

Guru/Prophet: An Affective Analysis of Reactionary YouTube Content

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## Abstract

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Jordan Etherington

This dissertation sought to examine how reactionary influencers on YouTube are able to create ‘gateways’ towards audience tolerance and even desire to enact violence against marginalized groups, particularly those groups relating to gender performance. for the purposes of YouTube moderation. This dissertation uses the perspectives of affect theorists Ahmed, Berlant, and Tomkins, and the gender theories of Connell and Butler to divide the examined influencers into two categories, gurus and prophets. Prophets, such as Tucker Carlson or the Prager U platform, presented already existing hegemonic narratives about gender norms as ontological truths that were key to the coherence of both society and individual identity. Meanwhile, gurus like Andrew Tate presented themselves as teachers whose ability to embody hegemonic masculine norms gave them both the wisdom and authority to convert loyal viewers into successful men like them. Both categories of reactionary influencer were examined with a focus on both rhetoric and modelling of masculinity and the performance thereof. While both categories worked to align viewers with fascist ideology through emphasizing hatred, fear, and anger towards real-world events while connecting feelings of hope, joy, and desire to quasi-gnostic mythic perspectives around masculine sovereignty, they presented significant differences in method and target audience. This has significant implications for attempts at deradicalization and resistance to the increasing tide of fascism in mainstream society. Another significant finding was that affective connections to reactionary beliefs were almost all found to originate with mainstream narratives around gender norms, particularly with regards to masculine success and authority under capitalism. Overall, this dissertation’s findings strongly counter mainstream assumptions that extremist reactionary ideology comes from a discrete fringe source rather than as a direct result of existence within a vicious capitalist social system that prioritizes White male comfort over the ability of ethnic and gender minorities to express any shred of agency.

*Keywords: Affect theory, Ahmed, Berlant, Butler, Connell, content analysis, Fascism, gender performativity, gender theory, hegemony, Manosphere, masculinity studies, online content, radicalization, right-wing extremism, semiotics, Tomkins, YouTube.*

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## PART 1: INTRODUCTION

Extremist right-wing content has become increasingly visible in popular online social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok (Lewis, 2018). Although these platforms have made scattershot efforts to counter extremist content (Ganesh & Bright, 2020), the problem persists. I will engage with this by analysing reactionary online content from an affect theory perspective. My focus will be on reactionary content made by ‘political influencers’ (Lewis, 2018) on the topic of gender and sexuality on YouTube. This will include influencers whose content is present on YouTube in an unofficial capacity, such as Tucker Carlson, as videos with Carlson remain uploaded by the Fox News account despite his firing in 2023.

Particular attention will be paid to how the affective performance of the presenter is linked to their gender performances, particularly to contrast themselves with those who disrupt hegemonic gender norms. The presentation of hegemonic masculinity and/or femininity also reveals how the audience is meant to feel about specific gender norms within the reactionary discourse.

The fundamental argument of this study is that the *mainstream* status quo (also referred to as *hegemonic*) provides fertile soil for right-wing radicalization. The assumptions impressed upon us from birth may be exploited to emotionally connect to beliefs that align with White supremacy, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and other prejudices. For example, when I was born in 1987, I was taught from birth that there was an objectively existing sex and gender binary. This implies that alternative gender performances/presentations were fundamentally *wrong*. Had my life gone differently, a right-wing influencer could have engaged with the affects connected to that understanding to invalidate the experience of trans folks, particularly regarding the legitimacy of their identities and the harms caused by transphobia. Similar maneuvers allow reactionary influencers like Ben Shapiro (2017), Steven Crowder (2020), or Tim Pool (2022) to *implicitly* position LGBTQ+ people and associated signifiers as sources of negative affective reactions without violating rules against *explicit* hate speech, while still making extremist ideologies seem mundane, laundering it through seemingly anodyne rhetoric similar to how the phrase ‘It’s okay to be White’ has been used by White supremacists (Brooks, 2020). This study will show how efforts to counter such hateful conduct and extremism purely in terms of explicit conduct and speech will have limited efficacy.

## 1.1 Positional Statement

This dissertation is political. While this research will adhere to the highest ethical and scholarly standards, it remains the product of a subjective viewpoint (mine), written from a leftist critical theory perspective. The topic of my research is the subject of great political, social, and cultural conflict throughout the world. I have full confidence in the results of my study and what is written here, but it would be negligent at best and maliciously deceptive at worst to pretend that this research could be made from a ‘politically neutral’ point of view. This is written with the understanding that hegemonic gender norms are a social construct built to reinforce an unjust status quo that benefits White cis-hetero male bourgeois interests at the expense of all other intersections of identity. This not only marginalizes (often violently) those unable to conform to imposed gender norms but also intersects with other combinations of identity to commit further forms of violence upon marginalized demographics. The influencers that I am studying use misinformation and prejudiced narratives to inflame hatred against already vulnerable populations for the benefit of the powerful and themselves. This research is being undertaken with the hope that it can, in some small way, push back against these regressive trends and encourage a kinder and more just future.

## *1.2 Theoretical Framework: Affect Theory and the Guru/Prophet Spectrum*

### 1.2.1 Why Use Affect Theory?

I am using affect theory as a theoretical lens because scholarly work has primarily focused on refining methods for debunking the misinformation rife in reactionary circles, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there is evidence that debunking misinformation and hate speech via the introduction of true information is of significant help (Caulfield, 2020), the approach neglects the affective, emotional, and structural dimensions behind *resistance* to accurate information (Young, 2021). The question of *why* people remain devoted to misinformation and prejudicial ideology even when exposed to thorough counterevidence is one that affect theory is well-positioned to answer. For example, connecting Blee’s research on hate groups (Blee, 2017) with Ahmed’s work on how emotional and accompanying somatic reactions are culturally constructed (Ahmed, 2014) suggests that ‘membership’ in reactionary subcultures and ideological groups comes with significant

emotional benefits such as a sense of community and a simplified worldview. This community and worldview are both produced by instilling negative affective reactions to people, things, and symbols associated with antagonistic groups, defining it through opposition. It is difficult to change one's mind about the legitimacy of LGBTQ+ rights when seeing a trans person triggers an involuntary negative physical reaction within oneself, which also provides internal proof of their membership within a community.

I would like to take this opportunity to express some caveats in the use of affect theory. When one uses the affect theory perspective, it is possible to create an impression that affects are both binary and deterministic. That people are completely controlled by these affects and therefore have no agency beyond the stimulus-response pursuit of pleasurable affective experiences. This is clearly not true, as people voluntarily make decisions that will not lead to pleasure or even actively reject pleasurable experiences everyday. Instead, I view affect theory as a method to analyze how socially constructed symbols and concepts influence us on a physical as well as mental level. Therefore, regarding audience agency, this study owes much to representation theory as pioneered by Stuart Hall (1997).

### 1.2.2 The Prophet/Guru Spectrum

The format of this study will be a content analysis of YouTube media featuring reactionary content creators. In the process of studying these influencers, I noticed that they fell into two main categories, prophets, and gurus. These categories are distinguished by how specific influencers interact with and serve their audience.

Prophet, in this context, is based on the definition of "One who utters divinely inspired revelations" (Merriam-Webster, 2024). They go beyond merely reciting events to interpreting them in a way that allows these events to be placed in a broader context that is cleanly integrated into the worldview of the audience. In other words, a prophet not only explains what has happened, but delivers *prophecy*, by which I metaphorically mean "the inspired declaration of divine will and purpose" (Merriam-Webster, 2024). Delivering prophecy does not always require predicting future events, even if they often use vague predictions to create an experience of fear and anxiety in the audience. What I want to focus most on is prophecy demonstrating an ability to discern a greater picture out of seemingly unrelated stimulus and data in a way that can appear profound, and that sense of profundity being the result of affective alignment with pre-existing

internalized beliefs. When Tucker Carlson explains how disparate events that display agency or acceptance of LGBTQ+ or non-white identities are evidence of an intricate plot to destroy straight white male supremacy, he is acting as a prophet. This provides a benefit to his audience as it allows them to make sense of what they perceive as distressing societal change in a way that *validates and valorizes their currently held beliefs and prejudices*. It tells the audience that they are correct to think and feel that things that disrupt the hegemony (defined in the context of this dissertation as White patriarchal supremacy) are disgusting and wrong. This ability to relieve anxiety leads the audience to create or reinforce positive affective connections between the prophet, and the worldview that the prophet expresses, and themselves. Like a skilled magician, the affective circuit can move from ‘anxiety -> exposure to content that relieves anxiety -> content is spoken by influencer -> positive feelings towards influencer’ to ‘anxiety -> exposure to influencer that relieves anxiety -> content is spoken by influencer -> positive feelings towards content.’ The influencer causes relief instead of the content that the influencer is communicating. This provides a vector for radicalization if the prophet expresses extremist views or becomes radicalized themselves. Because the prophet is seen as the source of truth, anything that comes out of their mouth is ipso-facto legitimate, even if that content is self-contradictory. This will be demonstrated in Part One, where I will examine three content creators on YouTube that I consider to be particularly rich examples of the prophet category, Tucker Carlson, The Quartering, and PragerU.

To summarize, a Prophet:

- Tells their audience *what is really happening*.
- Knowledge has an external source.
- Relieves anxiety by providing explanations that validate conscious or unconsciously held audience beliefs.
- *Valorize* those beliefs by placing them in a binary state of opposition with an evil enemy.
- Creates positive affective connections between themselves, the audience, and the content that they speak through connecting seemingly unrelated events, data, stimuli, and feelings to produce interpretations that can appear profound to a receptive audience.

- More likely to be supported by donors and sponsorships, often those who benefit from the worldview a Prophet supports (i.e., PragerU with fossil fuels).

A guru is defined by telling their audience *what they should do* in response to societal and/or personal issues. The guru's legitimacy is charismatic, drawn from knowledge or perspective that exists internally. Even when they are not engaged in explicit lessons, their daily performances of identity are framed as signifiers of that legitimacy. Audience members are not only meant to listen to the guru but emulate them. This is the main difference from prophets. Prophets provide understanding and interpretation, while gurus provide instruction and example. These instructions also tend to be *holistic*, in that their teachings are meant to be applied to one's entire lifestyle, rather than a single discrete part of it. A guru explaining how to become rich does not merely talk about investment tips or practices, they instead explain how cultivating a 'billionaire mindset' will make them more alert to opportunity (Tate, 2022). A guru explaining how to get a date does not give advice on dress style or date locations, they go on at length about how embodying hegemonic masculine standards, becoming an 'alpha male,' is necessary. For adherents, following instructions and internalizing the guru's mindset is one and the same.

This provides a fertile ground for extremely powerful affective connections to the guru and their teachings because gurus position themselves as each being a unique, in some cases the sole, source for life-affirming instruction. For Jordan Peterson it is about the ability to live a dignified and meaningful life, for Andrew Tate it is about how to get wealth and power, for FarFromWeak it is about how to be a 'real man,' with all the privileges and respect that come with being able to conform to that hegemonic ideal. A guru will present themselves as an indispensable resource for acquiring whatever a follower feels would allow them to "flourish" (Berlant, 2011). Because of their dependence on charismatic authority and claiming to be uniquely qualified to mold their followers' lives, gurus are also incentivized to encourage an authoritarian worldview. After all, an exceptionally powerful and wise individual should not have to take the opinions of inferior people into account. How 'guru' influencers connect with right-wing radicalization and affective networks will be covered in part two with an examination of the manosphere influencers Jordan Peterson, Andrew Tate, and FarFromWeak.

To summarize, a Guru:

- Instructs their audience in *how to live and act*.
- Authority comes from performance of a desired lifestyle (in this study, hegemonic masculinity)
- Has an intuitively greater understanding of life, which springs from their internal being.
- Teachings are holistic even if desired outcome is specific.
- While Gurus can work together, their objective is to cultivate an individual following of followers.
- Present themselves as being apart from mainstream society.
- Followers are monetized through the purchase of merchandise, services, and endorsements.

It is important to emphasize that these categories represent a spectrum, rather than a binary. Every prophet is in some ways also a guru, since how one frames events and trends will inherently encourage certain actions from their viewers. Similarly, every guru must in some way be a prophet because they must identify what problem is keeping prospective followers from feeling satisfied in their lives, and why solutions to those problems cannot be found in mainstream society or indeed anywhere outside of the guru themselves.

Furthermore, while I am focusing on right-wing content, this guru/prophet paradigm is not intended to be seen as exclusive to right-wing worldviews. There are a variety of influencers on the left that could fit both categories. While leftist worldviews are a harder fit for gurus because of the resistance towards authoritarianism and individualistic discourses, no ideology is categorically immune to charismatic individuals. Prophets can easily fit into any given point of a political spectrum, as their purpose is to interpret and contextualize events to fit their given worldview and then communicate that to others. That said, the present danger of normalization of left-wing extremism is much smaller than the continuing encroachment of right-wing extremism. Hence, I have chosen to concentrate upon the affective dimensions of right-wing radicalization.

These categories are relevant to both normalization of extremist content/rhetoric and accompanying radicalization because attempts to counter that an influencer's content will need to

be tailored depending on where the creator stands within the prophet/guru spectrum. For example, explaining that Andrew Tate is openly predatory, manipulative, and untrustworthy is unlikely to be as effective to Tate followers because that's part of why many followers *like him*. As a guru, Tate's legitimacy flows from his ability to present himself as a paragon of masculinity and wealth. His ability to (until recently) flaunt consequences for antisocial behaviour is experienced as a tantalizing glimpse into the power and agency available if one emulates Tate. Tate explaining that he only wants women who will be subservient to him is exciting for his followers to project their dreams of power and wealth onto, because the ability to exert one's will upon the world regardless of the consequences for others is what hegemonic masculinity really is when shorn of pretence (Connell, 2005; Bratich, 2022). The fact that Hustler University is clearly meant to siphon money from his own followers without providing the business education that he promises (Magee, 2023; Lawrence, 2023) is irrelevant when compared to the spectacle of power, agency, and wealth Tate performs. Conversely, Carlson's hypocrisy, the poor quality of his research and rhetoric and other personal failings are irrelevant because what matters is Carlson doing his *job as a prophet*. The way he acts outside of that context is irrelevant. It would be like refusing to order from McDonalds because you personally dislike a server there. But what are the theoretical concepts that underly the guru/prophet spectrum, particularly in the context of hegemonic masculinity and reactionary content? Let us now examine how affect theory, gender theory, and reception theory are used to form the theoretical underpinning for this study.

### 1.3 Key Concepts

#### 1.3.1 Affect Theory

Silvan Tomkins first concretely formulated affect theory in the first two volumes of *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (2008). He identified nine main 'affects,' which he defined as "...a group of nine highly specific unmodulated physiological reactions present from birth" (2008, 4). According to Tomkins, these nine affects serve as biological/mental responses to environmental stimuli that motivates the subject to react. To Tomkins, affects do not *determine* the response, instead they draw attention to the stimuli that triggered them. However, the affect that is triggered influences how stimuli are contextualized. As explained in the prologue of *Affect Imagery Consciousness: The Complete Edition*,

A good way to conceptualize this system of nine quite different alerting mechanisms is to view them as a bank of spotlights, each of a different colour, each flicked on by its own quite individual switch, each illuminating whatever triggered it in a way highly specific to that light. We don't "see" any stimulus unless and until it is brought into our field of awareness as colored by affect. (2008, 5)

These nine affects, as described by Tomkins, are surprise-startle, distress-anguish, anger-rage, enjoyment-joy, interest-excitement, fear-terror, shame-humiliation, dissmell, a term invented by Tomkins to refer to rejection of noxious stimuli, and disgust, distinguished from dissmell by being triggered by *ingestion* of noxious stimuli.

While affects are often associated with emotional responses, it is important to understand that affects are unconsciously experienced, whereas emotions are experienced consciously. Furthermore, affects are not purely mental experiences but also trigger visceral bodily reactions. For example, the surprise-startle affect is triggered by sudden, unexpected stimuli, which can range from a mugger ambushing you to friends shouting 'surprise!' to start a birthday party. The bodily reaction, a sudden intake of breath, blinking, and even taking a posture that would allow the subject to move quickly, is the same regardless of context. How that stimulus trigger will be emotionally contextualized and remembered will depend on what the nature of the stimulus turns out to be. The surprise birthday party will be experienced and remembered positively, while the mugger will be experienced and remembered negatively. Stimuli that are associated with those memories will colour future affective reactions, such as experiencing a fear affect when walking by the location one was mugged in.

A crucial factor in how affects can significantly influence social situations is that they are not solitary experiences. Perceiving an affective reaction tends to cause that reaction to spread. A crying baby (an example of a distress-anguish affect) triggers an accompanying distress response in the child's caregiver, motivating them to remove the source of the infant's distress. Anyone who has been in a space with a crying infant has certainly felt how that sound can cut through one's train of thought like a razor, making it difficult to focus until that sound stops, regardless of why it started in the first place. Fortunately, the degree to which this "affective resonance" (Tomkins, 2008, 6) can cause others to experience the same feeling is modulated as we grow and learn to develop a greater boundary between one's individual mental state and the affective states of others. Otherwise, we would be reduced to tears, rage, or panic whenever we perceived a crying baby or angry person. However, because affective resonance is useful for gaining

empathic insight into the ‘inner world’ of others, that boundary is never inviolate since that would make us far less able to socially interact with others. This corresponds with the main idea put forward by Sarah Ahmed, who discusses how socio-culturally constructed forms of political affect can be spread to others through affective resonance (Ahmed, 2014). For example, here is a description of how anger-rage can be intentionally spread.

anger can be autostimulated and thereby recruited on demand – initially as a pale imitation of the physiological affect mechanism, but soon enough morphed into the real thing as art paves way for the innate. The expression of our own affect triggers by resonance more of the same in self and other – a demagogue can make rage as infectious as a comedian can generalize laughter. (Tomkins, 2008, 6-7)

This is only a broad overview of what Tomkins lifelong work. I will end this discussion of Tomkins by explaining how his idea of affect will be integrated into this project. Ahmed writes that all cultures co-opt affective responses to assist in the process of interpolating their values and norms into their members by controlling the conditions in which those affective responses are experienced and then contextualized (2014). This differs from Tomkins’ more psychological focus. However, Ahmed makes use of some of Tomkins’ nine forms of affective response in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014). Specifically, Ahmed describes how anger, fear, disgust, shame, and joy responses are used to construct specific affective narratives that benefit cultural hegemony, often at the expense of marginalized demographics. Tomkins wrote in detail on the internal and external mechanics of these responses, such as the red face and tensed muscles of anger-rage. This is useful for analysis of reactionary media, as it allows for a more precise identification of the affects being invoked within the audience.

Interestingly, the most significant affect theorist that proceeded directly from Tomkins’ work has been Eve Sedgwick, a literary critic and one of the pioneers of queer theory. While fascinated with Tomkins’ work, her writing focused on the *why* of feelings instead of the therapeutic applications intended by Tomkins (Hsu, 2019).

*Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* represents an important example of Sedgwick’s work on affect theory, collecting essays by Sedgwick written for “exploring promising tools and techniques for nondualistic thought and pedagogy.” (2003, 1) She does this by focusing on the process and experience of feeling in ways that defy binaries, particularly those experiences relating to perceiving textures through the sense of touch. From an affective

perspective, she writes, the act of touching is inherently nondualistic. This is because the sensation of touch is always accompanied by an active knowing and investigation of the texture of the “subject” of the touch, even when unintentional, such as snowflakes landing on someone’s head. With touch, one is both passive and active participant. Sedgwick’s interest in *feeling* is not restricted to the emotional or sensory experience definition of the term, but in how both experiences engage each other. This is like how the term ‘touching’ refers to both an emotional and tactile experience, or how the term ‘touchy-feely’ implies that it is impossible to talk about affect without also invoking “what amounts to cutaneous contact” (2003, 17), which recalls Tomkins’ descriptions of the bodily movements that are inherent parts of affective experiences (2008). In this comparison, Sedgwick reveals another fallacy of dualistic thought, the mind/body binary. An affect cannot be purely mental or physical. Instead, it is an experience wherein the physical and mental realms are impossible to differentiate.

To Sedgwick, the value of Tomkins’ theory of behaviour being determined by a system of discrete affective responses has less to do with its accuracy in describing reality, and more about how affect theory encourages thoughts outside of simplistic binary frameworks. Pondering affect provides fluidity of thought, drawing in material and concepts from fields that are often considered disparate, thereby challenging common assumptions about how separate such fields or concepts truly are. Chapter 3 of *Touching Feeling* provides an example when Sedgwick interrogates how anti-essentialist arguments, a belief that our perceptions are discursively constructed, against the idea of biological affective responses become paradoxically essentialist in their nonessentialism.

It would be plausible to see a variety of twentieth-century theoretical languages as attempts, congruent with this one, to detoxify the excesses of body, thought, and feeling by reducing the multiple essentialist risks of analog representation to the single, unavowedly essentialist *certainty* of one or another on/off switch. (2003, 114)

In other words, Sedgwick saw attempts to describe everything as discursively created as leading to an assumption that everything is an undifferentiated stream of culturally constructed material, which itself risks ignoring crucial differences in the world being examined. Hence, she criticizes emotional theories that describe all affects as a singular state of “visceral arousal” as privileging a digital model of emotion (one is either viscerally aroused or not) over an analog model of emotion (there are finite ‘settings,’ but each one is qualitatively different), neither less

essentialist than the other. Instead, she argues that the preference for digital modes of thought as opposed to analog stems from a fear of association with the ‘natural,’ a mode of existence outside of human experience and therefore anathema to a discursive worldview. While Sedgwick explicitly states that she does not believe that machines are inherently digital or the biological inherently analog, but that this preference often privileges the machine to preserve the separation of human from nature.

This ambiguity of whether affect is biological or socially constructed, discursive or natural, and whether that differentiation even means anything, is not a disadvantage but in fact one of the chief attractions of affect theory for Sedgwick, as she explains further on the same page as the previous quotation.

There is not a choice waiting to be made, in evaluating theoretical models, between essentialism and no essentialism. If there’s a choice it is between differently structured residual essentialisms. But why be limited to the digital model of choice? A repertoire of risk, a color wheel of different risks, a periodic table of the infinitely recombinable elements of the affect system, a complex, multilayered phylo dough of the analog and the digital; these are the models that Tomkins’ work makes us eager to deploy (2003, 114).

Sedgwick’s work on affect theory is significantly more abstract than Tomkins’ but no less valuable. As a theory with one foot in both the physiological and the socio-cultural world, affect theory challenges many dualities that are often considered truisms. An incomplete list of which include mind/body, biological/social, essential/discursive, conscious/unconscious, emotional/rational. As someone investigating how reactionary right-wing content uses culturally constructed symbols to invoke affective responses, it is important to keep an open mind about how binaries can be far more fluid and arbitrary than they initially appear. Furthermore, analyzing the need to naturalize binaries, particularly the gender binary, for maintaining hegemony is an important part of this project.

The political use of affect and emotions brings us to *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014) by Sarah Ahmed, one of the foundational sources for this project. In Ahmed’s own words, the goal of *Cultural Politics of Emotion* is to “explore how emotions work to shape the ‘surfaces’ of individual and collective bodies.” (2014, 1) Specifically, Ahmed wishes to examine texts that have been publicly circulated “which work by aligning subjects with collectives by attributing ‘others’ as the ‘source’ of our feelings.” (1) In other words, these texts aim to invoke certain feelings (rage, love, shame, etc.), while simultaneously, defining the ‘others’ as being the cause

of the very emotions the text has produced. By doing so, the creators of these texts intend to bring the readers into greater alignment with their ideology. Ahmed uses the term ‘emotion’ to encompass both the conscious mental experience of emotion and the bodily experience of the affective response. Thus, when referring to Ahmed’s work, I will use the term ‘emotion’ unless specifically referring to bodily responses such as sweat, quickened heartbeat, etc.

For example, Ahmed uses the text of a British National Front (BNF) poster that claims that “swarms of illegal immigrants and bogus asylum seekers invade Britain by any means available to them...Why? They are only seeking easy comforts and free benefits in Soft Touch Britain. All funded by YOU – The British Taxpayer!” (2) The emotion that the poster aims to invoke is anger, yet the ‘goal’ of the poster is for the reader to define immigrants and asylum seekers as the source of the very anger triggered by the text of the poster. This anger, if decoded (in the Stuart Hall sense) in the manner intended by the BNF, does double-duty. It frames immigrants and asylum seekers as Others because that anger comes from a sense of injury caused by them stealing from the collective ‘YOU,’ and they cannot ‘steal’ from public benefits if they are a part of that same public. It also aligns the reader with the BNF, as taking part in that sense (feeling/emotion/sensation) of injury means accepting, even if subconsciously, the BNF’s definition of what constitutes the collective YOU, which, as a neo-fascist organization, is limited to White “Aryans” (2).

From a theoretical perspective, Ahmed does not “offer a singular theory of emotion, or one account of the work that emotions do. Rather I will track how emotions circulate between bodies, examining how they ‘stick’ as well as move.” (2014, 4) However, her conception of emotions as being able to circulate and move between people and collectives is a significant contribution, one highly relevant to the study of online affect and radicalization. Sarah Ahmed first explored this concept in “Affective Economies” (2004). Drawing from Marxist and psychoanalytic theory, Ahmed challenges the assumption that emotions are a wholly internal process that starts within the mind of the individual subject and is then expressed externally when ‘completed,’ whether consciously or unconsciously. Instead, she writes that emotions are used in different discourses to circulate through collective groups and tie them together. The individual bodily-centred experience of emotions can be used to bind people to a social, community-scale space. These emotions can also ‘slide’ from target to target, and emotion to

emotion, transferring the intensity of one emotional experience to another emotion or to even ‘stick’ emotions to a target other than the *originator of that current emotion*.

An example in “Affective Economies” (2004) can make this clearer. The article begins with a paragraph taken from the Aryan Nations website. One may expect such a website to be full of explicit calls to hatred, but instead the Aryan Nations frame their experience and purpose in the emotional context of *love*. To be sure, the paragraph gives explicit examples of hateful actions, such as “the white workingman curse about the latest boatload of aliens dumped on our shores to be given job preference over the white citizen who built these lands” (Ahmed, 2004, 1), but the paragraph claims that it is not hatred that causes these reactions to non-White people but love for ‘the nation.’ However, this love is meant to produce hatred by defining those ‘foreigners’ as being inherently hateful and threatening to the object of love. “The narrative hence suggests that it is love for the nation that makes the white Aryan hate those whom they recognize to be strangers, as the ones who are taking away the nation and the role of the Aryans in its history, as well as its future.” (2)

Furthermore, the hate reaction produced by this perceived threat to the object of love builds a connection between the individual subject to the greater Aryan Nation. “It is the love of white, or those recognizable as white, that supposedly explains this shared ‘communal’ visceral response of hate. Together we hate, and this hate is what makes us together.” (2) The visceral nature of the emotional and affective experience of hatred works to align members of a community that would otherwise have little in common. It could even be expressed as a formula, perhaps ‘Individual subject -> Love of whiteness-> Perceived Threat of Loss -> Hatred of non-whiteness -> Alignment with Aryan Nation.’

What this shows is that emotional/affective experiences have *an impact on the world beyond their ‘in the moment’ experience*. Without the invocation and experience of love of Whiteness (and those signifiers associated with Whiteness) that is then associated with hatred of contact with the non-white, the hypothetical subject could not align with the Aryan Nation and thereby distance themselves from those that do not fit the Aryan Nation’s concept of Whiteness. According to Ahmed’s model, emotions do not specifically reside “within” objects or subjects but instead reside in the connections *between* subjects. Much like monetary economies, the ‘affective value’ of an emotion is assigned by its ability to circulate between subjects and

objects. This circulation along these emotional/affective connections is what constructs one's sense of self. For example, a person may perceive stimuli that is interpreted as the cause of a positive emotional and affective response, such as a White viewer of Aryan Nation propaganda, which uses imagery that is culturally constructed to have positive emotional associations, such as a beautiful white woman. The positive emotional response to the imagery will then stick to the Aryan Nation and their representation of whiteness, making viewers who engage with that emotional experience align their sense of identity closer to that of the Aryan Nation and whiteness. Conversely, if they encounter something that is interpreted as the cause of a negative emotion/affective response, then their real or metaphorical retreat from alignment with the perceived cause of that feeling allows them to reinforce their sense of self by defining it as that which the subject *is not*. Thus, "the accumulation of affective value shapes the surfaces of bodies and worlds." (5) It is important to make a distinction between Ahmed's idea that people are not sealed off from emotions that do not originate within themselves, and the idea that people have no internal agency in the face of emotionally resonant signifiers. Instead, emotions are experienced by subjects *contacting* subjects or objects that are associated with an emotion, with an accompanying affective experience.

If emotions occupied different objects as inherent qualities of those objects, then everyone would have the exact same emotional/affective reactions to any given stimuli. Because we know that is not the case, the associations that define emotional experiences must be socially constructed. This is done through the establishment of associative pathways through which emotions travel, connecting different subjects/objects. Those pathways are constructed throughout history and thus can consist of a long string of signifiers that connect without requiring an explicit declaration or conscious understanding of the signifiers that construct the emotional association. Ahmed uses Frantz Fanon's experience of a child retreating into his mother's arms at the sight of him shivering while outside during winter as an example of fear circulating through an interconnected series of signifiers, "Such movement depends on past histories of association: Negro, animal, bad, mean, ugly. In other words, it is the movement of fear between signs, which allows the object of fear to be generated in the present (The Negro is: an animal, bad, mean, ugly)" (11).

However, the direction in which emotions travel is not restricted to a linear path. Ahmed describes how emotional circulation can move ‘sideways’ and ‘backwards’ as well. For example, the fear felt by the child in the Frantz Fanon example had moved sideways by travelling through the sequence of associations described in the previous quote until it ‘stuck’ to Fanon’s body, where it became “constituted as the object of fear” (11). This is also a movement ‘backwards’ through time, as objects of fear “become substituted for each other over time.” (11)

Ahmed’s research is relevant because it is through these networks of affect that people construct their identities. To Ahmed, emotion/affect is what gives life to these networks. Therefore, affective economies can be used and manipulated not only to convince individuals to conform to specific forms of ideologies and actions but can also be used to define a person or a collective’s identity. For example, stoking fear against a certain ethnicity causes people experiencing the desired fear reaction to construct an abstract border around themselves to separate them from that feared ethnicity, defining themselves as a group that is *not* that object of fear. Therefore, trying to change the mind of someone who is experiencing the intended affective reaction to right-wing propaganda or to the subjects thereof is not just a matter of ‘proving it wrong,’ but also of altering what is, consciously or not, a part of their internalized identity.

Another benefit of Ahmed’s work is her focused examination of how specific emotions/affects are used to create specific political outcomes. I have already discussed her explanation of the connection of love with hatred, but there is also the use of fear in the creation of collectives. Since fear involves a movement *away* from the object of fear, that necessarily includes an alignment *towards* others who also experience that fear. By examining the way that certain emotions are invoked and the signifiers that are referenced in the process, one can perceive the specific political outcome that right-wing content creators are pursuing through their performances, even when they deny it, such as someone spreading the groomer narrative but claiming that they don’t want to harm LGBTQ+ folk.

### 1.3.2 Cruel Optimism

The continuing existence of the guru influencer is particularly dependent upon long-term connections with their followers, which would appear to conflict with the service that they offer the consumers of their content. Manosphere gurus are sought after for instruction in masculinity-

coded tasks (which can range from exercise routines to instructions on how to attract women). After getting enough direction on how to attain those skills, the relationship between guru and follower should be complete. This is not conducive to the type of long-term para-social relationship that brings repeat business. Because it is not in the interests of manosphere gurus to solve the problems of their followers, they instead use rhetoric around common manosphere-based grievances and vague gesturing towards what men ‘should be’ to give their content enough of an affective impression for it to be perceived as profound and relevant. This aligns audiences with reactionary ideology that will encourage actions that reinforce regressive masculine ideals while also being incompatible with social success. In other words, the gurus of the manosphere encourage behaviours and mindsets that are not only unlikely to give them the success that their followers desire, but in fact act as obstacles to achieving those very goals.

This situation aligns with Berlant’s concept of *cruel optimism*, a situation in which something that a subject desires becomes an obstacle to that subject’s ‘flourishing’ (Berlant, 2011), a state in which the subject’s condition will improve. An object of desire in this context refers to a thing (not necessarily physical) that the subject perceives as the key to their flourishing. An example of that object of desire could be a fulfilling relationship, a long-sought job opportunity, or being in better physical shape. As Berlant points out, “all attachment is optimistic, if we define optimism as the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world to bring closer the satisfying *something* that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene.” (1-2). Optimism is the force that drives one to change one’s current circumstances in pursuit of a satisfying change. An affective connection is thus made with the ‘object’ that generates that sense of optimism. You invest energy into a sense that this person/place/thing/belief will in some way lead to that change. It is important to also understand that the affective experience tied to that optimism does not need to be pleasant. Dread, anger, fear and sadness can move one to change one’s circumstances just as easily as joy, happiness, or hope. The gnawing sensation of hunger can drive someone to pursue food more than the anticipation of a delicious snack, for example. What all of these have in common is that the optimistic force is *ambitious*, in that it moves one towards

a goal. I will summarize a sequence here because of how important this concept is to the dissertation.

Imagine a man who desires a romantic relationship with a certain woman. In this context, the woman is perceived as an ‘object of desire,’ with all the affective investment that comes with it. Now that this connection is established, the subject will move to achieve what they see as key to their flourishing, establishing a romantic relationship. As I said before, this is just an example of uncountably similar situations. The roles can be reversed, the object of desire can be a relationship with a person (positive or negative), the ability to achieve a certain action, to act according to one’s ideology, or even a goal without an actual endpoint (for example, someone may establish an optimistic connection to volunteer or work for organizations that alleviate poverty without believing that they will ever actually *end* poverty), and many more. The important thing is that it gets the subject to *act and change* their circumstances towards that object of desire, whether massively or minutely. Furthermore, “the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or the world become different in just the right way.” (Berlant, 2). What this means is that even if Person A never speaks to Person B, that attachment can be maintained by Person A contemplating the *idea of the flourishing* that will result from his desired relationship. To put it in point form:

1. Subject experiences a desire to alter their situation [Person A is lonely]
2. Subject perceives a stimulus that they interpret as being key to changing that situation. [they see Person B, who they are romantically attracted to]
3. Stimulus is now ‘affectively invested’ as an ‘object of desire.’ Note that the object of desire is seen as key to a goal, rather than the goal itself. [Person A believes that a romantic relationship with Person B will solve their loneliness]
4. Subject is now motivated to pursue and achieve the object of desire so they can experience that ‘flourishing’ [Person A begins to pursue that relationship with Person B so they won’t feel lonely]
5. This affective attachment is reinforced by anticipation and consideration of the object of desire and the flourishing that will follow [Person A often thinks about how great it will be when they are in a relationship with Person B]

It is important to distinguish between an optimistic and a cruelly optimistic connection. While it is doubtful that a romantic relationship can solve all of one's problems and anxieties in life, it is quite possible that Person A will see some positive outcomes from pursuing that optimistic connection. Perhaps this optimistic connection moves him to make changes to his life, such as exercising more, making more social connections, doing things outside of his usual comfort zone, etc. that improve his quality of life even if the object of desire rebuffs him. Perhaps it comes to nothing, and they move on, or perhaps it does in fact lead to a long-term relationship. The default assumption is that optimistic connections are *not* cruel.

Attachments become cruel when they lead people to pursue actions that in fact prevent their ability to flourish, yet remain “profoundly confirming” (Berlant, 2) in an affective sense. Thus, Person A's connection could become cruel if they became convinced that they needed to take harmful actions to attract the romantic attention of Person B, or perhaps if they did establish a relationship, but it became toxic and/or abusive. However, ending a relationship of cruel optimism is difficult because those optimistic attachments remain and continue to ‘stick,’ to extend Ahmed's concept of the economy of emotion, to all the other parts of that relationship. To cut off that attachment would necessarily come with a negative re-contextualization of those feelings, a deeply unpleasant experience. I am sure everyone has heard of or known people in a bad relationship that is nevertheless maintained because one or more of the participants are either A) deeply invested in the *idea* of what that relationship could potentially be, or B) feel they must be in a relationship for their self-image to feel validated.

The relationship of cruel optimism that Berlant is most interested in is the connection between the idea/goal of what Berlant calls ‘the good life’ and present-day liberal-capitalist society. Berlant uses the phrase to refer to a specific “moral-intimate-economic thing” (2) connected to “...enduring reciprocities in couples, families, political systems, institutions, and at work” (2), and “upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy...meritocracy, the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and that foster life as a project of adding up to something and constructing cushions for enjoyment” (3). Rather than using ‘good life’ to refer to a method of living, such as Plato's concept of the good life meaning living with virtue, Berlant is using it to mean the *outcome* that we in western capitalist society were

promised in exchange for participation and alignment in our society, and insomuch as it was ever consistently available to members of non-hegemonic demographics, it has become more and more frayed as previously taken for granted outcomes in society (at least taken for granted by privileged demographics) have become ever more precarious.

Unfortunately, this specific fantasy of the good life has too much invested in it to be easily shaken off, even when its illusory nature has become increasingly obvious. This investment is both external and internal. Those who benefit most from the status quo are not incentivized to make clear the flaws in a societal configuration that clearly heavily benefits them, and governments are going to want to preserve stability as much as possible, even if that stability is unpleasant to most of their constituents. The attainment of the good life fantasy is, like so much of socio-cultural existence, gendered. There are specific expectations that men in society (particularly straight White cisgendered men) are expected to conform to, and the rewards that they are expected to gain from that conformity. To put it briefly and broadly, the ‘generic’ good life male fantasy is to go through school, then get a long-term career, get married, have children, and then support that family with the income from one’s career. While the way that this might be achieved can vary, and there are exceptions to this, it is still the ‘default’ assumption of how life will go for a man. The way that one attains this life path and subsequent reward is through the embodying of hegemonic masculine ideals, which are seen as inherent attributes of male existence (Connell, 2005). Male members of society who have internalized this hegemonic expectation yet find themselves unable to attain it will therefore connect it to a failure to meet the responsibilities of ‘manhood,’ and experience existential distress. This produces a mindset vulnerable to exploitation and radicalization. This is where manosphere gurus come in, which will be covered in detail in Part 3.

### 1.3.3 Gender Theory

As stated in the opening, this study is focused on how reactionary content influences audiences through affective reactions to gendered signifiers. As one of the most foundational norms in our societal hegemony, the male-dominated gender binary holds a vast amount of conscious and unconscious influence over how we understand identity.

The main theoretical perspective that will be used with regards to gender is that of performativity theory as detailed in Judith Butler's seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity: 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (1999). In *Gender Trouble*, Butler describes how the division between sex and gender is artificial. This is because the only way in which sex can be perceptibly signified is through the interpretation of culturally constructed gender norms. Therefore, any objective division between sex and gender is impossible to prove without recourse to a *subjective* cultural construction of gender.

Both sex and gender are in fact processes that are made true via constant *performances* of hegemonic gender norms that also serve to promote dominant cultural discourses. This *gender performativity* requires that all people who engage with their culture adhere to certain socially approved gender norms or risk being converted from subjects of society to abject exiles, where they are no longer allowed to participate meaningfully in society's processes, nor are their identities considered legitimate or worthy of protection. Therefore, gender performances are used to not only to maintain the illusion of a stable gender/sexual orientation, but also to ensure that dominant discourses of power are reinforced and unchallenged by imposing severe consequences for doing so. It should also be noted that these imposed gender performances can do great harm to people who, for assorted reasons, find themselves unable to adhere to those gender norms without mental or physical consequences.

The direct relevance to the study of right-wing YouTube content is that reactionary content is extremely hostile to any subversion of hegemonic norms, and right-wing YouTube is no exception. Much of the reactionary content that I will be examining involves itself in discouraging emotional alignment (in the context of emotional economy) with any real or perceived signifiers of disruption to the conservative gender binary, such as LGBTQ+ existence, feminism, or non-conforming presentations of masculinity/femininity. Part of this argument. In doing so, these influencers also engage in a form of gender performance that their target audience *is* aligned with. For example, The Quartering's/Jeremy Hambly's performance of 'nerd masculinity' or Jordan Peterson's presentation as a paternal academic. Those gender performances reinforce dominant gender norms in their audiences by allowing influencers to present themselves as arbiters of valid gender presentation.

*Masculinities* (2005) by R.W. Connell provides a natural transition point from broadly studying gender/sexual performance towards a focus upon the construction of masculinities. Connell's argument is that there is not, in fact, a single objective definition to what constitutes masculinity, but instead a variety of different socially constructed forms of masculinity, the shapes of which depend upon the socio-cultural context in which they are developed. However, this is not to say that all forms of masculinity are treated equally. In every culture there is one form of masculinity that is the ideal, which is treated as the one socially 'proper' form of masculinity that males should emulate. This masculinity is referred to as *hegemonic masculinity*.

In western society, hegemonic masculinity is, at the most fundamental level, about the ability to exhibit dominance over the self and the world. Thus, the 'ideal' man is physically powerful, rigorously logical, emotionally stoic, capable, and willing to perform violence to preserve what belongs to them, able to provide for his family and friends, sexually virile, and able to maintain a leadership role in any situation. The hegemonic male does not show any signs of vulnerability, physical or otherwise. Anything that could be interpreted as submission must be clearly presented as his willing decision. Because this is a capitalist society, the exhibition of material wealth is an extremely important part of the hegemonic masculine performance yet paradoxically he must also not *need* that wealth.

Because this is an abstract ideal, it is impossible for anyone to embody it completely and securely. While the ability to embody as many of those norms as possible does give one access to certain social privileges, one will always fall short (Connell, 2005; Vandello, et al., 2008). This never-ending pursuit of the hegemonic masculine ideal can have significant negative effects on males' lives, depending on the form and degree of failure to conform. This can range from internalized feelings of inadequacy and shame to societal abjection, physical harm, and legal sanctions depending on the area. Even conformity causes harm through the incentivization of harmful traits, such as being unable to exhibit emotional vulnerability unless it is redirected as anger, constant anxiety around somehow being perceived as unmanly, or taking physically dangerous actions to 'prove' one's masculinity.

*Masculinities* explores the construction of masculinity and hegemonic masculinity through engaging in interviews with men from different backgrounds and life experiences about their experiences with masculinity and their attempts to conform to the hegemonic masculine

norm within Australian society. Connell also discusses the implications of masculinity on politics, be they local or international, and how masculinity is deployed for the purpose of political ideology.

Reactionary YouTube content is a direct example of the political deployment of hegemonic masculinity. In a time when alternative performances of gender have become increasingly mainstream, and the ability to adequately perform certain masculine norms (particularly economic ones) have fallen increasingly out of reach, reactionary content aims to reinforce the primacy of hegemonic masculinity in their viewers. Even when a reactionary influencer does not conform to that hegemonic masculine ideal, their content is still hostile towards anything that could subvert or threaten hegemonic masculinity in society due to them embodying *subordinate masculinities*. These are masculinities that are allowed to exist within society as a 'valid' masculine identity, and thus able to partake in a degree of patriarchal privilege, in exchange for being defined by its weakness compared to hegemonic masculinity. Even if those subjects are dominated by those who more fully embody hegemonic masculinity, their privilege still depends upon the preservation of hegemonic norms and are thus also incentivized to resist any threat to hegemonic dominance.

#### 1.3.4 Reception Theory

Hegemonic norms do not come into existence fully formed, instead it is reproduced using cultural representations, symbols, and practices around systems of culturally based semiotics, as described in *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (1997) by Stuart Hall. The book examines how signifiers used by different cultures and societies to represent the world do not merely constitute a *reflection* of an objective reality, but in fact *produce shared meanings* that reflect the norms and values of each culture. These shared meanings are produced and reproduced through a variety of cultural practices, which are themselves defined and regulated by those same cultural meanings in a complex circuit of tangible practice and abstract meaning.

The media of any given culture also inhabits this circuit. Representations of different peoples, places, objects, etc., will invariably be influenced by the cultural practices and meanings of the culture (or sub-culture) producing said representations. It is common for people to claim

that they only express the objective truth, for example Ben Shapiro's claim that "facts don't care about your feelings" (HLN, 2015, 0:45). Reception theory would argue that is impossible because all communication is done via representation (languages). Because a representation cannot perfectly replicate something, it is likewise impossible to perfectly communicate 'fact' in a way that is not somehow subjective.

The relevance to my use of affect theory is that if all social life is produced by complex circuits of shared cultural meanings, and if most emotional responses are culturally produced (Ahmed, 2003;2014), then the visceral reactions described by Tomkins (2008) must be part of that same circuit of shared cultural meanings described by Hall. Thus, even the most abstract topics can cause a physical reaction in a subject depending on both individual and cultural context.

Hall's concept of the encoding/decoding process in communication, and the accompanying concept of hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional positions of messages is also highly relevant for media analysis (Hall, 2022). Put briefly, Hall uses the terms encoding and decoding to describe the process in which communication is created with an intended meaning that is informed by the cultural understandings of those involved in the creation and dissemination of that communication (which can range from a sentence spoken to a friend to a massive media event like the Superbowl). That process is *encoding*. That communication is then *decoded* by whoever receives it according to their own cultural understandings. Hall describes three broad categories of how communications are read; dominant readings align with the meaning intended by the producers, negotiated is read as intended in some ways, but differently in others, and finally opposed readings interpret the communication in the opposite way it is intended. This concept provides a helpful perspective on the problem of reactionary media content that is composed of negative reactions to progressive media content that is intended to be reacted to in a positive matter, and vice-versa.

### 1.3.5 Conceptual Synthesis

Understanding why hegemonic masculine norms are so powerful and appeals to them so effective requires a synthesis of all these theoretical perspectives. Affective economies/networks, which are used to construct one's identity, all circulate

through each other, like tributaries of a great river. This means that the earlier in life a certain affective economy/alignment is internalized, the more it will circulate through future economies (Ahmed, 2004). The degree to which these connections remain strong depends upon how consistently and intensely those connections are reinforced, of course. I do not have a powerful affective reaction to baby food, for example. However, hegemonic gender norms are interpolated upon us *exceedingly early* in life, and the performance of those norms are constantly and intensely reinforced throughout one's entire lifetime (Butler, 1999). This constant awareness of the need to conform to gender norms has led to almost all cultural signifiers carrying gender associations. For example, by colouring something blue or pink, a previously 'neutral' object is made masculine or feminine. Understanding of these norms is also constantly being added to or redefined. This means that there are very few examples of cultural communication that cannot be decoded in a way that is associated with gender performance. Furthermore, hostility towards nonconformity is similarly internalized early in life and constantly reinforced by peers and society. We grow up being taught to feel discomfort around those who do not conform to gender norms and to likewise fear insufficiently conforming to those norms ourselves.

To give a personal example, when I was a little kid, I watched the Simpsons episode "Homer's Phobia", in which Homer meets a gay man, which makes him anxious about Bart's sexuality. At one point, Homer observes Bart choose between chocolate and strawberry frosted cupcakes, lamenting when Bart chooses strawberry, the implication being that Bart choosing a pink cupcake meant he was choosing femininity over masculinity. For awhile afterwards, I became worried that choosing strawberry flavoured snacks would not only cause people to make fun of me for being 'girly' but also that it would make me more effeminate. The Simpsons is not



*Figure 1: A demonstration of how earlier internalized affective associations influence new network formations. (@afraidofwasps, Sept. 26, 2019)*

an authority for modelling gender norms, but nonetheless the mere threat of someone calling me gay for eating an insufficiently manly snack was enough to influence my behaviour and my self-image, leading me to avoid publicly eating strawberry flavored foods for awhile. This was not a coldly pragmatic decision, but one that was the result of genuine fear of both social mockery and emasculation, not that I would have known to call it that.

The reactionary content that will be analyzed in this dissertation work off the same extremely entrenched and wide-reaching affective economies. It is possible to evoke anxious affective reactions by pointing at almost anything and saying that it represents a threat to masculinity because the affective economies of hegemonic gender norms circulate into almost everything and thus hold the potential for being designated as a site for emasculation anxieties.

#### *1.4 Definition of Terms*

##### 1.4.1 Right-Wing/Reactionary

This project does not distinguish between ‘far-right extremism’ and the ‘mainstream right-wing.’ This is because this project focuses on content that exists within a mainstream platform. While some of the content that is explored in this paper may qualify as far-right extremist content to readers, it nevertheless indicates that this extremist ideology is tolerable in mainstream right-wing spaces. If the normalization of hateful fringe views in mainstream discourse makes the reader uncomfortable, then I have succeeded. Another reason is that maintaining a distinction between fringe and mainstream right-wing ideology is not relevant for affect theory. Affect theory concerns itself with how affective and emotional experiences inform people’s actions, perspectives, and beliefs. Because the difference between extremist and mainstream right-wing ideology is A) subjective, B) exists within the same general framework of discourse, and C) is mostly a matter of specific linguistic rhetoric than underlying ideology (Speakman, Burton, & Funk, 2020). This is not to say that rhetoric is unimportant, but that the outcomes reactionary content is trying to bring about is the same regardless of how ‘politely’ it may be expressed. The term ‘reactionary’ is also often used because the content of these videos is defined by a reaction *to* perceived threats to entrenched hegemonic privilege, rather than attempts to change that status quo.

### 1.4.2 Rhetoric

Rhetoric is of significant importance because the research goal of this paper is to examine how online right-wing content influences viewer on an emotional/affective level rather than on a purely conscious ‘logical’ level. For this project, the Merriam-Webster definition, “1.the art of speaking or writing effectively...2. Skill in the effective use of speech.” (Merriam-Webster, 2022) of rhetoric will be used. It should be noted that this can include other elements used to present the speaker’s arguments, such as environmental elements like setting decorations that have complementary symbolic associations, camera placement, seating or standing position, choice of clothing, etc., all of which are relevant to the presentation of their argument. All the elements of presentation align with pre-existing signifiers that themselves carry positive or negative affective associations. For example, Jordan Peterson comes across as authoritative to his audience not only because of what he says, but how he speaks, the way he dresses, and how that aligns with the image of a paternally masculine intellectual, a ‘smart dad’ if you will.

### 1.4.3 Ideology

The definition of ideology has always been a hotly contested one. Marxist theory alone has three different meanings, according to Williams (1977). This paper uses ‘ideology’ to mean the ontological framework one uses to understand the world. Put simply, it is a ‘worldview.’

Despite this paper not defining ideology in the Marxist sense, it does share an understanding that worldviews are the result of socially and materially constructed contexts rather than inherent characteristics. It does not grow on trees. However, socially constructed is different from ‘false,’ as we can see from the immense influence people’s beliefs have on everyday existence. On that note, the question of whether right-wing influencers ‘believe’ what they say is impossible to satisfactorily answer and irrelevant to the focus of this study, which is on methods used to spread said ideology. Whether Tucker Carlson believes in the great replacement conspiracy theory (Bort, 2021), his content still influences sufficiently receptive audience members to affectively align with that conspiracy theory. As pointed out by Young (2021), excessive focus on authenticity ignores the underlying affective economies that influence audience commitment to that content.

With all that said, the understanding of the *production* of hegemonic ideology that this paper is written with is influenced by the ‘Propaganda Model’ described by Chomsky and Herman in *Manufacturing Consent* (2011). Although the book was originally written to apply to mainstream journalistic and media institutions, YouTube fulfills the criteria for a mass media platform just as much as any established TV network, and more established and successful right-wing content creators can be seen engaging with the five filters described in *Manufacturing Consent*. Regarding the filters of ownership and advertising, many right-wing influencers, such as Dave Rubin (Lewis, 2018), Prager University (Bridge Initiative Team, 2020), and Charlie Kirk and Turning Point USA (Kotch, 2020), are funded by wealthy donors and advertisers, whose interests must be served. Reactionary content also acts as a collective ‘flak machine’ that supports hegemonic interests by creating narratives that sow doubt and opposition to the agency of marginalized groups, such as trans rights being inherently threatening to children (Carlson 2021; 2022).

#### 1.4.4 Hegemony

Hegemony is used to refer to the dominant ideology of a given society, one that reflects and naturalizes the beliefs and interests of the most privileged intersections of identity within that society (Gramsci, 2011). By getting most of society to internalize these beliefs as natural, social control can be maintained without having to constantly resort to force. In Canadian culture, this is wealthy, White, heterosexual cisgendered men. The more identity criteria one fulfills, the more hegemonic privilege one can enjoy. Thus, even if one is a poor white man, you can still enjoy more privilege and a belief that those privileges are deserved, then if you were a poor Black man or poor White woman. This incentivizes those who are not served by the hegemonic status quo to still reinforce it to try and preserve what little privilege they may have.

Although this study is focused on hegemonic masculinity as defined by Connell (2005), the term ‘hegemonic status quo’ is also used to refer to the current structure of power and privilege in society overall. Thus, the expansion of LBGTQ+ rights may be opposed by the ‘hegemonic status quo’ because it threatens the dominance of heteronormativity even when those rights do not explicitly relate to masculinity.

### 1.4.5 Affect

After all the discussion of affect theory, the question remains: what definition of ‘affect’ will be used for this project? While every theoretical approach used to explore affect has value, Tomkins’ categorization of affects into 9 specific responses represents the most useful approach to affect for this project. Therefore, when in doubt about the definition of the term ‘affect’ in this dissertation, assume that I refer to an autonomous and involuntary bodily experience taken in reaction to stimuli that is then narrativized after the fact into a conscious emotional experience, contextualized by pre-existing socially constructed narratives, associations, and the environmental context of the triggering stimuli.

For example, much of my research involves analyzing performances of hegemonic gender roles, which involves the internal and external ‘policing’ of nonconforming gender performances. This could take the form of reacting to the sight of a trans or nonbinary person with a “disgust response” (2008), which includes the somatic experience of nausea, unease, increased wariness, and other unpleasant sensations. Reactionary influencers, both prophets and gurus, encourage this by providing narratives for post hoc rationalizations of that affective response (they are ugly, they are mentally unstable, they are a danger to your children, they are annoying, etc.), and modeling behaviour that affectively connects that response to ideal performances of identity (‘Andrew Tate thinks trans people are bad’ -> ‘Andrew Tate is a real man’ -> ‘I should be a real man like Andrew Tate’ -> ‘thinking trans people are bad means I’m a real man’). One should note that this does not prevent the flexible use of terms like affect and emotion when the definition is contextually clear or in reference to a theorist who uses one of the previously mentioned terms differently, such as Massumi’s use of the term ‘emotion’ (2002) vs Ahmed’s (2015).



Figure 2 reorientation of affective response from empathy to contempt (FarFromWeak, 2023)

This study is concerned with the methods used to *evoke* affective responses that increase emotional alignment with the narrative being presented (Ahmed, 2015). Although it often uses affective contagion, this is not always the case. Often signifiers may be displayed that hold affective connections within the reactionary discourse that contradict the displayed affect, often accompanied with the use of additional stimuli that contextually alter the coding of the audience. For example, in figure 1 we have footage of a weeping man used in a guru influencer video. Affective contagion would cause viewers to have an empathetic affective reaction. However, the *affective performance* of the video (which is examined in detail in the FarFromWeak section in Part 3) uses a variety of signifiers and associations within the manosphere discursive environment to make him a symbol of emasculation and therefore an object of fear, contempt, and disgust instead of compassion. This affective association encourages the audience to align themselves with the guru, who presents himself and his teachings as being everything the emasculated figure is not. Variations on this general affective performance theme are common within the manosphere.

#### 1.4.6 The Manosphere

I am defining the manosphere as ‘*an online discursive subculture that views hegemonic gender binaries and norms as intrinsic to humanity, with the maintenance of hegemonic masculine dominance being seen as vitally important to the preservation of a functional society.*’ The manosphere believes that ‘feminism,’ defined as challenges to masculine dominance, has taken control of society and relegated men to a subordinate role in society. This feminist hegemony uses all parts of society to attack masculinity and convince men to accept emasculation.

Research on the manosphere has attempted to map it into a variety of different communities (Han and Yin, 2022; Ging, 2019), as shown in Figure 3, or as types of masculine archetypes (Kyparissiadis and Skoulas, 2021). My project is less concerned with the categorization of various parts of the manosphere, and more on how different performances of masculinity are used to engage hegemonic affective networks to introduce and reinforce manosphere-compatible beliefs. This is not to say that I will not discuss “red pill ideology” (Han

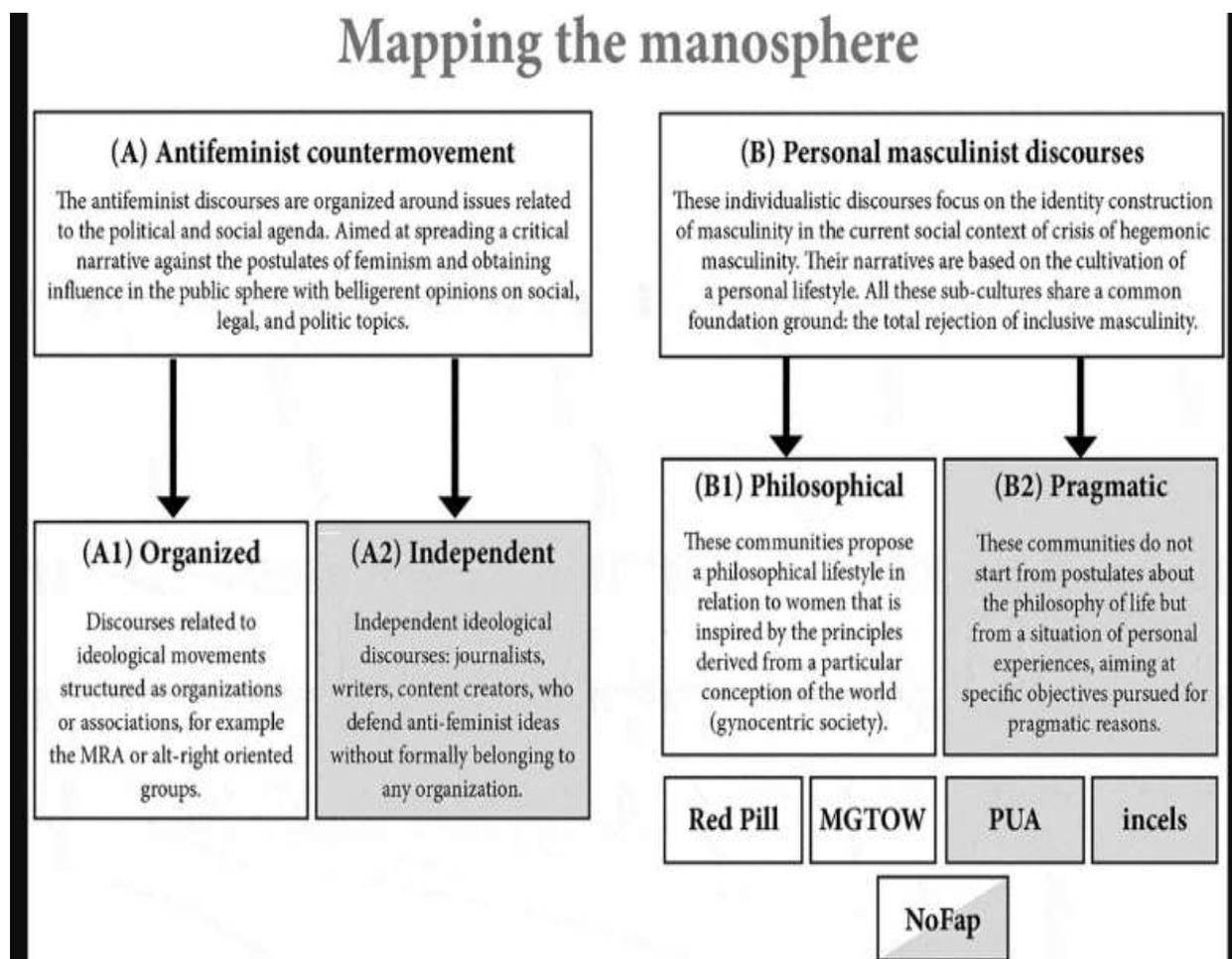


Figure 3 Map of the Manosphere (Han & Yin, 2022)

and Yin, 2022) if it is relevant to the content I am examining, but instead to point out that all manosphere discourse engages with red pill thought to some degree. They are all branches from the same masculine tree. This is not to say that the previously cited work is not useful, quite the contrary! It is simply to say that it is not altogether useful to *this* work to try and put these influencers into nice little boxes.

It has in fact been more useful in my research to try and determine a term for the ideology that manosphere discourse follows that is distinct from “mainstream society.” This has been a challenge. Manosphere ideology is largely incoherent and based more upon resentment of the feminine and a desire to hold power over one’s surroundings through some sort of correspondence with a vague hegemonic masculine archetype than an actual philosophy, which makes sense given its fascistic nature (Bratich, 2022; Paxton, 2004). Secondly, mainstream society is still largely dominated by a patriarchy, which is going to be hegemonically masculine. There is no clear dividing line where one’s ideology goes from ‘mainstream’ to ‘manosphere’ outside of a general social consensus. While *Vox* refers to Andrew Tate as belonging to the manosphere (Artsy), Joe Rogan, the most popular podcaster on Spotify in 2022 (Spangler), described Tate to his kids as “a legit world champion kickboxer. I like him, why do you like him?” (Rogan, 1:33). More pragmatically, no one in the videos I examined referred to themselves as being in the manosphere. It’s disadvantageous for gurus to portray themselves as being part of a strange fringe subculture, especially when most manosphere followers do not actually start out seeking manosphere content (FD Signifier, 2022).

However, I cannot deny that in my short journey through the manosphere, there still was a certain recognizable feel to manosphere content compared to other masculinity-focused content. It can be distinguished by a fixation on what I call ‘*fundamentalist masculinity*.’ Within that discourse, the ability for men to properly present as masculine is not merely a vital part of one’s identity but is in fact the fundamental attribute from which all other identifiers spring. Class, race, religion, job, etc. are all subordinate intersections of identity that are part of being a man. This is their fundamental epistemological understanding of human nature. The explanation of the origin and purpose of these masculine traits can vary depending on the guru and the audience. Appealing towards evolutionary psychology is useful for gurus that wish to present as rational, knowledgeable academics that are the ‘true holders of science’ (münecat, 2022), such as Jordan Peterson. Meanwhile, others like Dre Drexler (Drexler, 2022) may use religious explanations, claiming that hegemonic gender norms are not merely adaptations to environmental contexts but are divinely inspired instincts to which human beings must adhere to maintain divine favour. Fundamentalist masculinity requires a rigidly defined gender binary to function because masculinity can only be coherently defined in opposition to femininity (Connell, 2005). Because society has become more accepting of non-hegemonic gender

performances and definitions of gender in recent decades, the definition of masculinity is now also subject to more flexible interpretations. This is a huge threat to the masculine fundamentalist self-image. If you have placed the centre of your identity around adhering to a rigid definition of manhood, a choice that is validated through the privileges enjoyed by that hegemonic identity, then challenges to that hegemony and those privileges will be experienced as a threat to your sense of *self*. This is why manosphere content consistently characterizes masculinity as under threat. It's not a threat towards the existence of men so much as a threat to their favoured *image* of manhood.

This illusory crisis of masculinity is necessary for the manosphere's guru ecosystem to function because it rationalizes a fundamental contradiction. If 'masculinity' really were instinctively understood, why would anyone need to teach it? The manosphere gurus answer this by contextualizing their teachings as forgotten knowledge that has been intentionally suppressed to emasculate men by shadowy opposing forces, often connected to feminism and other vaguely defined interest groups (Han and Yin, 2022).

In fact, 'opposition' to masculinity is generally described in the same terms that the more explicitly political right-wing commentators use. Like so much of right-wing rhetoric, it is disadvantageous for manosphere influencers to concretely define their opposition. What is important is that the existence of forces that challenge patriarchy is used to justify the self-mythology around gurus' teachings, explaining why those teachings are simultaneously obscure, yet also worth spending time and money learning.

The existence of the crisis of masculinity changes this from a philosophical contradiction to a heroic process of 'rediscovery' and rebellion against an external unjust authority, one that is simultaneously too weak to materially strike back against consumers, yet powerful enough that it can shoulder the blame for all perceived shortcomings in gender performance. I have gone at length on this subject because it is really at the centre of how masculinity gurus are able to market their products, and it is an important overall consideration to have when examining manosphere content.

The worldview underpinning most manosphere content as I understand it can be broadly summarized as:

1. The gender binary is an objective truth that exists outside of human construction. The divide between men and women is rigidly distinct, whether set by nature or by divine action.
2. Hegemonic gender norms and ideals are therefore not the result of social norms, but instead the natural (meaning constructed outside of human artifice) result of the differences between the sexes.
3. Acting in ways that correspond with these rigid gender norms are the ideal way to live, as they allow the subject to exist in harmony with their natural instincts/divine purpose. The purpose of society is to allow these instinctive urges to be expressed while tempering them so that order can be maintained.
4. At some point, generally a vaguely defined “modernity”, western society has fallen into a state of cultural degeneracy and decay due to the influence of progressive ideals such as feminism and postmodernism, the believers of which have managed to convince the controllers of society that the natural instincts and gender norms of men and women are not just artificial, but evil. The motivation of these feminists and postmodernists can range from a long-term plan to dominate a weakened western civilization to a petty desire for greater sexual success on the part of those who cannot or will not conform to gender ideals.
5. This cultural campaign to make people doubt/reject their natural gender roles has resulted in widespread unhappiness with society and is the reason for the various social ills afflicting people in the present. People’s innate sense of gender rage and struggle against the prison that society has constructed around them, meanwhile, people are placed in positions and responsibilities that their innate natures are not suited for, such as women in leadership positions over men.

6. By reclaiming the forgotten/suppressed truth of how one's gender is supposed to act, people can gain success in all avenues of life, as they will finally be acting in accordance with their true potential. Furthermore, they will no longer have to be afflicted by anxiety and self-doubt, as they will be in the role that they are meant to be in.
  
7. The degenerate society has so heavily suppressed this internal truth that we live in that it cannot be independently discovered. A teacher is needed to guide men towards 'true masculinity.' Any criticism of the teacher from external sources is merely an expression of the forces of degeneracy trying to prevent people from reaching their true potential and ending their tyrannical hold on them.

## 2.0 Part Two - Hate With Me: Prophets On Youtube

Reactionary prophets are agents of ideological stagnation who work to prevent movement away from existing hegemonic alignments. What does it look like when a prophet is at work? What affective narratives and signifiers do they play upon? This section answers these questions by examining content from three prominent reactionary prophets and using the following coding format, inspired by Hall's coding/decoding concept, to visualize the affective economies each prophet is creating in each video.

Message <-> Message <-> Message

To clarify, 'message' here refers to a *meaning* that is being communicated through the video. That meaning is often communicated through speech, but can also be signified through visuals, music choices, and other audiovisual stimuli. Breaking up the overall argument of an entire video into a chain of different messages and affective reactions is useful to show how signifiers that may seem anodyne or nonsensical when placed in isolation can link together to create specific affective resonances that move backwards and forwards along the circuits that are introduced and/or reinforced through exposure to the content, and in so doing reinforce or alter the worldview of a viewer.

For example, let us imagine a prophet influencer decides to make a video claiming that the movie adaptations of *Dune* by Denis Villeneuve (2021; 2024) are an example of how Hollywood and popular media is trying to devalue White men and Western society. He discusses how in the narrative, the protagonist Paul Atreides must abandon the values and practices of the noble House Atreides in favor of living like the desert-dwelling Fremen, people who are coded as being Islamic middle-easterners so that he can survive against the villainous Harkonens, even taking one of the Fremen as a lover. As the plot progresses, Paul becomes increasingly integrated into Fremen society, becoming a leader and messianic figure to the Fremen and eventually leads a 'jihad' against the rest of galactic society, which is more 'European-coded.' He concludes that the movie is trying to convince the audience that 'Western culture' should be abandoned in favor

of Islamic culture, and that middle eastern people are stronger, smarter, and better than White people, and so 'we' should just surrender to the tide of foreign immigrants and allow them to take over Western culture. It is just another attempt by globalists to undermine Western culture, freedom, and self-determination.

The affective diagram for such a video would look like this:

*Dune: Part One* and *Dune: Part 2* are major Hollywood movies <-> Hollywood is part of the greater media system <-> that media system is controlled by leftists who are trying to destroy Western society <-> Part of that effort is through propagandizing how Western culture is weak and bad <-> *Dune Part 1* and *2* does this by showing how the hero has to abandon his White, Western values and lifestyle by living among the Fremen <-> The Fremen are Middle-Eastern looking Muslims <-> They are better warriors than the other people in *Dune* <-> The Harkonnens, who are the villains, are White people <-> When Paul becomes a Fremen and uses their ways, he is able to beat the Harkonnens <-> He decides to lead a jihad so that the Fremen can take over the galaxy <-> Hollywood is trying to convince us that we should let Middle-Eastern Muslims take over the world because they are stronger than White people, who are the evil Harkonnens. <-> Our society and culture is the greatest that has ever existed <-> Any encouragement to move away from that can only be harmful <-> Therefore, any criticism of that culture is an attack on us <-> *Dune Part 1* and *2* is trying to make White people hate themselves and the Western culture we built. <-> It is trying to harm us and make us easier to control <-> This is proof that popular media and pop culture is controlled forces that hate us and our culture and want to see it destroyed. <-> popular media and mainstream culture are evil <-> We should reject mainstream media and culture because it is evil. <-> We should see those things as disgusting and threatening.

This is obviously a nonsensical argument. However, the argument connects to specific pre-existing reactionary narratives and places those Villeneuve adaptations within those narrative contexts in an affectively satisfying manner. Even though the argument is nonsense, it may still reinforce pre-existing affective economies because it fits within that worldview smoothly and without resistance. Rejecting it may take more energy for a comparatively small affective reward.

Because these diagrams are meant to demonstrate how the narratives of these videos incorporate themselves into existing right-wing narratives, they are written from the perspective

of the dominant reading of the examined content. Individual audience members will likely have a wide range of affective reactions which cannot be incorporated within the format. The diagrams will still provide a useful map of how pre-existing affective economies are implicitly and explicitly evoked to align audiences with the rhetoric in the videos.

As discussed previously, this section of the dissertation will contextualize the analysis of the content using the framework of the ‘prophet’ role while examining the creation of affective connections between the influencer, the reactionary worldview expressed by the influencer, and their audience. We will begin by examining the prophet role as applied to a masculine identity that defines itself by its eternal victimhood and alienation from society, yet also by its consumption of increasingly mainstream consumer products. I speak of geek masculinity, a performance tied to a subculture near and dear to my heart. Geek masculinity is an essential masculine identity to analyze because of Gamergate, the infamous misogynistic movement that rose from 4Chan like Godzilla from the Sea of Japan. The methods used by Gamergate to incorporate extremist rhetoric into memetic imagery and internet humor both for the purposes of ideological laundering and the maintenance of aligned online communities have had a major influence on the ability of right-wing ideology to infiltrate geek spaces (Bezio, 2018; Off, 2022). Thus, an examination of geek masculinity and the affective performances used to inflame prejudicial beliefs in those who identify with geek culture can provide insight into how these authoritarian and populist movements continue to spread.

