, or those efforts in which an individual or community “…insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance,” are a critical part of pushing against post-feminist, neoliberal ideals (xix). These small moments may be overlooked in favor of larger, organized activist actions, but they are the way that many women connect with others and express feminist sentiment in their everyday lives.

Trolls and trolling (or, can a troll ever be feminist?)

While feminists may readily turn to online social networks to engage in activism and find community, they still remain fraught, contested environments. Others sometimes seek to disrupt these spaces by engaging in antisocial, subversive behaviors—such as pointlessly arguing or derailing conversations (Susan Herring, Kirk Job-Sluder, Rebecca Scheckler, and Sasha Barab 2002). This is colloquially understood as “trolling.” Popular discourse often imagines trolls as springing forth from anonymous spaces such as 4chan to wreak havoc on civil discourse online. But the reality is far more complex.

Trolling is both an identity and a practice. As Judith S. Donath’s (1999) early work into USENET groups demonstrates, trolling can disrupt communities by making members wary of new participants—as they might be trolls in disguise. Engaging with the troll is thought to only exacerbate their behavior—thus the oft-repeated phrase, “don’t feed the troll.” But this approach is also fraught, as it can unintentionally minimize the impact of these behaviors and silence victims (Frances Shaw 2013). While trolling encompasses a wide variety of activities, as Whitney Phillips (2015) argues, trolls themselves are unified by their self-identification
as such, their anonymity, and their interest in “lulz,” or what she describes as “a particular kind of unsympathetic, ambiguous laughter” (24).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, research suggests that those engaging in trolling behaviors demonstrate high levels of sadism and other antisocial personality traits (Erin E. Buckels, Paul D. Trapnell, and Delroy L. Paulhus 2014). This might be why popular media often conflates “trolling” with “harassing”—as journalists who discussed #Gamergate described its victims as targets of a “troll army” (David Whitford 2015). And while trolling is very often characterized as something a small group of antisocial people engage in, studies indicate that trolling behavior is far more widespread, and is often a response to individual mood and the overall context of the discussion at hand (Justin Cheng, Michael Bernstein, Cristian Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, and Jure Leskovec 2017). Other scholars have argued that simply dismissing trolls as solely in it for the “lulz” ignores the complexity of their motivations (which might be ideological or political) and the local context (Phillips 2015; Madelyn Rose Sanfilippo, Shengnan Yang, and Pnina Fichman 2017).

Given these complex realities—that trolls are in it for the “lulz;” that trolling might be politically or ideologically motivated, but is typically disruptive and chaotic—is it even possible for the image of the troll to be reclaimed by feminists? Perhaps, if we think about how the trolls’ “lulz” might be directed at more playful, rather than harmful, ends. As both Phillips (2015) and Gabriella Coleman (2015) suggest, trolling is often morally ambiguous—meaning at times the troll might be better understood as a trickster than a simple sociopath. The “trickster” is a boundary crosser, “…the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubles, and duplicity, contradiction and paradox” (Lewis Hyde 2010, 7). They are attracted to the dirt of humanity, both transgressing boundaries and exposing boundaries of which we were unaware. As such, they can exist in between, both embracing and exploiting contradiction when it serves their purpose (Hyde 2010). It is here that the feminist might meet the troll, and it is through humor, with an ironic re-envisioning of the original troll as trickster, that this connection is made.

**Feminist humor**

Feminists have long been accused unfairly of being humorless. As Sara Ahmed (2010) argues, the trope of the “feminist killjoy” is a powerful one, situating feminists as bearers of unhappiness and as spoilsports, viewed as destroying that which brings joy to others. Instead, their marginalized bodies are expected to be content and acquiescent in their oppression—to be anything less than happy is to be categorized as angry and difficult. Uncontrollable and unpredictable, the feminist killjoy seems intent on refusing to find joy in the normative gender roles that sustain others.

