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JOURNAL ARTICLE (PEER REVIEWED)

'Cheers to 365 Days of Being a Woman:' Dylan Mulvaney, Transgender Womanhood on Social Media, and the Right's Transphobic Countermovement

Shayna Maskell

Corresponding author: Shayna Maskell, School of Integrative Studies, George Mason University, 4400 University Dr, Fairfax, VA 22030, United States, smaskell@gmu.edu

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Abstract

Dylan Mulvaney, a transgender woman, has amassed a significant following on social media, with approximately 2 million followers on Instagram, 9.4 million on TikTok, and hundreds of thousands of views on her YouTube videos. In part, her popularity can and should be understood as a reinforcement of rigid gender binaries of femininity and masculinity, and a reification of "transitioning" into a hegemonic beauty standard of and for womanhood. Indeed, it is through her use of social media that she is able to both construct and reinforce what is acceptable as a transgender woman's body. This vast social media following has translated into sociopolitical capital. Mulvaney has become a de facto spokeswoman for trans women, sitting down with President Biden and securing a sponsorship with Bud Light. However, it was this sponsorship—which included Bud Light's creation of a personalized can of beer for Mulvaney—and its reception across social media that sparked a transphobic countermovement by the political right. Using traditional social movement techniques of repertoires of contention and framing, this countermovement attempted to defend existing power structures—or, more precisely, heteropatriarchal concepts of gender and sex—and their own positions of privilege. The boycott of Bud Light, as its primary form of collective action, reframed both the product itself and masculinity as defined by race (white), nationality (American), and sex-as-gender (hegemonic masculinity). Moreover, this countermovement primarily occurred in virtual space, with social media offering a platform to circulate this counter-ideology widely, normalizing and valorizing such efforts.

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Keywords

Transgender; Social Media; Countermovement; Masculinity; Femininity

Dylan Mulvaney, a transgender woman, has amassed a significant following on social media, with 1.5 million followers on Instagram, 10.8 million on TikTok, and hundreds of thousands of views on her YouTube videos. Growing up in San Diego in a very conservative Christian family, Mulvaney already knew at age four that she was a girl. As she related on her TikTok, she told her mother that 'God made a mistake,' to which her mother replied, 'God does not make mistakes.' This tension, between who she knew she was and who her family told her she was, set off decades of turmoil for Mulvaney. Coming out as a gay man at fourteen, she later realised, 'I settled into the identity as gay because that was all I saw around me' (Morales, Novak & Singer 2025). Ten years later, after graduating with a musical theatre degree and landing a role in Broadway's *Book of Mormon* in 2020, COVID hit and she became jobless. TikTok became her creative outlet, where she regularly posted videos of herself singing or interacting with animals. Two years and over a million more viewers later, Mulvaney began her most popular and life-altering TikToks: a series she called *Days of Girlhood*. On March 22, 2022, she proclaimed in her first video of the series, 'Here it goes: I am a girl.' Thus began her coming out as a transgender woman on one of the most far-reaching and widely used social media apps for young people. The remainder of the daily series on TikTok documented her gender transition journey, covering all aspects, from why she did not change her name to her emotions and opinions about hormone replacement therapy to the experiences she had as a transgender woman, including encounters with creepy Uber drivers. The series was an unmitigated viral sensation. As of 2025, *Days of Girlhood* has had over one billion views on TikTok.

This article explores how Mulvaney's self-made narrative reinforces rigid gender binaries and hegemonic beauty standards, (re)constructing what is acceptable as a transgender woman's body. This narrative of the acceptable transgender woman led Mulvaney to brand deals, interviews, and ultimately her controversial partnership with Bud Light. Furthermore, this article argues that it was Mulvaney's narrative and partnership with an American beer company that led to a transphobic countermovement by the political right. Using traditional social movement techniques of repertoires of contention and framing, this countermovement attempted to defend existing power structures—or, more precisely, heteropatriarchal concepts of gender and sex—and their own positions of privilege. The boycott of Bud Light, as its primary form of collective action, reframed both the product itself and masculinity as defined by race (white), nationality (American), and sex-as-gender (hegemonic masculinity). Moreover, this countermovement primarily occurred in virtual space, with social media offering a platform to circulate this counter-ideology widely, normalizing and valorizing such efforts.

The (Self-as-Girl) Narrative of Dylan Mulvaney

Since its release in 2016, the video-sharing platform TikTok has experienced a dizzying rise in popularity. As of March 2024, the app has been downloaded over 220 million times in the United States alone, with 1.1 billion users across 160 countries. With over a billion monthly active users worldwide, the US alone accounts for approximately 80 million users, 60% of whom are between the ages of 16 and 24 (TikTok Statistics 2024). This makes social media—and TikTok in particular—an ideal platform for creating, conveying, and consuming one's often carefully curated story of self. TikTok videos (also known as TikToks) act as visual representations of self 'circulat[ing] between individuals and groups, facilitat[ing] the creation and maintenance of relationships, memories, norms, and ideologies, and are widely understood as tools for identity formation and communication' (Tiidenberg & Whelan 2017: 141).

