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Protecting the Ladies: Benevolent Sexism, Heteronormativity, and Partisanship in Online Discussions of Gender-Neutral Bathrooms

Lindsey Erin Blumell, Jennifer Huemmer & Miglena Sternadori

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ABSTRACT

The recent adoption of bathroom bills restricting trans* people's access to public bathrooms of their choice in the United States has elicited a vigorous public debate invoking benevolent sexism, heteronormativity, and partisanship. This analysis includes 9,764 online comments posted on the 13 most-shared articles or blog posts about trans* bathroom accommodation from September 2015 to September 2016. The common themes in such discussions were arguments promoting benevolent sexism, including that women and girls need protection by men and from men and that sex differences are natural. Results showed that support for trans* access to public bathrooms was most prevalent in discussions on left-leaning sites, whereas opposition was most prevalent in discussions on right-leaning sites. Most, but not all, benevolent-sexism themes were prevalent in comments on right-leaning sites. The results are discussed in the context of their theoretical implications for the literature of benevolent sexism and heteronormativity.

INTRODUCTION

In an unforeseen tweet on July 26, 2017, U.S. president Donald Trump announced an intent to ban trans* people (trans* is used to include people whose gender, transitivity, and body identities are more nuanced and varied than the terms transmen and transwomen) from serving in the military due to the burden of their medical costs and allegedly disruptive presence (Lui, 2017). In spite of a vigorous pushback, including a lawsuit filed by trans* soldiers and media reports that the U.S. military spends more on the erectile dysfunction drug Viagra than on trans* medical costs, Trump' s initiative is another chapter in the saga of using political power to attempt to control the lives of trans* people (Halberstam, 2016).

U.S. legislative bodies have met the issue of trans* rights with both acceptance and resistance: acceptance by lawmakers who believe the same human rights afforded cisgender people ought to extend to trans* people, and resistance by those who believe trans* rights should not be guaranteed for many reasons, including their potential interference with other people' s rights.

The purpose of this article is to scrutinize the arguments underlying the public discourse about trans* rights. Toward this goal, dominant themes were analyzed in the online debate surrounding proposed and adopted laws prohibiting or limiting the access of trans* people to public bathrooms of their choice in the United States. Starting in 2015, several states proposed such so-called bathroom bills (Wang, Solomon, Durso, & Cahill, 2016). The increase of such legislation has been justified by claims that allowing people to use bathrooms reflecting their gender identity rather than sex assigned at birth would endanger women and children (Laylor, 2016 ; Westbrook& Schilt, 2014). This argument fails to acknowledge the lack of scholarly

evidence linking trans* accommodation to increased harassment of women and children (Laylor, 2016 ; Wang et al., 2016). Scholars have also noted that being denied full access to public spaces can have detrimental effects on trans* people, in some cases even leading to suicide or suicide attempts (Seelman, 2016; Sutton, 2016).

The debate made headway in March 2016, when North Carolina passed House Bill 2 (HB2), now repealed, requiring individuals to use public bathrooms based only on their sex at birth (Phillips, 2016). Public boycotts, canceled events, and a denouncement from the federal government (Hersher, 2016) spiraled into heated disputes about whether the alleged need for protection of cisgender women and children outweighed the rights of trans* people.

The vigorous effort to preserve sex-separated spaces is a manifestation of institutionalized gendered routines, or " the way in which these [sex] differences were and are put forward as a warrant for our social arrangements" (Goffman, 1977, p. 302). Ungendering public bathrooms would represent an unprecedented attack on the gender status quo, which reflects the political and social power of cisgender male elites and the relative vulnerability of women and sexual minorities. Institutionalized gender routines not only marginalize trans* people (e.g., Meadow, 2010; Schilt & Westbrook, 2015) but also have negative effects on women' s sexual health (Nack, 2002) and sexual agency (Dunn, 1998). Yet these routines and sex-separated spaces continue to be defended by both men and women. This study examines how the notion of " protecting" women ultimately subjugates them and simultaneously limits trans* rights. The following literature review outlines the connections between privacy, violence against women, and women' s access to public spaces, thus helping to illuminate the cultural baggage underlying the contemporary gender-neutral or unisex bathroom debate.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox (1974) defined the public sphere as " a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" and "access is guaranteed to all citizens" (p. 49). A full participation in the public sphere, they argued, required people' s ability to " assemble" and " confer in an unrestricted fashion" (p. 49) outside the confines of their homes. And although the public sphere is an abstract concept about the meeting of human minds, participating in it has traditionally (before the era of social media) required an embodied presence, necessitating public policies about the most private aspects of human bodies. These policies have evolved to define public behaviors; appearance; resources; access to resources; and, in the case of this study, use of public bathrooms.

Women and The Public Sphere

Before modern flush technology, relieving oneself in public was a communal event designated for men (Blumenthal, 2014). However, as Victorian ideals evolved (referring to Western contexts), social norms of propriety and cleanliness were adopted by the upper class and then trickled down through all levels of society, enforcing a sense of shame surrounding bodily functions and a need for "privateness" (Blumenthal, 2014, p. 88). It was also during this time that sex separated bathrooms were established (Rhodan, 2016).

Public uproar surrounded the first proposals to erect public female lavatories (Kogan, 2007; Penner, 2001). Underlying these concerns was how public female bathrooms signified women had a right to access public life more than ever before. This was worrisome to Victorians,

who viewed women as both physically and intellectually subordinate to men (Kogan, 2007). As more women entered the workforce, sex-separated spaces became the norm.

