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Hegemonic Masculinity and Toxic Technocultures.
Discourse in the Review Bombing of HBO's *The Last of Us*

Abstract: Review bombing is an internet phenomenon in which a mob of users posts a deluge of negative reviews and low rating scores in a short period of time against a product they consider offensive. It can be interpreted as a form of ideological conflict, which frequently corresponds to an outburst of social distress from gaming communities. This contribution focuses on the cyber hostility against HBO's adaptation of one of the most successful video games in recent times: *The Last of Us* (TLoU). Inspired by the tenets of Discourse Studies and of the Discourse Historical Approach, the paper analyzes the discursive strategies used to attack the series' inclusive representations. It suggests interpreting review bombing as a form of collective political resentment which conflates overt and covert forms of hate speech towards marginalized groups. Drawing on existing research on hegemonic masculinity, geek communities, and online hate speech, the contribution offers insights on how toxic masculinity functions as a gatekeeper to participation in contemporary media.

Keywords: *online hate speech*, *digital discourse*, *toxic masculinity*, *geek masculinity*, *review bombing*, *The Last of Us*

1. Hegemonic Masculinity and Geek Culture

The concept of hegemonic masculinity, which was introduced by Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell in the 1980s, has become a pivotal theoretical element of gender studies over the last 40 years. It refers to "the social arrangements that give a particular kind of masculinity a hegemonic position in sexual politics and that marginalize others".[1] In this view, hegemonic masculinity "embodie[s] the currently most honored way of being a man, it require[s] all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimate[s] the global subordination of women to men".[2] It is, therefore, normative and instrumental in maintaining the patriarchal system.

Hegemonic masculinity is not only constructed in relation to women, but also to other forms of marginalized masculinities. Indeed, this social order has been established also thanks to the cultural reconfiguration of nontraditional forms of masculinities as stigmatized outgroups and negative symbols, especially gay men. This ideological aversion to gay and queer individuals, as well as to women, has been studied across different research fields. In media and communication studies, toxic forms of masculinity have been investigated also within geek communities.[3]

Since the late 1970s, geek culture has maintained a complex relation with models of masculinity. Although historically associated with the demographic of the straight, white, cisgender male,[4] the image of the 'nerd'[5] has long been interpreted as antithetical to traditional hegemonic masculinity in Western

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[1] Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 58.
[2] Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept", *Gender and Society*, 19.6 (2005), 832.
[3] See Fergus Murray, "A Separate Reality: Science, Technology and Masculinity", in Eileen Green et al., eds., *Gendered by Design: Information Technology and Office Systems* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1993),64-80; Lori Kendall, "'Oh No! I'm a Nerd!': Hegemonic Masculinity on an Online Forum", *Gender and Society*, 14.2 (2000), 256-274; Michael Salter, "From Geek Masculinity to Gamergate: The Technological Rationality of Online Abuse", *Crime Media Culture*, 14.2 (2018), 247-264.
[4] See Soraya Murray, *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018).
[5] *Geek* and *nerd* are used interchangeably in the paper, meaning "a person that has a high technical interest with obsessive or exclusive dedication on a given object, especially technological and/or linked to themes like fantasy, science fiction, video games,

society. Indeed, geek masculinity has been defined as "an identity forged by rejecting both feminine-marked culture and constructions, as well as the traditional athletic male aesthetic".[6] However, as pointed out by Thiago Falcão et al., "the archetypal model of the hypermasculine nerd ... only outlines the substitution of a traditional hypermasculine ideal for another standard that continues to maintain hegemonic masculinity within pop culture".[7]

In more recent times, this has had a strong impact on the negotiation of power in the contemporary digital space, as thoroughly investigated by academic research dedicated to computer-mediated communication (CMC) and online communities.[8] Several studies in this research field have focused on power dynamics in geek communities, that is, those communities which "tend to coalesce around geek interests – technology, science, popular culture (particularly of the science fiction, fantasy, and comic book variety), and gaming".[9] In their book *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*, Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett reflect on identity policing in contemporary nerd communities writing that "geekdom is at a crossroads. Once defined by their outsider status and victimization, geeks are now powerful enough as a subculture to make victims out of others".[10] As a result, over the last decade, the digital space has seen the emergence and proliferation of several phenomena which show the "socio-technical congruence between geek masculinity and online abuse".[11] Examples of this are the gendered forms of trolling and flaming, both investigated extensively in CMC studies since the late 1980s as forms of online hostile discourse and anti-social behaviors.[12] Definitions of *flaming* abound in academic research and have evolved through the years. For example, in 1986, Jane Siegel et al. saw flaming as "the expression of strong and inflammatory opinions", while in 2010, Peter Moor et al. defined it as a behavior "displaying hostility by insulting, swearing or using otherwise offensive language" (1536).[13] An academic definition of *trolling* is provided by Claire Hardaker; according to her, this is the behavior of "a CMC user who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement".[14] More recently, one of the internet practices that has worked to reaffirm toxic gendered ideologies is review bombing. This is a jargon expression used "to refer to a phenomenon where a crowd of people performs an explicit, perceptible sabotage of a website", posting negative public ratings and reviews of a cultural

etc.". Definition provided by Thiago Falcão et al., "Conservatism and Toxic Masculinity in Gamer Culture: An Approach to *Magic: The Gathering*", *MATRIZes*, 15.2 (2021), 253.

[6] Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing* (Cham: Palgrave, 2017), n.p.

[7] Falcão et al., "Conservatism", 258.

