

## ARTICLE

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## The Masculinities and Emotions of Men Going Their Own Way

### *An Ethnographic Study on the MGTOW Reddit Forum*

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**Abstract:** *The manosphere consists of numerous anti-feminist websites, blogs, and online forums that are now widely considered misogynistic and male supremacist. Among the heterogeneous manosphere groups is the gender-separatist Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW). This article recounts a four-week digital ethnographic study that investigated the emotional and relational dynamics of the Reddit MGTOW forum. I found that rage and fear toward women are central to MGTOW users, as users worked together to reinterpret their feelings of rage and fear to construct a shared narrative that positions women as perpetrators. This worldview obscures the important role masculine ideology plays in male loneliness and disconnection. Giving advice and emotional support on the forum cultivated a sense of belonging and provided a space for men to navigate feelings of loneliness, frustration, and social displacement. Ultimately, MGTOW users expressed a desire to transcend restrictive gender ideals such as husband and father, yet paradoxically still adhered to a conservative, essentialized, and hierarchical gender order. MGTOW users thus performed hybrid masculinity, as they self-conceptualized as victims of society and simultaneously upheld preexisting gender hierarchies that situate femininity as biologically inferior. This study offers a new insight into the magnetism of anti-feminist groups like MGTOW and the ways digital platforms like Reddit amplify such harmful and antagonistic worldviews. Overall, this article highlights the importance of unpacking the affectionate and positive relationships within extremist groups to help explain the emergence into mainstream discourse of male supremacy and an increase of misogynistic beliefs concerning masculinity, femininity, and feminism.*

**Keywords:** manosphere, MGTOW, digital ethnography, masculinity, emotion, male supremacy.

Since the early 2000s, groups of men across the globe have gathered in online spaces referred to as the “manosphere” to deal with the supposed oppression men face in contemporary society. Angry about what they interpret as systemic disadvantages in the home, workplace, and courtroom, manosphere subgroups gather across niche online forums and major social media platforms to deal with the perceived “gynocentrism”

of society.<sup>1</sup> For instance, pick-up artists share ritualistic and intimidating techniques to pursue female sexual conquests (Jane 2018, 666), and incels coalesce around their shared experiences of sexlessness and loneliness (Kimmel 2013; Witt 2020). The “red pill,” a term appropriated from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, purports to “awaken men to feminism’s misandry and brainwashing” (Ging 2019, 640) and is the underlying philosophy of many manosphere communities. At its core, the red pill posits women as biologically evil and draws on hand-picked theories from biological determinism and evolutionary psychology to justify its claims (O’Malley, Holt, and Holt 2022, 13).

Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) is one such red pill subgroup within online manosphere spaces concerned with male oppression. MGTOW uniquely promotes a separatist philosophy: adherents are encouraged to live self-empowered lives away from women to prioritize their finances, hobbies, and careers. Self-preservation and personal development are pursued by avoiding romantic and sexual relationships, reducing contact with women, and sometimes even practicing celibacy (Wright, Trott, and Jones 2020, 910). This article focuses on the main site of MGTOW activity, [reddit.com/r/MGTOW](https://www.reddit.com/r/MGTOW), which peaked in 2021 with over 100,000 users and 600,000 posts. In August 2021, shortly after this research was conducted, Reddit banned [r/MGTOW](https://www.reddit.com/r/MGTOW) for breaking the site’s policies against the promotion of violence and hate (ADL 2024). Despite the closure of the subreddit, this article still offers crucial knowledge about how similar male supremacist beliefs become normalized in contemporary gender discourse (Solea and Sugiura 2023, 315).

In recent years, incels have gained public attention for their extremist beliefs (BBC 2019; Zand 2022) and have been identified as an ongoing terrorist threat (Ware, Hoffman, and Shapiro 2020) for their misogynistic attacks across North America. At least eight mass violence attacks were attributed to the incel ideology by 2022 (Zimmerman 2024, 166). Meanwhile, the violent rhetoric of MGTOW seems to have escaped the attention of mainstream news media. This oversight may be due to MGTOW’s separatist approach to the “male situation,” which could be interpreted as less extreme than other manosphere ideologies. However, the Southern Poverty Law Center (“Men Going Their Own Way,” n.d.) categorizes MGTOW as an extremist male supremacist movement due to its displays of misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia. The MGTOW Reddit community’s active period requires scholarly attention to further understand the popularity of male supremacy and its symbolic and physical violence against women.

Criminological and terrorism studies have linked manosphere engagement with traits of radicalization (Habib, Srinivasan, and Nithyanand 2022) and evaluated the extent of politicization in manosphere discourse (Zimmerman 2024). Other researchers (Decook 2019; Carian, DiBranco, and Kelly 2023) highlight how incel and red pill

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1 In the manosphere, gynocentrism refers to the practice of prioritizing women’s needs and perspectives over men’s.

worldviews long for a return to a white and Christian version of patriarchy, which implies the existence of white supremacist, xenophobic, and transphobic systemic ideologies alongside male supremacism. There is a growing body of masculinity studies on incels, including critical discourse analyses and interviews (Daly and Reed 2022; Solea and Sugiura 2023).

There is less research published on MGTOW. Lin (2017, 93) conducted an initial exploration of r/MGTOW participations and routines and found the ideology is primarily “a masculinist reaction to feminism that finds its conclusions in antifeminism, radicalism and anarchism.” Gorska, Kulicka, and Jemielniak (2023) identify a similar anti-feminist and misogynistic orientation to MGTOW on Twitter/X. However, insights from Twitter/X studies cannot fully represent Reddit communities, as the short-form posting style fosters different communication patterns and social dynamics compared to Reddit’s thread-based format.