Violence within the Public Sphere

Women' s entry into public life spurred additional social changes, such as the criminalization of rape. In England, the late Victorian era marked the first rape prosecutions, though convictions were rare (Wiener, 2004), whereas in the United States, rape survivors feared that reporting would tarnish their reputation (Murphy, 2014). During the Civil War, few soldiers ever stood trial for rape, because women had to prove they did not give their consent— and raping a woman of color was not even considered rape (Murphy, 2014). Rape survivors still face a similar challenge because of assumptions that perpetrators obtained consent, even if the victim only " secretly" gave it (Fraser, 2015).

The acknowledgment of rape as a crime and the link of its criminalization to women' s entry into public life resulted in the cultivation of rape myths, such as the stranger danger myth and the resulting lack of recognition of acquaintance rape as "real" rape (Jones, Grear, Fenton, & Stevenson, 2011). These assumptions persist even though most rapes occur within 1 mile of or in the home of the survivor or the perpetrator and is committed by someone known to the survivor (" Sexual Assault and Rape," n.d.). These facts contradict the assumption that women are safe only in their homes or in controlled areas, such as sex-separated public bathrooms (Kogan, 2007). Although keeping women " safe" has been focused on limiting their access to public life, the dangers that most women encounter are within their private lives.

Government Regulations of Sexuality and Gender

Advocacy groups, such as The Fenway Institute and the Human Rights Campaign, have documented multiple examples of anti-LGBT* legislation since the U.S. Supreme Court' s decision to legalize same-sex marriage (HRC Staff, 2017; Wang et al., 2016). More than 130 such bills in 30 states were proposed in 2015 and 2016. They can be grouped into four major categories: religious refusals, promoting conversion therapy (only in Oklahoma), anti-trans*, and nullifying established civil rights protections (e.g., HRC Staff, 2017).

Although North Carolina' s HB2 has been repealed, 16 states debated bathroom bills the first half of 2017 (Sanchez, 2017). The tide of bathroom bills since the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States illustrates how legislators continue to regulate sexuality in various areas (Currah, 2011). Meadow (2010) contended that public debates on legislation related to trans* people challenge" social institutions built on the idea that biological sex is both immutable and dichotomous" (p. 815).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Although sex-segregated spaces have failed to protect women, many still believe that gender norms ought to be maintained for women' s own good. Consequently, when lawmakers propose legislation about desegregating bathrooms or maintaining their current segregation, debates eclipse the limits of legalese to incorporate traditional ideals reflective of benevolent sexism and heteronormativity. Media, a central part of most societies' power structures, have often maintained gender norms and a hegemonic status quo (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014), criticizing public challenges to it (McLeod, 1995 , 2007). Benevolent sexism and Heteronormativity are

among the pillars of the gendered status quo and therefore are central to this analysis of the mediated public debate on the right of trans* people. Both conceptual frameworks are outlined in the following sections.

Benevolent Sexism

Glick and Fiske (1996, 2001, 2011) The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory classified sexism as either hostile or benevolent. The latter, the authors argued, expands our understanding of prejudice against women to include positive feelings or chivalry that still result in inequality, mainly in the name of helping and intimacy seeking. Because hostile sexism, or the overt negative subjugation of women, is more visible in various societies in the form of limiting women' s access to education and careers, workplace discrimination, and sexual assault and harassment, among others, benevolent sexism by comparison seems nonthreatening and may even be welcomed because it proposes that women be safeguarded by men, mostly from other men (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Goh & Hall, 2015). Benevolent sexism views women positively but at the same time suggests they need protection and are ultimately inferior to men. At the root of benevolent sexism is heteronormative idealization of the supposed natural but complementary differences between men and women in heterosexual relationships (Warner, 1991).

Discourses of benevolent sexism have long been used to justify how women ought to be dominated, even if that is accomplished through expressions of love and care (Goh & Hall, 2015). Benevolent sexism is thus a ubiquitous social mechanism that not only informs but also constructs the boundaries of most public conversations about gender. It presents a useful framework for this study on mediated public conversations generated in reaction to traditional and online media news coverage. Women who accept benevolent sexism tend to agree to greater restrictions placed on them by their partners and in the workplace, as long as the justification is to protect their personal safety (Moya, Glick, Expósito, De Lemus, & Hart, 2007).

In the context of the present study, the conceptual framework of benevolent sexism intersects with public and political discussions on gender-neutral bathrooms, reframing the issue of trans* rights into something different: protecting cisgender women and children (Laylor, 2016).

Heteronormativity

Heteronormative assumptions, at the core of benevolent sexism, help explain the fear of gender-neutral bathrooms because in certain " imagined interactions, transwomen have legal permission to enter gender-segregated spaces without the proper biological credentials" (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014, p. 48). So-called penis panics occur when gender status quos are challenged, such as in combining previously sexseparated public spaces (Schilt & Westbrook, 2015). The notion of " penis-free" women' s bathrooms drives the vehement opposition to allowing in any person who happens to have a penis; it persists despite the detrimental consequences to trans* individuals who are denied access to public spaces and the lack of evidence that granting them such access negatively affect cisgender women (Schilt &Westbrook, 2015). There is limited research on media and mediated responses to forgoing sexseparated toilets; nevertheless, based on previous literature, most media content can be expected to reinforce heteronormativity (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

Heteronormative assumptions limit the progression of trans* rights by mandating that gender differences govern public life (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). The naturalness of the gender binary justifies violence against trans* individuals (Schilt & Westbrook, 2015). Stryker (2013) used the framework of Heteronormativity to analyze transwomen' s experiences as public objects of both fear and fun, either bathroom predators or comedic cross-dressers— both representations used to justify arguments against incorporating gender-neutral bathrooms. The literature suggests that the desire to defend cisgender women turns to hostility against transwomen not because they pose a sexual danger but because they explicitly challenge heteronormative standards.