Contrary to this trope, feminists are often funny. Janet Bing (2004) argues that effective feminist humor places women’s lives at its center, noting that it is, “…not the humor of the oppressed, but empowering humor that recognizes the value of female experience” (22). As such, it often functions as a way to create solidarity among women. This is especially true for networked spaces, where humor becomes a key component of content shared across platforms (Limor Shifman 2014). As Nancy K. Baym (1995) argues, humor in online communities often works as a kind of transformative catalyst, “provid[ing]…social power to create and enhance participant solidarity and group identity.” Of course, feminist publics are not the only communities that trade in humor. Most gender-based humor shared online reflects public discourse more broadly, with “fun(n)yism…favoured over feminism” (Limor Shifman and Dafna Lemish 2010, 887). The political is often subsumed by depoliticized humor that
reinforces the status quo. So, just because a community trades in humor that features women’s lives, does not necessarily make it feminist.

Although much of Reddit trades in humor, most of it is decidedly not feminist, and significant amounts of it are misogynistic in tone. But there are pockets where women-oriented humor is welcomed. TrollX is one such community. Originally started as an April Fool’s joke as the offshoot of another women-focused subreddit, /r/TwoXChromosomes (TwoX), TrollX primarily serves a place for Redditors to share women-oriented memes (Figure 1). Both subreddits upend the premise that “there are no girls on the Internet,” the oft-repeated suggestion on early message boards and 4chan that everyone, even those who presented as women, were actually men. However, despite their shared history, there are significant differences between the two spaces. Discussions on TwoX tend to be serious despite their tagline, which suggests the subreddit is for both “serious and silly content… intended for women’s perspectives.” Highly upvoted TwoX submissions often focus on reproductive rights/health, sexual assault, and equality issues. Images are not allowed except on Fridays, and no memes or reaction GIFs are ever accepted. TrollX, on the other hand, explicitly welcomes this kind of humorous content.

Figure 1. Front page of /r/TrollXChromosomes (July 14, 2017).
TrollX is a unique space on Reddit, and therefore worthy of exploration on a platform increasingly known in the popular press for its association with right-wing extremism (Ben Collins 2017). The community’s significant size (over 217,000 subscribers as of June 2017) and ranking (#345 out of over a million subreddits) means that it is relatively prominent (redditmetrics.com 2017). Given this seeming contradiction—that a portion of the platform is likely hostile to its presence and yet the subreddit remains relatively visible with seemingly few repercussions—my research is structured around the following questions: What kind of content is highly upvoted on TrollX and what themes connect these postings? How is the identity of the “troll” remixed and upended by the community? And what might explain why TrollX can exist in the midst of Reddit’s toxicity?

Methods
This study employs a qualitative, thematic content analysis to understand the kind of content the TrollX community produces, as well as how popular postings are received. First, I coded 100 of the subreddit’s 100 most upvoted postings of all time using descriptive coding (Johnny Saldaña 2013). I also examined the top 10 postings that were “most controversial” to understand moments of contestation and boundary setting. Specifically, my analysis focused on both the link text and the content of the posting itself, as well as the general conversation that transpired in the comments. I used Gillian Rose’s (2007) analytical approach to visual images, which emphasizes how images reflect certain discursive patterns, focusing on both what was present and what was absent in the discourse. Postings were captured from May 22 to June 5, 2016 using Excel and Evernote for data management. These were then coded for their source and content, and categorized into themes using a pattern coding approach (Saldaña 2013). This work also builds on a long-term ethnography of Reddit, during and after which I engaged in participant observation of TrollX (Massanari 2015b).

The original analysis was updated and recoded in May 2017. This was necessary for two reasons. The first is that in December 2016, Reddit administrators made a major change to how they calculated the number of points for each posting, which retroactively affected archived posts—making the TrollX Top 100 substantially different in 2015 and 2016 (KeyserSosa 2016). Additionally, given the subreddit’s feminist orientation, the election of Donald Trump in the US changed some of the tenor of conversations within the community, resulting in more political posts becoming popular. I felt it important to consider how this event was received by TrollXers.

