



'The pussy ain't worth it, bro': assessing the discourse and structure of MGTOW

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ABSTRACT

In the era of networked affordances, misogynistic men's groups have been rapidly growing and have contributed to several physical fatal attacks along with the propagation of gendered online harassment and e-bile. It is thus important to study the organisational structures and communication dynamics of these groups to provide insight into why they have been successful in recruiting members and how they further spread and normalise misogynistic beliefs. One such misogynistic group is MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way). This study seeks to understand the structure and content of discussion within the forum of the official MGTOW website. To do so, it undertakes a content analysis of comments ($n = 1012$) inspired by Freelon's (2010, 2015) multi-norm approach to studying online communication, which draws on the liberal individual, communitarian and deliberative models. It also assesses the broader patterns of commenting ($n = 628,745$) participation amongst users ($n = 33,863$). The results suggest that debates on the forum combine elements of each communicative approach and that this reflects a contradiction in their underlying ideology of separation and individualism. In addition, it was found that topics of conversation primarily focused on two topics: women (the majority of which unfold in a misogynistic way) and defining MGTOW – both as a collective identity and a personal journey.

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Introduction

The 'Men Going Their Own Way' group – more widely known as MGTOW – are men who claim to want to literally 'go their own way'; they consider themselves separatists and encourage men to turn away from women and recentre themselves, valuing an individualistic, self-empowering way of life. MGTOW are a subgroup of the Manosphere which is the digital manifestation of the Men's Liberation Movement, and home to several other male-only groups (Ging, 2017). One group, known as 'Incels' (Involuntary Celibates), wish to exact 'retribution' on women, and whose members have perpetrated acts of violence and terrorism, such as a van attack in Toronto which killed 10. Another group, PUAs (pick-up artists), are a subculture of men focused on learning how to seduce and manipulate women into sleeping with them. While the high profile nature of the mass

attacks has brought Incels under scrutiny and globally trending feminist protests against PUAs (such as #takedownjulienblanc – see Trott, 2020) has drawn attention to them, MGTOW has largely flown under the public and scholarly radar, even as the group has grown very rapidly in size.¹ This lack of research may be explained by two issues.

First, the separatist lifestyle of MGTOW may be assumed to be less dangerous than the direct violence associated with groups such as Incels. Yet a recent study found that MGTOW propagate extensive and wide-ranging passive or undirected harassment and misogyny on Twitter that can normalise sexist attitudes (Jones, Trott, & Wright, 2019). Furthermore, 7% of harassing tweets were found to be violent in some way. Second, the Manosphere is often treated as homogenous because the groups are bound together by a belief in the ‘gynocentric order’² and Red Pill Ideology. The Red Pill is an ideology that has evolved from a reference to the film *The Matrix*. The central character Neo (Keanu Reeves) must choose between taking the red pill, which will open his eyes to reality, or the blue pill, which will allow him to stay deluded. Members of the Manosphere claim to be ‘red-pilled’ because they are now able to see that the world is dominated by privileged women.

MGTOW have previously been categorised as an MRA group (Farrell et al., 2019; Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016). As explained in more detail below, however, each group is ideologically distinct (Ging, 2017; Marwick & Caplan, 2018). This matters because ideology is a key variable shaping online political discussion and related actions (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Freelon, 2015; Hargittai et al., 2008; Valera-Ordaz, 2019) which means we cannot assume that MGTOW are similar to other Manosphere groups.

Following this, we expect that these ideological differences within the Manosphere – from group-focused MRA and Incel collectives and related actions, to more individualistic notions of self-empowerment and action associated with the separatist lifestyle of MGTOWs – are likely to influence (1) the nature of the discourse that occurs; (2) the kinds of actions that are called for; and (3) the organisational and leadership structures that underpin both. Furthermore, we cannot assume that MGTOW debates on Twitter (Jones et al., 2019) mirror those on other platforms. Twitter is a relatively open platform in which boundaries cannot easily be enforced, yet debates are also subject to at least some platform level moderation. In contrast, spaces such as the MGTOW forum allow boundary drawing and moderation by MGTOW themselves. We might assume that the MGTOW forum is relatively homogenous, but given the rapid growth in MGTOW activity, and the creation of digital refugees³ as other parts of the Manosphere have faced sanctions (e.g., the closing or quarantining of subreddits like r/incel), this assumption needs testing. In combination, this makes discrete research into MGTOW across different platforms important.

Given these different concerns, this article focuses on the structural underpinnings and nature of the debate within the MGTOW discussion forum, including moderation, leadership, in-group dynamics and the discursive form of debates, and how this contributes to the propagation of misogyny and different calls to action. A multi-layered research design is adopted that combines macro-level quantitative analysis of the patterns of participation; meso-level content analysis of a random sample of comments; and a qualitative digital ethnography in which time was spent reading and observing debates. The analysis is informed by Dahlberg (2001) and Freelon’s (2010, 2015) multi-norm framework for assessing political debate (see also Valera-Ordaz, 2019;

Vromen, 2008), which covers the liberal individual, communitarian and deliberative democratic philosophical traditions.

