'Risk of Sexual Violence Against Women and Girls' in the Construction of 'Gender-Neutral Toilets': A Discourse Analysis of Comments on YouTube Videos

Ben Colliver, Ben.Colliver@bcu.ac.uk

Birmingham City University, UK

Adrian Coyle, adrian.coyle@kingston.ac.uk

Kingston University London, UK

Abstract

This paper considers how the risk of sexual violence against women and girls is topicalized in social media interaction about 'gender-neutral toilets'. In particular, it examines how versions of the category of 'transgender people' are assigned a key role within the construction of sexual violence risk. A discursive analysis is presented of 1756 online comments in response to 10 YouTube videos relating to gender-neutral toilets. The analysis focuses on one theme entitled 'Gender-neutral toilets as a site of sexual danger' and its constituent sub-themes. The phenomenon of gender-neutral toilets was responded to with a limited set of gendered tropes that constructed and positioned stakeholders in culturally recognisable ways. Women and children were constructed as vulnerable to sexual violence, at risk from men (including versions of 'transgender women') and in need of protection. This transformed a debate over public space into a question of morality. The analysis contributes to existing literature by focusing on the discursive features involved in the construction of risk, and the implications of these constructions in minimizing the need to address social structures that position transgender people as legitimate targets of violence.

key words: gender-neutral toilets, sexual violence, transgender, discourse analysis

word count: 8,788

key messages:

1. Gender-neutral toilets were constructed as spaces of sexual risk and danger for women and girls.
2. The introduction of gender-neutral toilets was conflated with debates about the entitlement of transgender women to access women-only spaces.
3. Constructions of risk featured transgender people as potential sexual offenders but not as being at risk themselves in gender-segregated public toilets.

Introduction

Research on physical and sexual violence against women has focused on the nature, prevalence, causes and implications of this violence, and responses to it in terms of policy, prevention and service provision for women and children who are affected. These vitally important considerations have rightly been at the forefront of the research agenda. This paper takes a different approach and considers how violence against women – specifically the risk of sexual violence against women and girls – is topicalized in social media interaction about one specific gendered space: gender-neutral toilets, that is, public toilets available for use by anyone regardless of gender.

Here we look at how versions of the 'violence against women' trope are invoked and used in online responses to gender-neutral toilets. In particular, we consider how versions of the category of 'transgender people' are assigned a key role within the construction of sexual violence risk faced by women and girls in gender-neutral toilets and how a version of the category of 'transgender women' is used to construct them as likely perpetrators rather than victims of violence. In this respect, the paper extends the literature on the social construction of violence against women. In terms of space, that literature has focused mostly on the 'domestic sphere' (for example, Berns, 2001; Boonzaier, 2008), specific types of public space (for example, Berhardsson and Bogren, 2012), and war contexts (for example, Demmers, 2014). In this paper, we examine how what is treated as a (proposed) new space is socially constructed online and the role of 'violence against women' in those constructions. This is achieved through a discourse analysis of online comments made in response to YouTube videos relating to gender-neutral toilets. In this, we draw upon data taken from a broader research project that examined 'everyday' and 'mundane' incidents of hate crime and discrimination targeting transgender and non-binary people. First, we shall contextualize contemporary public debate about gender-neutral toilets.

Although the provision of gender-neutral toilets can be framed positively in terms of accessibility and inclusion for a range of people, on social media it has primarily been discussed in relation to facilitating access to public toilets for transgender people. The term 'transgender' is used throughout this paper to refer to people who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth based on observation of perceived biological sex. This is an umbrella term that incorporates a range of identities that do not conform to traditional, expected gender norms (Englert and Dinkins, 2016). However, the term has long produced debate and dissent within parts of the communities that are subsumed under it, particularly in relation to its difficulty in capturing the range of needs and interests of those diverse communities (Monro, 2003). The term 'cisgender' is also used in this paper. It refers to those who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, again based on perceived biological sex (Stryker, 2008). It has been acknowledged that within research that actively identifies people as 'transgender', 'cisgender' is often treated as the unspoken norm (Johnson, 2015). In this sense, the use of the term 'transgender' without the use of the term 'cisgender' allows transgender identities to be presented as remarkable and in need of interrogation whilst presenting non-transgender identities as unremarkable. For that reason, both terms are used here.

It is not the aim of this paper to interrogate the existence, authenticity or validity of transgender people and identities. Data will be presented that actively orient towards the de-legitimization of transgender people and these (and other) data will be critically examined. In recent years, though, discussions and often heated exchanges have occurred on social media platforms and in offline interactions concerning social and legal entitlements to self-declare gender and the rights that this confers on transgender people. These debates have also been played out in social policy and practice. For example, in 2017 President Donald Trump rescinded instructions that had been issued in 2016 by then-President Barack Obama directing schools across the USA to allow students to access toilets appropriate to how they identified in

terms of gender. In 2015, the city of Houston in Texas attempted to introduce the 'Houston Equal Rights Ordinance' which aimed to protect its citizens from discrimination based on a number of identity characteristics including sexuality, race, religion and age. However, this legislative endeavour was unsuccessful after a campaign of opposition that focused on transgender women and public toilets (Sanders and Stryker, 2016). Since then, 16 states have considered or proposed legislation that permits people to access public, gender-segregated facilities only according to their 'observed' sex at birth (Myers, 2018). North Carolina successfully introduced such legislation in 2016, although it was repealed less than a year later.