For Mulvaney, 'TikTok is a prime example of who you are, and what you want to share' (Mulvaney quoted in Julius 2022). And who she is and what she wants to share is her identity as a transgender woman. In part, this construction of the transgender woman as self is for the Mulvaney who never had the chance to experience her own girlhood. As she explains to *LA Magazine*, 'I didn't get to have girlhood growing up on time as everyone else, and I'm now learning all the things that little girls got to learn so long ago.' In this way, her *Days of Girlhood* embraces socially mandated daily activities of girls and women, with videos about fashion choices, hair, and makeup, acting not only as self-representation but also as her own psychological process of identification. Her material objects of girlhood in her TikToks connect to her creation of self as a girl (Tiidenberg & Whelan 2017). Her videos, then, (re)create her self-as-girl, (re)orienting identity as a dynamic process rather than a static, essentialist concept.

But as Mulvaney sees it, *Days of Girlhood* is not only for her own identification and self-representation but also as a role model. This construction of self-as-role-model is for everyone. As she explains, it is not only for the 'four-year-old, eight-year-old, fifteen-year-old Dylan—they didn't have a "me" to go on TikTok…' (Mulvaney quoted in Julius 2022), but also '…for everyone. It's not just for women or trans people or queer people. I want to be the person who brings these stories to the mainstream, because there is still so far to go with mainstream trans visibility' (quoted in Jones 2022). It is this combination—of (re)creation of self-as-girl and, simultaneously, teacher and model of what transgender womanhood is—that works not only as a self-narrative but also, more broadly, as a counternarrative. *Days of Girlhood*, as a narrative, challenges the construction of transgender women presented by major media outlets and political rhetoricians. Instead, Mulvaney's series-as-counternarrative works to reclaim the identity of a historically and contemporarily dehumanized and oppressed population (Amoah 1997). She does this by building an alternative understanding of what transgender womanhood is and looks like, creating 'a new context in which individuals who hear and benefit from the narratives can exist' (Shishko 2022). This counternarrative can reach millions of young people, aiding in their own self-identification processes, as well as shaping concepts of knowledge production, community, and feelings of belonging (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller 2023). At the same time, Mulvaney's construction of trans womanhood can help 'counteract the all-too-common tendency for adults to essentialize, stereotype, or disregard…' transgender individuals (Alvermann et al. 2021: 208). Mulvaney gives a face, a name, and insight into her daily life as a subject, counteracting the often pervasive dehumanization of trans individuals.

The success of Mulvaney's Days of Girlhood, with its accompanying self-narrative and counternarrative, provided the TikTok star with both financial and cultural capital. As the modern-day face of trans womanhood (the mantle perhaps wrested from the older and more conservative Caitlyn Jenner), Mulvaney parlayed her fame into branding and advertising deals with companies such as MAC, Kate Spade, CeraVe, and Neutrogena, as well as into political currency, even sitting down to 'interview' President Joe Biden about the threat of anti-trans legislation and bans on gender-affirming healthcare.

Transwomanhood and/as Binary, Hegemonic Womanhood

Despite the importance, popularity, and impact of Mulvaney's series as a form of self-representation and counternarrative, her success—and the transphobic right-wing backlash she incurs—must be linked to her specific construction of transwomanhood, more specifically to her fortification of rigid gender binaries of femininity and masculinity, and to a reification of 'transitioning' into a hegemonic beauty standard of and for womanhood. As the cultural studies and media studies disciplines take for granted, representation matters. More to the point, images and their construction of identity through the portrayal of men, women, and social roles in media (television, movies, social media, magazines, etc.) impact how people define themselves and who they want to be(come). As Carstarphen and Zavoina write (1999) in their book on sexual rhetoric,

'images structure meaning and a sense of reality in our world. These images, in turn, reflect and influence our perception of self' (pp. xvi–xvii).

