

The Manosphere as an Online Protection Racket: How the Red Pill Monetizes Male Need for Security in Modern Society

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To effectively manage, empathize with and respond to the implications and impact of the so-called ‘Manosphere,’ this paper is centered on the premise that researchers require an understanding of the draw factors that lead individuals to engage, affiliate with, and contribute to the various groups that constitute this wider movement. This paper seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge around the Manosphere by exploring how thought leaders propagate symbiotic cycles of ontological security and insecurity through YouTube in a manner that resembles a protection racket. It argues that these constructed ontological security cycles provide a powerful impetus to not only draw individuals into the Manosphere, but also to extract material and social resources out of them that can be reinvested to retain them within the movement.

Introduction

In late October 2021, the 21 Convention—a conference run by a collection of men who make up a portion of the online groups collectively known as the ‘Manosphere’—held its fifteenth annual men’s conference in Orlando, Florida. This event was originally pitched for men, but now is targeted at fathers and women, with the intention of making men (and now women) “great again” by rebuilding patriarchy and by developing men’s capacity for “self-improvement” (21 Studios, 2021a). It is worth noting that even in the midst of a global pandemic, the Manosphere and the men who produce content on popular social media platforms like YouTube continue to organize in-person and online events that maintain and mobilize their community of supporters and retain their popularity and relevance as patriarchal ‘thought leaders.’ The event’s advertising as “America’s last stand for masculinity” (21 Studios, 2021a) indicates a catastrophizing language that proliferates within the Manosphere. Curiously, such framing provides both a diagnosis of and a means to address a current crisis—that is, the promotion for the event declares that there is a crisis in masculinity and that to pay the fee to attend the 21 Convention is to take a stand against this calamity. Over the last five years, the Manosphere has gained increasing attention within academia. Currently, research into the space tends to take up one of three primary focuses: i) identifying the proliferation of ‘categories’ of masculinity and anti-feminist discourse within online spaces (Chang, 2020); ii) speculating the threat that Manosphere content and the men who consume it, present to society (Bates, 2021); or iii) examining the troubling role that social media platforms like YouTube or Facebook play in the distribution and dissemination of this content (for instance, Papadamou (2020) examines the ways that the YouTube algorithm may steer viewers toward such content).

Breaking from the approaches of previous research, this paper adopts a new approach to understanding the Manosphere. That is, to understand the impetus or draw of Manosphere content to its consumer base, our focus is instead on how influential content producers construct a perception of threat in their audience while simultaneously positioning themselves to provide a solution to this same threat. In this paper, we refer to these individuals as ‘thought

leaders.’ In constructing a sense of catastrophe and insecurity around ‘the crisis of masculinity,’ these thought leaders offer an apparent means through which their audiences can regain a sense of security and protection from this same malaise. We argue that influential figures within the Manosphere perpetuate symbiotic cycles of ontological security and insecurity through the YouTube and social media content they produce. Such cycles, we propose, amount to a ‘protection racket’ wherein these influential Manosphere ‘thought leaders’ maintain and grow their audience from whom they extract material, social or political resources. Beyond the influential capacity of these thought leaders, we also highlight the ways in which the neoliberal capitalist system produces ontological insecurity and underpins the ‘solutions’ that these thought leaders peddle. Thus, we show how the broader system of late capitalism is rendered invisible or innocuous to an audience who is committed to these thought leaders and to the crises and solutions they devise.

In mounting this argument, this article adopts the following structure: it first outlines the nature of the Manosphere and the various subgroups that make up this wider online movement. We will frame our outline of the Manosphere through ontological (in)security racketeering theory which we will draw on throughout our analysis. Through this framework, we identify cycles of insecurity and re-security that powerful ‘thought leaders’ use to incite fear and then a sense of security among their audiences—a cycle that simultaneously provides the thought leader with material resources and a consistent audience. Following this, we will define and discuss three representative Manosphere ‘thought leader’ influencers who possess significant followings in the movement and are, we argue, able to stoke anxiety and insecurity within it. We will then use this model to map this very cycle of catastrophization and assuagement onto the online content produced by these three influential Manosphere ‘thought leaders.’ In doing this, we will examine how Manosphere content producers can draw and maintain their audiences and how this cycle can provide financial or other incentives for Manosphere influencers to continue producing media content.

The Manosphere: An ontological (in)security theory analysis

The ‘Manosphere,’ as it has come to be known, is a predominantly online, heterogenous, non-uniform collection of groups, websites, and blogs operated by men who actively address what they have come to identify as a crisis of masculinity in culture, society, economics, and politics. The Manosphere is made up of a number of online (and occasionally in-person-meeting) groups, including the Men’s Rights Movement/Activists (MRMs/MRAs), Pick-Up Artists (PUAs), Involuntary Celibates (Incels), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOWs), and Proud Boys, among others (Bates, 2021). While these communities share a general concern around a perceived sense of a loss of men’s status, rights, and sense of self, they are disparate and often disagree over the precise cause of and appropriate means of redressing this sense of crisis.

We argue that the enduring sense of crisis that connects these divergent groups (and their disparate beliefs) within the Manosphere can be critically examined through ontological security theory. Ontological security theory has found growing salience within Social Science over the past three decades. Originally conceived within psychiatry by Robert Laing (2010) in the 1960s, the concept was popularised in sociology through several works by Anthony Giddens (1991, 2013). The 2000s saw ontological security increasingly employed by scholars interested in questions around International Relations (IR), beginning with Catarina Kinnvall (2004), Brent Steele (2008), and Jennifer Mitzen (Mitzen, 2006a, 2006b). Beyond IR and Sociology, ontological security theory has experienced something of a renaissance in Social Science. Generally, it is being used to explore topics ranging from populism (Homolar & Scholz, 2019) to immigration (Dingott Alkopher, 2018), the impacts of terrorism (Combes, 2017) and bushfires (Slade, 2020), and even the persistence of private car ownership (Kent, 2016).

