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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Swallowing and spitting out the red pill: young men, vulnerability, and radicalization pathways in the manosphere

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ABSTRACT

During the last decades, new forms of men's rights activism have emerged, commonly referred to as the 'manosphere'. This loosely connected, misogynistic online movement particularly attracts young men. Its shared ideology is the Red Pill, a neoconservative ideology that adopts essentialist notions of gender and sexuality, and selectively employs evolutionary psychology to support male supremacy. While the discourses of the manosphere have been mapped, little research exists on how and why young men join and leave such misogynist groups. This article contributes to critical youth and feminist scholarship by analysing the gendered dynamics of online misogynist radicalization pathways. Based on narratives shared on a Reddit community for former 'redpillers', this article explores 30 young men's experiences of entering and exiting the manosphere and details the essential role of vulnerability in these processes. The stories are synthesized into three phases to illustrate the paths in and out of the manosphere.

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Introduction

Almost two decades ago, in their reconceptualization of hegemonic masculinity theory, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) were cautiously optimistic about the possibility that 'a more humane, less oppressive' (p. 833) form of masculinity would become hegemonic. Indeed, research suggests that we have seen the emergence of more progressive masculinities in many Western societies, particularly among young men. For example, young men hold more liberal attitudes towards gender and sexuality, and are more supportive of gender equality than older men (Flood, 2015; Tinklin et al., 2005). Moreover, homophobia is said to have declined in many Western societies as young, heterosexual men embrace more 'inclusive' masculinities and promote less oppressive gender relations than previous generations (Anderson & McCormack, 2018).

However, gender change is far from straightforward, and there are reasons to be less optimistic about young masculinity as not all young men hold progressive views on gender and sexuality (Allen et al., 2022). In fact, recent research suggests that young men are more negative towards women's rights and gender equality than older men. They are also particularly susceptible to feeling threatened by gender change, due to assumed competition between the sexes (Off et al., 2022). In

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addition, some young men have been attracted to what is commonly referred to as the ‘manosphere’. This is a loosely connected network comprising social media communities that constitute new forms of men’s rights activism and include groups such as incels (involuntary celibates), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), and Pick-up Artists (PUAs). Despite differences between these groups, they commonly adhere to The Red Pill (TRP) ideology, a collection of antifeminist beliefs supporting male supremacy (Ging, 2019). The term derives from *The Matrix* (1999, Lana & Lilly Wachowski), where the protagonist must choose between taking the Blue Pill and staying in a reassuring illusory world or swallowing the Red Pill that will make him realize his cruel, enslaved reality. Men who align with this ideology identify themselves as ‘redpillers’, whose main online community was created in 2012 on the social network Reddit.

There is an emerging literature on discourses connected to the manosphere, including TRP (e.g. Ging, 2019; Johanssen, 2021; Jones et al., 2020; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Van Valkenburgh, 2021), but few have explored how and why young men join and leave such misogynist groups (Ging & Murphy, 2021). Aiming to fill this gap, we draw on 30 written narratives shared on a Reddit community for former self-identified redpillers. While not representative of all redpillers’ experiences, the stories help us to contribute to research on misogynist extremism by exploring the gendered aspects of how some young men enter and exit the manosphere. We chose the present internet community as it has a significant number of members (over 22,000 at the time of writing) and is, to our knowledge, the only one for former redpillers.

When analysing the former redpillers’ stories, vulnerability emerged as a central theme in all phases of radicalization and deradicalization. Whereas critical masculinity scholars have argued that acknowledging vulnerability may generate more progressive masculinities (Cover, 2019; Mellström, 2016), we demonstrate that experiences of vulnerability may also work to draw young men into misogynist extremism.

In the following, we first provide a brief overview of research on the manosphere before turning to radicalization studies and feminist scholarship on masculinity and vulnerability, which we combine to explore how the young men enter and exit misogynistic extremism. After some methodological considerations, we present our results, synthesizing the stories into three phases that illustrate the radicalization and deradicalization pathways in the manosphere.

The red pill ideology

TRP ideology is an amalgam of concepts and ideas that promote male supremacy and aims to free men from a society considered gynocentric and misandrist (Ging, 2019). To this end, it draws selectively on popularized forms of evolutionary psychology and claims that sexual difference is essential and natural. The underlying premise is that evolution has formed gender relations so that men and women have developed divergent reproductive strategies and mating preferences (Van Valkenburgh, 2021), an assumption used to present a sexual hierarchy where women are ‘hypergamous’ and only desire the most attractive men or the ones with the highest social status. Hypergamy is argued to have been exacerbated by the rise of feminism, the decline of marriage, the liberation of women, the sexual revolution, and lately by online dating (Johanssen, 2021). This is considered to have benefited a small group of successful men, so-called ‘alpha males’ since appearance is increasingly important. In TRP logic, a person has a ‘sexual market value’ based on image, income, and social status (Look, Money, Status). To be sexually successful, men need to have high LMS scores, which may be increased by ‘looksmxing’ the body and behaving like an alpha (Almog & Kaplan, 2017). Still, women could also be willing to date regular ‘beta guys’ to exploit them emotionally and financially (Roose, 2020).