[8] See, for example, Susan Herring, "Gender and Power in Online Communication", in Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff, eds., *The Handbook of Language and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 202-228; Susan Herring, "Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis: An Approach to Researching Online Behavior", in Sasha Barab et al., eds., *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning* (New York: Cambridge U.P., 2004), 338-376; Susan Herring, "Discourse in Web 2.0: Familiar, Reconfigured, and Emergent", in Deborah Tannen and Anna Marie Tester, eds., *Discourse 2.0: Language and New Media* (Washington, DC: Georgetown U.P.), 1-25.

[9] Adrienne Massanari, "#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures", *new media & society*, 19.3 (2017), 331.

[10] Salter and Blodgett, *Toxic*, 11-12.

[11] Salter, "Gamergate", 251.

[12] See, among others, Martin Lea et al., "Flaming in Computer-Mediated Communication. Observations, Explanations, Implications", in Martin Lea, ed., *Contexts of Computer-Mediated Communication* (New York: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1992), 89-112; John Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect", *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7.3 (2004), 321-326.

[13] Jane Siegel et al. "Group Processes in Computer-Mediated Communication", *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 37.2 (1986), 161; Peter J. Moor et al., "Flaming on YouTube", *Computers in Human Behavior*, 26 (2010), 1536.

[14] Claire Hardaker, "Trolling in Asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication: From User Discussions to Academic Definitions", *Journal of Politeness Research*, 6.2 (2010), 237.

product.[15] This technique has been used on review aggregator platforms such as Metacritic, Rotten Tomatoes, and IMDb to attack inclusive and gender-positive representations in mainstream media, especially in video games or films. Among the most recent and (in)famous incidents of review bombing is that which has targeted HBO's adaptation of one of the best-selling video games in recent times: *The Last of Us*.[16]

The present contribution, therefore, focuses on the cyber hostility against this cultural product and analyzes the discursive performance of toxic masculinity in geek communities. More specifically, the paper presents some preliminary findings of a qualitative pilot analysis of the discourse employed on the aggregation site Metacritic to review bomb HBO adaptation.

2. *The Last of Us*

Created by Naughty Dog and Sony, *The Last of Us* (TLoU) is a Play Station video game series, critically renowned for its emotional storytelling, unforgettable characters, and suspenseful action-adventure gameplay. It consists of two main parts: TLoU I and II. The former was released in 2013, has sold over 20 million copies, and spawned the latter, that is, a sequel which was published in 2020. In January 2023, a drama adaptation, which was created by the director Craig Mazin and one of the game developers, Neil Druckmann, debuted on American HBO Max.

The story of both the game and the drama is set in a post-apocalyptic America, ravaged by a Cordyceps fungus brain infection which has turned large parts of the population into rampaging zombie-like monsters. The lives of survivors are constantly threatened not only by the Infected but also by ruthless factions fighting over the control of territories: on one side, the highly militarized government agency FEDRA, which has established quarantine zones across the U.S., on the other, hunters, smugglers, and revolutionary militia groups like the Fireflies which revolt against FEDRA's fascist-like militarization. The story follows the actions of two protagonists, Joel and Ellie, respectively interpreted by Pedro Pascal and Bella Ramsey in HBO adaptation. Joel is a veteran smuggler who lost his daughter Sarah at the onset of the pandemic, while Ellie is a teenager who is immune to Cordyceps and, thus, she is possibly the key to humanity's survival. Joel is tasked by the Fireflies with escorting Ellie to safety and finding a cure to the infection. Through a series of flashbacks, the narrative introduces secondary characters, like the commander of the Fireflies Marlene, the survivalist Bill, Joel's partner Tess, and Ellie's girlfriend Riley.

TLoU holds a special place in mainstream media production, because the traditionally violent post-apocalyptic setting is the backdrop for more inclusive and progressive representations, in terms of character evolutions and identities. This innovative element is even stronger in HBO drama. First, it provides a more in-depth representation of Ellie's queer relationship with her girlfriend Riley (S1E7 – *Left Behind*). Second, it dedicates an entire episode (S1E3 – *Long, Long Time*) to the love story between two formerly peripheral characters, Bill (Nick Offerman) and Frank (Murray Bartlett). Bill is a paranoid and lonely survivalist, who has learned to thrive in the post-apocalyptic world, until a chance encounter with Frank radically changes his life. They fall in love and build a happy life together. As critic Darren Mooney writes, "Bill discovers that there is something more meaningful than his own self-preservation. In Frank, he finds joy and happiness. He gets to live, not just survive".[17] Indeed, the episode shows that

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[15] Venera Tomaselli et al., "Review Bomb: On the Gamification of the Ideological Conflict", in Oscar Bernardes et al., eds., *Handbook of Research on Cross-Disciplinary Uses of Gamification in Organization* (Hershey: IGI Global, 2022), 335.

[16] See, among others, Claire Whitley, "Review Bombing Is About Power, Politics and Revenge -- but It's not About Art", *The Conversation* (2023), *www.theconversation.com*.

[17] Darren Mooney, "No, That Episode of *The Last of Us* Was Not 'Filler'", *Escapist Magazine* (2023), *www.escapistmagazine.com*.

it is possible to find love and happiness even in the post-apocalyptic horror, as well as to experiment and to live alternative models of masculinity based on mutual protection and care.

Representations of non-hegemonic masculinity are not prevalent in post-apocalyptic settings, which have been traditionally dominated by patriarchal values.[18] Despite according to James Berger apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic representations "put forward a total critique of any existing social order",[19] Raffaella Baccolini[20] has analyzed how most post-apocalyptic narratives do not portray a radical change in gender roles: patriarchal systems, that were present before the disaster, continue to dominate even during the reconstruction process. As Baccolini stresses, in this context TLoU provides alternative representations of gender roles, because it further deconstructs the mainstream post-apocalyptic narrative of masculinity as inevitably violent.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the third episode, which emphasizes Bill and Frank's storyline, has polarized the opinion of critics and Internet users online, influencing their reviews on the whole series. On the one hand, professional critics have acclaimed it "the best adaptation of a video-game ever made"[21] and "absolutely magical television ... for its brave, poignant, heartbreaking character study".[22] On the other, HBO drama attracted the ire of users who were outraged by the episode's queer content and by the supposed transformation of Bill from an hypermasculine character into an emasculated man; these users, thus, turned to social media and web aggregators to label the show as the epitome of the so-called woke ideology and to review bomb its production.

