Characterizations of Feminism in Reformed Christian Online Media

The term “culture war” is often used to describe the relationship between evangelical Christianity and movements like feminism. Given the increasing dependence of religious groups on online media, analysis of the discourse therein offers an effective means of examining patterns within Christian discourse about feminism. The current study examines a corpus of 147 articles from a popular online North American Reformed Christian news site, focusing on what feminism is most frequently associated with and counterexamples to these characterizations. Feminism was consistently connected with false theology, breakdown of marriage/traditional gender roles, promiscuity and nontraditional sexuality, abortion, anti-Christian cultural change, and liberal politics. However, a minority of dissenting voices suggests that some are allowed to express cautious support of feminism.

Introduction

It will come as no surprise to most people that feminism and Christianity are not fast friends. A study of evangelical attitudes towards feminism by Gallagher (2004a) found that two thirds of American evangelicals consider feminism ‘hostile to Christian values’ (p. 229). Feminism has been blamed by evangelicals in North America for the declining value of the traditional family (Kassian, 2005), the rise of women in unbiblical positions of leadership (Creegan and Pohl, 2005), legalization of abortion (Steuter, 1992), theological liberalism (Grudem, 2006) and the rise of the divorce rate (Adams & Coltrane, 2007). The term ‘culture war’ is often used in conjunction with what is perceived as a battle between evangelical Christianity and movements such as feminism which, according to many, undermine Christian ideology (Ingersoll, 2003). For many evangelical Christians, ‘Feminism is bad news’ (Storkey, 1985: 114) and represents a challenge to such core beliefs as male leadership in the home and church and female domesticity as well as a ‘path by which evangelicals are being drawn into theological liberalism (Grudem, 2006: 15).

Consistent with this, a number of studies have concluded that antifeminism dominates evangelical religious identity (Brasher, 1998; Brown, 1994). Some have gone
so far as to argue that evangelical and fundamentalist religious beliefs are the source of antifeminism sentiment in the general public as well (Peek & Brown, 1980). Ingersoll (2003: 15) explores the consequences of this generalization, noting,

Conservative Protestantism is often portrayed by scholars as uniformly committed to ‘traditional family values’ and to the antifeminism therein…This monolithic Protestant traditionalism is then portrayed as a central force on one side of a larger culture war: conservatives (including evangelicals and fundamentalists) versus liberals (including feminists). This polarized view plays into the hands both of those who want to demonize conservative Protestantism and of conservative Protestant ‘traditionalists’ who want to claim that theirs is the only legitimate position within a “biblical” (by which they mean a conservative Protestant interpretation of the Bible) worldview.

Aside from allowing evangelicals to guard themselves from the influence of the surrounding culture by positioning feminists as extremists, as either ‘radical or extremely radical’ (Storkey, 1985: 114), this tension between evangelicals and relevant outgroups helps to build evangelical identity, retain members, and promote in-group solidarity (Smith & Emerson, 1998, Riley, 2001).

However, the relationship between evangelicalism and feminism in the United States is complicated, largely because both are broad terms covering a multitude of voices. American evangelicalism encompasses multiple Christian church denominations, organizations, writers, and teachers (Gallagher, 2004: 218), and has been operationalized fairly inconsistently (Hackett and Lindsay, 2008). Likewise, the term feminism stands for
a multitude of voices, its proponents arguing often in favor of radically different issues, albeit united by the belief that women be afforded the same status and rights as men.

In order to understand the particulars of this relationship, some have examined the extent of and rationale behind anti-feminism among American evangelicals. A significant number of studies have focused particularly on evangelical and Biblical feminism, tracing its emergence (Hornder, 2000; Scanzoni & Hardesty, 1992), evangelical backlash to feminism in the form of the Promise Keepers movement (Bartkowski, 2001; Heath, 2003), and ways in which evangelical Christians, particularly new converts, negotiate feminism in a community hostile to secular feminism (Manning, 1999). For example, Pevey et al. (1996) answers the question of how women within conservative religious communities find happiness and fulfillment and maintain self-esteem within the context of patriarchy. Relying on 12, 1-2 hour in-depth interviews and attendance at weekly meetings of a Southern Baptist ladies’ Bible study, she notes a considerable disjuncture between participants religious beliefs and the strategies they report using to subvert the doctrine of submission to one’s husband.

Among the most recent and most often cited are studies by Gallagher (2004a, b), which, using a combination of a national survey of self-identified evangelicals and semi-structured interviews, examines the extent to which feminism, in particular egalitarianism, as opposed to gender hierarchy, characterizes the perspectives of contemporary evangelicals. She concludes that two thirds of evangelicals view feminism as an encroachment on Christian values, although there is some ambivalence and even sympathy towards feminism, particularly among those who identify as egalitarian.

Objections to feminism by evangelicals include the assumption that it is linked to selfish
CHARACTERIZATIONS OF FEMINISM 4

individualism, the politics of sexual identity, abortion, and denial of gender difference (2004b). In particular, Gallagher’s conclusions regarding the source of the rejection of feminism are insightful. She concludes (2004a: 231-232) that this is due to five factors: 1. evangelical distinctiveness is maintained via careful distance from the surrounding culture, 2. evangelicals are suspicious of egalitarianism, 3. the concept of feminism has been effectively generalized and linked with particular beliefs that evangelicals find unacceptable, 4. evangelical authors have linked feminism with theological liberalism, and 5. major seminaries and institutions across the USA are dominated by gender conservatives. She notes, finally, that ‘To the extent that gender conservatives remain successful in linking androgyny and egalitarianism, evangelical feminism is likely to remain ideologically suspect to the majority of ordinary evangelicals’ (2004a: 232).