For the purposes of this article, those realities and concurrent understandings of self that are produced and disseminated by the media are tightly embedded in the culturally accepted (if not mandated) constructions of sex-as-gender as a binary and simultaneous hegemonic femininity. First, the essentialist version of sex and gender—one that has permeated historical, political, religious, and cultural conceptualizations—conflates the biological characteristics of a person (male/female, penis/vagina, XX/XY, uterus/prostate, testosterone/estrogen; Richardson 2019) with gender (a socially constructed identity; Butler 1999). Within this version of sex-as-gender, these biological functions are defined as socially constructed gender. To have a vagina and a uterus is to be a woman (or female, as the two are interchangeable in this view). Yet, even within this model of sex-as-gender, there exist only two choices: female or male, man or woman. Such a construction is sociocultural and political, however, as up to 1.7 percent of humans do not conform to 'female' or 'male' categories, and about 1 percent globally identify as nonbinary, genderqueer, or gender fluid (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Ipsos 2023). Thus, the seemingly neutral claim that two and only two sexes (and thus genders) exist is not natural, inevitable, or universal; it has instead been made to seem an immutable fact by the political, social, and financial interests of ruling institutions that assume, perpetuate, and render invisible this constructed binary (DuBois & Shattuck-Heidorn 2021; Stryker & Currah 2014). And while Mulvaney first considered herself nonbinary—an act of resistance and refusal to the naturalization of two genders—she explains in her 'coming out' TikTok that she began feeling less like a boy and more and more like a girl. As she says in her video, I felt so scared, and a little bit ashamed, of being back on the binary as a transwoman. But ultimately, I have to honor that's who I am' (Mulvaney 2022). Her shame, it seems, is a reaction to 'being back' on the woman/man binary, a choice she understands as required when shifting from nonbinary. Yet, as Butler (2004) asserts, this 'coming out' as a transgender woman is not a liberatory act, as it replaces one discourse with another. Moreover, Butler argues, it is this conformity to gender-binary discourse that allows individuals to gain recognition—in this case, Mulvaney as woman—while simultaneously reinforcing the power dynamics that produced those categories and the system that requires specific ways of performing and decoding gendered identity.

For Mulvaney, this gendered identity as (trans)woman demands certain rules, rituals, and practices that are performed within and through a complex set of culturally symbolic meanings (Butler 1999). Thus, gender is an ideology that informs and legitimizes (unequal) structural relations, imbues authority, rationalizes disparate resources, and delineates specific sets of roles and privileges for men (Connell 1987). Femininity, in this ideology, is constructed through discursive formations of women that complement and are subordinate to hegemonic masculinities. In this performance of womanhood, only specific configurations of femininity are considered acceptable—those that uphold hegemonic masculinity and complement it—what Mimi Schippers (2007) terms 'hegemonic femininity.' As Schippers (2007: 9) explains, 'hegemonic femininity consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.' This, in turn, orients individuals' behaviors and acts as a measure by which people can understand and judge others—and their own practices—in local and global settings (Schippers 2007).

Mulvaney's *Days of Girlhood* does exactly that: 'codifying those systems in the way they view and present their identities and the physical realities of their bodies in the digital sphere' (Siebler 2012: 81). The narrative of Mulvaney's series—the collection of day-to-day rituals and practices that conform her body into a woman—reinforces a controlled, narrow, and unambiguous definition of what femininity is, and which bodies are allowed to possess it (Hoskin 2017). In a series of TikToks, Mulvaney described the 'facial feminization surgery' (FFS) she underwent, including a hairline advancement (to make her hairline appear more feminine by moving it back), cheek and lip enhancements and lifts, rhinoplasty (for a more

'feminine' nose shape), a brow bone shave (to make the brow area appear softer), and a jaw shave and chin reduction (again, to 'soften' these areas to align with hegemonic femininity). While Mulvaney shared gritty details about her surgeries, including the painful and lengthy healing processes—which appear to shed light on the literal construction of hegemonic womanhood—she also posted a 'face reveal' video, offering visual confirmation and effectively 'proving' her gender 'as normal/right to [her] virtual audience' (Siebler 2012: 85). This 'proof' of womanhood is what gender studies scholar Kay Siebler (2012) terms 'the Barbie aesthetic', the most stereotypical form of which is a 'white feminine embodiment in which the subject possesses smooth, hairless, pore-less, and tanned skin; slender, elongated, toned limbs; pneumatic breasts; a whittled waist; and shiny, long blonde hair' (Whitney 2013: 121).

In subsequent videos, Mulvaney argues that FFS is a personal choice, and one that not every person who transitions requires. Despite this being theoretically (and practically) true, her 'correct' trans woman's body, based on hegemonic femininity, standardizes this hyper-feminine ideal for both cis and trans women. She 'looks' like a woman—white, thin, (eventually) blonde—who wears makeup and earrings, and embodies woman-as-to-be-seen. Popular culture, and social media influencers writ large, offer few alternative representations of this hegemonic femininity. As Siebler explains:

> The Internet encourages people to write narrow descriptions of their physical bodies as they relate to masculine and feminine gender norms. In turn, these users of the Internet begin to think of their physical bodies in relation to these norms and create a specific "real life" body that matches the cyber reality' (Siebler 2012: 81).

The implications of Mulvaney's conformity to hegemonic beauty standards for women normalize an online and offline environment in which women's bodies are constantly assessed, surveilled, criticized, and castigated if they do not measure up to these standard portrayals of femininity. For trans women (and cis women), one's body must align with 'the heteronormative, misogynist culture of masculine and feminine ideals' (Siebler 2012: 88).

