

## Canada's Beef with Lipstick: Eat or Be Eaten

*By Marina Banister*

*In the summer of 2015 the City of Edmonton Youth Council proposed a motion to City Council to adopt solely vegetarian or vegan food for all catered meetings for the purpose of environmental sustainability. The motion garnered national media attention, starting with a focus on the motion itself, however quickly transformed into a story about sexism when the online reader commentary started to attack the Youth Council Committee Chair Marina Banister. This paper will analyze the backlash Banister received in the online commentary sections by breaking apart four articles from CBC News Edmonton, Yahoo News Canada, and the Edmonton Journal. The online comments written in reaction to news articles about Banister's motion to City Council will be assessed in how they delegitimized her argument and undermined her political credibility. Ultimately the paper will conclude that the online comments focused on Banister which distracted from the motion itself and challenged her credibility as an expert on this issue.*

### **Introduction to Case Study**

“A slew of sexist and threatening online comments isn't stopping a University of Alberta political science student from encouraging Canadians to think about food sustainability” (Yahoo News Canada 2015) was the opening line of an article posted in Yahoo News Canada on July 9, 2015. In the summer of 2015 the City of Edmonton Youth Council proposed a motion to City Council to adopt solely vegetarian or vegan food for all catered meetings for the purpose of environmental sustainability. The motion garnered national media attention, starting with a focus on the motion itself, however quickly transformed into a story about sexism when the online reader commentary started to attack the Youth Council Committee Chair Marina Banister.

This paper will analyze the backlash Banister received in the online commentary sections by breaking apart four articles from CBC News Edmonton, Yahoo News Canada, and the Edmonton Journal. The online comments written in reaction to news articles about Banister's motion to City Council will be assessed in how they delegitimized her argument and undermined her political credibility. Ultimately the paper will conclude that the online comments focused on Banister which distracted from the motion itself and challenged her credibility as an expert on this issue.

As to acknowledge any potential for bias, I disclose that the subject of study, Marina Banister, is also myself, the author of this paper. This both gives me the ability to personally understand the topic and backlash as well as to interpret findings through the perspective of first-hand experience.

## Research

When conducting research to support the thesis of this study I was looking to understand the prevalent themes which arose out of the online reader commentary. This led to my research questions as follows: How many comments focused on Banister instead of solely the motion? What were the most common themes arising from these comments? To what extent does existing literature on social media, meat politics, and gender politics help us understand these themes? After using discourse analysis on online reader commentary, this paper will determine how the online comments written in reaction to news articles about Banister's motion to City Council delegitimized her argument and undermined her political credibility. The overarching conclusions of the crisis of masculinity, representation of ecofeminism in media, women in social media, and vegan politics will be synthesized through the scholarly literature which provides concrete academic support to the nine predominant themes that arose from the online commentary.

The four articles chosen were all published online, three were centred around the harassment Banister received, the last was about the motion itself. All four articles included pictures of Banister. The first article published on July 7, 2015 by CBC News Edmonton "Council to mull vegan platter vs. cold cuts in October" (Appendix 1) focused on the motion itself and quoted both the Canadian Cattlemen's Association, Mayor Don Iveson, and Councillor Andrew Knack. This article had a total of 32 comments not including replies. The next article was also published on July 7, 2015 in the Edmonton Journal titled "Virtual vegan witch hunt serves up social media at its ugliest" (Appendix 2). This was the first article published which focused on the harassment Banister received through online reader commentary. This article had a total of 39 comments, not including replies, and linked to Facebook. The next article, published by Yahoo News Canada "Student urging Edmonton council to go meatless unfazed by online sexism" (Appendix 3) published on July 9, 2015 also focused on the online harassment Banister received, but instead narrowed in on Banister's reaction to the sexism. This article had 277 comments not including replies. The last article is from CBC News Edmonton published on July 13, 2015 entitled "Edmonton Youth Council's sustainable snacking feeds online trolls" (Appendix 4) which also highlighted the online comment sections of articles. This story quoted notable gender study scholars as well as Banister. Comments on this article totalled 149 not including replies.

