'Getting by' on 4chan: Feminine self-presentation and capital-claiming in antifeminist Web space

by Judith May Fathallah

Abstract
The Internet imageboard 4chan is often believed to be a hub of fascism, white supremacism, and violent misogyny. The popular press associates 4chan with ‘incels’ (involuntarily celibate men), using the site to vent their rage at women. Yet a significant minority of posters on the site are female, and/or present themselves as such. These posters use various strategies to negotiate a space for identity-construction and to build subcultural capital within an antifeminist Web space, a striking development in what Amy Shields Dobson calls the process of ‘getting by’ in postfeminist neoliberal culture. By quantifying and analysing these strategies, whilst restraining the rush to ethical judgement typical to discussion of 4chan, this study aims to resituate 4chan’s feminine users from passive objects of violence to active participants in the site’s culture and influence.

Contents

Introduction
4chan in academia
Getting by as femanon: The findings

Introduction

In the contemporary digital environment where there is a premise of control over the way in which women engage with media, clear cut dualisms of agency and victimhood are blunt tools for understanding everyday mediated gendered practice (Kanai, 2015).

The Internet imageboard 4chan is something of a popular media bogeyman. Often represented as an online hub of fascism, white supremacism, and raging violent misogyny, Nicholas and Agius consider it as part of the ‘manosphere’, an ‘umbrella term’ which ‘combines many online antifeminist subcultures’ [1]. They note a significant ‘overlap’ between the manosphere and ‘the broader ‘alt-right’ (short for ‘alternative right’), a far-right conservative movement that tends to aggressively oppose multiculturalism and other aspects of Left Wing progressive thought’ (Nicholas and Agius, 2018, caps in original). 4chan has frequently been associated with so-called ‘incels’ (involuntarily celibate men), using the site to vent their rage at the women who have rejected them. Several spree killers with a particular agenda against women have participated in and been discussed on 4chan. As journalist Angela Nagle reported, a commenter on the ‘giddily offensive /r9k/ board of the notorious, anarchic site 4chan’ posted in 2016:

‘The first of our kind has struck fear into the hearts of America’, announced one commenter [...] ‘This is only the beginning. The Beta Rebellion has begun. Soon, more of our brothers will take up arms to become martyrs to this revolution.’ The post, dated October 1, was referring to the news that twenty-six-year-old Chris Harper-Mercer had killed nine classmates and injured nine others (Nagle, 2016).
Another commenter proposed that ‘/r9k/ needs a new martyr alongside our hallowed Elliot’ (Nagle, 2016). ‘Elliot’ refers to Elliot Rodger, the perpetrator of the 2014 Isla Vista killings, who murdered six people and injured 14. Both Rodger and Harper-Mercer left evidence describing their rage and frustration with their rejection by women, as well as their White supremacist views (despite the fact that, strikingly, both were biracial). Harper-Mercer seems to have been a regular contributor to 4chan. At 01.19 a.m. on the morning of the shooting, the following series of posts appeared on /r9k/:

Some of you guys are alright. Don’t go to school tomorrow if you are in the northwest. happening thread will be posted tomorrow morning so long space robots (No. 22785073, 2015).

Is beta uprising finally going down? You might want to chillax and not alert police (No. 22785128, 2015).

It’s either you kill me or my parents do, I’ll be waiting lad (No. 22785133, 2015).

Will post again in am, 10 min countdown. Won’t say more to [sic] much to prepare (No. 22785244, 2015).

Whilst some posters chimed in with advice for the would-be shooter, others responded with ‘no-one cares and you’re pathetic’ (No. 22785260, 2015) or an acerbic observation in green text:

> be american
> get shot (No. 22787588, 2015).

The ‘>’ symbol and use of green text (known as greentext) are 4chan conventions to relate a story or convey immediate action. 4chan naturally contained a huge amount of discussion and dissection of the killings after the fact, and to this day retains a fascination with Elliot Rodger. In reality, however, Rodger is as much scorned and derided on 4chan as he is lauded. His notorious self-description as ‘the supreme gentleman’ is particularly mocked, having become a meme to denote absurd self-aggrandizement and entitlement. Likewise, Harper-Mercer’s crimes are evoked by a meme which places images of historical figures next to variations of the now-famous line, ‘Some of you [x] are alright. Don’t go to [y] tomorrow’. The meme iterations become increasingly absurd (see Figure 1). Granted, we might object to the site’s willingness to create humour out of events in which real people were murdered, but a) this is hardly unique to 4chan; and b) the memes are far from the uncomplicated valorization of the ‘incel killer’ which the popular media has portrayed.
What this introduction ought to illustrate is that 4chan demonstrates a hegemonic mode of discourse Nicholas and Agius (2018) would call ‘masculinism’. Quite distinct from masculinities — indeed, from individual men — masculinism refers to ‘contexts in which modes of thought that are associated with masculinity have become neutralised and dominant, reifying particular and often destructive ways of being’ (Nicholas and Agius, 2018). Misogyny and threats of violence against women are absolutely commonplace across the site. But we can also see at once that this is not the end of the story. As the acerbic deconstructions of the valorization of male violence suggest, this antifeminist space also demonstrates a whole range of negotiations and strategies used by female-presenting posters to participate in the site.

I use female-presenting here to mean posters who refer to themselves as female, regardless of their actual gender. Given the discursive influence on social reality in which 4chan so obviously partakes, it matters less what the physical bodies of posters signify than how they present themselves on the site. For not only is it true that ‘antifeminism can be supported by both men and women’ [2], but as Nicholas and Agius have argued, the persistence of masculinism as a

Figure 1: Two examples of the ‘Some of you guys are alright’ meme.
cultural norm, elevating such values as force, violence, militarism and a performance of rationality, is a much more enduring form of dominance than that of ‘men’ as some imaginary homogeneity. Understanding masculinism as a hegemonic discourse ‘allows us to separate our gendered analysis from liberal ideas of gender as a binary attribute of individual men and women’ (Nicholas and Agius, 2018). To be clear: I am not suggesting there is no connection between online text and physical bodies. The actions of killers like Rodger and Harper-Mercer make it patently clear that there is, and that the relationship needs interrogation. But it isn’t a one-to-one correspondence between the physical bodies of posters and the text they post. It’s more like an osmotic relationship, deconstructing the boundaries between the digital and physical, between the construction of humans and personhood online and our material existence. In studying the routine harassment of female Wikipedia editors, Menking, et al. write that this porosity is the new normal, a social arrangement that we should consider the rule rather than the exception [3]. This article, then is concerned with the self-presentation of womanhood and girlhood on 4chan, investigating the strategies by which female-presenting posters claim a space for themselves on 4chan. For whilst one might imagine that women would avoid the site completely, this is far from reality. 4chan estimates its own userbase at 70 percent male, 30 percent female (4chan, 2020), though how this statistic is arrived at is unclear. Almost all 4chan users are anonymous almost all the time. It is therefore difficult to ascertain the identity of any given poster, but some are certainly women, as confirmed by uploaded photographs with timestamps. After all, in addition to and simultaneously with its dangerous and destructive aspects, 4chan is hugely influential, infinitely culturally productive, frequently quite innocuous (see the ‘Papercraft & Origami’ forum, /po/) and often completely hilarious.

