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“Kick the XX out of your life”: An analysis of the manosphere’s discursive constructions of gender on Twitter

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Abstract

The online community of the manosphere uses social media channels such as Twitter to promote a misogynist agenda. Feminist research has identified two key elements to their activism online: the harassment of women and the development of a discourse that presents feminism as threatening to men. Our research examined Twitter content produced in pursuit of both objectives to understand how the manosphere constructs masculinity and femininity. Analysis of the content identified three discursive strategies that we term: co-opting discourses of oppression, naming power, and disavowal by disaggregation. They serve to cast men as victims, construct women as a monstrous other, and reinstate gendered power hierarchies through a constant invocation of the female body within discourses of rape. Though powerful, these strategies are riven with tensions and bind manosphere masculine identities to the very women they wish to eradicate. Manosphere activism has escaped the virtual and leaked into the material world. We conclude by considering the implications of this breach for those women targeted by the manosphere as well as for the broader witnessing community and suggest avenues for future research.

Keywords

Twitter, social media, men’s rights, misogyny, gender, manosphere

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The manosphere can be described as online communities “loosely unified by an anti-feminist worldview” (Van Valkenburgh, 2019, p. 1). Predominantly male, its members have enthusiastically embraced online antifeminist activism (Ging, 2019). Operating across multiple platforms, they create a network of “extreme antifeminist content” (Gotell & Dutton, 2016, p. 70). Marwick and Caplan (2018) identify two main facets to their activism. First, the networked harassment of women is intended to police women’s behaviour in virtual spaces. Second, an antifeminist discourse that presents feminism as intrinsically threatening to men and serves to justify the abuse of women online is fostered.

While underlying ideologies of antifeminism and the victimisation of men at the hands of women are common throughout the manosphere, the explicitly stated aims of communities within the manosphere differ. Popular “pick-up artist” (PUA) forums, such as The Red Pill subreddit (r/TRP), help its members “seduce” or “game” women and “can be provisionally treated as representative of broader manosphere ideologies” (Van Valkenburgh, 2019, p. 4).¹ In contrast, Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) reject PUA aims to manipulate women to serve their own interests, calling instead for men to eschew completely women and “protect [their] own sovereignty” (MGTOW, 2020). MGTOW frames itself as a political movement akin to the Men’s Rights Movement (MRM) and the men’s liberation movement of the 1970s. Initially, pro-feminist developed as a faction in response to feminist gains in the political and legal arenas at a time when deindustrialisation saw rising unemployment among working-class men (Messner, 2016). Understanding men’s rights as being eroded by “institutionalised feminism” the new faction’s politics were explicitly antifeminist and primarily concerned with the loss of an “entitled masculinity” in which male power is justified by biology (Allan, 2016, p. 36).

The claim of “institutionalised feminism” has been extrapolated by men’s rights activists (MRA) and other manosphere communities to the androcentric position that feminism has brought about systemic discrimination against men (Nathanson & Young, 2006). This discourse is not restricted to manosphere and MRA communities; variants of it appear throughout Euro-American culture and the Global North. While post-feminist discourses claim feminism is redundant because women have achieved equality (Ringrose, 2007), neoliberal post-feminism resembles MRA discourses of discrimination against men. Feminist gains are often represented as a “turning of the tables”, a reversal of fortunes achieved at men’s expense, with women now dominating men (Gill, 2016, p. 625). The popular trope of the has-it-all woman who is in charge of her own destiny implies that the only obstacle to her success is the woman herself (Rottenberg, 2014). Another familiar representation of women post-feminism is the sexually liberated woman (McRobbie, 2004, p. 259), who renders obsolete the feminist concept of female objectification at the hands of men (Gill, 2007).

Manosphere activists mobilise these strands of post-feminist discourse – feminism is redundant, women’s gains were made at the expense of men’s rights, and women as unstoppable and uncontrollable – to justify and spread their misogynist

ideology. The idealised neoliberal woman comes to stand for all women, and her/their success comes at the expense of male subjugation. Any women who fail to meet this expectation are considered defective rather than oppressed, leaving an “oppression gap” into which the men of the manosphere are quick to step. The supposed impossibility of female objectification operates in two ways. Firstly, it plays into the age-old woman-as-Eve discourse in which men are the victims of female sexuality (Smith, 1989), conveniently reinvigorating rape myths in the face of #MeToo. Secondly, within manosphere communities it has been understood as a laying down of the gauntlet. The denial of the power inherent in objectifying women is a step too far in the loss of entitled masculinity and results in the intensification of their efforts at female objectification (Filipovic, 2007).

