

Article

# Sluts and soyboys: MGTOW and the production of misogynistic online harassment

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**Callum Jones** 

The University of Melbourne, Australia

**Verity Trott** 

Monash University, Australia

**Scott Wright** 

The University of Melbourne, Australia

## Abstract

Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) are a separatist Manosphere group (digital manifestation of the Men's Liberation Movement) who focus on individualistic, self-empowering actions as opposed to traditional collective actions typical of Men's Rights Activists and Incels. This study investigates how the ideology and rhetoric of MGTOW propagates and normalises misogynistic beliefs through online harassment, using a multi-phased content and thematic analysis of 10,280 tweets from three of the most active MGTOW users on Twitter. The findings document a link between the MGTOW ideology and toxic masculinity, showing that the online harassment generated is deeply misogynistic and polices the boundaries of a heterosexual, hegemonic masculinity. The analysis demonstrates that while the misogyny and violence produced by MGTOW is not extreme in nature, their appeals to rational thinking make it seem like common sense. The article develops new knowledge about the heterogeneous nature of the Manosphere and its constructions of masculinity.

## Keywords

Digital violence, emasculation, gender, manosphere, MGTOW, misogyny, online harassment, social media, toxic masculinity, Twitter

## Corresponding author:

Callum Jones, School of Culture and Communication, The University of Melbourne, Parkville VIC 3010, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

Email: [cjo0@protonmail.com](mailto:cjo0@protonmail.com)

## Introduction

In the wake of the #MeToo movement, conversations about misogynistic attitudes, harassment and violence against women have come to the forefront of public debate. Online, women are disproportionately targeted for harassment (Citron, 2014), and feminists even more so (Herring et al., 2002), by perpetrators who are more likely to be male (Jane, 2014). These actions are often underpinned by misogynistic attitudes (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016). There have been a number of important analyses of gendered online abuse or 'e-bile' (Jane, 2014), and responses to this by the feminist movement (Jane, 2016; Trott, 2018). More recently, the role of the Manosphere (the digital manifestation of the contemporary Men's Rights Movement [MRM]) has come under fire in terms of how it may be contributing to the propagation of gendered online harassment. The literature surrounding the early MRM focused on drawing attention to the narrow, traditional notion of masculinity and the social pressures and consequences that resulted from this restrictive vision (Marwick and Caplan, 2018; Schmitz and Kazyak, 2016).

The Manosphere is now home to several different groups, including pickup artists, the more radical 'Incels', father's groups, Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) and the Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) group and each has important differences that need to be unpacked. Recently, the group known as Incels – who self-identify as 'involuntary celibates' and harbour hostility towards women for denying them the sex they believe they inherently deserve – has raised particular concern. Incels have been attributed responsibility for inciting several high-profile incidents of male violence – the 2014 Isla Vista killings (Blommaert, 2017) perpetrated by Elliot Rodger and later the 2018 Toronto van attack perpetrated by Alek Minassian (Jaki et al., 2018). These attacks have put a spotlight on MRA and Incel groups within the Manosphere, and the literature has begun to conceptualise the link between these subcultures and how they may encourage and propagate violence (Dragiewicz and Mann, 2016; Kalish and Kimmel, 2010; Nicholas and Agius, 2018). Furthermore, platforms such as Reddit have begun to respond to the threat posed by radical Manosphere groups, closing the r/Incels subreddit and suspending r/TheRedPill. While Incels and other MRA groups within the Manosphere now receive significant scholarly and public attention, the MGTOW group have largely flown under the radar.

MGTOW are a group of men who vow to stop pursuing romantic relationships with women to focus on self-development and preservation; they are separatists who want to abandon the gynocentric order (Lin, 2017) and focus on more individualistic, self-empowering actions. While MGTOW borrow terminology associated with the red pill universe<sup>1</sup> and are sometimes described as MRAs (Schmitz and Kazyak, 2016), this article argues that MGTOW have developed their own ideology that makes them distinct from other groups within the Manosphere.

While men's and father's rights groups focus on 'equal rights' for men and have picketed for widespread social change and reform and used violent threats and actions, MGTOW's separatist approach has, we contend, led them to be presented as less dangerous than MRAs. This has, for example, occurred in mainstream media, such as Vice's article on MGTOW where they are presented as a somewhat 'sad' group of men (Lamoureux, 2015). This framing, we argue, is problematic. Empirical research that

assesses how MGTOW's different ideological approach shapes their discursive and physical practices is urgently needed. We contend that while MGTOW may not *necessarily* employ the explicit and directly abusive harassment documented by MRAs, they do generate passive harassment (i.e. broad-based harassment that has no specific target and subsequently can impact many potential victims). Passive harassment matters because it has been shown to contribute to psychological harm such as depression (Wolak et al., 2007), anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Pittaro, 2007) and the withdrawal of women from online spaces as a self-protective measure (Fox and Tang, 2017) leading to the silencing of female voices (Hampton et al., 2014). Furthermore, while the precise number of MGTOW followers is unclear, it appears to be a popular and growing group within the Manosphere: the subreddit r/MGTOW has grown from 54,000 members in early 2018 to 104,000 members in early 2019 and there are 32,859 members listed on one MGTOW forum.