This theory provides a useful lens through which to analyze the underlying function of central figures, content producers or, what we will go on to refer to as ‘thought leaders’ within the Manosphere and the ways by which they may reframe breakdowns in identity, routine or at a broader social or cultural level through particular narratives or frameworks (for instance, as we will go onto examine, their adherence to biological determinism or the perceived

threat of a ‘feminist agenda’). In its broadest sense, ontological security can be considered as “confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic existential parameters of self and social identity” (Giddens, 1984, p. 375). In particular, this perception of security is derived from “a sense of continuity and order in events, including those not directly within the perceptual environment of the individual” (Giddens, 2013, pp. 124-125).

One of the major perceived insecurities that underpins Manosphere discourse and anchors an ongoing narrative within the ‘sphere’ is that the world has become disordered, incomprehensible, and ‘unknowable’ to a majority of men. Comparatively, a central principle within ontological security theory is that the pursuit of ontological security, like physical security, can be understood as fundamental to the human condition. Without a sense of knowing the nature of the social, cultural, political, and normative world around them, individuals cannot hope to order their own existence. A perception that the world is in a persistent state of flux, and that one cannot place themselves within it is likely to produce intense existential anxiety in the individual, as they feel they are losing the ability to effectively navigate reality as a result of knowable ends becoming disaggregated from perceivable means. For instance, as per discussion within the Manosphere, this sense of disorder may emerge through a sense that expectations or promised futures (often predicated on gendered assumptions) have been broken or undermined (perhaps through divorce or a man’s inability to secure employment) and that, accordingly, masculinity is in crisis or under threat (be it from the perceived threat of feminism, or from formal structures or institutions that seemingly privilege women over men, whether legally, or with regards to employment opportunities and gender parity). In reordering and navigating their experiences of this disorder or crisis, groups within the Manosphere broadly embrace ‘Red Pill’ philosophy. This philosophy is a conceptual metaphor derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix* and which in the Manosphere is held to reveal the true machinations of the ‘real’ world—a world that economic models of scarcity, biological essentialism, and evolutionary hierarchies fundamentally govern, but which has paradoxically become socially restrained and feminized. Consumers of this Red Pill claim that the harsh realities of the world they perceive remain largely hidden to the social majority, which remains deluded or ignorant thanks to the continual imbibement of the contrasting ‘Blue Pill’ (Ging, 2019, p. 640). Effectively, the Red Pill promises an antidote to what is regarded as modern men’s ‘slavery’ to women and an unjust social hierarchy. Men are informed that they live within a pecking order comprised of a minority of ‘Alphas.’¹ and the majority of so-called Blue-Pill ‘Betas.’² The goal of many Red Pill converts then is to transform themselves from a Beta into an Alpha.

While there is significant overlap and migration between Manosphere groups, these communities are typically framed by specific routines and the ways by which they engage with and respond to Red Pill ideology. This formation of routine and identity corresponds with another central principle of ontological security theory: that a significant amount of ontological security is produced by consistent routines that help define an individual’s identity. Routines enforce order on existence by providing the agent sets of values, goals, and considerations by which to adhere and position themselves in relation to as they go about their lives. Routines help define the individual, for example, this may be as a ‘father’ from the complex process of child-rearing or as a ‘home owner’ as one acquires property (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998). Importantly, identity-linked routines help the individual to confront uncertainty and threat in the world by imparting a hierarchy of import, grounding, and constancy that can be especially observable during times of wider uncertainty.³ Importantly, when these routines become disrupted or undermined (for instance, through divorce or housing or financial troubles), relationality and constancy come into crisis and produce ontological insecurity.

The Red Pill, as a framework, provides a diverse set of Manosphere groups with a particular narrative about how and why men’s lives have become increasingly difficult and insecure and provide new categories and routines through which to concretize a sense of self. For example, PUAs embrace the Red Pill in their adherence to the idea that men need to adopt non-Blue Pill strategies and game the ‘system’ to successfully meet and seduce women (and often seem to enjoy the thrill of the ‘chase’ more than the outcome) (O’Neill, 2018). By contrast, while MGTOWs adhere to the same aspects of the Red Pill framework (i.e., that being Blue Pill leads to poor interactions with women and inevitably a miserable and dead-end marriage for betas), they conclude that a non-alpha man is best off avoiding

women altogether. Thus, they pursue a life without women. MRAs are interested in raising social awareness for issues that affect men negatively and which they believe are the result of a predominantly Blue Pill society. For example, they often highlight how outcomes of divorce proceedings seem to unfairly limit a man's access to his children while simultaneously transferring a disproportionate amount of his financial assets to the woman (an outcome referred to as "divorce-rape" in both Red Pill and MRA contexts (Khan, 2019)). Lastly, those in the incel community also commit to the Red Pill concept that women 'date up' (by seeking 'high-value men'); however, they typically believe that PUA strategies will not work for them due to factors around biological determinism and evolutionary psychology that preclude them from being a viable partner for a woman.⁴

The Manosphere can be said to render something of a community through these complex processes by which conflicted and unstable identities and routines become resecured through particular Manosphere groups and shared narratives. Community and communal ties are a central principle in the pursuit of ontological security. Indeed, communal connection not only gives individuals a sense of place within which to enmesh themselves, but also imparts a sense of authenticity, legitimacy, and continuity to the identities and routines they produce (for instance, the specific language or sets of beliefs developed within the Manosphere that undergird the Red Pill's 'us vs them' dichotomy). This is particularly true of 'hardened' communities such as religious fundamentalists and ultranationalists, that present and view themselves in starkly immovable terms and thus help to present their views and the world they live in in binary terms (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 742)—which, within the Manosphere, are frequently predicated on an essentialist and biologized gender binary.

