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# Mapping the manosphere. Categorization of reactionary masculinity discourses in digital environment

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## ABSTRACT

The manosphere is a fragmented group of digital communities promoting misogynist discourses. The main focus of these communities is the construction of man's identity with reactionary gender traits and roles based on the critique of feminism and its transformative influence on society, and a victimization storytelling. Various ramifications, or subcultures, can be identified within the discursive and ideological foundations that configure these channels of reactionary masculinity, especially new emerging communities labelled Red Pill, incels and PUA, which have gathered scholars' and media attention. However, this very diversity seems to introduce some confusion, becoming a fuzzy convergence of reactionary and anti-feminist statements and attitudes. Thus, this calls for a necessary systematic clarification of the characteristics they feature. With this purpose, this article examines the traits of masculine identities found in the digital manosphere subcultures, classifying them according to the discourses they promote, the philosophy of life they adopt, the organization they have, the performance they exhibit, and the type of violence they perform against women.

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## Introduction

### *Modern masculinity confronted with social influence of feminism*

The recent achievements of feminism in contemporary society set the foundations and parameters for the deconstruction of traditional masculinity. The decisive sociological approach adopted by third wave feminists calls into question the very basis of masculinity and destabilizes the binary model that sustains power relations between genders (Eric Anderson 2009; Michael Schwalbe 2015). Masculinity deconstruction process is a tool for erasing the traditional traits and the affirmation of hegemonic masculine identity as a vector of oppression for other social groups, women, and minorities. In this context, men are faced with the challenge of rethinking their own masculine identity and how this construct influences their behaviour and their daily relationships with others (David Morgan 2006; Eric Anderson and Mark McCormack 2014; Raewyn Connell 2005).

Attributes and traits socially associated with and/or assigned to masculinity have constantly evolved and changed through history and cultures (Jeff Hearn 2005). However, contemporary sociological and feminist studies have identified several characteristics of hegemonic masculinity as being oppressive in terms of their expression of power and domination over women and minorities (Connell and James W. Messerschmidt 2005; James W. Messerschmidt 2018; Kristin J. Anderson 2014; Richard Howson 2006). Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as a cultural and social dominance performed by men over women through a set of collective structures, behaviours, and prescriptive norms for gender roles (Connell et al. 2005; James W. Messerschmidt 2018). Masculinity is a complex social concept that is constantly revealed and expressed through the representational, discursive, and behavioural choices made by each individual in his daily private context and during his public performance as a citizen. (Raewyn Connell 1987, 2005) describes the plurality of masculinity as being socially stratified through power relations and hegemonic hetero-normative criteria. Hegemonic masculinity is a social construct that legitimizes men's status of power and articulates discourses in order to consolidate and perpetuate this privileged position, which is often linked to political right wing or far right movements (Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kate Miltner 2015).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, masculinity has been studied from two convergent intersectional perspectives in order to offer a broader vision of the phenomenon and its educational and communicative implications: first, the social hierarchies of power, and second, the individual construction of personal identity (Richard Howson 2006). Putting the focus on the causes and effects related to masculine identity conditioning, the deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity can be considered as a necessary social stage to prevent the perpetuation of inequality and oppression based on gender (James W. Messerschmidt 2018; Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell and John Lee 2004).

In the context of the great changes achieved by feminism and gender equality agendas in society, men have reacted in different ways. An emerging sentiment of masculine vulnerability, frustration, failure, and grievance emerged between men who refuse or fail to embrace the positive social change triggered by inclusive understanding of gender relations (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018). This leads to the expression of new forms of misogyny through the internet. According to the definition offered by Cristian Tileaga 2019, 3), "misogyny is a specific class of prejudice that harms the dignity of women by calling into question women's (human) rights to participation in public life, freedom of expression, and personal safety".

According to the Theory of Inclusive Masculinity (Eric Anderson 2009), men who reject the inclusive approach continue to reproduce behaviours, relationships and social structures determined by gender stereotypes, toxic emotions, control, and violence. The rise of diverse forms of violence against women takes place within the context of a recent decline in social values of empathy and inclusion, and the rise of hate speech and extremism. It is a phenomenon that has its roots in an escalation of the hegemonic forms of masculinity through discourses that find their echo in the political rise of the extreme right (Jack Bratich and Sarah Banet-Weiser 2019). In this context, the intensity of hate speech and harassment against women is increasing (Emma Jane 2018; Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018; Sylvia Jaki et al. 2019). Particularly worrying is the rise of extreme violence

such as mass shootings. Such acts are perpetrated in the name of a masculinity that feels humiliated and despised, transforming its frustration into anger that is expressed through channels of revenge against women (Carolyn M. Byerly 2020; Taisto Witt 2020).