Given the important differences in ideology and the rapid growth of the r/MGTOW subreddit, this study seeks to understand the extent to which the language and rhetoric of MGTOW on Twitter contains passive and/or active online harassment towards women *and* men. To do so, it establishes a link between MGTOW ideology and toxic masculinity, revealing how this core ideology shapes the types of abuse produced by the MGTOW community. Through this process, the study identifies different types of gendered online harassment that are rooted in a deeply misogynistic ideology propagated by the MGTOW group. Before discussing these findings, however, the literature review aims to more fully explain the theoretical underpinnings of this study. The first section outlines the origin and relevance of toxic masculinity as a theory, making note of how it is relevant in the online context. The second defines online harassment, specifically that which targets women and is perpetrated by members of the Manosphere before presenting the study's methodology and findings.

## Toxic masculinity

The term 'toxic masculinity' emerged in the 1990s out of analyses that examined different representations of masculinity and men's relationship with their fathers, and not in relation to feminism as many people believe (Haider, 2016). Some of these analyses focused on the social scripts that surrounded war, presenting an idealised masculinity as a model for heroism and representing war as a ritual transition from boyhood to manhood (Tracy Karner cited in Haider, 2016). Through the development of these social scripts, Haider (2016: 557) argues that violence has become a mode for one to assert their masculinity. Furthermore, Haider (2016) argues that within 'the matrix of patriarchy, masculinity is always defined in relation to femininity and toxic masculinities hyperbolize this binary' (p. 557). This binary portrays the feminine as weak (subordinate) while the masculine is positioned as strong (dominant).

The construction of essentialist gender binaries and the positioning of the masculine as powerful, dominant and authoritative plays into another concept described as 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Raewyn Connell's (1987) conceptualisation of 'hegemonic masculinity' emerged (prior to the notion of toxic masculinity) to describe the 'pattern of practice (i.e. things done, not just a set of role expectations of an

identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832). Hegemonic masculinity was normative and embodied the most 'honoured way of being a man', requiring all men to position themselves in relation to it, and contributed to the legitimisation of the 'global subordination of women to men' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832).

Drawing on Connell's earlier work, Terry Kupers (2005: 716) examines the relationship between toxic masculinity and hegemonic masculinity. Kupers (2005: 716) argues that toxic masculinity refers to the specific aspects of hegemonic masculinity that are 'socially destructive'. He (Kupers, 2005: 715) draws a distinction between these 'toxic' traits and the nontoxic expressions of masculinity that drive a man to succeed at work, provide for his family and win at sports. Defining toxic masculinity, Kupers (2005: 713–714) states that it is the 'constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia and wanton violence' and are, ultimately, 'socially destructive'. In this way, toxic masculinity is a result of championing these negative, hypermasculine traits, to the point that they become the idealised and desirable masculine identity. The key aspects of toxic masculinity identified from the literature that formed the deductive code frame used in this study are homophobia, misogyny, violent domination, a readiness to resort to violence, the need to be dominant and controlling, not showing or admitting weakness or dependency, and devaluing both women and feminine attributes in men (Adams et al., 2010; Haider, 2016; Johnston and Morrison, 2007; Kupers, 2005, 2010).

The online sphere introduces an interesting dynamic to an understanding of the representation and embodiment of toxic masculinity. In spaces such as the Manosphere, Nicholas and Agius (2018: 51) highlight how many of those who make up these online spaces do not embody hegemonic masculinity and self-identify as 'beta' men.<sup>2</sup> However, Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016) document the ways in which the power structures that support masculine identity offline are also present in online space. In fact, it is the failure to achieve and fulfil the expectations of what it means to be a man in relation to the narrow definition upheld by hegemonic masculinity that propels these 'beta' men to idealise an identity constructed from the principles of toxic masculinity. As a result, the different groups within the Manosphere adopt a range of approaches to address this perceived failure: some embrace their identity as an 'Incel', some rally against the subordinate groups they blame for their failure (as the MRAs rally against women and minorities) and others reject the current social scripts and attempt to 'go their own way' in the style of MGTOW.

This study is interested in understanding what this 'rejection' entails. What does it mean to 'go your own way'? How is this enacted and modelled? How does it contribute to perpetuating toxicity online? Answering these questions will help get to the crux of the MGTOW ideology and shed light on the ways toxic masculinity manifests within the separatist group. Having outlined the importance of MGTOW, the theoretical underpinnings of online harassment need to be established to properly explore the connection between toxic masculinity, MGTOW ideology and any harassment that its proponents produce. The following section will do so while also situating it within a conversation about masculinity online.

## Online harassment

Online harassment is a nuanced and complex concept as it varies in expression and severity. However, in recent years, research has begun to address online harassment from a gendered perspective, raising awareness of the often-gendered nature of the abuse and how women are disproportionately targeted (Citron, 2014). Banet-Weiser (2015) conceptualises what she terms ‘popular misogyny’ to describe the anti-feminist sentiment that permeates digital cultures and that often crystallises in the online harassment of public-facing feminists and women. She connects popular misogyny with the rise of MRAs. Several scholars have researched misogynistic abuse online that is specifically in response to feminist actions and women who gain publicity (Citron, 2014; Jane, 2014, 2016; Shaw, 2014). Emma Jane (2014), for example, coined the term ‘e-bile’, and labels online abuse as ‘misogyny online’ and ‘gendered cyberhate’, while others put forth terms such as ‘gendertrolling’ (Mantilla, 2013) and ‘online sexual harassment’ (Megarry, 2014). Vickery and Everbach (2018) and Mendes et al. (2019: 13) describe this phenomenon as ‘mediated misogyny’ to capture how this type of abuse can traverse both online and offline spheres. Importantly, Mendes et al. (2019: 13) recognise the potential for misogynistic abuse to be expressed as ‘low-level “banter”’ and within everyday sexism.