Ideology, the manosphere and online misogyny

All groups in the Manosphere share a belief in a 'gynocentric order' and Red Pill ideology. What makes each group distinct is their approach to dealing with the perceived 'gynocentrism', and the social issues they prioritise. Some of these differences can be understood when considering the history of the Manosphere and how it can be traced back to the traditional men's liberation and men's rights movements (MRM), which have manifested in several differing branches over the years. Marwick and Caplan (2018, p. 545) trace the roots of the contemporary MRM to the early 1970s, outlining how early men's liberation scholars attempted to attract men to the feminist movement by emphasising the harmful effects men experience from a patriarchal society. The literature surrounding the early MRM drew attention to the narrow, traditional notion of masculinity and the social pressures and consequences that resulted from this restrictive vision (Messner, 1998). Some of these consequences have been compulsory male-only draft requirements, unequal child support obligations and the oppression of emotional expression by men (Marwick & Caplan, 2018, p. 546). Many of these concerns remain prevalent within contemporary MRA groups. However, Messner (1998) identified a significant transformation in the late 1970s in which a fissure occurred in the men's liberation movement between a pro-feminist movement and MRAs. During this time, several early men's liberation activists began to develop more explicit anti-feminist and anti-women discourses and ideologies, inspiring new men's rights groups and communities to develop, cultivating their own particular ideologies and cultures, evolving into the contemporary MRM (Messner, 1998).

Current men's rights activism focuses on a series of social issues that MRAs consider pivotal to the continued subjugation of men. These views often present a flipped narrative in which men are positioned as victims of ongoing discrimination (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and this narrative is shared amongst many communities within the Manosphere. Previous research has found that many of these communities also express and propagate misogynistic attitudes. Cockerill (2019), for example, details how the discourse of MRAs contributes to a 'digital culture of misogyny', while Farrell and colleagues (2019) found that the language used within Incel associated Reddit communities has been increasingly misogynistic and extreme. How these groups propagate and normalise misogynistic attitudes, and how they approach establishing community norms, deliberate and spread anti-feminist narratives, enforce their beliefs, recruit new members, and resist or protest 'gynocentrism' may all be influenced by their differing ideologies.

While MGTOWs believe in Red Pill ideology and have previously been grouped with MRAs (Farrell et al., 2019; Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016), they have emerged as a different subculture within the Manosphere. MGTOWs encourage a separatist approach in which men live a self-empowered life away from women. Rather than take part in collective protests and attempt social reforms like MRAs, or the direct violence and terrorism of some Incels, MGTOWs choose to 'go their own way' and claim to focus on self-preservation and personal development (Jones et al., 2019). MGTOWs do this in different ways: some have sexual relations with women but avoid committed relationships; some opt for sexual celibacy, known as going 'monk'; and some go 'ghost', attempting to slip into the background and live unnoticed.

Structurally, MGTOW disavows the very idea that they are a group at all; they emphasise each individual man's voice and independence. MGTOW also often claim to be leaderless. However, previous research (Jones et al., 2019; Farrell et al., 2019) has found that, despite their separatist approach, MGTOWs also contribute to the propagation of online harassment. Their contribution to a 'digital culture of misogyny' (Jones et al., 2019; Cockerill, 2019), combined with their rapid growth as other Manosphere groups face sanctions, positions them as an influential group within the Manosphere and an important case study to explore how cultures of misogyny are growing, evolving, uniting and resisting feminism. But studying a 'group' that has several seeming contradictions and paradoxes raises many questions, and we turn to this next.

An approach to studying MGTOW debates

There are extensive studies of political discussion online. Research has typically operationalised Habermas-inspired elite models of deliberation that emphasise rational-critical communication (e.g., Wright & Street, 2007; Stromer-Galley, 2007). While this research is of value, privileging the deliberative normative view of what is desirable communication may be ill-suited to the study of everyday political talk online (Wright, 2012) across its communicative heterogeneity (Dahlgren, 2005), leading some scholars to suggest more inclusive, multi-norm models that combine liberal individualist, communitarian and deliberative approaches (Dahlberg, 2001; Freelon, 2010). Such an approach, we contend, is better suited for assessing communication amongst MGTOW, in part because ideology impacts the nature of discussion online (Valera-Ordaz, 2019). Conservatives, for example, are 'significantly more likely to speak in monologues and post insults than progressives' (Freelon, 2015, p. 784). Ideology may also influence the fact and form of moderation processes that are put in place – and moderation is a fundamental structural feature impacting communication and community (Wright, 2006; Graham & Wright, 2014).

The liberal individual model emphasises that individuals are 'rational, autonomous subjects who knows and can express their own best interest' (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 160) and stresses 'the single-minded pursuit of uninhibited self-expression, usually at the expense of civility and responsiveness' (Freelon, 2015, p. 774). Freelon (2015) highlights four 'indicative metrics' for liberal individualism: the use of monologue (as opposed to deliberative dialogue); the revealing of personal information; linking to other personal information (e.g., personal blog, YouTube channel or Twitter handle); and the use of flaming language such as profanity, obscenity and insults, particularly, for Freelon (2010, p. 1180), to harass opponents and to provide an outlet for opinions that are unpopular offline.

The communitarian model 'celebrates collaborating with like-minded others to advance ideologically specific goals and disengaging with outsiders' (Freelon, 2015, p. 774) and emphasises the reinforcement of community ties and 'high levels of ingroup interaction and collective identity construction and other forms of bonding alongside a commitment to strong ingroup/outgroup boundaries' (Freelon, 2010, p. 1177). Freelon identifies four characteristics of communitarianism: ideological homophily, or the absence of disagreement – anathema to deliberative democrats – but celebrated by communitarians as necessary for the construction of in group narratives and bonding; a conducive space for political mobilisation; the use of language that identifies community (e.g., we,

our, us); and that users engage in intra-ideological response and questioning and give reasons and avoid personal insults (2015, p. 775).

