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The Manosphere: A Case Study In The Epistemic And Material
Harms of Hegemonic Masculinity

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Abstract

The manosphere is a loose network of different online subcommunities known for its extremely anti-feminist and misogynistic rhetoric. This thesis aims to deepen our understanding of this phenomenon by providing an analysis of its gender discourse. Because its conception of masculinity and femininity is its most distinctive characteristic, and a key pull factor for men's involvement within manosphere communities, I believe that much can be gained by investigating the manosphere gender discourse. This analysis will draw on insights from the fields of sociology, philosophy, and economics. First, I will employ Raewyn Connell's gender order theory (1987) to illustrate how, in the manosphere, 'alpha masculinity' operates as the hegemonic form of masculinity. Secondly, I will explore the epistemic functioning of the manosphere gender discourse and argue that users resort to the manosphere masculinist discourse in order to articulate and communicate their feelings and experiences of social vulnerability. Their gender discourse is shaped by what I will name 'male ignorance'—a type of wilful hermeneutical ignorance that allows users to express their sense of vulnerability without having to question male hegemony. Male ignorance, I will show, epistemically and psychologically harms users. Finally, I will analyse an additional material harm of male ignorance—consumer vulnerability—and illustrate how the manosphere operates as an exploitative market where content creators profit off their audiences' ontological insecurity.

Abstrakt

Die Manosphere ist ein loses Netzwerk verschiedener Online-Subgemeinschaften, das für seine extrem antifeministische und frauenfeindliche Rhetorik bekannt ist. Diese Arbeit zielt darauf ab, unser Verständnis dieses Phänomens zu vertiefen, indem sie eine Analyse seines Geschlechterdiskurses liefert. Da die der Manosphere innewohnende Vorstellung von Männlichkeit und Weiblichkeit ihr charakteristischstes Merkmal und ein wichtiger Anziehungspunkt für die Beteiligung von Männern an Manosphere-Gemeinschaften ist, glaube ich, dass die Untersuchung dieses Geschlechterdiskurses viele Erkenntnisse liefern kann. Diese Analyse stützt sich auf Erkenntnisse aus den Bereichen Soziologie, Philosophie und Wirtschaftswissenschaften. Zunächst werde ich Raewyn Connells Gender-Ordnungs-Theorie (1987) heranziehen, um zu veranschaulichen, wie in der Manosphere die „Alpha-Männlichkeit“ als hegemoniale Form der Männlichkeit fungiert. Zweitens werde ich die epistemische Funktion des Gender-Diskurses in der Manosphere untersuchen und argumentieren, dass Teilnehmer auf den maskulinistischen Diskurs der Manosphere zurückgreifen, um ihre Gefühle und Erfahrungen sozialer Verletzlichkeit zu artikulieren und zu kommunizieren. Ihr Gender-Diskurs ist geprägt von dem, was ich als „männliche Ignoranz“ bezeichnen werde – eine Art vorsätzlicher hermeneutischer Ignoranz, die es den Teilnehmern ermöglicht, ihr Gefühl der Verletzlichkeit auszudrücken, ohne die männliche Hegemonie in Frage stellen zu müssen. Ich werde zeigen, dass männliche Ignoranz den Teilnehmern epistemisch und psychologisch schadet. Abschließend werde ich einen weiteren materiellen Schaden männlicher Ignoranz analysieren – die Verletzlichkeit der Konsumenten – und veranschaulichen, wie die Manosphere als ausbeuterischer Markt funktioniert, in dem Content-Ersteller von der ontologischen Unsicherheit ihres Publikums profitieren.

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Introduction

Humanity... All of my suffering on this world has been at the hands of humanity, particularly women.

—Elliot Rodger, *My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger* (2014)

On May 23, 2014, 22-years-old Elliot Rodger killed seven people and injured fourteen others in Isla Vista, California, before ultimately shooting himself. He left behind a 141 pages long manifesto titled *My Twisted World*, in which he names his attack a “Day of Retribution” (131) against women, collectively guilty of having denied him love and sexual access:

Women’s rejection of me is a declaration of war, and if it’s war they want, then war they shall have. It will be a war that will result in their complete and utter annihilation. [...]. I will be a god, punishing women and all of humanity for their depravity. I will finely deliver to them all of the pain and suffering they’ve dealt to me for so long. (131)

Rodger’s spree murder has inspired other serious episodes of both online and real-life violence against women throughout the years (Ging 2017). What all these attackers have in common is their association with the so-called *manosphere*. The *manosphere* is a loose network of different online subcommunities that promote anti-feminist and misogynistic rhetoric. Since the Isla Vista killings, it has been increasingly attracting the attention of media outlets, academic researcher, and international organizations—and for several reasons. Firstly, the *manosphere*’s exaltation of traditional gender roles, its promotion of norms of traditional masculinity, and its demonization of women and feminism clearly indicate that a backlash (Faludi 1991) against feminism and gender equality is well under way. Moreover, even though the *manosphere* is first and foremost an online conglomeration of websites, Internet forums, and blogs, the offline impact of its reactionary gender discourse is significant. Indeed, online misogyny been shown to facilitate and normalize real-life violence against girls and women (Baekgaard 2024). This finding is particularly worrying considering that the *manosphere* is an extremely widespread—virtually worldwide—phenomenon. What is even more alarming is that *manosphere* content seems to draw the attention of boys and younger men in particular (UN Women

2025). Their consumption of misogynistic online content might partly explain why young men today tend to hold more traditional views on gender roles compared to older ones (UN Women 2022).

If we want to stem the manosphere phenomenon, we must first gain a comprehensive understanding of the social and economic functioning of this online network. What is it that attracts manosphere users to this type of content in the first place? What is it that keeps them engaged with it? What is it, in fact, that they are looking for, and do they ever find it? Through this thesis, I intend to add to the collective efforts undertaken by researchers in the social sciences and humanities to address these questions (Hoebanx 2024). In particular, I suggest that, when it comes to understanding and counteracting manosphere participation, much can be gained by investigating the manosphere gender discourse. The manosphere view on masculinity and femininity, and on the relationship between men and women, is its most distinctive characteristic, and a key pull factor for men's involvement within manosphere communities. This work will therefore provide an analysis of the manosphere gender discourse (Chapter I) and illustrate its purposes and effects on manosphere users (Chapter II & III).

To achieve this, I will draw on insights from the fields of sociology, philosophy, and economics. Indeed, in addition to advancing current research on the manosphere, this work also aims to make significant contributions to contemporary debates in philosophy and economics. Within philosophy, I build on existing discussions about hermeneutical injustice and willful hermeneutical ignorance to examine how these phenomena can epistemically and materially harm dominantly-situated knowers—an idea that, to this day, remains contested. Within economics, I offer a new perspective on the issue of consumer vulnerability by examining a possible underlying cause that, to the best of my knowledge, has yet to be explored by economists: ontological insecurity.

The thesis is structured as follows. In Chapter I, I adopt the theoretical framework of gender order theory (Connell 1987) to investigate how manosphere users think about masculinity and femininity.

This decision is in line with contemporary scholarship on the manosphere (Ging 2017; Han & Yin 2023; Schmitz & Kazyak 2016; Vallerga & Zurbriggen 2022; Van Valkenburgh 2021). Through Connell's (1987) notion of hegemonic masculinity, I intend to illustrate how, in the manosphere, the concept of 'alpha masculinity' works to legitimize the subordination of women and femininity on the one hand, and 'deviant' men and masculinities on the other.

In Chapter II, I conduct an analysis of manosphere gender discourse that aims to elucidate its epistemic functioning. I first suggest that the masculinist discourse of manosphere users and its ideal of alpha masculinity might be the result of an attempt, on the part of users, to address and verbalize their own experiences of social vulnerability, which they perceive to be hidden from dominant discourse. To explore this possibility, I work with Fricker's (2007) theory of hermeneutical injustice. I intend to explore a personal intuition according to which manosphere users might see themselves as attempting—through the development of their gender discourse—to fill a hermeneutical gap and remedy a hermeneutical injustice. Nonetheless, the notion that men, simply by virtue of being men, might experience systematic hermeneutical marginalization remains a contentious issue. Therefore, I ultimately propose that the manosphere gender discourse is better understood, from an epistemic perspective, as being influenced and driven by what I name 'male ignorance'—a form of willful hermeneutical ignorance (Pohlhaus 2012) akin to Mills' (2007) white ignorance. The notion of wilful hermeneutical ignorance, I argue, can be a useful analytical tool for analysing the alternative, hermeneutical tools developed by manosphere users (i.e., their masculinist discourse). Users' male ignorance, I argue, serves to justify and uphold male supremacy in times of greater gender equality while giving users the opportunity to vent out their frustrations. Nonetheless, it also ultimately furthers users' perception of being hermeneutically marginalized and exposes them to epistemic and psychological harms.

In Chapter III, I illustrate a material harm of male ignorance that—to my knowledge—has still not been investigated in relation to epistemology: consumer vulnerability. The manosphere operates as a market where content creators provide their audiences with content and products, for a price. Despite

the variety of commodities being exchanged, I hold—following Bujalka et al. (2022)—that the manosphere market actually revolves around one single good: alpha masculinity as a remedy for ontological insecurity. My aim is to show, throughout the chapter, that the manosphere market is an exploitative one in which content creators take advantage of a vulnerable consumer base. I define *vulnerable consumers* as those consumers who (1) due to a reduced sense of control (2) either do not realise maximum value from a transaction or even receive a negative value from it (McGraw 2022: 36). I argue that the manosphere audience meets both criteria (1) and (2). Their consumer vulnerability is created and exploited by manosphere content creators. These men take advantage of their consumers' ontological insecurity—which impairs their sense of personal control (condition 1)—to sell them products which, although they promise to resolve this insecurity, only further it (condition 2).

Hegemonic Masculinity and the Manosphere

I. Hegemonic Masculinity

In the aftermath of the second feminist wave, radical and socialist feminism both came under scrutiny for their inability to explain how and why forms of male domination vary across time. While radical feminism was accused of gender essentialism and lack of intersectionality, socialist feminism was criticized for offering overly social deterministic explanations of misogynistic behaviours and discounting the role of individual agency in social processes (Messerschmidt 2018). These criticisms invited a shift from ‘patriarchy’ to ‘gender’ as the focal point of feminist theory. According to social theories of gender, it is socio-cultural constructions of gender, rather than biological differences between the sexes, that sustain and legitimize men’s domination over women (ibid.). Raewyn W. Connell’s *gender order theory* is one of the most important developments of this theoretical approach. It explains the existence and persistence of systemic misogyny in terms of a socially situated hierarchical relation between masculinity and femininity.

Hegemonic masculinity is a central concept in gender order theory. Connell, in collaboration with her co-authors, first developed the notion of hegemonic masculinity while investigating the production and reproduction of a social hierarchy between and among different masculinities and femininities in several Australian secondary schools (Kessler et al. 1982; 1985). The authors observed that male and female students did not conform to one singular model of masculinity and femininity. Rather, each school was characterized by “a particular gender regime” (42) that stemmed from the interaction between multiple masculinities and femininities and their struggle for a position at the top of the schools’ gender hierarchies. The surveyed schools were then the “arena[s] in which a complex, often contradictory, emotionally and sometimes physically violent politics of gender [was] worked out” (35). Among these several patterns of masculinity and femininity—the several ways of ‘doing

gender’ in the school—two would come to be seen by the students as the ‘natural’ patterns of masculinity and femininity: hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. These ideals of masculinity and femininity imposed a significant normative expectation on the gender performance of male and female students (‘That is how a real man/woman acts!’). To deviate from them meant performing a “deviant” or “inferior” (44) type of masculinity or femininity and risking incurring in ridicule, hostility, possibly even violence.

Following the publication of Connell’s renowned *Gender and Power* (1987), hegemonic masculinity has become a primary analytical tool for examining gender and gender relations at the group level. The term ‘masculinities’ refers to patterns of material and discursive practices—behaviours, attitudes, and languages (Whitehead & Barret 2001)—which are carried out by men as a way of performing gender. A particular masculinity is defined as hegemonic when it produces and legitimises a relation of dominance between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and *among* masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005) in a given historical and social setting.

As a simple (and simplified) example, we can look at the traditional ideal of masculinity in the West. Here, the “culturally exalted form of masculinity” (Carrigan et al. 1985: 592) is characterized by attributes such as stoicism, aggressiveness, physical strength, and heterosexuality. To be a ‘real man’, one must comply with the standards set by this type of masculinity and perform the gender and sexual practices it prescribes. Those men who fail to meet such requirements are seen as performing an inferior type of masculinity that is subordinate to the ideal one. This is the first way in which the traditional ideal of manhood is hegemonic: it establishes itself as the superordinate form of masculinity.

Furthermore, the hegemonic ideal of masculinity serves as the basis upon which an idealized form of femininity is constructed. If the ‘real man’ is expected to embody stoicism, aggression, physical strength, and heterosexual desire, then the ‘real woman’ is positioned as his complement—emotional, compliant, delicate, and heterosexually oriented towards men. Such a woman embodies what Connell (1987) names *emphasized* femininity—a type of femininity defined by “compliance with [female]

subordination and [...] oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men” (131). But even when a woman conforms successfully to this emphasized ideal and is thereby perceived as superior to other women who do not, she nevertheless remains subordinate to men.¹ This subordination stems precisely from the very traits that render her the ideal woman. By ascribing characteristics such as sensitivity and physical fragility to femininity and women, male dominance can be rationalized and legitimized. Thus, the traditional conception of masculinity is hegemonic not only because it establishes specific standards for men, but also because it reinforces the hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity and, by extension, between men and women.

A first fundamental feature of hegemonic masculinity, then, is its relational aspect: a hegemonic masculinity can only exist *as such* by virtue of its relation to a corresponding emphasized femininity and to other, non-hegemonic, masculinities (Messerschmidt 2018).

Gender order theory does not reduce hegemonic masculinity to a list of fixed character traits traditionally associated with ‘being a man’, such as assertiveness or physical strength. Neither does hegemonic masculinity simply refer to a type of socially dominant masculinity characterized by “violence, aggression, self-centeredness” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 840). In order to be hegemonic, a masculinity must expressly establish and legitimize specific power relations between men and women, and among men. Indeed, a certain masculinity can be dominant—either in the sense of *exercised by socially dominant men* or of *widespread*—in a determinate social setting without being hegemonic, and vice versa (Stu 2024). As an example of a masculinity that is socially dominant but not hegemonic, Connell and Wood (2005) cite “transnational business masculinity”, a type of masculinity performed by corporate managers that centres around economic and social power while endorsing gender equality (Messerschmidt 2018: 78). A hegemonic masculinity, moreover, does not need to correspond to the type of masculinity that is embodied by the majority of the male population.

¹ It is for this reason that Connell (1987) rejects the term ‘*hegemonic femininity*’ and writes about ‘*emphasized femininity*’ instead.

In fact, it rarely does. This is because hegemonic masculinity provides individual men with a “cultural ideal (or ideals) of masculinity” (Connell 1987: 132) that they only rarely—if ever—manage to actually realize. Few men, for instance, could attain the masculine ideal set by John Wayne’s or Sylvester Stallone’s characters (Connell *ibid.*). Importantly, the fact that hegemonic masculinity is, for most men, more of a dream than a reality leaves space open for everyday individual contestation of the hegemonic ideal and for the possibility that, over time, a new one will emerge (*ibid.*).

If it is neither through ubiquity nor dominance, how does a hegemonic masculinity establish itself as such? In Antonio Gramsci’s work (1971), the term ‘hegemony’ refers to a specific kind of “relation between different social groups” (Yang 2020: 324) in which one group dominates over the others. What distinguishes hegemony from other forms of domination is that, in a hegemony, subordinate groups consciously and willingly participate in their own domination. Their consent is not coerced through violence and direct control. While force may be employed, the hegemonic relationship is mainly legitimized via material and discursive practices, ranging from media content to economic policies (Connell 1987). Unlike Bourdieu’s (1991) symbolic violence, which is “prereflexive” in the sense of being “taken for granted, [...] misrecognized, and [going] without saying or thinking” (Yang 2020: 324), a hegemonic masculinity can only be hegemonic if a majority of men *and* women “collaborate in sustaining [its] images” (Connell 1987: 133). According to Connell (*ibid.*), most men endorse hegemonic masculinity even when they are unable to meet its standards because they “benefit from the subordination of women” that hegemonic masculinity legitimizes. Women, on the other hand, might “find the hegemonic pattern more familiar and manageable” (*ibid.*) and prefer it to its alternatives.