MGTOW and the better-known PUAs are not generally considered hegemonically masculine, rather they are “men who fall into the geek/nerd category” (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016, p. 172). In popular culture “geeks” are socially awkward scientists and technology whiz-kids, often bewildered by the world, but never presenting a threat to women. Yet the construct of the geek reifies “dualistic and misogynistic constructions of gender and intelligence” (Sartain, 2015, p. 96), locating science and technology firmly within the domain of the masculine intellect. The “outsider posture” adopted by geek masculinities conceals technological power and is the manifestation of a “worldview that is [...] encoded into, and privileged by, online platforms” (Salter, 2018, p. 252). Geek masculinities as they are performed in manosphere spaces transform the outsider masculinity of men who cannot, or choose not to, conform to hegemonic masculinities into a hyper-masculine identity (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). Women’s participation in technology threatens those masculinities constructed and safeguarded by technology and frequently provokes a backlash. One of the most commonly deployed strategies is the threat of rape, and nowhere has this been more apparent than in Gamergate.

In 2014, the ex-boyfriend of game developer Zoe Quinn published intimate details of their relationship in his blog and claimed she had slept with a games journalist in exchange for positive reviews (Jane, 2016). A group of users of the website 4chan seized on his claims to launch a debate that, though ostensibly about ethics in video games journalism, attacked women working in the games industry (Nagle, 2017). Gamergate was a pivotal moment in the history of men’s online activism (Marwick & Caplan, 2018), with the feminist games critic Anita Sarkeesian one of its key targets (Jane, 2016).

Feminists have successfully used online networks to organise, promote and share offline activism that reclaims the female body (Baer, 2016). As women leverage social media to challenge gender hierarchies (Mendes et al., 2019; Turley & Fisher, 2018), the manosphere works to reinstate them, and their efforts are frequently focused on sexualised attacks against the same body that women are reclaiming (Mortensen, 2018). The ease of engagement afforded by platforms such as Twitter, and the direct access they offer to like-minded others as well as the opposite-minded “enemy” (Humphreys & Vered, 2014), make the virtual world a seemingly ideal arena in which to reassert a threatened masculine hegemony.

Butler (1993) argued that gender is performative and constitutes an identity constructed through habitual practice, yet gender constructs can change with time and location. As a place where gender is negotiated, social media offers an opportunity to shift those constructs (Hutton et al., 2016). However, online communications rely on stereotyped bodies for “meaning-making” (Boler, 2007) and the relationship between social media and gendered identities is bidirectional (Van Doorn, 2011). Gender performances on social media can therefore entrench rather than remedy existing gender regimes.

Although technology design continues to privilege white masculinity and technological power accrues disproportionately to men and boys (Brock, 2018; Wajcman, 1991), women’s increased agency (Haines et al., 2016) is reflected in shifting gender performativity on social media. Research into rape myth acceptance found women are less likely to be believed and more likely to be seen as deserving of violence if they are perceived to have transgressed their gender role (Flood & Pease, 2009; Grubb & Turner, 2012). Rape myths “legitimize systemic violence against women” (Chapleau & Oswald, 2013, p. 19). Manosphere discourses of rape on Twitter, like rape myths, perform a hierarchy-legitimising function (Hockett et al., 2009) and are used to “punish” those women who “defy gender-intensified proscriptions” (Prentice & Carranza, 2002, p. 279). Twitter necessitates the absence of the body on which such violence is to be enacted. Yet the abuse experienced by Sarkeesian was graphic and concrete and included photographs showing men ejaculating onto an image of her face (Burgess et al., 2017). The invocation of the material body in the virtual space suggests that symbolic violence does not satisfy the manosphere’s need to subjugate the female body.

Twitter is a gendered and sexualised virtual space in which embodied identities are performed, one in which women’s increased agency fractures the power relations embedded in gender constructs. Our research explored the discourses of manosphere communities as they reacted to women’s changing gender identities. It analysed the harassment, including rape threats, of a particular woman, as well as men’s routine gendered manosphere talk on Twitter. The manosphere frames culturally dominant masculinities as distinctly nonhegemonic (Messerschmidt, 2018), their sexual successes and embodied masculinity constructed as undermining rather than legitimating gender inequality. For the men of the manosphere, dominant masculinities are a desired and disparaged fantasy (Van Valkenburgh, 2018). By investigating the discursive strategies used by the manosphere to produce masculinities and control women, we seek to understand how they construct new and reinforce traditional gender stereotypes.