## *2.1 The Quartering As Geek Prophet*

### 2.1.1 Geek Masculinity: An Overview

“Geek Masculinity” was first described in “The Nerd Within’: Mass Media and the Negotiation of Identity Among Computer-Using Men” (Kendall, 1999). Kendall examined how the technology-using men associated with the ‘nerd’ stereotype construct their own identity and sense of masculinity in a socio-cultural landscape that often denigrates them. In line with *Masculinities* (Connell, 2005) and *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (Hall, 2022), Kendall’s subjects were unable to conform to the dominant masculine ideal due to the negative associations made between their interests and by extension their selves

in cultural media representations. This incentivized them to negotiate an alternative form of masculine identity that allowed them to engage in computer-using subcultures at the turn of the millennium while still perceiving themselves as performing masculinity.

Keep in mind that the subjects of Kendall's article were still largely privileged people. Most of them were cis White heterosexual males, all solidly middle-class. The 'nerd' identity was reported as being popularly conceived of as male despite a quarter of subjects of the article identifying as female. Kendall defined the cultural stereotype of the nerd as possessing both hypermasculine ("intellect, rejection of sartorial display, lack of 'feminine' social and relational skills") (4) and feminized ("lack of sports ability, small body size, lack of sexual relationships with women") aspects (4). The tendency for the geek identity to be culturally gendered as innately male, allowing access of some masculine privilege, while still being the subject of emasculation establishes geek masculinity as a form of subordinate masculinity (Connell, 2005).

Now before I go into the juicier bits, I want to note that the following is not meant to be a takedown of all geek culture everywhere. There are sections of geek culture that are extremely progressive, and even enclaves of progressive geek culture within 'areas' that are known for having a reactionary fanbase, such as *Warhammer 40K*. Geeks are people, not a monolith. I am specifically discussing how geek masculinity intersects with affective connections between geek culture and masculine performance, and how that can explain why certain geeks react with fear and anger to the introduction of viewpoints that do not align with whiteness and masculine privilege. If while reading this, you think "hey me and my friends don't do this!" then great, you are not the subject of this discussion! From here on when I am speaking of geek masculinity, assume that I am speaking of a performance that is aligned with reactionary ideology and patriarchy.

Over the decades since Kendall wrote this article there have been several cultural shifts vis-à-vis the nerd identity. Importantly, the nerd has become less of a target of disrespect with the increased economic and cultural importance of computer and technology use. While the nerd is still *not* a hegemonically masculine identity, some characteristics of that identity are more mainstream than in previous generations, particularly interest in technology and 'geek' interests. It would be unusual for someone to be unable to navigate the Internet or maintain a social media

presence now (Salter, 2018). The hegemonic male identity can thus be said to have incorporated some nerd traits into itself.

Because geek masculinity is a subordinate masculinity, it must also be complicit with hegemonic masculinity. It does not represent itself as a threat to hegemonic masculine dominance in the way that other more marginalized identities, such as Black masculinity, may be perceived as. The platonic ideal of geek masculinity does not wish to threaten the masculine status quo so much as the identity desires a reordering of what attributes should be prioritized. This results in a tendency to participate (explicitly or unknowingly) in the same hegemonic oppression and domination of women and other marginalized groups as hegemonic masculinity while simultaneously identifying as an oppressed group within society. Because of this, the geek identity tends to exhibit a distinct degree of naivete about critical perspectives on hegemonic masculinity and by extension race (Tremmel, 2023). In fact, because internalized victimhood is fundamental to the geek masculine performance (Ottemo, Berge, Mendick, & Silfver, 2024), geek subcultures can be vulnerable to extremist right-wing rhetoric by establishing affective alignments between their different senses of victimhood (Josefson, 2021; Kelly, 2021).

Another important part of the geek masculine identity that I have noticed through a lifetime in geek culture is that it is extremely consumerist, a fact that further contributes to a subculture that prioritizes White male status and privilege. As noted by *Mary Sue* writer Teresa Jusino (2016), the ability to engage in geek culture and maintain one's 'geek cred' requires the constant expenditure of money, time, and energy.

Let us use the subculture I am most familiar with for this discussion, videogame subculture. A key part of the performance of geek masculinity is displaying knowledge of geek interests and media. Consistently displaying that knowledge requires staying current with the part of geek culture that one aligns with. Therefore, being able to perform masculinity in the context of video game culture requires the ability to *afford video games and video game consoles*. While there are avenues that one can use to play video games for free or at a reduced cost, such as piracy, borrowing a game from others, or waiting until a desired game goes on sale, they do come with complications that make them less ideal for geek performance.

A more serious limit is time. While many video games are short, some of the most popular can take dozens or even hundreds of hours to complete. Being able to consistently

complete games is therefore dependent on having a lifestyle with enough free time to dedicate to that hobby. I have personally spent well over 100 hours playing *Elden Ring*, and I shudder to think of how long I have spent on *Final Fantasy XIV*, and I am not particularly skilled in either game. This presents an impediment to those who need to work long hours or have other obligations that require most of their time compared to those who require less work to maintain their lifestyle. This class barrier is presented most explicitly when one considers the way that ‘casual’ video games, which have a lower barrier of entry and quicker play sessions are often derided by those who identify as ‘hardcore’ video game players (Squire, Wells, Anderson-Coto, & Steinkuehler, 2023). This creates an incentive for corporations to market their products to that demographic over other, less economically privileged ones. Even if geek culture has become increasingly diverse over decades, the ‘geek’ identity is still demographically mostly white, albeit not as hegemonically dominant as before (Ottemo, Berge, Mendick, & Silfver, 2024; Woo, 2018).

There are many factors that have led to the creation of an environment that favours white masculine participants more than any other demographic (Tremmel, 2023; Woo, 2018). However, I highlight the economic reality of videogame fandom because of the affective investment placed in corporations exhibited in geek masculinity. For geeks, the ability to perform geek masculinity and therefore avoid internalized feelings of inadequacy is utterly dependent on the output of various corporations. Geek masculinity is largely framed around familiarity with media. Even the more individually creative outputs like cosplay are based around replicating existing media signifiers. This fact reveals a key part of the affective relationship between geek masculinity, Whiteness, and capitalism. Corporations that provide material that validate their masculinity become affectively associated with relief from anxiety, belonging, acceptance, and so forth. To use Ahmed’s terms, they become a key part of an affective economy that allows those gamers to feel adequate in their own way contrasted against a world that they identify as being victimized by. Geek masculinity is incredibly negatively reactive to A) perceived criticism from ‘outsiders’ and B) to attempts to make media ‘political,’ two characteristics that consistently manifested in Gamergate and other examples of reactionary geek masculinity rhetoric.

First, criticism of these corporations can themselves trigger affective responses that lead ‘followers’ of their games to be extremely defensive of them, even when the topics of those criticisms have no tie to the consumer. The corporations are the providers of masculinity, and thus a perceived ‘assault’ on them can be experienced as an assault on not just a provider of masculine performance, but on that avenue of masculinity at all. Someone saying they dislike *Street Fighter* may be intended as an opinion but it’s still enough to make you imagine your time and effort being wasted because people may not *care* about Street Fighter. Furthermore, one experiences greater and greater affective investment as one expends time and effort on something (Berlant, 2011). If you have spent hundreds of hours getting good at something, it will become increasingly integrated into your identity. The phrase “Street Fighter 6 is stupid” can be perceived, consciously or otherwise, as some variation on “you are stupid”.

This affective alignment and desire for prestige creates an additional incentive to maintain the social capital of massive corporations and brands. Criticism of these corporations can enter an affective circuit wherein criticism of, for example, Activision-Blizzard’s business practices may be taken extremely personally because the social capital of the associated brands may be genuinely important to their own sense of achievement and legitimacy.

These reactions are particularly pronounced with criticism from perceived ‘outsiders’ because the default assumption of the geek masculine identity is that outsiders are, at best, not understanding of the various hobbies, and at worst actively hostile. I am not going to say that everyone that identifies with geek masculinity has been bullied growing up, but enough of them seem to react like people who *were*. When I engage with niche geek spaces, there is often this sense that outsider’s perspectives are not worth engaging with because they don’t have the experience to really ‘get it.’ That is why geek spaces are so often invested in social gatekeeping practices that repel disruptive outsiders (Reagle, 2015). An example of this feared disruption is the possibility of an outsider trying to hold geek content to standards that insiders did not ‘agree to.’ Consider a situation where a perceived outsider writes about how nerd spaces are unwelcoming to women. This is not only because it introduces dissonance in the bully: victim binary by implying that the nerds are being bullies, but also because it represents a rupture in a space that is meant to be a secure space *for nerds*.

The real, visceral distress caused by that rupture provides enough impetus to ‘narrativize’ the situation in a way that preserves that masculinized sense of victimhood. Now women or other marginalized identities are the bullies for trying to invade the one space they can exist comfortably within, trying to ‘force’ the occupants to change everything to serve a small, entitled minority. Trying to resist this invasion will lead to them facing social mockery and even sanctions! Oh, it is high school all over again! That high school remark is not just a crack at a strawman’s expense, mind. High school is an extremely emotionally and socially fraught space, inhabited during a highly formative life stage. It is understandable that the affective connections made there would remain active and open to spread to new stimuli that still ‘rhymes’ with those connections. Is a woman publishing an article that says your games are problematic? That certainly affectively rhymes with being laughed at by girls in high school because you wore a video game shirt.

This connects to the problem of the geek identity being dominated by the straight White male perspective. As previously stated, the *assumption*, both in and out of geek spaces, is that geeks are straight white men by default (Kendall, 1999; Woo, 2018; Ottemo, Berge, Mendick, & Silfver, 2024). Geek masculinity extends that assumption into believing that this plurality elevates the straight white male geek to *hegemonic consumer*. The geek masculine identity may be built upon victimhood, but within geek spaces, it demands hegemonic dominance. I define this title as ‘hegemonic consumer’ because their legitimizing narrative is dependent on a free-market capitalist belief that as the most numerous consumers of geek media, said media would naturally be produced to align with the desires of the ‘default’ masculine geek to appeal to the greatest possible market share. It follows that any media perceived as not appealing to the hegemonic consumer must represent a corrupting outside influence. While BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and female geeks are not necessarily unwelcome, their presence should be conditional on them abiding by social norms that prioritize the comfort of straight white male geeks. To the hegemonic consumer, they paid for everything and thus get to make the rules. The number one rule being not being *‘political.’*

What does ‘political’ mean in this context? It has the same general tone as the term ‘woke’ in conservative spaces. It is a shibboleth that refers to anything that disrupts the emotional security of the hegemonic subject by threatening white masculine dominance,

although ‘threatening’ may be too strong a word. All that is required is the introduction of stimuli that, even if only for a moment, risks disrupting one’s ontological understanding of the place of power and identity. This disruption is experienced as an intrusion that takes one ‘out’ of the media experience, something that can be seen in the oft-heard protest about ‘shoving one’s agenda/politics/ideology/etc. in my face/down my throat.’ This means that media that is *explicitly* political, by which I mean openly interested in commenting on systems of social power and control, like the *Metal Gear Solid* series or *Disco Elysium* can be considered ‘non-political’ because they do not introduce that disruptive experience. Conversely, media that does not engage in that political commentary like *Alan Wake 2*, can become defined as political, as HeelvsBabyFace, a reactionary YouTube commentator, does by bringing up the involvement of Sweet Baby, Inc. (2023), a consultancy firm that specializes in introducing inclusion and diversity in videogame narratives (Sweet Baby Inc., 2024). This provides proof of external intrusion into the videogame space, which is then used to contextualize any hegemony-disrupting content within *Alan Wake 2* as an insertion of ‘politics.’

This example of *Alan Wake 2* is an excellent representation of how reactionary media analysis preys on the insecurities at the centre of hegemonic masculinity and the subordinate masculinities that hang remora-like below it. According to Kelly (2020), masculinities tied to whiteness have largely become defined by a sense of victimization due to a perceived loss of hegemonic domination. This has created a view of life as a zero-sum competition between differing intersections of identities, one that mixes easily with far-right extremism (Josefson, 2021). Because hegemony is dependent on domination, it follows that such a mindset would experience any signifiers of non-hegemonic identities being valid independent of hegemonic permission as a reminder of that loss of power. If one’s identity is defined, by the holding of privilege, then any equalization of that privilege will be experienced as an assault. To return to *Alan Wake 2*, you play as Alan Wake for half of the game while in the other half you play as Saga Anderson, a Black female FBI agent. In *Alan Wake*, you played as the eponymous character for the full game. Thus, to the reactionary geek mindset, this is not seen as an *inclusion* of a new character in addition to the established Alan Wake. It is a *subtraction* from gameplay and resources that could have been spent on a White male protagonist, representing a withdrawal of primacy from the White male in favour of a Black female. The presence of Saga’s blackness is also described as a pain point in a popular thread on the r/AlanWake Subreddit ([Shawon\_718],

2023), asking about the previously referenced HeelvsBabyface video. While many posters disagree with reactionary discourse, those that are aligned with that narrative bring up that Saga is an example of ‘race-swapping,’ that she is a consequence of interference from ‘woke’ consultancy firms, and that her presence as a black woman is ‘distracting,’ seen as compromising the pure intentions of the game developers and writers. Of particular interest is the repeated focus on a single line shown in Figure 4, “Another white asshole deciding what I get to do, how I get to do it,” as an example of a woke attack on ‘gamers’ (2023). This contextless image works well as an encapsulation of the anxiety experienced by the hegemonic consumer in the video game space.

First, references to White identity disrupts White privilege by rendering whiteness visible, rather than the hegemonic default. Secondly, because the reactionary geek perceives all geek media as being meant to be spoken *to them*, this quote is interpreted as being aimed at the majority-white game consumer. To the reactionary geek

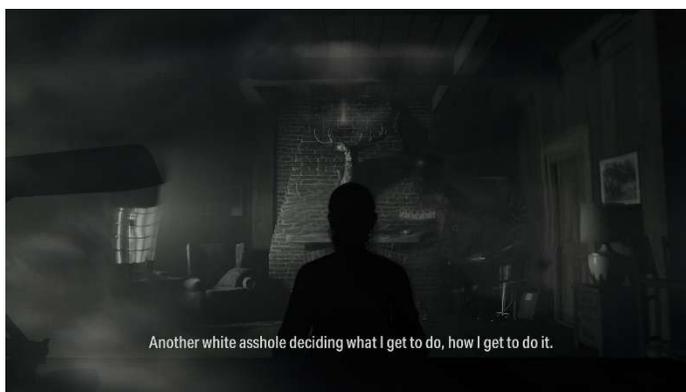


Figure 4 the offending line from Alan Wake 2 (2023)

mindset, this is not simply a character saying a line, but an expression of contempt for the White male consumer either from the game creators or from external anti-White male interests represented by Sweet Baby Inc. If geek media is no longer directed at and dominated by White men, then how can that media be used to vicariously perform hegemonic masculinity? The presence of non-hegemonic identities that address Whiteness and patriarchy in geek spaces therefore evoke sensations of fear and anger in those highly invested in the geek subculture being a ‘safe space’ wherein one can exist without fear of judgement.

One could draw a parallel here between reactionary geek discourse around geek subculture and how a Neo-Nazi pamphlet describes the English nation in *Affective Economies* (Ahmed, 2004). Both are characterized as an essentially feminine space that must be controlled by White masculine power to prevent them being penetrated and irrevocably changed by foreign invaders, be they immigrants or ‘woke’ journalists and consultants. This rhetoric is built around

the formation of a love: hate binary wherein love for those spaces is used to evoke hatred of the outside (Ahmed, 2014).

Affective economies being what they are, it is no great leap that an identity based off perceived exclusion and withdrawal from mainstream respect, victimhood, a fear of emasculation, and an emphasis on their perceived rationality and stoicism could view any stimuli associated with sources of emasculation and ‘bullying’ as an assault against their own identity. By engaging with this affective network, an enterprising prophet allows the audience to vicariously perform geek masculinity through experiences of victimhood, and knowledge, offering a narrative that rationalizes feelings distress and anger toward signifiers of inclusivity and equity as objective media and culture analysis. One should note that this does not have to be consistent with the content of the media being observed. This is why *Star Trek* or *X-Men*, media properties that have been famous for progressive political commentary for more than fifty years, can still have fans that complain about it only just now ‘going woke’ or ‘getting political.’ Geek culture prophets create and reinforce these harmful affective connections via connecting the feminine with cultural degeneracy, the concept of the ‘virtue signal,’ and ‘leftist corporate hegemony.’ These concepts (among many others) are fundamental to how the reactionary geek masculine worldview narrativizes encounters with hegemony-disrupting signifiers as an identity simultaneously founded on hegemonic privilege and catastrophic loss (Kelly, 2020). This allows audience members to simultaneously see themselves as rational actors, embrace experiences of weakness and emasculation as proof of moral superiority, while paradoxically treating efforts to pursue greater equity and justice in the world as inauthentic and immoral.

Jeremy Hambly is better known as ‘The Quartering’ to the world at large. He is a right-wing cultural influencer who describes his YouTube channel thusly, “Another social commentary channel but this one the guy has a beard! Let's Talk Games! I talk about issues many of us care about in the gaming industry, comics, and the world at large. Come to hopefully both be entertained & informed!” (Hambly, 2024).



Figure 5 Jeremy Hambly

Hambly stage decoration and appearance aligns with geek identity markers, which is important in a subculture so concerned with gatekeeping (Reagle, 2015). This is shown in the background of his studio, filled with retro videogames and accessories. The placement of entertainment products also provides a cover for the far-right content of his videos. It creates a casual, less threatening atmosphere compared to the intensity of his YouTube thumbnails. The casual viewer is given the impression that his content is not meant to be taken seriously, keeping newcomers from being scared off by the ideological content of his videos.

While he does make some content on politics (by which I mean pertaining to government processes), his focus is on interpreting the meaning behind media news. Like a priest reading the future in the scattered bones of an animal sacrifice, he declares that the low ratings of the female-led fourth season of *True Detective* (2024) are due to it ‘going woke.’ Similarly, Phillip Tremblay, Ubisoft director of subscription services, saying that people should get used to not actually owning their video games is linked to conspiracy theories around Klaus Schwab, the chairperson of the World Economic Forum (2024; Walker, 2024), and these are only his YouTube thumbnails. Let us now examine how Hambly uses those thumbnails to prime his audience.

### 2.1.2 Emotional Priming through YouTube Thumbnails

YouTube video thumbnails have the same utility as an eye-catching cover, meant to draw attention while also creating an impression of what the viewer can expect within. So, what impression do Hambly’s thumbnails create? Even a cursory examination reveals a focus on visuals and video titles that will trigger anger and/or contempt affects, even in cases where the video’s subject is



Figure 6 Thumbnail for “Supreme Court OVERTURNS Roe v. Wade & Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Goes INSANE While Disney Responds!” (Hambly, 2022)

portrayed as a positive development. For example, his upload in which he discusses the overturning of Roe V Wade, which he portrays as a positive development, is focused more on the

negative reactions of people *against* the decision, rather than the positive reactions of those who supported it, shown in figure 5 (Hambly, 2022).

This clearly displays the feelings he wants viewers to bring *into* to the video, rather than the content itself creating those affects. One might have expected that a pro-life video would use signifiers associated with positive feelings to that news, such as a smiling baby. This thumbnail is more concerned with depicting it as a left-wing (or ‘woke’) defeat than a right-wing victory. Two compatible explanations present themselves. First, reactionary worldviews are fundamentally about a self-perception of victimhood (Kelly, 2020; Ottemo, Berge, Mendick, & Silfver, 2024), and thus no permanent ‘clean’ victory can occur. Hence the thumbnail depicts Cortez defeated and crying, but the pro-choice feminists still being a threat. Secondly and more pragmatically, negative feelings are more easily recruited than positive feelings (Tomkins, 2008), which is the subject of the next paragraph.



Lazy Gen Z Brat ROASTED For MELTDOWN  
On TikTok After Being FIRED & BLAMES...

108K views • 7 days ago

Figure 7 Thumbnail for “Lazy Gen Z Brat ROASTED For MELTDOWN On TikTok After Being FIRED & BLAMES Everyone Else!” (Hambly, 2024)

An interesting wrinkle that I noticed on a second look at Hambly’s videos is that the affective ‘intensity’ of the thumbnails remains consistent regardless of the actual impact of the news being covered or the tone of the video. There is a constant heightening of tension no matter what the subject of the day is. A foolish Tik-Tok fad is as horrific or important as a landmark court decision. Consider how it would feel to have your nervous system react with equal intensity to both huge and completely trivial news, and

the impact becoming accustomed to that level of reaction would have on attempts to engage with such signifiers outside of content consumption. Of course, this tracks with Hambly and other reactionary prophets’ general thematic message. That message being that society is locked in an existential battle between the forces of goodness and woke ‘degeneracy,’ in the fascist sense of the term (Contrapoints, 2017). These YouTube thumbnails look the way they do not just to attract clicks by being eye-catching, but also to make *any* stimuli that connect to what is called

‘woke’ or otherwise ‘progressive’ to be feel equally distressing, and any act of hegemonic domination to feel equally satisfying. There is no difference in affective intensity between a brat meltdown (fig 7) and a conspiracy theory about Internet domination by the World Economic Forum (fig 8) because in Hambly’s worldview, they *are* the same things. They are both incursions of a force that would threaten his privilege and thus are assaults against him and his viewer base.

However, it is interesting to note how the way he carries himself contrasts with the extremely high-intensity emotional content of the thumbnails and titles of his YouTube uploads and what work that does for his audience and the effectiveness of his prophetic proclamations. My belief is that the calm, stoic air with which Hambly carries himself on video is made more effective and soothing for his audience when said audience has just witnessed the incredibly



1 Governing Body For The ENTIRE Internet Proposed! This Would DESTROY Free...

45K views • 6 days ago

Figure 8 Thumbnail for “1 Governing Body For the ENTIRE Internet Proposed! This Would DESTROY Free Speech!” (Hambly, 2024)

charged imagery/rhetoric used to entice people to click on his videos. According to Tomkins (2014), it is pleasurable to experience a lowering of high intensity neural activity, which is often caused by negative affects like anger or despair. ‘Naturally’ speaking, this is meant to represent the sense of relief experienced by the removal of whatever is causing that stimulus, such as the relief experienced by a crying baby being soothed into being quiet. Yet this can also lead to people seeking out sources of negative stimuli so that relief can be experienced when it is soothed, simply all sought out intentionally. Horror movies do this, for example. I believe a version of this happens with Hambly and his audience. They see the highly charged emotional imagery and rhetoric present in the thumbnails, experience an affective reaction that is contextualized by their own experiences, and then that affect is lowered/soothed to reflect Hambly’s calm stoicism/cynicism.

As a prophet, Hambly’s videos create a cathartic experience by speaking to the audience and confirming their own opinions and emotions as valid. Hence the conversation about the thumbnails. The audience is primed to feel a certain emotion and then Hambly can tell them that

they are correct to feel the affective reaction that was already intensified by the thumbnail art, setting up an emotional loop. With that understanding, let us now investigate how Hambly lives up to his thumbnails as he goes through his task as a prophet in these three videos.

### 2.1.3 Video – “Disney Gender-swaps ANOTHER Classic Film” (Hambly, 2022)



Figure 9 Thumbnail for “Disney Gender-swaps ANOTHER Classic Film”

This video is about rumors that a reboot of the 80s Disney film *Flight of the Navigator* will feature a ‘gender-swapped’ female lead. Hambly uses this as an opportunity to spin a narrative that the very minor decrease in straight White male leads in movies have led to the quality of cultural products being sacrificed to be “culturally inclusive (Hambly, 2022, 7:33)”. As a direct result, today’s films are more culturally ephemeral than ever.

As briefly discussed regarding *Alan Wake 2*, reactionary discourse views the introduction of any characters or elements that disrupt hegemony as a *subtraction* from a cultural work, rather than an *addition*. In this case, Hambly states that it represents the removal of the ‘intended’ White male cast member. “Was the character being a White male like contingent on the story, important to the story? No. But if it's not important, why change it?” (Ibid, 3:05). This is a common refrain in right-wing media commentary. Any inclusion of minority characters must have a plot-relevant ‘reason.’ In other words, while any character in a minority identity should only exist in cultural products if their minority identity is important to the plot, characters with hegemonically privileged identities should only be *removed* or altered if doing so is necessary to the plot. Privilege becomes plot armour.

Hambly describes the article as only stating that Disney was considering having a female lead in the reboot, yet Hambly guesses that they are also “...probably not going to be White (0:43)” and then speaks as if he *knows* that the lead character will not be White. This implies that Disney is not only trying to dismiss maleness but also Whiteness, which is framed as intrinsically linked. He is discussing a specific, White-centred construction of hegemonic masculinity which he portrays as being under continuing threat from cultural producers that have abandoned the ‘default’ white maleness of the movies of his childhood in favour of inferior ‘woke’ copies. One should note that this does not require proof for Hambly’s interpretations to be accepted, because this is already how his audience *feels* about popular media. Through confirming this, he validates their feelings and provides a specific target for it, changing it from the anxiety affect, which is directionless and thus unable to be soothed, to anger, which has a specific target and can therefore be responded to (Tomkins, 2008).

Yet validation is not only about telling the audience that their feelings are an accurate response to unrelated stimuli. Hambly must also express how they are morally correct to feel that negatively about these perceived changes. This is particularly the case with geek masculinity, which is fundamentally based on an experience of abject masculinity. They must be able to perceive themselves as the unjustly victimized in this exchange or they would have to accept that their desires for domination of marginalized others are mere cruelty, no different from the ‘bullies’ of their youth. Thus, Hambly transitions into explaining how the diversification of movie casting, which one must remember he interprets as exclusively transactionally motivated, in that all attempts at diversity in media must only be the result of a mercenary desire for greater revenues from non-hegemonic audiences, has led to a lessening of culture compared to the movies that his audience would have nostalgia for. He asks if movies made today will be remembered like movies from “our youth” (5:54), again positioning himself as a stand-in for the audience, and finished off by saying that the movies made now will inevitably be forgotten because they are products compromised by attempts at ‘wokeness’ as opposed to ‘good storytelling,’ citing such jewels of cinema as “*Batteries Not Included*” (6:02), “*Honey I Shrunk the Kids*” (6:03), or “anything made in the 80s, practically” (6:13). Hambly’s rhetoric assures the audience that they aren’t *racist*. No, they are upset because they know it will make media worse. They aren’t reflecting prejudiced beliefs, which would be irrational; instead, they are standing in defense of the objective truth, no matter how many people may wish it otherwise. It transforms

someone disliking a new piece of media into participation in a melodramatic battle for cultural existence (Kelly, 2020).

Let us examine this same process from an affective rather than a rhetorical point of view. First, I do not believe that people care much about *Flight of the Navigator* or the reboot, in fact I do not believe that Hambly himself does either. The same argument would be made if a reboot of *The Last Starfighter* were announced with a female lead. Instead, the movie is a stand-in for the diversification of culture in general, and the disruptive effect that increased visibility for marginalized identities has on the primacy of hegemonic masculinity. This is done through a three-part process. It starts with the activation of affects and emotions linked to insecurities regarding the hegemonic White male identity, explaining how a product that he (and therefore the audience which he speaks for) has nostalgic love for is being ‘taken’ from them by removing hegemonic White male dominance over the story through the introduction of a female (presumably) non-white lead in the reboot.

Now that he has activated this sense of abandonment and insecurity, he is able to narrativize that feeling as originating from the White male being abandoned in favor of other audiences, implying that any gain for minority identities is a loss for White masculinity. This also connects to the general sense of social alienation created by capitalism, diverting attention from systemic social factors in favor of pop culture depictions of White masculinity being insufficiently worshipful. Nostalgia is recruited for this process, Hambly contrasting the ‘more wholesome’ movies of the 80s, with the fatally compromised by wokeness media of today. The implication is clearly that ‘wholesomeness’ is in some sense a result of White male primacy.

But Hambly also offers long-term vindication. As the movies he describes as “wholesome” (5:54) are also described as being remembered and long-lasting, so too does he claim that the weaker degenerate movies made now will be soon forgotten. By extension, hegemonic masculinity will again return to its proper place as the dominant identity in popular culture, and therefore society. The audience is promised that the privilege they are entitled to as White males will eventually be regained if they don’t compromise with ‘wokeness.’

This video provides an example of how a reactionary prophet reinforces affective alignment with extremist beliefs by embedding those beliefs in narratives of victimization, cultural heroism, and artistic integrity. This shrouds the underlying message, that the presence of

non-hegemonic identities in media are signs of cultural corruption, in a socially, and more importantly internally acceptable veneer. The next video will show how the framing of corporations as ‘woke’ is used to neutralize cognitive dissonance caused by conflicting affective attachments. One rhetorical maneuver used by Hambly is to frame attempts to encourage more acceptance of marginalized demographics as being inherently hypocritical through the concept of ‘virtue signalling.’ Yet first we must engage with the question of how and why large corporations would be understood as leftist in the first place.

### 2.1.3.1 Affective Diagram:

New Disney reboot of *Flight of the Navigator* may have female protagonist <-> Protagonist in original version was male <-> That movie holds nostalgic value <-> It was a good movie <-> ‘gender-swapping’ the lead is a major change -> There is no ‘reason’ to have a female protagonist instead of the original male protagonist -> Disney must therefore be doing this to attract the ‘diversity’/‘virtue-signalling’/‘woke’ crowd/credit -> Disney is happy to discard original ‘vision’ of the movie that we liked, including discarding white male lead role, in exchange for chasing money -> WE (White males) are being discarded by pop culture at large -> -> Presence of non-hegemonic identities signifies threat to White male identity/privilege -> This disruption of the original artistic vision in exchange for pointless diversity will render the reboot lesser -> No one will remember the diversity-compromised cultural products of today -> This is different from the purer more artistically genuine and non-diverse products of the 80s, which we all remember fondly -> Lack of White male dominance must therefore lead to inferior cultural production -> Inevitably these hollow attempts at diversity will fail and media will return to proper hegemonic male-centric status quo -> Eventually society as a whole will also return to embracing hegemonic masculine privilege

### 2.1.4 A Theory of Leftist Corporate Domination: An Anecdotal Thought Exercise.

As the next video I am covering is concerned with the cynical use of LGBTQ content in corporate media, this is a good opportunity to discuss an interesting reactionary right-wing narrative regarding leftist ideology and large corporations. This narrative claims that massive corporations (media and otherwise) are dominated by far-left ideologues who collaborate with leftist academics to force society to reflect their leftist, anti-Western values. This is present in content by PragerU (Tripodi, 2018), Tucker Carlson (2022), and various Alternative Influence Network (AIN) members as described by Lewis (2018), to name a few. This narrative is repeated even though the far-left controlling corporate America would result in an unrecognizable economic landscape compared to the present day. However, I am not particularly interested in debunking claims that large corporations are leftist and would instead prefer that readers

consider what work this narrative does for the audience. There are a variety of factors implicit in the leftist-corporate narrative that ease its integration into the audiences' already existing affective networks.

The first factor, one that is discussed by Lewis (2018), is that reactionary media attempts to position itself as a countercultural movement. This allows for the formation of a sort of astroturfed counterpublic (Warner, 2005). From an affective point of view, this has the added benefit of increasing emotional investment in the audience by making them feel as if the content creator is an underdog, resonating with the feelings of powerlessness, frustration, and alienation that we all experience in late capitalism. It is interesting that this counterpublic facade can be constructed even in the case of Tucker Carlson, a wealthy heir who was also the most-watched figure on the most-watched cable news station in the United States.

From an audience perspective, the narrative works to explain feelings of alienation from greater society, particularly for those who hold right-wing beliefs. For example, the last few decades have seen great strides in LGBTQ+ visibility and acceptance. It is likely difficult for that audience to understand how this could have happened without having some kind of secret powerful string-pullers. This is further exacerbated by culture war narratives that frame ongoing public discourse around civil rights and diversity as a fraught war rather than a continual social process.

Finally, there are significant parallels between the leftist-corporate alliance narrative and antisemitic discourse. This is readily apparent when one examines the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the unfortunate tree from which so much antisemitic fruit has grown. The *Protocols* invents a shadowy worldwide conspiracy of Jewish elders that detail their plans for cultural domination and enslavement of the Gentiles, a significant part of which involves control over the organs of public discourse, academia, and the media (Bronner, 2019). This is echoed in the antisemitic conspiracy theory of Cultural Marxism, for example (Mirrlees, 2018). Although the leftist-corporate conspiracy is not likely to produce affective links to antisemitic ideology in isolation, stimuli that reinforces integration of antisemitic narratives into existing reactionary affective/ideological discourse is common, such as the preoccupation with George Soros (Fafaure, 2020), or 'Globalists' essentially playing the same role as 'Bankers' (O'Donnell, 2021)

Yet these theories may not tell the whole story, since they risk reducing the audience to mere will-less drones, which is against reception theory. Acceptance of those influencers' narrative requires the audience to already be receptive to the affective associations within those narratives, otherwise mere exposure would be enough to automatically sway anyone. Let us then examine how a theory of leftist-corporate dominance might be woven into norms of hegemonic masculinity. I will use myself as the example, describing the mainstream education I was given growing up in Canada starting in the 1990s. What I am describing next does not describe reality as it is/was, but reality as neoliberal society taught me. I aim to anecdotally demonstrate how the internalization of hegemonic norms *can* lead to a misunderstanding of the relationships between economics and ideology regardless of the 'intelligence' of the subject perspective.

The hegemonic ideology of Western society (neoliberal capitalism) positions capitalism and economics as the most rational outgrowth of human nature. To quote Burke, "...the laws of commerce are the laws of nature, and consequently the laws of God" (1800). This ideology sees traits such as hierarchy, as expressed by Burke in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (2003), and rational self-interest, as expressed by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1964) as inherent to humanity. While there are other modes of social organization, to try and engage with those is to at best set oneself up for failure by ignoring fundamental aspects of human tendencies. For example, I have often heard it said that socialism cannot work because people will take advantage of the system to enrich themselves without doing any labour, or that someone will inevitably set themselves up as a dictator anyway. It is better that everyone pursues their self-interest by working hard, and their work will be compensated by an amount set by the free market in response to the needs/desires of society. If everyone works hard, then they will get the amount of money that work is *worth*. If they can't get enough money to live on, then they should either work harder, do other work, or simply face the consequences of their choices. Everyone has the *chance* to be rich, but most people are not cut out for it.

Simultaneously, we are implicitly taught that the rightful masters of the world are straight White men (Carr, 2008). After all, the history that I was taught was made by straight White men, the powerful people that I learned about were straight White men, the laws that I was taught to live by were set by straight White men, the Canadian state was built by straight White men. Neoliberal democracy, the best way to live, was created by straight White men. Everything that

is good, prosperous, and strong about my way of life is the fruit of the White man's labour. If one internalizes the idea that our social structure is configured to accurately reward capability and punish laziness and incompetence, then the only logical explanation is that straight White men are the most capable people. Thus, out of one side of Canadian society's mouth, we are taught that everyone is equal. Yet at the same time we are saturated with images and stories of the success and power of White masculinity. We are in this way given an understanding that a racial hierarchy is present, even if very few people consciously intend for us to gain that understanding and similarly few of us consciously perceive the internalization of that belief.

As stated before, the idea that neoliberalism is a 'rational' economic system is impressed upon us throughout our development (Marinov, 2020). By rational, I mean an 'objective' understanding of reality, unclouded by preconceived biases or emotions, preferably through quantitative data expressed in a way that leaves room for only a single interpretation. In fact, the very word 'interpretation' is itself a gadfly to hegemonic thought, it leaves open the idea that any understanding of reality is still filtered through the imperfect faculties of the human consciousness. Yet despite being imperfect, humans are still perceived as inherently rationally self-interested actors. All people pursue their desires through the lens of rational self-interest, making decisions through mental cost/benefit analyses of their current situations and the choices available to them. Those who are the most rational, understood here as the most able to perceive the objective truth of reality, are the most successful. After all, they are the most well-served by the economic system of neoliberalism, a system that is presented as operating off an unbiased response to the collective needs and desires of a rational marketplace. There is something almost Gnostic about how we are taught to view wealth. We are all mired in a fallen world of impulsivity, emotional reactions, obstacles in our lives that seem impassible, but those who are gifted the *gnosis* of market-driven rational perception, wealth, power, and success are always in reach. Rise and grind your way out of Plato's Cave!

However, not all people are believed to be equally rational, otherwise everyone would be able to succeed, which is clearly not the case. Those people are lower in the hierarchy due to their inability/unwillingness to make rational decisions, either due to excessive emotions, lack of discipline, bad upbringing, or simple lack of mental ability. What is important is that these all spring from individual-centred problems, not systemic ones. Even someone who is raised in a

poor family can study hard and get a scholarship, after all. Someone who is obese can exercise, someone who works a bad job can apply themselves and go to night school to get a better one. If someone is truly left destitute and unable to reach their potential despite their best efforts, then enough effort will eventually lead to someone with the rationality to perceive their hidden potential and give them an opportunity. Those who can't or won't better themselves and their lot in life have decided, consciously or not, to allow themselves to be exploited by those with the drive, intelligence, and rationality to make themselves successful and shape society in their image (Danskin, 2019; Ibid, 2019)

All of this is to say that I was taught that the society I live in was not the result of humans shaping a society made to support the interests of the powerful. I was taught that our society was constructed by those with the clearest understanding of humanity, like sculptors seeing a statue within a block of marble. Hegemony is humble by nature. It is always quick to deny its might and instead insist that it is merely conforming to the pre-existing shape of reality.

It is easy to see how hierarchy follows from this belief in rationality. Our hegemonic ideology tells us that our society responds not to the whims of individual humans but instead to the mass aggregate of inherently self-interested human nature. Society functions through the recognition of needs and wants by the free market, which then creates products and services to fill those needs in exchange for wealth. Inequality is rationalized as the result of differences in individual ability to apply rational consciousness to one's situation. If success is framed as the ability to view reality most objectively and the measure of that success is the ability to extract wealth through capitalist enterprise, then it follows that those who are the wealthiest and/or the most powerful got there by having the greatest understanding of objective reality. With straight White men holding the most social/economic/political capital in our society, the rational conclusion is that society bends to hegemonic White masculinity because what that hegemonic identity perceives and responds to is *more real* than what everyone else does. Any critique against the legitimacy of straight White male domination must therefore be the result of a lesser understanding of reality, irrational adherence to identity politics, resentment, or spite. Furthermore, even the least powerful person that identifies as a straight White male is incentivized to reinforce this status quo, as it still privileges their perspective over those of other, less privileged identities (Danskin, 2019).

Look upon my wall of text, liberal proponents of the status quo, and despair, for I have constructed a logical case for White supremacist ideology. One made using only the implicit understanding transmitted to us by mainstream Canadian society. Yet one question remains. If economic and social dominance are the fruit of rationality, and White men are the most dominant group of people in the world and therefore inherently the most rational, then why are the biggest corporations also controlled by leftists, who are inherently *irrational* and self-destructive?

One answer is that reactionary discourse views leftism in relation to culture war narratives rather than economics. This is because our hegemonic ideology constructs economics as apolitical. Under this discursive framework, leftism is primarily about cultural change, with leftist economic policy merely being one of many methods of imposing ‘wokeness’ upon society. For corporations, this is often done by explicit marketing to/acknowledgement of nonhegemonic groups, rejecting elements of conservative ideology or associations with conservative groups for the sake of public perception. This understanding allows one to rationalize how massive capitalist corporations like Google (Hasson, 2020), Disney (O’Neil, 2022), and even Amazon (James. 2020) can still be labelled as ‘leftist’ even though they depend on inherently capitalist economic practices to function, because modes of production are not important in reactionary discourse outside of the cultural impact they may have.

There is yet another contradiction that must be resolved here. Belief in the inherent objectivity of the free market conflicts with the legitimacy of the straight White male supremacist hierarchical status quo. If the greatest beneficiaries of the free market can continue to extract greater and greater wealth while also being perceived as having discarded their ‘majority’ White male consumer base, then that would imply that the White male consumer is no longer the dominant demographic, as explained in the section on geek masculinity. One method of resolving this contradiction is the topic of the next video, wherein the idea of the ‘virtue signal’ is used to both resolve cognitive dissonance between belief in White male dominance and free market rationality, as well as to launder LGBTQ-phobic ideology.

2.1.5 Video – “Woke Hypocrisy! Fantastic Beasts BLASTED for Cutting Woke Stuff in China!”  
(Hambly, 2022)



*Figure 10 Thumbnail for “Woke Hypocrisy! Fantastic Beasts BLASTED for Cutting Woke Stuff in China!”*

Hambly’s role as prophet in this video is to resolve the previously explained contradiction found in accusations of corporate leftism. Put briefly, Hambly claims that any attempt by ‘Hollywood’ to display solidarity with marginalized groups must be purely cynical marketing exercises rather than genuine ideological principles. As proof of this, Hambly cites Disney’s hypocrisy in both proclaiming their support for LGBTQ and minority representation while also following anti-LGBTQ media requirements in nations like China and Russia, cutting out scenes that violate LGBTQ censorship standards, *Top Gun 2* not mentioning Taiwan, and the removal of Chadwick Boseman’s face from a Chinese poster for the *Black Panther* movie. This is an interesting argument because it is correct. The commodification of activist rhetoric by corporations without any reformative intent has long been a subject of criticism from the left (Guidotto, 2006; Kanai & Gill, 2020; Sobande, 2019), while still acknowledging the benefits of increased social exposure in normalizing acceptance of those marginalized groups/causes. From a rhetorical and affective standpoint, associating expressions of support for marginalized groups/leftist causes with cynical commodification reinforces an expectation of deception towards *any* expression of progressive support, connecting to preoccupations with authenticity in internet cultures (Lewis, 2018) and geek masculinity’s fear of being ‘tricked,’ emasculating them via revealing their knowledge to be faulty. Hambly tells his audience that feeling repelled by non-hegemonic representation springs not from bigotry but from discernment.

Hambly also engages with geek masculinity through his performance of clear-eyed rationality, while the opposition are characterized as being too immature and emotional to perceive the way that they are being ‘tricked’ by corporate efforts to “gaybait” (Hambly, 2022, 8:02). It calls to mind the nationalist rhetoric cautioning against being a ‘soft touch’ that can be tricked by appeals to emotion and compassion referenced by Ahmed (2004), although in this video’s case the warning is against LGBTQ support rather than welcoming refugees. This rationality is reinforced by his tone of voice, which sounds more bemused than angry, preserving his status as perceptive and rational rather than giving into his emotions. It also implies a position of intellectual dominance, presenting himself as being ‘above’ the topics of conversation by not getting emotionally invested in the institutions he is speaking against. This performance of logical detachment also reinforces his performance as a prophet by making him seem unsurprised.

This is done by Hambly using the ‘virtue signalling’ accusation. This term is often used in reactionary discourse to define progressive activity or communication as being primarily motivated by smug self-interest rather than authentic ideological commitment. When someone is accused of virtue signalling, they are being accused of doing or supporting good things only because those actions make them look good to others. This is circularly proven by the subject’s communication of said actions or beliefs. A literal signalling of virtue. Hypocrisy is worthy of criticism, but the idea of the ‘virtue signal’ reinforces an unjust status quo by requiring an impossible and unprovable standard of ideological purity (McClay, 2018). This reinforcement is done by “...elevating motive over the content of beliefs.” (Ibid, pg. 147). Furthermore, accusations of virtue signalling do not require explicit contradictions between motivation and action.

Say someone was marching in a Pride parade and they posted a picture of them doing so on social media. A substantive accusation of hypocrisy would require that the person’s picture be used to hide a contradictory motive or action, such as that person using their presence at a Pride parade to make themselves appear to be supportive of LGBTQ rights while simultaneously financially supporting anti-LGBTQ causes. This is where a valid criticism of Disney’s public support of LGBTQ rights could be made, because the Disney corporation also quietly contributes to the campaigns of Republican politicians who support the marginalization of LGBTQ folk

(Blair, 2022), presumably because Republican economic policies are more beneficial to large corporations. An accusation of virtue signalling, on the other hand, requires no actual evidence other than a perception that our Pride marcher cares more about the attention garnered from being seen at the march than LGBTQ rights, which is impossible to genuinely prove without that person explicitly stating it. Furthermore, because all online communication requires conscious intent, it is impossible for any online content to *not* be a signal of some kind. As pointed out by McClay,

“If actions are unavoidably performed before others, and the way we think about them is shaped by our culture, then all actions can be understood to be *only* performative; you wouldn’t do them if you had grown up in a different place with different parents and a different value system, and you wouldn’t do them if you thought they’d diminish your status or your standing as a good person.” (2018, 143)

Because of its uselessness as an actual method for describing hypocritical action, it is more useful to treat accusations of virtue signalling as an example of a thought-terminating cliché (Lifton, 1962). When Hambly accuses movie studios of inserting LGBTQ characters into movies purely to ‘market’ to those minorities and their supporters, what he is really telling the audience is that public engagement with LGBTQ themes and characters is merely opportunism rather than genuine acceptance. Even praise from viewers or critics can be twisted into the reverse by framing said responses as the only reason for that engagement. Any public discourse that displays support for activist causes that in some way disrupt the hegemonic status quo can therefore easily be dismissed as mere virtue signalling, instead of actual evidence of shifting public opinion.

To put it in affect theory terms; rhetoric that deploys virtue signalling-related terminology works as a thought-terminating cliché to prevent acknowledgement of greater public acceptance of minority groups, or at least greater engagement with media that involves minority groups. Exposure to stimuli intended to contribute to normalization of affective responses to the presence of marginalized groups can be ‘flipped’ into provoking negative affective responses through virtue signalling rhetoric that frames ‘normalization’ stimuli as a deception or insult.

This ‘woke hypocrisy’ narrative is quickly integrated with reactionary homophobic rhetoric by bringing up Disney’s (then) lack of opposition to the ‘Don’t Say Gay’ bill (officially titled the Parental Rights in Education Bill) in Florida, which Hambly repeatedly refers to as an

“anti-grooming bill” (1:42). While he is content to use it as an example of Disney’s hypocrisy, it is important to note that he is still playing to an exceedingly homophobic audience and it therefore behooves him to normalize the extremist contents of that bill, which was created to silence any discourse about non-straight sexualities in public school classrooms. Hambly’s message there is that any recognition Disney tosses towards LGBTQ demographics still comes second to political self-interest, which means that inclusion is a trick on the audience.

Hambly’s integration of ‘woke hypocrisy’ with homophobic discourse is also done by rationalizing negative reactions to the inclusion of minority groups in media as stemming from a distaste for ‘virtue signalling’ and ‘tokenization,’ both of which are common terms used to dismiss progressive signifiers. His argument here is that if the LGBTQ content included in the film was unimportant enough that it can be removed for consumption in LGBTQ-restrictive markets like China and Russia without damaging the overall product, then there was no reason for that content to be there in the first place. Taken in isolation, this argument could be interpreted as a call for more substantial LGBTQ content in media, regardless of what more homophobic markets may call for. However, taken in context of Hambly’s output, it is more likely that he is trying to associate normalization of non-hegemonic identities through inclusion in popular media with “tokenization”. In other words, the inclusion of any non-heterosexual character whose sexual orientation is not a central pillar of the plot must be a crass attempt to market to a minority at the expense of the overall product that should be treated negatively because it represents contempt for the audiences’ intelligence and therefore an attack on their masculinity.

The outcome this argument supports is the restriction of LGBTQ presentation to a segment of explicitly LGBTQ media, saying ‘I don’t have anything against gay people, I just want them to keep it to themselves.’ Any character that represents a break from hegemonic norms is perceived as an intrusive disruption of that comfortable status quo, an intrusion which must be justified before the hegemonic audience before it is allowed. On the other hand, whiteness just gets to be ‘human.’

Internalization of this discourse reinforces a variety of negative affective responses towards LGBTQ-related stimuli, ranging from contempt for supporters of progressive politics not penetrating the ‘ hilariously transparent ’ motives for corporate activism to anger at expressions of

support for marginalized groups as those expressions become emotionally associated with perceptions of deception, harm towards children, and corporate greed. His discussions of corporate commodification of activist causes are used to launder unpleasant affective responses to progressive stimuli, such as the presence of gay characters in mainstream media. Audiences of Hambly who feel a sense of discomfort at the presence of minorities in media can justify this discomfort as being a rational response to corporate hypocrisy, rather than an irrational arbitrary impulse constructed from the internalization of prejudicial discourse.

As we can see with Hambly, the role of the prophet is only marginally about the recitation of the actual news content and far more involved with uncovering hidden implications within the news that valorize his audience. Next, we will see how Hambly acts in a 'victorious' context.

### 2.1.5.1 Affective Diagram:

Various Hollywood studios have released cuts of major films that remove LGBTQ+ content as well as advertising featuring BIPOC people for markets like Russia and China <-> This contradicts claims of alignment with progressive causes by those same studios <-> attempts by the media to introduce more 'diversity' both in front of and behind the camera are cynical attempts to expand their audiences and 'virtue signal' to a degenerate public <-> We are correct to react to inclusiveness in the media with contempt and frustration because we know it is a trick <-> People that support inclusiveness in media are either dupes, in on the con, or are cynically virtue-signalling <-> For example, LGBTQ+ 'representation' is used in marketing to 'gaybait' the audience <-> This inclusion is often poorly done <-> It works to get people excited about the movie because most of them are easily led by their emotions. <-> Therefore, any LGBTQ+ inclusion in a movie that is not specifically 'about' LGBTQ+ issues or identity should be reacted to with dismissal and suspicion <-> If you or someone you know is excited or happy about this inclusion, that means that you or they are being tricked or led by your emotions <-> People with those non-hegemonic identities who defend that inclusion are blind to them being 'tokenized' by massive media corporations who do not care about them <-> Therefore, people of non-hegemonic identities should stick to making movies that are about them and their issues instead of supporting their portrayals in major movie releases <-> You being against diverse media representation is actually *helping people and society not to be taken advantage of.*

### 2.1.6 Video – “Entitled College Brats Get BRUTAL Reality Check When They Realize They WASTED Their Lives!” (Hambly, 2024)



Figure 11 Thumbnail for “Entitled College Brats Get BRUTAL Reality Check...”

I chose this video because it illustrates a situation where Hambly is engaging in his prophet role in response to something that differs from the 'larger' issues of the representation of minorities in media that made up the subject matter of the previous two videos. Instead, Hambly reacts in real time to a TikTok wherein a woman describes how her husband, who works in an unspecified trade position, makes four times as much income as she does despite her having a

master's degree. She concludes by stating that she would never push people into attending post-secondary education as opposed to trade school if they felt that trade school was a better fit for them. Throughout the video her tone is calm, at worst slightly exasperated, but she seems happy to be able to tell other people what she knows. She doesn't give the impression that she 'wasted her life,' saying that she makes very good money for her age.

After the TikTok is done, Hambly presents an AP article that describes how enrollment in trade school programs continues to increase while enrollment in other post-secondary school institutions is down. Hambly's contribution to the video is to use the TikTok and article to push a common reactionary anti-intellectual narrative, namely that university is a waste of money that people feel a societal obligation to engage in.

This presents several interesting twists from the other two videos in this section. The elephant in the room here is how to explain the contradiction between the title and thumbnail art of the video. My assumption when I first began taking notes on the video was that it would involve multiple people that possess signifiers that Hambly's audience hate going through some kind of negative college-related event that make them extremely upset. Or to put it more succinctly, people that are assumed to be 'entitled brats' are in some way 'put in their place' by learning that they had done something extremely foolish with their limited time. The affective purpose of this video would be clear, a sort of sadistic catharsis mediated by Hambly as he models it being socially and morally acceptable to enjoy their pain through both his reaction and rationalizations. It would have been easy to put this in a prophet framework as well. He would describe how such an event demonstrates how the left (understood to be tyrannically dominant in academic spaces) (Mirrlees, 2018; Bronner, 2019; Baune, 2019), is in fact weak and impotent against the hard light of reality. The meaning would have been clear, people who participate in academics are weak, entitled, and emotionally fragile. They and thus by extension the information that originates there cannot be relied upon. That would have been a pedestrian but satisfying experience for Hambly's audience.

But that is very much not what happened in this video, and thus one must ask first why Hambly decided to still go with that title and that thumbnail, and second, how does he manage the contradiction between initial affective priming and video content? One reason could be the need to keep a consistent and identifiable tone and aesthetic for his subscribers to look for. As

discussed before, the aesthetic style of the thumbnails and titles comes together to affectively prime the audience for a very specific sort of sadomasochistic catharsis, consistent with Kelly's depiction of aggrievement-based reactionary white masculinity (2020), as well as the identification with victimhood central to geek masculinity (Josefson, 2021). His audience comes to him for that specific mixture of feeling, and a thumbnail and title that look different may discourage his usual audience from clicking on the video. Having an attention-grabbing title and thumbnail, as discussed before, is more important for Hambly's ability to extract wealth and maintain his place in the YouTube algorithm than for his content to be consistent with what he promises. Stay or don't, he already has the viewer count and adding comments to complain is only seen as additional engagement for that algorithm.

To the second question then, how does Hambly spin this so that he can do his job as prophet? There is still plenty of meat on this bone for Hambly to engage with pre-existing emotional circuits of victimhood, aggrievement, and masculine ideals of individuality here.

I want to start by examining how he engages with those ideals of individuality and aggrievement because it provides a way for him to walk that tightrope of engaging with right-wing anti-intellectualism without breaking with the need for geek masculinity to perform intelligence and knowledge. He does this by framing going into the trades as a better idea than going to college or university, saying that nowadays college is unnecessary because everything can be learned online (Hambly, 2024). In the vision that Hambly provides, the ideal geek rejects the degenerate leftist grift that is post-secondary education to pursue their own individual journey towards knowledge. It changes education from being a boring chore where you are just one of many to an adventure where you refuse to accept the standardized teachings given to the masses. With all the time now available to you, you can join a more manly occupation in the trades, doing truly tangible work whose greater value is proven by the higher income it provides, the one true measure of worth.

I say that income is treated as the one measure of true worth because Hambly clearly treats skills as being 'real' only if they result in high incomes, as shown when he says the reason the teacher making the video he is reacting to makes less than her husband is because "he has real skills, she has a piece of paper" (5:20). This claim is nonsense, of course, because pedagogy requires an incredibly broad skillset beyond the fact that you must be knowledgeable enough

about one's subject to *teach it*. But I digress, the point here is not for Hamby to accurately transmit knowledge to his audience, but to encourage a young and frustrated audience to associate cultural institutions like college and university with feelings of resentment. The point is to internalize the belief that if you go to college/university you won't learn anything *real and valuable*.

A key part of this affective alignment is tapping into a sense of aggrievement, and victimhood experienced by his audience. This video touches on a surprisingly nuanced topic, and one that I must ask that the reader approach carefully. Buried within this prophet-interpretation of post-secondary educational institutions is something resembling a point. Absent of the reactionary context surrounding Hamby, he is correct that students in elementary and secondary schools are often taught that a college/university degree is the one way to a secure career with a decent income, something that has become increasingly at odds with the reality of the job market. This can be connected to a variety of economic and social realities that are beyond the scope of this dissertation but importantly does not actually mean that the skills learned at post-secondary institutions are useless. However, it is certainly easy to put oneself in the shoes of a newly graduated student saddled with student debt who is shocked to find out that their hard-earned bachelor's degree or diploma is not the avenue that they were *taught* it would be. It is no stretch of the imagination to understand how someone would feel aggrieved, victimized, and deceived in such a situation, a state that influencers like Hamby are well-positioned to take advantage of. The issue, they say, is not that, for example, almost every job position seems to require a post-secondary degree or that skills that are not immediately monetizable are treated as disposable, but that post-secondary institutions have become scams that brainwash students with "...BS courses about wokeness and gender studies" (Hamby, 10:02). This framing implies to the audience that all studies of the humanities and liberal arts are both an insidious poisoning of the cultural soul *and* a scam that wastes one's precious time and loads those students with excessive debt which incentivizes them to try and spread those 'woke' ideals so they can make their money back, like an educational pyramid scheme. In this way, Hamby encourages the dismissal of skills and knowledge that lead to an understanding of the oppressive state of the hegemonic status quo. At the same time, he valorizes engaging in labor positions that are useful to capital-C Capital without any risk of those laborers developing a class consciousness.

The trouble with trying to engage with this affective circuit is the truth buried underneath the anti-intellectual nonsense. It *is* true that many trades are valued by society and can provide a greater income than many positions that are available with a college or university degree. It *is* true that there is a broad and erroneous cultural assumption that people should only go into the trades if they don't get good enough grades to get into college or university, as Hambly points out when he says that only students who got bad grades would be pointed towards tech school (2024). It *is* true that universities and colleges are incentivized to claim that all of their programs will lead to valuable long-term careers even when that is not the case, and it is true that many students leave those programs heavily in debt and with few avenues available to actually pay them off while living a decent life. All these truths are placed in the same emotional economy as the conspiratorial belief that post-secondary institutions are trying to brainwash students into ignorant woke leftists that want to destroy society. How is one supposed to convince someone that one part is false while the other is true when they feel like a single integrated conceptual whole? I wish I had the answer for that.

#### 2.1.6.1 *Affective Diagram*

Many college students are entitled brats <-> They will be exposed to a reality that brutally rejects them <-> That rejection and their negative reaction to it should be enjoyed <-> Woman in the video discusses how her husband with a trade school education makes more money than her despite her having a Masters <-> You make more money learning a trade <-> You can also learn everything on your own using the Internet now <-> Society pushes people to go to postsecondary institutions <-> Those postsecondary institutions do not teach 'real skills' <-> Teachers do not have real skills <-> Postsecondary institutions (particularly the Humanities) are sites of leftist degeneracy and indoctrination <-> Teachers are exposed to leftist indoctrination and therefore vectors for leftist ideology <-> Teachers likewise 'push college' to produce more people like them <-> Woman in video is a teacher but is right to say she will never 'push college' on anyone <-> The worth of labor and knowledge is entirely determined by how much one is paid for it <-> Trade jobs make much more money than many occupations that require postsecondary degrees <-> Trade jobs are of greater worth than postsecondary jobs <-> Post-secondary school is a waste of time and money.

#### 2.1.7 Hambly/The Quartering – Conclusion:

Through these three videos we have examined how Hambly uses a performance of geek masculinity to give his prophet role legitimacy to his audience. His signification as a model of geek masculinity is expressed through visual elements like his beard, casual dress, and his studio

adorned with familiar geek brands and products. It is also expressed audibly through his tone of voice, a sort of world-weary know-it-allness, interspersed with subdued sarcastic comedic surprise and an occasional laugh. He speaks like someone that hates what is happening but too familiar with it to get upset anymore. This aligns with both hegemonic and geek masculine ideals of knowledge, and stoic rationality. In this Hambly can act in a way that is creditable to his male-centric audience before he even begins speaking about anything of substance.

Of course, Hambly does not merely make money from this, he also spreads far-right political ideology while claiming to be interested in talking about games and commenting on the news. Rhetorically speaking, Hambly uses a variety of familiar crypto-fascist talking points that are used to launder far-right ideology while still building affective connections with them. In our three videos he never *says* he is against non-white people and women being movie leads *but* that the recasting of white male leads in remakes is a sign of cultural degeneration and shallowness. He doesn't *say* that he's against the presence of LGBTQ+ people in film or in public life but he *does* refer to a bill made to silence discussion of non-straight sexualities or relationships in classrooms as an 'anti-grooming' bill and frames the inclusion of non-straight characters in major films as only a hypocritical and deceptive PR stunt for foolish 'woke' audiences. He doesn't *say* that universities and colleges are hotbeds of leftist cultural degeneracy, but he *does* say that going to university or college will require you to attend useless 'woke' classes like gender studies.

This ideological laundering is not novel (Brooks, 2020). for example, it is an essential part of the Alternative Influence Network (Lewis, 2018). This ideological laundering, the stealthy insertion and normalization of extremist ideology is not just used to sneak socially unacceptable ideology into public spaces for consumption by those in the know, as dog-whistles usually are. They also serve to make the mainstreaming of extremist ideology easier through getting receptive people to gradually become used to the affective connections that are formed through that rhetoric. For example, while it is still unacceptable to say that gay people are pedophiles, one would have to be blind to not notice how much work has been done to build a connection in reactionary spaces between LGBTQ+ identities, groomers, and pedophiles. Consider Hambly referring to the 'Parental Rights in Education Bill' as an anti-grooming bill. Contextualizing a bill that prevents discussion of non-hetero sexualities as an 'anti-grooming bill' automatically

implies that the expression or discussion of LGBTQ+ identity is a threat to minors. Saying that LGBTQ+ people are pedophiles would clearly be a violation of YouTube Community Standards, but this way he and many others can induce the same emotional associations without risking getting in trouble.

While Hambly is a prominent prophet influencer in reactionary geek masculine culture, he is far from the only one, and in fact a large fish in a small pond compared to a reactionary prophet figure like Tucker Carlson.

## 2.2 Tucker Carlson – Masculinity Of A (Former) FOX News Star

### 2.2.1 Tucker Carlson, Old Media Cultural Capital, and Catharsis

*Note: This section was written before Carlson was fired from Fox News. He is now largely present through his show on Twitter/X. Nevertheless, the writing about him during his tenure on Fox News remains valuable.*

Tucker Carlson is a popular reactionary influencer who formerly headlined *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, which was the highest rated show on Fox News until his firing in 2023. He is an interesting case when compared to the other content creators examined in this paper because until recently, his YouTube content was composed of clips from his Fox News show. This puts him in a different media space than Hambly. While Ben Shapiro or Charlie Kirk may have guest appearances on cable news shows, Tucker Carlson's audience base was on the television rather than Internet. These mediums have different audience demographics, particularly with regards to age, with the most common YouTube user age range within 13-35 years old (19.10%) (GMI Blogger, 2022), contrasted with Fox News, where the most common audience age range is 50-64 (30%) (Public Opinion Strategies, 2019). This demographic difference has implications for what content is presented on Fox News (and by extension the clips placed on the YouTube channel) the framing of said content, Tucker Carlson's masculine performance and thus prophet-style.

Because of the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973) associated with older formats like television news, Tucker can interact with figures that likewise have greater social capital than commonly seen on YouTube. For example, in one of the analyzed YouTube videos, Tucker Carlson interviews the governor of Arizona, someone who wouldn't give Hambly the time of day. This access also influences how Tucker presents himself and how he can perform prophecy for his audience. While both Tucker and Hambly engage in a performance of wounded White masculinity (Kelly, 2020), Tucker displays emotion more openly than Hambly. These displays of contempt, disgust, and anger are cathartic for his audience because it gives the feeling of being able to speak truth to power. Tucker is the audience surrogate but in a much more influential position than they will ever be. This differentiates Tucker's more privileged masculinity from the geek masculinity performed by Hambly. Geek masculinity is about being an *eternally* victimized

underdog, while Tucker acts with the brittle entitlement of a rich white man who is used to the universe bending to his will. Put simply, while Hamblly speaks like someone who has been bullied, Tucker speaks like a bully. These appeal to different audiences that engage with different media platforms, like the older demographic of cable TV news compared to YouTube. Tucker’s prophet style, a more confrontational display of aggrieved entitlement will now be analyzed, starting with him upbraiding a powerful politician.

### 2.2.2 Video – “Tucker Carlson Clashes with Arizona Governor over Youth Gender Reassignment Bill” (Carlson, 2021).



*Figure 12 YouTube Thumbnail for "Tucker Carlson Clashes with Arizona Governor over Youth Gender Reassignment Bill"*

The main purpose of the video clip is to show that Tucker Carlson (and by extension his audience) is deeply upset with Gov. Hutchinson over his decision to veto a bill that would have banned the use of puberty blockers in ‘children’ (it should be noted that his definition of children in this segment means teenagers). This offers Carlson the opportunity to speak ‘truth to power’ to this wayward member of the right-wing. His masculine performance suggests a stern boss scolding an employee.

This performance of domination is not unusual; however, the context very much is. Unlike Ben Shapiro ‘destroying’ a young college student, the figure that Tucker seeks to dominate in this instance is not a ‘liberal,’ but a conservative who has transgressed against his tribe by acting in favor of trans rights, something that Tucker treats as something that puts Hutchinson’s identity in doubt, “I think of you as a conservative, but here you are coming out as pro-choice on the matter of chemical castration! What changed?!” (0:36-0:44) From an economy

of emotion perspective, this connects Gov. Hutchinson and trans medicine to being in favour of abortion. It also connects the pro-choice movement and trans treatments to chemical castration, a term with connection to eugenic practices, and a harsh and disturbing-sounding word even for those who do not know the historical context. Finally, the wording he uses around ‘conservative,’ “I think of you as conservative...*what changed?!*” (2021) implies that Gov. Hutchinson’s decision is so transgressive that it threatens his identity as a conservative in the eyes of Tucker Carlson and by extension the audience. I pay so much attention to the intricacies of this quote because it really acts as an encapsulation of the rest of the video with regards to Tucker’s arguments. The words he uses are important in the sense of the specific emotional associations that they carry, ‘pro-choice,’ ‘chemical castration,’ ‘came out.’ They are characteristic of the transphobic and misogynistic fearmongering that has become unfortunately familiar in this political climate, and they are not only significant because of the audience that saw this on TV.

First, Tucker has an audience beyond the average television-watcher. He is also watched by the Republican Party and in this case by Gov. Hutchinson in particular. As a major right-wing influencer, opposing Tucker Carlson is politically risky. This helps to reinforce the affective performance of Tucker Carlson as a dominant prophet for conservative values and audiences, Hutchinson cannot risk pushing back against Tucker too much without risking political consequences from his electorate, because while Hutchinson is a mere politician, Tucker is the truth-telling prophet. This is why Hutchinson’s attempts to defend his decision by, for example, saying that Carlson’s characterization of the bill was inaccurate, that it would represent the State being able to interfere with families, and that he is in favour of limited government, can only go so far.

Another reason Hutchinson’s arguments fail is that the purpose of this entire segment is for Tucker to force Hutchinson to explain himself, and then make Hutchinson listen to him sternly lecture them about how they are wrong. This sends a message to Tucker’s primary audience that there is a source of resistance to the frightening world that Tucker Carlson and Fox News discursively constructs, a world wherein politicians are foolishly tricked by doctors to use children as lab rats for untested gender treatments while simultaneously breaking down the parent-child hierarchy by giving children free reign to start puberty blocker treatment after being

convinced to do so by irresponsible (at best) doctors. These politicians are often seen as completely out of touch and invulnerable to the material consequences of any of their actions, so to have a powerful media figure able to stand up to them and speak for what the audience would see as their interests would be very powerful, as it at once legitimizes the anxieties that they may feel from exposure to non-hegemonic gender representations (anxieties that are encouraged by Fox News coverage) and provides relief to those anxieties through Tucker. When they see Tucker Carlson excoriate Hutchinson, they are also imagining themselves being able to do the same thing, perhaps to figures of perceived power in their lives. Furthermore, Tucker offers reassurance that no matter how many studies or tests recommend normalizing non-hegemonic identities, or how many people try to be more accepting of marginalized people, the dominance of hegemonic identities is right and correct. To feel upset about seeing marginalized identities gain acceptance is not prejudice, it is wisdom.

To Tucker's other audience, namely Hutchinson and other politicians, the performance is a *warning*. It does not matter that Hutchinson is a Republican who believes in limited government, the sacredness of the family, or other core tenets of the conservative worldview, nor would it matter what his record was beforehand. He acted in a way that benefited the enemies of the right-wing, and now he will be publicly shamed for it on a format that is extremely widely watched by a powerful media figure that is popular with Hutchinson's voters. From an affective point of view, this can attach any consideration of acting against the right-wing ideological line with regards to gender roles with a fear/disgust reaction towards the prospect of being publicly shamed for a night. As discussed by Massumi (2002), intensities are utilized by society to control how bodies move, and in this case, the intensities provoked by resonance from Tucker's contempt/anger reaction towards Gov. Hutchinson can control how politicians will act in the future. It particularly sends a message regarding how different values should be prioritized. Note that Hutchinson said that he vetoed a bill restricting puberty blockers because it would introduce State interference with the family, something that is fundamental to conservative ideology. However, *the negative affective reactions from Tucker (who is the prophet of truth) did not stop*. The message, therefore, is that the maintenance of hegemonic gender norms is more important than limited government or non-interference in the family life of citizens. The narrativization of this segment for Hutchinson and other politicians is likely to include the idea that prioritizing

anything above preserving those gender norms will carry the risk of facing the wrath of Tucker Carlson and his audience.

Wrath is an apropos term to use with regards to Tucker's performance of masculinity in this segment, as he is extremely emotive. He is open in his sense of disappointment, anger, and contempt for Hutchinson, which plays into his affective persona as a vessel for truth. The purpose of this segment is not to prove the superiority of the right-wing worldview over the leftist worldview, which is taken as granted already. The purpose is to show that Hutchinson has betrayed the conservative cause and therefore conservatism is *angry at him*. He does not need to be proven wrong, instead, Hutchinson must be *punished* for compromising with those who would erode hegemonic gender norms, and Tucker is that masculine figure of authority in a position to enact that punishment. All his emotional reactions are directed against an antagonistic target (Hutchinson) and are expressed in a manner that is consistent with hegemonic masculinity, such as raising his voice, interrupting Hutchinson when speaking, and contemptuous laughter.

Overall, this video provides a particularly interesting case of affect being deployed directly against figures that are not merely ideological opponents, but ideological *traitors*. It is used in a way that not only creates catharsis for Tucker Carlson's audience with affective language and expression but also provides a warning to any conservatives who would attempt to compromise their dedication to the maintenance of hegemonic gender norms. Tucker achieves this through a masculine performance that emphasizes wrathful speech rather than the use of actual knowledge or logic, which is used more to emphasize the depths of Hutchinson's punishment and make him submit to Tucker than as an objective. In other words, Hutchinson's sin is not that he committed an error against facts, but instead that he broke with the truth as understood by the right-wing sphere, and in so doing allowed a gap through which 'false' progressiveness could seep in. Yet while this represents a direct encounter with political power, much of Carlson's work is also based around making certain that every part of society can become a potential trigger point for intense reactionary affects using culture war narratives.

### 2.2.2.1 Affective Diagram

Governor Hutchinson, a Republican, has vetoed a bill banning puberty blockers for teenagers <-> Puberty blockers are dangerous and unnatural <-> The left wants to make these freely available to children without any input by their parents <-> Ideologically motivated doctors want to trick children into thinking that they need to change their genders. <-> Therefore, society must stand totally firm against any attempt to subvert gender norms to keep children safe <-> By vetoing this bill, Hutchinson has compromised with the forces of evil <-> Republicans are supposed to be on the side of keeping us safe <-> Hutchinson doing this is a betrayal to us (the audience) <-> As someone who sees the truth, Tucker Carlson can express this to him <-> Carlson is powerful enough to make Hutchinson have to listen to him <-> Tucker Carlson can make sure that powerful people have to listen to us and to the truth <-> Tucker Carlson is strong, good, and represents good people like us.

### 2.2.3 Tucker Carlson, Culture War Narratives, and an M&M's Sexy Boots.

The next video provides an interesting example of how cultural ephemera is used for the maintenance of a perpetual culture war narrative. While cultural conflicts have always been present in societies throughout time, the last decade has seen a broadening of culture war narratives (Grunwald, 2018), a continuation of the right-wing strategy of emphasizing or even constructing perceptions of divisions within society to promote unity within right-wing organizations (Melzer, 2009). In other words, everything is made to be increasingly enmeshed within partisan politics, even if the subject is meant to be apolitical (in the sense that it is not meant to be associated with partisan politics). A significant recent example being the politicization of the wearing of masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (Kahane, 2021). Pop culture is often integrated into culture war narratives, a major example being the Gamergate movement, in which conflicts around diversity and representation within video game media acted as a proxy for ideological conflicts between progressive and reactionary elements in wider society (Bezio, 2018). Culture war narratives are vital to the organization of reactionary politics because those politics are defined by opposition towards cultural shifts. Without constant triggering of negative affect, there is nothing for reactionary politics to cohere around. Since a reactionary political movement can cast any part of a culture into that culture war narrative, regardless of how miniscule the actual cultural impact may be, this narrative presents a nigh-

endless source of affective resonance. Similarly, prophets can use the culture war as a narrative foundation for interpretation and Debordian spectacle (1967), tying transient media and cultural events into secret moves within an epic war of good against evil.

