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An Intersectional Feminist Reading of Social Media Conversations about the Duke and Duchess of Sussex

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Introduction

In May of 2018, American actress Meghan Markle married Prince Harry — formally becoming a working member of the Royal Family of the United Kingdom. Upon their marriage, they were granted the titles Duke and Duchess of Sussex. Following the televised wedding at Windsor Castle, the couple received immense amounts of attention and media coverage. People across the globe wanted to read all about the newly married royal couple, whether it be about their wedding, honeymoon, or everything in between. However, the attention they were receiving was not all positive. The media, social media specifically, was quick to express harsh judgment regarding their marriage. Tweets, Instagram posts, and news headlines became critical of Meghan's every move. Social media was relentless, spewing unnecessary hatred which caused the Duke and Duchess of Sussex to both suffer heavily.

Nearly a year after their marriage, the arrival of Meghan and Prince Harry's first child in May of 2019 gave social media an advanced outlet for their negativity. Racist posts about their son, Archie, flooded social media platforms with concerns regarding how dark his skin tone would be. It can be inferred that this was the final straw in what led to their decision to renounce their royal duties. Hence, in January of 2020, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex released a statement announcing that they would be stepping back in their roles as working senior members of the Royal Family (Duke and Duchess of Sussex, 2020).

After their departure from the Royal Family, the royal couple participated in a tell-all interview in which they spoke on various aspects of their time as working royal members. In perhaps the most heartbreaking moment of the interview, Meghan says "I just didn't want to be alive anymore," referring to all the hurtful media attention she received while she was pregnant (Landler, 2021). It reached the point where Prince Harry felt as if he could not leave his wife alone for fear that she would harm herself. It is hard to imagine what it was like for the Duchess of Sussex to live her life in the spotlight, terrified of which simple move of hers would be criticized next, all because of the color of her skin. Given the role that social media played in perpetuating racist narratives related to the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, I began this research project focused on social media posts that were perpetuating negativity towards the couple. Specifically, my research question is as follows: To what extent does an intersectional feminist reading of the social media conversations about the Duke and Duchess of Sussex highlight the reasoning behind the couple's decision to step down from the Royal Family and the demands of the institution?

Background

Markle in the Media

Meghan Markle is not a stranger to the media, whether it be within the United Kingdom or internationally. Researchers were quick to notice Markle's strong presence within the media, sparking critical analyses into media aspects that led to Markle and her husband, Prince Harry, relinquishing their royal duties (Clancy & Yelin, 2018; Mahfouz, 2018; Rahimli, 2020). Further, there were many reasons for Markle's negative attention from various forms of media. When she married Prince Harry, she was marrying into a White institution that thrives on their high-class English figureheads. Iman Mahfouz (2018) highlights the reasoning for Markle's heavy media attention by writing, "Since the announcement of the wedding, Markle has become a controversial figure in the press and on social media for being an American, biracial, former actress who is also divorced" (para. 1). With this, the media delineated Markle's many qualities that set her apart from the rest of the Royal Family.

However, the press and social media were quick to antagonize Markle due to these very differences, such as her race and status as a divorcee. Among the individuals who participated in encouraging negative media regarding Markle, the British were perhaps at the forefront of these social media posts. Mahfouz (2018) continues, "Unlike in traditional forms of media, such as the press for instance, users of social media have become producers rather than mere consumers of texts, being able to express their opinions and attitudes with a great degree of freedom" (para. 5). Thus, social media fostered easy access and a lack of filtering which allowed for the derogatory media posts to gain such traction – eventually becoming the leading cause for the couple's exit from the Royal Family.

The Creation of "Megxit"

When Prince Harry made the decision for his family to step down from their royal duties, the media went into a frenzy and crafted the term "Megxit" – a parody of the word "Brexit" which refers to the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union. Despite the Duke and Duchess of Sussex leaving the Royal Family due to negative media, their exit did not halt the hatred geared towards them via antagonistic social media posts. Even with the Duke of Sussex releasing statements that addressed how the media was creating a toxic environment, media outlets saw their departure as an outlet to continue to antagonize the couple. Undeterred, the media would refer to their step back from their duties as senior members of the Royal Family as "Megxit." With this term, the media was able to antagonize Markle, often referring to their departure as "drama," "royal drama," and "exit drama" (Rahimli, 2020).

