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**Alpha, Beta, Sigma: A Critical Analysis of Sigma Male Ideology**

By

**Mateo Valdivia**

A Major Research Paper

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

through the Department of Communication, Media and Film

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of Master of Arts at the

University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2023

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**Alpha, Beta, Sigma: A Critical Analysis of Sigma Male Ideology**

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December 13, 2023

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## ABSTRACT

In the online environment, the Manosphere has been identified as an unstructured network of groups who express harmful anti-feminist, and anti-progressive views. Informally associated with the Manosphere, Sigma Male ideology has emerged as an allegedly unique classification of men who are successful and popular, but also silent and rebellious. Despite assertions that they adhere to their own principles, Sigma Male ideological expressions, as conveyed through video memes of select fictional role models, demonstrate that they are more intimately connected to the Manosphere than acknowledged. This research paper applies critical qualitative meme analysis to TikTok videos that feature the specific Sigma Male inspirational figure of Travis Bickle from Martin Scorsese's 1976 film *Taxi Driver*. The objective of this study was to establish how Sigma Male representational practices reflect a comparable, or distinct ideology from the Manosphere. The resulting analysis of Sigma Male memes revealed that while their ideological perspectives correspond with the reactionary values of the Manosphere, they differ in being implicitly political. The ideological sentiments of Sigma Males are rather affectively charged and represent a point of political orientation where regressive political views are likely to develop.

## **DEDICATION**

This research is dedicated to all those who struggle with navigating the complexities of modern society and who believe a better world can be made.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## I. Introduction:

In September of 2023, renowned director Martin Scorsese partook in an interview with *GQ* magazine to break down his most iconic movies. In describing *Taxi Driver* (1976), he highlights main character Travis Bickle's loneliness and his dangerous, anti-social behaviour. Scorsese makes the chilling observation that today, the psychological and emotional state embodied by Bickle is a tragic norm: "Every other person is like Travis Bickle now" (GQ, 2023, 1:26). After nearly 50 years, the alienated, misogynistic, and racist character remains relevant not only as a representation of individuals in our contemporary moment, but also as an idolized representation for emergent and evolving masculine identities online.

Over the last few decades, the internet has gradually grown into one of the main spheres shaping societal views. Digital technology and social media are now ubiquitous features of our everyday lives, becoming new vehicles for socialization (Ask & Abidin, 2018; DeCook, 2018). For a time, it was believed these technologies would usher in a new era of global democracy, equality, and prosperity, premised on user generation. In the mid-90s American Vice President Al Gore described the internet as the ultimate public sphere because it "gave everyone a soapbox from which to speak" (Chun, 2021, p. 1). By the mid-2010s, uprisings in the Middle East propelled the reputation of the internet as a technology of liberation. More recently, however, the imagined utopian potentials of the internet have slowly faded: worldwide surveillance networks generated by a combination of state and corporate power have developed the digital realm as a space where lies and conspiracy theories are spread through social media algorithms. Instead of an increase in democratization, the internet has exacerbated political polarization, led to

increased provocations of violence, etc. For the political right, these technological affordances, and the social conditions they have shaped, have provided a pathway to spread their hateful and divisive ideology (DeCook, 2018; Johanssen, 2022; Kelly et al., 2022; Sugiura, 2021; Weimann & Masri, 2020).

One manifestation of this tendency has been the emergence of the *Manosphere*: a loose confederacy of blogs, websites, forums, and social media threads that serve as outlets for users to express their prejudiced, sexist, and dangerous views. Constituting this informal alliance is a multitude of like-minded (although sometimes conflicting) groups such as Men's Rights Activists (MRA's), Pick up Artists (PUA's), Men Go their Own Way (MGTOW) and misogynist 'Incels' united by a misogynist and hyper-patriarchal worldview that situates men in a battle against the feminization of society and a perceived loss of power (Ging, 2019; Johanssen, 2022; Rothermel, 2023). The perception of a 'crisis of masculinity' is not unfounded as there have been changes in some men's circumstances but rather than blaming neoliberalism's failures to uphold a promise of upward economic mobility or acknowledging their inability to cope with socio-cultural shifts, they blame progressive change and the marginalized for their alleged victimization (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Johanssen, 2022; Sugiura, 2021; Szablewicz, 2014).

The object of this study is Sigma Male (SM) ideology that has been loosely associated with the manosphere. A *Sigma Male* is a "slang term for a classification of men who are successful and popular but also silent and rebellious, a type of man who plays by his own rules" (Knowyourmeme, 2021, para. 1). The online presence of the SM ideology is evident in the memetic content disseminated and circulated through social media platforms such as TikTok which serves as the site of data collection for this research. With its skyrocketing popularity,

TikTok has become the leading social media platform, but it is also a central purveyor of far-right, extremist content that circulates with disturbing ease through the feeds of its youthful user base (Weimann & Masri, 2020).

TikTok edits under #Sigmamale and related hashtags feature archetypal masculine film characters as embodiments of the quintessential SM. On the surface this content may seem innocuous; however, it often advances anti-feminist, racist, and misanthropic sentiments. Hence, this research focuses on SM's communicative expressions through meme edits on TikTok, to explore whether the ideological sentiments embedded in their content align with those of the broader manosphere. While SMs sometimes distance themselves from the manosphere, alleging that they are independent-minded, their representational politics seem to suggest otherwise.

Accordingly, the following research questions, which are not mutually exclusive, are addressed herein:

- 1) How do SM memes situate this identity within the broader manosphere and/or hegemonic masculinity?
- 2) How are they motivated by an affectively charged backlash to progressive change predicated on an alleged crisis of masculinity?

To answer these questions and to better contextualize my focus on SMs, it is necessary to provide a comprehensive overview of the manosphere.

## II. Literature Review

### The Roots of the Manosphere

The contemporary iteration of the manosphere has a direct historical lineage that began in the 1970s with what was called the Men's Liberation Movement (MLM). Initially inspired by the achievements of second-wave feminism, the MLM was committed to critiquing conventional understandings of masculinity, recognizing the harm of sexism for both men and women (Messner, 2016). The group eventually splintered with one wing maintaining a progressive stance and the other espousing traditionally rigid gender roles and hierarchical power arrangements. The latter came to be known as the Men's Rights Movement (MRM), an organization of disaffected men who held women and their pursuit of equal rights responsible for their alleged victimization. Susan Faludi (1991) coined the term *backlash* to define this sort of cultural counter-reaction that materializes to undercut and roll back advances that feminists justly attained.

The discontent of the MRM was, to some degree justified. The trend toward de-industrialization in the 1970s led to the decline of traditional male work in some sectors of the economy. At the same time, more women were entering the workforce and gaining some degree of financial independence (despite the fact that gender inequality was still rampant) leading some to couch women's advancements as detrimental to men. The modest gains made by racial minorities as a result of the civil rights movement were also met with derision. Many men's rights activists believed that white men in the United States were suffering a crisis due to feminism, civil rights advances, and the broader influence of liberalism which they saw as eroding American culture. (Faludi, 1991; Johanssen, 2022; Mamié et al., 2021; Schulman, 2008). Today, similar resentments and sentiments animate the manosphere.

Originally popularized by Ian Ironwood (2013) in *The Manosphere: A New Hope for Masculinity*, the term was used to describe a collection of blog and forum posts about the perceived struggles of males. MRMs were pioneers in the online world of the pre-web era using e-mail and file sharing to forge social connections. In the web 2.0 era, like-minded entities leveraged the enhanced capabilities of user-generated social media platforms to disseminate their ideology more effectively and to establish connections with individuals who otherwise might have remained unexposed to their radical perspectives (Ging, 2019; Sugiura, 2021). Several scholars have asserted that the groups of the manosphere are united by the skewed perception that men are experiencing a ‘crisis of masculinity’ based on the alleged dominance of feminist values which are undermining not only traditional gender and familial roles but the very foundations of Western civilization itself. These groups see it as their responsibility to re-assert a robust masculinity identity, restore men’s dominant social standing and the ‘natural’ order of things vis-à-vis rigid gender roles (Han & Yin, 2022; Johanssen, 2022; Stern, 2020; Sugiura, 2021).

### *Alliance with the Alt-Right*

Essential to the trajectory of the contemporary manosphere is the melding of its members and ideologies with those of the reactionary alt-right. Lyons (2017) traces the ideological origins of the alt-right to two intellectual currents—paleoconservatism and the European New Right (ENR). Paleoconservatism dates back to the ‘old right’ of the 1930s which opposed New Deal liberalism and was also influenced by the fascistic ‘America First Movement’ of the early 1940s which opposed US entry into World War II. In the 1980s, prominent politicians (most notably Patrick Buchanan) presented paleoconservatism as an alternative to neoconservatism which was characterized as unnecessarily ‘globalist’ in its economic and military aspirations and too



liberal on social issues. Paleoconservatives were unapologetic defenders of white European Christian culture, “embraced traditionalist Christian morality, Eurocentric monoculturalism, isolationist nationalism and a complete end to social programs” (Berlet & Lyons, 2000, p. 243). Not surprisingly, most paleoconservatives were sympathetic to white nationalism advocating for a society for white people that prioritized their values, interests, and concerns.

The ENR additionally served as a precursor to the alt-right through their variation on traditional fascism. This group represented an initiative among far-right intellectuals to rework fascist ideology by adopting elements of other political traditions to mask their rejection of the principle of human equality. Rather than coordinating mass movements to seize state power, they advanced a ‘metapolitical’ strategy that sought to incrementally influence political and intellectual culture as a precursor to altering institutions and systems (Lyons, 2017). The ideology of the ENR and paleoconservatives coalesced on various topics such as opposition to multicultural societies, non-white immigration, and globalization; the interaction between the two created a space for Americans seeking to advance a white nationalist movement outside of the traditional Neo-Nazi and Ku Klux Klan networks (Stern, 2020).

In 2008, the term ‘alternative-right’ was introduced by Richard Spencer then a managing editor at the paleoconservative and libertarian *Taki’s Magazine*. It subsequently became a moniker (shortened to alt-right) to identify a variety of voices at odds with the conservative establishment and was adopted by an array of online commentators, blogs, Twitter accounts, podcasters, and Reddit Trolls who spread scientific racism, neo-fascism, and white nationalism (Lyons, 2017; Stern, 2020).