A gap can be observed between the changes accomplished in the institutional sphere—where inclusive masculinity now stands at a high level of visibility and influence—and the daily reality of men who continue to reproduce strongly internalized reactionary traits for their masculine identity (James W. Messerschmidt 2018). Even among them, some adopt an openly belligerent or hostile attitude towards the changes observed in society and promote a critical discourse towards inclusive masculinity. This trend is especially worrisome among adolescents and young people (Patricia H. Hawley, Todd D. Little and Noel A. Card 2008), notably within internet and gaming cultures (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018). The reactionary narratives and storytelling of the hegemonic masculinity crisis is in ideological turmoil with political entanglements that can attract young boys into strong antifeminist responses (Shawn P. Van Valkenburgh 2019). This bias perception pushes them into masculine supremacist attitudes, online harassment, and even extremist violent actions (Debbie Ging, Theo Lynn and Pierangelo Rosati 2019; Julia Ebner 2020; Kristin J. Anderson 2014). On the other hand, it should be noted that as the concepts related to inclusive masculinity are becoming more and more prominent in institutional, educational, and even mainstream media discourses, reactionary masculinity, as a backlash, is acquiring new spaces of expression in alternative digital media, growing new models of diffusion and persuasion within different community organizations and subcultures (Jieliang Lin 2017; Debbie Ging 2019), sometimes overlapping with broader political or ideological labels (Shawn P. Van Valkenburgh 2019).

The misogynistic reaction from men becomes a new reality through the participation of individuals on digital platforms with the creation of networked communities. This form of reaction against the advances of feminism is realized through fragmented communities with blurred borders that all share the features of a strongly misogynistic discourse. This phenomenon can be described as “popular misogyny” (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018) because it involves a dynamic of diffusion through direct participation of digital platform community users. Faced with the rising acts of violence against women, it is urgent to carry out an analysis of the ideologies that underlie these acts which can develop a misogynistic climate. These emerging movements on the internet are constructing and spreading new frames, stereotypes, and storytelling, that clearly differ from traditional antifeminist movements (Lauren Menzie 2020; Scott Wright, Verity Trott and Callum Jones 2020). Indeed, there is often confusion about the labels and names that are attributed to these new communities.

### ***The digital manosphere***

Reactionary masculinity in contemporary society can be sketched as a very basic segmentation into two general types: the first is the antifeminist counter discourse, and the second is a masculinist individualistic response which emphasizes the hegemonic traits and rejects the inclusive ones (Michael A. Messner 1998; Raewyn Connell 2005; Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018). The first is oriented towards the public discourse (largely in decline), while the second is performed in the personal sphere of the individual’s lifestyle, which is currently growing more and more popular because of the interactive environment of

digital platforms. As stated by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018, 3): “Misogyny is popular in the contemporary moment for the same reasons feminism has become popular: it is expressed and practiced on multiple media platforms, it attracts other like-minded groups and individuals, and it manifests in a terrain of struggle, with competing demands for power”. Consistent with this view, Angela McRobbie 2008 argues that the progress achieved by feminism in the political sphere is undone through popular culture and performative lifestyles that replace ideas of structural constraints and social consensus on inclusion, non-violence and equality.

The new reactionary masculine identities in Western culture is growing as a diffuse group of misogynic discourses is taking place in the digital environment, which can be identified as a whole with the term of the manosphere (Alice Marwick and Robin Caplan 2018; Debbie Ging 2019; Lise Gotell and Emily Dutton 2016). The manosphere is heterogeneous: it’s a broad space of misogynistic ideas, antifeminist discourses, masculinist narratives, men separatism, and even the systematic performance of harassment against women scattered into diverse communities (Jaki et al. 2019; Maddalena Cannito, et al. 2021; Ryan Coulling 2020). They are loosely gathered by some core ideas about gender construction and structure of power as individuals or groups, representing in its whole some kind of blurry “confederacy of interest groups” (Debbie Ging 2019, 638). This brings the attention of scholars and mainstream media to the fact that several groups articulating reactionary discourses on the crisis of masculinity in contemporary Western societies are converging into the digital manosphere, gaining more and more influence, from initially fringe platforms to mainstream ones (Debbie Ging and Eugenia Siapera 2018; Shawn P. Van Valkenburgh 2019).

Following the basic classification sketched previously, there are two main categories of reactionary masculinity: the antifeminist discourse and the masculinist narratives. Because of the fragmentation and diversification of masculinity communities in the digital environment, subcategories or subcultures can be identified within these two basic categories, which correspond to a systematic modulation of reactionary masculine discourse around core themes or ideas (Alexandra Krendel 2020; Angela Nagle 2015; Manoel H. Ribeiro, et al. 2021; Rachel M. Schmitz and Emily Kazyak 2016).

In the seventies, Men’s Rights Activism (MRA) movements were already created, mainly focusing on the issues of public agenda and their legal implications: divorce laws, alimony for spouses and children, custody of children, etc. (Michael A. Messner 1998). Most of them are promoting a victimization narrative on men being exploited by women on the basis of an alleged gynocentric structure in society and laws. Nowadays, with a set of diverse topics, new emergent communities are swarming on the internet such as PUA (Pick-Up Artists), incels, Red Pill and MGTOW (Men Go Their Own Way), later described in this paper. Previous studies on the ideological articulation of discourses within the manosphere have revealed a great diversity and fragmentation, to which it is convenient to respond with a systematic classification.

