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"Society failed men": male self-help influencers around dating and fitness, optimised hegemonic masculinity and networked misogyny

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ABSTRACT

Examining an important aspect of wellness industries namely male self-help influencers and their content, this paper studies the everyday expression of non-violent gendered extremism on social media and the ways that visuals help extremism to spread. The article, first, argues that the purported authenticity and intimacy along with platform affordances and vernaculars used by male self-help influencers make misogyny and heteronormativity accessible. These influencers brand themselves as entrepreneurial subjects and informed experts, embedded within the global neoliberal consumer landscape, in line with the burgeoning mainstream interest in wellness. Second, the article shows how seemingly "apolitical" and "neutral" media content, combined with references to popular media cultures and manosphere memes, perpetuate covert and acceptable networked misogyny. Expanding knowledge on influencer cultures, gender and online extre-mism, our findings identify these influencers as fun and accessible symbols of a widespread right-wing movement online, perpetuating stereotypical gender norms and optimized and hegemonic masculinity.

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Introduction

As wellness industries reach new peaks in their financial gains and have become a major force in the global economy,[1] there is a global burgeoning mainstream interest in wellness and wellness cultures, such as clean eating, superfoods and fitness. More recently, there is increasing interest in the "darker side" of the wellness industries, in the form of news stories, videos, short documentaries and social media posts which range from questioning its toxic ideals and false promises to investigating wellness scams and fake influencers. Social scientists have also recently investigated the intersection of wellness industries and influencers with conspiracy theories and extremism (Baker, 2022; Demuru, 2022; Sousa, 2024). How gender is discursively insinuated in online wellness industries particularly in the content of wellness influencers has been little studied in scholarly research. The recent research of O'neill (2024, 2025) focuses on women influencers' experiences and labor in the wellness economy, highlighting that it is a highly feminized terrain.

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The self-help industry (e.g., self-help books, podcasts, boosters), as a part of the broader wellness industries, could be defined with reference to the reformation and reflexive project of the self (Giddens, 1991; Lash & Urry, 1994). The self is constituted as the primary site of transformation (Hazleden, 2003), and is made responsible for this transformation, promoting the idea that good citizens care for themselves best by choosing, evading or denying specific social relations and/or consumer products (Rimke, 2000). This is embedded in the wider neoliberal politics and cultures today, resting on individualism, competition, entrepreneurship, self-regulation and calculation (Gill, 2008; McGuigan, 2016). As part of this, there is a growing industry of self-appointed lifestyle and wellness gurus, combining nutritional advice and exercise tips with self-development and new age spirituality (Baker, 2022). Amongst others, figures like Rollo Tomassi, Bronze Age Pervert and Asa Baber have set the foundation and blueprint for more recent male self-help influencers.

Most self-help content might appear "apolitical," neutral and entertaining at first glance, as they seem to be devoid of explicit political processes, relations, and practices. This article, however, identifies self-help videos for men as an avenue for the mainstreaming of non-violent gendered extremism, which we define as an expression and performance of misogyny, sexism, heteronormativity and/or transphobia. First, we examine the ways that self-help videos for men create idealized, optimized and hegemonic forms of masculinity and body, and perpetuate normative heterosexuality. These contents might spread right-wing ideas and ideologies, which have the potential to be more far-reaching than direct and open forms of right-wing political organization and propaganda. Second, we show that male self-help influencers assert masculinist supremacy by creating a sense of expertise, authenticity, and intimacy through various verbal, oral and visual strategies, platform vernaculars and references to popular media cultures. Although the internet is largely borderless and the audiences of influencers extend beyond a given national context, this article focuses on an aspect of digital wellness industries of the UK. Wellness industries have recently been mainstreamed to an unprecedented extent in the UK (O'neill, 2024), making it one of the biggest wellness industries in Europe and the world (Gough, 2024).

The article's research question is as follows: How do male self-help influencers and their content spread non-violent gendered extremism in the UK? Responding to this research question, the article first engages with the concepts of networked misogyny and the manosphere in relation to wider gendered extremism, linking this to influencers. After presenting its methodology, resting on a multimodal discourse analysis of the profile and content of male self-help influencers in the UK, the article lays out its findings in four sub-sections, informing its ensuing discussion and conclusions.

Gendered extremism, networked misogyny, the manosphere, and influencers

The article's theoretical framework is at the intersection of the concepts of gendered extremism, networked misogyny, the manosphere, and influencers. Men have been regarded as gender-neutral in radicalization and extremism studies, largely leaving the relevance of gender in their journeys unconsidered (Pearson, 2023). Previous research identified men's friendship groups or kinship as a potential precursor in adapting radical ideologies (Sageman, 2004; Scremin, 2023). Existing scholarship also highlighted the problematic nature of homogenizing or condemning the practices and experiences of people or groups with radical political positions (Pearson, 2019; Pilkington, 2016). Moreover,

previous research showed that many participate in extremist movements without necessarily embracing all its ideas, beliefs, and practices (Botto & Gottzén, 2023; Koehler, 2016), which is helpful to understand the appeal and reach of digital gendered extremism today.

One of the earliest research looking at digital gendered extremism was Jane (2014), who used the term e-bile to describe invective, *recreationally nasty* and sexualized threats of violence toward women online, circulating freely through the entire body of the Internet via e-mails, websites and social media networks. Today there is a virulent and more organized strain of violence and hostility toward women in online environments, which Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016) referred to as "networked misogyny." Connecting online practices to structural sexism and violence against women, networked misogyny rests on the structuring nature of misogyny that is already widespread, deeply entrenched and naturalized in Western culture (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016). Today this is helped by anonymity, trolls, technical affordances, structures, ownership and the insufficiency of policy frameworks of online platforms (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016). This opens up spaces and opportunities for a more visible, systematic and coordinated attack on women and women's rights, partly as a response to the visibility of online feminism (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023; Marwick & Caplan, 2018). Networked misogyny is not a subculture, as it rests on structural sexism and misogyny that pre-dates the Internet.

