

Anti-feminist Conspiracist Identities in the Manosphere

A Case Study on Men's Rights Activists Reddit Threads

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Keywords

Anti-feminist discourses

Conspiracy theory discourses

Manosphere

Identity construction

Reddit

Abstract

The manosphere, a network of anti-feminist online communities, has raised concerns over its misogynist extremism and violence. Several manosphere-related communities feature conspiracist attitudes framing men as victims of feminist oppression. This paper presents a pilot analysis focused on conspiracist discourses in a small set of threads containing the word forms “feminism” and “feminist(s),” published within the r/MensRights Reddit community in early 2024. The study adopts a qualitative discourse-analytical approach to examine conspiracist content within the dataset. The findings characterize conspiracy theorizing in the dataset with respect to existing scholarship, highlighting its lack of systematization and specificity, along with a disregard for the provision of supporting evidence (common in contexts where conspiracy theorizing may not be central but still present). Feminists tend to be dehumanized or portrayed as a homogeneous group (in line with previous literature) additionally adopting typical conspirator traits, in partial contrast with the irrationality and hatred ascribed to them by users, in turn portrayed as clear-headed, if relatively powerless, judges of the social reality. Misleading argumentation strategies are employed to support misogynist conspiracist views. Stressing the convergence between conspiracy theory discourses and the discursive construction of anti-feminist identities, this analysis calls for a nuanced reflection on the functions of conspiracy theories in the development of manosphere narratives.

1. Introduction

The manosphere can be defined as a loosely connected network of online communities centered around male identity and its alleged crisis in today's western societies. Their roots date back to male activism that, once an ally of feminist movements fighting sexism in society, moved away from progressive views in the late 1970s towards an understanding of societies as instead biased against men and in favor of women (Sugiura 2021). Explicitly anti-feminist, the manosphere developed over the internet across different websites, chat rooms, gaming and content aggregation platforms and social media, including communities like Pick Up Artists (PUAs, who share strategies to seduce women), Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), Men Going

Their Own Way (MGTOW, male separatists who pursue empowerment by minimizing their interactions with women), and Involuntary Celibates (incels, who wish but do not have sexual relationships with women) (Horta Ribeiro et al. 2021, 196).

One of the common ideological underpinnings across these groups, and itself a label for certain manosphere communities, is The Red Pill (TRP), an analogy from the film *The Matrix* (the Wachowskis 1999) that represents manosphere members' awakening to society's anti-male bias. The awakening, it is argued within these communities, takes place in a context of collective delusion and brainwashing, where most people are wrongly convinced that society has historically privileged men, and that feminism aims at equality among all genders. The internet has allowed for wide-ranging public dissemination of manosphere discourse (Sugiura 2021, 25), which normalizes misogyny and violence against women, both online and offline (Barcellona 2022), raising concern in recent years.

The appeal of manosphere communities and influencers taps into some men's vulnerabilities and frustrations, deriving from real challenges they have been facing in the last decades, especially in terms of "romantic rejection, alienation, economic failure, loneliness, and a dim vision of the future" (Rich and Bujalka 2023). While it has been suggested that male vulnerability may be brought about by a neoliberal economic system that failed to deliver on its promises of widespread wealth and wellbeing (Sugiura 2021, 26), TRP has been at times successful in promising compensation while fueling feelings of dissatisfaction, resentment and hate (while enriching its acclaimed influencers). It has also effectively provided its supporters with a set of symbols and attributes (e.g. memes, videos and other online content) capable of fostering a strong group identification within the communities they follow (Fitzgerald 2020, 15). Verbal language – the focus of this paper – is therefore among the semiotic resources employed, together with multi-modal communication as well as other social practices (see Burnett et al. 2024), by these people to seek legitimation, affirmation and compensation for their vulnerability and perceived discrimination.

Conspiracy theorizing, intended as the process of ascribing events to plots by powerful groups (Pierre 2020; Imhoff and Bruder 2014), emerges from manosphere communities, where it frames men as oppressed victims of feminism, seen as a powerful force dominating society (Dickel and Evolvi 2023). Given the importance of discourse in (re)producing and spreading manosphere-related views that, among other things, legitimize reactionary, discriminatory and violent behaviors, this paper deals with conspiracy theories (henceforth CTs) as they are discursively developed in this context. This study aims to be a first step towards an account of the role of CTs in constructing manosphere subscribers' identity, recruiting new supporters and retaining old ones.

2. Background and research aims

2.1 *The manosphere and its discourses*

Research on manosphere discourse has focused both on specific communities and on the general phenomenon, and has called attention to several features, such as the use (and sometimes the creation) of specific lexis (Bogetić et al. 2023), and a dichotomous and essentialized representation of gender. On the one hand, references to women tend to be dehumanizing, objectifying and derogatory (Bogetić et al. 2023; Krendel 2020); they are more often attributed emotive reactions, evaluated for their looks (Heritage and Koller 2020; Krendel 2020 about girls) and judged as innately selfish, manipulative, immoral, dishonest and capable of victimizing men (Bogetić et al. 2023; Heritage and Koller 2020; Krendel 2020). On the other hand, hierarchical and victimizing representations of men pervade these communities (Ging 2019), whereby hierarchically ‘lower’ masculinities – embodied by less ‘desirable’ and less socially powerful individuals – are evaluated as unhappy, insecure and incapable of reacting against female, institutional and societal oppression (Bogetić et al. 2023; Heritage and Koller 2020; Krendel 2020).

