

Misogyny uploaded: the influence of digital misogyny and the manosphere in boys and adolescents' identities

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, technological innovations have driven unprecedented societal transformations, fundamentally altering communication, knowledge construction and interactions within increasingly digital environments. These developments go beyond mere convenience, inducing systemic changes across political, cultural and social spheres worldwide. The internet, arguably the most significant technological advancement of the modern era, has served both as a tool and a platform for redefining social relations, shaping identity formation and disseminating ideologies (Choudhury, 2014; Alsaleh, 2024). The emergence of Web 2.0 in the early 2000s marked a significant shift in the way users interacted with digital media. Coined by O'Reilly in 2004, Web 2.0 signalled the evolution of the internet into a dynamic, participatory space, where boundaries between the producers and consumers of content became increasingly blurred. Dougherty (2004) referred to this new landscape as a 'read-write-web', reflecting the rise of platforms which enable user-generated content, real-time collaboration and interactive social engagement. Blogs, wikis, social media and video-sharing sites have become hallmarks of this new digital era, empowering individuals to participate in cultural production and public discourse on an unprecedented scale.

The affordances of Web 2.0 introduced new and diverse constructs of identity and anonymity. The proliferation of social networking technologies has enabled users to create digital personas, experiment with self-presentation and identity and engage in communities that transcend geographic and cultural boundaries (Choudhury, 2014). Simultaneously, the design of many platforms facilitated varying degrees of anonymity, creating spaces where individuals can express themselves without the constraints of social norms or accountability. The dual capacity for anonymity and visibility has enabled

an environment where both progressive activism and harmful behaviours can occur, with [Jane \(2017\)](#) highlighting how it is now difficult to recall a time when online spaces were not permeated with misogynistic rhetoric.

Crucially, the participatory nature of Web 2.0 has encouraged the growth of ideologically isolated communities, subcultural enclaves and echo chambers. As algorithms increasingly personalise content to users' preferences, digital echo chambers have flourished, allowing extremist movements and ideologies to spread with little resistance or dispute, as demonstrated by the expansion of the manosphere community ([Hoffman, Ware and Shapiro, 2020](#)). While some groups have used these platforms for social justice and equality, others have exploited them to promote misogynistic, xenophobic and dehumanising narratives. Scholars have recognised the rise of cyber misogyny and digitally mediated gender-based violence as concerning side-effects of this participatory shift ([Jane, 2017](#); [Ging, 2019](#)). This complex and contradictory landscape compels us to critically examine the politics and ethical implications of digital lives and how they are affecting the next generations of children and adolescents.

This chapter provides an exploratory review of how boys and adolescent males aged 10–19 years, as defined by the [World Health Organisation \(2025\)](#), engage with, are influenced by and occasionally become radicalised by misogynist ideologies within digital spaces. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature from media studies, sociology, gender studies, psychology and terrorism studies, it explores the links between masculinity, misogyny, the manosphere and extremism. The chapter highlights how social media, algorithms, anonymity and performative culture can help spread gendered hate speech and violence beyond online realms. By combining theory with real-world examples, it contributes to ongoing debates about digital citizenship, the development of children and adolescents and the urgent challenge of gendered extremism today. It provides an academic transdisciplinary perspective on radicalisation, emphasising that violent extremism is not limited to any one faith community. Instead, extremism is seen as a complex, multifaceted issue rooted in various groups and movements that promote violence for political or social aims. Considering this, the chapter will concentrate on the manosphere, Incel communities, and extremist misogyny.

Children's digital lives

A comprehensive analysis of children's digital lives goes beyond the scope of this chapter. This introductory section aims to provide an overview of the current digital environment for children and adolescents in general, before examining the specific role of social media to offer context for the following sections. Over the past few decades, the rapid development of digital

technologies has transformed societal structures, dynamics and relationships. Today, children worldwide are born into societies where digital technologies are deeply integrated into daily life, impacting nearly every aspect of their existence (Schwarz, 2021; UNICEF, 2025). For children and adolescents, technological devices intersect with various facets of their lives, including family environments, play, communication, social interactions, knowledge acquisition, entertainment, worldview development and education (UN, 2023; UNICEF, 2025). Consequently, the internet has evolved from a luxury to a fundamental and influential component of their daily experiences (The Children's Society, 2025; UNICEF, 2025). The widespread accessibility of digital technologies has introduced new opportunities and freedoms for children and adolescents, underscoring the importance of developing digital literacy skills at an early age. Such skills are essential to enabling young individuals to navigate the digital landscape safely and responsibly, thereby promoting responsible digital citizenship in an increasingly interconnected world (The Children's Society, 2025; UNICEF, 2025). Considering the advancements in technology and the evolving digital contexts of children's lives compared to previous generations, scholars such as Herring (2008) and Bennett (2025) describe children and adolescents as increasingly being 'digital natives' and refer to them as the 'net generation'.