I situate this work in the context of Amy Shields Dobson and Akane Kanai’s research into the strategies by which girls and women negotiate postfeminist digital culture. Both persuasively argue that postfeminist culture operates within the context of neoliberalism, based on an underlying assumption that the struggles of women as a class are ended, and that each person is free to make her own way in neoliberal late capitalism by performing individualist agency. This practice involves strategies of negotiation such as sexual self-subjectification; emotional management and engagement with the norms of masculinism which may be more or less politically aware, but I agree with Dobson that rushing to accuse girls and women of false consciousness, and to assume that they are exploited, is a) patronising; and b) risks actually perpetuating and reinforcing those very harms by insisting they must necessarily be damaged by their negotiation of masculinist norms [4]. This investigation, then, responds to Dobson’s call to slow our judgement; to hold back our condemnation that young women’s online practice is not feminist enough; and to investigate their strategies of negotiation with open minds. However, I take her work one step further. Dobson primarily investigates spaces and contexts she calls postfeminist; I move into a space, frequented by female posters, whose norms support outright misogyny.

Firstly, I will recap the key work on 4chan in general. This work falls into three overlapping areas. First, academics have looked at the qualities of anonymity and ephemerality that distinguish 4chan from most social networking platforms; secondly, they have looked at the deliberately offensive and taboo use of language; and thirdly, they have considered aspects of community and identity building. Then, I will discuss the methodology and data collection for this investigation. I gathered 4,497 relevant postings from 60 threads across the boards, using both real time screen-capture on 4chan directly and accessing off-site archives. Then I will present and discuss the results of manually open-coding the data, organized according to the discrete strategies posters utilized and comparing these to the small amount of prior qualitative/quantitative research. Finally, I will discuss the implications of the findings, the limitations of the study and indications for future research.

---

4chan in academia

4chan is an imageboard Web site founded in 2003 by a then-15 year old Christopher Poole, also known by his online handle ‘moot’. It was modelled on similar Japanese forums, and initially devoted to discussing anime. Its purpose expanded to include discussion boards for everything from politics to fitness to social meetups and webcamming. Usage statistics for the 10 most popular boards on 14 October 2019 were as shown in Table 1. 4chan receives 27,700,000 unique users monthly, and 900,000–1,000,000 posts per day as of October 2019 (4chan, 2020). The site’s popularity and influence on popular culture is undeniable. Many of the Internet’s most famous memes, from lolcats to rickrolling, originated on 4chan. The layout is basic and accessible: users start a thread within a board by posting an image accompanied by text, to which other users reply. In place of a username, posters may be assigned a ‘tripcode’ (a unique number generated from their password) to identify themselves across multiple postings. Most users, however, do not even use this, and post with a new anonymous identity each time. Auerbach (2012) calls this ‘per-message
anonymity’ or ‘near-total anonymity’ as opposed to the partial anonymity provided by using a tripcode. It is possible to enter a username in the posting field, but there is nothing to stop the next poster from entering the same name. Registration is not possible except for administrators.

Table 1: Statistics.
Source: https://4stats.io/.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Board</th>
<th>Posts per minute</th>
<th>Threads per hour</th>
<th>Average posts per day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/pol/</td>
<td>77.43</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>110243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/v/ [video games]</td>
<td>65.83</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>107162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/vg/ [video game generals]</td>
<td>57.23</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>89499</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/b/</td>
<td>47.16</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>75070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/tv/</td>
<td>34.23</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>50954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/int/ [international]</td>
<td>39.96</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>45233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/a/ [anime]</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>40167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/sp/ [sports]</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24922</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/co/ [comics and cartoons]</td>
<td>11.11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/trash/ [off-topic]</td>
<td>11.47</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18875</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Academics who have thus far looked at the site have given varying accounts of the controversial or taboo side of its content. Focusing specifically on the ‘/pol/’ or ‘politically incorrect’ board, which is devoted to discussing international politics, Hine, et al. found that 12 percent of posts contained hate words, with racial slurs being the most popular [5].

This accords with Nicholas and Agius’ (2018) claim that the masculinism online overlaps with factions of the alt-right that espouse racist forms of nationalism. It makes sense that racial slurs would predominate on an international board, but on 4chan more generally, I would hazard that ‘f*ck’ is the most common slur, though ‘re***d’ is also very popular, as Hine, et al. did note, ‘F*g’ is used to mean absolutely anything, and serves as an all-purpose suffix to refer to both oneself and other people. Posters from Britain are called Britf*gs. Posters who post art are called artf*gs. To refer to someone who is actually gay, the usual term is ‘gayf*g’, as opposed to a ‘straightf*g’, a coinage it is difficult to interpret as straightforwardly homophobic. Indeed, despite the widespread use of homophobic slurs, 4chan hosts a dedicated and busy LGBTQ board. Nagle comments that:

> The self-organized corps of women-hating men, by the lights of conventional academic-feminist theory, should be united in the repression of any and all gay male tendencies expressed online. But 4chan/b/ traffics openly in gay and trans pornography and hosts discussions of bisexual attraction (Nagle, 2016).

In studying the boards, I found that homophobia was more likely to be satirized than promoted (see Figure 2, which is also an example of a greentext story utilizing the ‘>’ symbol, wherein a poster satirizes an obsessive desire to ‘out’ a gay student to his college class. ‘MFW’ is an abbreviation of ‘my face when ...’, or ‘imagine my face when .../image represents my face when ...’). Similarly, Shedd (2015) has documented the homoerotically charged discourse common to ‘/fit/’, the board focused on physical fitness, with its obsession with the ideal male form and aesthetic.
As previous researchers have demonstrated, no slur can be taken at face value on 4chan (Manivannan, 2013; Bernstein, et al., 2011). Nor can insults:

This language is part of the group identity: pushing the bounds of propriety in order to “hack the attention economy” and turn heads (boyd, 2010). While the content on /b/ can be offensive, it can also be funny, open, and creative, as its creation and promotion of numerous memes attests to. [6]

Learning to make and take slurs is part of the in-group discourse, a method of demonstrating social capital and a key illustrator of in-group/out-group boundaries [7]. As we will see, posters presenting themselves as women can be very active in this strategy, which accords with Nicholas and Agius’ observation that an ‘adversarial mode of discourse is not restricted to men, but male-dominated spaces are more likely to have an adversarial norm, that then becomes the norm for all users’ (Nicholas and Agius, 2018). Developing the discursive perspective, Ludemann has usefully observed a phenomenon on 4chan he calls ‘Bakhtinian double voicing’ [8]. Ludemann’s study is of the board ‘/pol/’, which discusses international politics, and is slightly less anonymous than most of 4chan as a) identities are more likely to be stable throughout threads (but not between threads); and b) users display the flag of their country next to their postings (unless they are using a VPN to deliberately obscure their location). According to Ludemann, this means that posters are speaking on a flexible scale, ‘simultaneously mobilizing both the voices of an individual citizen of a country and the country as an anthropomorphized entity’ [9]. Following Bakhtin, Ludemann contends that ‘this allows the author to have multiple voices, multiple arguments, and ultimately multiple ideologies from which to frame an argument’ [10].