The current alt-right can be described as a white supremacist movement consisting of subcultures (some of which are specifically crafted to resonate with younger generations) who

believe that immigration, globalism, multiculturalism, and feminism will be the downfalls of Western civilization (DeCook, 2018; Nagle, 2018). They are a decentralized grouping but maintain a substantial presence on websites such as 4Chan, 8Chan, Reddit, and most recently Gab (Greene, 2019). It is on these sites that the alt-right adopted the digital know-how of internet subcultures by appropriating their methods and visuals (including those of gamers). Their acumen for the production and dissemination of *internet memes*—images, videos, and text that can be copied, remixed, and spread online—and irony permitted the alt-right to earn greater visibility, mobilize followers, and target opponents (Lyons, 2017; Shifman, 2013a).

Mamié et al. (2021) contend that the alt-right and manosphere have gradually converged as users who had previously participated exclusively with the manosphere commonly made the jump to engage in alt-right content. The ideological exchange goes both ways. Initially, members of the alt-right appealed for the inclusion of women as their procreation capabilities were seen as essential to fostering a white nationalist movement, but the continued connections to the manosphere motivated a hardline shift to woman-hating (Lyons, 2017).<sup>1</sup>

### Catalyzing Events

To contextualize the interweaving of these groups and their mutual elevation to mainstream attention and appeal, it is fundamental to turn to two distinct catalyzing events: the ‘#Gamergate’ incident and the Trump presidency. Ross (2017) describes the former event as a coordinated harassment campaign targeting video game developer Zoe Quinn. ‘#Gamergaters’ were motivated by false accusations that Quinn’s relationship with a gaming journalist was predicated on attaining favourable reviews for her newly released game. The campaign exploded

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the growing convergence between these groups, not everyone in the manosphere can be labelled White supremacist or fascist and not everyone in the alt-right can be categorized as misogynist (Johanssen, 2022).

to encompass allegations against developers Brianna Wu and Anita Sarkeesian, who were publicly critical of the stereotypical portrayals of women in video games. The geeks and gamers that occupied the boards of 4Chan and Reddit were provoked into violent misogyny; threatening women in the gaming industry with rape or murder under the false pretence of protecting the gaming industry (Johanssen, 2022). The reaction was so extreme that the Federal Bureau of Investigation stepped in to investigate the threats of violence, rape, and death against women who spoke out against sexism and a lack of diversity in the gaming industry (DiBranco, 2022). #Gamergaters were mobilized to challenge feminism, political correctness, and social justice warriors (SJWs) who were allegedly invading their largely white-male space (Nagle, 2018). Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2015) agree that the ease with which this anti-feminist backlash grew can be rationalized through the notion of *networked misogyny*: technical affordances, structures, and policies of online platforms facilitating the normalization of misogyny in Western culture.

Several authors have noted how the alt-right was able to take advantage of the aggrieved #Gamergaters through their shared perceptions that progressive change had led to their victimization and disenfranchisement (Bezio, 2018; Greene, 2019; Munn, 2019a; Ross, 2017). The alt-right exposed #Gamergaters to extreme white nationalist and men's rights sentiments, further radicalizing their beliefs (Ross, 2017). For example, prominent alt-right figure Milo Yiannopoulos authored articles that stimulated the burning hatred of #Gamergaters through exaggerated claims that the video game industry was being ravaged by feminist bullies and blogs that were more concerned with policing content than reviewing games (Stern, 2020). #Gamergaters who were drawn to Yiannopoulos' content would be channelled into former Trump advisor Steve Bannon's notorious website *Breitbart* where they would be presented with increasingly regressive alt-right sentiments such as "anti-progressive policies in favour of

isolationism, fear-mongering, and moral panic” (Bezio, 2018, p. 563). Furthermore, terms now popularly employed by mainstream figures such as ‘snowflake’ and ‘safe space’ originated in #Gamergate threads and forums like Reddit’s *R/Redpill* (Bezio, 2018, p. 563). For #Gamergaters, former President Trump’s mantra of ‘drain the swamp’ was only a small step away from their own ambitions to eliminate the alleged corruption in gaming journalism.

The 2016 election and the subsequent years of the Trump presidency were fundamental in vitalizing the manosphere and alt-right movements. DiBranco (2022) illustrates the way Trump set himself apart from other Republican candidates through his overt attacks on women, insults to their appearances and behaviours, and his defence of physical and sexual harassment and violence against them. During his administration, Trump faced damning accusations following the release of an audio recording where he admitted to committing sexual assault (Rothermel et al., 2022). The former president dealt with heavy scrutiny in mainstream media, but his supporters were quick to brush the accusations off, choosing to believe Trump's excuse that his comments were simply “locker room talk” (DiBranco, 2022, p. 11). Trump’s misogynist behaviours only earned him more clout among anti-feminist communities who hailed him as an exemplar of an ‘alpha male’.

Furthermore, Perry (2020) details that the rise and subsequent popularity of the Donald Trump campaign was driven in part by genuine grievances such as “socio-economic inequality, precarious and alienating employment, dissatisfaction with the political process and anger at a rigged political system designed for elites rather than the average citizens” (p. 149). Trump's influence on politics and culture warped the real concerns of citizens through the lens of white victimhood and dreams of reclaiming white power and culture. Correlating with Faludi’s (1991) observations on backlash, Inglehart and Norris (2016) suggest that contemporary backlash

sentiments have resulted in support for populist parties. Populists look past the rising wealth inequality, and neoliberal austerity politics that have created their position of economic precarity, and instead choose to cast blame on progressive cultural change, such as support for LGBTQ+ rights and racial and gender inequality.

Taylor (2020) suggests that Trump's campaign provided a figure for the alt-right to rally around, offering an avenue for the mainstreaming of their views. McCoy (2020) contends that Trump's race-baiting rhetoric, coupled with his reluctance to condemn such language or behaviour, resulted in a surge of white nationalist and white supremacist hate groups, as well as a rise in hate crimes targeting Black people. Trump demonstrated his alliance with these groups and their perspectives in his reaction to the deadly Charlottesville 'Unite the Right Rally' where he claimed there were "very good people on both sides"; equating fascists with antifascists and earning him approval from the alt-right (Taylor, 2020, p. 20).

### *Alt-Right Pipeline*

#Gamergate and the Trump Presidency represented a socio-political shift in which many (especially young) North Americans moved from centrist to far-right positions in what Munn (2019a) characterizes as the 'alt-right pipeline'. They identify three non-sequential phases that are shared by those radicalized through the pipeline: 'normalization', 'acclimation', and 'dehumanization'. Edgy humour and irony play key roles in the process of normalization, where ideology is repackaged in the visual vernacular of the web: animated gifs, memes, and witty references (DeCook, 2020). Layers of 'ironic distance' are created through edgy jokes as a defence mechanism that allows users to ignore serious engagement with questions of masculinity, femininity, or their individual experience. Excessive use of ironic jokes can be

dangerous when anti-social beliefs shrouded in irony unconsciously develop into sincere convictions (Johanssen, 2022; Sloan, 2022).

An affiliated concept designated as the *Overton Window* describes the leveraging of irony and satire to shift what is acceptable in political discourse; extremist ideas previously deemed absurd become realistic and even practicable (Greene, 2019; Stern, 2020). Greene (2019) highlights the user-created *Poe's Law* that describes the near impossibility of discerning irony and satire from extremist content unless intent is stated clearly. The term *based* has been adopted by the alt-right and white supremacists to denote their distaste for political correctness and approval of anti-social beliefs and actions (Kelly et al., 2022, p. 171).

The phase of acclimation is the result of psychological habituation, where pauses in the stages of the alt-right journey allow users to slowly become adjusted to their new extremist ideologies and beliefs. Through immersion in right-wing spaces, racism moves from a noticeable anomaly to an accepted backdrop of online environments (Munn, 2019b). Also referred to in online forums as 'irony poisoning,' users can become so detached from reality from jokes about genocide and rape that they become susceptible to hate groups (Evans, 2018, as cited in Munn, 2019b, p. 9).

The final stage of dehumanization involves the repositioning of various 'others' into entirely distinct ethical classifications where users' perceptions of marginalized groups become so warped that they are seen as inhuman. Terms like 'NPC' (non-playable character), a docile non-player-controlled character that only serves to facilitate the protagonist's game, are used to equate individuals to computer programs (Munn, 2019b). Kelly et al. (2022) detail a similar phenomenon of mechanistic dehumanization, which involves the reduction of women to emotionless machines. The distorted perceptions of marginalized groups evolve to be seen as

easy targets for harassment and violence, and as objects to be managed in deportation schemes of racial utopias (Munn, 2019b). With each meme or message, users may be at risk of slipping into the pipeline and accepting the radicalized ideology of the alt-right.

### Political Prescriptions

The alt-right and manosphere's misogynistic worldview is informed by their shared philosophy of the 'red pill' (Nagle, 2018). The concept is derived from the Wachowski sister's film *The Matrix* (1999) wherein main character Neo is offered a red pill to awaken him to "the reality that lies behind the ideological illusions of contemporary society" (Ross, 2017, p. 583). The Subreddit *r/TheRedPill* was created by former Republican Robert Fisher as an initial hub for 'red pillers' to share sexual seduction tactics under the guise of self-help. Being 'red pillled' is synonymous with a process of radicalization, where users take many 'red pills' over time resulting in an alteration in their beliefs (Munn, 2019b). Taking the 'red pill' indicates waking up to the alleged false consciousness of liberal thinking, and internalizing the perceived realization that white men do not hold systemic power or privilege. To be 'blue-pillled' is to remain a 'normie' (normal people who conform to society), accept the mainstream narrative, and live in ignorance of their supposed 'truth' (Greene, 2019; Kelly et al., 2022).

Elley (2021) describes the existence of an alternative configuration referred to as the 'iron pill' that originated on 4chan's SIG (Self Improvement General) board. The iron pill wakes one up to the 'truth' that civilization is becoming too indulgent and collapsing. The only route to survival and averting the collapse is to return to masculine strength, a more authentic way of living, and traditional values. Analogous to the 'red pill', the 'iron pill' is veiled as a path to self-improvement, but typical of far-right communities, there is an intermix of fact with fiction, pseudoscience, misinformation, and conspiracy. Users are encouraged to engage in realistic self-

improvement strategies, like creating a fitness regimen, but at the same time are subjected to antisemitic conspiracies about masturbation abstinence and the pornography industry weakening Western men. ‘Iron pillers’ advance their traditionalist lifestyle based on American conservative staples of Christianity and gun ownership as superior to the emptiness offered by a modern consumerist lifestyle. Other variants include the ‘black pill’ which reflects a nihilistic view wherein individuals see their situation of perceived suffering as immutable, with the only recourse being mass violence, suicide, or Incelicide (genocide of Incels). They commonly assert their defeated status with phrases such as “it’s over” and “it never began” (Kelly et al., 2022, p. 173).