Through critical research, the language and nature of social media posts surrounding Markle can be noted to engender new terms and impacted social environments. Ainura Rahimli (2020), in studying the semantic development of the term Megxit from the more popular term Brexit, concluded that social media discourse and the way this discourse circulates often leads to the creation of new terms. It is not only new terms that have impact, but the negative tone and comments that are presented, consumed, and then perpetuated by the masses that impact the people involved. On the topic of the couple's departure from the Royal Family, Rahimli (2020)

writes, “This step of them has not been accepted by the people equally. It is noteworthy to mention that their decision had a negative side according to some sources” (para. 2). It is then mentioned that 35% of those surveyed disapproved of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex parting ways with their royal duties. This response from the British was not unexpected as members of the Royal Family are held to strict economic and behavioral expectations, and a higher standard overall (Rahimli, 2020).

However, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex’s exit should not have initiated such damaging media coverage – both on social media and within news headlines. Rahimli (2020) continues, “The relative synonymy of drama and tragedy that reflects the subjective gradient of the Megxit process is undoubtedly the result of the divergence of events of different language and cultural personalities” (para. 15). Consequently, it was made clear that the Royal Family and the British in general were not prepared to accept a modern princess inspiring change within an old-fashioned system. With this, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex’s departure can be studied using intersectional feminism as an approach to dissecting negative media coverage and its lasting impact on individuals.

Feminism versus the Royal Institution of England

Feminism, by definition, is about equal rights and opportunities for all genders. More specifically, it encompasses “[r]especting diverse women’s experiences, identities, knowledge and strengths, and striving to empower all women to realise their full rights” (International Women’s Development Agency, 2021). Feminist views are often not represented when it comes to the Royal Family of England. Thus, when Meghan Markle married into the family, her feminist values were not well received. Laura Clancy and Hannah Yelin (2018) write, “...Markle does indeed represent a new feminist order, and is therefore part of the consensus surrounding a supposed moment of radical feminist change” (para. 5). With this, Clancy and Yelin (2018) explored the nature of Markle’s feminism and how society and social media responded to it. Their research outlined that many saw Markle’s modern temperament as a threat to the well-established monarchy. However, this research also highlights the notion that social media gives Markle too much credit when it comes to her being a paragon for feminism. For instance, the media were quick to make judgments when Markle wore trousers to a royal event. While some social media posts criticized her for not wearing a more feminine option such as a dress, others praised her for introducing feminist values to royal events. Yet, other female royals such as the Queen Mother had worn trousers long before Markle had. This consequently supports the fact that negative social media posts about Markle were often unsupported and merely posted as a means to elicit hate towards her because of her race.

These posts markedly represent the need for intersectional feminism, a methodology that branches from feminism and acknowledges the notion that different forms of discrimination intersect along the axes of race, gender, class, dis/ability, and more. Kimberlé Crenshaw writes in support of this notion: “Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains” (2005, p. 1242).

For instance, various races will not experience the same forms of discrimination based on gender alone, since women of color experience racism and sexism simultaneously. All in all, the plethora of derogatory social media posts targeting Markle were simply due to the very essence of her being “a feminist, post-racial utopia: a bi-racial, divorced, self-proclaimed feminist, American actor ‘modernising’ an ancient patriarchal institution” (Clancy & Yelin, 2018, para. 2).

Method and Methodology

After reading through the research mentioned above, I decided how to effectively approach my research question regarding the role social media played in prompting the departure of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex from the Royal Family. Consequently, here I evaluate social media posts and hashtags relating to Meghan Markle and Prince Harry through the methodology of intersectional feminism. The methodology of intersectional feminism combines ideas from both critical race theory and feminist theory. As defined by Crenshaw, who created this methodology, Crenshaw, “...intersectional feminism is the understanding of how women's overlapping identities — including race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, religion, age and immigration status — impact the way they experience oppression and discrimination” (Stiefvater, 2020). This embodies the idea that women experience the world differently based on various factors. For the Duchess of Sussex, her race, gender, and nonroyal status were all used against her in the media. With this theory in mind, I collected data using the method of web scraping, which is software designed to extract data from certain websites, such as Twitter, using keywords.