Method

The study considers two sets of Twitter content: a record of abusive tweets received by Anita Sarkeesian over a one-week period, and tweets collected based on their use of antifeminist hashtags. A discourse analysis informed by the recommendations of Potter and Wetherell (1987) focused on how two manosphere communities

constructed masculinity and femininity within their tweets. Potter and Wetherell's (1987) approach combines analysis of both the content and the form of text to understand how versions of reality are constructed in everyday talk. It understands talk as an active social practice which performs some function for the speaker. Through close reading of text in context, discourse analysis enables an exploration of how the text positions the speaker and others, its consequences and its variability. Our analysis is concerned with constructions of gender and power, and the use of men's talk as a means of silencing women on Twitter, where expression is restricted to 280-character bursts of text. In this limited form, every character performs a discursive function, and we pay attention to these minutiae of the form.

Sample

Two different strategies were used to sample data: 1) Dataset A consists of 157 abusive tweets received between 20 January 2015 and 26 January 2015 by Anita Sarkeesian (2015) and represents the operationalised misogyny of Gamergate. 2) All tweets published between 07 March 2019 and 13 March 2019 using the following hashtags: #mgtow #feminazis #mra #feminismiscancer. Hashtags were selected in order to capture a range of MRA and antifeminist voices. More than half (n=444) of the 847 tweets collected for dataset B featured the hashtag #mgtow (men going their own way), justifying our focus on this particular manosphere community.

Dataset B was collected after #MeToo challenged codes of sexual conduct and represents the creation and perpetuation of manosphere ideology through routine talk. Dataset A is over five years old and directed at a single individual. The two datasets are complementary and can be located along a continuum of sexual violence where “‘typical’ and ‘aberrant’ male behaviour shade into one another” (Kelly, 1988, p. 75). The violent and explicitly sexualised attacks against Sarkeesian are extreme, while the more moderate seeming MGTOW tweets purport to share widely held, normative values. They claim “ordinary positions” (Wetherell & Edley, 1999), presenting themselves as the “typical”. However, they operate in concert with the “aberrant” to construct masculinities which are preoccupied with achieving hegemony in online spaces through the complete subordination of women. As the “typical” often goes unremarked, its harm may hide in plain sight. Further, as they shade into each other, the demarcation between typical and aberrant is constantly shifted, rendering the aberrant increasingly normative. That this continuum is performed in disembodied spaces further serves to limit women's ability to name their experiences.

Twitter content is in the public domain and consent was not sought from account owners, but all tweets were anonymised prior to data analysis in line with professional guidance (British Psychological Society, 2017). The discussion below uses ‘P’ to represent participants, while recognising the inaccuracy of this term given the lack of consent or knowledge of the research on the part of Twitter account holders. Ethical approval was gained from the authors' university's

Department of Psychology Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection, and collection and analysis were undertaken in line with the approved research protocol. This included attending to the researchers' own well-being and protection from psychological harm caused by reading and re-reading abusive and violent material (Social Research Association, 2016).

Data collection and analysis

Content from Twitter was automatically collected by Twitter Archiver. Twitter Archiver exports to Google Sheets, and data was moved into a locally stored Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for analysis. Where tweets in dataset B were part of a thread, other tweets within that thread were manually collected and transcribed. Content from Sarkeesian's blog was then transcribed into a separate spreadsheet in the same Excel file.

Data were coded with specific attention to representations of gender and power, and how texts positioned the writer. Following initial coding, extracts were transcribed onto sticky notes in order to explore and map discursive patterns and strategies. Data was further reviewed and recoded in light of these patterns, and maps were refined based on recoding. Analysis continued throughout the writing process as contradictions within manosphere discourses became apparent, necessitating further review, coding and mapping of the data. Throughout the analysis, original texts, where available, were revisited so that tweets could be reviewed contextually.

Extracts within our analysis are quoted verbatim. Non-standard spelling and punctuation are original, and offensive and abusive language has been left uncensored.

Analysis

Our data analysis identified the following discursive strategies: co-opting discourses of oppression, naming power, and disavowal by disaggregation. Together, they created a narrative of manosphere talk and online activism and offered insight into the inherent tensions in their construction of gender on Twitter.

Co-opting discourses of oppression

The appropriation of discourses of oppression was a constant theme in our data. Although primarily used to construct a narrative of male victimisation, the discursive strategy adopted in pursuit of claiming victimhood, also worked to declare new ideologies of masculine identity. Male victimisation was framed as a consequence of women's actions, yet the masculine identities they wrote were threatened by this framing: in order to victimise men, women must hold some power. Redress was attempted through talk of women as a singular entity aligned with familiar powers, such as the state. To defend their position of victimhood, the manosphere

developed a misogynist rhetoric in which female victimisation was denied and rendered meaningless at every turn.