What’s in a name? Reclaiming the troll identity
An examination of TrollX’s content reveals several different thematic elements, connected by the overarching image of the “troll:” a playful, absurd, women-centered identity that ironically mixes the original image we are familiar with. In this section, I outline how TrollX’s image of the troll remixes and repudiates popular discourse about the idea of trolls described above.

Just TrollX things
TrollX posters often refer to themselves or members of their community as trolls, thus reclaiming the term “troll” as a shared identity from its often unsavory associations. TrollX remixes
the idea of the troll, standing metonymically for a feminist identity that trades in self-deprecating humor. The idea of feminists reclaiming the troll identity is not a new one; Amanda Phillips (2012) argues that a reclamation of trolling from the trolls could be a powerful move for those within the social justice and feminist communities. Phillips (2015) echoes this point, adding, “If feminists don’t find a way to harness existing trollish energy, it will be used against them” (164). However, the TrollX only reclaims a particular aspect of the troll identity—that which is motivated by humorous pleasures. In this case, the use of the term “troll” is used ironically, in a tongue-in-cheek way. These trolls harness the unbridled, chaotic energy of the trickster to play or upend some aspects of hegemonic femininity.

To be a troll in TrollX’s universe is to eat Rice Krispies treats over the sink with a bottle of wine and wonder if it is an appropriate dinner—post such thoughts to the subreddit, and receive affirmations in the form of upvotes and supportive comments (see Figure 2). Being a troll is about both reveling in the absurdities of everyday life, and invoking a tone of self-deprecation—perhaps as a way to create a communal experience out of a decidedly individual one. For example, a top TrollX posting featured a photograph of a woman wearing a hoodie with a thong stuck in it with the remark that she had walked around accidentally like that all day; another poster responded how she’d gone to the store not knowing she had a huge hole on the butt of her yoga pants. The “geek humor” that characterizes other parts of Reddit is tweaked here—centering women instead of men and becoming an exercise in self-deprecation rather than self-pity. TrollX humor can be crass, but it is generally not at the expense of others. And, unlike trolling in other spaces, where antisocial, negative behavior often defines what it means to be a troll, the TrollX troll is generally supportive and positive.

A quintessential example of the daily life of a TrollX troll is featured in a post ranked #64 (in 2017) on the top-rated postings of all time. Entitled, “This is life changing,” it links to a Tumblr post of a picture of a bathtub from the perspective of the person lying in it, a Styrofoam container of food floating on top of the water between their legs (Figure 3). Below
the picture some text reads, “Normally I would not post a bathtub picture but I just want to let everyone know that Chinese takeout floats.” This kind of posting perfectly encapsulates the kind of embodied, communal pleasures in which TrollXers partake: an enjoyment of self-care without guilt and a desire to share the riches of this finding with other TrollXers.

The troll’s “lulz” in these cases are gained by pushing back on hegemonic notions of femininity and the retrograde idea that women are less driven by carnal, embodied pleasures than men are. The troll identity becomes powerful because it repudiates the dominant discourse on Reddit about gender. At the same time, because TrollIX trades in humor any critiques can be easily dismissed by outsiders. Those with little understanding of the way the community uses “troll” may simply associate it with more familiar notions of trolling and its...
implied masculine subject (Kelly Bergstrom 2011; Phillips 2015). The ironic use of the term “troll” and its remixing into a (potentially) feminist subject remain invisible to outsiders.

