

**“Entitled to everything, responsible for nothing:” Gendered Discourses of Antifeminism, Biological Determinism, and Violence in Two Communities of Reddit’s Manosphere**

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**Abstract**

The manosphere, described as a “loose confederacy” of groups joined together by anti-feminist ideologies (Ging 2019), flourishes online, especially in online spaces that allow for ideologically aligned, but geographically dispersed, individuals to come together in community. This research examines two communities from the website reddit.com, /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill. These communities make up small parts of the larger manosphere, but are each important models for the intersections of sex/gender systems, masculinities, and ideological variants of male supremacy that take place under its umbrella. Incorporating data from a digital ethnographic project, this article explores, compares, and contrasts three gendered discursive practices manifest in /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill. Examining user posts and community generated content, I situate these two groups’ claims to antifeminism, fundamental differences between men and women,

and the leveraging of violence (broadly understood), as overlapping ways of claiming particular masculinities both unified within the manosphere and divergent between groups. Despite their classification as communities of the manosphere, the ways these two groups express their ideological standpoints and situate themselves as ideological-oriented communities, set them apart from one another. This critique extends our knowledge about how the masculinities of the manosphere, and their socio-political implications, are significant and growing problems as we seek to fashion a more just society.

**Keywords:** manosphere, men's rights, red pill, masculinity, digital ethnography, reddit.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

I know plenty of feminists that say they care and that only the crazy feminists act this way but then they turn around and if a man inconveniences them it's suddenly an act of oppression and its back to not giving a shit about men. Mens rights is seen by many as a hate group when all men want is equality but the second we ask for that we are hated on and shunned while being told that we need to check our privilege. Yes our privilege of higher suicide rates, our privilege of going off and dying for the country, our privilege of waiting on the sinking ship as the women are pulled to safety, our privilege of watching our children being given to the mother if there is a divorce. Yes we should check those privileges and be thankful for what as soon as feminists start caring in the high ups we arent going to progress at all (/u/DuPhuc 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> N.B.: Usernames, as well as spelling and grammar in direct quotations used throughout the paper are verbatim from reddit. Misspellings, word confusion, grammatical errors, etc., are not marked with *[sic]* as there are too many. I will also acknowledge the tensions inherent in using verbatim quotes and usernames from my data in this article. While there are arguments for the obfuscation or humanization of the individuals behind the data in qualitative work (Denzin, and Giardina 2019), in this case the inclusion of this information (as-is) is important as it situates the data and the users in the hybridised space of digital quasi-anonymity (Van der Nagel, and Frith 2015) where they are generated.

These words by /u/DuPhuc<sup>2</sup>, a user in the [www.reddit.com/r/MensRights](http://www.reddit.com/r/MensRights) community, are buried several layers deep in the comments on a thread about circumcision. Circumcision, and in particular the circumcision of infant boys, is an important issue within parts of the Men's Rights community; they see it as a violation of rights and bodily autonomy. The passion on display in the multi-layered discussion in this thread<sup>3</sup> is telling of the community's feelings. The thread has over 600 individual comments and is, like the post above, a microcosm of the broader discussion in this community. While the parent post for this thread is about the circumcision of infant boys without consent, it takes only two comments for the discussion to turn to a critique of feminism. "I thought it was her body her choice, should it not be the same for men" | "Don't tell a feminist that, because that's something the patriarchy does!" (/u/Ihavenopurposeinlifs, and /u/HungryHornyHigh). Antifeminism is the root and lifeblood of /r/MensRights and the manosphere. The "evolving collection of blogs [*sic*] discussing topics of masculine interests and men's issues" called the manosphere is a loose assortment of ideologically connected groups dedicated to "understanding what it means to be a male in the 21st century, particularly in the face of a culture irrevocably changed by feminism" (Ironwood 2013, 1)<sup>4</sup>. While the manosphere is understood as existing mostly online, the various constituents of this loose grouping of independent communities are active both online and offline, have local and global concerns for the status of men and men's rights, and discuss issues between men as well as between men and 'others' – especially women.

This research focuses on two communities from the website [reddit.com](http://reddit.com), /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, their discourses of masculinity, and how they situate themselves as

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<sup>2</sup> The website [reddit.com](http://reddit.com) uses the designations /u/ and /r/ to differentiate between individual user pages (for example [www.reddit.com/u/Here\\_Comes\\_The\\_King](http://www.reddit.com/u/Here_Comes_The_King) is the page for rapper Snoop Dogg) and communities ([www.reddit.com/r/MensRights](http://www.reddit.com/r/MensRights) is the Men's Rights community page).

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this article I will use the following terminology: Post – an original text, link, image, or video posting that is open to comments; Comment – text and link content by users on specific posts; Parent & Child – parent comments are top-level and comment directly on the original post, child comments are replies to parent comments or replies to other child comments; Thread – the entirety of a single post and comments.

<sup>4</sup> Ian Ironwood is the pen name of the anonymous author of *The Manosphere: A New Hope for Masculinity*, a pro-manosphere and Red Pill book intended to provide support and credible content on the history, development, and ideology of the manosphere. The publisher is listed as Red Pill Press, but this book does not appear on their website.

ideological communities. These communities make up small parts of the larger manosphere, but were chosen because they are important models for the intersections of sex/gender systems, masculinities, and ideological variants of male supremacy that take place under the manosphere umbrella. Incorporating data from a digital ethnographic project, this paper explores three gendered discursive practices employed by both /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill. Examining user posts and community content, I situate these two groups' claims to antifeminism, fundamental differences between men and women, and the leveraging of violence (broadly understood), as ways of claiming particular masculinities unified within the manosphere but divergent between groups. The differences between community discourses of masculinity, as well as the ways they sanction men and critique feminism differently are significant in helping to understand the diverse appeal of the expanding manosphere. The following section briefly describes the manosphere, reddit, and their interconnectedness, followed by how masculinity is manifest within these spaces. After that, a description of the methodological approach to the ethnographic project frames the research findings/discussion section. This work illustrates how the (re)production of masculinity, constructed in relation to women and/or to the feminized 'other' through the three areas listed above, and via the sanctioning of non-conforming men, helps maintain the fuzzy boundaries of doing male supremacy online.