Another important aspect of the debate is its extreme political polarization. An example was evident in a statement by former presidential candidate Ted Cruz, who complained about " grown men … allowed to use the little girls' restroom" (Gabriel, 2016, para. 4). Cruz' s concern was likely a manifestation of his conservative views, considering previous research findings that right-wing authoritarianism is positively associated with benevolent sexism (Christopher & Mull, 2006; Feather & McKee, 2012; Sibley,Wilson, & Duckitt, 2007). Feather andMcKee (2012) further found that conservative values, such as power and security, predict both benevolent and hostile sexism. The political science literature suggests that conservatives are especially likely to engage in efforts to justify and support the status quo (e.g, Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008). By contrast, supporting the status quo is less prevalent among liberals who are more likely to challenge the status quo (e.g., Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008). Furthermore, mass communication scholars (e.g., McLeod, 2007; Shoemaker & Reese, 2011) have argued that the media routines of legacy nonpartisan news organizations (categorized as center-leaning in this study) have traditionally supported the status quo and marginalized social change by framing it as deviance. This study analyzes audience reactions rather than media content, but it is logical to expect that common frames in the content being discussed would be to some degree reflected in the online comments about it. Thus, the following is proposed:

H1: Online comments supporting trans* access to public bathrooms of their choice or gender-neutral bathrooms will be more prevalent on left-leaning forums than on center- and right-leaning forums.

H2: Online comments opposing trans* access to public bathrooms of their choice or gender-neutral bathrooms will be more prevalent on right-leaning than on center- and left-leaning forums.

H3: Online comments challenging the gendered status quo will be more prevalent on left-leaning forums than on center- and right-leaning forums.

To capitalize on the trove of qualitative data represented by the thousands of analyzed comments, the first research question asked is as follows:

RQ1: What themes will emerge in a qualitative thematic analysis of online comments in this study?

As suggested by the reviewed literature, comments reflecting benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, and heteronormativity are likely to be most prevalent in online discussions on forums

with a conservative stance, such as Fox News and The Federalist blog. Within these general categories of sexism and heteronormativity, the following is hypothesized:

H4: Benevolent sexism themes will be more prevalent on right-leaning than on center- and left-leaning forums.

METHODS

The unit of analysis was the online comment. The comments analyzed were those posted after the most-shared articles about gender-neutral bathrooms and trans* bathroom accommodation. The focus on most-shared articles was meant to account for the relative popularity of these pieces, which logically should result in extensive and robust online discussions. The analytics tool BuzzSumo was used to identify the most-shared articles on the subject published between September 1, 2015, and September 1, 2016. BuzzSumo, which curates and archives social media content, was selected because it (a) allows free advanced searching by keywords and topics and (b) ranks the popularity of resulting articles by the total number of times they have been shared and commented on through different social media platforms or a direct link. Several events during this period generated intense public debate: the passing of HB2 in North Carolina and proposed bathroom bills in several states (Fae, 2016), the lawsuit and counterlawsuit between North
Carolina and the U.S. Justice Department (Grinberg, 2016), the overturning of an antidiscrimination bill by Houston voters (Fernandez & Smith, 2015), the introduction of gender-neutral bathrooms by Target as well as other companies and some schools (Safdar, 2016), and new federal guidelines on how to make public bathrooms fully accessible (Grinberg, 2016).

Searches included combinations of the following words: transgender, bathrooms, and gender-neutral. The 10 most-shared articles resulting from each search were collected, and duplicates and articles without comments were eliminated, leaving 13 unique articles with a total of 9,764 comments (Table 1). The articles were then organized according to level of partisanship, which represented a cross section of news organizations, websites, and blogs with political leanings across the spectrum. Previous research shows partisan media coverage differs from politically moderate sources in its content and effects. In the context of conservative media, the content differs in that incivility is higher (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011) and representative of conservatism' s association with gendered norms such as benevolent sexism (e.g., Christopher & Mull, 2006 ; Glick, Diebold, Bailey-Werner, & Zhu, 1997 ; Sibley, Overall, Duckitt, 2007) and homophobia and transphobia (Nagoshi, Adams, Terrell, Kill, Brzuzy, & Nagoshi, 2008). Consuming partisan coverage motivates users to debate online (Abril, 2015), make assumptions that one' s view represents the majority of public opinion (Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther, 2002), and show increased hostility toward opposing viewpoints (e.g., Kim, 2015 ; Kim & Pasadeos, 2007).

