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ACADEMIC CRITIQUES OF THE MANOSPHERE: ANALYSING THEMES AND NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the portrayal of the manosphere in contemporary academic literature. The manosphere, a collection of male-oriented online communities, is often critiqued for its anti-feminist stance and perceived social dangers. Through a thematic analysis of 29 scholarly articles, this research identified three main themes: the manosphere as dangerous and evil, wrong and deluded, and emotionally reactive. The findings suggest that academic discourse predominantly frames the manosphere negatively, highlighting its potential threats to gender equality and societal norms. This study calls for a more balanced and objective approach in academic evaluations to avoid reinforcing social prejudices.

Keywords: academic discourse, gender equality, manosphere, social prejudices



INTRODUCTION

“When patterns of inequality and injustice shift, individuals and groups, particularly those advantaged by the status quo, resist” (Flood et al., 2021, p. 393).

The manosphere is a collection of movements of men who use the internet to communicate gendered concerns, social understandings, mutual support, and aspirations whilst challenging feminist ideologies and society’s treatment of males (*Manosphere*, 2022; Sugiura, 2021). It includes groups such as Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs), Incels, Red Pill, Men Going their Own Way (MGTOW), and other male-oriented communities. The manosphere is known for its critiques of feminism and society, claiming that both devalue and discriminate against men (Sugiura, 2021). The communities that make up the manosphere provide spaces to enable men to self-determine and discuss their own concerns, philosophies, and practices from a vantage point of male experience and voice without concern for social censure. It has become, to greater or lesser degrees, a collection of taboo groups in larger society and specifically in academia, governments, and mainstream media.

The manosphere, like feminism, has diversified understandings about men’s issues (*Manosphere*, 2022). Some individuals contributing to manosphere groups (MGs) discourses lean towards similar goals to men’s liberationists, in seeking to free men and boys from restrictive gender norms that negatively impact men. Others are more supportive and affirming of traditional masculine norms, while still others are what might be considered more centrist, who see the strengths and weaknesses of traditional and ‘progressive’ masculine norms. A common thread in MGs is a belief that society devalues, discriminates against, and neglects the wellbeing and human rights of men and males as a group and fails to recognise and care about their concerns. They believe feminism provides the ideological and moral justifications from which to mistreat men, both by framing men (and masculinity) as problematic, dangerous, and privileged, and framing women as underprivileged, inherently innocent, and oppressed. In their view, society takes a one-sided approach to gender (Seager & Barry, 2019), treating women and girls as deserving of support, encouragement, resources, and special privileges. In contrast, they believe feminism views males as socially overly privileged and excessively powerful, which lends itself to equity strategies designed to adjust, redress, and realign the patriarchal power imbalance. For the manosphere, society is not patriarchal, but gynocentric, built from society systemically exploiting men’s resources and labour, and sacrificing their wellbeing, and lives, for the benefit and wellbeing of women and society as a whole (Han & Yin, 2022).

The manosphere is regarded by some as both a fringe (Mamié et al., 2021) and a populist movement (Nesbitt-Larking, 2022). There are concerns it is potentially politically influential (Jordan, 2019) and there have been calls to regard various manosphere groups as potential terrorist threats (O’Donnell & Shor, 2022). Contrast this with the feminists and allies (including modern men’s liberationists), of whom have been accepted at the highest levels of international community – from media, academia, government, and popular discourse (Messner, 2016). While feminists and pro-feminists (i.e., male feminists) are still addressing areas of concern on representation, violence against women, the gender wage gap, and numerous other fronts, they are also concerned about the impact of the manosphere groups for their willingness to challenge feminist orthodoxy and influence. Feminists and pro-feminists actively advocate to address inequalities for women and girls, problematise disapproved masculinities and men, and actively attempt to recruit men and boys to join in their fight against toxic masculinity, for the sake of gender equality that is intentionally aiming to benefit women and girls (Greig & Flood, 2020).



Both pro feminists and feminists are highly critical of the manosphere, minimise claims of male victimisation, or if they acknowledge men's issues, claim that it is patriarchy, not feminism, which is to blame (Messner, 1998).

The manosphere has caught attention in academia. While manosphere theories on gynocentrism, and criticism of feminism are treated by pro-feminists as inaccurate and invalid (Allan, 2015), academics are mindful that with the openness and accessibility of the internet, that manosphere ideologies can be spread and popularised (Rafail & Freitas, 2019). Some fear popularisation may impede, disrupt, and reverse the social progress towards gender equality for women and girls (Vingelli, 2017). While manosphere movements have no broader institutional support, there is a perceived potential their ideas could gain political traction (Maddison, 1999), so they are deemed a threat to gender equality for women and girls. As such, academics have been publishing texts to understand, review, and critique the manosphere or groups categorised as belonging to it.