That some members of the diverse population of evangelical Christianity are sympathetic or even pro-feminist to some extent is evident in the findings of such studies as Wilcox (1989), Bendroth (1993), and Gallagher (2003). The work of these and other scholars, such as Manning (1999), based primarily on data from interviews and surveys, indicate that variables such as beliefs about gender roles in marriage, denominational affiliation, political conservatism, and personal experience play a role in influencing, determining, and sustaining a spectrum of attitudes towards feminism. In this article, I focus on a group of denominations comprising the Reformed Christian Church, focusing primarily on those who consider themselves orthodox. Whilst many books exist reflecting on and warning against the influence of feminism on the Reformed Christian community, I am unable to locate any studies which empirically explore this community’s range of views on feminism or on how they are articulated.
Given the increasing dependence of religious groups and their members on online presence via blogs and news sites (Cheong et al., 2009), analysis of the discourse therein offers an effective means of examining patterns within Reformed Christian public discourse about feminism and identifying minority voices. Conservative Protestant media, alongside local congregational culture and more generalized political conservatism, plays a vital role in both creating and sustaining negative attitudes towards feminism, which trickle down, providing ordinary believers ‘with a particular vocabulary for describing and responding to feminism’ (Gallagher, 2004: 469). Media communication is therefore an important factor in forming views of reality for evangelicals, particularly for those who do not have firsthand experience with feminist ideas (Schultze & Woods, Jr., 2009). The current study aims to answer the following questions, examining the online discourse produced by this community about feminism, using a self-built corpus of 147 articles taken from a popular Reformed Christian news site:

1. With whom and with what is feminism most frequently associated among Reformed Christians in North America?
2. What counterexamples to these characterizations exist in this community?

**The Reformed Christian Church and Feminism**

Some have argued that self-identifying evangelicals distinguish themselves primarily by their focus on evangelism and conversion experience rather than their specific doctrines or denominational preferences (Lindsey, 2007). And yet, for groups within the evangelical community, community boundaries are less ambiguous. Reformed evangelical Christians, for instance, a body representing around seventy-five million
Christians in over two hundred countries (Atwood, 2010), find their identity primarily within doctrinal standards, such as those laid out in the Westminster Confession of Faith, and are frequently connected with Presbyterian, sometimes Congregationalist, forms of church government. For the Reformed Christian, key doctrines such as belief in the sovereignty of God, the great ‘Solas’ of the Reformation, and God’s election, redemption, and securing of His people through the work of Jesus Christ distinguish them from other evangelicals (see Warfield, 1970; Sproul, 2005; McKim, 2001; Wells, 1997), and divisions among Reformed denominations, detailed in Atwood (2010), can be traced to different interpretations of these doctrines. Indeed, the majority of conflict, what Brewer (2005) calls ‘the trend of splitting and reunification’, within the Reformed Christian community has arisen from disagreement over doctrine and particularly over what members within this community sees as encroaching liberalism.

It is unsurprising then, that amongst evangelical Christians, Reformed Christians, particularly American, are among the most anti-feminist (Storkey, 1985). Mary Kassian is one of the most vocal, defining feminism as ‘a complete rejection of the Judeo-Christian paradigm for male-female roles, relationships and societal structures as well as its concepts of God’ (Kassian, 2005: 11). Feminism represents for many Reformed Christians, a ‘direct and deliberate bending of the Bible to conform to the world spirit of our age at the point where the modern spirit conflicts with what the Bible teaches’ (Schaeffer, 1984: 130). Such a perspective is an effective survival technique. Smith and Emerson (1998: 68) refer to this as sheltered enclave theory, noting that, ‘Religions – especially traditional, orthodox religions – survive and prosper when they are sheltered from the undermining effects of modernity.’
Research on Feminism in the Media

Studies on how feminists are portrayed in the media rely on a diverse set of methodological frameworks, many of whom arguably employ some type of content analysis (see Krippendorff, 2012), often aided with corpus analysis. Many of the studies examining the representation of feminism in media have focused on large corpora of secular print newspapers. Huddy (1997), for example, examines the frequency with which ‘specific policy issues, women’s organizations, and individuals associated with the women’s movement have been explicitly labeled feminist or supportive of feminism’ (p. 188) in the New York Times and three major weekly news magazines between 1965 and 1993. Focusing only on those articles indexed under headings related to the women’s movement, Huddy coded each of 276 articles for primary and secondary issues arising in the articles and references to the terms feminist and feminism, individual feminists and organizations. She concludes that the media simplifies the feminist movement by identifying only a handful of feminists by name and that feminists are often characterized as in conflict with ordinary members of society. In another study, Jaworska and Kirshnamurphy (2012) targeted a corpus of German/British newspapers, focusing primarily on the 20 most frequent collocates to the left of the pattern ‘of feminist’, complements of ‘feminist is’, and most frequent adjectives in the vicinity. Findings include a strong tendency for the press to portray feminism negatively and the association of feminism with the outdated, irrelevant past, sexuality, academic fields, and the arts. Mendes (2012) reaches some of the same conclusions, using content analysis and critical discourse analysis to examine the discursive construction of feminism in American and British newspapers between 1968 and 2008. She concludes that over time, the press has
increasingly characterized the feminist movement as completed, constructing it as a personal set of beliefs for those women, seen as ‘whiners’ and ‘jealous of others’ (p. 565), who couldn’t achieve success in the workplace despite great strides made for them by their predecessors.