## **2. The Manosphere**

The manosphere has been described in a variety of ways, including Ironwood's (2013) "dirty snowball," Gotell and Dutton's (2016) "cyber-world of men's rights," Van Valkenburgh's (2021) "loosely connected group of anti-feminist Internet communities," Ging's (2019b) "loose confederacy of interest groups," Wright's (2020) "digital manifestation of the Men's Liberation Movement," and Cousineau's (2021a) hub and spike visual metaphor (think Covid-19 coronavirus). No matter how you choose to conceptualize the manosphere, each constituent group shares the core belief that feminism has changed law, society, and personal relations to the detriment of men and men's interests/rights. Beyond that core, manosphere groups shoot off in different directions of focus, attention, and levels of militancy/potential violence (Ging 2019b; Marwick, and Caplan 2018).

Understanding the genealogy of the manosphere as it relates to feminism, particularly through the “second wave,” is important to help contextualize its social significance today. Covered in detail elsewhere (Ging 2019b; Gotell, and Dutton 2016; Marwick, and Caplan 2018), all of the sub-communities that make up the manosphere have roots in college-age men engaging with the Women’s Liberation Movement (Fox 2004; Kipnis 1995; Messner 1998). Some of these young men were disillusioned by what they saw as a lack of recognition and agitation on behalf of the ways that men were also negatively affected by the social structures critiqued by the feminism of the time. This disillusionment caused them to split from other pro-feminist male allies of the women’s movement, and form the early men’s movement (Messner 2016). These young men thinkers and writers actualized the concepts and theoretical positions of the feminist movement to think about the ecology of men’s social roles, and critique what they saw as significant blind spots in feminism (Farrell 1975 and 1996; Fasteau 1974; Goldberg 1976). These critiques, evolved and bastardised over time, form the core of men’s movement groups today.

### **2.1. *Reddit***

Reddit is a social media<sup>5</sup> site that “bridges communities and individuals with ideas, the latest digital trends, and breaking news (...okay, and maybe cats)” (Reddit.com 2016). Reddit serves primarily as a content aggregator, and the broader reddit community is divided into over 2 million unique topic-oriented sub-communities, called subreddits<sup>6</sup>. Reddit has five key elements that contribute to its ongoing success as a platform, including:

1. Users produce all content (beyond ads and announcements);
2. Users curate what content they view through community-based subscriptions;

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<sup>5</sup> Social media as it is used in this paper is based on definitions synthesized by Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011), but this definition is contested, as is reddit’s place as ‘social media’. Although calling reddit social media can be troublesome, I do purposefully to better situate the website for the reader.

<sup>6</sup> Subreddits host content of all kinds, from the very broad and diverse (reddit.com/r/funny – almost anything “funny”) to the very specific (reddit.com/r/ BeansInThings – about beans in things).

3. Users can vote (positively or negatively) on site content,<sup>7</sup> and these votes determine post visibility and reddit user points, called “Karma”;
4. All content on the site supports asynchronous Bulletin Board System (BBS)-style<sup>8</sup> comment threads; and
5. Users can use the site quasi-anonymously, only revealing information they choose through posts and comments (Cousineau 2021a).

Each sub-community is moderated by volunteer members selected from willing participants of that same community. Although these individuals are charged with upholding reddit-wide content and anti-harassment policies, moderators are (mostly) free to enforce those rules as they choose within their own communities (Marwick 2017; Massanari 2015). Users populate their feeds with subreddits of their choosing, and can create collections of content that are personalized to their interests and/or ideological persuasion (Pariser 2011).

Reddit was designed as a discursive space (Ohanian 2016), as the combination of posting, voting, and commenting encourages both positive and negative commentary (Couldry 2003; Massanari 2015). The blend of socialization, discussion, personal expression, and like-minded community members creates communities of discourse, or what Papacharissi (2015) describes as affective publics. Ging (2019a, 49) explains that affective publics are “communities, which are discursively linked through storytelling, in the sense that their members become affectively attuned to and invested in political issues through processes of personal and emotional involvement and empathy”. So, users who engage actively with subreddit communities are likely to internalize underlying group politics and express a deep emotional connection to subreddit content, ideology, and personal identities (Lajoie 2019). While this can be positive and generative, such as in Lajoie’s (2019) exploration of /r/gaymers, it also permits the formation of communities of

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<sup>7</sup> There are some exceptions to this rule, as users can be banned from posting or voting on content from a given subreddit if they are found to be in violation of the community rules of that sub-community.

<sup>8</sup> A Bulletin Board System, or BBS, is a computer-based electronic community where members can read and write messages, download and upload files, and sometimes play text-based games. They originated in 1978 (Christensen, and Suess 1978), and their popularity peaked around 1995 (Edwards 2020).

discourse for far-right, counterfactual, and (sometimes) hateful groups (Cousineau 2021a; Salazar 2018).

### 2.1.1. *The Manosphere on Reddit*

The manosphere, as it is manifest on reddit, is a collection of subreddits, sharing some ideological standpoints and diversifying on others<sup>9</sup>. Beyond an antifeminist core, these communities act as distinct entities with distinct foci, and ways of actualizing their ideologies. This paper highlights how two of these communities, /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, engage similarly and differently with anti-feminism, gendered difference, and violence as intra/inter-gender processes, constructions of masculinity, and discursive practices.

/r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill were chosen as study sites because they provide different, but sometimes linked, community examples from within the manosphere. Both are focused on masculinity and male power, and both are particularly concerned with the role that feminism has played (and continues to play) in (re)defining social order – but they approach these issues in very different ways (DeCook 2019). These communities are not the most extreme, militant, or violent of the manosphere communities on reddit (see Kini 2017; Scaptura, and Boyle 2019, for discussion on violent incels, for example), but they do occupy two different ideological positions around men and masculinity, men’s social position, and what a ‘good man’ should be.

- /r/MensRights - [www.reddit.com/r/MensRights](http://www.reddit.com/r/MensRights). /r/MensRights positions itself as a place for discussion about “any issue that pertains to men's relationship to society” and how “men’s rights are influenced by how men are perceived by others” (r/MensRights 2019 - About Community). Created in March 2008, there are nearly 302,000 members as of May 6, 2021. This community is a complex interplay of

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<sup>9</sup> These subreddits include those that are ideologically aligned (like, for example, /r/TheRedPill (quarantined), /r/asktrp, /r/marriedredpill, /r/TRP (private), /r/redpillbooks, /r/RedPillWives, /r/RedPillWomen, and /r/RedPillWorkplace), and those that stand alone (like /r/MGTOW (quarantined), /r/incels (banned), or /r/braincels (banned)), as well as a huge number of others, including but not limited to: /r/seduction, /r/pickup, /r/pickupartists, /r/maledatingstrategy, /r/MensRights, /r/MensRightsMeta.

voices and goals that generates diverse opinions and approaches to a variety of issues that affect men. These include but are not limited to: domestic violence perpetrated against men; social perils that disproportionately affect men (including homelessness, suicide, violence, and early death; educational and employment prejudice); and the negative social influence of feminism. With a stated goal of “true” equality in societies, the part of the manosphere manifest in /r/MensRights sees the world as feminist-controlled social and legal systems that are stacked against men and their general wellbeing; women are *not* a subordinated class. Posts and threads are mostly commentaries and discussions on media content linked from outside of reddit (for example: online news articles, screen captures from social media, or YouTube content), and based primarily in Western democracies (especially Australia, North America, and the UK), but there are also users from other regions including a regular presence from the Indian sub-continent. Interactions between users are mostly civil, if not outright positive and supportive, and when users do disagree, exchanges can be long and explanatory, rather than short and aggressive. Rarely do disagreements degenerate into intra-group fighting, and when this happens it is often policed from within. Threads generally redirect discussion at some point to cultural misandry or general anti-feminism, as evidenced by the sample post from the introduction.