This research undertook to review scholarly articles and book chapters that report manosphere groups, their behaviour, and their discourses. The writing of scholars will influence how other scholars, researchers, and downstream, society, understand and perceive the manosphere, the people that contribute to it, and by extension, the concerns they express, particularly if these secondary sources are relied upon in place of primary source information. This research seeks to explore how manosphere movements and actors are portrayed in contemporary academic literature.

METHODS

This qualitative research adopted a thematic analysis approach (Clarke & Braun, 2016) to identify and analyse meaningful patterns within the data to answer the request question about how manosphere movements and their actors are portrayed in contemporary academic literature. Thematic analysis was adopted, given its clearly established structure that enables a well-defined approach to coding and theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The sampling was based on articles and book chapters from a University of Southern Queensland library searches on "men's rights" or "manosphere", and included other articles previously downloaded to the author's own reference database before the commencement of this study. As the research is within a qualitative framework, sampling of data does not require a large or representative sample, and it does not aim to make conclusions that are considered representative of the phenomena being studied. The articles selected from this pool addressed men's movements associated with the manosphere. The sampling was partially convenience, and partially purposeful.

Twenty-nine texts were selected for analysis, listed in Table 1. This included one book chapter, one conference proceeding, and the remaining were from scholarly journals, with the oldest published in 1997 and the most recent in 2022.

**Table 1**

Reference	Type
(Allan, 2015)	Theoretical article
(Alschech & Saini, 2019)	Research article
(Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016)	Research article
(Burke & Black, 1997)	Theoretical article
(Coston & Kimmel, 2013)	Theoretical article
(de Boise, 2019)	Editorial article
(Dickel & Evolvi, 2022)	Research article
(Edley & Wetherell, 2001)	Research article
(Evans & Riley, 2020)	Research article
(Flood et al., 2021)	Theoretical article
(Flood, 2004)	Book chapter
(Ging, 2017)	Research article
(Hopton & Langer, 2021)	Research article
(Jones et al., 2019)	Research article
(LaViolette & Hogan, 2019)	Research article
(Maddison, 1999)	Theoretical article
(Marwick & Caplan, 2018)	Research article
(Messner, 1998)	Theoretical article
(Messner, 2016)	Theoretical article
(Mills, 1997)	Theoretical article
(Palmer & Subramaniam, 2018)	Research article
(PettyJohn et al., 2019)	Research article
(Rafail & Freitas, 2019)	Research article
(Salter, 2016)	Theoretical article
(Van Valkenburgh, 2018)	Research article



(Venäläinen, 2020)	Research article
(Vingelli, 2017)	Book chapter
(Wright et al., 2020)	Research article
(Yun, 2018)	Theoretical article

The author downloaded all the articles and imported them into NVivo for coding. Each article was scanned for sections that directly referred to material related to the manosphere, or online communities recognised as being part of the manosphere. Utilising the six-step process of thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2016), the codes were developed alongside the reading, rather than having pre-existing codes. As the codes expanded, the author developed categories that would assist in identifying common themes and commenced developing initial names of themes. As the themes were written up, the author re-read the data in each theme to check that the theme name and its description aligned with the data. As a final check after themes had been developed, all articles were uploaded into Google NotebookLM to double check for potential misrepresentations. The prompts and responses are included in the Appendix.

REFLEXIVITY STATEMENT

The researcher is an adult male, an academic gender researcher, a therapist, and identifies as a Men's Rights Activist. He believes in the importance of supporting both men's and women's rights without partiality.

RESULTS

A total of three themes and three subthemes were developed from the literature surveyed. These included the first theme, and three subthemes introduces the manosphere as socially dangerous and evil, made up of morally bad people who display bad behaviour, of which has negative impacts. The second theme notes the manosphere as people who are misguided and wrong, and the final theme portrays adherents as emotionally reactive. All of the themes combined show a pervasive problematising of the manosphere, implying that they are a socially undesirable movement requiring strategic countering.

THEME 1: MANOSPHERE AS DANGEROUS AND EVIL

Twenty-five of the sources portrayed the MGs as dangerous, hostile, harmful, and/or evil. MGs were portrayed as morally bad, who act in hateful and illegitimate ways, and cause harm.

CATEGORISED AS BAD PEOPLE AND GROUPS

Twenty-six of the articles portrayed the manosphere, either generally or specific sub-branches, as dangerous, harmful, and morally corrupt. The most regular portrayal and accusation was that MGs were misogynist, sexist, and antifeminist in their attitudes, actions and intentions. They are constructed as an enemy of feminism, women, and society.