## **Purpose**

The analysis of the manosphere and the identification of the reactionary discourses that circulate in these communities are a topic of growing social interest due to the increase of this phenomenon and its possible social and political implications (Callum Jones, Verity Trott and Scott Wright 2019; Pierce Dignam and Deana Rohlinger 2019; Richard Rego 2018) and its influence on young people who have access to these ideological contents (Kristin J. Anderson 2014; Julia Ebner 2020). In the English speaking environment, where the first manosphere communities were born and where their influence is relatively important, a number of studies have been carried out on the characteristics and scope of their discourses (Alexandra Krendel 2020; Alexandra Krendel and Mark McGlashan 2021; Callum Jones, Verity Trott, and Scott Wright 2019; Debbie Ging 2019; Lise Gotell and Emily Dutton 2016; Marwick et al. 2018; Ryan Coulling 2020; Veronika Koller, Alexandra Krendel and Mark McGlashan 2021). Digital manosphere from non-English speaking countries has received little attention to date (Cannito et al. 2021; Winnie Chang 2020).

Furthermore, several ramifications can be identified in the discursive and ideological foundations that configure these channels of reactionary masculinity, especially within new emerging trends, introducing some confusion on the adequate labeling of these groups and communities (Cristian Tileaga 2019; Debbie Ging, Theo Lynn and Pierangelo Rosati 2019). A new approach is therefore needed to create a systematic clarification of the differing characteristics and features that addresses the diversity and complexity of the manosphere, which justifies the approach of this paper with the following research questions. How have these categories of reactionary masculinities been examined and studied in the research field of Social Science? What are the main ramifications of the manosphere that can be identified in the English speaking digital environment? What are the main identity traits and discourses of the communities consistently labeled in the digital manosphere? How can these different communities be classified and grouped using a systematic and coherent criterion of delimitation?

The purpose of this paper is dual: first, to major the direction and intensity of social investigation on these growing and diverse communities; second, to categorize the discourse of reactionary masculinities in the manosphere into systematic categories. Corresponding to these goals, the contents of the investigation are organized into two main parts. First, a bibliometric study is carried out based on the Web of Science database in order to identify the main contributions made to this research topic up to date. Secondly, based on the literature review a classification of reactionary masculinity communities emerging in the English speaking digital manosphere is proposed, with discursive and organizational criterion of delimitation.

## **Materials and method**

After performing a systematic review of the literature using basic bibliographic search,<sup>1</sup> our goal is to establish systematic classification criteria for the diverse communities belonging to the manosphere. Following the basic classifications and descriptions of men's backlash on feminism (Angela McRobbie 2008; Eric Anderson 2009), we organize the description of reactionary masculinities into two main groups: the antifeminist

**Table 1.** Matrix of qualitative variables for the mapping of the manosphere.

Variable	Description
Community organization	How is the online community structured? Is there some recognized hierarchical pattern or leadership?
Financing	Is there some funding for the community or monetization of contents?
Ideological discourse and causal narrative	What are the ideological and narrative foundations of the community?
Purpose and goals	What are the specific goals that the community aspires to achieve? How does this affect women as individuals and as a collective?
Actions and performing masculinity	What are the main ways of performing and recognizing the adherence to the community for their members?

Source: own elaboration

discourse and the masculinist discourse. The first group focuses mainly on debates and issues on the public and institutional agenda, while the second group focuses on the construction of the hegemonic masculine identity and how this construction of male characteristics can survive in today's society from an individual perspective. This basic classification falls short of explaining the swarming emergence and diversification of discourses embracing the reactionary masculinity in the digital environment in recent years in the new manosphere, which is articulated between several communities of popular forms of expressing misogyny (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018).

In order to identify the articulation of recently renewed and specific masculinist discourses on the internet, we aim to label the subcultures with specific identity and ideologically structured discourses in the manosphere. For this purpose, a literature review is carried out to understand and define features that identify various types of reactionary masculinity coexisting in the digital environment. This is done using a systematic and hierarchical description of their discourse and organizational characteristics. To perform this analysis we set up a basic matrix of five foundational characteristics that allows us to outline the communities and their organically developed discourses and orientations. These five qualitative variables correspond to: organization, financing, ideology, goals, and performing (Table 1).