One of the consistent guiding features of thought across the Manosphere is a persistent anti-feminist ideology (Nagle, 2017, p. 86). Indeed, in this space, feminism is broadly conflated with misandry—as is occasionally women's liberation and women's formal rights (Ging, 2019, p. 640)—and is identified by some of the members in these groups as a leading factor in the 'decline' of western culture and civilization. Specifically, such groups identify the source of this cultural malaise in the decline of men's traditional social, political, and physical primacy and their increased insecurities and anxieties around comportment, dating, domestic life, and work (For examples, see King, 2018; & Votey, 2021). Yet, it is through feminist frameworks that men's rights first gained social and institutional leverage. The Men's Liberation Movement (MLM) of the 1970s, which has its origins in second-wave feminism, has been identified as one of the earliest groups that became the foundation for the Manosphere today (Ging, 2019, p. 639; Nagle, 2017, p. 87). While the MLM emerged to critically examine men's roles in society, privilege, and male violence against women, a schism between MLM factions produced an anti-feminist branch. This wing disavowed the concept of 'male privilege' and employed a conservative understanding of sex and gender roles (Ging, 2019, p. 639). It is important to note that the fragmentation of the MLM was not the only factor that led to the development of the Manosphere, given its emergence as a phenomenon of the early-2000s, and it would be disingenuous to suggest that the insecurities that men experienced in the 1970s are precisely the same as those that men identify and experience currently. Today, the term, 'Manosphere,' which emerged around 2009 in Ian Ironwood's writing about the collection of blogs and websites he noticed that were primarily concerned with men's rights, has come to gain mass media attention focusing on its misogynistic language, death and rape threats and both on- and offline violence. The Manosphere has also been connected with the harassment that female gamers and journalists received following the 2014 Gamergate controversy, as well as with a number of doxing scandals of prominent female journalists, critics, and developers in the gaming space (for instance, the 2011 Register-Her.net scandal).

Indeed, it is not unreasonable to concede that there *is* very much a crisis within masculinity today. However, rather than locate this crisis as an issue with feminism, political correctness, or 'cancel culture' specifically, as is the Manosphere's focus, there are many clear causes for such a crisis linked to neoliberalism. These include the effects of downward mobility, inflation, wage cuts, wage stagnation, underemployment, overwork and burnout, housing insecurity, the growing cost of education as well as the demand for increasingly skilled workers, increasing precarity and the outsourcing of labor, the privatization of health services, and the atomization of the individual who is compelled to spend increasing periods of time isolated and online. Such contingent historical and social events have

all, unsurprisingly, led to a culture of more anxious, more insecure, and understandably disillusioned, angry men who may well question whether they are 'privileged' in the ways they may be told that they are, and who are seeking legible and accessible answers and narratives that explain the disparities they exist within (Ging, 2019, p. 652; Kimmel, 2017a, p. 22; 2017b, p. 16; Nagle, 2017, pp. 86-87). To this end, it is important to note that these crises and insecurities are not attributable to women, though they may be the target of this crisis, but to the limitations of globalization, economic necessity and neoliberalism, and life under capitalism.

In ontological security theory, these very kinds of social change, discord, and unpredictability are frequently understood as corrosive to a sense of security and thus undermine it. Within ontological security scholarship, such change has typically been associated with forces intensified under globalization and late/liquid modernity, such as mass migration and border weakening, labor insecurity, the erosion of traditional community, technology-driven alienation, and a perceived collapse of space and time via digital media, leading to a common view that we live in a particularly ontologically insecure time (Bauman, 2013; Fukuyama, 2018; Young, 2007). Of course, this is not to say that ontological insecurity is a modern phenomenon itself, but only limited work has attempted to apply its concepts outside of a contemporary context (Rich, 2017), and its effects have intensified dramatically due to the alienating and dislocating effects of late capitalism.

Indeed, technology-driven alienation and a perceived collapse of space and time via digital media have had a complex effect on the development and proliferation of Manosphere content, and, with the increase of online activity and the development of greater online communities, this technological change has played a significant role in centralizing the Manosphere and the disparate groups that form and inform it. Each area of the Manosphere has its own key influencers on YouTube and elsewhere on the internet, and these influencers are incredibly prolific content producers. Due to the ever-expanding nature of the Manosphere on YouTube specifically, for the purposes of this article, we opt to focus on Red Pill content creators broadly, rather than specific PUA, MRA, incel, or MGTOW types. While there are interesting differences between these groups, which often result in arguments and animated debate within and between these communities, it is nonetheless common for someone clicking through recommended videos on YouTube to find their way from an MRA video to one from a PUA through to a MGTOW or incel video (Papadamou et al., 2020). Indeed, many thought leaders frequently appear as guests in each other's videos. For example, Rollo Tomassi (Red Pill) may host an interview with a PUA. Alternatively, Better Bachelor (MGTOW and somewhat of an MRA) might refer to content published by Rollo Tomassi. Further, YouTube studio and group channels, like 21 Studios and the Red Man Group, have hosted a number of Manosphere influencers in dialogue or at conferences, such as Stephen Molyneux, Anthony 'Dream' Johnson, and Elliot Hulse.

Central to the activities of such Manosphere influencers are the ways in which their content, blogs, and especially multimodal resources on platforms such as YouTube provide a way for men to understand the everyday lived crises they experience. These include bitter divorces, battles for custody of children, and a noticeable lack of support services for men who have been sexually, physically, or emotionally abused or who are trying to escape domestic violence. In response to these, Manosphere influencers provide meaningful frameworks, a sense of security, comfort, and community for men who are suffering or who feel undermined and under-represented. Our interest in this study is not to excuse or overlook the misogynistic or violent threats, content, or actions that have become attributable to these sites and figures, but to attempt to 'thread the needle' as it were, taking men's concerns and insecurities seriously, and aiming to understand the sense of meaning, identity, and security that the Manosphere provides them. We believe that it is important to identify how men may be exploited by 'thought leaders' within these online communities who are able to deepen ontological insecurity around such issues towards material gain. Further, we take seriously the questions: what does the 'Manosphere' provide these users? What sense of meaning, routine, or security do the groups and charismatic influencers offer or exploit? To which crises within masculinity and within culture do these influencers respond, and in which ways do they exploit their roles in providing a sense of security to their audience? And what role does financial remuneration, subscription, or support play for Manosphere influencers and their perpetuation of materials, content, and (in)security among their audience?