While promoting a heteronormative and hierarchical worldview where heterosexual men fiercely compete against each other on a sexual market, redpillers also nourish resentment against women and their rights. TRP ideology is therefore an illustrative example of what Ward (2020) has termed ‘the *misogyny paradox*, wherein boys’ and men’s desire for girls and women is expressed within

a broader culture that encourages them to also hate girls and women' (p. 27). TRP ideology generally depicts women as controlling, manipulative and treacherous for withholding sex from men, demanding resources, and giving little back. In contrast, men are regarded as rational, honourable, and victims of forces beyond their control (Roose, 2020). Since feminists attempt to change gender relations, redpillers see feminism as toxic propaganda that undermines natural sexual differences and makes women unavailable to men (Regehr, 2022). TRP ideology claims that feminism has promoted women's economic and reproductive interests too far so men are now discriminated against and have become the victims in society (Ging, 2019). Redpillers' resentment at times includes advocating sexual and physical violence against women since they do not give men what they are entitled to (Johanssen, 2021).

Radicalization, masculinity, and vulnerability

We draw on two strands of research that bear on young men's ways in and out of the manosphere. One has theorized radicalization processes into extremist ideologies, the other how the disavowal of vulnerability is fundamental for young heterosexual masculinity.

The literature on radicalization has identified similar pathways into extremism across the political and religious spectrum, suggesting that many join extremist movements without necessarily embracing all its beliefs and practices; similarly, an individual may stop adhering to parts of an extremist ideology while still aligning with other parts of it (Koehler, 2016). Further, individuals may deradicalize but still socialize with the group, or the opposite: they may disengage but continue to believe in the extremist ideology – or at least parts of it (Björgo, 2008). This is especially the case when the ideology overlaps with ideas accepted in mainstream society. In fact, TRP is to be understood in the context of a broader societal backlash against feminism and an acceptance of male supremacy (Roose, 2020), which may help young men to disengage from the manosphere but still hold on to misogynist sentiments.

While scholarship on radicalization into jihadist, right-wing and left-wing violent extremism is well established, few researchers have explored pathways into misogynist extremism. As Ging and Murphy (2021) have recently pointed out: 'little if anything is known about how users become involved in manosphere communities, i.e. the processes of algorithmic, ideological and psychosocial radicalization or "pilling" which take place in different internet spaces'. To our knowledge, only two studies focus on radicalization processes in the manosphere, and deradicalization from misogynist groups online has not been explored at all. In a large-scale study, Ribeiro et al. (2021, p. 11) argue that the historical migration patterns between different manosphere groups could be steps in radicalization: 'Many of the individuals involved with the PUA community went on to participate in more extreme anti-feminist communities such as TRP, whose users in turn migrated to MGTOW'. In a qualitative study with incels, Regehr (2022) identifies specific patterns into misogynist extremism. The young men in her study sought community and belonging but when getting into the incel environments, their loneliness transformed into anger as they embraced a misogynist worldview. The echo chamber of the manosphere, where other men corroborated them, amplified their aggrievement. Finally, the 'indoctrination' included encouragements to violence and a celebration of incel mass murderers.

Regehr's study suggests that while radicalization is a matter of embracing an ideology, young men do not necessarily join misogynist or other extremist groups due to a specific conviction, but because they long for 'identity, community, protection, and excitement' (Björgo, 2008, p. 47). Kimmel (2018) links these needs to gender as it 'provides both the psychological inspiration to young men to join [extremist] groups and the social glue that keeps them involved' (p. 30). He further argues that young men are radicalized because they have difficulties living up to standards of masculinity and are attracted to violent extremism as it offers ways to become 'real men' again. While Kimmel sees involvement in extremist groups as an attempt to recuperate masculinity, Johanssen (2021) argues that online misogyny constitutes a refusal of vulnerability and that the manosphere could be

understood as a 'renewed backlash against vulnerable, reflexive and emotional kinds of masculinity' (p. 72).