Obviously, this does not imply that every single man and woman will conform to what hegemonic masculinity—and its corresponding emphasized femininity—demand of him or her. Each individual can—and most probably will—engage in a process of negotiation and, at times, contestation of the hegemonic ideal. Women, especially, might fully comply with the requirements of emphasized

femininity or might adopt “strategies of resistance or forms of non-compliance” (Connell 1987: 131). Likely, they will adopt a mixed approach of both compliance and resistance (ibid.).

But establishing the superiority of masculinity over femininity is not sufficient to solidify the hegemonic power of a particular masculinity. The consolidation of a hegemonic masculinity additionally requires classifying other existing, alternative forms of masculinities in a position of inferiority to the hegemonic one. Nonhegemonic masculinities, then, are not obliterated (Connell 1987). They are rather inserted in a hierarchy of masculinities that is legitimised by a majority of men, including those who fail to fulfil the masculine ideal (Yang 2020). The likely major reason for their cooperation is that “most men benefit from the subordination of women, and hegemonic masculinity is the cultural expression of this ascendancy” (Connell 1987: 132).

Connell (2005) categorises nonhegemonic masculinities based on how they relate to the hegemonic one. Complicit masculinities are performed by men who, despite not embodying hegemonic masculinity themselves, benefit from its existence insofar as it allows for the domination of men over women. Because these men gain “a dividend from patriarchy in terms of honour, prestige and the right to command” (67) as well as material benefits, they are willing to be complicit with the patriarchal project itself (88). They might, for instance, engage in everyday behaviours that are respectful and kind toward women, while, at the same time, dismissing the existence of systemic gender inequalities and refusing to engage with or support feminist ideas and movements. Among nonhegemonic masculinities, there are those which are considered illegitimate because they are not ‘masculine’ enough. These “subordinate masculinities” (64) stand in a relation of inferiority with respect to the hegemonic masculinity. A classic example of subordinate masculinity is homosexual masculinity. Homosexual men are frequently accused of not being sufficiently masculine, and their effeminacy marks them as inferior to heterosexual men. Marginalized masculinities (66), instead, are the result of the interaction of gender with other social categories. While certain men occupy a position of power over women in virtue of their gender, they find themselves at the bottom of the

masculine hierarchy due to, e.g., their class or race.² Finally, marginalized men might respond to their cultural and economic powerlessness—which has deprived them of the patriarchal dividend they feel entitled to—by adopting what Connell names a “protest masculinity” (84). It consists in a performance of hypermasculinity, a “pressured exaggeration [...] of masculine conventions” (86). Juvenile delinquency among boys has been cited as an example of protest masculinity (Broude 1990).

The examples I have provided so far refer to specific cultural contexts. They will not hold true at any place at any time. There are important variations in the hierarchy of masculinities across geographical areas and—in the same locus—across different levels, with different hegemonic masculinities coexisting on a local, regional and global scale (Messerschmidt 2018). Moreover, which masculinity holds hegemonic status in a social group can change over time. Existing masculinities are constantly engaging in a competition for supremacy, and the tide might always turn.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity has been widely applied to a range of social and cultural contexts (Messerschmidt 2018). This work extends that approach to the manosphere. Throughout the rest of this chapter, I adopt gender order theory and the notion of hegemonic masculinity to investigate how manosphere users construct and negotiate ideas of masculinity and femininity. I first offer, in the next section, a brief overview of the manosphere and its various communities. In the third section, I finally employ Connell’s theoretical framework to show how the kind of hegemonic masculinity at play in manosphere spaces serves to legitimize the subordination of women and femininity on the one hand, and of men and masculinities that are deemed ‘inferior’ on the other.

² Importantly, their dominance as men might be exclusively asserted over women within their own social group, rather than over women that occupy more socially dominant racial or economic positions.

II. The Manosphere

The past years have seen a rise in the spread and visibility of online misogynistic content, especially on social media (Banet-Weiser 2018). Among the many manifestations of online misogyny, one in particular has drawn the attention of social commentators and academics alike. Born in the late 1980s, the *manosphere* has only become more prominent since. It is the online counterpart of the antifeminist activism of the Men's Rights Movement (MRM) and has carried its rhetoric into digital environments. If, in its inception, the MRM (back then named Men's Liberation Movement) would contend that men and women are "equally oppressed" (Sugiura 2021: 16) by the harmful, societal imposition of expectations and restrictions on male and female behaviour, it quickly changed its tune. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, members of the MRM have been arguing that feminism has gone too far in its fight for gender equality. It has overturned the power relationship between men and women and led to the constitution of a misandrist society in which men are discriminated against and denigrated (Kimmel 2013). As I hope to clearly illustrate in the following pages, the manosphere's gender discourse reposes on the same antifeminist and masculinist bases as the MRM and its users display an analogous sense of urgency to restore those (white) male privileges that feminism has allegedly undermined (Banet-Weiser 2018).

Shaped by the unrestricted nature of the Internet, the anglophone manosphere is not a homogenous, organized community, but rather a widespread network of different online subgroups, each with some unique ideological features. It comprises several websites, blogs, and message boards, as well as social media pages, podcasts, and YouTube channels. This informal online network is centred around men and men's issue (Lilly 2016). Indeed, although manosphere communities differ in some respects from one another and may at times even clash, they are linked by a shared belief system. Their members reckon Western nations have turned, with the advent of feminism, into misandrist societies, where masculinity is under attack and men are at the mercy of women (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016).

Most people, however, have been brainwashed by feminism and remain blind to the truth of male oppression. Manosphere users stand here as an exception. They have ‘swallowed/taken the red pill’ (Lilly 2016; Van Valkenburgh 2021)—an expression borrowed from the (female-directed) movie *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski 1999)—and are therefore “enlightened to life’s ugly truths” (Ging 2017: 3). The rest of the population, instead, has ‘swallowed the blue pill’. They have decided to keep on living “a life of delusion” (ibid.) and to remain blind to the misandry of the Western world.

Finally, although users are predominantly male, a minority of users engaged in the manosphere is composed by women. Among them, we can find female MRAs (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016) and ‘traditional wives’ (or ‘Tradwives’ for short) who reject feminism in favour of a return to the patriarchal family model (Sugiura 2021).

All manosphere users, then, have ‘swallowed the red pill’ and become aware of men’s submission to women. Where each community differs from the others is in the approach its members adopt in order to deal with this bitter realization, as we shall now see.

II.I. *Manosphere communities*

Among the several manosphere subcultures, Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs) are the ones who most resemble, on a thematic level, the pre-internet Men’s Rights Movement. Their activism focuses on perceived attacks to men’s legal rights, such as biased divorce and child custody legislation, false sexual offense allegations, and selective military service (Lilly 2016). Schmitz and Kazyak (2016) define MRAs as “virtual victims in search of equality” (6). MRAs, indeed, believe men to be doubly victimized. If, on the one hand, traditional gender roles harm their physical, mental, and emotional health, feminism is, on the other hand, of no help to them, since it takes attention away from men’s issues and fully redirects it towards women’s. MRAs aim to put an end to cultural and institutional misandry via political activism. To this end, they call on other men to join their organizations and to advocate for men’s rights.

Like MRAs, Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) have ‘taken the red pill’. However, rather than trying to effect social change, MGTOW’s response to male oppression is full “homosocial solidarity” (Sugiura 2021: 24). Their identity politics “tend to be *affirmative* rather than transformative” (Gottzén 2025: 24). Because criticizing women—under the current social and political climate—is impossible and since women “have been programmed to ruin men’s lives” (Lilly 2016: 46), no significant change in gender relations could ever take place. The only way available to men to retain their freedom is to cut off all contact, sexual and otherwise, first with women, and then with broader society.

Pick-up Artists (PUAs), instead, are very much interested in being in contact with women. They suggest ways to ‘master game’, i.e., to seduce women. They regard women as sexual commodities, “mere objects, bodies to be tricked into sex” through looks and money (Sugiura 2021: 24). PUAs believe that any man, if he ‘improves’ himself (i.e., if he gets fitter, richer and more confident), can seduce any woman he desires with some simple techniques (Bratich & Banet Weiser 2019).

Incels (an abbreviated form of ‘Involuntary Celibates’), however, are of the firm opinion that these techniques could not possibly ever work for them. Extending the matrix analogy, incels describe themselves as ‘having swallowed the black pill’, i.e., having accepted the bitter truth that—because of their lack of physical attractiveness and of money—no woman will ever be sexually or romantically interested in them. Their outlook is fatalist: they cannot change, and neither can women.

Surely, the list of manosphere subgroups I have just presented is not exclusive. Moreover, different users can shift from one community to another or feel that they belong to more than one, or to none. As Lilly (2016) eloquently writes, the manosphere is “heterogeneous and nebulous, constantly changing and without a central establishment. It is read, written, contested, added on and replied to, by thousands of contributors, each with their own understandings and intentions” (39). Mine is a schematization, simplified but still accurate, of the most well-known and active communities. It will

allow me, in the next section, to analyse the hierarchy between masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities, that is operative in manosphere discourse.

Despite the clear differences among them, I argue all the manosphere communities described above commit to very similar ideals of masculinity and femininity. In the manosphere, one type of masculinity reigns supreme. Not all users, however, want or can (as incels believe) achieve this masculine ideal. Therefore, we witness an interplay of different masculinities that stand in a hierarchical relation to one another. This does not imply that all manosphere users fall neatly into one type of masculinity or another. Following Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), I allow for individual agency and recognize that each manosphere user might negotiate and individually contest the hegemonic ideal. Nonetheless, I argue that a systematization of the masculinities operating in the manosphere is necessary in order to conduct an investigation into the epistemic and material harms men incur when partaking in manosphere spaces.

III. Hegemonic Masculinity in the Manosphere

To analyse the masculinities at play in the gender regime of the manosphere, I will follow the strategy proposed by Yang (2020) to identify which type of masculinity is hegemonic in a localized context. I will first describe the masculinities performed by male manosphere users (Section III.I). I will then explore the relation of domination, established in the manosphere, between masculinity and femininity, as well as that between hegemonic masculinity and subaltern masculinities (Section III.II). Finally, I will look at the behavioural and discursive practices through which the gendered hierarchy of the manosphere comes to be legitimized by its users (Section III.III).

III.I. *Manosphere and Masculinities*

In their analysis of manosphere spaces, Schmitz and Kazyak (2016) describe male-dominated online communities as sites where conventional understanding of manhood and masculinity can either be challenged or perpetuated (3). While manosphere communities present ideological divergences, there is what Ging (2017) describes as “a common preoccupation with male hegemony as it relates to heterosexual gender relations” (16). These different subcultures may, at times, be at odds with one another but they share a collective understanding of modern society as being one in which women dominate, at the expense of men (Lilly 2016). Misogynistic beliefs feature, to a greater or lesser extent, in the discourses of all manosphere communities. In these spaces, antifeminist masculinities propagate (Ging 2017). Because the emasculation of modern men is conceived as a direct result of the victory of feminism over traditional values, manosphere users can only reclaim their lost masculinity by rejecting feminist conceptions of masculinity and of egalitarian gender relations.

The masculine ideal of the manosphere is one borrowed from traditional Western, white masculinity (Lilly 2016). It emphasizes individual qualities such as “mastery, productivity and rationality, loyalty and honour, and courage and violence” (ibid.: 73), traits that women are supposed to lack. Across the different subcultures of the manosphere, users relate differently to this ideal of masculinity. While some may identify with it, or aspire to master it, others engage in a process of negotiation or (fatalistic) rejection. Despite these multivarious ways of relating to the traditional ideal of masculinity, I argue that “classical masculinity” (ibid.) occupies a dominant position in the manosphere’s hierarchy of masculinities and establishes a hegemonic relation with other manosphere masculinities and femininities.

Manosphere discourse reposes on an abundance of “rhetorical and ideological tropes” (Ging 2017: 7) that transcend any ideological divergence between these masculinist communities. A particularly popular image is that of the Red Pill, previously discussed. Pretty much all manosphere users describe

their coming to the realization of living in a misandrist society—one that oppresses men in the most varied ways— as ‘taking the red pill’. They differ, however, in how they react to this “dark truth” (Updated Glossary of Terms and Acronyms, r/TheRedPill). To analyse their responses, it is useful to refer to another widespread manosphere trope: the categorization of men as *alpha*, *beta*, and *omega* (as well as, more recently, *gamma*, *sigma* and *zeta*) males and the establishment of a masculine hierarchy between them. Men are here classified based on whether they possess or lack a series of physical and psychological traits that, allegedly, make them sexually attractive to women. Among these are traits like confidence, dominance, height, and physical strength, but also individual characteristics such as personal wealth, social status and race (Alpha Traits, r/PurplePillDebate). As we will soon see—despite claims to scientific validity based on evolutionary psychology (Van Valkenburgh 2021)—the alpha/beta/omega hierarchy elicits “confused and contradictory” reactions from manosphere users (Ging 2017: 13). After having ‘swallowed the red pill’, some of them try to achieve alpha masculinity as a way to re-establish male dominance over women. Others (the incels) believe it is not possible for omega or beta men to turn into alphas and resign themselves to a life of subordination to more dominant men. Finally, some (like the MGTOW) reject the alpha/beta/omega categorization for being too ‘gynocentric’ and opt instead for cutting off all contact with women and society at large.

In general, manosphere users believe that alpha men are at the top of the masculine gender hierarchy in virtue of their physical appearance and social and economic status, which make them particularly appealing to women. Alpha males are frequently described as strong, assertive, and risk-prone, while also being protective, trustworthy, and stoic (Dhoest 2025). Their character and behaviour correspond to those prescribed by the masculine ideal of classical masculinity (Lilly 2016). Indeed, the alpha man is the contemporary analogue to the traditional masculine man. He is an excellent leader that has mastery over nature, women, and himself. He is extremely rational as well as independent. He is a protector as well as a provider. Finally, he is courageous, strong and willing to resort to violence if necessary (ibid.).

The primacy of alpha masculinity is evident in the gender discourse of the pick-up artist community, where men are called to reject inclusive masculinity (as it is not conducive to seducing women) and to adopt instead “a strong ‘alpha’ male identity” (Han & Yin 2023: 1932). Men are required to work on their character and to develop self-mastery and self-confidence. Their bodies become an instrument through which their capacity for self-control is made manifest: alpha men “embody” traditional masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005: 851) by furiously working out to build muscle (Lilly 2016) as well as by avoiding masturbation (Sugiura 2021).

Men’s Rights activists, too, uphold the traditional masculine ideal (Lilly 2016). In this community, masculinity is characterized by “(moral and physical) strength, stoicism, bravery, honesty” as well as by being “protective, [...] resourceful, [...] firm” (Daniel Devine, Wiki4Men). Some MRAs, however, explicitly reject the “alpha” label. They accuse the alpha/beta/omega model of being “gynocentric” since it is a “hierarchical classification of men *as valued by women*” (Zeta male, Wiki4Men; my emphasis). They consequently decide to adopt a ‘zeta’ masculinity, defined as a “way of ‘being male’ that positions itself outside of the usual hierarchical model of masculinity” (Glossary, A Voice for Men). Their criticism toward alpha masculinity, however, does not undermine its hegemonic character. MRAs see themselves as having been forced to reject alpha masculinity only because it “has been hijacked by feminists” (Ging 2017: 13). Some MRAs, finally, choose to join the Men Going Their Own Way community (Lilly 2016) and to adopt a non-gynocentric masculinity that eschews all romantic and sexual relations with women. For MGTOW, masculinity—unlike femininity, which is biologically determined—is a social construct open to personal reinterpretation. They call for a complete rejection of traditional masculinity, which—by turning men into “resource providers” (Han & Yin 2023: 1931)—has been responsible for men’s subservience to women (Gottzén 2025). While it might appear to eschew it, MGTOW’s masculinity is actually complicit (Connell 2005) with the hegemonic project of the manosphere. Their “separatist approach” (Han & Yin 2023: 1931) is a form of “radical individualism” (Gottzén 2025: 25) that has no interest in doing away with patriarchal practices and institutions. While MGTOW might not themselves perform

hegemonic practices of masculinity, they do not oppose in any way those who do. They are then free to enjoy what Connell (2005) names the “patriarchal dividend” (65).

