



Beyond Black and White: the Intersection of Ideologies in Online Extremist Communities

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Abstract

Current literature on online criminal and deviant groups recognises the role of online forums in the transfer of knowledge and socialisation of members, but current research lacks insight on the evolution and convergence of these groups. One area of concerns is how different aspects of these ideologies, most notably misogyny, anti-semitism and racism, are shared and developed between communities making up the manosphere and those dedicated to far-right themes. Current research has found overlaps in memberships across these two online groups, with growing evidence showing members' linkage to online harassment and offline violent incidents (Farrell et al., 2019; Regehr, 2022). To develop appropriate interventions to prevent such violent events, this research attempts to elucidate the different elements of the ideologies expressed in online communities known collectively as the “manosphere”, by analysing the Cambridge Cybercrime Centre’s ExtremeBB dataset. This database includes approximately 46 million posts made by more than 315 thousand registered active members on 12 different online extremist forums promoting misogyny and far-right extremism. To understand the interaction between far-right extremism and misogyny, we perform a qualitative analysis of a selection of posts already categorised by topic. Preliminary analyses show support for the following aspects: (a) similarities in radicalisation mechanisms, and (b) overlaps in the discourse on race and gender. These similarities provide potential gateways for previously isolated members to venture beyond their current association, suggesting the further adoption of extreme ideologies. Such a process, known as radicalisation, is highly correlated with extremism and terrorism (Borum, 2011; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). Findings from this research will allow for more precise interventions.

Keywords Online extremism · Misogyny · Far-right · Ideology · Radicalisation

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Introduction

Several high-profile events, such as the storming of the United States Capitol Building in 2021 (United States Department of Justice, 2021), the mass shooting by Elliot Rodger (Dorell & Welch, 2014) and the Toronto van attacks (CBC News, 2018), have brought the issues of misogyny and far-right extremism into mainstream discussions. Such attacks have drawn the attention of the policy community to the correlation between terrorism and misogynistic and far-right extremism, and the global nature of both, with ideologies and conspiracy theories spreading online.

The link between online extremism and real-world violence has become an urgent topic: many of those who stormed the US Capitol on January 6th, 2021, had met and organised online, building communities who shared the ideology that America was under attack from shadowy forces and needed defending. But what also needs attention is the complexity of beliefs and variation of attitudes within these communities. Current research has found overlaps in memberships between such groups and those known collectively as “the manosphere”, with growing evidence showing members’ linkage to online harassment and offline violent incidents (Farrell et al., 2019; Regehr, 2022). This paper seeks to advance understanding of this overlap in analysing the concerns of online communities at scale, applying both quantitative and qualitative tools to a dataset of almost 44 million posts from extremist and manosphere forums.

To combat far-right violence, it is necessary to understand the online communities in which these ideologies are discussed, strengthened and spread. There are many potential approaches to take, but traditional ethnography is a challenge in an environment when anonymity plays a large role. Instead, we apply mixed methods research utilising big data and qualitative analysis to probe the worldviews, preoccupations and rhetoric of these communities spreading toxic ideas in cyberspace.

One approach is to consider extremist groups, especially online extremist groups, as subcultures. This approach is common in current literature on topics such as various forms of sexual deviance (Holt et al., 2014; Maratea, 2011; Milrod & Weitzer, 2012) and hacking (Holt, 2007; Jordan & Taylor, 1998; Kinkade et al., 2013; Thomas, 2002). To aid the understanding of the ideologies within these communities, this paper seeks to explore the diversity of online extremist communities whilst also recognising their unifying features and ideologies. The ExtremeBB database, collected by the Cambridge Cybercrime Centre, is drawn on for a mixed methods approach to understanding these subcultures, first with quantitative analysis based on topic modelling, and then sampling the resulting categories to drill down into the content of those themes which preoccupy the participants of the groups.

Background

Use of Internet and Online Platforms

Several features of the Internet contribute to the growth and spread of toxic ideas by extremist movements. The first feature is the anonymous nature of the Internet, which is a result of the inherent lack of authentication needed to access the Internet (Weimann, 2004). Anonymity greatly reduces the risks of detection by law enforcement agencies since online

identities are not always tied to real offline identities. Additionally, social media and the Internet increase the diversity in the presentation of information, as well as the diversity of audiences who can receive such information (Chris Hale, 2012; Weimann, 2004). Individuals can communicate with anyone around the world with no filter nor engagement with traditional media.

In sum, the Internet provides a platform for like-minded individuals to find one another. Bowman-Grieve (2009) argued that virtual spaces, despite the physical distance and lack of face-to-face interactions, allow for the growth of communities that create and sustain social relationships. For example, Chris Hale (2012) documented the development of specialised language in online extremist communities. In some forums, individuals use the number “18” to refer to Adolf Hitler since the letter “a” is the first in the alphabet and the letter “h” is the eighth. The purpose of such language is to create a sense of in-group identity (Chris Hale, 2012); only individuals who are part of the movement and community can understand and therefore participate. As a result, social network sites, forums and other communications media, like communities in the real world, further contribute to the creation of shared common values, norms and a sense of identity (Maratea & Kavanaugh, 2012), which can have profound influence on individuals’ real-world behaviours.