Thought leaders within the Manosphere

In what follows, we identify the roles, content-production, and strategies of three ‘thought leaders’ within the Manosphere. We examine the posts, pages, subscriber numbers, and tactics of a selection of three significant influencers who—whether PUA, MRA, MGTOW, or otherwise—variously subscribe to aspects of Red Pill ideology and provide their audience with a sense of leadership, pseudo-paternity, guidance, and camaraderie. Such a review of these thought leaders, we propose, will provide an avenue through which to examine the ways by which the cycle of catastrophic thinking is perpetuated through and among the audience and who, in turn, provide subscription numbers and financial incentives for these leaders to continue producing content which feeds a positive feedback loop that generates insecurity.

It is important to note that this short-list of Manosphere ‘thought leaders,’ whose content we discuss below, is in no way exhaustive, and it should instead be read as indicative and will set the scene for future research that takes the discursive strategies of the Manosphere seriously. Indeed, the difficulties of identifying and defining what constitutes a thought leader within the Manosphere are numerous. For instance, can such ‘leadership’ qualities be judged to which criteria or metric, degree of notoriety, or perceived longevity within the sphere? Further, how or in which ways ought the ‘old guard’ of the Manosphere—for example, those formative, prolific stalwarts who are still active but may not have as many subscribers as their newer or fledgling Red Pill counterparts—be read and interpreted today? What of those who have recently been de-platformed and whose audience or subscriber numbers are unclear to researchers?

It is additionally important to clarify that we elected to examine only the channels and posts of YouTubers whose content is publicly accessible and neither paywalled nor requiring login nor membership to access. Our intention was to only observe content and, accordingly, we did not ‘like,’ ‘comment,’ or ‘subscribe’ to any of the videos or channels. Given the public accessibility of these channels and videos, our research did not require ethical clearance. Indeed, a secondary interest in our research project is with the significance of the very availability and accessibility of these channels and videos—that is, that they are not paywalled and do not require login but are instead open and accessible to their audiences who are invited to freely decide whether to like, subscribe, comment, or provide other social or financial support to these thought leaders. Our examination of their YouTube channels and social media sites was conducted in late October of 2021, and all numbers and figures listed below indicate the numbers of subscribers, views, and uploads by the end of the month.

In selecting the thought leaders for this study, we have opted to not only consider influencers with 100,000 or more YouTube subscribers, but also to consider their respective notoriety, history, and output within the Manosphere. Among an increasing number of online influencers in the Manosphere, standout figures we suggest are identifiable by their charisma, influence, and large subscription or follower numbers who possess a correspondingly large degree of ‘clout’ in the sphere. For instance, we have identified Red Pill writer and YouTuber Rollo Tomassi as one such leader. Tomassi produces long-form YouTube videos and interviews with other Manosphere and Red Pill influencers (these videos typically run for 2-3.5 hours). His Rational Male YouTube channel, which as of October 2021 has 128K subscribers, 305 videos, and 13, 378, 462 views since 2016 (Tomassi also has 82.2K Twitter followers) streams live videos every two or three days which gather between 15-370K views. Tomassi also uploads monologue videos every second or third day. His Livestream videos occasionally include a running chat bar for viewers to post questions or comments, and viewers are encouraged to make in-stream payments directly to his channel. Tomassi is revered within Manosphere channels for his series of books (*The Rational Male*, which are available via Amazon and which he spruiks on his website and YouTube channel), for having popularised the concept of hypergamy.⁵ (Tomassi, 2018), and for his incorporation of evolutionary psychology in discussing gender roles and differences, dating, and relationships. For an example of Tomassi’s direct influence on other Manosphere figures, see Richard Cooper’s (aka Entrepreneurs in Cars) 2018 testimonial YouTube video “How Rollo Tomassi & The Rational Male Improved My Life...”

One of the enduring aspects of the Manosphere is a fascination with the entrepreneurial: with being one's own boss, taking control of one's life, and making wise financial and relationship decisions. Richard Cooper, or Entrepreneurs in Cars, provides this focus through his YouTube videos and Unplugged Alpha podcast and book series. Curiously, Cooper does not list his number of subscribers on his Entrepreneurs in Cars YouTube channel (his channel, which, as of October 2021, has 1,038 videos, has gained 90, 385, 555 views since he joined YouTube in 2014), though his second channel, Rich Cooper Clips, has, as of October 2021, 117K subscribers and his 353 videos have received 16, 261, 589 views since the channel opened in 2020. It thus can be assumed that Cooper's main channel has significantly more followers. Cooper's videos run from between 3 minutes to 1-and-a-half hours. On Twitter, Rich Cooper also has 72.6K followers, and his Twitter bio proposes: "I unplug men from comforting lies, with cold, hard, uncomfortable truths about life & women" (@Rich_Cooper). While initially launched as a channel about luxury cars and entrepreneurship, Cooper "took the red pill" (2021a), as he notes on his website, and his YouTube channel and social media sites became focused on the 'truths' that are hidden from men about women, relationships, divorce, testosterone replacement therapies, and overall lifestyle success. His "Unplugged Alpha" podcast series *Before the Train Wreck* is on Apple Podcasts, and he has several books available via Amazon, including *The Unplugged Alpha: The No Bullsh*t Guide to Winning with Women & Life*, as well as *Dark Psychology Secrets and Enough is Enough: The DIY Debt Settlement Guide Your Creditors Don't Want You to Know About*, among others.