An essential aspect of the red pill ideology, most widely adopted by Incels, is the framework of men and women existing in an alleged sexual class system or hierarchy. At the top are the *Chads*; normie alpha males who fit the hegemonic masculine standard of an athletic, attractive white male to whom most women are biologically drawn. *Stacy’s*—the female counterparts to ‘Chads’—are stereotypically attractive, popular, white, blonde women.<sup>2</sup> At the bottom are *Betas*, low-ranking males who are used or ignored by females; identified as comic-book geeks, and gamers who display non-hegemonic senses of masculinity such as being socially awkward and shy (Johanssen, 2022). Though Beta males claim a subordinated or marginalized masculinity, Ging (2019) argues that they exhibit a ‘hybrid masculinity’ that desires to uphold hierarchical relations in extreme online displays of misogyny and racism while simultaneously rejecting the ‘normative’ masculinity of ‘Chads’. Nonetheless, ‘Betas’ position themselves as victims of feminism and political correctness.

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<sup>2</sup> Recently, the use of Stacy’s has waned in favour of the depersonalizing *femoid* (Female Humanoid Organism) (Kelly et al., 2022)



The circulation and ingestion of the ‘red pill’ ideology has had fatal results, demonstrating that in its most extreme manifestations online hate and violence can easily move beyond the digital realm. In 2014, Elliot Rodger killed six people and injured fourteen others before taking his own life. Investigations revealed that Rodger was radicalized through his hatred of women because of his inability to pursue them romantically. In his final video, Rodger stated: “If I can’t have you, girls, I will destroy you” (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019, p. 5015). An FBI inquiry found that misogynist incels responded to Rodger's actions with praise, insinuating they might continue his violent crusade against women in a “Beta uprising” (Kelly et al., 2022 p. 174). Such was the case with Aleks Minassian who, inspired by the “Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger”, took the lives of ten people, and injured sixteen others in 2018 (Barcellona, 2022, p. 176).<sup>3</sup>

### *Sigma Males*

The primary focus of this research are the online expressions of SMs, who situate themselves outside of the aforementioned Alpha-Beta dichotomy. They have been described as ‘lone wolves’ who reject external valuation and as introverted alphas who like to play by their own rules; they are preoccupied with avenues to self-improvement and embrace the ‘hustle culture’ (Knowyourmeme, 2021; Yalcinkaya, 2022). Despite their assertion that they are somehow unique, Hadford (2023) contends they are a subset of ‘red pillers’, as they embrace a vernacular that aligns closely with online ‘Alpha’ and ‘Beta’ males. They similarly are an unorganized group, lacking structure, or key figures; rather they idolize particular masculine figures—both real and fictional. SM edits and compilations heavily feature cultural icons such as

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<sup>3</sup> The Toronto Police Services and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police also charged Minassian for engaging in terrorist activity, establishing the attack as inspired by the Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremist (IMVE) movement commonly referred to as Incels.

Andrew Tate, Patrick Bateman, Travis Bickle, etc., identifying their images and behaviours as exemplars of SMs and therefore worth emulating.

Hadford (2023) analyzed a popular expression of SM ideology, known as the ‘Sigma Male Grindset,’ which refers to attempts to optimize one's lifestyle and streamlining or ‘hacking’ one’s mental and physical functions with the goal of self-actualization and ‘stacking’ cash. Grindset videos focus on the integration of intense dedicated work or ‘grind’ into men’s daily lives that will presumably result in an altered worldview and mindset. Through hyper-masculine affirmations, SM content pushes viewers to find prosperity, self-growth, and financial freedom by adhering to a rigorous regimen of lifestyle practices that prioritize self-discipline and personal empowerment (Yalcinkaya, 2022).

Rather than being a true avenue for self-fulfillment, the ‘grindset’ is rather an ascetic and alienating practice undertaken in an attempt to navigate the current neoliberal climate where everyone is a commodity and products are catered to appeal to people’s biggest anxieties and aspirations (Hadford, 2023). It is no coincidence that the popularity of the SM coincided with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, an event that revealed the fissures in capitalism with rising unemployment, stagnating wages, and inflation. Meme account *@doyoueveryjustfuckingascend* illustrates these circumstances asserting that “There is undeniable pressure on men to behave in a way that, under the wrong circumstances, can foster many bad traits... Combine that with western hyper-individualism and it could create a real sense of isolation” (Yalcinkaya, 2022, para. 11). The ‘grindset’ mentality condemns traditional wage labour in favour of passive income through property investment and cryptocurrencies and rejects consumerism as a replacement for self-worth. Rather, it suggests self-worth can be found by withholding orgasms and adhering to strict dietary regimes to increase gym gains—effectively reducing individual lives to “the most

miserable levels of sustenance” (Hadford, 2023, p. 89). Drawing on Marx’s concept of ‘alienation’, Hadford (2023) adds that the grindset’s radical individualism estranges followers from any sense of universal humanity; relationships become instrumental and merely transactional.

Extant research on SMs has tended to focus on the grindset philosophy. What remains understudied is the SM’s affinity for film characters like Travis Bickle and what it means for them to resurrect this decades-old character for meme production. Among the figures idolized by SMs, *Taxi Driver’s* (1976) main character Travis Bickle stands out as the embodiment of masculine anxiety (Taubin, 2012) deviating somewhat from the representations common in grindset content. Bickle’s struggles with mental health, employment, and anti-social behaviour alienate him from the streets around him. He slowly develops a hatred for the “animals” that populate the Manhattan streets, hoping for rain to wash them all away (Scorsese, 1976, 0:06:22). Travis exhibits sentiments akin to ‘red-pillers’ as evidenced in his rejection from ‘Stacy-like’ romantic interest Betsy. He paints Betsy as “just like the others, cold and distant” (Scorsese, 1976, 0:39:43), and condemns all women as part of a union against him. As well, the character expresses racist sentiments which reach a boiling point and are unleashed in a display of violence as Bickle executes a Black man holding up a convenience store. The character’s beliefs become so extreme that the film culminates in a failed assassination attempt on a presidential candidate and a vigilante slaying of sex traffickers. The extent to which Bickle has emerged as a ubiquitous presence in SM memes and what that might signify is therefore worthy of further investigation.

### **III. Theoretical Perspective/Framework:**

To examine the SM, this research incorporates Papacharissi's (2014, 2015) seminal works on 'affective publics.' Additionally, I draw upon key concepts derived from masculinity studies to investigate SM content and assess its representational politics. As previously noted, SMs tend to distinguish themselves from other identities/groups that constitute the manosphere and yet appear to be animated by similar ideological propensities.

Papacharissi (2014) characterizes *affective publics* as networked formations that are mobilized and connected, or disconnected, through expressions of sentiment (p. 125). They define affect—the cumulation of discordant feelings about public and private affairs—as the energy that drives network publics. This framework builds upon Raymond Williams' (1961) conception of *structures of feeling*, described as

“social experiences in solution, reflecting the culture, the mood, and the feel of a particular historical moment. As such, they capture articulated thought but also suppressed narratives in ways that combine expressions of realized outcomes and unrealized potential” (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 115).

Papacharissi (2015) provides the example of virally circulated YouTube videos or images rendered into memes, becoming a structure of feeling through their dissemination from person to person. These memes are organized to facilitate sharing and permit differentiated classes of people to find meaning and to further infuse them with meaning. She argues that it is these areas of affective processes that permeate social media, rather than traditional areas of civic expression, that should be paid attention to in order to better understand political activity online. Affective statements on networked platforms mix fact with opinion and emotion, to incite the way that we politically react in our everyday lives. As Ging (2019) demonstrated, the decentralized organizations of the manosphere take form around connective avenues of

sentiment through the construction and deployment of accounts of (often perceived) personal suffering to build effective consensus around gendered experience. Papacharissi (2014) utilizes the term affective attunement to describe the process of feeling one's way into politics. People are able to tune into a contemporary issue or problem, while also affectively attuning with it; or in other words, to develop a sense of place within the structure of feeling. Affect is a key part of how people internalize and act on everyday experiences, informing our worldview and generally how we think and act.

Papacharissi (2014) contends that affective publics have been altered by networked technologies that “suggests both space for the interaction of people, technology, and practices and the imagined collective that evolves out of this interaction” (p. 126). Social media have enabled expression and information sharing that liberates the individual and collective imaginations. Affective publics are mobilized and fostered by feelings of belonging and solidarity. Though they can produce feelings of community, affective attachments to media lack the ability to produce community—they either self-propagate a movement to develop community or entrap people in loops of spectatorship.

The framework of affective publics has previously focused on Twitter texts and hashtags; however, Hautea et al. (2021) have used it to analyze affective traits on TikTok. Zulli and Zulli (2020) suggest that the platform’s emphasis on video creation uniquely affects the way sociality unfolds and networks develop in online spaces. Papacharissi (2015) delineates how film and sound media easily modulate affect not only through the combination of audio-visual sensations but also in the representation of the affective states of others. Digital media invites and broadcasts affect but also sustains affective feedback loops that generate and reproduce patterns of relating to others.

To analyze the source of the SM's affective motivations and whether these expressions align with the mansphere, it is necessary to consider Connell's (2005) conceptualization of 'hegemonic masculinity' which is rooted in the foundational work of Antonio Gramsci. The theory of hegemony was conceived through Gramsci's analysis of class relations and describes the understanding that the masses are not controlled by force alone, but also through ideas (Bates, 1975). The domination of the ruling political leadership of a state that determines the direction of social life is predicated on the consent of those whom they lead; a consent that is secured through the dissemination and popularization of the worldview of the ruling class. The apparent consensual culture and politics of hegemony is sustained by meeting the minimal needs of the majority, while concurrently advancing the interests of the dominant group. Gramsci saw hegemony as inherently unstable and referred to the concept as an elusive moment in social conflict; recurrent social battles over meaning in politics and culture would contribute to these frictions. The failure to maintain the consent of the masses could result in a 'crisis of hegemony' where the populace may cease to consent to the ruling faction's position (Bates, 1975).