Studies have shown that extremists use the Internet for similar functions compared to other subcultures such as education, distribution of materials, research and recruitment of new members (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Freiburger & Crane, 2008; Gerstenfeld et al., 2003; Gill et al., 2017; Holt et al., 2015; Weimann, 2004). Overall, these movements rely on the Internet and cyberspace to develop communities and support networks that would otherwise be impossible to form in the physical world (Bowman-Grieve, 2009).

Political Ideologies

There have been many attempts to theorise “ideology”. For the purposes of this paper, the term refers to a well-developed worldview that seeks to explain the world, following Friedrich, who described ideology as a “programmatically congerie of ideas” (Friedrich, 1965). An implication of this definition as an all-encompassing worldview is that a single expression or claim can only be understood within the context of the whole, a fact seen very clearly in the forums under discussion in this paper. From the manosphere to far-right forums, the worldviews uniting the communities and structuring the discussions are well-developed and taken for granted by the membership, meaning individual discussion points often need to be contextualised within this broader ideology to be fully understood.

This sense of ideology-as-worldview, which structures and explains the world and also gives guidelines for behaviour, means that the themes extracted for discussion below are by necessity interlinked. Each topic is one aspect of the central guiding ideology, and so often different themes emerge within single discussion threads, and language and terminology appear across different topics. Conversely, an analysis of individual threads can cast light on the overall ideology, a contribution it is hoped this paper will make to an understanding on online misogynistic and far-right ideologies.

Extremism

At its core, extremism refers to non-mainstream opinions and ideologies, which includes a system of beliefs and ideas that range across political, social, economic, racial and/or religious perspectives (Borum, 2011; Martin, 2006). For this article, we view extremisms

more from a subcultural approach. The reason for this approach is twofold. First, extremist groups, much like these subcultures, hold beliefs and norms that go against the broader society's norms and values (Borum, 2011; Freiburger & Crane, 2008; Gerstenfeld et al., 2003; Gill et al., 2017; Holt et al., 2015; Weimann, 2004). Because of these non-mainstream norms and values, these individuals rely on the Internet and cyberspace to develop communities and support networks that would otherwise be impossible to do in the physical world (Maratea & Kavanaugh, 2012). Second, studies have shown that extremists use the Internet for similar functions as other subcultures. For online subcultural communities, these online platforms allow for information sharing, recruitment and development of unique languages (Holt et al., 2015; Holt, 2007; Jordan & Taylor, 1998; Kinkade et al., 2013; Maratea, 2011; Milrod & Weitzer, 2012; Thomas, 2002). For online extremist communities, the platforms are used in similar manners, including education, distribution of materials, research and recruitment of new members (Freiburger & Crane, 2008; Gerstenfeld et al., 2003; Gill et al., 2017; Weimann, 2004).

Manosphere

The manosphere is a broad term for several groups of men that promote certain forms of masculinity and often express strong hostility towards women and feminism (Ribeiro et al., 2021). These groups, including involuntary celibates (incels), men going their own way (MGTOW), pickup artists (PUA) and men's rights activists (MRA), have a broad range of subcultural values and norms (Lilly, 2016; Ribeiro et al., 2021). For example, the membership of incel groups tends to be younger men who share a sense of social isolation, anger and frustration towards the opposite sex in the context of dating and sexual relationships (Daly & Reed, 2022; Helm et al., 2022; Maxwell et al., 2020). On the other hand, members of the MGTOW communities believe that men are subjected to oppression in current societies, and the first step in fighting back is via the abandonment of women (Lilly, 2016). Despite the diversity in beliefs, a common thread across these groups is the promotion of masculine ideals rooted in misogyny.

Such promotion is taking place across social media platforms and forums at a global level. Men who struggle with dating or sexual relationships can find others with similar experiences online for mutual support or to nurse grievances (Baele et al., 2021; Daly & Reed, 2022; Lilly, 2016). It is estimated that 70% of young men have been exposed to manosphere ideologies (Bates, 2021). With technological advancement, the percentages of exposure are increasing. For example, Papadamou et al. (2021) find that YouTube algorithms increased the frequency of incel-related videos after an initial view of one such video. Such recommendation fits with recent evidence on the feedback loop of incel communities—the cycle of converting loneliness into anger and subsequently relying on that as motivation for actions ranging from the production of online extreme content to encouragement for violence (Regehr, 2022).

Far-Right Extremism

The ideologies and beliefs of the far-right movement, especially in the USA, are heterogeneous and diverse. Several ideologies fall under the movement, with at least eight sub-groups present: (1) Christian identity, (2) holocaust denial, (3) Ku Klux Klan, (4) Militia, (5) neo-Nazi, (6) Posse Comitatus, (7) Skinhead and (8) White Nationalist (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Gerstenfeld et al., 2003; Michael, 2003).

The Militia and Posse Comitatus groups' ideologies are more focused on government and law (Michael, 2003). By contrast, the Christian identity movement, the KKK, neo-Nazis and the Skinheads hold the belief in the superiority of the White race with variations in origins (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Michael, 2003). The Christian Identity and the neo-Nazi traced the superiority back to religious beliefs that Whites are the descendants of Adam and therefore the true chosen people of God (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Martin, 2006). The Skinheads also hold similar beliefs on race, but do not share the same religious background and are more likely to engage in violent acts (Michael, 2003).