There were over 20 articles published in response to the motion, however a sample of four articles were selected for this paper which totalled 497 online reader comments. These articles were selected because they cover a variety of readerships, are both about the motion and the harassment, and have publicly visible commentary sections. I chose Yahoo News Canada as a media source because they are national platforms that feature a vast variety of news stories and are aimed at younger, more urban audience. I chose The Edmonton Journal because that is where the news story about harassment originated and CBC News Edmonton because it is a local news outlet that is typically consumed by a wide demographic. Unfortunately there are articles in the National Post and the Edmonton Journal that would

have been beneficial to this study however were not selected as the comment sections have since been taken down.

## **Methodology**

After reading through the 497 comments, it was determined that 197 comments or 39.5% mentioned Banister. The remaining comments either discussed the motion itself, veganism, or other unrelated topics and were thus determined irrelevant to this study. Through extensive coding (Appendix 5) the following nine themes were determined among the 197 comments; arguing whether Banister experienced sexism, her appearance, Banister as a pushy woman, female vegans, fame seeking, victimhood, age, sexual harassment, and physical harm. The following sections will explain these themes, provide contextual examples, as well as relate it to the overarching concept of how the online comments delegitimized and distracted from Banister's argument in order to undermine her political credibility.

When analyzing these comments I was looking at the prevalence of mentions focused on Banister's appearance and sexual harassment. After reviewing the sample of 197 it became apparent that several more themes were prominent. A challenge of this study was sorting the comments into appropriate themes. As a result of the limited word count and sometimes unclear meanings behind the comment it was often challenging to determine which theme a comment best fit under. Likewise for each of the nine themes there were many applicable comments that can be used as an example, however a sample of the one or two most fitting comments were chosen to support each theme. A strength of this online reader commentary analysis was the quantity of comments reviewed which ensured the total collected comments were an accurate representation of the public backlash.

### **Theme One: Veganism**

The most prominent theme from the online comments was the occurrence of veganism and more specifically Banister's eating habits. This theme came up in 34% of the comments studied. A sample comment along this theme was from Yahoo News Canada:

“Typical girly girl hates her meat. It's so hard living with women when all they want is meat free “veggie meals”. No wonder they have to rely on men to do the heavy lifting as they don't have the strength as a result of eating only rabbit food, chocolate and cream” (ORC Yahoo News Canada 2015).

In fact, the concept of meat consumption is an inherently gendered practice. This is exemplified by in the academic paper “Metrosexuality Can Stuff It: Beef Consumption as (Heteromascu)line Fortification” by Wesley Buerkle, the idea that “masculinity claims for itself the right to consume” (Buerkle 2009 253) is discussed in relation to how female food consumption is heavily criticized by the populous as well as the media. Moreover that “consuming animal meat, actual muscle, translates into the acquisition of strength and power” (Buerkle 2009 255) a strength characteristic of hegemonic masculinity. When Banister urged male City Councillors to reconsider the amount of meat they consume, it was seen as a direct confrontation of their masculinity and freedom to consume without restriction. In media and advertising men are often portrayed to be eating “meat as a rejection of

feminine influence [which] renders beef consumption a male activity that revels in a retrograde masculinity, one that celebrates more traditional gender performances” (Buerkle 2009 256). Going further, in advertising and media “women and meat are one in the same. They are both prizes: they both represent dominant masculinity’s goals, and they both emphasize men’s consumption impulses (both sexual and dietetic) as essential to their maleness” (Buerkle 2009 258). Beef consumption is most problematic in the meat industry as it is the biggest sector of animal agriculture that contributes to environmental destruction. As the motion was to reduce meat consumption in Alberta - colloquially known as “beef country” - this dynamic of the modern cowboy rang especially true. Aggravated by Alberta’s recent election of a female Premier, the idea that women are taking over and changing the lives of men made much of the population especially sensitive to a bold suggestion by another woman. Deeming an effective way to reduce that power by sexualizing and delegitimizing the appearance of a woman as an easy way to distract from the credibility of her ideas.