This argument corresponds with critical masculinity scholarship arguing that eschewing any signs of vulnerability is essential to young men's identities as they are policed to adhere to masculinity norms. For instance, Kimmel (1994) has theorized that masculinity is based on a fear of not living up to ideals of what it is to be a man and being denounced by other men, while Messner (2005) posits that young men may feel pressured to be sexually assertive and aggressive. Embracing such norms of masculinity may obscure young men's precariousness (Shefer et al., 2015) since 'heteronormativity often means denying the vulnerability inherent in us all' (O'Neill, 2018, p. 156). In her ethnography of the seduction community, O'Neill (2018) argues that by disavowing vulnerability, PUAs may experience a 'crushing loneliness [...] as they attempt to navigate the dictates of a culture that scorns weakness and punishes vulnerability, especially among men' (p. 183).

Considering these findings, and following recent arguments that vulnerability could be a resource in feminist, queer, and anti-racist activism (Butler et al., 2016; Koivunen et al., 2018), some scholars have argued that vulnerability may be an opportunity for developing more progressive masculinities (e.g. Cover, 2019; Mellström, 2016). Drawing on Butler's (2004) conceptualization of vulnerability as a shared but unevenly distributed human condition, Cover (2019) argues that acknowledging the vulnerability of masculinity may foster recognition of others 'in ways which are responsible and responsive to [their] vulnerability' (p. 310) and generate less violent and sexist practices. However, vulnerability does not necessarily contribute to more progressive masculinities. For instance, some dating coaches within the PUA community encourage men to use 'displays of vulnerability' (Ward, 2020), such as sexual and socioeconomic challenges, to seduce women more effectively. Vulnerability may also be claimed strategically to justify resistance to social change and to oppose the rights of marginalized groups, for instance 'when feminism is figured as a castrating "threat" to ostensibly vulnerable men' (Butler et al., 2016, pp. 4–5).

Against this backdrop, it is important to explore the role of vulnerability in young men's pathways in the manosphere. We argue that experiencing vulnerability contributes to young men's misogynist radicalization, yet they do not necessarily join the manosphere to jettison vulnerability (Johanssen, 2021), but to find a remedy for it. However, the former redpillers' stories also suggest that their involvement in the manosphere did not help them meet standards of heterosexual masculinity but rather exacerbated their experiences of vulnerability.

Method

The present paper analyses 30 stories written by self-identified young men and published in a community for former redpillers. While not representative of all redpillers, these narratives provide unique insights into young heterosexual men's motives for joining and leaving TRP communities, which are the most active within the manosphere (Ribeiro et al., 2021). TheRedPill Archive, which collects every post of the most significant communities dedicated to TRP, had at the time of writing gathered 1.200.000 posts and over 29 million comments about TRP since 2013 only on Reddit. Redpillers also gather on other blogs, forums, and social networks such as 4chan. Since user profiles on Reddit are anonymous it is impossible to obtain socio-demographic data, but research suggests that young men are in the majority: men are up to 19 times more present than women and 84% of the users are estimated to be between 18 to 34 years old (Amaya et al., 2021). Created in 2014, the present subreddit for former redpillers has over 22.000 members who discuss their experiences of embracing and leaving the manosphere. The forum contains thousands of stories, but we started with the most recent shared by self-identified young men who argued that they had left or were leaving TRP. As the stories are published anonymously and members do not have to report their age, we only included narratives in which the person explicitly stated their present age (the oldest in our sample is 26 years old), or specified that they were in college or attended upper secondary school.

We have collected posts published on the forum for six months, from October 2020 through March 2021, using the online software [redditsearch.io](#) as it allowed us to access all the subreddit posts without the platform's algorithm filters. We coded the narratives using [Atlas.ti 9](#) software, which provided an overview of the data and enabled us to find recurrent themes. After repeated reading of the data and extensive notetaking, we reached theoretical saturation with 30 stories published between October and December 2020. We continued analysing posts published January – March 2021 but these are not included in the present paper as no new themes emerged.

The data has certain characteristics that must be acknowledged. Firstly, it should be noted that the experiences of radicalization reported in this study come from individuals who have, to varying degrees, disengaged from the manosphere. Therefore, their experiences and motivations may differ from those who are still engaged in the manosphere or choose not to share their experiences on this particular forum. Furthermore, the stories are written retrospectively and intended for a specific audience. Like other narratives produced by individuals who have left a disputed group or lifestyle, they are marked by tension between their past and present lives (Ebaugh, 1988). As we will demonstrate, the ex-redpillers' stories include some distancing from their former self, as well as a downplaying of their own misogyny. Nevertheless, the stories still provide important knowledge about how young men become attracted to TRP ideology, as well as their motivations for leaving, or trying to leave, it behind.