Far-right extremist groups also utilise the Internet given its anonymous nature and capability to reach diverse and large audiences (Chris Hale, 2012; Weimann, 2004). Studies have shown far-right groups' use of the Internet for purposes ranging from recruitment to revenue generation (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Gerstenfeld et al., 2003; Chris Hale, 2012). For example, a well-known far-right platform, Stormfront, serves as a gathering place for both potential recruits as well as existing members (Bowman-Grieve, 2009).

The platform was originally launched as a forum for planning and forming political and social groups in April 1995 (Chris Hale, 2012). Over the years, the platform evolved into a community. It allows users to discuss their "awakening", which are personal stories where individuals share their process of involvement and commitment to the movement (Bowman-Grieve, 2009). These stories and literature in return serve as an inspiration or bonding moment for other users. In addition, the community contains a dating section for White singles (Bowman-Grieve, 2009). By encouraging users to date others who are like-minded, the community assists users in developing a network and community of far-right extremists and movement supporters. Users also exchanged conversations on topics such as education, home-schooling and music. In many ways, these online conversations and interactions dictate users' offline interactions by encouraging interactions only with like-minded individuals. Such selective interactions reinforce a sense of group identity (Bowman-Grieve, 2009).

Intersections of Extreme Beliefs and Ideologies

The Internet and social media platforms, in conjunction with high-profile global events, further accelerate the intersection of different extremist beliefs and ideologies. While examining the Swedish far-right media's reaction to Greta Thunberg's leadership in climate change education, Vowles and Hultman (2021) found anti-feminist notions in opposition discourse. For example, far-right media sources viewed Thunberg's passion and emotions during her speech as hysterical and irrational. In addition, these media sources portrayed Thunberg as being manipulated by left-leaning politicians and even her own parents.

Another global event that highlights the intersection between different extremist communities is the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent mask policies. The policy requiring mask-wearing became a high-politicised and dividing issue, especially within the USA. While examining the no-mask discourse on Twitter, Lavorgna et al. (2022) showed that there is an absence of a specific "no-mask" community. However, at the early stage of the pandemic, the no-mask discourses became absorbed into existing extremist belief systems such as anti-government, QAnon, and anti-vaccination. The imposition of the mask policy was seen by some Twitter users as another example of political elites restricting their freedom.

With the help of the Internet and online social media, and the increasing mainstream place for such conspiracy theories (Twitter's owner Elon Musk has amplified such theories), it is becoming increasingly easier for any user to be exposed to extreme ideological

discussions. These two global issues demonstrate that there is a necessity to understand overlaps between extreme ideological discussions. More specifically, it is necessary to understand how various extreme ideologies or communities merge and potentially create new, possibly more extreme, viewpoints.

Research Question

The objective of this research is to provide insights on discourse and narratives across online forums of extremist communities. Specifically, this research, via exploratory qualitative analysis resting on quantitative modelling and sampling, addresses the opinions and overlaps in ideological discussions on the topics of political extremism, misogyny and racism. For the purposes of addressing toxic communication, we have discarded other hugely popular discussion topics on the forums we analyse, which are mainly to do with health (gym routines and diets for example), dating tips, physical appearance, personal finances and other personal topics. This is not because they are not important; they all play a role in forming bonds in the communities and creating the sense of a supportive in-group. These topics are the subject for future discussions; here, the attention is on topics connected to extremism.

It is hoped that this paper will contribute to an understanding of the dynamics and linkages between these extreme ideologies within the current landscape of online extreme communities. To do so, we need to understand members' discourse and narratives when discussing the full range of their concerns, and how opinions converge and also vary within the topics that preoccupy the communities.

Method

Data

The data the following analysis rests on is from the ExtremeBB Dataset from the Cambridge Cybercrime Centre (Vu et al., 2021), which includes data collected across 12 extremist forums up until 2021. The data collection was approved by the ethics committee of the Department of Computer Science and Technology at the University of Cambridge. Despite images and memes being important components of communications within these communities, the ethical consideration excluded the collection of such data due to the possibility of illegal images. In addition, the data collection process adheres to the British Society of Criminology's Statement on Ethics (Vu et al., 2021).

The scraped data includes forums on far-right ideologies, manosphere and cyber harassment, focusing on a variety of topics and discourse. These 12 forums are grouped into six categories: (1) white supremacy, (2) inceldom, (3) lookism, (4) pickup artistry, (5) men's movement and (6) trolling and doxxing. Across the 12 forums, there are close to 44 million posts from 308,743 users (see Table 1). These posts range between August 2001 and September 2021 (Vu et al., 2021).