In contrast, adults are often characterised as 'digital immigrants', suggesting a growing divide in which children and adolescents are fundamentally different from adults in their technological engagement and understanding (Prensky, 2001). This divergence implies that children and adolescents, due to their extensive exposure and interaction with technology, possess a level of digital literacy that many adults lack, potentially leading to a disconnect in understanding online behaviours and digital environments. As digital technologies continue to advance and a blurring of online and offline selves emerges, a growing concern is developing regarding the widening digital divide between adults and children. This divide raises significant issues related to the mental health and overall well-being of young people, as well as increased risks of abuse, bullying, radicalisation, grooming, exploitation, malicious influences and a rise in obesity (Bond, 2014; NSPCC, 2023; United Nations, 2023; The Children's Society, 2025).

Social media platforms utilise globalisation to connect an unprecedented number of international communities (Thompson, 2011). Bond (2014) examines the ongoing paradox of childhood engagement with social media within the rapidly changing digital landscape, highlighting the increasing interconnectedness between content creators and consumers in late modern society (Eickelman and Anderson, 2003). To better understand children's interaction with social media, researchers such as Boushel, Fawcett and Selwyn (2000) and Bond (2014) have shown that children are adopting social media at progressively younger ages. Recent data from Ofcom (2025)

indicates a year-on-year rise in social media use among 3- to 5-year-olds since the COVID-19 pandemic, with nearly 40 per cent of children aged 3–5 using social media in 2024. More concerningly, 19 per cent of these children operate the digital applications independently. Overall, [Ofcom \(2025\)](#) reports that 93 per cent of UK children aged 12–17 hold their own social media accounts. However, in an era marked by digital proliferation, milestone birthdays during childhood have gained increased importance, potentially shaping the childhood experiences of those who reach them ([Livingstone and Sylwander, 2025](#)). The age of 13 is widely recognised as the age of digital consent, supported by policies and legislation governing access to social media and networking platforms ([Livingstone and Sylwander, 2025](#)). Building on this, the [Children's Commissioner's \(2024\)](#) report states that 91 per cent of children aged 13–16 in England and Wales possess social media accounts.

Nevertheless, most social media platforms in the United Kingdom specify a minimum user age of 13; however, research by [Ofcom \(2024\)](#) and [Woodhouse and Lalic \(2024\)](#) shows that a significant proportion of children register with a user age exceeding their chronological age, nearly half of all 8- to 15-year-olds report being at least 16, with two-fifths of 8- to 12-year-olds and nearly six in ten 13- to 15-year-olds maintaining social media accounts. Additionally, about 60 per cent of children aged 8–12 have their own accounts. In academic debates regarding the digital age of consent, it is common to frame the issue within a dichotomy of risk versus opportunity, emphasising the need to find an appropriate balance for children's engagement with digital content ([Woodhouse and Lalic, 2024](#)). The primary aim is to ensure the safety and protection of minors by preventing their access to adult content and experiences, a goal supported by various legal, regulatory and policy measures. Although this approach is relatively straightforward for standard forms of adult identification, challenges persist because of the widespread presence of 'age-blind' internet content that complicates enforcement ([Livingstone et al, 2024](#); [Livingstone and Sylwander, 2025](#)).

The rise of gendered cyberhate and misogyny

As Web 2.0 matured during the late 2000s and early 2010s; its socio-political implications became increasingly apparent, especially regarding the rising visibility of online hostility directed at women and girls. While the democratising potential of digital platforms was widely recognised and celebrated, scholars and activists increasingly pointed out how these same technologies enabled new forms of gender-based violence ([Philips, 2015](#); [Jane, 2017](#)). This phenomenon, known as cyber violence against women and girls (cyber VAWG), covers a broad range of behaviours, including

but not limited to doxxing,¹ trolling,² flaming,³ image-based abuse.⁴ The period from the late 1990s to 2010 is often seen as a time of relative silence regarding cyber misogyny in mainstream discourse and public rhetoric. [Jane \(2017\)](#) emphasised that this silence was not due to the absence of gender-based violence and hostility online, but because they were dismissed as insignificant or ‘not real’ violence. Early cases of abuse were frequently downplayed or regarded as isolated incidents rather than as signs of systemic misogyny embedded within digital and online cultures ([Jane, 2017](#)). This potential epistemic blindness allowed misogynistic ideologies to thrive across various parts of the web, especially in communities that began to embrace anonymity and antagonism.

[Phillips \(2015\)](#) describes a golden age of subcultural trolling between 2008 and 2011, during which online forums like 4chan s/b/ and Reddit’s r/atheism became fertile ground for coordinated harassment campaigns. What initially appeared as nihilistic or ironic humour and behaviour gradually developed into politically motivated, gendered hostility, with women and girls, particularly feminists and people of colour, becoming primary targets of networked misogyny ([Phillips, 2015](#); [Hoffman, Ware and Shapiro, 2020](#)). The visibility of cyber misogyny and cyber VAWG increased in the early 2010s, aligning with the emergence and growth of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Reddit. Unlike the static sites of Web 1.0 or the early blogosphere of Web 2.0, these platforms enabled mass participation, real-time interaction, and the viral sharing of ideologies and content for the first time ([Choudhury, 2014](#)). Consequently, the speed and scale at which abuse could be perpetrated were amplified, with women and girls, especially those in the public eye or holding feminist views, often targeted ([Mantilla, 2015](#)). Hashtag campaigns like #GamerGate appeared, bolstering the organisation and mobilisation of loosely linked online actors engaged in sustained harassment, signalling the advent of a new form of ‘networked misogyny’ ([Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016](#)).