At the same time, the introduction of gender-neutral toilets was attracting media attention in the United Kingdom, particularly around provision for children and young people (for example, Pasha-Robinson, 2016). A major catalyst for an increase in media attention was the 2018 government consultation on reform of the 2004 Gender Recognition Act. That Act allowed people who were diagnosed with gender dysphoria to change their gender legally by obtaining a gender recognition certificate, which required that a 'gender recognition panel' (including medical and legal experts) had considered that the criteria for issuing a certificate had been met. The proposed reform of the Gender Recognition Act aimed to make it easier for transgender people to achieve legal recognition of their self-declared gender without necessarily having met all of the criteria specified in the 2004 Act (Government Equalities Office, 2018). Other countries, such as Ireland and Denmark, have already enacted legislation that treats gender as a self-declared category.

Doan (2010: 635) has argued that transgender people experience a "special kind of tyranny – the tyranny of gender – that arises when people dare to challenge the hegemonic expectations for appropriately gendered behavior in Western society." This may be most intensely felt within gender-segregated public spaces that permit others to apply and enforce heteronormatively-constructed expectations and standards relating to gender. Public toilets

receive attention in discussions about gender as they represent ultimate gender-segregated spaces (Doan, 2010; Greed, 2019). They are characterized and differentiated by constructions of biological distinction between women and men and, in line with this, have been described as "sites where individuals' bodies are continually policed and (re)placed within sex categories" (Browne, 2004: 332-3). The level and intensity of policing within these spaces may be heightened as the spatial structure of public toilets facilitates surveillance (Bender-Baird, 2016; Cavanagh, 2010). This heightened sense of policing of gender and gender presentation in these spaces can contribute to and legitimize abuse and violence against transgender and gender non-conforming people (Namaste, 2000) who "contest the 'natural' connections between sexed embodiments and sexed lives" (Browne, 2004: 333). Abuse and violence may arise from a discontinuity between an individual's professed gender identity and how others read their gender presentation – what Browne (2004: 332) has described as 'genderism', that is, "hostile readings of gender ambiguous bodies". Given these considerations, it is no surprise that public toilets have been found to be sites of anxiety, policing and abuse for transgender people (Browne, 2004; Doan, 2010; Faktor, 2011; Namaste, 2000). The ways in which transgender and gender non-conforming individuals present themselves in gendered terms may vary across contexts and spaces in order to reduce the risk of hostile, violent outcomes of gender-policing. As Nash (2010: 588) has noted, bodies and spaces "simultaneously (re)create one another" and the spaces that we occupy have material implications for how we navigate them. The meanings attached to bodies are always historically and spatially located (Longhurst, 2005).

Gender-neutral toilets can take various forms as physical spaces. They can consist of purpose-built, individual, self-contained cubicles which provide privacy to users. These toilets usually offer floor-to-ceiling walls and doors and may contain individual washing facilities. A 'quick-fix' approach to the development of gender-neutral toilets has simply involved changing

the signage on existing 'unisex' toilets which have usually been provided chiefly to meet the access needs of people with physical disabilities. This has attracted criticism on the grounds that it risks reducing the availability of toilets that are physically easy to access (Ramster *et al.,* 2018). Alternatively, gender-neutral toilets are sometimes provided by changing signage on existing female and male toilets and designating them 'gender-neutral' without any design or other modification. That form of gender-neutral toilet provision has attracted significant critique. For some, it highlights existing concerns about unequal toilet provision for women and men. In general terms, within gender-segregated provision, men have been calculated as having two thirds more toilet provision than women (Anthony and Dufresne, 2018; Greed, 2019). When gender-neutral toilets are created simply by relabelling women's and men's toilets, this tends to increase traffic to what were formerly women's toilets. The presence of urinals in what were men's toilets and their continued usage by men tend to make women reluctant to use those toilets. Hence this mode of gender-neutral toilet provision can exacerbate the relative lack of provision for women (Greed and Daniels, 2002).

In addition to these practical issues, it has been suggested that the implementation of poorly-designed gender-neutral toilets fails to recognise women's experiences of and fears about public spaces (Greed, 2019). Women can experience heightened levels of fear for themselves and their children in public spaces, specifically concerning the risk of physical and sexual violence and harassment (Pain, 1997; Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). The gendered nature of the fear of crime has often been framed as paradoxical: it has been contended that women experience higher levels of fear of victimization than men do but experience lower levels of actual victimization (Hale, 1996). This apparent paradox has been challenged on a number of grounds, notably that experiences of sexual harassment are routinely excluded from victimization surveys (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). In this sense, sexual harassment and violence act as a mechanism of control by which women's movement in public spaces and their

engagement in public life are curbed (Kelly, 1998). The fear of violence and especially sexual violence vary depending on the spatial setting. Urban public spaces and spaces populated by strangers, and specifically male strangers, are particularly associated with fear and a sense of risk (Doan, 2009; Doran and Burgess, 2011; Yeoh and Yeow, 1997). As such, gender-neutral toilets may be sites of fear for women in relation to violence and sexual violence.