Central to co-opting discourses of oppression was a message of victimhood and resistance:

#MGTOW is the answer from staying free and not being disposable sl[^]ves to western w0men and their big daddy government. (P151, l.b8)

According to P151, men are denied their proper role when they are “disposable” and therefore should “stay free”. Located within the politics of the alt-right (Nagle, 2017) common in the manosphere, P151’s reference to a “big daddy government” is immediately recognised and signified as oppressive. The term “big daddy” might commonly be used by a child for a beneficent and revered father. By employing it with reference to women, P151 infantilised women, because he aligns them with children in their inferior position and need for protection. However, women turn the protection offered by this “big daddy government” against men, and thus become oppressors. By constructing the state as an enabler of women, P151 made misogyny coherent with alt-right ideologies. In doing so, he turned the feminist concept of patriarchy on its head, while his reference to slavery vividly illustrated male oppression.

Carroll (2011) shows how white masculinity co-opts the representational meaning secured by oppressed groups as a reaction to having lost “normative” status. He argues that non-hegemonic identities, such as geeks or slaves, are frequently used to assert hegemonic masculinity. For #MGTOW to liken themselves to slaves meant claiming an oppressed yet naturalised masculinity.

The frequency of tweets claiming victimisation by #MeToo established women as the manosphere’s perceived oppressors. Men – even those accused of sexual harassment – have been found to emphasise their “victim” role (Kitzinger & Thomas, 1995). In our data, claims to victimhood occurred through a combination of rape myths (Burt, 1980), where women “just lie and make things up [...] #fals rape” (P476, l. b525), and the foregrounding of men. #MeToo was positioned as a vindictive enemy of men remorselessly attacking everything constitutive of modern masculine identity (Barrett, 1996) – their “careers and life” and “reputation” (P476, l.b525; P347, l.b460):

Acrimonious & unverified accusations serve to destroy a targeted enemy! #MeToo does not get play the part of rule maker & the selection process to determine males thrive & which are eliminated! MeToo is not for everyone! #HimToo #Notmetoo #Mentoo #MGTOW #DueProcess (P409, l.b418)

The language of warfare constructed #MeToo as an organised and unified attack on men and positioned it in direct opposition to a “natural order” of evolution and cultural systems of justice. #MeToo was also blamed for transferring male domains and their inherent power to women. In using #Mentoo, P409 denied women sole claim to victimhood. While “#Mentoo” indicates advocacy for male victims of sexual abuse, “#HimToo” is ambiguous and can be understood as the

“Him” accused of sexual harassment. Entangling the suffering of victims of sexual abuse with claims of their perpetrators’ suffering has an equalising effect.

The same discursive strategy was applied to create an entirely new male rape victim, one who has suffered “divorce rape”:

#toxicfemininity Let me start. Women force men into common law, fatherhood and #divorceRape and use the state to kidnap as children and take away his rights as a father. #MGTOW (P202, 1.b96)

The construct of “divorce rape” aligns rape, an act of violence and power (Brownmiller, 1975), with divorce, a legal process. By merging two entirely different events and experiences, it serves to strip meaning from the term rape and to present men as victims. P202’s use of “force” positions the affected men as the victims of women who are able to “use the state” to victimise them. In addition, it accuses women of “kidnapping” children, itself a violent and unlawful act. The dominant cultural meaning of the word rape as an expression of male power and violence challenges the manosphere’s claim of male victimisation by women. In using terms such as “divorce rape”, the manosphere works to erode meanings and delegitimises claims of gender-based violence.

The appropriation and redefinition of feminist discourse could also be seen in the use of terms such as “victim blame” (P566, 1.b711) and “shaming”:

Any sentence containing the words “real man” uttered by a woman is a shaming attempt. Women are always trying to say what a real man is. Their best attempt at assertiveness is aggression. A real man would (insert whatever benefits us here) and not want anything in return. #MGTOW (P347, 1.b468)

In a reversal of its common use, “shaming” happens to men when women define masculinity. P347 justified his claim to male victimhood by ascribing to women the masculine- and negative-coded quality of aggression and constructed it as a failed attempt at the masculine- and positive-coded quality of assertiveness. He then switches voices – from the first-person describing women’s talk, to the first-person plural speaking as women – and his lack of grammatical signalling of this shift further blurs the boundaries of masculine and feminine voices. However, in the act of claiming the voice of women, he firmly reasserts a masculinity in which the right to control women extends to his right to speak for them (Alcoff, 1991).