Current ethical guidelines about the use of social data online advocate a case-based approach, where the risks of the research on individuals are considered (cf. Markham & Buchanan, 2017). Following this, we did not ask for informed consent as the present community is public, all members are anonymous, and there is little risk that our study causes the subjects any harm. Nevertheless, since some formers post sensitive information about themselves, all nicknames, some biographical information and the forum's name have been omitted. We have also rephrased some sentences (without changing their meaning) to minimize the possibility of tracing the users and the forum.

When analysing the data, we found that the narratives tended to be presented in a three-phased structure. First, the young men argued they adopted TRP's essentialist view of gender and sexuality, which resonated with their own experiences of vulnerability, particularly in relation to dating and sexual relations, and marginalization in a masculine hierarchy. Second, they storied how they spent much time on the manosphere and adhered to TRP ideology, which made them increasingly paranoid around women. Third, the young men later exited the manosphere, either due to TRP's lack of consistency or because it did not fit with their experiences anymore, and continue struggling to renounce all sexist and misogynist beliefs associated with TRP. In all these phases, vulnerability emerged as a recurrent and central theme. For the sake of clarity, we present our findings according to this narrative structure, but also acknowledge that radicalization and deradicalization are not necessarily as straightforward processes, with distinct beginnings and ends (cf. Koehler, 2016).

Encountering the red pill

Young men are not necessarily drawn to extremist movements because they share the ideology from the onset (Björge, 2008; Kimmel, 2018). Similarly, few former redpillers embraced TRP ideology before entering the manosphere. Instead, they write about friends suggesting them to watch or read TRP content, encountering manosphere online communities by chance, or social media platforms recommending such content. One former writes, 'I started browsing looksmax 2 months ago, I found a thread about covid vaccine and from there I started browsing the forum for hours' (#6). Another user comments on how he was introduced to PUAs: 'I don't know when or why my recommended feed started getting filled with StephisCold and MJGetRight videos' (#13).

The most common argument for being attracted to manosphere communities was that the young men felt vulnerable. As a former redpiller writes: 'because I was a vulnerable young man I was easily manipulated into buying into their bullshit' (#3). Vulnerability mostly meant experiencing dating issues, relationship failure, being sexually inexperienced, or going through

difficulties in life. Some mention troubling relationships with abusive or emotionally distant fathers, while others write about bullying and loneliness, as a 17-year-old who argues that 'I've found it hard to keep friends which has had made my self-esteem absolutely dog shit. Through this low self-esteem and self-loathing, I began to isolate myself away from the world'. He spent his days playing video games and watching pornography and finally discovered TRP when attempting to 'better myself and my social skills' (#9). In the following, a college student claims that his 'vulnerable state' and time alone during the COVID pandemic facilitated his entrance to MGTOW, a manosphere group that encourages men to refrain from interacting with women (Jones et al., 2020).

I'm 19 and in my 2nd year of college. Honestly college has not been a great experience for me. I'm not really close to anyone. I've been humiliated twice in one year and this has made me feel distrustful of most people. About five months ago, I discovered MGTOW and the red pill. Thanks to the lockdown and my vulnerable state, I was drawn to it. I found most of the posts in r/mgtow fascinating and blindly followed them. (#22)

Feminist scholars have pointed out that young men are often pressured to adhere to gender norms and coaxed to demonstrate themselves as sexually experienced to prove masculinity (Kimmel, 1994; Messner, 2005). This is echoed in the present stories, as the most common cause of being attracted to TRP content was difficulties meeting expectations of heterosexual masculinity. The former redpillers emphasize feeling miserable for not having a girlfriend or having had sex. One former writes that 'Around my junior year of college, I stumbled on posts on reddit about MGTOW. Given my lack of success in dating, I was vulnerable and could be easily influenced by this way of thinking' (#2). An 18-year-old man also connects his recurrent dating failures to getting involved in various manosphere groups.

I'm an 18-year-old autistic male who's been addicted to redpill, lookism, and incel boards for almost 3 years now [...] I did have one date in early 2019 and the girl was attracted to me and started kissing me but I wasn't attracted to her. I still went along with it though because I thought I probably won't get this opportunity for a long time. That's the one success I had with girls in my life. (#10)

Another former redpiller highlights his desire for a sexual relationship during his high school years as central for being attracted to the manosphere.

