Article

Categorial feminism: new media and the rhetorical work of assessing a sexist, humorous, misogynistic, realistic advertisement

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Abstract

This article focuses on online assessments of a controversial British television advertisement. Across blogs, websites and forums, a range of stances emerged in debates about its possible 'sexism', 'humour', 'misogyny', or 'realism'. The analytic interest here is in the ways that assessors invoked 'f-' categories (e.g. 'feminism', 'feminist') as part of their assessments: across the data corpus, people would locate themselves or others in relation to 'feminism', where 'feminism' was variously old-fashioned, modern, prejudiced, vital, dogmatic, complex and/or many other things besides. To account for this variability, the article pursues an ethnomethodologically oriented policy of treating categories not as vectors for in-the-head *social attitudes, but as resources for* on-the-screen *social actions. Categories thus became analysable not for what they revealed about their authors' real thoughts vis-à-vis feminism, but for how they functioned as crucial components of recipient-designed online assessments. Studying examples of positive and negative assessments, the paper subsequently shows that and how users claimed or denied their own (or some others') allegiance to 'f-' categories as a method for strengthening their own (or undermining others') assessments. A concluding discussion considers the wider applications of a categorial approach to feminism in a world of increasingly mediated interaction.*

KEYWORDS: CATEGORIES; DISCOURSE; FEMINISM; ONLINE ASSESSMENTS; RECIPIENT-DESIGN

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In the run-up to Christmas in the UK, it is something of an 'invented' tra-dition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) for supermarket chains to commis-sion one-off television advertisements. Asda's 2012 offering was designed in collaboration with the advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi, and bore the tagline 'It doesn't just happen by magic. Behind every great Christmas, there's Mum. And behind her, there's Asda'. According to Saatchi & Saatchi, this 60-second advert was the centrepiece of a 'bigger integrated three-month Christmas campaign' which aimed to show 'the different ways Asda can help mum this Christmas' (Saatchi & Saatchi 2012). To that end, the advertisement tells what Saatchi & Saatchi describe as 'the real story of Christmas through mum's eyes rather than the perfect, idealistic and unat-tainable Christmas' often portrayed' (Saatchi & Saatchi 2012). It depicts

> a mum experiencing the trials and tribulations that go into making a magical Christmas, from struggling to get the (too big) Christmas tree into the car and scribbling her way through the Christmas card pile, to untangling the massive knot of Christmas tree lights and debating the best, (and quietest), toys for the kids. (Saatchi & Saatchi 2012)

For Saatchi & Saatchi, the advertisement culminates in a reveal shot of a 'typically British Christmas day scene in which the whole family is seen enjoying the day and relaxing in front of the TV'. 'The pinnacle', as they put it, 'of mum's work' (Saatchi & Saatchi 2012).

So far, I have been treating Saatchi & Saatchi's description as definitive. But as with any redescription, the sense and reference of what is being rede-scribed is altered in and through the linguistic choices of the description's author. Consider, for instance, the scores of online blog, website and forum users who posted *their own* descriptions in the wake of the advertisement's initial broadcast. For many of *them*, it culminated not with Saatchi & Saa-tchi's positive, celebratory narrative of 'the whole family enjoying the day and relaxing', but with a 'sexist' narrative in which 'dad' asks 'mum' (who, as they redescribe the advert, had just taken off her pinafore and settled onto the couch after singlehandedly preparing Christmas) 'what's for tea, love?' (cf. Cameron 1998). More generally, however, the notion that the adver-tisement was, in fact, sexist, was just one of a continuum of stances taken within various online debates and arguments about its 'humour', 'realism', 'sexism', and so on.

This paper focuses on these online accounts. Ranging across a large data corpus, it examines assessments and evaluative descriptions in which authors claim, or disclaim, the identity 'feminist'. The paper's analytic interest is in how different evaluations were constructed and how users' claims to 'be' or 'not to be' feminist were invoked during *both* positive *and* negative assessments. A larger goal of the paper is therefore to examine the

ways in which 'feminism' can be deployed as a member's category and rhetorical resource during the construction of social actions like description, evaluation and assessment. In other words I, as the analyst, will not be treating the advertisement as *my own* object of analysis and then judging its offensiveness *for myself* – which is perhaps the more usual starting point in feminist media studies – but instead looking at how online users treated it as *their* object for analysis, aligning or disaligning with 'feminism' as part of attempts to judge its offensiveness *for themselves*. In this way, the paper contributes to our understanding of how being or not being a feminist is given meaning in a particular discursive context and as a member's, rather than an analyst's category.

To 'be' or 'not to be' a feminist

As noted above, the focus of the article is not the advertisement *per se*, but the *assessments* of it that were posted on online, textually mediated spaces in the wake of its initial broadcast. Each assessment stands as a visible mark of the discursive, rhetorical and performative work carried out by a 'user' (Travers-Scott 2010). The initial observation from which this article stems is that, in constructing assessments, users regularly invoked – and in invoking created particular meanings for – categories like 'feminism' and 'feminist' (henceforth 'f-' words). At one end of a spectrum of semantic possibilities, 'f-' words were invoked as credibility-*enhancing* categories; as the most relevant categories to describe the person that stood – in Goffman's (1979) terminology – as the principal, author and animator of that particular assessment (e.g. Extract 1).