While much of the research in this area focuses on newspapers, Lind and Salo (2002) analyzed the characterization of feminists and feminism in television (comparing such representation to that of women) via content analysis of transcripts of 35,000 hours of ABC, CNN, PBS and NPR news and public affairs content. In particular, they used the concept of framing, i.e. the media’s encoding of an event within a frame or story line, thereby establishing its meaning, to understand the ways in which ‘certain words, terms, concepts, attitudes and values are associated with feminists’ (p. 212). Having reviewed existing studies which apply framing to mediated representations of feminism, they used Wordlink to find words collocating with feminism (word pairs) and compared them with pre-determined frames, arguing that use of the same frames across studies (something existing studies had failed so far to do) allow findings to be cross-compared. Findings include that references to feminism are uncommon when compared with frequency of such words as ‘woman’ or ‘women’, that feminism is portrayed as neither relevant nor applicable to the daily life of ordinary people, and that feminists are ‘not quite “normal,”’ not quite “regular,” not quite “real”’ (p. 224) in where they live, the lifestyles they lead, and the activities they take part in. Notably, they discovered that feminists are frequently associated with religion, and they hypothesize that this may reflect feminism’s challenge to traditional religion, though their methodology is insufficient to explore this claim further.
Moving beyond mainstream media, research examining evangelical Christian media has focused primarily on the relationship between conservative evangelicals, popular media, and politics in the USA (see Ryan & Switzer, 2009; Rossie, 2012, Hendershot, 2010). Some exceptions include Sturgill’s (2004) work on the structure, scope, and intended uses of church web sites and Collins and Sturgill’s (2013) examination of the effect of mass media on religious (including evangelical Christian) individual’s perceptions of science. While some have written about demonization of feminism in fundamentalist Christian talk shows (Kintz & Lesage, 1998), little if any empirical work has been done examining depictions of feminism in evangelical media. Given that the majority of people, particularly Christians, derive their understanding of feminism from the media (Huddy, 1997), examining the ways in which Christian media define, describe, and use the word feminism and related terms can shed light on the characterizations of feminism to which evangelical Christians are exposed and influenced by.

Methodology

Data for this study is derived from a corpus of 147 online articles on The Aquila Report, a website founded in May, 2008, which describes itself as an ‘independent news source for news and commentary from and about conservative evangelicals in the Reformed and Presbyterian family of churches’ (http://theaquilareport.com/). The Aquila Report team comprises four members, two of which are editors, but the majority of their content ‘comes from third party sources such as other publishers and bloggers’ in the Reformed Christian community (http://theaquilareport.com/about/). The Aquila Report
publishes roughly 8-10 articles per day on a range of topics of interest to Reformed Christians.

According to Reformed Churchmen Publications, The Aquila Report received 283,000 pageviews in May, 2014, passing the five million total page view mark. Within the Reformed Christian community in North America, this website is a key place to read about key events and issues within the Reformed church.

This corpus was built using Google sitesearch to identify all articles where the words feminism, feminist, and feminists occur in The Aquila Report articles between May, 2008, and May, 2014. As indicated by the site’s index, the total number of articles on the Aquila site during this period is 13,640, indicating that the terms in question, occurring in roughly 1% of articles on the site, are relatively uncommon, consistent with what literature on mainstream media reports (Lind & Salo, 2002). Details of this corpus can be found in Table 1.

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of articles</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total word count</td>
<td>202,592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of individual authors</td>
<td>32 women, 62 men, 1 unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articles written by men</td>
<td>104 (138, 499 words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articles written by women</td>
<td>42 (61,734 words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articles written by unknown</td>
<td>1 (2,359 words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average article word length</td>
<td>1,378 words</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Details of The Aquila Report corpus

This corpus-driven project (see Tognini-Bonelli, 2001) combined quantitative and qualitative methods, combining use of corpus software to identify all occurrences of the terms and recurring larger structures (i.e. clusters) with context-sensitive analysis of all texts to examine how the terms in question were used (see Bednarek, 2009). Studies such as Jaworska & Krishnampurhy’s (2012) study of the collocational profiles of the term
*feminism* in a large corpus of German and British newspapers and Lind and Salo’s (2002) analysis of the framing of feminism in an equally large corpus of U.S. electronic media use computational linguistics to direct their attention to high-frequency collocates, after which they can examine these qualitatively, focusing particularly on concordance lines rather than reading each text individually in its entirety. But as the Aquila corpus is a fairly small one, I could move beyond the automated statistics studies on larger corpora rely on (see, for example, Mautner, 2007) and examine each text in detail. This study used AntConc, a concordancing tool, to determine total word count, frequency of the chosen words, and frequent collocates to the left of the terms. But beyond this, quantitative analysis gave way to qualitative.