Interesting findings concerning MGTOW on Reddit are provided by Wright, Trott, and Jones (2020), who found the two most common forum topics were women and rationalizing the MGTOW lifestyle. They found that discussions were mostly civil with little disagreement, a pattern also identified in Trott, Beckett, and Paech’s (2022) quantitative study on the same subreddit. Trott, Beckett, and Paech highlight a high level of internal civility between members despite the high levels of hatred directed toward outsiders. This internal cohesion fostered a sense of belonging through shared emotional connections and fulfilment of users’ needs, which is a strong component in the radicalization process.

While these studies offer important insights into the nature of r/MGTOW topics, ideology, and community health, there are currently no qualitative studies that investigate the construction of internal relationships and the role of emotions on the r/MGTOW subreddit. This article therefore addresses two main research gaps. To begin with, this is the first study to explicitly focus on the role of emotions in the MGTOW community, which scholars of the far right indicate are critical in the construction of cohesion, shared purpose, and meaning in extremist communities (Miller-Idriss 2020, 11). Secondly, manosphere researchers rarely focus on the nature of relationships between insider members. This article brings a new lens to the discussion by analyzing the *positive* relationships between MGTOW members, which will help demonstrate how and why male supremacist communities attract and retain such high numbers of members.

This article presents findings from a virtual ethnographic study on the MGTOW subreddit, r/MGTOW, conducted in 2021. Research was guided by the following questions: 1) *What types of masculinity are constructed on r/MGTOW, and to what extent do gender constructions challenge broader systemic values?* 2) *How are insider relationships established on r/MGTOW?* 3) *What kinds of emotions play a role in identity construction and relationship formation on r/MGTOW?*

After discussing the theoretical framework and methodology, this article discusses three themes from the findings. “Gray Men and Constructions of Masculinity”

deconstructs the ideal MGTOW masculine figure, the “gray man.” The gray man suggests a desire to transcend oppressive gendered social roles yet simultaneously revolves around a traditional and essentialized gender order that paints women and femininity as biologically inferior and dangerous. Users’ appropriation of victimhood suggests they performed a type of hybrid masculinity that claims social marginalization yet reproduces existing gendered power dynamics.

In “Affectionate Relationships and Loneliness,” I look at how supportive masculine relationships on the forum created a welcome atmosphere and seemingly provided an antidote to men’s loneliness. Users traced their suffering to the evil nature of women, which obscured the role of a harmful masculine ideology in experiences of loneliness. “Fear, Rage, and Reddit” examines expressions of fear and rage on the forum, which were communally interpreted to fit their experiences into an existing misogynistic ideology. As such, the MGTOW forum may be considered an *outrage venue* (Berry and Sobieraj 2014) where like-minded individuals gather to hear misogynistic narratives repeated, beliefs cemented, and meaning and legitimacy given to individual suffering. Ultimately, users framed the MGTOW lifestyle, ideology, and community as a solution to men’s isolation, effectively disguising extreme male supremacist rhetoric in an appealing narrative.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Male Privilege and Misogyny***

It is useful to begin by understanding what leads discontented men to the manosphere, and how misogyny is articulated inside male supremacist spaces. In the latter half of the twentieth century, women’s widespread entry into the workforce, the breakdown of the traditional labor market, wage stagnation, and the recognition of female, LGBTQ+, and immigrants’ rights (Ging 2019, 652) caused some men to feel displaced. Some articulate this experience of destabilized male privilege as a “crisis of masculinity,” which refers to a perceived social exclusion and racial or gender disadvantage that views women and immigrants as economic and social threats. Studies of the far right give further insight into how the process of deindustrialization gave rise to the alienated and angry white male (Kimmel 2013, 22–26), resulting in exclusionary and dehumanizing ideological beliefs that aim to preserve the superiority and hierarchy of dominant groups (Miller-Idriss 2020).

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that the extent and quality of men’s social relations continue to decline in proportion to women’s, especially within the Global North (Ferrara and Vergara 2024). In the US, this “male loneliness epidemic” has been partially linked to the decrease in social infrastructures, such as churches and clubs, which resulted in an unprecedented increase in loneliness (Putnam 2000). Additionally, studies over the past thirty years have consistently indicated that adherence to and policing of dominant masculine norms disincentivize boys and men from developing intimate and sustained same-gender friendships (Ferrara and Vergara 2024; Campos-

Castillo et al. 2020; Vierra, Beltran, and Robnett 2023). These studies theorize that it is men who pressure one another to adhere to masculine norms such as emotionlessness, heterosexuality, and avoidance of femininity.

In the manosphere, it is common to see men blame women for their experiences of isolation and perceived social oppression (see, for example, Wright, Trott, and Jones 2020; Jane 2018). Such blame is typically expressed through iterations of misogyny such as rape threats and “cum tributes” (Jane 2018, 664).<sup>2</sup> Manne (2018) explains that misogyny is not an individual social act but a social system that upholds the patriarchal order by punishing women who step outside of patriarchal norms. In other words, men exhibit reactionary anger when the benefits they believed they were entitled to are not delivered (Kimmel 2013, 8).