In incels’ collective imagination, the figure of the alpha male is substituted by that of the *Chad*. Chad is a “highly desirable” man (Menzie 2022: 78) who is incessantly pursued by women that wish to sleep with him. While acknowledging that the Chad is superior to them in virtue of his appeal to women, incels describe him as “obnoxious” and “brutish” (ibid.). This ambiguity in Chad’s representation does not preclude him from standing for the hegemonic masculine ideal. While incels may have resentment or hostility towards the Chad (Han & Yin 2023), they still regard him as the “hegemonic masculine standard” (Sugiura 2021: 34). He is visualized at the top of that masculine hierarchy in which incels occupy a “subordinate position” (Preston et al. 2021: 835). Incels believe that—because of their physical appearance and lack of social skills—they will never be able to ‘transform into Chads’, i.e., to fulfil the hegemonic standard. Their masculinity is marginalized (Connell 2005) and subordinated to that embodied by the Chad, and it will stay so. Nonetheless, incels contribute to the legitimation of the Chad’s hegemonic masculinity insofar as they do not “question or reject this form of masculinity” (Vallerga & Zurbruggen 2022: 615). Connell herself (1987: 132) notes that a hegemonic masculinity might remain purely ideal, never embodied by any man, and still retain its hegemonic hold.

Finally, the label of beta male is applied to men outside the manosphere, especially those who embody a more inclusive masculinity. These men are perceived as having been emasculated, or ‘pussified’, by feminism. They are beta males, i.e., weak “nice guy[s] looking for validation from women” (Dhoest 2025: 2212). Since they have swallowed the blue pill, they have yet to discover the truth about women. Therefore, they fail to properly dominate them. This failure effeminates them (Lilly 2016) and subordinates them to manosphere men. The construction of certain men as deviant, as not-men, is characteristic of homosocial policing (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016). Masculine men are those who have taken the red pill, those who are part of the in-group. The others, the outsiders, are effeminate.

Importantly, in constructions of masculinity and femininity, gender interacts with other social categories, such as class and race. While MRAs argue that the Men's Rights Movement advocates for the legal rights and social equality of *all* men, the hegemonic masculine subject is white, upper-middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual and cis-gender (Lilly 2016). In fact, there is a widespread perception among manosphere users that white masculinity and Western civilization are threatened by feminism as well as by globalization (Górska et al 2023; Kimmel 2013; Sugiura 2021) despite their inherent superiority.

In this section, I have argued that alpha/Chad masculinity occupies a hegemonic position in the hierarchy of masculinities of the manosphere. Its hegemony is sustained by the complicity of other masculinities in the manosphere, including marginalized ones. Outsiders (the 'blue pill' men) are described as deviant and effeminate. In the next section, I will look at how femininity is constructed in the manosphere's gender discourse and how it interacts with its conception of masculinity. We will see that, while men are thought to have some agency in their construction and performance of masculinity, women are believed to all behave and think in the same way (Vallerga & Zurbriggen 2022)—as succinctly summarized by the manosphere expression 'All Women Are Like That' (Aler 2020).

III.II. *Manosphere and Femininity*

Masculinity is an inherently relational notion, as it only exists in opposition to a complementary notion of femininity (Connell 2005: 58).³ The traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity

³ In this discussion, I focus specifically on contemporary Western conceptions of masculinity, as that is where my interest lies. However, as Connell (2005: 57-58) points out, viewing masculinity and femininity as binary opposites is a relatively recent idea within European and American thought, and it should not be uncritically applied to other cultural contexts without considering their specific historical and social conditions.

require the establishment and maintenance of a boundary between the two, so that the two concepts are intertwined and separate at once (Lilly 2016). In the specific case of hegemonic masculinity, its construction and consolidation can only take place on the basis of the “subordination and marginalization” of women and of femininity (Cannito et al. 2021: 9). Femininity, then, is defined as both constitutively different and inferior to masculinity—as it can clearly be observed in the manosphere’s gender discourse.

In it, the traditional Western construct of femininity, that of a ‘housewife’ femininity (Lilly 2016), is reproduced. Women are (or are at least supposed to be) nurturing, kind, and beautiful. Their loyal, selfless and caring nature makes them naturally subservient to men (ibid.; Dhoest 2025). Their ideal role is that of wives and mothers. However, at the same time, women are most often presented under a negative light (ibid.). They are “irrational, emotional creatures” (ibid.: 57) who lack intelligence and assertiveness. They are inherently selfish, manipulative, and both physically and mentally abusive (Lilly 2016; Dhoest 2025), making them bad mothers and wives. Because they exploit men to acquire social and economic status (Perrone 2019), women are necessarily self-serving, untrustworthy (Dhoest 2025) and unfaithful (Menzie 2022).

How can such heavily contradictory representations of women—as both inherently other-directed and fundamentally self-centred—coexist in the same discourse? Manosphere users resolve this conundrum by blaming feminism for turning “normal, healthy feminine women into a bunch of gold-digging, consumerist harridans” (Kimmel 2013: 52). Modern Western women have lost their femininity, i.e., their “soft, submissive, faithful, respectful of men, non-critical, and non-controlling” nature (Dhoest 2025: 2212). For manosphere users, the liberated woman has turned into an unfeminine woman (Lilly 2016). Since these women are not fit to be mothers or wives, they are only good for sex and social prestige. They can only be useful as “commodities to be used as currency in masculine endeavours” (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016: 8). However, not all men are able to have sexual access to women. Incels hold that, because women are finally free to choose their sexual and romantic partners, they only go for attractive and wealthy ones. But incels are then being deprived of something

they feel entitled to in virtue of their being men. They accuse women of subverting the natural order by failing “to comply with the conditions of heteropatriarchal femininity” (Menzie 2022: 73). If women are resented for not sleeping with incels, they are also slut shamed—by the same men—for sleeping with Chads. They are accused of only doing so to obtain sexual and financial benefits as they are incapable of genuine affection (*ibid.*).

Non-Western women, on the other hand, are repeatedly represented as ideal feminine subjects (or, more correctly, objects). In a reversal of roles, it is white women who now fail to live up to the standards set by ‘foreign’ women from South America, Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia (Cannito et al. 2021). This is because, for manosphere men, non-Western is synonym with ‘non-modern’ (Lilly 2016: 53): ‘foreign’ women are associated with ‘primitive’ cultures that still hold on to patriarchal values, while Western women have been “‘corrupted’ by feminism” (Cannito et al. 2021: 19). This means they are “submissive” and “more eager [than white women] to provide goods expected by men” (Górska et al 2023: 3789).

It must be noted that, in some manosphere subcultures, men respond to women’s presumed ‘masculinization’ not by sexually objectifying them, but rather by cutting all contacts with them, as is the case for MGTOW (Lilly 2016). Moreover, while users are mainly heterosexual, some homosexual men participate in the manosphere as well (Ging 2017).

Hegemonic masculinity does not only establish a power relation between masculinity and femininity, but also hierarchical relations among different masculinities. Some of them are categorized as ‘feminized’ and, therefore, deviant. These men find themselves at the bottom of the masculinity hierarchy. This is the case for ‘blue pill’ men, that is, those men who have not (yet) taken the red pill and realized the truth about women’s devious nature and about the evils of feminism. If modern Western women are criticized for being too masculine, modern Western men are accused of being too feminine. They have been ‘pussified’ (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016: 7) and have turned into “manginas” (i.e., ‘men with vaginas’). They are accused of abiding by gynocentric norms and of

debasing themselves to be able to have romantic or sexual relations with women. Their submissive and emasculated nature makes them “simsps” or “whiteknights” (Górska et al. 2023; Han & Yin 2023). They have been brainwashed by feminism and are betraying their gender (Górska et al. 2023), but through no real fault of their own. It is women that, “in a misguided quest for equality” (Perrone 2019: 5), have emasculated men and turned them into beta males.

III.III. *Manosphere and the Legitimization of Hegemonic Masculinity*

To retain its hegemonic status, hegemonic masculinity needs to be legitimized by both men and women. In the manosphere, the legitimation of ‘alpha’/‘Chad’ masculinity as the superordinate form of masculinity is carried out online by male and female users. Their consent to the manosphere’s gendered hierarchy is obtained via the widespread adoption and performance of specific discursive and behavioural practices (Connell 1987; Yang 2020).

The gender discourse carried out in manosphere communities is built on allegedly scientific truths about human nature. These purported socio-biological facts are extracted via a “rational analysis of empirical data” and “critical reasoning” (Van Valkenburgh 2021: 91), a feat that women—who are defined as deeply emotional and irrational by nature—are assumed to be incapable of. Manosphere users advocate an essentialist definition of gender (Connell 2005) as an immutable biological reality, rather than a social construct. Masculinity and femininity are perceived to be “the ‘true essence’ of men and women—stable, innate, and primordial” (Lilly 2016: 70). This belief is validated on the basis of theories from evolutionary psychology (EP). EP states that humans’ behaviour and psychology are biologically determined as to ensure and maximize gene propagation (Van Valkenburgh 2021: 91). According to the ‘dual mating strategy’ hypothesis (Bachaud & Johns 2023), women have had—since ancient times—a vested interest in entering a stable relationship with a reliable partner who would provide them with emotional and material goods, while also mating with other, more attractive men that would provide their offsprings with ‘good genes’ (Van Valkenburgh

2021). Manosphere users weaponize this theory to state that women are, by nature, hypergamous and unfaithful. They will marry a nice and well-off beta man but cheat on him with attractive, but selfish, alpha guys. As manosphere users succinctly put it, “alpha fucks, beta bucks” (Preston et al. 2021).

This pseudo-scientific theory on female reproductive behaviour is used to justify the hierarchy of masculinities and the disparagement of women. The alpha’s superiority is determined by his attractiveness to women, who will always choose him over a beta or an omega. Beta men can hope to attract women “by mimicking alpha behaviour and appearance” (Van Valkenburgh 2021: 93) or at least aspire to settle down with less attractive women rejected by the alphas. Omega men—in virtue of their ‘genetic inferiority’ (Sugiura 2021)—are instead denied any possibility to sexually or romantically engage with women. These “undesirable” men have failed to achieve what their biological nature demands of them “because, ultimately, they will not reproduce” (Perrone 2019: 6).

Women’s subjugation is, on the other hand, justified by their lack of moral character and hedonistic nature (Lilly 2016). To ensure sexual and romantic relationships, women will deceive current and potential partners (Vallerga & Zurbriggen 2022). Since women are inherently manipulative and exploitative, men have the right to “counteract [their] manipulations” (ibid.: 611) by being dishonest themselves and assuming a dominating stance. Moreover, since their ultimate goal is to maximize gene reproduction, women will behave promiscuously and sleep with as many men as possible, even if it is at their own detriment (ibid.: 612). In fact, for incels, women’s attraction to the Chad is an “evolutionary flaw” (Menzie 2022: 78), as this type of man will be interested in having sex with them but unwilling to economically and emotionally support them. Why would he, since he can have any woman he desires and has, therefore, no interest in settling down? There is no need, however, to feel sorry for these women: if the Chad is uninterested in exploring a romantic connection with them, it is because he is aware of their exploitative and deceitful nature (ibid.). Women are, ultimately, “inferior to men in all aspects, except perhaps with regard to treachery and deceit” (Perrone 2019: 6). Theories of evolutionary psychology are, additionally, used to justify a racialized hierarchy of masculinities, as women are assumed to prefer men of ‘superior’ (i.e., white) races (Perrone 2019).

In manosphere discourse, women are further dehumanized by being perceived as “commodities with a quantifiable exchange value” (Sugiura 2021:) in the ‘sexual marketplace’ (Van Valkenburgh 2021). Women and men are assumed to have an assessable Sexual Market Value (SMV). Women’s physical appearance is additionally graded on the HotBabe(x) scale, where x is a variable that goes from 1 to 10 (ibid.). By viewing sexual relationships as market exchanges, manosphere users transform the heterosexual community into a ‘sexual marketplace’ in which women trade sex—the only thing they have to offer—in exchange for men’s social and economic capital (Vallerga & Zurbriggen 2022).

Manosphere users further legitimize their ideological position by portraying men as victims of “institutional misandry” (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016: 9) and feminist “hatred of men” (Górska et al. 2023: 3785). Women’s issues are dismissed. The existence of the patriarchy, for instance, is merely a feminist “myth” (Lilly 2016). Moreover, MRAs argue that there is no such thing as ‘rape culture’. Rape culture is only the product of a “feminist hysteria” (Gotell & Dutton 2016: 75) that brands all men as rapists and demonizes their sexuality because women refuse to take responsibility for their sexual agency (Banet-Weiser 2018). Male sexual aggression, then, is normalized (Górska et al. 2021) and men are turned into the real victims of rape culture. Finally, MRAs believe that there exists a “domestic violence industry” that exploits men for money (Lilly 2016)—a sign that social institutions are biased towards women (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016).

Feminism is viciously criticized for giving women too much power and subordinating men (Sugiura 2021; Schmitz & Kazyak 2016). MRAs, in particular, accuse the movement of being “hypocritical and oppressive” (Lilly 2016) for demonizing men and masculinity while only being concerned with white women’s issues. Feminists are deemed to be treating women as children who are incapable of caring for themselves and who must be protected from the consequences of their own choices. It is “an unfair protectionism” (Banet-Weiser 2018: 62). The Men’s Rights Movement, on the other hand, presents itself as the truly progressive movement, one that stands for actual equality between men and women and is genuinely intersectional (Lilly 2016). This description of the MRM

by MRAs is an instance of what Demetriou (2001) has defined the “dialectical pragmatism” of hegemonic masculinities. To retain their superaltern status in changing social and political circumstances, hegemonic masculinities can adapt themselves and appropriate elements of subordinate masculinities and femininities (Bridges & Pascoe 2014). In this case, MRAs take on feminist vocabulary to acquire social legitimacy (Perrone 2019; Schmitz & Kazyak 2016) and to claim a victimized stance (Marwick & Caplan 2018) in societies where misogynistic attitudes are less tolerated.

On a communicative level, the discursive style in the manosphere is ‘masculine’ as well (Lilly 2016). Users’ opinions are asserted with strong conviction and framed as facts, while their language is often quite crude (ibid.). The use of memes and the “supposedly, playful and humorous register” in which these men relay their beliefs banalize their misogynistic rhetoric (Cannito & al. 2021).

The legitimization of hegemonic masculinity is additionally ensured by resorting to aggressive behavioural practices. For manosphere users, online violence is a way to “‘do’ hegemonic masculinity” (Messerschmidt 2018: 129) and to assert male superiority over women and femininity (Ging 2017). These men exploit the technological affordances of the Internet to conduct online harassment, mainly targeted towards women (Banet-Weiser 2018: 84). Indeed, violence against women, especially in the form of rape threats and misogynistic insults, is a legitimate and central practice of masculinity in online homosocial contexts (Cannito & al. 2021).

In manosphere spaces, attacks are usually directed towards a specific subset of women, that is, those who violate patriarchal norms (Górska et al. 2021). This networked harassment is justified by setting up feminism and feminists as villains, and men as victims (Marwick & Caplan 2018). An example of such attacks is so-called *Gamergate* (Marwick & Caplan 2018). In 2014 and 2015, male gamers and MRAs leveraged social media to target women involved in video game development and criticism. While some participants framed the campaign as a fight for “ethics in video game journalism” (ibid.: 547) and a defence of free speech against perceived censorship, many saw it as a

reactionary pushback against the growing inclusion of diverse voices in gaming, which had traditionally been male-dominated (Salter & Blodgett 2012). Indeed, research on the use of the #gamergate hashtag revealed that it was largely employed to promote anti-feminist views and harass women (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández 2016).