Two theoretical notions laid the foundation for this study, the first being semantic preference, the relation ‘between a lemma or word form and a set of semantically related words’ (Stubbs, 2001: 65). Baker et al (2008) give the example of the two-word cluster *glass of* which shows a semantic preference for words related to cold drinks, such as *water, milk, and lemonade*. Second, Stubbs (2001) notion of discourse prosody, on the other hand, refers to the ways in which the language that frequently surrounds a particular word and ‘extends over more than one unit in a linear string’ (ibid, p. 65) attaches positive or negative associations to it. In other words, surrounding a word with other words with either pleasant or unpleasant associations reveals ‘the speaker or writer’s attitude or stance towards, viewpoint or feelings about the entities and propositions that he or she is talking about’ (Hunston & Thompson, 2000: 5). Sinclair’s (1991) oft-cited example is of the verb *set in*, which has a negative prosody, its main collocates including *rot, decay, malaise, and ill will*. While this concept has been relied on in numerous
studies, its use is somewhat controversial. Hunston (2007) explores the subjectivity involved in determining whether or not certain words imply something desirable or undesirable as well as variance in the prosody of particular words depending on context. One of the examples she cites is persistence, which occurs in a range of both positive and negative contexts. She notes the importance of examining counter-examples to any generalizations, as ‘these are instructive in reminding us that…discourse function, or semantic prosody,…belongs to the sequence rather than to the word’ (p. 257). This in mind, this study examines, first, the ways in which words and phrases surrounding the terms feminist(s) and feminism can be grouped semantically and what attitude towards feminism is thereby created and perpetuated and second, what negative evidence exists which falls outside any emergent semantic categories.

Following on from these theoretical concepts, drawing up a profile of feminism/feminist(s) involved:

1. Using AntConc to identify frequency of terms and words which clustered around them.
2. Examining the surrounding context (sentence, paragraph, and text topic) of each occurrence of the terms, paying close attention to all pre-modifiers (adjectives), subject complements, and finite and non-finite verb phrases whose subject is either one of the terms, its anaphors, or individuals identified as feminists. Close reading of the texts also enabled the identification of a few cases of metaphor used to characterize feminists, noun and adjective phrases which were listed with the terms in question, instances where feminism and feminists were polarized
with concepts, people, attributes, etc., and places where specific feminists were named.

3. Coding the linguistic context of each occurrence and identifying patterns and emergent themes which reveal the terms’ semantic preference which, in turn, contributes to their semantic prosody.

4. Identifying counterexamples and exploring ways in which they can be grouped thematically.

Regarding point 2 above, one might argue that including language surrounding named feminists, like Betty Friedan, should be excluded on the basis that the writers were identifying specific feminists and not necessarily generalizing the actions and characteristics they ascribe to these individuals to all feminists. However, as Huddy (1997) demonstrates, ‘feminists have been identified narrowly as a small subset of women involved in the women’s movement’. The characteristics of this subset are often attributed to the whole of the feminist movement. And indeed, this is consistent with how individual feminists vs. feminism as a movement were characterized in the corpus. For example, there were few instances of qualifiers used with the terms to indicate the possibility of diversity within feminism. ‘Some feminists’ and ‘One feminist’ were each used only once. Further, seven of the named individuals are described as ‘radical’ in 12 separate articles, a premodifier which was also the most frequent collocate to the left of feminist(s)/feminism (see Table 2). Additionally, feminists mentioned by name include liberal theologians and those who reject their faith (10), those described as embracing promiscuity (4), and pro-abortion feminists (2). In nearly every instance, these individual feminists were described and their actions portrayed using the same kinds of language.
authors used in conjunction with the more general terms feminist(s)/feminism. There were exceptions, particularly in the case of dissident feminists, those who criticize feminism in some way. These were included in the analysis and treated as negative evidence, and hypotheses regarding why they were characterized as more sympathetic figures will be discussed in a later section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>radical (35), modern (13), evangelical (6), second-wave (5), third-wave (5), secular (3), anti-(2), Biblical (2), committed (2), hard-core (2), Jesus (2), lesbian (2), militant (2), strident (2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Table 2: Most frequent collocates to the left of feminism/feminist

**Findings**

The corpus contains a total of 386 occurrences of the terms *feminist, feminists,* and *feminism* (see Appendix 1). Female authors used the terms with greater frequency, and specific individuals identified as feminists were almost exclusively female. A wide range of verbs were used with the terms, although subsequent sections will reveal how these verbs can be grouped into semantic fields.

**RQ1 With whom and with what is feminism most frequently associated?**

The following sections examine with whom and what feminism is associated most frequently, using the following emergent themes: false theology and doctrine, marriage and gender roles, sex and sexuality, abortion, culture/cultural change, and politics. While additional themes were also present, such as environmentalist and education, these were less salient. In all cases presented in these sections, the semantic preference of the terms
feminist(s)/feminism contributed to a negative semantic prosody. While there were exceptions, these will be discussed in a later section.

Some elements in the linguistic context of the terms appeared in more than one thematic category, and, likewise, some articles were about more than one main topic. For example, the noun phrase *same-sex marriage* was used in wider stretches of language focusing on marriage and sex/sexuality and so is listed in both thematic categories. Likewise, an article entitled ‘An Open Letter to the Evangelicals in the PCUSA’ (Carpenter, 2010) focused not only on liberal theology but also sexuality (gay rights). For this reason, this article was counted in both topical categories (false theology and doctrine, sex/sexuality).