Staying with the idea of the ‘spectacle’ briefly, it also helps to reinforce the neoliberal belief that consumerism can be made into a form of political activism. When one believes that the choice to watch a new Star Wars movie represents meaningful political action, the actual on the ground material conditions that those political actions are meant to represent go unnoticed. What does win is capital, which, through the commodification of political activism (such as Disney presenting itself as an LGBTQ-inclusive corporation), is able to extract value from an audience’s desperate desire to make their voices heard. This value comes in the form of, for example, people deciding to pay money to watch a movie, or to get into arguments on social media that boosts its algorithmic prevalence. Similarly, transphobic panic around a trans influencer getting gifted a case of Bud Light (Holpuch, 2023) was used to make the decision of what beer one consumes a form of political activism as well. This is not to say that culture and media representations do not matter but let us not pretend that arguing online about whether a Star Wars movie is ‘too woke’ is as productive as actual political action, even if in the moment it feels extremely important.

One may expect reactionary influencers to object to having the socio-cultural presence of something they have a grievance against be boosted by their actions. However, a culture war subject remaining prominent in the greater cultural conversation aligns with reactionary narratives of a society in decline, reinforcing beliefs around the reactionary prophet’s rightness as well as encouraging fear and isolation towards society outside of that reactionary bubble. Furthermore, it provides a subject that a prophet can return to repeatedly rather than an isolated flash in the pan. As an example of this process, we will analyze how Tucker uses a change to one of the M&M mascots as a sign of the erosion of male pleasure in society, transforming a mere candy mascot into a focal point for deep masculine insecurities.

2.2.4 Video- “Tucker Carlson Ridicules M&M Cartoon Characters: “Deeply Unappealing and Totally Androgynous.” (Carlson, 2022)



*Figure 13: YouTube Thumbnail for “Tucker Carlson Ridicules M&M Cartoon Characters: ‘Deeply Unappealing and Totally Androgynous’”*

In this short clip, Tucker Carlson uses a minor change to the Green M&M’s design in an advertising campaign to give a surprisingly revealing look at the affective associations that underly a great deal of reactionary culture war narratives. Tucker claims that the removal of the Green M&M’s sexy boots is symbolic of a continuing pattern by the forces of modernity and progressivism to remove male pleasure from society. This understanding of affective motivations and audience resonance is important because otherwise, it is easy to dismiss this video because of the absurdity of Carlson’s argument. It is absurd that Mars Candy, one of the largest corporations in the world and a clear beneficiary of capitalism and neoliberal policies would secretly work to undermine the very political and ideological forces that keep it powerful. If that was the case, it would be even more absurd for Mars Candy Corporation’s attempt to bring down capitalism and western civilization to come in the form of changing the Green M&M to be androgynous and their footwear from, in Tucker’s words, sexy boots to “frumpy sneakers.

But that is not the point of what Tucker is doing or what culture war narratives are about. The purpose of the culture war is to change arguments about what stakeholders perceive as actual material outcomes into clashes of virtue and belonging. It does not matter that there is no possibility that the Mars Corporation is being controlled by woke leftists. For Tucker and his

audience, the changing of the boots is important because it validates their perception of modern culture increasingly not representing hegemonic masculine interests over all others, which is indistinguishable from society becoming hostile to masculine dominance. Similarly, it doesn't matter what 'the left' wants. 'The left' is a linguistic stand-in for the invisible source of this ever-felt anxiety over society twisting into a form that Tucker and the audience cannot recognize as normal, good, and most of all, familiar. That is why Tucker Carlson will give equal time and weight to a giant piece of CGI candy changing their shoes as they would to discussing trans rights.

At the gut level, Tucker wants to make the audience bodily experience both cultural events, connected by the most tenuous of similarities (both would involve gender presentation and performance in some way) in the same way, like Hambly's thumbnails. A Green M&M's boots and LGBTQ+ acceptance are to be felt as equally important maneuvers in a culture war where the existence of not just the country as a geographic location, but the very understanding of how the culture of that country should make people live their lives is at stake. From that perspective, there is no way to differentiate degrees of evil or good, there is *only* bad or good and therefore a piece of candy having their shoes changed should be as revolting as the prospect of children being exposed to non-heteronormativity. To experience the culture of degeneracy and change, whether in the form of a candy mascot or a drag queen, with anything less than disgust and repulsion, is to compromise with a force of degradation and evil. This is especially the case with prophets, who are valued for their ability to interpret a design from the chaos of culture and media.

Tucker expresses the sense of anxiety that must be experienced by someone who shares this point of view, which is itself interesting. He states,

“M&Ms will not be satisfied until every cartoon character is deeply unappealing and totally androgynous. Until the moment you wouldn't want to have a drink with any one of them. That's the goal! When you're totally turned off...we've achieved equity.”  
(Carlson, 2022, 0:55-1:10)

One could be forgiven for being surprised that a deeply conservative pundit would be so upset by the idea of a cartoon being made less sexually appealing, since conservative thought is often tied with maintaining strict norms around modesty and expressions of sexuality. However, I would point out that patriarchy maintains those norms *to maintain masculine control over*

*sexual pleasure and female agency*. The isolation of sex from public expression is a means to that end. Thus, to Tucker and his audience, the removal of the Green M&M's sexy boots represents a threat to that masculine control and therefore masculine identity. That connection is made explicit when he says that equity will be achieved "when you're totally turned off" (1:09), implying that sexual pleasure is fundamentally linked to masculine domination.

But this segment is about more than being able to achieve sexual gratification from the Green M&M. It is also about hegemonic anxiety. Tucker's identification of himself and by extension his audience with the Orange M&M starting to "acknowledge and openly express his anxiety" (1:17-1:19) is important because he actually acknowledges that this is about a fear of a world that does not primarily serve him. Tucker notes that the picture of the Orange M&M does look anxious and wonders whether it's because "...he doesn't like all the ugly new shoes he sees around him. Maybe he liked the sexy boots. Maybe the Orange M&M is a secret sexist himself." (1:24-1:33). That claim that the Orange M&M is a 'secret sexist' does a lot of work, rhetorically speaking. The concept of *being* a secret sexist is one that also engages with fears of emasculation in a way that is more subtle than the sexy boots, so bear with me here. As previously discussed, hegemonic masculinity is fundamentally about the power to define oneself and one's surroundings. The secret sexist represents the fear of being labelled as a social deviant for reasons entirely outside of one's control. This is emasculating because it represents the penetration of one's being by the external world, therefore displaying vulnerability. This is clearly meant to validate Tucker, and by extension his audience's anxieties by reframing them in a manner more acceptable to hegemonic masculine performance. Feeling anxious about cultural change is weakness, but being angry about it is manly (Connell, 2005)! The figure of the secret sexist pulls double duty by framing contact with those who do not align with Carlson's views as a threat. They are the ones who can place the label of 'sexist' upon you, after all, rendering you a pariah. The tribe of Carlson and those he associates with are the only ones who can give relief from the affective associations experienced from societal change.

I will be honest; I initially chose this video because it was funny. The subject matter is objectively ridiculous, and I imagine that even Tucker's tongue was at least somewhat in his cheek. However, this video also provides an example of how reactionary communities are formed and reinforced through affective economies (Ahmed, 2014). When a viewer identifies

with some element of Tucker's message, for example also feeling that things today look 'uglier,' they simultaneously emotionally identify with Tucker then before. Because Tucker defines non-reactionary culture as an alien other, one cannot align more with Tucker without simultaneously distancing oneself with non-reactionary society. This is important to the preservation of reactionary communities. Making the prospect of interaction with outsiders feel viscerally unpleasant reduces the chance that followers might drift out of alignment with the community, after all.

Does it seem like a stretch for Tucker to connect an M&M mascot's shoes to the erasure of beauty and pleasure? Then you should familiarize yourself with a rhetorical maneuver used by Tucker that I like to call the 'affective whirlwind.'

#### 2.2.4.1 *Affective Diagram*

The Green M&M will no longer wear her sexy boots in commercials, exchanging them for 'sensible' sneakers -> removing the boots makes the M&M mascot less sexually attractive -> This continues a trend in making women in society less sexually attractive -> Having signifiers of sexual attraction is pleasurable to the men -> Sexually attractive things are beautiful -> The removal of these signifiers of sexual attractiveness likewise decreases the amount of sexual pleasure experienced by men -> This makes society feel less pleasant to men -> Feminists and progressives often talk about how women are treated as sex objects -> They want to make women be less sexually appealing for men -> They claim that this is to bring about equality -> 'Equality' really means making things ugly -> They want society to be uglier -> The Green M&M no longer wearing her sexy boots is part of an ongoing effort to make life worse for men -> This makes men feel anxious -> They say that wanting women to be beautiful is sexist -> If you tell anyone that you think things look uglier now, you will be called sexist -> No one in modern society will understand you -> Society is hostile to men and wants to make them feel worse because of feminism and other progressive beliefs.

#### 2.2.5 Tucker Carlson, Affective Economies, and the Affective Whirlwind

The 'affective whirlwind' refers to a phenomenon I saw in the next segment where rapid-fire speech is used to reinforce reactionary ideology by associating different signifiers with existing affective networks through consistent affective displays/stimuli rather than conscious vocal associations. The viewer is buffeted back and forth between different subjects too quickly to form a cogent mental idea of what the logical connection between those subjects are. Lacking the time to form a rational chain of association between subjects and desiring to still follow the

segment, the audience is instead forced to grasp at the only constant in this segment, his affective presentation. In practical terms, the actual speech content of the argument moved extremely fast, barely staying on a single topic long enough to make a proper argument before jumping to another subject in what felt more like a thought association exercise than a structured discussion. Tucker starts with the claim that then-Supreme Court nominee Judge Ketanji-Brown's refusal to legally define a woman is an act of hypocrisy and by the end he claims that rich leftist elites are using social media to control Americans' minds and stop people from speaking the truth, so the usual right-wing reactionary take. There is an overall argument, which is that American society is being destroyed by denying gendered differences. However, it is arrived at by jumping quickly from topic to topic, one moment Carlson claims that the #MeToo movement commanded us to believe all women and that was used to 'smear' Brett Kavanaugh at his hearing and then the next that performing violence in defense of a woman is a vital part of civilized life and then following that up by saying that women being allowed into the military is a sign of the degradation of American society, and so on.

I have come to believe that this does not represent a failure on the part of Carlson if one changes their understanding of what success looks like. This segment and others like it are not supposed to primarily engage with the conscious segment of the viewers' beliefs. Instead, think of how a movie soundtrack is, pun intended, instrumental to communicating the intended feeling of a scene to the audience. While certain parts of the soundtrack can be particularly memorable, the collective leitmotif of the score is vital to the overall mood of the film. So too with the next video and in similar content made by Tucker and his ilk. Specific claims are merely notes in a score, meant to be felt, not analyzed.

Throughout the entire video, Carlson's visual expression and his vocal tone shifts between indicators of contempt, joy, disgust, and distress-anguish. Because the prophet gives the audience catharsis by validating the audience's worldview as the capital-T Truth, his displayed affects also resonate with the audience. His anger is their anger, their disgust is his disgust. By speaking so quickly about so many different topics (#MeToo, unjust Twitter bans, Democrats hating women, immigrants controlling American social discourse through control of social media, women in the military, healthy dialogue being removed from society, etc.), Carlson's affects (and therefore the audiences') are attached to all these subjects much faster and more

efficiently than if a more sedate and considered pace was taken. If a statement or two should conflict with audience members' understandings of reality, Carlson will have moved onto another topic by the time a response can be constructed. This is even more effective for audience members with a pre-existing affective investment with Tucker Carlson, making them predisposed towards ignoring falsehoods and errors instead of engaging with unpleasant cognitive dissonance.

For example, when Carlson says that "Biden is in charge of everything and in less than a year the worst most fervid fantasies have come entirely true." (Tucker, 2022), this is clearly false, but it is true in the gut of the audience. They *feel* (whether they have been made to feel this before or this feeling is entirely new is irrelevant. The importance is in the affective NOW) an underlying sense of suffering and inner imbalance in their lives and Biden has been clearly attached to that suffering, and that suffering is 'invoked' (recalled/resonates/applied/reinforced) when Carlson connects it to other signifiers of frightening and threatening change that he views as threats to the fantasies of the Berlantian 'good life' (2011) that was promised to the audience. By pointing at common reactionary targets and describing them as degenerate or destructive, Carlson is providing an important service to the audience by keeping the good life fantasy alive. Far better to believe you are beset by enemies on all sides than to have to turn and see that the material wealth and security you had been promised your entire life was smoke and mirrors all along.

Thus, it doesn't matter that, epistemically speaking, the materialization of America's 'worst fantasies' being the opportunity for trans athletes to compete as their identified gender is a ridiculously low-stakes outcome of an entire presidency. The gut feeling (as much as I can express an emotion in static writing) is that the ability for trans athletes to compete as their identified gender is worthy of anger because it is proof that people are being allowed to cheat nature. This cheating is being used to break down the innate hierarchy that exists in human nature (racial/gender/sexual/economic) by allowing everyone to ignore their innate nature so that they can follow their own self-interests and fantasies (Danskin, 2019). "But I followed the rules!" The audience is allowed to feel. "I did what I was supposed to do!" Now these apparently ironclad rules are being ignored, while they simultaneously find themselves adrift in a world that has been revealed to care very little about rewarding the non-elites that support neoliberal

capitalism. Tucker, and reactionary media in general, allows the audience to take that anger and anxiety out on marginalized targets that are far more vulnerable than the structures of society that are the cause of their oppression and most importantly, feel justified or even virtuous for doing so.

To people deeply invested in hegemony, the world is strange, unfamiliar, and threatening now that heterosexual White masculinity is no longer unquestioned. By throwing them through a kaleidoscopic storm of grievances, the audience is reassured that their affective reactions to disruption of the hegemonic status quo are not only reasonable but morally correct. That it is proper for them to feel disgust at the sight of trans existence, frustration at women questioning men, and anger at ethnic minorities inhabiting spaces that were previously the sole domain of White people. The alternative is to face the prospect that capitalist White male domination (and the ideology created to support it) was never the only natural way of things, and that the goal they have been chasing this entire time was a mirage. Thus does a prophet gain believers by, ironically, distracting them from reality.

#### 2.2.6 Video – “Tucker: What Is a Woman?” (Carlson, 2022)



*Figure 14: YouTube Thumbnail for “Tucker: What Is a Woman?”*

Because this video analysis is concerned with providing a demonstration of the affective whirlwind, I am placing the affective diagram at the beginning of this analysis rather than the end to better illustrate how this performance interacts with memory and affective associations.

### 2.2.6.1 Affective Diagram

Ketanji-Brown did not define a woman because 'she is not a biologist' <-> Ketanji-Brown is lying because she knows she is a woman because that is the only reason she was chosen <-> The left is hypocritical because the #MeToo movement commands us to believe all women <-> Which was used to smear Brett Kavanaugh during the 2018 Judicial Confirmation hearing. <-> Biden believes that women exist because he says that domestic abuse against women must be stopped <-> A man hitting a man is acceptable but a man hitting a woman is bad and a moral crime <-> It is a noble male instinct for a man to protect a woman -> This is what makes civilisation civilized <-> The military wants to send pregnant women into battle, therefore a sign of the degradation of American civilization <-> Men and women are different on deepest level <-> Biden administration wants to remove that difference <-> Ergo they are commanding you to ignore instinctual knowledge<-> Ignore instinctual desire to protect women <-> Democrats hate women and are hypocrites <-> Trump wanted to protect women in Title 9 <-> Trump was good, Biden is bad for women <-> the worst Biden predictions have come to pass <-> Trans athletes are beating female athletes <-> People are commanded to tolerate and congratulate trans athletes despite it being known as false on an instinctual level <-> Intent is to make everyone act as if they believe something that isn't true <-> purpose is to control minds <-> Censorship and punishment used to do this <-> People are discouraged from saying transphobic things (or "fair questions") <-> Tucker Carlson was suspended from Twitter for 12 hours <-> Example of censorship and punishment <-> Person who runs Twitter is foreign immigrant <-> Does not respect American values <-> Ability to communicate is controlled by person who does not respect American values of free speech <-> Twitter claims they want "healthy dialogue"

<-> Asking questions about trans people is seen as unhealthy <-> Therefore "you" (audience) are not allowed to question or tell the truth about trans people because "they" want to remove gender to further control you and that is why Ketanji-Brown didn't define what a woman is and why you can get suspended from Twitter for saying transphobic things <-> Society is intentionally degraded and destroyed so that "they" (the left, who are also rich elites) can control your mind and take away your freedom and ability to speak the truth.

This looks like a mess if you expect these to be connected through so-called 'rational discourse.' However, as I discussed when describing the affective whirlwind, this exercise is about affective connections. The topics that Carlson brings up and the statements that he makes are intended to circulate specific emotional associations from topic to topic, like an irrigation canal. For example, consider this section of the network:

Ketanji-Brown did not define a woman because 'she is not a biologist' <-> Ketanji-Brown is lying because she knows she is a woman because that is the only reason she was chosen <-> The left is hypocritical because the #MeToo movement commands us to believe all women <-> Which was used to smear Brett Kavanaugh during the 2018 Judicial Confirmation hearing.

We have the opening statement and subject. Ketanji-Brown is the subject, and she is contextualized here by her not defining what a woman is and giving the reason that she is “not a biologist”. Tucker Carlson expresses contempt at her answer, which allows one to be carried to the next statement, ‘Ketanji-Brown is lying because she knows she is a woman because that is the only reason she was chosen.’ This affective reaction is justified by the statement that she is lying and that she was chosen purely for her gender and not on her own merits. However, that statement is also retroactively justified by the affective reaction, ‘Tucker Carlson feels contempt for Ketanji-Brown after giving that answer.’ The audience may think, ‘The reason he feels that way is justified by Ketanji-Brown only being there because she’s a woman.’ Yet a simultaneous train of thought is ‘the fact that Ketanji-Brown is only there because she is a woman makes Tucker Carlson contemptuous of her, and that contempt is proven by her giving a bad answer.’ As discussed before, affective economies do not just flow in one direction, but instead back-and-forth as new associations and linkages can recontextualize previously held thoughts, beliefs, or memories. That contempt is then linked to leftist hypocrisy and the #MeToo movement, which Tucker Carlson also recontextualizes as an authoritarian movement that possesses the capacity to **command**, not merely influence. Leftist hypocrisy is framed as being worthy of contempt and leftism is also constructed as being inherently authoritarian in reactionary discourse. As the #MeToo movement has been connected to leftism, it therefore implies that ‘leftism commands us to believe all women,’ a command which was used to ‘smear Brett Kavanaugh,’ meaning that Brett Kavanaugh would be rendered helpless before his (implied to be false) accusers.

Looked at linearly, this section argues that Ketanji-Brown lying about not having a definition of a “woman” represents leftist hypocrisy because the #MeToo movement’s call to believe women was used to smear Brett Kavanaugh. When looked at as a circulating process, the purpose of this part of the video is to make the audience see Ketanji-Brown as a signifier of:

people getting jobs they don't deserve, hypocritical leftists, the #MeToo movement making those invested in hegemonic masculinity feel threatened, and how the sight of Brett Kavanaugh's career being threatened by accusations from women confirmed those fears. Materially speaking, Ketanji-Brown had nothing to do with any of these previous events. She is still made a retroactive recipient of those affective associations through a technique of emotional gish-galloping, and that in only a single part of a fifteen-minute segment.

I could extend this section further to describe how questions about gender identity will be used to emasculate men by rendering taboo their ability to fight to protect women due to women being allowed into combat, or to say how right-wing, that is to say *correct* views are being censored on Twitter due to an (at the time) non-white immigrant running the website as CEO, who would therefore have no understanding or respect for 'American values.' But that would be me simply repeating a theme and naming a litany of right-wing extremist talking points that have been exhaustively traced and retraced. What is important is the free-association mad-libs nature of it all. Tucker starts from a single current event and through tenuous connections and references to currently felt audience insecurities, quickly creates a picture of a society in utter chaos from all sides, thus creating a sense of overwhelming anxiety in the viewer. This is how Tucker Carlson's prophet performance works, to act as an avatar of masculinity under attack, disgusted with reality, ready for a strong White authoritarian hand to control it again.

### 2.2.7 Tucker Carlson Conclusion: The Aggrieved White Male Avatar

What have we learned from examining Tucker Carlson as a prophet? How is that performance distinct from Hambly's? First, that his masculine performance aligns more with hegemonically masculine norms than Hambly's, and I would connect that to the significantly wider demographic that he has access to than a YouTube account that specifically describes themselves as discussing the gaming industry, media, and the world at large (Hambly, 2024). Tucker, until recently, was the star of the largest 24-hour news channel in the USA, and that would obligate him to try to appeal to a wider base than Hambly's audience.

Tucker is not a physical specimen of the hegemonic masculine ideal, but the way he carries himself, the emotions he shows, and the subjects he talks about taps into the same genre of wounded White masculinity (Kelly, 2020) that Hambly does. Tucker reconciles the

contradictions inherent to that performance, namely that one can be simultaneously stoic, and invulnerable yet victimized, through an interesting rhetorical trick played upon his audience.

You see, Tucker and his audience are clearly projecting their inner fears and anxiety over what greater equity will do to them out onto their perception of world events. Because the hegemonic worldview is based upon the necessity of patriarchy, anything that challenges patriarchy is reacted to as a signifier of instability. The trick comes when one remembers that affective economies go both ways. Any signs of instability or unpredictability in society can also be related *back* to those negative affects triggered by signifiers of equity, regardless of how tenuous the actual connection is.

This is not merely about who to *blame* for worsening standards of living, but something deeper and more unconscious. I can liken it to how when I am deeply depressed, I literally perceive the world as more broken, joyless, and entropic than it truly is. Colours seem less vivid, signs of wear and tear seem highlighted to my sight, news of despair sticks to my mind while good news slips from memory like water off a duck's back. This is because I am unconsciously narrativizing my own affective reactions in a way that 'makes sense' of my mental state, that the world is *making me* feel this way, rather than an internal chemical imbalance that I cannot actively perceive. There is something similar in the way that Tucker and other reactionary prophets draw feelings of shame and anger from symbols of equity, taking the way that one may unconsciously react to symbols of equity and instability as externalizations of the anxiety they may feel about being unable to adequately perform masculinity or see it performed, in the case of reactionary women and making them conscious.

Tucker not only legitimizes this connection but also valorizes it. Tucker tells his White right-wing audience that they are correct to feel afraid of cracks in their worldview, not because it will hurt them, since they are far too noble to be so selfish. They must not lose their power because without White men in charge and provided for, everything will collapse and eat itself alive, the anxiety and fear they feel from news of subversion of patriarchy is proof positive of that.

This concern becomes literal when one considers the special that he hosted on Fox News called *The End of Men* (Carlson, 2022). A full analysis of this special is outside the scope of this dissertation but does provide a look at how Tucker does not deal in metaphor to his audience. He

presents a world where modern society has drained the literal virility (testosterone) from their testicles, leaving men with less ability to have children. That same special proposes testicle tanning as a solution for regaining that testosterone (Kolata, 2022), and with it, masculinity.

In this way we can see that Tucker's prophet performance acts as not just a sign of cathartic *correctness* in their worldview, but also moral *rightness*. He tells them that they are not just right to be angry and anxious about the world changing because they see things clearly, but that they are right to be angry and anxious because what is happening is *evil*. He does this all the while modelling that same wounded masculinity, spitting bile at all the ways that the world is going mad. By maintaining that masculinity, he provides a haven for his audience. After all, if masculinity is needed to make the world go round, then the only safe place left is in the arms of Tucker Carlson. As a prophet, Tucker Carlson creates a very charismatic connection with his audience, but what about a situation where there is a group of prophets under a single umbrella organization? Does the prophet label become affectively attached to the group or with the individual hosts within that group? We will examine this further with the next section on Prager U.

### *2.3 Prager U – Reactionary Academic Aesthetics*

Prager U holds an interesting position in the reactionary YouTube ecosystem. It is a popular YouTube account, with 2.96 million subscribers as of this writing (PragerU, 2022), although this number does not reflect additional viewership through platforms such as Facebook, in which PragerU is consistently one of the largest spenders on advertising (Halper, 2019). PragerU is not an actual university, has no campus and does not offer any accredited courses (PragerU, 2022).

The core product of the PragerU channel is its signature 5-minute videos. Each of these videos consists of a 5-minute (give or take) presentation on different issues with a patriotic, pro-business, religious, and specifically anti-leftist academia agenda. The most recent videos as of this writing include “Writing the Constitution: Miracle in Philadelphia” (PragerU, 2022), “The Student Loan Forgiveness Scam” (PragerU, 2022), and “Why the Road to Hell is Paved with Good Intentions” (PragerU, 2022). While the presenters of these videos vary, the ideological content remains quietly consistent due to Dennis Prager’s editorial control over the content of every video uploaded under the PragerU name (Oppenheimer, 2018).

#### 2.3.1 Media Formatting and Legitimacy

To be clear, funding from right-wing groups and billionaires (Bridge Initiative Team, 2020) already give it an ability to influence the cultural landscape far beyond the average reactionary influencer, not just with media reach but also for attracting prominent figures in the right-wing space, such as Ben Shapiro or Jordan Peterson.

However, credit should also be given to the channel’s presentation. Its faux-academic aesthetic is key to its brand because the fundamental mission of PragerU is to provide a platform for right-wing ‘Judeo-Christian’ rhetoric because, in Dennis Prager’s view, “the universities have all but shut down, not to mention demonized, non-left ideas.” (Oppenheimer, 2018). Taking the academic aesthetic allows the platform to appear as a credible alternative to educational institutions and culture, whether through content available online, through partnerships offered to existing educational organizations (Shea, 2015), or even being approved for use in public

classrooms (Stone, 2023; Kingkade & Hylton, 2023). Consider the way their content is organized in the picture below:

**5-Minute Videos** ▶ Play all  
The best ideas from the best minds distilled into five focused minutes.

What's Wrong with Censorship? PragerU 93K views • 22 hours ago	William Howard Taft: The Really Big President PragerU 308K views • 4 days ago	Theodore Roosevelt: The Action Hero President PragerU 146K views • 5 days ago	Theodore Roosevelt: City Slicker to Cowboy President PragerU 291K views • 6 days ago	William McKinley: The Man Who Could've Been on... PragerU 330K views • 7 days ago	The Beginning of Wisdom PragerU 515K views • 2 weeks ago

**Real Talk with Marissa Streit** ▶ Play all  
Viewers are invited into the office of PragerU CEO Marissa Streit for candid discussions with today's business and thought leaders about education, business, and culture.

UK's Col. Kemp Blames Hamas for Palestinian... PragerU 228K views • 5 days ago	Arab Palestinian Warns the World about Hamas PragerU 644K views • 2 weeks ago	Paulo Figueiredo on Brazil's Political and Judicial... PragerU 178K views • 4 weeks ago	Tim Kennedy's First-Hand Account of Chaos at the... PragerU 224K views • 1 month ago	Peter Boghossian Says We Should Burn the University... PragerU 256K views • 1 month ago	Ed Calderon - Former Mexican Law Enforcement... PragerU 121K views • 2 months ago

**More with Marissa** ▶ Play all

Libs of TikTok Blamed for Teen Death by Dishonest... PragerU	PragerU Kids Is Now in Arizona Schools PragerU	NBC's PragerU Hit Piece: Marissa Streit's Full Interview PragerU	NBA Star Debuts Non-Woke Apparel Line PragerU	NBC's Hit Piece: Dennis & Marissa React PragerU	A Muslim Arab-Israeli Speaks About Hamas PragerU

**Kids Shows** ▶ Play all  
Fun shows and crafting activities created for kids K-12 that teach life skills, character development, and American history along with traditional values like faith, family, and freedom.

Becoming a Business PragerU 4.4K views • 2 days ago	Cash Course: Understanding Retirement Savings Accounts PragerU 6K views • 5 days ago	Street Smarts: The Championship Special PragerU 3.6K views • 3 weeks ago	Cash Course: Navigating Auto Insurance PragerU 5.2K views • 1 month ago	Cash Course: Understanding Assets and Liabilities PragerU 4.7K views • 1 month ago	How To Present Yourself Professionally PragerU 7.2K views • 1 month ago

**Stories of Us** ▶ Play all  
People from all walks of life share personal stories and their love for American values.

Kuzzat Altay: The Country I Was Born in Wants to Kill Me PragerU 6 waiting • Premieres 2/27/24, 2:00 PM	Taylor Silverman: The Trans Movement Is Erasing Wome... PragerU 384K views • 13 days ago	Mesha Mainor: I Switched Parties Because of My... PragerU 220K views • 1 month ago	Sophia Khalifa: My Life in Israel as an Arab Muslim PragerU 567K views • 1 month ago	Dr. Matthew Wielicki: I Refuse to Stay Silent about Climate... PragerU 1M views • 2 months ago	Raelynn: Getting Married Was My Boldest Act of... PragerU 469K views • 2 months ago

Figure 15 PragerU Video Page on YouTube

While the 5-minute videos take pride of place, one can also find a variety of other programs, such as “Kids Shows” (2024) or “Stories of Us” (PragerU, 2024). The impression is clearly meant to be that PragerU has something for every viewer, including content that is ‘safe’ for children. This professionalized format also creates an environment that sanitizes the far-right rhetoric in PragerU content. It does not engage with the signifiers that one learns to associate with extremists. The speakers look professional, authoritative, and speak calmly yet confidently.

The signifiers PragerU presenters use are suits, ties, professional looking introduction animations and credits as authors of smart-sounding books, TV-grade grooming, and the type of diction that one needs a coach for, to name a few. All of these are ‘costuming’ that we are taught to associate with knowledge, reliability, and authority. Someone who speaks calmly but confidently can seem to win a debate even if the actual content of their speech is cruel lunacy. Similarly, someone who responds emotionally and seems less sure of themselves could be perceived as impossible to take seriously even if their speech content were valid. This veneer of normalcy makes PragerU a dangerous source of the mainstreaming of far-right ideology (Dickinson & Cowin, 2022). This organizational aesthetic is also reflected in its relationship to prophets and gurus.

This organization provides an interesting version of the prophet/guru framework because it is a collective effort rather than focused upon a single central prophet figure. Dennis Prager may be in a key editorial position, but PragerU distinguishes itself from the other reactionary sources I cover in this study with its ability to organize a variety of people as either long-term employees or as guest speakers under the PragerU banner. This has advantages for both speaker and organization. PragerU can act as a miniature version of the alternative influence network (Lewis, 2018) to their audience by uniting different influencers under a single brand, with its own consistent aesthetics and formats. This means that affective investment in any given speaker will also tie back to PragerU as a whole and encourage viewers to view other content under the PragerU account. If a figure within PragerU becomes popular on their own, the brand will still derive some benefit from association. If a hypothetical figure is directly employed by PragerU, then their online influencer career will be dependent on satisfying the greater PragerU institution. Meanwhile, appearing in PragerU content gives influencers access to a massive audience who will see them being allowed into that umbrella as a pre-emptive mark in their favour.

Aldo, for example, most prominently hosts a running video series called “Man on the Street” (PragerU, 2024), wherein he goes to different neighbourhoods in LA to get people’s opinions, and includes titles like “How Many People Crossed Illegally into The U.S. This Year?” (Ibid), “Is Everything Racist?” (Ibid), “Are You Proud of Your Race?” (Ibid), and so on. He also appears in other PragerU videos like “Who Wouldn’t Want Universal Basic Income?” (PragerU, 2023) and is hosting a new PragerU series about young entrepreneurs called “The Hustle” (PragerU, 2024).

This organization favours prophets over gurus. Gurus are incentivized to make their audience believe that *they alone* can provide the teachings necessary to make their lives whole. This individualist motivation is at odds with PragerU, where individual speakers may hold prestige but are also interchangeable compared to the message due to the editorial control held by the organization itself. Prophets, on the other hand, are well-placed to engage with PragerU, because all that they must do is spread their message and move on.

To summarize then, PragerU demonstrates how the aesthetic and performance of respectability and professionalism can be used to numb feelings of discomfort and doubt that an audience may experience when exposed to narratives that support the oppression of marginalized groups in society. This numbing is as important as intensifying emotions because they make those same narratives appear ‘reasonable’ to internalize. This quiet alignment with hegemonic masculine supremacy can render ever more extreme and violent expressions of domination and oppression acceptable over time.

If there is anything one should take from the following analysis of PragerU content, it should be how strikingly *little* PragerU’s presentation of current society and the world PragerU presents as desirable differs from more openly extremist influencers. The difference lies in the pains PragerU takes to veil those desires behind a veneer of respectability. To demonstrate this, I have dedicated a large amount of space and time to dissect the so-called PragerU ‘documentary’ “MIA: Masculinity in America” (2023).

### 2.3.2 Video – “M.I.A: Masculinity in America” (PragerU, 2023)



Figure 16 Title Card for “M.I.A: Masculinity in America”

“M.I.A: Masculinity in America” (PragerU, 2023) is categorized as a ‘short documentary’ in PragerU’s YouTube channel. This is an apt description since it only runs for 16:46 minutes. Despite that short running time, it is a slickly produced video. It has professional grade film quality and camerawork, segments clearly shot in various locations, and interviews in professional looking sets. This all ties in with the previously discussed professionalization strategy.

So, what is the overall point that “M.I.A: Masculinity in America” (Ibid) is trying to communicate, and how do high production values allow for the use of affective rhetoric and stimuli to make that point more convincing to receptive audiences? The overarching narrative that the documentary wants the audience to internalize is the following: society increasingly sees men and masculinity as disposable, and that this trend is dangerous because masculinity is necessary for society to function, particularly in the defense of women and children. This is heavily implied to be connected to a rejection of marriage. This is expressed via the spread of feminist claims that women can live ‘without a man.’ It also damages the ability for boys to grow up into proper adults due to a lack of a male role model, increasing the risk of negative outcomes like drug addiction, participation in gang violence, imprisonment, and mental illness due to internalized self-hatred. The two genders are an absolute firm binary that each possess distinct

and complementary characteristics, with those complementary characteristics best expressed in a marital union. Therefore, men should not ‘cave in’ to the demands of feminists and popular culture to repress their masculine urges, desires, and strengths, as staying dedicated to masculine excellence will allow them to succeed at life both as an individual and as a father and a husband. Likewise, women must stop devaluing/criticizing actions and practices that adhere to hegemonic masculine norms.

### *2.3.2.1 Overall Engagement with Concept of Masculinity*

What strikes me most about this video is how masculine behaviour is almost entirely defined implicitly rather than explicitly. For example, a voiceover states “Over time, it seems that toxic masculinity has become a catchall term for any male behaviour that is seen as unpleasant or offensive. This inconsistent, arbitrary criticism leads many men to fall into the trap of actual toxic behaviour.” (4:48) over footage of Aldo walking and looking vaguely thoughtful. This doesn’t clarify what is meant by specifically ‘male’ behaviour, nor what is ‘actual toxic behaviour,’ or how that actual toxic behaviour would be distinct from ‘male behaviour that is seen as unpleasant or offensive.’ That surprised me because when I clicked on the video, I had assumed that the narrative would be about anxiety over masculine effeminacy (Vandello, et al., 2008; Bratich, 2022), which would require the documentary to define a behavioural binary.

Masculinity is instead described with broad characteristics and personality traits that align with hegemonic masculine ideals rather than specific behaviours. One interviewee, Brian Echevarria, describes his masculine presence as important for his family because he can provide safety from threats at night, while his parenting role is contrasted from that of his wife because while she provides a “softness, this nurturing” (6:23), he provides “this charge, this demand, this expectation.” (6:28). A contrast he ascribes as inherent to being a man. Another interview subject, Chloe Carmichael, described as a clinical psychologist and author, claims that the guidelines put out by the APA for working with men and boys in 2018 “pathologized traditional masculinity” (8:10), particularly characteristics like the ‘drive for success’ and a ‘drive for competition.’ Near the end of the video, Carmichael describes part of the “masculine role...to be able to assert who he is and to be who he is.” (15:44). While Aldo states that “traditional virtues like assertiveness, confidence, and strength...allow men to pursue greatness, protect others, and rise to life’s most difficult challenges” (16:19). Overall, this video most consistently defines

masculine norms as the exertion of physical strength, the will and desire to assert themselves upon the world, and the desire to defend the weak. But it leaves the material *performance* of those norms unstated. For example, Brian describes his parenting as being defined by a charge, a demand, an expectation, but leaves it to the audience to imagine how one would express it.

I am making such a big deal about this because what looks like laziness or even evasiveness is key to how reactionaries understand gender roles. To PragerU's worldview, masculinity is instinctively known to all people. Men know it because they are men, while women know it because the feminine is defined by exclusion of masculine characteristics. There is no need to go into specifics because the habits of masculinity will be followed once unnatural influences like feminism are no longer present. This reveals a fundamental contradiction in reactionary masculinity. The behaviours, desires, and drives considered 'manly' in mainstream society are simultaneously inseparable from *being* a human male yet also incredibly fragile without constant external reinforcement (Vandello, 2008).

The second fundamental way this documentary engages with masculinity is the degree it represents society as being *against* masculinity and thus against the very existence of men. This aligns with Kelly's description of the wounded masculine performance (2020), with the previously discussed essentialism about masculinity allowing for the broadest segment of the male audience to incorporate their own personal anxieties as a symptom of this wider societal tapestry of masculine victimhood. Yet this documentary also takes pains to soothe anxieties about the *importance* of masculinity, particularly when legitimizing perceptions of being unappreciated for hegemonic masculine performance. This is particularly the case with the 'solutions' offered by the various interviewees. They are not actionable for viewers but are instead vague calls for society and women to refrain from any action or attitudes that could undermine men's confidence in hegemonic masculinity and their performance thereof. This is expressed in a variety of ways by different interviewees. For example, Cassie Jaye, described as the "investigative filmmaker" behind *The Red Pill* documentary (PragerU, 2023, 2:28), describes her break from feminism as being partially caused by feminists not "really listening" (4:12) to the issues raised by men's rights activists, which she merely describes as "men's rights arguments" (3:51) or "...men's issues and boy's issues..." (4:13). Carmichael likewise draws a direct connection between increased rates of depression in men and women and what she calls

“A lack of acknowledgement about the role of men and their contributions” (9:05), expanding on that by saying that women who desire a man that “loves and respects them as a woman to think about offering the same gift to their boys and men.” (9:14). Similarly, John Gray claims that increasing rates of depression in men is tied to men feeling unwanted. The purpose here is, like many reactionary prophets, to interpret what they see as a problem in a way that puts the onus for change on everyone but the audience.

This ‘documentary’ creates positive affective connections between PragerU and the viewer while creating or reinforcing feelings of anxiety, fear, anger, and contempt for mainstream society. It does this by using signifiers and rhetoric that bring anxieties around masculinity to the front of their mind, and then informs the male hegemonic viewer that *they* are doing everything correctly and do not need to change their behaviour, blaming the ever-present worries that result from the precarity of masculinity (Vandello, et al., 2008) on the very people that are trying to encourage additional less precarious forms of manhood into the mainstream. One could diagram that affective connection like this:

I feel anxious about my manhood -> This video tells me that I am right to feel anxious about my manhood. -> Women/feminists are criticizing men Women increasingly think that they don't need men -> Masculinity is being rejected in western culture -> Women are wrong to feel that way about men because they need men -> Women/society should show more appreciation for what men (I) do. -> My anxiety is due to not being given enough appreciation and gratitude from women/society -> PragerU has made me feel better. -> What PragerU said makes sense/ What PragerU says fits in with the discursive worldview I have internalized -> PragerU is right about this issue -> If PragerU is correct about this, then they are right about other things.

One could continue adding connections forever, such is the nature of the affective economy model (Ahmed, 2004). I have chosen to end there to demonstrate how exposure to affective connections are not made in a bubble, especially with media that is as organized and aesthetically consistent as PragerU. A positive emotional connection made with the content of “MIA: Masculinity in America” (PragerU, 2024) is easily transferrable to PragerU content about other topics because elements that remind the viewer of that previous content, and the affects it evoked, can be reused. Most importantly through figures that are portrayed as holding legitimate authority on the topics they cover. Let us examine how the host, Aldo Buttazoni and interview subjects like John Rosemond and Chloe Carmichael are connected to signifiers of knowledge-authority.

### 2.3.2.2 *Holders of Authority: Representations of Interview Subjects*

Each of these interviewees are portrayed by PragerU as possessing authentic knowledge and therefore legitimate authority to speak about masculinity and its place in society. What signifiers do they present to viewers and what rhetoric do they use to communicate that authority? It should be clear that this documentary is intended to reinforce the idea that the hegemonic masculine ideals of western culture represent ‘true’ masculinity, and that any criticism of hegemonic masculinity is an assault on male existence. How does each interviewee communicate that differently?

Let us start with Cassie Jaye. She is described as an investigative filmmaker, with a title card pointing out her work on *The Red Pill* documentary, a 2016 film documentary about the misogynist MRA (Men’s Rights Activist) movement in America and Jaye’s increasing sympathy with their arguments as her exploration of it went on. It was heavily criticized due to her claims that it would be a ‘balanced’ men’s rights film that sought to engage with and understand the MRA movement, as well as her positive portrayals of MRA figures such as Paul Elam. Accusations of MRA involvement in funding led to public disputes and criticism from feminists like David Futrelle (Lee, 2015; Scherstuhl, 2016). Her interview with Aldo is focused on how her experience making *The Red Pill* led her to ‘leave feminism.’ She describes the cause as her being unable to adequately dismiss the talking points and issues brought up by the MRA members she interviewed for the film, after overcoming her initial disgust and anger at them (PragerU, 2023).

“...But then when I put pen to paper that’s when I really started to question my beliefs. I couldn’t argue with what they were saying and then when I did the fact-checking with the statistics they were putting out there with the statistics about history and gender roles I realized they were right. And when I was transcribing the feminist interviews I was realizing there were a lot of plot holes.” (3:20)

This narrative reinforces hegemonic gender norms wherein where women-centred movements and ideologies (as exemplified by feminists), are portrayed as too blinded by irrational grievances to respond to disagreement with anything but anger and disgust (Connel, 2005; Ahmed, 2014). Meanwhile, the MRA subjects are described as using statistics and history, and their arguments can stand up to fact-checking, showing their ability to perform masculinity

by staying stoic and rational. This dichotomy is reinforced throughout her interview with visual footage of angry-looking feminist protestors contrasted with calm-looking MRAs (3:10).

We can therefore see that Cassie Jaye's story is a classic prodigal son narrative, wherein a woman who holds visual signifiers of hegemonic femininity (Hamilton, et al., 2019) is fooled by her youth and female emotions into internalizing feminist ideology, but through the application of logic and reason, sees the light and returns to her proper ideological place, as visualized in Figure 18.

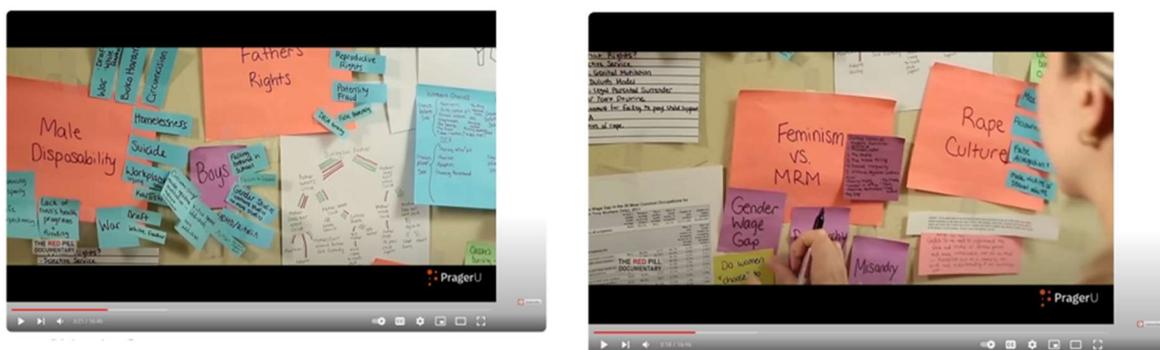


Figure 17 Men's Rights vs Feminism

This may be belaboring the point, but it must be noted for my sanity that the issues that are depicted as being connected to 'Male Disability' in the image on the left are in no way opposed by any serious understanding of feminist thought. Issues such as increased rates of homelessness, suicide, being exclusively subject to military drafts, inability to perform in school, among others are often connected to forcing men to adhere to impossible standards of hegemonic masculinity or responses to the inevitable failure to do so (Connell, 2005; Vandello, et al., 2008; Christensen & Jensen, 2013; Kean & Buiten, 2024).

However, the *purpose* of this segment is not to get people thinking about men's issues vs feminism except for the purpose of introducing or triggering already held beliefs that feminists and feminist thought are intrinsically opposed to caring about the harms done to men. What do feminists want? To make men feel miserable, unwanted, and weak, and if you try to tell them that they are wrong or even mistaken, then they will scream at you, tarring you as a sexist outcast forever. This is visualized through footage showing angry feminists that quickly cut to a depressed-looking man. Feminists = Sad men.

Her redemption narrative from the clutches of feminism concludes with her attaining that most blessed of right-wing female statuses: Wife and mother. She explicitly connects ‘men’s issues and boy’s issues’ with children (particularly boys) having their fathers be present in their life (4:13), which would rhetorically connect feminism with *rejection* of fatherhood. This is accompanied by a beautifully shot picture of her standing with her husband and son while also pregnant, evidence of the importance of ‘family’ as defined by Prager-U’s hard-right Christian worldview, particularly with regards to the place of the *father*. The picture is intended to evoke feelings of nostalgia and longing for the presence of an authoritative paternal figure within the family unit, presenting feminism as intrinsically opposed to those positive feelings.

It should be noted that this emphasis on the presence of fathers stealthily refers to a long-standing grievance of MRAs in particular and right-wing ideology in general regarding divorce and child custody orders that can constrain fathers from at-will access to their children and wives, particularly with the introduction of legal no-fault divorce in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Dinner, 2016). The decreasing ability for men to use explicit gender-based privileges as leverage to force women to remain in undesirable relationships (Ibid.) is experienced as an emasculation threat due to an increase in risk of rejection by a woman and the loss of authority, status, and access over ‘his’ wife and children. Thus, an otherwise anodyne and obvious statement of the importance of fathers in a child’s life is given unexpected emotional intensity when it is received by someone with the correct pre-existing affective configuration.

This tie to fatherhood is particularly powerful for the use of affective prophet work because of its universality. Everyone has a father, in a biological sense. In our culture, the presence of the father is seen as normal while the lack of a present father in a child’s life is perceived as an abnormality, a possible source of blame for any given problems faced in child and adulthood. This common concept of the father’s presence being vitally important provides support for a particularly important source of leverage for the maintenance of male privilege and dominance within the family unit for right-wing ideology. This is not to imply that fatherhood is disposable or useless, it is clearly not. I refer instead to this rhetoric being deployed to prevent either partner from attempting to dissolve relationships *even when that would be advisable*, connecting to existing hegemonic norms around the preservation of relationships being a key attribute of proper femininity. This provides another example of “M.I.A: Masculinity in

America” (PragerU, 2023) directing stimuli at the audience that will provide very different affective reactions depending on if the viewer is a man or woman. The masculine viewer is meant to feel reassured in their indisposability within the family and thus society, while the female viewer is intended to feel gratitude and submission towards the external masculine figure. That is what Cassie Jaye has learned to feel, after all. She has moved from unreasoning hostility towards masculinity to a purer understanding of her place in the world, as a mother, wife, and supporter of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity that is embodied by our next interview subject, Brian Ecchevaria.

Brian, described as a “Father/Husband/Activist” on the splash page that introduces him [See Fig. 16], is interviewed to help Aldo understand how important the presence of a father figure is in a child’s life. We can see how Brian’s presence is already attached to the narrative that dovetails the end of Cassie Jaye’s interview where she references the importance of fathers. Thus Brian’s purpose is to embody a ‘proper’ representation of fatherhood for PragerU’s audience. Although he is a Black man, his image and the way he describes the role of fatherhood conforms to hegemonic norms, largely defining his role as a paternal ‘protector’ figure. When asked about masculine role models growing up, he says that his life was in jeopardy before his step-dad joined the household because children in single-mother households are at a statistically greater risk of negative outcomes like mental illness or imprisonment. Since the specific reason for this statistic is never discussed, one must assume that the intended message is simply that paternal discipline is necessary for children to become orderly. That certainly seems to be what Brian means when he claims that his ‘presence’ changes everything for his kids and prevents them from being ‘vulnerable,’ up to and including his ability to ‘deal with’ threats at night (5:21).

Yet it is interesting that, affectively speaking, the example that PragerU chooses to use of him protecting his kids is a YouTube video of him arguing with a school board about how unfair it would be for his girls to have to compete with ‘boys.’ Resisting trans children from being able to participate in sports is clearly contextualized as a way to perform one of the duties of fatherhood that we culturally have the most positive feelings for: protecting children. We see another example of prophecy here, where negative affective associations to trans-related stimuli

are legitimized and actions that reinforce the marginalization of whatever those feelings are attached to are actually *valorized*.

Brian's role as father is also used to explain why men and women are not equal and interchangeable, which is brought on by Aldo using a clever rhetorical trick to allow Brian to actually agree to women not being equal to men. Aldo asks "We have this idea right now that men and women are completely equal and that they are almost interchangeable. Is that correct" (6:10). Brian says that it is not even close to true, but I think we should zero in on the utility of that question. Aldo sets up the ability to almost explicitly say women are *not* equal to men yet retain deniability by adding 'and completely interchangeable.' The meaning of Brian answering 'not even close' can differ completely depending on who is listening and what their perspective is. Does Brian mean that women are not equal to men? That they are not interchangeable? Both or either one, depending on which conforms most to your point of view. Whichever it is, that answer is imprinted with the authority of Brian's fatherhood, explaining how his presence brings "this charge, this demand. This expectation" (6:25), contrasting with motherhood bringing "Softness. This nurturing" (6:23), aligning with how hegemonic masculinity is often represented as an ability to exert one's will upon the world, while femininity is defined by the capacity to *be* affected by the world (Ahmed, 2014; Bratich, 2022)

After Brian's segment comes Dr. Chloe Carmichael. Dr. Carmichael's presence engages with the social capital given to people in medical positions. She has a PhD, she is described as a clinical psychologist and a published author, all signifiers of significant academic achievement. This allows her to inhabit a similar reactionary archetype to Jordan Peterson, that of the *academic renegade*. This archetype is defined someone who used to follow mainstream knowledge institutions until their ideological capture by leftist/progressive forces. Now they reject those corrupted institutions while still possessing the specialized knowledge that allows them to properly interpret and counter mainstream rhetoric, arguments, and proofs. This is useful for the narrative of the documentary because Carmichael can calm viewers' anxieties by telling them that the *real science* is still on the side of men. This not only provides a counter-economy 'path' against the authority of legitimate medical institutions but allows the narrative to partake of common feelings of resentment and helplessness towards medical institutions, which both hold vital knowledge for people's survival, yet are incredibly opaque in both access and

communication of that knowledge, while also often being experienced as dismissive of people's individual experiences and bodies (Walker, Remski, & Beres 2023).

Fears of doctors and psychologists altering people's identities 'unnaturally,' as shown previously when discussing Tucker Carlson's presentation of HRT treatments, are stoked by Carmichael's claim that the APA's (American Psychological Association) 2018 guidelines "pathologized traditional masculinity" (PragerU, 2023, 8:11), complete with a visual of those guidelines:

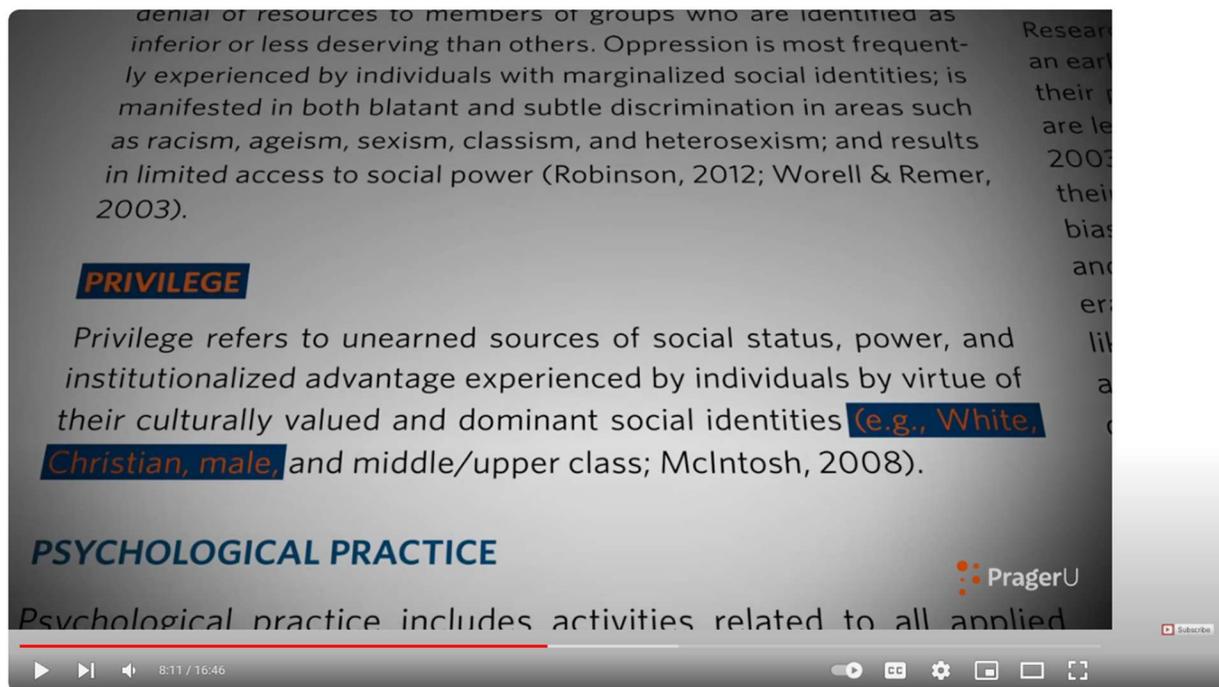


Figure 18 Visual of APA Guidelines regarding 'Privilege.'

This image reveals a belief held by PragerU and associates about masculinity, one that they cannot say without looking too extreme. On the surface this is meant to be evidence that the APA believes that White Christian males are inherently sick and must therefore be 'reprogrammed.' Yet what it is implying without explicitly stating is what PragerU thinks 'traditional' masculinity *should be*. Any analysis of PragerU or associated sources/influencers rhetoric around masculinity done without understanding that they see Whiteness and Christianity as inextricable from 'true' masculinity is incomplete. This is what is meant when it is pointed out that hegemonic masculinity is tied to White and Christian supremacy (Connell, 2005).

Of course this is also clearly intended to make their largely White, Christian male audience see mainstream psychology as antagonistic to their existence. Carmichael claims that the APA guidelines are against *anything* that is associated with masculinity by, for example, framing a section that describes a *disproportionate* fixation on ambition and success as proof that these establishments think that *any* drive for success or competitiveness is a symptom of mental illness. In this way, perspectives that are not aligned with PragerU's values are changed into existential threats by removing nuance, a practice that fits with the short runtime of Prager U content.

Carmichael's status as a psychologist gives her the social capital to make claims that would seem ungrounded coming from anyone else, allowing her to, for example ascribe increasing rates of depression in both men and women to society "putting men and women in politically correct boxes in which they don't necessarily fit" (8:36). Essentially recommending that men and women should stick to status quo categories of hegemonic gender performance (categories that still largely exist and exert great social pressure), and that these undefined 'boxes' Carmichael uses to represent non-hegemonic gender performance are by nature externally imposed and coercive. While this is deeply ironic, a person being framed as a rebel recommending that everyone conform to gender norms more, it is important to point out that she is also a rebel *female* academic. Like Cassie Jaye, she is meant to represent that women who are 'smart' are also in favour of strengthening masculine supremacist norms. However, this isn't the same prodigal son narrative. Instead, her presence is proof that 'the science' is behind the video's narrative. Look, her presence says to doubters, even reputable female psychologists support what PragerU is saying about masculinity being under threat! It can't be misogynistic because a woman is saying it!

John Gray, author of a book that was popular when I was in kindergarten, *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* (1992) is the next guest. Because he wrote a bestselling, albeit extremely gender essentialist relationship guide, he is there to reinforce the narrative that adhering to hegemonic gender norms is essential for a satisfying relationship for both partners. Interestingly, despite him believing that men and women are inherently very different beings (hence them being from Mars and Venus, two distant planets), he also agrees that 'traditional gender roles' are social constructs. On a purely content-based level, this is a complete

contradiction of what the documentary has been saying the entire time. Yet on an affective level it is not because Gray states that this is the optimal way to construct relationships between men and women with those innate gender differences in mind, saying that it is the result of “...wise people to make men good and women happy!” (11:24). The conclusion that the audience is meant to come to is still that society must not change hegemonic gender norms or gender roles, even if Gray just contradicted the premise of their entire worldview. Any movement away from them is a move from the best world there could be. It really does highlight the vibes-based approach to masculinity that characterizes “MIA: Masculinity in America” (2023) and right-wing thought in general. Having a line of reasoning is important, but it need not be consistent, let alone reflect reality. What matters is that it ends in the correct conclusion. Reality is meant for strong men to imprint their wills upon it in microfascist thought, after all (Bratich, 2022). By microfascist, I refer to the tiny hatreds, angers, beliefs, and practices of everyday life that generate the conditions for active fascism to form. These microfascist practices and internalized hatreds are born of misogyny (Bratich, 2022).

Later, Gray points out another criticism of how men are treated that nonetheless contradicts the narrative of not only the video, but the extremely pro-business ideology of PragerU itself. He points out that even if ‘traditional’ gender roles were brought back in full force, economic conditions would not allow them to function. Wages have stagnated so long compared to inflation that it is simply not possible for most families to get by with the husband as the sole breadwinner. This is hastily put back on track by Aldo refusing to engage with the point, simply stating that society has gotten too progressive and that traditional gender roles are needed now, even though Gray has just stated that doing so is impossible.

It is interesting how Aldo is completely unable to respond to an actual valid point about men being economically prevented from fulfilling the masculine norm of being the family’s primary provider. His lack of engagement can be tied to a key criticism of the narrative of the ‘American Dream’ made by Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), described in the Theory section of this dissertation. PragerU, as a producer of reactionary propaganda funded by billionaires (Bridge Initiative Team, 2020), is also financially and ideologically committed to not allowing the kind of discussion that Gray’s comments about the economic viability of masculine performance would necessitate. That would introduce a dissonant affective connection in the

audience. On the one hand the acquisition of wealth is seen as a key part of masculine performance in capitalism, yet the economic measures taken to maintain capitalism, particularly the free-market neoliberal policies supported by PragerU, would be revealed as a barrier to that same masculine performance. Allowing for that seed of doubt to enter the affective economy that is being cultivated by “MIA: Masculinity in America” (PragerU, 2023) could lead to ideological discomfort and even rejection in some rare cases. Thus, Aldo must quickly bring things back to what the real purpose of the video is, “...returning to traditional gender roles is probably what we need right now.” (11:53), to which Gray meekly acquiesces by saying that children need gender role models.

Our final guest is PragerU alum John Rosemond. Described as a “columnist & public speaker” as well as an “author of 15+ parenting books” (12:13), Rosemond’s rhetoric follows the same line about society finding men increasingly disposable and blames it an erosion in paternal authority over the family within the past 50 years (12:25). I find this to be an interesting addition to the affective and rhetorical narrative for several reasons. First and most importantly, he is situating this perceived erosion of paternal (and therefore masculine) authority within an actual historical context. This is a significant departure from the rest of the rhetoric in “MIA: Masculinity in America” (PragerU, 2023), which sticks to the usual vague right-wing microfascist binary of the corrupt modernist now contrasted by a mythologized past that must be reclaimed (Bratich, 2022). This offers a rare chance to examine a specific event or trend that Rosemond and the documentary are citing as one of the original vectors of the fall of masculinity in America, with all the accompanying affective baggage. Rosemond is referring to the spread of no-fault divorce laws beginning in 1969 and quickly spreading through most US states in the 1970s (Vlosky & Monroe, 2002; Dinner, 2016). The reason I believe this is because the video is saturated with signifiers and rhetoric that emphasize the importance of masculine figures within the family unit, and the devastating consequences of the absence of masculine figures on the safety and functioning of the family. One should also note that this video was released during a time where laws allowing no-fault divorce came under increasingly hostile scrutiny from the right, such as prominent influencers like Matt Walsh, Tim Pool, and Steven Crowder (Willingham, 2023; Knefel, 2022). I will discuss this more deeply at the end of the analysis but for now let us return to his 50 years claim.

Another reason I find Rosemond's uncharacteristically explicit diagnosis interesting is that he describes the present-day family as a matriarchy (PragerU, 2023, 12:25), changing what has heretofore been characterized as *the* fundamental socio-cultural unit into a site of emasculation threat. Rosemond's claim that the "American father is becoming less relevant. The father is no longer the parenting authority, the mom is. The dad's opinion is often treated as irrelevant. His voice is a nuisance." (12:25) taps into a specific flavour of emasculation. He presents the family as not hostile to the father figure, but *dismissive*. The dad is not seen as a threat to be opposed, but a nuisance to be ignored. Being hated and opposed is merely an opportunity to perform masculine ideals of dominance, authority, and invulnerability. To be ignored, though, removes the flow of constant external validation that hegemonic masculine identity is so dependent on (Vandello, 2008).

That dismissal happening within the family, represented as the locus of male authority, is a threat that cannot be tolerated. If your own family won't see you as a man, then how can the rest of the world do so? This rhetoric, if internalized, affectively recontextualizes outwardly unremarkable and common situations and interactions within the familial context. Your wife going out for a movie with her friends when you wanted to watch TV together is no longer an easily forgotten irritation, it is now a sign of your impotence. If you were man enough, she would have stayed. Your teenage child talking back to you when you tell them they can't use the phone at the dinner table is no longer mere teenage rebellion but an assault upon the core of your self-image by someone that is supposed to love you. Of course, lashing out for these perceived slights is likely to cause others to push back, resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy wherein the very actions taken to prevent rejection and familial breakdown bring those fears to fruition. The realization of those fears would then ironically strengthen those paranoid affective responses to perceived emasculation. If they thought they needed you, they never would have left.

The other interesting connection that Rosemond draws is between ADHD diagnoses and decreasing male achievement. He claims that young men being diagnosed with ADHD and medicate lead to an overall trend of "induced helplessness", leading them to remain content with living in their parents' basements while showing footage of a boy using a phone, transitioning to an adult man in that same room playing a videogame. This feeds into a common sense of contempt for 'modern men,' portrayed as docile and domesticated by a feminized society

through media and chemicals throughout reactionary ideology, as well as playing on fears of large modern institutions such as health systems and pharmaceuticals that is particularly present in the manosphere and new age subculture (Bratich, 2022; Walker, Remski, & Beres, 2023). The idea of ‘inserting’ an external agent into a boy through the mouth that then alters their behaviour to make them ‘less energetic’ and disruptive is easy to reframe as another tentacle from shadowy progressive forces acting to make men more passive and easily controlled, since hyperactivity often manifests in actions that are associated with masculinity, such as aggression, a need to engage in intense physical activity, and snap decision-making. All of these are behaviours that are culturally constructed as ‘normal’ for boys to engage in. Attempts to curb masculinity, even if toxic, which do not originate from the parents are therefore viewed with suspicion. That suspicion is likewise easy to connect to pharmaceuticals and healthcare.

Experiences with medical professionals are simultaneously intimate yet opaque and distant. We are asked to take substances that we do not understand into our bodies under the advice of people that have spent years training in extremely specialized and complex knowledge that is extremely difficult to explain to a layperson, and thus we are often just told to trust them because they have the right training (Walker, Remski, & Beres, 2023). Someone who is anxious about their masculinity may feel like they are being emasculated by not being allowed to take a more active and individualistic role in their health, being told to just be quiet and listen to the doctor. In other words, the exact same way Rosemond was describing the emasculated father. Rosemond talking about ADHD medicine may seem like it is out of left field but is in fact harnessing the same fears of emasculation that he has been engaging with the entire time, just with a different target. The father is dismissed and seen as no longer relevant, while the boy no longer needs a strong masculine role model because they can just get rid of those disruptive masculine traits with Ritalin.

Rosemond and the others make sure to conditionally soothe the anxiety evoked by the narrative of the video. Hegemonic masculinity is the natural state of the world, and therefore these attempts by resentful women to usurp masculine authority are doomed to failure. Rosemond states that women are wired to look to men for protection because men embody traits that women do not have (13:20). The place of men in America are threatened at present, but masculine dominance as a divinely ordained position never is, because women are seen in

hegemonic thought as existing in a state of constant penetration by the environment (Ahmed, 2004; 2014). Each interview subject tells the audience that women need men and children need fathers. The final word of PragerU about a future without masculine dominance is “a more feminine culture, dissatisfied women, confused children, and a broken society.” (16:07).

### 2.3.2.3 *Closing Thoughts*

Part of what makes hegemonic masculinities so interesting are its contradictions. We see here an identity defined by individual capability, dominance, external invulnerability, and authoritarian stoicism, yet entirely dependent on the existence and acquiescence of representatives of femininity (Connell, 2005). Of all the videos I have analyzed for this project, this one is the most revealing regarding the precariousness of masculinity and remember that includes Tucker Carlson being upset about an M&M becoming less sexy. This entire video, including segments that were cut for space, like Aldo’s segment where he talks to people on the streets of Hollywood, asking them things like “do you think society needs strong men” (PragerU, 2023, 9:35), or “do you think traditional masculinity is good?” (9:25), taps into emotional economies typical of reactionary masculine fundamentalism. Particularly deep insecurity and anxiety towards female agency, made obvious by the repetitive insistence on how much women do need men. Yet the understanding of what specific *narrative* within that misogynist milieu it was trying to implicitly communicate came together upon my realization that it was about marriage and divorce.

This recontextualization explains why so much of the rhetoric and imagery shown in the video was not what I had expected. I had expected it to be about women being angry and hostile towards men and masculinity, which Cassie Jaye seemed to imply at the beginning. As it continues, it becomes clearer that the true fear is women being allowed to *exist without men*. There is no greater example of this for PragerU’s patriarchal worldview than a willingly divorced and unattached woman. Their existence demonstrates that it is possible to voluntarily leave the supposedly divinely ordained marital state without any fault on either party, or to prefer living without masculine guidance/protection/control [for those are the same things within patriarchy]. This is a source of existential terror because it implies a vulnerability in the edifice of male domination. How can one be hegemonically masculine if people can just leave the state of being

dominated by you without you doing it ‘wrong’? More to the point, how can someone leave that state and then tell people that it is better than being in the divinely ordained position of marriage between man and woman? It is utterly emasculating because to the video, those women are not even engaging in a battle with men, they are merely stating that a woman does not inherently need a man to exist. So much of the affective atmosphere of this video feels simultaneously anxious, spiteful, and desperate for external validation, because this video does really want their audience to think that you have to be a husband to be a real man, and women who don’t want to get married are not merely making a decision for themselves, but instead unjustly denying you the ability to exercise your natural role and urges!

While the previous paragraphs did get a little casual, let us step back and consider the impact of these affective economies being internalized. While the tone may be juvenile and the rhetoric so vague as to be nearly meaningless, the prophet-work done in “M.I.A: Masculinity in America” (2023) appeals to a specific affective circuit wrapped up with pre-existing cultural norms around intimate relationships between men, women, and children. Our society is rife with imagery and signifiers of marriage representing a union between two halves, a wholeness created from previously incomplete people. Yet the marital union carries a significant power imbalance that favors men (Dinner, 2016) in ways both implicit and explicit. PragerU portrays that power imbalance as vital to the existence of masculinity. Thus, the goal of this video is for the audience to experience/feel signifiers that support feminine agency in relationships as attacks on men. Contentedly single women are a source of anger and fear because men and women are portrayed as being intrinsically aware of and desirous of marital unity. Any woman who rejects that unity is knowingly rejecting the natural order that maintains ordered human existence.

Imagine how those affective reactions will manifest behaviourally. I foresee, three main outcomes, broadly speaking. First is a higher chance of aggressive behavior towards women who display/express a lack of interest in intimate relationships with men, whether as a collective or an individual man. Rejection is already experienced as an emasculating act in men who are anxious about their masculinity (Vandello, et al., 2008), and this video encourages the audience to project resulting sensations of shame/frustration/sadness/etc. out into a high-stakes global context. One’s negative sensations and feelings from ‘*one* woman not wanting to go out with *me*,’ or ‘*my* wife wanting a divorce from *me*’ are spread out to encompass all women and society. ‘*All* women are

being taught not to go out with *men*, I am a man and therefore they are taught not to go out with *me*,’ *society* made my wife believe she should divorce *me*.’ This encourages followers to react to any stimuli indicating acts of female agency without male influence/control as a source of emasculatory threat.

When one has attached such negative affective reactions to signifiers as omnipresent as ‘female agency,’ it becomes extremely difficult to engage with culture outside of very isolated contexts. The second broad category of behavioural reaction could therefore be withdrawal from open society, as people are generally motivated to avoid sources of negative affects (Tomkins, 2008). This isolation works in PragerU’s favor, because it restricts opportunities for people to become acclimated to alternative viewpoints and modes of being outside of the restricted vision of existence that PragerU and its benefactors desire. For example, by implicitly contextualizing a woman’s desire to remain ‘unattached’ to a man as an assault against masculinity, interacting with women in a context where they do not submit to masculine authority risks bringing those anxieties and sensations to the fore. Because hegemonic masculine performance is essentialized as intrinsic to male existence, the subject is incentivized to see these negative affects as being externally forced upon them rather than coming from within, because if those feelings came from within, then that would mean that it would be possible for the male self to rebel against those so-called ‘natural’ norms without external influence, thus: ‘If I feel like I am not a man when I am around women, it is because those women are *making* me feel that way.’ Under hegemonic masculine norms, to be a man is to not be altered by the external world (Bratich, 2022), and therefore any nonconsensual negative affective reaction must be seen as a hostile action because it imposes vulnerability. Under this affective narrative, it becomes necessary to isolate oneself to socio-spatial areas that are known to be ‘safe’ for men, reinforced by the interview guests emphasizing the need for women to be kind, understanding, and tolerant of men’s actions (PragerU, 2023). Actions that push back against masculine norms, (which to PragerU include men being in control of all situations) even minor, non-personal ones, must then be understood as cruel, and hostile rather than incidents to be tolerated or disagreements to be negotiated.