Connell (2005) adapted the concept of hegemony to examine gender relations and particularly masculinity. *Masculinity* is defined as "simultaneously a space in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage with that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience and practice" (Connell, 2005, p. 71). Distinct manifestations of masculinity, as configurations of practice, are concurrently situated in a multitude of structures of connection that follow different historical trajectories. Masculinity, like femininity, is continually susceptible to internal contradictions and historical disruptions. This is in part because of the way gender intersects/interacts with race and class; the masculinities of white

men, are constructed not only in relation to white women and other subordinated men but also in relation to black men.

Hegemonic masculinity is a configuration of gender practice that embodies the most honoured way of being a man in a distinct moment, it compels other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimizes the global subordination of women. The public face of hegemonic masculinity is not exactly what powerful men are, but rather what sustains their power, and what many men are inspired to support (Connell, 2005). The cultural ideal of masculinity does not need to be achieved by the majority of men, rather, the ‘winning’ of hegemony involves the creation of models of masculinity including fictional film characters played by John Wayne or Sylvester Stallone.

Many men are unable to reach an idealized standard and in their subordinated position are expelled from the hegemonic ideal and come to be known as wimps, nerds, sissies, or geeks. These subordinated men generally remain complicit in maintaining the legitimacy of hegemonic masculinity, with several factors underlying their collusion including fantasy gratification and displaced aggression. But, most importantly these men benefit from the subordination of women, and they understand the continuation of hegemonic masculinity is the cultural expression of this power dynamic (Stacey & Connell, 1988). Users who produce or interact with SM content likely fall under this subordinated status and look to the filmic characters invoked in memes as expressions of their affective sentiments.

The dominance of men and subordination of women is a historical process, one that is open to challenge and necessitates effort to uphold. This positions masculinity to experience what is colloquially referred to as a ‘crisis of masculinity.’ This is alternatively theorized as ‘crisis tendencies’ of the gendered order, that can be used to understand the making of

contemporary masculinities. They argue that logically, masculinity as a configuration cannot be in crisis; it instead experiences disruptions or transformations. In the realm of power relations, crisis tendencies are visible in response to perceived threats to male dominance. Masculinities are restructured around this crisis tendency by way of contention over methods to maintain authority, and through varying reactions to feminism. Connell (2005) highlights research by Michael Kimmel that points to the social context of the United States at the turn of the century, where the ‘cult of the outdoorsmen’ emerged as a result of the women’s suffrage movement. In the 1960s, the women’s liberation movement and the Vietnam War resulted in cults of ‘true masculinity’ reflected in violent adventure movies such as *Rambo* and the growth of paramilitary culture in the United States.

As well, within the realm of production, masculinity has historically been tied to the image of men as breadwinners. When men’s earning ability is threatened so too is the definition of masculinity. Similarly, relations of *cathexis*--gendered practices that realize and shape desire--have shifted with the continued acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities as alternatives to the heterosexual order. As gender relations change, so too do the conditions in which men negotiate their identities and sense of self. Men have the capability to make changes to their gender patterns through specific political choices. However, these choices are predicated heavily on concrete social circumstances. The crisis tendencies of contemporary masculinity motivate men to uphold their vision of hegemonic masculinity and with the structures of digital networks, are funnelled into affective publics based on these negative sentiments.



#### IV. Methodology

Wiggins' (2019) conceptualization of mimetic dimensions and key aspects derived from Zidani's (2022) instructional text *How to Conduct Meme Research* inform the methodological approach employed to analyze SM content and its representational politics. Wiggins defines *internet memes* as "a remixed, iterated message that can be rapidly diffused by members of a participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique or other discursive activity" (p. 11). They can take the form of image macros, GIFs, hashtags, videos, etc. The ideological intent of memes is to craft a visual argument semiotically, and intertextually to initiate, prolong, counter, or influence a discourse. On the surface, humour is used to gain social salience but upon further inspection, the argument within the meme is often revealed as representative of an ideological practice (Wiggins, 2019).

The social media platform TikTok was chosen as the site of research. The site's content consists of short-form videos that incorporate music samples, filters, quick cuts, and stickers to optimize content for the compact length (Weimann & Masri, 2020). The application is exceedingly popular, with over one billion active monthly users in 2023, and has uniquely resonated among younger generations, with nearly 41% of users being between the ages of 16 and 24. Due to the relative novelty of the application, scholarly research is still in its infancy (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). Beyond the description of TikTok as a playground for young users, many scholars have emphasized its importance in research due to the impact of memes and trends on political discourse (Rogers & Giorgi, 2023).

Zulli and Zulli (2020) describe TikTok's infrastructure as mimetic, arguing that *mimesis* (imitation and replication) serves as the basis of sociality on the application. TikTok's video editing affordances demonstrate how the platform itself promotes a mimetic ethos. Weimann & Masri (2020) have shown that right-wing extremist content flourishes on the application,

“encompassing the far-right ideologies of fascism, racism, anti-semitism, anti-immigration, chauvinism, nativism, and xenophobia” (p. 757). TikTok’s cultivation of a young user base, whose sociality revolves around mimetic content controlled by algorithms that spread extremist content, positions it as the perfect site for radicalization through memes and is therefore particularly relevant to my study.

Zidani (2022) contends that the process of finding memes for collection should be informed by the understanding of the community making the memes. They describe the ‘community-based’ discovery method as a process where the researcher collects memes by visiting online communities and is best used when research is linked to specific communities. However, SMs are only loosely constituted as a community; hence of greater significance is the content they produce and the deeper meanings that will reveal whether or not their representational politics and ideological predilections align them with the manosphere. Accordingly, I procured a total of ten videos using the following hashtags: *#Sigmamale*, *#TravisBickle*, *#TaxiDriver* for analysis.

The process for meme procurement began with the creation of a new original TikTok account exclusively for this research to minimize personal algorithmic influence and to obtain the most authentic search results. The hashtags listed above were used in combination to procure only SM content of interest and to avoid irrelevant content that may feature one of the singular hashtags. After entering the hashtags into TikTok’s search function, SM memes under the ‘videos’ tab were combed for relevancy. TikTok videos were selected based on their validity as visual arguments that are semiotically constructed with intertextual references that reflect an ideological practice. With this stipulation, videos required the intertextual combination of edited clips from *Taxi Driver* (1976) and original embedded text. Once videos were selected,

precursory themes relevant to this research project emerged naturally and were subsequently determined (*Figure 1*).

**Themes:**

- T1:** Anti-Social
- T2:** Explicit Violence
- T3:** Irony
- T4:** Grindset/Motivation
- T5:** Beta/Self-victimization
- T6:** Racial Animosity
- T7:** Misogyny/Sexism
- T8:** Red Pilled

***Fig. 1***

Video information was then organized into a table for analysis including designated themes, number of likes, video caption, user-embedded text, and video hashtags (*Table 1*). TikTok creator usernames, video comments, and video audio were informally recorded and only referenced in the analysis if relevant. Screenshots that included all relevant information (excluding identifying information unless necessary) were taken to capture the full perspective of the content and ensure thorough analysis. These screenshots were embedded in the body of the paper alongside their corresponding analysis for visual reference.

**Table 1.**

**Video #      Themes      # of likes      Captions      User added Text      Hashtags**

**Represented**

1	T1, T4	45.5K	Part-57 *crown emoji* *Speaking head emoji*	*Sigma Mindset* Taxi Driver *10/10*	#movie, #taxidriver, #robertdiner, #speech, #motivation, #sigma, #sigmagrindset, #sigmamale, #sigmarule, #quotes, #moviequotes, #lifequotes, #FYP, #foryoupage, #viral, #onemindset_
2	T1, T3	28.5K	*No Caption*	"What is the one thing in this school that irritate you the most"	#taxidriver, #sigmamale, #Taxidriver1976, #travisbickle
3	T1, T3, T5, T7, T8	11.5K	*No Caption*	"pov: someone asks my opinion about society (i hate society)"	#real, #sigma, #relatable, #sigmamale, #based, #literallyme, #travisbickle, #taxidriver, #rge, #fyp *smile*, #viral, #foryou
4	T1, T6, T8	111.1K	"They do not know that they are one of my worst enemies"	" me watching as the mf who i literally hate with the passion of a thousand burning suns pases me in the halls at school (they don't know that I have an extreme, deeply rooted hatred for them)"	#taxidriver, #taxidriver1976, #travisbickle, #real, #sigma, #sigmamale
5	T1, T2, T3, T8	38	*No Caption*	"POV: me getting ready for college"	#travisbickle, #based, #real, #Sigma, #taxidriver, #sigmagrindset, #meme, #sigma
6	T1, T2, T3, T6, T8	85.5K	*No Caption*	"POV: I hear someone say 'bombastic side eye' while im shopping at the store"	#travisbickle, #based, #real, #sigma, #taxidriver, #sigmagrindset, #meme, #sigmamale
7	T1, T3, T5,	28.6K	"Real"	- "you're not a sigma you're just some depressed loser with no social skills"	#taxidriver, #robertdiner, #travisbickle, #sigma, #Sigmamale, #real, #realpost, #depressed, #mood, #literallyme
8	T5, T7, T8	127.2K	*No Caption*	"don't worry, you're smart and handsome. You'll find a girl eventually"	#Sigma, #travisbickle, #taxidriver
9	T1, T7, T8	642	*No Caption*	"POV: me looking at the furry lgbtq, blue hair girl walk past"  (I hate society and what it has come to)	#real, #taxidriver, #sigma, #viral, #goviral, #fotyoupages, #genz, #taxidriversigma, #goviral, #fyp
10	T1, T2, T3, T8	2203	"They Will Pay"	"Me with 3 hour of sleep off to school to exterminate all the pieces of shit, scumbags and filth of the school armed with only a hammer and a .44 snubnosed magnum (this is only a scenario i made in my head)	#sigmamale, #travisbickle, #taxidriver1976, #taxidriver

My methodological approach is based on Wiggins' (2019) expansion of Shifman's (2013b) original typology of mimetic dimensions which consisted of *content* (what ideologies or ideas are revealed by the meme), *form* (the physical incarnation of the message) and *stance*, (how the creator positions themselves in relation to the text, the linguistic codes, the addresses, and other speakers). In Wiggins' model for meme analysis, *content* refers to the information and the data that the meme conveys, and *stance* involves the examination of what should ideally be understood, and which imagined audiences are being addressed, ignored, or marginalized, etc. They emphasize the merging of content and stance since the expression of ideologies can be found in deliberate semiotic and intertextual constructions, particularly in the absence of human speech.