Others connect the use of taboo language to what David Auerbach has called ‘A-Culture’. Though most immediately associated with anonymity, Auerbach contends that A-Culture ‘stands for many things [...] accelerated; adolescent; aggregation; alias; anarchy; anonymous; anti-; arbitrary; arch; asshole; attack; audacity; autonomous; auto-’ [11]. At first glance, this might seem like an illustration of the dominance of masculinism on 4chan, and it often may be — but there is more to it. According to Auerbach (2012), a product of A-culture that ‘the individual stigma that someone might feel is replaced by a collective stigma belonging to the entirety of A-culture, as sites like 4chan are branded cesspools of hate and obscenity to the delight of many of their participants’. A-culture lends itself to a high degree of meta-awareness, as ‘what occurs in A-culture is a minimization of memories particular to the individual or subgroup and a maximization of the larger collective memory, thus enabling and encouraging the meta-awareness of that collective memory’ (Auerbach, 2012). In other words, users may not have a distinct or stable identity, but the group certainly does. The identity of the group itself is both more distinct and more important than the identity of individual users. This is why mastery of in-group profane discourse is so important, and allows female-presenting users to assimilate. This accords with Knuttila’s observation that ‘focusing then not on the person, but the act, becomes one way to articulate the [4chan] community: not the troll, but the act of trolling; not the joker, but the act of joking’.
Ephemerality is another important factor of A-culture. As noted, 4chan does not save or archive threads automatically and the turnover of posts is very rapid. Bernstein, et al. have made the only large-scale quantitative study of 4chan posts so far, focusing on the most popular board ‘/b/’, which received ‘30% of all 4chan traffic’ at the time of their study [12]. They note that until the publication of their article, ‘researchers and practitioners often assume[d] that user identity and data permanence are central tools in the design of online communities’ but go on to explain how 4chan boards ‘succeed [...] despite being almost entirely anonymous and extremely ephemeral’ [13]. They found that ‘most threads spend just ve seconds on the rst page and less than ve minutes on the site before expiring’ [14]. They further found that ‘over 90% of posts are made by fully anonymous users, with other identity signals adopted and dis-carded at will’ [15]. Though the study is dated, some of their figures provide important comparative context for my own findings below:

The majority of threads have a short lifespan and a small number of replies; the median life of a thread is just 3.9 minutes. Thread lifetimes are right-skewed similar to a power law, making the mean less meaningful: 9.1 minutes ($\sigma = 16.0$ min). The fastest thread to expire was gone in 28 seconds (i.e., a thread with no responses during a very high activity period); the longest-lived lasted 6.2 hours (i.e., a thread with frequent new posts to bump it). Six hours is a very long time in /b/. [16]

This gives us a good impression of how most 4chan threads fail to make much impact on the general discourse of the site. As we will see below, most of the threads concerning feminine identity contradict this rule, implying the topic is important to 4chan users. Indeed, Nicholas and Agius posit 4chan as a node of the manosphere wherein users ‘explicitly engage in discussion around gender norms and masculinity’ due to its users’ self-positioning as ‘betas’. Bernstein, et al. also stressed the importance of in-group discourse, noting that ‘lack of uency is dismissed with the phrase “LURK MOAR”, asking the poster to spend more time learning about the culture of the board’ before engaging [17]. The other popular dismissal is ‘newf*g’ or ‘summerf*g’, i.e., someone who is new to the site and/or is still in school or college and has joined over the summer holidays.

Finally, several academics have considered the workings of cultural capital in these discourse-only, relatively anonymous communities. Cultural capital was initially described by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, and traditionally might include knowledge of art and literature, manners, ways of speaking, styles of dress and codes of behavior which serve to elevate a person in class-strati ed societies, granting them opportunities, access and indirectly enabling wealth acquisition, or financial capital. Sarah Thornton (1995) coined the phrase ‘subcultural capital’ to describe the way that particular subcultures value distinct kinds of knowledge, ways of speaking, behaving, and dressing. Whilst these may be non-traditional and appear oppositional to outsiders, individuals within subcultures amass and utilize subcultural capital to elevate their position within their own social sphere. Whilst Knuttila (2011) thought that cultural capital ought to be irrelevant in contexts where users very rarely maintain stable identities across the site, I find this does not seem to be a deterrent from attempts to accumulate (sub)cultural capital within or occasionally across threads. Trammell (2014) likewise found that:

contrary to the purported ideology and discourse of anonymity associated with controversial, anonymous online spaces like 4chan, users of the site are in fact highly invested in delimiting and policing the borders of what counts as “acceptable” posting behavior within the community, and are also eager to defend themselves from accusations of unfamiliarity with the mores of the community’s subcultural practice.

It appears that permanent registration and a stable identity are not necessary elements in capital-building practice. Building on this, Asaf Nissenbaum and Limor Shifman observe that ‘despite its apparent pointlessness in an environment based on ephemeral and anonymous interactions, status plays a meaningful role in /b/’s community. Users regularly seek to impress fellow frequenters of the board’ [18]. Indeed, they posit that ‘Since users of /b/ are stripped of the usual social cues for identity, cultural capital may have greater salience here than in more conventional communities’ [19], because it is one of the few ways that posters distinguish themselves. These researchers made a grounded analysis of the 4chan /b/ board, which revealed how memes are used in this way. Building (sub)cultural
capital may be particularly pertinent for feminine-presenting users in their efforts at what Dobson quoting Berlant (2008) calls ‘the defensive, inventive, adaptive activity of getting by’ in antifeminist space [20].