However, this isolation is not sustainable to those who are anxious about hegemonic masculine performance because that same ideal requires men to exert agency upon the world. Women adapt to the world, while men are supposed to force the world to adapt *to them*. This can

easily lead to a microfascist (Bratich, 2022) fixation on having control over the agency of other people, especially women, to limit the chance of being subject to those frightening emotional ‘assaults.’ This is the third broad behavioural outcome, which is support and reinforcement of misogynist norms and practices. This intersects with aggression but differs in being proactive while aggression is *reactive*. These are instead efforts to pre-emptively stifle the agency of non-hegemonic subjects through the application of various forms of force, ranging from social reproval to institutional punishment via state legal system, in response to subversions or resistance to masculine dominance. By making non-submission to masculine dominance become associated with feelings and sensations of pain, fear, and anxiety, “MIA: Masculinity in America” (PragerU, 2023) encourages the audience to at least tolerate the repression of non-hegemonic demographics. It also encourages active participation in the intensification of repressive norms and practices to salve their own masculine anxieties, be it on an individual (refusing to listen to women) or collective level (engaging in political action to support misogynistic legislation).

PragerU categorizing “MIA: Masculinity in America” (2023) as a documentary is a microcosm of how PragerU engages in academic stagecraft. People that are labelled experts in the topics they cover speak to the audience with authority, outside studies and statistics are referred to, official-looking titles and credentials appear in taglines underneath their names. These are all hollow props and costumes meant to conceal the delivery of the same reactionary rhetoric that could be spouted on a hate group’s website. I use theatre terms here not only to be evocative but also to explain how the way that PragerU and “MIA: Masculinity in America” (2023) use signifiers of culturally legitimate holders of knowledge in a shallow way to make the delivery of their oppressive views more convincing to a culture who is taught to associate those signifiers with authority.

In this ‘documentary,’ for example, the aesthetics of a more reputable documentary are followed. The narrator (Aldo) is shown travelling around looking for sources of knowledge, people on the street are questioned about masculinity, and experts are asked to give their views on the subject. It looks and sounds like a genuine documentary. There is a popular understanding that documentaries will adhere to a certain standard of accuracy in their content. The accuracy of that belief can be debated but the point is that through our cultural education and experiences, we

come to associate media that partakes in the documentary genre style with being truer than media of other genres. PragerU is media-savvy enough to understand how to take advantage of those assumptions through some minor costuming and stagecraft. We will examine this further in the next video where Aldo engages in a 'Man on the Street' style video format.

### 2.3.2.4 Affective Diagram

American society increasingly sees masculine traits as disposable or even toxic -> This is most clearly seen when feminists try to convince women that they don't need men -> Why does society suddenly feel this way? -> Cassie Jaye used to be a feminist until she did a documentary on Men's Rights Activists -> She hated them because her feminist beliefs told her they weren't worth listening to -> They made a lot of good points when she actually began listening to them -> Feminist beliefs are what prevented her from learning -> Feminist beliefs encourage irrational hatred and stubbornness -> MRA beliefs are founded on data and research -> Men have real problems that feminists don't want anyone to care about -> Cassie has embraced her femininity and no longer hates men -> Now she is a happy wife and mother -> rejecting feminism made Cassie happier -> She now understands and acknowledges that having a male presence in a child's life is vital for their development. -> Brian Ecchevaria is a father -> He is an activist who spoke to his school board about trans kids being in school sports -> He was against it because he doesn't want his girls to have to play against boys -> boys are stronger than girls and could hurt them -> He is defending his daughters -> he is a good father -> Brian explains that fathers are essential by providing a balancing counter to the mother's nurturing feminine presence -> He provides structure and discipline -> He was raised by his mother and until his stepdad came into his life, he was at great risk of negative life outcomes (prison, gang membership, etc.) -> Boys who are not given an ever-present masculine role model will not know how to properly be men and will direct their masculine urges towards violent, anti-social ends -> Allowing or tolerating women raising alone will harm society and the people in it -> Men are also essential for the defense of weaker members of society, specifically women and children. -> Without a male presence, women and children will be left vulnerable -> Families need men -> Dr. Chloe Carmichael is a psychologist -> She disagrees with mainstream psychology -> She is rebelling against mainstream psychology because the APA is trying to pathologize masculine traits -> The people who society says know best about their field hate men, and want them to be miserable and weak -> They also hate Christians and white people -> This is making more men and women depressed -> Both men and women would be happier if society let them just act naturally -> John Gray is a famous author about relationships -> He showed how men and women act differently and hegemonic gender roles are the optimal way to set up relationships -> Society is so fallen nowadays that it's not possible for a man to fulfill their natural role as family provider -> Bringing back traditional gender values would allow everyone to feel less anxiety and would provide proper role models for children -> Rosemond points out how men are treated badly and dismissed by their own families -> This leaves men unable to exert their innate paternal authority and thus properly guide/protect the family -> Boys are emasculated by having their masculine traits diagnosed as conditions like ADHD and then medicated to make them more passive and compliant. -> Children are being drugged into becoming stupid and lazy adults -> This makes it easier for men to be rejected from relationships and childcare -> This is going to fail and lead to a effeminized culture and society -> Women are wired to look to men for protection because they can't protect themselves -> If there are no men left to protect them than women and children will be vulnerable to bad people -> bad people will be able to take over society unless men are returned to their proper place in society -> Men are resisting feminism because they instinctively know that they must be in the lead to keep everyone safe -> Feeling upset about gender equality is natural and good.

### 2.3.3 The Protocols of the Elders of Zion as Right-wing Ideological Foundation

The framing of universities as sources of cultural degeneracy that lure young minds away from proper “traditional” cultural norms is so omnipresent in right-wing discourse that it is easy to become numb to it. Universities are often described as culture war battlegrounds for young minds that are waged against arrogant and out-of-touch liberal faculties (Shapiro, 2010) teaching White youth to hate themselves (Gonzalez & Butcher, 2021), as well as to reject ‘traditional’ gender norms in favour of radical and unnatural gender identities (Carlson, 2018). This discourse around public institutions of learning has origins in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* according to *A Rumor About the Jews: Reflections on Antisemitism and the Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* (2019) by Stephen Bronner. While few reactionary sources studied for this project are explicitly antisemitic, the narratives and themes presented in *Protocols* are foundational to the current right-wing worldview, thus calling for a brief examination. Examples include the use of the term ‘globalist,’ which carries with it the same rhetorical function as “international banker” with regards to dog-whistle terms for antisemitic consumption (O’Donnell, 2021). Jordan Peterson’s use of the term “cultural Marxism” (Mirrlees, 2018) involves a rewording of an old conspiracy theory called ‘cultural Bolshevism,’ originating in Nazi Germany that claimed that critical theory was created by a cabal of Jewish leftist intellectuals destabilize ‘Western Civilization’ (Woods, 2019) is an example that is also connected to right-wing distrust of academia (Braune, 2019).

Bronner proposes that the *Protocols* represented a paradigmatic shift in antisemitism by linking “Judeophobia” to a “more total, and distinctly modern, form of political antimodernism” (2019, p. 48). While previous antisemitic conspiracies and accusations would be concerned with specific issues or events, this invisible threat now saturated the entire world. Furthermore, the *Protocols* vastly heightened the stakes of the antisemitic narrative. As Bronner states, “In earlier times, Jews were hated for divorcing themselves from public life...” (pg. 49) They were seen as an alien Other that refused to assimilate into Christian society, and therefore could not be trusted. However, “Works like the *Protocols* claimed that Jews dominated the universities [16A], the educational system [16B], the press [12A], and all organs of public debate protected by civil

liberties [9D]” (pg. 49). Now the enemy does not seek to simply keep to themselves but instead is engaged in a plot to overthrow the established order of society and replace it with a tyrannical regime characterized by torture, genocide, and starvation. From this perspective, there is no way to non-violently resist the Jew, because all organs of public opinion and non-violent persuasion are pre-emptively described as being firmly under Jewish control. It also implies that there is no way to go ‘too far’ in antisemitic resistance, since the Jewish threat is framed as willing to do literally anything to dominate the world.

Reactionary media characterizes universities, educational systems, and mainstream media as being sources of social ills, manipulated by shadowy elites and ‘progressives,’ just as the *Protocols* describes these same institutions as subject to Jewish control. This is because, as explained by Bronner, the Jewish population does not just represent a religion or an ethnicity, but a force for modernity. “Inspiring them and their political proponents is hatred for the secular and cosmopolitan, scientific and rationalist, and liberal and socialist, legacies of the Enlightenment” (pg. 150). This antimodern, right-wing extremists still hold authoritarian perspective today, but instead of seeing ‘the hidden hand of the Jew’ behind every event, a similarly ill-defined ‘globalist’ or ‘progressive’ force is seen to be behind every woe that the reactionary experiences or perceives.

To bring this discussion back to the realm of affect theory and masculinity, it should be clear that the degree to which tropes of antisemitic conspiracy theories have saturated the discursive framework of reactionaries creates a significant vulnerability towards progression into openly antisemitic and white supremacist beliefs. Attachment to the affective economies of the right wing requires attachment to antisemitic discourses like the influence of shadowy ‘globalists,’ or the framing of universities and public institutions as intentional spreaders of subversive thought for the weakening of the nation-state, as Prager U does. As one engages with more and more extreme versions of the present-day right-wing, what could be seen as latent or even unintentional antisemitic discourse becomes increasingly overt and intentional, such as open Christian dominionist Nick Fuentes (Right Wing Watch Staff, 2022) describing how he would discuss “Jewish Power” with his right-wing extremist friends in college (Fuentes, 2021). Even Dennis Prager, who is himself Jewish (Carmona, 2022), has found himself in a position

where he is willfully leading a media platform that reinforces and normalizes antisemitism to promote his ideology (Tripodi, 2018).

An example of how this rhetoric of anti-modernism and connection of degeneracy to institutions seen as centres of progressivism will be examined in the next video, which focuses on how a university set in a conservative, and therefore more positively framed region [Arizona] is framed as more accepting of the phrase ‘America First’ compared to one associated with progressivism [Los Angeles]. Note how signifiers of implicit antisemitism that were discussed here are deployed in the video.

### 2.3.5 Video – “Is ‘America First’ Racist?: UCLA VS ASU | Man on the Street” (2023)



Is "America First" Racist?: UCLA vs. ASU |  
Man on the Street

143K views • 11 days ago

*Figure 19 Thumbnail for "Is America First Racist?: UCLA vs ASU"*

‘Man on the Street’ with Aldo is a running PragerU series wherein Aldo Buttazoni will ask normal people on the street questions about various right-wing talking points like racism, illegal immigration, and the validity of racial pride (PragerU, “Man on the Street”, 2024). In this video, Aldo asks students whether the phrase/concept ‘America First’ is racist, emphasizing how different the responses are in Arizona State University (ASU) or the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA).

In line with prophetic propaganda, the outcome and meaning *of* that outcome are predetermined by the thumbnail, which shows an image of an ASU student on the left, and a

UCLA student on the right with Aldo in the middle, his head perched thoughtfully in his hand. The ASU student is masculine, athletic, and white. The UCLA student, on the other hand, looks more feminine and racially ambiguous. This thumbnail and the video it represents engages with a long-running conservative narrative that portrays California as a hotbed of coastal leftist degeneracy, which produces students that imitate that same leftist worldview. They are contrasted by the ‘normal’ students in Arizona State University, since Arizona is more conservative than California.

We should examine how this video presents ‘America First’ as a political and ideological concept. Aldo initially describes America First as “This political philosophy that says the American government should further the interests of the American people...that we shouldn’t be giving our tax dollars to illegal immigrants, maybe we shouldn’t fund foreign wars.” (PragerU, 2024, 0:53). Aldo further justifies this by claiming that America is unique in its lack of self-interest, while all other countries prioritize the interests of their citizens, disturbingly referring to ‘Germany for the Germans’ (Ibid, 1:15). While Aldo is trying to dress this up as an ethnically neutral pro-isolationist political viewpoint, it quickly becomes clear that he is reinforcing a white genocide narrative using the rhetorical tricks that Ahmed cites in *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014).

This is detectable by connecting an extended response to a man I have affectionately dubbed ‘Fro-guy,’ who asks him how one could balance putting ‘America First’ with also helping immigrants who have been victims of American imperialism and interventionism. Aldo’s answer reveals a fascistic worldview in which all national identities are deeply antagonistic to each other:

Every country in all of time. It’s about conquering others. If any other country on Earth could conquer America, they would do it in a second. If Mexico could colonize America, they would do it! The only reason that America could become what it is today isn’t because of it’s borders but by the values of those citizens within those borders. And by putting the interests of other countries ahead of ours, we are abandoning the values that made the country good in the first place. We’re going to lose the ability to help those other countries.” (PragerU, 2024, 2:04)

Aldo also draws direct connections between anxieties over American identity, whiteness, and purity by claiming that “Since September of last year, there have been more illegal

immigrants crossing per month than babies born to American mothers. So, we have a system now where there are more people taking out of a system than putting anything back in.” (3:10). Although the language used frames it as an economic issue, the visuals accompanying this rhetoric tie into reactionary associations of motherhood with the continuation of the nation and the self, as well as fears of declining birth rates among the ‘true’ inhabitants of the land being outmatched by an incoming horde from these illegal crossings (Ahmed, 2014; Ahmed, 2004). There is a further connection here where ‘American mothers’ and ‘babies,’ subjects to which Americans will surely have positive associations with, are framed as being against the ‘illegal immigrants.’ One can either love babies and American moms or support the rights of illegal immigrants, not both. Love of the country is also used as a counter to accusations of racism about America First. Two respondents from ASU declare that “I don’t think it has anything to do with race either. I think it’s just our country, loving our country, and that goes the same for any other country.” (PragerU, 2024, 2:39), and at the end Aldo poses in front of a giant heart, saying “See this? This is how much I love this country. America baby!” (4:57)

This construction of ‘America First’ is a retread of the common far-right nationalist belief that the nation has embodied too many feminine traits and thus become too weak and emasculated to maintain its powerful position in the world (Ahmed, 2004). This video describes America as being uniquely empathic, too willing to help others at the expense of themselves, easily penetrable through illegal alien crossings and the removal of money. By allowing too many ‘non-Americans’ inside, America will lose the values that make it great due to a change in demographics, much like how the feminine is associated with being changeable from external forces. Because other nations are described as being inherently competitive with each other, America’s emasculated state will lead to its inevitable conquest by foreigners if American masculinity is not regained. By that I mean an America that is closed off and only affected by external forces that it consents to, such as by cracking down on border crossings so that only those that are approved of may enter or only using funds in such a way that will directly serve the interests of American strength and hegemony. In other words, a fantasy of America as a nation surrounded by an impenetrable wall, so that nothing can threaten the nation that they love so much. Because they love America so much, they see any factors not under the control of

American hegemony (such as ‘illegal immigrants’) as a threat to the preservation of that object of love.

While Aldo does not express any explicitly racist views, the nationalistic and antagonistic worldview underpinning his idea of America First, such as the connections formed between immigration and a lack of American births establishes an American: non-American binary that is certain to easily trigger racist anxieties, such as white genocide-style conspiracy theories. Another racist element is his fascist-adjacent view that all peoples are intrinsically connected to the nations that they come from, hence him saying ‘Mexico is for the Mexicans.’ From that perspective, people who immigrate to America cannot help but carry some of the ‘essence’ of their home countries with them, which is now added to America. Thus, if immigration is not strictly controlled, American culture could easily change into something undesirable. To nationalists, a change from their hegemonic view of the ideal America would be to experience the agonizing loss of a loved one, thus the prospect of Others being allowed to enter America and exist freely becomes a source of terror. All of this is to say that yes, their version of America First is obviously racist, in that it encourages negative outcomes that will disproportionately fall upon specific minorities. The question becomes how PragerU uses this segment to convince its audience that it is *not*.

First, one should take a moment to consider its negligible utility as an actual examination of student beliefs. These segments provide a far too small sample size of students, the amount of time given to each student far too short for them to make a clear point about the questions they are given, and none of the students from either university are identified as holding any relevant credentials. The video being only five minutes long means that they can pick which respondents to include in the final product, to say nothing of the power of editing. However, for soothing anxiety about the validity of what ‘America First’ represents, it is top-notch.

By displaying people that are framed as a valid embodiment of regional opinion, these segments can create an impression that certain beliefs are shared throughout a much larger region than the small number of speakers would normally indicate. Hence, the UCLA students who consistently say that ‘America First’ is racist despite Aldo repeatedly trying to make the concept

behind it sound as harmless and reasonable as possible are meant to symbolize how the UCLA is full of un-American leftists, which is to be expected because California is portrayed in the American reactionary imagination as a bizarre half-State full of liberals who despise the rest of America. They cannot represent the ‘real’ America. They are distinguished from the ‘normal’ students of ASU. ASU students are reasonable, they understand the importance of putting America First, and so the viewer who has a significant emotional investment in the concept of America First as framed by Aldo can breathe a sigh of relief. Young people, educated people, even people that are clearly from outside America understand the need for it. The prophecy is clear, it is the Californians that are wrong!

So let us see how the anxiety neutralization sausage is made. First, although both sides are shown with a variety of BIPOC respondents, it is of greater rhetorical importance that BIPOC ASU respondents are represented as agreeing with the idea of ‘America First.’ Under the PragerU worldview, one defined by individualism and binary thinking, this presents as conclusive evidence that America First cannot be racist. From that perspective, human experience is influenced purely by one’s individual reasoning ability. Questions of morality are simply a matter of having enough rationality rather than understanding different perspectives. Similarly, errors in judgement are not the result of life experience, contexts, or other external factors, but a deficiency in one’s reasoning ability. Therefore, something that is racist must be easily and obviously discernable by those it is identified to be racist against, as they are most likely to experience the negative outcomes caused by racism. That would mean that a non-white person not detecting racism must be proof that it is not racist, as that racism would be immediately noxious to BIPOC individuals.

One may question why an audience that is clearly invested in the maintenance of the hegemonic status quo should care that much about being racist, or why PragerU should care about being seen as racist if they are clearly in favor of White supremacist outcomes. One factor is how racism is presented in popular culture as a state of disgust and unreasoning hatred for the Other, often to an uncivil and even violent degree. It is also not something that should be tolerated in a civilized society, thus the term ‘racist’ also often carries with it the implication that it should be removed. For example, the media portrayal of a racist is often someone that disrupts

the status quo by violently assaulting others, physically or otherwise. They exist to be stopped by protagonists so that social harmony can be restored, or they are pathetic figures that constantly shout racist slurs and conspiracy theories (Tucker Carlson included), existing to be humiliated. These are not figures one would want tied to one's self-image. This is not an inherent problem on its own. However, it does create an extremely specific image of what racists and racism *look like*. Racists constantly express their hatred of the Other in an *uncivil* manner. Bigots aren't just hateful, they are *rude*, and no one wants to be rude. They are not just violent, they are *emotional*, a distinctly emasculated state of being. They are KKK members, screaming skinhead neo-Nazis and supervillains out of comic books. If that is one's consistent exposure to an identifiable racist, then it would follow that whoever is not like that *cannot* be racist, leaving a great deal of rhetorical maneuvering room. That is why someone can calmly express academic-sounding rhetoric that effectively calls for the same outcomes as a more stereotypical White supremacist and still have people genuinely defend them as non-racist if they didn't outright use slurs, because they didn't dress and speak like a racist. In other words, it becomes less about the fact that the figure is trying to create a world wherein inequality and oppression are increased, and more about the disruptive and unpleasant methods one uses to express it. If BIPOC people can find something to like in 'America First,' then it cannot be racist, and if it cannot be racist then the audience does not have to fear looking like *those* racists if they also like 'America First.'

Of course, this produces a significant affective vulnerability that allows bigoted rhetoric to slip through one's intellectual and emotional defenses against prejudice. A vulnerability that happens to significantly benefit the hegemonic status quo, because the same elites that profit most from hegemonic dominance are also the ones who set the standards for civility. It follows that most oppression is done in a way that fits the social understanding of civil and 'normal,' allowing for racist practices on an institutional level to be promulgated in such a way as to not appear racist. Furthermore, defining racism as an individualistic *choice* neutralizes many arguments for political ideologies or systemic policies like 'America First' being racist based on outcome. This is because those outcomes come from systems rather than the desires of specific individuals. This is tied to it being presented as an internal state of immorality. One does not simply *do* racist things or think racist thoughts, one *is* or *is not* a racist by choice. Since racism is a state of being, racism cannot be systemic, as systems possess no beings or individual wills. By

reinforcing this individualized understanding of racism, PragerU neutralizes anxieties that could result from encountering evidence that beliefs tied to the concept of ‘America First’ are motivated by prejudice. This neutralization is assisted by presenting America First as being tolerable by the minorities that the video claims the concept is accused of being against.

Another rhetorical tactic is the shrouding of the material, ideological, and historical context in which this ‘America First’ concept exists. Instead, it is described as an abstract concept that exists in isolation from history and material outcomes. When presented as a country only wishing to put its own national interests before international issues, it has far less affective resistance to engage with because that is what all countries must do to function. One might as well argue that breathing is controversial. To audience members who are unaware of how the phrase is tied to populist nativist rhetoric used to mobilize popular affects of fear, anxiety, and anger against marginalized Others (Lofflman, 2021), ‘America First’ as Aldo describes it might as well signify ‘America should exist.’ This is especially the case when he frames the concept of America First as representing something that is universal to all nations, a necessary perspective to prevent nations from being conquered by external invaders, and most importantly is something that only America *does not do*, thus defining it as a lost norm rather than a deviation from international relations. ‘America First’ isn’t trying to be tyrannical or prejudiced, it’s about getting the USA to stop handicapping itself, and arguments against it come from people and countries that are upset about not getting to take advantage of American generosity anymore.

Because this content is meant to provide an easing of anxiety and moral catharsis, Aldo does not engage with how the concept of ‘America First’ would translate into material policy or the outcomes those policies would lead to. Fascism and microfascism are allergic to spending time among the muck of the material as opposed to the abstract, because the complexity of material existence often defies the moral binaries fascist thought proposes. It refuses to perfectly reflect the intentions of those who are powerful enough to exert their will upon it (Bratich, 2022). In other words, for PragerU to get into a grounded policy discussion would entail having to confront the messy nuances that would inevitably occur when trying to impose such a binary worldview onto something as complex as international relations. For example, how should America First deal with asylum declarations? How should they deal with children born in the

USA to ‘illegal immigrants?’ What if the people sent back are all killed? Who gets to count as American? How many generations does it take to be seen as American? What about territories like Guam and Puerto Rico, and so on? It would risk producing feelings in the audience that are dissonant with the intended message that America First is simple, common, and reasonable. It is therefore much better to keep discussions of America First as abstract and vague as possible, so that every audience member can come to their own conclusions about what they *want* the material incarnation of America First to entail.

By deploying a sanitized, purely abstract definition of America First, those who are shown to agree with it appear far more reasonable than the respondents who do not. This is because those who disagree are missing the key understanding that they are participating in content that has pre-emptively defined what ‘America First’ is in a way that makes their arguments useless. A liberal university student arguing against America First by saying “There’s a great answer to that and that is because we have benefited from the exploitation of countries across the world.” (PragerU, 2024, 1:26) might as well be telling the PragerU audience, ‘because America has conquered and exploited other countries, it should allow itself to be weak in contrition.,’ which in the PragerU discursive worldview simply plays further into the underlying anxieties around educational institutions’ part in the White genocide and ‘demographic replacement’ narratives that this video is trying to engage with. ‘Look at what UCLA has done,’ The video implies, ‘it has brainwashed people to hate their own country and people.’

This narrative produces an affective path of least resistance to dismiss both internal doubts one may experience in reaction to the aggressively prejudiced rhetoric around America First (Lofflman, 2021) as well as doubts from encountering arguments or evidence revealing outcomes that are dissonant with one’s understanding of America First. Most people do not think of themselves as aggressors, so the argument that America First is a reaction to a threat towards an object of love neutralizes moral anxieties (Ahmed, 2014).

Aldo, the prophet figure of the video, gives an interesting example of masculine gender performance. He clearly exhibits physical traits in line with hegemonic masculinity, although not so much as to be unattainable. He also performs masculinity via his stoic reactions to those who

disagree with him, responding calmly and confidently. He positions himself as supporting the ‘strengthening’ of America, seeking to save it from its feminized state.

Nowhere is Aldo’s presentation as a steadfast magnanimous masculine figure in greater evidence than at the end of the video when a UCLA student refuses to shake his hand. Aldo pursues the student and asks, “do you think I am racist for wanting to put American citizens first?” (4:10), to which the student responds, “I think the way you are going about it and the terms you are using like illegal alien is inherently racist” (4:13). This would seem like a suitable time for Aldo to aggressively counterattack him with facts and logic, but the student doesn’t realize that he has taken facts to a feelings fight. Aldo simply responds that they can agree to disagree and asks him if he will shake his hand “American to American” (4:32). The student refuses, Aldo says he tried, and they go their separate ways.

This scene is illustrative for two reasons. First, it reinforces the feeling that those who represent America First are *not* the aggressors by temporarily altering the stakes of the video from the material consequences of ‘America First’ policies to civility. ‘Sure, I may be arguing in favour of something that you think is racist, vile, and upsetting, but that’s no need for us to be *rude* to one another. I’m still the good person here.,’ it communicates. This connects to pre-existing anxieties around being subject to social censure or being ‘cancelled’ because of one’s right-wing beliefs. The second is that Aldo presents as calm and friendly compared to the less masculine-presenting student who is now framed as being emotionally fragile due to his reaction to what the video has presented as an abstract debate, effeminizing the student. In that moment, the point the student is making becomes irrelevant because *now* it is about an adult trying to reason with a rude child.

Appeals to civility will almost always favour the side of the status quo because the status quo is what defines proper etiquette. Meanwhile arguments against the status quo that disregard civility will be experienced as threatening due to associations with those standards with safety, and predictability. Aldo isn’t just being nice; he is standing up to a threat, and because he is the prophet figure, he is also providing a cathartic experience to audience members who themselves fear the prospect of being labelled racist. When he has the last word, so too does his audience.

In summation, “Is ‘America First’ Racist? UCLA vs ASU” (PragerU, 2024) is not meant to provoke conversation, but to promote the most anodyne version of ‘America First’ as the entirety of what that phrase represents. The audience, already primed to feel positively towards America First rhetoric, is encouraged to feel less anxious about the dissonance between positivity felt towards America First rhetoric versus the material harm caused by policies that rhetoric supports. This is done through presenting a dichotomy between the liberal wrongness of a California university (UCLA) and the still educated and America loving students of ASU. By changing the main stakes of the discussion from the material outcomes of immigration policies to the survival of an abstract idea of the American nation, respondents and audiences are presented as automatically aligning with America First rhetoric simply by expressing love for ‘America,’ implicitly placing those who disagree with PragerU’s rhetoric as antagonistic to America. America First being ‘racist’ is likewise defused through claims of the ‘America First’ worldview being universal and innate to all nations. The United States is presented as a feminized nation, open to penetration from foreign invasion due to America’s excessive empathy and kindness. America First can therefore be seen as a desire for the nation to ‘masculinize’ itself into a closed system that is unaffected by external, uncontrolled forces, one that is tempting in the tumultuous present.

### 2.3.5.1 Affective Diagram

America First has been falsely accused of being racist -> Aldo will ask students in Arizona State and UCLA whether America First is racist and why or not. -> We (the audience) knows that AS will get that America First isn't racist, because they are from a more conservative state -> UCLA will think America First is racist because they are a liberal university -> America First cannot be racist because all nations put themselves first -> The leftists in UCLA are saying that America should have to let anyone in because the USA has been strong in the past -> The UCLA and institutions like it brainwash people to hate their own country-> If we let in too many other foreign people, our culture will be overwhelmed and changed into something lesser -> Even non-White and non-American foreign students understand that when asked by Aldo -> If non-white people have no problem with it then it cannot be racist -> Therefore anyone who dislikes it just doesn't like America and wants it to become something else -> People in Arizona State love America because they understand that we cannot just allow anyone to come in just because they want to take advantage of American kindness -> We have to be strong and resist the urge to help others so that America can take care of itself and therefore make the world a better place -> People who are unable to resist their emotions don't think this way -> Aldo shows this when a student who doesn't get their way just walks off in a huff and won't even shake Aldo's hand -> People who don't agree with us are immature and childish. -> Listening to them would be a bad idea. -> We are correct because we love our country and want it to do better -> America First is not racist, anyone who says it is racist is wrong, childish, and selfish.

### 2.3.6 Prager U Conclusion: Redundant Prophets & Polite Oppression

This study has detailed how PragerU's content rhetorically reinforces existing affective connections that support the channel's right-wing agenda. One thing that sets PragerU apart from the other channels examined in this dissertation is that it is an example of how the role of a prophet can be divided between multiple people while still acting under the same collective umbrella. For example, it's signature five-minute videos all exist to reinforce or convince a particular right-wing rhetorical argument. The person who takes the role of the presenter is often different, yet the fundamental role of the speaker in those videos remains the same, a representative of moral and natural rightness for the audience's affective view of the world. Even more specialized hosts, like Aldo with his Man on the Street series, are still tied to the strict editorial control of the PragerU brand (Oppenheimer, 2018).

This diversity of presenters is also a strength in that it offers a way to utilize affective connections of relatability in the audience. Someone who may be put off by an old White man like Dennis Prager giving conservative talking points may find themselves more interested when that same ideology is given from a Black perspective, like Taleeb Starkes (2016) or Antonia Okafor (2017), for example. This allows PragerU to, ironically, use diversity to connect with audiences that it might not otherwise be able to reach and to make people doubt that the reactionary views supported by PragerU will lead to White supremacist ends. That kernel of doubt, the *feeling* of momentary disconnection from a minute assumption, can be enough of a wedge to allow reactionary politics in, albeit indirectly. Perhaps Republicans are bad, but this presenter does have a point that leftists seem to presume that Black people should all listen to them, for example. I should note that the outreach to diverse presenters is not limited to Black conservatives, there are also videos aimed at Muslims, Hispanics, and many others, allowing for greater prophet outreach that is tailored to reactionaries of all shapes and sizes (Oppenheimer, 2018).

PragerU frames itself as a counter to an academic landscape that Dennis Prager views as actively hostile to non-leftist concepts and ideas (Oppenheimer, 2018). This view of academia and other organs of public and civic engagement as sources of degeneracy is a bedrock of reactionary ideology, one that can be traced back to *The Protocol of the Elders of Zion* (Bronner, 2019). Where PragerU differs is that instead of attempting to present itself as a populist non-elitist group that leverages the home-spun wisdom of the common man, like Tucker Carlson or Hannity might, PragerU leans into the stage magic of the cultural authority given to those who look the part of the academic, as shown in “M.I.A: Masculinity in America” (2023). PragerU is happy to display the academic credentials of those they wish to portray as authoritative while simultaneously railing against the very institutions that granted them.

Utilizing these mainstream emotional economies is useful not just for getting viewers to spread their videos but also for PragerU’s continuing effort to insinuate themselves in schools, as shown by the offering of free educational materials for often overworked teachers to use in class (PragerU, 2025). Although PragerU continues to insinuate itself in the classroom through direct state endorsements (Natanson & Meckler, June 13, 2024). I want to focus on the use of these free

classroom materials because they represent an opportunity for PragerU to establish a connection not only with students via the teacher's knowledge-authority, but also with the teacher themselves. In my experience, discussions of reactionary audiences often carry an unspoken assumption that either they are stubbornly clinging to regressive ideology or that they are ignorant. This situation pushes against that assumption because while there is nothing preventing a teacher from having those pre-existing emotional attachments to PragerU or their worldview, simple pragmatism can suffice. Schoolteachers are often overworked and underpaid, thus even those who would otherwise be repelled by PragerU content may nonetheless be tempted by the prospect of quickly setting up a lesson plan, especially when it is wrapped in such a 'normal' looking package. What's more, one must also consider the general assumptions that students make about material that is shown in schools, which is that content that is presented in school by teachers is true. Thus, PragerU has cleverly managed to co-opt the authority carried by the American education system to allow their crypto-White supremacist rhetoric to bypass one of the few cognitive barriers, 'does my teacher agree with it' that young students can use to evaluate truthfulness.

PragerU is a powerful demonstration of one of the most important takeaways I have gotten from this study with regards to 'acceptance' of reactionary rhetoric. That is to say that metaphorically speaking, people are fine with opening a box full of garbage if the packaging is pretty enough. PragerU content is slickly, albeit cheaply, produced, surrounds their speakers and guests with the accoutrements of legitimacy and provide a wide variety of content for people who do not fit the usual White nationalist demographic. In other words, it very deliberately eschews the identifiers that we are taught to associate with 'racists,' which is to say identifiers associated with social disruption and low socio-economic status. The Klan member in the trailer park, or the angry skinhead covered in swastika tattoos. In other words, we were taught that racism comes from the bottom-up, meaning that we watched the poor and disenfranchised while ignoring that the biggest motivation for prejudice arises from the maintenance of hegemonic privilege. Prager U wants the same thing that Klan member and the skinhead do, and they are not particularly subtle about it if one listens. They just speak it with better diction and fancier words, and that has been enough to completely bypass our cultural resistance to prejudice. If you can get

a writing credit, a nice suit, a speaking coach, perhaps you too can pull back entire generations of social progress in your country.

Perhaps that is unfair to the audience, because what really made PragerU get as far as it has is that it coordinates with current hegemonic interests and is thus funded by those same interests. Fossil fuels, Christian nationalists, regulation hating capitalists, these are people who have power in Western society, and so if they wish to wrap White supremacist rhetoric in a soothing cloak of normalcy to maintain the broken system that preserves their power, then they are completely capable of pumping millions of dollars into a platform like PragerU to do so. That's why our feelings of repulsion towards bigots are so dependent on said bigot possessing signifiers of poverty and lawbreaking. Because when hegemonic elites or their prophets want to spread oppression, their control of mainstream social norms and media production allow them to camouflage it, and it makes me *so angry*. It is best then, that we move on to the final wrap-up of this project.

## *2.4 Conclusions For Project 1*

### 2.4.1 Impact Of Gender Performativity

Most of the male online influencers that I have examined in this section primarily engaged with norms of hegemonic masculinity, albeit often in different ways. The most common masculine performance traits that influencers presented were impressions of stoicism, rationality, knowledge retrieval, and physical fitness, but did not display other masculine traits that are associated with the dominant masculine ideal, such as displays of sexual prowess, and displays of outward physical aggression (Connell, 2005).

The specific expressions of this form of masculine performance differed from influencer to influencer. For example, Tucker Carlson's emphasis on emotional tone and confrontational style differed from The Quartering's use of geek culture identity to reinforce distaste for progressive ideology, which differed from PragerU's use of mainstream signifiers of academic and knowledge legitimacy to undermine those very same academic institutions and scientific processes. These differing forms have already been described in their respective chapters, and their distinctiveness is important because it allows the same basic ideology to appeal to audiences that identify with different performances of masculinity. A viewer may find Tucker Carlson's performance emotionally repellant yet empathize with the signifiers of geek masculinity that Hambly displays. Similarly, someone who places great value on the appearance of professionalism, formality, rationality, and 'civil discourse' may enjoy Prager U content while feeling that Hambly's more casual appearance and lack of professional/academic qualifications mark him as lacking intellectual authority, and Tucker's aggressive rhetoric and angry tone too emotional to feel believable. These right-wing influencers, and many others like them, are all spreading the same broad ideological rhetoric yet because the types of affective associations connected to the signifiers of different performances of identity (focused here on masculinity) can differ greatly depending on the observer, viewers can come away believing that each is significantly ideologically different than the other. This perception of ideological difference from affective performance can also have an impact on attempts to respond to the rhetoric of different

influencers. For example, A viewer who identifies with Hambly or Prager U may take offense if they are assumed to also be a fan of Tucker Carlson and shut out any further discourse.

Another part of masculine performance that must be highlighted is how almost all the featured content was clearly intended to evoke latent castration anxieties in the audience. Castration here is meant in the metaphorical Freudian sense, transphobia notwithstanding. Not fear of the literal loss of one's penis, but rather the fear of feeling insignificant and degraded (Sarnoff & Corwin, 1959) through the loss of one's masculinity. While many of these videos engage with this castration rhetoric on a subtexual level, such as "Is America First Racist" and "What is a Woman?", a surprising number of videos engaged with these fears on an explicit level, most obviously in "MIA: Masculinity in America", but also "Disney Genderswaps another Classic Film" and "Tucker Carlson Ridicules M&M Cartoon Characters". These videos frame cultural events that have progressive aesthetics in such a way as to make reactionary audiences feel that their social and even biological existence is under greater and greater threat. As explained previously, it also does not matter how much of an impact those cultural events would have. While "MIA: Masculinity in America" does try to fearmonger over efforts to genuinely increase gender equality, it is just as effective to connect those anxieties to things that don't really matter, like a rumoured Disney reboot or meaningless corporate gesture. The reason for this flattening of stakes is connected to the function of the prophet, the next sub-conclusion.

#### 2.4.2 Prophets As Cathartic Faith Reinforcers

The fundamental service that these reactionary prophets provide their audiences is to present themselves as channels for narratives that the prophet and audience believe to be objective and incontrovertible facts, chiefly perceptible through one's unconscious reactions to different stimuli. This is like how one of a religious preacher's functions is to reinforce the faith/attachment of their congregation to their religion through sermons. While many reactionary prophets do center religion in their rhetoric, the analyzed video content demonstrates that faith-based narratives can still work from a secular point of reference while maintaining analogous 'rhythms' of affective interaction between audience and presenter. A good example of one of these secular faith-based narratives is the gender binary.

The ‘faith’ in the existence of the gender binary is confirmed by the uncomfortable feelings they experience when it is contradicted. That reaction is framed as superior to knowledge derived from intellectual pursuits, which are vulnerable to subjective bias, manipulation by corrupt interests, and require specialized knowledge that is not easily accessible to laypeople. This stance that intellectual research is inherently suspect is augmented by the ‘hostile media phenomenon’ (Arcos, Gertrudix, Arribas, & Cardarilli, 2022). This refers to the tendency for political partisans to view media coverage of controversial events or issues as being hostile to their held positions regardless of fact-checking or adherence to journalistic neutrality. On the other hand, because reactionary ideology is built upon a belief in universally perceptible and instinctively known moral binaries, ‘gut’ reactions are framed as dependable, if not wholly precise, indicators of truth. These factors are a significant reason why citing scientific literature debunking concepts like conspiracy theories or the ironclad rule of the gender binary is often ineffective (Zolo, et al., 2017). Instinct is not seen as subject to manipulation, after all. The power of these narratives comes from how tied they are to deeply internalized frameworks of belief that function as subconscious pillars of a person’s identity. Stimuli perceived as a threat to a deeply held belief are likewise perceived as a threat to the observer’s identity and reacted to similarly to a physical threat. These kinds of reaction to media combined with the hostile media effect present a potent audience source for the ‘alternative’ narratives and media platforms presented by reactionary prophets, such as Prager U.

By validating the faith behind these narratives, a prophet may reframe these negative reactions from unconscious responses to a perceived threat into a rational and even moral response to an actual present threat. This not only validates the accuracy of an affective reaction but also preserves the subject’s sense of moral integrity and rationality. To continue the gender binary example, Tucker Carlson not only confirms the gender binary in “What Is a Woman” (2022) but adds a moral and rational dimension to one’s discomfort with subversions of that binary by explaining how resisting that binary will lead to societal collapse and violence against women. This reframing moves the experience from a simple confirmation of the audience’s worldview and into one of *catharsis*.

By catharsis, I mean the expulsion of negative emotions through acting them out, leaving the subject feeling happier than before. A universal example would be how one often feels at

least better after weeping. Because of affective contagion, it is possible to experience catharsis vicariously through viewing the performance of someone else one affectively aligns with, a principle that underpins the attraction of viewing horror media, in particular. Of the analyzed content, Carlson was the most directly cathartic, particularly in the video where he angrily argued with Indiana Gov. Hutcherson over his veto of anti-trans legislation (2021). However, all these videos showed at least an attempt to trigger cathartic experiences related to the reinforcement of reactionary faith-narratives. For example, the Hambly video “Entitled College Brats Get BRUTAL Reality Check When They Realize They WASTED Their Lives!” (2024) is an abject failure from the perspective of delivering what the title promises, since Hambly reacts positively to the video, the presenter of which seems quite happy with her life. Yet it succeeds as a *cathartic* experience because Hambly connects it with a performance of contempt for post-secondary academia, particularly the humanities. Thus, the audience is still given that feeling of refreshment after seeing the video and being validated in their beliefs and feelings.

Broadly speaking, the analyzed reactionary prophets displayed a simple three step pattern to produce a cathartic reaction in the audience.

1. Display focus of negative emotion
  - a. (a rumoured female led Disney reboot, an errant governor, APA guidelines that are framed as hostile to men, etc.)
    - i. → Negative affect is triggered
2. Demonstrate how that focus is connected to greater scope societal hostility towards audience identity.
  - a. (the female led Disney reboot demonstrates trend of artistic degeneracy, the governor is an example of how medical radicals are controlling politics, mainstream society wants men to be passive, docile, and miserable by medicalizing innate male desires)
    - i. → Negative affect is aligned with broader reactionary narratives
3. Demonstrate how the focus demonstrates how reactionary narrative is correct and faith in narrative must be preserved for the greater good. Audience is assured they are correct.

- a. (Media focused on diversity will inevitably be forgotten while true art will be remembered, allowing gender treatments for teenagers will have massive negative long-term consequences, societies that try and keep men from demonstrating strength, leadership, and individual competitiveness will collapse)
  - i. → Negative affect is purged alongside audience validation.

Keep in mind that this cycle process can happen multiple times in a single video, as is demonstrated in the Prager U videos “MIA: Masculinity in America” (2023) and “Is America First Racist?” (2024). For example, each time Aldo explains why a UCLA college student is wrong about ‘America First’ (Prager U, 2024) could be considered a catharsis event. What is important is that the catharsis cycle being accompanied by audience identity validation aligns the audience further with the prophet and the narratives that they support than if it was a mere recitation of reactionary arguments. The catharsis makes it exciting!

Thus, even if Carlson’s argument about gender in “What is a Woman?” (2022) is factually incorrect and easily disproven, the internalization of Carlson’s argument remains more immediately attractive to his audience than internalizing the concept of gender as a social construct. The latter is mundane, confusing, norms-defying and uncomfortably contradicts several connected deeply internalized beliefs in the reactionary audiences’ discursive space. Equally importantly, it presents a far less idealized version of oneself than Carlson’s narrative, wherein the subject’s discomfort is not only accurate but proof of moral clarity. It is a positive experience to have one’s worldview not only validated but escalated into being on the right side of history.

This is especially true regarding affective economies connected to the hegemonic masculine self-image, which is subject to constant external evaluation and precarity (Vandello et al, 2008; Connell, 2005). Reactionary prophets have thus reacted to wider acceptance of ways of being that do not integrate with hegemonic masculine dominance and acknowledgement of the contradictions within hegemonic masculine ideals by introducing narratives that connect white masculine performance to an experience of victimhood (Kelly, 2020) similarly to how the bullying experience is fundamental to the geek masculine identity. These narratives are best summarized as ‘look what they took from us.’ This is used to frame any stimuli that does not

align with hegemonic masculine dominance as an assault upon the audience. It is Hambly explaining how a reboot changing the main character's gender is a sign of cultural decline, Prager U describing people calling America First racist as being motivated by a mean-spirited hatred for American values, and Tucker Carlson saying that the Brown M&M's heels are being changed to sneakers by villainous progressives who want to remove all pleasure from the world. Under this mindset, any progressive cultural change is a stimulus for negative affective reactions, and that negative reaction is narrativized into proof of manhood itself! If you feel upset at a BLM protest, an LGBTQ flag, the sound of people speaking a foreign language on public transit, or the sight of a female main character in media that was previously headlined by a male one, then it is because *you are a real man, and 'they' are trying to hurt you.*

As the cruelties of capitalism have become increasingly widespread, even men in privileged demographics have become less able to perform economic modes of masculinity. 'Look what they took from us' rhetoric is deployed to transfer anxieties stemming from economic conditions into socio-cultural aesthetic changes, and in so doing create affective networks within the audience that firmly reject signifiers related to progressive social change, particularly with regards to social changes that in some way reject or criticize capitalism. This is clearly of benefit for the wealthy, who can bankroll prophets such as those platformed by PragerU, Tucker Carlson, and other influencers to deliver rhetoric that increase affective attachment to the capitalist status quo and its authoritarian foundation as sources of ideological and masculine validation.

As Ahmed and Berlant (2014; 2011) both describe, feelings *move* through associations, networks, economies, etc., to bring affective reactions to the surface of perception. For them to remain relevant, they must be kept present in the subject's mind. I have explained how prophets assist in the formation of these affective networks, but we must also examine how these circuits are kept active, and how it can impact radicalization. This can be done by looking at this situation through the lens of cruel optimism, described in the key concepts section of the introduction. The reactionary narratives examined in this study, particularly 'look what they took from us,' are well-positioned to continuously energize the optimistic attachments connected to the hegemonic 'good life' in a way that places adherence to authoritarian hegemonic norms, particularly of gender, as a fundamental necessity both for the enjoyment of that good life and

the preservation of privileged identity. This works both on an individual and societal basis. Because negative affects are more easily surfaced on command than positive ones, it is easier to ‘re-energize’ that attachment to hegemony with stimuli that are contextualized as threats to both individual and collective flourishing.

#### 2.4.3 Prophets And Radicalizing Genres

Much like a drug high, the same emotional/cathartic ‘hit’ cannot have the same impact if used repeatedly over an extended period. A threat that never strikes eventually leads to a boy who cried wolf situation as the feeling triggered by that stimulus becomes stale. New economies of attachment must constantly be formed to keep those reactions novel. Both prophet and audience are mutually incentivized to spread and internalize new connections to existing reactionary affective networks to gain that fresh high.

This incentivizes the use of conspiracy narratives by prophets, since conspiracy theories are by nature easily able to integrate new information, even contradictions, into their narratives (Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012), especially in the case of ‘big-tent conspiracy theories’ like Q-Anon (Conner, 2023). This style can be observed in reactionary rhetoric through references to vague oppressors or monolithic institutions as the cause of all reactionary social ills, ie. Tucker Carlson connecting trans acceptance with an overarching plot to destroy all free thought that involves big tech corporations like (then) Twitter, the US Military, and the #MeToo movement (2022).

The audiences’ need for constant ‘fresh’ stimuli to react to and the accompanying incentive for prophets to constantly introduce new stimuli into existing reactionary affective networks produces what Kelly refers to as a ‘genre’ (2020) that leaves subjects open to the internalization of increasingly extreme narratives and Truths. I use the term genre here because as explained before, these narratives are inconsistent with each other. Yet a prophet can order and interpret contradictory stories in such a way as to seem coherent because they *feel* the same and speak to broader, underlying beliefs (Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012; Linden, 2015; Van Prooijen, et al., 2023). Consider how right-wing media reacted to the January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, assault on the Capitol building. Initially, the reactionary narrative was that it was a false flag conducted by Antifa protestors in disguise to make Trump and his supporters look bad (Barr, Jan 7, 2021).

Later, media figures like Tucker Carlson spread the conspiracy theory that provocateurs, likely the FBI, within the protester group intentionally provoked them into attacking the Capitol (Palma, June 16, 2021). Finally, Carlson began claiming that the attack was in fact never an attack and was actually a nonviolent protest that lawfully gained access to the Capitol and is being maliciously smeared to discredit Trump and anyone trying to question Biden's suspicious electoral victory (Bennett, Khan, & Couzens, Mar 7, 2023). On an explicit textual level, this narrative is contradictory, yet it can pass without comment because all three carry the same subtext. That being that Trump and his supporters are under assault by shadowy omnipresent actors (Antifa as provocateurs or as false-flag actors, mainstream media, and the state) for trying to protest that their 'rights' (in this case the right for Trump to win) were being taken away. At the same time, reactionary media and prophets frame protests and other acts of agency taken by marginalized groups as not only threatening to the audience but also tolerated if not encouraged by mainstream, fallen society. The message in all of these is that only those who are considered non-privileged may make their voices heard. No matter what words are used to explain it, no matter if those words are coherent or even remotely line up with reality, the genre remains the same.

This adherence to affective genre instead of the actual specific content expressed in reactionary media encourages audiences to go down rabbit holes to look for a further affective fix, and as specific narratives become too familiar to produce an affective reaction, that same audience can use the algorithmic processes found on social platforms (Lewis, 2018) to move onto more extreme claims and prophets that will then produce novel and more intense affective reactions without straying from that genre. Nick Fuentes, for example, is open about his desire for a white-dominated theocracy yet gives much the same affective signifiers and narratives when speaking about masculinity and gender roles that Prager U does (Fuentes, 2022; Prager U, 2023). Similarly, we have discussed the connection between the claims in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and the conspiracist view of the world formed by reactionary narratives. Simply replace 'Global Elites' or 'Globalists' with 'Jews' and the narratives about how cultural institutions corrupt minds and maintain tyranny are unchanged.

This is not to say that everyone who listens to Tucker Carlson is inevitably going to become openly White supremacist. However, one must keep in mind that the affective

environment made by reactionary media and prophets provide make it significantly more likely. Consider that the wounded masculinity model proposed by Kelly (2020), which I see evidence of throughout reactionary media, is built around the male body and identity being under attack. When combined with the paranoia cultivated by reactionary media, enough exposure could lead to the formation of affective networks that connect every signifier of mainstream life and society with a sense of hostile threat. If taken at a macro scale, this would at best, lead to an immense increase in alienation from existing society, leaving subjects open to charismatic and authoritarian leaders (Papaioannou, Pantazi, & van Prooijen, 2023;). At worst, there is a very real risk here that a sufficiently charismatic leader or powerful cause could cause a spike in the already rising rates of stochastic right-wing terrorism. In either case, vulnerable populations would face the greatest threat, rather than the highly secure and resourceful wealthy elites these prophets and narratives claim to oppose.

#### 2.4.4 Implications For Reactionary Content Platforming

An unsurprising finding from this study was that while signifiers of hegemonic masculinity were constantly deployed, none of the analyzed content featured *explicit* calls for violence. This is clearly done to make the delivery of ‘gateway’ reactionary rhetoric more acceptable by mainstream platforms compared to reactionary rhetoric that is accompanied with calls to enact physical violence, while still activating existing affective associations with hegemonic masculinity in the audience. Instead of violent anger, the influencers emphasized affects that reinforce feelings of contempt, dismissal, and dehumanization towards marginalized identities, progressive causes, and deviation from gender norms. Conversely, content emphasized affects of despair, outrage, and fear towards topics that involved White male grievance, particularly with regards to resistance or subversion of hegemonic privilege.

By not explicitly calling for acts of violence while still knowingly connecting targeted groups with affective impulses that precipitate violent action, like anger-rage hateful affective economies can spread unabated. For example, Hambly’s video on the insincerity of corporate support for LGBTQ people (Hambly, 2022) might appear to be calling for media corporations to resist attempts to censor LGBTQ content. However, the affective and symbolic context his audience possesses allow them to perceive the ‘real’ dehumanizing anti-LGBTQ rhetoric hidden

underneath when decoding the video (Hall, 2022). Unless social media platforms have their hands forced by content that is too explicit to remain advertiser friendly, they have little incentive to moderate content that only implicitly spreads hatred against marginalized people. This is a significant contributing factor to the continuing failure of online social platforms to effectively enforce their rules against hate speech (Migdon, 2022; GLAAD, 2022).

Mainstream acknowledgement of the brutality implicit in this content offers two main obstacles. First it would unmask the cruelties present and allowed within mainstream society. For as much as so many of these influencers claim to be separate from mainstream media and society, they are not. They are at least tolerated on massive social media platforms and sometimes directly funded by extremely influential sources. If Tucker Carlson, Prager U, or Jordan Peterson are too much, then what of the other incredibly entrenched inequities that we tolerate within society? Sounds like a lot of work for an already weary populace. Furthermore, power is not in the practice of threatening its very foundations.

Yet the second main obstacle is more insidious, which is that to admit to the influence of the implicit is to contradict an important hegemonic assumption. We are taught that ‘normal’ people make decisions based on conscious rational choice, that the natural human condition is to exist as an individual that can only be influenced by what they choose to be influenced by, that we are masters of our own personhood. This is especially the case with hegemonic masculine performance, as it justifies masculine dominance over the feminine. Those who are intersectionally privileged by the dominance of hegemonic gender performance (Connell, 2005; Junn, 2017; Hamilton, 2019) as well as those whose identities are deeply invested in that performance, even if antagonistically as in geek masculinity (Blodgett & Salter, 2018; Kendall, 1999), would be both pragmatically and affectively disincentivized from accepting that understanding. It is to their short-term benefit to instead fight it with all their power and in doing so prove the superiority of the hegemonic ideology and their own legitimacy within it.

#### 2.4.5 Affect, Reactionary Masculinity, And Violence On YouTube

But for all that these actions and beliefs may express a political belief or opinion, it remains deeply ensconced within the same systems, be they economic or ideological, that produce the same anxieties that harm us, a classic example of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011).

Buying a product from a brand, woke or not, will not induce structural change, nor will ranting on social media platforms that are operated by massive tech corporations. All that this does is encourage political aestheticization, where politics are seen as a method of self-expression, which is directly opposed to the often-unexciting processes of political compromise and negotiation necessary for democracy to function. When politics are about the externalization of one's feelings, wherein the opposition is affectively synonymous with one's own fears, anxieties, and hatreds, how can there be democracy? Can one really accept a loss against a group that your body reacts to as an existential threat.

The answer is no. This is reinforced by a constant stream of rhetoric that frames incidences of insufficient submission to hegemonic masculinity as a societal castration threat. This creates an affective cycle where opposition to the agency of marginalized identities becomes not only a defence of masculinity in abstract but can be experienced as a performance of masculinity itself, in which case that opposition becomes a chance to feel validated in one of the most fundamental identities society impresses upon us. It also bears repeating that this does not apply only to cis men. The hegemonic feminine identity is defined by submission to *hegemonic* masculine norms and is thus also incentivized to oppose resistance to hegemonic masculine domination to preserve both its coherence and relative privilege as the 'feminine ideal' (Hamilton, 2019; Junn, 2017; Love, 2020).

This opportunity is particularly attractive in contexts where chances to perform masculinity are limited, such as regions with low economic opportunity, public resources, or social alienation. Thus, those who are most harmed by hegemonic masculinity are incentivized to become its most ardent defenders, because they have the most to prove. We see this with geek masculinity and their gatekeeping of nerd culture as a boy's club, young teens who see little chance to make a future for themselves becoming devotees of hustle culture, and those who are socially awkward becoming dedicated to manosphere pick-up artist strategies and incel ideology. This reactionary masculinity becomes their only avenue of feeling like they are doing what they are supposed to do, while ironically alienating them from healthier ways to manage their underlying anxieties.

So whither violence in all of this? While it is valid to jump right to concerns about this content encouraging stochastic physical violence against marginalized groups, my analysis of the

videos has pushed me to highlight how this content influences people to become more passively tolerant or actively encouraging of violence against marginalized identities, particularly via the State. This extends from physical violence to mental, emotional, and economic assaults. This is because of the black and white thinking encouraged by the authoritarian worldviews intrinsic to reactionary rhetoric. Violence and neglect committed against the marginalized become affectively attractive rather than repulsive because this right-wing content reduces them to abstracts symbols of weakness, corruption, emasculation, and every other internalized anxiety about masculine performance. If confronted about the material impacts this has on people, such as trans suicide rates, then they may respond with either denial, proof that such impacts are due to personal weakness, or that they should avail themselves of less ‘disruptive’ treatment, or sometimes all three (Shapiro, 2017). Where affective contagion would be triggered by directly viewing harm, this reduction of a person to a symbolic representation of anxiety/disgust allows that empathy to be neutralized. It can instead be viewed as the expulsion of toxic material that has been ‘ingested’ by society or the self.

In other words, the flood of right-wing content on YouTube and other social media platforms creates an affective atmosphere where the aesthetics and rhetoric of authoritarianism are couched in signifiers of hegemonic masculine norms which society has rendered so familiar as to seem ignorable, as discussed in Sub-conclusion B. Thus, they can slip through cultural comment and become inextricably linked to the internal maintenance of masculine standards, an arbitrary and precarious one at the best of times. Because part of masculine norms is the willingness and ability to perform violence in defence of ‘the weak,’ authoritarian arguments about the need to keep both society and men ‘strong’ through the purification of the self and society can partake of emotional connections with that norm. It creates a relationship of optimism, in the Berlantian sense, that by placing one’s agency in the hands of a strong leader figure, be it a guru or those that represent the desires of a prophet, one can *know* that they are secure in their internal masculinity and that society will no longer reflect anxieties about masculinity being thwarted through ‘effeminacy’ via spectacles of hegemonic masculine dominance. Thus, the ‘natural’ empathy that one would feel for harms visited upon the weak (which I note, somewhat pettily, is supposed to be a part of masculine norms), can be inverted into triggering a sense of fleeting self-validation at disgusting stimuli being ‘expelled.’ Yet this is easily displaced by an encounter with something that recalls the possibility of emasculation

(Vandello, et al., 2008), particularly as affective apophenic networks broaden. This keeps the sufficiently invested subject ever more eager to prove their adherence to masculinity, or submission thereof in the case of hegemonic feminine identities, both to society and to themselves. Because people can easily become numb to the same sensation, there is a desire to escalate, thus possibly leading from 'mere' apathy towards violence against the non-hegemonic subject to approval and even participation in that violence themselves. Yet prophets and gurus, like the ones examined in this study and social media platforms like YouTube, hold themselves as utterly blameless in the spread of reactionary affective apophenia that has encouraged the trend of growing authoritarianism throughout the west, and which they continue to profit from and proliferate (Speakman & Funk, 2020; Walker & Matsa, 2021; Young, 2021; Lewis, 2018). We move on now to the next major section of this dissertation, where I will examine the second category of reactionary influencer: the guru.

### 3.0 Part Three - Gurus Of The Manosphere



#### How to Articulate Your Thoughts & Influence EVERYONE - Full Guide (6 secrets)

Figure 20 Representative Thumbnail for Manosphere Content

#### 3.1 Why Am I Doing This to Myself?

I chose videos based on how they presented distinct/interesting situations that influenced how the guru A) performed their alignment with fundamentalist masculinity/manosphere ideology and B) presented themselves as a model for learning masculine wisdom. For example, I chose to cover an ad for Jordan Peterson’s miniseries, “Dragons, Monsters, and Men” (2022) because the strategies used to build sensations of excitement in such a short ad would differ from the longer-form content Peterson is known for.

While any discussion of affect network-building must discuss the reactionary elements of the influencers’ rhetoric, I am not interested in going line by line and ‘debunking’ their content outside of moments where it is directly relevant to creating affective connections, ie., content being used to form relationships of cruel optimism, or where it is enjoyable for me to do so. One must find what pleasures one can when engaging in such a grim area of research. Instead, I seek to analyze what feelings this content is trying to evoke, to what end and how that rhetoric creates cruelly optimistic relationships with their audience. The reason I am choosing to focus on this rather than straightforward debunking is twofold: first, it is not difficult to find credible information that lays bare the myths that the manosphere and related right-wing propaganda movements are based upon. If a reader would like a straightforward and thorough debunking of manosphere ideology, I heartily recommend the excellent “I Debunked the Entire Manosphere”

YouTube video by münecat (2022). The second reason is that I am interested in why people stay affectively attached to manosphere ideology despite its flimsy foundations. To do so will require a focus upon what *works* to build those attachments and *how* they work and are preserved, rather than the relatively simple task of taking apart what does *not* work.

This section will primarily look at the manosphere in the context of Berlant's concept of cruel optimism. Manosphere gurus exploit cruelly optimistic relationships between manhood and 'the good life' in several ways. First, their rhetoric is powered by the frustration and confusion of the audience when faced with the bait and switch nature of reaching 'the good life.' One of the services these influencers provide to their audiences is explaining this gulf between expected vs actual reality in a manner that preserves the ontological security of the audience. This comes in the form of reactionary discourse on how the expected masculine 'good life' is the 'natural' state of society and it was only recently taken by the forces of feminism and modernity (called 'woke,' 'liberal,' 'SJWs,' etc.). The guru diverges from prophet influencers when they go a step further and offer a way for the audience to regain their masculine power and thus the good life they were promised. This has a clear short-term affective benefit for the audience, as this contextualization does not require the painful rejection of the internalized relationship of cruel optimism. The masculine good life is still 'out there,' so to speak, it's just been stolen and hidden.

The benefit to the guru is that this allows the frustration and confusion to be redirected into affective investment towards *him* as the solution to those unpleasant sensations. In a way, they hijack the economic movement of optimistic affect between the subject and the object of desire when that movement is in some way thwarted.

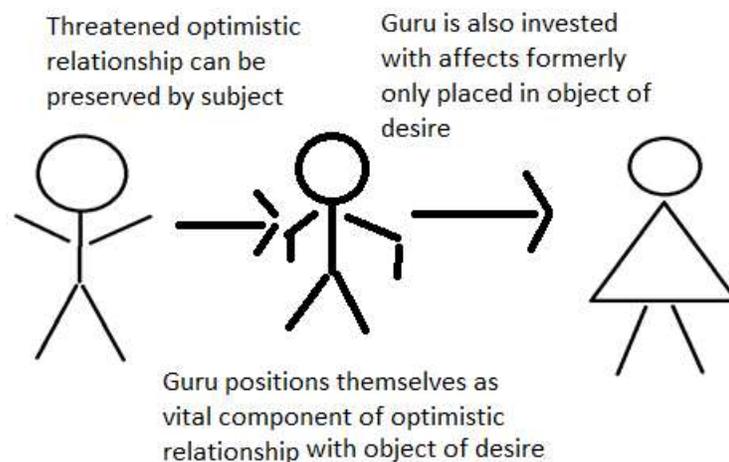


Figure 21 Guru-Follower Relationship

‘You were romantically rejected, or you feel unattractive, or that your potential has somehow been thwarted. Life just feels unfair to you because you can’t find a date or be successful. But you don’t have to give up on your dreams so long as you follow me.’ goes the siren song of the manosphere guru. Therein also lies the cruelest trick of the Manosphere relationship guru, because a non-cruelly optimistic relationship is *not* economically ideal for the guru. An optimistic relationship can change, it can be achieved, it can even be dropped in favour of a new one because, as previously explained, a non-cruelly optimistic relationship does not provide an obstacle to the flourishing the subject seeks. But as the manosphere is built on a foundation of grievance and inability to flourish, *a flourishing subject no longer requires the guru*. The guru is thus economically incentivized to preserve cruelly optimistic connections with unachievable objects of desire to preserve the subject’s need for him.

I will explain how this is so by using that hypothetical guru’s promise that their followers need not give up on their dreams. The dream in this case is the pleasant (or at least stimulating) sensation of returning to that ‘scene of fantasy’ of the attainment of the object of desire. As I previously explained, the guru places themselves in the path of the optimistic affective network so that they are now part of that scene of fantasy. If that scene of fantasy is achieved and made real, then the optimistic connection no longer exists. This is not to say that there is no longer a connection between subject and object of desire, merely that it is no longer an *optimistic* one in the Berlant sense, or at least not the same connection. Once again, that is not to say that the guru will not have *any* affective connection in the subject’s mind. The subject did achieve their desire with the guru’s help, after all. But it is not a reliable self-sustaining cycle the way that an optimistic connection is. The dreamer has awoken and moved on!

But a cruelly optimistic dream is painful to wake up from, even when it’s necessary to do so. Being able to stay asleep is pleasant, and the guru allows the subject to do that by giving ineffective advice that preserves the gendered status quo and prevents the subject from having to do the painful work of extricating themselves from their internalized ideology. The important part is maintaining advice that is ineffective enough to keep the follower from being able to move on while still sufficiently in line with hegemonic masculine ideals that rejecting it would require the follower to admit a flaw in their internalized idea of gender. Far easier to stay asleep, enjoy the dream, and if the teachings don’t work, one can always blame feminism. In fact, this

situation is advantageous for the guru because they can use it to drive a wedge between the follower and any source of dissenting information or social ties that could draw the followers' devotion away from them.

A final consideration regarding the use of cruel optimistic relationships and masculine fundamentalist discourse is that the affective connections between subject and hegemonic masculinity comes pre-constructed by the time a prospective follower can interact with a manosphere guru's content. After all, it is perfectly acceptable to praise hegemonic masculine traits. Admittedly part of this is because hegemonic masculine traits are not universally negative. There is nothing inherently wrong with being physically strong, for example. But it does create a relationship of cruel optimism that, much like the fantasy of 'the good life,' has had a lifetime of socio-cultural internalization in the mind of the average male subject. It is hard to untangle positive so-called 'masculine traits' that could be encouraged from negative ones. This makes that relationship all the more difficult to disengage from, and when one has a masculine fundamentalist guru insisting that negative masculine traits are (A) just as important as all the other traits of masculinity that one must achieve to gain validity and (B) under attack from a worldwide conspiracy aiming to emasculate men into passive misery, that situation can become socially alienating to the follower or even lead them to acts that harm themselves or others.

While prophets also engage with relationships of cruel optimism, I have found those relationships to be more distant and abstract than the very direct relationships built with gurus. PragerU uses their prophets to preserve the cruelly optimistic relationship to the capitalist 'good life' outcome such as the "Hustle Culture" series about entrepreneurs (PragerU, 2024). On the other hand, Jordan Peterson positions *himself* as a key to individual flourishing through masculine conformity, which creates an affective investment that feels different than one attached to a purely abstract concept. I will begin my analysis of guru content with Peterson, as he is a contextually fascinating right-wing manosphere figure due to his ability to serve the role of both prophet and guru at different times.

### 3.2 Jordan Peterson: *The Guru Academic*

Jordan Peterson is an interesting subject for this paper because he is both guru and prophet, rails against the ivory tower intellectuals of academia yet uses his history as an academic and psychiatrist for legitimacy within the reactionary media ecosystem and ‘mainstream’ discourse. Even his rise to prominence featured him simultaneously being a prophet, when he famously criticized Bill C-16 during a Senate committee hearing in 2017 (Chiose) and a guru, with the release of his bestselling self-help guide *12 Rules for Life* in 2018.



Figure 22 Jordan Peterson

Similarly, his personal mythology (by which I mean the background that lends him legitimacy as an authority figure) is attached to his previous occupations as university professor (prophet) and clinical psychologist (guru). While he resists attempts to politically categorize him (Callaghan), his explicit opposition to any alteration of the hegemonic status quo and his worldview broadly based upon an odd mix of biological essentialism and sovereign individuality make him the very definition of a reactionary.

However, his resistance to *accepting* a specific ideological position makes it easier to preserve a space in mainstream discourse as a self-help figure while keeping himself ‘above’ the political fray when it suits him. Conservatives get to put a New York Times blurb on the cover of their books, but far-right reactionaries generally do not. At least not yet. That acceptability is also a clear example of how deeply patriarchal domination is embedded in mainstream Western culture, regardless of what claims reactionaries may make about being ‘rebels.’

Random House and the New York Times should rethink their engagement with Jordan Peterson as a figure of intellectual legitimacy, because their engagement with him allows him to use the social capital given to them as information providers by mainstream audiences to create affective networks encompassing himself, his far right-wing ideology, and by extension all other right-wing figures that he engages with as colleagues and allies.

Our first video featuring Peterson, “The Current Crisis of Masculinity” (Daily Wire, 2022) provides a useful introduction to how his pre-existing social capital as academic and

therapist allows him to use pseudo-intellectual jargon to make his worldview more credible, reinforcing attachments between him and the fulfillment of masculine fulfillment in his followers.

### 3.2.1 Video - “The Current Crisis of Masculinity” (Daily Wire, 2022)



Figure 23 Thumbnail for “The Current Crisis of Masculinity”

From the beginning, Peterson presents himself as a rebellious truth-teller under assault from the forces of progressivism, as mysterious as they are misandrist. Shapiro asks him “Why do you think there is such a crisis in masculinity in the first place and why are there so many people out there who are angry at you for even talking to men?” (Peterson, 0:09). This question does two things for Peterson in his capacity as a guru-figure. It presents the statement that there *is* a crisis of masculinity as a matter of course, while still being vague enough that any male can empathize with that sense of anxiety.

This is not to say that there aren’t a series of issues that effect men that generally remain under-studied, some examples include: self-dissatisfaction with body image due to internalization of unattainable ideals (Maher, Lane, and Mulgrew, 2021), the precarious nature of work in late capitalism making it more difficult to adhere to masculine norms in a society where socioeconomic wealth is associated with masculinity while poverty is associated with femininity (Moreno-Bella, Willis, & Moya, 2019), and male self-image being more precarious when placed under perceived ‘gender threat’ compared to women (Steiner, Vescio, & Adams, 2022). However, the ‘crisis of masculinity’ as described by Peterson, Shapiro, and other compatriots cannot acknowledge these problems without admitting to contradictions within both masculine norms and capitalism.

The second thing that question does is emphasize that Peterson is being attacked (Kelly, 2020) for attempting to ‘talk to men.’ It doesn’t matter *who* is angry at Peterson for talking to men, because A) it centres the premise that Peterson is under threat for an extremely unjust reason, trying to help men by speaking to them, and B) It makes the audience into participants in the battle against those evil forces by becoming privy to knowledge that *they* don’t want them to know. This question also neatly aligns with overall manosphere discourse around feminist social domination (Han and Yin, 2022), making it easily consumable by that audience.

After only nine seconds into the video, we can see that Peterson’s ‘argument’ is already mostly set up by Shapiro to make Peterson an optimistic figure. The pain or fear that every individual male experiences at one point or another about being able to embody masculine norms is projected onto a societal level. Meanwhile, Peterson is defined as being one of the few figures that care about it, and for that he is the subject of mainstream anger and hatred. A perfect guru set-up! Why is he important? Because he’s the one that talks to men and wants them to feel better. Why don’t other people do that, and why do so many disagree with him?

To Peterson, the reason is “the lack of a concept of original sin.” (Peterson, 0:20). He explains that a sense of existential guilt and anxiety is intrinsic to human existence because our fallibility makes it impossible to live in perfect harmony with nature. Thus far, he has set up an entirely reasonable chain of logic in how there is a crisis in masculinity, if one were open to the possibility of it existing. I could see how someone young and anxious could hear this and think ‘oh yes, this is the guy who knows what is going on. He transitions into fundamentalist masculinity by saying that the previously mentioned existential burden has been “weaponized” (1:05). This is done by having that existential burden placed on young men, even children, and blaming it on their attributes of hegemonic masculinity. Peterson is a gender essentialist, and therefore frames critiques of hegemonic masculinity, such as the idea that patriarchy is associated with environmental destruction, as in petro-masculinity (Daggett, 2018), as calls for the destruction of male bodies.

This is because to Peterson (and by association his followers), there is no difference between masculinity as it is performed in western society and the inherent *state* of male existence. Therefore, any criticism of masculine norms beyond the specific manifestation of those traits is the same as saying that men are inherently evil. For example, it would be

acceptable to say that ‘hitting a woman is wrong,’ but not ‘the association of masculinity with violence leads to bad outcomes.’

Peterson’s use of the term ‘weaponized’ means that this existential burden is not an unintended consequence of feminist thought, but the intended result. Peterson extends this into an explicit connection between gender reassignment treatment for minors and the intentional destruction of masculine bodies. He states that the current discourse around masculinity in society tells men that “If you’re the least bit conscientious, because this sort of accusation hurts conscientious young men the most, well then the best thing you can do is, well let’s say castrate yourself.” (Peterson, 2:01), pushing back against laughter from the audience by continuing “And that would be real comical except that it’s also happening.” (2:15) This aligns with reactionary discourse around gender-affirming treatment being ‘castration,’ such as Tucker Carlson referring to puberty blockers as ‘chemical castration’ on Tucker Carlson Tonight in 2022 (Migdon). This is important because it establishes that this crisis isn’t just the usual complaints about men being wimps nowadays, rather that masculinity is so despised that men and boys are voluntarily having the genitals that define them as men removed.