## Analysis and results

### *Labels of reactionary masculinity in the manosphere*

The ideologically structured masculinist discourse emerged in the seventies in the US, forming constellations of different organizations under the name of MLM (Men Liberation Movement), MRM (Men Rights' Movements), and MRA (Men Rights' Associations). In general, with the exception of a branch of MLM (which had a liberal concept of masculinity), all these movements can be considered conservative responses to the advances of feminism in society (Michael A. Messner 1998). It was, and still is, a relatively marginal movement. MLM had practically disappeared, leaving the MRA groups as the main force of action, especially in legislation and lobbying activities, aimed at the public agenda. Overall, the MRA discourses are structured around a set of claims about being a husband and a father in today's society, and how their interests, as a group of power, have been attacked and undermined by women, gender equality, and feminism (Zachary Palmer and Mangala Subramaniam 2017). From its historical sources

in the 1970s, MRA “grappled with the paradox of simultaneously acknowledging men’s institutional privileges and the costs of masculinity to men” (Michael A. Messner 1998, 255). A special focus of attention for these groups was addressing the social organization of parenthood, marriage, divorce, and the related legislations considered unbalanced and unfair to men. Currently, the topics included in the MRA agenda have moved from structured family obligations and duties to the domain of personal sexuality constrained by progressive approaches, for instance, mutual consent and the prevention of harassment, violence, and rape, among other gender issues (Gotell et al. 2016; Michael A. Messner 2016). Consequently, the MRA action remains mainly aimed at influencing the public agenda, changing or reforming the legislation on marriage, custody, alimony, sexual consent, etc., sometimes maintaining political links with conservative or far-right political movements (Kristin J. Anderson 2014; Schmitz et al. 2016). Apart from structured MRA movements, some independent journalists, writers, and creators with a personal voice on conventional or digital media can be identified claiming antifeminist discourses, often close to the alt-right movement, but from an individual perspective and without formal organizational links (Lucy Nicholas and Christine Agius 2018).

On the other hand, in the last decade, new communities emerged in the digital environment with their own labels that correspond to the construction of reactionary subcultures, apart from the MRA organizations and without any explicit political ties (Ribeiro et al. 2021). These communities are far less concerned with the public agenda or changes in the legislation. They only focus their attention on the individual sphere: the relation between men and women in daily life, and improving their ability to perform their personal goals as masculine subjects exposed to a new environment. They do not correspond to a clearly defined ideological movement, but are claiming a personal way of constructing their own masculine identity. They are groups of individuals with the same perceptions on the issues related to the crisis of masculinity in the modern Western society: how these issues affect their personal relationships and how they can address them by resorting to some traits of hegemonic masculine construction. The whole set of these new communities contributed to the recent explosive growth of the manosphere, with a great diversity of narratives dealing with the crisis of masculinity and the reaction to the new gender equality context. They all share the perception of women being a threat and the mocking of inclusive masculinity. In the following sections we describe the characteristics of these communities and how they can be classified.

### ***Antifeminist countermovement***

The groups or individuals classified as antifeminist countermovement can be linked to the historical claims of MRA as explained before. Consequently, the objective of these communities, or individuals, performing in the digital stage is to act and reaffirm a reactionary ideological discourse in the public sphere, achieving objectives that are partially or completely aligned with the historical claims of MRA or with the most recent ones. They mainly have hostile reactions to feminism and gender equality social movements so they can be defined as a countermovement. As their predecessors, MRA, they articulate a narrative of men’s rights, and their “discourse claims that men are in crisis because of the feminization of society and it mobilizes primarily around issues pertaining to the interests of fathers and spouses” (Melissa Blais and Francis Dupuis-



Déri 2012, 22). Michael A. Messner (2016) points out that these ideological communities of men have evolved over the last decades, moving from a focus on family, education, alimony, and children custody towards the field of sexuality and socialization of women. In particular, they highlight the fight against the progress of feminism in anti-rape policies, the #MeToo movement, progressive gender norms, and consent standards (Gotell et al. 2016). Communities or individuals sharing this ideological field have strong connections with the alt-right or with conservative political movements (Dignam et al. 2019).

In addition, the creation of online platforms, discussion forums, and social networks allowed the personal expression of individuals and opinion leaders without them being formally listed in an organized movement. Social media platforms are territories of expressions for intellectuals with an ideological discourse aimed at attacking feminist postulates. Jordan Peterson and Ben Shapiro are two highly representative figures of this individualistic and belligerent discourse aimed at a progressive turndown in the public sphere and even the legislative area. Independent of their affiliation, and independent of the main topic they focus on, all these individuals can be labeled as belonging to the antifeminist countermovement because each of them has social and political implications. For this reason, it seems necessary to delimit the antifeminist discourse and masculinist agenda narrative in the public sphere and organize them into two groups: those who belong to or have explicit ties with an organization and those who are independent and remain outside organized structures, although their speech may be related to the alt-right nebula. All of them stand out for their capacity of frontal argumentation against the claims and achievements of feminism on social, political, and legal aspects, but have two different modes of organization. The financing of the organized groups, like MRA, are proceeding from the traditional channels (like affiliate fees, donation, and lobbying), while the independent antifeminist figures are exploiting the new digital way of monetizing content via social media or crowdfunding.

