free associations

Masculinity, affect and the search for certainty in an age of precarity
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Introduction

The spirit of 1968 was marked by the emergence of new social movements shaped by the emancipatory wishes, ideals and discourses of freedom that found expression across different spheres of Western culture, politics and society. The complicated legacy of the psychosocial, cultural and political currents that emerged at that time can be found in contemporary formations of right-wing masculinity, where the libertarian insistence on the importance of free speech has been appropriated as a defence against the mores of so-called 'political correctness'. This strategy is increasingly mobilised by men in media and online platforms as an attack against identity politics - and feminism in particular, which as a political and cultural movement also can be traced back to the progressive politics of 1968.

The social, cultural and political forces that emerged a little over half a century ago provide an historical starting point for this article which discusses their legacy for the contemporary relationship between the shaping of far-right masculinity and a desire for certainty in an age of uncertainty and precarity. Today, late modernity is regularly characterised by sociologists in terms of its ambivalence: on the one hand there is fluidity, disorganisation and uncertainty, and yet on the other, there is a reactive wish for certitude, authority and a move towards rationalization – as is often discussed in relation to the forces of neoliberalism which also have their roots in the last quarter of the 20th century (Bauman, 2000; Crociani-Windland, 2019). As psychoanalytic scholars remind us, such contradictions which take place at socio-political and cultural levels are also bound up with the experience of affect and the processes of unconscious fantasy (Elliott, 2013; Stavrakakis, 2019). Whereas the term 'emotion' is defined as being linked to the 'relatively conscious' socio-political realm of discourse, 'affect' refers to the seemingly irrational, unpredictable sphere of embodied feeling that is linked to the processes of unconscious fantasy (Crociani-Windland and Hoggett, 2012: 2).

This article explores the tensions and vicissitudes of affect and masculinity by taking theory from the fields of object relations (Klein, 1946) and US relational psychoanalysis (Benjamin, 1988; 2018) and applying those ideas to capture the fluid psychodynamics of contemporary feeling in relation to masculine subjectivities and the public sphere. We ground our analysis of masculinity through a case study of the media coverage of the well-known Canadian Professor of Psychology Jordan Peterson and we explore the nature of his appeal for his followers as galvanised through internet community platforms such as Reddit and YouTube. Despite scepticism on the part of some about his intellectual credibility (Samuels, 2018), he has nonetheless been dubbed 'the most influential public intellectual in the Western world right now' (Cowen, cited in Brooks 2018) and he has barely been out of media attention since 2016. His online

presence has been ubiquitous, with around 500 hours of lectures available on YouTube and myriad media appearances, interviews, televised debates and lecture tours in many countries. As a public intellectual, his pronouncements on issues such as free speech, education and gender politics resonate for those men who feel left behind and even persecuted by what they perceive to be a world shaped by prescriptive feminists and politically correct dogma (Kimmel, 2013; Winter, 2019). We argue that Peterson's appeal for such men is also symptomatic of a wider public mood underpinned by a wish for certainty in an age of precarity. Peterson deploys libertarian discourses of freedom that evoke the emancipatory language of 1968. However, we argue that such discourses are mobilised by a growing number of men today in order to defend against what they see as the potential loss of entitlements that have emerged with a new awareness of intersectionality, gender politics and the gains made by feminism.

The article deploys an innovative, interpretive, psychosocial methodological approach by paying attention to processes of fantasy and affect in shaping the identifications with Peterson as an object of the psycho-cultural and political imagination. Whilst the study of masculinity and the online communities associated with the 'Alt-right' [1] have received attention (Farrell *et al*, 2019; Ging, 2019; Lumsden and Harmer, 2019; Nagle, 2017); the unconscious psychodynamics of contemporary mediatised masculinity as a cultural and political force remain under researched. Given the affective quality of discussions that take place in this context, psychoanalysis provides a useful conceptual framework through which to unpack the force of those affects within the public sphere of online communication. Secondly, as we discuss in the case study, our research analyses thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2008) textual, verbal and non-verbal aspects of media data paying particular attention to those aspects which signal unconscious processes at work.

The research uses data collected from video-audio and online interviews along with user-generated discussion boards on participatory social media within what is dubbed as the *Manosphere*. The latter is a term that refers to the online expression of men, who attempt to assert, redefine and argue for a vision of masculinity and men's rights that resists changing gender roles of men and women (Ging, 2019; Kelly, 2017). [2] As a cultural formation, the Manosphere has its own jargon to enhance its legitimacy: that women dominate society at social, economic and political levels at the expense of men, who are the truly oppressed in this environment (Ging, 2019). Often associated with a form of masculinity promoted by the Alt-right, these discourses of men's rights range from mild resentment to extreme anger, with some users expressing violent, misogynistic attitudes and outlook. Peterson's critique of political correctness appears to sit well with aspects of far-right masculinity. However, he resists being publically aligned with either the political left or right, and has distanced himself from the Alt-right who fail to respect the principles and legacy of the European Enlightenment (Reddit, 2019). Thus, in

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[1] The term 'Alt-Right' was first coined by the far-right writer Richard Spencer in 2008, and emerged from the online culture wars which promoted the rise of Trump and his 2016 election as US President (Nagle, 2017).