Some women's toilets may also be associated with risk, although this may be more closely aligned with vandalism of the spatial environment rather than an actual risk of experiencing personal violence (Cavanagh and Ware, 1990). The desegregation of facilities in which people may find themselves in various states of undress may contribute to a heightened sense of vulnerability. Again, this level of vulnerability may be context-dependent. Particularly in heterosexual nightclubs, which are primarily alcohol-centred, toilets are often considered to be 'safe spaces' for women where women can obtain physical distance from men in the nightclub setting (Browne, 2004). The spatial dynamics of women's toilets offer social opportunities within a male-centric public sphere in which women can rest, talk and show emotion (Ramster *et al.,* 2018). Indeed, some objections to toilet desegregation may stem from a perceived loss of a 'safe space' for women.

This paper contributes to the literature on public space and women's fear of sexual violence by providing a critical empirical analysis of how risks and fears are worked up and made use of in the construction of the specific public space of gender-neutral toilets and how a version of transgender women is implicated in that process.

Method

The data set for this study consisted of 1756 comments posted in response to ten YouTube videos that were identified using 'gender-neutral toilets' as the search term. All videos were

sampled on May 1st 2017, with sampling restricted to content that had been uploaded in the preceding 12 months – a time when, as noted earlier, there had been a great deal of policy debate and legislative endeavour in the USA about entitlements to access public toilets. Initially, 431 videos were identified; 100 of these videos met the inclusion criteria concerning relevance to gender-neutral toilets, not being duplicates of other videos and having elicited at least five comments from viewers. An online random number generator was then used to select a manageable sample of ten videos. Three videos (two from the UK and one from the USA) involving discussions about and the sharing of opinions on gender-neutral toilets were produced by cisgender people and two (one from the USA and one from the UK) by transgender people. One other video produced in the USA involved a transgender woman asking members of the public if they would be concerned about sharing a toilet with her. One video was a feature from the *Jimmy Kimmel Live* show (a late-night talk show in the USA) asking the American public what they thought about gender-neutral toilets. Three videos were produced by US news stations and covered a news story relating to President Obama's guidance to schools allowing students to access toilets according to the gender with which they identified. Comments on these ten videos were excluded from the data set if they did not directly address gender-neutral toilets or if they were illogical or irrelevant to the study. Using these criteria, the 2328 comments produced in response to the videos were reduced to 1756 comments that were relevant to the study.

These were subjected to a form of discourse analysis referred to as critical discursive psychology (Wetherell, 1998; see Coyle, 2016, for a contextualization of this approach). In this, we attended to what was *achieved* by comments on YouTube videos on gender-neutral toilets, that is, the text's 'action orientation', rather than using comments as a way of establishing an understanding of the motives and intentions of each individual commenter. Although the videos that were sampled were largely produced in the USA, YouTube is an

international platform with an international audience. The specific geographical location of each commenter who produced data that were analysed could not be determined. Therefore, the cultural, political and social climate from which each person commented is unknown. In an era of bots, botnets and trolls, this would be problematic if the aim were to draw conclusions about the individuals who commented and their motivations. Yet, as this type of analysis focuses exclusively upon the action orientation of the text, the lack of cultural, political and social context for each commenter does not adversely affect the analysis conducted. In discursive work with social media data, the focus is on what arguments look like and what is accomplished by online 'talk' in relation to particular issues. The focus is on the talk because aspects of this may be or may become standard sense-making resources on those issues which can carry social consequences for the objects of that talk.

The data collection method raises ethical questions faced by research that employs social media data concerning users' understandings and expectations of privacy (Robins, 2015). Unlike many other social media sites, YouTube does not require registration to view content or associated comments. We therefore decided that this platform may be considered more public than other social media platforms such as Facebook which require people to register as users in order to engage with content. In line with the British Psychological Society's (2014) guidelines for social media research, all comments have been anonymized to minimize the risk of commenters being identified.

In the data excerpts that are used to illustrate the themes that were generated, the comments are presented as they appeared on YouTube, so any spelling or grammatical errors remain, as does the use of upper-case letters in some comments.