**The connected and communal troll**

The variety of content types and platforms represented on TrollX reinforces the idea that it is a space for networked humor. In both the 2016 and 2017 datasets, reaction GIFs were the most highly represented content type among TrollX’s top-ranked postings (24% in 2017; 22% in 2016). Often followed by the acronyms “MFW” (My face when), “HIFW” (How I feel when), or “MRW” (My reaction when), and a description of the situation that prompts the response, the reaction GIF takes a snippet of a popular culture artifact, sometimes with words, to stand in for the poster’s feeling. Reaction GIFs perform complex affective work through embodied gestures that become remixed in light of the poster’s captioning (Linda Huber 2015). As such, individuals universalize individual affective experiences into ones that others can quickly recognize, affirm, and experience vicariously. The reaction GIF is intentionally severed from its original context. However, its intertextual nature means that knowing the context (characters, scene, storyline, etc.) often enhances a viewer’s appreciation of the perfectness of this particular reaction GIF for the poster’s situation. Still, the affective work it performs remains salient even if one is not familiar with the original reference. Reaction GIFs loop continuously, inviting the viewer to watch each performance several times. This also works to intensify the affective experience for the TrollX viewer.

Just over half (55%) of the top-rated reaction GIFs examined feature animals, often reacting awkwardly (such as a cat bouncing uncomfortably on a trampoline) or unexpectedly (for example, a dog sitting on a cat’s face). Animal reaction GIFs are often used to express sexual desire, or sexual awkwardness, thus remixing the cute with the carnal. An examination of the daily top postings over time also reveals that TrollXers often post reaction GIFs involving feminist-friendly characters from popular US television shows, such as Tina Belcher from *Bob’s Burgers* and Lesley Knopes from *Parks and Recreation*, as well as from queer media, like RuPaul’s *Drag Race*.

After reaction GIFs, postings to social network sites such as Twitter and Facebook make up 22% of the top-ranked content. Twitter, in particular, is well represented in this category. Tumblr postings (14%) also make regular appearances, which is unsurprising given its outsized role as a platform supporting feminist (Akane Kanai 2015), fandom (Rhiannon Bury, Ruth Deller, Adam Greenwood, and Bethan Jones 2013), and queer (Alexander Cho 2015) communities. Photos and photo composites (multiple photos standing in for a video sequence, for example, or multiple photos of people around a theme) comprise 10% of the top-ranked content.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the community’s emphasis on sharing examples of networked humor, a critical aspect of the troll identity is its communal, convivial nature. TrollXers clearly delineate an audience to whom they are speaking: other trolls. Postings often include collective terms that address the audience, such as: ladies, fellow trolls, you trolls, everyone, thought of you when I saw this, etc. TrollXers also regularly celebrate their collective troll identity. A popular posting entitled, “How finding this wonderful sub feels as an older troll” links to a reaction GIF (drawn from a Vine video) of two teenage girls dancing in their kitchen, when an older woman joins in their dance in perfect sync. This posting demonstrates the
joy with which TrollXers celebrate their connection to other, likeminded trolls of various ages (responses indicated that others ranged in age from 20–50).

Weekly TrollCall threads, posted by TrollX moderators, become spaces for members to share photos and selfies celebrating their accomplishments, reveling in new haircuts or outfits, or playing with their pets. These become threads in which other TrollXers offer compliments and congratulations. TrollX’s communality also extends to a network of other Troll-related subreddits, such as /r/TrollXMoms, /r/TrollXGirlGamers, and /r/TrollXPorn. While much smaller in size than their parent subreddit, these communities serve as additional places for TrollXers to share and discuss content that isn’t necessarily humorous. This network of subreddits also suggests that being a troll is a mindset that extends beyond merely sharing humorous anecdotes in TrollX, and further works to distinguish it from the rest of Reddit.