Thematic Analysis

This analysis takes a constructionist epistemological perspective (e.g., Darlaston-Jones, 2007) in that it assumes gender roles, along with the various institutional routines that disguise their artificiality as well as enforce them, are socially constructed

(Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Therefore, the patterns of arguments being made in the debate on trans* access to public bathrooms represent conflicting mental scaffolds, which are upheld by different groups of social actors. To identify themes in the online comments, the first two authors examined the sampled content and made broad observations (Given, 2008). McKee (2003) emphasized how researchers analyzing texts can find " sense-making practices that were in place in a culture where it is circulated asmeaningful" (p. 43). This was important to the study because specific arguments in favor or against gender-neutral bathrooms and trans* access to public bathrooms were assumed to represent efforts toward sense making. Each researcher read the entire data corpus of 9,764 comments and organized them into categories representing specific patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researchers then discussed and combined the notes into broad thematic units (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 1999). Each theme was carefully reviewed to ensure that comments were appropriately organized. The researchers discussed whether the thematic units needed to be combined or divided further, and whether their labeling was appropriate.

The thematic analysis was theoretically driven (specifically, keeping the concepts of benevolent sexism and heteronormativity in mind), and thus conducted at the interpretive rather than the explicit/semantic level (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once the thematic analysis was completed, the researchers used the identified themes to create a coding protocol and coding sheet for a quantitative content analysis to test the preceding hypotheses about relationships between partisanship and (a) support/opposition to trans* access to public bathrooms, (b) tendency to challenge the status quo, and (c) benevolent sexism and heteronormativity.

Content Analysis

A codebook was created by operationalizing each variable through the following measures: creating a definition of the variable, identifying when to code for the variable, deciding the appropriate level of measurement, and providing an example of the variable (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2014). To test the aforementioned hypotheses, this analysis required the use of latent variables; the consistency of their coding was ensured through the detailed protocol and coder training (Neuendorf, 2011). In total, 12 variables were included. See Table 2 for the full list, definitions, and examples. For the male threat to commit violence variables, users were identified as male through self-identifying language, such as being a father or husband. For the first 11 variables, each comment was coded individually as either presence (1) or absence (0). A running tally was kept for each variable and each article.

The two coders were the first author and the second author. After the codebook was finalized (see Table 2), the coders reviewed the codebook carefully. Next, they independently coded a data set of 900 comments from nine articles.

The first author calculated intercoder reliability using ReCal2 (dfreelon.org). Table 2 reports Krippendorf' s alpha for each variable. After the first round, seven variables achieved acceptable scores: support, opposition, fearmongering, challenges the status quo, critical of the left, critical of the right, and partisan categorization. After discussion and further clarification of the codebook, the second round yielded three more acceptable scores: male threat protection, male threat retribution, and naturalness of sex differences. The third round achieved acceptable results for the final two variables: need to protect women and need to protect children (Neuendorf, 2011).

The partisanship variable was represented categorically as mostly right-leaning sources (Fox News, Stream.org, The Federalist, and The Federalist Papers Project), mostly center-leaning sources (USA Today, the New York Times [NYT], the Los Angeles Times [LA Times], Ted.com), and mostly left-leaning sources (The Huffington Post, Scary Mommy, and Renegade Mothering). The categories reflected perceived bias on the basis of a Pew Center survey (Blake, 2014) and ratings from the news website AllSites.com (2017). For the blogs Scary Mommy and Renegade Mothering, for which no ratings were available from the Pew Center and AllSites, we determined political leaning on the basis of posts consistently advocating strong leftist views. Scary Mommy and its founder, Jill Smokler, have extensively supported immigration, abortion, welfare, and other traditionally left issues. This is exemplified by a recent post criticizing cuts to welfare benefits, which states, " The family values party, eh? If their values include trying to make people go hungry, sounds like the Grand Old Party is on a roll" (Williams, 2018). Renegade Mothering has taken a similarly consistent leftist stance, strongly critical of policies associated with the right, as demonstrated by a recent post stating,"… we are left with detention centers for children ripped from their parents' arms, alongside a mural of our dictator" (renegade mama, 2018). There were 4,092 total comments posted on rightleaning sites, 5,018 comments on center-leaning sites, and 642 comments on left leaning sites.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Across all 13 sources, more comments opposed (48.0%) than supported (23.9%) gender-neutral bathrooms and trans* access to public bathrooms. Inflammatory language was common, and about 28% of comments were not coded as either in support or in opposition, because they consisted of entirely irrelevant information, such as personal insults to other users.

H1 stated that support for trans* access to public bathrooms of their choice or gender-neutral bathrooms will be more prevalent in discussions from left-leaning sources rather than from center- and right-leaning sources. To test the hypothesis, two pairwise, independent-sample chi-square comparisons of proportions (left vs. center; left vs. right) were conducted. Pairwise comparisons are used to understand if pairs are significantly different from each other. MedCalc.org was used, which compares the proportion (%) by sample size for each pair. The last column of Table 3 reports the results and significance. Table 3 also lists the total frequency of each variable followed by the percentage of frequency under the columns labelled: left, center, and right columns.

As expected, the proportion of support comments on left-leaning forums was significantly different from the proportion of support comments on right- and center-leaning forums. H1 was supported. H2 stated that opposition to trans* access to public bathrooms of their choice or gender-neutral bathrooms will be more prevalent in discussions from right leaning sources than from center- and left-leaning sources. The proportion of opposition comments on right-leaning forums was significantly different from the proportion of opposition comments on center- and left-leaning forums (Table
3). H2 was supported.

H3 stated that comments challenging the status quo will be more prevalent on left-leaning forums than on center- and right-leaning forums. The results showed the proportion of status-quo challenging comments on left-leaning sites was significantly higher than the proportion of such comments of right-leaning site but not significantly higher than the proportion of such comments on center leaning sites (Table 3). Therefore, H3 was partially supported.