**False Theology and Doctrine.** The mention of feminist(s) and feminism in *The Aquila Report* was most relevant in discussion of church doctrine, a key value in the Reformed Christian community (see Table 3). Forty of the 147 articles in the corpus containing reference to feminists/feminism were devoted to such topics as male imagery of God in the Bible, interpreting the Genesis account of the curse due to Adam and Eve’s sin and the PCUSA’s eroding belief in the importance of the book of confessions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency (and percentage of total)</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>main topic of article</td>
<td>40 articles (27%)</td>
<td>the two kingdoms in Scripture, women bishops, male imagery of God in the Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clustering</td>
<td>26 (24%)</td>
<td>process theology, women deacons, rejection of hell, pagan, nature worship, goddess worship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verb phrase</td>
<td>33 (19%)</td>
<td>‘argues against the divinity and uniqueness of Jesus Christ’, ‘assert that if God is male, then male is God’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Beyond just these 40 articles, however, throughout the corpus, feminism and feminist(s) clustered (occurred in a list of items) most frequently around language connected with theology and doctrine, such as *liberal Christians, theologically liberal,* and *women deacons*. Verb phrases following the terms were also most frequently connected to these issues, for example, ‘call the resurrection a myth’, ‘denies every basic Christian doctrine’, ‘distorts sound Christian truths’, and ‘argues against the divinity and uniqueness of Jesus Christ’. As one writer put it, ‘we are tempted…to reject the sound Christian truths which modern feminism distorts’. Pre-modifiers of the terms were also frequently connected to liberal theology and doctrine. For example, the modifier *theological* in the following excerpt identifies a type of feminism and makes clear how it runs counter to all of Christianity:
Daly took theological feminism to what she believed was its rightful and logical conclusion — to the absolute rejection of Christianity and all theistic conceptions of God.

In terms of nearly every feature examined in the corpus, feminism’s association with unreformed theology and doctrine is stronger than its association with any other category. It is thereby cast in a negative light by means of this connection with theological views, concepts, and people outside of orthodox, Reformed Christianity.

**Marriage and Gender Roles.** Feminism was linked with discussion of marriage and (traditional) gender roles, both important concepts in the Reformed Church, with almost as much frequency as it was with matters of theology and doctrine (see Table 4). Particularly noteworthy is the fact that while the terms frequently co-occurred with the language about marriage, it was most often polarized with it, which again contributed to a negative semantic prosody. In fact, feminism was polarized with marriage and traditional gender roles more often (68% of the time) than with any other thematic category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency (and percentage of total)</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main topic of article</td>
<td>34 (23%)</td>
<td>marriage and divorce, same sex marriage, Tim Tebow (and gender roles within marriage), polygamy, working women, patriarchy, men as primary breadwinners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clustering</td>
<td>7 (6%)</td>
<td>egalitarianism, rejection of traditional marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb phrases</td>
<td>31 (18%)</td>
<td>‘made divorce easy’, ‘call marriage a “comfortable concentration camp”’, ‘pretending there is no such thing as maleness and femaleness’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-modifiers</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>egalitarian, gender-neutral</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Feminists were described as those who ‘claim that financial and legal rights are theirs without marriage’, who ‘encourage women to leave their husbands’ and who ‘made divorce easy’. One feminist was singled out as someone who ‘called marriage “a comfortable concentration camp from which women should be freed,”’ and others were characterized by their divorces and otherwise failed relationships. Feminists/ feminism was also associated with gender role reversal and denial of gender role differences, i.e. those who ‘sought to replace gender altogether’.

Sex and Sexuality. Feminism/feminist(s) were linked very strongly with sex and sexuality, more specifically promiscuity and homosexuality, both of which run counter to values within most of Reformed Christianity (see Table 5). Feminists were described as those who ‘argue that they shouldn’t decry the hookup culture’, ‘call for a celebration of lust’, and ‘champion lesbianism’ while ‘attack[ing] heterosexuality’. One writer,
discussing the objectification of women, suggests that feminists are to blame for immodest dress, writing

‘If you have it, flaunt it,’ was expressed by more than one approving feminist.

The terms appeared frequently in lists of terms connected with sex/sexuality, and feminists were polarized in one text with those who remain faithful in marriage. Finally, five of the 34 feminists identified by name were characterized by such actions as calling for women to ‘enjoy multiple sex partners’ and embracing ‘hookup culture’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency (and percentage of total)</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main topic of article</td>
<td>19 (13%)</td>
<td>the purity movement, the super bowl, political, hookup culture, the objectification of women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clustering</td>
<td>21 (19%)</td>
<td>homosexual liberation, gay pride, rampant pansexuality, same-sex marriage, sexual revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb phrases</td>
<td>26 (15%)</td>
<td>champion lesbianism, express the notion ‘if you have it, flaunt it’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-modifiers</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>lesbian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminists associated with sex and sexuality</td>
<td>5 (15%)</td>
<td>Jessica Valenti, Hanna Rosin, Helen Gurly-Brown, Judith Butler, Elizabeth Wurtzel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polarized with</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>calling for chastity outside marriage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Sex and Sexuality

**Abortion.** Fourteen articles in the corpus focused on the topic of abortion, and the terms feminist and feminism clustered with noun phrases associated with abortion.
times throughout the corpus (see Table 6). Sixteen verb phrases involved interaction with abortion, for example: ‘are willing to kill the unborn’, ‘brag about how many abortions they’ve legalized’, ‘pushed to legalize abortion’, ‘demand an end to all age restrictions [on access to abortion]’, and ‘brag about the many abortions they’ve had’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency (and percentage of total)</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main topic of article</td>
<td>14 (10%)</td>
<td>Leon Kass, pro-abortion views in liberal churches, Obama and Plan B, Tim Tebow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clustering</td>
<td>10 (9%)</td>
<td>abortion rights, pro-abortion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb phrases</td>
<td>16 (9%)</td>
<td>are willing to kill the unborn, brag about how many abortions they’ve had, clamor for any age-restriction to be removed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-modifiers</td>
<td>4 (3.4%)</td>
<td>abortion-consumed, birth-bashing, pro-abortion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject complements</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>pro-abortion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminists associated with abortion</td>
<td>3 (9%)</td>
<td>Michele Bachman, Anne Eggebroten, Gloria Steinam</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Abortion

In one text, feminists are described in this way:

Indeed, the stepford wives have become the stepford lesbians. The prudish, judgmental church lady has swapped spots with the say - yet somehow self-righteous - birth-bashing feminist.