### **Theme Two: Arguing Over Sexism**

The second most prevalent theme was arguing over sexism. The articles that discussed the sexist nature of the online reader comments debated whether these comments were sexist or justified. In total 33% of the comments debated this matter. A CBC Edmonton comment captured this best:

“She’s wrong...If males would have made the same comments the reaction would have been the same. Don’t turn this into something sexist that totally isn’t. We had a guy in our class suggest replacing donuts with a veggie tray and man did he get grilled.... .” (ORC CBC News Edmonton “B” 2015).

Although it is unclear how the backlash towards the motion would have been different if the gender expression of the Chair was male, it is important to note that environmentalism is a gendered practice at its core and certain types of environmentally friendly practices are more likely to be picked up in the media. When Banister proposed the motion to eliminate meat at catered City Council meetings the makeup of City Council was 12 men and 1 woman. This change in balance, whereby a young female was advocating to older males, exacerbated the motions controversy. Typically women are tasked with being environmentally responsible, and messaging to encourage that practice is directed at them. It is seldom that older white men’s food choices are questioned. Women are often found in a binary whereby “there is growing social acceptance of the idea that women have unique environmental agency and an obligation to ensure that their families are living in an environmentally responsible manner” (Nutter Smith 2010 66) but at the same time, they are not empowered to promote environmentalism to the men in their households, instead reducing their personal consumption to compensate. Acknowledging this binary helps bring the “gendered tendencies in environmental communication” (Nutter Smith 2010 67) into focus. Moreover, Nutter Smith’s analysis helps shed light on why Banister’s motion gained so much media momentum.

Often ecofeminism is not picked up in mass media, however what this motion advocated was a small symbolic change to the infrequent and tax-dollar funded meals of elected officials. The symbolic approaches to environmentalism may actually serve to undermine more far reaching and systematic behavioral reevaluations that are needed for true environmental solutions, “yet it is precisely this

discourse – built around the idea of simple, painless changes in personal behavior – that has been most eagerly picked up by the mass media” (Nutter Smith 2010 68). This highlights some of the reasons the motion received such wide media attention, as well as a major criticism of the motion itself - which was that it was symbolic but had little real effect on environmental sustainability. It illustrated how green consumerism is appealing to the masses as it is an easy symbolic alternative to confronting more institutional elements of environmental destruction (Nutter Smith 2010 69). The motion falls within this category because instead of positioning for a reduction in consumption entirely it advocated for green consumerism. In this same way “the more significant behaviors are the hardest to modify, and they don’t tend to fit well with the marketing approach’s rhetoric of environmentalism as a series of small, painless changes” (Nutter Smith 2010 69). Moreover, while women are in fact seen as being in touch with nature and are expected to be environmentally responsible, it is not often that they actually define the perimeters of societal environmentalism, as such “women either support the environmental agency of men or act as an obstacle to the environmentalist goals of men” (Nutter Smith 2010 70). This picks up on a major theme of valid criticism that Banister encountered over social media which is that “a truly feminist ‘green’ political stance would imply a need to consume less rather than just consuming differently” (Nutter Smith 2010 78).

### **Theme Three: Pushy Perception**

The concept that Banister was pushing her opinions and beliefs onto others was another prevalent theme in the online reader comments of the selected four articles. This theme was discussed in 31% of the comments. This idea of a women pushing her ideas on men can be directly related to the crisis of masculinity.