Manosphere activists discredit women’s claims by ascribing masculine qualities to them and bolster claims to their own oppression by appropriating feminine qualities:

It took Western men’s sober recognition that women can do it all themselves, for men to finally start thinking about our basic rights as human beings. It’s no wonder #MGTOW has only now started to wake men up. This clearly shows which gender is the most caring and compassionate (P202, 1.b88).

In asserting that men are the “most caring and compassionate” gender, the new MGTOW masculinity constructed in this tweet is in conflict with traditional masculine ideals. This contradiction is apparent in the superlative relational positioning of the statement: that he is compelled to “show” that men are “the most” compassionate gender indicates some awareness that the notion deviates from patterns of practice within manosphere constructions of masculinity. A claim to caring and compassion introduces the vulnerability inherent in caring for another and so is at odds with the dispassionate masculinity P202 strives to restate through “sober recognition”. By claiming rationality for “Western men”, he denies it to women, thereby turning them into a mere “biological prop [to] servicing the possibility of ‘man’” (Walkerdine, 1989, p. 269). The women P202 attacks reject this role and so fundamentally threaten his masculine existence. Read in this way, it is possible to view his conflicting identities as attempts to embody both masculinity and that which makes masculinity possible. Historically, discourses of rationality have been used to oppress women and privilege men, yet the implications for men when women challenge this oppression have not been considered. P202’s response was to take those elements of femininity that have traditionally nurtured masculinity and incorporate them into a new masculine identity. This expansionist masculinity subordinates women by claiming male superiority in every respect.

The manosphere merges compassion and discourses of oppression to construct a wise and enlightened male hero who is “saving men and boys” (P259, l.b326). They manufacture victimhood as a legitimate, angry and attention-demanding response to the erosion of their “rights”, masking a deep-seated fear of becoming feminised by passivity (Allan, 2016). Victim identities do not sit comfortably with claims to hegemonic masculinity (Javaid, 2017). As the manosphere appropriates feminine characteristics and language in order to fully embody their constructions of victimhood, their ideal masculinity is rendered increasingly fragile. The following sections consider the strategies they adopt to scaffold their new masculinities.

Naming power

Throughout the data, names were used to construct a gendered hierarchy and to deny women a presence within it. Famous men accused of rape and sexual assault were presented as victims or survivors of misandry while male allies of women were “traitors” (P431, l.b448). Those named as victims of feminism are a racially diverse group of powerful and successful men: Brett Kavanaugh, Bill Cosby, R Kelly, Michael Jackson (P480, l.b531; P463, l.b508; P347, l.b640). Accusations against them were understood as threats to the alpha-male. In naming them as victims, the manosphere returned to their appropriation of discourses of black male oppression. In 1991, then Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas discredited allegations of sexual harassment as “high-tech lynching” (Rosenwald, 2018), constructing himself as a victim of racism rather than as a perpetrator of harassment. The phrase has since gained discursive currency (Gotell & Dutton, 2016),

and is alluded to when the manosphere singles out black men as victims of “false allegations”.

Although the manosphere sympathised with high-profile alpha-males, they reserved that name for themselves (P281, l.b636). While they were “lions” (P546, l.b183), other men were denigrated as “blue pill simps” (P580, l.b741) and “soyboys” (P170, l.b260). A “simp” “allows himself to be treated like a wallet” by women (MGTOW.com, 2019), while “soy boys” suffer from raised oestrogen levels due to a diet of soy products (Ebner & Davey, 2019) fed to them by “single moms” (P170). The men at the bottom of the hierarchy were seen to be the product of women, under their control or, worse still in the eyes of the manosphere, their enablers:

Simps really peaking the bravery in bitches with moose knuckles and strong chins (P521, l.b615)²

In naming feminised “simps” as enablers of women’s threat to masculinity, P521 lends credibility to his claim without compromising his own masculine identity. He inscribes the bodies of the women he writes with a mix of animal (“bitches with moose knuckles”) and masculine (“strong chins”) characteristics. However, this monstrous body is timid, its threat only achieved when a man, no matter how far down the male hierarchy, endows it with power by “peaking [its] bravery”. As P521 constructs the threat of female power, he makes it contingent on men and so returns power to the male domain. He neutralises the threat he constructs by offering an implicit resolution: just as men gave power, so can they take it away. Yet despite every effort to present it as such, the new masculinity of MGTOW was not self-sufficient and independent of women. In fact, it was only truly valuable if it presented a threat to women, as in P459’s use of the hashtag “#womenfeelsafeifmanisasimp” (l.b499). The hashtag implies that “simps” are failing as men by allowing women to feel safe, because without such male helpers, women have no power and would not be able to pose a threat to men. Thus, as with P521, action and agency were construed as residing with men while denying women presence and power.