For Wiggins (2019) internet memes are constitutive of a semiotic sign, their effects are dependent on the environment within which they are deployed and the interpretation of the interlocutors. A semiotic elaboration of stance accentuates the functions of metaphor, metonymy, juxtaposition, bricolage, pastiche, and synecdoche due to lack of human speech. As well, internet memes are inherently intertextual, they cannot exist without referring to something other than the subject matter they contain. The semiotic construction of memes is dependent on the intertextual integration of multiple popular culture references, combining images, video, and text to create a shared meaning. Their elaboration of the method situates *form* as a neutral memetic category of 'utility': the video, GIF, image macro, image inserted in another image, verbal text, or hashtags that constitute the meme format. When performing a meme analysis Wiggins (2019) proposes starting with form and then furthering it with the knowledge proffered by merging the content and stance dimensions" (p.17). Given the ubiquity of *Taxi Driver* (1976) SM meme form, elaboration of this component was limited to the first video examined to avoid repetition.

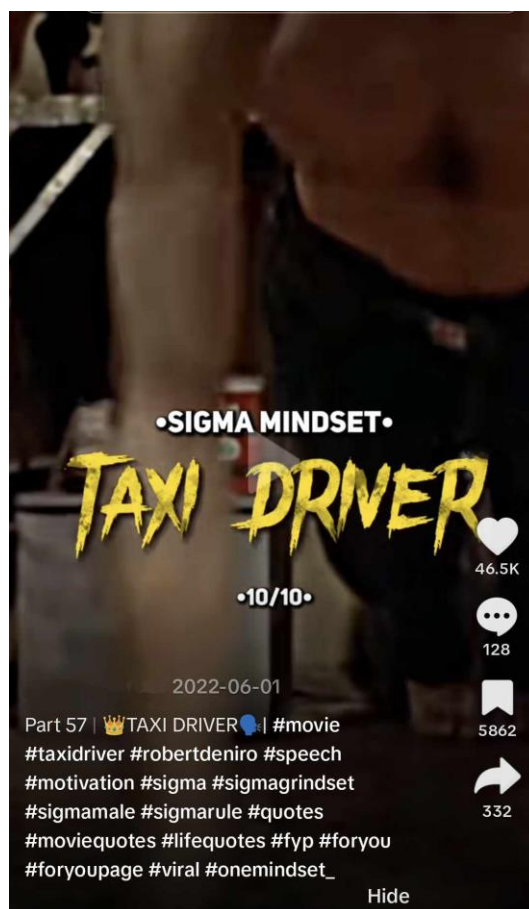
Zidani (2022) provided further guidelines for carrying out meme analysis. They succinctly describe the process as looking deeply at what the data is doing (p. 12). Particularly, the analysis should reveal what the content of a group of memes is doing to existing power dynamics in society and what kind of discourse these memes are producing within those power dynamics. Adhering to Zidani's (2022) recommendations the following questions were considered in conducting this critical, qualitative meme analysis:

- “Who appears to hold power in these memes? How is power related to power dynamics in society?
- Does the content of the memes reinforce specific forms of oppression like racism [or] sexism? Or oppose them? A little bit of both?
- Does the content of the meme push for recognition of something unrecognized in society? Are there people, voices, or facts that are omitted from the memes? What does this omission cause?
- Who or what are the memes critical of?
- What appears as normal in the data and what does not?
- Who benefits from these portrayals and omissions?” (p. 12)

Zidani (2022) claims that the unique advantage of this method is the emphasis on connections to social, historical, and political contexts rather than a mere concern about the volume of memes analyzed.

## V. Video Analysis

### Video #1

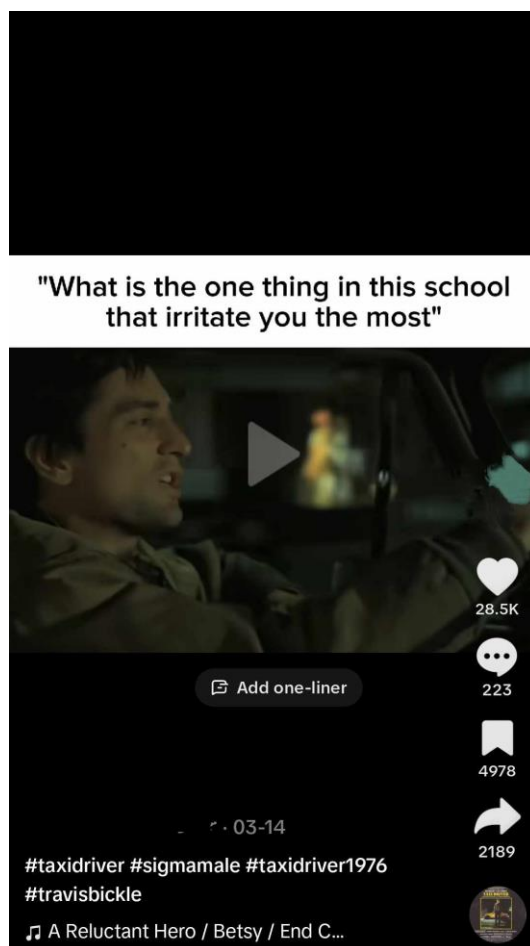


**Fig. 2**

*Taxi Driver* (1976) SM meme form consists of the remixing of deliberately selected segments of the film with added text and can be characterized as a video meme. The first to be analyzed is comprised of a scene from *Taxi Driver* (1976) (with an added introductory card “Sigma mindset”) where main character Travis Bickle is describing the workout regimen he is planning to adopt. The content of the clip is essentially unedited, showing the character doing various workouts, but notably holding his flexed fist to an open flame. In the unaltered audio, Bickle discusses getting into shape because too much sitting has ruined his body. His regimen will consist of push-ups and pull-ups and purging his body of pills as well as bad food. The

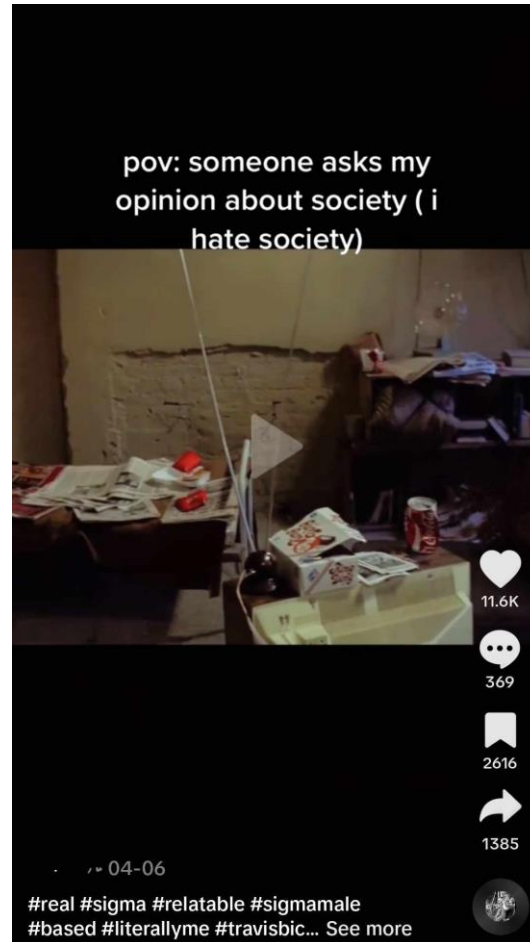
memes conveyance of ideology, as indicated by its hashtags, is exemplary of themes *T1* Anti-Social, and *T4*, Grindset/Motivation. The SM ‘grindset’ (Hadford, 2023) in accordance with expressions of ‘iron-pillers,’ supports what seems like genuine positive advice on the surface but is often supplemented with dangerous beliefs. On one hand, the clip promotes exercise and changing dietary habits, but at the same time showcases chilling images of self-flagellation. The meme stance evokes the imagery of Bickle’s fitness routine, striving to semiotically construct and uphold the hegemonic masculine representation of a tough and fit male. Yet, omitted from the remixed clip is that Bickle’s goal in implementing these life changes is not in the pursuit of self-actualization or making money, but rather in the service of optimizing himself for the assassination of a presidential candidate and a vigilante killing spree.



Video #2**Fig. 3**

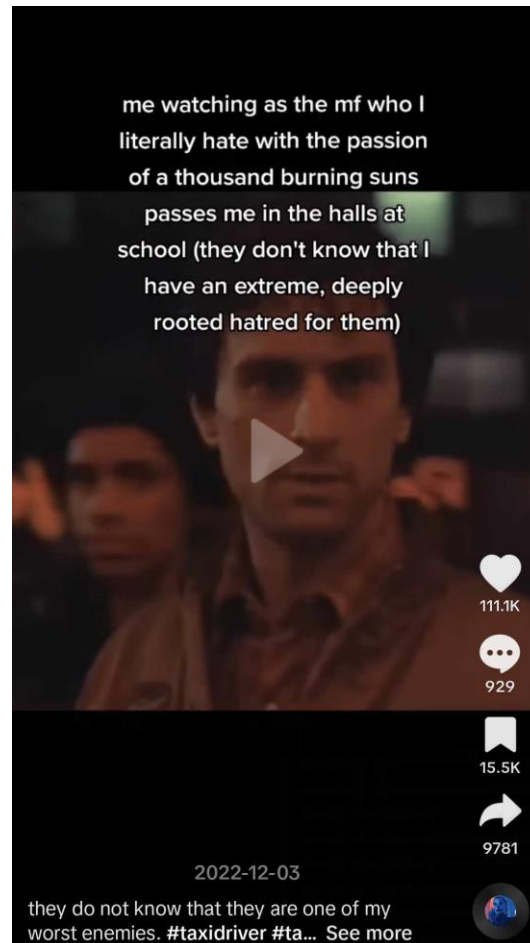
The following video meme included text asking: “What is the one thing in this school that irritates you the most” combined with an excerpt from the movie of Travis Bickle’s rant to presidential candidate Palantine and a staffer. Text is overlaid on these two characters depicting them as “Principal” and “Vice Principal” respectively. The memes content consists of Travis Bickle’s rant to the presidential candidate about his frustrations with the city; that it should be “cleaned up” and is like an open sewer full of filth and scum. Ideologically this meme reflects the designated themes *T1* Anti-Social and *T3* Irony. The meme poster and users who find salience in the meme have adopted the warped perspective of Travis Bickle concerning their personal school environment. Through Bickle’s words, the semiotic intention of the meme is to

label their peers and authority figures with the dehumanizing language of “filth” and “scum” and to ominously imply that they should be “cleaned up”. In line with the definition of SM, the stance of the meme suggests that they are somehow separate from the inferior people around them. Intertextually, their sympathy with Travis Bickle’s worldview reveals that like the character, their environment is the issue, ignoring their own agency in their experience of alienation. The remixing of this clip also loosely implies that their solution to “clean up” their environment is one of violence, as Travis Bickle attempts to later assassinate the character labelled as “principle”. Though not explicitly proclaimed as such, the memes anti-social language and potentially violent allusions are ironically hyperbolic, intertextually weaving Bickle’s extreme views as their own for further social salience. This intertextual use of the film allows for the user to maintain ironic distance from these words as they are Travis Bickle’s words not their own; however, this heavy use of irony represents a point where edgy, dehumanizing language can become internalized and potentially actionable.