Lilly (2016) identified the attack on and oppression of masculinity by feminizing forces, and the hypocrisy inherent in feminism as key ideas in manosphere discourse. Aiston’s (2024) Critical Discourse Analysis of Reddit posts within the MGTOW community highlighted a monolithic negative view of feminists, portrayed as falsely claiming to pursue social equality between men and women while threatening ‘natural’ traditional gender roles. Several argumentation strategies aimed at sustaining such misogynistic views were observed within this community (Aiston 2023): appropriation of feminist discourses, distorted to convey antifeminist messages; imagined reversal of genders in specific situations, aimed at highlighting supposed double standards while eliding context awareness and positing false symmetries between male and female experiences; (mis)cited statistics and studies; ‘mimicked marginality,’ achieved by presenting community members as censored, marginalized by online platforms, institutions and peers, and holding unpopular beliefs. These beliefs are framed as truthful precisely because they are not valued in mainstream discourse, which is reminiscent of conspiracist arguments (see Section 2.2).

An increase was observed in misogynist and violent language over time in these communities (Farrell et al. 2019), where references to sexual violence have a mobilizing power (Gotell and Dutton 2016) and metaphorical language can be used to construct gendered (hetero)sexual relationships as commodified, “oppositional, competitive and contentious,” drawing on a “bleak view of all human nature and human relationships” (Bogetić et al. 2023, 15).

The present research focuses on the MRA community, which pre-dates the era of online manosphere activism. Since their disengagement from pro-feminist positions, they have focused on social issues and institutions they regard as discriminatory against men (Horta Ribeiro et al. 2021, 197), such as military conscription and laws governing custody battles between separated parents. Their questioning of shifting gender norms is intertwined with personal narratives of sexual rejection, combined with an essentialist understanding of biological sex (Sugiura 2021, 23). Concerning language and ideology, MRAs have been placed in the middle of a toxicity and misogyny continuum, between the more extremist MGTOW and incels and the relatively more ‘moderate’ PUAs (Horta Ribeiro et al. 2021, 205); i.e., they are viewed as “conspiracy-based but not as potentially violent” (Henshaw 2023, 80) as other groups. Crucially, however, “there are substantial user overlaps” and migrations among these communities over time (Horta Ribeiro et al. 2021, 204) whereby users are “funnelled from less-extreme [older] to more-extreme [newer] groups” (Henshaw 2023, 80), with further links to “neo-Nazis, Identitarians, White supremacists, and conspiracy-based extremist movements,” also thanks to platform algorithms designed to keep people engaged and gather users with similar views (Henshaw 2023, 68). Such connections need to be taken into account, since engaging with a ‘moderate’ channel at some point does not prevent simultaneously or subsequently subscribing to violent ideas.

2.2 Conspiracy theories and their discourses

CTs can be defined as

[...] attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstance with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors [...] While often thought of as addressing governments, conspiracy theories could accuse any group perceived as powerful and malevolent (Douglas et al. 2019, 4)

According to Byford (2011, 20-37), CT believers see them as all-encompassing motive forces in history. Because the conspirator’s plans are always successful (up to the present), CTs are unfalsifiable: conspiracy theorists’ research lead coherently to the existence of the conspiracy, whereby the absence of proof or the presence of disconfirming evidence also become proof of the conspiracy. Moreover, CTs feature some founding narrative elements (Byford 2011, 71-94): identifiable yet mysterious, quintessentially evil conspirators, with a unitary group identity and generally pertaining to a social elite and/or to epistemological authorities (Demata et al. 2022, 1); an abstract, broad plan, normally persisting through various generations; and the endeavor to maintain secrecy through various methods such as propaganda. Conspiracist narratives construct politics – and history – as a struggle between good and evil with no

possible negotiation, where believers adopt the role of heroes who must (and eventually will) defeat villains (Demata et al. 2022, 10).

These premises and founding narrative elements are created through a wide range of discursive devices (see Demata et al. 2022), for example: a simplifying, dichotomous, us-vs-them construction of involved groups, (de)legitimized through referential strategies and evaluative language; the selection of salient elements and the establishment of unsubstantiated causal links to constitute evidence for unfalsifiable claims; the (mostly negative) affective and emotion-triggering language between CT believers and opponents, resembling extremist, discriminatory and hate speech.