The act of naming has long been recognised as a violating act of power (Butler, 1993). The subject must recognise herself being named and so acknowledge her subjecthood. Thus, she must occupy the name she is given; her identity is produced through interpellating moments, including those aiming to relocate her within an oppressive regulatory framework of gender (Butler, 1993). The manosphere demands not only that women are interpellated into this regulatory framework, but that they also recognise their power as “evil” and their bodies as monstrous.

Just as Butler (2004) allows space for resistance within interpellating moments, so does she state the necessity of the recognition that comes with a sexed identity. A striking feature of the data were the repeated refusals to name women.

#MGTOW #IWD Celebrate the silence – kick the XX out of your life (P236, l.b136.1)

I am showing other men how to enjoy the silence, lower drama and extra money when they cut the XX out of their lives. #MGTOW for the win. Never Marry an XX. Never Breed a XX. (P236, l.b152)

Men frequently named themselves as “man” and “men”. In contrast, women were “weemins” (P170, l.b338), “wahmen” (P486, l.b537), “the XX”, and “thots” (P148, l.b5).³ By denying women their proper names, the manosphere attempted to erase female identities, denying the recognition necessary for a “livable life” (Butler, 2004, p. 8). Not unlike Walkerdine’s (1989) nurturing “biological prop”, there exists an idealised, silent and invisible woman against whom manosphere masculinities are formed. This missing representation (Albury, 2013) sitting at the edge of manosphere discourses can be glimpsed in the CGI fantasy of the male gaze. It is so protected by the manosphere that Sarkeesian’s own act of naming was used to justify the attacks she experienced during Gamergate (Sarkeesian, 2013; P2, l.a2). The missing woman was also referenced in the manosphere’s “good victim” (Madigan & Gamble, 1991):

#MeToo Best celebrity response to media trolling for their MeToo story Nicole Kidman. She said yes, I’ve had a metoo story but I care to express it in the roles I play. Wow, an awesome response! Imagine if other women did the same! Turn it into a positive! #MGTOW #HimToo #Men (P409, l.b671)

P409’s suggestion that victims of rape and sexual harassment “turn it into a positive” transforms male abuse into a blessing in disguise for women, provided they remain silent.

The idealised woman is the unreal, unattainable figure the manosphere places within its regulatory gender binary because she presents no threat to gender hierarchies. Their non-naming of other women is the active and intentional construction of a third other. Just as their bodies are monstrous yet timid, so are “wahmen” and “weemins” phonaesthetically named as whining and snivelling. These women are not simply cast out of a fantasy gender binary, they are denied the category of woman. As the power within the collective “women” becomes apparent, the manosphere understands that the name alone is no longer enough to ensure women’s subjugation.

Through the act of naming, the manosphere constructed and located themselves at the top of a hierarchy of masculinity. While their attempts to erase female identity through the *unnaming* of women placed women outside of a gender hierarchy, these efforts were undermined by the primacy of masculinity in their own identities. Their very definition of naturalised masculinity presupposes a binary opposite. Although they wished an invisible idealised woman to perform that role, every masculinity they wrote was defined in relation to women as they exist in the world – women who raise sons, are victims of male violence, or challenge male power – perhaps to the extent that, for all their efforts to construct her as the

monstrous other, their discourse rendered woman the normative gender. Their response to this inherent and inescapable discursive conundrum was the construction of gender as a natural category signified by the body's biology.

Disavowal by disaggregation

The denial of women's identity was amplified by the manosphere's objectification of the female body. It was striking how often women were reduced to an assemblage of mere body parts, in particular their genitalia:

you can qriticue the games ... With your slut cunt #rekt (P33, 1.a34)

Any dumb hole can get knocked up, and choose to either abort – or conversely go after the father for support, while preventing him from visitation. Low IQ murderous THOTs. #MGTOW (P148, 1.b5)

These anthropomorphised genitalia were powerful: able to deny men rights and make pronouncements on popular games culture. Rather than grant agency to women as rational persons, these genitalia endowed the female body with animalistic power and allowed the manosphere to absolve themselves of the ethical imperative of recognition and respect for the owner of the body. Their misogynist rhetoric represented a backlash to an erosion of male entitlement to women's bodies.