The deliberative model, for Freelon, emphasises the use of rational-critical arguments; a public (rather than private) issue focus; discussions that stay on topic; debates that are cross-cutting in structure or what Freelon calls inter-ideological response and questioning; and that contributions are spread equally amongst participants rather than dominated by a minority.

In summary, MGTOW urgently needs scholarly attention because the group has grown rapidly, and research has shown they produce a range of toxic messages about women, but less is known about the structures and discursive processes that underpin this. MGTOW preach a form of individualism and actions that focus on self-improvement and a form of abstinence or avoidance that speaks to liberal individualism. Within the forum, they are also a collective though with (we assume) a strong ingroup identity. Finally, they often appeal to science and rationality to justify their criticisms and abuse of women and the adoption of a MGTOW lifestyle – and this appears suggestive of deliberation. Given the ideological differences and similarities between Manosphere groups and the seeming contradictions and paradoxes in MGTOW ideology, the multi-norm framework developed by Dahlberg and Freelon holds promise for studying communication amongst MGTOW (and the Manosphere more generally). Bringing all of this together, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the moderation process and leadership structure within the MGTOW forum?

RQ2: What is the structure, focus and nature of debate on the MGTOW forum, and to what extent does it exhibit liberal individualist, communitarian or deliberative ideals?

RQ3: To what extent does the MGTOW forum contain misogynistic language and calls to action?

Method

To address the research questions, this study adopts a mixed methods approach: large-scale quantitative analysis of patterns of participation on the forum over time; content analysis of comments; and a digital ethnographic analysis of the forum and broader MGTOW website.

First, at the macro-level, this study uses large-scale data scraping of the MGTOW forum, primarily to assess whether the pattern of communication was equal between users. This scraping focuses on public pages only. The first scrape collected the public profile list of each user account ($n = 33,863$), and specifically (1) the total number of posts each user account had created; (2) the total number of new threads each user account had created; (3) the number of ‘cunts punted’ credits (see below) each user account had received; and (4) the join date. The second scrape collected the public list of all of the threads (including who created the threads, number of replies, and the title of the thread – $N = 49,875$). The quantitative assessment of moderation focused on the ‘cunts punted’ score, and this was supported with the ethnographic and content analysis.

Second, a content analysis of a random sample of threads was conducted with a total of 1012 comments. All of the public comments from the random sample of threads were collected, as was the name of the commenter, the comment, the date and so on.

The code frame was built through a mixture of deductive and inductive coding. The deductive code development was inspired by, and partly adapted from, Freelon (2010, 2015) and Valera-Ordaz's (2019) multi-norm frameworks for assessing debate in online communities, and Wright, Trott, and Lukamto's (2018) approach to studying political talk in non-political online spaces and the types of calls to action that emerge (Graham, Jackson, & Wright, 2015). Such an approach was supported by Freelon (2015, p. 1186) who states that: 'researchers should feel free to appropriate and/or develop additional conversational measures' and 'it may not always be necessary to measure all 15 features as some will almost never be present in certain forums'. The code frame was then refined inductively, drawing on observations and analysis from the close reading of threads conducted for the digital ethnography, and through an initial pilot testing phase. Finally, an inter-coder reliability test was conducted for each coding category with two trained coders on 20% of the sample, reporting a Krippendorff's Alpha reliability score between .764 and 1 (Table 1).

Finally, in addition to the content analysis we adopted a digital ethnographic approach to further understand the ideology, culture and rhetoric of MGTOW. During this process, we immersed ourselves within the primary MGTOW forum, secondary MGTOW forums, the subreddit and the MGTOW community on Twitter. Adopting this overarching ethnographic approach allowed us to cross reference our findings across the broader MGTOW ecology and build a more comprehensive understanding of the group dynamics, MGTOW's position within the Manosphere, how users negotiate meaning, and the internal power struggles and fragmentation within the group across platforms.

The research design was informed by research ethics guidelines for internet research (Zimmer & Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017) and a significant amount of time was spent considering how to ethically study a group that is responsible for producing misogynistic and gendered online abuse (Jones et al 2019) in a way that protects both the researchers and commenters from becoming targets of abuse themselves. The most recent guidelines published by the Association of Internet Research (Franzke et al., 2020, p. 69) make it clear that user-generated content is often published in 'informal spaces that users often perceive as private but may strictly speaking be publicly accessible' and users may be unaware of how their data is being mined for research purposes. These ethical considerations shaped our practice in several ways.

It was not practical to get informed consent from all users given the large volumes involved. To help protect commenters, all users were anonymised; we do not include any usernames or quotes to mitigate the potential for re-identification and the use of a quantitative research design with content analysis and aggregate statistics further enhances the distancing from the individual participants. Our anecdotal evidence is that users did not see this as a private space; there are numerous warnings and reminders not to post identifying information (see moderation policy, below). To assess the patterns of participation we had to collect (public) individual user information such as the username and number of comments. To help protect this information, it is stored separately (i.e., usernames are stored separately from other data). These research design choices were also intended to address our second ethical concern: researcher safety. We wanted to maintain a safe distance as researchers from a potentially hostile group, and we believe that ensuring user anonymity and not publishing quotes from comments is an important step.

Table 1. Content analysis framework.