3. Review Bombing and Metacritic

Part of the wider phenomena of online hate speech, review bombing (RB) is an internet practice in which a mob of accounts (i.e., a digital crowd) posts "a large number of negative reviews and low rating scores in a short time span".[23] Review bombers are usually politically right-wing users "who intend to hurt sales of a product they decide offends them or is otherwise culturally or politically objectionable".[24] This phenomenon frequently corresponds to an outburst of social distress from gaming communities, as demonstrated by Venera Tomaselli et al. in their statistical analysis of the RB which occurred right after the release of Sony's game TLoU II.[25] As the scholars point out, that was the most prominent case of RB until 2020. Similarly, three years later, the premiere of HBO adaptation from TLoU I met with a deluge of negative reviews on many platforms, including the review aggregator Metacritic.

Metacritic is a subsidiary of the Fandom company. It collects both professionals' and users' reviews of a variety of products, such as films, television shows, music albums, and video games. For each item, Metacritic develops an algorithm called Metascore, "which aggregates the opinion of experts into a unique number within 0-100",[26] as well as a user score within 0-10. Registered users can also post textual reviews, along with their score. Metacritic rating system automatically breaks down users' reviews into

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[18] See Carlen Lavigne, *Post-apocalyptic Patriarchy: American Television and Gendered Vision of Survival* (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2018); Graeme John Wilson, "'What's the Difference Between Men and Women?': Hegemonic Masculinity in *The Walking Dead*", *The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, 7.1 (2019), 36-57.

[19] James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 7.

[20] Raffaella Baccolini, "Rapporti di genere nelle narrazioni post-apocalittiche", paper presented at the Conference *Oltre l'Apocalisse. Immaginari comparati alla fine dell'umano*, University of Padua (19 April 2023).

[21] John Nugent, "The Last of Us Review", *Empire Online* (2023), *www.empireonline.com*.

[22] Andy Welch, "The Last of Us Recap Episode Three – Absolutely Magical Television", *The Guardian*, Monday 30 January 2023, *www.theguardian.com*.

[23] Giulio Giacomo Cantone et al., "Ideology-Driven Polarisation in Online Ratings: The Review Bombing of *The Last of Us Part II*", https://arxiv.org/abs/2104.01140 (2023), 3.

[24] Jen Glennon, "Metacritic Has a Review Bombing Problem", *Inverse* (2020), *www.inverse.com*.

[25] Tomaselli et al., "Bomb".

[26] Cantone et al., "Polarisation", 6.

three groups: positive (user score within 10-7), mixed (user score within 6-4), and negative (user score within 3-0). Each category can be consulted via a drop-down menu. Figure 1 below shows the polarization between critics' and users' opinion for TLoU II videogame (left) and HBO series (right). More specifically, on the one hand, both products received a very high Metascore and a must-badge by professional critics, and, on the other, considerably low scores by users.
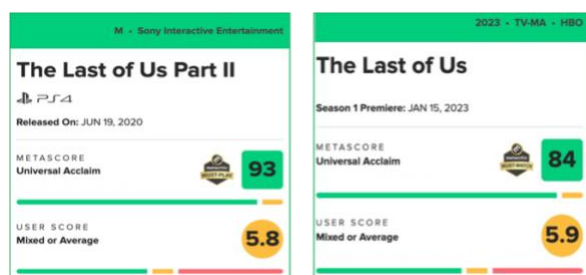

Figure 1. Polarization of critics' and users' opinion on Metacritic

4. Methodology

Metacritic was chosen as the primary source for the present study mainly because it had faced many major incidents of RB and struggled to counter this phenomenon, as investigated by some recent academic studies.[27] My pilot qualitative analysis focuses on users' negative textual reviews of the entire series, as well as of episodes S1E3 and S1E7. These are the episodes dedicated to queer characters and which triggered the RB.

Therefore, in order to build my database, the texts were selected by using the filters provided by Metacritic platform. More specifically, the "negative reviews" filter only shows those comments with a 3-0 user score. This was selected to filter reviews for Season 1, as well as for S1E3 and S1E7.

The texts were captured in September 2023 from Metacritic webpages[28] via NCapture for Chrome. This is a web-browser extension which enables to gather web content and to import it into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Thus, the captured texts were imported to Nvivo 14 and analyzed manually. Reviews written in languages other than English (e.g., Russian, Portuguese, Spanish, French), as well as those that were posted more than once, were deleted. This resulted in a final database of 407 reviews (of which 197 reviews for the whole series, 180 for S1E3, and 30 for S1E7).