These new patterns of misogyny and abuse are closely linked to the rise of toxic subcultures and networked communities that thrive on exclusion, antagonism, victimisation and the creation of self and group identities through opposition ([Mantilla, 2015](#)). Data from the [Global Action Plan \(2025\)](#) shows that 69 per cent of the boys surveyed have seen content hostile towards women and girls without actively searching for it. The dynamics of these communities are shaped by digital tools that enable them to recruit, radicalise and amplify their ideologies. Pseudonymity and anonymity enable users to evade accountability, whereas algorithmic curation fosters ideological homogeneity ([Regehr et al, 2024](#)). The widespread nature of such digital hostility has begun to uncover deeper tensions at the intersection of gender, technology and power. As scholars such as [Massanari \(2017\)](#), [Marwick and Caplan \(2018\)](#) have argued, platforms have often and continue to fail to

address the structural inequalities embedded in their design, moderation policies and business models. The prioritisation of engagement and virality over safety and equity has historically enabled the normalisation of online hostility, with gender-based violence, abuse, and harassment becoming a feature of contemporary digital cultures.

Discursive terrain of boyhoods and adolescent masculinities

Masculinity has developed into a complex and multifaceted concept within the discourses of gender and identity politics. Over the past 20 years, society's understanding of masculinity has faced significant challenges and changes. [Connell \(2000\)](#) suggested nearly three decades ago that boys often learn masculinity through the detailed interactions among peer relationships, adult-child dynamics and prevailing cultural norms. Additionally, Connell argues that masculinities are inherently adaptable, capable of being constructed and reconstructed to reflect modern social ideals, with historical, political and cultural contexts shaping earlier forms of masculinity. For theorists such as [Connell \(1995\)](#) and [Seidler \(2007\)](#), masculinity is frequently enacted and constructed through phrases such as 'real men do not cry' and 'man up', which can be viewed as integral components of masculinity and identity performance throughout history and in contemporary society. In this context, [Connell \(1987\)](#) argued that hegemonic masculinity theory offers a crucial foundation for critical studies of masculinities. Elsewhere, she describes hegemonic masculinity as 'the set of gender practices that represents the currently accepted solution to the problem of patriarchy's legitimacy, ensuring (or being perceived to ensure) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' ([Connell, 1995](#), p 77). However, [Waling \(2019\)](#) criticises this theory, asserting it overemphasises structural constraints while overlooking individual agency and remains rooted in heteronormative gender ideas. As a result, there is a call for an expanded framework that includes both hegemonic and alternative, non-hegemonic masculinities, along with the diverse lived realities and experiences of boys and adolescent males. In this light, scholars such as [Morgan \(2006\)](#), [Roberts \(2013, 2015\)](#), [Tarrant et al \(2015\)](#) and [Ward et al \(2017\)](#) have consistently raised concerns about boys and adolescent males in the Global North since the 1990s, linking these concerns to rising suicide rates, deteriorating mental health, antisocial and delinquent behaviour, lower educational outcomes and a deficiency of suitable male role models.

Building on this foundation, [Kimmel's \(2009\)](#) study involving boys and adolescent males aged 16–24 uncovered a trend of aimlessness among these individuals as they struggled to define manhood in contemporary society, a phenomenon he termed 'Peter Pan Syndrome'. This syndrome describes boys and adolescent males' tendency to seek external validation, often

engaging in reckless behaviour while avoiding taking responsibility that traditionally would be expected of them, such as, 'finishing their education, marrying, having a child, getting a job and moving out of their parents' home' (Dotzenrod, 2014). Wesselmann and Kelly (2010) have illuminated how discourses of masculinities, combined with the performance and enactment of masculinities and boyhoods, repeatedly manifest in male-dominated group settings, as seen in the manosphere and networked misogyny groups. Clark (2018) argues that expressions of masculinity within male friendship groups are connected to hierarchical power structures. These performances can reinforce camaraderie among men, influence their identity development and uphold patriarchal power relations.

Furthermore, Social Intensity Syndrome (SIS) further supports these ideologies and discourses, contributing to the emergence and perpetuation of 'laddism' (Zimbardo, Ferreras and Bruskill, 2015). Positioning sexual discourses within a framework that reinforces heterosexual norms, and the subjugation of women and girls raises serious concerns, especially when considering networked misogyny and cyber VAWGs. In environments characterised by all-male social and cultural dynamics, participation in such group interactions is linked to increased arousal and heightened testosterone levels (Zimbardo, Ferreras and Bruskill, 2015). The discourse surrounding male sexual drive suggests that males and boys have a more inherent inclination towards heterosexuality than females and girls, resulting in the expression of male-dominated sexual agency (Holloway, 1989). This nominalisation often results in aggression directed at women and girls (Holloway, 1989). The problematic nature of this discourse underpins various subcultures within networked misogyny and VAWG. Additionally, Zimbardo and Coulombe (2015) point out that inadequate attachment and bonding with caregivers are key features of SIS. This framework arguably promotes negative attitudes towards women and girls, leading individuals to prefer pornography and prostitution over consensual face-to-face interactions.