Category	Category description
<i>MGTOW codes</i>	<i>Codes that are specific to MGTOW/Manosphere</i>
(1) References to men/women	Direct or indirect references to individual or groups of women or men: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Indirect mention of Women: a post that quotes and replies to another user who directly mentions specific women, groups of women, or women in general. (2) Direct mentions of Women: a post that directly mentions specific women, groups of women or women in general (3) Indirect mention of Men: a post that quotes and replies to another user who directly mentions specific men, groups of men or men in general. (4) Direct mentions of men: a post that directly mentions specific men, groups of men or men in general (Note: 2 trumps 1, 4 trumps 3) Krippendorff's α = women 1.0, men 0.961.
(2) Online misogyny	A post that directly mentions specific women/men, groups of women/men or women/men in a misogynistic way. This can be expressed through slurs attacking women ('slut', 'bitch') or feminine/emasculated men ('cuck', 'soy boy', 'white knight', 'blue pill') and LGBTQIA+ people. It can also be expressed through more casual and banal references to women as inferior, self-serving, submissive or sexual objects (Jones et al 2019). (Yes/no code). Krippendorff's α = 0.99.
(3) Defining and rationalising MGTOW	The discussion of what it means to be MGTOW and its corresponding ideology. This can include discussions of the nuances and different interpretations of MGTOW ideology and the way that it should be performed, defining an idealised masculinity through placing MGTOWs as oppositional to feminised and emascuated men, and rationalising the pursuit of a MGTOW lifestyle, often through the use of scientific, religious or philosophical reasoning. (Yes/no code). Krippendorff's α = 0.929.
(4) Centring	The determination of the dominant focus of a post. Posts can centre on: MGTOW; Women; other members of Manosphere; Journalists, Journalism and News Media; Politicians and Political Governance; Religion; Science, Technology and Philosophy; 'Ordinary' people; Celebrity, Entertainment and Pop Culture; Business; Sports; Feminised Men; no clear central focus. This is contextual information used to help determine whether comments are liberal individualist, deliberative or communitarian and whether posts have what Freelon describes as a Public issue focus. (Dominant code). Krippendorff's α = 0.862.
(5) Conspiracies and mythologising	The use of conspiracy theories and myths such as female deceit (female infiltration of the forum and societal positions of power), gynocentrism, government control (espionage, censorship) and taxation (men are 'tax slaves'). Mythologising can include creation stories about the platform and Krippendorff's α = 1.0.
<i>Structural codes</i>	<i>Codes that assess structural factors within the forum</i>
(6) Reference to leadership	The discussion of, and references to, leadership within the MGTOW forum. References to leadership can either be a general discussion of leadership, or specific references to a leader. (Yes/no code). Krippendorff's α = 1.0.
(7) Moderation	Comments that call for moderation (e.g., block x user, don't attack me, can you edit this); threaten moderation (e.g., stop or you will be blocked); or are acts of moderation (where the moderator acknowledges they have edited or deleted another users comment). This also includes debates between MGTOW users when they determine what content is acceptable in conversations. This is a yes/no code. Krippendorff's α = 1.0.
<i>Communitarian codes</i>	<i>Codes that assess communitarian characteristics</i>
(8) Boundary drawing	Instances where a boundary is drawn about who is allowed to be part of the ingroup. Boundary drawing occurs when users discuss whether someone belongs within the group and is crucial to the development and maintenance of community. Boundaries can include a poster is perceived as a woman or feminised man masquerading as a MGTOW. (Yes/no code). Krippendorff's α = 1.0.
(9) Encouragement, support, and advice	Expressions of encouragement, support and advice between MGTOW users. These expressions can include matters relating to MGTOW or life in general and are considered important to building community because it can strengthen bonds and collective identity. Common expressions of encouragement include congratulating each other on the transition, or execution, of a MGTOW lifestyle ('glad you joined the path to light') or support on financial decisions or ill-health. Advice includes both the giving of advice and requesting advice. This code draws on Freelon's Community identification code. (Yes/no code). Krippendorff's α = 0.851.