Thematic overview

Three themes were developed from the data. We shall discuss in detail the theme entitled 'Gender-neutral toilets as sites of sexual danger' as it is most relevant to the concerns of this paper and was the most prominent theme in relation to the volume of relevant data. The two other themes concerned 'Claiming victimhood: Gender-neutral toilets as undermining the rights of cisgender people' and 'The de-legitimization and "Othering" of transgender people'. The latter theme will be invoked in the presentation of the analysis and consisted of a range of motifs that functioned to de-legitimize transgender people. Within this, there were recurrent attributions of mental illness to refute the validity of transgender people's claims to be or self-identify in terms of a gender different to that which had been assigned to them at birth. Notions of 'science', 'nature' and 'the unnatural' were also used to de-legitimize transgender communities and functioned to establish significant distance between the dominant 'natural' majority – cisgender people – and the 'unnatural' minority – transgender people – whose gender claims were constructed as a "scientific illogicality". Ideas of 'the natural' also fed into the mobilization of religiously-based morals and principles to undermine authenticity claims by transgender people. As such, transgender individuals were constructed as inferior, morally corrupt and in contravention of and offending against religious principles, values and norms.

We shall now provide a critical analysis of the theme of 'Gender-neutral toilets as a site of sexual danger', exploring the ways in which its constituent constructions were achieved and the implications for those who featured in these constructions.

Gender-neutral toilets as a site of sexual danger

This theme formed a central part of the counter-argument that was worked up against the widespread implementation of gender-neutral toilets. Its constituent sub-themes centred around the perceived risk of sexual violence: 'Space-specific risk of sexual assault against women and

girls', 'Transgender people as potential sexual offenders' and 'Safety in segregation'. These recurrent constructions problematize gender-neutral toilets in socially recognizable ways using child imagery, the construction of women as vulnerable and in need of protection, the drawing of distinctions between private and public spaces, and the pathologizing of transgender people. A range of discursive resources was used to privilege the commenters' own arguments. The discursive motifs that constituted this theme collectively oriented towards constructing gender-neutral public toilets as sites of danger to women and children and simultaneously reinforcing gendered norms of male dominance, creating morally justified fear around the introduction or widespread implementation of gender-neutral toilets, and thereby seeking to maintain the status-quo of gender-segregated toilets.

Space-specific risk of sexual assault against women and girls

In the comments expressing opposition to gender-neutral toilets, these toilets were constructed as spaces that presented a high risk of sexual assault against women and of child victimization. Echoing classic work on women's fears for themselves and their children in public spaces (Pain, 1997), that risk was framed as inevitable. For example:

1. "Wicked people will take advantage of the law and rape, molest, and or sexually assault others."

   (Direct comment to video. No responses elicited from other commenters.)

2. "Only a matter of time until someone is molested or attached."

   (Direct comment to video. No responses.)

3. "TWO GUYS IN SEPARATE INCIDENTS HAVE BEEN ARRESTED FOR FILMING WOMEN IN THE LADIES BATHROOM. ALSO A REGISTERED SEX OFFENDER HAS BEEN ARRESTED FOR GRABBING A LITTLE GIRL

IN THE TARGET LADIES BATHROOM."

(Direct comment to video. No responses.)

4. "Having been atracked...panties ripped, dick out...and now disabled and cant defend myself, I am very uncomfortable around unkown cis men alone with little clothing. So I can very much relate to profound discomfort."
(This comment is by a self-identified cisgender woman in reply to other commenters who are opposing gender-neutral toilets and speculating about cisgender men sexually assaulting women.)

The use of the definitive "will" (rather than "might" or "could") in comment 1 and the 'when not if' framing in comment 2 functioned to factualize the inevitability of sexual assault occurring. These risk assessments were given substance and vividness by occurring alongside experiential accounts, as in comments 3 and 4. Accounts of first-hand personal experience and second-hand reported experience reified the risk, worked it up as factual and as independent of the commenters, and heightened a sense of urgency about people expressing condemnation of (the introduction of) gender-neutral toilets. Factualization has long been recognised as a routine orientation of experiential accounts (Edwards and Potter, 1992). In comment 3, factualization is done by presenting an account of two incidents in which men are said to have engaged in voyeurism and one incident in which "a registered sex offender" perpetrated an assault on "a little girl" in a "ladies bathroom". The reasoning here appears to be that if such incidents already occur in gender-segregated public toilets, the risk is much greater in toilets to which both men and women have legitimate access. In comment 4, the commenter presents an account of how she had been sexually attacked by a man and rendered disabled. She represents this as having left her unable to defend herself and feeling "very uncomfortable around unkown [sic] cis men alone with little clothing." That phrase could be either a summary of potential assailants who could be attracted to gender-neutral toilets (that is, as we shall see later, cisgender men

dressed as women with malicious intent) or a de-legitimizing construction of transgender women as essentially men in women's clothes. The extreme outcome of the assault that the commenter refers to operates as a warning of the potential implications of acquiescing in the introduction or promotion of gender-neutral toilets.