Gavey (2005) and Keller, Mendes and Ringrose (2016) argue that such discourse obscures and constrains notions of respect and consent, cultivating a cultural environment that normalises gender-based sexual misogyny. Recent research by Amnesty International (2025), involving over 3,000 Gen Z individuals, corroborates these findings, revealing that 73 per cent of social media users have encountered misogynistic content, with half witnessing it on a weekly basis. Specifically related to cyber misogyny, 53 per cent of participants reported receiving inappropriate emojis on their posts and photos, 44 per cent unsolicited explicit images, 40 per cent unwanted sexually suggestive comments, and 27 per cent experienced online stalking. Consequently, Roberts (2014) argues that the crises examined in the literature contribute to a perception of boys and adolescent males as both vulnerable and potential threats to others, leading to notions of contested

victimhood. Ford (2018) claims that although there is widespread concern about the safety of girls, adolescent females and women, there is a significant lack of concern about the potential for boys and adolescent males to cause harm. Moreover, Roberts (2000) has previously highlighted a troubling trend where boys who adopt hegemonic masculine traits increasingly show indifference towards the consequences associated with sexual harassment.

As this section has shown, the often complex and evolving discursive landscape of boyhoods and masculinities is essential to understanding the broader phenomenon of cyber and networked misogyny. Online cultures and environments frequently amplify traditional, hegemonic and toxic masculinities, shaping the identities, beliefs and behaviours of boys and adolescent males in ways that reinforce systemic gender inequality and promote the spread of misogynistic ideologies in online digital spaces.

Manosphere and toxic masculinities of boys and adolescent males

Since the emergence of Web 2.0 and the proliferation of social media platforms, there has been a noticeable increase in hegemonic and toxic masculinity discourses, often linked with anti-feminist rhetoric, across various online spaces such as blogs, forums, message boards and social media (Ging, 2019; Stahl, Keddie and Adams, 2023). A key development in this trend is the rise of the manosphere in 2009, initially conceived as an online network of men's interest communities hosted on Blogspot. This concept was further expanded in 2013 by Ian Ironwood, a porn marketer and pseudonymous author of the self-published work 'The Manosphere: A New Hope for Masculinity' (Ging, 2019). The manosphere encompasses a diverse array of subjectivities, motivations, topics and subcultures. Included in this spectrum are groups such as Involuntary Celibates (Incels), Pickup Artists, Gamer Geeks, Traditional Conservatives (TradCon), Fathers' Rights Movements, NoFappers, Female-Supported Misogyny, Conservative Anti-Feminist Women, Tradwives and Far-Right Women.⁵ The dissemination of the manosphere involves a loose network of blogs, forums and video channels acting as modern centres of online misogyny and hostility. As a result, the manosphere has drawn increasing attention from media, scholars and policy makers, especially regarding its promotion of extreme misogyny, its links to offline acts of violence against women and its implications for policies and research on the connection between violent misogyny, extremism, radicalisation and terrorism (OECD, 2023).

Incels are currently regarded as one of the most dangerous and violent subcultures within the broader manosphere. The term originated from 'Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project', an undergraduate initiative by a Canadian woman in 1997, which aimed to support and rehabilitate

individuals experiencing frustration with dating and sexuality, specifically those who had not engaged in sexual activity for a period despite their efforts. By 2003, two distinct forums had emerged: one aligned with the original project's supportive goals, and another that became increasingly militant and hostile towards women and girls, advocating for violence against them, which has continued to proliferate today (Hoffman, Ware and Shapiro, 2020). Notable incidents documented by the Incel movement include Marc Lepine's 1989 massacre in Montreal, where he killed 14 women and injured ten others, often seen as an ideological precursor to the Incel movement (Moonshot, 2020). Although Lepine's attack predated the digital era, his targeting of women has led to his reverence in online manosphere spaces (Bloom, 2022). Conversely, Elliot Rodger's 2014 attack, fuelled by a 107,000-word online manifesto declaring a 'war on women', exemplifies how digital misogyny can translate into real-world violence. Rodger is now regarded as a 'Saint' within the Incel community, symbolising a new wave of online misogynist terrorism (Rodger, 2014; Moonshot, 2020). It is therefore essential to examine the spatial and cultural contexts of the manosphere both online and offline. Several high-profile offline attacks are glorified within these communities, including the 2015 Oregon shooting, the 2018 incidents in Toronto and Florida targeting women and girls, and the 2021 UK attack linked to the manosphere that resulted in five fatalities. As of 2022, at least eight mass violence incidents attributed to Incels have resulted in over 50 deaths (Zimmerman, 2024). Zimmerman (2024) advocates for recognising these attacks as misogynist terrorism, motivated by deep-seated animosity towards women and feminism, to instil fear among women globally and advance a political agenda.

The notable rise in manosphere content aimed at boys and adolescent males emphasises their vulnerability and susceptibility to unknowingly being drawn into the manosphere, often without conscious realisation, and subsequently engaging with more extreme material. Considering the spatial dynamics of online misogyny and boys and adolescent males, a recent study by Baker et al (2024) simulated online interactions of boys and adolescent males on TikTok and YouTube to examine the prevalence of manosphere content within 'clean' accounts. The study used ten fabricated accounts, evenly split across both platforms, representing five distinct user profiles: boys aged 16–18 interested in traditional gender-related content, boys aged 16–18 actively exploring manosphere-related content, and a neutral account. The findings were significant, showing that once an account exhibited an inclination towards manosphere content, there was a noticeable increase in exposure, with the content becoming increasingly toxic and problematic, alongside rising levels of engagement. Notably, toxic content was detected within the first 23 minutes across all accounts, with direct manosphere-related material appearing within 26 minutes.