It is not surprising, given the context in which TrollX exists, that content posted to the subreddit appeals mainly to subscribers, rather than other Reddit members. Just 31% of the 100 top-rated postings were crossposted to other subreddits (not including reposts of material to /r/TrollX). Many of these other subreddits are much smaller in size than TrollX, meaning that they are unlikely to be viewed by a large number of other Reddit members. Other postings were crossposted to subreddits because of their content, rather than their context. For example, one reaction GIF featuring a cat that was posted to TrollX with the title, “Waiting for the S/O to put the condom on” was crossposted to both /r/mildlystartledcats and /r/holdmycatnip under other titles. Still other postings found their ways to subreddits that were posting it to be critical about the material rather than seeing it as funny, insightful, or valuable. This included postings that were also crossposted to /r/TumblrInAction (a subreddit critical of Tumblr’s social justice communities) and /r/RedPillWives (a subreddit for anti-feminist women).

**The embodied and affective troll**

Given the large percentage of postings that are reaction GIFs, it is unsurprising that embodiment and emotion are a key aspect of the TrollX identity. However, it is important to note that feminism’s relationship to embodiment and emotion is fraught. As Sara Ahmed (2015) argues, feminism and anti-racist activism have long been dismissed by detractors as “emotional” rather than rational, creating a hierarchy whereby, “…thought and reason are identified with the masculine and Western subject, emotions and bodies are associated with femininity and racial others…” (170). This further excludes certain bodies from participating in the public sphere (which valorizes the rational), but also obfuscates the role that emotion and embodiment play in rational thought. However, TrollX seems to carve out a space in which hegemonic notions of femininity’s relationship to emotion are repudiated, while still allowing for acknowledgement that all people are affective beings.

Reveling in the realities of the “grotesque body” (Mikhail Bakhtin 1984) and, in particular, women’s grotesque bodies, is a prominent theme in many of the top TrollX postings. Invoking the grotesque connects TrollX to the humorous sensibilities of Reddit more generally, but it also highlights the differences between the two spaces. Popular subreddits, such as /r/WTF, revel in sharing explicit stories about bodily functions and sexual desire, and demonstrate a kind of “flawed masculinity” (Shifman 2014) characteristic of memetic content. In contrast, TrollX foregrounds women’s experiences, and therefore pushes back on the idea that white, cis-gendered men are the presumed producers and consumers of online content (Nakamura 2007). And embedding these experiences in humor connects TrollXers to others,
as laughter is, “…intimately connected to the individual's body, but it can also be part of a communal celebratory experience within the body politic” (Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund 2013, 100). Therefore, discussions on TrollX about basic embodied experiences—sexual pleasure, reproductive health, and bodily functions—have a political dimension because they upend expectations about who is doing the talking and/or listening. Drawing on Limor Shifman (2014), we might consider how TrollX uses a kind of “flawed femininity” as a main point of connection within the community.

One example that highlights this is a posting that appeared in the top 100 in the 2016 dataset entitled, “Periods top everything” (Figure 4). It links to two tweets from a male comedian, the first of which opines that women will never know what it is like to fear sneezing while urinating. The second, posted 20 minutes later, mentions that he regrets ever making the observation as women keep sharing their experiences with him about sneezing while menstruating. Responders on TrollX shared similar stories, with one poster musing, “Sometimes I wonder if I could sneeze hard enough to make my tampon shoot out like a cannon ball...” and another commenting that she always thought her newly inserted IUD might similarly “rocket out.” Others lamented the physical realities of pregnancy, which meant they regularly had to contend with urinating accidentally while doing everyday activities. The thread continued with stories of women's experiences in this regard, with one poster writing, “…who tries to play ‘unpleasant/horrorifying body emissions’ against women without expecting to be dominated?” And one TrollXer noted that the tweets on the subject, while intended as a joke, demonstrated a profound lack of understanding about women's lived experiences and echoed a larger problem with men not understanding “female anatomy.” Humor in this way works to resist the hegemonic notion that women's bodies are less messy than men's or that their own embodied experiences are somehow more pure and less crass. It also suggests that men (in particular) need to better understand the realities of women's experiences.