[2] This informal cyberspace includes a network of multi-media sharing websites, forums and blogs that cover a range of themes relating to masculinity which include relationships with women, men's rights, inceldom (involuntary celibacy), and pick-up artistry.

returning to the liberal traditions that have of late fallen out of fashion, he is seen by some as a social conservative (McLaughlin, 2019), while his followers regard him as 'a breath of fresh air' and view him as a reasoned, middle-ground voice of sanity in an age of extremes (Reddit, 2018). Nonetheless, his essentialist views on gender and his critique of identity politics have much in common with those of the far-right and thus some see him 'as a sort of gateway drug to the Alt-right' (West, 2019).

We begin by situating our analysis of masculinity within socio-cultural, historical and political contexts and then turn to the psychic drivers that shape formations of masculinity in the Manosphere and develop the discussion through a psychosocial case study of Peterson as a charismatic media figure.

Contextualising Masculinity in Crisis

An important context for ongoing debates about masculinity in both popular (Myers, 2016; Raisin, 2017) and academic discourse (Kimmel, 2013; Roberts, 2014; Starck and Luyt, 2019) is the notion that it is undergoing a crisis of some kind. The latter implies (in popular discourse at least) that whereas masculinity was once somehow *alright*, it is now unravelling and in peril. Following a tradition of gender scholarship that has problematised masculinity as a social and cultural construction, we take as a starting point the notion that masculinity is always contingent and subject to change and contestation (Connell, 2005). From a psychosocial perspective, masculinities are shaped by a mix of shifting socio-cultural forces and historically specific discourses that are also mediated by unconscious processes of fantasy and affect. Over the last thirty years, the precarious aspects of masculinity and, the psychosocial complexities of what it means to be a man in different contexts, have been well documented (see for example, Segal, 1990; Yates, 2000, 2007; Maguire; 2004).

In psychoanalytic terms, theories of Freud and Lacan have been deployed in order to explore the tensions that lie at the heart of masculinity: between the phantasies of power and phallic plenitude and the lived experience of limited power and the problematic reality of dependence and relations of difference (Yates, 2000: 77). That contradiction has been pushed and tested in late modernity by the loss of values and meanings associated with the reality and fantasy of the older patriarchal hegemonic order - a development which for some men has resulted in heightened levels of anxiety and a sense of crisis (Bainbridge and Yates, 2005). As we discuss, this sense of crisis can be found in contemporary popular culture and social media sites where men complain about a loss of rights, thereby creating an impression that following the paradigm shift in gendered relations they are somehow under siege from the forces of feminism and political correctness (Savigny, 2019).

Such anxieties are linked to historical and material shifts in social structures connected to the role of men in relation to the family, changing employment patterns connected to the rise of the service industries, under-achievement of boys in schools and also by representations of masculinity in different spheres of popular culture where the old narrative fictions of masculinity often fail to convince. Discussions about the so-called 'crises of masculinity' often cite the corrupting forces of consumer culture, where the latter becomes a pejorative signifier for the feminization of men, who have lost touch with who they *really are* - a message which ironically, is also promoted through the

consumption of online digital culture and social media sites related to the Manosphere (Farrell *et al*, 2019; Johanssen, 2019). The narrative of emasculation and the corrupting effects of consumer culture with all its feminising connotations of domesticity and cultural passivity and conformity has a long history (Segal, 1990) and in the late twentieth century came to the fore in films such as *Fight Club* (1999) or *American Beauty* (1999) where the castrating effects of consumption upon the experience of authentic masculinity were also emphasised (Yates, 2007).[3]

From the late 1960s, there was a new emphasis on the importance of emotional experience which had hitherto been associated with femininity. However, from then on, emotional expression became linked to the language of emancipatory politics and the freedom to express authentic feelings in a way that was a far cry from the restrained emotional codes of the previous generation. As Richards (2007) and others argue, the emotionalization of culture and society in the 1990s has its roots in that moment of 1960s radical politics where a more permissive attitude to emotional expression was set in train. From the 1990s one could see that legacy through the emergence of new forms of 'metrosexual' masculinity, where in mainstream culture, traditional stereotypical gender binaries of emotion were challenged through widespread representations of male suffering and vulnerability (Bainbridge and Yates, 2005; Layton, 2011).

Whilst the nature and merits of the emotional or 'therapeutic' turn in culture and society are contested (Yates, 2015), the ubiquitous language of feeling that characterizes so much of contemporary public debate, together with the level of affect which underpins such discussions (in the realm of sexual politics in particular), can be found in the self-help rhetoric of charismatic public media figures such as Jordan Peterson. Today, the emotionalisation of the public sphere continues - but here often in a more strident and reactionary tone, where what Peterson (2018a) sees as the 'chaos' of the contemporary world and its complexity can be managed through a set of 'rules' and ethical principles. Whilst the latter can be read as a sensible strategic response to the ambiguities of late modernity, there is a risk that when complexity is resisted, the angry certainties of prejudice may come to the fore. Today, there is a plurality of masculinities; however, as we discuss later in this article, what we see in the content of Manosphere and on the reddit pages of Peterson and his followers are the defensive affects of 'grievance' rather than 'grief' (Crociani-Windland and Hoggett, 2012).