I learned about Pick-Up Artists like RSD towards the end of high school. I was always 'friend-zoned' and constantly peer pressured by male friends that I needed to have sex. [...] As a young, naive guy, I listened to these PUAs, and it all made sense. I had to have a 'game'. (#1)

Here, the former writes about how he started to pay attention to PUAs' messages, and particularly the dating coaches from the now defunct Los Angeles-based company Real Social Dynamics (RSD) because of struggling with dating. While not articulating vulnerability, he argues he was pressured by male friends to have sexual relationships with women. This is not only linked to norms of heterosexual masculinity but also to a general trend in Western societies where human value is increasingly tied to being successful in the sexual market (Kaplan & Illousz, 2022), which is particularly emphasized by TRP ideology. Not living up to such standards may affect men negatively. As one former points out, 'I was originally attracted to MGTOW because I felt worthless for not having been in a relationship ever in my life' (#15). While he was allured by MGTOW and hence distanced himself from women, the pressure to have sex or date women made others attracted to PUAs (O'Neill, 2018). However, seduction tutorials and communities also prompted them to see women as unreliable and only interested in alpha men.

How it began: After my break-up, a buddy of mine recommended I watch and read this author named Corey Wayne. Corey Wayne is definitely on TRP spectrum and your basic PUA. I would watch his videos one after another for hours. It became an obsession. I started reading RedPill forums and found myself repeating many of their phrases. 'Women cannot love you. It's just your turn'. I felt like I had to consume as much material as possible to better my game and become perfect. (#4)

Feminist scholars have suggested that young, heterosexual men have difficulties communicating about relationship issues with peers (Shefer et al., 2015); in contrast, this former consulted a friend after his break-up. The advice he received resembles DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2013) argument that young men experiencing 'relationship stress' may turn to peers for advice, who may condone abuse and men's entitlement to sex. In this narrative, the friend did not explicitly advocate the use of violence but persuaded the narrator to watch PUA tutorials on how to cajole women into having sex (cf. O'Neill, 2018).

Closely related to the formers' stories of not living up to expectations of being sexually successful were experiences of not meeting gendered body ideals.

I am short (5'9), bespectacled, scrawny, moderately autistic, and have limited experience with women (two sexual acts, no relationships). When I was an undergraduate, I heard that a woman I was interested in called me 'cute'. It haunts me to this day. Cute is only a compliment to infants and puppies, not grown men. Cute men are the sort of men who get cheated on. Being called cute by a woman is the same as saying 'You're a good friend, but I would never sleep with you'. If someone calls you cute, that means they do not take you seriously. (#17)

Instead of taking it as a compliment or exploring what 'cuteness' could imply, this former took the girl's comment as proof that she was not sexually interested in him. His reaction needs to be understood in relation to TRP theories about sexual hierarchies and hypergamy, where women are argued to only desire alpha men (Van Valkenburgh, 2021) but also to wider cultural discourses of masculinity where muscular male bodies often represent 'a tough and invulnerable masculinity' while 'cute' bodies are associated with vulnerability (DeAngelis, 2017, p. 199). In the narrative, cuteness becomes connected to 'beta' men and something of the antithesis of alpha masculinity; alphas are considered handsome, tough, sexy, and desirable for women, whereas 'cute' men – particularly if they are short and skinny as this narrator – are regarded as soft, less masculine, and consequently not sexually desirable.

In this section, we have shown how the young men were attracted to TRP due to feelings of vulnerability, particularly regarding their lack of sexual success. This aligns with research on radicalization, which indicates that young men are drawn to extremist groups not due to ideological beliefs, but because they seek a sense of identity and community (Bjørge, 2008) and want to prove their masculinity (Kimmel, 2018). However, we argue that ideology plays a role in misogynist radicalization as TRP ideology partly overlaps with the young men's original ideals of heterosexual masculinity. Such discourse rejects traits like softness and vulnerability, which may have contributed to the young men's lack of sexual success, as it made it difficult for them to recognize when women expressed sexual interest in them.

Swallowing the red pill

The radicalization narratives suggest that the former redpillers immersed themselves in the manosphere relatively fast. After first encountering TRP, they usually started spending much time on manosphere forums and 'bingeing' TRP content, which soon became an 'addiction'.

I was 16 when I discovered and fell for the red pill (I'm 18 now). I went through a phase where I genuinely believed everything the red pill teaches (which I hate myself for to this day). This made me paranoid around women, hating other men who 'simp'. I became obsessed with red pill content to the point where it would be the only content I watched on YouTube, and over time, I absorbed the propaganda and swore to myself I would never get into a relationship in my life. (#12)

After learning about TRP, this narrator started adhering to its ideology and spent much time browsing the manosphere, which created an echo chamber where he only received information from TRP sources (cf. Regehr, 2022). He argues he believed everything he was taught in the community, which caused him to hate men who put women on a pedestal but get little in return ('simp') and – most important – made him increasingly 'paranoid around women'. This paranoia is

related to TRP ideology arguing that women are unreliable (cf. Roose, 2020), while his distancing from relationships suggests that he was attracted to the male separatism of MGTOW (Jones et al., 2020).