E-bile may be triggered by online disagreements over divisive subjects such as politics, religion, or sexual orientation, but participants of e-bile rarely engage substantively with each other's political positions (Jane, 2014). As such, networked misogyny and transphobia may not necessarily be engineered by a specific group (e.g., right-wing groups) (Jane, 2014), or it may not only be exclusive to right-wing men, for example, trans-exclusionary feminism (Ng, 2025). Although it is important to note that networked misogyny is more common and widespread than specific groups such as men's right groups, we identify it here as a part and manifestation of a wider far-right and anti-gender mobilization and neo-liberal ideology today (Huang, 2023; Koulouris, 2018; Ural & Eslen-Ziya, 2024; Yetiş & Özdüzen, 2024). While gendered extremism has been historically based on the patriarchal organization of society and therefore extends far beyond networked misogyny, networked misogyny arguably makes gendered extremism more acceptable and visible through the power of platforms and algorithms. More research is needed on how routine everyday practices might express, spread, and influence increasingly visible forms of gendered extremism online, including networked misogyny (Luger, 2022; Veilleux-Lepage et al., 2023). This article contributes to this knowledge gap by linking health and wellness advice and "fun" and "neutral-looking" forms of idealized masculinity performances online to networked misogyny.

A recent strand of literature examining gendered aspects of online extremism focused on the manosphere, where young men's exposure to antifeminist content online can be an entry point to the manosphere (Nicholas, 2024). The manosphere is an umbrella term describing online misogynistic and antifeminist spaces that rely on hostile sexism directed particularly at women and a disdain for feminism (Gheorghe, 2024; Habib et al., 2022; Rothermel & Kelly, 2024). Examples are MRA (Men's Rights Activists), incels (men who consider themselves "involuntarily celibate"), and MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way, who choose celibacy whilst demonizing women). These online spaces are made up of several communities, centering on sexism toward women, where sexual success and advice on attracting women are combined with various expressions of anxiety, despair, self-hatred,

and shame (Maloney et al., 2022). A component of the manosphere is pickup artists (PUA), which describes a community of men seeking sexual success with women through psychological manipulation. The modern movement is epitomized by the concept of *negging*; a man should not be nice to women when attempting to seduce them and should instead use subtle insults and put-downs as this purportedly hurts women's self-esteem and makes them more pliable (King, 2018). Hendriks (2012, p. 2) identified a dichotomy of hedonism and an "ascetic focus on self-discipline" in the movement. From smaller online communities on 4chan or Reddit, these discourses and ideologies spill into more mainstream platforms (Jones et al., 2020; Solea & Sugiura, 2023), such as X, YouTube and TikTok. This highlights a shift toward visual expressions of the manosphere by popular content creators and/or influencers, with their own meme-based lexicon around misogyny (Ging, 2019; Gothard et al., 2021; Kasimov et al., 2023). Although evidence shows that white supremacy permeates and dominates the manosphere (Gheorghe, 2024; Kasimov et al., 2023), these groups, including the influencers within them, are not monolithically white (Johanssen & Kay, 2024).

Influencer studies have shown that influencers engage in digital labor in the influencer economy (Duffy, 2016; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017), whilst building social capital (McQuarrie et al., 2013; Ouvrein, 2024), by leveraging celebrity to gain legitimacy and consent (Zeglen & Ewen, 2020). They use vlogs to bolster the perceived authenticity, credibility, and expertise (Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Morris & Anderson, 2015; Tolson, 2010). Influencers also exploit social media's narrative and technological affordances to hack audiences' attention through memes, news stories or animation, at times targeting journalists or bloggers to help spread their media content (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Video-centric platforms such as YouTube and TikTok foster parasocial relationships between the creators and audiences, strengthening the perceived credibility and authenticity of the content creator (Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Morris & Anderson, 2015; Tolson, 2010). Tolson (2010, p. 283) identifies this role as the *ordinary expert* and Abidin (2017) as *calibrated amateurism*, which she describes as both a practice and aesthetic where actors specifically over-craft contrived authenticity using the raw aesthetic of an amateur, whether they are amateurs by status or practice, by relying on the performance ecology of platforms, affordances, tools, cultural vernacular, and social capital. Maddox (2023) shows that online calibrated expertise is practiced through sponsored posts, creator monetization and platform dynamics, and stands at the intersection of neoliberalism and populist anti-intellectualism. Amongst other functions, we argue that the contemporary influencer economy opened room for the broader dissemination of extremist narratives beyond subcultural spaces and national frontiers using novel practices and aesthetics of intimacy, authenticity, and expertise.

Methodology

To examine men's self-help videos produced by UK-based influencers and their presentations and performance of hegemonic masculinity and misogyny through dating, fitness and health advice, we focused on the content on mainstream video-centric social media platforms of YouTube and TikTok. To identify male self-help influencers on these two platforms, we searched for the keywords of men's self-help, men's self-improvement, men's personal development, male dating advice, dating advice for men UK, and the hashtags of #selfhelpformen, #maleselfhelpuk #menspersonaldevelopment, #datingcoachformen,

#datingadviceformen, and #fitnessadviceformen in December 2022. At the intersection of these hashtags and keywords, we assessed the content of returned videos to determine whether:

(1) The account that posted the video belonged to an influencer and the influencer was from/based in the UK (had a British accent, geographically located themselves there, and shared culturally specific content);
(2) The account content was dedicated to helping males by providing them with advice on fitness, diet, and dating;
(3) The account had a notable following (over 100 K) and received significant engagement through the number of views (over 1 M).