Rhetorically, conspiracy theorists exploit argumentation to reject epistemological authorities' accounts (Herman and Oswald 2022, 102). They may replicate a “quasi-academic style” (Byford 2011, 89) or a quasi-rational fallacious argumentation (Lee 2022) in documenting purported conspiracies, to show expertise and gain authority – exploiting the same credentials they condemn in sanctioned experts, deemed corrupt and morally inferior. They may often use questions to show critical thinking and openness to dialogue, while disingenuously undermining competing accounts, possibly diverting the attention from the flaws in the CT.

CTs work as epistemic tools to learn about and understand a complex reality in simple, orderly terms (Barkun 2016); therefore, support for CTs may be a reaction to social changes perceived as threatening in an attempt to preserve one's sense of their social identity (Federico et al. 2018). This scenario is particularly fitting to the case of anti-feminist backlash: female empowerment, changing gender norms and LGBTQ+ movements can be perceived as threats by those attached to pre-existing social structures and identities. Furthermore, CTs do not necessarily take the form of fully developed accounts and believers need not be actively committed insiders for a CT to be relevant in a certain context (Procházka and Blommaert 2021, 5; Byford 2011, 93).

Indeed, belief in and endorsement of CTs can also fulfil social identity needs such as belonging, group esteem, and security (Robertson et al. 2022), becoming integral to some people's sense of self as members of like-minded communities (Sternisko et al. 2020). Online spaces can thus become “affinity spaces,” where the quasi-rational reasoning at the basis of conspiracy theorizing is shared (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Lorenzo-Dus 2022), and users enact specific conspiracist ‘personae’ (Inwood and Zappavigna 2022). Therefore, people may be drawn to CTs not only for their content, but also for the sense of uniqueness and individuality, non-conformity, humanity and epistemic/moral superiority they provide (Sternisko et al. 2020; Varis 2019). The phrase “anti-feminist conspiracist identities” used here points to the

importance, within the manosphere, of conspiracy theorizing with implications for the identities of community members.

2.3 Aims of the study

Overall, extensive research has been carried out about the manosphere as a social, digital, communicative and discursive phenomenon. Yet it has not, to the author's knowledge, been considered with as much attention in its conspiracy theorizing dimension, although that is generally acknowledged by researchers. This paper offers a view of the manosphere with this specific focus, through the lenses of Discourse Analysis. Common traits already seem to emerge between manosphere and CT discourses from previous literature, including: a Manichean, dichotomous outlook on society; the construction of the in-group's enemy as powerful, essentialized, homogeneous and immoral; the misleading use of argumentation and evidence into a sort of self-sealed and therefore less falsifiable account; and the in-group's self-positioning as marginalized and censored actors speaking a harsh truth. Drawing on these aspects, this study focuses on the discursive choices within one manosphere online community, identifying and describing potential instances of conspiracist discourse to document whether and how anti-feminism and conspiracy theorizing interact through language use. This case study was conceived of as a starting point to further explore the role of conspiracy theorizing in promoting the ideology of the manosphere and making it appealing to its older and newer members.

3. Method

The present research was conceived of as a pilot qualitative study focused on a limited amount of textual data, exemplifying manosphere discourse, that could be analyzed in detail. After surveying different possible sources of manosphere-related content and the existing literature, Reddit emerged as a reasonable option, originally gathering communities representative of various areas of the manosphere (Krendel et al. 2022). On Reddit, users can create and subscribe to subreddits, topic-based sections that work like content aggregation and discussion communities, where people can post content and/or comment on other users' posts. The algorithms on the platform suggest related content to users while filtering out unrelated content (Fitzgerald 2020, xvii). Among the manosphere-related subreddits retrievable through key terms like "manosphere," "red pill," "men's rights," "incel," and "MGTOW" (the label "Pick-up Artist" was not included as it was deemed less likely to focus on conspiracy theorizing), the r/MensRights subreddit, expression of the MRA community, was identified as the most suitable for this analysis.

r/MensRights, created in 2008 and gathering around 366,000 members at the time of writing, has remained relatively active and popular in more recent years (Horta Ribeiro et al. 2021, 200). To date, it is one of the few fully accessible manosphere subreddits – others have been quarantined or banned – because of its purportedly more ‘moderate’ stances, which makes this specific community all the more relevant to this analysis, because of the role they may play in attracting new followers while contributing to radicalization processes (Section 2).

In order to collect data where conspiracy theorizing might come out more clearly, a search for threads containing the word forms “feminism” and “feminist(s),” representing the most likely conspirators, published on r/MensRights subreddit was carried out. Anticipating that a volume of 30 to 40 threads (comprising original posts and related comments) might be suitable for manual, qualitative analysis, the 35 most recent posts – published between 15th and 25th April 2024 – were manually collected. Further scrutiny revealed that some of the threads initially collected were duplicates, which led to a final dataset of 32 threads. Excluding recurring strings like those about the time of publication of a post or comment, the number of upvotes and the links to other posts, the size of this dataset is estimated around 24,000 tokens, with an average thread length of around 1,400 tokens. The number of users participating in a single thread ranged from 1 to 10, averaging 7.8 users per thread. In total, the dataset comprises contributions from 186 different users. The dataset was uploaded to the UAM Corpus Tool software (O’Donnell 2012), where texts can be manually annotated following either featured or user-generated annotation layers.