In the only article to address misogyny on 4chan specifically, Manivannan argues that misogynist language on the ‘/b/’ board ‘demonstrably results from an internal moral panic about cultural exclusivity’ rather than a hatred of women per se [21]. This accords with the idea that slurs have an altered meaning on 4chan and do not convey the same prejudices they would elsewhere. Manivannan contends that female-presenting users who are ‘strategically targeted and trolled’ not because they are women but because ‘their exposed identity aspects’ like ‘self-photographs primarily featuring women’ serve to ‘unbalance 4chan’s anti-normative, anti-celebrity, and anti-leader ethic’ [22]. What is being punished, Manivannan argues, is not being a woman, but being self-promoting and attention-seeking, violating strong communal values of anonymity and the privileging of the group over the individual. She contends that if women ‘disclose their gender in accordance with /b/’s normative social structures and practices’, for instance where it is crucial to the context of a story being related, they ‘are treated no differently for it’ [23]. There is a strong parallel here with Dobson’s work with teenagers on sexting. She found that teenagers of both sexes were quick to blame girls for the exposure or leak of explicit material they had taken themselves, considering it a more-or-less inevitable consequence of attention-hungry behaviour [24]. Dobson relates this to a neoliberal context valorizing personal responsibility and agency, whilst Manivannan argues meanwhile that ‘misogynistic discourse is one variant within a canon of trolling practices meant to exert collective control over new, casual users who disregard /b/’s habitus’ [25]. The reason specifically misogynist terms like wh*re and sl*t are used are for the same reason other taboo words are utilized: to ‘provok[e] the normatively moral reactions that expose newf*gs and are central to 4channers’ performance of insult dialectic’ [26]. Failing to understand how the language operates in context — i.e., taking it as literally misogynistic — exposes one as naive to board culture, having ‘internalised the media’s sensationalist rhetoric rather than 4channers’ sensibilities and schemes of perception’ [27]. The point is well-made, and we will go on to discuss the denigration of men and masculinities on 4chan in our findings. Nonetheless, it must be remembered that misogynistic insults are much more common across 4chan than their ‘misandrist counterpart’ [28]. Manivannan attributes this to the fact that ‘self-disclosures of femaleness predominate on /b/’ [29], with women being more likely to post selfies than men, but does not back this up with quantitative evidence. Moreover, whatever the motivation behind these statements, misogynistic language helps construct and reinforce a social discourse with violent physical consequences to women’s bodies and lives entirely disproportionate to the violence perpetrated on men.

With this in mind, we now turn to the collection and analysis of data.

---

**Getting by as femanon: The findings**

As noted, 4chan has no stable archives and no inbuilt search function, and data disappears very quickly from the site. However, the external site ‘4chansearch.org’ allows one to search current posts across all boards by keywords. As 4chan posters refer to themselves or each other as ‘anon’, or ‘femanon’ to specify a female posting identity, I repeatedly searched the keyword ‘femanon’ over a month-long period from mid-August to mid-September 2019, and screenshotted the results. This provided me with a real-time sample. I also searched the archive site ‘v4plebs’, which stores some 4chan threads off-site, providing me with a sample of relevant popular posts from the past four years. Overall, I found 4,497 relevant posts, spread between 60 threads. The mean average number of posts per thread was 147.4, far higher than the overall averages recorded by Bernstein, *et al.*, suggesting that threads utilizing the keyword ‘femanon’ attract a lot of attention. This impression is supported by some of the derisive comments to this effect:

Saging this thread even though it’ll get 300 replies anyway (No. 96173199, 2016).
>FEMANON HEEERRREEE
>LOOK AT ME, I HAVE TITS
>I AM A WOMAN
>LOL
>201 replies

Fuck you, /r9k/. You enable this shit then complain about it (No. 53903783, 2019).

/r9k/, a board for relating personal anecdotes, was the board that yielded the most results with 32 threads. /pol/ was the
next most frequent, with 16, and the rest were divided between /b/, /soc/ (for socializing and meetups), and /x/ (paranormal), with one each on the television and cooking forums. Post No. 53903783 supports Manivannan’s contention that drawing attention to one’s female status is derided on 4chan, though the complaint that the board /r9k/ enables this practice indicates it may not be so much a breach of a social norm as a specific recognized practice which some posters dislike. It should be noted, however, that the mean average is raised by three threads with an exceptionally high number of posts (325, 330, and 332). The median number of posts per thread was 41. I manually coded the data, as the content is too referential, ephemeral, and idiosyncratic for automated software to understand. Through a process of open coding, it gradually became clear that posters claiming a female identity staked their claims to cultural capital and space within the community according to four strategies for ‘getting by’:

- Denigration of femininity, assuming a pose of submission and subordination to male posters
- Degradation of male identities, hooking into the popular construct of 4chan posters as ‘incels’ or betas. Posts in this category tended to posit women as social superiors, either guiding 4chan men to improve themselves, scorning them as worthless, or some combination of these strategies
- Assuming a right-wing political identity that incorporates womanhood, but aligns with other 4chan norms against a posited Other
- Empathetic bonding with other posters beyond, despite or indeed because of gender.

Notably, the two longest threads, with 332 and 325 posts, belonged primarily to categories b and d respectively. This immediately indicates that the construction of womanhood on 4chan is more complex than ‘incels degrade women’. Moreover, the degradation of men — by both male and female posters — was the most common type of thread. We should recall, however, that the degradation of particular men can sit within the discourse of masculinism, such as when men are criticized for behaviours coded feminine. Naturally, there was plenty of female degradation as well: as noted above, the customary response to any opening introducing the poster as female is ‘tits or gtfo’. Variations included ‘tits first, then we can talk’ (No. 808285798, 2019) and an image of the logo for stationary product ‘Post-its’ predictably photoshopped to read ‘Post-tits’ followed by ‘or GTFO’ in smaller font (No. 808287398, 2019). However, Manivannan’s analysis seems to be correct in that this meme functions primarily as a test, intended to establish whether or not the original poster is acquainted with 4chan discourse. Simply ignoring it gains respondents’ respect, whereas actually supplying photographs of breasts with a timestamp produces insults and incredulity as to why any woman would do such a thing. As one femanon responds to the request, demonstrating her knowledge of 4chan discourse. ‘I’ve been on here for 4.5 years [so] tits or gtfo doesn’t work on me’ (No. 190256634, 2018) Another poster explicitly affirms Manivannan’s thesis:

Tits or gtfo applies to women who come on here and needlessly tell us they are a woman. This is a site for anonymous discussion, if a woman is going to go out if her way [sic] and out herself as female for attention, then she may as well go all the way and show off her body as well. No one cares if women come on here for actual discussion, or say they are women when it’s actually relevant (No. 160914208, 2018).