Video #3*Fig. 4*

This TikTok video features the overlaid text: “pov: someone asks my opinion about society (i hate society)”, incorporating the scene in *Taxi Driver* (1976) where Travis Bickle is writing in his journal. The content of this meme includes edited audio that has been swapped with that of a later scene where Bickle narrates his deranged thoughts: “Listen you fuckers, you screw-heads. Here is a man who would not take it anymore. A man who stood up against the scum... the cunts, the dogs, the filth, the shit. Here is someone who stood up” (Scorsese, 1976, 1:07:16). Ideologically this meme is exemplary of themes *T1* Anti-Social, *T3* Irony, *T5* Beta/Self-Victimization, *T7* Misogyny/Sexism, and *T8* Red Pilled. The creator unambiguously states their stance in the bracketed response, that they “hate society”. Much like the previous

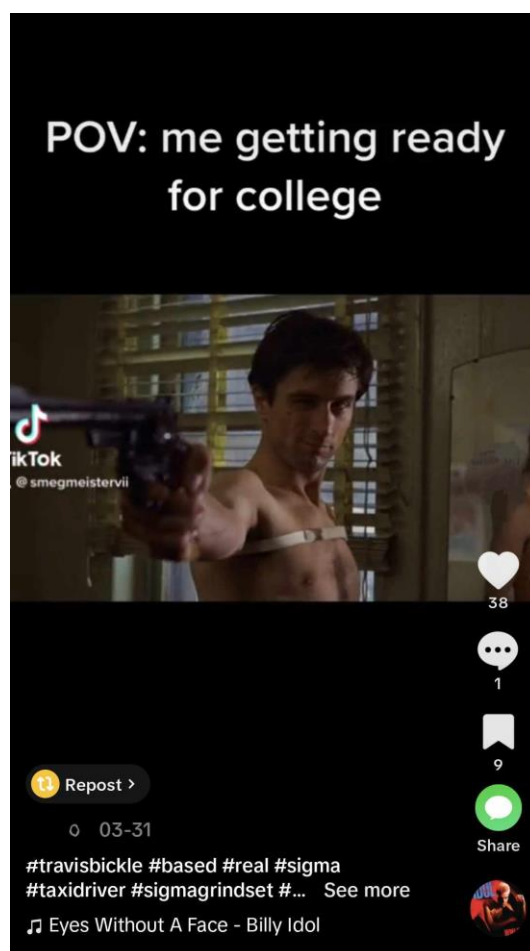
video, the meme adopts the dehumanizing and explicitly misogynistic language of Travis Bickle as their own, referring to supposed others in society as “cunts” and “dogs”. The meme also espouses a self-victimized and red piller worldview; the poster sees themselves in a subordinated position, not willing to “take it anymore”, and as someone who needs to stand up to contemporary society. Through the words of Travis Bickle, the meme expresses sentiments that are unnervingly close to online proponents of Elliot Rodger who suggested that they would continue his violent campaign against women in the “Beta uprising” (Kelly et al., 2022, p. 174). Furthering this connection, the meme makes intentional intertextual choices to edit the original vulnerable visual of mentally unstable and paranoid Travis Bickle failing to sleep, replacing this with the image of a macho manifesto writer on the edge of violence. The included hashtag *#Based* reveals the meme’s reference to semiotically constructed red piller sentiments. Most often the term insinuates a disagreement with political correctness and has been adopted by white nationalists and the alt-right to generally refer to the idea of “owning the libs” (Hagen & de Zeeuw, 2023, p. 2; Kelly et al., 2022). The hashtags *#real*, *#relatable*, and *#literallyme* create a layer of ironic detachment between the user and the meme’s expressions, where they hold the conflicting position that they are literally and figuratively Travis Bickle. One comment deserving of emphasis solidifies the above interpretation of the meme expressing that: “(everyone around me is an NPC)”, another dehumanizing term employed by the alt-right signaling a red piller worldview that other members of society are inhuman, and devoid of autonomy just like a videogame background character (Munn, 2019b).

Video #4*Fig. 5*

The content of this TikTok is comprised of text expressing: “me watching as the mf who i literally hate with the passion of a thousand burning suns passes me in the halls at school (they don’t know that I have an extreme, deeply rooted hatred for them)” superimposed on the scene of Travis Bickle staring directly at the viewer. This is the only meme so far that contains a significant caption that states: “they do not know that they are one of my worst enemies”. Ideologically this TikTok reflects the themes of *T1* Anti-Social, *T6* Racial Animosity, and *T8* Red Pilled. The stance of this meme is a position of hatred expressed towards an unknown “they”. The intertextual employment of this specific clip semiotically constructs the sentiments of the meme against racialized and marginalized others. In the original scene, Travis Bickle’s

cold gaze is directed toward a group of “rowdy black teens and a hooker mom with her kids... The near confrontation increases Travis’ anxiety” (Taubin, 2012, p. 61). The memes repeated references to an undefined “they” bolsters this reading as 4Chan and alt-right adjacent sites use the term to evoke an ambiguous othering resonant with aggressive xenophobic populist rhetoric (Tuters & Hagen, 2019).

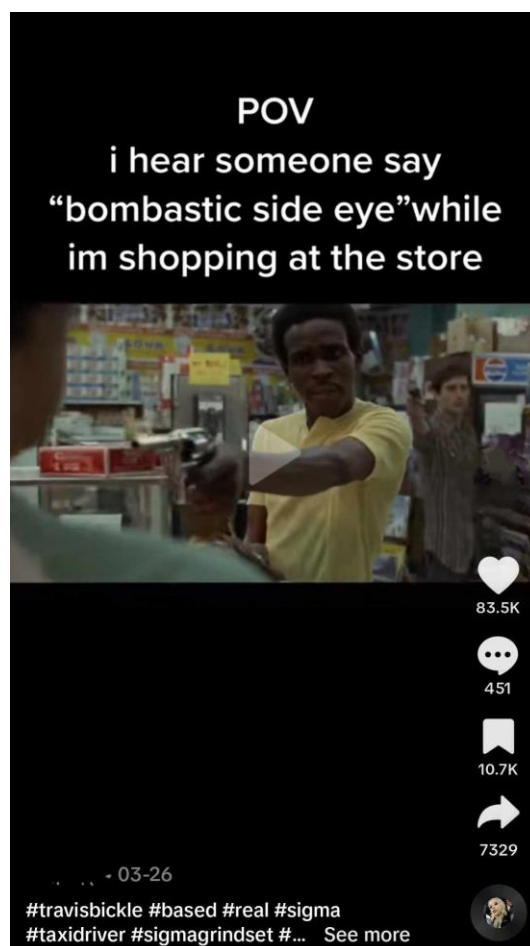
Video #5



**Fig. 6**

The following video contains content from the *Taxi Driver* (1976) scene portraying the character Travis Bickle rehearsing his gun drawing skills in the mirror, with additional text communicating: “POV: me getting ready for college”. Ideologically the meme can be categorized by the themes of **T1** Anti-Social, **T2** Explicit Violence, **T3** Irony, and **T8** Red Pilled.

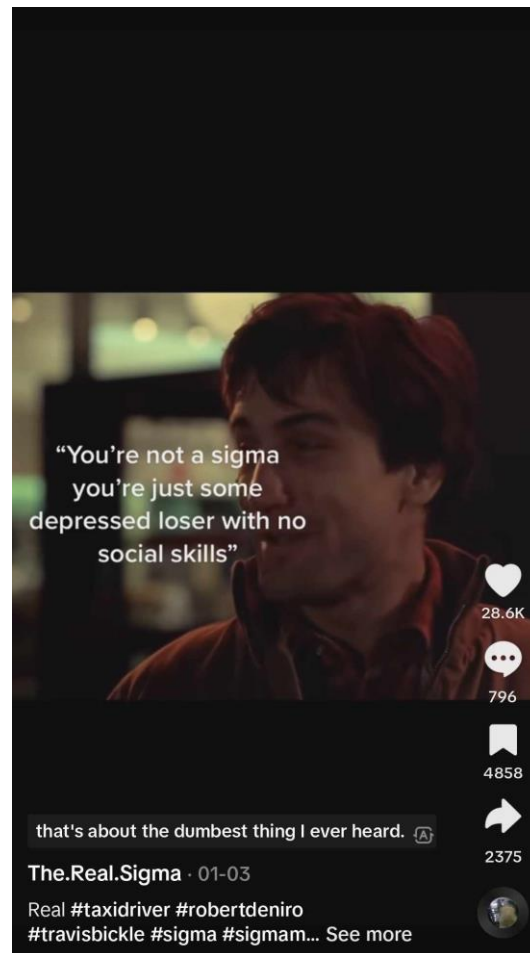
On its surface, the meme is dark and explicitly violent, suggesting the user is training with weapons in preparation for attending college. They insinuate their intent to use those weapons in a hypothetical school shooting. This interpretation is semiotically solidified by their intertextual deployment of this precise scene, where Travis Bickle is mentally and physically readying himself for an assassination attempt, and later a vigilante killing spree. The reappearance of *#based* underpins the meme as red pill, with the hypothetical violence being directed at post-secondary institutions that are often painted by the right as venues for liberal-left indoctrination. The addition of *#meme* may attempt to assert a layer of ironic distance from serious violent intent; however, without the overt acknowledgment of the meme as ironic, it is suggestive of the author's intent to “stop shitposting and... to make a real-life effort post” (Munn, 2019a, para. 3); or in other words, to bring the meme to life.