Whilst men such as Peterson and his followers feel themselves to be the victims of a resurgent and aggressive feminist movement, we also see a lively and engaged new generation of feminist activists who have challenged the structures of patriarchy in different fields of personal and political life, including the experience of every day sexism (Bates, 2014; Berridge and Portwood-Stacer, 2015; Eagle, 2015). Therefore, one could say that the old order of patriarchal masculinity and also those men who appear to defend it have indeed been targeted by feminists and by those women who, like other minorities, have reclaimed their own aggression as in the earlier emancipatory struggles

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[3] As Lynne Segal (1990) documented in her history of masculinity, the rebellion against so-called feminised activities of domesticity have their roots first, in the post-war period of the 1950s where images of men feeling trapped by the demands of the nuclear family could be found in plays such as John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) or films such as *Room at the Top* (1959) and then in the multivariant counter culture of the 1960s.

of the 1960s. Thus, whilst fifty years ago, many men participated in that cultural shift and were at the forefront of progressive political social movements (Kimmel, 2013), today, as our case study analysis of Peterson indicates, many men feel left behind, as some groups of white cisgender males identify as victims as much - if not more - than the still discriminated-against women and other minorities.

Psychic drivers and affective dynamics

Jessica Benjamin's (2018) psychoanalytic theories of intersubjectivity provide a useful set of ideas to understand the unconscious fantasies and affects that underpin the sense of victimisation identified above. Here, one can apply Benjamin's (2018) concept of 'doer/done to' dynamics and their relation to a breakdown of relationality and recognition, which in her work are conceptualised in terms of thirdness and intersubjectivity. Benjamin comes from a US based relational psychoanalytic tradition and already in her early work (1988) she had defined two kinds of relational dynamics in oscillation: the intersubjectivity of thirdness and the doer/done to or twoness of complementarity, which in her latest work (2018:3) are characterised as: 'experiencing the other as a responsive agent who can reciprocate that desire for recognition versus an object of need or drive to be managed within our own mental web'. Thus, for Benjamin, healthy modes of intersubjectivity involve the recognition and acceptance of the other - a process that also entails the toleration of difference in the other. It is through this process of recognition that a sense of thirdness can emerge, that allows for the awareness of experience beyond the narcissistic boundaries of the self and thus creates the conditions for meaningful communication.

However, when there is no experience of thirdness, the oppositional dynamics of two-ness dominate and so the possibilities of an intermediate space for meaningful dialogue are foreclosed. Here, as Benjamin argues, the oppositional dynamic of the twoness of complementary relations creates an impasse when 'each person' on both sides of the relational subject position feels '*done to,* and not like an agent helping to shape a co-created reality' (Benjamin, 2018: 24). This victimised sensibility of being 'done to' resonates in the current moment when, for example, minorities - who are still attempting to get out from an 'underdog' position appear to those on the 'other side' to be victimising the 'other' in the experience of that 'other'. As we will see in the case study of Peterson, there is a perception of victimisation by him and his male followers who feel emasculated and victimised by women. From the perspective of Melanie Klein (1946), this oppositional dynamic points to a paranoid-schizoid position and the projective dynamics that this condition entails, whereby persecutory anxiety leads to difficult to-bear aspects of the self being projected onto others (Klein, 1946).

Benjamin's (2018: 2) recent research on the impasse of the doer-done to dynamics was written partly as a response to the polarisation of Trump's America and the 'hidden pathologies of power and domination' that exist there and elsewhere in a precarious and polarised late modern world. As she says, the experience of 'being done to' can currently be observed more widely within culture, politics and society. We would argue that this process requires some further thought and analysis in order to unpack its meanings and understand its affective complexities and contradictions. The polarisation of

contemporary political discourse within the US and also in Europe – particularly in relation to right wing populism - has received much attention (Freeden, 2017; Hochschild, 2016). The emergence of far-right groups with their links to extreme modes of misogyny as exemplified through the online masculine subcultures of incels and pick-up artists (Braitch and Barnet-Weiser, 2019; Winter, 2019) reflect the hardening of gender binaries in the media age where technology enables a loss of inhibition (Johanssen, 2019), thereby facilitating a rise in destructive forms of online communication associated with persecutory, paranoid-schizoid states of mind (Klein, 1946) and the discharge of emotion through splitting and projection. The manic defences against anxiety which operate in this context may become bound up in a cycle of envy of the other, victimisation and shame.

It is against that backdrop of fear and persecutory anxiety that Jordan Peterson has found his voice as a champion of disillusioned men, one who can provide a set of rules through which to structure their lives.

To explore that voice further, we now turn to our psychosocial case-study of Peterson and his media persona on Reddit platforms and YouTube, where we apply Benjamin's insights in order to understand the psychosocial dynamics of his appeal for his followers.

Jordan Peterson, charismatic leadership and paranoid masculinity: a psychosocial case study

As our attention is focused on a psychosocial analysis of psychic drivers, we conducted a case study where we applied a hermeneutic, interpretive approach to a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2008) of both the verbal and non-verbal aspects of Peterson's affective communication. The non-verbal aspects of our analysis focused on his presentation of self in video/televised interviews. The latter allowed us to unpack his appeal by examining the relational dynamics and affective strategies deployed in his interview style debates, whilst also reflexively taking into account their impact upon us, as feminist scholars. For example, we often felt angry when watching his seemingly calm exterior, whilst communicating in a very directive manner those views which challenged our own. At other moments, we felt frustrated by his adversaries who seemed ineffective when debating with him and failed to 'land a punch'. Our affective responses to Peterson's delivery style and debates often mirrored those responses to him from feminists and those on the liberal left; as researchers those authentic responses also illustrated for us the difficulties of retaining an analytical stance, 'free from memory and desire' (Bion, 1967). Nonetheless, we were aware that we needed to focus instead upon the article at hand, which acted as a third in itself, in order to avoid being captured ourselves in a doer/done to antagonism.