The most common characterisation of MMOs was that of being hateful, evil, and harmful. Most criticised their anti-feminism and accused them of being anti-women and misogynistic. Feminism was portrayed as a common target of MG's, whereby they direct antagonistic reactive energy, and were often descriptively portrayed as linked with misogyny and the hatred of women.

This finding reflects those of other MGTOW studies, which report that a defining characteristic of the community is their distrust, deep-seated hostility and dislike of feminists and women more broadly (Jones et al., 2019, p. 1916).

The online community of the mansphere uses social media channels such as Twitter to promote a misogynist agenda... They serve to cast men as victims, construct women as a monstrous other (Hopton & Langer, 2021, p. 1).

The online collection of various MRAs websites and blogs consists of extreme, misogynistic viewpoints that blame women, particularly feminists, for the downfall of society. (Vingelli, 2017, p. 5)

One third of articles accused MMO's of being anti-minority, including homophobic, racist, transphobic and Islamophobic. Two thirds of articles focused on general anti-social qualities such as being violent or potentially violent, harassing, hateful, threatening, sinister, and predatory. The following quote lists of several of these accusations succinctly.

Indeed, the problem with the men's rights movement, or one of many of its problems, is its fundamental commitment to homophobia as essential to its definition of what it means to be a man. (Allan, 2015, p. 27)

...the mansphere can produce narratives and actions that are harmful to society at large. Aside from cases of physical violence such as the aforementioned attack perpetuated by Rodger, the mansphere is also connected to neo-Nazi, alt-right, and white supremacist groups, and often includes Islamophobic and racist ideologies. (Dickel & Evolvi, 2022, p. 2)

There are several motivations ascribed and assigned to MGs. These include the aforementioned misogyny, but also hatred, smugness (Evans & Riley, 2020), to maintain male dominance over women (PettyJohn et al., 2019), attempting to maintain privilege (Palmer & Subramaniam, 2018), to reverse women's gains (Vingelli, 2017), to seek revenge (Flood, 2004), and to punish women for challenging patriarchy (Dickel & Evolvi, 2022).

Their discourses mainly blame women for the socioeconomic situation in which men find themselves, thus accrediting the "scapegoat thesis" (Blaisand Dupuis-Deri 2012) as a means to gain power by subjugating and marginalizing women and legitimating the global subordination of women to men (Connell; Messerschmidt 2005). (Vingelli, 2017, p. 4)

Incels and MRAs who are driven by a desire to enforce hegemonic masculinity and reclaim power in society. (Jones et al., 2019, p. 1913)



What the Men's Rights Movement really wants, then, is a return to men's unchallenged, unquestioned dominance-but more than that, a dominance that each individual man feels he shares. (Coston & Kimmel, 2013, p. 380)

17 of the 29 articles categorised and stereotyped the MGs sympathisers based on various social identities. The most common descriptions in order of usage were White, then male/men, middle-class, and heterosexual. These terms are promoted in social justice literature as representing privilege and power. The implication of using these as descriptors for MGs might be to underline to the reader that these White, middle-class, heterosexual men are not in a minority or oppressed group but represent privilege and unearned entitlement. The articles either focused on directly describing MMO's ["MRAs are generally comprised of white, heterosexual men who argue that 'men are in crisis because of the feminization of society.'" (Vingelli, 2017, p. 3)], or criticising the dominance of their characteristics in underlying ideology, as in the following quote.

The ideological machinations of the manosphere serve as a stark demonstration, therefore, of how reduced homophobia can happily coexist with extreme expressions of misogyny and racism, indicating that inclusive masculinity theory's concept of inclusivity is limited to white, middle-class men (Ging, 2017, p. 652).

IDENTIFIED WITH BAD BEHAVIOUR

MGs are presented as demonstrating problematic behaviours. While one article accused men of digital manspreading into women's online spaces (Hopton & Langer, 2021), and antisocial behaviour.

MRAs actions take a variety of forms: insults proffered in discussions, systematic denigration of feminism, publication on the Internet of unauthorized photos of feminists... (Vingelli, 2017)

The latter is evident in a vitriolic smearing of women in public that includes on- and offline rape and death threats, hostility from Men's Rights groups and online trolling of well-known and less well-known feminists. (Evans & Riley, 2020, p. 2)

Most criticism for MG behaviour was that they were essentially reactionary and misappropriated concepts that did not apply to men. The manosphere was accused of being engaged in backlash politics, transforming their personal pain, grievance, and sexism into a political grassroots movement. The word backlash was regularly used, implying destructive and illegitimate kneejerk reactivity fueled by sinister motives noted before.