Video #6**Fig. 7**

The content of the subsequent TikTok remixes the segment from *Taxi Driver* (1976) portraying main character Travis Bickle’s indiscriminate killing of a Black man who attempts to hold up the neighbourhood bodega, in combination with text stating: “POV i hear someone say, ‘bombastic side eye’ while im shopping at the store”. The meme’s ideological expressions invoke the following themes: **T1** Anti-Social, **T2** Explicit Violence, **T3** Irony, **T6** Racial Animosity, and **T8** Red Pilled. On its face, the meme is outwardly violent depicting the meme user as Travis Bickle lashing out at a black convenience store robber with murderous intent at the utterance of a simple memetic phrase. The meme stance of violent racial animosity becomes clear through the distinct use of intertextual references to further semiotic interpretation. The memetic phrase that

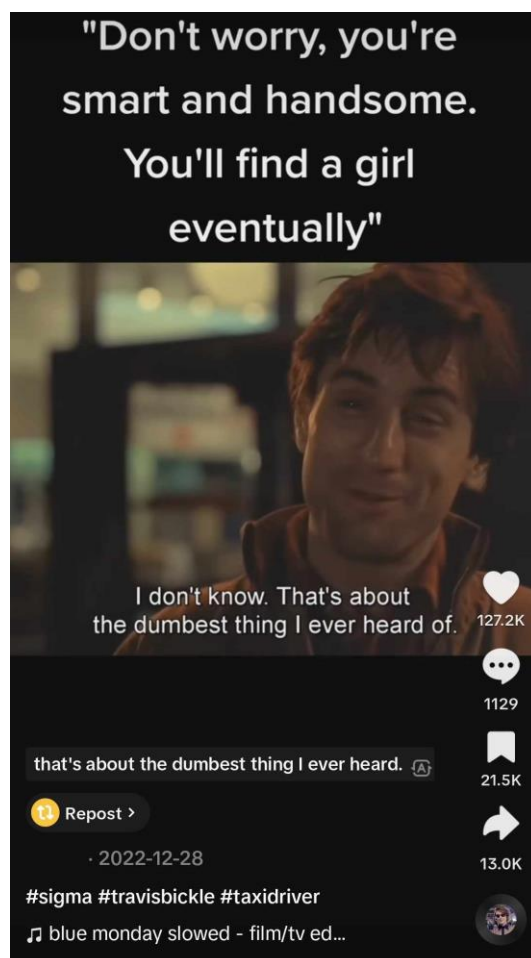


triggers this homicidal reaction originates from a popular TikTok audio of African TikTok user @Imaomal (Mateus, 2023). The meme's understanding as racially antagonistic is twofold; explicitly violent towards the black character on screen and insinuating the wish to enact violence against people of colour. The chilling depiction of vigilante violence against black people evokes the rise in reactionary violence in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter movement (McCoy, 2020). The inclusion of *#based* orients the meme's ideological rooting in the alt-right and serves as an endorsement of the violent anti-social actions depicted. The remixing of the meme's audio track supports the meme's signalling to the alt-right with the addition of 'synth-wave' music—a genre of music that has been co-opted by the alt-right as 'fashwave', drawing sympathy from fascists obsessed with nostalgia for the traditional past (Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019).

Video #7*Fig. 8*

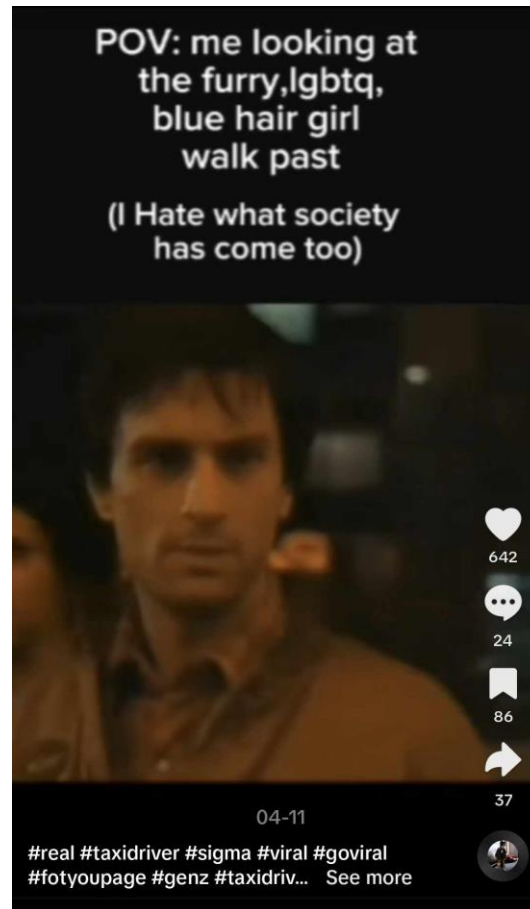
This TikTok video content consists of an edited piece from *Taxi Driver* (1976) of Travis Bickle’s response, “That’s about the dumbest thing I ever heard” (Scorsese, 1976, 0:48:51), to another cabbie's advice on how to clear his head. The complementary text reads “you’re not a sigma you’re just some depressed loser with no social skills”. On the level of ideology, the TikTok relates to the themes of *T1* Anti-Social, *T3* Irony, and *T5* Beta/Self-Victimization. The meme's stance is clear, as indicated by the added text, it is attempting to reject this characterization and asserting that SMs embody the opposite of a depressed loser with no social skills. The user goes so far as to insist claim to this identity by naming themselves “@The.Real.Sigma”. Despite these declarations, the intertextual use of *Taxi Driver* (1976),

along with included hashtags, reveal that the meme's stance is conflicting. The character of Travis Bickle encapsulates the given description of a SM; an anti-social, lonely, and paranoid man, whose lack of social understanding leads him to bring a partner to a pornography theatre on a first date (Taubin, 2012). The included hashtags *#depressed*, and *#literallyme* demonstrate that the user is aware that they, like Travis Bickle, can be characterized this way. They reject the label in an ironic sense to avoid serious engagement with their individual experience.

Video #8*Fig. 9*

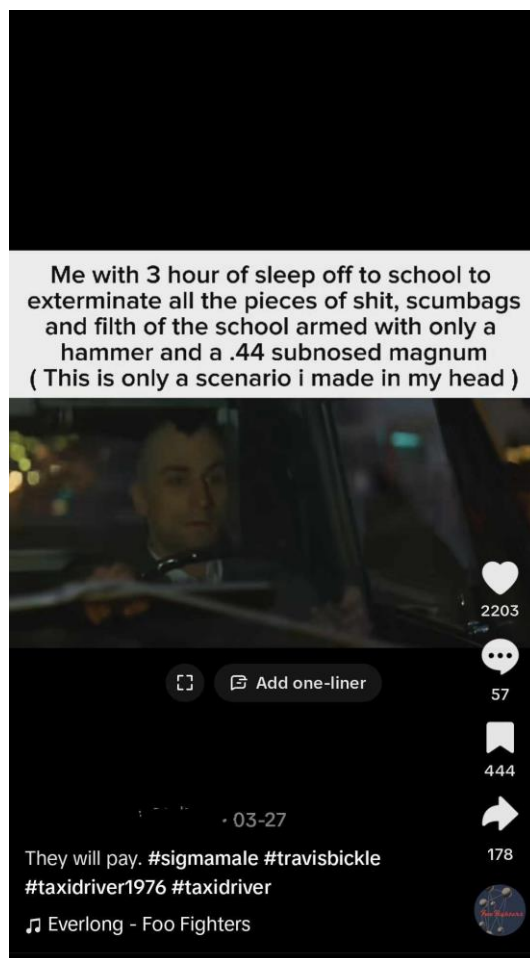
The content of this meme is almost consistent with the previous, utilizing the same scene but opting for alternative text stating: “don’t worry, you’re smart and handsome. You’ll find a girl eventually”. The meme stance is plainly stated; they reject the hypothetical characterization as smart and handsome and the idea they will eventually find romantic connection. In terms of ideology, the meme reflects the specified themes of **T5** Beta/Self-Victimization, **T7** Misogyny/Sexism, and **T8** Red Pilled. The distinct choice of intertextually weaving this text and character Travis Bickle elaborates the semiotic meaning of stance to reveal red pill sentiments. In the film, Bickle espouses anti-feminist perspectives on women and sees them as a union out to get him. The meme poster, like Travis Bickle, expresses a self-victimized status, that they are

fated to be lonely and undesirable; echoing the sexual class system supported by 'Betas' who see themselves as socially awkward and shy, and thus rejected and ignored by women. This meme, consistent with *Video #7*, is trying to signal what an SM can be characterized as. Yet they arrive at contradictory definitions; one indicates that a SM is emotionally balanced, well-liked, and socially skilled; the other rejects the characterization of an SM as smart, handsome, and able to find romantic connection.

Video #9**Fig. 10**

The sequential TikTok is comprised of the same content as *Video #4* of Travis staring in the direction of the viewer, remixed with differing overlaid text stating: “POV: me looking at the furry, lgbtq, blue hair girl walk past (I Hate what society has come too)”. As previously described, the chosen scene shows Travis’ anxiety peaking as he stares down a group of marginalized people passing him by (Taubin, 2012). Concerning ideology, this meme is exemplary of the themes **T1** Anti-Social, **T7** Misogyny/Sexism, and **T8** Red Pilled. The meme stance, like others, is a hate-fuelled rejection of contemporary society, but this meme positions this in the direction of a hypothetical person. The semiotic intent of the text extends the interpretation of the stance as red pillled, where this hypothetical “furry, lgbtq, blue hair girl!” is a

representative stand-in for the contemporary moment of the progressive, mainstream acceptance of LGBTQ and alternative identities. This perspective is bolstered by the intertextual use of Travis Bickle in this scene where he stares down people of colour in the street after a near confrontation. Like Travis Bickle, the meme poster sees these marginalized others as responsible for their discontent with society. One comment that warranted highlighting from account “@mein44uhrer”, exclaims that “this is when we need A.H. at most or at least a new A.H.”, most certainly describing their wish for the return, or a new incarnation of Adolf Hitler. The comment shows salience with the messaging of the meme solidifying its ideological interpretation as red pill, anti-feminist, and anti-progressive.