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Category	Category description
(10) Call to action	Instances where users are called to perform a political action. Actions can be political and public facing (signing a petition, attending a protest, boycotting) or it might be lifestyle and behavioural such as MGTOW should gather (virtually or physically) or avoid women. Following Freelon's Mobilisation code, posts that make a call to action are coded as communitarian as research suggests that actions are most likely to emerge from communitarian spaces. This code broadens the scope of action from Freelon in line with Graham et al.'s (2015) more expansive approach. (Yes/no code). Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.713$.
(11) Spatial or group affirmation	Comments that declare support, appreciation or love of the MGTOW group space and/or group ('I love this place', 'you always get great advice', 'I feel comfortable here', 'MGTOW is family'). This behaviour indicates a strong bond and that it is a group and correlates with community identification. (Yes/no code). Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.746$.
(12) Comment affirmation and reinforcement	Posts that affirm and/or reinforce previous comments. They do not have to use the language of agreement ('I agree'). Affirmation and reinforcement occur when a post continues with the topic and implicitly or explicitly agrees with a previous post. This code combines the strong ingroup characteristics of communitarianism with the declarative (rather than debating) style of liberal individualism. (Yes/no code). Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.888$.
<i>Liberal individual codes</i>	<i>Codes that assess liberal individual characteristics</i>
(13) Personal revelation	The disclosure of personal information and personal stories. This has to be explicitly sharing personal information. Coded as liberal individualism by Freelon because it speaks to liberal individualism's focus on the self. This code also captures Freelon's personal showcase. (Yes/no code). Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.942$.
(14) Personal or group attack	Attacks by MGTOW users, targeted at other MGTOW users or other Manosphere groups. This can be as a result of a disagreement in terms of ideology, conversation topic or user behaviour and conduct (e.g., you're an idiot'). This is equivalent to Freelon's flaming code. (Yes/no code). Krippendorff's $\alpha = 1.0$.
<i>Deliberative codes</i>	<i>Codes that assess deliberative characteristics</i>
(15) Agree/disagree	<p>The presence of either direct agreement or disagreement:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Agree: 'I agree', 'You're right', 'Yes, exactly' (2) Disagree: 'you're wrong', 'I disagree' (3) Neutral: neither agreeing nor disagreeing <p>High levels of agreement indicate communitarianism; high levels of disagreement indicate deliberation and high levels of neutral comments indicates liberal individualism (monologue). (Dominant code). Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.733$.</p>
(16) Reciprocity	<p>The determination of whether a post is responding to a previous comment. Reciprocity can be one of the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Reply: a comment that replies to another participant(s) or contents of a participant's post (e.g., name mentions, quotes). (2) Stand-alone: a comment that is not directed at participants or other posts in the discussion. This is based on Freelon's Monologue code. <p>Deliberation and communitarianism require reciprocity, but liberal individualism does not. (Yes/no code). Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.963$.</p>
(17) Rational critical argument	<p>The determination of whether a post is making a claim. Claims can be categorised as either:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) No Claim made (2) Assertion: a non-reasoned claim. (3) Reasoned claim: when a reason is provided to justify the claim. <p>Reasoned claims are key to deliberation. (Hierarchical code). Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.797$.</p>
(18) Evidence use	<p>The presence of evidence used to support a claim. Types of evidence include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Facts and sources (2) Examples and anecdotal evidence (3) Personal stories and information <p>(Hierarchical code). Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.782$.</p>

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Category	Category description
(19) Equal participation	The determination of whether or not there is equality in participation. Deliberation requires broadly equal participation. This is measured separately by determining the volume of comments and seed posts made by each user (no reliability test required).
(20) On topic	Deliberation for Freelon requires that threads stay on topic. This code captures whether a comment stays on the seed topic of the thread. Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.717$.

Overall, we believe that the important public benefits that derive from studying the discursive nature and structure of misogynistic groups like MGTOW, and why they have been so successful in recruiting members, make the risks – with mitigation procedures in place – worth taking. This type of research is essential if we are to prevent the radicalisation of men's groups, the continued propagation of gendered harassment and the further normalisation and spread of misogynistic beliefs.

Moderation and leadership

Moderation is a crucial structural feature of online debate and community formation (Graham & Wright, 2014). The power of moderation has become a major issue (Gillespie, 2018). Indeed, some Manosphere groups have been 'deplatformed' making the issue particularly sensitive. Moderation can take a variety of forms, from censoring posts to banning users, as well as 'constructive' activities such as facilitating conversation and encouraging 'good' behaviour (Wright, 2006). While moderation is generally considered to be important and necessary, poor moderation can have deleterious effects – what Chen (2015) calls 'moderocracy'. To mitigate this risk, most forums have public rules or community guidelines and the task of moderation is distributed amongst a group of people who are clearly identified.

The MGTOW forum has no public list of moderators and limited and opaque rules that are effectively hidden in a founding forum thread (and seem to have evolved as different iterations are posted in other threads adding to the opacity). The power to moderate is solely in the hands of the forum's founder, affording them significant power. It has also created issues as the founder began to post less frequently, and now appears to have left the forum, leaving no one in charge. New members cannot join, and some MGTOWs have spammed the forum with cat images that disrupt debate and slow the forum down. This has contributed, we argue, to the mythologising of the 'leader' of the forum – with 2% of posts in the sample referencing the leader – and various theories about his fate. It has also led to calls *for* moderation in the absence of the founder. In total, 2% of posts referenced moderation in some way and 1% discussed boundary drawing. This appears to be because debates were dominated by the core group, and the boundaries and discursive norms were known and understood.

The forum's moderation policy states that⁴:

Unlike Facebook, Yahoo or other websites where gynocentrics get 'offended' when they don't 'like' something you type, you are welcome and encouraged to speak openly and freely with no restrictions. There are no silly and childish 'abuse' buttons for women to push ... because

they are not even invited to read or comment. However, we ask that you kindly remain on topic and refrain from overly-criticizing any race or religion. [...] A few rules please:

- Totally inappropriates (like suggested violence) will be unapologetically deleted. We are not Jezebel.
- Please be conscious that you not any reveal personal contact information about yourself
- ... or post pictures of something like your car (with your license plate showing) or naked pictures of someone with a goat.
- By using the forum(s) you are declaring yourself to be a man of at least 18 years of age.
- We must reserve the right to remove anything at any time for any reason, although we trust there will be no need.
- That is all.

While the moderation policy echoes liberal individualism with its claim to openness, in its purest form, liberal individualism calls for unfettered and unfiltered free expression. This moderation policy actually creates a highly controlled and bounded space: (some) men are free to express a MGTOW worldview and ideology – at least as defined by the moderator. There is freedom, but to express a certain type of Red Pill ideology. The policy, thus, largely enforces a communitarian approach designed to create a safe space for the expression of such ideology. But does the practice actually adhere to the policy?