Bud Light and Cheers to 365 Days of Being a Woman

Her partnership with Bud Light, which began in 2023, ironically would not have been possible without Mulvaney's hegemonically feminine body and her use of social media. Her narrative of self-discovery, hyperfemininity, and authenticity, and her reinforcement of the 'ideal' transgender body (Lovelock 2017), along with her millions of followers, translated into sociopolitical capital. Such capital allowed her to become a de facto spokeswoman for trans women, which ultimately legitimized her brand relationship with Bud Light. The social media debut of this partnership started on April 1, 2023, when Mulvaney, dressed in homage to Audrey Hepburn's Holly Golightly from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, posed with cans of Bud Light and made her less-than-one-minute announcement. Carrying five cans of Bud Light, she faces the camera, sets them down on a small table, and begins: 'Hi! Impressive carrying skills, right? I got some Bud Lights for us.' As she cracks open a can of Bud Light, while wearing elbow-length black opera gloves, she continues:

> So, I kept hearing about this thing called March Madness and I thought we were all just having a hectic month. But, it turns out, it has something to do with sports! And I'm not sure exactly which sport, but, either way, it's a cause to celebrate.

At this point, twenty-two seconds into a forty-eight-second post, Mulvaney sips from the Bud Light can and says: 'This month I celebrated my day 365 of womanhood and Bud Light sent me possibly the best gift ever….' The camera cuts to a Bud Light can featuring her smiling face and a message reading 'Cheers to 365 Days of Being a Woman,' as she continues, 'a can with my face on it!' She finishes the clip by saying, 'Check out my Instagram stories to see how you can enjoy March Madness with Bud Light, and maybe

win some money too. Love ya! Cheers! Go team! Whatever team you love, I love too.' Her accompanying caption to the video reads:

> **Happy March Madness!! Just found out this had to do with sports and not just saying it's a crazy month! In celebration of this sports thing @budlight is giving you the chance to win $15,000! Share a video with #EasyCarryContest for a chance to win!! Good luck! #budlightpartner.**

Such a clip instantly reinforces the representation of hegemonic womanhood that Mulvaney embraces, if not capitalizes on. Her re-created look of Hepburn's Holly Golightly (complete with an updo, evening gloves, and necklaces) immediately connotes fairytale hegemonic femininity: beauty and glamour, upward social mobility, and (heterosexual) romance. What's more, Mulvaney's humorous asides about not knowing anything about sports ('what's March Madness? What sport? Go team!'), particularly a cultural form so embedded in contemporary American consciousness, constitute a deliberate and somewhat excessive boundary she draws between hegemonic womanhood and manhood. For men, sports are a regulation of violence, a show of virility, and a performance of power and dominance through competition (Turelli, Vaz & Kirk 2023). In other words, sports embody hegemonic masculinity. And as Schippers (2007) reminds us, gender is relational; what one is depends on what the other is not, and hegemonic masculinity demands that certain practices and characteristics are unavailable to women—in this case, sports. Thus, Mulvaney's constructions of hegemonic femininity (through dress and lack of sports knowledge) are reinforced as complementary to, and subordinate to, hegemonic masculinities.

The Right-Wing Bud Light Boycott OR Transphobia 'Legitimized'

The response to Mulvaney's post and her partnership with Bud Light was swift and overwhelmingly hateful, with covert—and sometimes overt—threats of violence directed toward both the social media influencer herself and the company. These reactions were, by and large, created and disseminated on social media itself. Most famously, singer Kid Rock posted a video across multiple platforms of himself shooting cases and dozens of Bud Light cans with a rifle, before turning to the camera and yelling, 'Fuck Bud Light and fuck Anheuser-Busch!' He then smiled and added, 'Have a terrific day.' Likewise, a former NFL cornerback posted a video on X of himself shooting stacks of Bud Light with a scoped rifle, captioning it 'bud light target practice lol'.

The outrage continued, particularly among politicians and cultural figures. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis publicly encouraged consumers to 'hold the company accountable', stating in a video that went viral, 'Why would you want to drink Bud Light? If we don't push back, they're gonna keep doing it. If you don't have conservative beer drinkers, they're gonna feel that. It's righteous. Pushback is in order.' In another viral video posted across nearly all major social media platforms, DeSantis told veterans on the campaign trail that he would serve them any beer 'except' Bud Light. He also ordered Florida officials to investigate Anheuser-Busch, arguing that the company had 'violated duties to shareholders' by engaging with Mulvaney.

Conservative activist Robby Starbuck tweeted, 'The message to conservative families from @budlight seems to be: We will encourage and even celebrate the erasure of men and women, along with all the values you care about. Bud Light has gone totally woke.' Similarly, Townhall.com columnist Derek Hunter tweeted, '@budlight: the groomer of beers.' Congressman Dan Crenshaw, a Republican from Texas, posted a video on Instagram stating, 'Saw Bud Light's stupid ad campaign. So guess what we're going to do? We're going to throw out every single Bud Light we've got in the fridge'—ironically, his refrigerator included beer produced by a subsidiary of Anheuser-Busch. Commentator John Cardillo, a former NYPD officer whose Instagram profile declares, 'I'll post what you're afraid to', wrote a response directed at both Bud Light and Mulvaney: 'Who the hell at @budlight thought it was a good idea to make a grown man who dresses like

little girls their new spokesperson? Brands have to stop listening to their woke creative teams and get in touch with their consumer demographics.' Even country star Travis Tritt posted a video announcing that he had removed Bud Light from his hospitality rider for concerts.