Extract 1
Mumsnet (www.mumsnet.com), 8 November 2012

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1   I hate to say this, as a committed feminist,
2   but [...]
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At the other end of the spectrum, however, 'f-' words were invoked as credibility-*eroding* categories; as the most relevant categories to describe the principal(s) – but not the author or animator – of a particular assessment (e.g. Extract 2).

Extract 2
Mail Online (www.dailymail.co.uk/home/index.html), 30 January 2013

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1   [...] I can't stand dimwitted claptrapping
2   feminists who are half educated even in
3   their feminism [...]
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More generally, what emerged from the data was a collection of 'f-' categories that, despite their lexical similarities, carried various, and often contradictory, meanings – what counted as a 'feminist' stance in one account would often be in rhetorical opposition to a 'feminist' stance in another. But how to develop this observation? Rather than trying to understand whether or not these categories revealed *what* people 'really' thought about feminism, I focused instead on *how* people used them precisely as categories while constructing an assessment. This is to treat words not as vectors for *in-the-head* attitudes, but as resources for *on-the-screen* social actions (Edwards 2012). Working in this way, I show that and how users would claim or deny their own or some others' allegiance to an 'f-' word as a method for strengthening their own assessment, or for undermining some others' assessment.

We already know a good deal about the (re)production of feminism(s) in and across various mundane and institutional settings. A large body of feminist scholarship has examined how people negotiate a relationship to 'feminism' in, say, their production of interview or focus group accounts of 'who they are' (e.g. Budgeon 2001; Griffin *et al.* 2012; Jackson, Vares and Gill 2012). In recent years, much of that research has reported a degree of disidentification from, and/or lack of engagement with, feminism: in people's interview based narratives, 'f-' words are oriented to either as past their sell-by-date, or as standing for values that anyone with knowledge of, or investment in, second-wave feminism would find disconcerting (e.g. Karsch 2004; Rúdólfdóttir and Jolliffe 2008; Scharff 2012). In turn, these empirical findings have been theorised as symptoms of a contemporary culture in which 'hatred' and an 'active, sustained, and repetitive repudiation or repression' of feminism (McRobbie 2004:6) have engendered some kind of 'post' (Gill 2007), 'commodity' (Goldman 1992) or 'Third Wave' (Genz 2006) feminism.

As with any research, however, these findings derive from certain methodologies; and methodologies focalise research objects from particular perspectives. Whether explicitly or – as is more usual – implicitly, many of the above studies display a broadly *phenomenological* stance towards language. This has two important implications for the ways in which scholars interpret people's relationships to feminism. First, research participants' talk is treated as if standing above and beyond the supposedly inert research context from which it emerges: if a participant is asked to talk about feminism and subsequently talks about disliking feminism, then that 'dislike' can be heard as the expression of an essential attitude. In this way, words become vectors for the transmission of underlying 'cognition' and 'experience' (Attenborough and Stokoe 2012). Second, analysts remain

indifferent to the *interactional dynamics*, and *context*, of the research situation in which 'feminism' is spoken about. In the parlance of semiotics, they 'shift-out' from a context in which participants speak about 'feminism' to a context in which they, as analysts, can judge that talk in light of their own predetermined definitions of what feminism actually 'is'. If feminism equates to *x*, *y* and *z*, but a respondent talks about how those things are dislikeable, then the dislike comes to stand as an indexical sign for the analyst's post-feminism (Benson and Hughes 1983:24–5). Underlying 'cognition' and 'experience' are thus glossed by an *analyst's* definition, theory or concept (Mehan and Wood 1975:49).

In the current article, however, we do not need to background context. The nature of the data collected means that instead of trying to 'retrieve' feminism from *post hoc* accounts of it, we can catch it 'in-flight' (Garfinkel 1967:79), as people invoke it for various rhetorical purposes within naturally unfolding sequences of online interaction. The question of whether people 'really' 'hate', 'repudiate' or 'disidentify' with feminism can thus be replaced by the question of how they use it as a category while constructing an assessment. But this shift in perspective is not purely data driven. In that the article develops a contextually sensitive analysis of an *online* setting, it connects to a tradition of ethnomethodological language and gender studies that have examined *offline* members' methods for invoking categories like 'feminist', 'woman' and 'sexist'(e.g. Stokoe 2010; Speer and Stokoe 2011). Here, context is not inert but inherently active, produced in and through people's interactions within various, locally specific settings. In this way, a research interview – or whatever other locally specific interaction one wants to bracket and then study – may be understood not as some window onto a participant's real feelings, but as a particular kind of interactional phenomenon that will, among other things, be 'heavy with ambiguity, and shot through with efforts at self-presentation by both interviewer and interviewee' (Harré 1979:115). To study social interaction from this perspective is not to 'shift out' from local interaction, but to treat it precisely as 'local interaction' and to look for the various, locally specific interests, beliefs, attempts at manipulation, and so on, that bring it into being (Edwards and Stokoe 2004).

In what follows, I examine data that phenomenologists might gloss as 'repudiating feminism'. But I also examine data that might be glossed as 'endorsing feminism', and many other things besides. The point, however, will be to show that beyond such analyst-driven glossability, there are users producing *their own* glosses on 'feminism' as part of contextually sensitive assessments of the advert, or other people's assessments of the advertisement.