Across comments, the invocation of personal experience and images of young girls and the factualization of opinion enabled commenters opposed to gender-neutral toilets to adopt a moral position as credible defenders of the safety of women and girls. Child imagery was a recurrent resource mobilized across the data set, with young girls being treated as the epitomé of innocent potential victims. The moral positioning of themselves as defenders of the safety of women and girls by opponents of gender-neutral toilets conversely and sometimes explicitly positioned those who advocated gender-neutral toilets as unconcerned about the safety of women and girls and consequently as morally inferior. When this positioning occurred, it seemed to make it difficult for some advocates to advance a credible case. In the comments below, there is only one attempt made by a commenter to counter-argue (comment 1). However, the counter-argument addresses only one part of the original comment before becoming a denigration of the original commenter:

1. "Just let a MAN come in a restroom while I'm in there..I won't be fucking pretty... Wanna be a bitch? FINE...I will kick his ass like he's a little bitch!!! it would be worth going to jail for a few hours!! Keep your pansy asses OUT of the women's bathroom!! I have grandchildren you pervs..and it's already happened, some pervs have uses it to get at looking at little girls!!"
(Direct response to video. One commenter replies with "You realise you just called all women bitches right? Sit down granny!")

2. "People ARE NOT all the same. You pervs are NOT the same as my little granddaughter, and you DO NOT have the right to have access to her."

(In response to a comment saying "You guys want it to be like the civil rights era you guys are stupid. Equality for all!")

In both comments above, there is a categorical differentiation achieved between the commenter and those who might disagree with them. The threats of violence to an imagined audience of transgender individuals in comment 1 and the use of upper-case letters and derogatory language intensify the comments and position the commenters as morally justified crusaders ranged against predatory "pervs" who wish to assault young girls and who constitute a body of ultimate 'Others'. The working up and mobilization of that category here may serve to implicate those who do not oppose gender-neutral toilets as complicit in or facilitating sexual violence.

More elaborated attempts were made than the one seen in response to comment 1 above to counter the invocation of 'child victims' and the consequent heightened sense of risk. These attempts involved locating the responsibility for ensuring children's safety onto parents and caregivers. For example:

1. "kids should not be allowed to go into any private area were adults are without being accompanied by a responsible adult."
   (Direct comment to video. No responses.)
2. "I don't get the fear of child molesting in gender-neutral bathrooms. If you are a responsible parent you don't let your small child go into the public restroom alone anyways."
   (Direct comment to video. No responses.)

These discursive moves might also serve to pre-emptively deflect any accusation of complicity in permitting children to be placed at risk of sexual assault. However, again discursive resistance was not straightforward. The unqualified location of responsibility onto parents, seen

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in the comments above, opens up a reading of that move as attributing responsibility for any sexual victimization of children in public toilets to a failure of responsible parenting. The fact that these comments did not prompt such readings or other critical responses is interesting, although the majority of comments in the data set did not initiate responses from others.

Earlier we noted how one commenter provided an account of two reported incidents of sexually-motivated offences by men against women and a girl in designated women's toilets. In the comments above, we see the risk to children being located in public toilets in general and, in comment 1, in "any private area were [sic] adults are". That broadening of the spatial location of risk to women and children to include gender-segregated public toilets and other public spaces was one main way in which the construction of gender-neutral toilets as posing a space-specific risk of sexual violence against girls (and women) was resisted. For example:

1. "All public bathrooms can be and are dangerous. No public place is safe. Each can be more dangerous than others."
   (Direct response to video. No responses.)

2. "Even with single gender bathrooms, there is the risk for assault. And boys can go to the bathroom literally right next to a pedophile. But most people aren't focused on that."
   (Direct response to video. Comments in response to this agree with the opinion expressed here.)

3. "A pedophile could do that I suppose but most Pedophiles don't try to pretend to be anything except themselves. Pedophiles will lure children anywhere not just restrooms so if a pedophile wanted to lure a child he could do it in a park, parking lot, near their home if that child wasn't being supervised."
   (In response to a comment implying paedophiles may use the existence of gender-neutral toilets to dress and present themselves as women to assault children sexually.)

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These and other comments that oriented towards broadening the risk space routinely used extreme case formulations in performing that function (for example, "All public bathrooms…No public space"; "Pedophiles will lure children anywhere") (Pomerantz, 1986). This extension of risk space was not challenged by other commenters; indeed, comment 2 elicited responses of agreement. Comment 3 went further and, in its three-part list "in a park, parking lot, near their home" (Jefferson, 1990), blurred the boundaries of risk and safety between public and private spaces. Overall, these comments constructed risk to children as always having existed and, implicitly or explicitly, represented gender-neutral toilets as not increasing that risk of sexual assault or creating a new risk.

Transgender people as potential sexual offenders

The subtheme of 'Transgender people as potential sexual offenders' is a concomitant of the previous subtheme about the space-specific risk of sexual assault against women and girls. In the comments, a direct link was frequently created between transgender people and sexual offending. This always involved the pathologization of transgender people as sexually and psychologically deviant. For example:

1. "They want to fuck little kids should we find a way for them to be able to do that? A grown man with a dick should not b going into the bathroom with women cause HE wants to b a woman."

   (Direct response to video. No responses.)

2. "Those types are usually have some sexual trauma associated with their gender reassignment. I feel that they are a threat to other small children and women. I feel that they are more likely to engage in other sexually deviant behavior such as

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pedophilia or rape."