- /r/TheRedPill - [www.reddit.com/r/TheRedPill](http://www.reddit.com/r/TheRedPill). With the tag line “Discussion of sexual strategy in a culture increasingly lacking a positive identity for men” (/r/TheRedPill 2019), /r/TheRedPill “packages itself as a group that helps men successfully engage in sexual and romantic relationships with the added benefit of reclaiming one’s manhood” (DeCook 2019, para. 5). However, the group, the sexual strategies they profess, and their socio-cultural perspectives on women and women’s roles are distinctly misogynistic, entrenched in a Western traditionalism about sex and gender, and borderline white supremacist (Cousineau 2021b; Dignam, and Rohlinger 2019; Mountford 2018). This subreddit was created in October 2012 and was quarantined by reddit in 2018 for violations to the new reddit code of



conduct<sup>10</sup>. At the time of quarantine, the community had over 292,000 subscribers, and in June 2019 that number had climbed to just over 400,000<sup>11</sup>. Content in this community is dominated by personal stories, links to blog posts, and links to other Red Pill content (YouTube videos, etc.), focused on the development of successful (Alpha) masculinity. Other forms of masculinity and ways of being are denigrated as sub-optimal, and the rhetoric around the development of alpha characteristics is deeply individualistic and meritocratic. Significant factors in the development of alpha characteristics are money and physical stature, and although the community has a space for those willing to ‘work on themselves’, there is a clear ‘ideal’ that men should be working to approach – even when that is physically or socio-culturally impossible<sup>12</sup>. While conversation and content are generally supportive of those looking to learn or develop Red Pill standpoints, this support is often couched in a kind of denigrating encouragement that is meant to push the user in a certain direction by highlighting non-alpha behavior – a kind of intra-male negging<sup>13</sup> (Green *et al.* 2017). Dominance over women is a significant pillar of Red Pill ideology, and “their understanding of male-female relationships is imbricated with ideologies of male supremacism” (Cousineau 2021a, 7).

## **2.2. Masculinity**

The (re)presentation of masculinity is an important point of both unification and divergence within the manosphere. While all sub-groups within the loose collective are rooted in being ‘men’ (with the exception, of course, of those small subgroups that are dedicated to women supporters of manosphere ideologies and manosphere men – for example:

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<sup>10</sup> For discussions on the implications of reddit quarantines of sub-communities please refer to (Carlson, and Cousineau 2020; Chandrasekharan *et al.* 2020; Myers West 2018; Ullmann, and Tomalin 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Accurate numbers are not available after October 2018 as reddit blocks users from seeing member numbers of quarantined subreddits. Viewing the community in an outdated version of the reddit platform (old.reddit.com) shows over 1.7 million members, but this number is unreliable.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the alpha is tall, rich, powerful, and charismatic. If you are short, you cannot make yourself grow, and no amount of work, education, or self-sacrifice will guarantee monetary success in neo-liberal capitalist society.

<sup>13</sup> Negging is the purposeful lowering of a woman’s (or man’s) self-esteem to increase perceived attractiveness of the assailant in order to achieve sexual conquest or make some other gain (Green *et al.* 2017); for example: “if you are a beta, you will not be able to realise that she is manipulating you” (/u/Project\_Zero\_Betas 2020).

/r/redpillwives), what it means to ‘be a man’ and the (re)presentational dynamics of that embodiment vary considerably. The masculinity of misogynist incels (short for *involuntary celibates*) has been discussed at length in popular and academic writing (Basu 2020; Ging 2019b; Reeve 2018; Scaptura, and Boyle 2019; Spampinato 2018; Stokes 2018), owing to the fact that self-declared incels have been the perpetrators in high profile mass killings in Canada and the USA (BBC News 2018; Isai *et al.* 2018). Misogynist incel masculinity is complex. It leverages the power of men and masculinity in a patriarchal society, but men who identify as incels occupy a subordinated class where their ‘right’ to (heterosexual) sex has been taken away. They are the privileged and the oppressed simultaneously (Ging 2019b). The masculinity of misogynist incels offers a good frame of reference to understand some of the differences in how masculinity is manifest between /r/TheRedPill and /r/MensRights, as the former follows a more hierarchical understanding of masculinity and men than the latter.

In /r/TheRedPill, the organization of masculinity is at the same time straightforward and complex, insofar as there is an ideal masculinity that men should work to embody (Alpha), and there is a collective of ‘other’ men (the non-Alpha, often simply lumped together Beta men, although other categories exist), but the dividing lines can be fuzzy. The alpha-beta dichotomy has roots in the Red Pill adherence to a discourse of applied evolutionary psychology, where women are genetically and evolutionarily predisposed to be attracted to one kind of man to supply ‘good genes’ for offspring, but another kind of man to support and nurture those offspring over time – the “Alpha Fucks/Beta Bucks” principle outlined in their foundational materials (Van Valkenburgh 2021). The traditional alpha in /r/TheRedPill, I argue, maps onto a passé form of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005) that projects backwards to an ideal of western traditionalism. The notion that the hegemonic form of /r/TheRedPill is antiquated is important because it recognizes that the construct of the ideal man as malleable, contingent on cultural context (Messer-schmidt 2018), and that the ideal alpha may not represent a cultural ideal in this cultural moment<sup>14</sup>. /r/TheRedPill presents an approach to masculinity and ‘being a man’ that rests

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<sup>14</sup> For one example of this, see “*The alpha spectrum is huge*” (/u/javiercer20, 2020).

on an intra-gender hierarchy of alpha and other men, resulting in a have/have not discourse that measures the value of the individual as a man through that hierarchy.