Additionally, [Over and colleagues \(2025\)](#) highlight that the attractiveness of online misogyny is increasing within this demographic, primarily driven by extreme and frequent controversial statements disseminated by social media influencers. Prominent figures within this masculine influencer community, such as Andrew Tate, Cooper Sterling, Jordan Peterson and Myron Gains, have faced criticism for endorsing misogynistic viewpoints while capitalising on male insecurities and promoting anti-feminist rhetoric ([Baker et al, 2024](#)). Furthermore, a 2022 study conducted by the Centre for Countering Digital Hate on TikTok revealed that content involving Andrew Tate accumulated over 250 million views and approximately 5.7 million followers. The research also identified 47 YouTube videos containing highly misogynistic content, some of which included paid advertisements from various brands. It is estimated that YouTube generated roughly £3.4 million in advertising revenue from these videos alone ([Centre for Countering Digital Hate, 2025](#)). It is no surprise given the attention and revenue potential of hosting such content, that social media companies are not supportive of limitations being placed upon their lucrative business models.

In late 2022, Meta Platforms Inc. (previously known as Facebook Inc.), a provider of social networking services, suspended Tate's official accounts across multiple social media platforms due to violations of company policies concerning 'dangerous organisations and individuals' (Smith, 2022). Prior to these bans, Tate's Instagram account amassed approximately 4.7 million followers. Subsequent to the suspensions, his accounts were also removed from TikTok and YouTube on account of recurrent breaches of community guidelines and terms of service, particularly related to hate speech ([Haslop et al, 2024](#)). Despite these restrictions, it is crucial to acknowledge that Tate's ideological messages persist and continue to be disseminated online, facilitated by his followers – primarily male – who employ algorithmic tools to distribute his content. This evidences how influencers leverage popular social media platforms among the youth, thereby extending their reach and impact on young males and adolescents ([Haslop et al, 2024](#)). Their persistent digital presence then raises concerns regarding the potential influence of Tate's misogynistic rhetoric on adolescent males and young boys, potentially fostering similar worldviews or engaging them with comparable discourses online ([Fazackerley, 2023](#); [Haslop et al, 2024](#)). Furthermore, these dominant discourses of masculinity are arguably designed to appeal to young boys and adolescent males, who are seen to respond to the solutions for current societal crises and the insecurities faced by young boys and adolescent males, offered by misogynist influencers. The appeal of such misogynistic content is constructed through imagery related to luxury cars, motorcycles, watches, symbols representing physical strength and dominance and financial and sexual success among young males, which can be linked to the depiction of hegemonic masculinity.

Additionally, there is growing evidence from several scholars (Bragg et al, 2022; Stahl, Keddle and Adams, 2023; Haslop et al, 2024) that influencers promoting misogynistic views may contribute to the spread of extremist ideologies and the radicalisation of young boys and adolescent males into extremist misogyny. For example, research by Global Action Plans (2025) indicates that one in ten boys aged 11–14 years now encounter ‘harmful’ content online within the first 60 seconds of logging into online spaces, and 52 per cent are familiar with the manosphere, with a third of these young boys expressing a favourable view of these influencers. Building on this, Hope Not Hate (2023) conducted a survey of adolescent males aged 16–17, which found that 80 per cent of British boys in this age group had engaged with content created by Andrew Tate, while only 60 per cent had heard of the current British Prime Minister. Furthermore, Internet Matters (2023) discovered that 56 per cent of young fathers under 35 approve of Andrew Tate, highlighting the potential influence on a generation of boys and adolescent males through family and social interactions, as well as online cultures characterised by misogynistic practices. As evidenced, in these environments, ideologies advocating male supremacy, anti-feminism, and sexual entitlement are actively created and spread (Ging, 2019).

Although the widespread influence of social media on the dissemination of ideologies is broadly recognised, scholarly research focusing specifically on its effects on boys and adolescent males within the manosphere remains limited (Banet-Weiser and Sturken, 2019; Abidin, 2021). Ging and Murphy (2021) identify notable gaps in understanding the motivations and experiences of boys and adolescent males involved in the manosphere, as well as the role of social media in shaping their beliefs. Scholars, then, are increasingly analysing the links between online misogyny, influencer culture, and the manosphere as a form of radicalisation with research indicating that pathways to extremism are becoming more similar across different ideological spectrums (Bjorgo, 2008; Koehler, 2016). However, it is important to recognise that, although much of the existing literature focuses on political and religious radicalisation, misogynistic extremism remains relatively under-explored. Hoffman, Ware and Shapiro (2020) highlight that most research on Incels and the manosphere has been carried out by journalists rather than by intelligence analysts, law enforcement agencies or academic experts.