The qualitative analysis is inspired by the tenets of the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), one of the major approaches developed in the research field of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). The DHA was introduced by Ruth Wodak and her colleagues from the Department of Linguistics of Vienna University to investigate the rhetoric of far-right populism. Since then, the DHA has been used extensively to analyze conservative discourse in politics and media representations, as well as racist and

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[27] See Tomaselli et al., "Bomb"; Cantone et al., "Polarisation"; Javier Coronado-Blázquez, "A NLP Approach to 'Review Bombing' in Metacritic PC Videogames User Ratings", https://arxiv.org/abs/2405.06306.
[28] Texts were captured on the following Metacritic webpages: *www.metacritic.com/season1*, *www.metacritic.com/episode3*, *www.metacritic.com/episode7*.

supremacist narratives of the "politics of fear".[29] The DHA focuses mainly on five discursive strategies which are defined in Table 1 below:

Nomination	Discursive construction of social actors, objects, phenomena, events, processes and actions
Predication	Discursive qualification of social actors, objects, phenomena, events, processes and actions (positively or negatively)
Argumentation	Justification and questioning of claims of truth and normative rightness
Perspectivation	Positioning the speaker's or writer's point of view and expressing involvement or distance
Intensification	Modifying the illocutionary force of utterances

Table 1. DHA Discursive strategies[30]

The present contribution aims to address the following research questions:

- How is hegemonic masculinity discursively articulated in RB?
- What types of gender-based prejudice intertwine in this digital discourse?

In the attempt to answer these research questions, the following sections provide illustrative examples of the above discursive strategies, and discuss some key preliminary findings of the qualitative analysis conducted on the cyber hostility against TLoU on Metacritic.[31]

5. Analyzing the Dataset

5.1 *Automated Language Censoring System*

A first element that emerges from the dataset is that in nearly 100 reviews some words appear censored through a string of asterisks. Excerpts (1) and (2) below provide just a couple of examples:

(1) This **** **** isnt even close to what happens on the game, Bill kills himself and gets a **** blowjob, very explicit
(2) Filler episode with annoying **** agenda

To understand this feature, I contacted Metacritic's editorial team. In an e-mail exchange, Metacritic co-founder Marc Doyle informed me that the aggregator uses an automated language censoring system to blank out sensitive words with asterisks. Doyle added that this system is shared among Fandom subsidiaries (such as GameSpot, GameFAQs, and Metacritic itself), and works through a set of words. However, he could not provide me with the list of sensitive words. To try and get a general understanding of this mechanism, after capturing my dataset, I submitted a mock review to Metacritic, which purposely contained both toxic language and neutral terms. Table 2 shows the original text of my review and the censored version that was published on Metacritic.

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[29] Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: The Shameless Normalization of Far-Right Discourse*, Second Edition (London: SAGE, 2021).

[30] Adapted from Michael Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, "The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)", in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, eds., *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies* (London: SAGE, 2016), 33.

[31] The author has not modified the texts quoted in the following sections in any way. All excerpts contain the original texts of the reviews. Any mistakes in spelling, syntax, or verb forms are authentic.

Original text:	Censored text:
The show is fucking shit, it contains too many queer characters. queer woke agenda for gays	The show is **** ****, it contains too many **** characters. **** woke agenda for ****

Table 2. Mock review to test Metacritic Automated language censoring system

This example seems to suggest that the system censors not only offensive expressions that are typically found in hate speech,[32] such as swearing and loaded words (e.g., *fucking shit*), but also terms that today are not offensive per se, like *gays* and *queer*. According to Fandom community guidelines users cannot post "any material that is inappropriate, profane, vulgar, offensive, disparaging, defamatory, obscene, or sexually explicit".[33] However, the automated system, which was probably introduced to limit hateful and offensive content, does not seem to be an effective measure to face the phenomenon of review bombing.[34]

Therefore, it is not possible to assess the extent to which hate speech is actually present in Metacritic reviews. Also, it is not always possible to study discourse "in its unexpurgated entirety"[35] as it should be done when dealing with potential hateful speech. However, more covert forms of ideologically charged discourse can be found throughout the dataset, especially in the predication, perspectivation, and argumentation strategies. The qualitative analysis conducted on the dataset shows that toxic masculinity is performed by recurring to three intertwining types of discourse, namely sexist discourse, anti-woke discourse, and homophobic discourse. The following sub-sections provide and discuss some illustrative examples taken from the texts in the review bombing under investigation.

5.2 *Sexist Discourse and Self-Victimization*

Sexist discourse has landed at the centre of recent academic research dealing with the proliferation of gender-based prejudice and its rhetorical features on the Web.[36] It does not come as a surprise, then, that instances of sexist attitudes are found in the rhetoric of toxic masculinity. Excerpts (3) to (8) below serve as examples:

(3) Ellie was not an always-anger cμnt
(4) so damn ugly like that Bella Ramsy thing
(5) the awful face of bella ramsey and her lack of acting skills
(6) Bella Ramsey is the worst live action Ellie, but she surely is the best fluid liquid goblin

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[32] Definitions of hate speech abound in scholarly research and legal contexts and often differ in terms of targeted groups. Broadly speaking, it can be defined as "any communication that disparages a target group of people based on some characteristic such as race, colour, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, or other characteristic". The definition is provided by John Nockleby, "Hate speech", in Leonard Levy et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Constitution 3* (Detroit: Macmillan Reference US, 2000).

[33] Fandom, "Terms of Service – Gamespot, Metacritic, TVGuide, ComicVine, GiantBomb, GameFAQs", *Fandom* (2022), *www.fandom.com*.

[34] Interestingly, the system does not detect – and thus does not censor – a sexually explicit, vulgar term like *blowjob*, as shown in excerpt (1).

[35] Emma Jane, "Back to the Kitchen, Cunt. Speaking the Unspeakable about Online Misogyny", *Continuum. Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 28.4 (2014), 558.

[36] For the debate on definitions of sexist and hate speech, see Donna Lillian, "A Thorn by Any Other Name: Sexist Discourse as Hate Speech", *Discourse & Society* 18.6 (2007). For the research on sexism and misogyny online see, among others, Claire Hardaker and Mark McGlashan, "'Real Men Don't Hate Women': Twitter Rape Threats and Group Identity", *Journal of Pragmatics*, 91 (2016); Majid KhosraviNik and Eleonora Esposito, "Online Hate, Digital Discourse and Critique: Exploring Digitally Mediated Discursive Practices of Gender-Based Hostility", *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics*, 14.1 (2018); Emma Jane, *Misogyny Online: A Short (and Brutish) History* (London: Sage, 2017).