The verbal content of those interviews and debates were thematically analysed and triangulated against the Reddit social media content that provided an indication of the thoughts, feelings and *mood* of Peterson's followers at any given time throughout 2018. Following Topinka's (2018) study of racist participatory media on Reddit and also Ging's (2019) study of masculinities in the online Manosphere, our study incorporated user generated discussion on Reddit, along with interview material of Peterson while on his

international book tour following the release of *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (2018a) to identify the dominant themes in Peterson's ideology and also the key themes that circulated and developed in the Manosphere as a response.

The data was collected by researching online materials that appeared over 11 months between January and December 2018 – a key time period that covers Peterson's rise to fame, and prominence in the public sphere. The data collection consisted of ten open letters to Peterson on r/JordanPeterson, his Reddit site, and six in-depth media interviews with Peterson. Reddit is a community-driven website generated by user-content comprised of videos, pictures and text displayed in a bulletin board style system (Farrell *et al*, 2019). Users remain anonymous while engaging in discussion on message boards dedicated to certain topics such as politics, popular culture, music and gaming and so forth. Reddit is one of the largest community-driven platforms for submitting, commenting and rating links and text posts on the web (Singer *et al*, 2014). Within Reddit, a subreddit [4] featuring up to one hundred and fifty thousand members, can be found under r/JordanPeterson, an area devoted to 'work associated with Jordan Peterson, a public intellectual, clinical psychologist, and professor of psychology at the University of Toronto' (r/JordanPeterson, 2019). Fans and followers on the forum proclaim that Peterson has changed or even saved their lives. A similar account can be found on YouTube, where viewers and users have resonated to Peterson's teachings, having felt alienated by 'social-justice jargon', craving an understanding of the world in which they are not seen as the oppressors (Lynskey, 2018).

We set out to examine the ideas, themes and affects that came out of the data so as to better understand the psychosocial mood of the Manosphere and the structures of feeling that underpin the formation of masculinity as represented on it through the Reddit and YouTube platforms devoted to Peterson. We wanted to know how the unconscious dynamics of victimisation and paranoia as discussed by Benjamin and Klein might operate on those platforms as constituting an *affective field* of media and mind, and whether there was a potential for spaces of thirdness to emerge in those fields. A key over-arching theme, 'a wish for certainty in an age of precarity' and four sub-themes emerged from the data collection and thematic analysis that included Reddit posts and YouTube interviews. These were:

i)   Victimhood and masculinity
ii)   Boundaries, gender binaries and evolutionary science
iii) Order versus chaos
iv)   The therapeutic significance of paternal role models.

These themes, which are present both within the reddit posts and within the content of Peterson's YouTube video interviews, also appear in the next section of this article which focuses on the relational dynamics of Peterson's debates and are discussed in more detail within the thematic analysis that follows.

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[4] A subreddit refers to a forum dedicated to a specific focussed topic, users can join and become community members of the subreddit and partake in discussion posting text, pictures or videos.

The relational dynamics of Peterson's debating performance

> A huge proportion of people who are seriously disaffected are men, most people in prison are men, most people living on the street are men, most victims of violent crime are men, most people who commit suicide are men, most people who die in wars are men, people who do worse in school are men, it's like, where's the dominancy here precisely? (Peterson, 2018b)

Peterson has come to notoriety for his provocative debating style and his rise to fame can be traced back to his provocative *Professor against Political Correctness* YouTube lectures in September 2016. This initial controversy centred on his objections to a legal amendment to the Canadian Human Rights Act that prohibited hate propaganda related to gender identity and expression. In addition, he objected to the mandatory anti-bias training planned by Toronto University and he stated his refusal to conform to the non-binary use of pronouns (Peterson, 2016). Canadian students opposed Peterson's stance by writing him a letter, to which he responded by posting another YouTube video (Peterson, 2016a), where he read out the letter, made the names and senders' emails public and asked the viewers to email them. Since then, he has been barely out of public attention.

Peterson's appeal as a charismatic media professor is also linked to the affective impact of the non-verbal aspects of his performance. When watching clips of his many online appearances, one can see that his public persona is made up of a photogenic, well-groomed physical appearance and a self-assured posture and demeanour; his gaze is steady and not afraid of the camera or his interlocutors, his speech is clear, articulate, but also not overly complex and academic. His performance thus conveys a traditional mode of masculine authority while not creating excessive distance or closeness. He models some of what he preaches, as in his 'Rule 1': 'Stand up straight with your shoulders back, be strong, be confident and don't expect an easy life' (Peterson, 2018a). At the same time, he projects the precarity and feelings of 'chaos' onto the feminine other (ibid.), and then claims to offer answers and solutions to the problems that he names as significant. His capacity and willingness to correct others, acknowledge precarity and question on the hoof, strengthens an impression of certainty, which is further enhanced by the way Peterson, depending on the relative perceived strength of his interlocutor, is able to control and master the encounter by throwing in unexpected angles or examples that disorient the discussant or steer the conversation in particular directions. We provide examples in what follows of three different styles of relating which can be mapped onto Benjamin's doer-done to framework that we outlined earlier.

i)   Peterson as the antagonist
Peterson's interview with Helen Lewis (Peterson, 2018b)

Helen Lewis: Why is masculinity order?
Jordan Peterson: I think it's because our primary social hierarchy structures are fundamentally masculine
Helen Lewis: and that's not the patriarchy?