According to Botto and Gottzen (2023), only two studies explicitly examine the processes of radicalisation and de-radicalisation among men and boys in the manosphere, with an emphasis on misogyny. One such study is a comprehensive investigation by Ribeiro (2021), which shows that migration patterns within the manosphere often begin with expressions of mild misogyny. With increased engagement, users may shift towards more extreme ideological discourses, adopting frameworks such as the ‘Red Pill’ or the nihilistic ‘Black Pill’. The ‘Red Pill’ and ‘Black Pill’ subcultures

derive their names from the 1999 film ‘The Matrix’ and are based on ideologies that advocate male dominance as a means of resisting what they perceive as a feminist and female-centred society (Ging, 2019). This perspective uses pseudo-scientific claims and evolutionary psychology to support the notion that inherent sexual differences drive mating preferences between males and females (Van Valkenburgh, 2018). Central to the ‘Red Pill’ worldview is the concept of sexual marketplace value and hierarchy, which promotes the belief that women are hypergamous, seeking men with high attractiveness or social status. It is argued that hypergamy has facilitated the rise of feminism, contributed to the decline of marriage and empowered women, thereby impairing some men’s and boys’ capacity to establish romantic relationships (Ging, 2019; Johanssen, 2021). According to the ‘Red Pill’ theory, an individual’s sexual market value is determined by physical appearance, financial resources and social capital; men are encouraged to enhance these attributes to improve their chances of success. Conversely, individuals with lower scores may develop a pessimistic ‘Black Pill’ outlook characterised by hopelessness and perceived victimisation. This outlook can foster suicidal ideation and promote increasingly extreme and misogynistic beliefs, which may endorse violence (Roose, Flood and Alfano, 2020; Botto and Gottzen, 2023). A vital component of this narrative is the victimhood discourse, wherein ‘Red Pill’ adherents perceive themselves as victims of societal discrimination driven by feminism and advancements in women’s rights, sometimes linked to calls for violence against women and girls (Johanssen, 2021). Furthermore, Hoffman, Ware and Shapiro (2020) highlight the similarities in radicalisation processes between the Incel movement and Jihadist groups within online environments, emphasising the challenges faced by counterterrorism agencies in tackling these emerging threats. These parallels are apparent in the development of ideological echo chambers, the potential for real-world violence, a culture of martyrdom, suicidal terrorist acts and issues related to sex and sexuality (Hoffman, Ware and Shapiro, 2020).

Additionally, Regehr’s (2022) qualitative research reveals that engaged members of the manosphere seek a sense of belonging, community and identity. The study suggests that a transition to more radical Incel ideologies involves transforming perceptions of loneliness into emotions such as anger, feelings of victimisation and societal grievances, similar to patterns observed in other extremist and terrorist organisations. This transformation fosters extreme misogynistic beliefs and justifies violence against women and girls, as well as the glorification of past mass murders (Botto and Gottzen, 2023). Regehr’s (2022) study examined young men’s involvement in the manosphere and found that their participation was driven not by misogyny or extremism, but by a desire for ‘identity, community, protection, and excitement’ (Bjoro, 2008). This finding aligns with other research on recruiting children and

young people into various extremist groups (Al Raffie, 2013; Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013; Awan, 2017; Schils and Verhage, 2017). Furthermore, a growing body of academic literature suggests that young males are particularly vulnerable to radicalisation by extremist organisations, mainly due to social pressures and expectations linked to conforming to hegemonic masculine ideals (Botto and Gottzen, 2023; Cooper, 2025). Extremist groups offer validation for young males to assert their masculinity as ‘real men’ amid these pressures.

Practitioner and policy responses

Despite the severity of attacks on women and girls previously highlighted, current laws and policies have not responded to the manosphere and Incel movements with the same urgency as other extremist threats. When considering a practitioner or policy response, a fundamental understanding of extremism and radicalisation is essential. These are recognised as multifaceted and global phenomena that emerge within diverse sociocultural and political contexts (Horgan, 2014). Central to discussions of extremism and violent ideologies is the understanding that they act as tools for enacting social, cultural, or political change (McDonald, 2020; Barcellona, 2022; Decook and Kelly, 2023). While extremism and terrorism have longstanding histories, it is essential to examine these phenomena within the UK’s legal and policy frameworks to see how they can or cannot be applied to extremist misogyny online. For example, the UK Law Commission (2021) has expanded protections for women and girls due to the rising threat from Incels, who explicitly endorse the rape and murder of females as political objectives; however, these measures do not extend to other subcultures within the manosphere. Hall (2022) articulates that the Terrorism Act (2000) defines terrorism through three key criteria: severity, targeted victims and the intent to advance a cause, including ideological motives. These criteria plausibly correspond with the ideologies and actions of the Incel movement. Hoffman, Ware and Shapiro (2020) contend that Incel violence exhibits patterns seen in contemporary terrorism, particularly hate crimes. They argue that actions undertaken by Incels should be classified as acts of political violence, given their explicit ideological and political objectives, as well as their publicly articulated motivations. Such acts, therefore, constitute a component of the broader extremist landscape with significant security implications. Furthermore, the authors emphasise that domestic extremism and terrorism are often more intricate and challenging to counter than external threats, primarily owing to internal political dynamics. Downplaying these as marginal or apolitical risks can misrepresent the true scope of the issue, underestimating the actual threats, harms and societal consequences involved.