When it comes to misogynistic online harassment, the intent of manosphere users is, on the one hand, to shame their female targets and their supporters. Shaming, in fact, is central, as it functions as a “disciplining mechanism” (Banet-Weiser 2018: 85) that limits and controls the behaviours of both insiders of the manosphere community (Perrone 2019) and its outsiders (Banet-Weiser 2018). On the other hand, there is more to it than the desire to humiliate. In 2014, a hacking scandal dubbed *Fappening* took place. Nude photographs of several female celebrities were stolen and uploaded on multiple Internet forums by some male users. In Banet-Weiser’s (2018) analysis of *Fappening*, she argues men were not motivated exclusively by a desire to shame and humiliate female celebrities, but also to assert male control over female bodies (87). For manosphere users, violence is restorative (Kimmel 2013): through doxing, death threats, trolling, and harassment, these men aim to restore their male power and reassert their dominion over women.

Importantly, the impact of misogynistic content from the manosphere extends beyond the internet, with evidence linking its consumption to increased gender-based violence in real life (Victims Commissioner 2025). As a study by Women’s Aid shows, exposure to this type of content leads male users, particularly young boys, to adopt harmful views about relationships and show greater tolerance for abuse (Dean & Davidge 2023).

IV. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have applied gender order theory, particularly its notion of hegemonic masculinity, in order to deconstruct and analyse manosphere gender discourse. It was shown that, despite internal differences, manosphere communities share a belief in male victimhood and female

dominance. They construct rigid gender hierarchies where traditional, white, heterosexual masculinity remains idealized and unchallenged. Their gender discourse promotes traditional masculinity—represented by ‘alpha’ or ‘Chad’ masculinity—as the hegemonic masculine ideal. This form of masculinity is characterized by dominance, rationality, and physical superiority and is upheld even by those men who feel excluded from it, such as incels or MGTOWs. Femininity is, instead, constructed as inherently inferior to masculinity. Western women are vilified as manipulative, hypersexual, and corrupted by feminism. This rigid gender binary also reinforces the intra-gender hierarchy among men, where those seen as compliant with feminist ideals are feminized and subordinated. The manosphere legitimizes hegemonic masculinity through discursive practices—such as developing pseudo-scientific gender essentialist theories and discrediting feminist activism—as well as behavioural ones, including the online harassment of female Internet users.

Building on the deconstruction of the manosphere gender discourse that was carried out in this chapter, the next chapter will offer an analysis of its epistemic functioning. It will investigate the epistemic needs this discourse aims to fulfil as well as the epistemic and psychological consequences it generates.

The Manosphere: Between Hermeneutical Injustice and Hermeneutical Ignorance

I. Introduction

What can manosphere gender discourse tell us about its users? How does it operate, and to which ends? In this chapter, these questions will be explored by drawing upon two prominent epistemological frameworks: Miranda Fricker's (2007) theory of *hermeneutical injustice* (section II), and Pohlhaus' (2012) and Charles Mill's (1997; 2007) works on *wilful hermeneutical ignorance* and *white ignorance* respectively (section III).

In the next section, I will elucidate the notion of hermeneutical injustice and apply it to the manosphere case. I suggest we can interpret its masculinist discourse—and users' participation in the manosphere more broadly—as an attempt on their part to fill a hermeneutical gap and remedy a hermeneutical injustice. The idea that men *qua* men may suffer from hermeneutical injustice is, nonetheless, controversial, as we shall see. Therefore, in section III, I propose an alternative framework which can be employed to analyse the manosphere's gender discourse and to make sense of men's involvement in the manosphere. I argue said discourse is shaped and motivated by users' *male ignorance*, a case of wilful hermeneutical ignorance (Pohlhaus 2012) that serves the purpose of ensuring the survival of male supremacism. Male ignorance, however, only ends up exacerbating users' sense of hermeneutical marginalization and making them vulnerable to epistemic and psychological harms.

II. Men and The Manosphere: A Case of Hermeneutical Injustice?

My analysis of manosphere's gender discourse draws from Miranda Fricker's (2007) work on

epistemic injustice. Her account of epistemic wrongs departs from traditional epistemology insofar as it does not abstract away from the fact that actual epistemic agents always stand in relations of power to one another. Dominant social agents exercise power over marginalized ones, that is, they have a socially situated capacity to control their actions (4). This capacity is “socially situated” (11) insofar as it can only be effective if all agents belong to the same social world. It requires all of them to share in the collective “social imagination” of the community (14), namely, to have available a universally shared pool of social meanings that are intelligible to all members of the social collective. The content of a collective’s social imagination is not neutral but is rather functional to the stability of the dominant groups’ social power and to the preservation of the existing social order. In patriarchal societies, for instance, the exercise of social power by men *qua* men over women *qua* women requires all community members to partake of shared conceptions of the social categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’. Men’s identity power (14) over women is both enforced and justified by a socially shared definition of men as, for example, rational, strong, and assertive, while women are portrayed as emotional, illogical, and submissive.

Fricker is particularly interested in how operations of social power can cause epistemic injustices to arise. An epistemic injustice is defined as a “wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower” (1). Fricker addresses two types of epistemic wrongs in particular: *testimonial injustice* and *hermeneutical injustice*. This section is chiefly concerned with examining this second form of injustice.

A hermeneutical injustice is the result of a “structural prejudice” (1) in the “collective hermeneutical resources” (ibid.)—those tools available to all community members to interpret and name their social experiences. Hermeneutical resources can be discursive, as in the case of words, concepts, and narratives (Falbo 2022), or non-discursive, such as embodied skills or habits (Ferguson 2025). In societies where an uneven distribution of social power is present, some social groups are largely excluded from those social institutions—such as academia or the legal field—in which

hermeneutical tools are developed and diffused. This implies the formation of a hermeneutical lacuna in the collective hermeneutical resources, a gap where the concepts needed to accurately describe the social experiences of marginalized knowers *should* be but are not. The hermeneutical marginalization of these epistemic agents results in an unfair lack of intelligibility of those social experiences that are specific to them. When these experiences cannot be communicated to other epistemic agents, but are intelligible to the marginalized knower herself, we are faced with a *communicative* hermeneutical injustice (Goetze & Crerar 2022)—or what Fricker (2016) defines as the ‘minimal’ case of hermeneutical injustice. In extreme, “maximal” (Fricker, *ibid.*) cases, there is a *cognitive* hermeneutical injustice (Goetze & Crerar 2022) such that even the marginalized knower herself is unable to correctly interpret and give expression to her particular social experiences.

A large part of the literature on epistemic injustices has focused on its systematic cases, in which an agent’s vulnerability to testimonial and hermeneutical injustices is linked to her marginalization in other social realms. However, an epistemic injustice can also be incidental, a one-off case that affects a socially dominant individual. A white man who is victim of stalking,⁴ for example, might face serious difficulties to be understood by others when trying to communicate his experience. This would make him a victim of a hermeneutical injustice, but one that is of incidental nature since “he suffers the injustice not because of, but rather in spite of, the social type he is” (Fricker 2007: 158).

In what ways can Fricker’s account of hermeneutical injustice help us understand the nature of gender discourse in the manosphere? I would like to advance the hypothesis that men who participate in the manosphere are attempting to remedy an incidental hermeneutical injustice. They are trying to fill a hermeneutical lacuna in the collective hermeneutical resources. This hermeneutical gap concerns these men’s social experience of vulnerability.

⁴ Example from Fricker (2007: 156-158).

II.I. Male Vulnerability and Hermeneutical Marginalization

It is true that, on a collective level, men hold a disproportionate amount of power across various domains, from political representation (OSCE 2024) to financial capability (Inequality.org 2023). And yet, male manosphere users often talk about not feeling powerful. They express feeling vulnerable and isolated.

Manosphere spaces are perceived by younger and older men as spaces where they can attempt to reckon with those insecurities arising from their inability to meet the standards of heterosexual masculinity (Botto & Gottzén 2024). A dissection of the radicalization stories of several ex-users shows that feelings of insecurity and vulnerability were pivotal in their involvement with the manosphere. These young men were in fact seeking a way to overcome personal worries of emasculation and male marginalization, often caused by their lack of success in romantic and sexual relations. Similarly, in Thorburn's (2023) analysis of Reddit forums dedicated to ex-incels and ex-redpillers, we see that most men approached the manosphere after a breakup or rejection, which had sparked in them a "fear of masculine inadequacy" (8). On a similar note, Sugiura (2021) notes that incel forums were initially places where men (and women) who had no success in romantic endeavours could air their frustrations and feel part of a community.

This sense of male vulnerability has been linked to important socioeconomic changes, such as the increase in income inequality and in men's level of unemployment, as well as the decline of traditional working-class professions (Sugiura 2021)—which have been majorly disruptive for men. Moreover, women's growing economic and social emancipation and the institutionalization of feminism has contributed to the destabilization of the gender binary model (Han & Yin 2023) and to significant alterations in gender relations at home and in the workplace. Ging (2017) argues that these socioeconomic disturbances to white male privilege are one of the main explanatory factors of why men join the manosphere. The manosphere, then, appears to function as a space in which men are

finally able to share with one another their sense of “frustration over the inability to fulfil expectations of male physical prowess or of sexual and economic success” (Cannito et al. 2021: 26).

There is a disconnect, then, between those multiple international organizations, governmental bodies, journalists, academics, and activists that argue that men hold a disproportionate amount of power—that they are members of a *privileged* group—and the lived experience of individual manosphere users. Regardless of the structural power conferred upon men by the patriarchal system, participants in the manosphere do not perceive themselves as beneficiaries of this power, often due to factors such as their physical appearance, socioeconomic status, or other personal circumstances that relegate them at the lowest ranks of the social hierarchy of masculinities. There is a perception, amongst these men, that dominant social discourse is unable and unwilling to capture their experience of social and economic vulnerability.

The result is a widespread sense of being hermeneutically marginalized. Manosphere users hold that the dominant gender discourse in Western societies has been shaped by feminist ideology in such a way as to fail to accurately portray the personal lived experiences of a vast portion of men. According to manosphere users, these men are therefore unable to communicate their social experiences to others, or even to accurately understand them themselves. They are victims of a hermeneutical injustice.

Fricker (2007) notes that hermeneutical injustice causes a serious epistemic harm to its victims. This harm is a *situated hermeneutical inequality*, in which “a patch of [the epistemic agent’s] social experience which [is] very much in her interests to understand [is] not collectively understood and so remain[s] barely intelligible, even to her” (162). But not to be able to understand and communicate our experiences, both to ourselves and to others, additionally cramps the development of our personal identity. When all the hermeneutical resources available to us have been developed by individuals

whose life experience is distinctively different from ours, our opportunities for self-understanding are limited. We might find ourselves following scripts dictated by others.

Correspondingly, manosphere users believe men to be victims of two, interrelated, serious harms. The first, a situated hermeneutical inequality, is of an epistemic nature: vulnerable men are being hermeneutically marginalized, and their lived social experiences are made invisible in dominant discourse. Their epistemic agency is undermined as they do not have the appropriate hermeneutical resources necessary to accurately interpret their masculine experiences.

But manosphere users criticize contemporary, feminist-infused social discourse not only because of its inability to accurately grasp the actual lived experiences of several Western men in the 21st century. They accuse it of effectively thwarting masculinity by telling men that they have no right to be *men*. For instance, on his blog *The Rational Male*, bestselling Red Pill author Rollo Tomassi (2016) contends that feminist critiques ostensibly targeting traditional Western masculinity are, in fact, aimed at discrediting masculinity altogether with the intent of promoting female hegemony:

Desire to win, need for emotional control, risk-taking, violence, dominance, sexual promiscuity or playboy behavior, self-reliance, primacy of work, power over women, disdain for homosexuality and pursuit of status – by orders of degree these are the foundational aspects of masculinity that’s been responsible for the advancement of humanity for millennia now. [...]. These parts of masculinity were and are functional benefits to men. Only in a society that defines supremacism of women and the primacy of female-correctness do these aspects become negative. (ibid.)

Feminists’ attacks against traditional masculinity and patriarchal institutions, then, are perceived as threats to the very survival of *real* (i.e., *masculine*) men—with dramatic consequences. The high rates of male suicide, for example, are put forward as evidence, in manosphere narratives, that men “are the new gender victims” (Jordan & Chandler 2019: 471). It is the inevitable result of the feminist pathologization and vilification of male behaviour.

From the perspective of manosphere users, most men—the so-called ‘bluepillers’—settle for the hermeneutical resources provided by the hermeneutically powerful group, i.e., the feminists. They therefore end up believing that their loneliness and anxiety are caused by a failure to comply with toxic, outdated norms of masculinity and that the development of a new conception of masculinity

that legitimates egalitarian gender relations will alleviate their vulnerability. However, this, according to manosphere users, is a seriously mistaken interpretation of the causes of today's masculinity crisis. It is not their inability to meet hegemonic standards of masculinity that is causing men to feel vulnerable. The issue is, rather, that dominant discourse is telling men that they are not allowed to be masculine anymore, that they have to hinder the development of their real self in order to be accepted. Emasculation—perceived by these men to be a cramping of their masculine self—is then the second, significant harm of this hermeneutical injustice. If men cannot perform 'true' masculinity, they cannot be 'real' men. Men who have 'swallowed the blue pill' cannot be their real selves but must conform to the dictates of dominant, feminist gender discourse.

Manosphere users, instead, have 'swallowed the red pill' and are fighting to get their right to be men back. They see themselves as practicing *hermeneutical dissent* (Goetze 2018). In manosphere spaces, these men finally have the opportunity to make their sense of powerlessness visible (Ging 2017), to develop the hermeneutical tools necessary for the portrayal of their vulnerability. They are trying to remedy a hermeneutical injustice (Goetze & Crerar 2022) by creating their own concepts—such as the Red Pill ideology and the alpha/beta/omega terminology—in order to contribute to and expand the shared social pool of hermeneutical resources.

Nonetheless, it is worth questioning whether manosphere users can truly be said to generate themselves said hermeneutical concepts. The manosphere has been active for several decades, and much of its terminology is already well established. In many cases, users—rather than coining new terms—adopt pre-existing ones. Furthermore, content creators within the manosphere play a pivotal role in shaping its gender discourse.⁵ They are often the ones formulating concepts which they later share with their followers. Nevertheless, it must also be noted that the manosphere encompasses a range of spaces—such as online forums and social media platforms—where users themselves actively

⁵ So pivotal, indeed, that manosphere content creators will be the focus of the next chapter.

participate in the ongoing refinement of the Red Pill and Black Pill frameworks. It would therefore be reductive to characterize all manosphere participants as merely passive recipients of pre-formulated concepts. In any case, while the degree to which individual users actively contribute to the development of its hermeneutical tools varies, the manosphere clearly offers to all of its members a set of interpretative resources that they find effective to articulate their lived experiences.

II.II. *Can Men Be Victims of Hermeneutical Injustice?*

So far in this chapter, I have argued that manosphere users' gender discourse and construction of an alpha masculinity represent an attempt on their part to fill a hermeneutical gap and to repair a (perceived) hermeneutical injustice.

However, a significant objection must be raised. Men, *qua* men, are hardly hermeneutically marginalized, and manosphere users are no exception. While it is hard to collect precise demographic data about the manosphere userbase, a large portion of these men are white, straight, and middle-class (Hodapp 2017; Sugiura 2021). A hermeneutical injustice exclusively occurs if a hermeneutical impasse is the result of a subject's hermeneutical marginalization. Since men *qua* men are not hermeneutically marginalized, Goetze and Crear (2022), for instance, argue that it would be inappropriate to argue that manosphere users experience a hermeneutical injustice. I personally tend to agree with them, and, for this reason, I will later present an alternative epistemic framework to analyse manosphere gender discourse. Nonetheless, I would like to suggest here that, perhaps, manosphere users' perception of being hermeneutically marginalized is serious enough that their case might meet the criteria of hermeneutical injustice.