This accords with Dobson’s observation of how both sexes in her focus groups scorned taking nudes as attention-seeking, a behaviour coded feminine, rather than girls or women themselves. There is also a more explicitly misogynist variation on this statement which appears multiple times in the data. This is the meme known as ‘no girls on the Internet’, where the following post is copy and pasted into threads (Figure 3). The premise (that women have advantages in life simply for being women, which men are denied) is fundamental to incel culture.
In category 1, posters calling themselves femanon buy into the degradation of women, either to posit themselves as the exception to what girls are usually like, or to assume a strategic pose of submission to male users. Both these techniques function to establish subcultural capital and make claims on the 4chan space. For example, one opening post posits that women posting on 4chan suffer from ‘Femanon personality disorder (FPD)’, which is defined by the 4chan Psychiatric Association as a personality disorder characterized by a pattern of excessive attention-seeking, usually beginning in early adulthood with exposure to imageboards, including but not limited to:

- Camwhoring
- Promiscuity
- Watching anime
- Weeabooism
- Playing video games, especially MOBAs and Nintendo titles
- Left-wing political beliefs
- Piercings
- Tattoos
- Candy-colored hair
- Doing “sex work”
- Doing cosplay
- Doing “lolita fashion” or “j-fashion”
- Strained relationship with father
- Regularly watching porn
- Abuse issues in her past
- Enjoys extreme rape fantasies (No. 54010688, 2019).

Posters reply by marking copy and pasting the list, and adding ticks or crosses into boxes they identify with themselves. Though self-effacing — as so much of 4chan is — this practice nonetheless functions to stake out a place within the communal identity that Auerbach recognized as so important. The poster positions herself as a recognized and recognizable ‘type’ within the 4chan community. Similar techniques included textual performance of sexual submission, e.g., addressing male posters as ‘daddy’; claiming to favour ‘the kind [of man] that knows his place, and isn’t afraid of it’ (No. 53935606, 2019); complying with requests for explicit selfies, describing oneself with the gendered insults 4chan favours such as ‘wh*re’. As one femanon puts it:

I know my place and let men do men’s work
I just want to handle housing stuff like decorating, maintaining cleanliness then daddy comes home. I keep my man satisfied and he pays the bills and buys me nice things
that’s how it should be (No. 160908974, 2018).

In addition to the claim of space and identity within the discursive economy of 4chan, this technique grants the femanon poster agency over other posters via her claim on their attention. Metatextual comments from the community complain about this technique, accusing femanons of attention seeking and upbraiding other male-presenting posters for granting them that attention. Nonetheless, feminine-self degradation was the least popular technique out of the four categories, dominating only this thread and appearing intermittently in others.
Indeed, denigration of male posters was far more common in the sample, dominating 13 of the threads. Many such threads open with deliberate provocation:

Femanon here. I personally love the shitstorm that starts every time some poor incel makes one of these anti women threads.
Sure, you’ll act tough and cynical here, but we all know it’s just a desperate overcompensation for how much of a doormat you are IRL.
After all, we do pretty much run the show. Men rely on us, work for us, spend money on us, buy us houses and cars and clothes.

[...]
Yep, this is the power we hold over you (No. 227463632, 2019).

Any other femanon here hate incels?
They’re all like “omg I can’t get laid”
You can’t get laid because you ugly and deserve the hate. Deal with it and work on your IT skills lol (No. 53905344, 2019).

These are both examples of how femanon posters position themselves as men’s social superiors, in one case dispensing some sharp advice, the other simply gloating over the ‘power’ women are claimed to hold over men. In one sense, these insults could align with a discourse of masculinism, valorizing ‘power’ and denigrating ‘doormats’. However, the poster apparently revels in the position of being financially taken care of, which hardly aligns with the claim of neoliberal independence for women that both Kanai and Dobson believe to be a hallmark of postfeminist culture. Perhaps this posture — inhabiting and gloating over the exploitative position attributed to her by incel culture — is unique to the ways women negotiate antifeminist space, ‘getting by’ by appropriating a position commonly attributed to them. Interestingly, male posters often join in on these male denigration threads, far more often than femanon posters denigrate themselves. In a post to /b/ with 96 replies, one user posts:

>femanon here.
My tinder experience so far.
gt;Which one are you /b/astards (No. 807259146, 2019).

With the following image (Figure 4):
/b/ is considered the most aggressive and misogynistic board on 4chan, so it is notable that so many male-posing posters are ready to admit they are ‘boring’ (No. 807263705, 2019), only ‘5”4’ (No. 807259265, 2019) or add ‘You forgot +broken’ (No. 807259488, 2019). This self-denigration demonstrates allegiance to a masculinist discourse, and identifies the self as failing to inhabit it. Some demand to know the problem with some of the categories, asking for instance, ‘WHAT’S WRONG WITH DJ LOL’ (No. 807259648, 2019) to which the acid response from another poster is ‘they talk like that’ (No. 807260919, 2019). ‘W[hat are ]y[ou ]d[oing]’ is assumed to indicate that ‘you’re an incel and haven’t got better pickup lines’ (No. 807260026, 2019). Thus, even as the discourse of masculinism is maintained, male and female posters collude in granting the femanon a higher social status than most of the men on the board.
Femanon posters also denigrate the men on 4chan to each other. When one offers to ‘deconstruct any complaints that any of you have about females’ (No. 53901304, 2019), as she ‘think[s] most of you are good people just a bit uninformed’, another responds

Another femanon here. Don’t waste your time. I’ve been at this for a decade and very few of these people here (and other boards) actually want to change and fear success. Others will just blame you for all their problems simply because you’re female and in turn, will just be toxic to your own life. Crab bucket mentality is very real (No. 53901399, 2019).

Nonetheless, the original poster does attempt to counsel and guide male posters on their relationship problems, fulfilling the role of femanon as guide and social superior. Finally, there were a few examples of male posters deliberately placing women in a position of superiority, including in a fetishistic manner. In one, the OP asks, ‘Femanon what would you do if you had unlimited power?’ (No. 54121708, 2019). The first response is

Step one is make myself immortal and create my ideal immortal lover
and we invent an infinite number of ways to kill each other during sex
at the peak of orgasm and then resurrect afterwards & repeat
Step two: world peace or something. F*ggot (No. 54122190, 2019)

Feminine/masculine stereotypes are thus inverted as the femanon first describes how she would assume the godlike power to create life, satisfy an infinite sex drive, and then in second place perhaps attend to the needs of others, before insulting the OP with a gendered slur. Calling the OP a ‘f*ggot’ directly after conceding that she would create ‘world peace or something’ utilizes 4chan’s generalization of the term to imply that the latter act is the one OP was expecting, and the femanon has overturned his expectation by placing herself and her pleasure first. Here is a good example of how femanons negotiate the discourse of masculinism to claim a space within antifeminist Web space, utilizing the humour factor of subverted expectations in a way a male poster could not. Another femanon answers:

Fight God. His sins outweigh all ours.
Become the Benevolent Mother of humanity (No. 54125080, 2019).