The motion being lead by a woman draws upon a common theme whereby men feel women have for too long imposed their food preferences upon them, and it is now time to stand against this oppression of rights. Hegemonic masculinity exists on the assumption that men still desire to hold privilege in society, privilege that is only gained through the oppression of women and non-human animals. In an act of defiance against the accepted norm of meat as a token of masculinity, the patriarchy has no choice but to dominant and animalize anyone who challenges this notion of meat consumption. Banister was compared to farm animals either in appearance or in relation to the torture and eventual slaughter of those animals. As astutely pointed out by Rogers in the notorious burger king “I am Man” commercial, “the narrative is clear: Women have emasculated men through the ingredients as well as the preparatory and presentational style of their preferred food” (Rogers 2008 259). Moving further, although the case for food sustainability is soaked with class politics, Rogers points out that meat media often portrays “all men have a desire to return to “real manhood” defined by the rejection of small portions, bourgeois aesthetics, quiche, and tofu, as well as by eating meat and performing acts of physical strength” (Rogers 2008 295) and dominance over women and animals. More broadly, many environmental ideologies challenge the privilege of dominating men, as such vegetarianism is considered a threat to hegemonic masculinity as well as male privilege (Rogers 2008 97). The ecofeminist movement “introduced the connection between the oppression of women and the exploitation of animals and nature” (Rogers 2008 298) which was eventually broadened to include many other dimensions of intersectionality.

Alberta specifically has a predominant culture in which meat consumption is linked to traditional hegemonic masculinity. In present times, many men who are seen as progressive or metrosexual may acknowledge the looming impact the beef industry has on global climate change and water consumption. This idea of men caring for the environment has become labeled as a feminine quality. A major parallel theme that was stated in the media coverage and online commentary of Banister's sustainability motion was that she was infringing on the rights of others. By her requesting other people reduce their meat consumption she was being bossy, preachy, and inappropriate. An example of the commentary directed at Banister is in response to the Edmonton Journal article *Virtual Vegan Witch Hunt Serves up Social Media at its Ugliest* "The only "witch hunt" was conducted by Ms. Banister and her colleagues, who aren't content to live and let live but instead want to force their dietary preferences on others" (ORC Edmonton Journal 2015).

#### **Theme Four: Victimhood**

Another common theme that emerged was the idea that Banister was too sensitive, playing the victim card, and could not handle the pressure of political life. A total of 30% of the 197 comments fell into this theme of victimhood.

When Banister proposed the motion, it read "vegan or vegetarian" food. However even though Banister is not a vegan herself (she is a vegetarian) the media almost exclusively picked up on the word vegan instead of vegetarian. This made both Banister and the motion appear to be more radical, as while vegetarianism is gaining more widespread social acceptance, veganism is still largely stigmatized as radical and extremely limiting. Although in this case the motion was specifically about food consumption, the media often paints veganism and vegetarianism as diets, even though there are a variety of reasons one makes these consumption choices. These include but are not limited to ecofeminism, animal ethics, health, religion, culture, and sustainability. In the article "Vegaphobia: derogatory discourses of veganism and the reproduction of speciesism in UK" Matthew Cole and Karen Morgan explain how the media portrays vegans as "ascetics, faddists, sentimentalists, or in some cases, hostile extremists" (Cole and Morgan 2011 134). The articles also explains how there are approximately twice as many female vegans than male, and female vegans are far more likely to be vilified in the press (Cole and Morgan 2011 144). Going further, "vilification of women's responses to nonhuman animal exploitation therefore combines sexism with a trivialization of a compassionate ethical response as 'sentiment'.... Women, including leading female politicians, were largely depicted as hysterical in their calls to stop eating beef while the voices of 'reassurance' were provided by male experts" (Cole and Morgan 2011 145). When the articles about online sexual harassment came out, many criticized Banister for being overly sensitive to the harassment, which very much fits with the idea that "when discussing veganism in the abstract, the oversensitive discourse is also a form of tacit feminization as it draws on gendered stereotypes of women as 'over-emotional' or irrational" (Cole and Morgan 2011 145). However when older, more established men such as Councillor Andrew Knack or then Councillor Amerjeet Sohi came to Banister's defence, the motion gained a little more credibility.

A comment which exemplifies the accusation that Banister was simply being sensitive to criticism was on Yahoo News Canada:

“Of course play the sexism card, there is power in playing the victim. All I saw from the examples were people questioning her health. Why does the media not play the sexist card whenever the feminist hate train spews their hateful filth to anyone who simply questions them?” (ORC Yahoo News Canada 2015)

Although the sentiment expressed in this comment was a common theme, its argument is rendered moot after analyzing who is systematically the target of vilification in media.