Masculinity is represented much more collectively in /r/MensRights. While there are men who will call on the derogatory language of betas and ‘simps’ in an attempt to call out other men (/u/X-MrDude-X 2020), largely the collective acts as a (mostly) unified entity representing men more broadly – with one significant exception. The anti-feminism that is so central to the identity of the men’s rights space and its members, overshadows this male collectivism and men who identify as feminists are universally derided and chastised within the group. The division of men and masculinity within /r/MensRights is not contingent, then, on the performance of a hegemonic masculinity, but rather on the recognition that women are *not* the subordinated class they are accepted to be in Western society – men are. Those who have yet to ‘be pill’d’<sup>15</sup>, are a kind of unfortunate victim, unable to realise their full potential as men because of their adherence to a social order that oppresses them – masculinity contingent on ideology.

### 3. Methodology

The work described in this paper is part of research exploring the discourses of masculinity embedded in the /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill communities. These subreddits were chosen as they represent two popular reddit manosphere communities, with different ways of approaching gender and male power. Through my previous exposure to their ideas, I believed they would show contrast in the ways manosphere subgroups approach gender-linked social issues (like relationships, or violence), while sharing common men-first values and without being overly extreme/violent. Employing digital ethnographic methods and analysis, I explore what discourses of masculinity, affirmation, and defence were engaged by members of these men’s communities. Along with long-term observation in both groups, I collected data systematically during a set period of time; March

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<sup>15</sup> This language is ubiquitous throughout the manosphere (although more present in communities like /r/TheRedPill versus /r/MensRights), and is meant to evoke the imagery of Neo from the movie *The Matrix* taking the red pill and waking up from the simulation to the reality of the world (DeCook 2019; Dignam, and Rohlinger 2019; Ging 2019b; Jones *et al.* 2020; Read 2019).

through June 2020. This section briefly discusses the methods used in the study, as well as the implication of those methods on the data collected.

### ***3.1. Digital ethnographic methods***

The research explored in this paper uses two types of digital ethnographic data collection through the building of a systematically collected data set, and long-term researcher involvement in the research communities embedded as a listener (De Seta 2020; Molina 2017). The more straightforward is a dataset constructed through systematic imaging and collection of post data from the /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill subreddit communities. Developed as a type of ‘data ritual’ (Kozinets 2019), this collection occurred over the course of three months, and the five most popular (sorted by ‘hot’) and five most controversial (sorted by ‘controversial’) posts in each community were captured as images three times each week. This yielded an average of 125 unique posts per category, owing to duplicates between data collection days – especially in the posts sorted ‘controversial’. These posts had an average of 46 comments per post, yielding a large and diverse data set of user posts and commentaries with over 23,000 individual user posts and comments. The imaging of posts and comments was done to preserve the visual representations of the posts and comments as they appeared on the site at the time of data harvesting. This decision was purposeful as the experience of online communities is too easily essentialized to the textual (or posted image) products of community participants (Pearce *et al.* 2020), and lacks attention to the ways the online space itself can influence the labour of the participant while engaging with the website’s content (Light *et al.* 2018). In the case of reddit, this type of whole-page imaging allows for the preservation of the (sometimes) complex conversations that are happening asynchronously, but also in real time, creating a messy landscape of parent and child comments that sometime require the reader to revisit prior comments and reacquaint themselves with the source topic area (for an example of this, see fig. 1).

The secondary mode of data collection requires long-term involvement in the communities studied, and I chose to be involved as an “eager participant-lurker” (De Seta 2020). De Seta uses Beaulieu’s (2004) exploration of the idea of internet researcher’s developing intersubjectivity as a way to situate the epistemological decision to observe (lurk in)

online communities without the need to “get the seats of our pants dirty” as prescribed by early internet-community researchers (Paccagnella 1997).

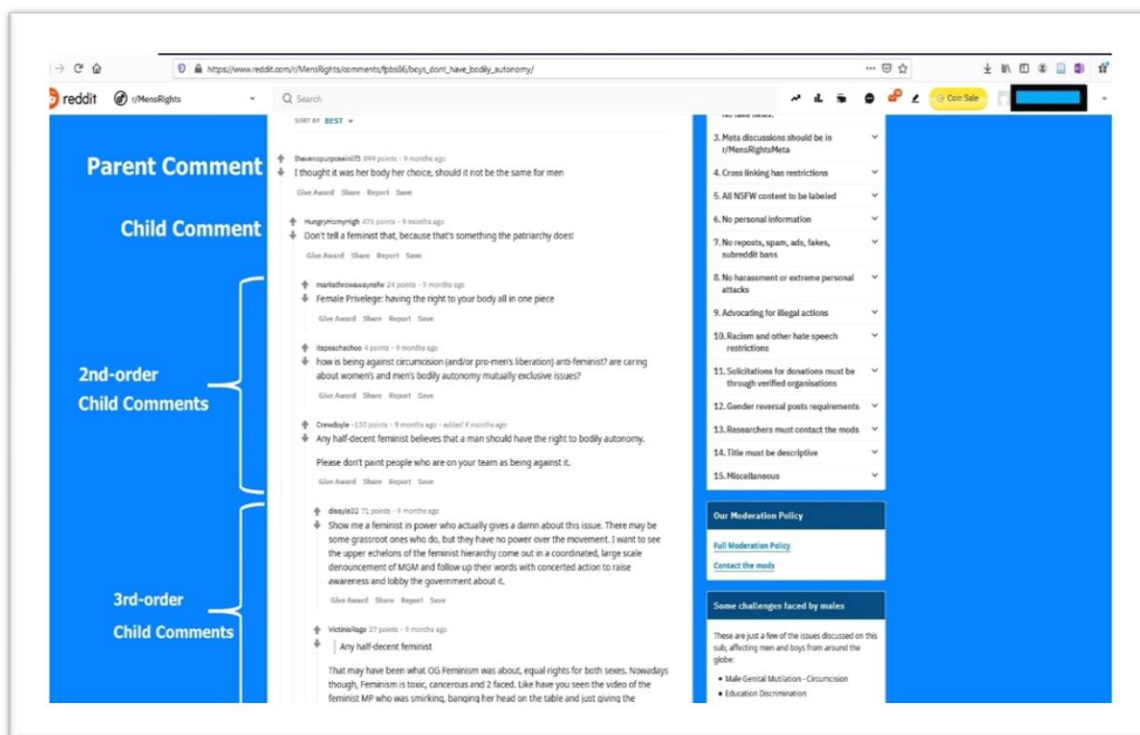


Fig. 1 - Screenshot of /r/MensRights thread showing parent-child comment threading, Dec. 31, 2020.