### **Red Pill**

Communities organized around the Red Pill label promote a concept of life constructed as a hostile reaction to the empowerment of women (Ribeiro et al. 2021; Shawn P. Van Valkenburgh 2018). Often referred to as The Red Pill philosophy (Veronika Koller, Alexandra Krendel and Mark McGlashan 2021), the world view and causal narrative of this masculinist community is based on an allegorical identity that refers to a reductive concept of men and women, and the alleged biological deterministic way that could explain their behaviour as individuals and as a collective. The term Red Pill is borrowed from the movie *The Matrix* (Lilly Wachowski and Lana Wachowski 1999). This popular mainstream science fiction film features a parallel reality where the Blue Pill represents submission to an oppressive order and the Red Pill represents the awakening to knowledge and freedom through the revelation of an uncomfortable truth. For the misogynist tenants of the Red Pill, the allegory directly applies to gender relations in the 21st century in Western society, characterized in their storytelling as being gynocentric. The influence of feminism and inclusive masculinity corresponds, within the jargon of the community, to the Blue Pill while the Red Pill describes the new awaking reality of men who have decided to play by their own rules. This translates into a lifestyle implying the refusal of any sentimental or marital commitment to women. The community is characterized by

a strong discourse against men allies to feminism, mocking them as submissive, feminized, and even emasculated. There is neither structural organization nor recognized leadership, but a nebula of individuals which adhere to the same ideological principle labeled as Red Pill. Some of the individuals are monetizing content about the Red Pill style life through social media or crowdfunding.

Furthermore, the Red Pill community uses a logical approach close to the neoliberal ideology with the conceptualization of women as commodities (Shawn P. Van Valkenburgh 2018), which is allegedly obtained and managed according to a range of techniques that can be learned, transmitted, and perfected. This process involves the use of sexuality as a form of affirmation of personal and individual success according to the criteria of the ability to seduce women. There is an explanatory hierarchy of men through “alpha”, “beta”, and “omega” labels in addition to the attribution of a value and erotic capital within the sexual marketplace. The use of aggressive seduction techniques and strategies based on extreme confidence (as the concept of “last minute resistance”) undermine and erase the consent of women, which can easily lead to active harassment.

### **MGTOW**

The community labelled MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way) is characterized by the basic belief that society is gynocentric, which is built to benefit women, using systematic mechanisms to extract resources from men (Jieliang Lin 2017; Scott Wright, Verity Trott and Callum Jones 2020). At the basis of the MGTOW philosophy lies the assumption of framing men as victims and a storytelling of separation from society. This community is present on the internet on the Mgtow.com portal, on the Reddit platform, on YouTube, and other channels. Although there is neither organization nor leadership established, the community recognizes a fuzzy set of manifesto that articulates their philosophy and discourses, as expressed in diverse internet sites. The ideological foundations of the community have very specific traits and “a separatist approach” (Wright et al. 2020, 931). They profess not only the rejection of inclusive masculinity, but also the traditional role of husband, boyfriend, and father, as resource providers. They focus on personal development, refusing any sentimental or sexual contact with women to avoid being exploited by them, and even withdrawing from society (Nicholas et al. 2018; Ryan Coulling 2020). MGTOW communities share many of their theoretical foundations with the Red Pill community although they differ in the practical approach in their relation with women. On the other hand, it is common to find a description of MGTOW as a lifestyle that is achieved through several stages, the first step being becoming a Red Pill.

The MGTOW community is focused on the individual improvement of its components; they do not identify as a movement and do not seek to have a public influence beyond the promotion of their own lifestyle as individuals choosing a path of separation. They even profess at some point that withdrawing from society is a way to avoid the systemic exploitation of manhood, which occurs, in their opinion, both in traditional and modern societies. The members of the forums who identify themselves as MGTOW are not usually characterized by active harassment towards other people, but by spreading passive harassment (Callum Jones, Verity Trott and Scott Wright 2019) through the dissemination of narratives generalizing negative stereotypes about the characteristics of broad social groups (women, men with inclusive masculinity), leading to possible long-term rejection, segregation and harassment attitudes. Their main way of action is through personal life

decisions and the performance of a storytelling about their own vital experiences. Social media, video platforms and crowdfunding are sometimes used in order to monetize the content from the most prominent figures of this community.

### **PUA**

The PUA acronym stands for Pick Up Artist. The members of this sub-culture are directly focused on solving the issues of seduction through an aggressive approach enhancing the most dominant masculine traits and characteristics (Ribeiro et al. 2021). They present themselves as “masters” or “gurus” with the ability to transfer some authentic knowledge, teaching, or performance often labelled as “method”. They refuse to assume the characteristics of inclusive masculinity and encourage their followers to erase any of these traits (conceptualized as “beta male”) as being a condition to seduce women, challenging them to adopt a strong “alpha male” identity. According to PUA, men’s dominant values and performance are closely related to reproductive success (Patricia H. Hawley, Todd D. Little, and Noel A. Card 2008). Their narrative is generally rooted in biological and animal world references. In fact, most of the PUA gurus adopt an approach of mixing fuzzy references to biology, evolution, and primitive behaviour in order to allegedly turn every modern man into a prototype of “alpha male”. References to the economy are also frequent in this subculture, which develops a storytelling with the configuration of seduction as a marketplace for both men and women. Each individual is defined by its own “sexual value” that can be majored through different scales and variables. As a consequence, the PUA discourse is covered with constant pseudo-scientific references to the biological and/or economic environment and a pseudo-scientific jargon. Contrary to MGTOW, this community is not aimed at expressing a philosophy and understanding of life, but is exclusively oriented to accomplish pragmatic goals: to achieve success in sentimental/sexual relationships and to seduce as many women as possible. They focus on personal challenges and improvement, with a large amount of self-praise and brag statements (Sofia Rüdiger and Daria Dayter 2020). They have an eminently pragmatic horizon: most important is the result, not the ideological, ethic, or philosophical implications of the means used in order to achieve that precise goal. A PUA guru makes typically the generic promise that every man, independent of his age, resources, or attractiveness, could get the girl(s) of his dreams—either for a one night stand or for a long term relationship—by following a method that is pretended to unlock the secret female attraction mechanisms.