In relation to the Manosphere specifically, and from the perspective of understanding the production of online harassment and abuse, much of the research has focused on either the Incel or the MRA communities. Marwick and Caplan (2018) develop the term ‘networked harassment’ to describe the online harassment they analyse within the Manosphere. Marwick and Caplan’s (2018) research specifically investigates the term ‘misandry’ as they identify it as a core tenet within MRA discourse. They argue that MRAs position themselves as fundamentally oppositional to feminism. This oppositional framing explains why they adopt a more explicit and direct approach to harassment. It also explains why MRAs sometimes situate themselves literally at the front and centre of targeted harassment campaigns directed at women and feminists (such as when ‘anti-social-justice-warrior’ and YouTube celebrity Carl Benjamin, also known as Sargon of Akkrah, threateningly sat in the front row of a panel feminist game critic Anita Sarkeesian was speaking on).

Several scholars have focused on the explicit violence produced by the Incel community after high-profile terror attacks were linked to what Minassian declared to be the ‘Incel Rebellion’ (Jaki et al., 2018). In particular, Blommaert (2017) and Ging (2019) have been influential in providing an understanding of the construction of masculinity within the Incel community and how the group fosters a collective that encourages, supports, and ultimately incites violence (both physical and online). Another group of studies has explored specific and extreme cases of ‘active’ harassment (harassment that directly targets specific victims). However, less focus has been placed on passive harassment, which, as noted, does not target a single victim, but rather many potential victims through a broadly harassing statement or image – see Barak (2005) – and can be as damaging psychologically as active harassment (Glomb et al., 1997; Miner-Rubino and Cortina, 2007).

Research has demonstrated the significance and legitimacy of other forms of harassment, such as psychological and emotional abuse (Follingstad et al., 1990), structural

and systemic sexism and discrimination (Rogers and Henson, 1997), microaggressions (Nadal, 2013), and gaslighting (Trott, 2019). Furthermore, previous research has demonstrated the effects and seriousness of everyday sexism, including how misogynistic views can be normalised and transmitted via memes and sexist humour (Shifman and Lemis, 2011). Several feminist activist campaigns and scholars have attempted to address the everyday sexism and harassment women are subjected to, including drawing attention to why these behaviours are problematic and how they reinforce hegemonic power and drive women out of public spaces (see sites like *Everyday Sexism* and *Hollaback!* as written about by Mendes et al., 2019). These kinds of more passive, subtle and everyday forms of harassment can be more pernicious than active harassment. Messner (2016: 16), for example, warns about the dangers of this type of ‘kinder, gentler’ form of antifeminism and misogyny, arguing that its subtler and strategic appeal to common sense as opposed to a more explicit backlash makes it more pervasive and persuasive.

In summary, there have been several important studies of the explicit and violent threats and actions made by Incels and MRAs – and active harassment more broadly. The rapidly growing MGTOW group have largely flown beneath the scholarly and public radar. We contend that the core tenets of the MGTOW’s separatist and self-centred ideology make them distinct from other groups within the Manosphere and, in particular, their ideology will lead them to produce limited active harassment, but extensive passive harassment. As research has begun to demonstrate, (online) passive harassment takes many forms and is harmful – leading to myriad deleterious effects. Given these dual concerns, this study considers and documents the various types of harassment produced by MGTOW. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What types and volume of active and passive harassment are produced by the MGTOW community on Twitter?

RQ2: How might the rhetoric and ideology of MGTOW contribute to the production of harassment and the normalisation of misogynistic beliefs?

RQ3: Is there a connection between toxic aspects of masculinity within MGTOW ideology and the generation of passive harassment in order to reclaim and assert hegemonic masculinity?

## Methodology

To understand the link between toxic masculinity, the ideology of the MGTOW group and online harassment, this study incorporated a multi-phase content analysis of the Twitter content from three highly active users within the MGTOW subgroup.<sup>3</sup> These ‘active users’ (Cunningham et al., 2008), ‘super-participants’ (Graham and Wright, 2014) or ‘key players’ take on leadership roles (Cobb et al., 2010) and are considered key influencers who help to set the tone and topic of the debates and as such hold significant power and influence within the network. In this study, we understand these central members as ‘key users’.

To identify key users, we collected a data set of 10,280 tweets focusing on the hashtag #MGTOW, using NodeXL Pro to parse the Twitter Search API. We identified the most

frequent users and then considered their broader engagement as this is another indicator of importance and influence within a network (Graham and Wright, 2014). The three key users received extensive replies and likes – within the sample, there were 138 Twitter users replying to their tweets with further harassment. The harassing tweets made by these additional users were also included in the data set, bringing the total user count for the study to 141. Overall, 1688 tweets by key users and other users were collected from within the larger data set. Several stages of content analysis were conducted to analyse the tweets. The first stage involved coding whether harassment was present and whether the harassment was ‘active’ or ‘passive’, using Barak’s (2005) definition as discussed above.