The evidence is mixed. A keyword filter is now used, partially redacting some forms of foul language (see example in the quote above). This is a clear limit on free speech at odds with the policy and arguably speaks to a norm of deliberation by enforcing a ‘taste’ based rule. Occasionally users were observed policing each other, calling out some of the rare (2%) personal or group attacks, typically leading to a commissive response and de-escalation – indicative of communitarianism. There were also discussions about what is, and is not, appropriate, and evidence that the moderator occasionally edited posts. For example, in one discussion of a post about ‘radical Islam’, a user posted images of beheadings, which the moderator reported that he had turned into external links (but not deleted the post) so that people could choose to view if they wished. In another case, the moderator edited the title of a thread, which the creator complained about, leading to a long debate about the use of evidence and what is and is not permissible – and the eventual banning of the user.

In an ironic echo of the kinds of abuse button the moderation policy criticises, a boundary policing ‘cunts punted’ or ‘gynocentric bulls genie’ button has been added which allows participants to flag a user they believe to be a woman or feminised man. This creates a formal process for the kinds of boundary policing envisaged in the moderation policy. It has turned boundary policing into a ‘game’ and ‘fun’ bonding process in which members go ‘tuna fishing’ to hunt out women and feminised men – men who are deemed to be physically weak, possessing female traits, are sexually submissive or subservient to women (Jones et al., 2019), and, if successful, they are rewarded ‘cunts punted’ credits. If the moderator determines that a poster is a ‘tuna’, the thread is moved to the (cat) litter box for quarantining and preservation, and users are typically blocked or downgraded so they cannot post. The person(s) who reported the user is also awarded ‘cunts punted’ points. While the ultimate moderation power lies in the hands of one individual, the process is typically done by a small group of users; it is a ‘pack’ activity. Across the 33,863 users, 160 separate users had received 1226 ‘cunts punted’ points. As this is not a one for one count, we do not know exactly how many users have been blocked, but it suggests that a small but significant minority of the users in the database – roughly 2% – were

blocked. Furthermore, at the time of the analysis there were 333 threads in the cat litter tray – though it seems that some of these were not moved there for quarantining, most were – another indicator of the scale of issues.

Having discussed the underling moderation and leadership structure of the forum, we can now turn to assessing the debates themselves. The next section focuses on whether commenting and the creation of new threads were equally distributed amongst the users – a core criteria of deliberation – using a dataset of all participants.

Patterns of participation

The MGTOW forum had 33,863 user accounts at the time of analysis, but only 14,795 of these were valid and opened a profile URL (Table 2). Looking at the dates people joined, the user base has grown steadily in size since it was launched in 2014, with 4074 users joining in its first year, and 7–8000 users joining each year between 2015 and 2017. There have been some 628,745 posts, suggesting that the forum is popular. Participation is, however, highly skewed – lacking what the deliberative model describes as ‘equal participation’.

In Graham and Wright’s (2014) terms, there with 74 super-posters (SP1s) with more than 2000 posts (0.23% of all accounts or 0.5% of active URLs) who had made 50.8% of all posts. At the other end of the spectrum, nearly 11,000 users had not made a single post (even though they did not need to register to lurk). There were also 46 SP2s who set the agenda by creating over 200 seed threads each – a total of 18,067 threads or 36% of all threads (49,875 threads and 3026 total thread creators) – receiving an average of between 3 and 58 replies. The tightness of the MGTOW group is reinforced because the forum has been closed to new users since roughly June 2018. The data suggest that the MGTOW forum comprises a dense and tightly bonded community, but to fully understand this we need to assess the content of the comments.

The nature of debate

The content analysis suggests that comments and debates in the MGTOW forum do not sit neatly in one theoretical category but intersect across all three. While users predominantly replied to each other (60%) and stayed on topic (93%), indicating deliberation, monologues (40%) were also common indicating liberal individualism. In fact, we observed that many replies had a monologic form: users often replied to the topic of the thread, but did so by making a monologic statement in which they generally affirmed the other post (70%). Users largely avoided arguments (85%) because they rarely

Table 2. Patterns of participation on the MGTOW forum.

No. of posts	No. of users	Total no. of posts
2000+	74	319,302
1000–1999	69	97,450
500–999	109	79,640
100–499	386	86,619
10–99	1178	39,182
1–9	2006	6552
0	10,973	0
Account not accessible	14,813	0

engaged in debates, and when they did argue, these tend towards agreement (10%) with just 5% being disagreements – suggesting a communitarian logic. When they did disagree, MGTOW often made statements asserting the primacy of the individual such as ‘each man to their own’.

A number of the disagreements were generated when a perceived ‘tuna’ was identified, and other disagreements were over things like films but also included MGTOW practices (see defining below) and the (albeit limited) boundary drawing discussed above. Users regularly engaged in requesting or giving encouragement, advice and support (34%), though spatial affirmation was rare (2%); it seemed that this was a given. Claims were often made as assertions (53%) rather than supported with evidence (26%). The form of evidence used is a mixture of facts and sources (10%) and personal experience (12%) with examples and anecdotes being infrequent (5%).