Video #10*Fig. 11*

The content of the final TikTok makes use of the scene from *Taxi Driver* (1976) that features Travis Bickle speeding and swerving down the city streets and finally coming to an abrupt stop on the side of the street. Accompanying text was added to the clip to convey:

“Me with 3 hours of sleep off to school to exterminate all the pieces of shit, scumbags and filth of the school armed with only a hammer and a .44 snub nosed magnum (this is only a scenario i made up in my head)”.

This meme can be ideologically positioned through the themes of *T1* Anti-Social, *T2* Explicit Violence, *T3* Irony, and *T8* Red Pilled. The stance of the text is dark and violent, outright stating their desire to violently “exterminate” members of their school community. The poster is careful



to separate themselves from the violent assertions, by insinuating they are ironically expressing that their words are simply a hypothetical scenario. The detachment from the intent only goes so far when the caption adds the sinister claim that “they will pay”. Moving beyond red pill sentiments, into the nihilistic realm of the Black pill, where the only recourse for their undetermined frustrations is mass violence. The audio remix to the meme enhances the layers of intertextuality through the use of the popular Foo Fighters song *Everlong*. As of late 2023, the song has become a TikTok trend used on videos that visually allude to Thomas Lea’s *2,000 Yard Stare*; a painting that depicts a WWII soldier experiencing PTSD and dissociation in response to battle (Owen, 2023). The intertextual layers affirm the stance of the meme as an expression of mental instability, cushioned by ironic detachment.

## VI. Discussion

Through analysis of SM TikTok's that remix the infamous 1976 film *Taxi Driver*, SM ideological leanings are revealed to align with other groupings of the manosphere and the alt-right, calling into question their claim to being lone wolves. The memes analyzed consistently displayed the use of irony, and through intertextual remixing with clips from *Taxi Driver* (1976), expressed anti-social, violent, racist, and anti-feminist sentiments. Yet, unlike the other groupings of the manosphere, sentiments expressed in SM memes are ambiguously political and rather represent a point of affective attunement where one can feel their way into politics.

As implied by its name, the SM exists as a distinctly male phenomenon making it essential to reflect on their memes as gendered expressions. The relationship that SM's have with hegemonic masculinity additionally positions them within the manosphere's Alpha-Beta dichotomy, embodying theme **T5** Beta/Self-Victimization. Corresponding with Ging's (2019) identification of Beta males as exhibiting hybrid masculinity, SMs similarly position themselves as victims of feminism, political correctness, and progressive change. In this subordinated position, SM's maintain hegemonic masculinity through memes displaying misogyny and racism, while simultaneously rejecting the normative masculinity of Chads. This refusal of normative masculinity could explain the singular reference to **T4** Grindset/Motivation. Like Beta's, SMs prefer to wallow in self-victimization over engaging with genuine self-improvement. In Videos #7 and #8, SMs are either explicitly or implied to be identified as depressed losers with no social skills, and unable to find romantic partnerships. The included hashtags *#depressed* and *#literallyme* acknowledge the SM's association with mental instability and imply salience with the meme's expressions. The choice of Travis Bickle as embodying the traits of an SM is consistent with this clashing hybrid masculinity. The character is described as "a prophet and a pusher. Partly truth, partly fiction, a walking contradiction" (Scorsese, 1976,

0:27:03). He is simultaneously a man on the edge, ready to kill, undertaking a workout regimen and upholding a masculine muscular image while fitting the gamer-like non-hegemonic masculinity with his lack of social skills and failures with women.

The SM's 'Beta-like' position fuels their **T8** Red Pilled sentiments; rather than looking inward to improve personal shortcomings, expressions of hatred are oriented towards 'society'. The intertextual use of *Taxi Driver* (1976) and the allusions to the alt-right reveal that their hostility towards 'society' is in actuality, a stand-in for progressive societal change. Characterized by **T7** Misogyny/Sexism, the memes intentionally evoke Travis Bickle's misogynistic and dehumanizing language to paint women and non-person 'others' as responsible for their affective attitudes. Their environment consists of "cunts" and "dogs" that need to be cleaned up. The acclimation and normalization of these sentiments towards marginalized others as inhuman can develop dangerous perceptions that they are acceptable targets of harassment and violence (Munn, 2019b). The memes show **T6** Racial Animosity through Travis Bickle's chilling execution of a black convenience store robber as an acceptable response to hearing the utterance of a black-created meme. While the hypothetical caricature of the 'blue-haired LGBTQ+' person is assigned responsibility for what they see society has "come to". Confirming the anti-progressive ideological underpinnings of these memes is the recurring use of *#based*; a term sometimes used in an ironic sense, often by the alt-right and online white supremacists to signal their commitment to and endorsement of anti-social, politically incorrect sentiments (Hagen & de Zeeuw, 2023).

At their most extreme, SM memes portrayed and alluded to **T2** Explicit Violence. These memes unambiguously communicate their wish to enact violence, as intended through the remixing of precise scenes of Travis Bickle training with weapons, speeding through the streets

to a murder spree, and explicit gun-related homicide. Memes such as these could be making use of edgy humour for social salience, or legitimately expressing a user's fantasy to follow in the footsteps of Elliot Rodger. In the Canadian context, these memes and their vicious implications provoke memories of the Montreal Polytechnique massacre, or most recently, the hate-motivated attack on a University of Waterloo gender studies class (Kelly et al., 2022; The Canadian Press, 2023).

Essential to interpreting the intent of SM expressions is the consideration of the recurring theme *T3* Irony. Through the use of memes, users can create layers of 'ironic distance' between themselves and their regressive messaging by insinuating they are ironic, or just simply jokes (Johanssen, 2022; Sloan, 2022). As per the user created 'Poe's Law' it can be nearly impossible to understand ironic and edgy humour from sincere extremist content unless stated otherwise (Greene, 2019). Although the videos often lacked clear indications of ironic intent, other than the inclusion of *#meme*, the sincerity towards committing real violence is questionable.

As inferred by the frequent reference to school and the location of memes on TikTok; SMs are likely young boys employing the edgy humour of 4chan and Reddit to signal group belonging or community (Tuters & Hagen, 2019). There is little by way of actual engagement with politics, rather the memes are affective expressions voiced towards "society", or the "furry, LGBTQ, blue-haired girl" as proxies for the progressive change to which they are opposed. This demonstrates that SM memes can be established as a part of the alt-right or manosphere pipeline, where users' views are slowly corrupted by the shift from innocuous content towards openly radical perspectives (Munn, 2019b).

In the contemporary context of progressive change for women and LGBTQ+ identities, masculinity is experiencing disruptions and transformations. Under these circumstances, the SM

identity has emerged as a reactionary response, analogous to the cults of masculinity that emerged against the Women's liberation movement and the Vietnam War. SMs political acumen is seemingly in the process of maturing, their memetic expressions show that their ideological leanings are developing alongside and in the same direction as the alt-right and manosphere.

## **VII. Conclusion**

This research has helped situate this newly emerging and unexplored identity of the SM as part of the manosphere and the alt-right. Though they may not be as outwardly political as the other factions, the representational politics of SM memes express similar sentiments. The results of the study further the field of meme studies and understanding their discursive power in spreading right-wing perspectives. This research additionally aids in the advancement of masculinity studies by shining a light on emerging practices in negotiating new hybrid forms of masculinity; taking on a subordinated position while still working to maintain the hegemonic standard and subordination of women.

Constituencies of the alt-right and manosphere continue to develop innovative approaches for spreading their dangerous ideological perspectives. One example of this that has propagated in a recent TikTok trend is the 'bone-smashing trend', which purports to promote bone growth through repeated blunt trauma to achieve a more handsome 'Chad-like' jawline (DeFranco, 2023). This trend is rooted in the baseless medical theory suggesting bones can develop and adapt to stress. This phenomenon is based on a broader trend, like that of the SM Grindset, called 'looksmaxxing' or masculinity maxxing; where young men try to maximize their aesthetic looks through any means (DeFranco, 2023).

Although such trends are clearly disconcerting, there are attempts to counter them. One case in point is the work of artist and internet culture researcher Joshua Citarella, who explored

the masculine pseudoscience of the online alt-right and manosphere. Citarella sifted through the layers of nonsense advice to search for the hidden kernels of truth that often underpin their messaging (Levy, 2023). The results of undertaking an alt-right-endorsed self-improvement technique found that suggestions like a lifting routine taken from 4chan's /fit/ board are genuinely beneficial to physical and mental fitness. At the extremity of conspiracies, the Infowars-sponsored 'Super Male Vitality' supplement negatively affected his mental capacities and strongly recommended against its usage (Citarella, 2021).

Citarella advocates for the left to make their mark on the young susceptible minds that are being drawn into the political right wing. Online leftists need to engage with the depressed, lonely, 'incel-in-the-making' teens who are sliding toward radicalization. Why not adopt the "ever-changing language of the shit poster" and go hard on irony; then pull them from the "nihilistic void [to the] early work of Nick Land, Gille Deleuze, or Mark Fisher?" (Arkenbout & Scherz, 2022, p. 46). Citarella put his advice into practice with his deprogramming edutainment video *The Slow Red Pill*. Adopting the aesthetics of the alt-right and manosphere, Citarella superimposes his face over SM archetypes such as Travis Bickle while breaking down for the audience the innocuous ways conservative meme accounts on Instagram can introduce unsuspecting extremist content (Citarella, 2022).

Yet another avenue for young people trying to navigate the contemporary moment that evokes similar rhetoric to the alt-right, twisting its meaning and purpose for a leftist perspective is a concept derived from Matt Christman's *Cush Vlog*. An informal livestream created by the *Chapo Trap House* co-host addresses the pervading feeling of alienation under what many consider late-capitalism, or what Christman refers to as "whatever the hell this is" (Zaitchik, 2023, para. 2). The beginnings of the show conjured up an antidote to the perpetual state of

willed hope and honest despair experienced by many. Riffing on the alt-right Red Pill, Christman crafted the concept of the ‘Grill Pill’. To take the Grill pill implies a refusal of delusion and nihilism, to log off, and to seek openings of meaning in friendship, comradeship, and the simple pleasures of being alive. Vast amounts of polarizing information and submerging one’s life online have surely contributed to the growing sense of alienation, but simple real-life connections can be a road to remediation. The intention of the Grill Pill is not to shy away from politics, but rather to provide a source of meaning and energy that fuels future imaginaries and potentialities for building something beyond “whatever the hell this is” (Zaitchik, 2023, para. 2).

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