(Direct response to video. No responses.)

The data excerpts above exemplify some standard content of the theme entitled 'The de-legitimization and "Othering" of transgender people'. Echoing many other comments, comment 1 presents a biologically essentialized version of gender (a standard feature of arguments for the continuation of gender-segregated spaces, as we noted earlier) and uses male terms to refer to transgender women. The location of transgender people within medical frameworks and particularly within a psychiatric deficiency framework was another routine aspect of the de-legitimization process, seen here in comment 2. This discursive move is an effective means of de-legitimization as it claims the social legitimacy of medical discourse and, depending upon how it is couched, can achieve a tone of compassionate understanding ("Those types are usually have [sic] some sexual trauma associated with their gender reassignment"). Compared to comment 1, comment 2 can be said to have a tone of 'more in sorrow than in anger'. These textual features reflect those identified in a recent large-scale study of online transphobia (Brandwatch, 2019).

Within the present theme, this pathologizing of transgender people contributed to the framing of the risk of sexual violence to women and girls in gender-neutral toilets as inevitable. In the data excerpts above, sexual deviance is treated as an essentialized or near-essentialized feature of what it means to be transgender and so the implication is that sexual risk or threat from transgender people is inevitable. Earlier we noted how transgender people may be subjected to risk through the policing gaze in gender-segregated spaces, evaluating their gender presentation (Browne, 2004). The present theme extends that and presents an evaluative gaze that assumes pathology. In these and many other comments, transgender people – almost always transgender women – are homogenized in broad, sweeping terms. Where this occurs, it has an inflationary effect in comments which construct threat and risk from transgender

women: it is a whole category of people who pose a threat (in this case, to women and girls in gender-neutral toilets), not just particular individuals within that category.

However, there were exceptions to the unqualified construction of transgender women as a homogeneous group in relation to risk. In these exceptions, the source of sexual assault risk in gender-neutral toilets was mostly held to be men who inauthentically located themselves within the transgender category for nefarious purposes or who were located outside the category. For example:

1. "I'm completely for LGBTQ rights and I'll stand with them all the way. But I ask that you try and understand where some people may be coming from. It's unfortunate that due to the fact that some perverts may see this as an opportunity to hurt people that this has reflected badly on those who this really is in place to accomodate and protect, the LGBTQ community."
   (Direct response to video. No responses.)

2. "You're stupid. It's not the trannies that we are worried about, it's the SEX OFFENDERS and PERVERTS who will claim to ID as a woman."
   (Direct response to a video that featured an individual speaking about their and other people's thoughts about gender-neutral toilets. No responses.)

In comment 1, the connection between those who were constructed as posing a sexual violence risk and transgender women is not absolutely clear but the connection is clearer in comment 2. That comment explicitly invokes the common trope found in the data set about the possibility of cisgender men dressing as women in order to assault women and girls in gender-neutral toilets. (A comment in the next subtheme partly qualifies that category of threat and invokes "a TG [transgender person] with a penis or a man new to cross-dressing".) That trope seems logically confused because the scenario that it describes would appear to apply to gender-

segregated toilets rather than gender-neutral toilets. However, in debates and arguments, logic may be secondary to the discursive recognizability and power of the tropes that are used. The commenter is clear though that those who claim to occupy an identity as woman on these grounds do so inauthentically and instead belong in the separate category of "SEX OFFENDERS and PERVERTS", with the differentiation stressed by the use of upper-case letters. This opens up another policing gaze: that of authenticity.

Safety in segregation

One response to the debate about gender-neutral toilets and transgender people that was commonly advanced was a suggestion about creating separate public toilet facilities exclusively for transgender people. This suggestion positioned transgender people outside the male/female gender binary. For example:

1. "I think trans people should get a New bathroom."

   (Direct response to video. One reply to this comment suggested that this may be dangerous for transgender individuals.)

2. "Just set up a third bathroom."

   (Response to a comment suggesting that President Obama would be uncomfortable if his daughters had to use a gender-neutral toilet.)

3. "Just wait until one day God forbid a young girl is raped by a TG [transgender person] with a penis or a man new to cross-dressing, don't say it's impossible. IF it does occur don't say we didn't warm you – you are just asking for trouble. Should be bathrooms for men, women and TG where little girls do NOT go!"

   (Direct response to video. One response from another commenter calling this commenter a "pervert".)

In some comments in which this suggestion was made, it was presented as an opinion without qualification and in a way that made it appear an obvious, common-sense solution to debates in the videos and/or in other comments. This can be seen in comments 1 and 2. More often, the suggestion about creating separate public toilet facilities for transgender people was explicitly presented as a solution to the risk of sexual violence against women and girls. This can be seen in comment 3 which produces a version of the common trope in the data set concerning the source of sexual assault risk. The commenter first builds a picture of that risk and positions advocates of gender-neutral toilets as responsible for any instances of sexual violence that occur if they fail to heed warnings. In this way, a risk is created for advocates, heightening the sense and urgency of a dilemma that requires a solution. The commenter then produces the suggestion of separate toilet facilities for men, women and transgender people as a means of addressing the danger and creating safety for all parties who are constructed as at risk. In this way, the suggestion is presented as reasonable and rational. However, this formulation does not engage with the possibility of a risk being created for transgender people who would be declaring their status publicly when using toilets specifically designated for transgender people. This risk was noted by a commenter in reply to comment 1.