Method and materials

The paper draws on a collection of approximately 1,000 posts across 32 websites. The corpus was collected by conducting an internet search for the words 'feminism' and/or 'feminist', 'Asda', and 'Christmas advertisement 2012'. Within the initial dataset, I found 146 posts containing various 'f-' categories. The subsequent analysis focused on these posts not as isolated entities but as phenomena produced within, and as part of the instantiation of, locally specific contexts. In general, the ways in which people formulate assessments will depend on the moment-to-moment context they create in interaction (e.g. Piirainen-Marsh and Jauni 2012). In this particular case, it follows that to know what is (ir)rational or (un)reasonable about feminism is often to know what others *have been treating as* (ir)rational or (un)reasonable about feminism. Because of the uniquely intertextual and 'surfable' nature of new media forums – where many users appeared across several forums and posts often contained references to other forum discussions – 'locally specific context' was approached not just as a forum specific *line-by-line* and then *post-by-post* phenomenon but also as a transforum, *mouse-click-by-mouse-click* phenomenon.

The data were analysed using discursive psychology (DP), an ethnomethodological approach to spoken and textual interaction (Ashmore 1993; Attenborough 2010, 2011, 2014; Edwards 2007). DP attends to the details of text construction, organisation and rhetorical orientation, including the notion of 'recipient design'; that is, the 'multitude of ways' in which actions like assessments are constructed to 'display an orientation and sensitivity to' their intended recipients (see Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974:727). Let us unpack this idea. Assessments 'display an orientation and sensitivity to' their recipients because the authors of assessments know – just as their recipients, as competent social actors, know – that assessments are read not just for what they say about the *object* being assessed (in this case, the advertisement), but for what they reveal about the *subject* doing the assessing (the user themselves). In Edwards's (2005) terms, authors and recipients constantly negotiate the 'subject-side' of publicly accessible assessments. That there are a 'multitude of ways' to do so is because there are a multitude of different contexts in which assessments may be produced and contested. An assessment might, for instance, be constructed so as to invite recipients to see it as precipitated not by a user's peculiar dispositions or irrational biases, but by the clear, inherently (in)offensive properties of the object under assessment. But of course other users who take a different stance can just as easily post comments in which this strategy is inverted, such that the initial user's assessment is evaluated as if rooted in the assessor's peculiar dispositions and biases.

Analysis

Analysis of the data revealed two interlocking rhetorical strategies: where users deployed 'f-' categories to suggest that anyone making assessment [x] was doing so on the basis of some pre-existing bias, prejudice or disposition, other users would deploy 'f-' categories to recipient-design an assessment [x] that could deflect or pre-empt precisely those kinds of subject-side allegations. The first section of analysis explores contexts in which assessment [x] was negative. Therein, negativity would often be portrayed as the preserve of the 'dogmatic' feminist, and negative assessments would be designed to foreground the advert's offensiveness while *disclaiming* any affiliation with feminism (e.g. 'I'm not feminist, but this was sexist …'). The second section explores contexts in which assessment [x] was positive. Here we find an inversion of this strategy: where positivity was the preserve of naive/ill-informed non-feminists, positive assessments would be designed to downplay the advert's offensiveness while *claiming* membership of the category (e.g. 'As a committed feminist, I liked it!').

Negative assessments: feminist theory versus common-sense practice

Across various forums, a prevalent method for prospectively or retrospectively attacking the subject-side of users who proffered negative assessments was to suggest that their assessments were caused by a pre-existing allegiance to a dogmatic feminism. In this way, other users were invited to see '*that*' category of person as incapable of judging the advert solely on its objective properties, and always as wanting to make it stand in metonymically for a society that their pre-existing (and inherently biased) feminist beliefs had already convinced them was sexist. Extract 3 shows us the kind of rhetorical context that users with a negative stance towards the advert had to orient to while formulating their accounts.

Extract 3
Mail Online (www.dailymail.co.uk), 6 December 2012

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1  Most mums DO make Christmas, it's how it's
2  always been, and probably will always be that
3  way [...] I'd love to be a fly on the wall at
4  the Christmas days of these feminists moaning
5  about this advert being sexist, I imagine
6  either a very lonely day with a microwave meal
7  for one, as they've refused to conform to
8  society and not learnt how to cook, or they're
9  barking orders at some downtrodden [sic]
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10 husband as he peels organic spuds in the
11 kitchen! Chill out and accept Christmas for
12 what it now is, a highly commercialised,
13 expensive day, planned, arranged and
14 delivered by Mum – embrace the awfulness, I
15 love it!
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Of immediate interest here is the referential phrase 'these feminists' (line 4). We are all potentially describable via an infinitely extendible range of identities, traits, roles and characteristics (Benwell and Stokoe 2006). Here, for example, the (hypothetical) individuals included by this user under the category 'feminists' could all have been described in many different ways – perhaps, for instance, as 'mums', 'parents', 'supermarket shoppers', 'internet users', and so on. So why 'these feminists' – as opposed to any other kind of reference – and why here, in this particular context? In this sense, it is a referential strategy that invites recipients and analysts alike to try and make sense of what else the reference may be attempting *in addition to reference* (Schegloff 1996:439).