Backlash can be defined as any form of resistance men exhibit towards policies, programs and initiatives undertaken by organizations to promote the hiring and advancement of marginalized employees (e.g., women, people of color, the handicapped, aboriginal people). (Burke & Black, 1997)

The MGs are also criticised for "co-opting discourses of oppression" (Hopton & Langer, 2021, p. 1). The literature expressed incredulity that MGs could claim that men are victims as a desperate attempt to gain legitimacy to their concerns.



They manufacture victimhood as a legitimate, angry and attention-demanding response to the erosion of their “rights”, masking a deep-seated fear of becoming feminised by passivity (Allan, 2016). (Hopton & Langer, 2021, p. 9)

Authors expressed criticism that MGs cynically appropriated “the ideal of gender equality” (Alschech & Saini, 2019, p. 371). This appropriating of victim language was deemed as a ploy to utilise the language and rhetorical strategies of recognised minority groups and feminism, while using it to attack feminism.

What is so striking is how affective the men’s rights movement has become, how it has co-opted the language of affect, emotion, feeling, and the personal being political to meet its own ends. The men’s rights movement, we might say, has appropriated the language of feminist consciousness-raising. (Allan, 2015, p. 26)

For the authors, males were not oppressed, victimised, or systematically disadvantaged by society, and their attempts to paint themselves in this light equated to a false equivalence. The men’s group identity disqualified them by default to make these claims, hence such claims were viewed with scepticism and criticism. MGs framing men as victims was deeply problematic and inappropriate to these writers.

NEGATIVE IMPACTS

Articles tended to emphasise the negative effects the MGs bring or may potentially bring. Areas flagged include normalisation and the spreading of misogynistic beliefs and attitudes (Hopton & Langer, 2021; Jones et al., 2019), the spreading harmful stereotypes about men who do not conform to traditional masculine norms (Jones et al., 2019), suppressing of women’s voices and undermining feminist activism (Evans & Riley, 2020; Ging, 2017), the undermining of legitimate men’s issues (Salter, 2016), and the manipulation of language to turn the public against feminism (Marwick & Caplan, 2018). The MGs have also been implicated in potentially leading to extreme violence, with five of the 29 articles referring to Elliot Rodger’s killing spree.

The manosphere may even “radicalize” men into committing acts of anti-woman violence (Marwick and Lewis 2017). Indeed, mass shooter Elliot Rodger (2014) wrote that certain manosphere websites “confirmed many of the theories I had about how wicked and degenerate women really are” (p.117–118). (Van Valkenburgh, 2018, p. 2)

THEME 2: MANOSPHERE AS WRONG AND DELUDED

The writers of the articles adopted a worldview, explicitly or implicitly, that women and feminism were to be sided with and was inherently good, that gender equality should prioritise women and girls, that criticism against feminism was wrong, that men as a group are powerful, privileged, and are not systemically victimised, and that male suffering is localised and due to patriarchy, not feminism. Any attempts to criticise feminism, call for rights for men, highlight systemic mistreatment or neglect of men, call for more balanced discourse on gender, was deemed to be wrong, deluded, or a front for a sinister agenda. MGs are deemed to display ignorance (PettyJohn et al., 2019), inherent contradictions (Wright et al., 2020), misperceive feminist communication and terminology (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Flood, 2004), would side with men accused of sexual assault (Norocel et al., 2018), cherry pick evidence to support



their beliefs (Vingelli, 2017) and are the holders of inaccurate beliefs such as men being hidden victims of domestic violence (Venäläinen, 2020).

...men's rights discourse most often displayed a blatant disregard for widely accepted sociological, economic, and psychological studies. Instead, men's rights discourse tended to rely on anecdotal stories, combined with a few highly questionable studies, that provided an emotionally charged basis for the development of an ideology of male victimization. (Messner, 1998, p. 265)

Although the men's rights movement has certainly advanced an interesting narrative, it is a narrative that cannot, in fact, be demonstrated. Indeed, one of the greatest weaknesses of the men's rights movement is that it simply lacks any claim to method or theory. (Allan, 2015, p. 37)

I admit that I am utterly fascinated by the men's rights movement for a number of reasons, ranging from their seemingly sudden presence to the kinds of arguments that are made, the so-called villain of their ideological framework and, perhaps most especially, because of how violent and aggressive its politics are while simultaneously denying, repeatedly, that it is misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, phallogocentric, and patriarchal (Allan, 2015, p. 23).