Discussion

Before considering the analysis in broader terms, it is worth acknowledging that the study can be said to have some methodological limitations. For example, ideally all 100 videos that met the inclusion criteria would have been engaged with systematically, at least through an initial broad-level process of coding and thematic analysis, followed by a much closer discursive analysis of selected features of the data set. The random selection of ten videos for close inspection that was implemented might have led to some features relevant to the research aims

being captured and over-emphasized and others being missed. However, the features that were worked up through the analysis were not confined to this particular study. They frequently resurfaced in other parts of the broader research project on everyday hate crime and discrimination experienced by transgender people and have also been discerned by other researchers in the field (for example, Chesser, 2008; Spade, 2006). They can therefore now be considered enduring, standard discursive tropes in the online construction of gender-neutral toilets, transgender women, and risk to women and girls.

From the elaboration of the central theme in this paper, it is clear how gender-neutral toilets were constructed as spaces of sexual risk and danger for women and girls. Discussions about moving away from gender-segregated spaces are rooted within the conceptualization of public spaces as masculine. As previous research has shown, public masculine spaces are often perceived as sites of fear, danger and sexual risk for women (Doan, 2010; Pain, 1997; Vera-Gray, 2018). Hence the sense of sexual risk and danger that was consistently worked up in relation to the introduction of gender-neutral toilets in the comments can be seen as a response to the loss of the women-only spaces afforded by women's toilets and the risk of public toilets becoming masculine public spaces by default (Browne, 2004; Ramster *et al.*, 2018).

In the data, the working up of sexual risk often appeared to embody the long-recognised construction of male sexuality as uncontrollable (Hollway, 1984). It echoed a version of the idea that men's sexual scripting dictates that men should have strong sexual needs and are supposed to remove any restrictions to the fulfilment of those needs imposed by a sexual partner (Byers, 1996). This, in turn, socially legitimizes the perpetration of sexual violence against women (Willie *et al.*, 2018). In the comments, the uncontrollability of male sexuality was given shape by the common trope of cisgender heterosexual men presenting themselves inauthentically as transgender women and subjecting women to (the risk of) sexual assault in gender-neutral toilets. This trope saw the introduction of gender-neutral toilets being conflated

with debates about the entitlement of transgender women to access women-only spaces. Here the idea of male sexuality as uncontrollable acquired the added feature of male sexuality as duplicitous and manipulative in finding routes to desired expression, even if that involves sexual violence against women and girls. Although gender-neutral toilets are an innovation, here they are culturally made sense of through the mobilization of familiar discursive resources. To invoke concepts from social representations theory (Farr and Moscovici, 1984), here we see the emergent social phenomenon of gender-neutral toilets being rendered familiar by 'anchoring' it in known, recognised ideas about the nature of male sexuality and 'objectifying' it in concrete images of the sexually predatory male.

Transgender people and specifically transgender women were also implicated in the construction of risk of sexual violence against women and girls in the data. The construction of lesbian women and gay men as sexual deviants has a long history (Conrad, 1992; Gonsiorek, 1982; Minton, 2002) and so this is not a new motif in the de-legitimization of sexual and gender minorities. Similarly, the pathologization of transgender people is well-established through the American Psychiatric Association's (2013) mental disorder category of 'gender dysphoria' and in popular representations (Inch, 2016). In this sense and at least at some level, deviance is characterized as an intrinsic component of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identities. This further implicates transgender people in the category of 'uncontrollable sexuality' and, as was seen in the data, positions them as potential sexual offenders within constructions of the complex gendered space of gender-neutral toilets. This can be seen as opening up another dimension for the operation of the policing gaze to which, according to Browne (2004), transgender people are subjected in gender-segregated contexts. The data from the present study indicated the operation of a gaze that often appeared to be suspicious of transgender women's authenticity and the risk of violence and sexual assault that they were held to pose to cisgender women and girls.

As is evident from the data, the figure of 'the transgender woman' – or a version of this figure – played a central role in the discussions of gender-neutral toilets. The data are an empirical demonstration of the 'hygienic imagination' in which segregation is used as a means of social distancing. As Cavanagh (2010) argues, the extent of coherence or continuity between what individuals profess in gender terms and how they are read by others is key in determining what is pure and what is abject in public toilet spaces. That notion of purity evokes Douglas's idea (in the original 1966 version of *Purity and Danger*) of dirt and impurity being determined by the infringement of category boundaries and consequent out-of-place-ness. The transgender woman becomes treated as a liminal, category-crossing figure, particularly if her gender presentation is evaluated as unconvincing, troubling or inauthentic. By virtue of this quality, she is rendered abject, impure and impossible to locate securely within gendered spaces and particularly within public toilet spaces (Cavanagh, 2010), even if they are gender-neutral. Such readings may then position transgender women as legitimate targets for banishment to separate toilet facilities or violent retaliation – and, as we noted earlier, discrimination and abuse against transgender people in public toilets is well-documented (Faktor, 2011).