One common reason the formers give for readily accepting TRP ideology is that it is presented as a straightforward message about men and women based on research.

I liked incel forums so much because they didn't sugar coat things. They give you brutal truths about genetic determinism and are backed by science and data from dating sites (#14)

The alleged scientific rigour of TRP played a crucial role in making this former regarding its assumptions as objective truths about gendered and sexual behaviour (cf. Ging, 2019; Van Valkenburgh, 2021). By presenting arguments about hypergamy and women's dating preferences as based on evolutionary psychology, they appear as irrefutable facts rather than sexist claims. But for many formers, TRP also became a critique of ideology of sorts claiming to uncover feminists' politically correct and illusory message about men, women, and sexual relationships. The young men preferred the unpleasant, 'brutal truth' about sexual hierarchies and genetic determinism as it confirmed their experiences of marginalization and vulnerability. However, spending time in manosphere environments and watching TRP content also made them increasingly preoccupied with their physical appearance and comparing themselves negatively to other men and their bodies. According to TRP ideology, men who fit better with the LMS rule are more masculine and get more sex, but it also promises young men to become more sexually successful by 'looksmaxing' (cf. Almog & Kaplan, 2017), which for the formers in our study included tracking weight and working out to build a more masculine body. Many formers were struggling with low self-esteem before their involvement in the manosphere, which inspired them to improve themselves.

I struggled with my image a lot and with relating to women. TRP always clowns whom they claim to be 'betas' and insinuate only affluent, muscular men are worth a damn. I used to buy into this and began hitting the weights and pursuing martial arts. However, a back injury, neck injury, and degenerating hands and wrists prevented me from doing this long term and I at times used to struggle with not being able to achieve the 'alpha' status as a result, and at times felt like less of a man. In addition, my ability to relate to women was hampered for a while. I used to believe because I was not TRP's vision of a virile, desirable man, that any time a woman showed me attention, it must have been because she saw me as weak and sought to exploit me as her 'beta bux' (#20)

This 22-year-old writes about his attempts to live up to the TRP vision of ideal masculinity through bodybuilding and martial arts and hence constructing a body that he believed is more attractive to women. But due to his bodily vulnerability, he had to quit training, and by not fulfilling the TRP standards, he felt emasculated. Embracing TRP worldview, he positions himself in a sexual market where women only desire alpha men. He became increasingly suspicious towards women since he thought they could not be interested in a man like him (cf. Almog & Kaplan, 2017). This exemplifies how the young men's anxiety when interacting with women, their experience of being marginalized on the sexual market and of vulnerability that attracted them to the manosphere were intensified when being red-pilled.

Previous research has shown how manosphere activists insist they provide uncomfortable but scientific facts about gender and sexuality (Van Valkenburgh, 2021). Here, we have detailed how the appeal of TRP for the young men in our sample is largely due to this claim, and how they quickly became absorbed in the manosphere (cf. Regehr, 2022). We add to this by demonstrating that, contrary to its promise to help them with issues such as lack of sexual success, adhering to TRP actually seems to have worsen their vulnerabilities. They became increasingly paranoid around women and aware of their difficulties in meeting TRP's standards of masculinity, which the ideology argues are essential for sexual success.

Spitting out the red pill

The formers were attracted to the manosphere mainly to deal with their vulnerability, as TRP promised a remedy for their low self-esteem and relationship issues. They however experienced that their problems were exacerbated due to TRP; it is therefore not surprising that this group of young men have decided to leave or at least distance themselves from the manosphere. Some claim that TRP did not fit their biographies and personal experiences anymore.

The first 'awakening' I had to bullshit occurred about ten months after my break-up. My ex had gotten into another relationship. I told myself it was probably some alpha male Chad and that she was hypergamous. Funny enough, it was not. It was a girl. My ex had told me she was bisexual during our relationship, so it makes sense in retrospect. The RedPill was utterly wrong. She was not 'riding the cock carousel' and searching for the best alpha, not in the slightest! I then noticed things in my personal life that went directly against RedPill teachings. My brother, a man who has battled drug addiction since he was 17, was in a healthy, stable relationship, and his girlfriend genuinely cares for him and is always trying to help. He is not rich, a 'Chad', and indeed not what RedPillers say women like, yet he found love. (#4)

As mentioned, hypergamy is essential to TRP ideology, particularly to PUAs and incels (Johanssen, 2021). However, this former experienced that women close to him did not behave according to this stereotypical depiction of femininity. When his girlfriend broke up with him, she started dating a woman, and his brother is said to be in a long-term relationship with a woman who genuinely cares for him despite his drug addiction. While this former's epiphany is based on personal evidence that contradicts TRP ideology, others started to doubt the scientific basis of TRP and see it as logically inconsistent.