The PUA community is offering his audience of men a set of seduction, objectification, and emotional manipulation techniques to use on women (Daria Dayter and Sofia Rüdiger 2016). They profess a strong biological determinism that they apply rigidly to the definition and understanding of gender roles and to the characterization of bodies with a precise but fluctuant value within the sexual marketplace. In this sense, their approach to women as a set of commodities that can be accessed through techniques and skills has important similarities to the Red Pill community. Every PUA guru is characterized by a set of methods used to seduce women, often labelled as “original”, although almost the same patterns and extensive use of manipulation and objectification techniques can be observed in the whole community. Inside and outside the digital environment, PUA gurus usually develop several channels for the systematic monetization of their own

methods: selling books and DVDs with complete courses, seminars, and personal coaching sessions. Amidst all of the subcultures of the manosphere, PUA is the only one which is clearly commercially oriented.

### **NoFap**

This community focuses on personal control over sexuality and achievement of manliness through self-discipline with some reminiscence of stoic philosophy. NoFap means rejecting masturbation and the consumption of pornography (Marlene Hartmann 2020). The main focus of the community is personal growth and achievement, connecting with inner masculinity in order to be, according to their jargon, “a real man”. The storytelling developed by this community considers that control on sexual instinct comes in contrast to the emotional and sexual dependence suffered by most other men in contemporary society who are considered weak and unable to achieve their path of success. NoFap community members also profess a salient critical discourse against inclusive masculinity. In fact, they do not refuse relationships with women, but consider the abstinence process as a way to realize and strengthen their own manhood; they highlight “the biological importance of masculinity, and masculinity as performance” (Kris Taylor and Sue Jackson 2018, 625). Amongst all of the communities of the manosphere, NoFap can be considered as the more conservative one because of the rejection of pornography and the acceptance of the traditional role of men in a formal relationship as father and/or husband, a role that all the other communities reject because of their conviction (Red Pill, MGTOW, PUA) or because of the impossibility of achieving a successful reproductive relationship with women (incels).

The NoFap approach is not homogeneous. It can be understood as a philosophy or as a lifestyle, depending on the focus and the storytelling developed by the individuals claiming practising NoFap. As a philosophy, the NoFap community is looking for a deeper meaning of their sexuality and also avoids relying on instincts when selecting their partner, with some influence from stoic philosophy on the high value of discipline. In its lifestyle dimension, the NoFap community focuses on aspects related to the health and personal benefits of avoiding masturbation and pornography consumption. In the opinion of its members, they achieve improvements in their physical and mental state and claim to increase their ability to be more attractive, describing it as a powerful seduction tool. In fact, some PUA include the NoFap practice in the method they use.

### **Incels**

The incels community, whose name originates from involuntary celibates, is a group of people who feel the frustration of being unable to find a sentimental or sexual partner (Jaki et al. 2019). The community operates mainly as a support group, or echo chamber, for individuals who share an issue that they are unable to resolve by themselves. They angrily focus on their personal failure because of the rejection from women and blame them for their lonely life. This strong resentment towards women can lead to violent acts, harassment, threats, and even shootings (Stephane J. Baele, Lewys Brace and Travis G. Coan 2019; Taisto Witt 2020). The incels’ hatred is also directed towards men who are successful with women, particularly the PUA community. Low self-esteem and suicidal tendencies are also salient characteristics of the individuals who join this community. The incels are characterized by a shared experience, as a result of long term failures in the

sentimental sphere, and they are united by a pragmatic goal: to break with their loneliness, get support from each other, and eventually take revenge on the women who despised them and on the men who exhibit a successful seduction profile. “Moreover, incels express their rage through language of uprising and a war on women. Their actions are a continuum of reactive violent responses to women’s refusal of social reproduction roles and aim to defend and restore patriarchal order” (Bratich et al. 2019, 5003). Consequently, these incels group are frequently performing hate speeches, harassments towards women, and in some extreme cases, physical violence and even mass shooting (Baele et al. 2019). Bratich et al. (2019) analyze the social psychology of the incels community from the perspective of the decline of neoliberalism, being one more facet of the failure of the marketplace logic within a commercialized competitive environment, in this case, applied to the erotic capital of each individual.