Second, a thematic analysis was conducted on the harassing tweets to determine whether elements relating to toxic masculinity were present. The key aspects of toxic masculinity identified deductively from the literature review were used to create an initial code frame. An inductive reading of the tweets found that this failed to capture some of the forms of harassment that were present and thus further categories were added. Similar or related codes were then grouped to form the definitions in the final code frame. This combination of deductive and inductive coding provides a more comprehensive code frame that captures subtler forms of harassment (Table 1) and is, we believe, an important theoretical and methodological contribution in itself. First, it provides a more nuanced account of harassment through the thematic analysis. Second, it operationalises this for content analysis, and the code frame definitions can be adopted in future studies. An inter-coder reliability test was conducted with two trained coders on 10% of the sample ( $n=48$ ), using Krippendorff’s alpha; they ranged between reliability scores of .79 and 1 (see Table 1). It is important to note that a single tweet may have been coded for containing multiple types of harassment rather than the dominant type.

We also examined the official MGTOW website ([www.mgtow.com](http://www.mgtow.com)), the connected forum and the promotional material posted on the website. We specifically read their ‘About’ page, ‘History’ page, ‘Glossary’ page (in which they list the definitions for the language specific to their community and the broader Manosphere), ‘The Manosphere’ page and the ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ page. Collectively, these pages provided us with additional information about MGTOW’s history, ideology, who they are and insight into the language and rhetoric central to their community. These details were used to complement our analysis of the MGTOW key users on Twitter.

## The nature of online harassment by MGTOW

Of the 1688 tweets within the sample, 483 (29%) were coded as harassing. Within those 483 harassing tweets, there were 540 unique expressions of harassment; the reason this number is significantly higher is because many harassing tweets had more than one expression of harassment. Of the harassing tweets, 54% ( $n=262$ ) were made by the three key users, and the remaining 46% ( $n=221$ ) were made by the 138 other users. As suspected, passive harassment made up the vast majority of the data set, with 96% ( $n=465$ ) of all the harassment being broadly harassing, while only 4% ( $n=18$ ) had a specific target.

Three key points arose from the findings regarding the frequency of harassment categories (Figure 1), which will be explored in detail below. First, the banality and passive

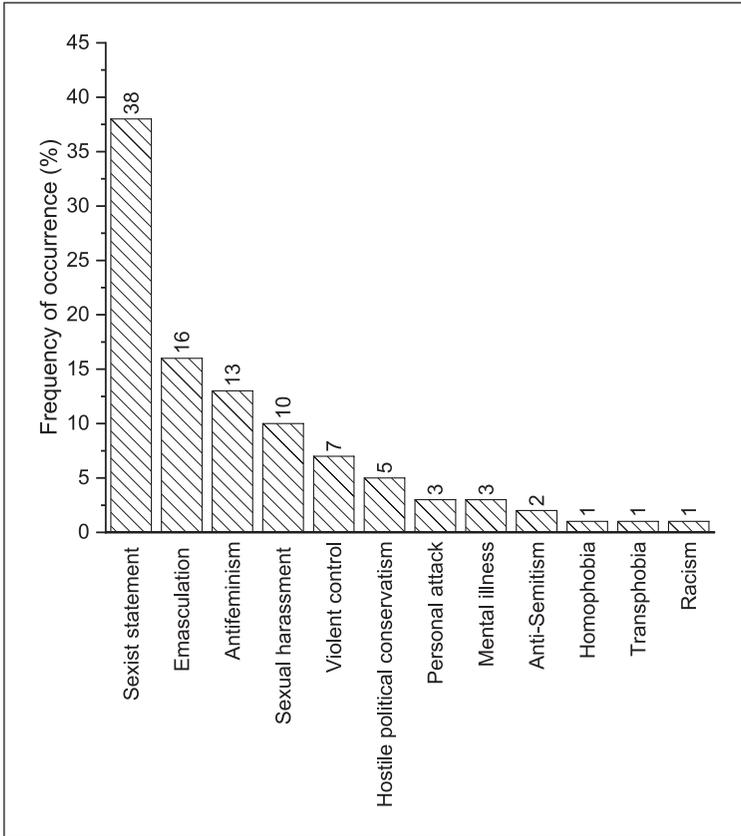
**Table 1.** Categories of harassment.