Calls to political action were rare, and when they occurred, they were focused on what individuals or groups of individuals should do. In the sample, no calls involved traditional forms of advocacy such as calls to sign an online petition or contact an elected representative – common in other online communities (Graham et al 2015, 2016). Differences of opinion did occur in political threads, such as over gun control, though calls to action were rare and, again, not directed specifically at government. When individual politicians were mentioned, this was often misogynistic in nature, with Justin Trudeau perhaps receiving the most vilification. Overall, calls to action were consistent with the MGTOW ideology of separatism and a generally critical view of government; these results emphasise the distinct nature of MGTOWs compared to MRAs who frequently engage in collective and connective actions (Table 3).

Across all of the posts, 34% disclosed personal information including details about the identity of the user such as age and location. Many of these posts shared the users’ previous

Table 3. The nature of debate ($N = 1012$).

Theoretical framework	Code	No. of comments	Percentage of comments
<i>Communitarian codes</i>			
Boundary drawing & moderation	Yes/no	20	2
Encouragement, support and advice	Yes/no	345	34
Call to action	Yes/no	31	3
Spatial/group affirmation	Yes/no	23	2
Comment affirmation and reinforcement	Yes/no	704	70
Argumentative form	Agreement	99	10
<i>Liberal individualist codes</i>			
Personal revelation	Yes/no	343	34
Personal or group attack	Yes/no	17	2
Reciprocity	Monologue	400	40
Argumentative form	Neutral	864	85
<i>Deliberation codes</i>			
Argumentative form	Disagreement	49	5
Reciprocity	Reply	612	60
Rational critical argument	Assertion	531	53
Rational critical argument	Argument	262	26
Rational critical argument	None	215	21
Evidence in support of claim	No evidence	737	73
Evidence in support of claim	Fact/source	104	10
Evidence in support of claim	Examples/anecdotal	46	5
Evidence in support of claim	Personal experience	125	12
On topic	Yes	937	93
On topic	No	20	2
On topic	Seed	55	5

romantic or family history as well as their goals for the future. Personal stories about unhappy relationships, cheating partners and manipulative ex-wives were often described in detail, usually to illustrate AWALT⁵ and serve as the basis for the MGTOW lifestyle. The provision of (deeply) personal information speaks to liberal individualism according to Freelon's code, but in this case, we argue it had a strong communitarian logic: the sharing of personal stories that were critical of women was part of the group bonding process and collective identity formation. Furthermore, several conversations sought to define the MGTOW ideology – this accounted for 18% of the total sample. These discussions describe and conceptualise what it means for men to 'go their own way', framing themselves as distinct from MRAs and other Manosphere groups and elevating themselves to the enlightened 'red pill' status. Sharing one's journey to being 'red-pill' operated as a method of induction for users and often took the form of a monologue, as discussed above.

Overall, we conclude that the debates were predominantly communitarian in form, because they were a closely bonded group engaged largely in support and affirmation over a shared hatred for women, and one that generally avoided disagreement and excluded or marginalised any voices that were perceived as dissenting from the MGTOW worldview. In the next section, the topic of debates and who was centred is discussed, which speaks to Freelon's public issue focus for deliberation, but extends this to the nature of being MGTOW itself.

Topic and centring

The most commonly discussed topic in the MGTOW forum was women, with 33% of all posts centring women (and 59% of posts directly or indirectly mentioned women). This is somewhat paradoxical given the separatist ideology of MGTOW. The majority (61%) of these direct mentions were misogynistic – portraying women in highly negative ways (e.g., manipulative, liars, sluts), and framing femininity as a threat to masculinity in an oppositional and, often, adversarial tone. Even in sub-forums that appeared to have a broader focus, the threads often focus on negative portrayals of women. For example, in the sports section, the most recent threads at the time of the analysis included: 'GF or wife trying to keep you from the gym', 'women in men's sports', and 'WNBA players are overpaid'. Some 737 threads mention women; 560 threads mention feminists or feminism; and rape is mentioned 271 times. Furthermore, thread topics that do not obviously sound like they will attack women are often discursively turned to centre on, and attack, women. For example, a thread on boats was quickly turned to focus on 'gold diggers' being attracted to boats.

In addition, 1% of all comments centred on feminine or emasculated men in a misogynistic way (e.g., by framing them as weak as a result of either their female traits or their ongoing servitude to women) and 8% of all comments attacked or denigrated men in some way, usually communicated through slurs such as 'soy boys', 'beta cucks', 'white knights' and 'blue-pill'. These results are not surprising given the historical context of MGTOW and the Manosphere. Messner's (1998) analysis of the Men's Liberation Movement and the fissure that led to the development of the MRM highlights the anti-feminist and misogynistic core that make up the foundations of the contemporary digital manifestation of the MRM. The founders of MGTOW were also originally MRAs before

becoming disillusioned with the activist processes; believing the ‘gynocentric world order’ cannot be changed, they instead adopted a separatist approach. The discourse of misogyny and anti-feminist rhetoric was often used to indicate that a user was rejecting the traditional social scripts of marriage and relationships and to reaffirm their status as a MGTOW. Any user that made positive or hopeful comments about one day having a relationship with women were cast out of the group, deemed ignorant or ‘blue-pilled’, or were suspiciously seen as a female infiltrator (see above).