Misogynistic acts of violence linked to the manosphere can be explained as aggrieved entitlement (Kimmel 2013) in response to the violation of patriarchal norms and expectations (Manne 2018). For example, Vito, Admire, and Hughes (2017) found that Elliot Rodger, self-proclaimed incel mass murderer, felt entitled to sexual and romantic privileges and became frustrated when they were not received. For incels, sex with women is the most important entitlement because “failure to have heterosexual sex signals not only sexual incompetency or virginity but also raises suspicions of homosexuality” (4). Similarly, Zimmerman (2024, 174) argues that incels use acts of mass violence to exact revenge on those they believe have wronged them and to temporarily situate themselves as the ultimate hegemonic male.

### *Masculinity in the Manosphere*

Connell and Messerschmidt’s theory of *hegemonic masculinity* involves a hierarchical model topped by an “ideal” man with all privileged attributes—for instance, white, upper class, able-bodied, and straight. The term encompasses not a physical description of a fixed transhistorical model but an abstract category of dominating characteristics. Hegemonic constructions of masculinity do not necessarily correspond closely to men’s actual lives. What is most important is the relational nature of the concept and how it is associated with other identities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 838). Four further conceptions of masculinity sit below the hegemonic: complicit masculinity is not hegemonic but realizes some benefits of gender relations; subordinate masculinity encompasses deviant, effeminate identities; marginalized masculinities are those trivialized or discriminated against; and lastly, protest masculinities are compensatory hypermasculinities that are formed in reaction to a lack of economic or social power. Hegemonic and subordinate masculinities are contextually dependent and “shape a sense of what is ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ gendered behavior” (Messerschmidt 2019, 90).

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<sup>2</sup> Ejaculating onto a printed image of a woman and sharing evidence online, often for degradation.

Hybrid masculinity is a concept elaborated by Bridges and Pascoe (2014), an idealized masculinity different from hegemonic masculinity. By selectively incorporating performances and identity elements usually associated with marginalized and subordinated identities (such as ethnic minorities or women), hybrid masculinities allow men to strategically situate their identity away from hegemonic masculinity. Hybrid masculinities are sometimes celebrated for challenging traditional gender norms, but, ultimately, they still uphold patriarchal systems of power (Bridges and Pascoe 2014, 251). For example, feminist men who perform emotional sensitivity yet still reproduce structural inequalities through sexist or homophobic jokes.

Literature on masculinity in the manosphere varies in specifying which models of masculinity are performed. Ghumkhor and Mir (2022, 147) believe that the manosphere assumes “a shared masculinity that cuts across cultures and faiths” as the “crisis of masculinity transcends acute political, economic, and social differences.” In contrast, Solea and Sugiura (2023) remark how diverse manifestations of masculinity are performed within different manosphere groups: while men’s rights activists (MRAs) perform exaggerated hegemonic masculinity, incels are more contradictory and adopt a marginalized depiction of masculinity. Alternatively, Vito, Admire, and Hughes (2017, 90) find that incels are not genuinely social deviants but in fact overconform to dominant conceptions of hegemonic masculinity. Perhaps Ging (2019, 62) is most accurate in mapping manosphere gender performances. Her systematic review across the heterogenous manosphere finds that men adopt hegemonic masculinity when it suits them, and distance themselves from the concept when they wish to appear or feel socially marginalized.

Manosphere literature suggests a diversity of gender expressions and performances. Research question 1 asks: *What kinds of masculinities are constructed on r/MGTOW, and to what extent do gender constructions challenge broader systemic values?* This article adds to the gender and manosphere discussion by focusing on how *MGTOW* on Reddit relates to broader cultural perceptions of hegemonic masculinity.

### ***Emotions in Digital Cultures***

Scholars of extremism and the far right recognize affect and emotion as driving forces of hateful digital cultures, attracting and binding members together through compelling sentimental narratives (Witt 2020; Ahmed 2004; Deem 2019; Ganesh 2020). Affect is the precognitive bodily experience that precedes emotion, whereas emotion can be understood as the conscious means of translating affect into the (socialized) language of the mind (Papacharissi 2015). Papacharissi emphasizes the role of affect and emotion within political subcultures: the phrase “affective publics” refers to networked communities that are mobilized and connected through expressions of sentiment. It is important to acknowledge that affective flows online are not fleeting but remain resonant with members even after specific links or content disappear (9).

Like Papacharissi, Ahmed (2004, 20) points out that “affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is . . . the circulation between objects and signs,” working to align individuals within communities through the strength of their collective attachments. It is the alignment with the collective that brings the individual into being. Ahmed argues that the far right is fueled not by hatred and frustration but by love and protectionism, which is channeled as hatred toward the other. While Ahmed suggests examples from nationalist and white supremacist communities, this theory also applies to male supremacist groups and can help us understand how the circulation of affect does not simply inspire hate and anger toward women but also cultivates a shared sense of purpose, cohesion, and belonging (Miller-Idriss 2020, 11).

According to Kimmel (2013, 36), the emotions of American masculine communities do not occur organically but are consciously constructed by the *outrage media*. Berry and Sobieraj (2014) explain how the outrage media aims to provoke emotional responses in audiences through overgeneralizations, sensationalism, inaccurate information, and the vilification of opponents. The outrage economy is an outcome of regulatory and technological changes to the media landscape that make this content profitable. Outrage discourse takes up residence in “outrage venues,” where similar-minded attendants hear their values rearticulated in convincing ways through vocabulary and styles of delivery familiar to them (Berry and Sobieraj 2014, 8). This theory is particularly applicable to Reddit. The site’s “karma” system allows each user to upvote or downvote a post or comment, translating to a “karma score” for the original poster. Reddit’s algorithm then prioritizes highly upvoted posts on the subreddit’s homepage—including “popular” and “hot” feeds—which tend to be more extreme, sensationalist, and value-affirming content. In contrast, posts and comments with more nuanced or oppositional viewpoints tend to be downvoted, limiting their visibility. As explained by Massanari (2017), this “karmic” voting system functions within Reddit’s “attention economy,” which encourages toxic cultures to proliferate.