Peterson's interview with the British journalist, Helen Lewis, provides an example of an antagonistic style of relating, in which Lewis is hired by the up-market male magazine GQ to debate the meanings of masculinity and patriarchy. At first, the affective dynamics between them is contained, although Peterson's bodily posture is not relaxed and the pace and intensity accelerate when Peterson challenges Lewis's feminist understanding of inequality as being rooted in 'patriarchy as a system of male domination'. He says that inequality is less about 'power' and more about 'competence' and it is the latter which enables men to progress and do well in life. Real disagreement ensues between Peterson and Lewis which centres around the theme of men's victimization, and Peterson cites the online posts of his followers, who he says feel undermined by the forces of feminism and identity politics.

Peterson cites statistics to back up his assertions about men's underprivileged positions and he accuses women of being 'ungrateful' for what men have done to create the best living conditions in history. In this scenario each party lacks recognition and is identified by the other as doer, while identifying themselves as done/to. The interaction reinforces the impasse dynamic as described by Benjamin. However, as we see in the subreddit posts, for Peterson's followers, the pleasures of identifying with him are related partly to his status as a charismatic public Professor who can vanquish his feminist detractors using statistics and 'facts' from evolutionary clinical psychology books.

ii. The Ally
Peterson's interview with Camille Paglia (Peterson, 2017)

Jordan Peterson: There's nothing more dangerous than a weak man.

The second example of the relational dynamics of victimisation discussed by Benjamin can be found in Peterson's interview with Professor Camille Paglia; in this case they are well matched in terms of their affective intensity (Peterson, 2017). There is no dissonance between them and here, the doer/done to dynamic can be seen in their shared hatred of post-structuralism: they are united against the persecutory external reality as also discussed in the subreddit posts, where the old certainties of an earlier era of political activism and debate have been replaced by what they believe to be neurotic intersectional feminists and university campuses obsessed with 'safe spaces.'

iii. The Interlocuter
Peterson's debate with Slavoj Žižek (Peterson, 2019)

Žižek: We will probably slide towards apocalypse.

Peterson: It is not obvious to me that we can solve the problems that confront us.

In his live debate with the celebrity philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, Peterson is less self-assured than in the previous two interviews (Peterson, 2019). Žižek is a formidable match for Peterson and whilst his intellectual skills appear superior to those of Peterson who is less fluent when debating the merits of, say, cultural versus postmodern Marxism, they are both able to agree as well as disagree on various points. One could thus say that

despite the celebrity circus surrounding the televised debate which received global media coverage, there is in this instance a more intersubjective form of dialogue in which Peterson seems unable to take control, and he may even have been disarmed by the occasional agreement and also the gender of the high status public intellectual involved. Therefore, whilst the done to/doer dynamic was disrupted in this instance, that disruption was enabled perhaps because of the narcissistic pleasure of jousting with a man he deemed to be a worthy rival.

What transpires from attention to non-verbal and relational aspects of media appearances is Peterson's ability to manage and modulate affective intensity and offer a model of performativity able to appeal to his male audience. As we now discuss, when analysing the themes of that audience response through the Reddit posts, Peterson's appeal appears to rest on his capacity to convey a sense of reassuring order and agency in an age of cultural complexity and change.

Thematic analysis: creating binaries as a defence against anxiety

> The point being that this is all young men hear, especially those without fathers in their life. They have been beaten down and cowed by it. Here comes a man like yourself who tells them no, you have value, there is nothing inherently wrong with masculinity, stand up straight with your shoulders back, face the world and all its malevolence, pick up your load, be responsible, tell the truth, and realize your potential. For that, you are demonized? Dear Lord how we have fallen.
> (User u/Coozy, 2018)

As mentioned earlier, the key over-arching theme that emerged from the content of our data collection and thematic analysis was 'a wish for certainty in an age of precarity'. We identified four sub-themes from the data collection that included Reddit posts and Peterson's YouTube interviews. Before turning to an in-depth psychosocial analysis of that content and its meanings, the themes are summarised and presented here in relation to examples of his online followers' posts.

i)   Victimhood and masculinity

A recurrent theme of both Peterson's interviews and the subreddit posts is the idea of masculinity, and its supposedly 'natural' association to aggression, being 'demonized' and under siege from a number of 'politically correct' forces, including social media and feminism:

> 'social media manifested soft individuals that have lost the will to fight for what they desire' (u/Coozy, 2018).

> 'I grew up indoctrinated as a beta male, in the midst of 90s feminist education reforms, I married a mother-figure wife, hence I came to the realization, a few years ago, that I needed to recover my masculinity if I wanted to be happy' (u/NotThisAgain, 2018).