We can see this by looking at what Johansson Wilén (2024) calls "incel epistemology". Incels hold that being an 'incel' means belonging to a specific social category with distinctive social experiences (ibid.). It constitutes its own social identity. They genuinely believe that their inability to form a heterosexual relationship separates them from the rest of society and constructs them as members of

a marginalized group, the ‘brocels’ (ibid.) They are not victims of hermeneutical injustice merely because they are men, then, but because they are men who fail to embody hegemonic masculinity. Incels’ experience of marginalization allows them to ‘see the truth’ (inscribed in the Black Pill ideology) and confers upon them an “epistemic privilege” (ibid.: 2) not unlike that of members of other marginalized groups. As an incel user writes, “[b]lack-pilled chads and incels are the only ones who can see the world the way it actually is” (ibid.: 10). Even in other communities of the manosphere, Red Pill ideology is presented as an “occluded” and “secretive” knowledge (Bujalka et al. 2022: 12) that is only accessible to the initiated, namely, ‘redpillers’. Women and male ‘bluepillers’, instead, remain trapped in ‘the matrix’. The existence of the Incel and Red Pill epistemologies shows that—at least for a significant portion of manosphere users—the sense of social and epistemological marginalization might be strong enough to admit the possibility that these men might perceive themselves as targets of a hermeneutical injustice.

Nonetheless, even if we admit there might be a hermeneutical lacuna in the collective hermeneutical resources that does not allow for an adequate interpretation of manosphere users’ experience, there is nothing that prevents these men from filling this gap by altering the collective social imagination. Men are clearly not excluded from those places in which hermeneutical tools are developed—such as academia or the press—and they definitely do not lack for attention from broader society. Modern men might be facing many difficulties, but being silenced is certainly not one of them. The attention that the manosphere continues to attract, even from its detractors, is in itself a clear proof of that. I am, consequently, not sure that hermeneutical injustice is the most appropriate lens to interpret the development and character of manosphere gender discourse. In the rest of this chapter, I will therefore present as an alternative explanation a sibling phenomenon of hermeneutical injustice that is, however, not the result of hermeneutical marginalization: *wilful hermeneutical ignorance*.

III. Wilful Hermeneutical Ignorance

Pohlhaus (2012) defines *wilful hermeneutical ignorance* as a specific form of epistemic injustice in which “dominantly situated knowers [...] continue to misunderstand and misinterpret the world” (716) because they refuse to acknowledge and acquire those epistemic tools that marginalized knowers have developed to make sense of and communicate their social experiences. Dominantly situated epistemic agents dismiss not only “any epistemic resources that might have been developed to make sense of the experienced world of those marginally situated” (728) but even the possibility that “there is anything to be known here” (ibid.), that is, that their understanding of the social world they inhabit might be improved by incorporating the situated knowledge of marginalized knowers. Their ignorance is wilfully maintained despite efforts on the part of marginalized knowers to share their hermeneutical tools with the broader epistemic community. The paradigmatic case of wilful hermeneutical ignorance is that of *white ignorance* (Mills 2007), a motivated cognitive bias on the part of privileged, white epistemic agents in racialized societies (Fricker 2013).

The notion of wilful hermeneutical ignorance might provide us with a useful framework to better understand how manosphere gender discourse operates. I argue that men have just as much of a vested interest in overlooking the existence and exact functioning of gendered power relations as white people do in remaining ignorant about racialized power structures. We could name this motivated cognitive bias *male ignorance*. How does male ignorance relate to the manosphere? Franklin-Paddock and co-authors (2025) have observed that, the less men acknowledge their gender confers on them a privileged status, the stronger they endorse manosphere attitudes and the more threatened they feel by feminism. I argue male ignorance is a potential explanatory mechanism for this phenomenon.

The mechanism through which white ignorance is maintained is twofold. White knowers can either outright refuse to acknowledge and engage with the epistemic resources developed by black communities, or they can actively undermine and discredit them (Pohlhaus 2012: 728). Their ignorance is motivated by self-interest, for, as long as white people can refuse to acknowledge the lived experience of marginalized black subjects, white supremacy is allowed to keep on flourishing for the most part undisturbed. At the same time, if they remain blind to the actual existence of those racialized power relations that structure their social reality, white epistemic agents cannot possibly have a correct understanding of the social world they inhabit. The implication is that white knowers are “unable to understand the world that they themselves have created” (Medina 2012: 212).

Similarly, male ignorance is of paramount importance for the survival of male hegemony. If men can remain blind to the unequal gender distribution of social, political and economic power, they can continue to benefit from it pretty much undisturbed. Insofar as they shed a light on gender inequalities, feminist epistemic resources represent a threat towards male ignorance and, consequently, male hegemony. This is why it is of fundamental importance, for masculinists, to dismiss and revile feminist knowledge—a phenomenon we can frequently observe in manosphere spaces.

The manosphere provides a space in which men are encouraged to uphold their male ignorance and retaliate against any attempt made to undermine it. To this end, the manosphere operates as an *epistemic echo chamber* (Nguyen 2020). An echo chamber is an epistemic community in which “a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members” (10) is created. The members—the manosphere users—share a set of core beliefs, which make up the Red Pill worldview. The voices of non-members—male and female feminist activists—are actively epistemically discredited. By accusing them of being dishonest or unreliable, manosphere users ensure that no evidence against the tenets of Red Pill ideology could ever be taken seriously and risk causing scepticism among manosphere members.

Mills (2007) notes that epistemic discrediting of the Other is a necessary means to maintain white ignorance. The testimony of people of colour will be “dismissed or never solicited to begin with” (28) because of an “epistemic presumption against their credibility” (29). We can see here a parallel with another form of epistemic injustice—*testimonial injustice* (Fricker 2007). In systematic cases of testimonial injustice, dominantly situated knowers—in light of an identity prejudice—consider marginalized knowers to lack credibility. A testimonial injustice takes place when—due to prejudices on the part of the hearer about the speaker’s identity—a speaker’s word is given less (or, possibly, more) credibility than it is due based on evidence alone. In the manosphere, the credibility of feminist voices is constantly called into question. This epistemic undermining is instrumental in safeguarding male ignorance.

To see this, we can take as an example the way the feminist notion of *rape culture* is discussed in the manosphere. This term refers to the cultural normalization of sexual violence towards women via practices such as victim-blaming, sexual objectification, and the dismissal of rape accusations. The notion of rape culture was developed by feminist activists as a hermeneutical tool to illustrate how rape, far from being a mere “individual behavioural problem”, is actually “an exercise of domination within the broader structure of male domination of women” (Kessel 2022: 131). Manosphere users vehemently reject the use of this term, and they dismiss its hermeneutical significance. In the manosphere, the existence of rape culture is seen as a ‘myth’ (Lilly 2016). Users carry out an “anti-anti-rape backlash” (ibid.: 69) and portray rape culture as nothing more than a “feminist-inspired moral panic” (Gotell & Dutton 2016: 75). Rape accusations are dismissed as being fake, either because the alleged crime did not happen or because its occurrence was the woman’s fault (Lilly 2016)—for she should have not been alone out at night, or been drunk, or dressed provocatively. In this way, rape is blamed on women’s sexual agency, rather than on male perpetrators (Banet-Weiser 2018). Another way manosphere users undermine the concept of rape culture is by arguing that rape

statics are exaggerated and that “feminist empirical research is ‘junk science’” (Gotell & Dutton 2016: 73).

If manosphere participants dismiss feminist quantitative and qualitative analyses and give little to no credibility to women’s personal accounts, men receive a “credibility excess” (Fricker 2007: 17). We see here a second distinctive feature of epistemic echo chambers: the members’ “epistemic credential” is amplified, and they are “assigned very high levels of trust” (Nguyen 2020: 10). In MRAs websites, for instance, users usually side with male perpetrators while rape allegations by women are easily suspected of being false (Gotell & Dutton 2016). Stories of sexual assault in which a male victim has been attacked by a female perpetrator are instead magnified (ibid.). The way such cases are portrayed is extremely significant. The victim’s story fades into the background, and his victimization is exploited to show that there is no such a thing as a ‘rape culture’ that targets women. Feminism is accused of being overly concerned with women’s issues and stubbornly refusing to acknowledge men’s suffering. Seeing rape as a gendered, systemic issue—as feminists do—is considered misandrist (ibid.), while manosphere users see themselves as the real egalitarians (Lilly 2016).

This ostensibly ‘gender-blind’ attitude to sexual violence echoes the “‘colour-blind’ ideology (Mills 2007: 25) characteristic of white ignorance in racialized societies. Such ideology consists in “the refusal to perceive systemic discrimination, the convenient amnesia about the past and its legacy in the present, and the hostility to black testimony on continuing white privilege and the need to eliminate it to achieve racial justice” (30). By accusing people of colour of being ‘the real racists’ for ‘bringing race into everything’, white people can disregard the existence of racial inequalities and their own complicity in a racialized system of oppression. Analogously, the purpose of the seemingly ‘gender-blind’ ideology of the manosphere is to “delegitimize women’s issues” and to “dismiss broader social gender inequality” (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016: 10)—as in the case of rape culture.

Importantly, the fact that this ignorance is ‘male’ does not mean that it is confined to men—just like white ignorance does not only affect white people (Mills 2007). In fact, it is very often feMRAs

(female Men’s Rights Activists) who are the strongest critics of the notion of rape culture (Gotell & Dutton 2016).

What function does the epistemic denial of the concept of ‘rape culture’ play? First, we have to keep in mind that the notion of rape culture was born out of women’s attempt to understand their own lived experiences. Whereas feminist women have seen the development of this hermeneutical tool as necessary in order to illuminate a part of the female social experience that has been obscured from the collective social imagination, men—in virtue of their privilege—do not share neither in the experience itself nor in the need to understand it and communicate it.⁶ However, this cannot possibly be the only reason manosphere users dismiss the existence of a rape culture, since plenty of feminist men recognize that it does in fact exist.

I argue that manosphere users engage in an active rejection of the term because it is in their interest to do so. Their ignorance is wilful and motivated. In his discussion on the motivations for white ignorance, Mills (2007) notes that “white group interests” are “a causal factor in generating and sustaining white ignorance” (30). The purposeful blindness of white knowers to race-based power dynamics allows the “[establishment] and [maintenance of] the white polity” (Mills 1997: 15). Similarly, men retain an interest in sustaining male ignorance as it is precisely their obliviousness of gendered structures of power that allows their social and economic dominion over women to go unchecked. In the manosphere, feminist narratives about male hegemony are clearly interpreted by male users as an attack against their masculinity, where masculinity is effectively interpreted as having direct control over and access to women.

⁶ This is not to suggest that men cannot be victims of sexual violence. However, statistical data indicate that a significant proportion of victims are female, while a substantial proportion of perpetrators are male. Furthermore, the marginalization or dismissal of male sexual victimisation can itself be understood as a manifestation of hegemonic gender norms—particularly insofar as male victims are perceived by other men as embodying a subordinate form of masculinity (Javaid 2017).

Going back to our ‘rape culture’ example, manosphere users believe this concept “is a product of *hate culture*” through which “feminists keep all men and boys in a climate of permanent accusation” (Hembling 2012) (emphasis original). At the same time, their argument that women have a responsibility to be hyper-vigilant to prevent sexual violence naturalizes male sexual aggression (Gotell & Dutton 2016). Because masculinity is associated with high sexual libido and sexual access to women, the feminist calls to end rape culture are perceived as a threat to “men’s capacity to be masculine” (Banet-Weiser 2018: 58).

For manosphere users, the stakes are high. They have an interest—whether they are aware of it or not—in thinking of sexual violence against women as the fault of, at most, a few bad apples, or of the assaulted women themselves. If these men were to acknowledge that there is a systemic and gendered dimension to sexual violence, they would need to question the implicit association between masculinity and sexual entitlement to women. And then, not only would they have to recognize that men do hold an undue amount of power over women—they would have to relinquish said power. Their ignorance is to their advantage. Could it also be to their detriment?

III.I. *The Epistemic Harms of Male Ignorance*

In his discussion on white ignorance, Medina (2012) argues that wilful hermeneutical ignorance might constitute a case of (cognitive) hermeneutical injustice. The racial blindness of white epistemic agents renders them unable to have an adequate grasp of their social experiences, causing them an epistemic harm. Similarly, we could say that manosphere users’ male ignorance prevents from gaining an accurate understanding of their social world. Consequently, they would be victims of a (self-inflicted) hermeneutical injustice.

In fact, manosphere users do face epistemic harms alike those of hermeneutical injustice as a result of their participation in the manosphere and their belief in its gender discourse. To interpret their

experiences of vulnerability, these men resort to hermeneutical tools that are not only ideologically harmful to women (Cannito et al. 2021) but that have serious, damaging consequences for manosphere users themselves as well.

First, the development of alternative hermeneutical tools on the part of manosphere participants only furthers their hermeneutical marginalization. Goetze and Crerar (2022) note that members of extremist groups—and the manosphere is certainly one—can fall victims to communicative hermeneutical injustice if their theories and vocabulary are unintelligible to the rest of society and, therefore, cannot be communicated and understood. This is clearly the case for manosphere users. Outsiders usually find their gender discourse not only highly unpleasant but also hard to decipher, leading to a hermeneutical impasse between manosphere members and the rest of society.

Moreover, and most importantly, as Goetze and Crerar (*ibid.*) remark, when marginalized knowers attempt to fill a hermeneutical gap, “the hermeneutical lacunae borne of marginalisation might be filled by meanings and interpretative tropes that reflect an extremist view of the world” (27). Such is the case for manosphere users, who—by constructing and adopting extremely misogynistic and “over-simplified cultural models of the social world” (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016: 11)—fail to achieve an “improved understanding of their social experience” (Goetze and Crear 2022: 26).

This renders them susceptible to the epistemic harm characteristic of cognitive hermeneutical injustice: a failure to develop an adequate interpretation of those experiences of social vulnerability that have pushed men towards the manosphere in the first place. Instead of recognizing the socioeconomic roots of their sense of ‘malaise’ and anxiety, manosphere users tend to attribute their perceived disempowerment to women, feminism, and so-called ‘political correctness,’ which they claim have eroded traditional forms of male authority (Bujalka et al. 2022).

This last epistemic harm is further intensified by the valorisation of traditional masculine norms—both engine and product of the male ignorance characteristic of manosphere discourse. Hintikka Kieval (2019) argues that, when men internalize the code of masculine conduct prescribed by a normative masculinity, they can fall victims to a (cognitive) hermeneutical injustice. In manosphere

gender discourse, ‘alpha’ masculinity is the normative masculinity that dictates “what it means for a man to be a man” (ibid.: 4). If a manosphere user is to become a ‘real’ man, he must be physically and mentally strong. Strength, however, implies the willingness to repress one’s emotions, and to hide them from others, particularly women. Kaufman (1999) refers to this suppression of “a range of emotions, needs and possibilities, such as nurturing, receptivity, empathy and compassion” as the “price of [male] power” (82). The result is a “lacuna in place of a more complete range of emotional capacities” (Hintikka Kieval 2019: 5), such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy. Manosphere members who attempt to embody alpha masculinity lack the hermeneutical tools to interpret, articulate, and share a large portion of their feelings.

The harm of this cognitive hermeneutical injustice is twofold. Firstly, failing to understand how the feel—and why they feel the way they do—renders these men unable to make sense of a large part of their own social experience. Secondly, and relatedly, it “cramps the very development of [the] self” (Fricker 2007: 163) of these men. In order to become alpha men, users engage in the suppression of their emotional sensitivity and any other individual trait that might be perceived as ‘feminine’ (Thorburn 2023). This inhibits the development of an important aspect of their personality, preventing them “from living a fully enriched inner life” (Hintikka Kieval 2019: 5).