Papacharissi’s (2015) and Ahmed’s (2004) theories suggest that tracing the circulation of affect and emotion helps us understand the collective magnetism of manosphere communities. The concepts of outrage media and outrage venues (Berry and Sobieraj 2014) include the role of the platform in explaining how hateful communities coalesce around emotion-laden issues. So far, the role of emotion in community building has been explored in incel communities (Witt 2020) but not in MGTOW. Research questions 2 and 3 address this gap: *How are insider relationships established on r/MGTOW? And what kinds of emotions play a role in identity construction and relationship formation on r/MGTOW?*

### Site Description

Manosphere groups concerned with male oppression, like MGTOW, can be traced to men’s liberation movements from the 1970s that criticized traditional masculinity (Ging 2019). Ribeiro et al. (2021) suggest that members of older men’s rights groups

(such as pick-up artists and men's rights activists) gradually migrated to alternative and more extreme subsets of the manosphere. This explains why the newer MGTOW community was the most active and popular manosphere group, particularly after [reddit.com/r/Incels](https://www.reddit.com/r/Incels) was banned in late 2017 (Ribeiro et al. 2021). The user base of [reddit.com/r/MGTOW](https://www.reddit.com/r/MGTOW) grew steadily after its 2011 launch and reached over six hundred thousand posts by 2020 (Wright, Trott, and Jones 2020). MGTOW communities used a complicated insider language that is shared across similar manosphere sites, with naturalistic and deterministic lingo to explain their social oppression, such as “alpha” and “beta” men and “hypergamous” females.

The MGTOW subreddit used the same user interface as all other subreddits hosted on the parent site, Reddit. The forum's self-description read: “This subreddit is for men going their own way, forging their own identities and paths to self-defined success.”<sup>3</sup> There were ten forum rules that aimed to sustain peaceful interactions, keep the forum content relevant, and avoid any content that could harm the subreddit's perceived legitimacy. When this research was conducted in 2021, the community was “quarantined” by Reddit. This meant posts were excluded from the Reddit homepage “popular” feeds, searches, and recommendations, and users attempting to enter the subreddit were first required to agree to view offensive content.<sup>4</sup> The quarantine of [r/MGTOW](https://www.reddit.com/r/MGTOW) in December 2018 was probably due to the Southern Poverty Law Center's classification of MGTOW as a male supremacist ideology (“Male Supremacy,” n.d.).

## Methods

Throughout April and May 2021, I undertook a virtual ethnography of the Reddit MGTOW forum. In virtual ethnography, the researcher observes a forum that evolves in real time and participates in the group cultures to gain insider meanings and feelings (Hine 2000). This enables the researcher to access the unique insider experiences—making sense of a messy arrival of comments and posts, waiting for responses, and encountering periods of high and low activity—in the same way an insider would. The advantages over content analysis were plentiful: I noticed smaller details such as changes in mood, reported or deleted content, and hidden threads that would not appear in a keyword archive search. I treated the field as a living and shifting space instead of a data store, as the virtual field was a place where things happened, identities were formed, and understandings of the world were contested.

Conducting research into the manosphere entails risks that may increase after work is published, so methodological choices must be thoughtful and anticipatory (Massanari

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3 See “[r/MGTOW Stats](https://subredditsstats.com/r/MGTOW),” Subreddit Stats, accessed April 7, 2025, <https://subredditsstats.com/r/MGTOW>.

4 See “[Quarantined Communities](https://support.reddithelp.com/hc/en-us/articles/360043069012-Quarantined-Communities),” Reddit Help Center, accessed April 22, 2025, <https://support.reddithelp.com/hc/en-us/articles/360043069012-Quarantined-Communities>.

2018). Hine (2000) advises that if there are significant risks of harm to the researcher, sometimes the “lurker” position in virtual ethnography is preferable (see also Kozinets 2010). A lurker can become invisible like all other forum users while still actively reading and participating in the temporal experiences of the community (Hine 2000, 48). In my case, being a lurker alleviated some risks for a female researcher participating in a misogynistic community. Nevertheless, it did not mean I was a passive observer during the research: I was, to some extent, a participant—sharing the concerns, emotions, and commitments of the research subjects (47). To expose myself to the MGTOW community lifestyle, I also listened to MGTOW podcasts and interviews and read tweets from MGTOW accounts.

I began with a two-week familiarization phase by visiting various Reddit forums and watching manosphere YouTube videos. This was followed by four weeks watching, anticipating, and experiencing emotional reactions as forum discussions unfolded every day on reddit.com/r/MGTOW. As a relational ethnographer (Desmond 2014) I paid attention to the relations between the community members: the tensions, conflicts, friendships, and hierarchies occurring in the MGTOW ecosphere. I browsed forum threads based on their activity level and their number of “upvotes.” The most popular and active posts were easy to navigate as Reddit allows users to select the “top posts” from the “past 24 hours,” “past seven days,” “past month,” or “ever.” This was a helpful feature as posts on r/MGTOW per day would reach up to fifty and comments per day over five hundred.<sup>5</sup>

At the end of the study period, all data were categorized into four groups: elicited (textual data taken directly from the forum observation), archival (preexisting and filtered for relevance), fieldnotes (my observations, interpretations, and reflections), and contextual (e.g., YouTube, articles, and podcasts). To ensure forum users’ privacy and keep with the forum’s anonymity, all discussions referring to specific individuals have personal details redacted.