As of 2024, the UK now defines extremism as ‘the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred, or intolerance’ that seeks to negate rights, undermine democracy or cultivate environments conducive to such outcomes (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Department for Levelling Up and Housing and Communities, 2024). Responding to this updated definition, Lowe (2024) has recognised the positive shift in removing the concept of ‘Fundamental British Values’ from the extremism definition but has warned that the new framing of extremism could have broader implications for policy and practice. Lowe (2024) further emphasises that in identifying extremism, it is vital to recognise which ideologies pose potential security threats to the state, which can be facilitated through various means, including but not limited to electronic communication, misinformation as fact and the exploitation of citizens, including children and young people. As a response to Lowe (2024), the Involuntary Celibate (Incel) ideology from the manosphere is now classified within the broader spectrum of extremism, alongside more well-known ideologies such as Al Qaeda, Daesh and the Extreme Far Right and Left. While these developments have transformed the understanding of extremism, it is important to consider the amplification and proliferation of extremist misogyny, especially in online spaces, which has not yet been formally categorised within this.

Moreover, the Shawcross Review (2023) of the Prevent Strategy controversially did not classify Incels as terrorists, asserting they do not meet the legal thresholds for terrorism, despite evidence of increasing referrals of young individuals susceptible to misogynistic radicalisation, who subsequently engage with Channel Panels (Home Office, 2023). While the Prevent Strategy imposes a legal obligation on educational and other institutions to combat radicalisation, proposals to restrict sex and relationship education, coupled with governmental reluctance to designate Incels and similar groups as terrorist entities, have limited opportunities for meaningful dialogue among youth. This gap leaves young people more vulnerable to online radicalisation and the proliferation of gendered hate ideologies within digital male-dominated spheres (Adams, Stahl and Oberg, 2021). This discussion naturally leads to an examination of the role and application of securitisation. Although the concept of securitisation has been deemed problematic, it nonetheless offers three significant functions in facilitating policy responses to threats posed by the manosphere. First, securitisation reframes the threat from a rhetoric of ‘gender wars’, where discourse may overshadow substantive political action. Second, it ensures the allocation of appropriate resources and prioritisation of responses to the threat. Third, understanding the manosphere, particularly the Incel movement, as a security concern allows access to existing policies and legislation designed to address public security threats (Tomkinson, Harper and Attwell, 2020). Emphasising

securitisation shifts the perception of misogynist violence from a private issue to a public security concern, necessitating legislative and policy interventions for mitigation and response.

The Department for Education 2025 is now addressing these issues by developing and implementing teacher training programs focused on the Incel movement, social media influences, online misogyny and other related online dangers (Stahl, Keddie and Adams, 2023). The Personal, Health, Social and Economic Education (PHSE) Association has documented growing concerns among schools about the influence of misogynistic online influencers on children and young people. This issue is especially urgent at a time when young individuals are particularly vulnerable to alternative narratives and the potential radicalisation of boys and adolescent males into forums and communities that endorse and celebrate violence, rape, misogyny and abuse towards women and girls (PHSE, 2023). Personal, social, health and economic education is a means through which primary and secondary school-aged children, and young people can learn about a range of topics, such as healthy relationships, respect, self-esteem, bullying and digital literacy, and should be seen as a preventative educational tool crucial to safeguarding and challenging problematic narratives (PHSE, 2025). Alongside this, the Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education Regulations 2019 make it mandatory under sections 24 and 35 of the [Children and Social Work Act 2017](#) for all primary-aged children to receive relationship education and secondary-aged relationship and sex education, with schools having the discretion to decide how to deliver the content (Department for Education, 2025b). However, it should be noted that parents and carers retain the right to withdraw children and young people from sections of the curriculum related to sex education (Department for Education, 2025a). Given the variability in delivery across the country and the fact that not all children and young people have access to comprehensive sex education, there is a potential risk that some may seek information online. This could expose them to content such as that found within the manosphere, which may be inappropriate or misleading.

The recent debates surrounding the inclusion of the Netflix series 'Adolescents' in educational settings have focused on its portrayal of a young teenager, Jamie, and the Incel movement. There have been calls for the series to be incorporated into school curricula (PHSE, 2025; Thake, 2025). While the series provides some introductory insights into the manosphere and Incel ideologies, it inadequately addresses critical issues such as misogyny, gender-based violence, radicalisation, knife crime and hate crime, and fails to offer interventions, solutions or resources for educators to facilitate comprehensive discussions on these complex topics (Katcorbett2, 2025). Moreover, research from the [Centre for Countering Digital Hate](#) (2025) indicates that the largest online Incel forum, which garnered 2.7 million views within the first quarter of 2025, responded to the series with heightened misogynistic and gendered

hate speech, with approximately 25 per cent of posts inciting hate and slurs, and around 66 per cent containing misrepresentations of Incels influenced by the series. These findings underscore the potential risks associated with using the series as an educational resource without proper contextualisation, notwithstanding its BBFC Age-15 rating. Considering this, [PHSE \(2025\)](#) recommends educators address the underlying issues depicted in the series, such as toxic masculinity and misogyny, through the PHSE and RSE curricula, providing resources like their free guide, 'Addressing misogyny, toxic masculinity and social media influence through PHSE education'. They further suggest that such topics be integrated into broader, planned educational programmes rather than approached in isolation. Nevertheless, because of age restrictions and the option for parents or carers to withdraw children from parts of RSE and PHSE, there is concern about how all children and young people will access this knowledge and education outside the online environment. The importance of an inclusive and accessible approach to education is highlighted.