Sexuality is also a prevalent theme. In typical TrollX fashion, postings suggest that, while pleasurable, sex can also be awkward and funny. Two highly ranked postings demonstrate this. Both center women's experiences with (presumably male) partners. The first post (“MRW I'm on top but my bf [boyfriend] is thrusting and won't let me get a rhythm going.”) features a reaction GIF of a cat trying to stand up on a trampoline, but instead bouncing awkwardly because a child is jumping on it. Comments on this posting varied, with most TrollXers agreeing that this was annoying, and some men admitting they were guilty of this, but vowed to change their ways. The second post (“MRW my boyfriend asks me to sit on his face and I have no idea what I'm doing”) is also a reaction GIF—this time of a puppy wagging its tail, sitting on top of a cat's face, and hesitantly looking down at the cat while moving its hips. TrollXers responded by noting that this was an empowering position for women, as it meant they were in control of the sexual pleasure they received, but also admitted to sometimes worrying about whether or not their partner could breathe or that they would accidentally fart on them. The original poster agreed, but wryly recentered the dialogue around women's sexuality, “That's seriously all that I think about, but then again, suffocating and death by pussy wouldn't be a bad way to go...” Someone else commented that they loved the regular juxtaposition of cuteness and sexuality on TrollX (“…cute gif[s] applied to sexual moments”), again demonstrating the absurd humor community members appreciate.

Centering women's bodily experiences in these ways is certainly not the norm on other parts of Reddit. One example that demonstrates this is a posting from March 2015 on TrollX, which was also crossposted to /r/funny (a rarity, as I mentioned above). It concerned a photo
of someone’s boarding pass in which the confirmation number read “GR8VAG” (Figure 5). On TrollX it was posted (and upvoted highly, reaching the all-time rank of 18) with the title, “When even the airline knows you’ve got it going on,” and comments ranged from someone saying they now knew what they wanted to get on their vanity license plates to a pun-filled short story about a fictional sex airline where this would be normal. On /r/funny the popular posting was simply titled, “Uhh… thanks?” suggesting that the poster was a cis-gendered man (thus the question mark), and likewise assumed that the individuals reading it would be other men. Comments on that posting were low-effort, placing men at the center of the humor, and ended up digressing into a debate about airport surveillance technology.

In this way, TrollX reclaims the view that women’s bodies are messy, leaking, and disruptive (Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price 1999). Like other kinds of spaces where women-oriented humor is shared, TrollX postings suggest women are active agents in their lives. However, in emphasizing humor that critiques individual experience rather than structural, systemic issues, the TrollX troll might be more ambiguously feminist than at first glance.

**Figure 4.** Periods top everything.
Discussion: TrollX’s feminist politics?

TrollX’s community centers women’s everyday lives and experiences. But is it feminist or merely post-feminist? Its sidebar, “Come for the period comics, stay for the cultural awareness,” suggests an intentional interest in linking humor, embodiment, and women’s experiences embodying a feminist, rather than post-feminist, politic. It also proposes that individuals may initially visit the subreddit in search humorous content, but that they will return, and actually become a “troll.” This is not to suggest that all TrollXers share the same perspective on what constitutes a feminist, or feminism in general, but rather that, through humor, a kind of feminist politic is expressed.

In engaging with the grotesque, TrollX’s conversations mirror a long history within women’s comedy; comedians have often “played ugly” as way to subvert gender norms within what is a notoriously sexist industry (Danielle J. Deveau 2010). Likewise, feminist media has often used the grotesque as a way to couch incisive critiques about the everyday, oppressive expectations of hegemonic femininity (Rosie White 2013). Instead of lamenting the disruptive nature of women’s bodies, as much of the culture does, TrollX celebrates it. While this is transgressive at moments, it is likely also one way in which the community remains relatively unseen by those on Reddit who might be able to dismiss its feminist undertones by simply focusing on the base grotesquery it celebrates.