## Results and Discussion

### *“Gray Men” and Masculinity*

Many MGTOW users self-identified as or aspired to become a *gray man*. The gray man represented the highest adherence to the MGTOW lifestyle and avoided all unnecessary social encounters to pass through life undetected and trouble free. As one user described it, a gray man “maintains a low profile and seeks shelter within himself and his close environment.”<sup>6</sup> Users frequently discussed the gray man philosophy and lifestyle. What was most intriguing about the gray man was the freedom it gave men to pursue their

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5 “r/MGTOW Stats.”

6 All r/MGTOW quotes are presented as originally posted, with no corrections made to spelling, grammar, or punctuation.

own hobbies and form identities without the “shackles” of traditional fatherhood and marriage. Living an independent gray life was admired because it allowed one to explore hobbies, see the world, and enjoy an early retirement. This was summarized by one user, who remarked, “when I got divorced it took about three months for it to dawn on me that I can keep my pet snakes in the living room. I don’t have to keep them in the garage anymore lol.” In opposition to the freedom afforded to a gray man, users pointed out how other submissive and modern men “would not make the profits they could or even went out of business because their girlfriend or wife demanded so much time from them.”

MGTOW’s gray man enlightenment was a double-edged sword: it exposed the frustrating “truth” of gynocentrism but also presented men with the choice to adjust their lives accordingly. As expressed by one user, “we’re about freedom, and that freedom includes the option of going back to the plantation as a slave.” The slave on the plantation refers to a man who adheres to mainstream masculine expectations. For example, the worst imaginable scenario for most users was a settled life with children and a wife, who would drain their time and finances, restrict their livelihoods, and inevitably betray or abandon them. One user emphasized the importance of pursuing a life with the goal of “retir[ing] at the age of 30–40 . . . marriage and [kids] will only get in the way of this and so would trying to date for sex or a relationship.”

At first glance, the high regard for gray men in the MGTOW forum might suggest a progressive attempt to reject traditional expectations of masculinity. Living as a gray man is a refusal and critique of family gender roles, as users viewed fatherhood and marriage as dangerous for their finances, health, and well-being. One user wrote, “we serve as sperm banks and ATMs to women, and that is all we are to them.” Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate below, the independent and liberated gray man philosophy is limited in its challenge of masculinity and patriarchy considering how the gray man’s attributes reaffirm wider cultural notions of a patriarchal gender order.

MGTOW users still subscribed to a conservative, traditional, and dichotomous understanding of gender. The “true” male nature, epitomized by the gray man, was associated with aggression, intelligence, physical strength, and self-sufficiency. One user recalled how, during a difficult childhood, “I had to cut my own branches, pitch my own tent and brew my own coffee. I never received any helping-hand, nor did anyone really care what became of me.” Desirable masculine values and qualities like these were defined in opposition to undesirable masculine values, a division that also reflected the symbolic division between MGTOW and all other men. One user reflected how modern men “can’t make decisions / they are not loyal, they are afraid of everything, they cower to others that show any strength, they see strength as a weakness.” Another user remarked, “I still have a few guy friends but for the most part most men lack ethics and drive to be men.” Despite the critique of gendered expectations offered by the gray man philosophy, this dichotomous view of masculinity reflects adherence to broader gender structures that give meaning to masculine characteristics by situating them in opposition to an inferior femininity (Messerschmidt 2019). In other words, if the gray

man is the MGTOW masculine ideal, it only derives such status via comparison with an undesirable, exaggerated femininity (Messerschmidt 2019).

As for portrayals and expectations of women, MGTOW users often reminisced about the (imagined) women of a nostalgic patriarchal past, who were moral, monogamous, and modest. One user remarked how, “if society somehow got its culture back to monogamy, a lot of the issues with modern women would disappear.” Compared to the respectable women of the past, participants regarded the modern-day woman as promiscuous, deceptive, and scheming. This generally negative view of women was often legitimized through the language of pseudoscience, which judged women on their utility or danger to men. For example, as one user commented:

You just have to expect hypergamy, Briffaults Law, monkey branching and cheating. That’s the package deal, it’s the nature of what you’re dealing with. It’s no different from a cat sharpening its claws on your furniture. That’s what they [women] do. It’s their nature and you’ll never prevent it.

Hypergamy refers to the tendency for women to marry above their social status, education, or income. Briffault’s law says that the female has the power to establish relationships, depending on whether they benefit her or not. Monkey branching is the act of women secretly lining up potential romantic interests. The use of these pseudoscientific theories not only answers men’s complex feelings of displacement, anxiety, and frustration, but also seems to legitimize hateful rhetoric.

Similar to my observations of MGTOW users, incels also demonstrate a dichotomous view of masculinity and use a lexicon of pseudoscience in their vilification of women. Despite self-identifying as deviant and low on the gender hierarchy (Daly and Reed 2022), incels, research suggests, subscribe to wider hegemonic masculine traits such as excessive aggression (O’Malley, Holt, and Holt 2022) and success in the heterosexual marketplace. Incels situate the alpha or zeta male as superordinate (both of whom excel in social and sexual pursuits),<sup>7</sup> whereas MGTOW users refuse sex and relationships, preferring gray man independence. How can we compare constructions of hegemonic masculinity in two ideologically different manosphere groups? MGTOW users pursue a separatist lifestyle and avoid sexual or romantic relationships with women, which suggests that—unlike incels—their gender performances deviate from Western hegemonic masculinities that emphasize sexual prowess. In fact, an accomplished and respectable gray man rejects women in all spheres, including romantic, social, professional, and even familial ties. While both groups construct masculinity in opposition to inferior femininity, incels frame their struggle around exclusion from heterosexual success, whereas MGTOW users redefine masculine achievement through deliberate withdrawal: illustrating two different responses to the perceived failures of modern gender relations.