The female body of the manosphere was at once powerful and dumb, hated and desired, but consistently deserving of violence. Despite their discursive efforts to strip meaning from rape, it remained their tool of choice to control and silence women. This was most evident in the rape threats sent to Sarkeesian:

If you ever come to Europe I will rape you into oblivion (P54, 1.a61)

I Will Fuck You In The Ass So Hard I Would Break The 9.5 Earthquake Record And Leave That Ass Jiggling For Days (P61, 1.a680)

I hope you get raped by 4 men with 9inch cocks (P2, 1.a49)

The threats are graphic, violent and concrete, yet also hyperbolic, distant, and attribute agency to others. By separating the speaker from the act, the tweets perform a disavowal of responsibility.

This disavowal was continued in the conspicuous absence of most of the male body from rape threats. Only the penis was evident and was explicitly and repeatedly weaponised, to the extent that it acted almost independently of the man:

I don't advocate violence against women at all but this bitch I'll make an exception for (WITH MY DICK) (P93, 1.a103)

go put a dick in your mouth and shut up (P117, 1.a128)

The autonomous penis attempts to return rape to its pre-feminist positioning as a biological imperative (Brownmiller, 1975), or a function of men's "uncontrollable sexual urges" (Flood & Pease, 2009, p. 128). Yet, the use of the "dick" to explicitly silence and punish Sarkeesian exposes such manosphere myths. The use of the penis rather than the person simply underscores the threat because the penis constitutes embodied masculine identity (Butler, 1999); it is synonymous with the male. It is also the weapon of rape and its constant invocation is a reminder that rape is a reality which exists beyond the boundaries of online discourses. As these men deny their violence by assigning that violent capacity to their penises, they write male violence.

Their denial of responsibility for acts of violence extended beyond the (dis)embodied "dick" into the discursive realm through the use of capitalisation and emojis that placed threats into a space where their meaning could be denied:

kill yourself oh wait sorry did I hurt your tits with my keyboard (P8, l.a9)

Oh and btw, we're gunning for you (P83, l.a93)

P8's feigned concern and P83's cute winking emoji undercut the threat and introduce the possibility to challenge interpretations that insist on the tweets' violence.

While P93 and P61, whose tweets were discussed previously with regard to threats of graphic sexual violence, used capitalisation to emphasise aggression, the absence of capital letters and grammatical pauses in P8's tweet creates ambiguity of meaning. Violence and rape threats were presented as a joke, and when Sarkeesian named them as threats of sexual violence those making the threats undermined and belittled her response, ensnaring her in their discursive strategies. This is a common strategy which intentionally silences a victim by denying her the right to challenge her attackers (Jane, 2014). It is doubly confounding because it frames the victim as active and motivated in misunderstanding the tweets' meaning. This allows the aggressor to construct himself as a victim of her wilful misunderstanding, while reducing her to her sex, her "tits", and the relentless accusations of emotional lability and hysteria (Ussher, 2013). By writing threats that can be dismissed as "a joke", the manosphere constructs a discourse in which they can hold both aggressor and victim identities at once while taking responsibility for neither.

The manosphere's sexual harassment of Sarkeesian exemplified the community's practice of simultaneously performing and concealing power. The imagery conjured by the manosphere to attack her was a fantasy of masculinity in which the idealised man violently denigrated the female body. While Sarkeesian was its primary target, the images' endless repetition can reify identities and thereby create repercussions that reach far beyond Gamergate (Chowdhury et al., 2020).

Discussion

We have identified compelling patterns and variations in manosphere constructions of gender. Their focus on the female body as a site of both punishment and female erasure makes normative the constant threat of violence for women in digital spaces. In pursuit of silencing women, they claim victimhood by appropriating discourses of oppression and denying women the language with which to challenge them. This strategy intersects with neoliberal and postfeminist discourses as they circulate within the manosphere and in popular media and culture.

Manosphere discourses are powerful, yet the masculinities they construct are riven with contradictions. They must embody powerful masculinity while presenting themselves as victims, and they must be at once masculine rational and feminine compassionate. MGTOW discourses are particularly self-limiting because every masculinity they construct relies explicitly on a relational positioning to the women they try to deny. The creation of a liminal representation of an idealised woman – a foil for their performance of masculinity – serves as a solution to this dilemma.