For this analysis, we selected posts based on keyword groupings identified using a probabilistic generative model, the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) (see Vu et al., 2021 for detailed discussion on the model). The LDA model uncovers underlying patterns by observing co-occurrence probability of terms. The model identified the top ten topics for

Table 1 Topic categories from LDA model

Forum categories	Topic categories	Forum categories	Topic categories
White Supremacy	Financial systems	Pickup Artistry	Contact methods
	Racial identities		Politics
	Racial stereotypes		Pickup theory
	Race mixing		Pickup practice
	Crime and race		Elections
	US elections		Dating stories
	Guns/firearms		Health/fitness
	Cooking		Finance/economy
	Anti-multiculturalism		Nightlife
Inceldom	News/current events	Trolling/Doxxing	Physical contact
	Race		Gaming
	Financial systems		Doxxing of influencers—financial status
	Size		Interpersonal relationships
	Politics		Cooking recipe
	Health/fitness		Sexuality, sexual orientation and transgender
	Society		Obesity and weight loss
	Sexual politics		Doxxing of YouTubers
	Facial features		Medical discussions
Lookism	Dating	Men’s Movement	Discussions on pop culture
	Intelligence		Doxxing Info and discussion—Twitter
	Race		Discussion on financial and economic system
	Hair and skincare		Politics
	Eyes		Perception of women
	Diet		Cars and vehicles
	Appearances		Discussion and advice on dating women
	Genetics		MGTOW—advice and awakening stories
	Facial features		Lifestyle discussion
Intelligence	Hormones	Psychology and emotions	
	Intelligence	Perception of criminal justice system and rights	
	Health/fitness	MGTOW and humanity	

each forum category, resulting in a total of 60 topics. Each topic is composed of ten keywords that have the highest probability of co-occurring.

To understand and provide context on each identified topic, 50 posts within each topic were randomly selected across posts of various lengths. This approach is to ensure that the sample for each topic would resemble the population of posts. This resulted in a sample of 3000 posts.

To better label and understand the coherence of discourse within each topic, each author read and coded samples of ten categories for three forums. The goal was to provide an appropriate label for each identified topic. While reading through posts, each author took note and coded for themes and patterns in discourse. Across posts, we found topics ranging from discussion on popular culture and television shows to critiques and stories on

self-realisation. Despite such range, both authors noticed common topics (e.g. race, misogyny and political ideologies) across forum categories. The below exploratory analysis of this qualitative step in research highlights the complexities and heterogeneity of these topics across extreme online communities.

Findings

Topic modelling produced ten topics for each of the six types of online forum, summarised in Table 1.

On the surface, not all these topic categories involved ideological discussions. Some examples of non-extremist keywords include the following: (a) topic 10 under Trolling/Doxxing category contained the keywords “twitter”, “delete” and “block”; or (b) topic 2 under Lookism category had the keywords “hair”, “skin” and “bold”. This is where the qualitative analysis provided insights. Each category was sampled, and representative posts were manually read and annotated, and it was then clear that every subject had the potential to include misogynistic, racist and antisemitic content. For example, discussions around the relative attractiveness of eyes, or around gym routines, might include racist theories comparing bodies of different ethnicities, or misogynistic theories as to what women want.

Yet attitudes were far from uniform. The manosphere may share general features of a misogynistic worldview, but attitudes to race, politics, society, class and money vary hugely, and indeed it is these subjects that often dominate, taking up more space than the misogynistic ideology which brings people to the group in the first place. Misogynistic attitudes do underlie all discourse of these groups, but it is by no means present in all posts. In other words, users are often attracted to the group by a single issue, which is, for most, the difficulties in getting a woman, but they remain on the sites for far more complex debates, reflecting the emotional gains of being part of a community. These discussions and exchanges highlight members’ effort in making sense of their positionalities and identities towards a non-dichotomous approach in societal norms and concepts (e.g. women versus men, masculinity versus femininity, white versus non-white). In this section, we highlight sub-themes and explore the intersections and overlaps between them.

Racism

As is clear in Table 1, race is a preoccupation for most of the forums in the database, and more so when we include content from discussions of physical appearance that relies on racist theories of bodies, attractiveness and sexuality. Here, we analyse three major themes identified when reading sampled posts: history of race relations, anti-semitism and inter-racial relationships. Racist terminology was found in many posts, but other users attempted more neutral, “scientific” language, avoiding offensive terms even when the underlying ideology is fundamentally racist. This shows the invaluable step of qualitative analysis to support quantitative methods, as racist sentiments are not easily found by software if they are written in non-racist language.

Debates on Historical Context

Within discussions on genetics and ethnicity were accounts of global histories of genetic moving and mixing, and analysis of the resulting phenotypes. The clearest results of

such genetic mixing are seen in America: one post “proved” ethnic differences using average household income for different American backgrounds down to categories as small as “Swedish” and “Palestinian”.

Other historical discussions relate to slavery, with one sub-topic being how Black people also owned slaves: “According to federal census reports, on June 1, 1860 there were nearly 4.5 million N***** in the United States...The country’s leading African American historian, Duke University professor John Hope Franklin, records that in New Orleans over 3,000 free N***** owned slaves, or 28 percent of the free Negroes in that city” (White Supremacy - Topic 2)

There are also discussions of crime statistics that include the racial composition of cities, with emphasis on the criminal dispositions of Black and Hispanic individuals, issues which arise within discussions of political systems as well as those directly about crime. Differences between White and Black people on aspects such as IQ and linguistics are found not only in white supremacy forums (where these theories are to be expected) but also within discussions in the manosphere on the relative attractiveness of races, which includes discussions of intelligence, shape of facial features, strength, height, colourism and so on.