Unlike the categories listed above, 'these feminists' is particularly useful to this user's project of exposing the subject-side motivations of those who find the advert offensive. The issue here is not categorisation *per se*, but the ways in which categories can be made to carry certain sets of inferences and 'category-bound' actions (Sacks 1992). Indeed, even before considering the details of what 'feminists' actually do, it is worth noting how the category *qua* category tightly delimits the universe of possible actions to which a person so categorised may be seen as relevantly engaged in (Attenborough 2013). For although it is possible for any of the hypothetical individuals categorised here as feminists to be read as providing negative assessments on the basis of any number of different facets of their identity (e.g. as mums, parents, and so on), this is not what the category invites us to see as 'possible'. Disembedded from their own first-hand experiences and concerns, each individual has been re-embedded as part of a group driven by pre-established beliefs. And for us, as recipients, their categorial transformation into generic representatives of 'feminism' also transforms what we are invited to see as the cause of their negativity (cf. Eglin and Hester 2003:55). As 'mums', for instance, they might have been readable as people with experiences, and, perhaps, experiences similar to those of the 'mum' portrayed in the advert. But as 'feminists', their assessments start to seem as if based not on extrapolations from firsthand *experience* but applications of secondhand *theory*. If the former is readably localised, providing tacit knowledge of similarly localised experiences, then the latter provides prepackaged knowledge of how to make sense of any and all experiences.

To judge on the basis of experience may or may not lead to accusations of bias. What cannot be in doubt, however, is that a 'mum', judging as a mum, has to think for herself about how, *or even if*, first-hand feelings and experiences are relevant in *this* context. But where feminism can be read as something prepackaged, it invites recipients to see 'these feminists' as mapping an advert onto a theoretical framework that effectively thinks for them, telling them how to experience, and feel about, the advert. 'These feminists', *precisely as 'feminists'*, are therefore readably less able than mums, parents, and so on, to assess the advert on its actual, objective merits. And so even before knowing what feminists believe in, the category invites us to see just that (i.e. that they *do* have pre-existing beliefs).

But let us now consider that question: what is feminism? Although as *analysts* we might have answers to this question, here, for this user, it is an occasioned, locally specific matter. As with all such categories, 'feminists' allows for multiple meanings and suggestions to be bundled together and then repackaged as common-sense knowledge about the kind of people to whom the label is being applied. Here, for instance, the actions of 'these feminists' are inference-rich (see Stokoe 2012a, 2012b). Take their 'moaning' (line 4). To 'complain' or to 'raise legitimate concerns' might be to focus on specific, identifiable incidents; but to 'moan' is to do something far vaguer, non-specific and potentially unreasonable. Because in this user's account 'these feminists' have nothing specific to say about the advert itself, 'moaning' shifts the cause of the complaint from the advert and towards their dispositions as 'these feminists' (Edwards 2005).The action thus finds its motivation in their only witnessable identity, as 'feminists'. But they do not just moan inchoately. They also 'refused' to 'conform to society' (lines 7–8). Note here that this is not quite the same as, say, 'failing to conform to society'. One can fail *deliberately*, but one can also fail *despite one's best efforts*. The action of 'refusal', however, can only ever be caused by deliberate intent (cf. Marlin 1984). So if they are lonely and do not cook, then this is because they have *chosen* to live this way. In that the actions flow from a deliberate intention to refuse, the source of the intention can be traced to their only relevantly available categorial identity as 'feminists'. As with their 'moaning', then, a standard philosophical narrative of action (e.g. Anscombe 1957; Davidson 1980) becomes a useful rhetorical resource: actions follow intentions, where intentions flow from 'feminist' beliefs. On such a reading, the ability of 'these feminists' to assess this or any other advert objectively, and on its merits *qua* advert, is undermined.

So how, in the context created by this and many other such instances, did users construct negative assessments? Overwhelmingly, users would either refigure what they were *saying* as common-sense, or what they were

seeing as naively 'there', such that what they said and saw were valid irrespective of whether or not they were subsequently accused of being feminists. Consider, for instance, Extract 4.

Extract 4
Marketing Week (www.marketingweek.co.uk), 15 November 2012

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1   I'm a divorced mum with no man about so unfortunately
2   the ad does reflect my role. I am far from a bra-
3   burning feminist but do find it offensive to suggest
4   that it's all down to the women to sort. To be fair,
5   it's probably also offensive to all the men who do
6   their bit at Xmas [...]
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In online interaction, there are few opportunities for identity to become 'glance available' (Jayyusi 1984:67). Although you can type as anyone, the public availability of that 'anyone' will depend, in large part, on the categories you type with. So let us note immediately that the referential strategy 'a divorced mum with no man about' (line 1) is more specific and experientially located than 'these feminists' in Extract 3. To self-categorise as a 'divorced mum with no man about' is to invite recipients to infer a particular set of skills and competencies (i.e. that you have been married, divorced, had children, and now have to look after those children outside of a nuclear family) along with the entitlement to comment on this advert that flows from those competencies. It displays the basis upon which the user is assessing the advert: what she thinks is not the product of prepackaged theory, but direct practical experience of situations similar to those represented in the advert (Pomerantz 1984).