As mentioned earlier, self-deprecation is a hallmark of the TrollX version of the troll. There are two ways in which this might connect to a larger feminist ethos. TrollX may provide an important reprieve from the day-to-day experience of being a feminist woman, allowing
members to “blow off steam” with likeminded others without having to return to larger political issues. But it is possible that the TrollX troll is actually an example of what Lauren G. Berlant (2011) refers to as “cruel optimism.” In Berlant’s formulation, cruel optimism is “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered to either be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic” (24, emphasis in original). By relying on self-deprecation as a mode of expression for feminist sentiment, the TrollX troll is self-limiting.

Given these realities, I contend that the TrollX troll is only a half-formed feminist figure. It reclaims and ironically remixes the part of the troll identity that engages in “lulz,” but does so for purposes that are not overtly political or critical. These lulz are counter to Phillips’ (2015) notion of deriving joy from “unsympathetic, ambiguous laughter.” Instead, the TrollX lulz are tied to a shared sense of communal laughter that is ambiguous only in its celebration of the grotesque. It remains transgressive and recalls the figure of the trickster at times, especially when viewed against the postfeminist milieu of popular culture. When compared to third-wave feminist thought and its emphasis on intersectionality, however, TrollX’s feminism falls short. While the top-most postings definitely demonstrated an uptick in discussions of systemic sexism as a result of the 2016 US presidential campaign, they also continued to reflect a community mostly focused on the individual, everyday experiences of white feminism. With the exception of one posting from the 2017 dataset (Figure 6), which features a screenshot commenting on the movie Hidden Figures, and its importance in both portraying

![Figure 6](image_url)

**Figure 6.** Representation. Matters.
African American women on screen working in science and the impact that it has on young women, few of the top postings feature the lived experiences of people of color.

Unlike race, where TrollX often centers the experiences of white women, its politics around gender identity might be considered more enlightened. One could argue that even its name, “TrollXChromosomes,” subtly deconstructs a biological narrative implied by its sister subreddit. In contrast, its sister subreddit’s name, “TwoXChromosomes” emphasizes an outmoded biological basis for describing womanhood, as not all women have two X chromosomes and not all individuals with two X chromosomes are women. Thus, TrollX could be viewed as embracing a more pluralistic and welcoming feminism than TwoX, one that accepts a variety of gender identities and expressions. This is demonstrated in two postings from the 2017 dataset that explicitly deal with trans issues. The first is a highly upvoted reaction GIF featuring Lucille Bluth from the US television comedy *Arrested Development* (Figure 7). Titled, “I am a transwoman. MRW guys send me unsolicited dick pics” the GIF features matriarch Lucille Bluth giving a knowing glance while lifting her glass with the words, “Mine was better” overlaid. This posting serves as a larger commentary on the unwelcome harassment that women often experience on dating sites (in particular) when interacting with heterosexual cisgendered men. But it does so from a trans woman’s perspective—making it relatively unique in terms of other TrollX postings. It encourages the viewer to consider the multiple ways in which women’s bodies are experienced. Another popular posting also features trans issues as a topic. It is a screenshot featuring a supposed dialogue between women and Republicans about their efforts to limit trans people from using the bathrooms that correspond to their gender identities (Figure 8). This posting critiques the hypocrisy of the Republican party’s platform on women’s issues, but is told from the perspective of cis-gendered women, rather than the trans women who would be most affected by the legislative efforts. While explicitly political in one sense, in that it discusses the multiple ways in which women are impacted by misogyny and anti-feminist policies, it is not intersectional in its consideration of the realities of the lives of trans women, who are at far greater risk of sexual assault and violence than cis-gendered women.

*Figure 7.* I am a transwoman. MRW guys send me unsolicited dick pics. [Still image of GIF.]
Concluding thoughts: why does TrollX thrive on Reddit?