Some subreddit posters complain that social media and feminism combine in unwarranted attacks upon 'toxic masculinity' and that:

> 'In my opinion if this trend goes on, there will be no masculinity or any desire for fighting for what you want and we will be weaker as a species'. (u/dawakohawa,847444, 2018, Text, 2018).

ii)   Boundaries, gender binaries and evolutionary science

The need to ward off 'chaos' through the re-assertion of boundaries and gender binaries is a recurring theme of the posts and this concern was often framed with reference to the language of evolutionary psychology used by Peterson. Here, the language of evolutionary science was used to reinforce essentialised fears about the 'survival' of masculinity and the threat of 'feminist women' whose values were viewed as being socially dominant to those of men:

> 'I can't help but feel (there it is again...) that my rooted feminine characteristic traits are not only holding me back, but also preventing me from being a strong male role model for not only my current partner but also other people around me. I often feel like my current partner is occasionally more of a man than me and despite the fact that such a thing can be interpreted as a healthy relationship, deep down it grinds me down that I don't quite know how to be a man. (User u/NotThisAgain_84744, 2018)

The discourse of evolutionary psychology and its links to 'values' is also used by Peterson (2017) and this theme is taken up by users who engage with him on his Reddit platform. As the previous quotations illustrate, the thematic binary of aggression versus weakness is present and linked to gendered fears of victimization of men by women and a loss of male potency as a consequence.

iii)   Order versus chaos

Given that Peterson's (2018) book promises to provide 'an antidote to chaos', it is unsurprising that the wish for order and a sense of control in an increasingly chaotic world is a recurring theme and is expressed in apocalyptic terms as being 'beaten down and cowed…dear Lord, how we have fallen' (u/Coozy, 2018).

iv)   The therapeutic significance of paternal role models

A recurring sub-theme is the gratitude felt by users for Peterson as a father figure who provides a containing 'rule' based guidance to ward off the sense of catastrophe and confusion than many of the followers seem to feel. Peterson seems to provide reassurance and comfort and his status as a psychologist reassures in this regard. As one poster put it:

> 'He is also brilliant at making the people talking to him feel like they are being listened to - one of those people that has a stare that is simultaneously comforting, inquisitive, and encouraging' (u/schnozer, 2018).

Some posts on this theme even take on religious connotations, looking to Peterson as a charismatic spiritual leader:

> I reached the conclusion that life wasn't worth living i could not stop using drugs, until i discovered 12 rules for life: an antidote to chaos, and chaos was my life…. your description as religion as a set of archetypal stories changed my perception, and i have now discovered my higher power, connection with others, thank you Jordan Peterson. (u/kcormack24, 2018)

Discussion: victimisation and the doer-done dynamic

The recurring theme of victimisation which links to the doer-done to dynamic discussed by Benjamin is evident in themes of the subreddit posts that we analysed and that same dynamic was present in the content and affective performance of the filmed interview debates. Following Benjamin (2018), one can argue that such a desire for order and certainty is linked to a defensive need to ward off fears of risk and of the persecuting other. We see such anxiety as underlying the psychosocial experience of powerlessness and victimhood, which underpins the wish for a simple set of rules as outlined in Peterson's book and which are reproduced on his Reddit platform. These rules are shaped around basic binaries, justified by an evolutionary biological stance and allied with a traditional, normative psychological approach to gender. The latter is also linked to Peterson's order (male) versus chaos (female) dichotomy; the desire to provide, and be provided with a paternal role model, the dislike of political correctness; and the values of responsibility, competence and respect as masculine adult qualities.

In his interviews, we see that much of the language used by him in relation to the current situation in Western society is directive and even aggressive and contrasts with the composure of Peterson's delivery, aimed at personifying the qualities he admires which centre upon ideas of competence and responsibility. Peterson uses a wealth of terms indicating risk, even apocalyptic change, as we see here in his interview with Camille Paglia:

> Things could go extraordinarily well if we were careful but I'm not optimistic and maybe that's me, I'm pessimistic because I see 5 or 6 things happening that are at the level of catastrophe that are all happening at the same time (Peterson, 2017).

The experience of victimhood and impending catastrophe is present both in Peterson's own words and in the posts in his Reddit site, where the sense of persecution can be easily discerned. Women are the main, although not the only targets of blame as exemplified both by the subreddit posts and also in the debate with Helen Lewis presented above. He elaborated on this theme of victimisation in his 2017 interview with Camille Paglia:

> The problem is that the women that are sane, are busy doing sane things, they have their career, they have their family, they are quite occupied, they don't seem to have the time or even the interest to go after their crazy

harpy sisters. I don't see any regulating force for that terrible femininity. And it seems to be invading the culture and undermining the masculine power of the culture in a way that I think is fatal. (Peterson in Mind.Blown, 2017)

The idea that men are being deprived of the possibility of being aggressive and competitive is presented as one of the ways in which they are victimised. That deprivation is put at the door of feminists, but also importantly, whilst not naming anyone individually, it is targeted at the group he names as 'post-modern neo-Marxists'. For Peterson, social construction appears to be irreconcilable with biology, and for him, post-modernism is a radical relativist position which having lost sight of reality through the rejection of metanarratives has created a chaotic world. Debating whether gender is biologically or socially constructed or whether post-modern neo-Marxists have really had the power to fragment society to the extent claimed by Peterson, has been a major focus for both his detractors and supporters.