Another potential area of advancement that can address misogynist violence, public security concerns and the radicalisation of young people into extremist misogyny is the development of the Online Safety Act in 2023 which aims to impose a strict zero-tolerance policy towards online harms impacting children. The legislation highlights social media platforms' obligation to monitor and manage the content they host, thereby strengthening protections for children in digital spaces. It requires organisations to proactively prevent and quickly remove illegal and harmful material, such as cyberbullying, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, pro-anorexia, eating disorders, pornography and content inciting violence ([Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, Home Office and Ministry of Justice et al, 2023](#)). Additionally, the Act mandates platforms to enforce age restrictions and implement age-verification measures to prevent children from accessing potentially harmful content. Social media companies are also required to publish public risk assessments and communicate the risks related to their platforms transparently ([Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, Home Office, and Ministry of Justice et al, 2023](#)). Notably, the Act tackles violence against women and girls, though its scope is limited to revenge porn and the non-consensual sharing of deepfake images, without extending to issues like misogynistic extremism found in certain online communities. Furthermore, in May 2024, Ofcom proposed 40 measures for online platforms to enhance children's safety, including the deployment of safer algorithms, rigorous age verification, and improved moderation. However, a 2024 report by the Children's Commissioner for England and Wales found that the implementation of the Online Safety Act 2023 is falling behind the rapid advancement of technology. As a result, children face online harms and unassessed risks as technologies develop, leaving children and young people awaiting protections to be put in place to shield

them from online dangers. There is no doubt that a time lag will exist between the evolution and development of new technologies, and the ability of governments to respond legislatively. This is primarily due to the bureaucratic processes that parliament must follow to introduce or amend legislation. A key challenge is how to future proof legislation that does not overly restrict public freedom yet protects the most vulnerable.

Conclusion

The development of digital technologies has created a paradoxical landscape characterised by simultaneous empowerment and vulnerability, connectedness and isolation, liberation and repression. This chapter has demonstrated how the internet serves as a contested space where issues of identity, power and ideology are exposed to boys and adolescents. While early pioneers viewed it as egalitarian, contemporary digital environments reveal complex interactions, increased participation and anonymity have fostered creative expression alongside network misogyny and cyber violence against women and girls (VAWG), particularly within fringe communities like the manosphere. These spaces are battlegrounds for cultural conflict, particularly for boys and adolescent males, often perpetuating gender-based violence and challenging notions of accountability and identity.

The radicalisation of boys and adolescent males online is a multifaceted issue requiring policy and research attention. Noting the gaps in literature, it is important to acknowledge the dearth of longitudinal studies exploring how online platforms shape masculinities and boyhoods and the role of digital structures. Misogynistic ideologies exploit vulnerabilities, shaping identities and norms rooted in victimhood and grievance. Thus, future research may benefit from examining not only how young males engage with or enact misogynistic content and practices but also resist such radical influences. Understanding how some boys and male adolescents are able to avoid misogynistic behaviours despite exposure to harmful content is also crucial to informing early intervention strategies. Interventions should go beyond prevention, promoting critical digital literacy, healthy masculinity and inclusive communities but these strategies cannot be effectively delivered without practitioners being trained to identify and challenge misogynistic attitudes, currently amiss (PHSE, 2023). As the digital public sphere gains prominence in politics and society, addressing the structural factors of cyber VAWG is vital for future digital justice.

Notes

- ¹ Doxxing, which is the collection and sharing of personal information aimed at coercion, shaming, or silencing the victim, often as part of coordinated offline campaigns (Jane, 2017; Yar and Steinmetz, 2024; UC Berkeley, 2025).

- ² Trolling, which involves deliberate, deceptive and socially disruptive conduct within online communities, usually carried out for entertainment or personal gratification (Yar and Steinmetz, 2024).
- ³ Flaming is recognised as an online expression of targeted hostility characterised by insults, name-calling, and other aggressive behaviours (Jane, 2017; Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services, 2019; Scriven, 2024; Yar and Steinmetz, 2024).
- ⁴ Image-based abuse, historically referred to in academic literature as revenge pornography, involves the sharing of intimate or sexual images without the consent of the person depicted. This form of abuse is often aimed at humiliating, shaming, or embarrassing the victim. It is frequently considered part of the broader issue of gender-based violence (Yar and Steinmetz, 2024; Women and Equalities Committee, 2025), which includes persistent harassment exemplified by campaigns such as those seen in 2014. During that year, the online harassment campaign known as #Gamergate targeted women in the video game industry, notably by feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian. Sarkeesian documented a harassment campaign that began in 2012 after a crowdfunding appeal to produce a video series on sexism in video gaming. Similarly, in 2014, developers Brianna Wu and Zoe Quinn gained prominence as figures in this campaign. According to Jane (2017), at the height of the campaign, Quinn received over 16 gigabytes of online abuse, while Sarkeesian logged over 100 screenshots of abusive messages within two hours.
- ⁵ For a comprehensive overview of each group, please refer to Perlinger, Stevens and Leidig (2023), 'Mapping the Ideological Landscape of Extreme Misogyny'.

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