While pursuing my research, I used intersectional feminism to analyze social media posts and tweets through not only a gender bias but a racial lens as well when it comes to how the media treated Meghan Markle based on the color of her skin. In Crenshaw’s work regarding intersectionality, she also “details that race and gender hierarchies don’t have an additive negative effect but rather intersect and interact to produce uniquely discriminatory realities for those multiply marginalized” (Jackson et al., 2020, p. 80). With that being said, this methodology is one that can be used to study how systemic racism affects people in modern day society, including how Meghan Markle was negatively treated by a country that is predominantly White. Further, I used intersectional feminist theory to assess social media posts that criticized Markle due to her gender, focusing on feminism and gender inequality. Essentially, I collected data from a social media platform, Twitter, to analyze how these platforms laced with racism and anti-feminism have affected Meghan Markle and Prince Harry, eventually leading to them stepping back from their duties as working members of the Royal Family.

Results

The Blatant Racism Towards the Duchess of Sussex

Upon the news that Prince Harry was dating Meghan Markle, an actress, American, and divorcee, social media quickly generated opinionated posts with Twitter at the forefront of all platforms. While some users were excited that the young prince had found a potential princess,

a large majority of posts shared disapproval of Meghan as she was of mixed race and did not fit the typical nature of a royal member. With this, posts and tweets began to emerge criticizing her every move and sparking false narratives. This behavior did not soften following their marriage, and instead, it began to accelerate. One of the driving factors of belligerent tweets geared towards Meghan was her race, as one user tweets,

Blacks just want to take over and we see this behavior over Black Meghan Markle who wants to take over the most powerful white family in the world. Meghan could've chose a black family but she didn't. She chose a white family she continues to destroy. #Megxit #PrinceAndrew. (ANGEL, 2019)

This is a telling case of the systemic racism that is present in staunch royalists, and Britons in general, that revealed itself when Prince Harry began his relationship with Meghan. Though Prince Harry expressed concern to the press and the people about Meghan's well-being across the years, social media seems to ignore his pleas each time — labeling Meghan as dramatic or weak instead.

The racism in such tweets was not always flagrant. Racial microaggressions were also apparent in various social media posts. Microaggressions, by definition, are underlying and subtle discriminatory statements against members of a marginalized group, in this case, African Americans. For instance, the following tweet utilizes a microaggression towards Black women by labeling Meghan as a diva in response to conversations about wanting to be recognized as a humanitarian:

Meghan Markle is as FAKE as they come. "Humble Meghan" is a hoax. Diva Meghan is the truth. I can't imagine why. Anyway, here's a peak into the REAL Meghan. #meghanmarkle #megxit #megainmarkle. (azurseasky22, 2019)

Using "diva" to describe Meghan subtly hints at the negative stereotype of "angry Black women," implying that Meghan only wanted to be known as a humanitarian simply for the label and not for the charity work that she has participated in. The blatant, overtly racist tweets and the ones using subtle microaggressions allowed Meghan no relief and proceeded to diminish her. With these two tweets in mind, the use of the #Megxit hashtag over a year before the Duke and Duchess of Sussex formally left the Royal Family shows just how social media contributed to their exit as the formation of this hashtag not only created, but heavily spread, the idea that Meghan should leave the Royal Family.

Kate Middleton versus Meghan Markle

Since the announcement of Meghan's engagement to Prince Harry, social media users and avid Kate Middleton fans began to vigorously compare the two duchesses. While this was inevitable, the treatment and support of the two duchesses was glaringly different. Headlines regarding their relationship and posts analyzing their actions were abundant. In November of 2018, it was claimed by the press that Meghan had made Kate, titled the Duchess of Cambridge upon her own marriage, cry at a dress fitting before Prince Harry and Meghan's wedding. Of course, social media had mixed opinions regarding the claim. However, users were mainly on Kate's

side as Meghan's character had already been and continued to be attacked. Recently, it was revealed that quite the opposite had occurred, and Kate was the one who had made Meghan cry. Still, people were quick to rush to Kate's defense tweeting statements such as,

You know, I wonder if what caused Catherine to cry was Meghan's poor treatment & bullying of Kate's staff? These seem to be two hot topics that won't seem to die...Is it possible they're related? I can see Kate getting that upset by Meghan bullying her staff #MEGXIT #MoonbumpMeghan. (JustMyThots, 2021)

This tweet is a prime example of how individuals would pit these two women against each other, eliciting a theme of anti-feminism.