### **Theme Five: Appearance**

When originally conducting this research, the focus on Banister’s appearance was at the forefront because they were the comments which were highlighted in Paula Simons original article on sexism. However, on closer inspection only 19% of the sampled comments mentioned Banisters appearance. Most notably a large portion of the comments which focused on her appearance mentioned her makeup and the perceived effort that she put into her looks. This content is exemplified in the quoted comment from Yahoo News Canada:

“I guess if she didn’t want the conversation to be about how she looks she maybe shouldn’t have posted a picture of herself (at least not one where she has obviously gone the extra mile to make people focus on her appearance. i.e; full on makeup, jewelry, blown out hair, and a “sexy smile”” (ORC Yahoo News Canada 2015).

Many readers assumed Banister had control over the pictures selected in the articles. However the reality is quite the opposite as none of the photos used in articles were provided or vetted by the Chair. For example the picture used in the Yahoo article was pulled off Banister’s public Twitter profile. Moreover in the Yahoo article, Banister stated “Ultimately I don’t want the conversation to be about how I look” (Yahoo News Canada 2015) which this commenter responded to by saying:

“It doesn’t make the remarks about her looks right, but on the other hand, her later statement and her choice of photo are conflicting. Also, nothing against vegans, but they often come across as really pushy and preachy. If it was about a religious person trying to force their beliefs on someone, it would be considered not cool or acceptable, but in this case it is o.k?” (ORC Yahoo News Canada 2015).

These comments on Banister’s appearance did serve to delegitimize her political credibility. Professor of Women’s Studies Cristina Stasia was quoted in one CBC article on the case stating that “It’s much easier to say to Marina or the youth council: ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about, you’re just a skinny babe, you should listen to us,’ she said.” (CBC News Edmonton “B” 2015). This showcases a popular idea that focusing on women in politics appearance instead of their ideas is one method of distracting from the credibility of their ideas. Similarly PETA’s use of conventionally attractive women to promote vegetarianism did a disservice to Banister because there is a stigma against trying to promote vegetarianism through women in the media. The study “Selling Ideology: Commodification of women’s bodies in PETA media campaigns” by Megan Tabag explains how PETA often gets backlash for using stereotypical feminine beauty to sell the ideology of vegetarianism. Going so far as to say “PETA has

appropriated mainstream sexual tactics to sell vegetarianism” (Tabag 2009 3) which is a controversial strategy. Similar to Banister’s motion, the Edmonton Journal received backlash for the photo they used of Banister, some claiming that the Journal was using it as “click bait” to try to drive traffic to the article. Some of the criticism the picture received was that it didn’t have anything to do with the motion itself, which parallels criticism PETA receives about its media strategy which is using women who have little to do with the ideology to try to advertise vegetarianism.

Namely in this particular case, Banister was seen as a classic neoliberal women. As a result of her makeup, blown out hair, and jewelry she was not depicted as what an environmentalist “should” look like. This is a counter discourse to many women in mainstream media because women who conform to traditional modes of heteronormative beauty are typically more widely accepted by the public. This however worked against Banister as the products used to achieve her appearance were seen as directly conflicting her ability to be an environmentalist. In the Edmonton Journal article, Paula Simons wrote “Other commenters, she said, attacked her for wearing makeup, suggesting she couldn’t be a serious environmentalist or real feminist if she used nail polish” (Edmonton Journal 2015) which further reinforces this idea. This discourse has footing in the wider ecofeminist realm. The 2007 article “Friend or Food: Raising the Flag for Feminist Vegetarianism” by Aimee Dowl articulated the discrepancy between male and female vegetarians as well as the differences between feminist vegetarians (Dowl 2007 60). Dowl focuses on how meat has been sexualized and objectified to emulate women and vice versa going on to say that “we reduce the animal to a piece of meat packaged in the supermarket. And it is the same psychological objectification that results in sexism and rape” (Dowl 2007 61). The article also points out how vegetarian feminist messaging has not yet gone mainstream in media because of the movement’s lack of sex appeal (Dowl 2007 63). This dialogue is relevant to the Edmonton case study because it both highlights how traditional environmentalists or vegetarians are seen to look a certain way, a neutral, non-sexual way. The mass public used Banister’s appearance to delegitimize her credibility as an environmentalist because she supposedly didn’t look the part. That being said, Banister’s look also propelled feminist vegetarian dialogue into a media focus, because she exemplified the ideal female neutral; that of white, upper middle class, conventional attractiveness. Normally women who conform to white neoliberal forms of beauty are rewarded in the public sphere for their mainstream appearance, however in this situation that worked against Banister as the ideal feminine environmentalist is not supposed to seem consumeristic.