So what, then, are we to make of the subsequent suggestion: 'I am far from a bra-burning feminist' (lines 2–3)? As in Extract 3, what it means to judge this advert as a 'mum' or 'divorced mum' is an indexical matter; it is resolved (or not) in the particular contexts within which those categories are deployed. So here, in a context where negativity was being undermined by other users as the reaction of dogmatic, extreme, theory-led 'feminists', the category 'divorced mum' might or might not lead to accusations of bias. It *might* invite users to see someone with experiential entitlement to make an informed assessment. But it might *just as easily* invite them to see someone with a grudge against men because of those past experiences. 'I am far from a bra-burning feminist' can be read as a pre-emptive counter to the latter reading. Indeed, we do not need to know whether this user thinks 'divorced mum with no man about' should become a euphemism for 'bra-burning feminist' to see from her denial that she thinks other users might. In this sense, the phrase provides for

a classic disclaimer, or method of 'stake' inoculation (see Edwards 2007): it may not wipe out the sorts of interest discounting that users might go on to make, but it may be more effective than simply allowing them to do so for themselves. Note, too, how this inoculation is managed: where the category 'feminists' might be read to collect exactly the same kind of (unpalatable) person, 'bra-burning feminists' open-ups and differentiates that otherwise global category (Jayyusi 1984:166). In differentiating her experiential stance from that of 'bra-burning feminists', this user only has to disclaim a certain kind of subject-side: she may still be accused of being a feminist, of course, but she is now no longer '*that*' kind of feminist. This non-extreme sense of feminism is subsequently reinforced by the vagueness of the formulation 'down to the women to sort' (line 4). The formulation is idiomatic, and designedly so: it is not easy to see it as anything other than a simple, common-sense statement (cf. Drew and Holt 1989). It constitutes the practical, performative payoff from not being a bra-burner: whereas an extreme, bra-burning feminist might invoke some theoretical denunciation of a 'phallocentric society' (or whatever), this user gives us something that could be right in all sorts of ways without ever being 'feminist'.

Disclaiming category membership in this way attends to the contextually specific subject-side problem of how to produce negative assessments without that negativity being read by others as 'just' the product of some theoretically driven bias or predisposition. A slight variant on this tactic was to compartmentalise a feminist identity.

Extract 5
Backbencher (http://thebackbencher.co.uk), 10 November 2012

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 1  Has anyone else noticed how much Christmas
 2  adverts dislike women? Now this might just be
 3  the embittered feminist that lives inside me
 4  talking (normally, I like to keep her as
 5  reasonable as possible), but I have noticed a
 6  very disturbing trend in Christmas advertising.
 7  Women are those to whom Christmas is entrusted.
 8  As the vaguely patronising adverts of Tesco,
 9  Littlewoods and Asda show, it is mums who make
10  Christmas for the enjoyment of all and we
11  should thank them all for their tireless
12  efforts to make our holidays memorable and
13  lovely and stress-free. Look at them going
14  about preparing for us all! Look at them
15  buying all the food [...]
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As with the 'divorced mum' who was not a 'bra-burner' in Extract 4, this user constructs a common-sense basis from which to evaluate the advert. Unlike her, however, this user seeks to deflect subject-side attacks not via carefully managed representations of personal experience, but via the apparently empirical observation of 'facts'. Put simply, she 'notices' (lines 1 and 5) things about a series of adverts that were 'out there', as it were, on television. But while assessing those noticings, the user does not inoculate against a possible stake in the production of the assessment. Rather, she confesses to one (e.g. 'this might just be the embittered feminist that lives inside me talking', lines 2–4). And, at first sight, this appears a strong confession. To be 'embittered', for instance, is to have a *disposition* for being negative or thinking harsh thoughts. So whereas being, say, 'cross' or 'annoyed' can be a heat-of-the-moment thing, to be 'embittered' is to bring the smouldering resentments of one's past to bear on the present (see Edwards 2005:264). Despite this, however, the apparently strong confession is bound up with the user's rhetorical construction of a partitioned self such that an 'embittered feminist' exists alongside a 'reasonable' person (line 5). In this way, the stake confession helps to carefully partition 'feminism' as part – but only part, and certainly not a whole – of the user's core self. So at the same time as confessing a feminist stake in the assessment, this user shifts footing such that the disclaimer ('this might just be the embittered feminist that lives inside me talking, but …') is produced by the reasonable self. This orients to and manages the subject side of the assessment in at least two ways. First, because it creates a reasonable self that can be seen to be reflexively aware of the other self's irrational tendencies (e.g. line 5). And, as with the previous extract, this at least partially pre-empts attacks similar to those produced in Extract 3. But second, because it is now the reasonable self that can be seen to do the 'noticing' of both the 'dislike' (line 2) and the 'trend' (line 6). The verb to notice carefully manages the intentions behind this user's actions: rather than setting out deliberately to 'find', 'study', or 'look' into adverts, it now appears as if she came across a few in passing (cf. Marlin 1984). In this context, then, to note minimises agency: a series of adverts flickered into this user's field of vision, before then fading away of their own accord (see Attenborough 2013:216–17). So in casually 'noticing' this pattern, rather than seeking it out with obsessive focus, the 'I's' readiness to see the world as sexist regardless of the 'objective' facts is downgraded. The embittered 'I' is thus pushed further away from the reasonable 'I's' evidence gathering. That we read not about one, but a whole series of adverts (lines 8–9), works with this sense of noticing to further the effect of a reasonable self making a reasonable point: *to find* a series of similarities merely suggests the agency of the person who set out

to make the finding; but *to notice them* suggests the strength of the similarities that were unavoidably 'there', and impossible for anyone with a television to miss. Indeed, in that the 'I' attempting to maintain reasonableness is the same 'I' that notices the initial evidence, there is an interesting parallel here with the rhetorical construction of neutrality in accounts of scientific discoveries: there, technologies are pushed in front of scientists to present findings as free from human influence (Woolgar 1988); here, in Extract 5 and others like it, we see the naive, empirical eye of the 'I' pushed in front of an embittered feminist to present the initial noticing as free from bias.