The second focal point of discussions on the MGTOW forum was rationalising the MGTOW lifestyle, defining what it means to be a ‘man going their own way’ and recounting one’s journey to becoming ‘red pillled’. The findings from the content analysis revealed that 33% of all occurrences of misogyny were rooted within the personal experiences and anecdotal stories told by MGTOWs. In fact, storytelling played an important role in MGTOW discussions as it provided a space in which MGTOWs could build a sense of solidarity and community around shared struggles and experiences. The sharing and recounting of personal negative experiences with women was also a primary method of performing one’s MGTOW membership and was used as a signal to other MGTOWs that they were indeed ‘red-pilled’. The discussions highlight that for MGTOWs, taking the Red Pill means they can leave the plantation⁶ and avoid monkey-branching⁷ women, which, they believe, are necessary steps to take to limit the impacts of gynocentrism⁸ on their day-to-day lives and reclaim personal sovereignty.

Surprisingly, there was a complete absence of references to other groups within the Manosphere, indicating that MGTOWs did not feel the need to define MGTOW in relation to MRAs or other existing groups. This is perhaps due to the closed nature of the forum and would be different on more open platforms such as Reddit and Twitter in which the community has to reinforce their ideology and protect it from outsiders.

Other issues that were centred by MGTOW included references to science, technology, philosophy and religion – generally to provide evidence in support of their world views (representing 8% of the sample), and particularly essentialist notions of gender and male sovereignty. When discussions were not centred on MGTOW or women they often drifted back to the ‘real world’ and its many blue-pilled inhabitants (7%) including married couples and ‘husbanks’.⁹ Interestingly, husbanks were at times met with sympathy, with MGTOWs wishing a better life for them – this better life, unsurprisingly, could be achieved by taking the Red Pill. MGTOWs also took an interest in public figures – 5% of posts centred on celebrities and pop culture. They often referenced celebrities associated with masculinity (MGTOWs are encouraged to be a ‘Johnny Cash’ in a world that is full of ‘Justin Biebers’) and lamented the rise of political correctness in films. They also commented on big business and business figures – but again this often had a gendered angle: the push to add women to boards was criticised while business strife was blamed on female CEOs. Similarly, the media and journalists were widely criticised – often framed with a perceived bias against MGTOW and men in general. It is unsurprising that the news media targeted with the most vitriol were publications led by, or mostly made up of women; an entire thread was dedicated to mocking the weight gain of female members of the editorial board of Huffington Post.

Overall, discussions on the MGTOW forum focused predominantly on women and the members’ journeys to becoming ‘red pillled’, and when they did discuss other people such as celebrities, politicians or business figures, there was a strong gendered frame. While

MGTOW rarely focus on formal politics and political processes, we argue that many of the threads had an implied public issue focus because they directly or indirectly engaged with debates about feminism, masculinity and society. This speaks to deliberation in Freelon's categorisation.

Conclusion

This paper has found that the MGTOW forum is dominated by a small minority of posters who had made more than half of all the comments, and routinely set the agenda of discussion. The nature of the debate within the forum was largely homogenous, with very limited disagreement, and extensive affirmation and reinforcement. The forum did have a support function, particularly when new members joined, but this was interspersed between general comment and debate amongst the core group. MGTOW discussions primarily centre on women and MGTOW themselves. When talking about women, users did so in an openly misogynistic way. When talking about MGTOW, conversations sought to define and rationalise it as an ideology, both for the individual and the collective. The content analysis suggests the communicative form was largely communitarian, with strong group bonding, ties and engagement. There were some liberal individualist elements – including a lot of statements, misogyny and swearing, and some anti-Semitism – broadly in line with Jones et al. (2019). There was limited evidence of deliberation in the sense that claims were normally assertions rather than rational and discursive equality was lacking, though debates were resolutely on topic and there was at least an implied public issue focus.

The prevalence of communitarian behaviours, particularly in regard to moderation and policing boundaries, somewhat contradicted the liberal individualism promoted within the MGTOW ideology and how they frame themselves as a 'lifestyle' or 'philosophy'. While this study has yielded insights into the nature of MGTOW group dynamics and the central topics of conversation on the relatively closed MGTOW forum, it is limited by its focus on one site. Comparative, cross-platform research such as on Reddit, YouTube and Twitter will allow us to explore more fully how platform dynamics impact debate, and particularly what happens when MGTOW other manosphere groups convergewith the general public.

Notes

1. In 2018, a post by an administrator on the subreddit r/MGTOW celebrated the group reaching 54,000 members but by mid-2019 the subreddit had 124,000 members and MGTOW hashtags on Twitter are also very active (Jones et al., 2019).
2. The notion that women are consistently favoured in theory or practice, which places them in a position of dominance over men within a societal hierarchy.
3. Digital refugees refer to users who migrate from one online space to another as a result of the initial space being shut down (e.g. platform decisions, moderation).
4. In our discussions of online posts and tweets we will not be adopting the convention of writing 'sic' after grammatical, spelling or syntax errors in recognition of the informality and colloquialisms found in such contexts. This is common practice when studying online discourse (see Emma Jane's 2014 work on e bile).
5. AWALT is an acronym that stands for 'all women are like that' commonly used within Red Pill ideology to assert that all women will behave in the same way in certain situations.

6. Leaving the plantation in MGTOW ideology refers to rejecting modern gender roles – which dictate that men should protect and provide for women financially – and putting oneself first.
7. Monkey branching is when a woman maintains personal relationships with men other than her current partner so that she has ‘back ups’ to swing to should she choose.
8. The notion that women are consistently favoured in theory or practice, which places them in a position of dominance over men within a societal hierarchy.
9. A reference to the fact that traditional gender roles dictate that men within relationships should provide financially and the woman willingly accepts, and at times, exploits this.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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