We then identified three UK-based male self-help influencers with large followings and prominent online visibility: *Leo*,[2] *PrimaryMale*,[3] and *WillWeaponShow*[4] in two platforms. Although there was a lot of male self-help content related to fitness and diet tagged in these hashtags and keywords, we sampled these three influencers looking out for the additional category of dating advice and assessed accounts based on a consistent production of content rather than more irregular content creation. Care was taken to avoid selection biases by extensively searching the platforms and aggregating the results, however, the unknown nature of the algorithms that these platforms use to serve content makes it impossible to eliminate all biases.

Following Pearce et al. (2020), we engaged in a visual cross-platform analysis of male self-help content creators on TikTok and YouTube, acknowledging the interplay between the social phenomenon under investigation and the medium within which it is being researched. We thus paid attention to platform vernaculars, which is a way of understanding how communication practices emerge within platforms, resting on a combination of styles, grammar and logics that constitute genres of communication (Gibbs et al., 2015). Affordances and deriving vernaculars inform how users, such as influencers, engage in the participatory cultures and economies of platforms, what meaning becomes visible as the result of this participation and how users understand and articulate their use of platforms (Keller, 2019; Vicari & Ditchfield, 2025). In analyzing each influencer's account and content to identify overarching themes, styles, narratives, aesthetics and consumer products, we used a two-step approach: analyzing their overall online content and investigating their use of texts, images and platform affordances in their most popular content, as this may represent each influencer's most engaged-with and visible content.

We then used multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) to systematically analyze the sampled data. MDA is helpful for investigating the speaker/writer and hearer/reader roles and relationships and how these communicative practices form and maintain power and social realities (Kress & Bezemer, 2023), with an emphasis on platform affordances and wider platform vernaculars. MDA is a data analysis method that includes hybrid forms of communication, such as text, sound and images (O'halloran, 2011). Discursive methods are commonly used to examine gender-related online phenomena, including #MeToo (Almanssori & Stanley, 2022) and gendered conflict (Colliver & Coyle, 2020; Sagredos & Nikolova, 2022). In analyzing the accounts and content of the influencers, we examined how social realities are constructed to justify and legitimize hegemonic narratives and

galvanize support (Van Dijk, 2015), particularly the performances of hegemonic and optimized masculinity and networked misogyny within TikTok and YouTube cultures.

Using MDA, we first discursively analyzed the overall profiles of the three influencers to understand their location in the influencer socio-cultural economy. Second, we focused on their visual and textual representational strategies and use of affordances in their popular videos to understand how they perform their identities and make and reach their audiences. We found out that three main discourses dominated their content: 1) building strong and muscular bodies 2) attracting women and 3) becoming successful businessmen, which shaped our findings. In laying out the findings, we pseudo-anonymysed the names of the influencers throughout the text, blurred their products and names of the videos in the screenshots. To anonymyse the screenshots that we took from the influencers' videos, we used Adobe Photoshop to apply the penciling technique. Penciling enables researchers to edit images from photo-like quality to pencil-sketch, to reduce recognition to the naked eye and render the image unrecognisable to search engine queries (Taylor & VandenBroek, 2025). These techniques helped us protect privacy and confidentiality whilst preventing us from amplifying the content of these self-help influencers.

Findings

"Become fit and strong": body and fitness experts

Male self-help influencers adhere to common characteristics of other influencers of fashion, lifestyle and politics, such as creating highly engaging and personalized content (Abidin, 2016), by using visual strategies and techniques. The product in gendered economies of visibility is the body, whose value is constantly deliberated over, surveilled, evaluated, judged, and scrutinized (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Influencers also brand themselves as experts on specific topics (Abidin et al., 2021; Archer & Robb, 2024; Maddox, 2023), hoping to become "shapers and disseminators" (Abidin, 2021) and/or role models (Archer & Robb, 2024). In this instance, the influencers aim to become experts and role models in having "desirable" bodies. Leo's channel description, which is an important platform affordance of YouTube, indicates that he considers himself as an expert in self-improvement, as he describes his channel and videos as "life-changing for you" on the path to become strong, fit, successful and wealthy men. To perform his calibrated expertise, Leo addresses his audiences and onlookers directly, as if he "really knows them" (Chung et al., 2023). He uses strong facial expressions in the talking head style and places the viewer within the given situation by directly commenting on "your journey" (Figure 1). Leo's content concentrates on his own face, body image and his personal stories of health, physical attractiveness, entrepreneurship, and dating, thereby creating an authentic and intimate engagement with his viewers (Abidin, 2016; Bishop, 2021; Miyake, 2023). He largely employs his own lived experience, and his main style of communication is an authoritative monologue, which is representative of other similar self-help influencers.

Like Leo, PrimaryMale talks directly to the camera in vlog-style, centering on PrimaryMale's face, body and "hyper-masculine" persona, through which he promotes stoicism, high testosterone, physical strength, and acquisition of wealth in his videos. PrimaryMale's most popular content is body language analysis videos, offering behavioral coaching for men as a calibrated expert (Abidin, 2017; Maddox, 2023). Although PrimaryMale's most popular content is not as intimate as that of Leo, PrimaryMale also juxtaposes his analysis of situations and popular media with his own journey and transformation in becoming a strong, desirable and successful man.