Having shown how users *disclaim* feminism and forms of feminist identities to make *negative* assessments, we now move on to see how feminism is *claimed* when *positive* assessments are made.

Positive assessments: appearance versus reality

In the previous section, we looked at ways in which online users negotiated the subject-side of negative assessments in a context where such assessments risked accusations of extreme 'bra-burning' feminism. This section shows how users negotiated the subject-side of *positive* assessments in a context where other users had already suggested that only stupid, ignorant or 'non-' feminists would be positively predisposed towards the advert. If, in the first section, it was possible to be accused of *being-too-feminist* (and therefore predisposed to dislike the advert rather than assess it objectively or open-mindedly), then here, we see that it is equally possible to be accused of *not-being-feminist-enough*.

Let us start with an extract that exemplifies the kind of subject-side attacks that were being made against positive assessments.

Extract 6
Mumsnet (www.mumsnet.com), 7 November 2012

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1   Is this really what you want your sons and
2   daughters to see as a role model for a modern
3   relationship? Martyred harassed women and
4   oblivious ignorant men? Gee, it's like
5   feminism never happened.
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This user is engaged in what, following Jayyusi (1984:52), I want to call a 'social theoretical' reading of the sorts of people who liked the advert. What is meant here by social theory? Essentially, the turning of collections of persons into collectivities such that we – whether as lay or academic social theorists – may then do things like find explanations for 'social events' of various kinds (Jayyusi 1984:52). This user's social theoretical problem is to

explain what it is about the sorts of people who like the advert that allows for them to reach such an 'obviously' erroneous conclusion. Feminism becomes this user's device for solving the problem: it makes sense of, and in making sense of goes *beyond*, the opinions of those sorts of people. So how does this happen? The reference to 'your sons and daughters' (lines 1–2) invites recipients to categorise themselves, as they view the advert, as parents. The verb 'to want' allows for the question to be directed towards current parents *and* parents-to-be. But it also indexes an intentional state: to 'find out that' your children have access to modern relationship role-models might suggest a lack of parental agency or guidance; but to 'want' that same end-result implies that you intend to act in ways that can help to bring it about. In this context, 'wanting' imputes a certain kind of 'moral' sense to all incumbents of the category 'parent'. By implication, then, a 'moral' or 'proper' parent is one that seeks to ensure their children will grow up with 'modern' role models (line 2). But this is not what parents who like this particular advert seem to 'want'. To be sure, the user is presupposing that, as parents, they do 'want' good role models for their children. If they find them here, however, then the inference is that they cannot have wanted 'modern' role models. This provides us with a part of our social theoretical reading: the sorts of people who like this advert do so because, as a collective, they cannot see it in the same way as 'proper' parents. An explanation as to *what* they cannot see, and *why* they cannot see it, is then provided. The user's characterisation of the advert's relationship role models provides the first kind of explanation. Positioned together in the relational pairing 'man–woman' (lines 3–4) rather than, say, 'husband–wife', the actions performed by each of these paired characters is transformed. The latter pairing *could* have been used to suggest (and *did* suggest, for a number of other users) that the advert portrayed a conventional relationship. In this relational pairing, the wife's domestic actions and the husband's lack of such actions could have been used to suggest a normal division of labour: a wife 'is' a devoted nest-builder while a husband 'is' a loveable yet useless-around-the-home wage-earner. They would stand as role models, then, but only where the model was a distinctly unmodern relationship. As 'man–woman', we see a similarly gendered pair, but only now without any conventional, preset rights or responsibilities vis-à-vis one another. Caught within this pairing, the 'woman's' domestic actions and the 'man's' lack of domestic actions create an unsupportable asymmetry. An abnormality is revealed: the devoted, nest-making 'wife' is, *in fact*, a harassed, self-martyring 'woman' (line 3), while the loveable 'husband' is, *in fact*, an ignorant, oblivious 'man' (line 4). The final part of this social-theoretical reading appears when we find out why the collective of 'improper' parents cannot see as 'proper' parents see: their vision

is trapped within a prefeminist scopic regime. The colloquial 'gee' (line 4), for instance, indexes surprise at this naivety towards 'modern' relationships and the role of feminism in restructuring those relationships in a gender-equal way. Unlike 'proper' parents who are aware of feminism, then, this other collective is unable to reveal the 'martyred woman'–'ignorant man' pairing for what it 'really' is. In this sense, the user's social theory develops a contrast between 'appearance' and 'reality' (cf. Jayyusi 1984:164). To suggest that anyone who likes the advert has only a 'face value' understanding of it provides for the possibility of an alternative, and 'deeper', account. In providing just such an account, the user invites us to see that anyone who likes the advert is doing little more than showing off a subject-side naivety regarding feminism's importance in the 'modern' world.

So how, in this context, did users with positive assessments orient to the possibility that they might be accused of naivety or ignorance? They would often seek to deflect such attacks not by repudiating feminism, but, on the contrary, by portraying themselves as 'total', 'absolute' and/or 'fully committed' feminists. In Extract 7, for instance, the user's self-identification as 'feminist' effectively flattens the previous user's appearance–reality distinction.