(7)   Bella Ramsey makes me think of Gollum from The Lord of The rings
(8)   Ellie is arrogant, emotionless, reckless

Examples of sexist discourse abound in the predication strategies used to review Bella Ramsey and her rendition of Ellie. As shown by this selection of excerpts, both the actor and her character are qualified negatively, through pejorative adjectives (*arrogant*, *emotionless*, *ugly*, *worst*) as well as gender-based insults (*cunt*)[37] and metaphors that hint at physical ugliness, monstrosity, and deformity (*goblin*; *Gollum from the Lord of the Rings*). This reminds of rhetorical elements typically found in sexist discourse, where women are attacked through an abundance of "scathing, appearance-related judgments [and] ad hominem invectives".[38] All these discursive devices show the strong objectification that is commonly found in misogynistic discourse. In particular, *so damn ugly* and *the awful face*, in excerpts (4) and (5) respectively, recall two of the aspects that characterize women's objectification according to feminist philosophers Martha Nussbaum and Rae Langton, namely "reduction to body" (i.e., identifying a woman with her body or body parts) and "reduction to appearance" (i.e., treating a woman primarily in terms of how she looks or appears).[39]

These few examples also show that gender-based resentment is not always conveyed discursively through overt forms of hate speech. Excerpt (8) contains three adjectives which are not openly denigratory or insulting per se (i.e., *arrogant, emotionless, reckless*). However, they all express characteristics which often are not associated to in-real-life women, as well as to female characters in cultural products: in fact, women and girls of all ages have long been stereotypically represented mainly as "beautiful, kind, delicate, sweet, fearful, affectionate, emotional, caring" and usually "their actions and behaviors conform to the three-fold imperative to be good-looking, obedient, and caring".[40] Such representations have been shaped by patriarchal ideology and, at the same time, have influenced gender hierarchy and sustained hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, Ellie's nontraditional features – along with Ramsey's nonbinary gender identity[41] – make them suitable targets for review bombers guided by conservatist values.

Several other reviews show how conservatism gets reaffirmed through a discourse that intertwines sexism with other hegemonic ideologies, such as white suprematism. This is visible in particular in those reviews referring to the ethnically diverse cast of TLoU, as well as to Pedro Pascal's interpretation of Joel. Although Pascal has been praised by many professional critics for his ability to show the protagonist as a tough but also vulnerable man, review bombers did not like his rendition. Excerpts (9) and (10) serve as examples:

(9)   nothing is normal anymore nowadays. All female roles are strong, brilliant, all white men are stupid, no good, are stupid.
(10) They turned Joel into an indecisive and incompetent idiot who can't do anything right just because he is a straight man. Every female and ethnic diversity quota person is portrayed as exceedingly wise, skilled and kind. Every bad guy is a white man.

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[37] Also note that the intentional misspelling of the disparaging term *cunt* in excerpt (3) is sufficient to bypass Metacritic automated censoring system and post an overtly offensive review.
[38] Jane, "Kitchen", 560.
[39] Martha Nussbaum, "Objectification and Internet Misogyny", in Martha Nussbaum and Saul Levmore, eds., *The Offensive Internet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P, 2010), Kindle Edition; Rae Langton, *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2009), 228-229.
[40] Raffaella Baccolini et al., "Gender, Literature and Education for Children and Young Adults", in Raffaella Baccolini et al., *Literature, Gender and Education for Children and Young Adults / Littérature, genre, éducation pour l'enfance et la jeunesse* (Bologna: BUP, 2019), 7.
[41] In excerpt (6) Ramsey's gender identity is ridiculed as she is defined "the best fluid liquid goblin".

These excerpts exemplify how patriarchal and supremacist ideologies interplay in discourse. In (9) and (10) HBO's attention to diversity and inclusive representations is reframed as a purposeful victimization of 'true' masculinity, which is supposed to be straight and white in the minds of review bombers. It is therefore visible how a narrative that is simply more inclusive – and realistic – in terms of gender and ethnic diversity is perceived as a threat aimed at overturning the status quo, i.e., the lost 'normality' invoked in excerpt (9), and eventually at devaluing the power of straight white men. Such conspiracy theory is discursively sustained thanks to an argumentation fallacy in excerpt (10) ("They turned Joel into an indecisive and incompetent idiot who can't do anything right *just because*[42] he is a straight man"), and more generally by recurring to the so-called victim/perpetrator reversal strategy, which characterizes conservatist ideologies and works to present historically marginalized groups as hegemonic.[43] In excerpt (10) we can also find the argument from example, where the supposed transformation of Joel "into an indecisive and incompetent idiot" epitomizes the victimization and the demonization of traditional masculinity, as well as the distortion of the original features of the series and its characters.

In the texts quoted above, thus, these strategies are also linked to conspiracism. Recent studies in psychological science have shown that "belief in conspiracy theories appears to be driven by motives that can be characterized as epistemic (understanding one's environment), existential (being safe and in control of one's environment), and social (maintaining a positive image of the self and the social group)".[44] Moreover, such theories can offer some form of compensation for groups that have been perceived – and have perceived themselves – as outsiders that can use conspiracy theories to subvert hierarchies of power.[45] More specifically, in online communities such as the geek community, often "conspiracy theories represent normative positions [and] may offer an important source of belonging and shared reality".[46] Also, within the geek community, conspiracy theories have come to define the so-called anti-fandom. This is "a form of critical fandom that is politically and culturally opposed to new developments in a franchise they are already fans of".[47] As investigated by Robert Letizi and Callan Norman, in alt-fandoms "conspiracy theories are fabricated in order to defy the supposed ideological and narrative transgressions of a new text".[48] Prominent examples of this phenomenon are the anti-woke sentiments often expressed on contemporary digital platforms, and which are found also in the RB here under analysis.