### **Theme Six: Age**

Marina Banister was the Chair of the City of Edmonton Youth Council Sustainability Committee which is a volunteer organization tasked to provide policy recommendations to City Council Community Services Committee. This is important because the motion Banister proposed was well within the mandate of the organization she served. Likewise the Youth Council is a group of Edmontonians between the ages 13 to 23. During the time the original motion was proposed Banister was 20 years old, and her young age was mentioned in 19% of the online comments sampled. Most commonly she was referred to as “pretty young”, “little girl”, and a “child”. An example from CBC comment was “Pretty young to already be espousing her own political agenda and forcing it on others” (ORC CBC News Edmonton “A” 2015). When commenters refer to Banister as young it pulls ideas of inexperience. Moreover Paula Simons from the Edmonton Journal noted that in her research most of the people



posting negative comments were adults, which “given the amount of time Canadian adults spend obsessing about teen cyberbullying, it was disturbing to watch the spectacle of adults taking to the Internet to gang up, dog-pile style, on well-meaning youth volunteers” (Edmonton Journal 2015). Youth apathy was also mentioned in the conversation surrounding Banister, Councillor Andrew Knack related Banisters case in his comment to the Edmonton Journal when he said:

“These are people volunteering their time to try to make this country, this province, this city, better for youth. This type of bullying and sexual harassment does nothing to encourage more people to come forward.” (Edmonton Journal 2015).

The idea that Banister was not only a woman but a young woman added an intersection of potential criticism and delegitimization from online commenters.

### **Theme Seven: Fame Seeking**

“Well we all know she’s looking for people to look at her” (Yahoo News Canada 2015), this comment from this Yahoo News Canada reader captures the theme of how Banister was perceived as seeking fame when she presented this motion, or in other words, her intentions were self-serving instead of altruistic. “The Complex Visual Gendering of Political Women in the Press” by Asa Kroon Lundell and Mats Ekstrom discusses how the pictures media chose to include in articles differs greatly depending on if it is a man or a women photographed. As well, the type of picture used is a tool to convey a certain message about that politician. The photograph of Marina Banister was taken by a male Edmonton Journal Photographer Shaun Butts outside of the Edmonton City Hall. The shot was of Banister from elbow up, wearing a draped sky blue top with a high neckline, a delicate gold chain necklace, and pearl earrings. Most notably Banister had obviously applied makeup consisting of smoky lined eyes and a pale glossy lip, as well as curled hair. It is no secret that Banister put time into her appearance the morning that the photograph was taken. Interestingly enough, Banister’s photograph was originally used exclusively with online media, whereas the original print articles had instead chosen a photograph of elected Councillor Andrew Knack. This could be seen as reaching the different demographics to which those two forms of media are designed to appeal to, as young media consumers read articles digitally, whereas an older profile reads paper news copies. Andrew Knack was a supporter of this motion and defended Banister once the media backlash ensued, but he still undeniably a white, cis-gender, straight, upper middle class man, in his late 30s. Andrew Knack’s photo appeals to an older and more traditional demographic, whereas Banister’s photo was often tagged as click bait. Click bait is described as material which boasts sensational or provocative headlines or photos in order to draw attention and visitors to an online feature (Oxford Dictionary). Ekstrom and Lundell point out how “first general tendency when it comes to visualizing women in politics involved in a media-driven scandal is to emphasize their femininity” (Ekstrom and Lundell 2008 895). This is relevant to Banister as “women in politics are gendered with a focus on appearance as they are framed from a male point of view and with a male gaze” (Ekstrom and Lundell 2008 906). This article also highlights how women in politics are often pushed into categories in the media namely the princess, mad woman, and witch (Ekstrom and Lundell 2008 906). Banister’s categorization evolved, initially she was painted as a witch enforcing her opinions onto others, but then transformed into a princess once gaining public sympathy. Banister squarely fell into the princess role as “she was cast as young and vibrant, and the reader is reminded that the papers often used to comment on