Thematic Analysis

RQ1 asked what themes emerged in the online discussions of trans* access to bathrooms of their choice and gender-neutral bathrooms. In total, six themes were identified that are presented in order of relating to (a) benevolent sexism and heteronormativity (fearmongering, need to protect women and children, threats of violence, and naturalness of sex differences), (b) challenging the status quo, and (c) the indirectly related theme of partisanship (critical of the right and left).

Fearmongering. Many users engaged in what-if scenarios, presenting the potentially negative consequences of trans* access to public bathrooms. One concern, for example, was that transwomen who have retained masculine strength could easily overpower the frail " real" women in public bathrooms: " A trans woman, who has male anatomy can defend himself. Small girls, and women cannot defend themselves against an anatomical male, whether he is a stalker or a trans woman" (The Federalist, Haver, 2015). The users' fear sometimes reflected themes present in the discussed article, such as an April 13, 2016, article on The Federalist Papers Project blog titled " What Gender-Neutral Bathrooms Begets: Man Arrested for Filming Women." It reported a California man had been arrested for dressing like a woman and filming women in a Macy' s change room (Gehl, 2015). The article, which generated 900 mostly negative comments, failed to inform readers that the incident took place in 2013 (3 years before Target' s decision to create gender-neutral bathrooms) and had occurred in a women-only area (Klernack & Lloyd, 2013). Users also expressed concerns about the end of the world, God abandoning the country, and morality being flushed down the toilet. In an attempt to defend the gendered status quo, the ungendering of public toilets was associated with sexual deviance, as suggested by comments such as " next they will want to legalize bestiality" (Fox News, 2016a) and " eventually liberals will be supporting PLM. Perverts Lives Matter" (Gehl, 2015).

Protection. The importance of protecting cisgender women was highlighted in 11.2% of comments and of children in 11.6% of comments. This theme assumed negative consequences from which cisgender women needed defending. That need was sometimes extrapolated to unrelated topics, such as women's participation in sports: "IN 10 YEARS, GIRLS WILL NOT KNOW THAT WOMEN WERE ONCE EQUAL. WHAT WILL BE THE NEXT RIGHT THAT WE LOSE" (Brown, 2016). Sometimes the desire to protect cisgender women and children was present even in arguments supporting trans* access to public bathrooms: "I'd rather my kid be in a restroom with a transgendered person than with someone like Dennis Hastert, Josh Duggar or a catholic priest" (NYT, Davis & Apuzzo, 2016).

Violence Threats. Although the benevolent sexism framework presumes men act as protectors of women, including by force, only 1.4% of comments included threats of violence in the name of protection. One Stream.org (Brown, 2016) commenter wrote, "Yeah, I'm going to discriminate with any Y chromosome that walks into the women's restroom with my wife or daughters there—with force. And any man of worth will do the same." Another commenter, on a NYT article (Davis & Apuzzo, 2016), wrote, "… if I see a man go in the women's bathroom anywhere while mywife or daughter is in there I will personally go in and drag them out of there and they will be hurting."

Threats of aggression against women appeared in about 1% of all comments, and those who had made declarations to protect their wives and daughters did not challenge these threats. The highest concentration of threats (3.3%) was observed in comments on the USA Today article on Target's incorporation of genderneutral bathrooms. Even though the article was about a

corporate decision, some users threatened to punish women: "I think time all men go into womans[sic] bathrooms. show them what can happen." Even sarcasm contained hostility: "Cool … ladies, I can't wait to meet you in the bathroom, and your daughters. I love the new USA … I'll have my micro camera ready too."

Because violence by people born with male genitalia was seen as inevitable, users argued that establishing gender-neutral bathrooms infringes on women's rights: "… And this is the party that prides itself on looking out for women's rights!" (The Huffington Post, 2016). Such aggression was seen as a consequence of male biology. One Stream.org (Brown, 2016) user wrote: "… Do you want a bunch of little boys coming in the restroom and raping your little girls? I understand the hate needs to stop but boys will be boys. Just for kicks and giggles it's going to happen."

Natural Sex Differences. Biological distinctions between men and women were used to justify a strict sex segregation of public bathrooms in 8.3%of comments. Critics of gender-neutral bathrooms defended heteronormativity and invoked an imaginary majority believing in essential differences. Arguments about "the rights of the 99.9% that don't want to share a restroom with someone of the opposite sex?" (Davis & Apuzzo, 2016) were repeated throughout the analyzed discussions. One LA Times reader stated, "Why does a minority get to dictate to the majority?" Another replied, "America is based on the minority not being oppressed by the majority. It seems you did not go to school." Defenders of heteronormativity—which assumes that only "attraction between two differently sexed and gendered bodies is normal, natural, and desirable" (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009, p. 42)—further complained about excessive exposure to a gay agenda. Some even speculated that bathroom sexual assault victims are being silenced: "Sometimes victims are quiet for a long time and in this current atmosphere of all-LGBT-all-the-time-no-matter-what, I wouldn't be surprised if victims didn't feel safe speaking up" (The Huffington Post, 2016). Target's gender-neutral bathrooms decision drew especially strong criticism: Target wants to make sure that the LGBT community, as tiny as it may be, feels safe in the restroom, and that their privacy concerns are honored. In doing so, they are also making a statement that they care not one bit for the safety, security, and privacy concerns of heterosexual women and their children (Fox News, 2016a).