The first annotation task consisted in identifying parts of the text potentially conveying belief in one or more CTs to then proceed with an analysis of their language. A set of exclusively content-based criteria was thus applied prior to discourse analysis to units of meaning within the texts – usually sentences, more rarely single clauses or larger paragraphs.

They were considered conspiracist, if they mentioned – i.e., gave discursive salience to – at least one of the following:

- a powerful group;
- an evil or at least morally wrong agenda;

together with at least one of the following:

- secrecy on actions and/or intentions;
- disinformation and manufacturing of information;
- damage being done to a community, working to external actors’ advantage.

While it might be argued that in order to be considered conspiracist, a unit of meaning should meet all of the above, it is also important to take into account that the analyzed texts developed over longer exchanges of posts and comments: therefore, elements might be

scattered elsewhere in the conversation or implied through the wider context of the thread and the community where the exchanges take place. Moreover, CTs can vary greatly in their forms and narratives, making it difficult to break them up into clear, discrete elements that remain consistent across all theories.

An ad-hoc annotation layer was created to categorise conspiracist units through language-based parameters, based on previous literature on CTs and manosphere discourses, and especially taking into account their shared traits (Section 2.3):

1. Whether the conspiracy theory elements listed above were explicitly acknowledged or implied;
2. Evidentiality strategies employed to support CTs as true, e.g.:
 - 2.1. References to external sources, e.g. news items or research outputs and their discursive characterization as more or less reliable, legitimate, accurate;
 - 2.2. Use of hedging or any other discursive device suggesting that an opinion is being expressed vs presenting a claim as factual;
 - 2.3. Reference to anecdotal experience, personal or reported.
3. References to conspiring actors and their victims: these can range from naming specific individuals (individualization, nomination), through referring to them as groups with specific features (collectivization, identification), representing them as a quality or object (abstraction, objectivation) or simply not mentioning them at all while still acknowledging their actions or intentions (suppression, backgrounding) (van Leeuwen 1996);
4. Predicates associated with the conspiring actors and their victims when in subject position, considered in terms of lexical choices and degree of agency;
5. Other discursive resources (e.g. rhetorical and argumentation strategies) emerging from the texts, employed to support users' stances.

The UAM "Search" tool, retrieving text strings on the basis of their annotation, was employed to analyze conspiracist discourse in the data, zooming in on specific strategies and identifying patterns deemed relevant to the research aims. This first exploratory phase was then integrated with further qualitative analysis and close reading, which included the co-text of conspiracist units of meaning. The analysis was carried out individually by the author and is therefore subjective despite partly drawing on prior theories. Moreover, it involves cases where categorization was unclear, ambiguous or layered. For the same reasons, this method cannot be applied in automated analyses. Nevertheless, it was helpful in providing some first insights into the conspiracist aspects of these texts and emerging patterns could, if

operationalized differently (e.g. as specific lexical items, semantic domains or syntactic structures) be applied to a quantitative analysis on a larger dataset. Finally, examples were selected and used to illustrate the findings in the following section: the account names of the authors of posts and comments are not disclosed here; all examples are reported as they appeared when collected (including offensive language and language/spelling inaccuracies).

4. Analysis

4.1 Degree of explicitness

Conspiracist units of meaning were identified in 27 out of the 32 threads considered, which suggests a certain degree of pervasiveness of conspiracy theorizing when feminism is mentioned in r/MensRights. The more explicitly conspiracist segments relied on words pointing to plots, such as the evocative and vague “agenda,” associated with varying levels of secrecy. For example, a user in Thread 10 labelled “Feminist hidden agenda” a news piece covering a study on patient survival with female vs male doctors – who seemed to fare worse in this specific comparison. This lexical choice hints at covert manipulation of information and rejection of epistemological authorities (Section 2.2). Some contributions explicitly echoed past authoritarian regimes: another user in Thread 10 used the simile “It starts to look like nazi propaganda” which, besides conveying mass deception, positions men in the same situation as groups persecuted by the Nazis. In Example 1, a citation from 1984 is used to comment on a perceived underestimation of situations favoring women in society. Feminism, incorporated in the tripartite structure of the quote as the complete opposite of “equality,” becomes part of one of three oxymorons allegedly imposed on society by forces akin to the 1984 regime. In Example 2, a sarcastic antiphrasis, attributed to feminists themselves through direct speech, is exploited. Here, they are made to defend themselves with the very same language used by MRAs, with “supremacy” and “under the guise” unequivocally referring to conspiratorial actions.