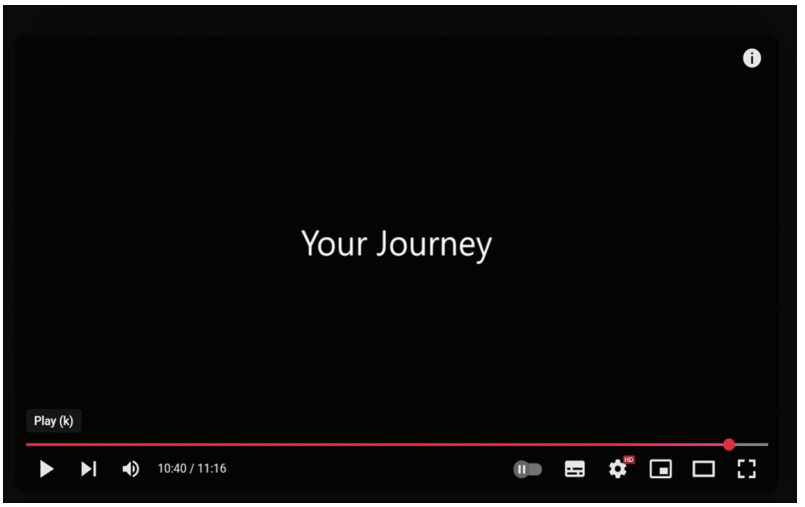


Figure 1. A screenshot of Leo's video.

WillWeaponShow, similarly, labels himself as a coach and mentor under the category of "Education" on TikTok. Choosing categories on TikTok is a crucial affordance of TikTok, shaping algorithmic cultures of recommendations and discoverability for content creators and feeding wider platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015; Keller, 2019; Vicari & Ditchfield, 2025). In describing himself as a "coach & best-selling author," whose advice is claimed to be "evidence-based," WillWeaponShow's online performance hinges on the perception that he is an informed expert on dating, self-confidence and transformation. Differently, WillWeaponShow's account has short videos, he tags his own sound and shows his editing tools in the videos, as his main platform is the more interactive platform of TikTok.

Leo's most viewed video, juxtaposing his own archival photos as a younger man with images of his current muscular body, revolves around the theme of helping men to become more attractive. Leo states that having a muscular body attracts the opposite sex, which he illustrates with his own shirtless image juxtaposed later in the video with an image of "attractive," i.e., thin women (Figure 2). His shirtless image serves as the leitmotif of the video, shown repeatedly when he poses in front of a bathroom mirror. The focus is on his

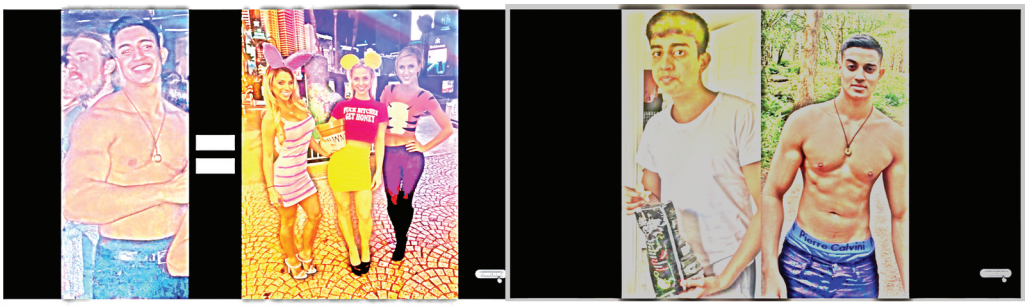


Figure 2. Two penciled screenshots of Leo's video.

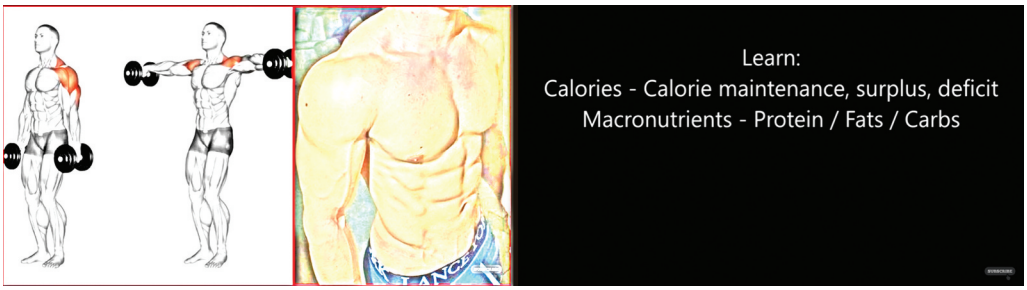


Figure 3. Two penciled images of Leo's video.

muscular body, presented in a small natural bathroom setting with neutral colors of light brown and gray at the background, highlighting his body. The video identifies male success to be based on strength and dominance, promoting heteronormativity, whilst imagining women as an attractive, homogeneous, and mindless commodity. There is also an undertone of a fatphobia, positioning non-conforming female body types as unattractive. This creates a binary understanding of men and women, whilst promoting a competitive and hierarchical understanding of the body, beauty and sexual identity. In Leo's most popular videos, women are presented to be shaped, lured and dominated, and society should return to "traditional" gender values. Masculinity and femininity are thus presented as binary opposites. Leo also presents the narrative that civilization has become decadent and is collapsing, and that the only way forward is by returning to masculine strength and tradition. For this, Leo provides his viewers with practical health and fitness advice, such as reflections over best diet and how best to keep fit. He provides what would otherwise be considered general, neutral advice on physical fitness and lifestyle, such as daily workout routines, diet, and change of habits (Figure 3). These would be deemed "positive" tips for someone seeking to become healthier and fitter and the video might initially appear apolitical.