All across social media, disdain, disgust, and anger were directed toward Mulvaney, for her existence as a trans woman, and toward Bud Light as a company, for its 'values' in partnering with Mulvaney. These reactions, from politicians, commentators, and the conservative commentariat, spurred an organized and specific transphobic countermovement by the political right. Using traditional social movement techniques of repertoires of contention and framing, this countermovement attempted to defend existing power structures—or, more precisely, heteropatriarchal concepts of gender and sex—and their own positions of privilege. Their primary form of contention was the use of the boycott. This tool of protest was not chosen randomly; it was used because of perceived political opportunity. As social movement literature contends, the type of collective action a group takes depends on the conditions that form around their grievances and enable anger to turn into mobilization. As Tarrow (2022), a titan of social movement theory, asserts, these conditions (sometimes known as political opportunities and resource mobilization) are essential to when, how, and who participates in collective action. For this transphobic countermovement, these conditions were rooted in what participants saw as a breakdown of traditional social structures in 2022 and 2023: Biden was president, having beaten the right's self-proclaimed savior, Donald Trump; the white population decreased from 76 percent in 1990 to 59 percent in 2022; the married two-parent household fell to 18 percent, with the most common households being single people living alone and married couples with no children; Biden signed the Respect for Marriage Act, codifying marriage for same-sex couples federally; and the number of LGBTQ candidates for office was the largest on record, with 6.3 percent identifying as trans and 5.3 percent identifying as nonbinary or genderqueer (America in Facts 2023). And while polling indicated that the majority of likely voters (64 percent—72 percent of whom were Democrats, 65 percent Independents, and 55 percent Republicans) thought there was 'too much legislation' aimed at 'limiting the rights of transgender and gay people in America' (Data for Progress 2023), politicians and cultural figures used the issue prominently, often to polarize and mobilize their base around claims of 'grooming' and so-called 'pedophilia' through bathroom restrictions and the perceived inequity of transgender people's place in sports. This sociopolitical milieu of 2022–2023 America incubated and legitimized the right wing's claims of repression and danger.

The choice of a boycott was both sociocultural and moral. The right-wing insistence on the ethical grievance posed by Bud Light, through its partnership with Mulvaney, spurred boycott participation among those who perceived the collaboration as 'strikingly wrong and that has negative and possibly harmful consequences for various parties' (Klein, Smith & John 2004: 96). Moreover, the history of the boycott in American social movements—though more typically associated with leftist causes—made it a repertoire that is generally known and understood, while also requiring relatively little commitment and involving low risk (Tarrow 2022: 111).

The Bud Light boycott, and its formulation across virtual (social media) and everyday life (the people participating in the boycotts), was not only constructing a moral claim but was also producing a collective identity. The purpose of a collective identity, as understood through social movement theory, is for participants to understand who they are, what they stand for, and why they do what they do (Polletta & Jasper 2001). As Melucci (1989), the theorist behind collective identity, argues, such identity is all about 'common cognitive frameworks', or a shared understanding of status (whether real or imagined), linking participants to a larger social community (35). For the far right, this collective identity is set in opposition to vilified adversaries—transgender people and anyone who seemingly supports them. Thus, the right's identity is located in feelings of both risk and insecurity, morality and decency, an identity founded in 'protecting' their own while excluding and marginalizing transgender people. This collective identity, then, serves a dual function as both a 'resource' and an 'incentive' for action (Choup 2008: 193).

This collective identity was formulated, and the boycott validated, by the (typically unconscious, though sometimes intentional) framing of the issues involved in the right's outrage. Framing accompanies every contemporary social movement; it is an attempt at symbolic mobilization. That is, because movements (in this case, the right's transphobic countermovement) want to replace 'a dominant belief system that legitimizes the status quo with an alternative mobilizing belief system that supports collective action for change' (Gamson, Fireman & Rytina 1982: 15), they offer alternative understandings of symbols to gain support and mark themselves off from their opponents. This 'schemata of interpretation' helps individuals within the countermovement not only to locate themselves, but also to articulate and label new information about the world around them, while at the same time demonizing opponents (Snow et al. 1986; van Dijk 2023). White supremacist and religious right groups, specifically, have often reframed the 'glorious past'—a time when sex was confined to marriage, everyone went to church, all marriages were wonderful, no abortions took place, homosexuality did not exist, and there were no pressures or laws to integrate the races—while using rhetoric of despair and doom for the future if something does not change (Stewart, Smith & Denton 2012: 50). Such frames align closely with the transphobic countermovement incited by Mulvaney's partnership with Bud Light. While the boycott of Bud Light is a form of collective action, it is legitimized and rationalized by the reframing of what it means to be a white, cisgender, American, beer-drinking man.