Status Quo Challenges. In counterarguments to heteronormativity and benevolent sexism, 6.7% of comments challenged the status quo, mostly stating the current system has never protected cisgender women and children. One commenter on The Federalist (Haver, 2015) wrote, "There have been more reports of priests raping children than transgender people sexually assaulting others in the restroom." Others pointed to systemic-level abuses: "1 in 4 girls are sexually abused, boys it's 1 in 6. The issue is ending the violence. Period" (Fox News, 2016b).

Partisanship. Partisan divisions were implied or clearly stated throughout most of the comments. Many users self-identified as liberal or conservative in their comments, and assumed those who held opposing views belonged on the opposite side of the political spectrum. Criticism of leftist ideology was observed in 13.2% of comments, labeling it backward, twisted, and illogical. Some users critical of the left defended themselves against conservative stereotypes: "Liberals are only tolerant until you disagree with them … then you are a racist, bigot, evil, puppy killer" (Malcolm, 2016). Some vouched for conservatives' intelligence: "… contrary to their claims of being so much smarter than all others unable to apply communication, empathy and the ability to agree" (Malcolm, 2016), whereas others criticized the elites ("This is what happens when we elect Harvard-trained lawyers to the White House," Davis & Apuzzo, 2016).

Criticism of the right was evident in 5.5% of all comments, focusing on the perceived desire to maintain the status quo: " The conservatives have so utterly lost the CultureWar that this is what they' ve resorted to. What was once about marriage and the military is now reduced to cakes and bathrooms" (Ferner, 2016). Other comments discussed documented incidents: " There has never been a single case of a transgendered female molesting a little girl in a women' s bathroom. … There are cases of sexual predators in the men' s bathrooms though. Every single one was a socially conservative Republican" (Davis & Apuzzo, 2016). Idaho senator Larry Craig was referenced as " another religious extremist right wing nut job, who once attempted to solicit a homosexual act in an airport men' s room" (Malcolm, 2016). Others focused on how " former Congressman Hastert, the former Republican speaker of the House is being tried on sexual abuse of boys" (Malcolm, 2016).

Testing H4

Having completed the thematic analysis, next H4 was tested, which stated that benevolent sexism themes will be more prevalent in online discussions on right leaning forums than on center- and left-leaning forums. To operationalize and test this hypothesis, we used the themes identified in response to RQ1, and tested six sub hypotheses, H4a– f, which reflected the identified themes. Each of the first two themes was represented by a single sub hypothesis. The third theme, protection, was represented by two sub hypotheses to distinguish between comments focusing on the protection of women and comments expressing concerns about the protection of children. The fourth theme, threats of violence, was also represented by two sub hypotheses: One focused on comments that contained threats of violence intended to protect women, and the other dealt with comments that implied threats of violence against women.

H4a focused on fearmongering about the potential negative impact on women and children resulting from trans* access to public bathrooms of their choice or gender-neutral bathrooms. It was partially supported (Table 3) because the proportion of fearmongering comments on center-leaning sites was significantly higher than on right-leaning sites, which was opposite to the hypothesized direction.

H4b focused on the emphasis on natural differences between men and women. The results showed the proportion of such comments on right-leaning sites was significantly higher than the proportion on center-leaning and left-leaning sites (Table 3). H4b was supported.

H4c focused on the emphasis on protecting women. The results showed the proportion of such comments on right-leaning sites was higher than the proportion on left-leaning sites but lower than the proportion on center-leaning sites (Table 3). The latter finding was opposite the hypothesized direction. Therefore, H4c was only partially supported.

H4d dealt with an emphasis on protecting children. The results showed that the prevalence of such comments on right-leaning sites was higher than on left leaning sites but lower than on center-leaning sites (Table 3). The latter finding was opposite the hypothesized direction. Therefore, H4d was partially supported.

H4e focused on threats of violence to protect women. The results showed the prevalence of such comments on right-leaning sites was significantly higher than on center-leaning and left-leaning sites (Table 3). H4e was supported.

H4f focused on threats of violence to punish women or to show the world the dangers of having men in women' s bathrooms. H4f was not supported because threats of violence to punish/prove a point were more prevalent on center-leaning than right-leaning sites, opposite the

hypothesized direction, and the difference between right- and left-leaning sites was not statistically significant (Table 3).

DISCUSSION

This study examined online public discussions about gender-neutral bathrooms, seeking to identify how benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001, 2011), heteronormativity (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014), and partisanship influence these discussions. The analysis of online comments contributes to the literature examining how public opinion is communicated, constructed, and negotiated in response to controversial issues. The results also revealed some of the ways in which benevolent sexism and heteronormativity intersect with political ideology. The latter has been used to explain so-called penis panics (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009, 2015) and conservatives' propensity for system justification (Jost, Nosek, et al., 2008). The former has been used to publicly " protect" women via segregated spaces while stifling their access to the public sphere (Kogan, 2007; Penner, 2001).