Extract 7
The Digital Fix Forums (http://forums.thedigitalfix.com/forums),
11 November 2012

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1   If anything it probably idealises the kind of
2   women who probably wouldn't be seen dead in
3   Asda. Personally looking after your home,
4   children and the old man does not strike me
5   as being a betrayal of feminist values; it's
6   what I would call being mature and responsible
7   and something to admire rather than condemn.
```

To explain this point, let us start by noting that this advert does not 'strike' her as a betrayal (lines 4–5). This metaphor works in a similar way to a 'noticing' in Extract 5: if you notice something, then you do not necessarily set out to notice that something; similarly, if something strikes you, then that something is not agentively sought out because of, say, some predetermined stance that the 'something' gives you the opportunity to rehearse. In this way, both formulations suggest that the advert's objective properties, and not subject-side motivations, precipitated the assessment. But this 'striking' does not make for the kind of naive, ill-informed assessment that Extract 6 was designed to attack. For what strikes the user is a sense that the advert does not depict a betrayal of 'feminist values' (line 5). We do not

need to know what this user 'really' thinks of as 'feminist values' to know that here, in this context, the very use of the phrase projects a publicly observable cognisance with feminism. Recipients are being invited to see that in the immediate aftermath of the striking, this user possessed the cultural capital to 'get' the possible relevance of feminism to any subsequent assessment of the advert. And, as a result of this publicly observable feminism, the 'martyred', 'harassed' non-feminist 'woman' of Extract 6 can be recast as a 'feminist' in a relational pairing with 'the old man' without that recasting having anything to do with naivety: it is precisely this user's familiarity with feminism that allows her to reframe actions like 'looking after' the 'home, children' and 'the old man' (line 4) as quintessentially *feminist* actions. Other users can still, of course, disagree with her about what constitute feminist values; but what they cannot do is accuse her of ignorance in relation to this thing that they, and her, would both call 'feminism'. This is how her own publicly observable version of feminism 'flattens' Extract 6's contrast between appearance and reality: to like the advert is not to be naive and incapable of finding the 'real' anti-feminism behind the 'apparent' content, but, on the contrary, to see how any such reading would miss the 'real' feminist values that are there within the advert's 'apparent' content.

   More often, however, users making positive assessments of the advert would present themselves far more explicitly as 'feminists'. Consider, for example, Extract 8.

Extract 8
Marketing Week (www.marketingweek.co.uk), 18 November 2012

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 1   I really liked this ad. I am a 40 something
 2   mom with two school age children ... and I do
 3   shop at Asda. Sexist or realistic. I only
 4   found out today about the sexist controversy
 5   and I could only role [sic] my eyes at the
 6   critics. I thought the ad was funny, realistic
 7   and relateable [sic] to moms. The first time I
 8   saw the ad I laughed at my husband and said
 9   'look familiar'. The critics have to get off
10   the soapbox. I am a modern, educated working
11   woman and consider myself a feminist but I
12   like it.
```

As a '40 something mom with two school age children' (lines 1–2) this user understands the reality of domestic life; and as a 'modern, educated working woman' and 'feminist' (lines 10–11) is familiar with the same

concepts and theories as 'the critics' (line 6). As both at the same time, the stages of her search for a reasoned and considered (rather than naive and ill-thought-out) assessment are marked for us to see: as a feminist, she *could* have turned to feminism as a resource with which to find 'sexism' with the incumbents of categories like 'martyr' and 'ignoramus' performing degrading actions; but, as a mum, she saw that, in this instance, it was not an appropriate explanatory resource. The concurrent categorisations bring together as coherent, rather than pull apart as naive, the actions of liking the advert and being a feminist, as well as those of being a feminist and a mother. What they *do* pull apart, however, are the critics. If they cannot see the advert's 'realistic' and 'funny' representation (lines 3 and 6) of domestic life then they are, in fact, the naive ones. And it is here that we see this user attending to Extract 6's appearance–reality distinction. Unlike the user in Extract 7, however, she does not flatten it. Rather, she inverts it. As a feminist, she can see why 'the critics' might think the concept of 'sexism' provides for a 'real' reading of the advert. As a mum who knows all about 'domestic life', however, she can see that in this case it conceals the advert's underlying humour and realism. The inference here, then, is that the critics end up masking the advert's real meaning beneath the veneer of an irrelevant concept.

Extract 8 evidences another form of subject-side management. As well as displaying her feminist credentials, this user's '... but I like it' (lines 11–12) makes accountable her sense that her final assessment might not be popular among fellow 'feminists'. We see something similar in Extract 9.