5.3 *Anti-woke Discourse*

Excerpts (11) to (18) below exemplify the interdiscursivity between the rhetoric analyzed so far and the anti-woke discourse, and give some insights into the discursive weaponization of *woke*.

(11) An insufferable borefest of the woke agenda
(12) Another woke serie … trying to impose its deviance, instead of telling a story.
(13) It is a rubbish work imbued with the idea of political correctness. The political correctness advocated by drugman is political brainwashing, not correct politics.
(14) WARNING!!! This show contents an LGBT, woke, ****, lesbians Propaganda.

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[42] My emphasis.
[43] See Ruth Wodak "The Boundaries of What Can Be Said Have Shifted", *Discourse & Society*, 31.2 (2020), 235-244.
[44] Karen Douglas et al., "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories", *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26.6 (2017), 538.
[45] Ibid., 541.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Warren Green, "A Game About Hate: The Last of Us Part II Review Bombing, Ugly Fandom and Metacritic", in Derek Foster et al., eds., *Audience Studies – Participatory Culture of Fandom* (2023), *www.ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub*.
[48] Robert Letizi and Callan Norman, "'You Took That from Me': Conspiracism and Online Harassment in the Alt-Fandom of *The Last of Us Part II*", *Games and Culture*, 19.4 (2024), 513.

(15) this show is just an excuse to throw more woke political nonsense down the viewers throat.
(16) t's a trap! The entire purpose of the series seems to be to promote woke ideology.
(17) Blatant wokewashing.
(18) anti-family sentiment, liberal, force fed wokeism and apparently total nonsense concept at the start.

These are just some instances of the recurring use of the terms *woke* and *wokeism* in the RB which occurred on Metacritic against TLoU. Although in contemporary conservative discourse the adjective *woke* is used as a negative qualification, the Merriam Webster dictionary traces its origin as a neutral term in African American Vernacular English (i.e., a US slang), where *awake* is often rendered as *woke*, as in "I was sleeping, but now I'm woke".[49] Since 2014, this adjective has gained widespread use as part of the Black Lives Matter movement, especially after the murder of George Floyd in 2020 by four white police officers, an episode which has become the epitome of police brutality and violence against Black people in the U.S.[50] Thus, *woke* has gained a new popularity as a byword for social awareness, with the meaning of "alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice".[51] Nevertheless, in most recent times, it has often been used as a derogatory term, "as a means of characterizing such alertness (or the political and social views stereotypically associated with it) as doctrinaire, self-righteous, or pernicious".[52] This process of discursive reframing and weaponization has occurred especially in conservative political and media discourse of English-speaking countries and beyond. As analyzed by Bart Cammaerts, similarly to *cancel culture* and *politically correct(ness)*, conservative media have turned the adjective *woke* and the noun *wokeism* into disparaging labels, and social justice has undergone a process of "abnormalisation", while the so-called social justice warriors (SJWs) have been reframed as having "extreme deviant political positions".[53]

This is the reason why both *woke* and *wokeism* often appear in the discourse here under analysis along with other ideologically charged terms, like *agenda* in excerpt (11), *propaganda* in (14), *political correctness*/*nonsense* in (13) and (15), or *ideology* in (16). At the same time, to stress the supposedly intolerant attitude of SJWs, these terms are frequently employed with verbs expressing aggressiveness and violence, such as *impose*, *throw down the throat*, and *force fed*, respectively in (12), (15), and (18). Moreover, in excerpt (14) the capitalization of *warning* and the repetitions of the exclamation mark (*WARNING!!!*) can be interpreted as intensification strategies aimed at strengthening the message and capturing readers' attention. This excerpt also shows the rhetorical interplay between anti-wokeism and another discourse that features in hegemonic masculinity, that is, the homophobic discourse.

5.4 *Homophobic Discourse*

Instances of homophobic attitudes abound in the reviews of episode three, dedicated to Bill and Frank's story. However, homophobia is not always conveyed through overt forms of hate speech. Let's consider the following examples:

(19) Third series - inappropriate and excessive..
(20) too graphic for me
(21) The 3rd episode ruins the entire series, totally garbage content with zero relevance to the series
(22) The third series is just a shame! Agenda. I do not recommend it!

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[49] "Woke", *Merriam Webster* [n.d.], *www.merriam-webster.com*.
[50] See Deborah Douglas et al., "One Year on, How George Floyd's Murder Has Changed the World", *The Guardian* (2021), *www.theguardian.com*.
[51] "Woke", *Oxford English Dictionary* [n.d.], *www.oed.com*.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Bart Cammaerts, "The Abnormalisation of Social Justice: The 'Anti-Woke Culture War' Discourse in the UK", *Discourse & Society* 33.6 (2022), 730.

(23) But Series 3 is just a disgusting unnecessary non-canonical liberal agenda that no one asked for.

Here homosexuality is not mentioned explicitly, but some adjectives, nouns, and verbal expressions attribute negative evaluations to episode three: the episode itself is qualified as *inappropriate and excessive* in (19), *too graphic* in (20), while in (21) it is labeled as the element which "ruins" the overall quality of the series. This is rendered discursively also by employing strongly evaluative and ideologically charged expressions such as *garbage*, *a shame* and *disgusting unnecessary non-canonical liberal agenda*, respectively in (21), (22) and (23). Also, expressions like "for me" (20) and "I do not recommend it!" (22) show the employment of perspectivation strategies to strengthen the user's ideological involvement in this discourse.