Purposefully situating oneself in this way, De Seta argues, can be a better representation of the real experience of participants in large online communities, as the majority of users are lurkers rather than regularly active participants/posters, and it serves to challenge the “false choice between naturalist lurking and active involvement” (2020, 88). Outside of the systematic data collection window, I have been a participant-lurker in both communities for over three years, with a passive but persistent interest in community discussion and action over that time. This personal and intentional involvement in the communities studied is reflexive of a more contemporary approach to ethnographic study, where the researcher can (and perhaps should) be familiar with the community they choose to study (Kanuha 2000). Not only does this permit a kind of long-term understanding of the ebbs and flows of the communities, it better positions the researcher to see and understand in-group dynamics, outliers, or how the community might be shifting during any given window of systematic data collection and analysis (Danley 2018; Kanuha

2000). For example, during my research, reddit has introduced three significant (and many minor) changes to its policies on abuse and harassment, resulting in changes in subreddit rules to prevent /r/TheRedPill from being banned and deplatformed.

### **3.2. Analysis**

Each post was reviewed, reading the text provided by the poster, following any major link provided, and/or watching any media that was included as part of the post (this included YouTube videos, news articles, blog posts, and links to other websites). After this, I read the top three parent comments and using the information from the post and those comments I began to form a basic thematic structure to the arguments being made in the post. I then read through all the comments sequentially, as they were presented in the thread. This means that the sub-threads formed under each parent comment in the post were read in their entirety before moving onto the next parent comment. After the first 25 posts were reviewed, I made a list of the significant themes that emerged from the posts and threads. For example, this early list for /r/MensRights included: anti-feminism; base arguments for the community; solidarity; domestic violence; relationships; body issues; masculinity; and cultural bias. As analysis progressed, these initial themes were expanded, contracted, separated, and augmented with comments and thematic content from comments throughout the set of empirical materials. Broader discourses began to emerge, including broad adherence to the politics of the right, male superiority, questioning of women's (in particular feminists') rationality and intelligence, and meritocratic neoliberal understandings of work and personal value.

Analysis in ethnographic work is ongoing, as the experiences of the researcher as part of the community, or in the space of the community, are always already part of the data and interpretation of that data (Gullion 2018). The user experience as the lurker/researcher is essential to help contextualize the data from systematic collection, as the broader and long-term exposure to the community provides a different kind of analysis. The analysis is also subject to the theoretical and subject orientations of the researcher, in that the researcher's positionality is essential to the way that the community and data are approached, understood, and represented (Gullion 2018). For example, as a researcher I

have a social justice orientation and employ feminist theory and methodologies to foreground gender and other power inequities in my work. These orientations are always already embedded within the research designs and projects that I undertake, and necessarily influence the research questions asked, as well as the ways that I interpret and represent the findings. As a researcher the tensions I face when interacting with contentious, anti-feminist communities, means it is often difficult to consider these men's arguments without the shadow of right-of-center politics and male supremacist undercurrents. While it is impossible to separate the researcher's positionality and politics with the research content, it is incumbent on the researcher to do the intellectual labour of investigating how deeply and inextricably linked individual arguments are from the dominant community ideological perspective (Atkinson *et al.* 2008). Within some communities, like /r/MensRights, the arguments of individual users sometimes put them in opposition to the avowed anti-feminist stance of the group (and manosphere). This complexity is important in understanding the deeper meaning of the group's ideology and participant involvement.

#### **4. Claims and Models of Masculinity**

Discussing how men and men's issues are perceived in society and/or lamenting a social order that lacks a positive identity for men seem like laudable goals, but even the brief overviews of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill should cause one to second guess the intentionality of those community purpose statements. They do, with a little contextual examination, demonstrate the ways that these two communities seek to situate masculinity in certain ways, including but not limited to: expressed and pervasive antifeminism, the presupposition that men and women are fundamentally different, and the use of violence (as a concept and potential action). The remainder of this paper explores each of these themes as they manifest within these two communities.

##### ***4.1. The Antifeminist Nucleus***

Antifeminism is what forms the core of the manosphere – it is the one ideological underpinning that unites the confederacy. Because of this, it is embedded in all discursive and doctrinal elements of the manosphere's constituent groups, and /r/MensRights and

/r/TheRedPill are no exceptions. Feminism, as perceived by the members of these groups, is a global phenomenon with local and specific implications for their lives, meaning that the men who come together and meet in these communities have shared concerns, but occupy divergent legal and political jurisdictions. What they find in these reddit communities, then, is a way to come together under group-specific anti-feminist rhetoric, and find support. This creates a kind of fraternal, or homosocial, support structure for personal and local action that has global reach (Archambault, and Veilleux-Lepage 2019); and the kinds of communities (or third places)<sup>16</sup> that are so important to the formation of ingroup leisure spaces with strong participant identification (Camp, and Dunlap 2020; McKeown 2020; Robinson, and Holt 2020). In both communities, anti-feminism is framed by a *man versus feminism* (or *feminism against all men*) approach that is imbricated with the ideals of masculinity discussed above. “Feminism is not about equality. Its about female supremacy. They just say its about equality to cover that up. Hell, probably to them, female supremacy is equality” (u/tiredfromlife2019 – April 18, 2020) Alongside this is an inter-gender animosity for women (via feminism) that is expressed through the use of pejorative language, and a blame cycle that brings many, if not all, socio-cultural complaints from these groups back to feminism as its starting point.

The man versus feminism approach of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill is essential to helping us understand how the foundational elements of their worldviews extend from a neo-traditional view of masculinity – in particular the need to assert power (Johnson, and Cousineau 2018). Power in this context is deeply individual, and although these users are part of a community of support, they tend to speak in ways that isolate and individualize. The men in /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill assume an individualistic/meritocratic worldview, and purposefully contrast that with a collectivist (social justice<sup>17</sup>) worldview taken up by feminists. What is at issue for the members of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill is that they perceive the collectivist orientation of feminists to be about a

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<sup>16</sup> Oldenberg (1999) described third places (outside of home (first) and work (second) places) as welcoming and beneficial to the individual and community. For more thorough discussion see Oldenberg (1999) or Camp and Dunlap (2020) for a more contemporary take.

<sup>17</sup> Importantly, the term social justice, in the sense that the men in these groups are using it, is entirely pejorative and in the context of the social justice warrior memology (Massanari, and Chess 2018).



desire and ability of women to live off the production, capital, and progress produced by men – “The whole point of feminism is simple / Entitled to everything responsible for nothing” (u/benderXX – April 21, 2020). It stands, then, in opposition to the meritocratic value system these men understand that underpins their socio-cultural systems and the ways they understand ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways of doing things.