Harassment category	Category description
(1) Homophobia	<p>Discrimination against gay people, often where homosexuality is used as a way to insult those who are perceived to be non-masculine. For example: male feminists are 'gay'. Homophobia is also expressed by referring to homosexual acts negatively, for example, a man is weak because of the 'dick up their arse'. (Krippendorff's <math>\alpha = 1.0</math>)</p> <p>The willingness to maintain power using violence. This is expressed through a desire to use violent acts to subdue anyone who challenges male hegemony. Violent control is expressed through direct reference to actions such as punching, choking, shooting, hitting, slapping, killing, kicking, dropping, taser, taser, smashing, spraying, executing and throwing objects at victims. The desire to control and train women using violent acts is also an important component; these are used as a means of discipline. For example: 'train your wife' using weapons such as a 'taser'. (Krippendorff's <math>\alpha = .91</math>)</p>
(3) Sexual harassment	<p>Harassment that is inherently sexual in nature. This can be expressed visually through sharing pornographic images in public online spaces. It can also be verbal through making explicit references to the performance of sexual acts (oral and penetrative sex, facials, sex toy use), male and female sexual anatomy (penis, vagina, breasts) and references to sexual assault and rape (false accusations, rape, groping). (Krippendorff's <math>\alpha = 1.0</math>)</p>
(4) Antifeminism	<p>A strong dislike of feminists and feminism, often claiming it to be a dangerous and damaging ideology. More so than anything else, feminism is labelled a disease that is negatively impacting the world and turning it into a 'shit hole'. Feminists are labelled as fascists ('feminazi'), unattractive and unfeminine, promiscuous, incompetent, oversensitive or sexually subservient. A hugely significant element of anti-feminist rhetoric is establishing it as a mental illness or disability. For example, 'fertard' is a common expression used to demonstrate feminist incompetency or stupidity through comparisons to mental disability. Delusions, insanity and the need for psychiatric care are all used to discredit feminist thought as mental illness. (Krippendorff's <math>\alpha = .852</math>)</p>
(5) Emasculation	<p>When the manhood of victims is called into question through gendered insults, typically for showing or admitting weakness or dependency. Common slurs target feminine physicality ('soy boy' which is a reference to the fact that soy milk has oestrogen in it, 'mangina'), sexual submissiveness ('cuck', 'gimp'), physical weakness ('beta male', 'snowflake') and subservience to women ('simp', 'white knight'). Emasculation can also be expressed by mocking stereotypically feminine characteristics in men or portraying them as weak and undesirable. Such characteristics are usually juxtaposed with corresponding male characteristics to illustrate the unquestionable superiority of masculinity. Men possessing feminine characteristics are seen as inferior and weakened by them. For example, weak men are those who appear or act in a feminine way such as wearing women's clothing or using makeup. (Krippendorff's <math>\alpha = .89</math>)</p>

*(Continued)*

Table 1. (Continued).

Harassment category	Category description
(6) Sexist statement	Broad and more general sexism often expressed through gender stereotypes. For the most part, insults focus on depicting women as inferior ('unintelligent', 'incompetent'), self-serving ('selfish', 'lying', 'manipulative'), submissive ('get back in the kitchen') and sexual objects (sexual assets with depreciating 'sexual market value'). Sexist statements also include insults that pertain to a specific gender, in this case specifically women. Examples include broad contempt such as 'cunt' and 'bitch', as well as specific references to sexual promiscuity ('slut', 'whore', 'thot', 'hoe', 'skank'), deceit ('gold digger') and unintelligence ('dumb blonde'). (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .808$ )
(7) Mental illness	A subcategory of sexism that shows dislike for women by comparing their intellect to that of people with an intellectual disability or a mental illness. Insults include references to intellectual disability ('retard', 'spastic') and mental illness ('psycho', 'deranged'). (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .852$ )
(8) Transphobia	Discrimination against transgender people. This often occurs in the form of deliberately misgendering through the knowing use of incorrect pronouns, through slurs such as 'tranny', or through denying the existence of transgender identities by claiming it is a 'made-up gender'. (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 1.0$ )
(9) Anti-semitism	Discrimination against Jewish people. Predominantly following the trend of the great Jewish conspiracy – that Jews, through their significant wealth and power, are in control of the Western world. This is often communicated through references to omnipotent Jewish 'forces' that are 'sneaky' and living in 'the shadows'. (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 1.0$ )
(10) Hostile political conservatism	Characterised by a broad hatred of the political left, where they are, for the most part, depicted as inferior. Inferiority is often established through references to intellectual disability ('leftard', 'libbard'), oversensitivity ('social justice warriors') and political radicalism ('commies', 'socialists'). Also includes promotion and adoration of the political right, especially Donald Trump. (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .879$ )
(11) Racism	Harassment that focuses on racial characteristics as a way to insult or offend. For example: 'smelly curry Mumbai dog'. (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 1.0$ )
(12) Personal attack	Non-gendered direct attacks on victims that are usually insults or threats and for the most part contain swear words. For example: 'dipshit', 'clown', 'moron', 'idiot', 'fuckwit'. (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .791$ )



**Figure 1.** The frequency of harassment by harassment category.

nature of the harassment alongside the limited expressions of extreme violence. Second, there is a contradiction between what the MGTOW ideology professes and the actions of MGTOW members. This is most noticeable in the conflict between their separatist ideology and the repeated centring of women in much of their rhetoric. Third, the construction, contestation and reinforcement of an idealised vision of masculinity that reflects the characteristics associated with toxic masculinity and how this is achieved via tactics such as the emasculation of other men. This is a particularly interesting point of tension within the MGTOW ideology and our findings. On their forum, they define what it means to be a ‘real man’, which surprisingly indicates a very progressive notion that attempts to deconstruct gender stereotypes, yet their actions and expressions subscribe to a traditional model of masculinity. Crucially, the MGTOW ideology indicates the struggles men experience when they feel the restrictive bonds of societal prescriptions of masculinity and heteronormativity (similar to feminist beliefs); however, MGTOWs blame women and feminists for these restrictive notions and expectations rather than society and the patriarchy. Our findings document that despite this desire to ‘break free’ from the

'shackles' of an oppressive notion of masculinity, the members of MGTOW continue to conform to the ideals of toxic masculinity and use harassing behaviour to reclaim or gain male 'sovereignty'. This leads to the fourth key finding this article contributes: it demonstrates how passive harassment is used as a way of reclaiming, performing and proving one's masculinity to the rest of the MGTOW community and broader society.