This threat of weaponization also ties neatly into common but more abstract masculine anxieties, such as loss of power, agency, and strength. The loss of the phallus, to put it in Freudian terms. The idea that the “weaponization” is a slow and insidious effort to poison children’s souls with self-hatred is an attractive externalization for Peterson’s audience who are grappling with such anxieties, many of whom likely first approached him in his mainstream capacity as a self-help guru through his self-help books. The belief that insecurity and self-contempt, a common reaction to the inability to achieve hegemonic masculine ideals (Connell, 2005), is an externally imposed trick done to keep you from reaching your natural potential is much more exciting and hopeful than having to accept that inner security and satisfaction is difficult to reach and often at the mercy of factors beyond individual control.

Shapiro’s role in this video is to continually reinforce that Peterson is a rebel underdog. Take the refrain of Peterson “getting hatred from so many” (Peterson, 3:24), references to Peterson being asked “Why you’re even bothering to speak to men.”, and Shapiro saying, “It’s obviously a good thing you’re doing, so why are so many people upset at you?” (3:46), and I think that this is part of how Peterson (and Shapiro by proxy) make use of his mainstream

credibility as a self-help guru. Those using Peterson as a gateway into the right-wing that have encountered him *through* his self-help books, which are sold everywhere, would be attached to a version of Jordan Peterson at his most relatively reasonable. Therefore they will be more likely to have an image of him as a voice of wisdom and authority. Someone going from reading the *12 Rules For Life (2018)*, listed to the right, to hearing that *so many people* are angry at Peterson for *talking to men* is going to assume that anyone who has a problem with Peterson must be a wild-eyed extremist.

Peterson attributes the ‘anger’ against to female resentment for bad experiences with men, growing up with feminist parents, and in either case pushing that resentment onto their children, either as an external object of hate for girls or an internal self-hatred for boys. As Peterson explains it, that opposition to masculinity comes from difficulty disassociating “calm confidence from the expression of power...” (5:28). By power, Peterson means the ability and willingness to coerce others to do what you want, and Peterson thinks that is a bad thing to do. This is an example of Peterson’s habit of using pseudo-intellectual speech to cover what is an extremely basic argument, namely that the ability and willingness to wield power can make you seem charismatic and cool. However, Peterson describes it thusly; “if you are someone who has a proclivity to manifest power, then that looks like the manifestation of both ambition and will...” (5:41). Peterson’s version makes him look smart for saying it, and makes the audience feel smart for hearing it. Note that I am not saying that Peterson is using the language *incorrectly*, rather that he makes the core of what he is saying sound more profound than it really is. This aligns with a core method of manosphere rhetoric, the use of ‘evidence-based misogyny’ (Rothermel, 2023). This is a strategy wherein manosphere figures and followers cite and misinterpret information taken from academic studies, statistics, news articles, and other sources to make them and their arguments appear authoritative to listeners, as well as make the *users* of that strategy feel more confident. It doesn’t matter that the evidence used is faulty, evidence-based misogyny is about presentation rather than facts. To wit, Peterson’s arguments are harder to refute if you attach value to Peterson’s credentials as an academic. Because Peterson *sounds* credible, people trying to counter his rhetoric are at a severe disadvantage unless they too can speak academically, regardless of the actual validity of their arguments. Thus, Peterson’s academic credentials allow him to speak evidence-based misogyny into being. When Peterson says that the is women want competent generosity more than anything, “and the data on that are

very clear (sic).” (5:14) Or that “*we know*, for example, that younger women are more likely to be attracted to men who show Dark Triad traits” (4:54), he doesn’t need to cite a specific study, he can just refer to ‘data’ or say that ‘we know,’ because he is already assumed to be deeply involved in that knowledge-making process. Speculation is the same as evidence when it springs from Peterson’s mouth.

To return to our journey, Peterson says that women’s tendency towards attraction to men with Dark Triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus), puts them at a higher risk of being hurt by men to which they are attracted. Women are thus more likely associate those masculine qualities that they find attractive and effective with abuse and harm because they can’t distinguish between men that have dark triad traits and men that are merely expressing “...the ambition that serves competence” (6:05). In other words, Peterson frames criticism of hegemonic masculinity as an expression of resentment towards masculinity due to previous trauma or merely bad relationships with others who express masculine traits.

Internalizing this narrative that criticism of patriarchy has a fundamentally pathological origin is concerning on several levels. It changes the stakes of any contact with feminist ideology from a way of thinking that is at odds with mainstream patriarchal norms to an ideology that is both result and cause of generational trauma and mental instability. In the mind of someone who has absorbed this idea, there can be no compromise with criticism of masculinity because compromising with it *will hurt children on a subconscious level, it will destroy families, it will sow chaos*. This creates an ideological and affective barrier, making interaction with feminist thought likely to be experienced as a source of danger and anger on the part of those Peterson followers. Secondly, while Peterson may dress this up with some academic terms and calls for empathy for men and women “never getting an encouraging word in their lives” (4:35), the substance of his diagnosis for why people are angry at him is not much different from White supremacist Nick Fuentes’ views on feminism (Fuentes), providing an avenue for the affective associations with Jordan Peterson’s material to flow to Fuentes’ more explicitly hateful rhetoric and ideology.

This pathologizing tactic is extended and made explicit when Peterson describes the left as being a pathological doctrine. He does a very interesting trick here where he takes the focus

on power relationships, mentioning Foucault by name, and not only broadens it to include the entire left, but then turns it from that focus being intended as a criticism or analysis to one of approval of power! To him, the entire ‘doctrine’ of leftism is summarized as a belief that “the fundamental human motivation is the willingness and ability to use compulsion-power. Power! It’s all about power!” (7:09). Furthermore, whenever he hears someone discuss power relationships, he thinks “that is not a sociological observation...that is a confession...on your part” (7:22). He accentuates this with a big frown when he says ‘confession,’ furrowing his brow so deeply that his eyes disappear into shadow. It is a rhetorical trick I’ve seen used in bad faith arguments about racism. In those instances, observation and criticism of racist practices is framed as ‘the real racism’ because to do so will either A) encourage division between different people by pointing out inequalities or B) indicates that the person making those observations is far too interested in ‘differences between races.’

In this case, the focus that leftist theories often have on relationships of different types of power (economic, gender, religious, social, neurotypical, etc.), is characterized according to Peterson’s earlier escribed definition of power, one’s capacity and willingness to coerce others. However, this works from an individualist perspective rather than the systemic perspective that leftist theory tends to focus on. For example, under Peterson’s definition, a corrupt police officer is exerting power when he forces an innocent Black person to give him a bribe under threat of violence. However, where can one locate that coercion when examining the difficulty Black families have securing bank loans for housing compared to White families (Broady, McComes, & Ouazad)? I doubt that most people at those banks consciously desire that Black families not be allowed to access loans or credit. Instead, it occurs because the accepted wisdom is that Black people are unjustly considered to be a credit risk compared to White people. Most such cases of systemic racism are expressed without any of the human actors being consciously aware of it. There really is no place for these systemic interactions in Peterson’s ideology, since he views the individual as the only real ‘level’ of society (Peterson, “Jordan Peterson | Podcast”).

This means that he could not give an accurate description of power in the context of Foucault even if he wanted to. To Peterson, any attempt to focus upon people as groups rather than individuals is “collectivism” (Peterson, “An Evening With Jordan B. Peterson”), a tyrannical violation of sovereign individuality. When he is talking about the left and power here,

his goal must be to reinforce associations of discourse around systemic marginalization with feelings of contempt and/or suspicion/fear/anger.

Returning to Peterson's interview with Shapiro, Peterson gives an example of how he spreads this perspective while 'disproving' the idea of marriage being an example of an unequal power relationship. His first point is that "power is an extraordinary unstable basis to establish a marriage on, plus it doesn't work because women, who are so annoying, are extraordinarily difficult to oppress." (7:43) Now here, he gives a big smile when he says women are annoying, clearly saying it in jest, and he gets a big laugh from his audience when he says they are difficult to oppress, with the camera moving to a woman in the audience laughing. Shapiro is also smiling; everyone enjoys this bit of levity while also feeling empowered. There is even some light applause from the audience. His second point is that attempting to build a marriage on power is preposterous because "...the expression of power in a relationship does not produce intimacy. The best it can produce is a combination of tyranny and slavery, and that does not characterize the institution of marriage per se." (8:11).

Now I bring this section up not only to note the audience reaction, but also how it reinforces the belief that the hegemonic view of marriage must be correct because the institution of marriage is not *meant* to be a combination of tyranny and slavery. If it was, the claim goes, then it would have been discarded as nonfunctional because women are difficult to oppress. It is an affective cats-cradle where the strength and agency of women is tied inextricably to the inherent justness of the dominant institution of marriage. This is because if you have internalized the fact that all relationships are inherently between individuals, then someone arguing that marriage is unequal and oppressive to women is actually trying to say that women are weak and easily oppressed, and thus any pretensions they make to thinking that women are equal to men is rank hypocrisy. It may be a nonsequitur to someone trying to discuss how women were and still are systemically oppressed through unequal social and economic norms, but that doesn't matter. Individual relationships are not normally sustained through explicit and intentional expressions of dominance and control, and trying to broaden those relationships out into groups is a denial of one's essential individuality and uniqueness. Therefore any discussion of systemic power relationships is at best foolish, and at worst a cover for anti-family tyranny.

But let us not forget the guru-ness in all of this, because while Peterson has been discussing things in a prophet sort of way, his perspective is also economically incentivized by his role as a guru. A weakness of the guru figure is that their solutions are on an individualist scale, and thus cannot actually fix things that derive from systemic injustices. Jordan Peterson getting someone to clean their room as part of a routine to make themselves feel better can be effective, but it can only go so far if the reason they are depressed and upset is that they cannot find a job that will help them pay off the student loans for a degree they were promised would give them a stable well-paying career.

His closing remarks shift to being much more optimistic in tone. Peterson discusses what he has concluded “is the antithesis to power, or the will to power lets say, in terms of arbitrary compulsion.” (10:53). As he speaks, he leans forwards and puts out his hand as if reaching for a great revelation, which this surely would be to his audience, since the origin point is Peterson himself. That antithesis, he declares, is “...something like the spirit of free and voluntary play.” (10:58). He claims that the highest manifestation of an optimally-structured set of relationships with everyone around one’s self is the ability to engage in that free play. Note that he does not actually specify what that play would involve, but he smiles and uses terms like ‘lovely,’ that it’s ‘optimistic,’ and that “there is nothing better than playing, fundamentally.” (11:25). The problem, as Peterson sees it, is that “play can be suppressed by almost any other emotion” (11:49).

This part is interesting because Peterson makes a declaration that highlights why he thinks masculinity (specifically strong, strict patriarchy) is one of the most important things to society. He says that it is the father’s place to ‘create structures’ around the garden that is the environment that a child exists in so that the garden can remain well-tended and organized and safe and therefore play can be carried out. Peterson places this in the context of child-rearing, but it is clear that he sees this as a role that should be done by all masculine actors.

The guru-ness behind this all comes out when Peterson says that all of this “spirit of voluntary play” is what he and Shapiro are trying to accomplish with “Dragons, Monsters, and Men”, the series that the larger interview this was taken from is meant to promote. Essentially he is saying that by following the teachings that he will show in the Dailywire+ series, he will be able to get the audience into the highest manifestation of healthy relationships, because that is the

state at which the spirit of voluntary play occurs. That is why I have taken so long writing about this video that seems to be very prophet-driven, because it is one of the few sources that give a real theory behind Peterson's guru nature. All of his advice on relationships and making people their best selves really does seem to flow from the perspectives and values that he discusses here, as does the inevitable relationship of cruel optimism that he forges with his followers. This will be examined more closely in a short clip from the "Dragons, Monsters, and Men" series itself, uploaded on YouTube.

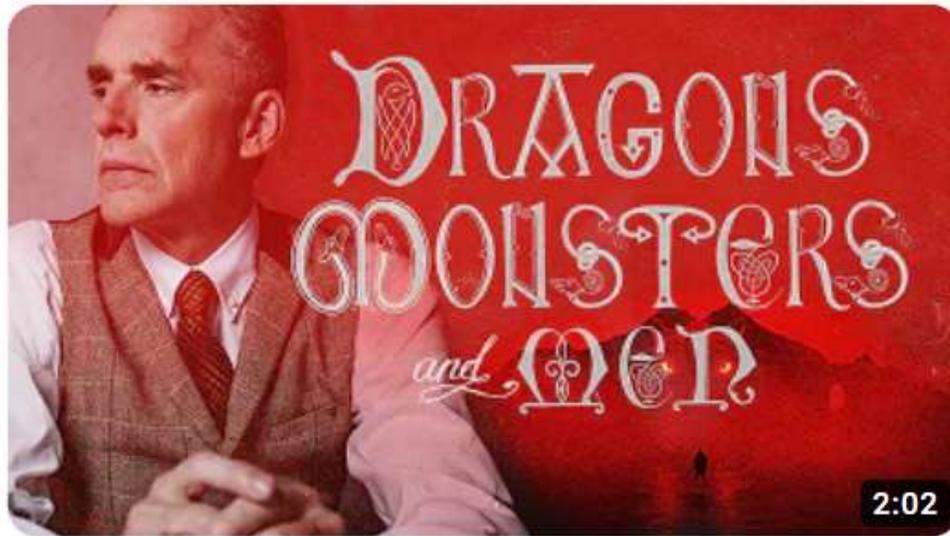
I would like to end the discussion of this video by really dissecting Peterson's framing of what the 'spirit of voluntary play' is, and the ramifications of such a line of thinking. Peterson views the erection of walls as the role of the father, a masculine authority figure. That erection of walls, or to put it another way, structure, is necessary to determine the borders of what is allowed to be within the well-tended paradise, as opposed to the chaos of nature outside. These consistent rigid and secure structures must be very important if Peterson insists that there is *nothing* better than playing, and any negative emotion can suppress the ability to play. Therefore, anything that exists outside of what the father has determined can be allowed within the structure of the garden must by nature be unpleasant and suppressive of play. Furthermore, Peterson states that play is incredibly important to children for a variety of reasons, not least because it teaches them to be competent adults. This could be a reference to *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga, 1949), with the walled garden being analogous to the 'magic circle' concept, play being a force for the creation of order and coterminous with society.

However, this dissertation is focused on what Peterson is communicating to the audience, and there is no real attempt to explore Huizinga's concepts of play for the audience. For example, Peterson's insistence that play can be suppressed by any negative emotion absolutely contradicts Huizinga's idea of the role of play in war. War becomes play through the creation of rules of war, of war being seen as 'outside' of normal life, and war being an opportunity to gain collective and individual 'validity,' but to call it 'free and voluntary' and suppressed by negative emotions is ridiculous on its face. No, I would say that it is not that deep and what Peterson intends for the audience to understand is the popular idea of play as being experimental and relatively consequence-free, whimsical even, ironically enough for one as dour as Peterson.

The function of the metaphor in the context of the entire video ‘text’ is for it to be extended beyond childcare to all of societal interaction, considering that Peterson claims that the spirit of voluntary play is the highest manifestation of optimal relationships while speaking to an adult audience while also describing it as the antithesis to arbitrary compulsion. In that sense, the online audience is meant to get the impression that: A) The left has been previously characterized as defined by arbitrary coercive power, B) That the antidote to coercive power is the spirit of free and voluntary play, C) the spirit of play and fun can only result from optimal relations with everyone around you, and D) the spirit of play can be snuffed out by any negative emotion or experience, for example hunger. This communicates that leftist ideology is inherently unable to create optimal relationships between people and society because they rely on coercive power, which is inherently negative and therefore snuffs out the spirit of play. Internal feelings of hostility towards progressive ideology, causes, and concepts are also a sign of the inherent impurity of leftist thought, as leftist radicals try to subvert the work of masculine power by questioning His structures and trying to erect structures outside of masculine control. Those negative feelings his audience and followers have when seeing a trans person in public, for example? That is because they are a sign of a society without strong secure walls, a society that allows chaotic elements into the walled garden within which play, growth, and optimal relationships can be carried out.

I also want readers to understand something very important. Regardless of how ridiculous I might have made Peterson’s points sound in writing; he is a *genuinely talented speaker*. He is calm, but clearly enthusiastic when he speaks. He sounds excited and confident in his speech, not a trace of uncertainty. With Shapiro nodding along with what he says, the audience applauding or laughing, it is difficult to not get carried along with it. His claims about feminism being inherently pathological or boys being told to castrate themselves may be absurd, but it *feels* credible in the moment. The way in which stagecraft and charisma can render anodyne words enthralling is both what is difficult to get across when one is simply reading a retelling of it and what this dissertation is all about. Keep that thought with you as we transition to the next video.

### 3.2.2 Video - “Jordan Peterson’s ‘Dragon’s, Monsters, and Men’ | Only on Dailywire+” (2022)



*Figure 24 Thumbnail for “Dragons Monsters and Men” (2022)*

Because this study is limited to YouTube, I was not able to find larger clips of this 4-part streaming series, which is not surprising when one considers that it is being positioned as a major offering of the Daily Wire’s premium streaming service, Dailywire+. This commercial will need to convince the audience of the validity of Jordan Peterson’s guru style in a very short amount of time compared to a one hour or more video. This is especially the case because unlike the free content available on YouTube that much of his audience can easily access, this requires a premium streaming service subscription. In other words, it’s easy to say that something is good when it is free, but will this commercial be effective in convincing his followers to take the next step?

The video starts with a Game of Thrones inspired opening, showing a kind of runic-style symbol gradually being drawn while Jordan Peterson’s voice-over says “One of the first things that I tell young men, well and young women as well, but the young men really need to hear this more I think. You should be a monster, an absolute monster...and then you should learn how to control it.” (0:01). This is a clear appeal to ideals of hegemonic masculine performance around the idea of both aggression and stoicism. The ideal man must be both capable of violence and able to control that violence within him, and the vocal emphasis that Peterson puts on MONSTER leaves little doubt that the monstrosity is a vital part of his equation for ideal masculine performance.

When it cuts to actual footage of the show, Peterson makes the importance of the ‘monster’ explicit. He states that “a man who is capable of aggression, but has it under control is a waaaay more useful man than one who cannot do that” (0:13). Now because the commercial cuts to another clip of Peterson speaking, it is left ambiguous as to whether ‘the man who cannot do that’ is intended to refer to someone who is incapable of aggression or a man who is incapable of controlling himself. However, the surrounding context of the clip, with the bass and drumline background music and the red and black coloration of the title card saying JORDAN

PETERSON could imply that aggression rather than control was most important, simply because the music and colours are associated with aggression. This clip makes Peterson seem, for lack of a better term, like a badass. It also fits with the general attitude of the manosphere around male aggression, which is that aggression is an intrinsic part of masculine existence that must be pointed in the right direction.



*Figure 25 Set of “Dragons, Monsters, and Men.” Jordan Peterson performs masculinity through occupying a space with signifiers that communicate hegemonic masculine norms around knowledge.*

The next clip of Jordan Peterson speaking (which is what this entire show actually is, Jordan Peterson speaking from various angles) is him saying “So you’re willing to go get a JOB, but you’re terrified of an interview. It’s like, there’s a dragon for you!” (0:20). For context, Jordan Peterson uses the term “dragon” to refer to a fear that must be overcome so that you can achieve something necessary, going back to at least 2002 (Peterson, 2016). So when the clip follows that quote up with “you want to fight the dragons that guard the gates of the treasure that you wish to attain” (Peterson, 2022, 0:25) what he means is that your fear of job interviews must be fought to gain a paying job. If one looks at this with a purely instrumental perspective, there is no difference between Peterson talking about slaying dragons and someone’s parents saying they need to work on being less afraid of job interviews. Yet the framing makes doing something very mundane suddenly exciting, especially to Peterson’s mostly male audience, as slaying dragons is usually carried out by exemplars of masculinity in stories and myths. It makes getting ready for a

job interview a way to perform masculinity while also improving one's life. To be honest, I would have no quarrel with Peterson if this was most of what he did, even if it sounds rather silly.

Another fascinating feature of the commercial are the affective signifiers placed *around* the pedestrian self-help material that Peterson is expressing. A meaningful-sounding violin and drum score play in the background, and impressive looking title cards state that he will help you “DISCOVER YOUR PURPOSE” (0:52) and “EXPAND YOUR POSSIBILITIES” (1:13). Meanwhile his actual speech is restricted to quotes like “You must face your being with the necessity of transformation” (1:20). This is not altogether different from when a less ‘prestigious’ manosphere guru like FarFromWeak uses exciting footage of anime fight scenes (FarFromWeak, 2023) or an explicitly ‘redpill’ guru influencer like Manhood (2022) uses stock footage of successful looking men sitting in a corporate boardroom set. The intent is to use the affective weight of the signifiers placed around the actual rhetoric spoken by the guru so that the affects attached to those signifiers ‘stick’ to the rhetoric and the guru themselves. This is a common strategy to make the words of the guru seem much more profound than they ordinarily would.

This is also shown in the attempts by the camera crew and editors to make this show more visually exciting than it is. With quick cuts and even simultaneous camera angles used to spice up Peterson's dry speech. The people behind “Dragons, Monsters, and Men” clearly feel that these flourishes are

necessary to maintain audience interest and enthusiasm. Otherwise this is a self-help seminar being done by a guru to whom the audience has hopefully attached enough emotional significance to make the mere sight and sound of him speaking exciting enough to be worth the cost.



Figure 26 Example of visual edits used to increase excitement of commercial content.

What does distinguish the use of affective set-dressing with Jordan Peterson from someone like FarFromWeak is that Peterson's brand and significance is tied to his actual flesh and blood self. Unlike FarFromWeak, Manhood, or other guru-influencers who separate their online and offline personas, Peterson's followers will want to see Jordan Peterson in the flesh. Furthermore, part of the selling point of "Dragons, Monsters, and Men" is to display that the Daily Wire has been able to land Jordan Peterson as an employee. It is therefore important for the commercial to continuously display footage of Jordan Peterson so the audience can feel the authentic presence of the guru and transfer the affective significance that they hold for Peterson to the DailyWire+ subscription service. However, this provides an interesting limitation for how far the video can push affective set-dressing because they can only do so much with Jordan Peterson sitting in a chair and speaking.

There is a notable contrast between Peterson as he appears in the previously discussed Daily Wire interview with Ben Shapiro (2022) and how he appears here. In the interview, Peterson seemed much warmer. He spoke less sharply, he interacted with the audience, he displayed a sense of humour. In this ad, Peterson does not smile, instead he speaks with the tone of a stern paternal figure. It is not a harsh tone, but it is one that gives the impression of being an authority figure as opposed to being *authoritative*. The Peterson shown in this brief ad would not want to talk about the spirit of voluntary play. Yet it works for the impression that Peterson wishes to have in this context. This Peterson is modelling the performance of manhood that he believes is necessary for his audience to emulate. That masculinity is stern, concerned with productivity, self-control, and the use of aggression to achieve specific goals rather than 'play.' In other words, he is trying to forge a parasocial relationship with his audience wherein Peterson becomes a father figure. I would like to examine this framing of Peterson as the stern advice-giving father by returning to his claim that a man 'should be a monster' as detailed in this next video.

### 3.2.3 Video - “You Should be a Monster | Jordan Peterson Motivation” (Word to the Wise, 2022)



Figure 27 Thumbnail for “You Should be a Monster” (2022)

Before I go into the content of this video, we should discuss how the video has been uploaded by what I like to call a ‘symbiotic account.’ Symbiotic accounts like this one, WordToTheWise, upload audio or video clips of a popular influencer, accompanied by stock footage of relevant (whether literal or affective) imagery. As can be seen by the viewer count for this video, this can be an effective way to get a lot of engagement on YouTube with little effort. In exchange, the actual guru gets additional social media engagement, more ways for potential followers to encounter their content, and a means to evade social media moderation or even account bans. It also assists in exposing audience members to content that they would otherwise be unlikely to encounter. For example, someone whose viewing habits indicate opposition to Jordan Peterson’s rhetoric would be unlikely to see his content show up in searches or as recommended videos. However, if that same person were looking for motivational content, or other related subjects, than videos from accounts like WordToTheWise would be more likely to appear than an hour-

“You Should Be A Monster” | Jordan Peterson Motivation

WordToTheWise  
235K subscribers [Subscribe](#)

961,402 views Dec 7, 2022  
 “You don’t become safe by being castrated.”  
 Try Audible’s free 30-day trial and enjoy 2 free audiobooks here: <https://amzn.to/2MRvzXL>  
 Check out Jordan Peterson’s latest book “Beyond Order”: <https://amzn.to/3HEaTRh>

Figure 28 Note the viewer numbers for this episode at the time the screenshot was taken.

long lecture from Jordan Peterson's official account. There are a variety of accounts that do this. Viewing "You Should Be a Monster" (2022) quickly leads to recommendations for content from accounts with names like "The Diary of a CEO", "WAKE UP", "INSPIRED NATION", "Motivation Madness", and "Evolve Your Mind", just to name a few. These accounts work by providing quickly digestible content that create a specific affective stimulus, that of 'motivation.' It is also clear by how widespread these accounts are, and the large viewer counts they get that these are established elements of the online influencer space. They are more remoras to be tolerated rather than leeches to be removed.

With that understanding, let us move on to the content of this video. The rhetorical purpose of this video is to have Peterson argue that a man's ability to confidently exist in the world and exhibit self-respect requires the capacity to inflict harm. In his own words, "...if you are not capable of cruelty, you are absolutely a victim of anyone who is." (5:31). That capacity for cruelty is connected to the ability to engage in masculine-coded pursuits, such as competition, responsibility, discipline, and other attributes of what Peterson calls "masculine competence" (3:34). More specifically, Peterson suggests that for one must have something that *must be suppressed and controlled* to grow into a mature man, otherwise that impetus to become mature will never develop. The "Satanic tendencies" (0:09) must be wrestled with and "transmuted" (0:21). This is consistent with the rhetoric communicated in his interview with Ben Shapiro, particularly regarding the need for a controlled space for voluntary play and his anxiety towards his perceived societal hatred of masculine traits. He refers to people that do not have those 'Satanic tendencies' "naïve" (0:38), "resentful" (0:39), "weak" (6:23), and most tellingly, "castrated" (10:27). The use of the term castration is telling, as Peterson's argument hinges on the idea that masculine power (the phallus) is inseparable from so-called monstrous urges and proper development into manhood requires the discipline and insight to integrate those urges into a socially acceptable avenue.

Peterson's use of his guru-status to explain the concept of the Jungian shadow (the personal traits that one's conscious self dislikes and does not wish to acknowledge), and how the perception and integration of one's shadow is necessary, is not an inherently negative act. Being able to make peace with the negative attributes of yourself can do a lot of good, as it is only by acknowledging the existence of those negative attributes that one can control them. What

concerns me is that Peterson is not telling his audience of young, alienated men that it is important to understand that the capacity for evil/cruelty exists within everyone, and only by acknowledging that fact can you possess the self-awareness to prevent yourself from unintentionally bringing that forth. Instead, he is telling his audience that the capacity for evil and cruelty must be *cultivated* if they are to take their place as a ‘real man.’ We can split hairs about what Peterson ‘really means’ when he says that a man should be a monster, but his rhetoric clearly claims that a successful man must at least be *capable* of violence and cruelty, otherwise he is castrated, weak, and naïve. Peterson’s emphasis on violence and masculinity is also a significant departure from the overall definition of the shadow, which is focused on internal traits that the self rejects. Indeed, an *aversion* to violence could be a component of the shadow for someone raised in a culture that values the capacity for violence.

The interplay between the visual stock footage and the audio clips of Peterson provides opportunities for the integration of Jordan Peterson’s rhetoric within the affective networks of Peterson’s audience through the visual signifiers chosen by the uploader to accompany specific parts of the audio content. Some of this footage is simply a visualization of what is being said, such as footage of rabbits eating grass while Peterson discusses how being harmless like a rabbit isn’t virtuous because they are not capable of doing anything but being eaten. The footage which engages with Peterson’s rhetoric on a more metaphorical level is more interesting because it provides a way for the symbiotic account creator to add their own affective twist to what the guru is saying.

I am certain that the reader will be unsurprised to find that said metaphorical imagery was often used to reinforce hegemonic masculine domination. Imagery was also used to reinforce affective investment in the guru by associating them with positive signifiers. Although this is not at all a comprehensive view of all imagery that is used for these

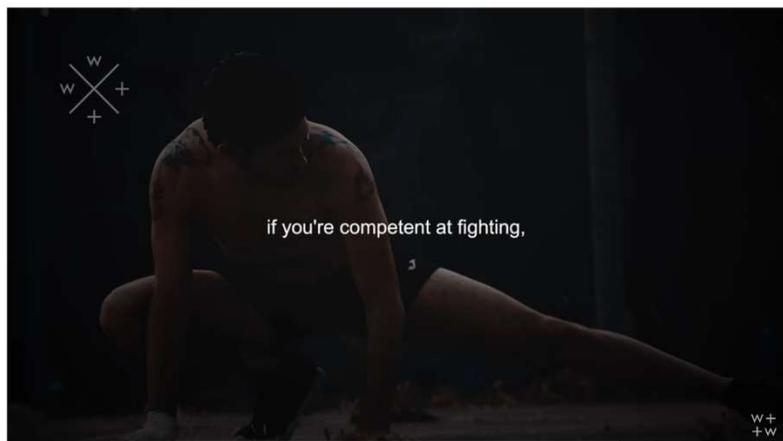


Figure 29 Footage of the athletic masculine body

types of videos, a few patterns stuck out to me that were interesting when paired with Jordan Peterson's self-help advice.

One common pattern was the presentation of athletic male bodies. The parallels with Peterson's rhetoric are quite clear. These bodies represent an idealized form of masculinity, both as a visual representative of physical prowess, and as a positive embodiment of the capacity for violence. Athletes engaged in martial arts bouts and warm-ups frame the connection between violence and 'proper' masculinity in a way that we have been socialized to accept. It allows receptive viewers to feel that because martial arts are cool, then it is natural and *good* to want to be violent like Peterson is encouraging men to be. It also links Jordan Peterson's rhetoric with physical attractiveness and virility. These bodies are not just strong, they are also attractive. This is a deliberate decision because, there are many extremely strong and physically fit male athletes who do not fit the current male beauty standards. Powerlifters, for example, are extremely physically powerful, but tend to have less defined musculature compared to the men shown here. Thus, the impression given is that by listening to Jordan Peterson, you will not only be a more self-confident man, but that self-confidence and awareness will lead to greater physical attractiveness and strength. This connection between masculinity, physical prowess, and combat sports is a consistent pattern in manosphere discourse, which I will engage with more fully in the discussion about Andrew Tate, whose self-mythology integrates his kickboxing career.

Another repeated motif was scenes of natural majesty with people in a state of meditation, relaxation, or casual movement, such as walking. These people face away from the camera towards nature. There are 13 instances of this occurring in this 11-minute video, so clearly this is another deliberate

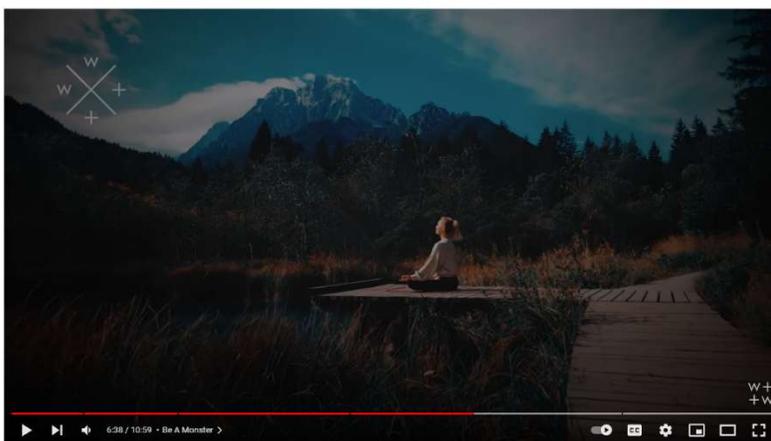


Figure 30 An example of nature + human serenity imagery

choice. This imagery links Jordan Peterson's argument about the development of aggression to cultural associations between the natural world and purity. This implicitly reinforces a key tenet

of masculine fundamentalism, gender essentialism, through an appeal to ‘nature.’ An important part of this affective reinforcement is that discourses around nature as a stand-in for defining different objects and subjects as pure/impure are extremely common in mainstream society (Levinovitz, 2020). One need only go to a grocery store to see a bevy of products proclaiming the inclusion of vaguely defined ‘natural’ ingredients or processes. This imagery is also present in ‘natural’ medicines, supplements, and courses that manosphere gurus often sell. The wildly successful Liver King, whose line of “Ancestral Supplements” promise to return what “...The Modern World Left Out” (Ancestral Supplements) is a prominent example. In this context, both Peterson and the Liver King reflect a common sentiment that modernity has alienated us from our so-called ‘natural’ roots, although one should understand that ‘nature’ in this context is often a subconscious stand-in for purity (Levinovitz, 2020). The difference is that in mainstream contexts, the lost purity stems from alienation from natural, unpolluted environments in the literal sense. The idea of air without smog, water without microplastics, and so on. However, influencers like Peterson, the Liver King, and WordToTheWise can take the *feelings*, such as grief, anger, alienation, and the like, that can be reasonably sparked by discourses and knowledge around destruction to the environment and one’s health and tie the solutions to their reactionary ideology.. I believe that is why the people in these scenes face *away* from the camera, they represent the potential that can be found in turning away from modernity and looking instead to nature/purity, exemplified here by Peterson’s teachings. The viewer must align themselves with Peterson’s teachings before they can become pure enough to join them in natural serenity. The video implicitly arguing that the cultivation of controlled cruelty is a solution to masculine anxiety says uncomfortable things about how the editor of this video views human nature.

This is counterbalanced by what I felt was the most confusing category of imagery, human faces idly staring, often with ambiguous facial expressions. I am not including footage of people performing an action while facing the camera, such as someone speaking to someone else, using a phone, playing a game, etc.

So, where the people in nature imagery represents the positive effect of striving towards the natural/pure state of masculinity described by Peterson, those who face towards the camera signify uncertainty. As shown in the two pictures to the right, this can have positive or negative connotations. The lighting and attire of the man on the train seems more positive while the anxious-looking man in darkness less so. Someone watching this video is likely to feel that those men reflect the start of a journey towards manhood and self-actualization.

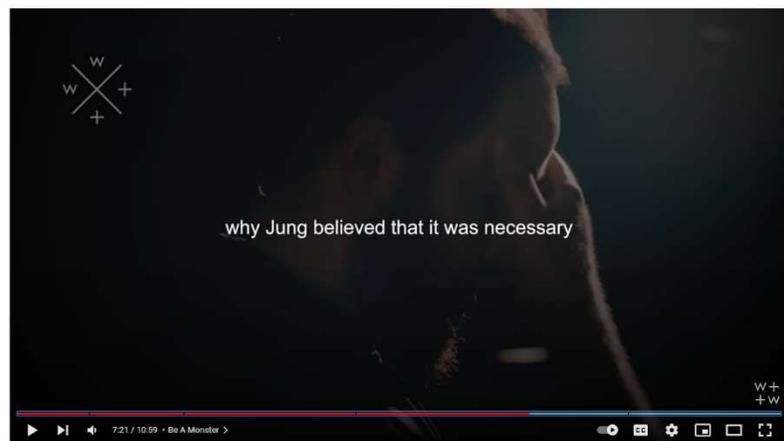


Figure 31 examples of positive and negatively connotated 'staring' imagery

It feels uncertain and uncomfortable, as all changes do, but that sense of discomfort is a necessary sacrifice to embody the masculine norms Peterson feels are so important. The framing of discomfort and uncertainty as not only necessary but an indicator of personal improvement is useful for constructing and reinforcing the guru's credibility in the hearts of their followers. If a follower finds following Peterson's teachings to feel unpleasant or lead to unpleasant circumstances, that's a sign that it's working. Like the legends of alchemy turning lead into gold, negative affective experiences are paradoxically given positive affective associations.

The final imagery is the use of the guru himself, Jordan Peterson. This video shows footage of Jordan Peterson giving a lecture to a class. Unlike the other visuals, this footage merges with the audio. The narration is now made visible. This is another strategy to add credibility to the video's content. Here that credibility is given by the mere presence of the guru speaking. Viewers who already have respect for Peterson can see that the content is straight from the teacher's mouth and therefore must be true.

Speaking of the mouth, the use of Peterson's physical body is consistent with the other two videos discussed in this section. The visual presentation of Peterson conforms to the popular image of the enlightened scholar, lending visual weight to his arguments and teachings just as much as his penchant for using esoteric academic terms and namedropping theorists works on an audio level. After all, as a guru of masculinity, he must be shown being able to in some sense *live* his own teachings, and so many masculine norms are tied to visual signifiers. In this case, he appears less like the stern father figure of the "Dragons, Monsters, and Men" ad, and instead embodies the masculinity of the sage. He is a bringer of knowledge and wisdom, instructing his followers in the proper way to live.

### 3.2.4 Jordan Peterson Conclusion: The *Dark Souls* of Manosphere Gurus

A distinct picture of Peterson's specific guru-style within the context of the manosphere emerges from my analysis of the previous three videos. First, Peterson's credibility as a guru-figure springs from his presentation as a rational academic teacher. While religion is clearly important to him (Peterson, 2021) his use of religious imagery in these videos tended to be pragmatic, used as rhetorical appeals to common cultural understandings of his conservative audience. His treatment of religion, and Christianity as a whole, seems to be focused on its use as a source of social stability, personal optimization, and philosophical framework rather than a belief in the divinity of God (Treweek, 2022; Menkis, 2022). This emphasis on understanding coming from rational, academic study is counter to the style of other manosphere gurus whose credibility tend to flow from claims of superior *intuitive* understanding of masculinity. Of course, Peterson still engages with the same discursive structure these other gurus do. He deflects the suspicion that reactionary subcultures like the manosphere have for academia by presenting himself as a defector from a corrupted institution, much like Dr. Carmichael in "MIA: Masculinity in America" (PragerU, 2023).

This rebel-academic role Peterson occupies is important to how he performs/models masculinity to his audience. He does not appear as the stereotypical manosphere influencer that does a lot of bodybuilding and shouts about women in his car. Peterson's masculine presentation is based around presenting the image of a knowledgeable man. This provides his followers with a greater sense of ontological security in his teachings and makes it harder for his content and

teachings to be dismissed by people who are not familiar with him. This is why so much emphasis is put on Peterson's actual body in the analyzed videos as well as his speech. While Peterson's rhetoric is often ridiculous when he speaks outside of his self-help/Jungian psychologist wheelhouse, such as explaining the essentialist need for human hierarchy via captive lobster neurology, most people do not have sufficient academic grounding to catch where Peterson is mistaken. Even those who do must then engage in a social milieu that associates *his* academic credentials and personality with intelligence and legitimacy. This social capital allows his followers to connect affects of contentment, and confidence to the internalization of his teachings.

Peterson's teachings about taking responsibility, being stoic and dignified in the face of the malevolence of existence, and gender essentialism give an explicit avenue for his followers to perform masculinity. However, the act of engaging with Peterson at all *feels* masculine in a specific way. It will also offer me an opportunity to demonstrate an example of geek masculine performance via guru as opposed to via prophet. Readers will recall Hambly being described as an example of geek masculine prophet and how that performance was done by interpreting events so that they aligned with reactionary grievance narratives around modernity and threats to hegemonic masculine dominance (Kelly, 2020). By making audiences feel that they were under threat yet also correct about the world, he allowed them to feel like men.

Peterson does this differently while still engaging in the same discursive milieu through a clever reversal of 'science communication.' Rather than expressing complex scientific/intellectual ideas in more publicly accessible language, Peterson uses pseudo-intellectual language to make anodyne lessons/claims sound profound to his followers (Johnston, Cody, 2022; Evans, Robert, 2023). This is different from someone being bad at communicating to laypeople, which tends to cause frustration. Instead, Peterson's rhetoric brings forth interest and excitement, despite a common reactionary sentiment being how intellectuals use academic jargon to make real working people feel confused and intimidated. While considering how these different affects could be produced by similar rhetorical styles, it struck me that Jordan Peterson's communication is like the feelings produced by engagement with *Dark Souls* (From Software, 2011) lore.

*Dark Souls* is a dark fantasy action-rpg video game created by From Soft. What is relevant here is that the story is extremely sparse with regards to direct exposition. The player is shown an introductory cutscene that describes the founding myth of the setting status quo, the four rulers of Lordran, and the current plague/curse of undeath that has led to the player avatar waking up in a prison/asylum. The only context you are explicitly told in game through dialogue is essentially that you are the 'Chosen Undead,' you should ring two bells to wake up a giant snake who will tell you it is your destiny to relight the First Flame to continue the 'Age of Fire.' Understanding the actual narrative context requires the player to examine and cross-reference the often-fragmented information given in descriptions of the myriad items the player encounters, as well as spatial details in the world. In a less well-designed game this would be exceedingly frustrating, but the lore is consistent enough that it is quite fun, like playing an archaeologist examining artifacts found in between duels with skeletons. It also provides a way for fans to demonstrate prestige in a way that aligns with geek masculine virtues around the ability to interpret data, draw connections between seemingly disparate information, and communicate those findings. If that same information were delivered to the player via an expository NPC or in-game codex it would deny the player those interest-excitement affects that come from their own efforts.

Engaging with Peterson creates similar affects to that gathering -> interpreting -> connecting process, albeit in a manner that still preserves the optimistic connection that centres Peterson as the source of masculine knowledge. It also requires significantly less mental effort on the part of the follower because Peterson explicitly gives the conclusion and then uses language that borrows the appearance of high-level intellectual thought to make that conclusion *seem* profound and the audience member *feel* smart for understanding such a profound thought. For example, Peterson talks about how accomplishing goals requires one to face challenges, which is an extremely basic life lesson. However, he mystifies this basic teaching by framing it as the performance of a universal story archetype of the knight (you) having to slay the dragon (overcome a challenge) to attain the treasure (attain a goal) in a way that is clearly meant to echo Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1948) style of mythological interpretation. At no point is the conclusion ever in doubt, but it sounds enough like advanced academic discourse that understanding it makes it feel like one's intelligence/masculinity is being validated.

This is distinct from more charisma-based manosphere styles. No matter how much of a man you are, you will never be as much of a ‘top G’ as Andrew Tate is. On the other hand, it is theoretically possible to match Peterson’s understanding of masculinity and life through sufficient study. However, it should be noted that Peterson is not actually teaching critical thinking or interpretation in these situations because he is still providing the meanings. He remains a guru.

I have written about how Peterson’s content makes his audience *feel* about his teachings, and the affective associations of the signifiers that he surrounds himself with. I will now discuss how his teachings *work*. This is where he engages with relationships of cruel optimism, because almost all his teachings are centred around the maintenance of the patriarchal status quo, especially with regards to hierarchies. This is a criticism that has been made by multiple commentators (FD Signifier, 2022; Big Joel, 2020; Big Joel, 2022; Johnston, Cody, 2022; Evans, Robert, 2023). It makes his teachings of extremely limited use for those facing difficulties originating in systemic flaws in society.

For example, one of Peterson’s 12 rules for life is “Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world” (2018). On the face of it, this is a decent enough tenet. It can feel empowering to be told that everything that is wrong with your life is because of an internal flaw, which means you can fix it. The fact that hegemonic masculinity valorizes individualistic self-determination makes this easy to integrate into the performance of his largely male audience. However, as video essayist Big Joel (2020) points out, Peterson extends this to an idea that only someone who has become a perfect internal sage can be trusted to criticize society, and who can be said to have attained true internal equilibrium? Thus, his followers enter a relationship of cruel optimism because often that inability to ‘put one’s house in perfect order’ or otherwise act as an optimal individual is *caused by the very structural problems that his teachings demand his followers ignore*. Allow me to give you an example that could easily be faced by Peterson’s target demographic, young White males. Jordan Peterson encourages his followers to display masculine competence through productivity, as shown in his discussion with Ben Shapiro (2022) and mentioned again in the upload by WordToTheWise (2022). However, the way that productivity is displayed to others and securely experienced in capitalist society is via the accumulation of wealth. Opportunities for the accumulation of wealth are, even for hegemonic

intersections of identity like White men (to say nothing of marginalized groups), not evenly distributed. Depending on one's circumstances, there could simply be no opportunity to achieve what Peterson would call a productive life because the only jobs available do not provide anything beyond a subsistence standard of living. Nothing can be produced because all their time and money must go towards maintaining their living conditions. Furthermore, the stress of existing within such a precarious situation would likely lead to feeling upset, irritable, and otherwise unhappy. These problems could at least start to be addressed through a criticism of the world, since they are caused by systemic economic inequalities. According to Peterson, our hypothetical white male would need to reach a state of internal equilibrium or risk causing more problems than they solve. That state of internal equilibrium is prevented due to the external problems that Peterson forbids them from addressing. This is the very definition of a relationship of cruel optimism.

Jordan Peterson's guru style is based off a stern authoritative sage figure that teaches that happiness is fleeting and that an ethical, internally satisfying life can only be achieved by following innate gender norms and roles. This masculine performance stands in stark contrast to the hedonistic and materialist teachings promoted by our next subject, Andrew Tate.

### 3.3 Andrew Tate: Top G(uru)

Andrew Tate is as far from Jordan Peterson as you can get while still basically engaging in the same discourse. Where Peterson relies on his education and academic experience to gain credibility from his audience, Tate is openly contemptuous of educational achievement that does not assist in getting rich (Tate, 2023). Where Peterson is ostensibly engaged in a search for inner meaning in a world that is often

cruel and uncaring, Tate focuses on acquiring external signifiers of manhood. Finally, while Peterson engages with philosophy and theory to reinforce his intellectual credibility, Tate's guru-style requires all his teachings to spring from himself. Even Tate's presentation of his



Figure 32 Tate's Self-Presentation as Masculine Exemplar

physical body displays this idea of himself as the true wellspring of real badass masculinity to his audience. His understanding of masculinity exists not only in his mind but is etched upon his rock-hard abs and biceps for all the world to see.

If you understand anything about Tate and the worldview he represents, then understand this; Andrew Tate is all about *external validation*. Not just to indulge his narcissism (although that is a big part) but also to maintain the persona that his followers expect of him. He embodies a cash-money hustle dream of being so powerful and rich that that giving a fuck about anything, but self-pleasure becomes optional. Unsurprisingly, he's also a sex trafficker and admitted unrepentant rapist (Tahsin, Shea, & Hume, 2023).

Lest this give you the idea that Jordan Peterson is a 'reasonable' alternative to Andrew Tate, please remember this: Jordan Peterson and Andrew Tate may not like each other but ideologically speaking they are remarkably similar. Both Peterson and Tate are gender essentialists, dead set against attempts to alter the neoliberal status quo, and believe that modern

society has become corrupt and effeminate. Both desire that hegemonic masculine dominance become an explicit part of social life rather than a merely implicit one.

So why discuss Andrew Tate after Jordan Peterson if these gurus both want the same social outcomes? First, they chiefly appeal to different audiences. Andrew Tate's id-driven pitch appeals to pubescent boys, while Peterson's more suit and tie responsibility-first approach appeals to college age and older men who are trying to exist as adults. Secondly, Tate exploits both his audience and social media platforms in a novel way, incentivizing said audience to spread Andrew Tate footage and content. This has allowed him to maintain his relevance in the manosphere despite his criminal charges taking up much of his attention. Even if Tate were unable to upload content by himself, his network of fans can continually upload content for him. Finally, Tate is located far more on the guru end of the spectrum compared to Jordan Peterson, who tends to straddle the line between guru and prophet. This is because Andrew Tate is much more directly reliant upon the consumption of his *personal* teachings than Jordan Peterson is, focusing more on a charismatic social relationship between him and his followers. Because the way that Tate uses his guru-relationship with his followers uses fewer mainstream channels than Peterson, I will take some time to more fully explain how he operates.

When I say that Andrew Tate has a charismatic social relationship with his followers, I am speaking in the context of Weber's description of charismatic authority. To Weber, charisma refers to a certain quality by which a specific individual is elevated beyond ordinary people and treated as exceptional (Weber, 1947). That quality can be anything that a certain group finds worthy of adulation. In Andrew Tate's case, it is his ability to present himself to teenagers as a hypermasculine yet entertaining icon. This is one reason that attempting to 'debunk' Andrew Tate is often fruitless. In the minds of his followers, he does not need to adhere to normal standards. His image of success and power is all the legitimacy he needs to be worthy of authority. Furthermore, the charismatic social connection is an emotional/affective connection tied directly between follower and leader. This is different from the other forms of authority that Weber described, rational-legal and traditional authority. In both of those, the leader is seen as occupying a position that is separate from themselves. For example, the Prime Minister of Canada holds authority because his position satisfies the laws and rules of Canadian society. He was voted as Prime Minister in an election. Conversely, the traditional leader is someone whose

status is connected to an inheritance from past generations, be it literally hereditary or part of a longstanding tradition. King Charles became King after Queen Elizabeth II died because he was first in a line of succession that goes back centuries. He didn't need to *qualify* for being King other than his ability to satisfy that traditional role.

His charismatic authority also changes his cruelty and narcissism from something his fans must rationalize or ignore to something that can be celebrated as an aspirational trait. Everyone else acts polite and nice, and what do they have to show for it? A miserable dead-end job. Meanwhile Andrew Tate gets to say and do whatever he wants and be super rich. He came from poverty but now he's got all the money and women in the world (Hustler's University, 2023). Tate must clearly be doing something right and anyone saying otherwise is either asleep, jealous, or stupid.

At times, Tate will gesture towards him having some sort of grounding philosophy, such as his 41 Tenets (41 Tenets, 2023), a list of declarations about what he believes. These tenets are standard manosphere talking points, with a dash of reactionary dog whistles and Tony Robbins style self-help affirmations to spice things up. To give a few examples, Tenet 29 "I believe in honouring my ancestors and living in a way that would make them most proud of me today." (2023), Tenet: "I believe that men have the sacred duty to raise kind, feminine, and virtuous daughters." (2023), and Tenet 19: "I seek to improve my personal freedom to think, act, and live true to my masculine imperative in all ways" (2023). They all go on like this. However, they provide enough of a façade of intellectual grounding that it can make his young audience think that he is more than a man who makes funny Tiktoks about only giving CPR to sexually attractive women. Furthermore, most of the 41 tenets are not objectionable unless the reader is familiar with the implied meanings behind them. Who would say that it is wrong for men to "...become as capable, powerful and competent as possible in this life" (2023)? The reader would have to become familiar with Tate's definition of capable, powerful, and competent, and how 'power' to him is inseparable from domination. To young teens, they sound like brilliant rules spoken by a trickster-prophet. Guidelines whose efficacy is proven with Tate's every display of cruelty, vulgarity, and wealth.

This all means that Andrew Tate needs fulfill no role nor hold any qualifications beyond maintaining his followers' confidence in his exceptionality. Explaining why Andrew Tate is

unworthy of being followed on moral or ethical grounds is likely to be unsuccessful to his most fervent fans because his leadership role isn't based on anything external to him. All he must do is remain relevant to his fans and social media so that he can ensure a constant flow of new followers. This relevance is cleverly maintained through the same social media network wherein his main manosphere grift operates.

### 3.3.1 Andrew Tate: Top G(rifter) -Hustler's University

'Grift' is one of those 'you know it when you see it' words without a specific common definition. For my purpose, I am defining 'grift' as a product or service that does not provide the outcome that a customer purchasing it would expect if the seller were operating in good faith. Not all grifts fit the legal definition of a scam, but all scams are grifts. Selling access to classes that promise hidden secrets to get rich is an example of a common form of Internet grift because the grifter can claim that they never actually made a false promise to the customer or provided them something that is demonstrably of lesser value than they claimed. One cannot put an objective value on advice, nor can the student determine the subjective value of that advice for them until they have already paid for the acquisition of said advice (Olson, 2022).

Andrew Tate's main guru grift, Hustler's University, on version 4.0 as of this writing (Hustler's University 4.0, 2023), is a prime example. In an introductory video titled "HUSTLER'S UNIVERSITY 4.0, THE MODERN 9-5 ESCAPE PLAN" (2023), Tate claims that applicants will learn Tate's money-making secrets from "millionaire professors" (0:16). What's more, Hustler's University promises applicants a community where everyone helps and supports each other. The video ends with Andrew Tate saying that Hustler's University is the single greatest place in the universe for those trying to 'escape the Matrix.' The Matrix being his phrase for what he considers the prison of mundanity that society tries to trap people in. In practice, 'The Matrix' is code for anything that conflicts with what Andrew Tate says or wants.

If you see Andrew Tate as a guru figure, this video is a dream come true. He is offering his audience an opportunity to recapture their economic manhood at a time of increasing economic precarity. Symbols of luxury and status are festooned throughout the video. Jets, cool clothes, smoking cigars by a waterfront, expensive watches. All the things that they are raised to believe are cool, and that Tate consistently associates himself with by proxy on social media.

Where is your Bugatti? By joining Hustler’s University, you can finally answer that question and become a Top G like Tate. All for the low price of \$50 USD per month.

Investigations by Coffeezilla (2022) and Magee (2023) reveal that the reality of Hustler’s University is far more mundane than the promised. The actual university is a Discord server wherein subscribers can attend online video conferences given by ‘professors’ with little verifiable background information or credentials. According to reviews, the course material is basic financial information that is freely available (Magee, 2023; Charlie Lawrence, 2023; Coffeezilla, 2022). Hustler’s University has no age restriction nor refund policy beyond the discretion of the Hustler’s University Support Team. The website is filled with exhortations to prospective buyers that they must act quickly and subscribe now, saying that the \$50/month price will increase to \$147/month at some undetermined (but imminent) time. At the bottom of the webpage is a small disclaimer stating that “the HU team doesn’t guarantee any profits or financial success” (Hustler’s University, 2023). All of Tate’s work to establish himself as a guru is for the purpose of leading his followers to this crude facsimile of an online course where he can economically exploit them.

Yet Hustler’s University is not a one-way pipeline, because it is also the source of his social media influence.

Hustler’s University has an affiliate marketing program wherein subscribers can generate income when other people subscribe using special referral links provided to them (Logan Ski Finance, 2023). This is the reason for the

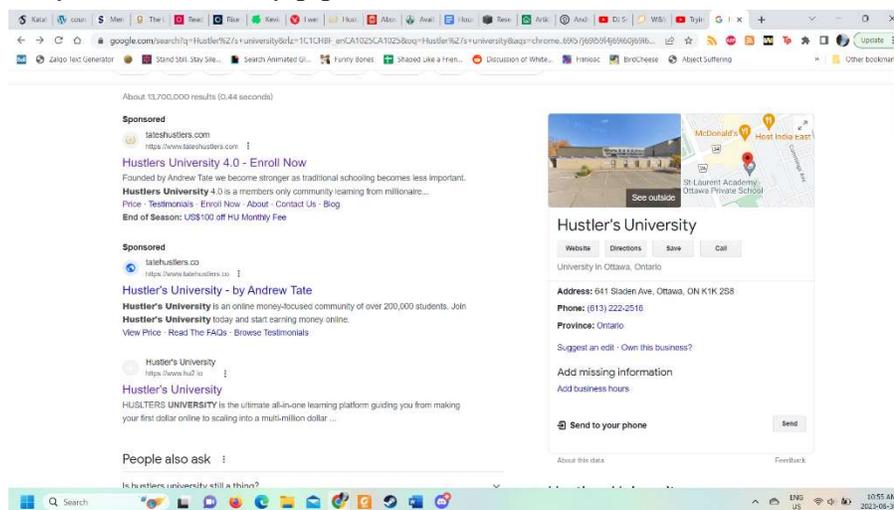


Figure 33 Examples of Hustler's U 'clones'

copycat HU websites in Figure 33. Most of the posts about Tate on social media are from people who are materially incentivized to constantly post about Tate, even creating multiple social media accounts purely for the purpose of artificially inflating social media engagement (Magee,

2023). Subscribers must defend Tate not only out of emotional attachment, but also because a threat to Tate is a threat to the income that is, according to Tate, the true measure of masculine worth. This network of fans/employees also renders it nearly impossible for social media platforms to completely remove Andrew Tate content. There are too many separate accounts constantly posting and spreading it. Thus, even though Tate himself is restricted from posting on most mainstream social media platforms, he does not actually need to. His followers can do all the work for Tate while paying for the privilege at the same time. After all, they only get a one-time \$11 commission per new subscriber (Magee, 2023; Logan Ski Finance, 2023) while Tate gets a cool \$50 every month.

Any study of Andrew Tate's video content must keep this context in mind. It is easy to assume that the thousands of commenters on Tate media singing his praises are brainwashed teenagers taken in by a con artist, but that is not the entire picture. While the charismatic attachments formed between him and his audience is important, many of those posts are also made because Tate has made it in their material interests to do so. If you are subscribed to Hustler's University, you have an incentive to constantly spread Andrew Tate content in every possible context to get as many *new* subscribers as possible. Tate essentially has tens of thousands of unpaid workers promoting him, some of whom will even hire other people to do those promotions for them (Logan Ski Finance, 2023).

While reading my affective analysis of the selected videos, remember that Andrew Tate himself does not choose the content, since he is banned from YouTube. Instead, they are composed of what his followers and self-interested content creators believe makes Tate attractive. In a sense, these represent a distillation of Tate's persona through the lens of social media enthusiasts. Let us begin now.

### 3.3.2 Video - “Andrew Tate’s Speech NO ONE Wants to Hear” (Motivation Mentors, 2022)



Figure 34 Thumbnail for “Andrew Tate’s Speech NO ONE Wants to Hear...”

The title of this video reflects a part of the charismatic draw of Andrew Tate for his followers, one used by many other gurus. He is described as giving a speech no one wants to hear, yet one that is also eye opening. His state of enlightenment, proven by his escape from ‘The Matrix,’ gives him the ability to perceive more accurately what everyone *needs* than lesser minds. Hence, rude, degrading, or harmful behaviour can not only be excused, but inverted to be seen as a sign of wisdom and compassion. This is present in some religious figures, like the ‘holy madmen’ of Tibet (DiValerio, 2015). However, it is also a repeating behavioural and interpretive pattern for cult leaders and guru-figures in the context of this study (Walker, Remski, & Beres, 2023).

Gurus like Tate can use this cruelty-compassion paradox to further insulate their followers from acknowledging, internally or externally, the contradictions in their teachings. Anyone pointing Tate’s numerous personal and ideological flaws can be safely dismissed as an unenlightened soul. Furthermore, Tate being up-front with this behaviour allows it to be routinized. Showing a clip of Andrew Tate talking about choking and raping a hypothetical female machete attacker (Ahmed S., 2023) won’t prompt examination from a fan of Tate because he’s *always* like this. You cannot accept Tate as an aspirational guide to masculine performance without allowing his misogynistic violence to, on some level become an inextricable part of that masculinity.

The video opens with a clip of Andrew Tate in his studio during a livestream. A young viewer asks Tate “what is the best fastest way to get a six-pack?” (0:02). This leads Tate to engage in what the video presents as the ‘speech no one wants you to hear’ which, it should be

noted, is a collection of various Tate clips edited together to sound like a single continuous speech. I will skip right to the core of his response. He argues that “value is linked to difficulty” (0:22) and therefore attempting to find an ‘easy way’ is a dead end. To Tate, the value of achievement is intrinsically tied to the suffering required. Moreover, because value is linked to difficulty, the value of a person can be measured by the difficulty of the things that they have achieved. Those achievements can be done by anyone who is able to access sufficient reserves of will and discipline, which can only be cultivated on an individual basis. Self-determination is at the heart of any endeavour that someone attempts to accomplish, and as a corollary to that, there is no such thing to Tate as external circumstances that can truly stop someone.

As with many of these gurus that claim to be teachers, they start with a kernel of truth. Of course, discipline is important, and many achievements require hard work. It is important for young people to learn this so they are not left feeling inadequate when they inevitably encounter a challenge they cannot easily overcome. However, Tate’s conception of how people should meet adversity and develop a sense of discipline is both unhelpful and not remotely unique. It is instead status quo masculine norms repackaged in the form of a muscular cigar-smoking man who is willing to say the quiet part loud. He is saying that you must be willing to be stoic and quiet in the face of suffering. In fact, suffering is good because that indicates that you are accomplishing something valuable. This is consistent with how masculinity is associated with stoicism, refusal to express emotions connected to vulnerability, and the contextualization of painful and traumatic experiences as a vector for masculine performance. This is also an example of the alignment between Peterson and Tate’s conceptualization of masculinity. They both think you should suffer; Tate is just louder about it.

For example, there is a video clip of Tate saying, “nobody is going to care about you as much as they need to care to fix your life.” (0:45). That is not particularly mind-blowing, although it may be a useful thing to be reminded of occasionally. Coffeezilla (2022) observes that because Tate is mostly known for being entertaining and funny, some prosaic self-help advice can sound profound to a young audience who already likes him. Much like Peterson, he presents his basic self-help advice in a novel, albeit much more antagonistic way, essentially ‘negging’ his audience. He is saying that his audience cannot wait for someone else to fix their lives for them, but in such a way as to cast doubt on how much people care about them. Yet to

someone who is feeling frustrated about their life, it can feel validating for somebody to tell them that they are correct to feel like nobody cares enough about them, and that they will have to fix their life themselves. It's not kind, but at least it's honest in a bitterly cathartic way.

What I find interesting here is that his repackaging of status quo manliness as great hidden truths provides a funhouse mirror version of Peterson's pseudo-intellectualist strategy. When Tate says "I do not feel like training, but I still train because I am a disciplined individual. You don't get to go through life only doing the things you feel like doing" (8:43), it feels profound and intuitive not because it is a great hidden truth of the human condition, but because it's easy to integrate with hegemonic norms in a way that does not feel unfamiliar or frightening. This smooth integration is facilitated by the visual imagery chosen by the Motivation Mentors account.

Athletic imagery is common in this video, just as it was in "You Should Be a Monster" (WordtotheWise, 2022). For example, when Tate talks about the importance of discipline and stoicism, the video shows footage of athletic men exercising. Pre-existing associations between masculinity and the idealized male body (strength, power, discipline, capacity for violence, agency, etc.) are thus brought to the fore and attached to Tate.

However, there is a comparatively greater use of melancholic imagery featuring men in this video, often in a dimly lit setting grimly looking downwards or out into the distance. An example of this is when Tate says "I can't imagine truly wanting to quit anything and not being able to quit. I can't imagine it" (2:41). The corresponding footage is a regretful-looking man sitting in darkness with a bottle of alcohol in the foreground. This category of footage corresponds to rhetoric on either the necessity of pain and discipline or the ability for pure will to defeat all obstacles and challenges. This may seem contradictory but remember that the purpose of this video is not only intended to motivate the viewer, but to make that viewer idealize Tate. Thus, this footage presents a contrast between Tate's iron willpower and the weakness of ordinary men. This combination of footage and voice-over presents a binary to the viewer, experiencing the hope offered by Tate's speech and the despair associated with the melancholic imagery. The choice is clear, either follow Tate's teachings or become a failure.

The final interesting imagery element is the juxtaposition of discipline and action with entrepreneurship or ‘hustle culture.’ In the last quarter of the video, Tate speaks about the importance of constantly working towards making money. But where the 9-5 steady paycheck is static and routine, the entrepreneurial hustler is a rugged individual who succeeds through their superior intellect, wits, discipline, and ability to perceive opportunity. To Tate, “If you truly wanted money, you wouldn’t be able to sleep until you had it. And this is the point, because when I had nothing, I couldn’t be distracted. You couldn’t distract me from what I wanted” (6:03). The imagery is tantalizing, Tate’s exhortations juxtaposed with US currency, a man staring into the camera with a computer screen reflected in his glasses, and finally by a muscular shirtless man standing framed by the sun behind him. It proposes a process. Use the computer to get money and achieve masculine perfection.

This video changes from bog-standard ‘man-up’ advice to creating relationships of cruel optimism when examined in the context of Tate’s motive to convince his audience to join Hustler’s University. This relationship is built through a series of stages. First there is Tate’s discursive worldview, one that is intrinsically competitive and hierarchical, unsurprisingly aligned with reactionary authoritarianism. Everyone is intrinsically aware of the zero-sum nature of reality and thus anyone supporting kindness and egalitarianism is either trying to fool you or is a loser suffering from Nietzschean resentment. What divides winners from losers is being able to ‘control your mind.’ Tate even claims that his complete control over his mind is what allows him to stay in good shape despite people pointing out that “All you do is drink vodka and travel the world.” (3:26).

‘Controlling your mind’ is a combination of masculine ideals of stoicism and neoliberal faith in the power of individual agency. He claims that, if someone is depressed, he doesn’t expect them to be “popping pills and sitting laying in bed. I expect you to be giving me a huge list of everything you’re achieving each day” (4:03). What this means is that any problem *is* solvable with sufficient motivation. Anyone who is impoverished or otherwise less fortunate is there because, deep inside, they *want* to be there. After all, “Everyone knows what they are supposed to do” (3:51). He makes allowances for what he calls ‘real mental illness’ but doesn’t specify what counts as real. We know depression doesn’t.

So, what are men supposed to do? To Tate, they must adhere to masculine ideals of physicality, wealth, and power. Although Peterson also exhorts his followers to adhere to masculine norms, Tate is far less interested in questions of meaning. As stated before, Tate's philosophy is only interested in external validation of masculinity. Signifiers of success and power (luxury cars, wealth, an athletic physique, sexual success with women, etc.) can be used to gain respect and power over others. It is, after all, both how Tate gains influence over his followers, and the end to which that influence is directed. These signifiers are how you know that you are a king instead of a peasant, and anyone who has those signifiers deserves them.

As with all gurus, Tate must make himself appear to be vital to the achievement of an object of desire yet at the same time only appear to help his audience achieve it. Hustler's University works on a subscription model, so long term subscribers are needed. Thus, he twists an optimistic goal (material success) into a cruelly optimistic one that appears to create a clear path towards that success while simultaneously sabotaging it. He does this in a few specific ways. First, his discussion of wealth is geared towards encouraging short-term impulsive decision-making in his young audience. They are told they only have 10-15 years to make money and after that their quality of life will decrease drastically. He tells them that they should constantly be worried, anxious, sad, and even panicking over them not having enough money at any given moment and not be distracted by anything *but* the acquisition of that money. He even cites himself as proof, saying that his refusal to be distracted from his goals is what brought him from poverty to wealth.

He mixes this tone of insistent desperation with the hopeful claim that merely by 'gaining control of one's mind,' the doors to every avenue of success will open. The goal is not to engage his audience in mindfulness, but instead to convince them that all outcomes are the result of that person's mental state. Imitating other self-help gurus like Tony Robbins or Jordan Peterson, Tate seeks to convince them that all problems can be overcome with a change of individual mindset rather than the difficult and often frustrating work of altering one's material conditions. This introduces a subtle trap. Because something as subjective as a 'mindset' is not externally measurable, it is impossible to prove or disprove the efficacy of these mindset methods. Therefore, Tate and his followers can dismiss any criticism of this method by claiming that the critic simply didn't cultivate their mindset enough. How do they know that they failed to

discipline their mind? Because they aren't incredibly successful. How will you know when you have reached a sufficiently disciplined mindset? When everything becomes "ridiculously easy" (3:26). Because the only verifiable proof of Tate's method being used 'properly' is when the subject is ultra-successful, any attempt to point out a flaw in Tate's advice becomes evidence of a flaw in the observer. This also incentivizes Tate's followers to *never* admit that Tate's advice is not working, and that Hustler's University is anything but a guaranteed success. That would be tantamount to admitting failure, and people who fail are peasants, not kings. Once you are confirmed to be a peasant, you are stuck there. Better to keep hustling and hoping. Besides, suffering is what gives achievements value, and you should expect reaching your goal to be hard and discouraging.

This video is an example of Tate giving a sales-pitch for Hustler's University nested in a motivational speech like a matryoshka doll. Much like the hegemonic masculinity that Andrew Tate endorses, it contains numerous contradictions. It claims to be a speech that no one wants to hear, yet the content of that speech are the same elementary level exhortations to discipline and stoicism that one would expect from a mediocre gym teacher. He starts the video criticizing how people are always looking for the easiest way to do things and later says that everything becomes "incredibly easy" if you can access a vaguely defined state of complete mental control. Finally, Tate talks about how discipline and consistent routine are necessary to achieve goals, but encourages affects of desperation, anxiety, and fear to get his audience to restrict their planning to short-term gratification.

With such clear flaws in Tate's rhetoric, it is reasonable to wonder why anyone would ever want to follow this man. I have already discussed how his charismatic attachment style works to attract and retain followers. However, there is a concept that Tate uses to provide intellectual justification for why his actions are correct and everything that contradicts him, from research to parental figures, is wrong. One that I have mentioned in passing but will now explain in detail with the next video analysis. I need to tell you about *The Matrix*.

### 3.3.3 Andrew Tate: Top G(nostic)

We all know the hit 1999 movie *The Matrix*. We all know the premise and the plot. I need not belabour the irony of the term 'red pill' being co-opted by discursive environments like

the manosphere. What is important for Tate and similar reactionary influencers is that *The Matrix* provides an easily accessible and widely understood metaphor for the unpleasant experience of the entire world seeming to be against them. It is a form of right-wing theodicy, the answer to the question ‘Why do feminist women keep happening to manly men?’ That answer is: The world as it is presented to you is an illusion.

I have made a few comparisons with reactionary movements to Gnosticism, the idea that the physical ‘material’ world that one sees is in some way false or flawed in comparison to another purer world that can be reached or perceived through ‘gnosis’ (Greek for understanding). This other world can be a metaphor for understanding, such as the allegory of Plato’s Cave, where one moves from seeing the shadows of the world to the world itself. It can also be a reference to a spiritual state, wherein one is literally ‘trapped’ within a fleshly prison in a clearly flawed (if not actively cruel) world. The goal there would be to achieve a spiritual state wherein one’s pure spirit ‘escapes’ to the pure world of spirit upon death. This is more characteristic of the beliefs currently practiced by the Mandeans. Meanwhile the pop-culture view of the world as a prison ruled over by an actively malicious demiurge springs chiefly from the science-fiction book “*VALIS*” by Phillip K. Dick (1981) by way of “*The Matrix*” (1999). There is, of course, more nuance than can be included in this dissertation. The important parallel is the idea that the world as we see it is false, and that freeing oneself from that false world is done through attaining understanding of reality or ‘gnosis’ (Greek for wisdom).

Most reactionary prophets and gurus are gnostic in the sense that their dismissal of contradictory evidence often lean on conspiratorial explanations that create a sense of falsity to mundane society. The ‘mainstream media,’ ‘woke academics,’ ‘critical race theorists,’ ‘feminists,’ ‘Jews,’ and so on. These are pragmatically deployed to explain why, for example, Tucker Carlson is stoking fears about white replacement and other media sources either won’t talk about it or actively debunk that conspiracy theory. The overwhelming consensus against Tucker Carlson or Andrew Tate is not reached by people coming to the same consistent conclusions independent of each other, it is because there is a force controlling those findings to keep the general populace ‘asleep.’ In the discursive environment of Tate and Tucker, there is no such thing as consensus except that which is created as an expression of power. Thus, any appearance of consensus that does not align with them must be the result of a top-down

intentional exertion of force. Like a socio-political demiurge, these shadowy groups, personified in figures like George Soros or Klaus Schwab, are materially powerful but flawed and spiritually fallen, and thus will inevitably fall as the flaws in this façade of society become more obvious. The links with Gnosticism are implied and unlikely to be deliberate.