The heterogeneity of the manosphere offers a degree of resolution to the problem of contradictory positioning. While some groups educate countless young men in abusive strategies to procure sex, others single out female targets for harassment and abuse online, and yet others use digital spaces to develop misogynist political ideologies. These three areas are functionally interdependent: PUA forums introduce disenfranchised and sexually entitled men to neoliberal misogynist discourses which lay responsibility for all their woes at the feet of women; attacks by groups such as those shown in dataset A attempt to silence women, carving out a space in which MGTOW can further its cause. Gamergate made misogyny in action the front-line defence of the world of technology. Manosphere communities such as MGTOW promote their ideology, secure in the knowledge that there is an army of enthusiastic supporters on hand to attack any dissenting female voices. In turn, their ideology celebrates and provides justification for the violence enacted by the men on the front line. Together, Gamergate and MGTOW have constructed a climate of threat and risk for women in online spaces.

That tensions sit at the surface of manosphere constructions of gender online is also evidenced in their constant discussion and rewriting of rape. They construct masculinity through graphic male violence which, on Twitter, requires that the female body be made concrete in order for it to be subjected to masculinity. It is here that the idealised woman of manosphere talk is discarded and the monstrous other becomes their object. The effect of this discourse is that some women are withdrawing from the internet (Jane, 2017). However, Twitter's "increasingly porous borders" (Van Doorn, 2011, p. 538) make this discourse inescapable. News coverage of online rape discourses reaches audiences offline (Pennington & Birthisel, 2016) and affects women's social media engagement with economic and material consequences (Ging & Siapera, 2018). MGTOW appears relatively harmless yet represents only the "respectable" face of manosphere misogyny. Their

superficially “rational” discourse appeals to the mainstream and has already begun to shape an “anti-anti-rape backlash” (Gotell & Dutton, 2016, p. 75).

The practice of “digital manspreading” makes manosphere discourses inescapable and limits women’s choices in online engagement (Easter, 2018). Digital manspreading, for example, the manosphere’s use of hashtags to insert themselves into female talk, is a statement of ownership of digital spaces. It also extends the reach of manosphere discourses of rape and acts as warning and punishment for women. Threats of violence have also breached the virtual sphere and entered the material world through threatening letters and “swatting” attacks.^{4,5} Boundaries are further permeated as the material world is pulled into the virtual through practices such as “doxing” (Eckert, 2018; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Mortensen, 2018).⁶ New forms of technology-enabled symbolic and physical violence, such as revenge porn and the use of digital platforms to harass women who have left abusive relationships (Jane, 2016), increase the range and variety of tools available to men who harm women and institute male violence and female oppression in digital spaces. Ironically, it might be the very technologies that facilitate the spread of misogyny that afford women the power to reshape the virtual world. In an age of platform capitalism, the amount and diversity of the data may be a more valuable commercial resource than loyalty to a particular community (Srnicek, 2017).

Limitations of this research include the fact that only one platform has been analysed. MRAs operate across multiple platforms online (Ging, 2019) and future research should consider how discourses of victimhood, the use of naming, and the construction of the female body are used elsewhere by manosphere communities. Additionally, the anonymisation of our data meant that we were unable to incorporate key facets of manosphere identity construction into the analysis. Such analysis would have allowed for the exploration of those female voices speaking from within the manosphere. Although research has considered how the alt-right uses female voices to further its cause (Ebner & Davey, 2019), we are not aware of any research specifically investigating the openly misogynist discourses of women within the manosphere.

Finally, research must engage with those active in the manosphere. The anonymous and faceless discourses analysed here give little sense of the context of the speaker. In order to develop meaningful interventions to counter misogynist ideologies online, we need to learn more about the shape of lives attracted by the manosphere.

Conclusion

This study has offered a snapshot of how gender is performed by the manosphere on Twitter. Central to this construction have been practices of silencing, objectifying, and threatening women. In the echo-chamber of social media, such violent discourse feeds a spiral of extremism with dangerous implications for women. However, our research also showed that manosphere gender identities were

dependent on the continued existence of an enemy-other, in the form of women. It therefore exposed the hollowness of men's claims to be "going their own way" and drew attention to cracks in their ideology.

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Notes

1. In the film *The Matrix*, the red pill enables those who take it to see the truth of their enslavement; taking the blue pill maintains the illusion (Ging, 2019).
2. "Moose knuckle" refers to male genitalia that are visible through the clothes. The female equivalent is "camel toe".
3. A "thot" is a sexually promiscuous or provocative woman, synonymous with "slut" or "whore".
4. In the UK, MP Anna Soubry received a letter threatening she would meet the same fate as Jo Cox, a female MP who in 2016 was murdered while meeting constituents. Other female MPs have also raised awareness of a growing number of serious threats made against them.
5. "Swatting" is the practice of making a false report of a serious emergency resulting in an armed police unit – a SWAT team – attending a person's home or workplace.
6. "Doxing" refers to publishing private identifying information, such as someone's address, or her children's identities, online.

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