- (1) War is peace. Liberty is slavery. Feminism is equality. (Thread 31)

- (2) Also feminists: “Feminism totally isn't a female supremacy movement operating under the guise of equality!” (Thread 31)

More implicit conspiracist segments focused on condemning various aspects of the anti-male societal bias at the center of manosphere ideologies. Example 3 reports and comments on a news headline with a rhetorical question (useful in CT rhetoric, see Section 2.2) positing the

existence of such unfair bias. Example 5, also a question, implies total lack of accountability for women committing sexual assaults. Similarly, Example 4 points to some type of top-down manipulation as an explanation for a stop in online subscriptions to r/MensRights. By enacting a typically conspiracist pattern and excluding alternative interpretations, the episode itself is positioned as evidence of a conspiracy.

- (3) Police investigate after woman's identity shared on misogynistic Facebook groups. Double standard? (Thread 10)
- (4) Why aren't women ever mentioned when it comes to sexual assault. (Thread 10)
- (5) New people were joining our MensRights sub at about one thousand a month...then we reached 359,000.. ...and ever since its not change by a few hundred, for MONTHS... Anyone smell a rat? (Thread 2)

4.2 Evidence supporting CTs

Only around 9% of the segments categorized as indicating conspiracy theorizing (14 out of 158) were accompanied by linked or otherwise retrievable references, and around 21% (33 instances) were accompanied by any type of reference (including non-linked/non-referenced mentions of studies, videos etc.). Studies, reports and statistics interpreted as diverging from MRAs' stances were strongly criticized as ideology-driven, biased and manipulative. In Example 6, the user's delegitimation of mainstream research outputs is marked by inverted commas around the word "studies," as well as by the referential strategies employed (e.g. "agenda-driven"), vaguely implying some type of top-down control. Apart from the equally vague "actual reporting data," there is no discussion of what makes research results valid. In Example 7, feminist accounts are the object of the verb "debunk," which identifies them as disinformation; disproving them is the condition that "credible scientific studies" must meet to be considered by the user.

A distinction is thus created between academic epistemological authorities – rejected as corrupt by external influences – and other "credible," "actual," "more telling" sources. This suggests that users' reliability criteria do not lie specifically in how research is done or in expert consensus, but rather in whether results mirror their stance, which reinforces its self-sealing quality (Section 2.2).

- (6) The problem is most “studies” are based on biased, agenda driven self-reported survey information which isn't scientific. Actual reporting data, while still imperfect is much more telling. (Thread 25)
- (7) Any credible scientific studies debunking the “Feminist” assertion about sexual harassment being supposedly incredibly prevalent in the workplace? (Thread 25)

Anecdotal evidence was also uncommon in this dataset, whereas un-hedged statements presented as factual prevailed. It is reasonable to link lack of external references to social media use, regardless of community and content. Documented evidence on general patterns of source citation on social media is scarce; however, lack of references has been observed in populist and right-wing online communication in single national contexts (Hameleers 2022), as lack of fact-checking on social media has certainly boosted populist, extremist and conspiracist messages (Demata et al. 2022, 6).

4.3 References to conspiring actors

While some CTs identify specific individuals as members of the conspiring group, this was not the case in the current dataset. Consistently with Byford (2011), conspirators, identifiable yet elusive, were generally collectivized and identified with their ideological stance through labels like “feminists” and “misandrists,” with their gender identity (“women,” see Example 8) or perceived socio-political status (“elites/elitists,” Example 9). Importantly, the centrality of the lemma “feminist” (both as an adjective and noun) is determined by the initial query used to build the dataset (threads containing “feminist(s)” or “feminism”) as well as by its centrality in MRA discourse. The analogy between feminists and authoritarian regimes (Section 4.1) is also expressed through collectivizing references. Commenting on military conscription and civil service in Austria (where either of the two is compulsory for male citizens), one user wrote “Feminazis want men to die,” compounding an epithet entailing an overlap between feminists and Nazis. The comment was constructed as if feminists were behind or strongly supported Austrian legislation. Elsewhere, they were defined as “a gender supremacy cult” (religious references were also found in Aiston 2024, 711).

- (8) American women try to exert authority over foreign countries' people constantly (Thread 14)

- (9) The upside of thinking for yourself [...] is that you're that much harder to control by elitists or those with bad intentions. (Thread 29)

In some cases, the pronoun “they” was used, with no previously mentioned referent; this intensified indeterminacy, making conspirator’s identity even less clear, possibly representing collectively accepted views, which can endow them with impersonal authority and power (van Leeuwen 1996, 52). Whether anaphorically tied to a specific referent or not, “they” is instrumental in the discursive construction of conflict, marking the distance between the in-group identity and the enemy’s, as amply demonstrated by Critical Discourse Analysis (van Dijk 2003, 58) and found in both CT and manosphere discourse scholarship (Sections 2.1-2.2).

In other cases, conspiring actors were represented as more abstract entities: “feminism,” referring to ideological aspects, or “propaganda,” “misinformation,” “feminist push” and “cherry-picking,” referring to their practices. In one instance (Example 10), a parallel is drawn between feminists and “evil,” by attributing them the same predicative strategies. Introducing the parallel with “[i]t’s no coincidence” implies that nothing happens by chance, possibly hinting at powerful forces governing the world, both of which are typically conspiracist assumptions (Byford 2011).