The Manosphere is also made up of thought leaders and influencers whose concern is not just with men's mental health and mindset but also physical health and wellness. For instance, Men's Right Activist Elliot Hulse's catchphrase, "Make Men Strong Again," is central to his "King Transformation" fitness system, which costs \$997USD. Hulse claims that adherence to his program will allow men to become stronger, more successful, and confident and "command respect from women" (For the full speech, see Hulse, 2020). Across his website and YouTube channel, Hulse provides personal testimonials and biographic backstories to advertise and promote his workout regimen. With 821K subscribers and 901 videos on YouTube which have gathered 100, 818, 732 views since starting the channel in 2012, Hulse has become a popular speaker and figure within the Manosphere and, like Rollo Tomassi, has made appearances at Red Pill and men's rights conventions. Hulse's YouTube uploads run from between 2-25 minutes and address topics around his intolerance of laziness, his advice on pursuing financial success, his dietary and exercise routines, and relationship advice. Like other Manosphere influencers on YouTube, Hulse also interviews and teams up with numerous Manosphere personalities. For instance, he has appeared with "The Certified Health Nut" and wellness 'guru' Troy Casey, who has his own YouTube channel and website where he promotes a reclamation of 'masculinity' and various diet, supplement and exercise tips for wellness (Hulse, 2019).

Themes of catastrophe and solution

While we acknowledge that a full outline of all the ideas presented by these content creators is beyond the scope of analysis here, it is possible to identify common themes and patterns which are prevalent across their videos and posts regarding threats to masculinity and men, generally. Typically, the themes that emerge from the corpus of Manosphere thought leaders' YouTube videos can be read as fitting one of the following two categories: threat proliferation and threat solution. The first of these themes represents a position that contends a clear binary exists in the social, cultural, and legal environments in which men are threatened, even as they are typically framed as being privileged and holding all of the power in the common consciousness. The second category represents a self-help solution paradigm in which viewers are encouraged to take control of their own lives to cope with the disparity outlined by the themes in the first position and avoid the existential threats to themselves and others.

The first category, in which a binary is set up with the audience and its privileged access to occluded knowledge on one side and the ignorant society on the other, is very much steeped in Red Pill philosophy. These include, for example, the view that women are hypergamous by nature and constantly seeking to maximize their reproductive success with a 'better' man. This is presented as a traumatic contradiction to the Blue Pill idea that most women can be expected to be faithful to a man who is kind, caring, and understanding toward them. In addition, taking the Red

Pill supposedly enables men to understand that the legal system is set up *against* them—for example, various aspects of the manosphere contend that during divorce proceedings, the man can expect the court to work unfairly against him. This is further compounded by the understanding that *culture* is against men; for example, they can be expected to be presented as ‘dead-beat’ fathers by popular media. These ideas maintain conflict between a stereotype of traditional values and modern ideas about gender, relationships, workplace relations, and even workplace conditions and structures and present men and masculinity as under attack and existentially threatened by forces that mainstream society is unable or unwilling to recognize. It is thus a totalizing philosophy and worldview. Most importantly, the framing of these ideas is one in which the content creator is presenting the ideas *to* the audience, for the uninitiated audience to undertake a kind of revelatory experience of understanding this worldview and for the converted to have their understanding of this hidden knowledge reaffirmed.

The second category of themes and ideas in the manosphere, in which audience members are encouraged to take control of their own lives to ensure success (with women, relationships, family, work, health etc.), offers a solution to the problem identified above. By understanding the true nature of a world against him, a Red Pill man apparently can discard the Blue Pill fantasies that are a part of the ‘conditioning’ or brainwashing that keep him in perpetual existential peril. Repeatedly, the audience is informed that they can remain in their existing Blue Pill mindset and suffer or accept Red Pill orthodoxy and follow the path(s) to success outlined by Manosphere content creators. The kind of suffering promised to those who refuse the Red Pill is not simply a future in which the man does not achieve success. Rather, it is a future in which the man is unable to find sex with a woman and fulfill one of the fundamental tenets of masculinity. Moreover, the suffering extends even to the Blue Pill man who does manage to find a partner; he is told that without the Red Pill he will be unable to keep the partner due to his failing as a man and his life will then be destroyed through brutal divorce. The intensity of this failure is presented in existential terms as total life destruction by Manosphere thought leaders.

These two primary thematic categories are immutably connected, with the first positioning the agent as inevitably suffering unless they recognize the state of the world presented to them, which primes them for the second category, which offers a solution to avoid the same suffering and misery. In this latter theme, the disparate subgroups of the Manosphere manifest their ideological divergences. For example, the MGTOW solution to avoiding the suffering of mainstream society is to ‘go their own way’ and avoid women, marriage, etc. Meanwhile, the PUA solution to the changing social conditions is to ‘learn game’ and focus on building social status to not miss out on sexual opportunities. Regardless of their diverse prescriptions, as we show within the context of ontological security, each of these solutions ultimately represents one key step in a broader feedback loop of exploitation between thought leaders and their audiences.

Ontological Racketeering within the Manosphere

The activities of many thought leaders within the Manosphere can be broadly understood via an ‘identity racketeering’ model within ontological security theory. As we have noted, beyond IR and Sociology, there has been something of a recent renewed interest in ontological security theory in the Social Sciences more generally. Curiously, despite clear potential applications, the theory has only been used in limited instances to explore issues around political extremism, movements, and ideas (Agius, Rosamond, & Kinnvall, 2020; Kaunert, de Deus Pereira, & Edwards, 2020; Morein, 2020; Rich, 2021). In particular, little attention has been paid to how individuals or groups (like content producers in the Manosphere) might deliberately proliferate, instill, and exploit such ontological insecurity in target audiences towards specific cynical ends. Indeed, ontological insecurity has generally been thought to be generated as a passive by-product of social, political, and economic phenomena and conditions, rather than as a tool that can be employed and manipulated proactively and wilfully by conscious actors. Although such intentional approaches may be inferred from certain research and analysis (Agius et al., 2020; Homolar & Scholz, 2019; Steele & Homolar, 2019), it has largely escaped direct consideration in the literature on ontological security.