Drinking has historically been reserved for men (Bosson et al. 2009; Darwin 2018; West 2001). It was women who had the responsibility to take care of the home; it was women who frequently organized temperance movements; and it was women who were near-monolithically excluded from male spaces of and for drinking (the exception being women present for male pleasure, including brothels, saloons, and strip clubs). In this way, male drinking was constructed as a homosocial event, cementing gender identity through the ritual of imbibing alcohol and operating as a protest against—and contrast with—womanhood. Being a man was and is defined, in part, by drinking. Drinking functions as a rite of passage: a ritual of young men in high school, in fraternities, in the armed forces, on Friday and Saturday nights, during pre-marriage traditions, while watching football on Sundays, and at any event where masculinity is centred. These drinking rituals often reinforce gender segregation, consolidating male bonding and group cohesion that is reproduced across social and cultural institutions. In this way, drinking—and beer specifically—is used to assert masculinity, particularly when such identities are challenged or questioned (De Visser & Smith 2007). As Darwin (2018) notes, 'it is not that Budweiser [is] necessarily popular due to [its] quality, but rather due to [its] symbolic association with a dominant expression of masculinity' (p. 303). Beer equals manhood.

The Bud Light partnership with Mulvaney challenges this gendered domain in two specific ways, both of which appear to imperil hegemonic masculinity: women who drink beer, and transwomen who drink beer. The relative absence of women beer drinkers—particularly within the demographics of Bud Light's target audience—helps differentiate which behaviours are coded as 'masculine' and which are 'feminine' (and thus to be avoided). Indeed, any indication that a man is engaging in acts associated with femininity often challenges his gender status (Bosson et al. 2009; Weaver, Vandello & Bosson 2013). While subsequent sections will explore the (re)framing of hegemonic masculinity in greater detail, it suffices to note that right-leaning beer drinkers feel threatened not only by women entering a masculine-coded domain (i.e. drinking beer) but also by the presence of transwomen within it. As right-wing commentator Cardillo described Mulvaney, as 'a grown man who dresses like little girls', her visibility as a beer drinker places this gendered identity in jeopardy. This perceived 'mutilation' of gender necessitated a reframing of who can legitimately drink beer. Unsurprisingly, this reframing narrows the category of acceptable beer drinkers to white, American, sex-as-gender men, aligning with historical accounts of US beer culture that 'solidify the white mythology of beer and brewing, erasing the experiences of women, the poor, and racialised minorities',

while situating beer at the centre of both masculinity and the American imaginary (Chapman & Brunsma 2020: 28).[1]

This reformulation of who is 'legitimate' to drink beer is contingent on the absolutism of the sex-as-gender frame and the reassertion of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal norms, or what trans theorists call cisnormativity (Bauer et al. 2009; Kennedy 2018; Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft 2018). In large part, this desperate need to reaffirm, validate, and elevate this specific form of masculinity is a cultural reaction to what members of the right see as a 'masculinity crisis.' The construction of this crisis by the right consists of the so-called collapse of traditional masculinity and the feminization of society, a frame driven by nostalgia for a mythical, romanticized past when men were 'real' men (invariably white and heterosexual) and women were 'proper women' (Kimmel 2012). Indeed, this construction of cisnormativity is premised on 'the assumption that everyone is cisgender or should be' (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft 2018: 11).

This masculinity collapse and so-called feminization are often constructed as the outcome of changes to the family (divorce, single-parent matriarchal households), economics (women in the workforce, globalization), and sexuality (rising cultural support that challenges heteronormativity), and are, uncoincidentally, framed as the outcomes of women's struggles for autonomy and egalitarianism (Morgan 2006; Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman 2017). Such so-called crises denote a concurrent challenge to patriarchy and to 'the resources that maintain power, the symbolic props that extend power, and the ideological apparatuses that develop to sustain and legitimate power' of and for men (Kimmel 1993: 30). As a transgender woman, and as one face of Bud Light, Dylan Mulvaney encapsulates the right's fervour, declaring, as one Reddit user posted, that 'major institutions are legitimizing and normalizing a grown man who pretends to be an adolescent girl'. Singer Ted Nugent declared on a *Newsmax* episode that she was 'the epitome of cultural deprivation'. In a society that extols cisnormativity—an ideology that seeks to exclude and erase trans people from institutions, policies, and public spaces—Mulvaney is framed as an affront (Kennedy 2018; Miller 2016). Her transness itself—her existence, and one validated on such a popular cultural platform—is a direct affront to the normalization of cisgender bodies and supremacy. In this way, the right constructs itself as 'blameless victims of oppression … [who] demand an end to what oppresses them' (Smith, Denton & Stewart 2012: 59).