Anti-Semitism

Reading sampled posts quickly reveals that antisemitic discourse within this dataset is ubiquitous, which raised questions about the topic modelling approach, as the quantitative analysis did not yield any such single category. Further reading showed that this was not a fault in the modelling, but rather a result of the huge varieties of names and terms used to describe both Jews as a group (which includes Zionists, Israeli(te)s, Hebrew, cultural Marxist, Judaic and other more offensive terms) and the conspiracies that they are a part of (e.g. global elites, banking elites, media moguls and networks).

“The problem is the very existence of the globalist elite that has completely hijacked the ownership structure of our people’s most important institutions: the banks, the media, academia, and culture/entertainment”. This is a fairly typical expression of the conspiracy which sees secret power networks running the world; this does not name “Jews” at the head of such a cabal, but that is implied and understood, and seen overtly in other posts describing the same conspiracy. But precisely because these conspiracies are commonly held and indeed uncontroversial within these communities, the detailed portrayal is simply not necessary for internal communication, meaning the specific words are not used enough to be easily gathered into a coherent topic by LDA modelling. This finding shows the importance of mixed methods in using big data: human intervention is needed to understand the allusions, including dog-whistles, when talking about a subject.

There are conflicting views of Israel to be found amongst these communities: on the one hand, there is admiration for it as a pro-ethnic nationalist state; on the other, it is seen in the context of “Jewish media propaganda” preventing America reaching the same goal, for example by hiding the bad effects of immigration. “We’re in a Jewish Civil War, and ... Nationalism is a PsyOp”, claims one member of RooshV.

What is often present, as with all the other topics presented, is the pseudo-science used to justify, explain and “prove” the theories and conspiracies, based on (long-disproved) racial science and genetics, just as other racist theories are supported in these forums.

Interracial Relationships

The issue of interracial relationships is one sub-theme cutting across categories and demonstrates concerns about non-dichotomous approaches in defining race. Within white supremacy forums, members expressed negatively and looked down upon this type of relationships, using terms such as “race mixing”, “race traitors” to more derogatory terms of “coal burners”. “I’ll try again (just for you): 1. No one should race mix. Race mixing is destructive for all involved. That’s the bottom line. 2. Race mixing between whites and non-whites should, in my opinion, be punishable by death” (White Supremacy - Topic 3). This is a fairly typical white supremacist approach to race, one to be found in manosphere posts but not held by every user as discussed below.

There are some disagreements on the gender aspect of interracial dating. For some, interracial relationships are not seen as evidence for not being racist: “Ways in which I’m not racist - I fuck niggers - I see nothing wrong with miscegenation (white women should reconsider having kids with black men since they are often absentee fathers though. Unless he’s some Carlton Banks type)” (Lookism - Topic 0). For some, interracial dating is a direct product of brainwashing by mainstream media and values:

Women are just as against race mixing as much as men the thing about race traiting is most race traitors accept race traiting for their gender but not for the opposite gender of their race. Talk to a race traiting female and ask her what she thinks about white males with asian females and shell disagree with it. Race traitors are hypocrites because they only support race traiting for themselves and not the opposite gender of their race. (White Supremacy - Topic 3)

One comment goes as far as saying that there can be no logic behind such a decision, especially when taking statistics of violence and sexually transmitted diseases amongst Black males.

This negative view goes beyond interracial relationships to condemn mainstream attitudes towards multiculturalism and diversity. Both movements are seen as a threat to the survival of the race, and some see these movements in antisemitic terms:

Multiculturalism is a tenet of Jewish religion because Jews are the most mixed breed on the planet. The religion of every race carries within it the rules for genetic survival and so the religion of the Jews (the most mixed of all racial groups) promotes race mixing for everyone. (White Supremacy - Topic 3)

This negative view is shared by members within the Incel and Lookism forums. Many are openly racist, in a clear white supremacy framework, labelling various groups with physical and personal stereotypes, some drawing on early anthropological views of race. Some white incels blame multiculturalism for their reduced chances in dating.

Despite the shared negative perception amongst forum categories, there is some pushback against this view, mainly surrounding the assumption that the White race is genetically superior. One member reasoned that if the assumption is true, then the White race would survive regardless. Similarly, within the Incel and Lookism forums, a significant minority are anti-racist, seeing wide genetic mixing as key to stronger and better-looking children, though on this subject, many fear that white skin and blue eyes are being “evolved out”, the white race an endangered species. Some posts interrogate their own attitudes towards race, admitting racist tendencies whilst advocating mixed relationships and taking the knee.

Misogyny and Feminism

Defining Sex and Gender

Misogynistic views of women are a common theme across different forum categories. One common topic is concepts of biological sex and gender. Within the Trolling/Doxxing category, members engaged in in-depth discussions over conceptual definitions for gender and sex, and the intersection of these definitions with other aspects of social activities such as sporting events and sexual orientation. In general, members attempted to highlight the differences between biological sex and gender.