Extract 9
Mumsnet (www.mumsnet.com), 8 November 2012

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1   I don't find it so bad – apart from the last
2   line. I think it is the reality for quite a
3   few women (if the AIBU posts on here are
4   anything to go by[)]. I haven't seen it on TV
5   yet (just seen the links here) but I prefer it
6   to the usual John Lewis drivel ... And I say
7   all this as a feminist Waitrose shopper married
8   to a 'new-man'. Scuttles off and hides
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Here, we have the phrase 'and I say all this as ...' (lines 6–7) along with a concluding statement that, in switching from first-person to an emboldened first-person direct homodiegetic narration, allows us, as recipients, to 'see' the user scuttling off and hiding (line 8). Let us recall that in Extracts 4 and 5, to invoke the kind of biases and prejudices that would inevitably lead a 'feminist' to dislike the advert, was immediately to disavow any allegiance

to feminism. In a context in which users were being negative about the advert, disavowals helped to suggest that the cause of the negativity was not feminist dogma, but the advert itself. Here, though, in Extracts 8 and 9, to hint at the kinds of biases and prejudices that feminists would normally be expected to possess, was not to disavow, but to declare an allegiance to feminism. In this context, a strategy that would have been unhelpful to and for the users in Extracts 4 and 5 became helpful. Why? Because the users in Extract 8 and 9 present positive assessments. Formulations such as 'but I like it' and 'and I say all this as …' are designed to show off a *typical feminist* predisposition to dislike this kind of advert, in a context where these *individual feminists* had actually liked it. And where a self-identifying feminist can like an advert that a feminist should not be expected to like, then the 'liking' can only appear to stem from the advert's objective properties.

Conclusions

This paper analysed a collection of online assessments of a controversial television advertisement in which the authors of those assessments claimed, or disclaimed, the identity 'feminist'. Instead of trying to understand what those 'f-' categories revealed about people's 'real' thoughts regarding feminism – which is perhaps the more usual approach in interview or focus-group studies – the paper used tools from discursive psychology to investigate how people used 'f-' categories, precisely as categories, while constructing assessments. In that the former approach treats words as vectors for *in-the-head* beliefs and experiences it is phenomenological, pursuing a *categorical* understanding of what feminism means to research participants. In that this paper treated words as resources for *on-the-screen* social actions, it was ethnomethodological, pursuing a *categorial* understanding of how people use terms like 'feminism' for locally specific interactional purposes.

Starting from the premise that online assessments of the advertisement constituted social actions, the analysis foregrounded their essentially dialogic (or in some cases *polylogic*) function. Because authors knew – just as recipients, as competent social actors knew – that their assessments would be read not just for what they said about the advert but for what they revealed about the author doing the assessing, they were designed to pre-empt any subsequent attacks on that author's credibility, objectivity, and so on. In the analytic sections we saw how 'f-' categories were intimately bound up with these recipient-designed assessments. To attack those who disliked the advertisement, for instance, was to categorise 'them' as feminists (where feminism was extreme, dogmatic and Manichean), while to defend against those attacks was to be anything but 'feminist' (where feminists might be,

but were not always, extreme, dogmatic and Manichean). To attack those who liked the advertisement, on the other hand, was to categorise 'them' as naive and without knowledge of feminism (where feminism was vitally important to understanding, and being part of, the modern world), while to defend against those attacks was to be a committed 'feminist' (where feminist was indeed important, but just not *that* relevant in this context). Bad, vital, extreme, irrelevant to the case at hand, Manichean, complex: it is here that we see categorial feminism-in-the-making. 'F-' categories were worked up and filled out in any number of ways, and the precise nature of those 'working ups' and 'filling outs' depended on the specific interactional tasks under construction. To be sure, in producing their own distinctive 'f-' categories, each user may 'really' have thought that feminism was bad, vital, or whatever. The usefulness of a *categorial* approach to feminism in this context, however, is that it does not need a *categorical* understanding of what people 'really' think about feminism to show that and how the ways in which they work up and fill out the category 'feminism' will be designed for the overall purpose of defending (or attacking) the subject-side of their own (or some other's) assessment.

So what is the take-away methodological message here? That a categorial approach does not seek to understand 'how' people's intentions and actions are informed by feminism, or 'what' their ideas and experiences of it actually are, but that it looks instead for the rhetorical procedures that people have for publicly presenting answers to these 'how' and 'what' type questions, either in relation to themselves or others. In this one localised case study, for instance, we found various procedures for 'tying' 'f-' categories to certain actions, intentions, cognitive states, and so on. But if the context was unique, the procedures were not. And it is here that we can perhaps see how, in a world of mediated interaction, a categorial approach to feminism has wider applications beyond this particular case study. Across the burgeoning spaces of online articles, readers' responses, gossip columns, celebrity interviews, online forums, Twitter and Facebook, and so on, people type about why, if, how, where and when a person is a 'feminist', and why, if, how, where and when an incident of some kind is caused by, or explainable because of, 'feminism'. In so doing, they make use of just such tying procedures. In such instances, the aim of a categorial approach to feminism would not be to help analysts tie participants' rhetorical actions back to analyst-driven categories like, for instance, 'post', 'neo', or 'Third Wave' feminism – indeed, *academic* tying procedures such as these would *themselves* become targets for such an approach. But in studying how participants tie certain actions, intentions and so on, to 'f-' categories, a categorial approach would render all such constructions –

whether those 'we' liked or those 'we' did not – more defeasible than they otherwise might have been.

About the author

Frederick Attenborough is currently Lecturer in Communication and Media Studies at Loughborough University. He has written extensively in the area of feminist media studies, focusing on the media – as broadly conceived – from an ethnomethodological perspective. His publications include articles in *Discourse and Communication*, *Discourse and Society*, *Feminist Media Studies* and *Journal of Gender Studies* that have analysed what it is that we read when we read about sexism, rape, misogyny and related subjects in the media.

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