It is hard to argue with the felt affective experience that underlies whatever framework of thought is brought to bear upon such polarised debates. However, whilst Peterson has not declared a definite political position for himself, there is nonetheless a political aspect in the blaming of supposed neo-Marxists, alongside women and the advocates of gender fluidity, as having created the trouble. The appeal of simple binary frameworks is that they offer a clear and uncomplicated lens through which to comprehend the world and therefore manage the growing complexity of globalised, Western societies. The construction of 'rules' and the boundaries associated with them are reached for in an attempt to contain the growing sense of disorientation and fear of catastrophic change at a social level. In spite of Peterson not being a politician, there is a mode of male fantasy in his discourse that can also be found in current styles of male populist leaders such as Donald Trump or Boris Johnson who, in the name of 'free speech', eschew the constraints of so-called political correctness whilst reinforcing older boundaries associated with categories of gender, 'race', class and nation and the otherness of marginalised groups.

What we see in Peterson as a public figure is a similar mobilisation of strategies as displayed in both current right-wing politics and historically (Hofstadter, 1964), whereby challenging rules is seen as fair game, while at the same time, those same leaders declare the need for clear rules to be given and obeyed. The contradiction is not hard to see, yet it appears invisible to those seeking leadership and containment. It is a trick played within an in/out group dynamic, and in group relations terms, we can see this as the exploitation of a 'Basic Assumption' mentality of 'Dependency' (Bion,1962), whereby the group experience a form of regression and look to a strong leader to save them from their anxiety. In such situations, charismatic leaders such as Peterson function by providing an object on which to discharge the 'free-floating affect' (Crociani-Windland and Hoggett, 2012) caused by uncertainty over one's status in the world. The discharge of excess affect, of 'too much' (Benjamin, 2018), is looked for and perceived as a form of containment and as a means to manage paranoid anxiety, while in reality it serves to amplify and perpetuate cycles of projections and victimhood. Targeting other groups who are already marginalised and justifying this practice through recourse to a

traditional discourse of natural (masculine) hierarchies, results in a basic form of scapegoating.

The affective dynamics of Peterson's appeal

Whilst in many respects, Peterson's approach reflects an overly defensive binary world view, one could, in a more positive vein, argue that his appeal is linked to a more constructive form of affective containment. The latter might apply to those young men who feel misrecognised, lonely and alienated in a world where the rules have changed and where the identity markers of masculinity are no longer valued or even open to the next generation who must contend with issues such as climate change and a lower standard of living than their parents. It is against that backdrop that Peterson is able to convey a sense of empathy for those who experience victimhood and anxiety. He appears earnestly to wish to offer a form of paternal leadership to such men by giving some basic orientation and rules and his call to maturity and taking responsibility comes across as heartfelt. As a psychologist he is aware of the need for meaning and has shown courage in deciding to take a stand and cope with the level of exposure and attacks he has endured in the past few years.

The affective experience of threat as expressed by Peterson and his followers may be real to those experiencing it, but one might disagree with who or what is supposedly to blame. Peterson is a complex character: if we take the issue of political correctness as having been a catalyst that propelled him into the public sphere, it is easy to see that our case study, in as far as our analysis of public material can go, hinges on affective dynamics, far more than rational debate. Here, it is useful to return to the ideas of Benjamin (2018) for a relational psychoanalytic view of those affective dynamics. Some of the paradox of the doer/done to scenario outlined earlier, which we argue is prevalent in the language of the Manosphere, is that the intense feeling of being wronged and the experience of righteousness which underpins it is used to justify whatever hurt is inflicted upon the other. The shared experience of affect in that context is significant and is of a paranoid nature. Each opponent is filled with a sense of victimhood that can be understood as a Nietzschean *Ressentiment*, a poisonous, but pleasurable form of resentment that can be politically manipulated, amplified and given an object on which to discharge the unpleasant affect (Crociani-Windland and Hoggett, 2012).

The relief of such a discharge, while producing a temporary experience of pleasurable intensity only manages to exacerbate entrenched positions. These entrenched positions become inscribed and justified, creating a sense of righteous anger, thereby further polarising and fueling tensions and conflict. Finally, the temptation is to restore order in what is perceived as chaos by the drawing of binaries, a form of splitting in themselves: right, wrong; male, female; in, out; for me or against me and so on. Klein's (1946) description of the paranoid-schizoid position and its links to splitting and projection are evident and have been widely written about in relation to political and social life (see for example, Hoggett, 2015; Richards, 2018; Yates, 2015, 2019). This cycle of doer and being done to helps the subject justify the desire for certainty in what is perceived as an overly complex, persecutory environment.

In our case study of Peterson, we found an overly defensive, paranoid understanding of masculinity and gender difference. For example, within the written texts and verbal debates, particular forms of masculinity and the modes of behaviour associated with it are justified along certain lines: men are competitive, naturally given to territorial battles (as in the lobster image in the first of Peterson's *12 Rules*), physically stronger and able to deploy that strength or the threat of it in battling out an argument. Peterson has made the point that debating with a woman is difficult because violence or its threat are considered out of the question, also dividing women into 'sane' and 'insane' and proposing an alliance with the sane ones, who should speak up to defend the men (Peterson, cited in Mind.Blown, 2017). From Peterson's perspective, aggression is a fundamental aspect of being male (rather than human) and attempting to live in a more co-operative, less combative fashion goes against their nature and leaves men open and powerless when dealing with women's own wish to dominate. Peterson has justified this by deploying an evolutionary perspective, using his academic credentials to validate his position. In our earlier examples, only the debate with Žižek was closer to some kind of negotiation and intersubjectivity, as it contained both yes and no, agreement and disagreement; but as noted previously, the less narcissistic stance of Peterson in this instance could arguably be related to less defensive dimensions of debating with a man considered worthy of engagement.