III.II. *The Secondary Harms of Male Ignorance*

Yet, in Fricker’s (2013) response to Medina, she argues that—while white ignorance is clearly an “epistemic dysfunction” (50)—it cannot be considered an instance of hermeneutical injustice. For it to constitute a case of hermeneutical injustice, it would require (1) a lack of epistemic culpability on the part of white knowers and (2) a lack of adequate hermeneutical resources from which white knowers could gain the relevant knowledge (Fricker 2016: 51). Even if we assume that (1) holds, appropriate hermeneutical tools about racism are clearly available to white epistemic agents. Likewise, manosphere users have available to them plenty of feminist epistemic resources.

Moreover, even if we were to conceive of the possibility the relevant knowledge about racism (in our case, misogyny) has been suppressed, so that both conditions (1) and (2) are met, this might still not be a case of hermeneutical injustice. This, according to Fricker (2013), is because “it is not whites [men] who are broadly disadvantaged by the hermeneutical lacuna — they are only epistemically disadvantaged” (52). The white epistemic agents’ ignorance concerning the existence and functioning of racialized power relations materially harms people of colour (Mills 2007), and not white knowers themselves. Similarly, even if manosphere users’ male ignorance epistemically harms men, serious material repercussions befall women. Indeed, the gender discourse of the manosphere—shaped and sustained by the male ignorance of its users—not only ideologically legitimizes male hegemony over women, but it justifies the perpetration of online and physical violence against women (Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019).

Male ignorance, then, is still to the benefit of men. As Fricker (2013) notes, it seems “odd to insist that a group X that broadly benefits from some local hermeneutical impoverishment nonetheless thereby suffers an epistemic injustice” (53). I stand with Fricker on this, and I am resistant to see in male ignorance an instance of hermeneutical injustice. However, an important distinction must be drawn between male ignorance and other forms of wilful hermeneutical ignorance such as white ignorance. Manosphere users are not only negatively affected by their male ignorance from an epistemic point of view. They also incur into serious, secondary (i.e., non-epistemic) harms.

To see how this is possible, we need to remind ourselves how the gender discourse of the manosphere operates. The Red Pill ideology paints a hierarchical relation not only between men and women, but among different types of men as well. Those men who are unable to comply with the standards of hegemonic masculinity feel inferior to—less masculine than—those they perceive to be embodying an ‘alpha’ masculinity. The perception of their inferiority and their fear of emasculation arouse in these boys and men a deep sense of vulnerability. Feminist epistemic resources could provide them with some useful tools on how to tackle the normative expectations of masculinity.

Engaging with feminist theory, however, would also force these men to recognize the privileged position their gender grants them, and to relinquish it. Therefore, the only explanations for their vulnerability that they can accept are those that fit within the Red Pill worldview—a worldview that is shaped and limited by their male ignorance. This might be more comfortable, but it is also more harmful.

Indeed, male ignorance not only makes manosphere users blind to women's issues, but to men's as well. Rather than recognizing the actual (largely socioeconomic) causes of their vulnerability, they accuse themselves of not being masculine enough (and women of being too masculine). Their ignorance, then, exacerbates their vulnerability, since it leads them to try to dispel their unease in ways that are actually counterproductive. Indeed, for these men, the solution to their vulnerability is not to find community, or to let go of harmful normative expectations of masculinity, or to advocate for social and economic change. It is to fulfil the hegemonic masculine ideal of the alpha man, no matter the cost. The 'redpilled' interpretation of men's social experience of vulnerability, then, is not merely inaccurate, but detrimental as well. And not only to women—who are the targets of intense, misogynistic hatred—but to manosphere users themselves too. The psychologically consequences of this outlook are particularly harmful.

Boys and men who join the manosphere in an attempt to understand their experience of vulnerability are faced with a socially conservative gender discourse shaped by male ignorance. In this discourse, the traditional, Western conception of masculinity retains hegemonic power over other types of masculinity. According to the Red Pill worldview, individual men can overcome their vulnerability by coming to embody its hegemonic, masculine ideal: the 'alpha' male. An alpha man is strong, both physically and psychologically. He has mastered self-discipline and self-control. Importantly, this self-mastery requires the rejection of the desire for inter-personal, emotional connection—which is nothing more than a “feminist illusion” (95)—as well as the refusal to display “emotional vulnerability” (Van Valkenburgh 2021: 96). Only by “ignoring one's emotions and desires” (ibid.) can a man achieve the status of alpha.

The strategy advocated by manosphere figures for overcoming personal vulnerability (a subject further explored in Chapter III) deliberately rejects emotional openness as part of the solution. For instance, previously mentioned Red Pill author Rollo Tomassi (2014) states that exposing one's vulnerability is "an act of submission, surrender and a capitulation to an evident superior [i.e., to women]". Emotional vulnerability is a "weakness" (Tomassi 2019) that men must hide, particularly because women—despite what feminists might say—naturally find male vulnerability repulsive (Tomassi 2014). According to the blogger, it is a biological truth that "unguarded, easily expressed emotion is a feminine trait" (Tomassi 2011), while men are naturally wired to be stoic, competitive, and aggressive (Tomassi 2019).

In the same vein, Andrew Tate—the most popular content creator in the manosphere—argues that a 'real' (alpha) man is able to suppress any negative emotion (Stöckl 2023). In Lesson Six of his '52 *Essential Lessons to the Young Kings*' (n.d.),⁷ for instance, he urges his followers to eschew feelings of sadness:

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS "SAD". YOU ARE EITHER CONTENT AND HAPPY WHERE YOU ARE. OR YOU ARE FURIOUSLY MOTIVATED TO CHANGE SOMETHING. EITHER OR. BLACK AND WHITE. YING AND YANG. (Tate, n.d.) (emphasis original)

Likewise, in Lesson 1, he states:

YOU ARE AS HAPPY AS YOU DECIDE TO BE. RIGHT NOW - DECIDE YOU'RE ECSTATIC.
WHY NOT? YOU'RE ALIVE?
WHY WASTE TIME BEING SAD.
SMILE. LET'S GO. (Tate, n.d.) (emphasis original)

To overcome poor mental health, Tate suggests "embracing hard work, physical improvements, and shared masculine brotherhood" (Tate, n.d.). However, men, according to Tate, live in a constant state of competition with other men "to ensure their continued relevance and social standing" (Stöckl 2023: 45). This is because—as he states in Lesson 12— "life isn't worth living as a man unless you're in

⁷ The webpage for the 52 *Essential Lessons to the Young Kings* has been deleted while I was writing the draft for this thesis. It is possible to find a list of the lessons at <https://www.scribd.com/document/660724156/Young-Kings-t-me-riseT9>.

the top 10%. [...]. You must be a winner, or you will live a life of pain” (Tate, n.d.). Men must then always “be ready to kill those who try to kill [them]” (Tate, n.d.) and this makes qualities “such as empathy and sensitivity” naturally “inimical to masculinity” (Stöckl 2023: 41).

Similar exhortations to repress one’s emotions and to adopt an aggressive stance towards other men can be found all over the manosphere. The psychological harm they cause to manosphere members is significant. Several ex-users have described how their attempts to embody alpha masculinity caused them “considerable mental distress” (9) and severe self-esteem issues (Thorburn 2023). The extreme importance attributed to physical attractiveness, and muscularity in particular, causes both redpillers and incels to engage in practices of self-objectification. Several manosphere users, for instance, practice so-called “*looksmaxxing*” (Halpin et al. 2025: 1), a series of behaviours whose goal is the “[maximization] of one’s physical appearance” (ibid.) according to the hegemonic ideal of alpha masculinity. Community members who fail to meet its standards are told that “they have no hope of having a romantic/sexual relationship, and that they are failures as men” (ibid.: 6). Users are encouraged to engage in practices such as “bonesmashing”—breaking one’s facial bones so that they will grow back stronger and thicker— “leg lengthening”, and “mewing”—positioning the tip of the tongue against the roof of the mouth to obtain a more defined jawline—in order to permanently alter their bodies (ibid.: 5). In an effort to embody alpha masculinity, then, manosphere users can be willing to physically harm themselves. Obsession with their own physical appearance, however, ends up exacerbating users’ insecurities and to develop “poor body esteem, [...], body shame, and [to engage in] body surveillance” (Vallerga & Zurbriggen 2021: 616), which can lead to suicidal ideation (ibid.).

Participation in the manosphere, moreover, furthers users’ social and emotional isolation, not only from women—which are reduced to objects of both sexual desire and irate contempt—but from other men as well. This includes men who are more sexually successful (Botto & Gottzén 2024) as well as other manosphere users. In incel communities, for instance, “there is no social support [among members], only antisocial support” (Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019: 5020). Rather than providing

“mutual aid and solidarity” to one another, users are encouraged to “individualize via hostility” (ibid.: 5017). Insults, goading, and incitements to violence—both to others and self-inflicted—are frequently directed towards other members in incel forums. As Ricard (2018) aptly describes, “[t]o exist in these communities is the ultimate contradiction. You share your loneliness, but then to build it into anything other than anger is a sign of weakness. There’s a ritual to it.” Ultimately, the dictates of alpha masculinity end up exacerbating those feelings of vulnerability that lead users to join the manosphere in the first place (Botto & Gottzén 2024).

Why do participants in the manosphere engage with a discourse that ultimately contributes to their own psychological distress? I argue that a significant factor is the familiarity of the underlying ideas. Although the terminology and rhetorical strategies of manosphere discourse may appear novel, its foundational concepts are far from new. As Perrone (2019) observes, the manosphere’s gender discourse is marked by a “repackaging of old masculinity” (7), now framed as a solution to the crisis contemporary men are facing. As previously discussed (Chapter I), the hegemonic masculine ideal promoted within the manosphere essentially revives the traditional Western, white model of masculinity. In a similar vein, Western women are vilified for rejecting the norms of traditional white, domestic femininity (Lilly 2016).

Additionally, and crucially, the interpretive frameworks offered within the manosphere serve to ideologically reinforce male dominance. These frameworks allow participants to maintain a form of ignorance that upholds the existing gendered power structure. In this context, manosphere users may be understood through Adorno and coauthors’ (1950) concept of the *pseudo-conservative*: individuals who regard themselves as marginalized or excluded and yet function as defenders of the status quo (Faludi 1991: 168).

IV. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the epistemological dimensions of manosphere gender discourse. I proposed that, through it, users seek to make sense of, articulate, and share their feelings and experiences of vulnerability—which they believe to be invisible in dominant social discourse. Although I do believe that many manosphere users might perceive themselves as victims of a hermeneutical injustice, I do not agree that this is the case. Rather, I suggested that manosphere gender discourse reflects a form of wilful hermeneutical ignorance which I have named ‘male ignorance’. This is a motivated cognitive bias that obscures awareness of structural gender inequalities. Male ignorance allows manosphere users to express their discontent and sense of vulnerability while simultaneously maintaining the advantages of male privilege. However, such ignorance leads to both epistemic and psychological harms. But that is not all. In the following chapter, I will analyse the market side of the manosphere and explore in depth one additional harmful consequence of users’ male ignorance: consumer vulnerability.

The Manosphere Market and Consumer Vulnerability

I. Introduction

Throughout the two previous chapters, I have looked at manosphere *users* in general. In order to discuss and examine the manosphere market, however, I must highlight the distinction between two categories of manosphere users: *content creators* on the one hand, and *audience* on the other. The former generates revenue by producing Internet content as well as physical and digital products—such as workout plans, online courses, and workshops—which are consumed by their audience. I intend to show that—despite the variety of commodities being exchanged—the manosphere market actually revolves around one single good: hegemonic masculinity as a remedy for ontological insecurity.

In order to do so, I will first offer a definition of ‘ontological insecurity’ and explain how it relates to the manosphere. Afterwards, I will present the manosphere as a market for ontological security. Content creators offer their audience a specific interpretation of their state of ontological insecurity: it is the result of the feminization of men and society, for which feminism is to blame. The audience is urged to take a proactive stance. Individual men can contrast personal and societal emasculation by ‘swallowing the red pill’ and becoming ‘real’—i.e., alpha—males. How can they do so? By consuming the creators’ content and buying their products, of course.

In actuality, however, this does very little to restore men’s sense of ontological security and only serves to exacerbate their vulnerability. My aim is to illustrate, throughout this chapter, that the manosphere functions as an exploitative market in which content creators take advantage of a vulnerable consumer base. I *define vulnerable consumers* as those consumers who (1) due to a reduced sense of control (2) either do not realise maximum value from a transaction or even receive a negative value from it (McGraw 2022: 36). I argue that manosphere audiences meet both criteria (1) and (2). Their consumer vulnerability is created and exploited by manosphere content creators.

These take advantage of their consumers' ontological insecurity—which impairs their sense of personal control (condition 1)—to sell them products which, although they promise to resolve said insecurity, only further it (condition 2). Because incels do not believe they can achieve alpha masculinity (Chapter I), my analysis specifically focuses on Red Pill users and content creators.

II. Ontological Insecurity and the Manosphere

In their groundbreaking text on the monetization of manosphere content, Bujalka and co-authors (2022) argue that manosphere users' feelings of deep vulnerability—amply discussed in the previous chapter—are the result of a loss of *ontological security* (2).

Sociologists define ontological security as a state of “confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic existential parameters of self and social identity” (Giddens 1984: 375). Padgett (2007) identifies several key indicators of ontological security, including environmental stability, the presence of routine, a sense of control over one's life, and a secure foundation for the development of personal identity. An ontologically secure individual has a “stable sense of being” (Rossdale 2015: 371) and a “firm sense of knowing the world and [their] place in it” (Wehrle 2019: 14). The social world to which they belong appears to be coherent, understandable, and dependable.

Important societal changes can however undermine this sense of basic trust and security (ibid.: 15), triggering feelings of insecurity, shame, and existential anxiety. According to Giddens (1991), and later Kinnvall (2004), this state of *ontological insecurity* is commonplace in contemporary Western societies, where the significant socioeconomic transformations brought about by industrialisation, capitalism, and globalization have led to the erosion of trust in traditional power structures, including governmental institutions and the media (Lounsbury 2023) as well as established religious authorities (Gallup International 2025). Increasing rates of anxiety, depression, and loneliness—particularly seen among young adults—are interpreted by some researchers not merely

as indicators of individual pathology, but as manifestations of existential or ontological insecurity (Banwell et al. 2023; Henwood et al. 2018; Valente & Valera Pertegas 2018).

Individuals can restore their sense of ontological security through a process of ‘securitisation of subjectivity’ (Kinnvall 2004) that will offer them “security, stability, and simple answers” (Kinnvall in Wehrle 2019: 17). Kinnvall (2004) argues that, in times of ontological insecurity, individuals can decide to turn towards systems of meaning—such as nationalism and religion—that will provide them with a “stable identity” (Leeming 2023: 34). In this way, they become the offsprings of a greater, mythical self (Wehrle 2019: 17)—like the nation or the religious community—that has its roots in ancient times, before modernisation came to wreak havoc. The securitisation of subjectivity additionally requires the construction of an Other to which the Self can be contraposed—like The Foreigner or The Blasphemer. As it constitutes a threat to the stability and homogeneity of the Self, the Other is an enemy that must be fought and outcasted (ibid.: 18). The rise of right-wing populist movements has been interpreted as a means through which individuals seek to secure their subjectivity and restore ontological security (Steele & Homolar 2019; Wehrle 2019). Brexit, for instance, has been understood as a response by ‘Leavers’ to an identity crisis (Mohammadpour & Reza Saeidabadi 2025). In this context, European Union integration was perceived to be a challenge to Britain’s biographical narrative and collective identity. Voters aimed to dissipate their feelings of ontological insecurity by reaffirming their national identity.

Political scientist Kinnvall (2018) argues that men can be particularly vulnerable to feelings of ontological insecurity, as the contemporary reshaping of gender relations contributes to furthering their sense of turmoil and disorientation (Wehrle 2019: 19). Perhaps, then, the notion of ontological security might be useful to further illuminate the construction and functioning of gender discourse in the manosphere. This is not a novel approach, as prior research has already explored the relationship between ontological insecurity, masculinity, and extremist ideologies (Agius et al. 2020; Maloney et

al. 2022; Merino et al. 2020). Manosphere scholarship in particular (Bujalka et al. 2022; Leeming 2023) has focused on how, through the construction of a secure, stable masculine identity—the ‘alpha’ male—manosphere users attempt to overcome their sense of ontological insecurity.