I left it just a few weeks ago. I somehow managed to come to my senses and question everything these guys said. They keep saying, 'trust no woman, AWALT', which just seemed ridiculous to me. How can half the population even behave the same way? Just like men, every woman has an individual personality. There are shitty men as well as shitty women. (#22)

This former began to question the claim that 'All Women Are Like That' (AWALT) – that is, they all only desire alpha men – and critique TRP's stereotyping of women as unreliable since they only want high-status men. He argues that the theory about women's behaviour on the sexual market is 'ridiculous' as it does not consider individual difference. While finding inconsistencies in TRP, formers also accuse it of making their lives worse, despite the promise of the contrary. Some left because TRP had adverse effects on their mental health and exacerbated their loneliness.

[...] after all the hours of listening to their theories and eventually stopping, I started to feel weird. I feel like not me at all. I feel like my brain is melted. I feel like I can't socialize and now have no friends. I mean, I have a girlfriend, and I feel like I do not even deserve her. I... want the old me back... (#1)

The vulnerability this former experienced before entering the manosphere seems to have worsened as he now has problems socializing. He portrays his Red Pill experience as changing him fundamentally so that he does not recognize himself anymore and wants his 'old me back'. Most formers in our study became worried about being exploited by manipulative women, but some also assert that TRP affected their relationships negatively. One writes, 'I've browsed 4chan for years during times when I've had relationships but that's probably the reason why they've ended anyway' (#23), and another former points out that his girlfriend broke up with him for his misogyny and "'incel" kind of a world view' (#25). Yet another argues that 'I left it after seeing how much my newfound beliefs were hurting my girlfriend at the time' (#21). These accounts of the damaging influence of TRP on their relationships suggest that the young men have started to recognize the vulnerability of the other (Butler, 2004; Cover, 2019) and the destructive consequences of their misogyny.

Deradicalization is not always a linear process, extremists may rather experience various detours and returns in their attempts to leave, and may leave to a different extent (Koehler, 2016). This also applies to the former redpillers, who present different ways of leaving TRP behind. Some formers

argue that they have left manosphere communities and successfully abandoned their previous misogynist beliefs.

I have just been lying in bed thinking about how much red pill crap I ate up for a while. My life has been way better since I stopped dwelling on all that garbage all the time. It's just a bunch of fucking cynics being cynical. It makes me sick now. I just look back on my worldview back then with such disdain. I have not been able to think about it at all for the last two years. My path out of it just involved completely cutting off anything related to it for the longest time. (#8)

Here the former explicitly distances himself from TRP ideology by dismissing it as 'crap' and 'garbage' and filled with 'disdain' when thinking about his former worldview. Formers argue that they had been 'indoctrinated' (#11), 'brainwashed' (#19) or 'manipulated' (#3) due to their vulnerability at the time, but now had started to realize that TRP ideology was 'bullshit' (#4). Such accounts present the formers as passive victims of TRP indoctrination and could be seen as displays of vulnerability (Ward, 2020) that downplay their role in their radicalization. But their disavowals simultaneously convey anger over being deceived and could be understood as signs of disengagement. To deradicalize, the former in the quote above (#8) had to keep away from manosphere forums for a long time. While he seems to have both disengaged and deradicalized, others write that they have withdrawn from manosphere communities but still adhere to TRP ideology.

[E]ven though I despise the misogyny of the red pill, I cannot help but still believe in its normative views. I do not want to think it is true, but my feelings do not make it less accurate. (#17)

This former redpiller had left the manosphere but still embraced parts of TRP's assumptions, which suggests that disengagement is not always followed by a complete deradicalization (Bjørgo, 2008; Koehler, 2016). He depicts an inner struggle where he is repelled by TRP's misogynist ideology, yet he 'cannot but help' to believe in it anyway. This, we would argue, highlights the role of affect in the manosphere, not only as the forums are filled with resentment, aggression, and self-pity, but also because redpillers share a nostalgia over an idealized time before feminism and the sexual revolution and a fear of change in gender relations. Kimmel (2013) argues that white men's 'emotional vulnerability' – including sadness, anxiety, grief and worry – 'is carefully manipulated into political rage' by the far right (p. 32). Similarly, TRP offers young men ways to mourn and respond to the loss of male privilege in society and their personal lives. TRP is compelling since it resonates with their experiences of gendered vulnerability, but as mentioned, whereas it promised solutions to their issues the same vulnerabilities largely persist even if they have left the manosphere. As one former puts it, 'I still have the same insecurities that led me to redpill' (#17). In addition, some formers argue that even if they have disengaged and deradicalized, they still struggle with the consequences of their time in the manosphere.