However, the overarching tone is negative and critical towards recent trends of non-binary gender and support towards the transgender community. Some believed that non-binary gender and transgender categories are due to the far-left's agenda on race rather than the LGBTQ+ communities. In other words, straight, White men are made to feel disenfranchised and responsible for societal injustice; by identifying as trans-women, it allows them to regain their voices. "Nonbinary is the hot thing to be among SJW [Social Justice Warrior], because you can claim to be trans and gain sweet sweet oppression points without having to go through the hassle of actually transitioning". This post continues undermining the whole movement, dismissing the reality, and suggesting it is an easy way to virtue-signal: "No need for hormones or surgery, all you need is to get an edgy haircut and a bow-tie or something. Plus you can make up a whole ton of cool special labels for your gender instead [instead] of boring old male/female". This user acknowledges it might be a reality for a "rare few people who legit fall outside of the binary, I don't know". But, according to him, the majority are just part of the liberal conspiracy, and it is straight white men who lose out (*Trolling & Doxxing - Topic 4*).

Women as Causes of Frustrations

The debates on definitions of sex and gender are echoed in other forum categories. There seems to be a general sense of confusion with regard to women's behaviours, and more broadly, feminism. Issues of non-binary gender, bisexuality, and transgender are some factors used to explain the frustration with dating on sites in the manosphere. Others include the increased ease for women to engage in discreet sexual encounters as further means to restrict men in dating and sexual relationships: "Women now could not only have sex with who they wanted, it was now easier than ever and even MORE discreet and easy. Birth control and abortions were practically free. Now, if there was any doubt before, ugly men were truly out of the picture" (*Inceldom - Topic 4*).

The fluidity afforded by recent trends in sex and gender led to confusion on how women wished to be treated both in general and also specifically in the context of relationships, many posts claim. Confusion and uncertainty are in turn seen as sources of frustration, anger, and failures that men experienced in reality. "Overall ... most of the creepy sexual fetishes in the modern world are unintended feminist byproducts", one poster argues, arguing: "Women don't behave like women anymore. If a young man is surrounded by women who are physically attractive but don't behave like feminine women ... of course he is going to be sexually confused". The blame is relentlessly on women for this state of affairs: "All of these spooky internet fetishists would probably "be cured" if women started behaving like ladies again" (*Men's Movement - Topic 2*).

This is not an isolated example. Within the Incel categories, women are routinely seen as the root cause of frustrations and anger experienced by members. The discussions range from the lack of available females for dating to the treatment received by men who had been falsely accused of rape. In the first instance, some members shifted from viewing “chads”, or ideal men with social capital and distinguishing physical features (Maxwell et al., 2020), as the reason behind the competition for female partners. “You need to start looking at numbers and statistics instead of Chad’s gonial angle and hunter eye cantal tilt.” argues one post, going on to explain the shortage of women as having a lower sex drive, but more importantly, their changed behaviour patterns: ...“More and more women are fucking dogs, focusing on careers or just partying for fun. Women are not taking part in dating as actively as men. They are not horny and desperate.” This poster estimates that this difference means: “there’re [there are] 2-3 males per female. The competition is real. It’s the numbers that are against you, not Chad’s deep set eyes and jawline” (Inceldom - Topic 6).

Changes in gender roles, such as focusing on careers as mentioned in the previous post, or embracing sexual liberty, are seen as main causes of dating frustration. This is a shift from earlier narratives in incel communities where the frustration is rooted in one’s inability to become a chad, financially and/or physically (Maxwell et al., 2020). The emphasis on women being the root case is more in line with newer narratives in incel communities on platforms such as Reddit (Helm et al., 2022).

One approach to manage such confusion and uncertainty is ignoring or having zero engagement with women. In some cases, women were described as evil or bullies. This is evident in posts across topic categories where (male) members shared their negative interactions and consequences from dating or intimate relationships with women. “... Unfortunately at this point I’m not really interested in marriage or dating much anymore so they can all go have fun being someone else’s problem, I don’t want them in my life lol”. starts one typical post, going on to describe a formative experience which is again typical of these sites, which can read like group therapy sessions, sharing past traumas. “When I was in high school I wasted 6 months crushing on this girl. I asked her out and she shot me down, and I was dumb enough to be an orbiter thinking she’d like me someday because I really was great, she just had to see it. Eventually I started dating another girl, and the girl I had wasted the first half of my senior year crushing on suddenly decided she liked me”. Sympathy comes for such narratives, but also lessons learnt: “What’s the moral of the story here? Girls are f~~~ed in the head and they don’t know what they want. Just worry about what you want out of life that doesn’t require input from other people and strive to achieve. If p**** is a goal of yours, don’t make it the goal, make other things the goal and p**** chases success” (Men’s Movement - Topic 5).

These stories are comparable to awakening stories seen in communities such as Stormfront where members share their process of involvement and commitment to the movement (Bowman-Grieve, 2009). These chosen quotes may prompt others to reflect upon their own experiences and identify similarities, which can ultimately serve as a bonding point for potential recruits and new users.