Andrew Tate is far more explicit. He expresses a discursive worldview that merges the metaphysical with the social while also providing affective justification for followers to join Tate's Hustler's University grift. Let us examine it from the point of view of one of those followers.

### 3.3.4 Video - "Andrew Tate on the Matrix in 8 Minutes." (Beyond 5D, 2022)



Figure 35 Thumbnail for "Andrew Tate on the Matrix in 8 Minutes"

This video is interesting to connoisseurs of YouTube influencer slop like me. Unlike most symbiotic influencer content, such as the previous video by Motivation Mentor, Beyond 5D does their own narration along with the usual clips of Andrew Tate. This allows Beyond 5D to further control the presentation of Tate and requires less editing and labour time. Because these videos are often made for the purpose of promoting Tate's brand and getting as many viewers as possible to click affiliate links to Hustler's University, it is to the uploader's advantage to be able to churn out as many videos as possible.

Returning to the content of the video itself, an insidious thing about Tate's Matrix discourse is that it starts with the shadow of a genuine problem. Tate defines the Matrix as "systems that are created by society deliberately to enslave" (0:02). In other hands, this could be used to introduce the audience to concepts of ideology (in the Marxist sense) or hegemony. Unfortunately, the self-serving way that Tate (and by extension Beyond 5D) engages with the Matrix concept precludes his audience from engaging in systemic analysis. Neither Tate nor those who align with him would want the audience to interact with the world critically. Instead,

this rhetoric is used as a blunt instrument to attach feelings of threat and hostility towards anyone that is critical of Andrew Tate.

For example, Tate defines the Matrix as essentially being in control of all society and specifically targeting him due to his message. This reinforces an optimistic attachment to Tate as being the sole source of truth and hope in the world, while also rationalizing dissonant stimuli, such as anyone who dismisses or criticizes Tate as being the result of the Matrix's lies.

An example of this optimistic attachment to Tate as truth-giver is reinforced by Beyond 5D when he describes Andrew Tate as being "the biggest threat to the government system because he's constantly exposing it and waking people up to the truth" (0:14), with Tate's social media ban or 'cancellation' being shown as proof of his virtue. The video then ups the emotional intensity further when it is accompanied by footage of Tate declaring that "I just hope they don't suicide me, because what happens if you don't shut up? Eventually that's what happens" (0:29).

Now if you have read this far, then you can understand what is being done here. In this short section, the narrative has taken this path:

Andrew Tate is waking people up from slavery -> This makes Tate a threat to government systems  
 -> Andrew Tate has been banned from social media -> Those systems are moving to silence Tate ->  
 Andrew Tate's life is under threat.

Implying that the content of the video has world-changing stakes is a great way to drive engagement and vicariously indulge in Andrew Tate's charismatic authority. Tate being the biggest threat to the *entire government system* (whatever that means) is not something that you can just not watch. It could all be deleted by YouTube tomorrow, and then you'll never get to learn about how to escape the Matrix. It implies that engagement with the video and Andrew Tate counts as resistance to the tyrannical Matrix, allowing the audience to vicariously participate in Tate's heroic efforts to wake up the world.

This cultish view of Tate is reinforced by how he is presented visually and vocally as a threat to the Matrix, with Beyond 5D giving such breathless statements as “Andrew Tate brought the whole slavery system down, proving his theory right” (1:49). While showing visuals that emphasize Tate’s individual

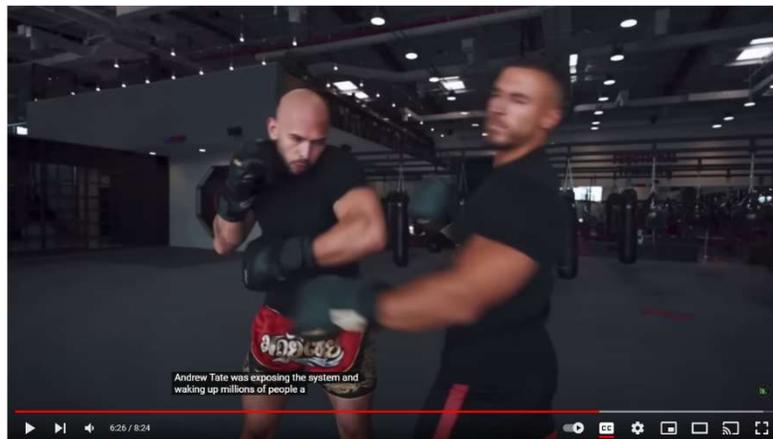


Figure 36 Tate as athletic exemplar

body-centred power, like Figure 36. This reinforces the idea of Tate as being a charismatic source of wisdom and truth. In Tate’s world, power and wisdom can only be accessed on an individual basis, while oppression and lies are features of collective systems. This makes it easier for followers to see any flaw in Tate’s teachings to be a sign of vague omnipresent oppression rather than error on the part of the guru.

This presentation of Tate flattens all discourse around him into a moral binary. One is either for Tate, the source of liberation, or against Tate, and thus in favour of slavery. Therefore, one cannot have an *honest* objection to Andrew Tate. There can be no space to discuss Tate’s human trafficking, his abhorrent misogyny, or the financial exploitation of his followers. The truth of the accusation doesn’t matter, only that Tate is good and anyone trying to stop him is bad.

Tate’s teachings on the purpose of *gnosis* shows a fundamental departure from other strains of Gnosticism. Gnosticism resolves theodicy by positing that the material world is a fundamentally flawed shadow of the perfect spiritual world. Tate is characteristically focused only on the material. Ironically, he has elevated the Matrix from a prison that can be escaped to being omnipresent and inescapable, claiming:

“The rich are always going to get richer and that’s the way the game is set up, so you still need to find the best move on the chessboard. There’s no point sitting there saying ‘I want to play a different game,’ cause it’s never going to happen” (2:43).

What this means is that the purpose of *gnosis* is not transcendence, but *material exploitation*. To even the most cursory understanding of Gnosticism, this would be counter

productive. Pursuing material gain is the equivalent of getting really into hoarding Monopoly money. Yet in the status-obsessed world of Tate, it transforms his constant need for masculine validation into proof of his own kind of gnosis. This is another reason footage of Tate that is intended to present him as a sage often shows him



Figure 37 Tate with signifiers of material wealth

with signifiers of wealth and power, because it represents proof of his mastery over the Matrix. It's also why phrases like 'what colour is your Bugatti?' or calling critics "brokies" (Urban Dictionary, 2024) are used by Tate followers to dismiss criticism. If one sees the world as being inherently hierarchical, and those in power are the wealthiest, then it follows that wealth is the only true measurement of *gnosis*.

The flaws of this worldview are self-evident. It is more important and interesting to instead consider why this philosophical grift is so attractive to young people. Tate's description of the Matrix resonates with how it *feels* to be a teenager living in a slowly crumbling neoliberal empire, especially if they have had no exposure to alternatives to neoliberal capitalism. Schools constantly bombard you with the 'right' way to do things, and insist you live in the greatest society in human history. Yet the those who follow the rules look miserable and exhausted while rule-breakers and the self-interested seem to get richer and more powerful everyday. Parents and teachers try and assure you that doing things the 'right way' will lead to true fulfillment. Yet your parents also must work harder and harder to make payments/rent for no apparent reason. They clearly aren't fulfilled. How can you trust that they are right? This is your entire future, and that future looks increasingly like you are on a conveyer belt towards a dark abyss. Anxiety gnaws at your stomach and spine as that pit comes closer. What's even worse, you can't get a girlfriend. At least other people can get girlfriends, and they seem so happy when they are together. Maybe if you got a girlfriend, you could feel less bad before the pit eats you. That's what you want. Not to feel good, but to at least feel *not bad*.

This is a common emotional state, and it has only become more common as things have gotten worse for most people. The gap between rich and poor continues to widen precipitously, the environment suffers daily atrocities, jobs that were supposed to support a family can now barely pay for rent in a single-occupancy apartment. Unless constant vigilance is maintained, social safety nets are eroded by those who serve the interests of the wealthy. You're also probably a teenager, which comes with a whole host of individual anxieties as your body and emotions change without warning. Being a teenager could make one feel like the world is arbitrary and cruel in a utopia, let alone Earth in 2025.

Now Andrew Tate shows up on your social media feed, and he looks so rich and successful. He's confident and tells funny jokes. Sometimes those jokes seem mean, but what's the harm? Everyone is sharing Andrew Tate videos, so he must have something to him! Your teachers don't like him, but they don't like anything. After awhile, Tate brings up the Matrix, and you learn that things feel bad not because you are confused but because you're *awake*. Those people who tell you not to worry? They're asleep. They feel the grinding pain of their dead-end lives, but they aren't special enough to realize they can stop it. Not like you. If you follow Tate's teachings, you can be wealthy. Even better, that horrible gnawing anxiety will go away. Tate will make you *safe from the pit!*

This sets up an extremely attractive optimistic investment. If you do not have much life experience and are frustrated by the world, why *should* you believe Andrew Tate is bad news? The idea of the Matrix at least holds out *some* chance that you can succeed, which is more than you can say for the excruciating prospect of working at a job you hate for decades. It also makes you feel like that time spent worrying and fearing was confirmation that you are special, and now Tate offers Hustler's University for special people like you to make something of yourself. All you must do is believe in guru Tate, and you can finally get the future you deserve!

If you think you could never have fallen for this kind of trick, I ask you to evaluate what you were like as a teenager. For my part, I'm not sure if I would have fallen into Tate's sphere of influence, but I do know I *could* have. That hypothetical teenager I was addressing was me circa 2004. Keep in mind that I didn't have a particularly difficult life. I was on the autism spectrum, and had other family challenges, but everyone has challenges. I also had a very supportive family

network that was invested in everyone's success. I had some friends, creative outlets, and a stable economic situation. Imagine the situation for someone without such good fortune.

I could go on and on about how teenager or young adult could *feel* about being in the Andrew Tate sphere and unplugged from the Matrix. But let us hit on the cruel optimisms inherent to this worldview. One of them is clear from how I have described the attraction of the idea of the Matrix and accompanying grift-pitch. That being that this idea of the Matrix has no coherence beyond creating a moral binary wherein alignment (affective and/or ideological) with Tate is good and alignment against him is evil. If something that Tate likes happens, it is a strike against the Matrix, so it is good. If something he did not like happens, the Matrix caused it, and so it is evil.

A more important flaw that is harmful on an individual and societal level is that the outcome of Tate's Matrix discourse is to encourage dismissal, if not active exploitation of others. We can start with Tate's understanding of "*the Matrix*", as given by Beyond 5D,

"Anyone who has watched *the Matrix* carefully understands that the people inside of the Matrix realize that something isn't right, so they escape the Matrix. Once they escape the Matrix, they understand how the Matrix works so they plug back into the Matrix with new powers. And then they hack the Matrix and escape again" (7:10).

I have heard it said that there is no wrong way to interpret media, but this interpretation of "*The Matrix*" (1999) is wrong at a very deep thematic level. It is textually true that understanding of the Matrix allows you to exhibit superhuman powers. What this explanation and Tate's discourse ignores is that the correct purpose of those powers is the liberation of humanity through destruction of the Matrix, even at the cost of said superhuman powers. Neo can't do his super kung-fu in Zion, but it's still preferable to existence within the Matrix because it allows for true self-determination. Andrew Tate's worldview of the Matrix has more in common with Cypher, who betrays Zion in exchange for what is a particularly comfortable prison cell.

My point here is not to give a stale diatribe about authoritarians being bad at media literacy, but to use "*The Matrix*" (1999) to contextualize how Tate inverts liberatory elements within Gnostic narratives. Much like other neoliberal New Age gurus, Tate claims that he can provide a way to 'win' at capitalism (Walker, Remski and Beres, 2023). That incentivizes his followers to not just tolerate but enthusiastically defend the very social systems that produce the

enslavement they seek escape from. To quote the video, “This is why it’s so important to understand the system that we live in. We’re able to understand it, use it, and take advantage of it” (Beyond 5D, 2:26). No Matrix means no super kung-fu.

This perspective also serves create a moral dichotomy between followers of Tate, who have woken up from the Matrix and are now “deserving” (Hustler’s University, 2023), and everyone else. In Tate’s ideology, where one’s circumstances are completely controlled by an individual’s mindset, anyone who has not ‘woken up’ to Tate’s message is that way by choice. The reasons for that choice are irrelevant. Because they remain asleep, they implicitly consent to being stepping stones to success by those who are awake. Any attempt to empathize with them or their stated interests is a waste of time because the Matrix too thoroughly compromises those feelings and desires for them to be authentic.

A connected problem is that this worldview claims that social reality operates by predictable and consistent rules.

In other words, that the world works like a video game. This is an extremely soothing notion to the many people who are confused and frustrated by the contradictions of a society that claims to operate by rule of law while also being shockingly arbitrary in its application. Even



Figure 38 Tate as video game protagonist/Social reality as video game.

if they have been cut off from the rules that allow access to that system’s benefits, at least it implies that there *are* rules. This is visually illustrated by Beyond 5D’s use of gameplay footage, using an Andrew Tate player avatar in *GTA: Online* to demonstrate how acquiring Tate’s *gnosis* will give you the ability to ‘level up’ and fulfill your desires through understanding of reality works by, just as video game characters go through a linear progression of greater and greater power.

This attempt to ‘gamify’ society represents an interesting crossover with Pick-Up Artist (PUA) discourse. PUAs are distinguished within the manosphere as gurus who claim to know

secret social interaction methods that will improve one's success, mostly in the context of convincing women to have sex. To PUAs, human consciousness is seen as operating algorithmically. Specific stimuli will *always* result in the same specific response. 'Succeeding' in social interaction becomes merely a matter of knowing the right inputs to get one's desired output. This heavily reductive and inaccurate view of human interaction denies human agency and even consciousness, and it is no coincidence that it is particularly deployed against women. It is another extension of the hegemonic patriarchal view of the feminine as being an object of the natural world. Like a wild animal or an unexploited forest, the female mind is depicted as chaotic and irrational but rendered predictable and productive by the application of masculine-coded knowledge. To the PUA, all people, but especially women, are secretly puppets that have no *real* agency. As we will see later, Tate's understanding of human relations aligns with PUA logic, and with the Matrix, he extends this logic to all socio-economic reality. The unfathomably complex networks of historical, economic, and social processes that explain why some people are rich while the rest of us are poor is reduced to being a matter of having the will and intelligence to discern which inputs will consistently result in the desired outputs. This gamification of reality argues that Andrew Tate knows an objectively effective strategy to 'win' and is willing to share it with whoever is 'deserving.'

To summarize this video analysis, Tate's presentation as a revolutionary leader veils an allegiance to the neoliberal status quo that produces the problems he claims to be able to solve. A classic example of a relationship of cruel optimism. Tate's offer of freedom from the 'Matrix' produces a cultish relationship wherein his followers are incentivized to see Tate as the only source of truth, and any dissenting voice a servant of ignorance and oppression. His charismatic authority, disconnected from any need for legitimization outside of signifiers of material wealth, encourages his followers to become alienated from the rest of the world and their relationships. As a cruelly optimistic relationship, this reduction of the outside world to a game with winners or losers determined by material wealth heavily impairs the ability of his followers to thrive in the way that he promises. A significant manifestation of this cruelty exists on the socio-economic level, as Tate encourages his followers to spend time, effort, and money on Hustler's University as a gateway out of the Matrix. When a follower has been sucked dry of money, they will be discarded back into the Matrix and told to blame themselves, worse off than they were before (Coffeezilla, 2022). Considering the young demographic that Tate's followers come from, with

their need for belonging and emotional confusion, this sense of failure could have serious ramifications for the rest of their lives.

Thus far I have written about Tate in his capacity as a motivational guru in the entrepreneurial context, however some of his most successful content presents him as a guru of romantic relationships. The next video analysis will describe how Tate’s rhetoric frames far-right masculine fundamentalist standards of gender relations as being inseparable from the maintenance of masculine identity. The formation of cruel optimistic relationships between Tate’s advice and the achievement of fulfilling romantic relationships within his followers’ affective economies will be examined in the context of hegemonic masculine norms.

### 3.3.5 Video - “Andrew Tate Explains Why Women Lose Respect for You.” (EDUCATOR, 2022)



*Figure 39 Video Thumbnail for “Andrew Tate Explains Why Women Lose Respect For You”.*

Let us first examine the feelings that this thumbnail is meant to evoke. Andrew Tate is in the foreground with his powerful physique on display, looking at attractive women in beachwear with disdain. The text says, “NO RESPECT = CHEATING”. Dismissing attractive women would seem to contradict Tate’s function as a romantic guru, isn’t the point to attain them? Recall that hegemonic masculinity is partially defined by the capacity to dominate the feminine. Thus, manhood requires not only sexual intercourse but always being in control of the relationship.

One way that this obsession with domination is rationalized in the manosphere is the belief that women are instinctively ‘hypergamous.’ Hypergamy is defined as “marriage into an equal or higher caste or social group” (Merriam-Webster, 2024). Research results on the

prevalence of various categories of feminine hypergamy (educational, economic, caste, etc.) are mixed. Some show the rate has remained steady or increased (Urbina, Frye, & Lopus, 2024; Almås, Kotsadam, Moen & Røed, 2020), others have reported a decrease (Erát, 2021; Esteve, et al., 2016). It is presented as a social pattern rather than an intrinsic feminine trait. For example, Almås, Kotsadam, Moen & Røed's study found that while the tendency was higher in women, a significant portion of men also expressed a desire to 'marry up' (2020).

Regardless, the manosphere's fixation on constant masculine validation makes the prospect of a woman leaving for a higher-status man a nightmare scenario. This manifests in the use of evidence-based misogyny (Rothermel, 2023) to portray women as heartless slaves to their instinct, willing to betray anyone to make a better life for their 'offspring' (münecat, 2022). Thus, the studies that do statistically show the existence of hypergamy would be all that is necessary to expand the fear/contempt of the 'gold digger' to *all women*. This dehumanizing of women into will-less automatons dismisses any vulnerability in masculinity by denying feminine agency. From this perspective, women only leave men so that they can be provided for by another man, not because the woman *chose* to do so, but because their inscrutable primeval instincts drove them to it. Furthermore, it implies that anything a woman does that 'makes' a man feel attracted to them is meant to lure them into being sucked dry and left a broken-hearted emasculated husk.

The social function of hypergamy rhetoric within masculine fundamentalist discourse could take up an entire dissertation on its own. For our purposes, it is enough that we know that Tate's disdain of the women in swimsuits is meant to tap into that association of female sexuality with the prospect of emasculation. Displaying their sexually attractive bodies on the beach is as heartlessly predatory as the lure of an anglerfish. Andrew Tate is too strong to fall for it. He only feels sexual excitement when *he* wants to, and not when these heartless bitches do. This demonstrates why it is vital that he teach his audience the importance of 'respect.'

The setting of the video is a room in Andrew Tate's house. The décor could be generously described as IKEA-chic. Tate himself is sitting front of the camera, looking more casually approachable than the previous portrayals of him, wearing a simple black t-shirt, sitting on a nice computer chair. His lack of his usual signifiers of status makes him seem more approachable to the viewers. It is as if he is speaking to them as Andrew Tate the person, rather

than Andrew Tate as an embodiment of masculinity and success. Tate is here to reveal ‘the truth,’ free from any kind of posturing or showmanship. That truth is:

“Women fuck men they respect. They don’t fuck men they like, they don’t fuck men they love. They fuck men they respect...I have women who respect me but fucking hate me, but they’re here every time I call” (0:06).

The casualness which with he states this may seem out of alignment with the hyper-charismatic guru figure we have been discussing thus far. Consider instead that being able to speak so casually about what he claims to be the fundamental truth relationships can be a show of charisma and grandiosity too. He is still the guru, just visiting the mortal plane right now.

Tate’s charismatic privilege to casually disregard social norms is also displayed by his use of the term fuck. He constantly refers to sexual intercourse as some variant of ‘fuck.’ It is as if he is lowering himself to the level of his audience. We’re all just men here shooting the shit, his body language and speech seems to say. But it isn’t just about being crass to excite his teenage audience. Fuck carries a specific connotation of casual, emotionally detached sex that is solely concerned with physical sensation rather than any sense of emotion connection or reciprocity.

Now anyone who has even cursory knowledge of Tate knows that he sucks and that he hates women. But what does that thesis teach his audience? First, that the primary objective of a relationship is (heterosexual) fucking. Secondly, that fucking is an outcome and confirmation of women having ‘respect’ for their partner. Third, that ‘respect’ is here defined as holding *power* over women. Finally, that if you hold power over a woman, they will fuck you whenever you want. This is why Tate takes pride in women who hate him still fucking him, because it confirms his dominance over them. It teaches his audience that caring about the thoughts, desires, and feelings of one’s partner only gets in the way. Women have sex with you when they know that you can make them do it.

If ‘respect’ is defined as recognition of a partner’s capacity for coercion, then it follows that any action that shows insufficient submission to said capacity must be ‘disrespect.’ Tate teaches that a lack of leverage over a woman is a recipe for disrespect. “Imagine a girl came to you and said, ‘no matter what you do, no matter how many times you cheat, I will never never leave.’ You know all the shit you’d do? I know what I’d do!” (2:57). Tate’s contempt for

weakness and vulnerability is narcissistically projected onto others here. Because Tate views relationships as fundamentally based on dominance, a woman who is not controlled by Tate may be able to defy and therefore emasculate him. This is a terrifying prospect for him and other masculine fundamentalists. Reframing it as originating from an external source ('the woman is disrespecting me') spares the man from both having to acknowledge his internal anxiety ('I am afraid of women making me look weak') and provides an internal justification for any aggressive actions taken to quiet that fear ('I had to shout at that woman because she disrespected me'). Internalizing this definition of disrespect risks associating any perceived disregard from a woman with emasculation and fear, increasing the likelihood of gender-based violence.

Tate's practical instructions for 'ensuring respect' can be summed up as set boundaries, play the field, and always be willing to walk away. These are unremarkable, commonly given pieces of advice for young people, and that's exactly why Tate's use of them is so insidious. He reframes them to be about the need for male dominance. In doing so sets up his audience for failure in such a way as to emotionally connect women with contempt, anger, and despair. For example, his version of setting boundaries starts with him making a prospective girlfriend cut off any contact with male friends. Given what we know of Tate, this is clearly a social maneuver to establish dominance. If they agree to this condition, it signals the possibility that they will allow give up more control down the road. It's a useful test for a sex trafficker. But for his audience of young men and boys that just want to know how to get a girlfriend, it's another example of cruel optimism. They are told that part of being a man requires knowing that they are in control. Yet this advice requires them to fundamentally base intimacy on mistrust, the opposite of what healthy intimacy is based on.

Ironically, the other categories of advice, play the field and be willing to walk away are predicated on doing the opposite of what Tate makes his girlfriends do. Men should be playboys and interact with lots of different women so that they will have a wide variety of experience and know the type with which they are compatible. As a corollary to the previous advice, men must always be willing to walk away from a relationship. This willingness to leave is framed as a *weapon* that can be held over an insufficiently submissive partner as leverage. This incentivizes his followers to view relationships as disposable and interchangeable, as well as reinforcing a paranoid ideal of gender relations.

As this is the one video with Andrew Tate directly addressing the audience, I must note a similar dilemma to my Jordan Peterson section in that Tate is genuinely entertaining in a way that is appealing to the id. I like to think of it as a sort of aspirational edginess. Tate's lack of verbal restraint is extremely attractive to frustrated teenagers not just because it is funny to them but because he presents the possibility of being able to constantly satisfy one's desires no matter what the context. This, of course, aligns with hegemonic masculine ideals of male agency. From this frame of mind, even Tate bragging about being an abusive partner becomes tied to this idea of freedom. It's not about whether the viewer *wants* to be abusive, it is about how if you were a real man, you would have the *capability* of being abusive *if* you so desired.

Through these videos we have looked at Tate as guru in three contexts: Tate as self-help guru, Tate as gnostic thought leader, and Tate as guru of interpersonal relationships. Now let us synthesize them together.

### 3.3.6 Andrew Tate: Top G(oblin) – Conclusion

This was a more difficult section to write than I had previously anticipated because of how openly cruel, exploitative, and contemptuous of weakness Tate's content is. Jordan Peterson's guru-ness can be responded to based on his self-help advice, his references to academic theorists, and his presentation as rebellious truth-teller. Peterson wants to look respectable, even when the actual content of his speech aligns with right-wing extremism. Tate is not that different from Peterson with regards to ideology, but his charismatic leadership is at least partially based on a rejection of that respectability. He is openly selfish, exploitative, and cruel, and his fans love him for it.

This is not to say that he does not try and present himself as serious, such as in the clips used in "Andrew Tate's Speech NO ONE Wants to Hear – One of the Most Eye-Opening Speeches" (2022), but those moments are experienced as revelations that are accentuated by Tate's cruelty and hedonism. It reminds me of the format of the old shock-talk show *Jerry Springer* (1991). The audience was encouraged to clap and cheer as the guests fought and insulted each other. Sometimes they would take questions from the audience and the audience

would just insult one of the guests. It was all gleefully lowest common denominator TV. Yet at the end Jerry Springer himself would give a short monologue explaining the moral behind the episode. It was so bizarre and out of place, and yet because it was bizarre and out of place it felt more profound than it would otherwise. That is how Tate's guru-ness can be so effective. His advice ranges from utterly basic (you need to be willing to work hard and have discipline to achieve lasting success) to borderline malicious (it is important to be willing to leave so that you have a weapon in your relationships). Yet because it is surrounded by frivolity, that advice seems like an oasis of seriousness in a desert of immaturity (Coffeezilla; Evans, 2023). It also allows his followers to place Tate in a strange ideological superposition, like Schrodinger's guru. He is simultaneously a fun-loving playboy who enjoys edgy jokes and a wise teacher who can see beyond the Matrix into reality. Bring up a clip of Tate saying something shocking, and his followers can say "hey it's just a joke, don't take it so seriously.," yet they still treat it as if there is some reflection of truth within.

This frivolity can have lasting consequences. Even while he is unable to access social media, his legions of fans continue to make content about and featuring him. He can still post video content on Twitter (now X) that his fans spread onto social media platforms from which he is banned. His Hustler's University gift continues unabated, draining followers of time, money, and hope. Internalizing Tate's idea of manhood will have serious negative consequences for the ability of fans to socially interact with men and women, let alone have satisfying intimate relationships.

Andrew Tate's view of relationships is at best competitive, if not predatory and that extends to his followers. Tate's guru lessons are a poison chalice, meant to make his followers increasingly dependent on him as his teachings isolate them from others, and then convince them to pay Tate for the privilege. He presents the willingness to treat other people as resources for physical and economic gratification as inseparable from 'real' manhood. Surely no healthy person could believe that this is proper masculine behaviour, right?

Unfortunately, as with Jordan Peterson, Tate is working off associations that 'mainstream' society has with the hegemonic masculine ideal. If they didn't have as much pre-existing 'stickiness,' so to speak, then Tate would have had a much harder time convincing his followers that he knew how to be a man. The affective networks he would have to build from

whole cloth would be quite disadvantageous for his sort of low effort manosphere guru set-up. Thus, to look at Andrew Tate and his influence over his fans and then pretend at confusion for where his success could come from is blindness. Tate is doing what he always does. He finds pre-existing things and then exploits them. In this case, it's hegemonic masculinity. He's just willing to discard respectability and focus on the signifiers of masculine power that are associated by our culture with affects of confidence, desire, and security.

Another interesting thing is that I noticed an element of masochism in Tate's audience. An example of this is a short but notable clip in "Andrew Tate on the Matrix in 8 Minutes" (2022). In it Tate shouts at the audience that if his headstone and any given audience member's headstones were beside each other in a cemetery, everyone would look at his and ignore the other's. This is "because you're fucking average, and there's nothing worse on this planet than Mr. Fucking Average" (0:50). Tate's charismatic authority is reinforced through a masochistic relationship with his audience. Psychoanalysis provides an insightful perspective on how and why this is effective and masochism's place in the manosphere and mainstream masculine performance.

I am not a specialist in psychoanalysis, so I will keep this relatively brief and likely painfully broad to more learned readers. First, note that I am specifically referring to 'moral masochism' (Corveth, 2021; Berliner, 1958) rather than masochism for sexual gratification. In moral masochism, one seeks out or accepts pain because for whatever reason, the subject believes they deserve it. Often this originates in the superego due to a perceived failure to measure up to a social norm or other standard. Berliner believed that masochism could be traced back to one's primary caregiver not giving enough love and attention, yet because the subject still has that attachment to the caregiver, they constantly and futilely attempt to draw that love from them. Because their caregiver chiefly gives them criticism and rejection, they mistake criticism and rejection *for* love. Eventually they can become addicted to this quixotic quest to the point where they unconsciously attach themselves to people who also can't or won't love them back while rejecting those who are willing and able to, because a relationship without criticism and rejection is loveless to the subject.

This provides an interesting parallel with hegemonic masculine norms and Tate in particular. There is a far higher chance of experiencing that lack of affection in favour of

criticism and withdrawal from a masculine role model because emotional withdrawal is *a masculine norm*. Consider all the male characters in media who express affection in the form of criticism or so-called ‘tough love’ and are depicted as being right to do so. I would propose that the masochistic relationship described in the previous paragraph is *far* more normalized between young men and boys and masculine role models than between other role model relationships. Tate’s fandom is attracted to him in part because many young men are already used to interpreting emotional withdrawal, criticism, and other painful interactions from the men in their lives as being expressions of love and affections, done to ‘toughen them up.’ From this perspective, even the abuse of trust through Tate’s Hustler’s University gift can be transformed into an expression of love. This is yet another example of the difficulty of convincing fans to detach from exploitative or reactionary gurus being tied to how the guru in some ways exemplify the mainstream norms the gurus claim to be rebelling against. The difference between Tate demeaning his audience and a father communicating with their son chiefly through grunts and criticism is that Tate is ruder about it. The father, from Berliner’s (1958) perspective is merely setting up his son to run into the arms of Tate or another abusive relationship later.

There is also an additional relationship between masochism and the manosphere that is less specific to Tate. Moral masochism can be connected to a conflict between the subject’s performance compared to the standards internalized within the superego. Masochism in this case uses pain to expiate the guilt of failing to ‘measure up’ to that standard. Since so much of the manosphere is focused on achieving that ever-elusive state of being secure in their reactionary view of manhood, much of the audience that seeks out manosphere content do so because they already view themselves as a failure. This opens them up to tolerating pain from manosphere influencers, such as say, being ripped off by online courses.

It is striking how similar this masochistic interaction within the manosphere and Tate in particular, is to the pick-up culture (or PUA scene) practice known as ‘negging’ (Green, Kukan and Tully, 2017). This negging comparison is particularly apt for a few reasons: First, the PUA scene is a core part of the manosphere, and this demonstrates how both philosophical and pragmatic elements of the manosphere can bleed into each other, as shown in the fig. 2 image (Han and Yin, 2022). Secondly, it provides a novel perspective on how Tate forms connections with his audience. The young men and boys that engage with Tate do so not only to vicariously

experience masculine privilege and power, but also because Tate plays on their insecurities to make him appear wiser and more authoritative in contrast. Third, it illustrates a direct connection between Tate's sexual trafficking practice and his Hustler's University grift. Just as Tate and his associates used sexual and emotional abuse to coerce his 'girlfriends' into engaging in online sex work for Tate's personal enrichment (Bassett, 2022), vulnerable fans are subjected to an undermining of their self-worth to make them more receptive to seeing Hustler's University as their only chance at making something of themselves. Tate sees vulnerable people as targets for exploitation via affective attachment and coercion. This is not meant to imply that someone being grifted into joining Hustler's University is equivalent to the trauma and abuse suffered by his trafficking victims. However, it does demonstrate another context wherein exploitative relationships are deliberately cultivated by Tate.

But I grow tired of Andrew Tate. I would like to go now to our final manosphere subject. Unlike the previous subjects, this guru shuns the spotlight, only appearing via audio dialog over clips from various media. Despite this lack of physical presence for his followers to emotionally invest in, he has managed to gain a modestly successful following (1.02m followers as of August 2023). We are going to examine "FarFromWeak."

### 3.4 FarFromWeak: Ghost Dad

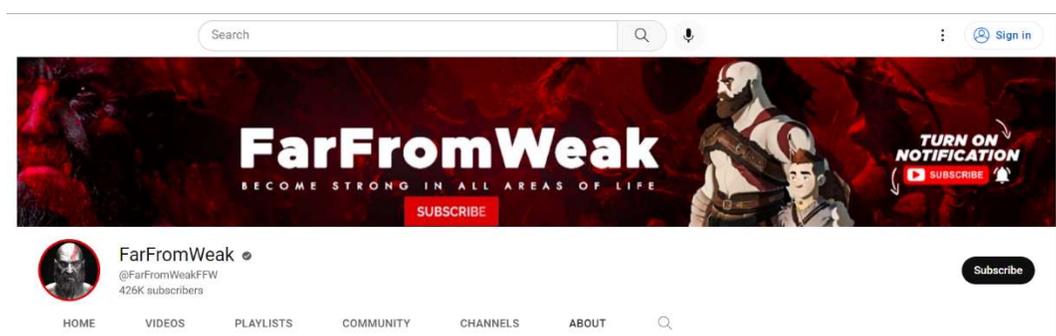


Figure 40 Header of FFW's YouTube Channel

FarFromWeak (called FFW from now on) is a ghost, his teachings spread through his gravelly-voiced recitation of hegemonic masculine attributes set to clips of anime, popular 'manly' figures in media, and stock footage.

Something that is interesting about FFW is his use of visual clips in concert with his narration. This audio-visual combo has been featured in a few of the videos already, you might say. However, unlike the symbiotic videos featuring Jordan Peterson and Andrew Tate, these are done under the direction of FFW himself. One could argue that the affective association between the visuals chosen in "Andrew Tate on the Matrix in 8 Minutes" (2022) does not reflect the intended meaning of the audio clips of Andrew Tate. Here no such argument can be made.

This format provides advantages and disadvantages for maintaining affective relationships between with his followers. Obviously, eschewing a focus on one's offline physicality makes it difficult to branch out from online media. Jordan Peterson can give interviews to newspapers and magazines, do speaking engagements, appear at conventions and other media events. It also precludes the ability to centre one's authority in one's own body like Andrew Tate does. Tate's charismatic authority is in part justified by his physical fitness and kickboxing career. Tate can show off his Bugatti and then demand to know what colour yours is. Their followers can feel those positive associations from seeing the masculinity-achieving body of the teacher in any context, no matter what Tate says or does.

FFW can't access that attachment to his embodied self. However, it allows him to have complete control over how he is presented to his followers, including taking advantage of pre-existing affective associations with figures that have no actual connection to FFW. This is particularly the case with Kratos from the 2018 *God of War* and *God of War: Ragnarök* (2022), the Norse duology where he has a beard. FFW's YouTube page and personal website are covered in signifiers and imagery relating to Kratos, as is FFW's presentation within the videos. His voice, the chief interface with his audience, is low and gravelly, clearly meant to imitate Kratos' own voice. This allows FFW to eschew having to put effort into his physical presentation. He doesn't have to maintain an exercise routine to look buff and manly, for example. Another advantage is it allows him to easily reinvent himself in response to external conditions. If Kratos suddenly becomes less popular, he can switch to a different figure to tie their presentation style to.

That said, a change from Kratos would be more difficult for FFW than simply swapping some images around and speaking in a different tone of voice. He is using the Kratos design from the last two titles in the series because those games are thematically based around fatherhood and self-improvement via Kratos's relationship with his son, Atreus.

FFW uses game footage to frame his videos as Kratos giving Atreus advice about manhood. This shapes the parasocial relationship that FFW builds with his followers into a paternal context, with the audience occupying the position of Atreus listening to his father's advice.

*God of War* (2018) is chiefly about Kratos learning to allow himself to become more emotionally connected with Atreus, reflected in his greater willingness to, for example, express affection through touch as the game progresses. This is a useful narrative for a guru to tie themselves to when trying to attract a following of lonely younger men. Yet FFW's presentation



Figure 41 Kratos (and by extension FFW) being presented as a paternal figure

makes it impossible for his audience to attain the same father-son emotional connection that he clearly wants to associate himself with. Part of this is the distance inherent to parasocial relationships. However, FFW embraces an additional layer of distance by making his entire presentation a facade. His speech is an imitation of the tone and cadence of Kratos, perhaps even digitally altered, and his visual ‘self’ is a patchwork of different media properties. It is ironic that he should associate himself with a narrative about breaking hypermasculine norms around emotional vulnerability when FFW’s entire online self is a phantom, a ‘ghost dad.’

FFW has, predictably, found a way to monetize his followers’ attachment to him with the same type of audience pipeline Tate uses. He offers a fitness course which promises to, as the link indicates, triple your testosterone through a series of exercise regimes, lifestyle changes, and mindset training (TRIPLE YOUR TESTOSTERONE, 2023) This is the same style of grift as Hustler’s University, albeit with a primary focus achieving manhood via physical development as opposed to financial wealth. While the webpage is technically outside of the research focus of this dissertation, it is important to understand how grifters like Andrew Tate and FFW use the platform. To these gurus, YouTube is useful for advertising their teachings and pulling followers closer to the reactionary views that inform those teachings, as well as building affective attachments through parasocial relationships. However, YouTube cannot be the *end point* of this relationship. Relying solely on YouTube leaves the guru vulnerable to demonetization, being sanctioned under community guidelines, or more likely simply being left behind by competition or the dreaded YouTube algorithm. On the other hand, a follower who has decided to pay their own money to be exposed to more of a guru’s teaching has demonstrated a willingness to make that emotional investment a financial one as well. In an ideal world, the risk inherent in financial investment would make one more likely to withdraw. Unfortunately, the sunk cost fallacy and the nature of cruel optimism means the opposite is often true.

While reading this analysis, keep in mind the voice that FFW is attempting to imitate. Kratos has a gravelly voice, like rocks tumbling out of someone’s lips. Even without recognizing it as Kratos, it carries this impression of power, stoicism, and potential aggression (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Furthermore, I should also be clear that Kratos’ design and presentation remains a product of an industry that continues to privilege hegemonic masculine norms over other intersections of identity (Behm-Morawitz, 2017), particularly with regards to media

representation. The narrative of *God of War* (2018) and *God of War: Ragnarök* (2022) wants the player to meditate on the havoc that Kratos' aggression has wrecked on both himself and the world and how Kratos can and by extension all of us must learn to "be better" (2018;2022). But that conflict is irrelevant to FFW's purpose because the ludic experience of inhabiting Kratos still aligns with the masculine ideal of being a big badass hero who gets to righteously commit massive violence to protect the weak.

This is not to say that the narrative is ineffective or disingenuous in its effort to interrogate toxic masculine traits in video game protagonists. However, let us consider how the gameplay, the chief source of sense-impressions from the game, *feels* like. Excitement from engaging in violence, a rush of satisfaction and power from successfully defeating opponents through superior skill, accompanied by luxuriously crafted animations of bloody death. This skill is required to complete the game, and the better you are at killing as Kratos, the easier it is to progress through it. This is a classic case of ludonarrative dissonance, a term for when the gameplay experience conflicts with the narrative a video game is trying to express. Here, the narrative is that Kratos' character development and self-actualization is a result of relying less on aggression, and more on connecting with others, the *gameplay* rewards the player for doing the same things Kratos always has. FFW is tapping into those *ludic* memories of Kratos, how badass it felt to play as him. Now Kratos (or FFW in a Kratos costume) offers to show them how to be that cool in real life by learning to conform to masculine fundamentalism. Let us now examine how FFW attempts to do so in the context of three of his videos.

#### 3.4.1 Video - "Why High Value Men IGNORE Women" (FarFromWeak, 2022.)



Figure 42 Thumbnail for "Why High Value Men IGNORE Women"

Much like the Andrew Tate video “Andrew Tate Explains Why Women Lose Respect For You” (2022), this thumbnail depicts female sexuality as a figure of paradoxical fear and desire, and not in the fun kinky way. We discussed how research around ‘hypergamy’ is taken out of context and mis-used by the manosphere through evidence-based misogyny (Rothermel, 2023), as well as how imagery of sexual desire from or towards women could be twisted into a source of fear of being emasculated. However, I would like to take use the opportunity afforded to us by this thumbnail to discuss more abstract ways that female sexuality is constructed as threat or distraction. A fundamental part of the hegemonic masculine ideal is the (assumed) ability for men to be impervious to the outside world. Femininity, defined by what masculinity is *not*, must conversely be associated with a sense of vulnerability and penetration by the outside world, as pointed out by Sara Ahmed in her discussion of xenophobic discourse describing ‘open borders’ in feminized terms (2004). Yet in this thumbnail framing, with the woman’s hungry mouth and tongue seeming to invite the viewer to penetrate *her*, we have a vision of feminine desire and even sexual success as a trap. It encourages the viewer to perceive feelings of sexual desire triggered by women as justification to resent the woman who intentionally nor not, triggered said erotic feelings and thus has affected (pun intended) the masculine subject. It is a strange inversion of the assumed desire for sexual gratification one would expect from FFW’s audience, especially younger ones. This image should logically suggest an object of sexual desire likewise desiring the viewer. Instead, the context around it is built to make this aspirational image a source of resentment and frustration. The message is this: Women can and will use their sexual wiles to control you, and you must ignore them if you are to remain unbreakable and unwavering.

It recalls incel discourse, where women are resented both for their refusal to give the sexual pleasure the incels believe they are entitled to and for how the sight of their bodies brings that sexual frustration to the mental fore. ‘Women put their bodies on display,’ the resentful impulse says, ‘to constantly remind me of what I cannot have.’ Bear in mind that when I mean ‘bodies on display,’ I mean the existence of sexually attractive women in the same space that our hypothetical incel occupies. Whether the women ‘want’ to be seen as objects of sexual desire or not, their physical presence brings the incel back to awareness of their intolerable state of self-perceived emasculation, a connection to psychoanalysis which will be further explored in the conclusion.

One can see how being instructed with big harsh text to ‘start ignoring her’ could be attractive. If women are going to keep ignoring them, then that will just give them a leg up on self-improvement, allowing them to turn refusing to engage with women (or perhaps simply feeling too shy or socially interacting for other reasons) from a sign of effeminacy to a performance of masculinity. It’s not that you can’t talk to girls, it’s just that you’re too focused and rational to waste time on them.

The term high-value man engages with the hypergamy concept in a more explicitly neoliberal capitalist way. Because women are believed to be instinctively compelled to ‘mate upwards,’ someone who is ‘high value’ (for whatever definition of value, usually it is attached to signs of hegemonic masculinity, although not always physical ones) will have greater sexual success with more physically attractive women than someone of ‘lower value.’ Those women will also be less likely to find another ‘higher-value man’ that they could leave them for, easing fear of emasculation through loss of women to control. Men and women are defined by their place in a sexual marketplace, where emotional and physical intimacy is reduced to trying to calculate which side can ‘get the best deal’ instead of looking for compatibility. Although the high-value man is merely better able to hold onto women, they are still treated as inherently untrustworthy and heartless slaves to instinct. The high-value man is simply able to accumulate enough signifiers of high-value to keep a desired woman too distracted to look for competition, nowhere is it implied that either really *love* each other, it’s just transactional. The concept of the high-value man also sees use as a theatre of dominance over women for a red-pill audience, such as with recently deceased Manosphere influencer Kevin Samuels. One of his signature segments was a call-in show where women would call in to have Samuels essentially rip into the personal flaws that made them undeserving of a high-value man (Missouri, 2022), to the vicarious delight of his mostly male audience.

The chief affective associations that FFW is working to create/reinforce is women + contempt, FFW + dad narrator, and stoicism/emotional withdrawal from women as performance of masculinity. As shown in figure 43, FFW often uses anime footage to emphasize narrative content, as opposed to the live-action visuals used in the similarly formatted Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson videos. If FFW is aiming for young ‘geeky’ men, then it makes sense to use anime imagery. It also does provide a way to visually distinguish his content from other manosphere motivation videos.

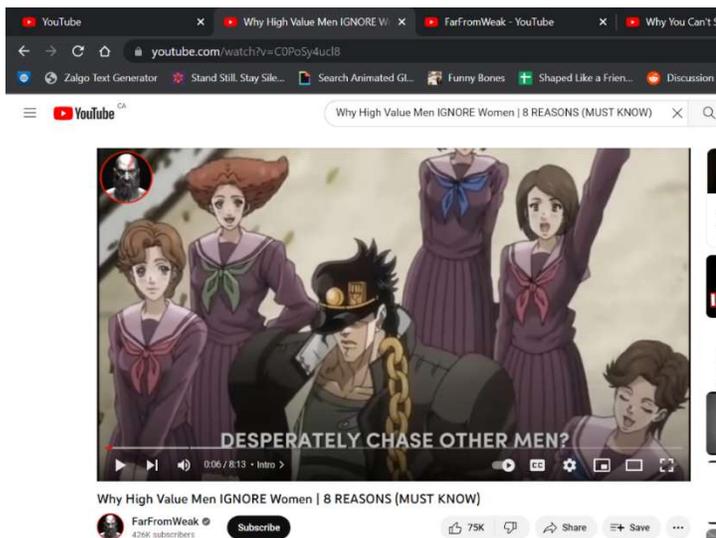


Figure 43 Despite being 16, Jotaro Kujo demonstrates his high-value status through his physical size and dismissal of women.

Although the visuals are overwhelmingly taken from other media, it is vital to note that, much like FFW’s use of Kratos, the audience is not meant to place those visuals within the narrative context of the media they are taken from. Instead, they are meant to only hold meaning within their immediate visual signifiers as contextualized by FFW’s narration.

For example, the picture shown in Fig 56 is of Jotaro Kujo from *Jojo’s Bizarre Adventure: Stardust Crusaders*. That image is shown while FFW talks about women desperately chasing ‘bad boys.’ However, Jotaro Kujo is the main protagonist and hero of *Stardust Crusaders*. He’s a bit rough around the edges but certainly not bad. He is also not interested in these women and finds them annoying. If anything, Jotaro should be a model for how high-value men ignore women. A viewer knowing that context would be confused by this narration. It works better if you just think of each image as holding as much meaning as a poorly written alt-text for the visually impaired: ‘large strong man dressed like a punk is surrounded by excited schoolgirls.’ In that sense he works as a stand-in for the envied sexually successful bad boy archetype. Don’t think about the deeper implications! Just listen to your gut from what you immediately see! There’ll be another disconnected visual in a second anyway.

FFW's subtitles anchor the connection between the audio and the visuals. More than any other part of the video, the consistency of the subtitles is what allows the viewer to follow FFW's overall narrative, making it appear more coherent and thus more memorable than the carousel of imagery would otherwise allow.

Here, the opening statement of why women chase 'bad boys' ends with FFW stating that "if you think the answer is money or looks, you are delusional" (0:08). Looks and wealth are often the assumed hegemonic masculine path to sexual success. Look at Andrew Tate's teachings, for example. FFW draws in followers this way by A) stating that those means are false and B) tantalizingly implying that he knows the true way to get women. This is particularly attractive to viewers who feel unattractive and unable to become wealthy. This true way, it turns out, is that "high-value men know how to ignore women" (0:29).

Ignoring women in this context is not *about* ignoring women, as odious as that would already be. It is presented more as a psychological tactic; by ignoring women, they are starved of precious attention and thus forced to get it directly from the ignorer. FFW promises followers a way to experience a form of masculine power by making women approach *them*, placing them under their control, another example of PUA mentality.

Now, I would like to offer some grace to the audience and allow that a less toxic motivation for following this advice could be that approaching a prospective romantic partner is extremely stressful. Masculinity is extremely precarious, and since part of masculinity is romantic and sexual success, any rejection could be interpreted as a loss of masculine identity (Vandellos, 2008). The fear of emasculation, which can have actual social consequences if it occurs in view of social peers, can keep men with low confidence from even attempting to ask a woman out. This is particularly the case for neurodivergent people like me, who have an even more challenging time engaging in accepted gender performance due to alienation stemming from the effects of their disabilities (First as Tragedy, 2022). One does not have to resent women to find the prospect of a woman approaching them to express romantic interest appealing. I bring this up to remind readers that watching a video like this does not inherently require a radicalized mindset. Someone entering a search as benign as 'how can I make girls notice me' could easily come across this video, which promises distinct and structured instructions on how to socially interact.

FFW structures these reasons into the following eight categories:

- Mind Games
  - Busy With Their Purpose
  - Be Bold
  - Know How to Be Alone
  - Ignore Her
  - Be Direct
  - Don't Change Your Plans For Her Mindset
- (FarFromWeak, 2022)

This list further reinforces my interpretation that the true purpose of this video is to provide rationalizations for existing negative affects towards women rather than actually providing useful information. Consider how incoherent these 8 reasons are, for example. The first reason, 'mind games,' encourages viewers to constantly act inconsistently to keep their partner uncertain about how stable their relationship is, emotionally abusing them to 'keep them humble.' Thus, encouraging women to go out of their way to please their man out of sheer anxiety. This already contradicts the stated goal of teaching viewers to 'ignore women,' because this mind game requires you to act inconsistently, rather than ignore someone consistently. But it doesn't matter because that is mutually exclusive with the next reason, 'busy with their purpose.' Here, high value men are described as ignoring women because they are too busy with long-term goals, self-improvement, and so on. So, are we ignoring women to trick them into noticing us or are we just actually ignoring women? Regardless, 'busy with their purpose' is contradicted yet again by 'be bold,' which can be summed up as take risks instead of being passive, don't be afraid to approach a woman if you see one. So now we're just not ignoring women at all. It's a mess!

I have only described three of the eight reasons thus far, and they are mutually exclusive with each other. This is a demonstration of how many guru teachings are expressed in contradictory vagaries that sound profound. Yet an audience that is caught in a relationship of cruel optimism with FFW must believe that FFW's special guru wisdom will somehow reconcile those contradictions. An example of how he does this is when he claims "...being passive is the way of the woman and not the way of the man...before you can even think of ignoring a woman,

you need be able to approach them like a man first” (3:53). The sentence hits the sort of cadence one would expect of a profound statement even if the content is nonsense. Much like how one can perceive the emotion of someone speaking in a foreign language through tone, people can also sense and internalize meaning from speech that is logically incoherent yet hit the right ‘beats’ to stimulate the affect of hearing something profound. This perception of non-actionable profundity can create a cycle after a devoted follower experiences a negative result from putting said teachings into action. Negative outcomes cause frustration and disorientation, leading them to return to the guru for a restoration of ontological security. In this way, a guru’s teachings being ineffective can paradoxically *increase* optimistic attachment in the guru rather than decreasing it. In other words, the ineffectiveness of a Jordan Peterson or Andrew Tate’s teachings may not matter to some devoted followers, because only the guru has the knowledge to judge success or failure.

Let us continue examining the list. ‘Know how to be alone’ *sounds* like the least toxic item on the list, except that it’s much pettier than self-acceptance. It’s that learning to be alone makes it easier to ignore women. Reinforcing the masculine ideal of being impervious, an island unto themselves, the man who is satisfied with being alone is paradoxically more attractive to women because they are complete in themselves. They aren’t less of a man because they don’t have a girlfriend, therefore making them more of a man! This connects to the next reason, ‘ignore her.’

FFW explains that high-value men will ignore women if they ‘start unreasonable or irrational fights.’ As women have already been framed as unnecessary to a complete man, it follows that there their needs are disposable. It is simply a matter of ‘browsing’ until a viewer finds the best lady instead of wasting time compromising to maintain a relationship. Imagine having to compromise repeatedly! This is anxiety-soothing for someone who may see compromise with women as emasculating (Vandello, et al., 2008). Emotionally shutting out their partner is a way to demonstrate dominance and control and withdraw from a stressful situation that also aligns with masculine norms. In fact, this instruction/reason can be easily merged with the next two activities on the list, which are ‘be direct,’ and ‘don’t change your plans for her.’ All three of these encourage feeling contempt for women. Take this explanation of ‘being direct’: “High value men are direct and straight-forward. For them it is better to be rejected than

to waste time playing games with a *woman* [emphasis mine]. When a woman plays games with this man, she simply gets ignored or ghosted” (FarFromWeak, 2022, 5:41). Similarly, ‘don’t change your plans for her’ is surprisingly literal. By not changing one’s desires or routines to better conform to a partner’s needs, the woman learns that they are disposable and thus subordinate.

The final item on the list, ‘mindset’ reminds the audience that “High-value men know their worth, and they know that they are attractive to women. They do not see women as superhuman creatures” (7:12). This allows them to be relaxed around women, which FFW says is “...extremely attractive to women” (7:30). This is obvious, confidence tends to be attractive. Yet placed alongside the rest of the list it sets followers up for failure. How can someone simultaneously internalize the contempt FFW would have them hold towards women yet also completely relax around them? Can they be expected to maintain that air of relaxation when faced with rejection or simple disagreement? I would guess ‘no.’ That is because, as has been amply demonstrated, this video isn’t about attracting women, it’s about indulging this sadistic desire to put women ‘in their place.’ FFW, much like Andrew Tate, wants his audience to feel that ideal masculinity requires continual demonstrations of dominance over women. As such demonstrations are impossible without engaging in emotional abuse, this ‘relaxation’ and confidence is a byproduct of having dehumanized women enough to be willing to engage in such practices.

It is interesting that the way that FFW has described the hypothetical high value man, seems like a male version of what red-pill and incel believers perceive women as. The hypergamous woman is depicted as a coldly logical being only interested in dating ‘upwards’ to satisfy mating instincts, yet the high value man is lauded for being able to ‘select whatever woman he wants.’ Women are resented for using their physical attractiveness to manipulate men to do what they want, and yet this high value man is explicitly described as using mind games to ‘humble’ his romantic partners. Now unequal gender expectations are intrinsic to the manosphere, and arbitrariness is a feature of power, not a bug. I am more interested in how, in Missouri’s words, “these men are not looking for love, they want revenge. The pursuit is not romance, it’s reprisal” (2022). Whether it is consciously known by the audience or not, the

affective experience of this video is to take pleasure in imagining a man treating women how redpill and incels perceive women as treating them.

A consistent part of incel ideology is that they are ‘nice guys,’ who have been used and discarded by women in favour of ‘bad guys.’ It is why Jordan Peterson mentions that young women are attracted to men “exhibiting Dark Triad traits” (Peterson, 2022, 4:54) when speaking to Ben Shapiro, and why FFW starts this very video with an image of an anime character showing the signifiers for a physically powerful ‘bad boy’ surrounded by women. Women who say they want a nice romantic partner are presented as liars and scam artists. One may be attracted to becoming a high value male figure in part as revenge against women. However, there is also the fact that masculinity in the manosphere is as precarious as anywhere else (Vandello, et al., 2008), and that part of the manosphere’s definition of manhood is dominance over the feminine. FFW’s advice aligns with the overall cruel optimism of the manosphere’s presentation of masculinity. Attempting to correct this is not easy, since asking someone who has internalized FFW’s definition of masculinity to ‘be nice’ to women is really asking them to constantly risk emasculation. It is not just the idea of being rejected that is emasculating, but also the idea of being tricked into being a ‘nice guy’ for a woman who will then discard them. There is even a name for men who consistently do this, ‘simp.’ This emasculation risk presents a constant source of anxiety for people who are highly invested in adhering to hegemonic masculine ideals, and it may therefore be a source of short-term relief to simply reject women outright rather than dealing with the risk of emasculation. Where would such a person go to affirm their masculinity? Back to gurus like FFW.

This video encourages his followers to see all women as simultaneously beneath consideration and requiring constant manipulation and attention. Its default affective state is that of contempt, which Tomkins described as “the mark of the oppressor” (1995) and saw as the most damaging affective state in any relationship. This is because the subject experiences the source of contempt as an object of loathing (Frank, Adam J & Wilson, Elizabeth A., 2020). Sure, it may be able to use contempt to reaffirm one’s masculinity through a sense of dominance over the feminine, for it is also the “affect of hierarchization” (2020, chapter 6), but it’s a decidedly unattractive face to show the world.

We have just gone through a video where FFW provides advice that would sabotage any romantic relationship. Now let us see how FFW ruins male friendships.

### 3.4.2 Video - “3 Signs They’re NOT Your Friends”. (FarFromWeak, 2023)



3 Signs They're NOT Your Friends

931K views • 8 months ago

Figure 44 Video Thumbnail for “3 Signs They’re NOT Your Friends.”

This video is an interesting example of manosphere discourse, because most manosphere content is focused upon reinforcing masculine domination. Instead, this video is intended to cover a relationship where both members ideally have equal standing. So how will content created for a discursive environment based around a competitive hierarchy contend with the idea of friendship? More importantly, how will FFW make the case that his audience needs intensive and expensive coaching for true male friendships? Let’s find out!

This is accomplished by telling his viewers that male relationships are rife with betrayal. He begins by saying “Do you have real friends? If you have to stop and think about it, you don’t.” (0:01). The background music is a loud humming bass while an ominous sounding choir sings in the background. The beginning visuals are from an anime called *One Piece*, with a clip that does align with what FFW is saying. It shows a character being friendly with a crew member that will later betray them. Friendship is binary, FFW tells us. You either have a ‘real’ ride or die friend or you have a traitor in waiting.

This is the main way that FFW increases the affective stakes of having a ‘real’ male friend in this video. That male part is vital as I don’t believe that FFW, or at least the video persona, believes that men and women can be friends. After all, he characterized women as

manipulative, exploitative and requiring constant vigilance to keep them in their place. To FFW, this is an incontrovertible fact. On the other hand, men can have truly equal relationships, but those friendships must be based upon absolute loyalty. He characterizes these relationships as both extremely rare, yet also common enough that everyone will eventually meet “good people” (7:02). This hopefulness highlights the precarity of friendship because this follows an entire section on ‘fake friends,’ who seem good and do good until they reveal themselves to be evil. FFW is clearly using the ‘fake friends’ concept to explain why betrayal from close friends and family cause the most emotional pain. However, it is also the opening for FFW to begin his pseudo-profound guru teachings. There is no way to distinguish a ‘fake friend’ from a real one, as their external actions are indistinguishable from a real one until the moment of ‘betrayal.’ They have been warned that any friend could be a fake friend, and there’s not really any way to tell the difference, yet they are also told that they should trust people and let them get close. But they are also told that it is better to be alone than to have fake friends (6:56). This encourages a sense of paranoia and precarity in the audience, all they know is that they will inevitably fail.

To FFW, a good friendship requires a good ‘exchange of values’ wherein each friend makes the other stronger or better in some way. He also emphasizes a need for compatible values and principles, describing it as sharing the same “code of honour” (1:33). His reasoning is that friendships based solely on shared interests will be ephemeral, because in FFW’s words, “I know it seems like they are your friends, but they are not your friends. You are all friends with the same drug” (0:53). Neither of these points are conceptually different from advice you would get anywhere. However, the language and images that FFW couches these lessons in are influenced by the underlying masculine fundamentalism that he bases his brand upon, and that in turn influences how those lessons may be internalized.

Masculine-associated qualities of rationality and productivity are evoked here when FFW describes friendship requiring an ‘exchange of value.’ FFW explains reciprocity in relationships in a way that encourages viewing friendships in a neoliberal sense that emphasizes rational categorization of different areas of value and ongoing productivity. He even gives an example of a group of friends that exchange different forms of value to “make more money together” (4:54). In this way, abstract concepts like friendship are quantified and commodified. How do you know that your friendship is a good one? You just check your list of friendship

value categories and see if they have gone up. Are you making more money, are you more fit, are you more successful with women? If so, then you know that you are in a good masculine friendship.

FFW consistently describes friendships in ways that align with masculine fantasies of physical power and danger. Take how FFW describes the consequences of bad friendships in these quotes; “Here is the truth, in any other time in history, men knew that choosing a bad friend would get them killed.” (1:21), and “It’s all fun and games while you and your fake friends are having fun, but it’s not funny anymore while you lay there dying as they have left you behind” (2:44). The emotional pain that his audience is far



Figure 45 Thor fighting Kratos, implicitly associating performance of masculine friendship with violence.

more likely to experience from a toxic or broken friendship is recontextualized as a sort of warrior experience that fits with manly ideals more than crying alone in one’s room. Meanwhile, good friendships are likewise described in terms like loyalty, codes of honour, and other terms that suggest similar masculine warrior fantasies. Even discussions of beneficial friendship practices are accompanied by violent imagery. An especially egregious example is FFW asking whether the viewers and their friends are ever “brutally honest with each other, even if the truth hurts?” while showing a clip from *God of War: Ragnarök* where Thor is fighting Kratos (3:11). Dialogue about loyalty is accompanied by Leonidas being killed by arrows in *300*. While these are not omnipresent, it is still striking how often male relationships are paired with themes of physical violence. This cannot be explained away as mere coincidence. Because this is a video purely concerned with masculine relationships, it is not just about how friends should act, but how *men* should act in their relationships with other men. That means that the advice and the imagery FFW uses must align with what he sees as the proper way to express that masculinity.

The imagery and text used by FFW in this, and other videos consistently align with the three categories of masculine ideals Kypparisiadis and Skoulas describe as existing in the manosphere (2021). Those categories are ‘classical male masculinity,’ ‘the man of honor,’ and

‘men as warriors.’ Classical male masculinity refers to an idealizing of a mythologized past version of masculinity that was able to satisfy one’s inner self, one that modern society will no longer allow to be expressed. It is seen as embodying qualities of “mastery, productivity, rationality, loyalty, honor, and courage” (206). This yearning for an ahistorical past wherein ‘men were men’ can be seen in FFW’s references to how men had to be more careful choosing their friends in the past, implying that in the present people are careless about relationships because the consequences of poorly chosen friendships are no longer fatal. It is also displayed by FFW’s use of clips from fantasy media, such as *God of War: Ragnarök*, *Lord of the Rings*, as well as anime like *Naruto* and *Berserk*, and historical dramas like *Peaky Blinders* and that manosphere favourite, *300*. The displayed imagery aligns with the idea of a now lost time when men could more easily control their surroundings and act out (assumed) masculine urges, including violence and conflict. This does not have to align with the thematic meaning of the media being shown. What is important is that when Aragorn draws his sword or Kratos is in a fight, they look cool and in control, the way that his audience of teenagers wishes they could be as well.

The man of honor is defined by his absolute loyalty to his family and surrounding environment (Kypparisiadis & Skoulas, 2021). This stems from the manosphere’s need to define masculinity as a direct contrast to the corruption of the feminine, to which they ascribe attributes of being manipulative, fickle, abusive, and egoistic (Kypparisiadis & Skoulas, 2021; Ducat, 2004). Hence, the ideal man must be loyal, straightforward, and consistent. FFW is no exception. As has been previously covered, the chief anxiety that FFW evokes in his audience is the idea of being betrayed or abandoned by friends, as opposed to the best friendship quality being loyalty. In the manosphere, whenever one is encouraged to be loyal, straightforward, and kind, there is an implicit undertone of ‘*unlike a woman.*’

Finally, the men as warriors ideal is a way of rationalizing the cultural association of masculinity with violence and making it a virtue (Kypparisiadis & Skoulas, 2021). Men *should* be violent and enjoy that violence, albeit directed in a way that adheres to the other ideals of masculinity. This association of masculinity with violence is shown in myriad ways in this video, whether through imagery or text (FarFromWeak, 2023). As already explained, FFW consistently uses imagery of battles, warriors, and violence during this video. He also describes the

consequences of poor choices in friendship in terms of physical violence as well. Betrayal is associated not with emotional or social harm, but with physical violence and death. Even the description of being honest with one's friends uses violent language. "Are you and your friends *brutally* honest with each other, even if the truth *hurts*?" (3:11). In fact, the video begins by creating an association between truth, pain, violence, and strength. Set to a clip of Kratos in a fistfight with an enemy in *God of War* (2018), FFW says "This video is very important, but it will hurt some feelings, so click away if you can't handle the truth!" (0:18). Overall, this video not only reinforces the cultural idea that part of being a 'real man' is being at risk of physical violence. It also implies that masochism is an important part of manhood.

FFW's evaluation of true vs fake male friendship gives a perspective into what the manosphere values in relationships between men, as opposed to relationships between men and women. The overall affective atmosphere that FFW creates differs from the sadistic contempt and distress attached to women in the previous video. Here, the main affect is anxiety, a low-intensity subcategory of the fear-terror affect wherein the actual source of that fear cannot be perceived (Tomkins, 2008). Specifically, anxiety around fake friends. Although FFW assures viewers that there are people worth being friends with, he does not provide a way to distinguish between good and bad friends. The most consistent measurement of friendship quality he provides are loyalty and the ability to provide 'value' to members of that friendship. Both of those measurements are likely to cause an increase in anxiety with regards to any given person's friendships if internalized. The depth of someone's loyalty cannot be measured before it is evaluated, for example. The idea of relationship 'value' introduces a sense of precarity. If one is concerned about providing value and evaluating the value of one's friends, then they must constantly evaluate whether they are providing enough value, and of the right kind. This has an interesting parallel with the precarious nature of manhood itself (Vandello, et al., 2008). Much like masculinity, friendship must be continuously projected, defended, and reinforced, as it may be lost in a single moment of weakness. Now part of this is just the nature of human relationships. Friendships can end in single intense moments of conflict. Yet making value evaluation a fundamental part of friendship for a young audience encourages an idea of friendship as inherently transactional, a 'but what have you done for me lately' kind of thing. Furthermore, unquestioning loyalty and transactional value are qualities that contradict each other. You cannot have someone's back no matter what while simultaneously constantly

evaluating whether that relationship is advantageous for you. Finally, the fixation on these fantasies of physical consequences for bad friendships draws attention from the more masculinity-threatening but far more useful conversations of the emotional experiences of conflicts between friends for a young audience.

However, such discussions would ruin the atmosphere that FFW is trying to create. This isn't about improving relationships; this is about a fantasy of what 'real' manly relationships are like, one that has little in common with reality. As this video is based upon fantasy, the lessons therein will inevitably fail when applied to reality. This will lead to greater social isolation and affective negativity. Frankly, playing through *God of War: Ragnarök* would genuinely provide more useful lessons and emotional grounding regarding masculine relationships than what FFW provides.

We have gotten a look at how FFW wants his audience to feel about relationships with women and friendships with men, but what about how his audience should feel about themselves? The next video will provide an example of how his brand of masculinity guru mentorship engages with self-improvement.

It is for this reason that I find the prospect of FFW and other reactionary creators integrating practical advice in some ways more concerning than Andrew Tate's cruelty masquerading as edgy humour or Jordan Peterson's pseudo-academic rambling. This is material that can lead to short-term positive outcomes on a personal scale, while still being attached to hateful ideologies that can have long-term negative consequences both for the viewer and for those around them.

### 3.4.3 Video - "5 Masculine Habits That FIX 99% of Your Problems." (FarFromWeak, 2023)



Figure 46 Video Thumbnail for "5 MASCULINE Habits That FIX 99% Of Your Problems"

This video demonstrates that, unlike Andrew Tate, whose brand is inextricable from misogynistic sadism, FFW can create content that does not have to be misogynist. The five habits that FFW describes are ‘rule your mind,’ ‘make money,’ ‘exercise daily,’ ‘natural foods,’ and ‘one problem at a time’ (FarFromWeak, 2023). These are not fundamentally anti-social and illustrates the most insidious element of FFW’s manosphere guru style. Much like Peterson, it is difficult to explain to people unfamiliar with media analysis and right-wing rhetoric, let alone a teenager, how someone telling you to exercise daily can be harmful. This makes it easier to normalize FFW’s rhetoric and thus integrate him and similar influencers into existing positive affective networks, particularly if the advice should happen to prove effective.

I will briefly contextualize how FFW describes the five masculine habits so we can quickly move onto the meat of the discussion, where I can enjoy making surface-level wellness industry advice problematic. ‘Rule your mind’ refers to engaging in mindfulness exercises like meditation sessions to improve focus and decrease anxiety. ‘Make money’ is exactly what it sounds like and is the least tangibly helpful section. I think exhorting someone to make money is problematic but I’m a socialist, so of course I would. ‘Exercise daily’ is about the importance of daily exercise for physical and mental health. ‘Natural foods’ tells his audience about eating mindfully and avoiding junk food. Finally, ‘one problem at a time’ advice viewers to focus on working on one life challenge at a time to avoid the paralysis that can occur if one tries to solve everything at once. Again, not much to really object to here. The issue, as I gestured to in the

beginning, is how these lessons are packaged.

One might note that a lot of these habits do not immediately strike someone as being the manliest in isolation. ‘Make money’ is the closest aligned to hegemonic masculine ideals, but otherwise they all require a bit of massaging to make them into the explicitly manly habits FFW describes them as in the title. This presents a minor challenge for FFW because his content must at least feel as if it belongs within manosphere discourse to satisfy his audience. Thus, he will need to make his audience perceive practices like mindfulness or eating healthy as essential expressions of rejecting femininity. This is that insidiousness I was talking about. One cannot operate in the manosphere discourse without engaging in the reactionary rhetoric that saturates it.

For example, let us examine how FFW explains the need for these five habits by introducing a binary between his viewers and ‘most men.’ This is done by stating that “most men whine and complain about their problems like a little girl. Pathetic!” (FarFromWeak, 0:05). While he says this, footage of food streamer Nikocado Avocado (real name Nicholas Perry) crying in a bathroom plays. This is a powerful affective and rhetorical combo for the internalization of hegemonic masculinity. Nikocado has a reputation for displays of emotions and behaviour that manosphere influencers are contemptuous of. His videos often feature him eating unhealthy amounts of food while crying, or arguing with his boyfriend (Assarch, Mendez, II, Cheong, Lloyd, 2023). His reputation in the right-wing online sphere fits the image of men castrated by modernity. To his viewers, the affective image evoked is that most men have likewise become soft, weak, and pathetic. The viewers are special because they have the wisdom to listen to gurus like FFW and thus learn the ‘hidden knowledge’ that society has denied them.



Figure 47 Nikocado Avocado as embodiment of castrated male

FFW defining these practices as being specifically masculine encourages a false dichotomy wherein not just those habits, but the results thereof are seen as intrinsically masculine as well. Take mindfulness for example, if someone is taught that mindfulness is an intrinsic habit of masculinity, then it would make sense that only men can be expected to have the qualities that are associated with mindfulness. Mindfulness is associated with emotional control, reason, and perceptiveness. These are all qualities that are associated with men in mainstream culture. However, mindfulness is also culturally associated with greater ability to clearly communicate emotions, and being less violent and angry, which are associated with cultural expectations of femininity. FFW, Tate, and others avoid this contradiction by focusing on related concepts in Stoicism (Love, 2021). The use of the aesthetics of Mediterranean Antiquity is a common feature in right-wing discourse (Zuckerberg, 2018), so a philosophy developed in Ancient Greece fits right in. It's not about that soft mindfulness done by suburban moms during yoga class; this puts it in the mold of the classical male archetype described by Kypparisiadis & Skoulas (2021)! This allows manosphere influencers to contextualize mindfulness practices in a way that elides any possible non-masculine associations.