Furthermore, in another tweet referencing Meghan and Kate, individuals began to insinuate jealousy between the duchesses—further developing their rivalry within social media.

#MeghanMarkle is starting up yet another smear campaign against #duchessofcambridge first in a DM article full of #duchessmeghan old tricks of using friends and American expressions, now Lainey gossip has been paid to do the same thing. Someone is salty Kate is so loved. (Dr. sage14, 2020)

Staunch royalists lean towards the Duchess of Cambridge, while Americans favor the Duchess of Sussex. Polls showed that 46% of Britons did not feel sympathy towards the Duchess of Sussex, despite the treacherous media treatment she had been enduring. This same poll also revealed that only 41% favored Meghan, while 67% favored Kate (Dixon, 2019). Though both women were commoners before marriage, Meghan's mixed race and American roots were negatively paralleled with Kate being White and raised in the United Kingdom, simultaneously highlighting pedigree and prejudice. The creation of friction between the two duchesses further inspired an outlet on social media to place Meghan below Kate due to her race.

The Newest Addition to the Royal Family isn't Exempt

When the Duke and Duchess of Sussex welcomed their first baby, Archie, people across the globe shared their warm wishes for the couple. However, there were also a multitude of individuals who felt the need to share negative opinions regarding the newest member of the Royal Family. Specifically, BBC Radio presenter Danny Baker tweeted a black and white photo of an older couple holding hands with a chimpanzee and captioned the photo, "Royal baby leaves hospital." This tweet, now deleted, received equal parts praise and backlash as many shared negative views about the royal baby because he was part African American due to his mother's lineage. Social media shared concerns regarding the royal baby's complexion as many wondered if the baby would have dark or fair skin. This shines a light on the racism that is often the sole motivator in tweets such as this one.

In addition to concerns regarding the royal baby's complexion, many spewed hatred by questioning whether or not her pregnancy was legitimate as they suspected the use of a surrogate. Upon the birth of Archie, his birth certificate was not immediately released and the new family of three would not appear before media outlets. Social media users mistook these actions and claimed that Meghan was faking her pregnancy and instead had a surrogate. In

reality, the couple was just recovering from the birth of their first child and privately enjoying their first moments as new parents. Similarly, when the Duchess of Cambridge gave birth to her first child, the birth certificate was also not released immediately. Her first son was born on July 22, 2013, and the birth certificate was not released until August 2 (BBC, 2013). The Duke and Duchess of Sussex took the exact same number of days to release their son's birth certificate as well. Still, social media users were not convinced that this was just simple royal protocol as one tweet reads,

Lol! We already knew this! #RoyalBirthScandal #IllegitimateArchie Harry and Meghan will not release Archie's birth certificate to ensure baby's privacy. (TeaLipstickCeleb, 2019)

Though these two women carried out the same actions after giving birth to their children, only one was publicly scrutinized and criticized for it.

Besides regular Twitter users, top-rated journalists also weighed in on the birth of Archie and the hostile attention Meghan was receiving. Infamous British journalist Piers Morgan responded to headlines that argued in favor of Meghan and the vast racism her family was receiving by tweeting,

Oh pur-lease. a) They're not being 'hounded'. b) The criticism of them has got nothing to do with racism and everything to do with hypocrisy. (Morgan, 2019)

With nearly eight million followers, Morgan was able to instigate further hate and speculation about Meghan's pregnancy and baby as he suggested the notion that she was being dramatic rather than experiencing racism. These social media reactions clearly reflect the intersectional feminism that is present within negative posts about Meghan as she was judged for her actions not solely because she was a woman, but because she was a woman of color.

Countdown to #Megxit

In the months leading up to their official announcement of stepping back as working members of the Royal Family in January of 2020, tweets exploiting the use of the #Megxit were abundant. After every public appearance or royal announcement, individuals would flood Twitter with ungrounded negative tweets. The animosity is palpable as a tweet by Jaime Fabulina (2020) shows:

Meghan Markle is beyond rude. #Megxit what's her deal? She can't claim feminism or #wokeness for her childish rude behaviour toward people who are there to help She just doesn't get it.