The incel community became infamous with the mass shooting executed by a 22-year-old incel, in May 2014, in Isla Vista, California. Elliot Roger, killed six people, injured 14, and eventually committed suicide. He left a manifesto entitled *War on Women* that caused similar acts by copycats. Incels community’s rhetoric promotes violent impulses and the creation of an image of victimization, hatred and a desire for revenge against women, who are highlighted as the group that deserves to be punished. Due to their extremist tendencies and violence, the incels represent the most studied group within the manosphere.

### ***Systematic classification of reactionary masculinities online***

The characteristics of the different communities labelled in the manosphere are described in Figure 1, following five qualitative variables corresponding to their foundational and operative structures.

Based on the previous descriptions, an original classification of reactionary masculinist discourse is proposed (Figure 2). At the top of the manosphere system, following the basic classification on reactionary masculinity, there are two main categories: antifeminist discourses (A) and masculinist discourses (B). Within these two basic categories, several subcategories can be identified that correspond to a systematic modulation of reactionary masculine discourse around core themes, ideas, or life projects. These subcultures had experimented explosive growing into the internet environment. Two of these subcultures derive from the antifeminist discourse: the first (A1) is related to MRA or political movements within organized structures; the second (A2) is characterized by independent creative contents and critical discourses not belonging to any structured organization. The masculinist discourse (B) is more diverse and mostly coincides with the concept of “networked misogyny” as defined by Jack Bratich and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2019). Unlike antifeminist countermovements, these communities do not focus on intervention in the public agenda, but on the adoption of individual lifestyles and explicit rejection of inclusive masculinity. It is possible to identify communities that are based on a shared vision of a particular philosophy of life, two subcultures classified in B1 group: Red Pill and MGTOW, with a structured and ideological discourse about the roles of man and women in society. We can also identify communities that are strictly aimed at pragmatic goals that do not imply adherence to philosophy or systematic vision of life, but the adaptation and reaction to specific situations, such as the two subcultures classified in B2 group: PUA and

	Community organization	Financing	Ideological discourse	Purpose and goals	Actions and performing
<b>MRA organizations</b>	Hierarchical structure	Affiliate fees, donations, lobbying	Antifeminist and masculinist discourses in the public sphere	Public agenda, legislations, social behaviors	Mass communication, lobbying, strategic alliances with alt-right
<b>Antifeminist contents creators</b>	Individual activism and/or opinion leadership	Monetization of contents, crowdfunding	Antifeminist discourses in the public sphere	Public agenda, legislations, social behaviors	Personal contents creation, integration into the alt-right nebula
<b>Red Pill</b>	Fuzzy community, without organizational structure	Monetization of contents, crowdfunding	Distancing from women and formal relationships Individualist masculinist discourse	Personal life and fulfilling an individual ideal of self-realization Seduction of women	Storytelling Mocking of inclusive masculinity Sexual harassment
<b>MGTOW</b>	Fuzzy community, without organizational structure	Monetization of contents, crowdfunding	Withdrawing from relationship with women, and eventually withdrawing from society Individualist masculinist discourse	Personal life and fulfilling an individual ideal of self-realization	Storytelling Mocking of inclusive masculinity Passive harassment
<b>PUA</b>	Individual leadership (so-called "master" or "guru")	Monetization of contents, selling digital books and courses, coaching sessions, seminars	Performing the "alpha male" stereotypical attributes Pragmatic masculinist domination discourse	Seduction of women	Psychological manipulation Sexual objectification Sexual harassment
<b>NoFap</b>	Individual leadership	Monetization of contents	Personal discipline Conservative masculinist discourse	Self-control and seduction of women	Self-improvement Sometime used as a subsidiary technique by some PUA
<b>Incels</b>	Individual activism	No	Individual antifeminist discourse based on repetitive experiences of failure in the personal sentimental/sexual life	Self-compassion Community support Revenge on women and successful men	Hate speech and harassment Suicide tendencies Violence acts