In another, the feminist movement is uniformly blamed for a view of pregnancy as ‘a problem’.

Where once the institution of marriage gave legitimacy to sexual relations and children, it no longer serves as much of a gatekeeper. This can largely be attributed to the sexual revolution, which paved the way for sex outside of
marriage; the feminist movement, which pushed to legalize abortion, thereby making pregnancy a woman’s ‘problem’ to deal with as she sees fit; and the decreased role of religion in American life.

In other texts, feminists are characterized as being abortion-consumed, and named feminists associated with abortion are identified by their having had an abortion and/or campaigning for access to abortion. The terms were not polarized with language connected to abortion anywhere in the corpus.

**Politics.** The corpus contained some instances where feminism was linked to politics (see Table 7). In particular, it was associated with being a democrat, a political liberal, and/or a Marxist. While feminism was discussed in several articles about Sarah Palin, Mrs. Palin herself was not identified as a feminist but rather someone who beat feminists at their own game. One writer puts it this way:

But just when members of the party’s encrusted feminocracy were celebrating their womanhood by bragging about how many abortions they’ve legalized, they hear the throaty rumble of a Harley-Davidson sporting a lady with a rifle in one hand, a baby in the other, and running the biggest state in the union with an 80-something-percent approval rating. Talk about worse than having a bad hair day.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency (and percentage of total)</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main topic of article</td>
<td>9 (6%)</td>
<td>Mitt Romney, Sarah Palin, socialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clustering</td>
<td>23 (21%)</td>
<td>democrat, liberationist, Marxism, pacifism, political activist, political radicalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-modifiers</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>Marxist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminists associated with politics</td>
<td>2 (6%)</td>
<td>Hilary Clinton, Michele Bachman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Politics
Of note in this category is the high frequency with which the terms occurred in list (clustered with) political language, a frequency eclipsed only by the false doctrine/theology category. Another finding worth mentioning is that no verb phrases connected with politics followed the terms in this corpus.

**Culture/ Cultural change.** Finally, feminists were, at times, connected to discussion of cultural impact (see Table 8). In particular, feminists were identified as responsible for the death of Christian culture, the decline of culture, connected with concepts such as multiculturalism, and depicted as a movement which ‘changes institutions dear to founding fathers’. No specific feminists were identified, suggesting that it is movements and not individuals responsible for cultural change, as seen in the following example:

The ad puts on display how a secular, feminist and ultraliberal view of the world disorders humanity and society in general and reduces our identity - for women specially - to nothing more than the sum total of our sexual desires and escapades.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency (and percentage of total)</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main topic of article</td>
<td>10 (7%)</td>
<td>death of Christian culture, decline of culture, postmodernist culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clustering</td>
<td>7 (6%)</td>
<td>multiculturalism, secular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb phrases</td>
<td>12 (7%)</td>
<td>‘disorders humanity and society in general’, ‘dominate American culture’, ‘produce a massive change in Western culture’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Culture/ Cultural Change
**RQ2 What counterexamples to these characterizations exist in this community?**

Fifteen articles in the corpus, written by 6 men (12 articles) and 3 women (3 articles), characterize feminism in a way that was distinctive from the norm in the corpus. Where the majority of authors in the corpus used language in a way that drew a sharp distinction between Christianity and feminism, these ten Reformed Christian writers used more cautious language, even going so far as to gently rebuke the Reformed community for their portrayal of feminism and feminists. However, nowhere did any of these authors self-identify as feminists, even whilst identifying common ground with feminism. One male writer in particular, six of whose articles contain positive reference to feminism, notes in another piece that despite the fact that a picture of a supporter of the equal rights amendment hangs in his office, this should not be seen as an ‘apologetic for feminism’. So even when feminism is presented in a positive light, it is still identified as ‘other’, as outside the Reformed Christian community.

The articles focus on a similar range of topics to those portraying feminism negatively (with some articles focusing on more than one topic): marriage and gender roles (4), gender quality (4), theology and doctrine (3), abortion (2), politics (2), the environment (1). And like the articles in the corpus which place feminism in a negative light, the terms in question are surrounded, in some cases, with language connected to such issues as abortion, theology, and gender roles. However, these associations do not serve the same function, that of connecting feminism with ideas and ideals antithetical to Reformed Christianity. Instead, analysis of the cautiously positive portrayal of feminism in these articles indicates the existence of five messages: feminism is diverse, feminism is right about some things, feminism is not the bogeyman, and feminism and Christianity
have some common enemies. Some references to feminism were connected to more than one message.