THEME 3: MANOSPHERE REFLECTS EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY AND VULNERABILITY

The third theme shifts from MGs being wrong and misguided, to framing them as emotionally vulnerable, hurt, scared, and angry, as additional explanations for those attracted by the movements. Some men in MGs are described as disenfranchised (Hopton & Langer, 2021), vulnerable to being manipulated (Coston & Kimmel, 2013) by more educated and financial men (Messner, 2016) leading the various MGs. Allan (2015) argued there was a deeper fear at play, in his article titled *Phallic Affect, or Why Men's Rights Activists have Feelings*:

Returning to the task at hand, we have, I believe, established that castration anxiety is central to the men's rights movement. (Allan, 2015, p. 34)

MGs men are framed as anxious and insecure about coping in a complex modern world (Mills, 1997), of losing masculinity and becoming feminised (Hopton & Langer, 2021), and of women taking advantage of them (Allan, 2015). However, discussion of men's emotions were most commonly highlighting men's anger, rage, and bitterness (Vingelli, 2017).

The basic narrative across readings that refer to the emotions of MGs are that men may be hurt due to individual personal circumstances or worry about men's changing place in the world (Messner, 2016). They see the gains of women as costs to men, and that instead of blaming their own masculinity, or wishing to support women's progress and the dismantling of patriarchy, or recognising the asymmetry of gender rights that women experience, they are influenced by problematic leaders to mistakenly blame feminism, and women, and become bitter, angry and rageful, in a desperate and selfish desire to reclaim male power.

As a result, men's rights websites and pamphlets are clogged with howls of anguish, confusion, and pain. And this anguish, confusion, and pain, we believe, is real, and well grounded. Real, here, is not to be confused with true. These men do feel a lot,



but their analysis of the cause of those feelings is decidedly off-especially when we see that the howls of pain have been transformed into rage and the Men's Rights movement has become a movement of re-appropriating power at all costs, no matter who gets in the way. (Coston & Kimmel, 2013, p. 373)

DISCUSSION

All 29 articles problematised the MGs, including their philosophical viewpoints, their adherents, and their motivations. Overall MGs were portrayed as illegitimate, reactionary movements of dishonourable men of privileged demographics, based their movements on gender and power ignorance, motivated by anger, control, and misogyny, demonstrated through hostility and harassment, and with potentially violent social ramifications. MGs were cast in a universally negative light, with problematic attributes, characteristics, behaviours, motivations, and impacts. They were presented as disqualified and unworthy participants in the gender and rights discourses.

AD HOMINEM GROUP ATTACKS EMBEDDED IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

Many writings examined framed MGs as enemies to feminism, gender equality, and women. Problematic behaviour and beliefs of individuals within the group was specifically sought out for and selected for attention and criticism. The authors also contextualised their writing by negatively portraying both the groups and those aligned with the groups as inherently problematic.

Given the writers represent institutional scholarship and enjoy scholarly support and governmental funding to support the development and propagation of their ideological commitments, how might they morally justify vilifying mainly public internet groups that have much less social, governmental, and institutional power and resources comparatively? They did this through several means. They positioned the targeted outgroups as socially toxic, linking with various social evils such as sexism (Flood, 2004), racism (Ging, 2017), homophobia (Allan, 2015), even terrorism (Wright et al., 2020). Dog whistling was utilised to activate additional prejudice by appealing to social characteristics that are socially acceptable to criticise. Flagging or emphasising racial, gender, and sexual characteristics such as whiteness (Ging, 2017), maleness (Hopton & Langer, 2021), heterosexuality (Vingelli, 2017) and other identities as proxies to stereotype with privilege, power, oppressiveness, and moral insensitivity, enabled the authors moral justification to stigmatise and criticise their targeted outgroup and its members. The MGs were portrayed as both socially evil and invulnerable to damage from prejudice and stigma applied to them from the academics. Some authors attempted to balance with recognition that some men were genuinely hurting on an individual level, and that these men were vulnerable to being exploited and misdirected (Messner, 2016). The implications were that the target outgroups and that which was associated with them, were inherently problematic.

Some articles examined data from various social media platforms to describe and articulate problems that the groups perpetuate in their discourse (Hopton & Langer, 2021; Venäläinen, 2020). In framing the rationale for ferreting and amplifying the problematic elements, evidence would be presented that the group was suspicious or problematic already or could potentially cause social problems or lead to hate or hurt of vulnerable groups (Mills, 1997). While seeking to expose problematic patterns in discourse is not problematic in itself, if the academic discourse solely focuses on illuminating the group by its problematic elements and



failing to present more balanced, accurate, and nuanced understandings of the group, such an approach may both be intellectually misleading and dishonest, and also reify or increase social prejudice against the groups.