The thematic analysis suggested that benevolent sexism uses the facade of chivalry and heteronormativity uses the gender binary to justify limiting women' s access to the public sphere as well as trans* rights. Human rights ethics, on the other hand, affirms that individuals ought to have the same access to all rights afforded, regardless of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, and so on (Morsink, 1999). Although gender-neutral spaces have no connection to women' s inequality and their lack only serves to subjugate trans* people (Laylor, 2016; Wang et al., 2016), initiatives to remedy such injustices divide the public, whereas political elites (mostly cisgender White men) continue to regulate sexuality, gender, and gender identity (Currah, 2011). The thematic analysis also suggested that protecting cisgender women is dependent on certain conditions, including but not limited to the following: (a) The defender has a personal relationship with the woman (wife or daughter), which situates her welfare within her importance to an individual man; (b) the threatening man is seen as non-normative, deviant, and uncontrollable, in perpetuation of the stranger danger rape myth (Weiss, 2009); and (c) the woman being protected is cisgender, monogamous, and heterosexual, revealing an implicit assumption that "good" women who have men to protect them will not be raped. Transwomen, by contrast, were not seen as needing protection because of their deviance and presumably masculine strength. The findings offer clues as to why critics of genderneutral bathrooms overlook where and how violence against women usually takes place (in private spaces by a known person).

The content analysis confirmed the expected relationship between progressive views and support for social change (trans* access to public bathrooms) and between conservative ideology and benevolent sexism and heteronormativity. However, some findings were unexpected. The proportion of fearmongering comments and protection comments, speculating about the potentially negative effects of desegregating public bathrooms, was significantly higher on centerleaning than on right-leaning sites. The prevalence of threats of violence to punish women, a manifestation of hostile sexism, was also higher on centerleaning sites, possibly reflecting hostile sexism' s association with social dominance orientation (e.g., Sibley et al., 2007).

The findings suggest that although some benevolent sexist and heteronormative themes are more explicit on right-leaning forums, they are present across the political spectrum because they are deeply embedded in the sociocultural milieu. Taken for granted and assumed to be the natural way of things by many people, benevolent sexism has all the characteristics of a

pervasive ideology that encourages many individuals and groups to embrace a false consciousness and act against their own best interests (e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This analysis contributes to knowledge about the prevalence and manifestations of benevolent sexism and heteronormativity in digital spaces and their interactions with political ideology. It illustrates how ideological beliefs that have long helped to maintain the status quo, such as benevolent sexism and heteronormativity, can be weaponized to incite fear and anger across digital spaces. This ideological fervor produces " real-world" consequences that transcend the boundaries of these digital spaces as partisan divides deepen and people begin to coalesce around beliefs about who deserves to have access to power, resources, and space. As many voters in the United States grapple to understand how Donald Trump won the White House, this study lends insight into how significant reinforcement of ideologies such as benevolent sexism and Heteronormativity has been mounted in digital spaces, potentially producing actions and consequences well beyond those spaces. Indeed, both angry warnings about and anxious foreboding of such consequences trickled in some online conversations. The expectation of a Trump election victory resounded throughout the comment sections: " Enjoy the Trump presidency" (Davis & Apuzzo, 2016). One commenter stated, " I' m starting to hope Trump is elected so ' progressives' can get a taste of government by fiat against the will of the people" (Davis & Apuzzo, 2016). Another predicted that, in response to the new bathroom bill, people " better get used to the sound of President Trump" (Davis & Apuzzo, 2016).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study are limited by the selection of only 13 online discussions from a limited number of sites, which are not representative of the breadth and depth of public discourse occurring in the digital environment. Further, the categorization of the sources' political leaning in three crudely partitioned groups represented some loss of data. For example, the New York Times is considered to be more left-center than USA Today, and The Federalist Papers Project is viewed as extreme right-wing, whereas Fox News is right-leaning. Furthermore, there are differences between blogs and news sites staffed by professional journalists and dealing in edited and (mostly) fact-checked content. For the purposes of hypothesis testing, some of these forums had to be grouped together. Furthermore, five of the sources are mainstream news organizations, which follow established news routines and editing procedure and tend to enact more stringent policies on online comments than some of the other sources used in this analysis.

The findings are also limited by the use of online comments rather than a direct and prolonged inquiry, such as in-depth interviews. Future research could incorporate focus groups and ethnographies to explore benevolent sexism in political and religious discourses through face-to-face interactions.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that, for many women, benevolent sexism and traditional gender norms (including heteronormativity) are considered the only avenues for alleviating their very valid fear of sexual and other violence. Many of the commenters recognized that violence

against women is prevalent, but their reliance on benevolent sexism as the solution to the problem indicated a lack of understanding of the problem' s roots. By fighting to maintain chivalry, not only are women and trans* people denied human rights, but trust is also put in a failed system that does not guarantee protection. Moreover, benevolent sexism simply accepts male violence as inevitable and therefore does not challenge those responsible for such behavior to change. Yet the intersection between benevolent sexism and heteronormativity and political ideology, along with the often volatile and insulting exchanges that occur between users on public forums, indicates that a great deal of sensitivity and two-way dialogue are necessary to reach a solution. Many forum users seemed genuinely concerned for their own safety (as women) or for the safety of their wives and daughters (as men). These concerns must be heard and addressed. However, media content preceding user comments must also clearly explain how rape myths and benevolent sexism are associated with human rights violations against trans* people— without any guarantee of safety for cisgender women— and explicitly discourage their use to shape this conversation or dictate public policy.