PrimaryMale's content also centers on his physical appearance as a muscular man, and his videos revolve around how men should behave. In his popular videos, PrimaryMale directly speaks to the camera, lamenting that men should be physically active. He gives examples for how this should be achieved, by engaging in bodybuilding and self-improvement, showing little emotion, and avoiding expressing themselves, thereby perpetuating unrealistic "masculinised" norms and expectations for men (Duffy et al., 2022). PrimaryMale generally uses white color in the background and wears plain-colored shirts to highlight his body shape and facial expressions. In many of his videos, the viewers can see the technical equipment he uses, such as his microphone, adding a sense of authenticity. PrimaryMale places utmost value on biology, biological sex and physical appearance, which is reflective of hegemonic masculinity and femininity in male self-help milieu. PrimaryMale also holds testosterone in high regard (Figure 4). Several videos focus on building testosterone levels for male success and muscle gain, stating that men's testosterone levels are purportedly falling. PrimaryMale's identity as a self-help influencer blends fitness instructor (e.g., his advice to "fat guys" to stop doing cardio and start lifting heavy weights), self-help guru (e.g., his advice for self-care when men are traveling), propagandist (e.g., his advice for



Figure 4. Penciled image of PrimaryMale's video.

men to gamify life, including dating), and misogynist (e.g., his suggestions for men to use their male aggression "to get what they want from women").

In his TikTok videos, WillWeaponShow also presents himself as an informed expert in wellness and dating, speaking directly to the audience, either by himself during his daily activities or with women. Unlike PrimaryMale and Leo, WillWeaponShow generally wears a suit and a hat, the background colors are warmer and majority of his videos focus on an activity, rather than analyzing a situation, which is related to the platform vernaculars of TikTok namely short-form videos and interactivity. WillWeaponShow's performance of hegemonic masculinity is hidden behind his "neutral" advice-giving and expertise in dating and fitness, such as his advice for men around regular daily walks or martial arts training. Differently, WillWeaponShow works with women who act in his videos (Figure 5). Although women act in these videos, their performances are robotic, responding to WillWeaponShow's directions on command. Different from Leo and WillWeaponShow at times engages in a dialogue with women by asking them questions. However, women are used as props to demonstrate WillWeaponShow's behavioral dating advice. They are presented as inactive, voiceless, and submissive, perpetuating normative gender roles for women as weak and sexual objects. He also engages dialogue with his viewers using direct address and eye contact, representing the ways male self-help influencers make direct eye contact with the camera instead of aversive eye contact. This likely increases the impact of these influencers' persuasive communication (Chen et al., 2013) and informs their claims of expertise.

Dating and relationship experts for "real men"

Added to their "expert" advice on body and fitness, male self-help influencers act as self-appointed experts on men's dating and relationships with the "opposite" sex, reproducing and reinforcing normative gender roles. While a lot of influencers play with codes and norms of gender elsewhere, male self-help influencers here reproduce heteronormative and patriarchal norms of sex, gender and body, like some other fashion, beauty, lifestyle, and political influencers (and their commenters) (Duffy et al., 2022).



Figure 5. Three penciled screenshots of WillWeaponShow's videos.

Leo's second most popular video is on the ways society failed men, which focuses on Leo lamenting that modernity has destroyed men's purpose in society. In this video, he personalizes the perceived "masculinity crisis" and offers help to men (Figure 6). Leo engages in direct Incel rhetoric here, arguing that society has become sexist favoring women and advises his audiences to become "real men" against this, suggesting that society is naturally male-dominated, which should inform men's approach to dating. Leo lists the attributes of "real men" as masculinity, strength, and stoicism, and advises men to adopt these values. The video emphasizes Leo's face and strong facial expressions and the lighting on his face comes from below, giving solitary or monumental authority to the character or object in focus (Saunders, 2016). Combined with the plain background, the lighting



Figure 6. A penciled screenshot of a Leo video.

presents both warm and serious visual aesthetics, allowing him to leverage intimacy with his audiences whilst exerting authority over them. He states that the government replaced fathers and their familial roles, which destroyed men's purpose, arguing that marriage, divorce, and childcare laws are sexist as they favor women. Leo claims that it is hypocritical for men to be less masculine because masculinity is needed to have sex with women. This resonates with the manosphere ideology, which largely purports that gender equality destroyed society (Parks et al., 2022).

Like Leo, in a popular video, PrimaryMale laments that modern society has failed and disempowered men and made them "weak" (Figure 4), for example because men cannot hunt and skin animals and fix their own cars anymore. In these videos, he sits by a white wall, presenting the logo for his channel, featuring the design of a king from a pack of playing cards, which serves as an archetype of a powerful, authoritative and idealized masculine figure. PrimaryMale appeals to what masculinity scholars have called *hybrid masculinity*, whereby men adopt practices, traits or characteristics from marginalized groups (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Ging, 2019). By talking about various aspects of men's victimhood in the modern day, PrimaryMale capitalizes on the discourse that marginalized communities have long used to draw attention to injustices and social inequalities that they have faced. This corresponds to the incel ideology that feminine values dominate current society, that this fact is suppressed by feminists and "political correctness," and that men must fight back to protect their existence and identities (Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Tomkinson et al., 2020). Moreover, in a popular dating advice video, PrimaryMale asserts that "selfish" men are successful with women, that women his age are no longer attractive, and that no woman is "the one". He advises men "to build a library of women" and date as many women as they can, as for him vagina educates men, whereas penis confuses women. He also uses other sexist terms like "low-quality" and "high-value" women and men (Figure 4).