One exception to this general omission can be found in the work of Rich and MacQueen (2017) in their work exploring the historical relationship between the authoritarian Saudi state and its religious revivalist subjects. Through the application of an ontological security framework, the authors propose a four-stage model of ‘identity racketeering’ whereby:

- A thought leader can exploit, catalyze, focus and securitize (Eroukhmanoff, 2017, p. 104) a series of latent existential anxieties around identity within a given population via various instruments afforded by its power, privilege, and legitimacy vis-à-vis the target audience.
- Having spread ontological insecurity, the actor uses their position of authority in relation to the observers to offer a solution to that same source of threat.
- In so doing, the securitizing agent will also extract resources from the audience in the form of money, materials, social capital, and clout.
- Finally, the thought leader will reinvest some of this capital back into its capacity to promote anxiety in a positive feedback loop around the generation of ontological insecurity.

Although this model was originally built to account for the activities of a state in relation to a large-scale religious movement, its essential components nevertheless possess a degree of transferability to other time periods and contexts involving ontological security. As will be demonstrated below, thought leaders in the Manosphere have demonstrated significant capacity to generate ontological insecurity in their audiences, offer solutions to these insecurities, extract resources through this, and redirect some of these same resources to restart and sustain the process. In particular, drawing upon the ontological threat of change as a potential creator of anxiety (Gustafsson & Krickel-Choi, 2020), this article will identify the Manosphere’s confection of an unstable and changing cultural environment as a key element of its generation of ontological insecurity.

The first element of this process can be seen in how thought leaders draw on and focus latent anxieties in the Manosphere towards a securitized end that presents masculinity in a state of systemic existential threat. Videos put out by the aforementioned leaders commonly possess provocative titles that describe aspects of modern life as a man in a state of siege. Hulse, for example, has put out media with such descriptions as “NEVER Trust What Women Say (Her Actions Reveal Everything!),” “The Satanic Seduction Behind Women,” and “There Are No More Virtuous Women”. Similarly, Tomassi has published content with titles such as “Modern Women Can’t Teach Men,” “Women run the world, Patriarchy is a lie,” and “Women want Mandatory Vasectomies for Beta Males.” Cooper provides similar, with media such as “Single Moms Raising Boys as Girls,” “Why Marriages End When She Makes More Money Than Him,” and “Society Doesn’t Care About Men (And That’s Ok).” Although varied in their particular focus, all such videos make their primary focus catastrophizing the state of men, othering and securitizing women, and proliferating ontological insecurity around the issue of masculinity to the audience. Hulse and Cooper intersperse such content with more innocuous self-help material, with titles such as “How to Read More Books in Less Time,” “Real Estate Tips Post COVID – Should I Buy a House?” while Tomassi spends most of his effort on the aforementioned alarmism.

Stoking ontological insecurity in their audiences, manosphere thought leaders inevitably move to offer a solution to the identified ills. These are not presented as suggestions up for discussion, but as definitive truths by the enlightened and paternal guide. Viewers MUST enact these actions or face ruin as an impotent beta male. Such guidance manifests in multiple formats. Both Cooper and Hulse often provide directions via short clips of approximately one minute, with titles such as “Attracting Women 101,” “Rise to The Top of The Hierarchy,” “STOP Overthinking and TAKE ACTION.” Beyond punchy short takes, all three YouTubers also offer long-form content that engage in deep dives to further elaborate methods of threat mitigation that can last several hours as either video essays starring the individual, or group discussion live streams pulling in guests from the wider Manosphere community. A clear implication throughout all the proffered antidotes to beta status is the need to stay vigilant for inevitable future emergent challenges, the threat of which requires the viewer to remain connected in a para-social

relationship to the thought leader for further guidance. It seems that even if one transcends beta status and becomes an alpha man by deploying Red Pill wisdom in their life, they must then be constantly on their guard for society's (and women's) attempts to topple them. Thus, the threat to one's ontological security is forever renewed, and, as shown below, the avid audience member must listen to another YouTube video, or perhaps buy another online course, or perhaps purchase another ebook.

The solutions to the constructed ontological threat offered by the thought leaders above are not provided altruistically, but inevitably come with an attempt to extract some form of material resource from the audience. As outlined in all their descriptions, Tomassi, Cooper, and Hulse all advertise various books, self-help courses, exclusive communities, and other purchasable media that claim to provide the reader with a method of redressing the sources of ontological insecurity they simultaneously spend their digital careers highlighting. Such materials are not simply promoted in profile descriptions but are often continually cited within discussions of threat by the creators or otherwise embedded as native advertising. Tomassi, for example, features Amazon links to his published books as a footnote border to his short takes. At the same time, Cooper continually refers to his books in his videos, his coaching services, as well as his subscription-based community "The 1 Percent" which promises members greater guidance in actualizing themselves as alphas and proofing themselves against insecurity. Beyond this direct form of extraction, all three of these Manosphere thought leaders monetize their channels through YouTube and, in some instances, have gained sponsorship deals, allowing them to gain passive advertising and promotional revenue from their audiences.