her long legs, lipstick and clothes that markedly differed from the men's grey suits in parliament" (Ekstrom and Lundell 2008 906). Media habitually categorizes women into roles and uses pictures designed for the male gaze.

### **Theme Eight: Sexual Harassment**

A main reason the story of cyber bullying got picked up by the media is because of the sexual harassment Banister received in many online comments. The comment that got the most wide spread use was pulled from the National Post and used in the Paula Simons Edmonton Journal article "She looks great until you get her clothes off and she proceeds to just lay there exhausted from all that walking and not eating real food" (Edmonton Journal 2015). Other comments include "I would like to treat her like a piece of meat" (ORC Yahoo News Canada 2015) and "She calls herself a vegan, but with a pretty face like that I bet she gobbles the protein stick just fine." (ORC Yahoo News Canada 2015). The paper "Online incivility or sexual harassment? Conceptualizing women's experiences in the digital age" by Jessica Megarry published in the School of Social and Political Sciences indicates how online sexual harassment is disproportionately directed at women and is a factor in women's voices being silenced on the internet. Overwhelming there is a "widespread culture of misogyny that exists online" (Megarry 2014 46). This online harassment many women experience inhibits them from voicing their opinions, in turn limiting their ability to participate equally to men (Megarry 2014 46). It is important to note that the internet is considered a subsection of the public sphere, an area where ideas are brought forward, discussed and debated; a place women continue fight to gain equal access (Megarry 2014 48). Moreover, because women are placed in a position of disadvantage in patriarchal societies they are sometimes less able to portray themselves as agents of social change in the online public space (Megarry 2014 48). Megarry also goes on to discuss how "women face significant structural barriers to having the issue of online harassment [by] taken seriously in the public eye" (Megarry 2014 49). Moreover "the prolific rise of social media sites has resulted in an increased blurring between our online and offline lives, rendering our bodies more central to our online personas" (Megarry 2014 29).

### **Theme Nine: Physical Harm**

In the worst circumstances of online abuse, Banister was presented with threats of physical harm in the comment sections of online articles. Unfortunately, this is not uncommon when women are presented as leaders in social media. Moreover, although Banister said in many interviews that "When I saw someone post, 'Well, it's a good thing she's pretty, because she isn't very smart,' I felt bad. But after a while, I started to find the comments sort of amusing. I didn't let them faze me." (Edmonton Journal 2015), these comments, which occurred in roughly 0.5% of the comments, should still be taken seriously as they are representative of a larger battle women face in safe social discourse. Some of the comments Banister received include "Good! She should be beaten to death with a zucchini!" (ORC Yahoo News Canada 2015) and "What a clown. I hope she gets cancer." (ORC Yahoo News Canada 2015). It is important to note that a commonality of abuse experienced by women online is that they are targeted "on the basis of their identities as women, and that stereotypical ideas of femininity are consistently utilized in a derogatory manner" (Megarry 2014 49). This draws parallels to what happened to Banister as her appearance that was discussed in online comments served to delegitimize her ideas. The comments written in the online articles regarding Banister's motion also "displayed a preoccupation with physical