This tweet was not in response to another, just simply written and posted by the user, claiming Meghan is falsely in favor of feminism. This tweet, supposedly from another woman, is just one of many hypocritical tweets aimed at the duchess. She claims that Meghan is the one who is anti-feminist while simultaneously tearing her down. This exemplifies what intersectional feminism allows us to see, as the user not only exerts anti-feminism but allows racism to interfere with her ungrounded judgment of Meghan.

At this point in time, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex were not the only ones receiving an immense amount of negativity on the platform. Their son, Archie, also had tweets aimed at him. The royal couple kept Archie's public appearances minimal and only posted photos of their family around the holidays. Still, this did not halt users from giving rise to judgments and hatred towards the baby. With this ill intention, one user posted a tweet which included malevolently edited photos of Archie, including a picture of the baby with a brown paper bag over his head and eyeholes cut out (EyupMiDuck, 2019). The tweet was comprised of hashtags such as #spudhead, #stayincanada, and #biffaboy. Biffa is a British derogatory slang word meaning fat, while spud is another word for potato. However, perhaps the most blatant hashtag is one that refers to Archie as a "thuglet." "Thug," a racially charged term, denigrates African American men as being involved in violence, or it denotes the color of their skin. It is a term based in racism and it was used to describe Archie because his mother is half African American. These hurtful and racist tweets regarding Archie, in congruence with the lack of support towards their son from the Royal Family, was perhaps the final straw that led the Duke and Duchess of Sussex to announce their exit on January 8, 2020 — nearly three weeks after Twitter witnessed a pernicious frenzy over their baby.

Conclusion/Implications

Through the research I conducted, I was able to determine that an intersectional feminist reading of the social media conversations about the Duke and Duchess of Sussex effectively highlights the reasoning behind the couple's decision to step down from the Royal Family and the demands of the institution. My research shows that had Prince Harry and Meghan Markle been more supported rather than harassed by social media, their outcome may have been different. One major takeaway from this study was determining that there were women promoting feminism while also tearing down the Duchess of Sussex. It showed how these women could allow racism to motivate them to be anti-feminist when it comes to women of color. Perhaps this was especially hard for the duchess to understand as she has always been known for being a feminist and often worked with the younger generation to promote feminism. Overall, the negativity the royal couple received was uncalled for, racially motivated, and unnecessarily spread across social media platforms such as Twitter.

Though the research I conducted was efficient in the sense that it accurately analyzed the negative treatment of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex on Twitter through supporting tweets, there were some implications regarding limitations. One implication of this research project is that my data was limited to solely one social media platform. This project reflects the negativity and racism Meghan and Prince Harry received only on Twitter. If I were to conduct this study again, I could expand my database to include posts from other popular social media platforms such as TikTok or Instagram. Another implication of this study is the fact that it shows how social media inspired the royal couple's departure, rather than including other forms of media like the news. It is known that mainstream media was also a factor in their exit due to the use of disparaging headlines and negative news coverage. Thus, I could initiate a new study that could potentially be used in conjunction with this one, analyzing how mainstream media encouraged racism and anti-feminism towards Meghan, all leading to the royal departure.

All in all, this study allowed me to gain an understanding of how powerful social media truly is. The harmful comments, disrespectful statements, and blatant racism that was aimed towards not only Meghan, but her entire family, severely altered her mental health. Her admission of having suicidal thoughts and her husband's pleas for the media to stop harassing his family goes to show just how significant of a role social media can play in one's life. All of these users are able to hide behind a screen, while actual lives are substantially damaged as in the case of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. Further, this study has advanced my interest in what exactly provoked the departure of the royal couple as working members of the Royal Family. Hence, besides including mainstream media in a new study, I could continue my research in studying how the Royal Family played a role in their departure as well as they left the couple defenseless against social media, and the media in general. There may be more factors that contributed to the life-altering exit of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex; however, it is undeniable that social media had an enormous role in creating the toxic environment that led to such a monumental decision.

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