Figure 1. Characteristics of the mansphere communities. Source: own elaboration

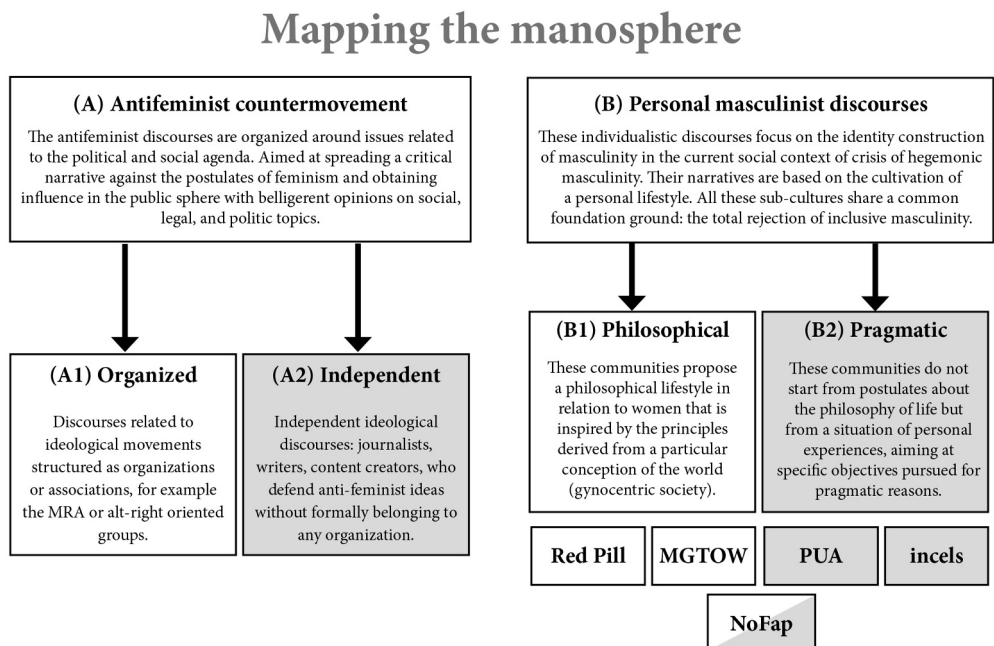


Figure 2. Ideological map of the mansphere. Source: own elaboration

Incels. Finally, the NoFap community is a heterogeneous group that can belong to the two previous subcultures B1/B2. It can be understood as a philosophy or as a technique, depending on the focus of the members.

This map is a useful tool in order to identify the ideological position and the adherence to different discourse types of reactionary masculinity. The proposed classification grid is covering the great diversity of individual, group, and community narratives into the manosphere, and enables a better understanding and delimitation of all of them.

## Conclusions

The digital manosphere is a relatively recent concept that includes a great diversity of communities around core ideas on the situation of men and masculinity in the current society. As a relatively marginal phenomenon, the manosphere developed in the digital environment for years under the radar, but has recently gained a more extended audience. Faced with the deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity and the social changes promoted by feminism, several reaction movements are emerging online, based on a set of values about the comprehension of the nature and role of men and women, and their social relationships and interactions. All these communities are aiming at the construction of hegemonic masculine performances. Contrary to the traditional MRA which focus on public agenda issues, the most prominent aspect of new misogynic communities online is the individualist rejection of inclusive masculinity in personal life. It is a reactionary masculinist response oriented towards creating its own interactive spaces for the expression and diffusion of victimization narratives with “a vision of masculinity perceived to be under siege” (Cannito et al. 2021, iv), which emphasizes the need to recover the power structures in the private sphere by men.

The manosphere is usually described as a set of communities with porous boundaries and loose relationships between them. The common traits are a misogynist worldview and a redefinition of masculinity in the contemporary context, with the use of different narratives about performance relying on a set of stereotypical models of masculinities. Fierce critiques about men embracing inclusive masculinity is commonly spread in all manosphere forums through a very diverse set of insulting and mocking neologisms: “manginas”, “blue-pills”, “gimps”, “betas”, “sims”, “soy boys”, all describing men allegedly subjugated in the gynocentric structure of society. This reactionary and insulting jargon has motivated a growing interest from the scholars, adopting a sociolinguistic approach (Alexandra Krendel 2020; Scott Wright, Verity Trott and Callum Jones 2020) or an ethnographic content analysis (Lauren Menzie 2020).

The new digital manosphere is related to the crisis of masculinity in modern society. These men communities perceive the current environment and the progress of feminism as a threat to their masculine identity, way of life, and gendered structures of power. Previous studies on the ideological articulation of discourses in the manosphere have revealed a great diversity to which it is convenient to respond with a detailed examination in order to avoid confusion and a misleading interchangeability between the labeling of these groups.

The main conclusion that can be drawn is that the manosphere is congregating a set of very diverse expressions on reactionary masculinity, which makes a categorization process necessary. The systematic categorization on the basis of a matrix of five foundational characteristics was performed in order to outline a proper delimitation of the labeled

communities and their organically developed discourses and orientations. The results of our analysis on the ideology underlying the diversity of expressions in the manosphere allow us to perform its mapping, with structured categories defined by a set of values and different approaches that reactionary men deploy in order to exercise power and control over women as individuals or as a collective. The classification proposed in this paper warrants a solid conceptual basis for further investigation via systematic categorization of reactionary masculine discourse online.

The revision of the literature reveals that the digital ecosystem of the manosphere has been mainly studied in the English-speaking environment since the year 2018. In contrast, there is almost no investigation in other linguistic contexts. We consider it urgent and necessary to address this gap in future investigations. Likewise, it will be important in future studies to develop the theoretical basis for a better acknowledgment of underlying dynamics which could explain the expansion and fragmentation of reactionary masculine discourses in the manosphere, especially the structured opposition to inclusive masculinity which is the salient narrative framework of these communities.

## Note

1. The bibliometric analysis was carried out using the WoS Online Scopus, and Google Scholar databases. The search criteria were limited to cover the new digital phenomenon (Manosphere, MGTOW, Red Pill, PUA, incels, NoFap). The results obtained after manual checking the contents is a list of 49 articles published until the end of the year 2020. Furthermore, 13 articles were published in the first six months of 2021.

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