### *Casual and banal sexism*

Previous research has documented rape threats (Jane, 2014), death threats (Megarry, 2014) and cyber stalking (Pittaro, 2007) as examples of behaviours that are used to attack and silence women in online spaces. However, the high degree of passive harassment found in this study demonstrates the banality of the misogyny and sexism reflected in MGTOW rhetoric. For example, the use of violent control did not occur in the data frequently at only 7% ( $n=37$ ) of harassment. Instead, the most prominent forms of harassment that were expressed were casual sexism (38%), emasculation (16%) and antifeminism (13%).

Manne (2017) conceptualised a difference between sexism and misogyny, arguing that sexism is the ideology that supports patriarchy while misogyny enforces it. She contends that misogyny is a response to the perceived threat of feminism to the patriarchy and it operates as a way of punishing women and men who step outside of the status quo. Manne's (2017) conception of this difference helps us to understand the different purposes and intentions of the sexism and passive harassment our study found. Many of the passive forms of harassment we detected within the MGTOW rhetoric were reflective of the sexist ideologies and values the group maintained. The passive nature operated as a way of vocalising and spreading their ideology while the absence of specified targets suggested the enforcement of their values was not a high priority compared to the other groups such as Incels and MRAs who are driven by a desire to enforce hegemonic masculinity and reclaim power in society. As a result, the misogynistic nature – at least in terms of how Manne (2017) defines it – of their rhetoric remains largely in the background and there is a distinct lack of 'calls to action' within the findings.

The employment of subtle forms of harassment, such as sexism, is problematic in that they contribute to the socialisation and reinforcement of harmful gendered views within the group. Several scholars have previously considered the dangers of banality. Hannah Arendt (2002) coined the phrase 'the banality of evil' to describe how abuse and acts of evil are perpetrated by regular people. Although Arendt's (2002) conceptualisation was in relation to the Nazi regime, feminist scholars have also worked to deconstruct the 'monster myth'. The monster myth works to position perpetrators as 'others', situating them outside of society rather than recognising the everyday nature of gendered violence and how regular citizens contribute to a misogynistic culture (Trott, 2019). This mythology was also reflected within the MGTOW community. MGTOWs position MRAs and Incels as 'others', by thinking of them as 'betas' or 'losers' while they conceptualise themselves as regular individuals. This conceptualisation MGTOWs have of themselves as 'ordinary men' who have encountered difficulty in their life allows them to appeal to a large pool of men who are unsatisfied with their life. This may help to explain why support for MGTOW has been growing – though more research is necessary to understand this.

Subtle forms of harassment are also less likely to be called out and condemned than explicit and extreme behaviours like rape and death threats because they are not conceived as being dangerous and are rooted within an appeal to common sense. This is a pivotal distinction between MGTOW and other Manosphere members such as Incels. Jaki et al. (2018) found that many members of the Incel community believe that attitudes which condone violence against women, and even actively encourage rape, are acceptable and are therefore tolerated within the Incel group. However, MGTOW's sexism is communicated as uncontroversial and embedded casually within their rhetoric. An interesting example of this from the data is the use of gender stereotypes. A large amount of the sexism that occurred included references to traditional conceptions of the female role and gender stereotypes more broadly. Interestingly, this reflects existing research which has found that a key part of MGTOW ideology is the belief that men should be traditionally masculine, by being dominant and independent, while women should submit and be content to nurture (Lilly, 2016). Clichés like get 'back to the kitchen' and 'make me a sandwich' inevitably made an appearance as well as the assertion that women should spend their time 'cooking', 'cleaning' and 'sucking dick'. Another stereotype was the 'female emotional brain', which supposedly clouds women's capacity for logic. Women were often described as too emotional to assess a situation logically and rationally, to the point of being equated with children. Their tendency towards hyperemotionality was cited as a contributing factor to a lack of logical capacity.

Many of these sexist stereotypes were transmitted via memes. Sarah Ahmed (2017: 261) is one of many scholars who have documented how humour and the use of irony and satire can be employed to continue perpetuating sexist and racist utterances. Memes and seemingly innocuous jokes can be encoded with sexist ideologies and position the target (generally women and ethnic minorities) as overly sensitive or as 'feminist killjoys' if they challenge the joke (Ahmed, 2017). The use of humour as a form of harassment operates to trivialise the derision of a social group and communicate an implicit norm that discrimination, and in this case misogyny, is acceptable (Shifman and Lemish, 2011).

Furthermore, MGTOWs demonstrate a deliberate attempt to present themselves as moderate and to frame their ideology and beliefs as logical. They specifically state on the front page of their forum under a short description of their ideology that their beliefs are essentially 'common sense for men'. This appeal to common sense can be found in how MGTOWs frame and align with their ideology. For example, they draw parallels between understanding MGTOW tenets and the superiority of men with understanding basic scientific principles such as the world is round. They integrate quotes from well-known men such as Galileo and Newton to emphasise the scientific and rational basis for MGTOW beliefs. This works to frame their beliefs as not radical but common, relatable, and, crucially, rational, thus ensuring the path to join MGTOW is perceived as 'natural' and obvious, lowering the barrier to entry and broadening the opportunities for recruitment.