The introduction of gender-neutral toilets could have been framed in terms other than 'risk'. For example, this initiative can be justified in terms of a rationale of inclusivity and ease of access, given that gender-neutral toilets can be more accessible than gender-segregated toilets for those who may require support from someone of a different gender, such as children and people with disabilities. Furthermore, gender-neutral toilets have been advocated on the grounds that, depending on how they are implemented, they can reduce queuing times for women and be less costly to the public purse (Anthony and Dufresne, 2007). However, these framings were not a notable feature of the data set which was dominated by constructions of sexual danger and risk, the de-legitimization of transgender people (reported in Colliver *et al.*, 2019), and claims about the undermining of cisgender people's rights. This could be considered

surprising, given that the alternative framings presented above involve rights, access and children, all of which featured in the constructions that were generated from the data set. Their relative absence might be an artefact of social media data where nuance and subtlety tend to be lacking and there is often an extremization of expression and opinion. Yet there may be another explanation.

As we have seen, across the analysis, the motif of (risks of) sexual violence was drawn upon heavily to create an argument against the implementation of gender-neutral public toilets. From a discursive perspective, we argue that sexual violence risk was mobilized to this extent because it can be readily used in emotionally-charged ways that close down or make it difficult to advance counter arguments and that facilitate the 'Othering' of those who disagree. The construction of gender-neutral toilets as spaces of risk of sexual violence was heavily gendered, most obviously in the way in which women and children were conflated and constructed as vulnerable, at risk from men (including inauthentic versions of 'transgender women') and in need of protection. This, together with the use of child imagery in working up victimization risk transformed a debate over public space into an issue of morality in which commenters and readers must side with the dominant 'moral' group as defenders of the sexual safety of women and girls or, by omission, be assigned to an 'immoral' or at least morally negligent position.

The risk motif featured transgender people as potential sexual offenders but not as subject to risk themselves in gender-segregated public toilets. This is despite the fact that, as we noted earlier, the policing of gender and gender presentation in these spaces can contribute to abuse and violence against transgender people (Namaste, 2000). Indeed, in the comments which presented the suggestion about creating toilets exclusively for transgender people, the risk that this would pose for transgender people was barely noted. The question of whose risk was focused upon and worked up and whose risk was ignored or under-played may have depended on which groups the commenters aligned with and regarded as entitled to concern.

Therefore, notions of cis-normativity prevent the acknowledgement of risk to those deemed as 'Other'. As was noted in the thematic overview, within the theme on the de-legitimization of transgender people, a significant distance was established between the 'natural' cisgender majority and the 'unnatural' transgender minority. This distance may have led to the risks posed to transgender individuals being rendered largely invisible and to them not being positioned as necessary stakeholders within the risk debate. This can be seen as an example of the ongoing erasure of transgender people's experience, in contrast to the invocation of transgender people as objects (Namaste, 2000).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has shown empirically how, in social media data, the relatively new cultural phenomenon of 'gender-neutral toilets' was constructed as a social space and populated with bodies (women, girls, cisgender men, transgender people, parents, victims, perpetrators and moral agents) whose meaning derived from their assigned locations and roles within those spaces. This exemplifies the idea noted earlier that bodies and spaces create and recreate one another and that the meanings attached to bodies are historically and spatially located (Longhurst, 2005; Nash, 2010). Gender-neutral toilets were responded to with a limited set of gendered tropes that constructed and positioned stakeholders in culturally recognisable ways. Women and children were conflated and constructed as vulnerable, at risk from men (including versions of inauthentic 'transgender women') and in need of protection. This, together with the use of child imagery in working up victimization risk, transformed a debate over public space into a question of morality. The possibility of transgender people experiencing risk in gender-segregated toilets through the policing of gender presentation was absent from the data.

Through this analysis, we have demonstrated the ways in which discourses of violence were employed in constructing a particular space and particular categories of people within that space. More specifically, we have contributed to the understanding of discourses of violence against women and girls in an online context by focusing on how the construction of risk in a specific setting was structured and functioned. Whilst there is a body of literature that explores the risk of violence from geographical, attitudinal and conceptual perspectives (for example, Browne, 2004; Cavanagh and Ware, 1990), we have examined some discursive features that are drawn upon when constructing risk. From this, we conclude that the risk of sexual violence in relation to gender-neutral toilets is constructed in familiar ways that draw upon socially recognisable motifs. This functions to maintain the status-quo and also to minimise the need to address cis-normative social structures that maintain the gender binary and position transgender people as legitimate targets of violence.

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