Another more extreme approach to addressing confusion is rooted in the threat and justification of violence towards women. Men were encouraged to refrain from showing support towards women as a means to ensure that they behave themselves. In fact, there seems to be the assumed notion that women enjoyed rape. One extreme post went as far as stating that women need to be raped and that feminism is a simple manifestation of the biological desire: “Women need to be raped. It is the only language they understand. Women enjoy rape. Don’t let them tell you otherwise, because they are notorious liars and don’t

know their own minds. [...]”. As is common throughout these discussion forums, biology is invoked, though in this post there is no accompanying theory claiming any “proof”: “Women have a biological imperative to be raped”. The final move to linking it to feminism is based on the need to provoke men (implying at the very least his own feelings towards feminists) and so fulfil this need to have violence inflicted on them. “Feminism is really just an outward manifestation of an internal problem with modern women. These ‘feminists’ desperately want to be put in their place. That’s why they act out so much and are so belligerent. Whether they know it or not, subconsciously they want to piss men off and get men to make them submit” (Inceldom - Topic 6).

The definition of rape is also discussed. One common topic is false accusation of rape where it is believed that women would falsely cry rape based on various reasons, such as feeling guilty or covering up infidelity. One member went as far as this: “Rape is forceful penetration by threat of violence. Simply lying there saying nothing because she felt scared to say anything is not rape. You say you were raped, show me your defence wounds” (Men’s Movement - Topic 8).

Inferiority is another common theme; in fact, it is a major reason driving many users to manosphere groups, seeking answers to rejection from women (Maxwell et al., 2020). One topic of discussion is the size of men’s genitals, with emphasis on men failing on non-consensual sex due to their size.

It is important to note that other forms of coercion which involve non-physical violence are widespread on the forums. While none of these posts explicitly endorse or encourage physical acts of violence, it is normalising these assumptions within these communities. For example, name-calling (e.g. sluts) and using threats of harm as means to control women’s behaviours were mentioned. These behaviours, albeit non-physically violent, fall under the World Health Organization’s definition on violence against women: “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (World Health Organization, 2023). In other words, it is possible for members who identify with the community to integrate these values via online conversations and interactions, and ultimately impact their offline interactions with others (Bowman-Grieve, 2009).

Intersection of Political Ideologies, Race and Misogyny

A marked aspect of all these forums is the intersection of existing ideologies and concepts. These posts serve as wake-up calls or encouragement to other members in identifying the true causes of various issues and disagreements faced by these communities, interlinking issues with women, race and politics together. The first sub-group of these posts attempts to make linkages to political ideologies, asking members to critically reflect on their political preferences. “We need Social Democracy for a racially unified and homogeneous ethnic group” argues one incel poster, saying that the far-right are the only people not to persecute incels, and “If you were an intelligent Conservative virgin, you’d realise that”. Apparently “The normies are left-leaning politically and economically....Why the hell would an incel advocate for a far-left authoritarian government as well? We’re already under a far-left government in the West” (Inceldom - Topic 3).

This post fits with the general perception of these communities, as reported in the media nowadays (e.g. Wild, 2022). This specific member frames his viewpoints in terms of the treatment of the community he’s posting in—politics is part of the incel identity.

However, we also see support for other political ideologies within the manosphere. This again highlights the lack of homogeneity with this community and instead demonstrates the sense-making process for members. One member of the pickup artist site RooshV is openly anti-democratic: democracy is “the worst form of government” because it is “designed to subvert and destroy nation and tradition”. The post argues that monarchy is better for society. Yet on the very same site, in a very different discussion, there are pro-democracy sentiments. “I’m going to steadfastly maintain that democracy is not the problem, it’s the elites who are the problem,” another user argues, saying that although elites have always existed, “The difference today is that the elites who rule us...hate us”.

Of fucking course it’s a REPUBLICAN CONSERVATIVE WHITE GIRL burning the coal. The biggest coalburners are CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICAN white women. Since we fetishize black men and see them as fuck oxen that were brought here in chains to serve white women. We get off on the taboo. /pol/ and Stormfrontcels on here accuse me of being a NPC. And say that I like black guys because of virtue signalling and media brainwashing. But the truth is, liberals and the more whiny type of blacks (not all blacks) complain that I’m racist for sexually fetishizing black men. I have very politically incorrect views of race and immigration. But I’m not hardcore racist. I’m casually racist. (Lookism - Topic 0)

There are members expressing their preference for the incel community due to their dislikes of both liberal and conservative values. Overall, these posts highlight how members of these communities are making sense of their own positions in relation to the current state of society and governance. During this process, we see members’ efforts in conserving and justifying their identities and viewpoints.

Daily Activities and Lifestyles

This theme encompasses several topics across all forum categories. The content is diverse and wide-ranging, but all of them pertain to activities common in members’ everyday lives. For example, in Trolling and Doxxing and White Supremacist forums, there is one topic category consisting of recipes and tips on cooking (sometimes for individuals with special dietary needs). The Lookism forums, on the other hand, have two main elements: (a) specific advice requested and given for problems with hair care, skin care, gym regimen and diet, and (b) the generic pseudo-scientific analyses of physical attributes, with information such as the correlation between vegan diet and lighter eye colour. Some other topics include popular television shows, cars and nightlife.