appearance and suggested that a woman's worth and value lies in her sexual appeal to men" (Megarry 2014 50). This parallels a "kind of pornographic invitation which perpetuates hierarchical gender norms and incites others to display threatening sexual behaviour towards the victim" (Megarry 2014 50). Banister experienced this sort of commentary through a variety of rape threats and sexual innuendos written in online comment boards. Moving further, many of the insults to Banister were not critics of the motion but instead insults to her appearance, as Megarry states "in a paradigm where women are consistently valued by their attractiveness to men, unattractiveness is seen to be the highest form of insult" (Megarry 2014 50). Marina Banister's case was a prime example of how "the internet is a male space to which women have limited access, and communicate to women that their presence online is tolerated only on the basis of their sexual value and appeal to men" (Megarry 2014 50). One of the biggest media backlashes Banister received was the notion that trolls on the internet cannot be taken seriously, and that the threats were empty and thus should not be taken seriously. I disagree with this rhetoric, as Megarry points out "the harasser is not, as such, concurred with their own private access to a specific women, but rather with creating an atmosphere online where she is made to feel continually scared, threatened and vulnerable" (Megarry 2014 51). Lastly, "online sexual harassment is a political term, and it identifies the abuse of women online as a manifestation of male dominance which functions to perpetuate male social control in cyberspace" (Megarry 2014 52) and thus "by conceptualizing the harassment of women on the internet as online sexual harassment it is possible to convey the specific social message that sexual inequality online is harmful to women, and limits their ability to achieve equality in the online public sphere" (Megarry 2014 53).

### **Overarching Findings**

In conclusion, the study of online comment sections in response to Marina Banister's motion from the City of Edmonton Youth Council for Edmonton City Council to adopt vegan or vegetarian catering was met with widespread and gender specific backlash. This analysis shows us how a significant portion of the comments focused on Banister herself and not the motion in principle, the distraction from the issues serving as a disservice to the mission Youth Council was trying to accomplish. These comments delegitimized Banister's credibility by removing her power as an expert through rampant criticism of her appearance, which was seen as consumeristic and vapid, as well as her perceived image as being pushing her feminine and radical values on the public. Time and time again women are torn down in the public sphere for reasons that are unrelated to their ideas or qualifications, but instead are attacked for who they are as a person and women. Coupling this notion with the intersection of gendered meat politics, it is not surprising that Banister's motion received such criticism by the public.

Furthermore, when this case study is synthesized with existing literature on the gendered politics of meat consumption it becomes apparent as to why the public responded in the way they did. Although the Youth Councils motion was led by a woman, the intersectionality of the young woman, challenging consumeristic attitudes, who did not fit the visual mold of an environmentalist were all equally important factors which led to the harassment she received. This is because "while some took issue with the philosophy behind the council's recommendation, calling Banister a "veggie Nazi" – others targeted her in a much more physical sense, including hostile and sexually-suggestive comments" (CBC News Edmonton "B" 2015) which many would argue was a result of the pictures used in the online articles. In the words of Paula Simons "It was as if Banister personally embodied, in microcosm, all the things online

trolls love most to hate. It all devolved into a post-modern witch hunt, a shocking display of social media's power at its ugliest." (Edmonton Journal 2015). In this way, Banister's case study was not an anomaly but instead the manifestation of the way the public reacts to women who challenge accepted culturally practices in our patriarchal and speciesist society.

### **Conclusion**

This inquiry into the backlash against a young female political activist is significant to the study of gender politics and mass media. It exemplifies how the proposed motion to reduce meat consumption was handled differently because the face of the initiative was female. The research reveals how online reader commentary responds to women who challenge a societal norm by refuting their argument through delegitimizing their person. It points out similarities between the oppression of women and the dominance over animals and exemplifies how the crisis of masculinity is still present in 2015. The research provides quantitative data on the number of comments which discussed the motion compared to the individual bringing it forward. Women who prompt society to reflect on accepted cultural norms of consumption and hegemonic masculinity often face challenges in both traditional and social media. Time and time again, the core issue of what these women want to discuss can be side tracked by attention to their appearance, age, or gender. A common discourse of the politics of the meat industry is that people justify the oppression of non-human animals through their objectification. This study compared how Banister was oppressed similar to non-human animals in this regard, commonly known as women being treated as "a piece of meat".

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