Based on this body of literature, it seems that it is hegemonic masculinity that, in the manosphere, functions as the “identity marker” that promises to users the “truth, stability and security” they have longed for (Leeming 2023: 36). The securitisation of users’ subjectivity rests here on a strict dichotomy between masculinity and femininity (Wehrle 2019: 20). Feminists play the role of the dehumanized and vilified Other (Lilly 2016). Portrayed as a “leading factor in the ‘decline’ of western culture and civilization” (Bujalka et al. 2022: 4), feminism is considered responsible for the ontological insecurity that is gripping modern men. Feminism is perceived to have displaced men from their traditional roles in society and undermined their sense of masculinity, thereby depriving them of a coherent identity. It is by restoring this identity that ontological security can be reestablished. This belief is legitimised, on the part of manosphere users, via reference to a glorious (and mythical) past, in which men occupied their rightful place as warriors and providers (Lilly 2016; Leeming 2023). By embodying alpha masculinity, users can restore their ‘true’ masculine identity, and “security can be achieved again” (Merino et al. in Leeming 2023: 63).

As we will see in the next section, manosphere content creators play a pivotal role in both amplifying users’ ontological insecurity and capitalizing on their desire for ontological security.

III. The Manosphere: A Market for Ontological Security

I suggest we think of the manosphere as an ecosystem that is centred on a particular market: the market for ontological security. On the demand side, we have male members of the manosphere audience. Their incentive is to find a suitable explanation and solution to their sense of malaise. On the supply side, manosphere content creators—or “thought leaders” (Bujalka et al. 2022: 1)—provide just what their audience is looking for: an explanatory framework for their feelings of insecurity

(‘feminism has turned men into second-class citizens’) and a way to regain their confidence (‘become an alpha man, and you will finally feel content’).

The discourse peddled by these thought leaders resonates with their audience as it does not threaten their male ignorance (Chapter II). The Red Pill worldview promoted by content creators offers visibility to users’ feelings of existential insecurity and instability without questioning their sense of entitlement to a male hegemony. The fault for men’s unhappiness lies with feminism and liberalism, and with the political elites that have used both in order to “subdue men” (Leeming 2023: 48).

The tone of the discourse is catastrophic (Bujalka et al. 2022). Users are told that they are not ‘merely’ suffering, but rather that “they are lacking, or have lost, control, identity, and meaning” (Bonnamy 2023: 88). With the advent of feminism, men are said to have lost control, not only over women, but over their own lives and society as well (ibid.: 50). Because losing control implies failing—and failing is considered to be “distinctly un-masculine” (ibid.: 51)—masculinity itself is under threat. According to manosphere thought leaders, “there is no longer a place in society for ‘manly’ men” (ibid.: 50). Men and masculinity are under existential threat (Bujalka et al. 2022). By prophesizing the death of masculinity and masculine men at the hands of feminism and ‘The Left’, what manosphere content creators do is, in fact, not providing an explanation for their audience’s ontological insecurity, but rather promoting it. They take their users’ (very real and deeply felt) sense of personal vulnerability and transform it into fear—and rage.

But manosphere users have no need to lose hope. Luckily for them, those same content creators who have instilled fear into their hearts can provide that promise of security they are now desperately looking for. Manosphere thought leaders guarantee their audience that each user can avoid a life of misery if he is willing to do what it takes to be an alpha. Users are encouraged to turn to self-control to restore their ‘lost’ masculinity. If they “take control of their own lives”, they are ensured success in all domains of social life (Bujalka et al. 2022: 7). The content creators present themselves as guides

and teachers that can assist their male followers in the process of self-transformation. But not for free, obviously.

Two ways independent manosphere content creators are able to generate revenue are crowdfunding and the monetization of their social media content (Han & Yin 2023: 1931). Their audience can finance their work either through direct donations or by engaging with their content on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Rumble. The larger the audience, then, the bigger the money. Size, however, is not everything. Content creators must be able to attract the attention of as many followers as possible, but also to retain this attention over a longer period of time. To this end, it is of vital importance to arouse strong emotions in their audience. By triggering feelings of panic, anger, and outrage, manosphere thought leaders can bring about *affective publics* (Papacharissi 2015) that are deeply emotionally invested in their content.

Additionally, many content creators sell products to their followers. Their audience is encouraged to purchase books, digital courses, workshops, and coaching sessions, the purpose of which is twofold. Firstly, consumers are promised that the more they engage with the Red Pill worldview, the more ‘truths’ (about society, women, and misandry) they will uncover. This will allow them to ‘escape the matrix’. But the truth will not just set them free. It will make them happy. It will allow them to become alpha men and to be everything they have always dreamed of. By attending a pick-up artist’s seduction workshop, they can restore the “masculine confidence” (Banet-Weiser 2018: 112) feminism had deprived them of. There will finally be no woman—no matter how attractive—who they will not be able to seduce. Or, for instance, by purchasing (for \$499) one 90-minute ‘Soul Guidance Session’ with manosphere thought leader Elliott Hulse, “modern men who are hungry for both success and holiness” will be able to “[walk] a path of masculine initiation” that “can change the entire trajectory of [their] life and business” (Hulse, n.d.). If one session is not enough, they have, of course, the opportunity to go “deeper [...] into the Soul Spiral™” (at an additional cost). They can also purchase Hulse’ book *Make Men Strong Again*, which—by teaching men the “12 pillars of traditional

masculinity”—will help them “become the [men they] we’re [*sic*] born to be (the same type of man that women find *irresistible*)” (Hulse, n.d.) (emphasis original).

No other manosphere content creator, however, has mastered the art of selling alpha masculinity like Andrew Tate has. The man—who is currently facing charges of rape, bodily harm, and human trafficking (Somerville & O’Byrne Mulligan 2025)—is one of the most influential manosphere thought leaders. Tate’s content offers his audience exactly what they are looking for: a clear and (allegedly) fireproof way of restoring ontological security. In virtue of his “height, physical strength, wealth and alleged sexual prowess” (Leeming 2023: 56), Tate presents himself as the perfect embodiment of alpha masculinity. His ability to perform hegemonic masculinity makes him superior to all members of his audience (ibid.) and provides him with something they lack: “security and dominance” (ibid.: 57). Thankfully, however, his followers have the possibility to “[l]earn from the best” (Tate, n.d.). Tate is willing to “teach the deserving the secrets to modern wealth creation” (ibid.). All they need to do is purchase his programs. *The Real World* is an online program that teaches the “skill” of “money making” (ibid.) by providing courses on subjects such as artificial intelligence, cryptocurrencies, e-commerce and social media marketing. The price ranges from \$49 to \$99 per month, based on whether the consumer wants to, respectively, “earn”, “prosper”, or “conquer” (ibid.). While *The Real World* team “doesn’t guarantee any profits or financial success”, it also promises that if you “follow [their] step-by-step lessons and guidance, [...] you will start a profitable business” (ibid.). Tate does not only sell financial success. Through the *War Room* program, men can “experience the power of Brotherhood and Community” (ibid.). For the price of \$7,979 (with an “annual upkeep fee of around \$2k” according to Nox, a representative of the company I spoke to), men can access a “global network in which exemplars of individualism work to free the modern man from socially induced incarceration” (ibid.). More precise information regarding the program is not present on the website.

Hulse' and Tate's products are only some examples among many. They show that, in the manosphere market for ontological security, masculinity is turned into a "consumer lifestyle" (Rosenmann et al. 2017: 2). By buying the right kind of products, one can become the right kind of man—an alpha.

For decades now, economists have been investigating the role that social identity plays in agents' economic decisions. In fact, economic behaviour can be partly explained by the "identity-based payoffs" (Akerlof & Kranton 2000: 717) an agent derives from her own actions. Men, for instance, may refuse to enter female-dominated occupations—like nursery or childcare work—simply because such professions are viewed as 'feminine'. The gender-job association decreases the overall payoff of working such jobs, pushing men towards different occupational fields (ibid.: 722). Importantly, third parties can manipulate these identity-based payoffs (ibid.). Through appropriate marketing strategies, companies can make their customers associate with a particular identity in order to encourage behaviours such as "buying the product or service" or "telling others about it" (Champniss et al. 2015: 5).

This, I argue, is what manosphere content creators do. They are able to incentivize the consumption of their content and products by making their male audience attend to their masculine identity: 'being a man' becomes an extremely salient part of their followers' personal identity. Content creators achieve this result via the Red Pill discourse they endorse on their platforms. Reed II and Forehand (2016) note that emotions "help a consumer embody a salient identity" (96). By "catastrophizing the state of men [...] and proliferating ontological insecurity around the issue of masculinity" (Bujalka et al. 2022: 9), manosphere thought leaders arouse feelings of anger and anxiety in their audience. Men and masculinity are portrayed as being under attack, and manosphere users are told that they can only counteract this threat—and restore their sense of security—by 'taking the red pill' and facing the harsh truths dispensed by content creators.

In fact, Red Pill content creators take it a step further than just encouraging audiences to 'tune into' a general masculine identity. They provide them with one they can *aspire* to, one day, fully embody:

the ‘liberated’ (i.e., redpilled) alpha man. This is not an identity that manosphere users can hope to embody naturally, merely ‘by being themselves’. They must follow the guidance of their thought leaders, that is, they must consume their content and their products. Bujalka and co-authors (2022) describe the commercial strategy of manosphere content creators as a form of *identity racketeering*. These men “deliberately proliferate, instill, and exploit [...] ontological insecurity in target audiences” (ibid.: 8) in order to gain money and success. The audience is told that, unless they listen to and espouse the Red Pill knowledge spread by content creators, they will never find love, or have sex, or be successful (ibid.:8). For instance, in Lesson 2 of his ‘52 Essential Lessons to the Young Kings’ (Chapter II), Tate tells his male followers that “as a man you will never have intrinsic value. You’ve either made yourself important or you haven’t” (Tate, n.d.). A man can only be worthy (of attention, of love, of satisfaction) by becoming wealthy, attractive and successful. If he does not want to improve himself—that is, to become an alpha—he is, according to Lesson 22, “a bottom-tier piece of shit” who “deserve[s] misery” (ibid.). I contend that the overarching message conveyed by many manosphere content creators is that failure to adhere to their prescribed notions of masculinity will result in an unhappy and unfulfilled life. Those who fail to embody alpha masculinity are portrayed as doomed to a life marked by feelings of instability, lack of control, and insecurity—all hallmarks of ontological insecurity.

To summarize, the manosphere market offers basic commodities—such as workout programs and seduction workshops—but what is truly being marketed is the promise that purchasing these goods will enable one to embody a particular identity: alpha masculinity. This is not unlike how consumers of luxury clothing and accessories might be motivated in their purchases by a desire to embody a persona of affluence and refinement, rather than by the commodities themselves. But alpha masculinity itself serves as a means to another, ultimate end: the attainment of ontological security. This underlying desire is the primary driver behind the consumption of manosphere content and products.

In the following sections, I will examine whether the manosphere market can be said to exploit the vulnerabilities of its consumers. I will argue that, by proliferating ontological insecurity among their audiences, manosphere content creators might be able to create vulnerable consumers they can profit from. Given the novelty of this area of research, empirical data on manosphere consumers' vulnerability remains limited. Consequently, I will be drawing parallels with a different industry which has been widely linked to exploitative market practices and accused of capitalizing on consumer vulnerabilities (Aphramor 2010; Begley 1991; Khubchandani & Batra 2024)—the weight loss industry (Perez 2024). By showing that the manosphere employs exploitative practices comparable to those of the weight loss industry, I aim to reinforce my argument by offering compelling reasons to believe that the former—like the latter—both creates and exploits vulnerable consumers.

IV. Consumer Vulnerability in the Manosphere: Loss of Control

The first hallmark of consumer vulnerability is a reduced sense of control on the part of the consumer (Section I). This lack of control may be expressed in various forms, such as limited authority over resources or restricted access to information. In this context, I propose to interpret this deficiency in control in psychological terms, as a symptom of users' ontological insecurity.

Many consumers of weight-loss products report experiencing a perceived lack of control, particularly in relation to their weight or eating habits. This perception appears to motivate their purchasing decisions (Herriot et al. 2008). Importantly, this perception of being out of control can be purposefully stimulated by fitness and lifestyle influencers. For instance, a study analysing around a thousand posts from Instagram influencers found that they often present diet and exercise as areas requiring strict control to achieve an ideal body (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko 2019). Their content often implies that followers need external tools—such as products and routines provided by the influencers—to regain control over their bodies and reach their goals. Consumers, therefore, occupy

a position of vulnerability insofar as they perceive themselves as deprived of control and dependent upon external guidance for its restoration.

What we have seen so far in this chapter suggests that this impression of ‘lacking control’ could likewise be present in at least a large portion of manosphere users. It seems to manifest, in the first place, at the individual level (Hill & Sharma 2020: 559). In the manosphere market for ontological security, consumers seem to experience a heightened sense of threat and vulnerability, a perception of being out of control. Their fears and insecurities concerning their sense of self and the state of the social world are skilfully stimulated by thought leaders, who are responsible for proliferating a sense of ontological insecurity amongst their audiences. Following the strategies for survival outlined by these content creators seems to be presented to users as their only way out from a situation of existential danger. It appears as a *necessity*: it is not that the audience wants to purchase the content creators’ services and products—it *needs* to.

Additionally, I suggest that users’ diminished sense of control within the manosphere market is further reinforced, at the interpersonal level (*ibid.*), by their epistemic subjugation to thought leaders. Content creators present themselves as beacons of truth who offer their “uninitiated audience” a “revelatory experience” (Bujalka et al. 2020: 8) that will “‘remove’ a shroud from their [...] eyes” (*ibid.*: 12). By taking in the secretive knowledge dispensed by the thought leader, the audience is able to see truths that are hidden from the rest of society (Bujalka et al. 2022: 12) and to ‘escape the matrix’. Their liberation, then, is not only epistemic in nature, but political as well. Indeed, one of the ‘truths’ Red Pill content creators share with their audiences is that liberal movements (including feminism) are part of a “purposeful and deliberate mission run by political elites to subdue men” (Leeming 2023: 49) and keep them in a state of slavery. Manosphere users, therefore, should be wary of trusting outsiders who do not subscribe to the Red Pill ideology. At best, they are extremely ignorant. At worst, they are malicious accomplices of the matrix.

As a result, manosphere users might feel encouraged to exclusively trust other members of the manosphere and, above all, the thought leaders. This “aggressive emotional isolation” (Nguyen

2020:11) and marginalization from broader society (Bujalka et al. 2022: 12) are reinforced via a *disagreement-reinforcement mechanism* (Nguyen 2020: 12). Indeed, in the manosphere, “the existence and expression of contrary [to the Red Pill ideology] beliefs” (ibid.) actually serves to bolster members’ trust in the manosphere world view—and in its content creators. For instance, Andrew Tate’s ban from mainstream social media platforms, as well as his criminal charges, do not seem to particularly faze his supporters. To them, such accusations are merely evidence that “the matrix actively pursues [Tate’s] subjugation” (Stöckl 2023: 48) because of “his adamant commitment to telling the truth” (ibid.: 49).

The emotional isolation of members and the disagreement-reinforcement mechanism are standard features of epistemic echo chambers (as well as typical techniques of cult indoctrination) (Nguyen 2020). I have already noted (Chapter II) that the manosphere is an example of digital echo chamber. The echo chamber-like structure of manosphere plays a fundamental role in manosphere users’ consumer vulnerability.