However, once I had unlearned the red pill (by lurking around this sub mostly), I felt like the damage had already been done as it's irreversible now. I trained my brain so well that I cannot feel romantic attraction to anyone now. Also, it makes me feel kind of like a shitbag for only feeling sexual attraction towards women. (#12)

This former asserts that embracing the TRP worldview morphed his desire, which is now difficult to reverse so he continues to sexualize women. Radicalization scholars have pointed out that individuals may disengage from an extremist group but not necessarily abandon its ideology (Koehler, 2016). The data discussed in this section, and particularly the quote above, extends this literature by suggesting that deradicalizing from misogynist extremism is not simply a matter of conviction or disengaging from a specific online community, but also about how young men feel about women. The misogyny of TRP may continue to influence them even after disengagement. To stop objectifying women may be difficult as sexism and misogyny is widely accepted in Western societies and individuals increasingly view each other as in a sexual market (cf. Kaplan & Illouz, 2022).

Conclusions

In this article, we have detailed young men's pathways in and out of misogynist extremism online. The former redpillers were largely attracted to manosphere communities and TRP due to an experienced pressure to live up to standards of heterosexual masculinity, including being physically attractive and sexually successful. These norms seemed unattainable for the former redpillers and made them feel inadequate and vulnerable (cf. Kimmel, 1994; Messner, 2005). We have contributed to feminist scholarship on young men and the manosphere by detailing also how the formers were not attracted to TRP ideology to eschew vulnerability but to find a remedy for it (cf. Johanssen, 2021; O'Neill, 2018). The formers were interested in TRP partly to deal with their vulnerability, handle their relationship failures, and work on their bodies and selves. This finding echoes radicalization scholars arguing that young men are not necessarily attracted to extremism for ideological reasons but because they long for identity and community (Bjørge, 2008), as well as to meet standards of masculinity (Kimmel, 2018). However, we expand on this literature by highlighting the intersection between TRP ideology and a wider societal approval of male supremacy and notions of the sexual market. This overlap may contribute to young men's attraction to TRP, as well as aid them in disengaging from the manosphere without abandoning misogynistic beliefs.

Furthermore, our data suggest that while TRP's hierarchical and sexist worldview resonated with the young men's sense of vulnerability, it was channelled into resentment and aggression towards women and sexually successful men (cf. Regehr, 2022). The young men's self-identification as vulnerable could be understood as an example of male identity politics, where particularly white men are increasingly seeing themselves as victims (Kelly, 2020) and that has become a way to mobilize politically. TRP appears to speak particularly to a sense of being marginalized on the dating scene and in a heteromasculine hierarchy as it promises ways to restore men's sexual market value and, consequently, their masculinity. This ideology offers young men the position of victims of a misandrist and 'lookist' society but promotes solutions that reproduce the very same norms of heterosexual masculinity that caused their predicament in the first place. Not surprisingly, the formers write that TRP did not help them deal with their vulnerabilities but rather exacerbated them. Many argue they still have the same issues after disengaging from the manosphere and having deradicalized from TRP ideology.

Vulnerability could also be seen as a way for the young men to disassociate themselves from TRP, as they largely present themselves as victims of propaganda. Such mitigation must be understood in relation to that they share their stories in a very specific online space, namely a forum for former redpillers. Disavowing TRP ideology is expected in this environment, but displaying vulnerability (Ward, 2020) simultaneously presents a subject that has always been a 'good', albeit somewhat naïve young man. As the formers depict themselves as manipulated, they indirectly argue that they cannot be blamed for embracing TRP ideology. It should be noted that the formers seldom mentioned or specified what they had done to or written about women online. While previous research has demonstrated that the manosphere is characterized by vitriol and resentment against women (Jones et al., 2020; Marwick & Caplan, 2018), the former redpillers primarily wrote about other men spreading misogyny online.

These findings speak to current debates about the role of vulnerability in transforming the gender order. While vulnerability has been argued to foster more progressive masculinities (e.g. Cover, 2019; Mellström, 2016), our study suggests that it may also be a way into misogynist radicalization as well as not taking responsibility for one's misogyny. Yet we have also identified some formers that started to recognize how their TRP-inspired misogyny had affected others negatively. This suggests that acknowledging the vulnerability of the other may be a component of deradicalization from misogynist extremism (cf. Cover, 2019). But above all our study highlights the contradictions of

vulnerability where it both could enable more progressive masculinities and be used strategically to foster misogynist politics and justify resistance to gender change among young men (cf. Butler et al., 2016).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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