**Message 1: Feminism is diverse.** One author, writing about Mary Eberstadt’s (2012) book on the paradoxes of the sexual revolution, notes that while Reformed Christians accept certain terms as encompassing a diversity of voices, terms like feminism are narrowly defined. She writes that Eberstadt’s ‘broad-brush condemnations also take aim at modern feminism, a term that is about as precise as “evangelicalism” and therefore runs the risk of dehumanizing an entire movement of diverse voices’. Given the corpus’s consistent characterization of feminism as a largely homogenous movement, this author’s point of view is unexpected and atypical.

**Message 2: Feminism is right about some things.** Whilst maintaining some distance, several writers point out that feminists are sometimes right, identifying such issues as standing with the disempowered, caring for the environment, opposing patriarchy, and sexual harassment. This is evident in the following excerpts:

- One of my enduring values, which carried me through the Feminist and Gay Rights movements of the 1990s, and continues to motivate me today as one of Christ's own, is the desire to stand with the disempowered. (*alignment with the disempowered*)

- It seems to me that radical feminist theologians and ethicists who suggest that one’s view of gender affects one’s view of environment are correct. (*care for the environment*)

- Feminists are correct to see an abusive form of ‘dominion’ in harsh forms of patriarchy in human history, and they are correct to see an analogy with human
abuse of the earth itself. It is no accident, I think, that a metaphor for human mistreatment of the earth is often ‘rape’. (*opposition to unbiblical patriarchy, care for the environment*)

- We can all see what this means, even apart from divine revelation. One of the good things the feminist movement has brought to us is the way we deal publicly now with sexual harassment. An employer who pressures an employee for sexual favors isn’t just an immoral person; he is misusing power. When the CEO sleeps with an intern, his offense isn’t just against God and his wife, but is also an unjust abuse of power. (*sexual harassment*)

As in the rest of the corpus, the authors of these excerpts portray feminism as a united movement. However, by identifying ways in which the goals of the feminist movement are consistent with a Reformed Biblical perspective, they minimize the distance between feminism and Reformed Christianity.

*Message 3: Feminists are not the enemy.* While not every author in this group was willing to identify areas feminists had contributed to improvements in society, a significant number expressed the belief that feminists have been unfairly demonized. In the first excerpt below, one writer admonishes his Christian audience, noting that feminists are not bogeyman to be feared. The next three cite an unfounded fear among Christians of the feminization of the church and of the devastation of society many Christians attribute to feminism. The final excerpt, while noting a mistake made by feminists in interpreting comments made by American football player Tim Tebow, refers to ‘our feminist friends’, using language signaling closeness.
...the feminist bogeyman who shows up if we see a woman publicly reading scripture or praying during worship, or assisting with the Lord’s Supper... When our cynicism makes enemies of friends, the results can be devastating.

The young guy had come to embrace a certain [false] narrative...Liberalism and feminism contributed to the rise of women, the softening of biblical authority, and the feminization of the church

In the conservative Presbyterian denomination in which I serve as elder, there is ongoing concern about the "proper" roles of women, accompanied by a fear of encroaching liberalism perceived as enmeshed with feminist ideals, and so on.

Whether feminism had an aggravating or countervailing role in this devolution [into many divorces, out-of-wedlock births, widespread acceptance of homosexual activity, and the hookup culture] into barbarism is fair game for debate.

Jezebel, a feminist website, picked up on comments Tebow made in an interview with Vogue magazine... I'm not upset at our feminist friends for reading Tebow wrong on this.

In each case, the authors seem to be exhorting their readers either to assuage the fears of their fellow Christians or to extend the arm of friendship to those ostracized by the Reformed Christian community for their feminist views.

Message 4: Feminism and Christianity have common enemies. Finally, feminism is portrayed positively in this group of texts in the presence of a common enemy. This message varies from message 2 in that mentions of feminism therein reference an opposing force rather than simply a common goal, such as caring for the environment.
When women are under threat of violence, in particular, Christian writers ally themselves with feminism, although political enemies are also grounds for an alliance in at least one text, as evidenced in the following excerpts:

- Mavis Leno (wife of The Tonight Show’s Jay Leno) chairs a committee of the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) on Afghan women and girls. In a telephone interview, she told me she is “worried sick” about diplomatic negotiations with the Afghan government and fears the Taliban could again leave women at a disadvantage. (*Taliban’s persecution of women*)

- Now the city is reconsidering the decision [to ban restrictive religious clothing], with heavy opposition from feminist groups (who believe these practices are degrading to women… (*restrictive religious clothing*)

- We should join with others, including secular feminists, in seeking legal protections against such manifestations of a rape culture as sexual harassment, prostitution, and sex slavery. (*sexual crimes and harassment*)

- We can all see what this means, even apart from divine revelation. One of the good things the feminist movement has brought to us is the way we deal publicly now with sexual harassment. An employer who pressures an employee for sexual favors isn’t just an immoral person; he is misusing power. When the CEO sleeps with an intern, his offense isn’t just against God and his wife, but is also an unjust abuse of power. (*sexual harassment*)

- Caci said she reported her ‘run-in’ with Romney [wherein Romney reportedly harassed a group of women with his views on sex and dating] to those women,
CHARACTERIZATIONS OF FEMINISM

who published a Mormon feminist journal entitled Exponent II. (Mormon views of sex and dating)

- Feminists are correct to see an abusive form of ‘dominion’ in harsh forms of patriarchy in human history, and they are correct to see an analogy with human abuse of the earth itself. It is no accident, I think, that a metaphor for human mistreatment of the earth is often ‘rape’. (opposing patriarchy)