Overall, in line with discursive traits found in other manosphere communities (Section 2.1), women and feminists are designated by othering, dehumanizing labels: some of these can construct feminists as efficiently and powerfully exerting their ideological influence on society. In a few cases, potential anti-male conspirators did not completely coincide with feminists, being somehow associated with them, e.g. the political and ideological left or society as a whole, serving whomever is in power (Example 11). Zottola and Borba (2022, 476) referred to similar discursive practices in anti-genderist CTs as “thematic bundles” that suggested the existence of overarching conspiracies. In some instances, conspirators were not mentioned at all (suppressed reference), but their presence could be implied, e.g. through generalized and impersonal expressions or agentless passive verbs (Examples 12-13).

- (10) Feminism [...] seeks to continue to exist so that it can be seen as valid. It's no coincidence that evil works in a similar fashion. [...] Evil pursues power so that it can have the means to continue to do what it wants to do: propagate untruth. (Thread 31)

- (11) Am I the only one who thinks the talk of toxic masculinity is nothing more than a shit test/manipulation test from society in order for the powers that be to keep looking for things to scrutinize in men? (Thread 23)

(12) [...] we live in a disgustingly gynocentric world [...] (Thread 18)

(13) It does not take much to get banned there, simply posting here is enough. (Thread 26)

4.4 Actions ascribed to conspiring actors: main semantic domains

4.4.1 Claims, viewpoints and intentions: the feminist agenda

Verbs like “say,” “tell,” “declare” and “think” were attributed to feminists (and other potential conspirators). As emerges from close reading, the dimension of debate is central to the alleged conspiracy, so that conspirators can be attacked because of what they claim rather than do outside the debate (e.g. political action). Conspirators’ intentions – expressed through nouns like “agenda,” “intention,” “end goal” and verbs like “want,” “try,” “seek to” – were also mentioned. Intentions ranged from mass manipulation/control (Section 4.4.2) to more explicitly anti-male objectives, which remain relatively vague except when addressing judicial systems. These predicates contributed to the attribution of unitary agency and purposes to all feminists, in line with CT narratives (Byford 2011, 71).

In a limited number of cases, feminists purportedly envision a future society without men, i.e. their “end goal,” which reflects a conspiracist apocalyptic outlook on reality (Byford 2011, 84). In both Examples 14-15, users notably state that information on such extreme goals came from feminists, to whom they directly ascribe “say” and “declare” predicates. These statements work as unfalsifiable proofs of the existence of such plans; since they are impossible to verify, and most people would not accept them as plausible, they also represent claims to a higher, ‘privileged’ knowledge that only members of the manosphere are prepared to acknowledge, a key trait in the development of conspiracist identities (Section 2.2), also noted by Aiston (2023, 240-241) in MGTOW discourse.

(14) Feminazis want men to die. I've heard them say this out loud. Men stick together, and refuse to fight. (Thread 35)

(15) Feminists have declared their intention to reduce the male pop'n to 10% of the total pop'n and to strip that remaining 10% of all rights, and use them as sperm “donors” [...]. (Thread 31)

4.4.2 Exerting influence: manipulation of information

As anticipated in Section 4.4.1, debate and communication are an arena where feminists wield their power. Accordingly, the actions attributed to (feminist) conspirators also consist in

information control and manipulation of public opinion. Example 16, for instance, explicitly uses the verb “manipulate,” coordinated with “groom,” recalling criminal (sexual) abuse against vulnerable individuals – originally minors, here “impressionable women.” Two distinct categories are created, namely feminists vs vulnerable women who, this time in line with passivizing gender stereotypes, become the victims of manipulation. Such reversal was also observed in reference to feminist and queer activists, turned by some “gender ideology” conspiracy theorists into a danger for “ordinary” women and queer people (Zottola and Borba 2022, 482).

- (16) Most feminists are hella politically lazy and they know the only way they can maintain the monopoly on gender issues is by manipulating statistics and grooming impressionable women into their cult. (Thread 15)

Moreover, the analyzed posts mention practices of “indoctrination,” “propaganda” and “monopoly on gender equality,” implying feminists’ pervasive control over society and its disguised dominant political (and economic) status. Example 17 uses the expression “collective hivemind” to convey the threat posed by feminists to individual freedom of thought. The user harshly criticizes feminists’ conception of humanity (“being a decent human being”) as the erasure of individuality; this is a trait that manosphere members themselves attach to feminists by collectivizing, abstracting and dehumanizing them, which here results in circular reasoning.

- (17) They think the only way to be a decent human being is by being part of a collective hivemind that indoctrinates you with hate and falsehoods [...] (Thread 29)

One post (Example 18) subverted the news headline “teenage boys are being bombarded with misogynist content on social media,” by reversing genders (Section 2.1). The rhetorical question, starting with “Nothing about,” implies lack of public coverage, and therefore feminist control over the media. The use of a war metaphor positions young boys as victims, while the replacement of “misogynist” with “misandrous” frames the two concepts as comparable, symmetrical, and equally present on social media.