The end to this oppression, this 'crisis of masculinity,' demands the reframing of sex as gender and the reinforcement of the gender binary. As discussed in previous sections, the historical essentialist view, embedded in historical, educational, cultural, and religious ideology and doctrine, conflates sex (biology) with gender (social construction). This is the frame used by the right. According to this reframing, gender identity is 'mere ideology or illusion, whereas biological sex is elevated to the status of a definitive, objective, scientific marker' (Fischer 2023: 403). In this view, sex and gender are immutable. As one Reddit commentator wrote: 'Because [sic] men aren't [sic] women, they have never been considered so, and this recent social trend being pushed on us that you can "change your gender" would have been unheard of and laughed at 30, 20, 15, or even 10 years ago.' Because biological sex is merged with gender, a trans woman is, as conservative commentator Clay Travis said on his show *Outkick*, 'a dude pretending to be a woman.' To be a 'real' woman is to be a biologically born woman, and anything else, as the right frames sex and gender, is pretend. Misgendering Mulvaney on her YouTube show—and thus stripping Mulvaney of her gender identity and autonomy—Liz Wheeler argues that Bud Light is wrongly 'honoring Dylan Mulvaney as if Dylan Mulvaney is a woman.' Trans identity, then, is not only delegitimized but also erased.

This framing is contingent and inexorably connected to the sociohistorical and contemporary 'concept of American masculinity,' which is, in part, 'defined by the ability of a man to control' (Connell 1987: 14).

1 This is not to argue that beer drinking in America is, or ever has been, confined to only white men. However, the mythology of the origins of beer is firmly rooted in white supremacy, and in the contemporary beer scene, Black and brown brewers and drinkers have been left out of the conversation (see Chapman & Brunsma 2020).

If institutions are emasculating men, and, as Reddit user mardicao007 claims, 'promoting brainwashing and indoctrination of kids,' then 'only real white men can rescue this American Eden from a feminized, multicultural, androgynous melting pot' (Kimmel & Ferber 2000: 601). And while it is primarily men who control the definition of both manhood and womanhood, women also valorize and legitimate this definition through their own reactions (as seen with Liz Wheeler above). Primarily, these women contrast 'real womanhood' with Mulvaney. Instagram user MAGABarbie posted a picture of herself (white, blonde, wearing makeup) with the caption, 'Today I celebrate 12,620 days of real womanhood. Where's my sponsorship? @budweiserusa @Tampax @Nike.' Likewise, Representative Lauren Boebert, a white woman, tweeted, 'Today, I celebrate 13,262 days of being a woman. I've been pregnant five times (miscarried in 2012) and gave birth to four incredible boys that came out of my womb… Womanhood is so much more than just dressing up in makeup and a skirt for internet videos.' These social media posts reinforce the right-wing framing of sex-as-gender, using biological reproductive functions to delineate who is 'real' and who is not.

Frequently driving the right's attempt to legitimize and naturalize sex-as-gender and cisnormativity is the assertion of 'protection.' That is, 'real' women need to be protected from the imposter woman, Dylan Mulvaney, as well as all other trans women. This protection is not of women themselves, but of the concept of womanhood. Right-wing actors on social media framed womanhood as being under attack by the charade of 'trans womanhood.' Dolos2279 on Reddit writes of Mulvaney, 'This person, in particular, is quite obviously just making fun of women by acting as a stereotypical caricature. It's just bizarre and they are attempting to gaslight people into this delusion.' Similarly, a competitive skateboarder told Fox News Digital, 'Dylan Mulvaney has consistently and continuously made a mockery of women and claims to identify as a girl … It's disappointing to see someone making a mockery of females be applauded for it.' A producer from Blaze TV (tagline: For people who love America) stated that Bud Light had 'desecrated' womanhood by placing Mulvaney's image on their beer.

Indeed, 'protection' of women was reframed as quasi-feminism, venerating and worshipping 'real women'. Silverman argued that Bud Light does not 'share our value of respecting women', and gaxxzz, a Reddit contributor, wrote, 'I'm just not going to drink a beer that sponsors a narcissistic freak that degrades women.' These 'traditional' ideals have also made their way into women's notions of feminism, as Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) have made bedfellows with—and enabled—the far right's cisnormativity as an ideology globally (Billard 2023). Yet this pretense of respect and protection is simply a guise to justify the right-wing countermovement's reconstruction of hegemonic masculinity. It is one more way to 'conceal fundamentally heteropatriarchal and paternalistic anxieties about the need to ensure the safety of white girls and women, at the expense of trans people' (Fischer 2023: 404). And if, as gender scholars (and this author) argue, gender is a symbolic system through which power is organized and produced, then the sex-as-gender and 'protection of women' frame is another fantasy mobilized to reestablish American masculinity, fetishizing a bygone gendered order of patriarchy. Thus, this countermovement simultaneously claims victimhood (for 'real' women) and justifies the right to discriminate.