Discussion

This study has examined the contexts in which feminism is discussed in Reformed evangelical Christian media and the ways in which this contributes to negative discourse prosody. While some dissenting voices were found, feminism was consistently characterized in the corpus as promoting false theology and doctrine, undermining marriage and distinct gender roles, celebrating promiscuity and nontraditional sexuality, calling for the legalization of abortion, effecting antichristian culture/cultural change, and siding with liberal politics. Counter to Storkey’s (1985) identification of a softening of attitudes towards feminism among Christians, this study therefore demonstrates that among more conservative evangelical groups, feminists are still regarded as an enemy. Such findings are consistent somewhat with what members of evangelical congregations say in interview about feminism (Gallagher, 2004b), although Gallagher’s finding that 2/3 of evangelicals, while expressing skepticism, are also cautiously appreciative of feminism is inconsistent with what was observed in this corpus, where such sympathies were outnumbered significantly.
While a similar demonization of feminism can be found in mainstream media, this study indicates that the ways in which feminism is cast in a negative light in Reformed media do differ in important ways and therefore accomplish a unique goal. By closely associating feminism specifically with ideas and issues counter to Reformed Christian beliefs and practice, such as liberal theology, the boundaries separating this community from the surrounding culture are reiterated and strengthened. As Riley (2001: 72) writes, ‘by positioning feminists as extremists…it minimizes the impact that such individuals and associate social movements have had on creating social change’. For example, the identification of feminism with denial of gender roles and acceptance of nontraditional forms of sexuality marginalizes explicitly feminist perspectives within Reformed evangelical Christianity since the issue of gender is so central an aspect of evangelical subculture and identity (Gallagher, 2004a). By blaming feminism for contributing to marriage and family breakdown, polarizing it with happy marriage, for example, Reformed Christians identify a common enemy and unite around their efforts to remain faithful to their beliefs. By characterizing feminists are those who urge women to sexual freedom and promiscuity, Reformed Christians are reminded of their community’s beliefs about sexuality and encouraged to stay firm in the faith. The following quote by prominent Christian writer Mary Kassian (2005: 293) exemplifies this beautifully:

It is from Him [God]…that we gain a proper framework for understanding ourselves, our world, and God Himself. If we look to ourselves for the framework, as feminism does, we will undoubtedly distort the pattern.

Feminism is not just demonized but also monsterized in this community insofar as aligning with feminism means aligning with ideas and behaviors contrary to God’s word.
Yet the existence of dissenting voices indicates that even within this conservative community, it is sometimes acceptable to align with feminism, albeit in guarded, qualified ways. That the most frequently dissenting voices in this corpus are male is unsurprising, given evidence that women who speak sympathetically about feminism are sometimes vilified (Creegan & Pohl, 2005; Frankovic, 2014). And while women wrote about feminism in the corpus more frequently than men, they consistently characterized it negatively, suggesting that perhaps identity formation of Reformed women involves visibly distancing themselves from feminism, more so than do men. This is a matter warranting further exploration.

Findings from this study are limited by their reliance on a small corpus built from one website and could be strengthened via comparison with other forms of media used within this community and additional Christian communities. Though this site is a significant source of news within the Reformed Christian community in the United States, focus on a site of this size with roughly 250,000 views per month represents a modest, early exploration. Additionally, this article has not examined ways in which language surrounding the terms in question could be categorized in other ways, for example, into frames such as those used by Lind and Salo (2002). Certainly, patterns emerged in analysis that suggest that framing is another fruitful way of examining this corpus, and I hope to do this elsewhere. Language about feminism establishes boundaries and maintains group identity for the Reformed Christian community, and research examining the extent to which language surrounding other issues accomplishes the same goals would likewise be fruitful. Finally, further research on perceptions of feminism within a wider range of informal discussion within evangelical Christianity in the United
States and elsewhere will shed light on the ways in which this corpus is representative of this community and unique among Christianity more widely. Given recent controversy in the evangelical community over church leaders’ response to cases of spousal abuse, divorce, sexual violence, and other issues stemming from the Christian church’s beliefs about men and women (see Hobbs, 2015), unpacking the ways in which discourse about women either works against or aids in raising awareness about such matters is urgently needed, particularly in light of the growing online presence of influential patriarchal voices (Pyles, 2007).

References


Horner, S. S. (2000). Becoming all we’re meant to be: A social history of the contemporary evangelical feminist movement, a case study of the evangelical and ecumenical women’s caucus (Doctoral dissertation). Northwestern University, Evanston, IL.


Appendix 1  
Table A1: *Feminst, feminists, and feminism* in *The Aquila Report* corpus

| Frequency of terms in the corpus | Feminist: 164  
|                               | Feminists: 42  
|                               | Feminism: 180  
| Use of terms by male authors   | 245 occurrences (1.77 per 1,000 words)  
| Use of terms by female authors | 140 occurrences (2.27 per 1,000 words)  
| Number of individuals named and identified as feminists in the corpus | 34 (33 women, 1 man) in 46 articles in the corpus.  
| Number of verbs used with feminism/ feminist(s) | 174 (140 unique)  
| Number of pre-modifiers used with feminism/feminist(s) | 117 (47 unique)  
| Number of instances where feminism is polarized with another idea, issue, etc. | 48  
| Number of subject complements | 33  
| Number of NPs/APS occurring in a list with terms | 110  