WillWeaponShow's content similarly centers on how strong men should discipline themselves, including their physique and behavior, to attract women. Such advice targets men by recommending them not to be "nice guys" and giving advice on becoming "strong men" by for instance, pulling a woman toward them when greeting. His dating advice, differently, also targets women, including telling women to "calm down" and thus centers on the manipulation, domination, and coercion of women and their submission to men. This is evident in a popular video where WillWeaponShow describes the "conversation Aikido," referencing the martial art style that uses someone else's weight against them (Figure 7). He illustrates a man and a woman on a date and the man speaks to another woman. The woman accuses him of flirting with the other woman. He states that, rather than denying flirting, the man should throw the accusation, accusing the woman of only thinking he is flirting because she flirts with other men. In his most viewed video on friend-zoning against the repulsion-zoning WillWeaponShow claims that women have an invisible "friend zone" that will stop unattractive men or men they do not like from entering. He demonstrates how and why women friend-zone men and how to spot, through a woman's body language, if the viewer was friend-zoned.[5] The theme of dehumanizing women continues across other content, presenting them as animalistic, needing to be approached with caution. He uses PUA-like rhetoric, presenting seduction as an emotionless science and romance as an emotionless process, employing terminology such as "lust zones" and "repulsion zones." He continuously "uses" women as "props" as stereotypical gendered



Figure 7. Three penciled screenshots of a WillWeaponShow video.

relationships may solicit effect from like-minded male audiences (Abidin, 2016), transforming this form of online influencer presence into networked misogyny that systematically targets women's public visibility (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Bulut & Can, 2023).

"Every high-level man was a simp at one point": exploiting popular media

For their health and dating advice to reach more audiences, self-help influencers engage with various media genres, formats and aesthetics. Intertextual use of contemporary popular media formats in their content (e.g., the mainstream UK television series *Peaky Blinders* and/or memes) enable them to be more accessible and look fun. Leo creates his own meme characters reflective of existing meme characters to mock "weak" men and celebrate hyper-masculinity. PrimaryMale and WillWeaponShow use the meme "simp" to rail against men who treat women positively. Different from Leo's content, PrimaryMale and WillWeaponShow verbally and visually incorporate *Peaky Blinders* into their content; the former revering the character Tommy Shelby and praising his stoic, albeit aggressive body language, the latter emulating the characters through his wardrobe, wearing attire reflecting the series' characters.

Meme characters are regularly incorporated into Leo's videos and play an important role in his performance and entrepreneurship. A common visual theme involves Leo's own versions of the "Wojak"[6] and "GigaChad"[7] memes, namely the characters "Jeffery" and "Adonis" (Figure 8). Like "Wojak," "Jeffery" is presented as awkward and anxious around women. Conversely, "Adonis," like "GigaChad," is a "true gentleman," who can attract "beautiful, feminine" women through dominance, masculinity, and attractiveness. Such memes reflect the manosphere's (particularly



Figure 8. Three screenshots from a Leo video.

Incels') misogynistic rhetoric (Habib et al., 2022; Maloney et al., 2022), where men are divided into the rigid and stereotypical groups of weak betas (Wojak) and dominant alphas (GigaChad) (Ging, 2019). The content of these meme characters, like Leo's own talking head style and his direct eye contact and address, play into hegemonic masculine stereotypes and characteristics. Here "weaker" men are demonized and physical strength, stoicism, and dominance are revered (Parks et al., 2022).

PrimaryMale frequently uses memes to villainize "simps," who are "too nice" to women.[8] Simp is an internet meme and acronym ("Sucker Idolizing Mediocre Pussy"), adopted by manosphere communities (KnowYourMeme, 2022; Ward, 2021). It is used negatively to refer to men who are overly invested in and "too nice" to women. The term not only denigrates men for communicating positively with women but also suggests that women are not worthy of positive communication. Similarly, WillWeaponShow uses the term "simp," discouraging men from being "nice guys" and "friend-zoned." Like Leo's use of his own memes, PrimaryMale and WillWeaponShow skirt around the manosphere ideology by utilizing verbal memes



Figure 9. Four captions of PrimaryMale videos.

in their rhetoric, granting these influencers the affective power of meme-centric communication (Ging, 2019; Shifman, 2013).

Memes are not the only popular media format that male self-help influencers incorporate into their content. PrimarlyMale's most popular videos examine the behaviors of fictional male characters, most prominently Tommy Shelby from the *Peaky Blinders* (Figure 9). In these videos, PrimaryMale analyses scenes, pausing to highlight the characters' body language and relating them to men's self-improvement of their everyday body language. This is done in a "positive" manner; PrimaryMale believes the characters' behaviors to be praiseworthy, for example, explaining why Tommy Shelby sitting a certain way makes him appear dominant and therefore why men should act this way. Similarly, in some of his popular videos, WillWeaponShow's clothing aesthetics revolves around a three-piece suit and flat cap, reflecting the clothes worn by the male characters of *Peaky Blinders* (Figure 10). In male self-help milieu, Tommy Shelby is perceived as masculine, strong, and stoic and is celebrated because of representing dominance and power.

"Since you are here, buy my testosterone product and digital course"

Influencers exploit popular media and textual and visual affordances of social media platforms to monetize their content, and this intersects with their performance, rhetoric and personas. Influencer economies are built on influencer collaborations with certain brands (Arnesson, 2024). They also rely on influencers' building their own brands through self-branding (Khamis et al., 2017; Miguel et al., 2024), especially for the purposes of "stay-at-home consumption" (Abidin et al., 2021). The brand collaborations and "being themselves



Figure 10. Three penciled screenshots of WillWeaponShow's videos.

the brand" both rest on an always-on mode of entrepreneurial labor within the digital ecosystem (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017).