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Table 1
Most Shared Articles

	Source	Article Title	FB Shares	Twitter Shares	Other Shares *	Comments**
Right-leaning sources	The Federalist	A rape survivor speaks out about transgender bathrooms	666.6k	2.1k	635	650
	Fox News	Target to allow transgender people to use bathroom of their choice	121.3k	450	105	623
	Stream.org	A call for national civil disobedience to Obama's public school transgender bathroom mandate	118.3k	685	146	1382
	Fox News	340,000 pledge to boycott Target over transgender bathroom policy	70.9k	1.3k	224	537
	The Federalist Papers Project	What gender-neutral bathrooms begets: Man arrested for filming women	19.6k	95	3	900
Center-leaning sources	*USA Today*	More than 700,000 pledge to boycott Target over transgender bathroom policy	151.8k	3.4k	694	2054
	The New York Times	U.S. directs public schools to allow transgender access to restrooms	104.2k	9.8k	487	2703
	The LA Times	This school is opening the first gender neutral bathroom in Los Angeles Unified	18.9k	414	24	88
	Ted.com	Ivan Coyote: Why we need gender-neutral bathrooms	14.5k	1.9k	309	173
Left leaning sources	Scary Mommy	Parents boycott Target over transgender bathroom policy	650.5k	735	151	15
	Huffington Post	Target says transgender people can use the bathroom that fits their gender	74k	868	65	244
	Huffington Post	Obama administration to issue decree on transgender bathroom access	69.4k	364	19	283
	Renegade Mothering	Gender-neutral bathrooms are a mother's dream	16.6k	49	6	112

* Linkedin, Pinterest, and Google+
** Total Comments: 9764

Table 2
Intercoder Results and Frequencies of Coded Variables

Variable	Definition	Example	α	*f* (%)
Support	Supports gender-neutral toilet initiatives	I haven't shopped at Target for years – I will now start doing so	.85	23.9
Opposition	Opposes gender-neutral toilet initiatives	All people should be upset and willing to stop this nonsense	.86	48.0
Fearmongering	Focuses on negative hypothetical situations resulting from trans* accommodation	The world is coming to an end	.80	14.9
Need to protect women	Focuses on any negative impact gender-neutral toilets have/could have on women	Do you really think we should put innumerable women and children potentially in harm's way for the occasional transgender?	.82	11.2
Need to protect children	Focuses on any negative impact gender-neutral toilets have/could have on children	Maybe you are ok with men showering with your daughters but I am not!	.88	11.6
Male threat to commit violent act – protection	Includes threat of violence in order to protect women/children	Any dude who tries to enter a women's bathroom…while the women of my family are in there…will be dragged out feet first…	.82	1.4
Male threat to commit violent act – retribution	Includes threat of violence against trans* people	Some of us know chicks with dicks…we kick their asses and leave em on the floor where they belong	.95	1.0
Naturalness of sex differences	Focuses on the "natural" differences between men and women	If one has a penis they belong in the men's room, if they have a vagina they belong in a woman's room.	.83	8.3
Challenge status quo	Critical of current heteronormative system	Grow up all feminism is the view that all people should be treated equally be they male or female…	.87	6.7
Critical of the left	Negative towards the left, liberals, Democratic Party, or politically correct	Obama went over the deep end with this one	.89	13.2
Critical of the right	Negative toward the right, conservatives, or Republican Party	More GOP politicians have been arrested for sexual misconduct in bathrooms than trans people	.81	5.5
Partisan categorization	Source's partisan categorization (right, center, and left leaning)	Determined by Pew, AllSites ratings, and self-identification of website	1.0	R = 42 C = 51 L = 7

Table 3

Results of Chi-square Tests and Descriptive Statistics

	Left (n = 654)	Center (n = 5,018)	Right (n = 4,092)	
H_1: Support comments	286 (43.73%)	1,345 (26.80%)	707 (17.28%)	Left > Right, χ^2 = 238.37*** Left > Center, χ^2 = 80.94***
H_2: Opposition comments	200 (30.58%)	2,237 (44.58%)	2,246 (54.89%)	Right > Left, χ^2 = 133.39*** Right > Center, χ^2 = 95.85***
H_3: Status quo challenges	56 (8.56%)	377 (7.51%)	225 (5.5%)	Left > Right, χ^2 = 9.49** Left ~ Center, χ^2 = 1.18
H_{4a}: Fear mongering	64 (9.79%)	822 (16.38%)	567 (13.86%)	Right > Left, χ^2 = 8.09** Center > Right, χ^2 = 11.12***
H_{4b}: Natural differences	48 (7.34%)	351 (6.99%)	409 (10.00%)	Right > Left, χ^2 = 4.58* Right > Center, χ^2 = 26.53***
H_{4c}: Protecting women	41 (6.27%)	681 (13.57%)	376 (9.19%)	Right > Left, χ^2 = 5.99* Center > Right, χ^2 = 42.16***
H_{4d}: Protecting children	39 (5.96%)	647 (12.89%)	449 (10.97%)	Right > Left, χ^2 = 15.34*** Center > Right, χ^2 = 7.83**
H_{4e}: Threats to protect women	3 (0.46%)	60 (1.20%)	72 (1.76%)	Right > Left, χ^2 = 6.12* Right > Center, χ^2 = 5.01*
H_{4f}: Threats to punish women	3 (0.46%)	73 (1.45%)	13 (.32%)	Right ~ Left, χ^2 = .33 Center > Right, χ^2 = 30.83***

Note. df = 1 for all χ^2 tests. n refers to the total number of comments posted to all forums in a given category of political leaning. Numbers in parentheses indicate percentages of comments in each category of forums by political leaning.

*$p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$