Other reviews express homophobic resentment more explicitly. It is, therefore, interesting to consider the discursive strategies that some users employ to argument their negative reviews.

(24) all the action and interesting bits have been removed in exchange for old men porn, sexualizing children, and the frequent forced woke preaching.
(25) **** rom com with soft porn.
(26) episode 3 is where I drew the line. An entire episode dedicated to the **** love affair between Bill (Nick Offerman) and Frank (Murray Bartlett). Lots of **** sex. Kissing. Nudity.
(27) When I saw the kiss I had to pause and skip, but skip right the moment the fk each other, and fk my eye, that screen over my eyeeeee, damn ittt
(28) Anita Sarkeesian write you a letter this time around too? I dont even dare buying the remake of TLOU on PS5 either. Pretty sure he crammed in some **** fisting scenes in there all together with a pride parade.

Although some words appear censored, it is clear from this selection of excerpts that both the protagonists of the episode and their love story are reframed through toxic masculinity. In all five reviews, the gay love story is reframed as pornographic content, by recurring to a hypersexualizing rhetoric and expressions like *old men porn* (24), *soft porn* (25), *nudity* (26), *fisting* (28). Such argumentations are, nevertheless, fallacious: in fact, the episode itself does not show any explicit sex scene and nudity is almost non-existent, unlike traditional gendered narratives which strongly objectify women both in mainstream media and in the gaming industry.

Excerpt (27) expresses a stronger homophobic reaction from a user who laments his involuntary exposition to a supposed same-sex intercourse. Here the user's disgust closely reminds a gay panic reaction, which is discursively expressed through coarse language ("fk each other, and fk my eye") and character flooding ("my eyeeeee, damn ittt"), that is, "the deliberate overuse of a character within word boundaries".[54] These are two elements that commonly characterize toxic discourse online and can also be interpreted as intensification strategies which strengthen the illocutionary force of the message. Thus, the homophobic distress shown here confirms previous findings on heterosexist attitudes in the geek communities, where "heterosexuality remains an important component of geek identities, interconnected as it is with hegemonic masculinity".[55]

Excerpt (28) shows another discursive element that is interesting to point out, that is, the nomination of Anita Sarkeesian. Sarkeesian is an American feminist media and videogame critic who became one of the most targeted women during the GamerGate controversy. As analyzed by recent scholarly research and media coverage alike,[56] GamerGate was born in 2014 as an online movement ostensibly dedicated

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[54] Ine Gevers et al., "Linguistic Analysis of Toxic Language on Social Media", *Computational Linguistics in the Netherlands Journal*, 12 (2022), 42.
[55] Kendall, "Nerd", 267.
[56] See, among others, Simon Parkin, "Gamergate: A Scandal Erupts in the Video-Game Community", *The New Yorker* (2014), www.newyorker.com; Andrea Braithwaite, "It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity", *Social Media+Society*, 2.4 (2016).

to reforming ethics in video games journalism, but it soon developed into a misogynistic harassment campaign against feminist users, who are perceived as a threat to traditional video games – and gamers. For this reason, it has been defined as a "web-based campaign of harassment against women who make, write about and enjoy video games, masquerading as a movement of gamers upset about a perceived lack of ethics among games journalists".[57] More specifically, the online harassment against Sarkeesian started right after she developed a video series on sexist tropes in the video game industry; she soon became the target of a massive harassment which has rapidly escalated and used different tactics typical of online misogyny, such as sexualized insults, image-based harassment, rape and death threats, doxxing, and mass shooting threat at public events.[58] Therefore, Sarkeesian's nomination is sufficient to show the interdiscursivity between two recent articulations of toxic geek masculinity, i.e., GamerGate and the review bombing here under analysis.

5.4.1 *Emasculation*

A recurring topic in the discourse analyzed is the supposed emasculation of Bill, exemplified in excerpts (29) to (32) below.

> (29) Ep3 turning straight man, masculine with survival into a pansy
> (30) Bill is stupid in the TV show. Bill is suppose to be a man up, a badass and a tactical person but in the show he's the opposite round.
> (31) they decided to make Billy, a conservative doomsday prepper misanthrope into a **** guy who kisses and has relations with the first strange weird dude to end up at his doorstep
> (32) An episode focused on two men playing house in the middle of an apocalypse. Terrible.

This selection of reviews shows the discursive dichotomy used to name and qualify the original Bill from the videogame and Offerman's rendition of the character in the TV series. The former is described as the quintessence of traditional hypermasculine ideals; he is "a straight man, male with survival" (29), "a man up, a badass and a tactical person" (30), "a conservative doomsday prepper misanthrope" (31). Conversely, Offerman's Bill is denigrated through a series of discursive elements which convey the lack of male traditional features: he is insulted for being *stupid* (30) and *a pansy* (29), the latter being an offensive term used against effeminate gay men. The supposed transformation of Bill into an effeminate – and almost childish – character is also reaffirmed in excerpt (32), through the verbal expression *to play house*, meaning in American English "to pretend in child's play to be grown-up people with the customary household duties".[59] This not only refers to the semantic field of stereotypically female household duties, but is also in stark opposition to the apocalyptic theme.

In the examples quoted above, alternative models of masculinity are rejected by appealing to the trope of the straight survivalist, which is a typically hyper-masculine hero. Hyper-masculine models play a central role in a system based on hegemonic masculinity, despite being often unattainable ideals. Analyzing the role played by ascendency and complicity in the cultural expression of masculinity, Raewyn Connell notes that:

> the cultural ideal (or ideals) of masculinity need not correspond at all closely to the actual personalities of the majority of men. Indeed the winning of hegemony often involves the

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[57] Taylor Wofford, "Is GamerGate About Media Ethics or Harassing Women? Harassment, the Data Shows", *Newsweek* (2014), *www.newsweek.com*.