Shifting structures of feeling, doubt and resistance in a precarious world

In this article, we have used Jordan Peterson as a case study to present a new psychosocial approach to the study of the Manosphere as an affective, mediatised phenomenon through which to explore the mood and meanings of masculinity as a psychosocial formation within the late modern age. In tracing the history of masculinity since the emancipatory politics of the late 1960s and 1970s, we identified some themes which have endured since that moment of progressive politics when the construction of masculinity and gender began to be explicitly questioned and where the old essentialised binaries of gender where problematised. The foregrounding of emotional subjectivity and its significance in challenging definitions of masculinity was part of that process, contributing to the emergence of 'therapy culture', where in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the psychological language of feeling and emotional 'healing' was often foregrounded culturally as a means of challenging defensive and reactionary forms of hegemonic masculinity (Yates, 2015). Whilst that moment constituted a potential 'opening up' of binary gender relations, today, the ethos of expressing one's emotions have shifted once more. As we have argued, the wish to push against a 'politically correct' establishment and the boundaries of free speech have been re-worked to shore up the identity of some men who want to challenge the very identity politics which, paradoxically, marks them out as potentially another identity group with a powerful sense of grievance.

The progressive nature of the early men's rights groups and the discourses of emancipation associated with them have thus undergone a number of shifts, which illustrate Stuart Hall's view of the relationship between history, late modernity and cultural change. He argued that in each new conjuncture, all elements of the past and its struggles are not lost, rather they are reconfigured as a response to the present moment

(Hall, 2017). Masculinity is not a monolithic patriarchal ideology or group, and the contemporary rise and character of the men's rights online groups which is partly shaped by the dynamics of mediatisation, also reflects a more defensive social formation than previously, as it is shaped in opposition to others thereby reinforcing the binary structures of a fantasy masculine order. The latter taps into contemporary ideologies and networks of the far-right which perpetuate a mode of relating that is underpinned by the structures of victimisation and a doer/done to antagonism. As we have seen with Peterson's publications and filmed debates, this antagonism is bound up with a sense of paranoia that is redolent of the wider political scene of far-right authoritarian politics.

The shared sense of being victimised recalls Richard Hofstadter's 1964 thesis of *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, in which the ethos and fabric of political culture is characterised by the fear of persecution and defensive, paranoid modes of projection. The latter is suggestive of the contemporary moment in Trumpian US politics and elsewhere in Europe, where the language of being 'done to' by what Trump calls a 'rigged' and 'crooked' system is widespread (Smith, 2016) and as in the UK Brexit Campaign, 'taking back control' has been a very appealing slogan. The 'paranoid style' discussed by Hofstadter can be found in Peterson's own philosophical approach when he claims to champion the enlightenment tradition of challenging the prevailing truths and common sense. However, as evident in many of his online postings, Peterson takes an *a priori* position of assuming people are unworthy of respect, until proven otherwise (see Peterson, 2018b). His distrustful approach and debating style are thus different to – say, the Descartian practice of 'epistemic doubt' from the same Enlightenment tradition to which he is keen to align himself. The latter argues that whilst one must question the truths of a particular position or society, one should also include *both* positive and negative possibilities rather than perceiving the other as object of suspicion (Cottingham, 2016). In short, doubt involves the suspension of judgment rather than pre-judging right or wrong. Allowing oneself to experience complexity sits well with Benjamin's model of intersubjectivity and the importance of being open to a third position which ontologically involves an opening up of the self to the other and a mode of surrender that holds out very different possibilities to the overly defensive structures of victimization and of 'being done to'.

It is significant, perhaps, that Peterson is not the only charismatic male figure to use YouTube and Reddit platforms to communicate ideas to large followings of mainly young men.[5] Such figures and their online followers provide examples of a new model of group psychology and male leadership for the media age. Whilst not detracting from the specificity of Peterson's seductive appeal, one can see that he and others like him are perceived as providing a form of charismatic masculine leadership for those men who are looking for an affective object that might alleviate their perception of chaos and persecution in a precarious and unpredictable world. Peterson and others are catching the *Zeitgeist* of a time of crisis and transition. However, rather than much needed containment, what such men offer through the performative, mediatised channels of the Manosphere is a mode of rhetoric that provides a defensive, backward-looking content

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[5] See, for example, Ben Shapiro, Dave Rubin, Joe Rogan, Alex Jones and Russell Brand, who use the media of YouTube and podcasts to preach their ideas and opinions to their large followings.

and the validation of projective states of mind. Engaging with such content may encourage a dynamic that can be understood as the holding of grievance and *ressentiment* rather than grief over the loss of a supposedly better and simpler world, thereby foreclosing the potential for more productive forms of 'working through' the perceived losses of the past. The nostalgic longing and grievance over loss prevents an appreciation and imagining of the new. The validation of projective states of mind may produce a reassuring sense of shared experience, but it does not offer ways of getting beyond that into a depressive position (Klein, 1946), or in Benjamin's terms, an area of 'thirdness' and possible negotiation with those not sharing that experience. Such engagement does not offer the necessary affective forms of containment that managing a complex world requires, and thus falls short of what men such as Peterson may wish to offer.

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[6] In 2020, the subreddit posts listed here, that were archived and analysed at length by the authors were removed from the r/JordanPeterson Reddit platform, thereby reflecting the fluid and ephemeral nature of internet data.

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