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<sup>7</sup> Zeta males are a new type of “sociosexual warrior” who transcend the apparent gynocentric social hierarchy (Ging 2019, 650).

Research question 1 asked: *What types of masculinity are constructed in MGTOW, and to what extent do gender constructions challenge broader systemic values?* On the surface, the MGTOW gray man philosophy suggests a desire to transcend broader systemic masculine roles and give men freedom to pursue their own identity configurations away from the restrictions of marriage and childrearing. But illustrations of gendered subjects within the forum were still binary, traditional, and misogynistic. MGTOW users thus presented a contradiction: their worldview was structured squarely around traditional superior hegemonic masculinity and biologically inferior femininity, yet they challenged and critiqued typical traditional masculine characteristics and expectations. The MGTOW worldview misguidedly attributes the harmful impacts of patriarchal family values back to the biological, moral, and intellectual inferiority of women rather than the system of patriarchy, which structures expectations for men in the romantic and family sphere.

Therefore, rather than understanding MGTOW users as overconforming to hegemonic masculine ideals (Vito, Admire, and Hughes 2017), it is more accurate to understand users as enacting a *hybrid* form of masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). This involves selectively incorporating performances usually associated with marginalized or alternative identities. The MGTOW users performance of victimhood and its adherents' refusal of sexual or romantic pursuits present an alternative masculinity that, however, does not challenge existing powers and structures of inequality. Hybrid masculinity means MGTOW men can strategically appear outside of hegemonic masculinity, masking the profits they reap from their superordinate position in the gender hierarchy (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Casting themselves as *victims* of an oppressive gender order excuses and normalizes misogynistic MGTOW narratives and absolves users of responsibility for symbolic or literal harm to women.

One might wonder why men in the manosphere lean toward patriarchal and misogynistic gender views rather than construct alternative or less harmful masculinities that would allow them to further transcend restrictive patriarchal expectations. Manne (2018) explains how misogyny is fundamentally an act of punishing women for perceived violations of the patriarchal code. From the MGTOW perspective, women prevented full enjoyment of men's independence and livelihoods, which was a perceived infringement on their rights as men. For example, women who did not allow their husbands to keep snakes in the house, or women who won custody of children in court cases, were fundamentally disobeying patriarchal values that taught men to expect superiority and certain privileges in their romantic and family lives. Not finding such expectations met explains the retaliatory misogyny that sought to restore the traditional patriarchal order by "inflicting hostile or adverse social consequences on women" to enforce desirable gendered social norms (Manne 2018, 13).

### ***Affectionate Relationships and Loneliness***

A striking observation from the ethnography was a high frequency of supportive, affectionate, and caring posts and comments. To understand the magnetism of the

forum, it is insightful to examine r/MGTOW's most popular type of interaction: advice and emotional support.

MGTOW users often demonstrated affection toward fellow users and offered advice to those experiencing hardship. In response to a post about a user struggling with grief after losing his father, responses offered companionship, such as "If you want to talk I'm here man, but rest assured your father is in a very very loving place." In other cases, support was offered in the form of financial advice. For example, men encouraged entrepreneurship and investment for early retirement in the hope of giving other members financial freedom from the oppression of family life: "Live your own life, man. These ladies generally major in stupid shit and rack up a ton of debt. Work your ass off and build some chips to have a happy and amazing life down the road." One user poetically termed their community a brotherhood: "I see us as the beginning of another brotherhood of warriors of the mind, that savors truth and wisdom from all sources, like mountain springs, and we are becoming a river."

The supportive and affectionate atmosphere on r/MGTOW came with a strict delineation of insiders versus outsiders, reinforcing feelings of community cohesion. There was an extensive list of outsiders that MGTOW users viewed as antagonistic to their cause, such as feminine men, feminists, trans people, and women. For example, one user stated, "male feminists are almost always massive shitbags in real life," and another believed the MGTOW lifestyle "terrifies the feminine, females, soyboys etc because it means you don't care . . . if they live or die." Another user warned others to expect that "minorities and transgenders [will] get free money off your tax dollars in the next five-ten years." In this sense, the MGTOW forum was not simply a masculine space: racial, sexual, and political identities were also negotiated, policed, and excluded.

The masculine-coded and exclusive MGTOW brotherhood was a sanctuary for men who felt lonely in an increasingly "feminized" society. One user claimed that, through giving advice, "the red pill and MGTOW are saving lives." The emotional and social support on r/MGTOW was likely a critical factor in its ability to attract and maintain members. Indeed, one user stated, "Ok I may be only 17 and my life hasn't started yet but I oddly feel welcome here with y'all. Being a straight white male is rough these days. But I feel welcome." Young men experiencing loneliness perceived r/MGTOW as a welcoming and supportive community that could alleviate their suffering and give direction to complex feelings.