Implicit (and often explicit) in all of these right-wing reframings of sex-as-gender, and underlying the protection frame, is the gender binary: man/male OR female/woman. Ironically, the reassertion of the gender binary—which, for the right wing, destroys the legitimacy of trans girls and women—is reinforced by Mulvaney's own embrace of this binary and the accompanying hegemonic femininity. Yet her perpetuation of hegemonic femininity and the gender binary is repudiated and invalidated in the eyes of the transphobic countermovement because Mulvaney's transgender body undercuts 'a hetero-patriarchal ideology in which' women's primary 'responsibility is to take care of reproduction both in the family and the nation by breeding' (Saresma Tulonen 2022: 78). While Mulvaney's codification of womanhood does seemingly protect and propagate the right's framing of sex/gender as complementary and hierarchical, her inability to reproduce—or to have female reproductive organs—is sufficient to vanquish any claim to

womanhood. Ironically, as a (trans)woman, Mulvaney is subject to the same unequal power relations and subjugation imposed on 'real' women. Thus, the gender binary, along with the strict reframing of what constitutes 'real' womanhood, not only constructs a set of valorized identities for this countermovement, it also offers moral justification for prejudice (Bjork-James 2020).

These frames—of sex-as-gender and hegemonic masculinity/femininity—are not only augmented but also made possible by their positioning within social media. Traditionally, social movements as political entities make use of any small opening of or access to institutional channels; for the transphobic right-wing countermovement, social media platforms offered a space to circulate their ideology on a recurring basis, spreading dogmatic frames, increasing communication and coordination between individuals and groups, and ultimately merging personal identities with the collective identity of the countermovement (Bennett & Segerberg 2012). It is this identity, fostered and reinforced on social media platforms, that connects the personal to activism, influencing individuals' behaviors and readying them for collective action (Diani 2011), spurring online identities into offline collective action (boycotting Bud Light). From xenophobic to nationalist to Christo-fascist to Nazi movements, online space has been crucial for constructing collective identity, radicalizing through 'education,' and goading individuals to take collective action (Caren, Jowers & Gaby 2012; Saresma & Tulonen 2022; Winter 2019). Moreover, this cycle—of dissemination, reinforcement, identity, and collective action—often garners mainstream media attention, normalizing, if not valorizing, this polarizing ideology. The transphobic cisnormative countermovement ignited by Mulvaney's partnership was no different, constructing a collective identity centered on the re-framing of masculinity—one based on beer, the binary, and nostalgia for hierarchical, power-laden frameworks of gender—and parlaying that identity into a boycott of Bud Light grounded in an explicitly transphobic ideology.

Conclusion

As men's studies scholar Michael Kimmel (1993) writes in his foundational text *Invisible Masculinity*, 'the quest for manhood—the effort to achieve, to demonstrate, to prove their masculinity—is one of the animating experiences in the lives of American men' (Kimmel 1993: 30). This quest for manhood, and the maintenance of such manhood as a complementary but superior gender, involves a constant struggle to retain power through domination and control, primarily through social reproduction and the naturalization of those powers. This quest inevitably involves the staunch defense of hegemonic masculinity, one centered on the white, middle-class heterosexuality of cisgender men, and the marginalization of both alternative forms of masculinity and any person deemed Other, including trans bodies. The boycott of Bud Light did precisely this. Not only did hegemonic frames of masculinity regain prominence and legitimacy, but they also materially impacted Anheuser-Busch, contributing to a national 28 percent loss in sales and unseating Bud Light as the top-selling beer in the United States (Liaukonyte, Tuchman & Zhu 2024).

More insidiously and violently was the impact on Mulvaney herself, as well as on the broader trans community. Two months after the boycott, Mulvaney posted a TikTok explaining that her partnership with the brand had incited 'more bullying and transphobia than I could have ever imagined … I've been followed and I have felt a loneliness that I wouldn't wish on anyone.' This corporeal and metaphysical threat to the trans community reignited a wave of anti-trans legislation and policy, with over 100 anti-trans bills proposed in 49 states in the United States as of October 2025. These bills largely target health care in the form of bans on gender-affirming care, as well as education, including so-called 'bathroom bills,' prohibitions on teachers using pronouns that differ from students' sex, and bans on transgender youth participating in sports. Globally, governments such as England's have directed schools away from gender-affirming policies, while the Supreme Court has defined womanhood as biological sex; Hungary's prime minister has proposed a constitutional amendment recognizing only two sexes; Bosnia has rolled back protections against hate speech and hate crimes; and Georgia has banned gender recognition and criminalized trans-specific health

care. These domestic and global efforts to deny legal rights to transgender people underscore the structural ways trans voices are marginalized and silenced. Indeed, such legal struggles operate as queer necropolitics, wherein trans people are consigned to 'everyday death worlds' marked by routine and normalized violence against their bodies (Haritaworn, Kuntsman & Posocco 2014). Mulvaney herself also criticized Anheuser-Busch for failing to reach out during the period of intense transphobia and physical threats directed at her. Yet in a pointed caption—addressed both to the right-wing countermovement that incited such vitriol and to those invested in hegemonic femininity—Mulvaney offered one final rejoinder: 'Trans people like beer too.'

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