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What do we need to know about the manosphere and young people's mental health?

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Abstract

The manosphere is an international network of social media influencers and communities promoting male supremacy and anti-feminist ideologies. Young men are engaging with this extremist content at high rates. Despite growing concerns among educators, policymakers and researchers, systematic data on the long-term impact of the manosphere on young people's mental health and behaviour remains limited. However, preliminary data suggest that the manosphere is encouraging sexist attitudes, exacerbating existing inequalities in schools, and spreading dangerous messages about mental health. We discuss the current state of research, highlight the challenges of measuring engagement with online misogyny, and propose priorities for future work. Our commentary underscores the urgent need for multi-level interventions to counteract the negative effects of the manosphere on the attitudes of young men, and their downstream consequences for the mental health and well-being of women and girls.

Keywords: Manosphere, misogyny, adolescents, online harm, mental health

Introduction

Online misogyny has increased at an alarming rate over the last 15 years. Social media influencers within the 'manosphere' amplify cultural narratives that women are fundamentally inferior to men. Within these online spaces, women are often derogated as innately illogical, selfish, materialistic and scheming. Men are presented as the primary victims of contemporary society. Negative attributions about women, combined with a narrative of male victimhood, are used to justify harassment, coercive control, and discriminatory behaviour (Ging, 2019). It is well established that experiences of discrimination, including sexism, have negative implications for victims' mental health (Hackett, Steptoe, & Jackson, 2019). Thus, it is crucial to understand the ways in which the manosphere may be influencing the attitudes and well-being of young people.

Engagement with the manosphere

In some respects, engagement with the manosphere is a hidden problem. Although a few influencers have gained widespread notoriety, many others do not engage with mainstream news channels. As a result, the scale of the manosphere may be underestimated by many adults. However, an increasing number of young people seek information through alternative online channels, exposing them to greater risk of disinformation. The manosphere is an international movement but its scale can be illustrated with data from the United Kingdom. A poll commissioned by the charity Hope not Hate in 2023 found that 80% of 16- and 17-year-old British boys had consumed content created by Andrew Tate, a well-known member of the manosphere. In contrast, only 60% of boys in the same age group had heard of the British Prime Minister. A poll by Internet Matters, also in 2023, found that 56% of young fathers (under the age of 35) approve of Andrew Tate.

The dynamics of online misogyny create a situation that may be particularly persuasive for teenage boys. Influencers compete for hits and shares within a limited marketplace of attention. Within this marketplace, controversial and extreme opinions are particularly likely to receive attention, leading to a radicalisation of available content. Algorithms designed to offer users more of the content that they like, combined with systems for blocking unfavourable comments, create echo chambers in which individuals are presented with an increasingly homogenous and polarised world view

(Baker et al., 2024). Adolescents are drawn into this online world at a developmental period in which they are disproportionately concerned with their peers' opinion (Crone & Konijn (2018). Furthermore, these boys are often about to experience the disappointment, embarrassment and rejection that almost inevitably accompany dating for the first time. The manosphere offers them a lens through which to understand these difficult experiences. It thus engages teenage boys with a deeply discriminatory world view at a point in development when they are likely to be particularly vulnerable to it.

How is the manosphere influencing young people?

Researchers, practitioners, and politicians report grave concerns about the ways in which engagement with the manosphere appears to be influencing the behaviour and attitudes of teenage boys and young men. To date, however, the consequences of interacting with online misogyny have not been quantified in a systematic way. Crucially, longitudinal data are often lacking, limiting our capacity to make inferences about causal relationships. Nevertheless, there are some studies exploring the ways in which engagement with online misogyny is related to attitudes and well-being.

Gender attitudes and discriminatory behaviour

Correlational research suggests that engagement with online misogyny is associated with negative behaviour towards women and girls. Bunce et al. (2024) found that the more male pupils within a school engage with online misogyny, the more female pupils and female staff within that school are experiencing sexist discrimination. This statistical relationship remains significant when the size of the school and the socioeconomic status of its intake are controlled for.

The causal relationship between boys' viewing misogyny and developing sexist attitudes may be more complex than it first appears. One possibility is that engagement with the manosphere causes an increase in misogyny among teenagers. Social learning theories predict that individuals who are exposed to extensive misogynistic content will start to internalise the stereotypes, attitudes and behavioural norms that are common within that sphere (Over & McCall, 2018). An alternative, and still concerning, possibility is that misogynistic content offers licence to boys already inclined towards a misogynistic world view to express those views more freely and to act on their negative

attitudes. Crucially, these processes could operate in tandem - adolescents with sexist attitudes could be drawn to the manosphere and then radicalised by the messages they receive there.