Users often traced these experiences of loneliness to the same source: women. One user, reflecting on his new job, remarked, "I kinda miss my male dominant, blue-collar job because I could talk about anything with the fellas." This was one of many indications that men experienced a lack of (offline) male friendships and were frustrated with the encroachment of women into previously male-dominated spaces. Manne (2018, 108) explains that the angry male response to the increased female presence in male spaces is one manifestation of how men believe they are entitled to masculine-coded perks. Not receiving these masculine-coded perks is the cause of misogynistic retaliation against women. In this sense, frustration with the lack of male-only spaces and exclusion of

women, queer, or feminine people from the MGTOW forum signal a belief that women should not compete with men for male-dominated spaces (Manne 2018, 114).

The frequent displays of affection and support in the MGTOW forum require a deeper understanding of the “epidemic of male loneliness.” Psychological and sociological studies indicate that a greater adherence to masculine norms and conservative gender values cause a deterioration in close male friendships (Vierra, Beltran, and Robnett 2023; Campos-Castillo et al. 2020; Botha and Bower 2024). In other words, the rigid patriarchal structures that instruct men to socialize in restrictive ways lead to a large number of men reporting loneliness and few close friends (“Men’s Health Survey” 2018). The MGTOW worldview neglects to confront the oppressive gender order that plays a role in male loneliness and, instead, deflects blame onto women. While the MGTOW forum may seem like a supportive venue for lonely and suffering men, the antagonistic worldview it promoted—where women are evil perpetrators causing men’s suffering—reinforced an exclusionary ideology that further isolated its members from society and ignored the role that gender constructions play in their negative experiences.

Research question 2 asked: *How are insider relationships established on r/MGTOW?* Like the work of Trott, Beckett, and Paech (2022), my findings about the affectionate nature of interactions suggest that the welcoming atmosphere masks the extremist potential of MGTOW rhetoric. Rather than addressing how a strict adherence to traditional masculinity is a lead cause in the male loneliness epidemic, MGTOW users blamed members’ struggles on external factors like the feminization of masculine spaces. Ultimately, the highly civil nature of forums like r/MGTOW highlights how emotional support within extremist groups entices newcomers and presents harmful ideologies as a simple and logical explanation for complex feelings of displacement, isolation, and frustration. While giving advice and emotional support foster a sense of belonging in the MGTOW brotherhood, r/MGTOW remained an explicitly masculine-coded space that reinforced patriarchal ideals and sustained exclusion of outsiders, including women, feminists, and trans people.

### ***Rage, Fear, and Reddit***

On r/MGTOW, expressions of anger toward society were common and often conveyed through aggressive or violent language. For example, one user remarked that he felt “a mix of disgust and rage everytime [he] saw couples.” Interestingly, individual posts expressing frustration, anger, and exhaustion were often confirmed, reinterpreted, or redirected by other users through the comment thread. For instance, in the example below, the exchange begins with user 1’s frustration with his perceived low social position. You can see in the replies how users offer reinterpretations of his emotional experience: user 2 suggests that what user 1 is experiencing is similar to his exclusion from society; and user 3 suggests that what they are experiencing is a sadistic nihilism toward an idiotic external society. This example depicts the first central communal emotion on MGTOW—*rage*.

User 1: I've joined the Manosphere only in the last 5 months, initially I remember being fucking furious about how society has been pulling one over us the entire time and now I'd say I'm somewhere between denial and bargaining.<sup>8</sup>

User 2: You are not alone. As I get older my desire to interact with people decreases, and it wasn't high to begin with.

User 3: I think that is your brain protecting yourself from the idiocy in clown world these days.<sup>9</sup> Everywhere you look in the media is some incredibly stupid thing going on that will likely negatively impact you in some way . . . they are their own worst enemies and soon they will create a world we all fucking hate, then most of those useless idiots will die when society collapses, good riddance.

This shows how negative emotions were not individual expressions but more like group projects: they were collaboratively reworked and given meaning and direction through MGTOW interpretations of society and mutual reinforcement of certain emotions.

Alongside rage at the immoral world, there were also many expressions of *fear* of the future. For MGTOW users, being a man inevitably came with significant risks, which I coded into three categories of fear. Firstly, one of the biggest fears was the anxiety of being socially outcast: "women can destroy you socially as well by manipulating your friends and family into hating you." Secondly, many were afraid of the family court, which they viewed as naturally biased toward women and therefore having the power to strip a man of his hard-earned assets. As one user put it, "the court system[s] in most (if not all countries) are biased against men and if she is just done with you you can lose alot of what you have rightly earned." And lastly, the fear of emotional pain or betrayal by a female partner provoked fear in MGTOW members because "women can destroy you emotionally, they know how to reach inside your heart, mind and soul and destroy you and they won't hesitate to do anything in their power to keep you in line." These three types of fear have something in common: women are always the source of the fear, whether it be through their betrayal, their infliction of emotional pain, or their accusation of sexual assault.

Ahmed (2004) argues that far-right fears are concerned with the loss of an object. Focusing on the object of fear is more important than the psychic experience of fear itself because it says something about what the community holds sacred. This logic can be applied back to the three categories of fear I found on the MGTOW forum:

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8 This is a reference to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five-stage model of mourning.

9 "Clown world" describes a society that is morally bankrupt, absurd, and irrational.

social ostracization, the family court, and emotional betrayal. Ahmed's theory reveals how MGTOW fears, though directed at women, suggest deeper anxieties about men losing their social status, economic resources, and emotional security. Irrespective of whether these fears pose a real risk to men, the association between the object and the fear is not created by fear itself but by the social imaginary of the community.