Having extracted resources from their audiences through offers of protection, Manosphere thought leaders can reinvest some profits into their threat promotion activities. This enables them to continue cultivating anxiety, evolving ideas, and sustaining and growing their community base at a high tempo. Between August and September of 2021, for example, Elliot Hulse produced approximately 60 pieces of manosphere content on YouTube. During this same period, Tomassi generated around 10 pieces of content, although these tended to be far longer in length and more complicated in production. Cooper fell between these two poles, with around 20 pieces of content with a wider variance of length and complexity. Having gained resources from offering to cultivate the promised sense of ontological security, the Manosphere thought leaders are then positioned to begin the racketeering cycle anew, thus helping to maintain an environment in which they paradoxically serve as the constructor of threat, as well as a vital alleviator of it for their audiences.

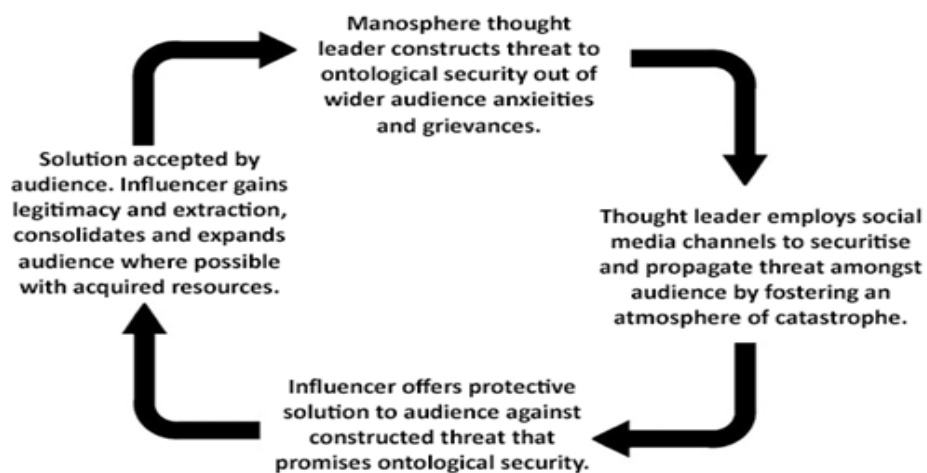


Figure 1: Ontological racketeering within the manosphere.

A note on neoliberalism and the Manosphere

While this research is primarily focused on the role of the Manosphere influencer or ‘thought leader,’ it would be remiss to avoid reference to the audience and, in particular, to the cultural and systemic framework that positions them as amenable to the content in these thought leaders’ posts. Why is it that audiences are moved by their posts, and why is it that they don’t instead look to other systemic frameworks or structures in making sense of their anxieties and insecurities?⁷ In this regard, it is important to consider not only the role that neoliberal capitalism plays in facilitating ontological insecurity but also the ways by which the social effects of neoliberal capitalism have sunk so deeply into our cultural unconscious that it provides both the very logic and the very narratives of success and of failure (for instance see Mirowski’s writing on ‘everyday neoliberalism’) that a Manosphere YouTuber’s audience, or indeed a great many of us in our day-to-day lives, unwittingly use to make sense of or frame our sense of self-worth, identity, and security.

The social and material effects of neoliberal capitalism, certainly, can facilitate disruption, breakdown, and the loss of identity and routine and can provoke a sense that the world is in a state of disorder—these, the principles of ontological insecurity, we have already discussed in our examination of ontological security theory and the Manosphere. As we have noted previously, the breakdown of community, the proliferation of precarity (in housing and employment), the privatization and dissolution of social services, increasing atomization, and the imperative to work and spend time online are all real-world symptoms of neoliberal/late capitalism that can and do produce insecurity and instability in people’s daily lives. However, for Philip Mirowski, this is a system that has not only been rendered invisible and seemingly non-ideological, but it is also a system wherein neoliberal capitalist solutions are the go-to in addressing the very problems that neoliberal capitalism has produced: it is a system that “offers more, better neoliberalism as the counter to sputtering neoliberalism, all the while disguising any acknowledgment of that fact” (Mirowski, 2014, p. 92).

Increasingly, the popular means of addressing precarity, isolation, and insecurity have, within a neoliberal capitalist framework, come to take up the individualist imperative that one only needs to better self-manage, to self-improve, to ‘entrepreneurialise,’ rather than, say, take up political action—a trend that Christopher Lasch has discussed since the late 1970s and a common theme, as we have noted, in Manosphere posts that are framed, albeit within a Red Pill logic, through the language of self-help. Against the threat of an incoherent world, a disrupted sense of routine and identity, the ‘entrepreneurial individual’—the competitive, self-expressing, risk-bearing individual—becomes the iconic story of neoliberal success. Indeed, for Jodi Dean, the neoliberal dictum of ‘enjoyment’ through which we are enjoined to self-fashion our individual success and betterment or risk failure, has become the imperative of our time: “*I must be fit; I must be stylish; I must realize my dreams. I must because I can – everyone wins. If I don’t, not only am I loser, but I am not a person at all; I am not part of everyone*” (Dean, 2008, p. 62). In this way, it is perhaps unsurprising that Manosphere content producers spruik neoliberal capitalist solutions to the insecurities this same system produces, where, in response to the perceived loss of ‘traditional’ male identities and ‘qualities,’ the breakdown of routines (say, through a divorce), men are instructed on how to improve their entrepreneurialism and excellence; their individualist, Alpha/Sigma-mindset; their financial or physical or romantic successes (be it through exercise regimens or ‘pick-up’ advice); their acquisition of material goods like cars or properties. Rich Cooper Clips, for instance, posts a number of videos that identify the ‘traits’ of the ‘top’ 5% men—again, the figure of the neoliberal entrepreneur who, unquestionably, is presented as a subject of desire both for their male audience (to be) and for women (to have). Whether or not their audience members really want to develop these ‘traits’—to be entrepreneurial, to have the 1.62 hip-to-shoulder ‘golden ratio,’ to instrumentalize relationships with women—such Manosphere videos are predicated nevertheless on the seemingly unquestionable assumption that these ‘traits’ are not only demonstrative of (an abstract idea of) success but also that by taking the Red Pill and adhering to new routines, attitudes and regimens, their audience too, can secure themselves against the insecurities that affect their lives.