[58] For an in-depth analysis of the online harassment campaign against Sarkeesian, see Beatrice Spallaccia, "Gamification of Cyber Misogyny in the USA", in *It's a Man's World (Wide Web): A Critical Analysis of Online Misogyny and Hate Speech* (Bologna: BUP, 2020), 65-90.

[59] "Play House", Collins Dictionary, *www.collinsdictionary.com*, n.d.

creation of models of masculinity which are quite specifically fantasy figures, such as the film characters played by Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne and Sylvester Stallone. ... The notion of 'hegemony' generally implies a large measure of consent. Few men are Bogarts or Stallones, many collaborate in sustaining those images.[60]

Finally, it is worth mentioning the strategic use of *beard* in some other reviews, as shown below:

(31) certainly is disgusting to straight audiences that do not want to see two haired and beard men kissing each other and naked making love to each other in a post-apocalyptical zombie story.
(32) Waiting a week in order to watch half a series of how the beards of two smugglers are intertwined - well, that's it.
(33) they didn't have to show us a whole one hour of grown men with beards groping each other.

These three excerpts shows that the noun *beard* is used as a metaphor for masculinity, which the reviewers here interpret as humiliated and castrated by homosexuality. Therefore, the metaphor of the beard becomes strategic in homophobic discourse, because it is employed to create a discursive dissonance between Offerman's traditionally male physical appearance and his character's sexual orientation. This overt animosity against gay characters and their representation confirms that homophobia is an essential element of hegemonic masculinity. To quote once again Connell's words:

> The most important feature of contemporary hegemonic masculinity is that it is heterosexual ... and a key form of subordinated masculinity is homosexual. This subordination involves both direct interactions and a kind of ideological warfare. ... These transactions are tied together by the contempt for homosexuality and homosexual men that is part of the ideological package of hegemonic masculinity.[61]

The analysis of the selected excerpts thus shows how hegemonic masculinity works to marginalize queer men as members of a stigmatized outgroup, and how this ideological warfare against subjugated masculinities is conducted discursively.

6. Conclusion

This paper has focused on RB, that is, an internet phenomenon that has spread in recent years on online platforms to express ideological conflict over inclusive representations in cultural products such as HBO adaptation of TLoU. While some studies have been published lately to investigate RB in fields such as computer science and statistics,[62] the present contribution has framed it within the broader phenomenon of hate speech and recognized it as one of the many tactics used online to reaffirm prejudice discursively. This study has presented the first qualitative analysis of covert and overt forms of hate speech found in Metacritic negative reviews of HBO adaptation of TLoU part one. By analyzing the discursive strategies found in this dataset, this contribution has shown that toxic masculinity values do emerge from the study of the phenomenon and discourse under scrutiny. Moreover, it has demonstrated that "contemporary hegemonic masculinity is built on two legs, domination of women and a hierarchy of intermale dominance".[63] To answer the research questions, it has investigated how hegemonic masculinity gets

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[60] Connell, *Gender*, 184-185.
[61] Ibid., 186.
[62] Tomaselli et al., "Bomb"; Cantone et al., "Polarisation"; Coronado-Blázquez, "Ratings".
[63] Terry Kupers, "Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment in Prison", *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 61.6 (2005), 716.

discursively articulated in the RB against TLoU, through the victimization of female and queer characters alike. The qualitative analysis has confirmed that conservatist and normative values are reaffirmed discursively by intertwining two traditional forms of gender-based prejudice, misogyny and homophobia, with more recent anti-woke sentiments. Nevertheless, the study comes with some limitations. First, as pointed out in section 5.1, Metacritic automated censoring system made it impossible to determine the extent to which hate speech – especially in its overt forms – is present in the dataset. Second, for constraints of space, the pilot study could only address a few aspects of the microstructure of the texts, and some discursive strategies found in the quoted excerpts could not be analyzed more thoroughly. A third possible limitation lies in the fact that the analysis developed was exclusively qualitative. Therefore, future research may be conducted to analyze the corpus by joining quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Despite these limitations, the contribution has highlighted that, when faced with inclusive narratives, many members of TLoU audience seem to have a twofold problem, which is simultaneously linked to assumptions about the genre of the product and its expected narrative setting, and to their own identity. First, part of the audience of post-apocalyptic stories seems to be still conservatist and to consider inclusive representations as conflicting with post-apocalyptic narratives. Second, new models of masculinity unveil the fragility of geek identity, which has historically been constructed as a marginal masculinity.[64] As Adrienne Massanari writes, "suggesting that geek culture can also be oppressive and [that can] marginalize certain populations may create a sense of cognitive dissonance for these individuals, who likely view themselves as perpetual outsiders".[65] And yet RB can be interpreted as an example of what Massanari calls "toxic technocultures". These are toxic cultures which are enabled by and propagated through sociotechnical networks, and which demonstrate "retrograde ideas of gender, sexual identity, sexuality, and race, by pushing against issues of diversity, multiculturalism, and progressivism".[66] The cultural roots of online toxicity make it imperative to keep investigating RB and other forms of collective political resentment against historically marginalized groups, to better understand how they are articulated online, and how they get reaffirmed in discourse. I consider this the most effective way to study how hegemonic, toxic masculinity still functions as a gatekeeper to participation in contemporary media.

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[64] Salter and Blodgett, *Toxic*.
[65] Massanari, "Technocultures", 332.
[66] Ibid., 333.