Suggestive evidence for a causal role of online misogyny comes from surveys of school teachers. Seventy-six percent of secondary school teachers and 60% of primary school teachers in the UK are extremely concerned about the ways in which online misogyny is influencing their pupils (Over et al., 2024). When asked to give examples of how online misogyny is influencing their male pupils, teachers reference increases in sexist comments and discriminatory behaviour. For example, one secondary school teacher reported an incident in which male pupils told a female pupil *“I wouldn’t even rape you”* and *“You wouldn’t make much money on Only Fans”*. A primary school teacher reported an incident in which a male pupil said *“It’s ok to hurt women because Andrew Tate says so”*. More broadly supporting a causal role for the manosphere in shaping attitudes, work from computer science suggests that users tend to migrate from more moderate platforms (for example those advocating for men’s rights) to more extreme platforms (for example, those advocating for men to ‘go their own way’ and live separately from women) over time (Ribeiro et al., 2021).

Mental health

One implication of this research is that, by exacerbating existing inequalities and fuelling increases in sexist discourse, the manosphere may be negatively affecting women and girls’ mental health. Previous research suggests that experiencing sexism more broadly has negative implications for women’s mental health (Hackett et al., 2019). More directly investigating the relationship between boys’ engagement with the manosphere and women’s mental health, Bunce et al. (2024) recently showed that the extent to which male pupils within a school engage with the manosphere predicts the extent to which female teachers within that school report depressive symptoms and harmful work-related stress. No such relations were found for male teachers.

Understanding how boys’ engagement with the manosphere is related to the mental health of girls with whom they interact remains a crucial direction for future research. Research conducted in the US has shown that rates of depression among teenage girls have increased rapidly and disproportionately over the last ten years. This

has coincided with increases in their experiences of sexual violence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). However, no research has yet directly investigated whether boys' engagement with the manosphere may be contributing to these trends.

While women and girls are the primary victims of the manosphere, it is also important to consider whether engagement with the manosphere might negatively impact men and boys' mental health. Misogynistic influencers often purport to be helping men with their mental health. However, these same influencers often express contempt for mental health problems claiming, for example, that depression does not exist or that its prevalence is wildly exaggerated (Konu et al., 2024). Konu and colleagues have recently found that stigma surrounding seeking help for mental health problems is particularly high among young men who engage with the manosphere (Konu, et al., 2024).

Relationship to other forms of extremism

There is an emerging interest in whether engagement with the manosphere also encourages participants down a road towards other discriminatory beliefs and extremist political positions (Ribeiro et al., 2020). Misogynistic influencers often express racist and homophobic opinions. As engagement with the manosphere and associated online spaces grows, discrimination against people of colour and members of the LGBT+ community is likely to increase with downstream consequences for the victims' mental health and well-being.

Priorities for future research

Measuring engagement with the manosphere

In order to understand how engagement with the manosphere is influencing the behaviour and well-being of young people, we need access to data that fuses measures of engagement with psychologically meaningful variables such as attitudes and mental health. At present, the field is limited to self-report data in which participants describe the types of content they interact with. Whilst these self-report methods provide insight, there are two key issues that arise from using this approach. First, participants may be reluctant to reveal and/or unable to accurately report how extensively they engage with misogynistic influencers. Second, researchers are limited to asking questions about influencers that they have heard of. Teenagers and young people may be accessing large

quantities of content with which researchers are unfamiliar. One solution is large scale data donation in which participants share their social media histories en-masse with researchers through a secure data pipeline. Contemporary machine learning solutions (such as large language models) can then be leveraged to analyse these data in order to understand how engagement relates to individual difference variables such as gender attitudes, homophobia and support for the far right. By combining data donation with social network approaches, researchers will be able to more accurately map how boys' engagement with the manosphere is related to the mental health of women and girls with whom they regularly interact.

Understanding how to intervene

Engagement with online misogyny is a complex problem and requires a multi-level approach. Addressing this issue requires action from government, social media companies, schools and, where possible, parents.

One important goal for future psychological research is to understand how to help teenage boys to think critically about misogynistic content when they almost inevitably encounter it. One promising avenue may be to incorporate 'inoculation' techniques in which individuals are presented with watered down versions of discriminatory views from the manosphere and encouraged to generate counter arguments to them. Such techniques have been shown to be effective in reducing resistance to vaccination and discouraging inaccurate views around climate change (van der Linden, 2023). They may hold promise for countering misogyny as well. In principle such approaches could be incorporated into the national curriculum and be utilised by parents interested in protecting their sons from the influence of the manosphere. Equally crucial is to work with girls to help them understand the signs of abusive and discriminatory behaviours and give them the skills to respond safely and in ways that protect and enhance their own well-being.

Preparing young adolescents to critically engage with the manosphere is one important goal for future research. Another equally important goal for psychological research is to mitigate the influence of the manosphere on individuals who have already consumed considerable misogynistic content. Recent research suggests that interaction with an AI can be one effective persuasive strategy for countering disinformation

(Costello, Pennycock, & Rand, 2024). Such approaches could be adapted to target disinformation from the manosphere.

Concluding thoughts

The influence of the manosphere over young men's attitudes, and their downstream consequences for women and girls' mental health, represent a pressing concern that demands immediate attention. It is crucial for researchers, clinicians, educators and policymakers to be aware of, and collaborate in, addressing its harmful impact. Multilevel interventions are needed to protect young people from this expanding toxic environment.

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