IDEOLOGICALLY BASED CRITICISMS: DEPARTURE FROM FEMINIST ORTHODOXY

The criticisms of the MGs were often based on their distancing from feminist commitment and ideology. Feminist ideology emphasises patriarchy, female disadvantage, problematises men and traditional masculinity, emphasises male power, and promotes that feminism is the answer to gender equality for women, and as a byproduct bring gains for men too. MGs challenge many of these assumptions in that they emphasise that both sexes have social advantages and disadvantages, benefits and harms, and that it is important that society addresses issues for both sexes rather than disproportionately allocating support for only one sex. MGs also highlight that society has historically prioritised women's wellbeing and safety, that it relies on male disposability, and that feminism, rather than being a solution, contributes to male disposability and is inherently hostile towards the rights of men. Much of the criticisms of MGs reasserted feminist 'truths' and framed and dismissed MGs claims as made in bad faith, as untrue, and ultimately destructive. The rhetorical strategies used to discredit those who criticise feminism or express concerns for men are similar to those noted by Macnamara (2006): feminist scholars may frame any challenge of feminism or disapproved advocacy of men, as (a) backlash and (b) accuse the challengers of misogyny; both of which were employed by most articles.

DISQUALIFICATION OF MALE VICTIMHOOD

Modern social justice discourse emphasises group identity and perceptions of vulnerability and experience of historical injustice linked with such identities, as central to making moral and general claims of disadvantage and social injustice. It provided theoretical and moral justification to disenfranchise voices that do not fit its own criteria of worthiness. Groups that are deemed to be vulnerable, are to be protected from criticism and negative stereotyping, in case it leads to further injustice and oppression. However, identity groups deemed to be powerful, and hostile are treated as immune from criticism and negative stereotyping, and if negatively affected, may be viewed as a positive decrease of power and disparities important for equity in society, or rhetorically blame targets for their reactivity, and seek to delegitimise their reactions (Caplan & Nelson, 1973).

MGs, particularly MRAs and Father Rights groups, present men as being systemically disadvantaged socially and legally, and therefore in need of justice. By claiming social vulnerability, symbolically they contradict the binary narrative of male social power and oppression, and female oppression and victimisation that feminism relies on. To counter the claim of males also being vulnerable to social neglect, damage, and injustice, and of females being beneficiaries of social protection and support for their wellbeing, the authors have used several strategies to disqualify males from claiming victim status. The first is to recast men's issues, pain, and advocacy as done in bad faith (e.g. rights as a trojan horse to re-oppress women, and reactive backlash), misdiagnosing the cause (i.e. faultily blaming feminism instead of patriarchy), and misdiagnosing the scope (i.e. reflects localised pain, not systemic injustice). In addition to these, they accuse men of misappropriating rights and victim language, of which are



deemed appropriate for some people to use, but for men, it is improper for them to use language of vulnerability, despite the gravity of the issues they may raise.

HOW MIGHT NON-FEMINIST MEN INTERPRET THE MESSAGING ABOUT MEN FROM THESE ARTICLES?

The articles' attitudes towards the MGs, overtly or covertly, appeared antagonistic by portraying them in unbalanced, unfair ways likely to evoke prejudice from readers. For men who align with ideologies sympathetic to men's interests on men's own terms, the articles seem to lend support to male disposability theory proposed by Warren Farrell (Farrell, 1993). Farrell claimed that societies treat male interests, health and wellbeing as disposable for the greater good of society by protecting women and children. Men are socialised to protect and provide, especially for women and girls. They are socialised to not complain about their concerns, to deal with problems independently, or using awareness of their concerns to motivate a commitment to helping women and girls (United Nations, 2014). The Manosphere breaks many of these rules in that they may prioritise what men's interests are, and they do not demonstrate the gynocentrism that feminism promotes (Crowe, 2011). The manosphere breaks traditional gender norms and it may appear that this may in part explain the academics backlash towards them.

Collins (2019) highlights what he calls the empathy gap that society has towards men. Based in the same traditional expectations that men have less social value than women, he notes how internationally enhancing protection and wellbeing for women are prioritised over the human rights of men. While he and other men's rights activists have listed many areas where men and boys are disadvantaged, neglected, and ignored (for examples, see Nuzzo, 2020a; Nuzzo, 2020b; Siddiqi, 2021; Whitley, 2021), society continues to almost entirely ignore men's rights when addressing gender rights. Collins notes that the common response to men expressing their concerns will be some version of 'it's all men's fault' or 'blame men'.