A male poster replies:

Wow I didn’t even know I was into gentle goddess femdom but I like your description and wish we lived in that world (No. 54125654, 2019).

This post is rather different, and actually elevates feminine-coded values of caring and nurture rather than masculine-coded dominance. Its popularity, and the respondent’s wish that ‘we lived in that world’ with the implicit acknowledgement that we don’t, demonstrates that just occasionally, women negotiate antifeminist space by directly challenging its hegemonic values — and that even more occasionally, they succeed.

There were several threads in which posters asked femanons if they would date men with particular characteristics (notably gamers, Pakistanis, and 4chan posters). There was even a tendency for male-presenting posters to criticize each other for insulting women too crudely: one poster addends a still from Elliot Rodger’s video manifesto to the sarcastic comment ‘careful with that edge bro, almost make[s] you sound like the supreme gentleman’ (No. 807260379, 2019). The expression ‘careful with that edge’ is used as a retort to obvious attempts to seem ‘edgy’ or controversial, which are actually interpreted as juvenile and absurd. This statement does a lot of ideological work, making use of the Bakhtinian double voicing and variation of scale that Ludemann recognized above. In one post, it criticizes a) the poster to whom it is directly addressed; b) 4chan and the /b/ board’s intermittent valorization of Rodger; and c) Rodger himself. The still chosen shows Rodger speaking from his expensive car, reportedly a gift from his wealthy parents. Since the time of the attacks, posters both on 4chan and elsewhere have criticized Rodger’s manifesto as self-indulgent, self-pitying, and weak, given his objectively privileged upbringing and life.

The third group of strategies involved femanons presenting themselves as ‘redpilled’ (No. 96170263, 2016): that is shorthand for holding extreme right political views, usually highly nationalist, often white supremacist, antifeminist, pro-Trump and ultraconservative, all values Nicholas and Agius contend align with masculinism. It does not
necessarily mean pro-American: on the contrary, the present state of America is often criticized as ‘degenerate’, having allowed itself to be weakened by any combination of feminism, liberalism, multiculturalism, the Democrat party, some sort of international Jewish conspiracy, and/or some other bogeyman. European posters particularly may express sympathy with the Fascist regimes of the twentieth century, claiming that history has been rewritten to mischaracterize their actions and ideologies. The ‘redpilled’ femanon claims subcultural capital by demonstrating expertise with 4chan sociopolitical norms and positing herself as valuable by dint of rarity: a ‘redpilled’ woman is supposedly unusual. Naturally most threads of this sort were on /pol/. One /pol/ thread which received 73 responses opens with ‘French Femanon here’, and a link to a YouTube news report on young African migrants jumping onto the back of lorries in a French port town, hoping to get to England (No. 209907801, 2019). The video contains a vox pop with local residents, some of whom claim that that the migrants have brought crime and violence to the area. Her comments, in French, are a nostalgic description of the area in earlier times, which she perceives as having being peaceful and safe. Initial responses demonstrate the usual form of 4chan hazing:

You are a pure white french female that wants to be bred and impregnated? (No. 209907869, 2019)

Nobody in the world gives a fuck about the french but the french themselves (No. 209907926, 2019).

Le tits or gtfo (No. 209908513, 2019)

But as the OP either ignores this or responds with unimpressed equanimity, the discourse rapidly develops into a conversation which treats her as any other poster, with users united by ‘redpilled’ perspectives, both in English and French:

>migrants

Real sick of them using that term. They are hostile invaders. At the very least, they seek to take resources from Europeans (No. 209908701, 2019).

sorry about your n****er problem there, looks really fucking bad, same shit happens here in the states when the ghettos get overpopulated, the n****rs spill over into areas that are not degenerate and they rob and steal and bring drugs, its fucking horrible (No. 209910335, 2019).

The worst thing is that France is turning into a Muslim caliphate. As bad as the sp*ec infestation is in Burgerland, at least they pray to Jesus and not some sand n***er that raped kids (No. 209910892, 2019).

The OP replies:

It is the right punishment for we sinned by being antiracist and universalist c*nts for 200years+. We believed our mission was to civilize the n****rs il [sic] Africa and then that our mission was to bring the Africans in Europe to civilize them here. Nothing changed.

We deserve it for being this stupid. The n****r shouldn’t be civilized at all (No. 209910597, 2019).

Notice how the values of antiracism and universalism slide so easily into self-castigation metaphorically invoking female anatomy. Here is an example of how femanons uphold masculinist norms without explicit discussion of gender. In addition to their racism, posters bond over their perception of some vast conspiracy on behalf of the ‘elites’ to replace white people with immigrants:

The French love to deny it and persuade themselves that it is not happening by the way. Recently, great replacement started to be acknowledged by some high ranked personalities in France, as a good
thing of course. But even with this, only 20% of French believe that the great replacement is organized by our elites. Can you imagine a bigger r***rdation/hypocrisy state? (No. 209911108, 2019).

This form of populism, which can be described ‘as a “thin ideology,” that merely sets up a hypothetical confrontation between ... right-wing populists championing the “people” against an elite accused of favouring a third group of their choice’ [30] is very popular on /pol/, and by utilizing the discourse, femanons present themselves and are accepted as one of the ‘people’ in the context of the forum. When the OP declares that she has ‘no hope’ for France, as ‘the r***rdation has been injected in us for too long’ and ‘The gilets jaunes SUPPORT this way of thinking’ (No. 209912216, 2019), an American poster suggests that she ‘might as well move to the land of burgers and help buttress the white majority against an exploding immigrant population of filthy b**ners. Join us dude’ (No. 209912503, 2019). The inclusion of the female OP, due to her racist politics, extends from the virtual to proffered physical sphere, even to the point she is addressed by a normally masculine term of friendship.

Not all femanons adopt the discourse of alt-right masculinism unproblematically. Many try to negotiate with it instead. They argue that ‘the alt right needs to be more female friendly and less sexist’, calling on the ‘the white men of the alt right movement’ to ‘denounce and condemn the [...] incel and mgtow [Men Going Their Own Way, a male separatist movement] psychopaths terrorizing white women’ (No. 160092405, 2018). Asking why they are excluded in alt-right spaces, they are typically told that they aren’t, but their contribution must adhere to traditional gender roles. Sometimes these posts idealize motherhood and childbearing:

You aren’t [excluded or unwelcome], but the most important way you can contribute is to find a white husband, have a lot of white babies, and be the best mother and wife you can be. The ability to literally create brand new human beings is your greatest power, and you should never forget the value in it. It’s not that your other offerings don’t have value, it’s that your ability to reproduce is so valuable that it eclipses them massively (No. 160901946, 2018).