- (18) “Teenage boys ‘bombarded’ with misogynist content Nothing about how they spend their lives being bombarded with misandrous content...? (Thread 28)

Another response to the above-cited headline metaphorically frames feminism as a pathogen or toxic substance, claiming that “university students are exposed to feminist ideas.” Other passive predicates contributing to this construction of feminists include users being “banned,” “punished for their beliefs” and “guilt-tripped” into certain beliefs. One user states that the Wikipedia entry for “misandry” is “under the control of feminists.” Additionally, conspirators are accused of exerting control over the masses by secretly fabricating and maintaining conflict or stress within the population (Example 19).

As findings suggest, and in line with previous research, users reversed the representation of movements that fight sexist and patriarchal oppression, turning them into oppressors, and in turn portraying themselves as oppressed victims. Example 20, although not marked as conspiracist, clearly enacts this reversal, creating a hierarchical system where the more privilege one is traditionally attributed, the more victimized they are. Interestingly, the verbs attributed to feminists as potential conspirators in this dataset also include instances such as “infantilize” and “gaslight,” similar to those denounced by feminists when addressing patriarchal discursive patterns.

(19) They [elites] 'll give it [legitimation] to all the right people and deny it to all the wrong people, on the basis of maximizing antagonism to daily life. The military does this too. They keep new recruits under high stress with ever-changing rules in order to make them compliant. (Thread 33)

(20) Identity politics is just terrible. They all make men out to be the devil. Bonus hate points if you are white. (Thread 22)

4.4.3 Exerting influence: the legal and political framework

Some threads concern legal and political efforts by potential conspirators. Thus, carrying out “lobbying efforts,” “attempting to pressure” a government, or to “remove” pieces of legal protection, spending “political capital” (Example 21) and “pushing for laws” (Example 22) all form part of conspirators’ predicates. They all implicitly attribute unitary interests and capacity for coordination, as well as considerable resources and power to feminists, disregarding the multiplicity of actors, groups and interests operating in any political context, including in actual conspiracies, as pointed out by Byford (2011, 20).

(21) The largest feminist organisation in the US has spent a great deal of its political capital opposing default 50:50 custody. (Thread 17)

- (22) These feminists really are pushing for laws to punish men for simply being a man. Converting their misandric feelings into law. (Thread 2)

4.4.4 Feelings: hate and anger

Some users seem to draw a connection between feminist conspirators' plots and their feelings, among which hate – typically, against men – is essential, as shown in Examples 22 (above) and 23. Feminists also allegedly promote hate in the public sphere as a mass distraction and control strategy (Example 24). In one comment, feminism is defined as “a cult of hate” and “a religion of hate,” reinforcing its perceived irrationality as well as endowing it with an elusive and mysterious status typical of conspirators' characterization (Section 2.2).

- (23) Blatant male hate propaganda. Feminist hidden agenda (Thread 1)

- (24) They [feminists] definitely want us to hate each other. (Thread 23)

Feminist hate is also directed, more abstractly, towards the “patriarchy” (whose existence is called into question, undermining their credibility) and occasionally becomes a generalized and pathologized attitude (Example 25). Hate is thus associated with behavioral, cognitive or argumentative flaws expressed through words and phrases like “misandry/misandric,” “delusionary shit” (Example 28 below), “dumb” or the infantilizing label “sensitive adult children” (Example 26).

- (25) Feminists are sick individuals with a pathological hatred for everything that's sensible or just. (Thread 21)

- (26) That's exactly why I don't comment on that subreddit [r/feminists]. They're sensitive adult children (Thread 26)

Throughout the dataset, anger is similarly ascribed to feminists/women as an emotional trait (through expressions like “angry feminists” or “angry rant on men”) and as an instrument to control people. Conversely, whereas a good part of this dataset may be – quite expectedly – angry in tone, the only instance when a poster uses “angry” in reference to themselves is a negative sentence: “This doesn't even make me angry any more (sic).” Overall, a pattern linking anti-male conspiratorial efforts to feelings rather than carefully thought-out political

objectives can be noticed. This seems in direct contradiction to the societal and political power users attribute to feminists.

4.5 MRAs' agency

Possible practical male responses to the situation of injustice and power imbalance described in the threads were discussed only in few instances (Examples 27-28). Community members portrayed themselves realizing about, discussing, describing, denouncing and criticizing the status quo, but rarely attributed themselves the agency and power to counter feminist forces. Additionally, the only nominated personalities supporting Men's Rights within the dataset were women (Bettina Arndt, Erin Pizzey).