### *Ideological contradiction: woman-obsessed separatism*

Several contradictions arose from the analysis of MGTOW ideology and the rhetoric within their tweets and the forum, stemming from the challenges of defining what it

means to ‘go their own way’. The crux of the MGTOW rhetoric is that men who choose MGTOW as a lifestyle need to abstain from romantic relationships with women and, in some cases, casual sexual relationships too (going ‘monk’). Yet, much of their dialogue is centred around women – again due to the fact that they must perform a rejection of women to belong within the community. However, the additional focus on women within the discussions also works to reinforce the MGTOW ideology and the need for the group. Through the shared experiences of a multitude of men, women are painted as ‘cunts’, ‘bitches’, ‘sluts’, ‘whores’, ‘thots’, ‘hoes’, ‘skanks’ and ‘gold diggers’ who should be avoided. The repeated use of these words contributes to a socialisation of misogynistic and sexist rhetoric.

Despite these shared experiences and MGTOW’s apparent focus on self-improvement, there is a degree of factionalism within MGTOW and the tensions within the group highlight how users attempt to claim authority or social status by continuing to subscribe to aspects of toxic masculinity. MGTOW members themselves recognise they ‘do not play well with others’, which has resulted in various different interpretations and approaches to the MGTOW ideology and helps to explain some of the contradictions between the MGTOW ideology and the actions of MGTOW members. The traditional goals of MGTOW were ‘instilling masculinity in men’ and forcing a ‘man-up’ mandate (MGTOW, 2019). These original goals conflict with the attitudes and beliefs of the contemporary MGTOW collective, which declares that ‘the true definition of a “real man” is any human being born with XY chromosomes. The remainder of that definition is entirely up to him’ (MGTOW, 2019). Contemporary articulations of the MGTOW group state an objective that focuses on freeing men from oppressive gender stereotypes and notions of masculinity and allowing them to reclaim ‘sovereignty’ over how they define themselves. However, the findings document several methods in which users attempted to police the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity, reinforcing a traditional and oppressive notion of masculinity.

### *Harassment as a demonstration of MGTOW identity, masculinity and manhood*

Despite the lack of explicit misogyny, the prevalence and propagation of sexism within the group via passive harassment is problematic as it contributes to the normalisation and promotion of essentialist gender stereotypes. A sexist ideology protects and supports patriarchy and has been used as a foundation for the justification of misogynistic actions, such as intimate partner violence and rape (Moya et al., 2005). It is also worth noting that the harassment that was identified in this study occurred entirely within a group of male peers. The very premise of MGTOW is that it is a group of men who are collectively moving away from relationships with women, and as this study has shown, part of that process includes demonstrating or performing a rejection of women.

What constitutes a ‘real’ MGTOW member remains contentious. This largely arises due to the fact that the MGTOW group centres itself around what they are not doing (i.e. not getting married or having relationships). Many of the discussions that surround the framing of the group focus around rejecting women and the current ‘gynocentric order’ rather than what it looks like to be ‘going their own way’. As a result, there is a challenge

in defining what it means to be a 'real' MGTOW and the only clear way for a user to prove their membership is by performing and demonstrating a rejection of women. This tension explains why much of the harassment is passive rather than explicit in nature as the rejection of women is a performance for their male peers rather than a deliberate attack on women specifically.

In the same way as MGTOW members demonstrate their membership to the group by rejecting women, they demonstrate their masculinity by rejecting non-masculine men. Emasculation was found to be a weapon used to attack men and represented 16% ( $n=84$ ) of all harassment in the data set. In the context of male-to-male online harassment, emasculation is a subtle method that is used to attack other men by questioning the legitimacy of their masculinity. The men who were being attacked were those who did not align with the idealised masculine identity that MGTOWs have constructed for themselves. 'Cucks', 'soy boys', 'manginas', 'blue-pills', 'white knights', 'gimps', 'betas', 'simps', 'pussies', 'bitches' and 'faggots' were viewed as having committed the ultimate sin: they were either feminised or submitted to female power.

Homophobia and transphobia were also used as ways to police the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity and enforce heterosexuality as the only acceptable form of masculine sexuality. While MGTOWs reject relationships with women, they must perform their heterosexuality in other ways. Thus, the performance of a heterosexual hegemonic masculinity is often expressed as a rejection of homosexuality. The basis of a repudiation of homosexuality remains its equation with femininity; hence, its rejection is a way of policing the borders of hegemonic masculinity and a way of maintaining and reinforcing masculinised power.

An interesting point of consideration that arises from the centring of women is the positioning of feminism and how MGTOW situates itself in opposition to the feminist movement. Our findings document that 13% ( $n=69$ ) of all harassment contained or expressed anti-feminist sentiment. This finding reflects those of other MGTOW studies, which report that a defining characteristic of the community is their distrust, deep-seated hostility and dislike of feminists and women more broadly (Lilly, 2016). This hatred for feminists stems from the belief that they are to blame for the flipped gender hierarchy (where men are oppressed by women) and have created patriarchy as a myth to trick gullible, 'blue-pilled' men into submitting to the gynocentric social order (Ging, 2019; Lilly, 2016). This targeting of feminists, when combined with the 38% ( $n=206$ ) of harassment that is sexist, reflects just how much MGTOW focus specifically on women, with 51% ( $n=275$ ) of all harassment attacking women for either their characteristics or their ideology. The history of the MRM more broadly documents how men's rights activism, or what was labelled the 'men's liberation movement', was initially inspired by second-wave feminism in the 1970s (Ging, 2019: 2). Some scholars have also started documenting the men's rights activism and popular misogyny that emerges as a backlash in response to feminist activism (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Menzies, 2007). The case study of MGTOW further cements the inextricable link between the two. As they state on the history page of their website, 'feminism is the gasoline' to the MGTOW fire. This suggests that as feminism swells in popularity (as seen by the #MeToo movement), groups like MGTOW will continue to grow and become a space in which men try to reclaim and reinforce hegemonic masculinity in response to the perceived loss of power they

experience in mainstream society. The detachment from women that MGTOW promotes may also lead to the further isolation and separation of these men, which in turn may provide a site for further radicalisation.