Conclusion

Through this paper, we have outlined the ways that three Manosphere ‘thought leaders’—charismatic and influential individuals—employ social media platforms like YouTube to generate and catalyze a series of latent existential anxieties around male and masculine identity within their audiences. Subsequently, these influencers variously promote their own books, online courses, in-person retreats, workshops, online video-conference services, vitamins and supplements, exercise regimens, and podcasts and video series as a panacea to these same ills. These thought leaders, we have argued, cultivate ontological insecurity in their audiences around issues of masculinity, securitizing issues around transforming gender roles, male virility, loneliness and isolation, relationships, and the effects of feminism on modern society. Their use of online platforms like YouTube provides Manosphere influencers enormous outreach in fostering and maintaining an audience and in continuing ‘business as usual’ even during periods of lockdown or social distancing. Audiences are also increasingly savvy to the possibilities afforded these influencers and to the significance of the capacity for such outreach. For instance, as one YouTube commenter noted in response to Elliot Hulse’s address at The 21 Convention conference in Florida in 2020:

The big difference we have between the time we are living in now and civilizations that crumbled in the past is that now we have the ability to communicate with one another on a global scale. Like antibodies fighting off an infection, the Red Pill has sprung up as a response to this cultural Marxism. Thanks to the internet, we have the ability to reach millions of men and fight the decline in ways that the people of ancient Rome never could. By promoting men and masculinity, I think we can pull ourselves out of the decline. (Made by an anonymous commenter on Hulse, 2020)

The potential for Manosphere influencers to conduct business at a global scale—to engage their audience within a complex cycle of insecurity and re-security and perpetuate an unresolvable tension that has significant flow-on effects in shaping culture and society—is noteworthy in ongoing research and analyses of this online space. In this paper, we have made a small step towards addressing this by examining the reach and popularity of a select number of Manosphere thought leaders and how their ideas can sustain and proliferate. However, in taking such an approach, we have endeavored to remain transparent about the limitations that arise in identifying or discussing Manosphere thought leaders. In devising further research, it will be imperative to address several other questions in locating and anchoring discussion: in particular, examining how individuals gain enough legitimacy to become thought leaders, exploring the ways that an individual might fall out of being a thought leader, and examining how ideas in the manosphere appear to exist in parallel to wider critiques of capitalist alienation, yet never seem to coalesce with them.

In closing out this discussion, we propose that the use of ontological security theory also offers an alternative understanding of how to detach people caught in cycles of the Manosphere—that attacking the ideology directly or attempting to disprove individuals may not be as effective as providing alternative means of achieving a sense of ontological security. As we have argued in this article, while these ‘thought leaders’ offer apparent solutions to the source of consternation that they have constructed, the responses they provide also serve to perpetuate anxieties in a positive feedback loop, which lead to ongoing audience engagement, subscription and often payment—in short, extraction. Indeed, they reaffirm the status quo that they propose to challenge: that, for instance, it is not systemic issues like the neoliberal culture of insecure work, or the lack of social and crisis support services for men under the privatising state that is destroying relationships or undermining men’s sense of security, but is instead located in the natural system around women’s ‘innate hypergamy’ which, according to Red Pill logic, is socially condoned through a mainstream feminist agenda and ultimately is inescapable (Tomassi, 2021a). Much of the appeal of the Red Pill and indeed, much of the appeal of these Manosphere thought leaders specifically, is their apparent ability to ‘remove’ a shroud from their audience’s eyes to reveal an occluded misandrist inequality that persists in plain sight of the unenlightened. However, this very framing of Red Pill ‘knowledge’ as secretive and as being concealed by women (Tomassi, 2018) or by broader society (Van Valkenburgh, 2021), and the security apparently afforded through the revelation the Red Pill provides, reinforces the Manosphere and men as perpetually marginalized and sidelined from women and the mainstream. In doing so, it functions to reaffirm the ongoing catastrophism that

circulates in the Manosphere and which is simultaneously promulgated by, and profited from, these influencers, ironically leaving audiences in a state of ontological vulnerability.

Endnotes

1 Men who have achieved top social and sexual status and thus receive respect, admiration, and sex from women. Generally theorized to constitute around 20 percent of the male population.

2 Men who make up the bulk of society, doing what they have been told to do and because of this do not receive respect, admiration, or sex from women.

3 For example, during natural disasters or wartime, the aforementioned routine-linked identities of 'father' or 'homeowner' provide the agent a set of specific tasks and objectives by which to navigate said crises, rather than just be beholden to them – "I must save my children" or "I must protect my land."

4 It is worth noting that incels have also come to largely embrace another 'pill' entirely: 'Black Pill' philosophy, a nihilistic 'pill' that rearticulates the Red Pill concept of a social hierarchy that privileges women, but it is a 'pill' that secures men in only their sense of genetic inferiority and their inability to ever find love or happiness (Preston, Halpin, & Maguire, 2021, p. 4). It is important, however, to note that there is disagreement between incel groups concerning the significance of the 'Black Pill' and, indeed, there are incel groups that reject and attempt to debunk the 'Black Pill' (see, Scientific Anti-Black Pill (Incel Wiki, 2021) versus the Scientific Black Pill (Incels Wiki, 2021)).

5 The idea is that in a post-feminist world, the majority of women only seek sexual gratification from the top twenty percent of men.

6 Often emphasized by the deliberate bolding of specific words in titles.

7 Where the Manosphere does draw on a critical discourse, it is typically by way of a co-option of discursive framing and phrasing. It will, for instance, identify the systemic inequality affecting men's lives as feminism (consider, for example, the popular refrain that, as a result of the mainstreaming of feminism, women now 'steal' men's jobs).

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