I don't think winning is masculine or feminine, they are different approaches and tools that can be used for winning. For example, winning by bureaucratic means like a disqualification is a feminine way to win. I think masculinity is about the self and femininity is about the others/society. Winning by your own merit, intellect, strength, wealth, etc. VS manipulation of values and perception, hiding behind rules or bending them, shaming etc. (/u/Quesomanchegoo – March 21, 2020).

The ‘right’ way of being and doing things is firmly rooted in individualistic, merit-base value systems where the ability to achieve “on your own merits” and “work hard” equate to success in society, regardless of gender. This belief is on display in discussions of workplace achievement, and especially any discussion of a wage gap between men and women, immediately claimed to be a feminist falsehood.

Toxic feminists promote the pay gap myth as a way to absolve women of responsibility ... the toxic feminists just stop at 'pay gap' because finding out the reasons for it would undercut their agenda. Instead they jump into thousands of homes and just say ‘oppression’ is the reason (/u/Seeken619 – April 1, 2020).

A post by /u/Anonymous74829572010 (“*A question on my final exam on management class*” 2020) does a good job of illustrating how the community approaches discussions on the idea of a wage gap through their neoliberal and meritocratic understanding of capitalist systems. The post is a screen capture of an online test question asking “How many cents per dollar do women earn compared to men?” and gives 4 multiple-choice options between 50 and 80 cents. The problematic structure of the question notwithstanding, the members of /r/MensRights who comment on the post do two things: express their hatred

for feminism: “Feminism is cancer and this post is an example” (/u/Mens\_rights\_matter2); and attack the idea of a wage gap by talking about personal choices, or stating some variety of ‘that’s not how capitalism works’. In this thread one commenter explains that the question is not actually problematic at all, since the issue is about earnings, not about pay, “It’s true. They used the word “earn”. There is an earnings gap, due to men and women making different choices” (/u/mikesteane). This is one way that members of /r/MensRights rationalize the issue of wage disparity, via women choosing lower earning fields and professions without consideration of the deep socio-political and economic structures that reward ‘women’s’ work less than ‘men’s’ work (e.g. care work vs. tech sector) (Fortin *et al.* 2017).

The users’ arguments about ‘reward’ for and ‘value’ of work take a few forms, and in the following post by /u/CristiVasile2000 two of them appear: “How many WORKED HOURS women do compared with men? Surprise, is less than 77%!!”. The first argument is /u/CristiVasile2000 comment is straightforward, value should be calculated based on hours worked. Men, on average they argue, work more hours than women, are therefore more valuable in the (capitalist and neo-liberal) economic system, and should make more money as a result. Rarely do discussions about hours worked overlap with type of work, what kind of work is compensated, or the discourses of masculinity and femininity that hang over different types of work and their associated compensation rates regardless of hours worked. The second argument in this short statement is a bit more nuanced, as it assumes that a rational economic system under capitalism would not allow someone to be compensated at a higher rate for the same work. This argument concludes that, where all other things are equal between men and women in terms of productivity and employee value, that businesses would only hire women if they could. Under the presumed ‘gender pay gap’ say the /r/MensRights users, they could get the same outcomes for less money: “So any good manager would only hire women, to save costs” (/u/a-man-from-earth). The insinuation is that if women are paid less, it is because they either work fewer hours (as stated above), or, that there are other determinants that lower women’s production or make it less valuable. This gives away the community’s individualistic, neoliberal, and capitalist worldview in important ways, and is explored further below.

While the anti-feminism is obvious in some parts of this post, it is more subtle in its critiques of the idea of a wage gap. These critiques are rooted in the neoliberal supposition that economic forces are rational and predictable, and the constituent factors that make up labour market participation and earnings are straightforward and logical (Boas, and Gans-Morse 2009; Cornwall 2016). They ignore, for example, family and care work as contributors to economies, as well as the historical devaluation of these kinds of work even when they are part of the paid-work economy (for example: daycare workers, personal support workers, and teachers in some jurisdictions) (Diekman *et al.* 2010). By ignoring these important elements, they also ignore the extensive feminist scholarship, theorization, and activist work that has been done to illuminate these issues with the intention of creating social change. Users in /r/MensRights demonstrate a foundational ethos of Western traditionalism around gendered work, roles, compensation, and power. The ideological positioning of choice in determining individual social and economic status comes from that same narrow traditionalism and is a familiar refrain from those who perceive their own power diminished by gains made by ‘others’.

/r/TheRedPill, for their part, lament feminism in similar ways, but also go so far as to dismiss feminism altogether. In some cases, feminism is not viewed as a social movement for equality at all, but rather a test of men’s resolve to maintain the patriarchy.

Just so you know, our society isn’t run by women. This is a patriarchy and it’s going to stay that way. It’s going to stay that way because it’s what we (men) want. And it’s going to stay that way because it’s what women want. You just think they don’t because you misunderstand feminism. You think feminism is women wanting to dominate men. It’s not. It’s just another shit test, but on a macroscopic scale (/u/Sonny\_Luna – May 31, 2020).

Contrast the more nuanced ideas from /r/MensRights with the overt claims to gendered power and the correctness of male supremacy from /r/TheRedPill, and we can see the insidiousness of shared and diverse antifeminism.

#### ***4.2. Men ≠ Women: fundamentally different beings***

The depth and toxicity of the antifeminism displayed by the users in /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill are indicative of anger and resentment at the perceived loss of power by men in Western society. It also demonstrates a politics of difference through the assumption of fundamental difference between men and women. The idea of fundamental difference takes a number of forms, each meant to separate men from women as a way of advocating male supremacy. The male supremacist advocacy is direct and overt through /r/TheRedPill, but is more subtle in /r/MensRights. In both communities the idea is couched in a biological determinism rooted in evolutionary psychology and sex roles, themselves largely anchored in what Debbie Ging calls “pseudo-scientific self-help manuals on heterosexual gender roles and relations” (Ging 2019a, 56).

The fundamental differences between men and women are foundational for /r/TheRedPill. /u/itiswr1tten provides a good example in the post “*TRP is Biology – Only the Truth Matters*” (2020). In this post, /u/itiswr1tten (a high-status contributor to the community) explains his interpretation of “the science of why biology instructs sex – and the conclusions about what biology defines to be male and female.” In effect, /u/itiswr1tten tries to explain how human civilization is deeply rooted in sexual dimorphism and sexual strategies of men and women. He uses these ideas (attributed to evolutionary biologists Bret Weinstein and Heather Heying) to justify the ways that /r/TheRedPill men approach sexual relationships. As women have a singular set of needs, men choose to fulfill either the donation of ‘good’ genes, or support child rearing – *alpha fucks/beta bucks* (see example in the text of this post online and snippet below re: AF/BB).