FFW's rhetoric around "controlling your mind" is the same hyper-individualistic presentation as any life problems being the result of insufficient willpower and discipline as Andrew Tate, which I will not bore you by discussing in detail again. What is interesting is how these discourses about self-control provide opportunities to engage in masculine sovereignty through masochism. This is centred in FFW saying that the worst part of failing to control oneself is "...you won't even blame yourself" (1:31). While footage of a slightly overweight man eating a burger plays, FFW asks "When is the last time you heard a broke man admit that it is his own fault he is broke...or an obese man say that he's a fat pig who eats too much?" (1:38). The language used evokes disgust and contempt, using terms like 'broke' and 'fat pig.' In the world of FFW and the manosphere a man's inner self and capabilities are sovereign, and external reality theirs to shape. To say that anything is not their fault would be to admit that there are

forces beyond individual choice, which would mean acknowledging vulnerability. FFW and other manosphere gurus need the poor man and the obese man to admit that those are personal failings, because otherwise they must contemplate the reality that the whims of fate could do that to them as well.

Part of the attraction of this message is the same Freudian masochistic impulse described by Corveth (2021), to which I referred in the Andrew Tate conclusion. Subjects try to gain vicarious approval of a masculine model by agreeing that yes, they are a fat pig, and now they will listen to their advice. However, there is also an underpinning of hope and agency in the moral masochist experience of believing that one's problems are purely of one's own making. If someone is obese because they live in an area with poor access to fresh and nutritious food and a low-paying job that requires long hours without much opportunity to engage in physical exercise, there really is not much they can do. But if they are obese because they are, in FFW's words, a "fat pig who eats too much," then they just need to put down that Big Mac. In other words, believing you have made yourself a fat slob means believing that only you are powerful enough to have made you that fat slob, which means that your agency is still sovereign. You have the power to make yourself a man, no matter how inaccessible the means to eat and exercise are to you. Considering how hyper-individualized society already is, and the masculine ideals already internalized throughout their childhood, it is not difficult to imagine that the average young male viewer would find this line of thought easier and more acceptable to internalize than how systemic factors have led to poverty and/or obesity, despite how demeaning the rhetoric is.

The 'making money' section has the least practical advice. It's more about emotionally connecting one's legitimacy as a man to the accumulation of wealth. There is an interesting sort of emotional connection that FFW tries here though. He states that "As a man, you need to make money. It is one of your duties as a provider" (4:30), but the imagery displayed is of Andrew Tate smoking cigars and enjoying masculine-coded luxuries. Wealth as duty vs wealth as source of pleasure, these should contradict each other. However, consider how often rhetoric around masculine privilege is justified with reference to duty. How often have both the gurus and prophets analyzed in this very text externalized fear at the loss of privilege by claiming it would destroy society? Imagine then, that a viewer is being encouraged by FFW to see masculine duty, privilege, and pleasure as inextricably connected. Men are supposed to make money to provide

for their family, and in so doing they deserve to enjoy the privileges of power that come with it.

In the section on nutrition, FFW immediately doubles down on establishing that eating healthy is a form of masculine performance. Nikocado Avocado is shown eating a variety of unhealthy fast food just before FFW says that “you are not a little kid or a woman having hormonal mood swings. As a man eat only with intent!” (6:58). Nikocado is once again being used to signify the masculinity castrated through infantilization. This time he signifies infantilization/effeminacy by connection to misogynistic stereotypes of femininity as being indicative of lack of self-control on an emotional, mental, or physical level. This also continues the narrative of justifying male supremacy. Little kids and women occupy the same level of agency within reactionary gender ideology. Both must be controlled for their own good because only a man can ‘eat only with intent.’ That is to say, think and act rationally. This fits with the associations of hegemonic masculinity with logic and emotional stoicism (Connel, 2005; Ahmed, 2004), and how that manifests in relationships where the agency of women and children are both treated as secondary concerns.

The final part was surprisingly unproblematic. It is called ‘one problem at a time.’ FFW advises his viewers to not allow themselves to get overwhelmed with all the issues they are facing, which can lead to paralysis. Instead, FFW gives them a workable strategy. He recommends that every evening, they should write out a single problem that they are going to fix the next day and then concentrate solely on working towards that goal. I cannot find much fault in that practice, it is one of the many strategies I use when I feel overwhelmed myself. The reason why this video is particularly troublesome with regards to affective alignment with manosphere discourse is that someone without any previous knowledge of these kinds of life practices may be unable to distinguish what is relevant to these actions then what is not. FarFromWeak’s audience is likely to already be significantly affectively invested in the maintenance of fundamentalist masculinity because that is the audience he goes out of his way to attract. Thus, any positive results from the advice given in this video and the concepts discussed therein will likewise be connected to FarFromWeak and by extension to hegemonic masculinity in general. The thinking could go like this: ‘FarFromWeak taught me how to use mindfulness techniques to become calmer and less anxious. He told me that mindfulness is a masculine technique. These mindfulness techniques have really helped me. Therefore, FarFromWeak’s

instructions about how to be a man are correct.’

It is for this reason that I find the prospect of FFW and other reactionary creators integrating practical advice to in some ways be more concerning than Andrew Tate’s cruelty masquerading as edgy humour or Jordan Peterson’s pseudo-academic rambling. This is material that can lead to short-term positive outcomes on a personal scale, while still being attached to hateful ideologies that can have long-term negative consequences both for the viewer and for those around them.

#### 3.4.4 FarFromWeak Conclusion: Ghost Dad of Hyperreality

From a purely rhetorical standpoint, FarFromWeak should be a very uninteresting guru figure. He doesn’t bring anything new to the table with regards to content outside of him intentionally connecting himself to Kratos as a sort of online persona. In fact, there is very little to FarFromWeak at all. He is intentionally chasing trends that other more popular manosphere influencers use instead of expressing his own opinions. His real-life identity is a mystery, as is his true appearance. His rhetoric is bland red-pill misogyny regurgitated from subreddits and other social media, mixed with some gestures towards anodyne self-help advice. His work is carried more by ominous background music, a Kratos impression, and clips from media and anime than the actual content of his speech. His grift is uninspired, a pale imitation of Hustlers University, just with an emphasis on physical fitness instead of wealth accumulation. He has neither the asshole-charisma of Andrew Tate nor the academic pedigree of Jordan Peterson but is clearly trying to imitate both. This derivativeness is, strangely also why he ended up being my favourite subject of study for this dissertation, in the same sense that one could theoretically have a ‘favorite’ car accident.

Understand that I refer to FarFromWeak as ‘ghost dad’ not merely as a reference to an obscure Bill Cosby movie. It is a commentary on how FFW has cobbled together a moderately successful YouTube career by making of himself a Baudrillardian hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1981). This has some serious implications for parasocial affective connections with an audience because it demonstrates how it is possible to induce affective connections that are purely one-way and completely mediated. FFW gives nothing of himself to the audience. All the signifiers

that he places in his content that are meant to indicate his reality do not *actually point towards anyone that exists*. Even his voice is an imitation of a fictional character.

Now it is true that Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson's content are also heavily manipulated. Their presentation is calculated to maximize engagement and attachment from their audience, be it through speech, stagecraft, or action. However, Tate and Peterson still present themselves as flesh and blood figures for media consumption. Their physical appearance is an essential part of their brand. The, for lack of a better term, guru-force that they exude towards their audience is invested within their bodies. This is because an important part of being a guru is the creation of an attachment in their audience via something only the guru can provide. Considering how difficult it is to provide something unique; the simplest signifier of uniqueness is the guru's body. We see this with Andrew Tate, where the strength and fitness of his body provides all the validation that his teachings require. The spectacle of Tate's body smoking cigars, driving expensive cars, sitting with beautiful women, and still retaining a powerful physique embodies a fantasy for his audience to aspire to through emulating him. Likewise, we see the body of Jordan Peterson speaking to crowds of people who hang on his every word like it was water in a desert. If not crowds, then he appears among other intellectuals or is at least spoken to as if he is an intellectual. Jordan Peterson gets respect and legitimacy from those around him, as his cadence and rhetoric sound profound to the untrained ear. His embodied self is also a promise to his followers. This embodiment of teachings makes certain that the guru's followers see those teachings as inseparable from the guru, thus maintaining their highly lucrative optimistic attachments on the guru alone.

So, I ask the reader, if FarFromWeak is incorporeal, how can he ensure that his followers optimistic connections remain focused on him as a guru rather than simply as a vector for knowledge? My answer is that the optimistic connection is tied to a simulacrum of a human composed of media clips, voice impression, and red-pilled rhetoric rather than the influencer as an embodied human being. What impact does this have on the development of affective connections that could lead to radicalization? While it is easy to say that this is part of a continuum of parasocial engagement with online influencers that has become less and less connected to the real, much like the phenomenon of 'fake news' being a continuum with news media (Morris, 2021), I feel that this is a significant break in the connection between the real and

the signified. FFW can completely alter his image and thus create a relationship of cruel optimism that does not even have to approach material accomplishments. Take Andrew Tate, as ridiculous and cruel as he is, he can show a material result through his body and wealth. What can FFW be ‘stuck’ to? The main embodiment of his ‘self’ is Kratos from *God of War*, a fictional character animated in CGI. In this sense one could argue that FFW represents a point on a continuum of hyperreality that has more in common with bots and LLMs auto-generating content. There is no end or beginning to his content, no overarching narrative or intent. Only whatever he believes will maximize algorithmic engagement in the moment, and that means that it is impossible for his audience to ever ‘achieve’ the cruelly optimistic connection. One could theoretically become as rich and as muscular as Andrew Tate. You can never become like FarFromWeak because there is no FFW to materially become.

Yet is that literal impossibility not the culmination of hegemonic masculinity as cruel optimism (Allan, 2017)? The ideal we as men are taught to meet comes with contradictory requirements (always be calm and collected but also don’t let people insult you, for example), and instructions that are vague and arbitrary at best (the meaning of ‘man up’ always seems to differ depending on context). With that in mind, it makes all the sense in the world for masculine fundamentalism to be taught by a simulacrum of a man. Therefore, while I do specifically argue that FFW represents a hyperreal break between the real and signified that is distinct from other influencers, it is in line with the affective relationships of cruel optimism and hegemonic masculinity that such gurus depend on.

Let us examine his process of attachment through varying the emphasis on the title ‘Ghost Dad.’ FFW as a *Ghost Dad* is the simplest one to consider and already discussed in detail. FFW is a simulacrum. I know there is a person behind the controls, but the nature of that person is obfuscated by his output being so based on imitation as to be indistinguishable from an LLM. There is simply no way to know what his internal life is via his content, and it really doesn’t matter except to illustrate that disconnect between FFW as person and FFW as presented. The impact of his activity remains the same regardless and he is moderately successful as YouTube influencers go.

When we look at the *Ghost Dad*, we look at the affective connection that he seeks to create between himself and his viewers. Jordan Peterson is paternalistic in the wise elder sense;

he tries to give you fatherly advice but is distant and academic even while he tells his followers to clean their rooms and stand up straight. FFW, on the other hand, wants his audience to see him as a surrogate father. When he represents his audience, it is as Atreus, Kratos' son in the video games. He seeks to create this sense of personal intimacy between him and his audience by not just addressing the camera as 'you,' but by making his position as a font of fatherly wisdom clear in his speech. He says "I will tell you..." when he explains the purpose of each video. These may seem like small, insignificant things, but they create a cumulative affective impact over time, forming a rhythm that makes parasocial affective attachment easier. Furthermore, because the audience can 'predict' FFW's actions through his consistent speech patterns and phrases like "pathetic!," it feels as if they 'know' FFW. The signifiers of parental intimacy used by FFW are thus experienced as a consistent and soothing stimulus. To use Tomkins' system of affective responses, FFW's presentation as a paternal figure elicits an intertwined interest-excitement and enjoyment-joy response (Frank & Wilson, 2020). The interest-excitement response comes from the experience of not only learning more about 'how to be a man,' but from the prospect of further understanding FFW, the guru that brings them masculine wisdom. They are incentivized to further understand FFW because to understand the guru is to bring oneself further into alignment with them. The enjoyment-joy response comes from the predictability of FFW. He speaks the same way in all his videos. No matter the content of his speech, his cadence suggests a father who is a stern badass but still loves his children deep inside.

While his videos suggest different topics, they never really diverge from general red-pill manosphere discourse, nor has he really changed how he thinks about things over the time I have watched him. One could create a playlist of FFW videos, put it on autoplay, and it would be difficult to tell when one video ends and another begins if the viewer doesn't pay close attention. While this could be a source of boredom and frustration to some, other viewers could find comfort in FFW providing the *cadence* of a paternal relationship while simultaneously never actually introducing anything that pushes back on hegemonic masculine norms or requires significant critical engagement. Indeed, this feeling of predictability could not just induce a feeling of comfort but also of mastery. By being able to more easily predict FFW's content and speech, they can feel that they are becoming more manly because they are becoming more like FFW. As Ahmed states in "Affective Economies" (2004), emotions serve to align subjects with

social groups. Meanwhile, Tomkins describes how positive affects provide ways to incentivize familiarity with perceived sources of knowledge and safety. Using both perspectives, we can see how FFW engages with affective relationships to create a parasocial paternal relationship with his viewers.

However, when we put those together as the *Ghost Dad*, we can see the cruel optimism that lies at the heart of FFW's relationship with his audience. Beyond the overarching cruel optimism of hegemonic masculinity, FFW seeks to produce a relationship that is inherently contradictory. He wants his followers to believe that he can tell each of them the exact things that they all need to reach their object of desire, yet he is as far from intimate as it is possible to be. There is nothing there at the core of the online persona through which he interacts with his followers. While he does present consistent traits, those traits can be easily changed while remaining as 'FFW' as before because of his hyperreal state. There is a cruel irony that in his attempt to appeal to viewers that might yearn for a paternal figure in their lives, FFW is more like an absentee father. The kind of father that can only be reached on a phone or give a birthday card with generic platitudes yet can never actually react *to* his audience on a genuine level. One might as well create an affective attachment with a generative AI program.

This cruel irony reinforces the hegemonic masculinity that FFW promises to teach his followers to embody. He is a distant father figure that does not express real emotional connection to his followers except to mold them into a figure that resembles his own presented self as an authority figure. Furthermore, FFW may be the only guru covered here that can fully embody the traits of the hegemonic male, because his nature as a changeable simulacrum makes him an abstract principle more than a flesh and blood being. Jordan Peterson and Andrew Tate, for all their fame, media savvy, and presentation, can not purely represent hegemonic masculinity because they are flesh and blood humans. Regardless of how much they or their audience may desire it, they cannot embody an abstraction. To illustrate the importance of this fact and how it ties into gender and the manosphere, we must take a detour to discuss gender and fascism.

In *On Microfascism* (2022), Bratich analyzes fascist thought and cultural production with the theory that it is fundamentally connected to a masculine fantasy of autogenetic sovereignty, the idea that masculinity is defined by "...the absolute act of power to define and create oneself" (pg. 27), visible in this dissertation through the emphasis on the sovereignty of

masculine agency. Because reactionary understanding of masculinity is defined by contrast to femininity, women and other feminine bodies are simultaneously seen as objects in need of protection/control, but sources of terror and impurity. Fascism, and the microfascist actions that can conglomerate into an explicit institutional or organizational fascist base, requires an underlying eliminationist tendency towards non-hegemonic gender norms and all the intersections with it. By eliminationist, Bratich does not necessarily mean literally destroying all that do not fit the fascist mold of masculinity, but instead that fascism views opposition as unworthy of participation in society and thus subject to removal from the political process by any means necessary (pg. 8). This is a process that requires violence, whether it is in the form of social suppression, removal, and the social or physical extermination of that opposition through killings and cultural genocide. Thus, this violence is often closer to what Jasbir Puar (2017), is quoted by Bratich as calling “the right to maim’...Elimination reduces capacity, it is debilitation and the production of disability.” (2022, pg. 10). Those hated populations are marked for greater disadvantage, restriction of agency, and other life conditions that lead to a state that Berlant calls the slow death (2007), wherein the processes that one must go through to continue life simultaneously ‘wear out’ that life. Hence, even those women who most conform to hegemonic gender norms are allowed inclusion but only in such a reduced state. To the masculine fundamentalist, this maiming must be done because, as an embodiment of ‘untamed’ nature, and physicality, allowing the feminine any kind of freedom risks bringing the most unbearable fear of autogenetic masculinity, allowing the masculine subject to be affected by the world outside of their will and desire, to fruition.

Narratives like the Biblical story of Adam and Eve tap into this fear to provide a religious justification for patriarchal domination of women. Woman is born from physical, rather than divine source. Woman is allowed to make her own decision; woman gets tricked by a talking snake and ruins everything. Tale as old as time. That same patriarchal and misogynist urge is inherently reflected in fascist thought, and in the manosphere, even when they come from non-religious perspectives. Thus, the manosphere is inherently fascist because they are fundamentally gender eliminationist. Manosphere ideology is defined by their fear of femininity because exposure to the feminine is seen as corrosive to masculinity, which is not just defined as an identity, but an essential state of being. That is why women are characterized in all parts of the manosphere as needing to be subject to masculine. It is also why manosphere content

displays and reproduces expressions of contempt, terror, anger, and disgust towards presentations of gender that do not fit hegemonic gender norms. The validation of existence outside of the gender binary represents a state of existential and cultural corruption, especially in the case of trans women. To the fascist, such stimuli confronts them with the possibility of emasculation, and with it their ability to exercise sovereign agency.

FFW can paradoxically embody this fascist view of masculinity because the fascist/hegemonic construction of masculinity can *only* exist in the realm of the abstract. Because it is impossible to truly live as a ‘self-made man,’ without influence or connection to the world around them, fascist masculinity must flee life to a state of abstraction (Bratich, 2022). This state is often narrativized as a prelapsarian mythical past, be it the Garden of Eden or a vague time where ‘men were men.’ Fascist masculinity is constantly struggling to regain this mythical time of perfection and constantly failing, as fascism is defined by struggle, not actual victory. Because this can never be achieved, followers are made to experience a constant state of anxiety, shame, and anger and hatred towards the feminine, the origin point of that fall from grace. Even if you think of yourself as able to conform to hegemonic norms, the abstract nature and contradictory standards of that masculinity render that state precarious (Vandello, 2008). You will fail eventually because you exist in a material world, one that does not conform to abstract ideals of masculinity. No matter how much of a man you are, you will eventually need to eat something that is not a steak. The cause of that anxiety is projected onto women and signifiers of femininity, because to doubt masculinity itself is to be emasculated and thus re-experience that fall from grace in miniature.

FFW, by which I mean the simulacrum that exists online, need never experience that fall from the abstract into the physical because he *is* an abstraction. Among all the influencers studied here, he alone can engage in autogenetic sovereignty, literally being a self-made man. Additionally, FFW need never be influenced by the existence of physical reality outside of what he chooses to present as an influence. He cannot be *made* to say or do anything he does not want to. The FFW on the YouTube channel is not the man that runs the channel in real life, FFW is instead the spirit of the guru that has come to give his audience the means to perfect masculinity unencumbered by the flaws of physicality. A Ghost Dad indeed.

FFW's abstract nature also complements his place as a guru. Unlike more tangible influencers, FFW the guru can never be reduced to mundanity through physical existence. His audience will always exist in a state of compromised masculinity compared to his own, for FFW does not need to sully himself with the crude matter of the world. Therefore, any flaw in FFW's advice or teachings can be rationalized as a flaw in the follower, who exists in a state of imperfection and would be incapable of perfectly carrying out the teachings of the enlightened guru. He also cannot be accused of hypocrisy or failure to live up to his own ideals because FFW has no existence outside of communicating those ideals. He can be the perfect receptacle for affective connections to masculinity for his followers because he can exist in a state that permits no compromise with femininity.

This may sound like FFW should be a messiah of misogyny, the master of the manosphere and the monarch of the microfascist impulse. But let us reflect on what the state of a being that can potentially embody hegemonic masculinity actually *is*. For all that manosphere followers, gurus, and prophets alike crow about their desires for power and sovereignty from the world, that state requires one to be a hollow puppet. FFW can never fail only because he does not say anything that has not already been said. He can navigate the constantly contradictory ideals of masculinity thought only because he will never have to tangibly prove his teachings. He can exist within this state of perfect abstract masculinity, never touching the world but the problem is that *he can never touch the world*. He cannot have any physical impact outside of an electronics screen. Finally, let us remember that all my descriptions of him as sovereign exist purely to describe the *figure* of FFW as he appears in media. FarFromWeak's actual tangible existence is dependent upon the largesse of YouTube. At any moment YouTube could decide to demonetize or ban the account and the holder of that account would be unable to exert any force upon the website.

Similarly, the true man as defined by fascist thought and hegemony must constantly insist on their power, agency, and sovereignty while always conforming to extant social norms and pursuing assimilation into existing power structures. FFW will eventually disappear, and when his account lapses into inactivity, that passing will go unnoticed because he never created anything new or notable. Yet I cannot help but remember the breathless comments where that hollow man was praised as the key to happiness, to self-improvement, to unlocking potential and

putting one's life on the right track. What does it say that he managed to have that much impact on some viewers? Are they so desperate for guidance and attention that the Internet equivalent of a fake felt monkey mother is enough to satisfy them? These are the questions that keep me up at night, that we are a society so alienated from ourselves and each other that even content as ridiculous as FFW's can create genuine affective connections. His version of masculinity is taken from popular culture as well as the manosphere, lifted whole cloth. Thus, his cruelly optimistic guru teachings to his audience represent an attempt to capitalize on the inevitable failure to live up to an impossible ideal that so many young men are nonetheless told they must embody. How is it that we can pretend at amazement when they decide to turn to figures that tells them to be self-serving, cruel, and hateful to those who are vulnerable when we have set them up to act in such a way?

### *3.5 Conclusion: Cruel Optimism, Affective Connections, Manosphere Gurus, and the Poisoned Well of Masculine Culture*

Looking back at this work can be difficult. It took me a year to complete, and I suppose that I should start with determining what I feel that I have answered to satisfaction and then engage with the questions that have arisen in the process of completion.

First, my examination of Jordan Peterson, Andrew Tate, and FarFromWeak are in line with my hypothesis, that part of their ability to craft powerful affective networks with their audience is the use of rhetoric and stagecraft that evoke feelings connected to already existing associations with masculinity and social norms while paradoxically declaring that they are providing something new and unique to their audience. This is intrinsic to my theoretical construction of the guru as a figure of influence that locates an object of desire and convinces their audience that they are the *only* essential connecting point to the fulfillment of that desire. This object of desire requires a change in their life, and so an optimistic connection is created between the desirer and the object. As the guru now stands within that connection, they may partake of that affective flow between object and desirer. The guru is experienced as inseparable from the path towards flourishing. This is not remotely exclusive to the manosphere, but the manosphere has proven a fruitful area of research into it because of the abstract nature of what the manosphere seeks. Although I wrote about only three manosphere gurus, rest assured that I studied many others, and there are plenty of others that constantly appear and disappear in the churn of the manosphere subculture. It is an extremely inviting space for entrepreneurs after all, one that not only does not require external qualifications, but is in fact repelled by them.

Jordan Peterson, Andrew Tate, and FarFromWeak all pursued their guru-ness with different methods, both rhetorical and organizational. Jordan Peterson drew legitimacy from his academic credentials but also by presenting himself as someone who exercised his own agency as a principled defector from the degeneracy of academic modernity. Andrew Tate qualifies himself through charismatic authority that springs from his body. This is not just about his powerful physique, but also what he presents his body as doing and experiencing. He smokes cigars, dominates sexually attractive women, conspicuously displays wealth. Most importantly he displays power and supreme masculine agency through his disinhibition with social norms or

consideration for others without having to endure any consequences. Jordan Peterson can tell people what to do to live a dedicated and principled life, but Andrew Tate shows his followers what they can achieve if they live and act like him through his actions. Sure, he will talk for hours about the importance of keeping women ‘loyal,’ the importance of hustling and grinding, or how all mental distress is just a matter of self-perspective, but that would not be enough to distinguish himself from the crowded manosphere marketplace alone. Finally, FarFromWeak exists as a simulacrum of an influencer, cobbled together from various media figures and content clips. FarFromWeak is the anti-Tate because he is, more than anyone else, an example of an abstract being while Tate’s authority is connected to his materiality. He uses rhetoric that sticks out from the churn of manosphere talking points and distinguishes himself by his use of external media content that is familiar with his audience demographic and then uses them as signifiers for the points he is discussing. For example, a scene from popular anime series One Piece is used to emphasize that even friends can betray you if you are not careful about who you hang out with. These clips move so quickly and change so often that it does not matter if any individual stimuli fail to make an impression because there will eventually be one stimulus that does work just from sheer numbers. I will now examine what our combined trio of manosphere gurus tell us regarding their affective influence on their audience.

### 3.5.1 Finding #1: Different Methods, Same Ideology, Same Outcome

My subjects may protest at the claim that they all believe the same thing, with Jordan Peterson having gone on record speaking against Andrew Tate, for example (Power, 2023). However, the world that their discourse creates is the same. They both act to reinforce a desire in their audience for the world to bend to the will of masculinity. That masculinity is of an extremely specific kind, a hegemonic patchwork of ideals and social norms that is held as a source of innate transcendent truth despite it being the result of cultural production rather than having any ontological claim to truth. Both Tate and Peterson view hegemonic masculinity as encoded in both DNA and spirit, manifested through fleshly desire and divine prerogative. Furthermore, they both claim that the ordered existence of reality as we know it is dependent upon patriarchal dominance. To be more specific, all three demonstrated red-pill ideology, the belief that the world is subject to a sexual hierarchy that works according to marketplace principles (Johannsen, 2022), to some degree. Accompanying this belief was the claim that this

revelation is actively hidden from the greater population so that women can hold dominion over men. The shape this imagined dominion takes varies from women being able to string men along for the false promise of intimacy to women wanting to create an underclass of men to live in a state of unsatisfied misery. Opposition to red-pill ideology was contextualized using conspiracist ideation (Lewandowsky, et al., 2015), wherein proof of falsehood or disagreement is presented as evidence of efforts to hide truth by hidden malicious actors. This ranged from Jordan Peterson being asked "...why are there so many people out there who are angry at you for even talking to men?" (Peterson, 2022, 0:09), to Andrew Tate's version of The Matrix as an omnipresent system built to enslave people, particularly by preventing men from being able to enact their desires (Beyond 5D, 2022). FarFromWeak justified his hyperreal persona by saying that his anonymity is necessary to keep him from being 'cancelled' by YouTube and other powerful forces who wish to preserve a world where "only weakness is promoted" ("Face Reveal (600 00 subscribers)" FarFromWeak, 2023, 3:20). One would expect that learning that everything one knew about how the world worked (or at least how intimacy worked) would lead to needing to act in a way entirely outside of the truth-shrouding mainstream. Paradoxically, these gurus focused on telling followers they needed to adhere to hegemonic masculine traits *even more*.

That is why there is so much talk from these gurus about being able to, in so many words, achieve masculine potential, because there is so much groundwork already covered for them by cultural reproduction of gender norms. They do not need to waste time explaining *why* men and boys should embrace the attributes that they constantly encourage. They need only offer a method towards fulfillment of that masculine ideal. Once again, they all express this differently. Jordan Peterson is invested in masculinity being performed with what he calls "calm confidence" mixed with a lower-case stoic dedication to fulfilling all of one's innate masculine obligations in a dignified manner. Peterson eschews focusing on being happy, which he says is too ephemeral to depend on, instead saying that men should be 'productive.' His version of productivity is the image of the ideal family man from the 50s. They should be stoic, calm, rational, have a wife, a respectable job, and not try to change the system. Tate on the other hand sees masculine potential as being measured through the ability to indulge one's desires. The real man is powerful enough to get rich, get laid, and do whatever he wants. FarFromWeak's version of masculinity is an incoherent jumble of the two, too busy giving vague directions to how his viewers should act to give an idea as to his ideology beyond being 'red-pilled.' However, these

differences are skin-deep. They all engage in the common relationships of cruel optimism that society foists upon men and boys, to the harm of not just those men and boys, but people of all other genders as well (Allan, 2017).

Both Tate and Peterson repackage the hegemonic conception of masculinity as being defined by being ‘armored’ from all unwanted outside influence (Ahmed, 2004; Connell, 2005), a feature shared with microfascist conceptions of masculinity (Bratich, 2022). This often-flawed material world is often personified as a woman, or more abstractly, as the feminine condition. Yet we should keep in mind that these gurus are not attempting to mold their followers on a purely mental basis. As discussed by Ahmed in *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), emotions are evoked not just to make people connect positive or negative associations with objects, but also to align bodies with distinct groups. Tate and FarFromWeak both discuss how important physical activity is to being a man, and visuals of male athleticism are a common feature in manosphere aligned media. Although Peterson presents himself as a more cerebral guru figure, he also focuses on altering bodies towards cultural signifiers and postures of success and responsibility. Dress in a suit, stand up straight, clean your room, make sure to shower. All of these serve to draw affective associations between certain bodily configurations and postures and the definition of a ‘real man,’ creating an extremely narrow definition of what valid manhood is. What is notable is that none of the gurus covered here can offer a guide to the performance of masculinity that can change what people raised in western culture have already been taught. They can only make that performance feel more important than before by creating more affective emphasis on those signifiers of masculine success. Fundamental to Tate, Peterson, and FarFromWeak is their emphasis on individual success and personal agency. Because they view masculinity as an essential characteristic that one either does or does not have, it is incumbent upon their followers to succeed in expressing it. Differing circumstances (such as class, wealth, time, or physical ability) are excuses for laziness, encouraged by a society that wants to make men weak.

I make so much of how similar these manosphere influencers are because I wish to avoid the urge to place these manosphere influencers in a spectrum of acceptability that we all too often waste time doing when faced with corrosive influences on the social fabric. I have had and read discussions where people will say that they like Jordan Peterson but that Andrew Tate is

way out of line, for example, or even that they just try to take the good elements from Andrew Tate and not internalize the misogyny. On a socio-cultural level, trying to tease out the ‘more’ acceptable figures in the manosphere is like trying to only take ‘the good parts’ of Andrew Tate’s content. One cannot control the affective economies that are created by engaging with the stimuli that one encounters because those affective connections are subconscious in the moment. Therefore, watching and enjoying some Andrew Tate videos because you think that they are funny or you want to get motivated to work out, while not evidence of consciously hateful beliefs, will create a greater alignment with Andrew Tate’s content because of the positive connections you have made with him. Furthermore, the fact that Peterson and Tate are operating within the same ideological space will make a fan of either of them more open to positive associations with the other. There is also the influence of social media algorithms to consider. “Alternative Influence” (Lewis, 2018) focused on alt-right influencers on YouTube, but the principles are the same. Extremist content tends to lead to greater exposure to extremist content, and even though the manosphere gurus I examined lacked both the intentional networks of mutual cooperation and the motivation to create them that the prophet influencers exhibited in “Alternative Influence” (2018), the similarity in content and target demographic will cause them to be linked in YouTube regardless.

Another platform-related factor in my argument that Tate and Peterson should be seen as more similar than not is the influence of what I deemed ‘symbiotic channels,’ as shown in the Jordan Peterson video “You Should Be a Monster” (2022), which was uploaded by the channel WordToTheWise instead of Peterson’s official channel. These are a type of channel that exist purely to upload clips, audio or visual, of different gurus accompanied by different visuals to emphasize their point, as discussed before. Because these channels do not necessarily specialize in any one influencer or guru, they can create algorithmic connections between different gurus when viewed. Channels like Chispa Motivation, and Motivation Madness contain clips of ‘speeches’ from Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson mixed in with other figures like Denzel Washington and Kobe Bryant, flattening the difference between mainstream celebrities and regressive manosphere gurus. It

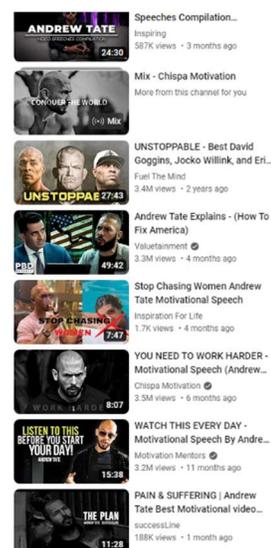


Figure 48 Symbiotic channels for Andrew Tate content

should also be noted that even if a specific channel does not have content from both figures, the recommended videos column goes across channels, making it easy to move from any one specific manosphere guru to another. Finally, the way recommended playlists can move from one video to another makes it highly likely that someone who is passively listening to motivation content could find themselves gradually listening to reactionary videos without having any actual idea of the difference. It is startlingly quick to go from a motivational speech by Kobe Bryant about doing your best to a video of Andrew Tate telling you how to ‘control your masculinity.’ It is for this reason that it is not a productive use of time trying to distinguish between respectable and non-respectable members of the manosphere. There is nothing that fundamentally separates Jordan Peterson from Andrew Tate or from FarFromWeak except that Jordan Peterson is *politer* and has qualifications from sources that we are taught to respect. He peddles the same dehumanizing ideology. Algorithmically, Jordan Peterson represents a gateway to more overtly extremist right-wing gurus and influencers. His nonthreatening image serves to prime audiences for more intricate affective connections between what constitutes valid gender expression and hegemonic masculinity, which is inextricable from white cis-heterosupremacy.

### 3.5.2 Finding #2 – The Cruel Optimism of Masculine Self-Help

Another consistent theme was vague self-help advice being packaged as life-changing revelations. This has been discussed repeatedly in the context of individual gurus and videos. Outside of very basic self-help instructions that could be found quite easily online, such as FarFromWeak explaining mindfulness breathing exercises (2023), gurus focused on exhorting their followers to achieve their potential through vague appeals to quasi-Stoic mindfulness practices, hard work, responsibility, ‘hustle,’ and how to control women. While the discussions that FarFromWeak had about the practices of ‘high-value men’ could be taken as being more specific, it should be noted that those instructions often contradicted each other. For example, he instructs his audience to ignore women but also to ‘be bold’ in approaching them. Men should concentrate on what they are trying to achieve in the rest of their life beyond pursuing women, but they should also be direct about their intentions with women.

Theoretically speaking, this lack of instructional clarity can be drawn to a few factors and incentives. Ideologically speaking, the way that the manosphere constructs masculinity is fundamentally essentialist. You do not perform masculinity; you *are* masculine and either

succeeding or failing at properly harnessing it. While Butler would say that there is no inner essential masculinity, and our ideas of gender are the result of a socially constructed structure of performances that we are taught is correct, the manosphere would say that while it is possible to *not* act like a man, that man-ness still exists within all men. Crucially, that means that it is improper to teach someone how to be a man like one would teach a skill. Rather, gurus attempt to change the inner perceptions of their followers to align with what they see as a valid expression of masculinity. While Jordan Peterson does have therapy experience, it is important to understand that when he is telling men to stand up straight and act with ‘calm confidence,’ that he is telling them things that he believes they *already know* they should do. He is reminding them to listen to the manly voice inside of them that society has tried to suppress and villainize. After all, the only way for masculine fundamentalism to remain a coherent worldview is if they believe that certain human habits are encoded in DNA and/or the soul. Similarly, while I am not qualified to diagnose anyone, Andrew Tate’s narcissistic style leads me to believe that he sees himself AS an ‘alpha male’ and therefore any of his own tendencies, habits, and desires are expressions of so-called peak masculinity. He doesn’t have to give step by step instructions on how to control one’s own mind because it would be like trying to instruct someone in how to breath or make one’s heart beat. He explains what he does, why he does it, and it is up to the students to imitate the master. It is also why he feels that it is okay to discuss how contemptuously he treats women in such a frank manner, because his desires are perfectly in tune with how masculinity should be expressed for him, and he should be telling his students how to act similarly. That he takes glee in explaining it is simply greater confirmation of his rightness.

Another ideological factor is that as an expression of far-right conservative ideology, the manosphere and related groups are inherently anti-intellectual, regardless of how they try and dress it up. Like the microfascist urges from which they derive their animating force, fundamentalist masculinity is meant to be *felt* and *acted upon*, not arrived at through critical thinking or evaluation of evidence. Even Peterson, by far the most academic-seeming manosphere figure that I encountered during my research, is more interested in countering what he sees as the *inhibition* of masculinity by a world that he sees as dominated by leftists and feminists. In fact, most of the manosphere figures that I encountered were far more focused on trying to generate a, psychoanalytically speaking, *disinhibiting* effect on their audience (Johanssen, 2022), encouraging them to let loose with their innate masculine desires and

strength. It is like a funhouse mirror version of Gnosticism where instead of gaining freedom through knowledge, audiences are encouraged to disregard knowledge and learning, which can only confuse the male essence, in favour of masculine intuition. Hence all the time spent attacking anything that is associated with femininity, which includes practices of learning that do not align with their construction of masculinity (I use ‘their’ because that construction can vary wildly from influencer to influencer and time to time). The manosphere is motivated to remove the shackles of feminine influence from the male mind and then to emotionally align them with masculine fundamentalism by linking femininity with affects of anger, contempt, disgust, and other negative feelings. This alignment serves to prevent the follower from ever again falling under the effeminizing sway of modernity. Instructions can be forgotten, but emotions and gut-feelings remain. To the manosphere, the anxiety-producing complexity of the world is not a result of increasingly intrusive technology and connectivity being yoked to the neoliberal profit machine, but an intentionally malicious attempt to cloud the minds of men, and thus the world must be reduced to its component parts. Examination invites nuance, and nuance is anathema to the latent fascism and authoritarianism that flows like blood through the manosphere.

From a pragmatic perspective, we should not lose sight of the fact that these videos are made to be monetized. If they are not directly monetized from views, then the gurus are motivated to use these videos as a pipeline that moves interested followers into monetized sections of that guru’s network. For Jordan Peterson, it is his books, speaking engagements, the subscription service Dailywire+, etc. For Andrew Tate it is Hustler’s University, and for FarFromWeak it is Triple Your Testosterone. It makes no sense to put one’s best material in a place that can be accessed for free if you are motivated by profit. Instead, this material should be seen as a way to create affective attachment to the guru in question, which will then increase the chances of viewers wanting to spend money on their ‘premium content.’ This is not to say that the premium content will be any more, but it does contextualize why this content is often so poorly constructed to address the problems that it claims to be able to solve. It is not meant to solve those problems; it is meant to make viewers see the guru as someone who *can* if they can only get closer to them. Hence why their monetized services often advertise that it is personally overseen by the guru, such as the claim that Hustler’s University is personally attended to by Andrew Tate himself, or how the subscription to FarFromWeak’s testosterone course includes

entry into an ‘exclusive Discord server.’ These videos should not be seen as fully self-contained works by themselves, but instead as appetizers that are meant to tantalize, rather than satisfy.

This pipeline goes double in the case of Andrew Tate, where the online guru videos are created and uploaded by his fans/followers. For them there is a dual layer of financial incentive. The Hustler’s University subscription is prohibitively expensive, particularly for the younger audience he targets. This pushes subscribers to work as social media managers on Tate’s behalf to cover the cost of subscribing via affiliate links. This makes it even more unlikely that Tate media found for free on YouTube will contain ‘satisfactory’ content. The people who have the training and knowledge to help with low self-esteem, discipline, financial investment, and the like are not going to sign up for Hustler’s University and therefore would not have any motivation to post Andrew Tate content. Instead, we have people who have signed up for Andrew Tate to help them with issues in their lives being made to post videos that are made to entice people with those same issues. It is truly a case of the blind leading the blind.

What does this all tell us from a theoretical standpoint? Primarily that this supports my hypothesis about the cruel optimism that is foundational to the manosphere self-help grift. This cruel optimism is not merely an incidental byproduct of their ideology. Gurus are motivated not only to spread their ideology of gender essentialism and masculine supremacy, but also to extract wealth from their followers in exchange for the reinforcement of affects connected to hegemonic masculine norms. It is therefore to the guru’s advantage to *specifically* cultivate relationships of cruel optimism with their followers. This provides the guru with recurring opportunity to extract wealth from followers, as well as to re-energize the affective connection with the guru as well as the object of desire that the guru has positioned themselves as an indispensable guide to. As discussed at the beginning of this study, the pursuit of the object of desire feels good, as anticipation of the acquisition of the object of desire constitutes an act in itself. It feels as if one is *doing something*. That should be kept in mind when we see these Jordan Peterson videos talking about the importance of hegemonic gender roles and are tempted to write off viewers of them as immature drones. Viewers derive pleasure and satisfaction from watching those videos, and when those gurus fail to follow through on the promises they make, the followers still have those associations of positive affective investment to keep them coming back. In fact, this provides a self-sustaining circuit of emotional investment in the guru that only intensifies in

response to failure. Masculinity cannot fail, it can only be failed, and if they know that the way to masculinity is through their guru of choice, then all they must do is get more information to increase their masculine intuition. They can feel that while they might still feel insecure, no one said the path would be easy, and giving up would be letting the woke feminists win.

### 3.5.3 Finding #3 The Pleasures of The Manosphere

We should consider what it is about those videos that get followers to keep coming back to these manosphere gurus despite the inevitable material failures of the content and ideology therein. It is tempting to imagine that the victims of this cruel optimism are lost sheep, good men and boys that have lost their way and just require the right exposure to leftist theory to become the feminist egalitarians that we know they are on the inside. This ignores the possibility that some people may *not* want to extend the reach of their compassion from those they already deem worthy. This can be because they are too deeply ensconced within networks of affect and ideology that make seeing the humanity in different marginalized groups unbearable. It can also be because to be frank, sometimes people just suck.

A significant sociological factor is that while most men can never reach the status of hegemonic masculinity, for those who are able to perform complicit masculinity (Connell, 2005), the rewards are still considerable. White male privilege is a hell of a drug. Even if society rarely explicitly explains male privilege or patriarchy in such a way as to make it useful for a material understanding of how it effects people's day to day lives, there is still an implicit understanding in society that straight White men are privileged and given more power. Awareness of that bias does *not* necessarily result in empathy for the marginalized nor a desire to correct said inequalities. To those who are deeply affectively invested in those inequalities, any attempts to correct those injustices is experienced with fear, horror, anger, and hatred. Conversely, stimuli that reinforce those affective connections will be experienced as pleasurable. It feels good to be told that men are awesome and better than everyone else, because you are a man, and it is good to be what you are! As Tomkins explains people are motivated to pursue positive affective reactions and avoid negative affects (Tomkins Institute, 2022).

We can also look at how the manosphere incorporates pleasure through a psychoanalytic lens, as Kelly does in *Apocalypse Man* (2020). What really stuck out to me

throughout my journey was the consistent incorporation of both sadistic and masochistic rhetoric. I am defining masochism and sadism as experiencing pleasure from pain in oneself in the case of masochism, and in others in sadism. While I have explained moral masochism in “Andrew Tate Explains Why Women Lose Respect For You” (2022), I will take a paragraph to briefly contextualize both sadism and masochism in the context of drive theory and affect. Before I go on, rest assured that this is an extremely broad overview of a single perspective on an extremely contentious concept within the already contentious field of psychoanalysis. I am using it here because it provides an interesting theoretical basis for analyzing why so much masculine fundamentalist content focuses on pain. I make no claim to deep understanding of it.

Put very briefly, drive theory posits that all unconscious conflicts are ultimately the result of a conflict between the two most primal motivations or drives within us, the libidinal drive (*eros*) and the death drive. Eros is a creative and productive force. It motivates us to live and create conditions for life. The death drive is a self-destructive urge towards the dissolution of the self into ‘nirvana,’ or non-existence (de Masi, 2015). This destructive urge can manifest in both tangible and symbolic ways (Kernberg, 2009). Many of our actions may be motivated by the unconscious fusion of drives or conflicts between those drives. In fact, a fusion between the life and death drives are necessary for life, otherwise nothing could stop the death drive from causing someone to kill themselves or others. This fusion prevents either drive from being able to be ‘purely’ manifested except in extreme cases of imbalance. When drives conflict, on the other hand, it can manifest as actions that contradict one’s motivation. For an example relevant to the manosphere, say a person desires love from someone that seems to ignore them, to which the person reacts by acting aggressively towards the ignorer, either literally or symbolically. They are motivated by a desire to have their feelings reciprocated [*eros*] but also a contradictory urge to remove a source of pain and frustration [death drive].

Hegemonic masculine norms already provide ample outlets for both sadistic and masochistic affects if enacted in certain ways. Sadism can be indulged through dominating and destroying external obstacles to desire, while the stoic experience of pain offer a way to engage with masochism. Experiencing pleasure from either can be both internally and externally contextualized as the satisfaction resulting from manliness. By targeting an audience characterized by anxiety, self-loathing, and anger connected to a perceived inability to properly

embody masculinity, the manosphere draws forth these circulations between sadomasochism and masculine identity, making the experience and infliction of pain an explicit rather than implicit foundation of masculine performance.

For my part, outright sadism was most explicitly present in the FFW video “Why High-Value Men IGNORE Women” (2022). Here FFW presents emotional withdrawal from women as an expression of masculine domination over the feminine, with sadistic fantasies of emotional abuse and disorganized attachment justified as being necessary to keep women ‘humble’ and under control. It parallels how de Masi describes the process of the destructive drive becoming more powerful, with FFW “coaxing the patient who is seduced by the arousal stirred by omnipotence, cruelty, and power.” (2015, p. 96). If reinforced enough, those habits of cruelty and domination, originally intended as a toxic means towards the experience of sexual pleasure, can become a source of sexual pleasure and masculine validation in themselves. Similarly, Andrew Tate’s description of women as being interchangeable receptacles for pleasure engage in somewhat less explicit sadism, where the exertion and validation of masculine power once again lies in the ability to ‘dispose’ of a relationship in response to unwanted agency.

Masochism was significantly more common in my journey through the manosphere, although that could be the result of my research focus on the self-help offered by gurus. Kelly found the rhetoric of the incel sub-section of the manosphere to be extremely sadistic, for example (2020). Nonetheless, masochism as being a source of masculine performance was present throughout all three analyzed influencers. Jordan Peterson’s masochism was more connected to emotional stoicism where part of being masculine is the ability to withstand the pain of existence without complaint. It is significantly more implicit than the moral masochism of FFW and Andrew Tate’s style, wherein the audience is subjected to demeaning language. This process was previously discussed in the section on Andrew Tate.

What is interesting is how these sadomasochistic elements within manosphere content illuminates another source of pleasure from these cruelly optimistic relationships with these manosphere gurus. Being more manly, at first presented as a means to an end, perhaps for motivation, satisfaction in life, or a relationship, becomes the end in itself. Feminine subjects become desired not for intimacy but as objects to dominate to prove one’s manliness. As these attempts to match the masculine ideal inevitably fail to succeed, the expiation of guilt from

failure becomes another main source of pleasure, creating a closed emotional loop. One cannot be failed by the guru because the suffering caused by those failings merely provide an opportunity to prove one's endurance. In other words, both the infliction and endurance of pain becomes inextricable from masculine performance and the pleasure thereof, much like how the presence of a pathologically powerful dominant drive within a personality is described as eventually seeking to dominate that personality in its entirety (De Masi, 2015).

This pleasure-seeking through pain is justified through the manosphere's focus on rendering all opposing perspectives as not merely wrong, but *evil*. Any school of thought that advocates for equity and thus threatens the primacy of male supremacy becomes equivocated with a threat to the audience/followers' selves. This is the other side of the reason why convincing someone to reject manosphere alignment takes more than good arguments and exposure to the right literature. Indulging in the pleasures of masculine supremacy provides incentive for the subject to turn towards the manosphere, while the vilification of conflicting viewpoints pushes them *away* from alternatives. To use Tomkins' nine affects, someone invested in manosphere discourse is going to react to stimuli that aligns with masculine supremacy with pleasure-joy, and interest-excitement, while stimuli that opposes or conflicts with it will elicit unpleasant feelings that incentivize withdrawal or even aggression towards conflicting stimuli. Someone can consciously choose to still engage with stimuli that cause negative affects, but that requires some kind of extra motivating factor such as it being necessary to maintain a close relationship a subject may value. Even then, there is the complicating factor of the guru to consider. If the subject feels a deep investment in their relationship with the guru, then that relationship will have a powerful influence on their actions, beliefs, and willingness to change either of them. Parasocial or not, the feelings that travel along that affective association are real. For example, if someone feels that only Andrew Tate is talking to them in a way that reflects their world experiences and offers a way to attain their desires, then they will have little reason to acknowledge the myriad accusations and criticisms of Tate. Doing so would make them feel bad for no perceived gain as opposed to the good feelings they get from indulging in the optimistic connection with him, as well as rationalizing disinhibited behaviour (Johannsen, 2022). Gurus are highly skilled at manipulating affects in a way that will appeal to their target audience. The resulting affective relationships make it more difficult to motivate followers to withdraw from the guru and their teachings.

This is not to say that rejecting extremist misogyny or even ‘converting’ to progressive ideology is impossible. It happens every day. However, the various stakeholders (relatives, friends, educators, leftist influencers/prophets etc.) in pulling men and boys away from manosphere discourse must understand that they are playing with a deck that is already stacked against them. Gurus have no incentive to be genuinely invested in the long-term welfare of their followers, only in their followers’ loyalty and usefulness. Someone who is genuinely invested in someone’s welfare will have to tell that person things that they don’t want to hear and do things that the person they care about may not wish for them to do. On the other hand, the guru is free to *only* say and do things that will elicit positive affective associations in their followers. Eventually it can come to the point where even abuse and exploitation can feel positive. Part of what allows for manosphere gurus to so easily capture interested followers in these webs of positive affect is the subject of my next major finding.

#### 3.5.4 Finding #4: Hegemonic Masculine Supremacy means *Hegemonic* Masculine Supremacy

Believers claim that they have woken up from a fundamentally *false* view of the world to see the terrible true shape of existence. They express the experience as being earth-shattering. Yet the actions and beliefs that they describe as resulting from this revelation consistently align with the same configuration of hegemonic masculinity that is supported and taught by the so-called ‘illusion’ they have woken up from. Become physically powerful, become wealthy, show off your wealth, engage in sexual pleasure with physically attractive women, be stoic, be emotionally withdrawn, ignore women unless you want something from them and engage with them from a position of power. These are not iconoclastic characteristics for a man to pursue but the very bedrock of how the status quo defines the ideal man. Similarly, the idea that women are unreliable, over-emotional, manipulative, disloyal yet also vulnerable and passive are so interwoven in our societal discourse that even people who would never consciously believe such things can find them being subconsciously woven into the media they produce or consume. Look at how female characters are written in *The Wire*, despite its leftist bona-fides, for example (PopMatters Staff, 2008).

One would expect that this would make it more difficult for different gurus to really stick out to their prospective followers. Surely people would want to completely break away from the

standards constructed by the same society that exists to restrict their true masculine potential. My analysis has found the opposite is true. Emphasis on pre-existing masculine norms is an extremely productive way for a guru to gather new followers. There are some elements of manosphere discourse and performance that are more fringe than others, such as semen retention and NoFap (Burnett, 2022). Manosphere rhetoric still mostly relies upon portraying dominant patriarchal norms as being under threat from femininity. Performing hegemonic masculinity is framed as the ticket to success and respect from others.

I theorize that this strategy is useful for gurus and other manosphere influencers because it provides a pre-existing discursive array of masculine attributes that the audience has already been taught to value. It takes much less effort to become associated with pre-existing hegemonic beliefs that have been impressed upon the audience since birth than to construct an entirely new theory of masculinity. This tendency also aligns with other features of manosphere ideology, including their prelapsarian view of history, their disdain for intellectualism, and their inherently conservative nature. By conservative, I do not only mean ‘right-wing,’ although the ideology of the manosphere and its ideological cousins are inherently right-wing (Bratich, 2022; Kelly, 2020). I mean conservative in the sense that they believe that the ideal manner of existence has already been firmly proven, and any deviation from those practices are sources of degeneracy. This is displayed via constant references to a vaguely defined ‘traditional masculinity,’ ‘ancestral’ practices, and the use of signifiers that reference different periods in the past. The period in question can vary but is often before the second women’s rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the time when the early men’s rights movement that would form the ideological ancestor of the modern manosphere first appeared (Messner, 1998). These references to the past are not about actual historical analysis but are meant to evoke attachments to the manosphere’s mythopoetic construction of the ideal man. That is why references and imagery related to the Roman Empire, Classical Greece, the Viking age, 19<sup>th</sup> century laborers and the 1950s nuclear family patriarch can be claimed to all present a single coherent vision of masculinity, even though inhabitants of these periods would identify with very different standards of masculinity. People from Ancient Rome, Greece and Pre-Christian Scandinavia would also find modern definitions of race and sexuality to be incompatible with their own. For example, a Roman citizen would likely find the idea of being put in the same category as a Scandinavian as a White man to be insulting, because to them, the difference between a civilized

Roman and a foreign barbarian is more significant than the similar shades of skin. From a pragmatic perspective, these contradicting historical references are effective because regardless of historical inaccuracy, they are all widely understood as signifiers of strength, ancient dignity, and traditionalism. Claiming that they all represent a single unbroken line of objectively understood masculinity helps to create a sense of that prelapsarian past where 'traditional masculinity' was understood before society 'fell' into the claws of feminism. Attempting to construct a 'new' masculinity, even one that remained defined by masculine supremacy would represent a fundamental betrayal of the manosphere worldview.

Another pragmatic advantage for the supporting hegemonic masculinity is that manosphere gurus can repackage existing affective associations to signifiers of manhood as mystical validation for their support of hegemonic masculinity. As surprising as it may be to us humanities scholars, most people do not have a working knowledge of affect theory or any need to gain one. Thus, when a manosphere influencer like Andrew Tate displays their physical prowess and capacity to enact violence and a viewer experiences a positive affective reaction to that display, Tate can contextualize that attraction as an innate sign of his validity as an enlightened teacher. We don't feel that way because we have been taught to see athletic men being able to punch and kick people as awesome since we were children. We feel that way because we instinctively recognize masculine excellence. This places the guru's enlightenment in a purely individualistic capacity. Why is Tate so cool and smart? Because he can do manly things. Why do I think manly things are cool and smart? Because I feel awe and admiration for his ability to do them.

To conclude this finding, hegemonic masculinity exists in a quantum state. Both alive and dead, oppressed, and dominant, something that is everywhere yet also hidden, a truth that exists within all men yet only understood by an elect few. These hegemonic ideals are impressed upon our minds from the moment we are born, and yet these influencers use the fact that they are so internalized as to be barely remarked upon as proof that these same ideals have been rendered fringe and unknown. Every depiction of hegemonic masculinity can therefore become a secret delight to the audience, pre-conscious proof of their exclusively known but widely validated strength and privilege. It is a powerful thing to be able to feel oppressed while still being

dominant. It is another intoxicating sensation that makes the manosphere and its gurus so inextricably tied to authoritarianism and fascism.

### 3.5.5 Finding #5: The Manosphere is Fascist.

I will be blunt. The manosphere is fascist. Those who would deny the inherent fascism of the manosphere are wrong. Those who feel disgust at being compared with fascism should take it as proof that they may still get out. Those who try and justify it are fools or villains. I will say it again. The manosphere is fascist. There are those within the manosphere who do not consider themselves fascist and are not sympathetic to fascism, yet they swim in its waters, nonetheless.

More importantly, the manosphere being fascist is not an incidental result of current conditions or its most prominent representatives. No, the manosphere's fascism is an essential element of its being. A manosphere that was not fascist would not be the manosphere. My definition of fascism follows from the previously explained concept of microfascisms as described by Bratich in *On Microfascism: Gender, War, and Death* (2022). Although the concept of microfascism originates with Deleuze and Guattari, I find Bratich's use of the concept particularly apropos for this project.

At its core, the manosphere is fascist because its main project, the encouragement of the elimination of female agency from private and public life that exists outside of the control of the male, requires a hatred of lived reality. As described by Bratich (2022), the world that fascism desires can only exist within abstractions because that world is one of complete purity through masculine control. Yet the masculine ideal requires a purity of thought, body, and spirit that is unattainable in true material existence (Connell, 2005). This is because hegemonic masculinity depends upon the existence of a second concept to define itself against, femininity. The fixation upon masculine supremacy, both mainstream and fringe, requires a gender binary where *everything* is either masculine or feminine. Because the manosphere (and microfascism) is fixated on purity, *any* association with femininity is felt as a corrupting threat to masculinity. Femininity cannot become masculine; it is a purely one-way movement. This is much like how White supremacy, itself inextricably linked to hegemonic masculinity, views Whiteness as a state of purity that contact with the Other will inevitably soil. Because masculinity is so precarious

(Vandello), any experience within reality carries with it the risk of emasculation. Thus reality, life, or nature itself becomes a site chiefly associated with feminine corruption. To someone whose identity is deeply invested in the maintenance of machismo, this suffuses existence with fear and anxiety, one that must be placed under firm control so that no man need fear the identity-shattering experience of emasculation.

Of course, this is all futile. The world is an inherently impure place because the purity to which fascism, and its incarnation as the manosphere aspires to is an abstract notion formed by human minds, which the universe has no obligation to conform to. Yet a key part of hegemonic masculine performance requires the demonstration of one's capacity to exercise will and agency upon the world. Reality (and women) are meant to be a mirror that reflects one's desires back upon men, but this can never truly happen. Fascist masculinity must therefore retreat to abstractions, to legends and rituals that reaffirm the existence and validity of that ideal. When they return to existence, they come ready to destroy life and replace it with a fully controlled and non-threatening facsimile.

This requires a look at how fascism, the manosphere, and fascism-situated gurus engage viewers' feelings. All these work by reinforcing and connecting with existing bonds of frustration, anger, hatred, and contempt for those that would impede the ability for the audience to fulfill their desires. Gurus promise followers the ability to achieve those desires, but with the caveat that the ability to fulfill them requires alignment with the ability to fulfill hegemonic masculine norms. The cheat code to the universe is being a big strong man. Of course, that mediates their desires through a masculine supremacist and therefore fascist lens. Desires, frustrations, and fears must be stretched to become more abstract and all-encompassing to match the abstract and all-encompassing nature of the fascist obsession with pure manhood and opposition to life. Optimistic attachments become less about attaining a desire and more about how to eliminate feminine agency. It becomes less and less about how to get a girl to like you, or how to get a date, and more about *crushing a woman's ego, making women stay loyal, or why you should ignore women*. Similarly, frustrations and resentments like a bad boss, bullies at school, or a lack of opportunity are no longer mundane day to day inconveniences. They are escalated to arenas in a cosmic/abstract battle. Bad bosses and bullies are not just sources of harm to the follower, but symbols of the battle of society versus masculinity in the case of bosses

or a lack of opportunity. Bullies are incarnations of the constant battles that all men have fought since time immemorial. These push real-world material concerns out of the real world and into the field of mythmaking. They are no longer part of ‘life,’ but of the ‘abstract.’

The most damaging element of all is how microfascism and thus the manosphere harnesses fear. Fear is the most fundamental affect to both masculine supremacy and fascism. This is because both fascism and the manosphere are a cultural manifestation of an overly dominant death drive. The death drive ‘desires’ self-destruction to return to a state of blissful nirvana/nonexistence wherein one need never face the impositions of an external reality, or a ‘state before birth’ wherein one’s desires can never be excited (Mills, 2006). Fascism and the manosphere display this through a fixation on impossible purity as a condition for tolerable existence. This drive is also indulged in masculine identity as requiring an *impossible agency*. By impossible agency, I mean that the truly masculine subject must be able to essentially become omnipotent, able to perfectly enact their desires upon the world while never being affected by external stimuli beyond what they desire, thus having perfect dominance over reality. Just as the destructiveness of the death drive may be described as motivating one to annihilate all sources of desire as opposed to *eros* motivating one to satisfy those desires (de Masi, 2015), the manosphere and fascism motivate their adherents to annihilate all sources of unwanted stimuli to prevent themselves from being *penetrated* by sense-reactions to these stimuli. Fear is the most fundamental affect of fascism and masculine supremacy because, as discussed in the previous paragraphs, both beliefs can only be satisfied via a narcissistic domination of external reality, yet the very existence of that external reality renders that satisfaction impossible. Just as the presence of women is required to prove one’s mastery yet are also constant sites of feared feminization, existence is both necessary but must be feared as a site of constant vulnerability. To be a strong man you must prove your existence, to exist is to suffer, to suffer is to be vulnerable, a true man is invulnerable. Therefore, only the dead, who have proved themselves and no longer suffer, can be men.

To fear is to be emasculated, and to be emasculated is to lose the masculine-exclusive right to strength and agency. Therefore, all sources of fear and anxiety must be stamped out. Why else must manosphere influencers spend so much time explaining how brave and powerful they are? They must scream it to silence the ever-present anxieties within both them and the

audience's minds. They exist within a milieu that cannot accept the inevitability of fear and insecurity without breaking one of the core tenets of masculinity, emotional stoicism. The entire world is a source of fear to the masculine supremacist, and this is something that is injected into the follower as well. Note that the sources of fear and hate described in the videos are never specified. They are overarching, ever-present and unstoppable forces. The Matrix, the Woke mob, the forces of feminization, all these vague concepts that can be embodied briefly but can never actually be captured. These are all masks for anxiety, a fear affect that has no specific source and thus cannot be escaped or lowered (Tomkins). The woke mob are clearly a sign of anxiety over social change, and the prospect of social death from an inability to adapt. The Matrix reflects anxiety over loss of individual agency, the fact that despite the hyper-individualistic ideology neoliberalism impresses upon us, someone's skill, talent, and willpower can in fact lose to systemic inequalities or just bad luck. Finally, the specter of feminization is the most fascist-aligned of all anxieties. It is not about becoming more like a girl, but what femininity *represents* to them. It represents passivity, vulnerability, weakness, softness, emotionality, all this pointing to a *vulnerability to being penetrated* and thus altered by the hated impurity of the material world! This counter against the fear of life and the world is well-described in episode 181 of the podcast *Conspirituality* during a discussion of Redpill YouTuber Iman Gadzhi;

“...the tech-bro manosphere Bitcoin grindset wants two different things. They want absolute freedom, but also absolute discipline at the same time. And I think this double desire, this contradiction, is a doorway into whatever the Internet has preserved in amber out of the various phases of fascism. It's like a siren call. Ideas of natural health, gender essentialism, cultural tradition, finding your spiritual purpose. But also ideas of speed and domination...In this space, men want absolute freedom while preserving absolute dominance hierarchies. It's a space where you want to appear as uniquely counter-cultural as Jordan Peterson while you passionately argue for a world gone by.” (Remski & Walker, 2023, 26:37-27:42)

The fascist nature of the manosphere provides fertile ground for a guru to establish themselves, because its discursive landscape encourages the existence of hierarchies and love of a leader. It is much easier for a guru to come into such a space and present themselves as a uniquely enlightened teacher that deserves zealous loyalty than a space characterized by anti-authoritarianism. Furthermore, the guru has a ready-made vague opposition that can be pointed at as a target for negative affective reactions if their followers are unsatisfied or the guru is in some way revealed to be fallible. The nature of fascism also leaves their followers less likely to

question contradictions in the guru's teachings, or areas of non-alignment between the guru's teachings and their actual actions. A guru's authority does not flow from any source that could be open to honest criticism because that authority rests upon their unique and unfalsifiable perception of the world. Much like the fascist leader claims the ability to uniquely embody the spirit of their people, the guru claims the ability to embody the spirit of whatever object of desire they place themselves on the path of. For manosphere gurus, this is the sublime spirit and will of masculinity itself, placing themselves as the singular source of masculinity. The follower does not need to pursue deeper understanding of what the guru is doing and why but instead only imitate. Through imitation and adherence to the guru's teaching, their own natural masculinity will shine through and make all things clear. Success, happiness, and respect will surely follow.

This provides a bind for those who wish to debunk or otherwise counter the manosphere guru, because fascism/hegemonic masculinity is fundamentally opposed to intellectual discourse as a legitimate form of political exchange. Fascism and hegemonic masculinity are about action, strength, speed, and agency. To stop and consider whether an action *should* be done, or to take advice from someone purely on the merits of their argument is to show weakness. It is letting the outside world control you and thus corrupt you with their weak femininity. That is not to say that a fascist cannot *use* rhetoric or intellectual arguments. However, those intellectual arguments must be subordinate to the masculine will, and an intellectual argument can still be dismissed by a display of masculine performance and power. Often the only way to 'defeat' them in a way that will be acknowledged by their audience requires beating them at their own game, one which is deeply tilted in their favour. An example of this can be seen with leftist YouTuber Hasan Piker's encounter with Andrew Tate (Piker, 2022). In it, Hasan argues that Tate is wrong about women being worse drivers than men, explaining that it is because Tate's only source is anecdotal evidence, and that empirical data shows the opposite. Tate completely rejects the statistics by essentially saying that all reality is subjective and the only 'truth' is the personal truth that each individual lives with, and that there are too many lies on the Internet for anything from there to be taken as fact. Even after Piker describes to him at length why empirical and scientific study is important, Tate returns to his point that in his personal experience women are worse drivers than men. The point where Tate loses is when Hasan manages to press him enough that Tate removes his headphones and begins smoking, cutting himself off from the stream. One of the teenage streamers with Tate says, "He

gets very stressed sometimes...” (15:18). When Tate returns, Hasan presses on that display of vulnerability, saying that he understands why Tate is upset, as he has clearly been rattled, and when Hasan is asked to leave, he says “it does look a little bad though if you feel that I should leave the call because you feel that I am overpowering you a little bit” (19:55).

I want to emphasize that this is not a knock against Hasan. Hasan was engaging in a good faith argument wherein he did a good job explaining that Tate’s argument prevents people from being able to make large-scale conclusions or come to agreements about anything. Tate did genuinely lose that argument and Hasan happened to jump at the opportunity to sow doubt about Tate’s charisma and authority. However, one should not lose sight that the moment where Hasan ‘won’ was not because he his argument was correct, but because his argument stressed out Tate enough to make him momentarily appear less masculine and powerful. This is why I do not believe that it encouraged most of Tate’s audience to feel less contemptuous about women. It was a valuable moment, and Hasan deflating Tate’s aura of invulnerability in front of an audience while also making a good argument was the best result anyone could have hoped for. However, even if Hasan were able to similarly deflate every significant manosphere figure, it still wouldn’t push believers out of belief in masculine supremacy as a whole, because of the final and most important finding of this dissertation.

### 3.5.6 Finding #6: Mainstream Society is Complicit

As discussed in Finding #4, the manosphere is built upon a scaffolding of hegemonic masculinity and power structures. Far from being the revelation that its gurus often claim it to be, manosphere discourse is inextricably tied to the ongoing eliminationist agenda against any threat to hegemonic male privilege and dominance. Because we live in a patriarchal society, that means that the manosphere does not act to create a new society, but to regress society into a fascistic fantasy of male authoritarianism. The fact that their view of the past is anachronistic is cold comfort to those who have been and will be harmed in its pursuit. This matters because the way that audiences are convinced to feel they must act and feel like by manosphere influencers and their supporters is only different from the mainstream in *degree*, not kind. Imagine a man that is capable of enacting physical violence without much effort, travels around the world enjoying luxuries such as smoking cigars, drinking expensive drinks, and driving very cool and expensive

cars. He has sex with almost every attractive woman he meets and treats them interchangeably. Did I just describe Andrew Tate or James Bond? While one character is fictional and the other physically exists, authenticity of his persona notwithstanding, Bond is seen as an extremely popular cultural touchstone and masculine icon, while Tate is responded to with outrage and finger-wagging.

Of course, it is only reasonable to not want people to act like James Bond in real life. However, let's not kid ourselves. It is not as if the various hegemonic masculine traits both Bond and Tate exhibit are not shown everywhere in the cultural texts and performances that we use to socialize kids and adults. For example, Small's research shows that being the main source of wealth in a relationship is still considered an important indicator of masculinity, especially within upper-income White couples (Small, 2023). Upper-income White couples have the most social and political influence within Western culture and are therefore better positioned to make their values normalized through their ability to influence cultural transmission, whether through media or politics. Similarly, some of the most lauded fictional and real-life masculine figures are defined by their capacity to commit violence and dominate others through force, whether physical, social, or financial. Consider action movie stars like Dwayne Johnson and Vin Diesel in the *Fast and the Furious* franchise. They are celebrated by audiences for their powerful physiques and ability to destroy villains through mastery of technology, powerful cars, and physical combat. Consider how often media depictions of the police frame them not as the violent enforcement arm of the State and Capital, but as heroes fighting for order against the violent chaos that would surely erupt if they let up for a moment (Dowler, 2016). The US military propagandizes through massively popular video game series like *Call of Duty* and movies. Under capitalism, men who are wealthy are depicted as being entitled to power, sex, excitement, and freedom from restraint. How can we be shocked by the desire of young men to embody the power and violence that is constantly presented as signifiers of masculine excellence and legitimacy?

We also live in a world that consistently expresses contempt for women, manifesting in events as singular and far-reaching as the overturning of *Roe V Wade* by the US Supreme Court (Totenberg & McCammon, 2022), or as mundane and omnipresent as the esteem-shredding standards of appearance that are constantly socially transmitted to women (McCallum

& Widows, 2016; Mink & Szymanski, 2022). Of special import is the disproportionate portrayal of women in popular media in ways that adhere to hegemonic masculine narratives of femininity (Gurrieri, 2020), extending to the framing of violence against women as something that both victim and attacker are mutually responsible for (Easteal, Holland, & Judd, 2015). This does not even begin to engage with the various intersections of the feminine identity with other sites of marginalization, such as race and able-bodiedness. For example, women who are better able to adhere to Western beauty standards are treated better and are more successful in Western culture (McKay, Moore, Kubik, 2018). Rape myths regarding female victims of sexual assault continue to be endemic, often resulting in sexual assault victims not coming forth to avoid re-traumatizing treatment by the justice system (Brooker & Butler, 2021).

Peterson, Tate, and other manosphere gurus illustrate the gulf between what the mainstream cultural narrative tells us society is like and the ugly inequalities that still characterize Western society. But because that cultural narrative tells us that our society is one of rationality, equality, and prosperity, we are blind to the connections between the cruel microfascist rhetoric endemic to the manosphere and the way that such rhetoric is an outgrowth of affective connections to mainstream representation of gender ideals. The manosphere and these gurus could not gain the followings they do without some pre-existing structure to hang their grifts upon. How can we say that Andrew Tate does *not* represent what a man should be when his constant masturbatory displays of wealth, his performances of physical power and violence, and his contempt for women and exploitation of women's bodies are all reflected in mainstream society?

To close out this section and my findings in general, I would ask the reader to think about this the next time they see a display of violence rooted in performances of extremist masculinity that is responded to with a claim that 'there is no place for this violence in society.' Is that statement meant to be one of fact, or is it meant to express an ideal? Because it being stated as fact represents a fatal blindness to the affective connections between masculinity, power, and the exertion of violence against the marginalized as well as against any who would threaten that dominance, all of which exist well within the mainstream. The manosphere, and the gurus that profit from it, merely represent a particularly odious and societally corrosive manifestation of those connections. The wound that they represent will never be fully healed if mainstream

society itself does not take action to remediate the gaping inequalities present along gender, class, race, sexuality, and other intersections of marginalization.