Leo's main revenue rests on his entrepreneurial videos presented as a special playlist in his channel entitled "entrepreneurship" and his recommendations at the end of his videos for viewers to buy his premium subscriptions. Rather than creating a highly aestheticized and polished product, Leo aims to leverage authenticity (e.g., by referring to his life experience and transformation) and intimacy (e.g., by addressing his audiences directly and pretending as if he gives them customized feedback), whilst exploiting desirability (e.g., presenting his naked body) to make profit. Leo additionally offers digital courses that sells his vision and feedback, showcasing his use of multiple platforms to monetize his content. By providing critiques of YouTube and similar companies (e.g., he says "I am not a YouTuber, I am a leader of over a million men" or "do not trust YouTube gym advice"), he positions himself against other YouTubers, the logic of the platform and its wider commercial implications. Nevertheless, Leo's visual aesthetics and rhetoric rely heavily on the commodification of his own body whilst leveraging the platform logic of YouTube, as he frequently asks the viewers to like and comment on his content and subscribe to his YouTube channel and premium Snapchat (Figure 11).

In contrast, PrimaryMale directly sells his products at the beginning of his videos without pretending that he is not a commodity. As part of his self-branding, PrimaryMale essentializes biology by highlighting that men's value is foremost dependent on testosterone and divides men into "high" and "low" values based particularly on their testosterone levels, with him describing the channel itself as a brand. He extensively advertises PrimaryMale products, including supplements, testosterone boosters, men's underwear, and a self-help book (Figures 12 and 13.). At times PrimaryMale presents his products as the camera focuses on professionally taken photographs (Figure 12), while sometimes holding the product himself in domestic settings (e.g., his book) (Figure 13). The former creates a professional identity with the use of professional photos of the products. The latter builds a more relatable self-branding strategy based on a curated intimacy with his audiences, as they can view his face and the consumer product and hear his voice (Bishop, 2021). This display of the entrepreneur self helps him construct a perceived desirable self (Takeyama, 2010), whilst turning him into a relatable commodity in the marketplace. Like PrimaryMale, WillWeaponShow uses his social media profiles and

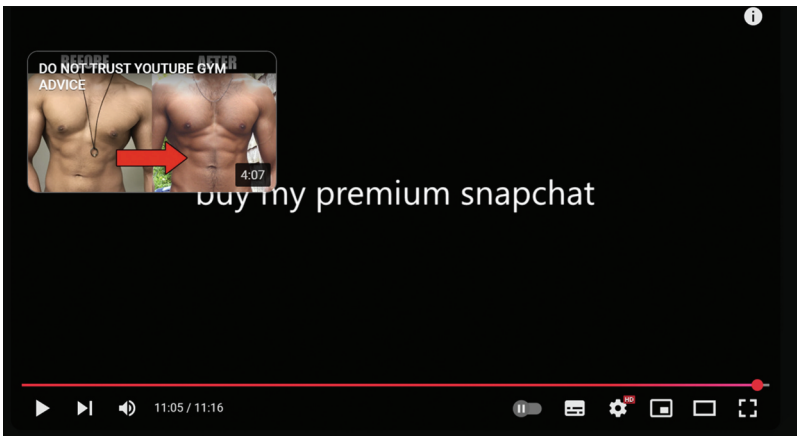


Figure 11. A screenshot of a Leo video.



Figure 12. Screenshotted image of a PrimaryMale video.



Figure 13. A penciled image of a PrimaryMale video.

website to sell products, consisting of courses, video consultancies, and e-book series. Like other male self-help influencers, WillWeaponShow's self-presentation relies on a hegemonic masculine entrepreneurial identity and labor (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017), perpetuating a notion of authenticity and expertise on self-confidence, dominance and dating, manifested particularly in his digital courses (Figure 14).

Discussion and conclusion

This article presents two main takeaways from our multimodal discourse analysis of the representational strategies and performance of UK-based male self-help influencers giving advice on health, fitness and dating, in order to understand how their content might spread non-violent extremism. First, our findings show that in the examples discussed here, the logic of networked misogyny (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016), depends upon presentations

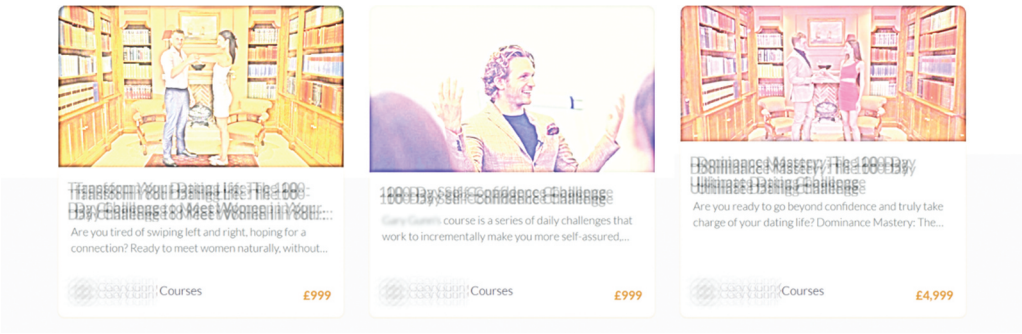


Figure 14. Three captions from WillWeaponShow's products.

and performance of not only hegemonic masculinity (and femininity) but also an optimized self and a sense of calibrated expertise (Abidin, 2017; Maddox, 2023), using idealized body images, strong and authoritative monologues, direct address and eye contact, triumphant stories of life-experience and the trivia of personality as well as popular media and interactive affordances of social media platforms. Optimized self here is focused on a constant and open-ended aim to improve facets of self through fitness, nutrition, beauty, cognitive and physical performance, sexuality and social relations (Nehring & Röcke, 2024; Röcke et al., 2024). This is calibrated around a gendered imperative to consume and to promote consumption in the interests of health and wellness (O'neill, 2024), whilst perpetuating unrealistic norms and expectations for men (and women) (Duffy et al., 2022). The representational strategies in the videos rest on a hierarchical, competitive, calculative, and entrepreneurial male identity, appearance and physique, reinforcing and reproducing the neoliberal subjectivity, embedded in normative gender roles.