## Conclusion

This study has assessed the rhetoric and ideology of the MGTOW group by using a multi-staged content and thematic analysis of the tweets of three key users (and related debate) to determine how they contribute to the production of active and passive online harassment. The article makes a number of important contributions to the field.

It documents a link between the MGTOW ideology and toxic masculinity, and how the types of harassment MGTOW generates is rooted within a deeply misogynistic ideology that propagates beliefs of the toxic aspects of masculinity. The analysis demonstrates that the misogyny and violence produced by MGTOW is not explicitly extreme in nature, with 96% of the harassment being passive, and this contributes to the socialisation of men within these groups and the normalisation of misogynistic and sexist beliefs. Furthermore, their appeals to rational thinking and incorporation of references to historical scientists and influential philosophers help to market their brand of misogyny as that of ‘common sense’.

The analysis highlights two underlying factors that drive the production of passive harassment by MGTOW members. First, the need to perform their rejection of women leads to expressions of sexism, antifeminism, and more broadly, misogyny in order for individuals to prove their allegiance and belonging among their male peers. Second, passive harassment containing emasculation and homophobia is used to police the boundaries of a heterosexual, hegemonic masculinity and reveals how many of the users continue to subscribe to the aspects of toxic masculinity the founders of MGTOW declare independence from. These forms of passive harassment are used as ways of further denouncing associations with women and femininity and to prove their heterosexuality within an all-male space that is marked by an absence of women and relationships with women. This article has developed new knowledge about how masculinity is constructed and contested within men’s online spaces and has highlighted the heterogeneous nature of the Manosphere and the MGTOW group specifically.

To do this, the article puts forward a code frame that can be used to understand the common types of online harassment that are most prevalent within the Manosphere and that stem from prescribing to the ideals of hegemonic and toxic masculinity. This theoretical and methodological contribution builds upon the existing literature to further an understanding of how toxic masculinity manifests as online harassment within the Manosphere.

Overall, this study has brought some much-needed scholarly attention to the more seemingly innocuous members of the Manosphere and has demonstrated that they are dangerous in *going their own way* through extending the theorisation of subtle harassment. Further research into groups like MGTOW is necessary to paint a more detailed picture of their ideology in order to further understand their motivations and help inform the prevention of their online incivility and targeted aggression of women and ‘inferior’ men.

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## ORCID iDs

Callum Jones  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4269-4827>

Verity Trott  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0288-4044>

Scott Wright  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4087-9916>

## Notes

1. Red and blue pills are references to the film *The Matrix*, where the lead character must choose to take either the blue pill, meaning he will stay deluded, or the red pill which will open his eyes to reality. MGTOWs (Men Going Their Own Way) claim to be red-pilled because their eyes have been opened to the ‘reality’ that is female dominance and privilege. Blue-pilled men, on the contrary, remain deluded (Ging, 2019: 3; Lilly, 2016: 43).
2. Oppositional to ‘alpha’ male – often defined as a physically weak, submissive or feminised man.
3. We chose not to name the specific MGTOW users or to quote tweets in their entirety to retain anonymity on their part and also to maintain a safe distance as researchers, minimising the risk of potential hostility. Several researchers (Ahmed, 2017; Chess and Shaw, 2015) have discussed the abuse they have received in response to their own work due to a lack of anonymity and as women speaking publicly about these issues. As such, we believe our approach can be a model of good practice for future researchers in this area and provides a method for minimising risk when discussing abuse in online spaces.

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### Author biographies

**Callum Jones** is a recent graduate from the University of Melbourne. He has recently completed a year-long quantitative research project within the School of Culture and Communication. His research focused specifically on the connection between radical ideologies and the production of online harassment. Specifically, he looked at the MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way) group within the Manosphere and explored the connection between their expressions of masculinity and misogynistic harassment. For the past 3 years, he has worked at the national organisation for the prevention of violence against women and children, Our Watch.

**Verity Trott** is a lecturer in digital media research at Monash University. She completed her PhD at the University of Melbourne, in which she examined the organisational practices of feminist activism in the digital age. Her published works focus on indigenous women's use of social media, everyday political talk online and rape culture in popular media. Her current projects explore digital feminist action, online harassment and toxic masculinity, and feminism in popular culture. Her teaching and research practices involve developing and implementing a range of computational methods for analysing the political, cultural and social dimensions of digital media technologies.

**Scott Wright** is an associate professor in Political Communication, senior research fellow in the Centre for Advancing Journalism and a former Mid-Career Fellow of the British Academy. His research interests include everyday political talk, online deliberation, below-the-line comment spaces and data journalism. He has published widely in leading international journals including *Political Communication*; *International Journal of Press/Politics*; *New Media & Society*; *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*; *Information, Communication and Society*; and the *European Journal of Communication*.