(27) Men stick together, and refuse to fight [in reference to military conscription] (Thread 35)

(28) Men... It's time to hit the streets and stop this insane delusionary shit. (Thread 32)

Overall, it seems that victimized men are portrayed as relatively powerless or unwilling to take action (as shown by studies on incels and MGTOW), apart from voicing their dissent and revealing feminists' wrongdoing online. While consistent with conspiracy theorists' determination to fight conspirators, this diverges from the ever-present prospect of a victory that Byford (2011, 84) had described as common among CT believers.

4.6 What conspiracy?

The instances of conspiracy theorizing retrieved in this analysis do not form an internally coherent theory. There is variation, for example, between the assumption that feminists or women actively maneuver society in their own favor and their taking advantage of favorable powerful forces in society (as exemplified in the dataset by expressions like "warped cultural agenda," "feminist nations," "countries that discriminate in favor of women"). In some cases, feminists' hidden agenda seems aimed at maintaining or increasing societal and political power, to men's detriment; elsewhere, extreme dystopian purposes are mentioned (i.e., creating a society without men, or where men have no rights).

There is no shared account of specific conspiring personalities, while vagueness emerges about their actions and plans. Specific events (generally described by media outlets linked in a post or comment) or studies are sometimes cited as proving the existence of an anti-male agenda; however there does not seem to exist, in these posts, cohesive shared knowledge about

the alleged anti-male conspiracy. Elements of CT discourse nonetheless contribute to defining the identities – men/MRAs versus women/feminists – at the basis of the MRA narrative, positioning them within the framework of social conflict and power imbalance.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Building on prior scholarship recognizing links between CTs and manosphere ideology, this study examines conspiracist discourse within r/MensRights, affirming its significance even in the absence of explicit ties to more radical subcultures. The findings suggest that conspiracy theorizing in the dataset does not constitute a coherent knowledge system or narrative. Previous scholarship has indeed observed that CTs may circulate in a “diluted,” not fully defined, mitigated set of interpretative patterns, assertions and arguments, adaptable to different contexts and audiences (Procházka and Blommaert 2021, 5; Byford 2011, 93-94). The conspiracist discursive elements identified in the dataset intertwine and partly overlap with discursive features previously detected in manosphere discourse studies. The CT approach adopted here facilitated a more nuanced understanding of these discursive features and their functions.

Firstly, within the dichotomous, Manichean view of society depicted by MRAs, dehumanizing and essentialist representations of feminists/women could adopt conspiracist traits by representing them as collectivities, authoritarian regimes and abstract concepts, or by implicating rather than directly mentioning their presence. Their predicates pertain to the semantic domains of debate, intentionality, information/mass manipulation and, to a lesser degree, legal and political influence, meaning that users in this dataset placed feminists’ power at the level of ideas, claims and communication, rather than political action. Overall, vagueness and implicitness in their portrayal enhanced their mysterious and elusive character as well as their perceived power. This discursive construction contrasts with the hating, angry, irrational, foolish and juvenile qualities – consistent with manosphere misogynistic tones – simultaneously attributed to them by users.

Secondly, the analysis underlined how, within in-group victimization dynamics (identified by previous research), conspiracy theorizing may serve to recast diminished agency as heroic exposure of hidden plots. In some cases, such framing worked as a claim to a higher, privileged knowledge, rejected by epistemological authorities and therefore valued and supported.

Thirdly, conspiracy theorizing was found to aid in the deployment of misleading argumentation. False symmetries were identified, in line with previous studies (e.g., between misogyny and misandry), along with clear-cut distinctions (e.g., legitimate vs corrupt

knowledge, feminists vs other, “impressionable” women). A CT approach was useful in highlighting the self-sealing, unfalsifiable quality of some of the claims in the analyzed threads. On the one hand, the elusive nature of conspirators and their plans in the dataset may be implicitly justified by claims that the truth is being hidden or censored, rendering evidence inaccessible. On the other hand, rather than drawing on verifiable external sources, evidence is generally presented through unverifiable, un-hedged statements (e.g., concerning perceived censorship and information manipulation), evaluation of research reliability based on whether it aligns with the community’s views, and seemingly open-ended questions that subtly lead to a confirmation of the user’s beliefs.

This analysis suggests that conspiracy theorizing, however vague and subtle, may be a handy tool in MRA Reddit discourse, where it intertwines with anti-feminist discourse and is particularly useful in reversing victim and oppressor narrative roles. The thought processes, discursive practices and social dynamics enabling such radical operation and making it acceptable for people gravitating around these communities are key to the appeal of the manosphere, and should be further analyzed and discussed, possibly together with those directly involved in its promotion.

Further research would benefit from combining qualitative and quantitative approaches on larger datasets. Along with a more accurate description of discursive trends concerning manosphere CTs, it may reflect and inquire more deeply into the function of conspiracy theorizing within these communities – e.g., how deep it lies in the manosphere system of beliefs, whether it operates as a core or marginal component of the main narrative, whether it fulfils more epistemic or persuasive functions. A nuanced understanding of these dynamics might help devise arguments and strategies for constructive responses to these dangerous and damaging messages.

Bionote

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