The social media account(s) and content of male self-help influencers were primarily introduced as apolitical spaces with influencers providing viewers with positive guidance as self-appointed experts on physical fitness, healthy eating, building confidence and dating effectively. Nevertheless, the rise of influencers as self-described experts is situated within current social and political shifts in society where there is increasing skepticism toward institutions, official experts and authority (McQuarrie et al., 2013; Zhao & Bouvier, 2022). This is also consistent with the anti-expertise and anti-establishment narratives that have left its mark on much of the post-Brexit social and political landscape in the UK (Hall, 2023; Ozgul et al., 2025; Ianosev et al., 2025). Leo presents himself as a highly endorsed self-improvement educator and plays on misogynistic tropes centered on dehumanizing women, prioritizing hyper-masculine qualities, criticizing "weak" men, and lambasting society for purportedly "failing" men due to gender equality. PrimaryMale legitimizes himself by describing the account as a brand that provides advice for male self-improvement, yet his narrative propagates his hyper-masculine persona of high testosterone, stoicism, and physical strength whilst openly dehumanizing women. WillWeaponShow, while claiming legitimacy through his description as a best-selling author and evidence-based dating coach, presents women as submissive robots and his dating and behavioral advice involves dominating and manipulating women. By assigning themselves expert status in their channels and positioning themselves superior to some men

(e.g., weak men) and all women, male self-help influencers perpetuate heteronormative beliefs, linked to hegemonic masculinity, misogynistic propaganda (Maloney et al., 2022; Parks et al., 2022), and ultimately networked misogyny (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Bulut & Can, 2023).

Second, our findings show that the incorporation of popular media and memetic cultures in self-help influencer videos helps spread subtle forms of gender-based extremism and make this rhetoric acceptable. Convergence of different media formats, platform affordances and vernaculars as well as genres make their claims reach audiences more easily, and their claims of expertise give them credibility to make such claims. By adopting discourses and aesthetics of promotional and popular media cultures (e.g., endorsing popular media characters or writing personalized advertorials) and exploiting expertise, authenticity, and intimacy on social media platforms (Abidin, 2016; Bishop, 2021; Miyake, 2023), male self-help influencers become more accessible as entrepreneurial subjects. Through the influencers' visual and verbal presentations of *Peaky Blinders'* characters, there is an implicit endorsement of popular English-language television, which, we argue, helps these influencers gain more legitimacy and reach. The discursive uses of popular media and persuasive oral communication (e.g., direct address) also mobilize dehumanizing discourse targeting women through health, fitness and dating advice.

Added to the impact of popular legacy media on self-help cultures and the manosphere, this article also provides empirical evidence on how the intersecting spaces of the manosphere, and self-help milieu have its own popular visual cultures revolving around sexist memes (Ging, 2019; Gothard et al., 2021). We argue that manosphere memes and popular media act as coded dog whistles and as a veil, making it harder for the influencers to be directly associated with misogynistic and sexist cultures, and thus reduce the possibility of backlash to their content. The extremist narratives revealed with the help of popular media formats and interactive platform vernaculars are hidden as they seem to come from a place of guidance, positivity and fun and not from explicit political ideas and ideologies. They also act as a form of multivocal communication, where the communicated words or images mean one thing to the wider public but carry an additional implicit meaning only recognized by a subset of audiences. This allows the influencers the gain from conveying messages implicitly, not explicitly (Albertson, 2015; Bhat & Klein, 2020). Only those who *know* what the memes and popular media mean can decipher what the influencers speak about.

These media cultures allow self-care, entertainment, fun and humor to serve as a means of being open about extremist messages revolving around dehumanizing women and non-hegemonic men, whilst being able to write it off as harmless, "just a joke" (Askanius, 2021; Ozduzen et al., 2023), or "positive" advice for a healthy and successful living, relying on enjoyable and easy-to-use formats, platform affordances and vernaculars. This makes these techniques of networked misogyny less obvious and more difficult to challenge when compared to more overt political efforts to spread hegemonic masculinity and misogynistic ideologies and consequently makes such content harder to challenge and subvert, hidden behind the guise of coaching, self-improvement, entrepreneurship and entertainment. For future research investigating online self-help cultures, we suggest looking outside the English-speaking world to gain a more rounded picture of the intersection between hegemonic masculinity, networked misogyny and self-help cultures.

Notes

1. According to Global Wellness Industry (2024), the industry was worth more than 26% before the pandemic and reached a new peak of $6.3 by 2023.
2. Leo had about 2.3 M YouTube subscribers, 265 M views, and 900 videos as of March 2025.
3. PrimaryMale had about 170 K YouTube subscribers, 23 M views, and 550 videos as of March 2025.
4. WillWeaponShow had about 415 K TikTok followers and 310 K likes as of March 2025.
5. The "friend zone" is a longstanding meme, referring to "an interpersonal relationship in which one member wishes to become romantically involved while the other does not" (KnowYourMeme, 2018). This is often related to "nice guy," where men become friend-zoned because they are "too nice."
6. "Wojak" expresses "melancholy, regret or loneliness" (KnowYourMeme, 2023b).
7. "GigaChad" represents "an ultra-masculine, sexually attractive male" (KnowYourMeme, 2023a).
8. The concept of the "nice guy" is a meme, used negatively to refer to men in the manosphere. Nice guys think they are caring and empathetic, but are seen to have ulterior motives, and are often "friend-zoned" (KnowYourMeme, 2020).

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