This article explores one women-focused Reddit community, /r/TrollXChromosomes. Findings of a thematic content analysis of TrollX’s most popular postings suggest an interest in sharing networked forms of humor (in particular, reaction GIFs), celebrating women’s embodiment and sexuality, and engaging with feminist values. These themes are held together by the image of the troll, but one that ironically plays on the traditional way we commonly think about trolls and trolling behavior. The TrollX troll is embodied, communal, and playful, and revels in everyday absurdities. Additional research is required to understand whether TrollXers actually identify with the TrollX “troll,” and whether they view it as a feminist figure. Also important is understanding how they navigate their experiences in places on Reddit where women are not always received positively. However, this work provides an important first step in exploring this unique community. More research is also needed to unpack the critical importance that moderation plays in maintaining the delicate balance of a community like TrollX.

However, the fact that TrollX flourishes on Reddit is somewhat of a conundrum. Many of the platform’s most popular subreddits demonstrate, at minimum, retrograde ideas about women, and often feature anti-feminist chatter; another shadowy collection of subreddits have traded in sharing creepshots (stolen images of unsuspecting women), fat shaming, and racism. And there are also popular subreddits like /r/mensrights, /r/The_Donald, and /r/theredpill, all of which are blatantly misogynistic, racist, and transphobic. This toxic atmosphere should make the mere existence of a relatively feminist-friendly space like /r/TrollX on Reddit unlikely.

As I have shown, TrollX’s use of humor as a mode of discourse means that the community it is able to slide under the radar, perhaps because it then avoids accusations of being comprised of “feminist killjoys.” Its tactical remix of the “troll” figure allows it to embrace aspects of Reddit’s geeky humor, while also placing women’s experiences at its center. Humor becomes a tool by which TrollXers can express support for one another and revel in everyday absurdities. While not mitigating negative experiences that TrollXers face in other parts of Reddit or the rest of their lives, the troll identity might provide a kind of invisible social support that provides an outlet for them to commune around these experiences with likeminded others.

Figure 8. Found some truth on FB [Facebook].
In addition, the TrollX troll inwardly focuses on building a community around “lulz,” and, as such, is less engaged with actively disrupting other spaces. Critiques about Reddit and the culture at-large that do happen on TrollX are usually cloaked in humor. This stands in contrast to other feminist and social justice subreddits on the platform (such as /r/ShitRedditSays, /r/circlebroke, and /r/openbroke), all of which are more serious and more direct in their critiques. And because these subreddits engage regularly in metadiscussion about other Reddit communities, they quickly (and, in my mind, unfairly) gain reputations as being humorless social justice boogeymen. TrollX, however, gets a pass precisely because, on its surface, it is just a humor subreddit—enlightenment is secondary to the enjoyment of memes and reaction GIFs. Additionally, the polysemic nature of the networked feminist humor that is shared makes it easy for outsiders to ignore the deeper critiques that TrollXers make.

All of this suggests that the image of the TrollX troll, while embracing some aspects of feminism, remains ambivalent about its more political, activist elements. That being said, it does offer some important pointers as to how feminist communities might exist in other toxic spaces. Remixing and reassembling particular discursive structures (as TrollX does with humor) might allow them to exist in plain sight without being undone. It also suggests the importance of not being so visible that communities like these become a target for others to join in and derail, gaslight, or otherwise upend their feminist intent. Likewise, TrollX demonstrates the importance of encouraging communality and solidarity. In TrollX’s case, the reclamation of the troll identity allows members to collectively share and bond around everyday experiences. However, the understandable survival strategies that the TrollX community engages in to ensure a relatively peaceful existence on the Reddit platform—humor, self-deprecation, and a tendency to focus on individualized experiences rather than systemic oppression—works to undercut a fully-realized version of the feminist troll.

Note

1. In accordance with the Association of Internet Researchers’ ethics guidelines (Annette Markham and Elizabeth Buchanan 2012), usernames have been eliminated to ensure privacy. In addition, direct quotations from TrollX have been changed slightly to preserve the writer’s anonymity while still retaining meaning.

Disclosure statement

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References