All the articles reflected demonstrate support for, or at least, complicity with feminist ideology. Feminist ideology, its narratives and its equity morality, forms a gender hegemony in society and academia, where specifically men's gender ideologies are condemned, and different groups who challenge the hegemony are scrutinised and marginalised. Within feminism, men as a group, on the basis of their social status, and the privilege, power, and oppressor stereotype ascribed to them, are denied in academic discourse, access to fair and equal representation, denied the right to have concerns fairly and accurately understood, and are vulnerable to being stigmatised and vilified by partisan scholars. The tone taken towards men who do not comply with feminism, and the dismissal of 'grievances' without fair, complete, or accurate consideration, makes it understandable that MGs would mistrust and voice concerns about feminism and view it as colluding to keep society antagonistic and neglectful towards men as a group. For men in these groups, feminism provides the ideological framework and political influence that devalues and dehumanises men as a group, whether feminist allies or not. The portrayal of MGs in these articles merely reinforces perceptions that feminism fuels anti-male sentiment and prejudice.

Feminist scholars have every right to analyse and criticise movements, ideologies, and behaviour. Academic scholarship should strive towards objectivity, and balance, rather than appearing to incite prejudice, polarisation, and sectarianism. It should avoid using the tools of propagandists, such as vilifying those they study, invoking stereotypes, ascribing motives,



applying hostile interpretations and meanings, scapegoating, and appearing to speak from ideological partisanship rather than academic objectivity and curiosity. They need to be careful that their academic advocacy and allyship does not slip into political and emotive propaganda that might intellectually and emotionally prejudice readers against the population being studied. They need to be careful not to slip into a form of academic imperialism and ideological sectarianism when studying outsider groups who they do not culturally align with or understand. Ideological sectarianism is the assumption that one's group's beliefs, values, and perspectives are inherently true, and those who do not align, are essentialised as a type of ideological and moral 'heathen'.

Writers need to understand reflexively their own ideological biases and prejudices lest these biases motivate, distort, and shape the discourse. Peer reviewers should assist in moderating, and ensuring appropriate balance is maintained and bias be challenged. The findings in this study raise ethical issues about scholars using their influential positions to target and vilify public groups, based on gender status, to vilify and stoke social prejudice for a group that is already socially stigmatised (Macnamara, 2006). There is perhaps a fine line between advocacy and hate speech, irrespective of how eloquently it is expressed.

CAPACITY FOR SELF-REFLECTION

There were three articles that showed some critical self-reflection and concessions, though these were written in the context of instrumentally considering how to convert men and boys to become feminist allies. One highlighted that men and boys who have been sexually victimised do not get the same priority or recognition as women (PettyJohn et al., 2019). Another admitted that by criticising MGs at a macrolevel, this has created an "empathy wall" (Alschech & Saini, 2019, p. 376) to distressed fathers. Another author admitted that the feminist approach to interacting with those in MGs may be counterproductive (though ironically named his chapter: Backlash: Angry men's movements).

I think pro-feminist men (myself included) have been too quick to stereotype as committed woman-haters and sexist dinosaurs all men who raise typical "men's rights" issues. We have been sometimes influenced by the dominant model of oppositional politics, in which all such men are "enemies", to be approached (if at all) with disdain, hostility and self-righteous zeal. We have focused sometimes on the negative and we have attributed motives to men's actions which are not necessarily accurate. Such approaches limit our political effectiveness, making it very difficult for us to reach anyone but the almost-converted. (Flood, 2004, pp. 277-278)

Each of these show some concessions as part of their larger agenda, to reduce resistance and impact of MGs rather than to listen with openness and respect to the concerns and criticisms, and to engage in genuine intellectual debate or movement towards building consensus and dialogue. Until this happens, and while both implicit and explicit vilifying descriptions were a common style of portrayal in this literature, trust is unlikely to develop quickly, leaving MGs aligned men more likely to consider feminists enemies of men.

CONCLUSION

The academic portrayal of the manosphere consistently vilified its groups and adherents, depicting them as socially dangerous, misguided, and emotionally reactive. This study highlighted the pervasive negative framing and lack of balanced representation in scholarly



literature. While a minority of articles show critical self-reflection, the overall discourse remained antagonistic, reinforcing mistrust between the manosphere and feminist scholars. For genuine intellectual debate and progress towards gender equality, academic scholarship should strive for objectivity, balance, and avoid ideological sectarianism. This approach will foster a more inclusive and respectful dialogue on gender issues.

APPENDIX

All articles were uploaded into Google's NotebookLM as a second source to cross-reference. The prompts and answers are provided below:

Question: What attributes were assigned to manosphere adherents?

Reply:

The sources, while highlighting the diverse and often contradictory nature of the manosphere, predominantly assign negative attributes to its adherents. These attributes centre around a shared anti-feminist ideology and a perceived need to reclaim male dominance in response to feminist progress.