Economists Levy and Razin (2019) note that echo chambers—defined as the segregation of individuals who share the same beliefs or preferences (7; 9)—form and thrive because of particular cognitive biases that arise when members interact within the chambers (11). Users will unconsciously ignore or misinterpret information which contradicts their beliefs (confirmation bias). They will ignore how the information they are interacting with is not random but, rather, in line with their personal preferences and beliefs (selection bias). Finally, they will overlook how the pieces of information they consume on different websites often originate from a common source—a phenomenon that economists name *correlation neglect* (Enke & Zimmermann 2019). Such biases lead users to update their beliefs in a distort and disproportionate manner, inducing extremism and polarization in beliefs (Levy & Razin 2019: 4). This failure in belief updating, I argue, causes manosphere users’ sense of ontological insecurity to further. It strengthens their faith in Red Pill ideology as a lifeline, making them increasingly more vulnerable and more reliant on thought leaders.

Levy and Razin (*ibid.*) also advance the possibility that echo chamber might arise because their members have a “‘motivated beliefs’ incentive” (20) to segregate together. Motivated beliefs are beliefs who are biased in a self-serving way. Individuals can engage in motivated reasoning for either affective or instrumental reasons (Bénabou 2015). I want to suggest here that the formation of the manosphere echo chamber might be (at least partially) explained by motivated reasoning on the part of men. I propose that believing in Red Pill ideology allows men to alleviate their feelings of ontological insecurity (affective reason) while also permitting them to retain their male ignorance and avoid renouncing their privileges (instrumental reason). What is at stake for these men is their sense of security, directly related to their identity. By subscribing to Red Pill ideology, users may sustain a sense of personal identity centred on their masculinity, which in turn helps to restore a degree of ontological security.

Indeed, given the significance of what the manosphere market appears to offer—namely, ontological security through the acquisition of an ‘alpha’ identity—it is plausible that participation in this market is shaped by consumers’ motivated beliefs. First, there seems to be an affective dimension to users’ adherence to Red Pill ideology: if the world operates as Red Pill narratives describe, then these men can re-establish a coherent sense of self. Within such a framework, social order appears stable and intelligible: each person—man or woman—has an assigned place and script to follow. In addition, there are instrumental incentives for ‘swallowing the Red Pill’, as its belief system does not challenge users’ male ignorance and enables them to avoid questioning the privileges associated with their masculinity (Chapter II). Two birds with one stone. In order to preserve this worldview, however, users must necessarily discount or explain away all contradictory evidence. This has, overtime, contributed to turning their community into an echo chamber.

Affective and cognitive biases, however, allow third parties to more easily manipulate and exploit members of echo chambers (Levy & Razin 2019: 18), as I believe that the case of the manosphere market illustrates. Manosphere thought leaders—through their panic-inducing content—are able to further their audience’s feelings of vulnerability (Section III). It seems plausible that, the more

insecure and afraid their followers feel, the stronger their incentive to believe in Red Pill ideology is. After all, it offers them a straightforward solution to their malaise: altering their appearance, improving their self-confidence, and becoming wealthy will suffice to assuage their fears and pain. Content creators can capitalize on their audience's motivated belief in the Red Pill worldview both by producing content on it and by selling them products who are supposed to help them achieve the ontological security they are seeking. Because users' engagement with the thought leaders' content is shaped by cognitive and affective biases, the amount of genuine control they exercise over those transactions they carry out in the manosphere market is limited.

This reduced sense of control partly explains why manosphere members are victims of consumer vulnerability. The fact that the products they purchase do not effectively fulfil their underlying promise—the restoration of ontological insecurity—is, as we will see in next section, a second reason for regarding manosphere users as vulnerable consumers.

V. Consumer Vulnerability in the Manosphere: Unfulfilled Promises

Through their Red Pill content, manosphere thought leaders appear to offer their audience a simplified theoretical framework that may help users make sense of their social experiences and feelings of vulnerability. Additionally, their products seem to provide a purported means of alleviating this vulnerability, namely, the embodiment of alpha masculinity. The manosphere thus promises that, by adhering to its standards of hegemonic masculinity, users might be able to regain a lost sense of ontological security. Nonetheless, there are compelling reasons to question the overall effectiveness of this alleged solution.

Firstly, manosphere content creators seem to be “constantly moving the goalposts for success” (Perez 2024). The goal, for instance, is not simply ‘to be fit’, but to get fit via the ‘right’ diet or workout routine. Similarly, it is not enough to seduce many women, as one must seduce the ‘right’ ones (i.e., ‘high value’ women) and in the ‘right’ way. This resembles patterns observed in the weight

loss industry, where the bodily ideal promoted by the industry as well as the approaches recommended for its achievement are constantly shifting. The ideal body is not fixed but mutable, oscillating between excessive thinness, pronounced curves, or muscularity. Likewise, dietary rules evolve—from avoiding fats to shunning carbohydrates, or from cutting out dairy to eliminating gluten or meat.

Secondly, in the manosphere, the full restoration of ontological security appears to always remain out of reach for all members. Even those who achieve the status of alpha cannot feel safe. According to the thought leaders, they must forever remain vigilant, as others—jealous of their success—will surely try to knock them down (Bujalka et al. 2022: 9). We can clearly see this, for instance, in Tate’s *52 Lessons to the Young Kings*. According to Lesson 11, the price a man pays for “being a winner” is that, sooner or later, most people “will turn on [him]” (Tate, n.d.). Because you “cannot control people” or “society”, you need to always “be ready to kill those who try to kill you” (Lesson 13, *ibid.*). Moreover, feminism and The Left continue to pose a danger for masculinity and men—they are a threat that even alpha men must always remain aware of. For these reasons, individual feelings of anxiety and insecurity will hardly dissipate. In the manosphere, then, “the threat to one’s ontological security is forever renewed” (Bujalka et al. 2022: 10), and users are incentivized to keep on consuming manosphere creators’ content and products.

Finally, the proposed solution is counterproductive as it may in fact further users’ ontological insecurity by undermining their self-worth. As explained in Chapter II, attempts to comply with the requirements of alpha masculinity often trigger low self-esteem and body-image issues among manosphere users and exacerbate their social and emotional isolation. Although the manosphere presents itself as a “confidence industry” for men (Banet-Weiser 2018: 115), its users’ self-assurance is often demolished, rather than built. Users may ultimately find themselves in a worse psychological state than when they first engaged with the manosphere. The resulting erosion of self-confidence further alienates them from the idealized image of the strong, assertive, and self-assured ‘alpha’ man. Consequently, the prospect of embodying this identity—and thereby achieving ontological security—appears more unattainable than ever.

Do content creators know that the products they are marketing might be at best useless and at worst seriously counterproductive? I believe that many of them do. Perez (2024) notes that both the manosphere market and the weight loss industry “need you to fail” in order to generate and increase revenue. Weight loss companies have a strong economic incentive to sell products that will only guarantee short-term results. If their clients managed to actually lose the weight and to keep it off *for good*, they would have no need to spend additional money on the company’s products and services (Tovar 2023). Analogously, if manosphere users were actually content with themselves and their lives, they would have little need to invest much of their time and money on content creators. If one workshop on how to pick up women is enough to successfully teach you to seduce all women you might desire, why would you pay for another? If a single online course could actually teach you how to become rich, why would you pay for private counselling? Thought leaders’ goal seems to be less to help their audience and more to keep them hooked on their content and products. And the more vulnerable and insecure users feel, the easier that is. Therefore, if said contents and products are not merely useless but also harmful, it is all for the better.

Of course, these approaches may yield positive outcomes for some individuals, much like dieting products can be effective for certain users. However, as far as the weight loss industry is concerned, such results appear to often be short-lived (UCLA 2007). It is possible that, in the same vein, while manosphere users might experience a temporary boost in self-esteem, the underlying issues that led them to take part into the manosphere remain unresolved.

We see, then, that manosphere members appear to meet the second condition of consumer vulnerability: sellers are able to make them overestimate the value of the products they are being sold (Stonedale 2015: 561) and to convince them to purchase commodities from which they will receive little to no value—or even a negative one.

But how are manosphere thought leaders able to retain their audience interest in their content and products, when these do not yield the results consumers are looking for? A potential explanation is that customers are persuaded that if they are dissatisfied with what the manosphere is offering them, the fault lies with them, rather than with the Red Pill worldview.

Indeed, the Red Pill discourse is pervaded by a “self-help narrative” (Leeming 2023: 60), according to which anyone can become an alpha male *if they try*. If they do not manage to, then, it can only mean that they have not tried hard enough. If they are still dissatisfied with their body, they must eat more red meat or lift more weights. If they cannot seduce a woman they are interested in, they must work more on their self-confidence. If they are not getting richer, they must ‘grind’ more or get more aligned with an ‘abundance mindset’ (Pavlina 2007). Bonnamy (2023) describes this attitude as one of “magical voluntarism” (178), the belief that “it is within every individual’s power to make themselves whatever they want to be” (Fisher 2014).

The notion of “boundless” personal agency has been argued to be a hallmark of neoliberal masculinity (Bonnamy 2023: 184). According to Dean (2008), the neoliberal “fantasy of free trade” promises that “*everyone* will win” (54) (emphasis mine). As long as a market transaction is freely undertaken, all involved parties will benefit from it. And yet, the idea of competition—which is of paramount importance for neoliberal ideology—implies that not everyone can in fact be a winner. Someone *must* lose (ibid.: 55-56). For Dean, neoliberalism can only solve this contradiction by attributing to the ‘losers’ themselves the fault for their failure (ibid.: 57): if they had behaved differently, they would have won. Similarly, it can be argued that the manosphere promises to all its users that they will win. They will find ontological security. All they need to do is to follow the instructions given by the content creators and become alpha males.

And yet, members’ desire for control—over their own lives, over women, over society—is often constantly frustrated. A common position in the literature on the manosphere is that the psychological, social and economic vulnerability that grips modern men has its roots in the failures of the neoliberal system (Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019; Cornwall et al. 2016; Finlayson 2021; Van Valkenburgh 2019;

Morin 2021). It cannot be solved by going to the gym or improving one's seduction skills. Red Pill discourse, however, lacks "an effective structure for dealing with [users'] failure" (Bonnamy 2023: 215) to achieve ontological security. The only solution these 'losers' have available to them is the neoliberal one of better self-management, self-improvement, and entrepreneurialism (Bujalka et al. 2022: 11) as well as an increased reliance on the 'experts', that is, on the manosphere thought leaders (Bratich & Banet-Weiser 2019). The more lost the audience feels, then, the more it comes to rely on content creators. The manosphere market for ontological insecurity thrives on the vulnerability of its consumers. The "feedback loop of exploitation between thought leaders and their audiences" (Bujalka et al. 2002: 8) allows the former to generate profits that will be re-invested so as to further proliferate ontological insecurity and enlargen their customer base.

VI. Conclusion

This chapter has contended that the manosphere functions as a marketplace for ontological security. Content creators first instil fear, shame, and anger in their audiences and then promise to help them regain the lost sense of stability and self-worth via the pursuit of alpha masculinity—a goal attainable by engaging with their content and purchasing their products. Yet this market is exploitative, situating consumers in a condition of dependency and vulnerability in relation to thought leaders. First, consumers experience existential insecurity and a sense of being out of control, which thought leaders exploit by presenting their guidance and products as the only means of regaining stability. Users' dependence on content creators is enhanced by the echo chamber-like structure of the manosphere which makes them susceptible to cognitive and affective biases. Secondly, the manosphere's promise of restoring ontological security through the pursuit of alpha masculinity is ultimately illusory and designed to fail. Ontological insecurity is continuously renewed, keeping consumers psychologically dependent on thought leaders and ensuring continuous profits for them.

Ultimately, the manosphere operates through a feedback loop of exploitation: the more insecure users feel, the more they consume; the more they consume, the more their insecurity deepens.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the epistemic and economic functioning of the manosphere by analysing the function and effects of its gender discourse.

In Chapter I, I analysed the construction of masculinity and femininity in the manosphere through Connell's (1987) gender order theory. I argued that the manosphere gender discourse promotes traditional masculinity—represented by 'alpha' or 'Chad' masculinity—as the hegemonic masculine ideal each man is called to conform to. In Chapter II, I suggested users resort to such masculinist discourse in order to articulate and communicate their feelings and experiences of social vulnerability. I first explored the possibility manosphere participants might be considered victims of a hermeneutical injustice—a possibility I later rejected. I rather argued that users' beliefs are shaped by what I called 'male ignorance'—a form of wilful hermeneutical ignorance that allows users to express their sense of vulnerability without having to question male hegemony. Male ignorance, however, has negative epistemic consequences. First, it furthers manosphere users' hermeneutical marginalization from broader society. Secondly, it leads them to inaccurately interpret their social experiences of vulnerability. Users who have 'swallowed the red pill' end up believing that they can only feel better by adhering to the strict standards of hegemonic masculinity. This has, additionally, a harmful psychological impact on manosphere participants, who are called to reject emotional sensitivity and self-objectify in order to become alpha men. Finally, in Chapter III, I analysed an additional harm of male ignorance: consumer vulnerability. I argued that the manosphere functions as a marketplace in which users purchase content creators' products in order to achieve alpha masculinity and restore a sense of ontological security that has been lost. I contended that manosphere users are vulnerable consumers for two reasons. First, because of their ontological insecurity, the amount of control they effectively exercise over their transactions with thought leaders is limited. Secondly, the content creators' products fail to deliver the promised results. Rather, such products are designed to fail in order to keep consumers in a state of dependency towards content creators.

Overall, this thesis has contended that a large portion of manosphere users might be driven to this online space by feelings of extreme vulnerability. Its gender discourse appears to offer stability and security and ultimately promises happiness and satisfaction. Unfortunately, however, ‘swallowing the red pill’ only serves to exacerbate users’ sense of vulnerability and further alienates them from the larger society.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This work has hopefully offered some useful insights into what draws users to the manosphere—and what keeps them there. Nonetheless, it has some important limitations that future works should overcome if we aim to gain an even deeper and more accurate understanding of the manosphere phenomenon.

In Chapter I, I discussed how the notion of hegemonic masculinity can be employed to explore the manosphere gender discourse. I suggested that alpha masculinity operates as the hegemonic ideal to which users compare themselves. However, it is necessary to keep in mind that the manosphere is an online conglomeration of individuals, rather than a cohesive social and political group in which all members adhere to a strict ideology. Each user can negotiate in his own terms with the manosphere worldview and its hegemonic ideal of masculinity. Future research should investigate in deeper detail how different users contend with the ideal of alpha/Chad masculinity. Deeper knowledge on the precise demographics of manosphere users is particularly needed in order to determine how users’ other social identities, such as their race and class, impact their participation in the manosphere.

In Chapter II, I argued that manosphere participation is motivated by a strong sense of personal vulnerability on the part of users. Further research is needed in order to investigate the causes and characteristics of this vulnerability. Understanding what causes these feelings of insecurity and dissatisfaction would help explain why men decide to join the manosphere, or why they do not. This is particularly important if we are interested in finding ways to curb manosphere participation.

Finally, in Chapter III, I analysed the relation between manosphere content creators and their audiences. Following Bujalka and co-authors (2022), I argued that thought leaders deliberately proliferate ontological insecurity among their followers, making their audiences dependent on them and their content. This, however, might not hold true for all content creators, and certainly hardly applies to all manosphere users. Additional research is needed to explore more sporadic and superficial consumption of manosphere content as well as to investigate the extent to which creators are motivated by financial, rather than ideological, reasons. Moreover, more work is needed to understand whether content creators respond to users' already existing need for ontological security or whether they are responsible for creating said need in the first place. An answer to this question is of fundamental importance if we hope to deradicalize manosphere users.

This work has been motivated by a desire to better understand what lies behind the gender discourse of the manosphere—a discourse that I have always found abhorrent due to its misogynistic and racist rhetoric. Despite the repugnance Red Pill ideology might elicit in many of us, I believe it is of the utmost importance that we look past that initial reaction in order to investigate the manosphere phenomenon with as much respect and open-mindedness as possible. At the same time, we must remain aware, while doing so, of the harm these men and their ideology inflict on women and other marginalized groups. Manosphere users' feelings of vulnerability and impotence might explain the adoption of such harmful rhetoric, but they do not excuse it. There is no simple solution to addressing the issue of manosphere participation. What is certain is that any approach we might choose will have significant ethical, social, and political ramifications. My hope is that this work offers valuable insight into how we might reflect on and address this complex matter.

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