Ahmed (2004) further encourages scholars to question what fear *does*. MGTOW users coalesced around anecdotes of rage and fear, and the communal practices of storytelling and interpretation molded feelings into simplified shared narratives. We can understand this as "affective attunement": individual feelings are transformed into shared emotions, which strengthens the users' bond to the community (Papacharissi 2015). Individual stories of fear always followed the same formula of the male victim and the malevolent woman. Such stories have harmful consequences for gender relations because they reestablish a perceived distance between the genders (Ahmed 2004).

To further explain the origin of angry and fearful narratives in settings like r/MGTOW, Berry and Sobieraj (2014) describe a new genre of political opinion media they term "outrage media." Outrage media is characterized by venom, vilification of the enemy, and hyperbolic interpretations of current events. The outrage media creates an outrage discourse, which departs from typical media channels to reside in niche outrage venues such as r/MGTOW. Rather than political opponents, the enemies in this case were women. Berry and Sobieraj (2014, 8) liken outrage venues to churches: "the faithful attend, hear their values rearticulated in compelling ways, and leave feeling validated and virtuous for having participated."

The r/MGTOW forum, as an outrage venue, structured discussions and limited users' willingness to engage in conversations with opposing worldviews (Berry and Sobieraj 2014). During my ethnographic research, I saw how the more extreme posts that depict women as perpetrators and men as innocent victims were favored at the top of the "hot" and "popular" feeds. Massanari (2017) demonstrates how Reddit enables toxic subcultures to proliferate. Redditors can upvote or downvote material depending on how insightful they find it, and highly upvoted material appears on the subreddit's front page and therefore gets more attention from the users. The upvote "score" is displayed on the post and is translated into karma points for the original poster, which represent their contributions to Reddit. Although this system seems to suggest the site is democratic, in reality it incentivizes certain activities that might gain karma for the redditor (Massanari 2017). This system encourages and prioritizes sensationalist or extremist content, whereas alternative or oppositional posts may be downvoted or not voted at all and therefore absent from the "hot" and "popular" feeds. In effect, this prevented users of r/MGTOW from challenging or nuancing their misogynistic beliefs.

Research question 3 asked: *What kinds of emotions play a role in identity construction and relationship formation on r/MGTOW?* I discovered that rage and fear are communally rewritten and interpreted by MGTOW users to produce a mutually confirmed interpretation of the world. This strengthened their commitment to the MGTOW

ideology and established a (perceived) distance between the victims (men) and the perpetrators (women). We can understand the MGTOW forum as an outrage venue where attendees hear their values rearticulated through venomous and hateful rhetoric.

## Conclusion

Manosphere groups like MGTOW, incels, and pick-up artists have been linked to numerous mass violence attacks against women and minorities (Zimmerman 2024). Studies suggest there is a concerning normalization of male supremacist ideologies in mainstream discourse (Solea and Sugiura 2023), which may explain why we see a growing gender divide among Generation Z. For instance, in the UK, young men increasingly see feminism as harmful, and one-fifth look favorably on far-right social media influencer Andrew Tate (Duffy, Campbell, and Skinner 2024).

Previously, scholars (e.g., Rothermel 2023; Jane 2018; Gotell and Dutton 2016) critically analyzed the nature and logic of hatred and misogyny circulated in heterogeneous manosphere groups, and others (Moskalenko et al. 2022; Habib, Srinivasan, and Nithyanand 2022) mapped the radicalization and terrorist potential of engaging in such groups. This study brings a new perspective to the manosphere discussion by focusing on the *positive* emotional bonds between forum members. This relational approach to understanding male supremacist communities will help future researchers understand the growing attractiveness of such extremist ideologies, the factors that make men want to stay, and the complexity of issues and feelings that these groups try to deal with.

This article stresses how the “gray man” lifestyle and philosophy is extremely appealing to young and old men who are dissatisfied with the traditional male social roles they feel restricted to. Emotion was a central force behind the r/MGTOW community, where users communally interpreted their feelings and identities to fit complex feelings into the preexisting, misogynistic, and essentialist gender ideology of MGTOW. Giving advice and emotional alignment fostered a sense of belonging in the r/MGTOW community, which highlights a need to examine how emotional support within other extremist digital spaces—such as white supremacist websites and forums—entice newcomers and present harmful ideologies as a simple and logical explanation for complex feelings of displacement, isolation, and frustration. Moreover, the technological qualities of the host platform must be given more attention; as shown in this article, there are specific technological qualities of Reddit that allow extremist content to dominate forum discussions.

Ultimately, analyzing the manosphere is incomplete without a broader look at how systemic conditions facilitate the formulation of niche male supremacist ideologies. Although MGTOW members position themselves as outsiders, they remain embedded within patriarchal structures and shifting gender norms. MGTOW’s adoption of a marginalized identity conceals such enduring structures of power, and users frame their experiences as gynocentric oppression rather than by critiquing a system that

discourages men from establishing meaningful and supportive relationships with one another.

Further research could investigate the rhetorical and linguistic techniques used in rationalizing different manosphere ideologies and belief systems, as well as the role of platforms in reinforcing and amplifying such extremist views. It is important to further investigate how misogynistic beliefs and worldviews are justified and maintained, both within private manosphere communities and across public social media platforms. The technological qualities of sites—such as algorithms and moderation practices, together with the profit-driven ideologies that underpin them, like attention economies that prioritize views, clicks, and profits—play a crucial role in the spread of toxic ideologies. Further examination into these would illustrate how and why men become further entrenched in hateful groups and could therefore offer practical guidance to counter digital hate and the mainstreaming of misogyny.

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