/u/itiswr1tten’s post is but one example from /r/TheRedPill in this topic area, and all serve to confirm one or more of the series of dichotomies between men and women identified by Shawn Van Valkenburgh in the sidebar content of /r/TheRedPill. Van Valkenburgh points out that for adherents to the Red Pill, “The observable world is considered the only valid source of empirical data, the “objective” analysis of which informs [their] conclusions about human nature and society” (2021, 7). For much of the writing on /r/TheRedPill little of that empirical data comes from scholarly research or pop-science, but rather from personal experience; ‘seeing it for yourself’.

The reality is that the core foundational material of TRP is very much based in biology. There is no need to fear biological determinism - understanding it will actually give you more freedom (thanks jojo this was a great point). What comes through goofy terms like AF/BB [Alpha Fucks/Beta Bucks] is in fact fully supported by the truth. Reject the lies where you see them, and you will see it for yourself (/u/itiswr1tten, 2020, The Cure for Cancer - para. 5).

One of the many aspects missing from /r/TheRedPill's interpretation of reality and objective analysis through biological determinism, is any concept of personal or confirmatory bias (Auxier, and Vitak 2019; Tait 2017). The members of this community, as they internalize these ideas of biological destiny (and its limitations) are unencumbered by the burden of having to consider the intersectional complexities of social order, race, power relationships, sex-gender systems (Crenshaw 1990; Rubin 2009), or even credible new science that challenges previous notions of evolutionary sex-roles (see Haas *et al.* 2020). Perhaps not coincidentally, and also unencumbered by rigorous interrogation, the biologically deterministic approach to human sexuality and reproductive behaviour also supports the Red Pill hierarchies between men – an example of the important intra-referential discourse that creates hierarchies between masculinities (Messerschmidt 2018; Schmitz, and Kazyak 2016).

As with many issues, the adherence to the concept of fundamental differences between men and women is somewhat more subtle in /r/MensRights, although no less important to the ideology of the group. For /r/MensRights, the expression of inherent biological differences is shrouded in anti-feminist critique where their comments about feminists apply to (almost) all women: “Thats exactty What the Problem with women especially feminists women are. What they say is exact the opposite from What they are doing. They say What is expected from them nothing more” (/u/Godudop, April 21, 2020). Feminists are a stand-in for women who make choices or hold beliefs that the men of /r/MensRights are unable to rationalize and this (over)generalization reveals, among other things, “a substantive knowledge gap about what feminism is/was” (Ging 2019a, 52). Just like racism, the subtle sexism and male supremacism can be far more effective and pervasive

than overt forms (Foucault 1979). The discourse on feminism in this subreddit is of particular importance because it is deeply gendered. The ‘feminists’ under scrutiny are always women (men who identify as feminists are always called ‘male feminists’), and the tone of posts and comments that reference them are (almost always) derisive.

Women hating the fact that men are entering their spaces and as you can see these are feminists. The group I remind you who along with the rest of the left that called for the annihilation of male spaces and yet they can't handle men entering their spaces.

Hypocrisy!

Also. notice how a woman called said men losers and cucks. Didn't feminists say that men being cucks and lead by women were winners and stunning and brave?!  
(/u/tiredfromlife2019).

The anger at women, shrouded in critiques of feminism in /r/MensRights is complicated because women play several important roles in the ethos of the subreddit. Along with being the foil these men fight against, they are the object of sexual attraction, and supporters of the cause, so they must always occupy a multi-faceted role in the men's rights ideology.

#### ***4.3. Someone's Getting Hit Tonight: Violence as a Lever***

When discussing violence in relation to /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, it is important to begin by stating that neither community condones violence outright. While it would be a step too far to claim that either group abhors violence, moderators and users police overt calls for violence quickly and efficiently. Although this may stem from increased monitoring by reddit after updating community conduct policies beginning in 2018 (the communities do not want to be banned), it makes the communities' use of violence in their discourses of masculinity and sociality more interesting. Where the use of antifeminism and understandings of male/female difference were similar, the ways that /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill discuss the subject of violence is quite different.

Discussions of violence, or at least male tendencies toward violence, fall in line with intra-masculine hierarchies and the biological determinism so important to the community ideology of /r/TheRedPill.

Friends who have proven themselves loyal to your and your development deserve to have you back them up when times get tough. Lovers who do everything to please you deserve to be led through the path of love, and protected by those who would harm them. A man who cannot defend those he loves with tribal violence is no man at all. Remember your masculinity - you are called upon to fight (/u/LiveAFTSOV, 2020).

/u/LiveAFTSOV's statement is part of a very long post titled "*10 Virtues of Traditional & Sacred Masculinity*" and does a good job of elucidating both elements of Red Pill conceptualizations of violence: men's roles; and the embodiment of masculinity inherent in the actualization of violent behaviour. A Red Pill man should be willing and able to engage with violence. Rarely, however, do they call on men to engage with that (presumed) biologically engrained part of their existence. Instead, they discuss how to act violently is a part of male instinct – "It's also instinctual for a man to beat the shit out of another guy who has what he wants. It's also instinctual for a man to do a lot of things by force, rather than negotiation" (u/tyrryt – May 31, 2020), "Think about it, going back to our primal nature [...] Mother nature has blessed us with these predispositions for a reason, and the main reason was probably the ability to use said strength advantage in order to forcefully procreate (or what the modern World now commonly refers to as the act of 'rape')" (/u/lilennui – May 31, 2020). These instincts, though, are softened, calmed, or outlawed by civilization; "But we lock those men in a cage and take everything away from them" (/u/tyrryt – May 31, 2020), "We have taken away the ability of men to exert control over women by taking away their natural power and making them weak both mentally and physically" (u/lilennui – May 31, 2020). The lamentations of some members of the community notwithstanding, the dominance and control linked to patriarchal masculinity are essential to the worldview of Red Pill ideology in that it justifies the male supremacism that anchors their worldview (DiBranco 2020; Marwick, and Caplan 2018).