## 4.0 Part Four: Conclusion

### 4.1 *The Anti-Life Equation: [Fascism + Hegemonic Masculinity x (Guru + Prophet)]*

After spending 5 years examining the affective content of reactionary YouTube videos, I have arrived at a specific conclusion that synthesizes my conclusions for both the guru and prophet sections. Alongside the previously explained theoretical perspectives, this conclusion also heavily draws from some unexpected last-minute inclusions, running in like a surprise participant in the middle of a wrestling match. These guest stars are the psychoanalytic concept of the death drive, and Berlant's idea of the 'slow death' (2007). Broadly speaking my conclusion is that reactionary gurus and prophets produce content that serve to affectively align their audiences with worldviews that teach them to reject empathy outside of an increasingly narrow range of human identities. Antipathy towards alternative ways of being is portrayed as fundamental to masculine identity. The hatred of alterity is important to protecting hegemonic masculinity's dominance, but I want us to also look at how hegemonic masculinity connects to an acceptance of the slow death that is becoming increasingly common to the non-elite experience under capitalism. This acceptance of the slow death is connected to a cultural encouragement of the death drive's desire for the return to a state of non affective tension or 'nirvana' (De Masi, 2015) and is itself a factor in the rising tide of fascism throughout the western world. At the bottom of this is how capitalist domination connects to hegemonic masculine ideals and affects to create a worldview wherein masculinity should be expressed through hatred of material existence. Such a worldview is *at best* microfascist and is key to the internalization of fascism both within the ego and in society. I call it 'anti-life.'

What do I mean by anti-life? First, it is a shameless reference to the *New Gods* comic book series by Jack Kirby (1971). The villain Darkseid, tyrannical god of evil, is drawn to Earth to seek the mysterious Anti-Life Equation, mastery of which will grant mind control over all sentient life in the universe. Anti-life in the context of this dissertation refers to a social condition wherein hegemonic power structures harness the death drive to maintain the status quo. The fundamental characteristic of anti-life is to reject reality in favour of the retreat to the abstract (Bratich, 2022). This perspective sees sadomasochistic disregard for or even cruelty to the self and others as fundamentally necessary to maintain one's masculinity in the face of penetration by the corrupting influence of the material. Hence, it seeks to dominate or annihilate activities or modes of thought that promote engagement with and acceptance of a world that does not conform to one's desires and worldview. Much like the Anti-Life Equation, anti-life narcissistically seeks a world where all perspectives and possibilities conform to a singular will. This totalitarian world would be a perfect reflection of the hegemonic ideal (in this case hegemonic masculinity), with none of the constant nagging imperfections of base reality. Such a thing is, as I have made thoroughly clear, impossible. Yet the pursuit of such a world leads to fascism, particularly manifested in expressions of sadism towards marginalized subjects, and masochism towards the self. Regardless of its futility, anti-life's urge to beat the world into shape has and will continue to cause unimaginable suffering.

When I speak of 'retreat to the abstract,' I would like to clarify that it not analogous to supporting abstract ideals, let alone engaging in abstract thought, enjoying escapist fiction, or otherwise engaging in play as described by Huizinga (2009). The ability to evaluate the world symbolically is a fundamental part of human existence, breaking it would be as futile and unhealthy as trying to completely adhere to hegemonic masculine standards. Imagination is vital to problem-solving, critical thought, social progress, empathy, and making life more than a constant cruel exercise in survival.

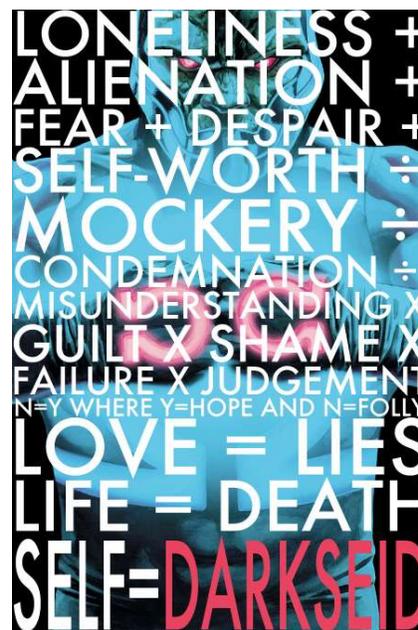


Figure 49 the Anti-Life Equation as interpreted by Grant Morrison in *Final Crisis* (Comicvine, 2014)

The key distinction is that the retreat is motivated by being repulsed by the failure of reality or the self to conform with one's ideal. This alignment towards the ideal causes one to conversely be aligned away from reality (Ahmed, 2010). To give an example, I love *Star Trek* media. I have loved it ever since I was a child. It has significantly shaped how I think and feel about the world. I would love to live in the Federation. I would be engaging in a retreat to the abstract if the world's refusal to be the Federation caused me to emotionally disengage and resent it. I would literally become more anti-life.

Encouragement of anti-life worldviews is used to protect hegemonic dominance and capitalism itself from widespread societal rejection. This is a vital priority for the billionaire class as the structural flaws and brutalities of neoliberalism have become ever more catastrophically visible and widespread. Thus, the new social contract for masculinity that these reactionary influencers promote aim to make the slow death that characterizes existence under capitalism, both personal and environmental, as not merely a necessary side-effect of economic growth, but as a goal in itself! A key rhetorical avenue for transitioning emotional economies to accept and even embrace anti-life is through appealing to the masculine ideal of autogenetic sovereignty (Bratich, 2022). This is the belief that masculine validation is measured by the degree to which reality conforms to your desires while the self is only affected by consent. I have already explained how this belief further manifests in the content this dissertation analyzes, which can be summarized as opposition towards any signifiers that unsettle hegemonic masculine dominance, as their presence triggers feelings of insecurity and anxiety about personal masculine validity, which are then externalized out into the body of society. Frustration at an inability to express agency in one's own life is another source of anxiety over masculine performance, and obviously one that could be accurately directed at capitalist society. It is therefore of immense importance for hegemonic structures of social reproduction, especially reactionary media, to displace those frustrations towards expressions of marginalized agency that might disrupt the grinding death inherent to capitalist existence. The use of existing social norms and optimistic relationships that align with the now-degraded hegemonic social contract is invaluable.

#### 4.1.1 Anti-Life Equation #1: Cruel Optimism x (Sadism + Masochism)

Relationships of cruel optimism relating to gender performance are key to the creation and eventual transition into anti-life ways of being and thinking, the bait on the hook. Prophets do so by associating signifiers of non-hegemonic identities and practices with narratives of emasculation and failure to attain the ‘good life’ (Berlant, 2011) and in so doing encourage adherence to unsustainable and unjust economic and cultural systems. Meanwhile, gurus interpose themselves as vital intercessors in the achievement of optimistic relationships, and in so doing remake the criteria for flourishing. Both gurus and prophets tie the ability to flourish under capitalism to the achievement of the impossible objectives of masculine sovereignty. These will inevitably lead to frustration as the pursuit of masculine sovereignty fails to provide the flourishing that is promised. While frustration need not always lead to aggression, it is a key component of masculine performance. Relationships of cruel optimism significantly disincentivize physically or emotionally striking out against the actual sources of frustration. In such a situation, the displacement of that aggression onto more vulnerable targets is a common response (Berkowitz, 1989). This aggression can be directed both externally and internally.

When directed internally, the follower engages in moral masochism, wherein the failure to flourish is believed to be caused by personal failure to measure up to masculine standards. This is particularly common for cruelly optimistic relations to gurus but can also be the case with prophets. Corveth (2021) describes a particularly guru-relevant scenario wherein subjects may seek relationships that cause harm or at least lack love because they have grown up trying to seek approval from care figures that never expressed it, something Corveth describes as trying to get blood from a stone. It is no great leap to imagine that boys who grew up seeking the approval of masculine role models that tried to embody hegemonic masculinity, which discourages the vulnerability of emotional intimacy, would find the demeaning way that Tate speaks to them as oddly comforting. Yet trying to chase that parasocial approval requires the internalization of harmful practices, beliefs, and emotional economies. Masochism in prophet context tended to be less actively demeaning to the audience and more about triggering masculine anxiety in a societal context, bringing forth the ‘wounded male’ performance (Kelly, 2020). In any case, the frustration and anguish provide their own relief by acting as a form of internal punishment for the super-ego’s satisfaction. When that masochism becomes unbalanced, the frustration-relief cycle can become the primary goal rather than the flourishing they were frustrated about not reaching in the first place. This engages with the death drive because it incentivizes and

reinforces a desire to constantly return to hurtful stimuli, even to the point of directing aggression towards those who would interfere with that masochistic affect-loop (Corveth, 2021).

The other option is to displace that frustration through violence against categories of targets provided by the gurus and prophet influencers. These targets are those the influencer defines as emasculating influences within society. Note that the targets do not have to be described as effeminate to be one of these targets. For example, the White genocide conspiracy theory frames non-white population growth as emasculating to hegemonic masculinity because of the supposed fecundity of non-white migrants (Bort, 2021) in comparison to the White male that has been weakened by modernity, as shown in “Is America First Racist?” (PragerU, 2024) and Tucker Carlson’s rhetoric (Bort, 2021). This rhetoric reflects fears of emasculation through being penetrated, projected out onto society at large (Ahmed, 2014). Conversely, targets that are framed as being emasculating influences, or at least signifiers of emasculating degeneracy are tied to affects of disgust and contempt in cases like Nikocado Avocado, an overweight online personality known for videos of him binge eating, being used to signify the infantilized modern male in “5 Masculine Habits That Fix 99% Of Your Problems” (FarFromWeak, 2023). Conversely, more aggressive feelings of anger and fear can also be embedded in subjects made symbols of emasculation through child safety rhetoric, such as the connections between LGBTQ folk and groomers (Hambly, 2022) or claims of boys are being tricked into literally castrating themselves via gender transition (Daily Wire, 2022) by unethical doctors (Carlson, 2023). Meanwhile, feminine agency was the subject of a mingled fear and contempt. Women are seen as weak, powerless and irrational without masculine support (PragerU, 2023; Carlson, 2022; Daily Wire, 2022) yet even the symbol of a women acting independently of men’s will are treated as threats to society and masculine identity (PragerU, 2023; Tate, 2022; Hambly, 2022). This content is meant to make expulsive actions against these and other signifiers they paint as offenders against masculinity not only acceptable, but opportunities to regain that wounded masculinity from these so-called ‘attackers’ (Kelly, 2020). Harming these signifiers of displaced anxiety are thus not only experienced as *defending* masculine identity but a sadistic method of reconstructing that masculinity. An example of this can be seen in Kelly’s description of incel rhetoric where sadness and longing for intimacy are mixed with frequent expressions of violent misogynistic hatred (2020). Much like the previously described masochism cycle, there is no ‘love’ to mitigate this cruelty or provide an end point to destructiveness (De Masi, 2015).

Hambly's thumbnails and titles like "Entitled College Brats Get BRUTAL Reality Check When They Realize They WASTED Their Lives" (2024) provide an example of reactionary content directly appealing to these sadistic impulses. Even if the actual content of the video was significantly more sedate, the name and thumbnail carry the promise of seeing people designated as enemies of masculinity experiencing some form of hurt, presented for audience enjoyment.

I want to be clear. Even if the rhetoric here was not meant to create sadomasochistic affect loops, I would still find it repugnant. Morally speaking, it does not particularly matter to me whether someone in America is calling ICE on a migrant family because they want that specific family gone or because they gain an erotic thrill from the expulsion of non-whiteness. However, the former person has a tangible end goal in mind that can be satisfied, whereas the latter is firmly in the abstract. That abstraction allows for the second stage of anti-life to be established, wherein affective economies that circulate negative feelings related to emasculation and gender performance are 'stuck' (Ahmed, 2010) to a wider and wider array of signifiers, incentivizing isolation from society. This is done through the establishment of what I call affective apophenia.

### 4.1.2 Anti Life Equation #2: Material Reality = Emasculation x Fear x Despair x Anger

Humans are pattern-seeking beings, anyone who has looked up on a cloudy day knows that. Although this is an important survival trait, pattern-seeking can also lead us to perceive connections where none necessarily exist. An example can be seen in the use of ‘lucky charms,’ where a completely unrelated object is seen as influencing certain outcomes, particularly random ones like gambling. This is known as

‘apophenia’ (Merriam Webster, 2024) and is a common part of cognitive function. Constantly spending mental energy drawing connections between often random pieces of information may seem counterproductive, but the benefit drawn from those times when an actual connection is discerned is worth all the false positives, evolutionarily speaking (Shermer, 2008). Generally, apophenia is an easily manageable cognitive flaw. I won a couple hundred dollars from a lottery ticket while wearing a hat, so now it’s my lucky hat. However, that same tendency can become a powerful tool for the spread of anti-life by drawing ever widening connections between perceived sources of emasculation. Much like a cult (Davenport, 2024), the end goal is to socially condition believers to have negative affective reactions to anything that does not acknowledge hegemonic masculine domination. Hegemonic masculinity can never reach a non-precarious state of balance with tangible reality, and reactionary content requires an enemy for their audience to feel threatened by. These factors will cause more threatening connections to be made until all material reality becomes tinged with hostility. Imagine something like the map of the deep state created by Q-Anon believers, shown below. Only with emotional connections between different points.

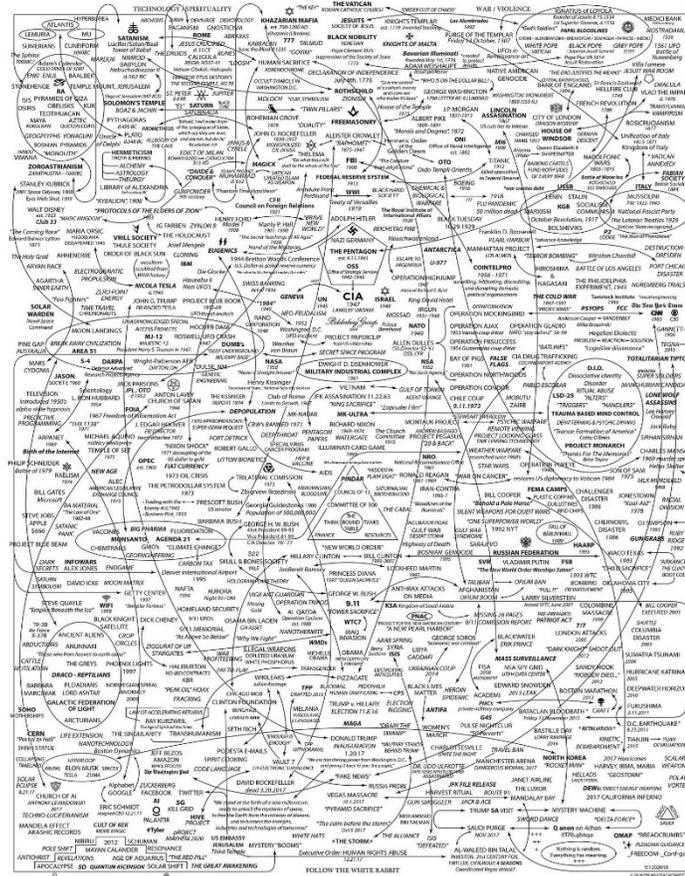


Figure 50 Map of Q-Anon Conspiracy Circa 2024

Only with emotional connections between different points.

The comparison to Q-Anon is relevant because part of the reason apophenia is so effective can be chalked up to the conspiracist frameworks that are generally embedded in extremist beliefs, particularly the extreme right (Imhoff, Zimmer, Klein, et al., 2022; Sutton & Douglas, 2020). Conspiracist rhetoric being a common feature of reactionary narratives has been noted as early as Hofstadter's discussion of the paranoid 'style' (1964). Such narratives fundamentally engage with apophenia, and play a major role in affective engagement between audience and influencer. However, as discussed in the media analysis of both projects, there must also be subconscious and preconscious connections made between signifiers that work on an affective rather than 'conscious' level. This is because the outcomes desired by many of these influencers, which I would conclusively summarize as 'hegemonic masculine dominance being acknowledged as the supreme, unquestioned, legitimate force in human existence,' is currently *usually* too extreme to explicitly express while maintaining a foot in mainstream publics (Warner, 2005). However, affective connections are subjective and can thus be used to make connections between signifiers appear to be objectively real by inducing affective reactions that are intense enough that they *feel real*, perhaps even real enough to internalize as a central pillar of one's identity (Ahmed 2005; Berlant, 2011). For this study, that signifier is the performance of *hegemonic masculinity*.

Affective apophenia and threats to hegemonic masculinity are the fundamental tempo of reactionary guru/prophet content. 'Threats to' should be taken in multiple ways. Some influencers presented threats to the pre-eminence of hegemonic masculine norms, such as Tucker Carlson and the loss of the Green M&M's sexy boots (Carlson, 2022), or Jordan Peterson discussing how questioning of masculine dominance leads to men feeling worthless (Peterson, 2022). The other distinct version of the 'threat to' discourse is a threat to the *audience's ability to perform hegemonic masculinity*. Andrew Tate claims that sexual failure is caused by women disrespecting you (Tate, 2022), Prager U describes how men are lost because they don't know how to be men (Prager U, 2023). This threat is primarily located in an individual deficiency or a societal failing, although often the primary location is associated with the other. An example of the former being primary can be seen in content that emphasizes a need for fortitude, strength, stoicism, etc. Such as Tate exhorting his followers about recognizing the value of pain and difficulty in achieving goals (Motivation Mentors, 2022). However, the surrounding context of those statements carries with it an implication that mainstream society has caused that weakness

by removing the need for individual responsibility, willpower, etc. Conversely, Carlson's rants about society becoming less masculine (Carlson, 2022) are primarily about externalized threats but also carry an implicit message about why *you* fail to be manly enough. This distinction looks like a six of one, half-dozen of the other situation, but it explains why content that is ostensibly concerned with individual achievement and motivation, such as Jordan Peterson's self-help content, can still align audience feelings with reactionary beliefs about hegemonic masculinity. As above, so below.

As discussed in the introduction, appeals to hegemonic masculine norms are powerful because one's gender identity is imposed *incredibly early*, often before birth (Butler, 1999). We know that affective economies are used to define one's identity via connections to previously existing affective associations. If one encounters novel stimuli, the affective response and conscious understanding of that stimuli is defined by comparisons to previous knowledge (Tomkins, 2008). Therefore, the earlier an affect is stuck to something, the more fundamental that affective connection will be to one's identity *and* the more affective connections that specific 'knot' will interact with. Gender is thus primed to be associated with nearly everything,

The maddening degree to which binary gender norms are attached to different signifiers in our understandings of ourselves and the world around us can be seen by looking at all the products and services that are tied to gender norms, often with no actual gender-specific function. Almost every product, performance, or practice is either explicitly labelled as for men or women, or has a gendered method of execution or presentation, such as pink vs blue shavers. While some definitions may be objects of ridicule, such as those tactical baby strollers for men (Tactical Baby Gear, 2024), it nonetheless reveals a culture obsessed with gender categorization. We already exist within a state of gendered apophenia, one consciously maintained for profit and status.

Societal fixation on gender provides an easy to access anxiety for those who are heavily invested in embodying hegemonic masculinity. This is because masculinity is an all-or-nothing deal due to it being defined in opposition to femininity. Ergo, if a man acts in a way that does not conform to those standards, then they are not being 'not-masculine,' they are 'being feminine.' Neutrality is not an option. This would be less serious if manhood were not so precarious (Vandello, et al., 2008). This is a constant source of anxiety in the lives of men and motivates

many to hyper-perform masculine norms to prevent others from expressing doubt in their performance. They must, in other words, expect that life is constantly waiting to assault their self-image.

This emotional pain point is made apophenic by prophets/gurus by first identifying a cultural object or situation that can in some way be presented as disrupting gender norms, and then explaining to the audience how this phenomenon connects to a conspiratorial trend that threatens the masculine self-image, externalizing the constant masculine performance anxiety experienced by men (Connell, 2005; Vandello, et al., 2008), especially when it is embedded within existing authoritarian narratives about cultural effeminacy.

Let us use Hambly's (2022) narrative that a possible *Flight of the Navigator* reboot having a female lead is an indicator of cultural degeneracy as an example. His claim sounds absurd to the uninitiated. However, to an audience who is both constantly on edge about masculine performance and has internalized the idea that society is against men, this is just confirmation of what they already know. The difference is that now a largely forgotten 80s Disney movie is associated with unjustly lost privilege and a vague 'better past,' while a potential remake is conversely associated with a degenerate future, as well as made a source of anger/contempt for depicting non-hegemonic agency (a female taking the lead instead of a male). This is also a reinforcement of the association of material existence with despair and emasculation. If this movie ever came out, it would be experienced as a reinforcement of their belief that society sees men as disposable.

Taken in isolation this video would be irrelevant, but keep in mind that it is about *making connections*. Hambly talking about the *Flight of the Navigator* reboot isn't really about a movie, it's about encouraging and/or reinforcing a conspiracist mindset where everything is connected, everything is intentional, and nothing happens by accident (Barkun, 2003). In this case, that reboot becomes proof that there is a vague but active force (the media) that is extremely powerful, evil, and *hates you*. Assuming this is viewed alongside rhetorically similar content, very likely, with how social media algorithms work, this is a process where, under continual exposure to similar media and other narratives, almost everything can be declared 'woke' (in its use as a right-wing pejorative shibboleth meaning 'not-right wing') (Remnick, 2023) and instantly incorporated into an entire reactionary worldview as proof of that worldview's validity.

If part of that worldview is, as Hambly implies, that all modern mainstream media engages in trying to be ‘woke’ at the expense of masculine identity, then stimuli involving modern media will increasingly be reacted to as a threat to be avoided or destroyed.

This network-broadening content also has the effect of increasingly isolating audience members who have internalized this conspiracist framework. As more cultural signifiers become tainted by association with ‘the enemy,’ it becomes harder for believers to interact with mainstream society in non-antagonistic ways, as they will be associated with fear, contempt, anger, and other negative feelings. As a hypothetical example, a restaurant that they used to socialize in that flies a pride flag may now trigger an affective response of fear and anger because of the various associations that pride flag carries as a signifier. The subject may decide to go inside anyway, although now the experience is compromised by that affective reaction, or they may decide to never engage with that place again, in either case their ability to engage in social interaction has been diminished. Furthermore, if they were to engage with that restaurant and they had an unpleasant experience there, that unpleasant experience is likely to be at least partially tied to the presence of an LGBTQ+ signifier. This can extend further and further, until every part of mainstream society is now experienced as a pit of degeneracy.

Both prophets and gurus use this broadening of the affective net, but they present it towards the audience differently. To revisit, prophets used the broadening to restrict their audience on an ideological level, while gurus focused on using it to restrict their audience towards being loyal to *them*. One must of course keep in mind that these are not distinct categories or strategies. When a guru like FarFromWeak talks about how one of the attributes of ‘high-value men’ is their willingness to ignore women to ‘keep them humble’ (2022), they are clearly using language drawn from the manosphere (Missouri, 2022; Han & Yin, 2022) which enmeshes their audience in a specific ideological context, and in so doing, creates negative affective reactions to women who are outspoken and ‘not humble’ in those viewers that are receptive to such connections. However, the context here is not necessarily to warn the audience, but to present *himself* as a teacher of those desired masculine traits.

A particularly interesting use of the broadening net can be seen with Andrew Tate’s use of the term ‘The Matrix’ (Beyond 5D, 2022). Most of the influencers that were examined for this dissertation preferred to keep the broadening gradual or at least contextualizing what vague parts

of society were untrustworthy, such as the ‘gender studies’ (Hambly, 2024), ‘big tech’ (Carlson, 2022), ‘universities’ (PragerU, 2017), or Jordan Peterson’s idea of ‘Cultural Marxists’ (Mirrlees, 2018), all adhering to the anti-intellectualism that is characteristic of reactionary thought (Barthes, 2013; Bronner, 2019), Tate instead declares that ‘The Matrix’ is a massive interconnected system whose main attributes are being made to ‘enslave’ (Beyond 5D, 2022), manifesting chiefly through opposition to Andrew Tate. This produces a much more intense connection between follower and teacher, where Tate is not merely a provider of knowledge, but the only avenue out of slavery and despair. Any attempts to criticize Tate’s claims or teachings is merely greater proof of his rightness, that resistance experienced as an extension of the Matrix trying to destroy this avatar of true masculinity. Tate can thus more tightly pull this negative web of affect into a shape that outlines him and those things he approves of, without need of ideological coherence.

For gurus this broadening is important from a pragmatic standpoint, because they need to ensure that the optimistic connections (Berlant, 2015) that their followers hold related to masculine achievement are connected as tightly to them as possible on an individual basis so that they can extract both financial and social capital from those followers to support themselves. We see this with the various versions of Hustler’s University (Magee, 2023; Laurence, 2023), or FarFromWeak’s now defunct webpage offering to “TRIPLE YOUR TESTOSTERONE” (FarFromWeak. 2023) through an ongoing exercise and nutrition course. As discussed in the conclusion to project two, it is important to see the function of many of these guru YouTube videos not as self-contained works, but rather as free appetizers intended to build attachment to the guru figure and funnel followers into their directly monetized and owned websites. Followers in those independent spaces represent more controllable sources of income and influence, since the guru doesn’t need to depend on the whims of algorithms, nor fear YouTube moderation to stay connected with those followers.

This affective broadening practice, whether done by prophets to thrill and validate, or by gurus to offer improvement and hope, leads to inherently reactionary and authoritarian ends. It depends upon connecting signifiers that do not adhere to currently hegemonic norms with negative affects, and because that flow of feeling must be constantly maintained, new targets for discomfort must always be added. This results in an increasingly narrow range of stimuli that can

be considered positive or even neutral, causing those who are sufficiently invested to increasingly view the world as antagonistic to their physical and cultural selves. It also places the audience in a state of constant anxiety. Any part of society could be unmasked as being under the influence of the vague but existentially terrifying gloom of ‘wokeness,’ there is a sense that nothing can be depended upon. Nothing but the influencer, who can position themselves as a dependable North Star whose teachings and proclamations offer a zone that gives safety and knowledge while also paradoxically being the *source* of that stress. This incentivizes audience members to align more closely with authoritarianism. Not necessarily consciously so (although it often is unsubtle), but in the sense that seeking a source of perceived stability and security becomes more attractive and familiar when one has internalized a view of the world as chaotic and uncaring if not actively malicious towards one’s existence. It also creates a worldview where hostility towards the unfamiliar becomes a default response, as the audience is primed to expect anything that does not rigidly adhere to hegemonic masculine norms to be an infiltration by the creeping tide of progressiveness.

I have spoken a lot about conspiracies and conspiracism here, and an important distinction I want to make is that while the formation of anti-life thrives off conspiracism, it does not necessarily require an actual coherent *conspiracy theory*. That is because, much like an emotion is a conscious narrativization of an affective reaction, a conspiracy theory is an intellectual narrativization of conspiracism. As a microfascist phenomenon, anti-life favours following a figure who embodies soothing of that conspiracist anxiety through the dominance/destruction of external reality over following an intellectual framework that the leader must adhere to. This is important to understand because conspiracy theories, as much as believers might be open to holding contradictory beliefs (van Prooijan et al., 2023), can be disproven. Anti-life is ‘proven’ through affective reactions to stimuli, and you cannot disprove how someone is feeling. The legitimacy of the leader’s authority similarly does not require coherence or ethics, only that they promise to make the world *feel* less hostile.

As an example, let us return to Andrew Tate’s concept of ‘The Matrix’ (Beyond 5D, 2023), his main conspiracist framework. He may describe someone or something as being ‘part of the Matrix,’ but I doubt he will ever do something as definitive as writing a timeline of the establishment of the Matrix or identify exactly who runs the Matrix and from where. It is an

entirely abstract concept, whereas Bohemian Grove is at least an actual place where people go. There's no actual theory to Tate, only desire transmuted to theology. Now part of this is obviously because Tate is not a deep thinker and is in no hurry to provide a focal point in his content that is not him. But I think another more interesting reason is that the Matrix as abstraction provides a way to introduce a more all-encompassing anti-life perspective in his audience by putting the source of both misery and victory entirely out of reach, because the Matrix is also a stand-in for hegemonic masculinity itself.

Consider that according to Tate, the Matrix is a source of all-encompassing misery and emasculation. Awareness of this emasculation makes the world an enemy but is also proof of being 'awake' and special. However, one can gain 'control' of the Matrix and thus fulfill all of one's desires through pure masculinity, as embodied by Andrew Tate. The true embodiment of 'victory' and masculinity is through enslaving all others. There is no way to reach that victory condition, and no way to modify the pain caused by the Matrix, since it suffuses the entire world. However, because slavery of others is the truest form of masculinity, one can strike against the Matrix's emasculation by dominating others around them, particularly those who are associated with femininity. Others resisting being dominated by the believer is taken as proof of the Matrix pushing against the follower, either directly or vicariously through blind sleepers. Thus, a sadomasochistic orientation towards the world is incentivized. Sensitivity to emasculation provides proof of exceptional awareness, and that emasculation anxiety is soothed when masculinity is proven through dominating others. The retreat to the abstract is encouraged through the idea of attacking and controlling the Matrix, which can never truly be reached. Yet the pursuit of that abstract requires an increasing detachment from the world, a 'numbness' as Bratich calls it (2022), to render the pain inflicted on the self and the harm inflicted on others acceptable. Eventually, the world becomes a mere stage for the follower's personal journey towards oblivion.

I should address the place of those who do not conform to hegemonic gender norms in this oeuvre of affective broadening. By not conforming, I do not only mean refusal to adhere to the gender binary, but also those who *cannot* embody hegemonic standards of gender performance, the meaning of which has been discussed in detail throughout this project. While there is obviously a spectrum of non-performance, from subordinate masculinities/femininities to

performances of gender that refuse or are even hostile towards the gender binary, I expected to find that they would be framed to different degrees as existential threats to society and was surprised to find that this is not *exactly* the case. To be clear, people who do not conform to hegemonic gender norms still consistently have negative affective associations attached to them, but the direct associations tended to be disgust/contempt rather than the fear/anger affects I expected. This does not mean that a trans person could not *also* trigger those more threatening responses, but that tended to be due to trans existence being a signifier for another signifier that those responses were tied to. Transness could be a signifier that reminds one of signifiers of the cultural forces that hate masculinity, to give an example. In any case, nonconforming bodies, or associated symbols thereof, tended to be shown as symptoms of social degeneracy, emasculation, and weakness. They are antagonistic but lack agency, easily led dupes of the real villains, the shadowy forces of wokeness. They are people who, through social conditioning, mental illness, and/or weakness of will, have decided to reject their natural/divine place as men and women and follow an easier path of self-gratification and are therefore inherently inferior to those who embody hegemonic gender norms. They can only ‘win’ if society capitulates to them.

This may seem contradictory to the constant right-wing rhetoric that describes effeminacy as an existential threat to civilization but is resolved if one recalls that affective investment in the hegemonic masculine identity requires that hegemonic masculinity be intrinsically dominant over all other forms of identity. To acknowledge that a gender performance that does not recognize masculinity as superior could hold legitimacy would expose the contradictions within that worldview. One cannot acknowledge that political and social gains made by LGBTQ+ or BIPOC identities stem from the will or agency of those same identities, as that would imply that hegemonic mastery is not actually absolute. This is resolved the same way other, more explicitly White Supremacist ideologies reconcile belief in the supremacy of White people with a reality that constantly disproves it, by saying that any perceived advances by non-White peoples are either the result of misplaced compassion or unseen, often antisemitically coded social manipulations from the shadows (Braune, 2019; Bronner, 2019). The encroachment of alternative gender performances onto public life is likewise viewed as a signifier of moves made by vague unseen forces and factions (the left, the woke, the feminists, etc.) in a large-scale conflict against ‘natural’ hegemonic life. In other words, marginalized subjects are not people, they are pieces on a board. This does not modify the harms done to those marginalized groups by

right-wing rhetoric, but it is significant for understanding the worldview shown in the reactionary content oeuvre. Appeals to the legitimacy of desires that contradict hegemonic norms are irrelevant because marginalized resistance to hegemony is seen as a signifier of the influence of an intrinsically evil and threatening enemy, which is a key part of the microfascist rhetoric used by both categories of influencers (Bratich, 2022).

Finally, all the effects of affective apophenia add up to a single greater outcome that are consistent with anti-life and fascism. When anti-life and apophenia are sufficiently internalized, one can enter a frame of mind wherein the ‘realness’ of material existence and abstraction change places. The vision of abstract existence that the death drive pursues becomes ‘truer’ within one’s mind than the material universe of the flesh and blood self. I call it the ‘gnostic inversion’ as it ties into the comparisons between reactionary rhetoric and Gnosticism that I have occasionally made throughout this work. I want to emphasize here that I am not making any sinister implications about Gnosticism as a concept, merely using an extremely basic understanding of it as a helpful analogy.

To briefly recap, by Gnosticism I broadly mean the belief in the material world as a fallen/false prison of the spirit, which seeks escape into the ‘true’ divine world of the spiritual. Similarly, reactionary rhetoric presents the material world as having fallen into degeneracy through modernity, usually tied to inadequate conformity to hegemonic masculinity through the corrupting influence of feminism. The ‘true’ spiritual world refers to the ‘mythic past’ where gender conformity was omnipresent, masculine dominance was assured, and emasculation anxiety was a distant fear. In short, a world free of tension. The actual historical context of this mythic age is irrelevant, it could be placed in the paleolithic age or a mere thirty years ago. Its purpose is to provide an abstraction to which one could point and go ‘things were good back then and they are not now.’

Now one can wish they lived during the Sengoku Jidai in Japan without having internalized anti-life. The mythic past is not about history, it’s about abstraction and ideals. Just as Gnosticism sees the spiritual world as ‘more real’ than the base material world, so to does the reactionary rhetoric of anti-life see the abstract world as the reality and the material world we live in as the false corrupted one. This is more of a religious view than a scientific one, sometimes literally so, such as my experiences with certain Christian viewpoints which see the

material world as inherently corrupt. This is tied to the essentialism inherent to right-wing belief. A consistent theme of the analyzed content was that hegemonic gender norms were ontologically true. Those roles were those covered by our current hegemonic gender norms. More than 100 000 years of homo sapiens history, and Western society as of the 20<sup>th</sup> century got it right! From this perspective, any society that does not adequately encourage and enforce these hegemonic gender norms is turning away from how human existence is really 'meant' to be. By encouraging women to exert a distinctly unladylike agency over their own existences and bodies, feminism has corrupted modernity with a false concept of how humans should relate to one another, the result being these constant feelings of unhappiness and anxiety as one tries to make their way through life according to rules that inherently conflict with one's innermost purpose. Thus, one can enter a belief that the society that one can interact with is a deception, while the society that only exists as an untouchable abstract is how things 'really are.' Gnostic inversion also fits in with the conspiracism inherent to reactionary rhetoric. Society is 'fake' because it is the result of the vague progressive conspiracy constantly manipulating things behind the scenes. If people could see how things 'really were,' then we could go back to how we are supposed to live.

This inversion of reality has a few important implications for how one engages with the world. First, consistent with anti-life, it encourages at least emotional disengagement with the society that defines one's material existence and by extension detachment from one's community. If one believes that the social structures they occupy are the result of anti-human corruption, then it makes sense to not engage with them by that structure's terms. This detachment can emotionally manifest in a spectrum moving from active repulsion to passive apathy. While repulsion could be associated with aggressive emotions like anger or disgust, it can also partake of despair and fear. Meanwhile, passivity would be more associated with contempt. This is a spectrum, not a binary, and a subject's orientation towards society can shift from situation to situation.

Manifestations of these emotions are going to support the erosion of democratic norms and civic engagement because of the next consequence. This form of disengagement from society brings with it a contempt for collective agency and democracy, in line with the contempt for the weak that is characteristic of fascism (Eco, 1995). This contempt for collective agency is sustained by three emotional branches. First is the sense of spiritual superiority that the

internalization of Gnostic inversion can provide. This works off the same emotional circuit that provides a narcissistic sense of gratification from belief in conspiracy theories (Prooijen, 2022; Cichocka et al., 2022). It allows the believer to see themselves as more special, while also investing their discomfort within society with a sense of meaning (Cichocka et al., 2022). However, internalization of this belief must likewise align the subject with more openness to support of hierarchical thinking, particularly regarding human organization. This follows into the next branch, which is the belief that the unenlightened masses cannot be trusted to make their own decisions because they are blind to the illusion of reality. As I discussed in the section on perceptions of leftist hegemony and capitalist ‘discernment,’ beliefs in objective reality are key to maintaining the reified notions of value in capitalism. How can someone who cannot see what the world really is be trusted to take part in political decision-making? Any democratic result that does not conform to ‘the truth’ must be seen as the result of the masses being manipulated like sheep to their own detriment. The last branch is mainstream society’s love of narratives wherein reality is shaped by exceptional individuals rather than being the result of collective social trends and/or material conditions. This is something that I cannot blame on reactionary propaganda or anti-life, but its mainstream placement is an important avenue for the internal legitimization of more explicitly anti-democratic ideologies.

Affective apophenia and conspiracism is an important part of maintaining anti-life commitment by ensuring that believers are constantly bombarded with an ever-widening array of distressing stimuli associated with engagement in public society. This incentivizes believers to isolate themselves from tangible communities in favour of those that venerate an abstract ideal of society. Reactionary gurus and prophets are both ideologically and economically incentivized to encourage audiences to encourage that disconnection, and more importantly, to never provide a point wherein that abstract ideal can be truly manifested and the audience’s anxieties permanently soothed. Eventually this can lead to a state of gnostic inversion wherein the intangible ideal becomes more ‘real’ than material reality. This gnostic inversion, aided by the disconnection from potential alternative points of view, likewise leads to contempt towards mass public engagement and thus apathy or even hostility towards democratic processes that do not submit to hegemonic power. The fascist strongman is seen as acceptable or even preferable to elected officials because their exceptional power can hammer reality into a shape that resembles the mythic ideal. As they hammer reality by destroying the lives of the marginalized in the name

of hegemonic domination, the believer can indulge in sadomasochistic gratification of the death drive. They see the life draining out of society, both metaphorically and very literally, as the dross being removed from the beautiful ideal within. ‘Eventually we will all be dead,’ anti-life sings, ‘and Heaven will remain.’

We have examined the process by which affective economies of anti-life belief are established and eventually metastasize to become dominant within the minds of individual subjects. In doing so I have largely focused upon the content and rhetoric of reactionary influencers. Yet the ultimate purpose of anti-life is the preservation of current hegemonic power structures, which means mainstream society is complicit in the spreading cancer of fascist cruelty.

#### 4.1.3 Anti-life Equation #3: $\text{Self} = [\text{Purity} - \text{Material Reality}] + [\text{Capital} \times \text{Hegemony} \times \text{Pain}]$

There is a broad cultural assumption that ideological extremism must chiefly originate from the cultural fringes. This is broadly true, in that something that is extremist cannot also be mainstream. However, what is and isn’t ‘extremist’ is subjective. For example, Trump won re-election in 2024 on an openly free-market Christian nationalist platform. That would have been considered fringe a mere decade ago, now it is driving policy in the White House. Can one really say that such ideology is extremist anymore, at least in the US context? The fascist ideology that now directs policy in the US and elsewhere is a direct outgrowth of many of the affective economies, particularly those connected to hegemonic masculine dominance, established by the same neoliberal status quo whose more moderate representatives now pretend at shock at how this could ever happen. The difference is the degree to which the death drive will be indulged in the pursuit of those norms, to the great suffering of many.

For example, consider Andrew Tate, someone whose cruel misogynistic and amoral rhetoric should surely qualify him as holding an extremist worldview. Nonetheless, he was able to become incredibly popular on social media, particularly among children and young adults (Evans, 2023). People watched in confusion at how this awful parody of a man could become so powerful and appealing to anyone, let alone apparently ‘normal’ boys. Articles in major newspapers were written trying to explain him and the world he comes from (Artsy, 2023; Magee, 2023; Tahsin, Shea, & Hume, 2023). However, one point that was often overlooked is

the impact that his embodiment of mainstream norms of hegemonic masculinity has on viewers. He often displays his powerful physique, surrounds himself with beautiful women, smokes expensive looking cigars and drives expensive cars, shows himself playing chess, etc. These are mainstream signifiers of masculinity, their legitimacy impressed upon our psyches by the same society that would pretend at shock that their embodiment could lead to fame for such a toxic person.

This is not to say that mainstream sources, such as the ones I have cited above, do not mention his embodiment of hypermasculinity. However, I have found that there is often a lack of curiosity in mainstream sources about how and why the presentation of signifiers of masculinity or other hegemonic norms can be so effective as covers for fringe rhetoric. I believe that part of this can be explained by the nature of hegemony itself.

Hegemonic norms are, by definition, enforced largely through the ruling ideology being internalized by the occupants of a society. This internalization comes with the assumption that the norms of that ideology are both ontologically true and obvious. The way that we often teach these norms has a lot in common with the rather frustrating phrase ‘do as I say, not as I do.’ this idea that people should only internalize explicit lessons, and that therefore any non-explicit decoding within a cultural text is the result of the individual viewer seeing something that ‘can’t be there.’ In other words, because we assume that everyone is working from the same internalized set of social rules and understandings, there is likewise an assumption that we can immediately and consciously understand what any communication means. If we do not understand it, then they are either lying, we are missing some key information, or they are bad at communication. This encourages an incurious naivete towards society and reality that suppresses the ability to critically interpret one’s world, and is therefore useful for the ruling classes to encourage. It also blinds people to the possibilities of alternative interpretations and an understanding of how unconscious biases can influence our actions through implicit connections to signifiers we may not even be aware exist. This is why one can play *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* (2013), a game where a villain remarks fondly about the “Good old days after 9/11” and honestly claim that it is ‘not political’ because it does not explicitly support a specific political ideology.

Thus parents may expect that Andrew Tate's explicit instructions to act abusively towards women would obviously be rejected in favour of the clear rightness of the instructions that they have already given their child, but that does not take into account the implicit lessons that society has given that same child about how men are supposed to act through media, real life experiences, interactions with other adults and peers, etc. When it comes to deeply established affective investments, the unconscious mind simply does not discriminate between the explicit and implicit. Hegemony as a whole is hostile to acknowledging the implicit reproduction of social norms because it would reveal the same fundamental contradiction we see in manosphere media; that something depicted as utterly natural simultaneously requires constant effort and reproduction. Neoliberal hegemony is also ideologically resistant to acknowledging the implicit because it is based on an individualist humanist perspective where individuals make rational choices and are thus the ultimate arbiter of all their decisions and actions. Furthermore, admitting the influence of the implicit would require the possessors of capital to acknowledge their responsibility for the horrors of capitalism that they profit from.

Throughout this analysis, we have seen how appeals to mainstream ideals of masculine performance were used both implicitly and explicitly were connected to right-wing ideology. This could be done through the aesthetics of various masculine performances, like Andrew Tate's hypermachismo, Jordan Peterson's fatherly intellectualism, Richard Hambly's cynical geek masculinity, or FarFromWeak presenting himself as Kratos from *God of War*, Aldo from PragerU being shown with weights in his room and a casual hoodie. All of the male influencers examined for this study in some manner closely engaged with a form of mainstream masculine performance. These performances make the extreme appear familiar and mundane because they are surrounded by signifiers of the *normal*, and thus act to lull one into complacency about the content of communication. Thus Andrew Tate feels less respectable in adult company than Jordan Peterson, even though they are ideologically more similar than not.

There were also explicit calls to masculine performance across the prophet/guru spectrum that were used as excuses or even demands for masculine domination. Carlson never directly states that men must attack trans people to keep their manhood, since that would admit hegemonic masculinity can 'lose.' However, he references masculine norms in a context that makes progressive actions seem threatening to the performance thereof. For example, he states

that the defense of women is the most noble male instinct and what keeps civilization in place, and then explains how the ability to defend women is being placed in jeopardy by the decisions of the Biden administration, such as allowing pregnant women into battle. He thus concludes that this is all part of an effort by Democrats to remove the difference between men and women and leave women defenceless (Carlson, 2022). These statements are essentialist, but not necessarily hateful on their face when taken out of context, yet within context they play on pre-existing internal masculine anxieties, and defines those anxieties as at least partially stemming from the existence of those who insufficiently conform to hegemonic gender norms, and also defines the public existence of non-conforming identities as a sign of an ongoing effort to destroy civilization. If Tucker was asked about it, he might say that he isn't being hateful, he is merely describing what he observes as men and women being told they should act the same, and in a world where only the explicit can be real, we would be forced to take them at his word and ignore how he has defined even the smallest compromise of masculinity, the privilege to commit violence on behalf of women, as an existential threat and contextualized bending of gender norms as a moral evil. Yet we all act as if this is acceptable and we go about our day because we have very specific mainstream norms against violence, and everyone *knows* you're not supposed to be violent, and therefore these influencers can say anything but a direct call to violence and remain innocent. It's not his fault you took it too far.

Accepting that the soil of neoliberalism was already fertile ground for the seeds of anti-life is necessary for understanding the seemingly sudden turn from liberal democracy to authoritarianism. This is most certainly not to minimize the malign influence of billionaire donor ghoul, social media algorithms, and many other important contexts. Research and exposure of such manipulation is an extremely important pursuit and otherwise I would not have bothered covering PragerU. However, if this is *all* we focus on, we too risk falling into perspectives dominated by contempt, despair, and conspiracism that reduces the public we wish to serve to the status of automatons that will blindly follow whatever social media tells them to do. In other words, our own state of anti-life. People chose to believe the prophets and gurus I studied because their ideology and guidance provided a way to make sense of the world in a way that supported their self-image, particularly with regards to masculine performance. This allows them to forego the agony of detachment from pre-existing optimistic connections in the face of

material conditions that make those connections untenable. The optimistic connections I will cover here are the connections between hegemonic masculinity and capitalism.

As pointed out at the beginning of the conclusion, the key driver for this intensification of anti-life norms is the desire to maintain mass adherence to the cruel optimism of capitalist society. The social contract of capitalism is, broadly speaking, the promise that one's labour and abilities will be rewarded. This includes the ability to perform masculinity in the role of financial provider. Now I'm not speaking in support of this expectation, but it *is* what society clearly communicates as the expected configuration of the family. Intersections with patriarchal privilege notwithstanding, it provides an outlet of masculine performance that is at least more on the side of *eros* than the death drive. By being a financial provider, one is at least assisting in the creation and preservation of a family or relationship that exists within the material world instead of an abstraction. Yet as capitalism grows less able to sustain its population, men are finding themselves less able to embody the economic roles that they have grown up internalizing and which society nonetheless expects them to fulfill. As Berlant (2011) points out, it is impossible for a growing amount of people to sustain themselves, let alone an entire family, on incomes they get for work that nonetheless demand higher and higher productivity. Aside from the damage to physical well-being this causes to almost all people, it also creates a situation wherein almost all men are in a state of constant emasculation anxiety to one degree or another.

I am not arguing that male identity, let alone cisgender White male identity, is marginalized. This current 'crisis in masculinity' is the result of unchecked labour exploitation by those who hold capital, and to be clear it affects *everyone*. The difference is that societal norms prime White men to expect the world to exist to serve them and allow them agency and power. Even though the degree of oppression is still much lower for non-wealthy straight White men than those of other intersectional identities, the difference between expectation and result causes perceptions of oppression to be disproportionately high (Kelly, 2020).

Capitalism is incapable of *solving* this problem because to do so would require slowing down or even reversing the current degree of worker exploitation. Just as a shark must continue to swim or die, capitalist economics depends upon an ever-increasing extraction of value from the world. For capitalists to maintain power, they must redefine what it is to be a true hegemonic man. This definition must provide an achievable outlet for masculine performance while also

maintaining worker loyalty to capitalist production and patriarchal domination, which is done by harnessing the unconscious impulse towards destruction within the death drive (de Masi, 2015)

This anti-life performance of masculinity can be summed up as the opportunity to die and/or destroy in the pursuit of economic production. This reframes the slow death of capitalist existence as something to pursue rather than to fight against. As one slowly dies under more and more hostile work environments, that lost life is converted into value, thus satisfying the death drive and masculinity's urge to return to the site of abstraction piece by piece. This death can come in a literal sense, as the result of unsafe work environments, literally being worked to death and the like. It can also be a death in a metaphorical sense, with masculinity performed by removing all internal characteristics and capacities that do not involve the pursuit of economic wealth. It is important to understand that in this case, the main abstraction that fascism (Bratich, 2022) and the death drive (Mills, 2006; De Masi, 2015) wish to convert life into is not a time or place but to economic value. The desired abstract outcome to this conversion is not merely to become wealthy but to 'win at capitalism' (Evans, 2023; Walker, Remski, & Beres, 2023). The difference is that anyone could theoretically become wealthy through sheer luck. In fact, most wealth is acquired through the luck of being born into it. Winning at capitalism, on the other hand, is about embodying a type of hustle-culture masculinity characterized by a willingness to abandon all other motivations other than that of being able to acquire wealth. It is not about making a certain amount of money; it is about making oneself into a machine for generating it. Thus, one kills all that is unique about one's 'self' in yet another pursuit of embodying abstraction.

Winning at capitalism ties into many concepts and anxieties around reactionary gender roles, particularly that of the hypergamous woman (münecat, 2022), the high-value man (Missouri, 2022), and the man as provider and defender (PragerU, 2023). The conversion of materiality into abstract value, for example the ability to assign a value to a piece of uninhabited land, gives capitalist economic production this veneer of rational objectivity that appeals to the male ideal of bringing order to so-called chaos while remaining untainted by feminine-aligned nature (Ahmed, 2011; Bratich, 2022). This is also displayed in less explicit but still connected rhetoric, such as Jordan Peterson's calls for men to live 'productive lives' (Peterson, 2022), which is performed through rigid conformity to masculine norms, including men as providers, as

opposed to disruptive agency. Finally, on a more pragmatic level being able to look at one's bank statement as a rating of how 'correctly' you are living is extremely attractive in this precarious and unpredictable world we live in. The deep intertwining of masculine performance with capitalist production is also displayed in analyzed prophet content. The maintenance of male economic dominance within the family is taken as a key to masculine identity and thus the masculinity of society (PragerU, 2023) and conversely the 'manliest' and thus worthy jobs are the ones that offer a higher income, as shown in Hambly's discussion of why trades work is better than post-secondary humanities education (2024).

The final ingredient for this anti-life capitalist masculinity is tied to the concept of 'wounded masculinity' as described by Kelly (2020). The experience of injury, whether it is physical, mental, or moral is taken up as a core component of White masculine performance. Kelly contextualizes it as a feeling of injury from the perception of White masculinity being under assault (2020). However, this could also be applied to the experience of slow death under capitalist labour, the agony of which is redirected from its actual source, capitalist exploitation, to the same marginalized groups that are also characterized as being a threat to White masculinity. This also decreases the ability for that wearing out, an experience shared between working class peoples of all intersections of identity, to become a source of class solidarity. Instead, the experience of decreasing quality of life becomes hoarded as a specifically White pain that aligns one against the non-white masses. Emphasis is instead placed upon non-White Others as being the cause of this economic precarity, shown mostly clearly in prophet content (Hambly, 2024; Carlson, 2022; PragerU, 2024). To summarize, anti-life capitalist hegemony aims to create a configuration of masculinity wherein White working-class men would rather die to serve or defend the very capitalist machine that brutalizes them than recognize the interests they share with less privileged intersections of identity.

As we can see from a synthesis of all three sections of the 'anti-life equation,' reactionary content from both prophets and gurus promotes affective economies that connect the validation of masculine identity to a form of miserable half-life based on hyper-individualistic atomization and alienation. Viewers are encouraged to see other people as either threats, competition, or trophies. Meanwhile, the reality of one's senses is constantly associated with anxiety, falseness, and disappointment in comparison to the expectations one is given for it. This produces a feeling

of either apathy or hatred for the world, rejection of community, and thus greater alignment with authoritarian leaders who likewise reject cooperation in favour of domination. The fact that this orientation towards the world also aligns with selfish capitalist ideology is no accident. Seeing one's fellows as competition to impress the rich and powerful, and the world of one's senses as not mattering is extremely advantageous for the maintenance of the capitalist machine.

Meanwhile those who are marginalized for non-conformity to hegemonic norms can be either safely disregarded or even used as easy sources to redirect one's internal pain and anxiety at through various forms of harm and degradation. Most importantly, none of these awful feelings towards the world, this hate, fear, and anger, are products of an outside interloper. These are all based off pre-existing emotional ties to hegemonic masculine norms, albeit slightly twisted or redirected. In fact, the various promoters of anti-life could not have had such immense success if society wasn't already ripe for such a destructive turn.

So how does one try to counter such an awful perspective? Arguments will not work, for ideology is merely the rationalization of the emotional orientation of anti-life. This is also not a problem that can be fixed at a moderation level, merely delayed. Because social media platforms and most of the Internet are firmly captured by the profit-driven logic that depends upon the same capitalist status quo that anti-life maintains, it is not unreasonable to expect the corporations that control social media to put up any kind of resistance that would deny them short-term profit growth. These platforms are also extremely vulnerable to being taken over by wealthy interests. Just look at Elon Musk taking over Twitter/X. Finally, the tech industry that the production of social media platforms is ensconced within is securely dominated by hegemonic masculine privilege (Latini, 2023).

Anti-life authoritarian takeover is clearly a larger issue than just social media algorithms, albeit one that social media bears a significant responsibility for. I don't know how to realistically fix this problem. What I can offer is a counter-ideology to anti-life, which I like to call...

#### *4.2 A Treatment to Anti-Life: Living Courageously.*

I want to set some reasonable and clear expectations for this section. First, I am not a guru, so I am not going to make any claims to transcendent wisdom that I am uniquely qualified

to share, nor is it a fully formed guide to life. It's a sort of patchwork some surface level cognitive behavioural therapy experience, Nietzsche, posthumanism by way of Alaimo (2010), as well as the affect theory I have studied for this dissertation. I am also not going to claim that I am a perfect exemplar of such a mindset, far from it. Perfection is a myth. What I offer is merely a mindset that I have found helpful in my personal experience. I have chosen to include this because I did not want to end this dissertation on a hopeless note. If it helps anyone, then this entire dissertation will have been worth it.

It should be clear by now that anti-life masculine performance rests upon three fundamental affects, joy, shame, and disgust. Joy is gained from the exertion of agency upon the external world, particularly agency which causes the world to conform to a more desirable ideal state. Meanwhile, disgust comes from unwanted 'penetration' from the external world. Shame is the link between joy and disgust because any interruption of that exertion of agency represents a 'penetration' of masculine invulnerability by the material world. These feelings move in a repeating loop because of the constant need to externally demonstrate masculinity (Vandello, 2008), the retreat to abstraction inherent to microfascism (Bratich, 2022), and constant underlying emasculation anxiety. This results in the previously described anti-life mindset.

Hegemonic masculinity, especially in its anti-life form, socializes men to see any such deviations from one's ideal outcomes as proof of personal weakness and/or proof of the degeneracy of material existence. Under affective apophenia, these are highlighted and viciously recontextualized as personal failures and/or threats. How awful this must feel, for such deviation is constant! Nothing can go *exactly* to plan, after all. Microfascist thought responds to this constant barrage of negative stimuli by encouraging a state of emotional numbness (Bratich, 2022). Such numbness brings with it a flattening of affective reaction that may seem a useful way to get through an adversarial life, yet I know from personal experience that is also what it feels like to be deeply depressed. To no longer be afraid, the death drive instead sacrifices the ability to experience happiness.

However, anti-life is not inevitable nor inescapable. Far from being the ontologically 'true' form of masculinity, this mindset is the result of socialization and reification (Connell, 2005; Butler, 1999; Hall, 1997). Thus, it can also be undone by socializing processes. If anti-life

is based upon alienation and resentment for the material world, then it follows that learning to engage in material reality both emotionally and cognitively is key to a more satisfying existence.

This does not require any revolutionary techniques, just development of the capacity for mindfulness, which broadly refers to an enriched state of awareness of one's present experiences (Purser & Milillo, 2015). Training resources for mindfulness, such as meditation techniques, are freely available online. Mindfulness is also a key part of anxiety treatment therapies like mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (Psychology Today, 2022). Many Buddhist traditions also involve reaching mindfulness states, although I would avoid drawing too close an equivalence between Buddhist practices and self-help mindfulness techniques to prevent historical and spiritual decontextualization (Purser & Milillo, 2015).

The key to this unlearning is to engage in greater awareness of one's present situation, environment, and affective experience. This will allow you to engage in a cognitive evaluation of one's surroundings, the affective reactions those surroundings are triggering, and then to critically reflect on *what* stimuli is producing those feelings and *why*. One can also evaluate whether the feelings that one is experiencing are truly caused by the external environment or if it is one's *internal* state being projected onto that external environment. This will ideally result in a greater ability to cognitively evaluate whether the affective state induced by environmental stimuli is proportionate or appropriate. An example relevant to the dissertation subject could be interacting with a woman. Perhaps you tried speaking to a woman and she ignored you or seemed to dismiss you, which made you feel angry and embarrassed. This closely aligns with common hegemonic masculine cultural narratives, which many of us, unconsciously or otherwise take as accurate to reality. Yet mindfully examining one's present surroundings could show that those assumptions are incorrect. There are myriad reasons for someone to not reciprocate a response that do not involve malice, such as being distracted, not being in the mood to socially interact, etc. Considering these possibilities can help make material environments feel less hostile and therefore allow yourself to reconsider what a proper response is. It is unreasonable to feel angry or ashamed for someone not hearing you, for example.

I also wish to draw a distinction between the idea of accepting material reality on its own terms and accepting material reality without any judgement or agency. This is in fact the opposite of what I seek to encourage. Accepting material reality requires one to *engage* with the

conditions of material reality by consciously observing precisely how and why parts of one's lived experiences trigger the reactions they do, whether those reactions do in fact align with how *you* view yourself, and what could/should be done to change either your actions or the environment to make it feel less unpleasant.

The mindset that would ideally develop from this is one that can approach stimuli that does not conform to one's expectations or ideals without automatically viewing that lack of conformity as a *threat*. This is especially vital when it comes to the evaluation of humans, environments, and cultural signifiers. This does not mean that feeling discomfort in an unfamiliar situation is a failure, feeling that way is entirely normal. However, it is important to critically examine the reason for that discomfort and if it conforms to reality. So much of reactionary narratives is about making non-conformity to dominant social norms into an indicator of moral failure or danger, and thus resisting unthinking adherence to those narratives is extremely important for fighting anti-life. Greater tolerance for exposure to unfamiliar stimuli will likewise increase willingness to interact with the uncontrollable world, which will lead to more opportunities for non-mediated social connection and community engagement. This will likewise lead to greater opportunity and willingness to exert agency towards goals that can be tangibly achieved and have a material impact.

I call this mindset living courageously. First, as a direct counter to hegemonic masculinity and anti-life's definition, which associates courage with demonstrations of force and dominance. Courage cannot in fact exist under the state of rigid dominance that reactionary politics desires because it requires one to maintain composure and focus *while experiencing fear*, which is a vulnerable 'penetrated' state. Someone who flees from the world cannot be courageous any more than a missile can. Similarly, existing in a state of constant dominance over one's environment renders courage impossible. Secondly because living courageously is extremely challenging. Yet just as friction may be used to start a fire, so too are these challenges opportunities to live a more meaningful and satisfying life.

Living courageously requires more than merely tolerating external reality not conforming to one's idealized hopes, but in fact embracing that possibility. This sounds easy on paper, but the execution is difficult. How often are we disappointed or frustrated because someone or something did not turn out as we had wanted or expected? When Gautama Buddha

taught that the root of all suffering was desire, he was referring to this disparity between ideal and reality (BBC, 2009). The universe has no obligation to conform to our wishes, after all. Similarly, we often become uncomfortable when people's behaviour does not align with our preconceptions, even when that person would have no reason to even know of said expectations. This can even be the case when that behaviour is different in a beneficial way, as we must go to the effort of realigning our own responses to match this new reality.

The mindfulness required for living courageously takes greater effort and discipline than anti-life masculinity. That is because a mind who is willing to adapt to external reality on its own terms has less recourse to flattening them into simple binaries of good/bad, male/female, godly/worldly, etc. Allowing for nuance literally requires more mental energy expenditure because the subject must spend more time thinking through the meaning of the stimuli. Thus, mental endurance and attention span must be trained over time. This is particularly difficult in a society as full as distractions as ours is.

Furthermore, cultivating the ability to evaluate whether something is good or not without reflexively comparing it to an externally imposed ideal requires self-confidence and critical thought. You must believe that you have the wisdom and the right to determine what is good for you. This can be extremely difficult, especially since a key attraction of prophets and gurus is the externalization of one's standards onto these influencers, and because failures of hegemonic masculine performance are often experienced extremely negatively (Vandello, 2008).

However, this also offers a more positive outlet for the performance of masculine ideals around fortitude and discipline. Instead of seeking out pain to expunge anxieties around meeting the impossible standards of hegemony, one may come to learn that pain may be a fact of life, but it is not all there is to life. Furthermore, willingness to interact with one's community on their own terms will allow one to develop genuine social support networks built upon mutual emotional connection. These networks not only assist with mental and emotional resilience but also allow for greater ability to tangibly effect the world. This is the opposite of isolating parasocial networks maintained by reactionary influencers, which seeks to frighten viewers into isolation for the benefit of themselves and their capitalist masters who would condemn us all to a life of hyper-individualistic slow death.

I want to take a moment for some caveats and some pre-emptive responses to arguments that could be made. Most importantly I want to be clear that I am *not* claiming that this will completely solve everyone's life problems, be they material, emotional, or existential. Similarly, I cannot guarantee what conclusions someone would come to if they did build this mindset. It is not as if everyone who practices mindfulness will instantly become a feminist socialist. Similarly, as living courageously is based upon individual action, it cannot function as a blueprint for large-scale social change on its own.

What I do genuinely believe is that this provides a way for people to critically evaluate their affective and material circumstances and begin looking for solutions to their own individual challenges without cultivating the sadomasochistic resentment and atomization of anti-life.

To summarize, then. Living courageously is about the development of a mindset that counter-acts the emotional and mental poison of anti-life ideology. This is achieved through cultivating the ability to mindfully engage with one's present reality on its own terms rather than the degree to which it fails to meet the impossible standards of hegemonic masculinity. Engaging with reality 'on its own terms' requires developing a critical awareness of one's own desires, feelings, and material circumstances in a way that is not dependent upon blindly following the directions of a prophet, guru, or other leader figure. This is necessary because a) everyone's circumstances are unique, therefore making one's self-image dependent upon the ability to emulate another person's presented self is a recipe for failure, b) placing one's moral agency purely in the hands of another person abrogates one's personal responsibility to think through the consequences of one's actions, and c) because no one can truly completely understand the mind of another person, blind obedience must constitute another version of the authoritarian retreat to the abstract.

Engagement with reality requires fortitude and bravery because of the need to consciously acknowledge the reality of one's present emotions, acceptance of external reality not conforming to one's ideals, and most importantly, the ability to accept failure as a necessary fact of life rather than an indicator of corruption of either the self or of one's reality. Furthermore, it requires the ability to not blindly conform to social norms or peer pressure. In other words, the courage to stand up and realize that as an individual you do have self-worth outside of one's

ability to emulate a standard you never signed up for. However, the challenges inherent in resistance to the capitalist slow death will allow you to truly live for yourself and others.

#### *4.3 Concluding Remarks and Directions for Future Research*

Before I conclude, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight some opportunities for future research. First and foremost, this is not remotely a comprehensive look at reactionary propaganda content online, let alone on YouTube. The right-wing grift ecosystem is constantly metastasizing, and I'm sure the 2025 Trump administration will promise new and terrible avenues for infection. My intention was to demonstrate how categories of 'gateway' online reactionary influencers utilize mainstream cultural signifiers to align audiences with reactionary ideology, and I stand by my work.

That said, I should discuss the elephant in the room, which is the emphasis on straight, White-coded male perspectives. I say White-coded because Andrew Tate has a Black father but did not present himself as such in the material I viewed. My reasons for this were twofold. First, the intersectional contexts and experiences of marginalized groups are profoundly different enough that I felt that it would do a disservice to those contexts for someone of my own intersectional identity to try and analyze them. This is especially so when it comes to affective responses to reactionary signifiers, which can vary hugely depending on socio-cultural context. FD Signifier makes a trenchant observation in "Understanding the Black Manosphere" (2022) that it is tempting to try and flatten the 'Black' manosphere into a single easily categorizable chunk of the broad manosphere. The Black manosphere's socio-historical context with regards to the affective interactions between hegemonic masculine norms and Black bodies of all genders (Avery, 2021; Robertson, 2022; Tee Noir, 2022; Small, 2022) deserves someone with greater intimate knowledge of that context. This is clearly an extremely rich area of research. I would recommend anyone interested in Black masculinity studies to start with bell hooks' work, Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), and more recently Tommy J. Curry's *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* (2017). There is also accessible video content done by FD Signifier, Foreign Man in a Foreign Land, and Lil Bill in 'CornbreadTube,' so named as a Black-focused version of Breadtube, the informal network of leftist content creators on YouTube and elsewhere.

Similarly, earlier versions of this dissertation included analysis of videos featuring female reactionary influencers like Candice Owens (2021) and Lauren Southern. There is clearly work to be done on analyzing the role of privileged femininity in reinforcing patriarchal domination (Hamilton et al., 2019; Junn, 2017; Lang, 2020), especially with regards to gender performances by female reactionaries (Love, 2020; Kelly A., 2018. Kelly, C., 2021). On a more pragmatic level, this text is long enough even after cuts. I felt that it would be more beneficial to the overall work if the focus remained on reactions to expressions of marginalized agency on the part of those who already largely hold hegemonic masculine privilege, like *Apocalypse Man* (Kelly CR, 2020).

Finally, there is a significant research gap is on radicalization gateways for audiences with neurodivergent conditions, such as autism spectrum disorder or ASD. As pointed out by video essayist First as Tragedy in “Dissecting the (Autistic) Manosphere” (2022), manosphere gurus’ promises to provide instruction on how to succeed at masculine gender performance are particularly attractive to those who struggle with social cues. People with ASD are more likely to engage in online socialization due to factors such as lowered need for mentally fatiguing social masking (Trevisan, et al., 2017; Miller, Rees, & Peerson, 2021; Lai, et al., 2017), and lowered vulnerability to stigmatization and bullying (Mañano, et al., 2015; Botha, Dibb, & Frost, 2022). This tendency, combined with the prevalence of reactionary content online (Dafeure, 2022; Lewis, 2018; Day, 2022; Horowitz, 2023), autistic individuals’ lowered access to sexual education and knowledge (Weir, Allison, & Baron-Cohen, 2021), difficulties with social performance of masculine norms (Bejerot & Eriksson, 2014), and internalized ableism (Gheorge & Yuzva, 2023) resulting from the social stigmatization and policing of autistic identity (Moore, et al., 2022; Jones, Gordon, & Mizzi, 2023) leave autistic individuals particularly vulnerable to alignment with exploitative anti-life ideology and communities. This is even more salient during adolescent development, which is characterized by heightened emotional dysregulation (Romeo, 2013) and anxiety around social status (Rahal, et al., 2020). Thus far, research into the link between ASD and the far-right has largely and rather tastelessly contextualized autism as a possible risk factor for stochastic gender violence perpetrated by incels (Williams, et al., 2021; Woodbury-Smith, et al., 2022; Broyd, et al., 2023; Gheorge & Yuzva, 2023). While the research is ably done, the focus reinforces stereotypes of autistic people as alien and inherently resentful of women (Moore, et al., 2022). Research that focuses on factors that may motivate autistic

people to adopt anti-life orientation towards society, particularly those factors that engage with interactions between autistic traits and ‘neurotypical society,’ could provide a valuable alternative focus, particularly if done from an autistic perspective.

So here we are at last. It has been a long five-year journey, and I feel as if I have only barely scratched the surface. I wish that I could say that signs are encouraging, but frankly they are not. As I have discussed throughout this project, those of us with a stake in human freedom and dignity no longer have the privilege of being shocked by the mainstreaming of authoritarian ideology, especially in 2025. This has been a long time coming, allowed and even encouraged by cultic adherence to neoliberal market economics and the neglect of public institutions in favour of ever more privatization. The Internet of my youth, which once promised the creation of a new global brotherhood unbound by differences of language, race, or religion has been captured instead by social media megacorps who use it to jam us into an algorithmic panopticon. Mindless programs that know more about us than our most intimate lovers work to restrict us to only seeing the most individually bias-confirming, emotionally triggering content. The very platforms that we are nigh-socially obligated to engage with also work to psychologically compel us to docilely consume media while more and more of the world outside is carved up piece by piece between the unimaginably wealthy.

So yes, things could be better. Still, I want to leave the reader with this understanding. As discussed throughout this conclusion, the politics that reactionary gurus and prophets work to align the audience’s identity with fundamentally hinge on contempt for the material world as false. Ideologically, this is because their identities are built upon the constant embodiment of impossibly pure states of abstract being and absolute binaries. Neither of these can be truly accommodated by the unpredictable nature of reality. Only a Sith deals in absolutes. Thus, the security of one’s identity is always at risk of disruption, and because admitting to insecurity would be to admit to a lack of faith/confidence this anxiety must be displaced out onto the world. ‘I know that I’m a real man/Christian/patriot/etc., it’s just that the world keeps trying to make me feel bad!’ On a pragmatic level, it is important for gurus and prophets to encourage a disdain for reality so that their followers will be more likely to disregard sensory evidence that contradicts their teachings. ‘If I see Andrew Tate doing something bad, it’s really just the Matrix trying to *make* him look bad.’

The constant anxiety and fear fed by this cognitive dissonance drives them to seek ever-increasing control over others, whether it be through cultural dominance or naked force, to avoid stimuli that may bring these insecurities to the mental fore. In this lies the greatest weakness of the authoritarian. Because they are encouraged to experience dissonant stimuli as hostile action, they are incentivized to reject that evidence. This *discourages* those who are most skilled at their work from being able to apply themselves fully, both because it would cause them to experience dissonance internally and externally will risk censure if they act in a non-conforming manner. Lastly, because worthiness is evaluated based upon alignment with the abstract as defined by the leader, those in positions of authority are more likely to be placed due to loyalty rather than actual ability. The consequence of this outgrowth of the death drive is that such organizations are incapable of making decisions that are based upon a full evaluation of their material situations, which will inevitably lead to them taking self-destructive actions that were otherwise avoidable. This is not to encourage a wait and see approach to rising and/or explicit fascism in one's community, nor is this meant to minimize the awful damage that authoritarians have and continue to cause throughout the world. But I want the readers to know that for all the power and authority the authoritarian believer projects, they are still based upon an unsustainable illusion. The people may be convinced or coerced to agree that the king is in fact wearing clothes, but that king will still die of exposure.

Conversely, by living courageously we can make real positive differences in the lives of those around us. We can free ourselves from the belief that humanity is condemned to constant warfare with the Other based upon some atavistic instinct, mythic ancestral grudge, or declaration by the elite class. Nor must we be forced to conform to the dehumanizing social norms and standards, particularly hegemonic norms that are used to arbitrarily confine and divide us against each other for the sole profit of the most powerful few. What we can all do right now, is decide to get up and find at least one thing to do in our community that will help someone else, that will build connections and improve reality as it truly exists. It's not the solution, not by a long shot, but it is the beginning of one. Doing this will not only defy the reactionary project to fill the collective body of society with despair and hatred but also give individuals the chance to truly determine what will give their lives satisfaction and meaning.

I would like to end on this quote from *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965) by Vonnegut, which I think really sums up a better and truer way of thinking than the cruelty of anti-life capitalism we've found ourselves in.

“Hello, babies. Welcome to Earth. It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It's round and wet and crowded. At the outside, babies, you've got about a hundred years here. There's only one rule that I know of, babies — ‘God damn it, you've got to be kind.’”

So be kind, be real, respect how you feel but also critically examine the reason behind those feelings. Good luck everyone!

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