- **Anti-feminist and Misogynistic:** A core finding across the sources is the characterization of manosphere communities as fundamentally anti-feminist and misogynistic [1-5]. This manifests in their belief that feminism is harmful to men and that men are disadvantaged in society due to feminist policies and ideologies [2, 5-7]. The sources portray manosphere adherents as seeking to undermine feminist progress [2, 4] and blaming women for societal problems and their own personal failings [5-9].
- **Networked Harassers:** The sources consistently describe manosphere adherents as engaging in online harassment, particularly targeting women and feminist voices [1-4, 10]. They are portrayed as coordinating attacks [2, 4], employing tactics like doxing and revenge porn [11], spreading misogynistic language [1-3], and creating a hostile online environment for women [2, 5, 12-14].
- **Driven by a Sense of Victimhood:** A prominent attribute assigned to manosphere adherents is a sense of victimhood, often rooted in a belief that men are disadvantaged in society due to feminism [2, 6, 15-17]. They are depicted as claiming that men's rights are being eroded and framing themselves as victims of a "gynocentric order" that privileges women [5, 7, 18]. This sense of victimhood, as portrayed in the sources, often serves as justification for their misogynistic views and harassing behaviours [10, 19].
- **Strategic Use of Language and Logic:** The sources describe manosphere adherents as strategically employing language and logic to legitimize their views and mask their anti-feminist agenda [4, 17, 20, 21]. They point to the use of terms like "misandry" to construct a narrative of male victimhood and demonize feminism [4, 10, 15, 20]. Additionally, the sources note their attempts to appeal to rationality, science (particularly evolutionary psychology) [1, 22, 23], and even neoliberal economic principles [24] as a way to give their misogynistic views a veneer of credibility.



- **Embracing Contradictory Masculinities:** The sources depict the manosphere as rife with contradictions in their constructions of masculinity [25-27]. They highlight the tension between their claimed victimhood and their desire to assert dominance [27-30]. They also note the conflicting ideals of traditional, hegemonic masculinity, which they claim to reject, while simultaneously policing the boundaries of that masculinity through their rhetoric and behaviours [26, 31-33].

The sources, while acknowledging the heterogeneity of the manosphere, present a largely unified portrait of its adherents as driven by anti-feminist sentiment, a sense of male victimhood, and a desire to reclaim a perceived loss of male dominance. They achieve this through online harassment, strategic manipulation of language, and contradictory constructions of masculinity.

Question: Provide examples of the sources presenting the manosphere adherents in a positive light?

Answer: The sources provided do not contain information on how many articles portray manosphere adherents in a positive light. All of the sources discuss or analyze the manosphere and its adherents in a neutral or negative light.

Question: Do any of the sources offer any positive attributes to adherents of the manosphere?

Answer: The sources provided offer a largely critical perspective on the manosphere and its adherents. There are very few instances where positive attributes are ascribed to members of these groups. However, some sources do acknowledge ways in which certain manosphere groups or individuals attempt to present themselves positively, even if those attempts are ultimately viewed as superficial or disingenuous by the authors.

- **Potentially Positive Traits Framed Negatively:** Some sources highlight traits that could be perceived as positive but ultimately frame them within a negative light. For example, [1] notes that the MGTOW group has been "growing rapidly," suggesting that they have been successful at attracting members and propagating their ideology, even if that ideology is presented as harmful. Similarly, [2] acknowledges that MRHAs (Men's Rights/Health Activists) make "stated commitments to sexual and racial diversity," which contrasts with the perceived homogeneity of other MRA groups. However, the source ultimately argues that this apparent inclusivity is a tactic to gain legitimacy and obscure their anti-feminist agenda.

- **Strategic Use of Positive Language:** Source [3] observes that Greg Andresen, co-founder of the "One in Three" campaign (an Australian MRHA group), admits to strategically using less aggressive language in his advocacy, stating that he has "chosen to play nice and 'toe the line' to get a foot in the door." This suggests a calculated attempt to present their views more palatably to a wider audience. However, the source frames this tactic as manipulative, aiming to advance an anti-feminist agenda under the guise of men's health concerns.

- **Positive Descriptions of Pro-Feminist Men in Contrast to the Manosphere:** Several sources discuss pro-feminist men's movements as a distinct and generally positive counterpart to the manosphere. For example, [4] describes pro-



feminist men as those who "believe that they can work as allies with women in a struggle to transform traditional masculinity and our patriarchal society." While this does not directly praise manosphere adherents, it implies that their opposition to feminism is a negative trait.

It's important to note that the sources predominantly focus on analyzing the negative aspects and impacts of the manosphere. Any seemingly positive observations are often interwoven with critiques of their underlying motivations or framed within a larger narrative of anti-feminist harm.

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