In addition to offline activities, posts sharing information relevant to online activities are common, especially within the Trolling and Doxxing forum category. There are topic categories dedicated to various social media platforms (e.g. YouTube, Twitter). These posts tend to be information on individuals of interest, which can include their date of birth and other aliases or handles on the platform. Other topic categories cluster based on behaviours (e.g. familial dynamics) or personal characteristics (e.g. obesity) of targeted individuals. Interestingly, within these topic categories, members are inclined to share both personal experiences and facts. For example, within obesity and weight loss, a majority of the posts shared concerns on eating disorders and detailed discussions on metabolism.

Discussion

Previous analysis of these extremist online communities (Vu et al., 2021) focused on establishing a categorisation of forums and identified the most discussed topics within each category. This research follows up on those results and provides a deep qualitative inquiry into the ideologies and viewpoints of the communities, analysing how interconnected the topics are, and how discussions are used in identity formation at the level of both the individual and the ideology: discussion threads serve to bolster the group's identity whilst simultaneously giving those participating a sense of belonging.

This construction of identity clearly plays an important role in structuring the discourse and narratives in the extreme communities we studied. This research shows how and why individual members are drawn towards these communities in the first place, but also sheds light on the dynamics after joining, negotiating their own positionalities in the current era. Our findings highlight that recent changes in gender norms and roles have resulted in negative emotions and life experiences for people who are attracted to these communities, looking for explanations and help with these negative experiences.

In some cases, these social changes are conflated with the fluidity in sexual identity as well. Gender as a concept is socially constructed rather than biologically determined (West & Zimmerman, 1987), and thus subject to change throughout time. The concept is continuously defined via social interactions, which are in return structured by gender norms. In this regard, individuals can be punished or rewarded for their actions in relation to these norms, and the consensus amongst these communities is that their own definitions and approaches to gender are deemed unacceptable by society and so they are punished for their opinions and beliefs. To cope, these communities develop a range of responses, such as the creation of the blackpill viewpoints (Daly & Reed, 2022) that encourages a hyper-focus on physical appearances and simultaneously advises leaving women alone.

These discussions can be seen as the efforts of members to make sense of the world via the adoption, cementation and development of new ideologies. Through active debates, they attempt to understand how their positions fit within larger and often uncertain or unclear identities, communities and societies in today's world. This is evident in recent discourses surrounding the politicised issue of mask policy in the USA (Lavorigna et al., 2022) and more global issues such as climate change (Vowles & Hultman, 2021). These extreme communities fit their members' needs by introducing and normalising existing ideologies as potential foundations for new identities and communities. The discourses we are seeing and analysing capture the process in which different communities are moving towards the creation of new ideologies based on existing concepts.

The dynamic process of identity formation on the individual and ideological level demands a similarly dynamic approach to research. These misogynistic and far-right communities are far from set in stone, but rather continuously recreate and reaffirm membership and belonging through active discussions, with aspects developing over time. This organic evolution of subcultures is very different to other forms of extremism, most notably Islamist or Communist, which both have central texts and top-down hierarchical structures which make them far more rigid in ideology, requiring different types of research.

The personal experiences and stories sampled and analysed here fit well with current models of radicalisation (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). For example, there were many posts on personal experiences or grievances with regard to interactions with women, which often showcased the inspirational moment for an individual's interest in a movement (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; McCauley & Moskalenko,

2008). These posts are comparable to awakening stories where individuals share their process of involvement and commitment to the movement (Bowman-Grieve, 2009).

The many categories produced by topic modelling that appear irrelevant to a particular ideology (gym routines, diets and so on) are still clearly serving a purpose in communities. McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) suggested that individuals join radical groups because of social relations such as friendships with members in those groups. These relations tend to intensify after group involvement due to common goals and threats. These non-ideological discussions can be seen as the accumulation of social capital within these communities (Portes, 1998), where information prevalent to daily activities such as cooking are being exchanged amongst members. These discussions further speak to the complex dynamics within and across these communities.

Such complexities all point to the need for a nuanced policy approach. Current approaches of takedowns may further isolate these individuals by taking away the support networks whilst further solidifying the groups' identities (Maxwell et al., 2020; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). Policymakers should thus consider a multi-pronged approach that involves careful observation of discussions, intervention targeting negative emotions and life experiences, and when necessary, removing the most extreme and unlawful content (Lally & Bermingham, 2020). Other stakeholders need to review and modify current features of platforms to limit or minimise the spread of extreme content (Papadamou et al., 2021).

Conclusion

The links between online extremism and real-world violence are being seen ever more clearly, one attack at a time, the background of many far-right attacks showing participation in online extremist communities and sometimes organising and announcing (even sometimes live streaming) attacks in these forums. Although the mechanisms between online radicalisation and offline behaviour are not well understood, it is clear that the bigger the online communities grow, the more potential for violence there will be.

This research suggests a pathway for a greater understanding of how these ideologies develop, strengthen, grow and cement their membership online. These extremist subcultures are fulfilling a role in giving their members a place and a status in a community—a sense of belonging—and an explanation of their situation in the wider world. Constant research attention must be paid as these ideologies are dynamic; whilst some general aspects remain the same, concerning women and race, many other aspects are constantly developing, with potential effects on behaviour as well as worldview. To combat the toxic behaviour in the real world, toxic communication online also must be understood.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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