Look for a decent white man and settle down with him. Start a family. You’ll do far more for the cause we alone could ever achieve (No. 160906402, 2018)

You can participate by remaining a virgin until you find a hardworking conservative white man to inseminate you, then you can continue to participate by raising his children while he handles the hard stuff (No. 160909061, 2018).

And so on. Sometimes, these posts are accompanied by propagandistic images of white women nurturing children, typically dressed in pure white and haloed by sunlight. As we saw above, accepting a position of submission is one strategy by which femanons claim a space on the 4chan community. However, not all accept this position. One opens her thread by stating that she wants to ‘create a discord [chat room] exclusiv[e]ly for nationalist women as [she] can’t seem to find any. Reply if you would be interested. Women only no men or traps allowed’ (No.184668328, 2018). She claims to have none of ‘those impulses to protect children and agree with boyfriends<husbands [sic] but I have been nationalist since about 14’ (No. 1846741, 2018). The proposition receives some hostility, with one poster demanding, ‘For what fucking purpose? So you can talk about knitting or some stupid shit? Just [...] join some nationalist disco[r]d regardless of sex’ (No. 184668585, 2018). But then she is immediately defended by multiple posters:

Since it’s not a woman, but good luck, it would be valuable (No. 18466998, 2018).

Men like to hang out with men, women with women. There’s literally nothing wrong with this (No. 184669128, 2018).
Getting by' on 4chan: Feminine self-presentation and capital-claiming in antifeminist Web space

The OP agrees that the purpose is to ‘talk about women stuff with other [women]’ and claims ‘you would clearly find it boring’ (No. 184669176, 2018). When her nationalist credentials are challenged by the demand ‘Do you even love your country? I’ve heard women get hard over invader dick’ (No. 184669190, 2018) she responds, ‘Yeah and wanna find other women who do’ (No. 184669235, 2018). She states a desire to ‘avoid degenerate shit’ (No. 184670227, 2018). which mixed spaces are said to encourage. One male posing-poster believes that

having a non-degenerate server for the few decent women is good, since it would insulate them from the legions of degenerate wh*res that would encourage them to fornicate, cheat on their husbands, get abortions, and so on. The only argument against it is that there aren’t enough of the target women to populate it — and that’s valid, but it couldn’t hurt to try (No. 184671623, 2018).

One even suggests the video game forum on 4chan as a likely place to look for participants. The thread does result in the creation of the server and an e-mail for those who would like to be invited, demonstrating that despite the backlash, the non-maternal, non-obedient femanon OP did succeed in carving out a space for her enterprise and presence on /pol/. It would be fascinating to gain access to such a discord, on which the ‘redpilled’ values Nicholas and Agius describe as ‘masculinism’ would apparently be discussed through the lens of ‘women’s stuff’, without the necessity to negotiate antifeminist space, but unfortunately by the time this thread had been archived, the links were dead.

The final group of strategies utilized 4chan discourse to create bonds of friendship and camaraderie despite, across, or even because of gender. Many of these threads focused on the posited social insufficiency and life failures of all 4chan users, be they anon or femanon. This relates to Kanai’s (2015) work on the necessity of ‘relatability’ for getting by in postfeminist culture: for demonstrating one’s failures and insufficiencies in attaining hegemonic gender and class roles. Kanai writes that in demonstrating these failures, allegiance to middle-class neoliberal gendered norms is ultimately affirmed: humour and relatability are created in the (relatively small) gap between the real and the ideal. On 4chan, the gap is much bigger, and indeed the norms themselves are at times called into question. For example, one poster writes that she avoids relationships because she is ‘incredibly sick’ and will ‘only cause the people I care about to suffer with me until I eventually die and shatter their heart’ (No. 54149661, 2019). When a poster inquires as to her condition, she replies, ‘cystic fibrosis, the kind that will probably kill me before I’m middle age’ (No. 54149690, 2019). The anon assures her that he would be ‘glad to be there for you until the end, and then off myself to join you’ (No. 54149733, 2019), given that he ‘haven’t [sic] planned on living long and giving all my love to a hopeless fembot sounds like a very good way to spend these final years’ (No. 54149811, 2019). ‘Fembot’ is a variation of ‘robot’, the in-group name for posters on /r9k/. Ordinarily, describing oneself as pathetic or a failure would lower one’s social position, but as failing within wider, mainstream society is the normal construct of a 4chan user, it actually operates here to gather subcultural capital and form social bonds, querying the neoliberal norm of a high-energy, self-sexualized, highly productive subject as ideal. At other times, femanons claim that they pose as male in order to fit better into the 4chan culture, citing attributes that are typical to 4chan posters but not usually associated with women:

because real autistic women just want friends. ones that won’t try to fuck them. and neurotypical women are really hard to be around. the dream is just to have likeminded friends [all sic] (No. 54099571, 2019).

If I tell anyone I’m female I don’t get to pal around with the boys and am automatically forced into a hierarchy of hypothetical females where my rank determines how much positive attention I get from males. So it’s just easier to either imply I’m male or even say I’m trans (which men still psychologically interpret as a fellow male and are capable of genuinely pair-bonding with). Any questions or nah, bros? (No. 5409961, 2019).

When femanons demonstrate subcultural capital via strong knowledge of 4chan discourse and norms, they are treated with more respect and inclusion. One femanon claiming to be an FBI agent offers to answer questions on her job. After she ignores the inevitable ‘tits, badge and timestamp’ demands (No. 125846736, 2017), anons begin to ask her serious questions, including ‘so do you have to get a masters in forensics to be a doc examiner or what?’ (No. 125855004, 2017). Similarly, the thread on what femanons would do with infinite power referenced above involved some earnest
philosophical discussion on life and meaning, such as whether or not mortality is what makes existence meaningful, and whether it would be possible to create meaning and purpose in an infinite existence. The exchanges were respectful, and gender was never suggested as a barrier to philosophical thought. A respondent to the FBI thread made explicit Manivannan’s point about facility with 4chan discourse:

Idk if this is a larp but kek has blessed this post and you seem to be about getting the corruption out of our government. You also ignored the trolls demanding tits and used /ourguy/, so you have some experience here. I like you (No. 125858958, 2017).

IDK is an abbreviation of ‘I don’t know’. ‘Larp’ stands for ‘live action role play’, and is used derogatorily on 4chan to mean a poster misrepresenting their identity. ‘Kek’ is the humorous/ironic deity of 4chan, based on an Egyptian god of primordial chaos that sometimes took on a frog form (see Palau and Roozenbeek, 2017). Invoking Kek’s blessing upon the thread thus positions it as an excellent contribution to the site. ‘/ourguy/’ is an expression used across 4chan to ask or determine if a person is one of the group, i.e., shares the common values of the board(s). Posters ‘demanding tits’ of such a person are denounced as trolls, in strong evidence for Manivannan’s theory. Femanon also demonstrate their proficiency with 4chan discourse by utilizing the deliberate offense trope. One self-proclaimed ‘drunk femanon’ opens an ‘ask me anything thread’ with

If you’re gonna ask stupid fucking questions, then you’re gonna die of pancreatic cancer. Otherwise, fucking go for it, robots (No. 53935519, 2019).