*/r/MensRights* discussions rarely, if ever, turn to the idea of a male predisposition to violence. Most interactions discussing violence within this community are focused on domestic violence, and in particular the ways that male victims of domestic violence are silenced, shamed, or mistreated. Social approaches to understanding and addressing domestic violence, treatment of women versus men in cases of accused domestic violence, and general existential malaise about men's victimhood are common refrains. While the men in this group lament all domestic violence, they are especially conscious of the ways they see domestic violence perpetrated by women as ignored or taken less seriously. The post "*Domestic violence towards male is not a serious matter to most of the people in the society*" (u/robinwrightmac, April 1, 2020), contains a meme showing a supposed victim of woman-perpetrated domestic violence. The comments that address the meme follow a pattern where the men call out how problematic the meme would be if it depicted a female victim, interspersed with comments explaining that the meme is itself a joke. For the men's rights advocates in the thread, the meme itself is problematic as it makes light of male victims of domestic partner violence, joke or not. The fact that some people can also find the meme funny is a kind of meta-problematic, where men are seen to have internalized the idea that a man being physically assaulted by his partner is humorous. In response to one such comment, the original poster responds "This is what I wanted to point out. Violence against male is so lightly taken that it is meme-worthy. This shows the social hypocrisy like anything". For */r/MensRights*, violence, rather than being a mark of masculinity and male evolutionary status, is an example of how men are oppressed. This oppression is not, as we might conclude through feminist or social justice lensing or the oppressive structures of patriarchy, but rather via society predisposed to ignore male pain and victims. "I worry about my future as a male. It feels like my constitutional rights mean nothing and I have no true legal protection from anything." (u/SharpGalaxy 2020).

Discussions on violence are indicative of the ways internal discourses of masculinity within groups serve to police membership and enactments of 'proper' manhood, and for */r/MensRights* and */r/TheRedPill* they are deeply divergent. Still, both communities use violence as a lever in their own way, with much of the violence (although not all) being



targeted at men. Both groups use violence as one way to justify their ideological standpoints about men in society, and functionalize discourses of masculinity and power to make their points.

## 5. Conclusion

Manosphere communities like /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill are complicated places. This paper has demonstrated that complexity by comparing and contrasting their antifeminist thought and rhetoric, uncritical understandings of difference between men and women, and their conceptualisations of violence as an asset or mode of male oppression. These groups both stake claims to a piece of the manosphere. They also create models of masculinity that are unique to them, but have things in common (Ging 2019b). Both subscribe to neoliberal, meritocratic ideas about value and social contribution (Van Valkenburgh 2021). Both place men, through biological imperatives of control, sacrifice, or logic and rationality, as biologically superior (Gotell, and Dutton 2016). Both see feminism as a social ill that harms men and women, and has done significant damage to individuals and society (Mamié *et al.* 2021; Rothermel 2020). Both advocate for male supremacy.

But, these groups are also distinct. Where /r/TheRedPill sees violence as a part of ‘real men,’ but calmed and contained by feminist power structures, /r/MensRights sees violence used against men as an important way that men are subordinated. /r/MensRights has space for (almost) all men, where /r/TheRedPill advocates for a specific kind of man and specific kind of ‘alpha’ masculinity – where there are good alphas and bad betas.

Give up the “beta ways” and they will stick around longer. Women want a dominant man. She should be proving herself to him and he should reward her when she acts in a way that benefits him and withdraw attention when she doesn’t. Turn the tables around and shower her with undeserved affection and she will perceive herself to have more value than him, and it’s Checkmate (/u/GlobalAsshat – May 25, 2020).

Through their discourses of masculinity, both /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill cast a figure of ideal manhood that necessarily (whether inadvertent or explicit) sanctions other

men. While critiquing feminism, masculinity is policed via group ideological standpoints (Malin 2010), subordinating some men within groups that say they focus on the collective rights and/or biological imperatives of all men.

These similarities, differences, and unique places within the manosphere are important because they represent a large (and growing) segment of the population (Forscher, and Kteily 2020). As we face increased right-wing populism around the world, the permissive political spaces created by that infiltration into mainstream politics allow these groups to flourish (Aharoni, and Féron 2020; Boehme, and Isom Scott 2020). Manosphere groups become, then, manifestations of masculinity politics that thread masculinity and male supremacy into conventional political discussion with the intent of challenging established social narratives. They do this primarily through affective publics, having members invest time, personal capacity, and emotional capital in the ideological aims of the group, but also through the affordances of platforms like reddit that create spaces with little oversight where far-right ideology and pipelines toward extremism can take root (Cousineau 2021a; Munn 2019). They also do the work of policing dissent and shaping particular types of masculine ideology.

The expansion of these groups threatens equity work in all areas, especially gender equity, and should give us pause as we consider our social and gendered futures – especially in Western democracies. The election of Donald Trump, and the subsequent surge of white, male, and Christian supremacist actions (for example: the Soldiers of Odin in Scandinavia, Canada, and Australia)<sup>18</sup> are significant examples of the possible harms that continued exposure to ideologies of hate, supremacy, and domination can have on people and social structures. Continued study of elements of the manosphere, especially in locations like reddit, is essential to better understanding and working against the regressive ideological standpoints of these groups. For example, further work situating these groups

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<sup>18</sup> The Soldiers of Odin are a paramilitary fraternal organization, founded in Finland in 2015 (2016 in Canada) that describes itself as “a patriotic street patrol organization, which opposes harmful immigration, Islamization, and globalization, and aims at tackling the by-products caused by the aforementioned problems, like weakening of the security” (Kotonen 2019, 241). That has faced “accusations of racism, neo-Nazism, and white supremacy, due both to the group’s anti-immigrant, anti-Islam stances, and the composition of its membership” (Archambault, and Veilleux-Lepage 2019, 273).

on the far-right spectrum of political activity, as well as drawing lines between the dissolution of traditional fraternal organizations and the rise of these homosocial/fraternal extremist groups is important work to be done. At least some of the discourses of masculinity in spaces like /r/MensRights can seem innocuous at first glance – the loving father disillusioned with custody proceedings or the unwilling teenager signing up for selective service (i.e. the draft) – but even these are couched in a pervasive soft misogyny (Manne 2017). Better understanding these discourses, and especially how they intersect with, complement, and encourage more aggressive, domineering, and violent forms can help us recognize and stem the flow through the radicalization pipeline (Munn 2019). Knowing that the discourses of masculinity are different between manosphere communities also provides sites of resistance. Understanding, for example, that the kind of intra-masculine violence espoused by /r/TheRedPill is opposed and actively policed in /r/MensRights provides an opportunity to separate, and possibly divide, these elements of the manosphere. Fracturing of ideological communities has the effect of reducing numbers into ever-increasingly specific groups, making them easier to police via deplatforming or other means (see, for example Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) and /r/FemCels on reddit (Schofield 2021; Tiffany 2020). Highlighting irreconcilable ideological differences may be a way to split the manosphere and help reduce its collective reach. This research does some of that work.

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