The customary demand for explicit pictures is met with an acid ‘Boring af. Please kill yourself’ (No. 53935636, 2019), then later, ‘CashApp or gtfo’ (No. 53935916, 2019), retorting that the poster must send her money for a view of her body. He offers, and she turns down his suggested amount as ‘not even enough to buy weed’ with an accompanying image of an anime girl holding a sign reading ‘fuck you’ (No. 53936067, 2019). Anons suggesting that the poster is not really female are described as ‘REEEc*nts [...] getting triggered’ (No. 53935751, 2019). The onomatopoeic ‘REEE’ literally refers to the sound some frog species make when angered or threatened, and functions simultaneously on 4chan to represent a noise of outrage from self-identified ‘autists’. Questions that attempt to treat the OP differently for being female are rebuffed:

How much do you weigh? (No. 53936767, 2019).

This isn’t a dating app, f*ggot (No. 53936866, 2019).

The anon to whom the ‘fuck you’ was directed compliments the OP, ‘good AMA by the way, some proper conversations as opposed to a thread full of c*nts’ (No. 53936195, 2019). The OP femanon thus establishes herself as familiar, practiced and skillful with 4chan’s discourse of offense, able to turn gendered insults back on the poster and indeed reprimand him for using the site incorrectly. This accords with Shedd’s argument that insults function in 4chan to establish camaraderie despite gender. However, the longest thread utilising these strategies primarily functioned as a bonding space that was actually dependent on gender, or at least, gendered violence. The OP asks, ‘Ever been raped before? I want to know what it’s like’ (No. 807257643, 2019). In typical 4chan fashion, she immediately goes on: ‘I’m going to get really wasted tonight in a urban area near some black owned nightclubs and see what happens’ (No. 807257643, 2019), but most of the thread is taken up with bonding over femanons’ experience of rape and sexual violence, rather than racist rhetoric. Some warn the OP, others offer empathy and sympathy to those sharing their stories:

Don’t do it. There’s nothing good about it. I got drugged and raped by some asshole frat boys on a cruise ship and it still gives me nightmares (No. 807261312, 2019).

Yes, I was raped last year when I was at college, this really creepy guy kept staring at me in class, it was horrible (No. 807263483, 2019).

Not really the place to say something like this, but I feel sorry for you and I want to give you a hug. Horrible frat shits (No. 80726536,
I’d really recommend rape play. Don’t go looking to get raped [...] Someone forcing themselves inside your body is life changing, especially when you’re fighting to get away (No. 807266001, 2019).

Here the near-total anonymity of the board actually allows for a vulnerability and revelation of feminized pain which both Kanai and Dobson find is self-censored and/or pathologised in postfeminist Web space, probably due to its association with an outdated form of second-wave feminism. As Kanai (2015) puts it, ‘it is inappropriate to inundate readers with ‘too much information’, particularly with a vulnerability that is deemed unfunny and excessive’. This norm is perhaps alluded to by the comment that the board is ‘not really the place to say something like this’. 4chan being what it is, there is of course the odd interjection of ‘that sounds hot’ (No. 807258405, 2019) and ‘lmao you deserved it’ (No. 807259011, 2019) but these statements are very much in the minority of the 325 posts in the thread. Most of the thread is taken up by the sharing of experience and expressions of support.

Thus we have established that despite 4chan’s reputation as a female-hostile space, posters assuming a female identity use a variety of strategies to claim space for themselves and their concerns across the boards, and accrue the kinds of subcultural capital which elevates posters within the discourse of 4chan. Whilst related to postfeminist strategies of ‘getting by’ identified by Kanai and Dobson, these strategies are adapted to a fundamentally antifeminist space. Much of the time, femanons utilize a discourse of what Nicholas and Agius call masculinism, valorizing masculine-coded values and denigrating feminine-coded ones, but they demonstrate facility with appropriating this discourse to insert themselves as subjects rather than objects, as with the assertion of ‘the power we hold over you’ (No. 227463632, 2019). At other times, the discourse of masculinism is challenged, as values of nurturance and support are elevated both in fantasy and regarding real-world violence. The dataset also raises questions as to whether ‘masculinism’ is always the right term for discourses invoking racist-nationalist and ultra-conservative values, as the prospect of a chatroom exclusively for redpilled women demonstrates. Certainly, 4chan is home to a disturbing amount of hate speech, including extreme expressions of racism and misogyny. Some of these statements may even amount to incitement to violence, given the everyday porosity between online and off-line space that is now well established. Nonetheless, the popular press’s characterization of 4chan misses both the complexity and variety of the site, which after all hosts a range of boards and a huge amount of posters, and the strategies by which posters who do not fit the site’s norms of identity claim space within it. Future researchers could look at how posters presenting themselves as non-white use the site — particularly black posters, given 4chan’s free use of an anti-black slur. They might compare self-presentation on and off the international board, where posters’ user-numbers are accompanied by national flags. Finally, future analysis would benefit from coding programs sophisticated enough to analyse the rapidly-changing slang and meme usage on the forums — this would enable larger data sets to be coded, once against assisting with quantitative analysis and allowing more basis for comparisons. Given how allusive and ephemeral the language can be, however, in addition to posters’ frequent idiosyncrasies in typing, this may be some time in development, and would need extensive manual testing in pilot studies to ensure both accuracy and comprehension.

About the author

Judith May Fathallah is Outreach and Research Associate in the Lancaster University Management School. Her interests are digital and new media, fan cultures, gender, online cultures, and media convergence. She is the author of Fanfiction and the author: How fanfic changes popular cultural texts (Amsterdam University Press, 2017) and Emo: How fans defined a subculture (University of Iowa Press, 2020).

E-mail: j [dot] fathallah [at] lancaster [dot] ac [dot] uk

Notes


4. Dobson, 2015, pp. 7–9; 14; 69; 77–78; 97; 99.


9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.


14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.


22. Ibid.


27. Manivannan, 2013, p. 117.


29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

References

4chan posts, Archived by the author; available upon request.

2015.


doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91515-9, accessed 19 May 2021.


doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-68360-7, accessed 19 May 2021.


Editorial history

Received 20 January 2020; revised 20 July 2020; accepted 28 January 2021.

To the extent possible under law, this work is dedicated to the public domain.

‘Getting by’ on 4chan: Feminine self-presentation and capital-claiming in antifeminist Web space by Judith May Fathallah. 
First Monday, volume 26, number 6 (June 2021). 
doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i6.10449