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Masculinities in Cyberspace: An Analysis of Portrayals of Manhood in Men's Rights Activist Websites

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Abstract: A growth in cultural ideologies concerned with men and masculinities in contemporary American society has recently emerged. Men's rights activist (MRA) groups embody a movement emphasizing the crisis of masculinity. Despite men's privileged societal status, MRAs seek to establish resources for men to utilize in elevating their perceived subordinated position in society in relation to women and social minorities. Little research has systematically investigated MRAs on the Internet, which is rapidly becoming a primary source of information and social connectedness for people. Through a content analysis of the 12 most prominent MRA websites, we explore the various strategies used by contemporary men's groups designed to provide support for men in their pursuit of social legitimacy and power. Two primary categories of MRAs with distinctive ideological strategies emerged from this analysis: *Cyber Lads in Search of Masculinity* and *Virtual Victims in Search of Equality*. Though both groups promoted men's entitlement to social power, Cyber Lads utilized themes of explicit aggression towards and devaluation of women, while Virtual Victims adopted political and social movement rhetoric to address men's issues. The implications of these websites are discussed in terms of gender equality and their potential effects on individual men and women.

Keywords: men's rights; masculinity; manhood; websites; content analysis

1. Introduction

The past several decades highlight a growth in cultural ideologies concerned with the state of men and masculinities in contemporary American society. Scholars are increasingly addressing the changing cultural conceptions of men and men's individual identities related to their roles as fathers, their position in feminist discourses and the emergence of the New Man's pursuit of masculinity [1]. One such outlet that has emerged from this rhetoric of masculinities in flux includes men's rights activist (MRA) groups and organizations [2]. As a form of backlash against feminism and the movement towards gender equity, MRAs seek to establish resources for men to utilize in maintaining their elevated position in society in relation to women and other social minorities [3]. MRAs appeared as an outgrowth of the men's liberation movement, which established itself in response to feminism under the argument that men also suffer negative consequences as a result of rigid gender role expectations in society [2]. Although some organizations associated with the men's liberation movement align themselves with the goals of feminism and gender equality [4], men's rights activist groups focus increasingly on the toxic consequences of feminism on men's lives, leading to a distinctive anti-feminist framework [2,5,6].

The growth and dissemination of MRA ideology is highly dependent on vast social networks of men connecting with other men to garner support, air their grievances, and recruit new members.

In order to reach a wider audience, MRAs have taken to the Internet as a means of establishing online communities of like-minded men. Dubbed the “manosphere”, one online collection of various MRA websites and blogs consists of extreme, misogynistic viewpoints that blame women, particularly feminists, for the downfall of society [7]. Other examples of men’s rights’ online presence include those groups, deemed “masculinist” in nature, vying for men’s equitable treatment in arenas such as child custody for fathers and the promotion of men’s health [6]. Though these two primary groups of MRAs utilize unique strategies in how they frame their beliefs, ranging from a woman-hating lens to the men-as-oppressed framework, they both rest on the ideological foundation calling for men’s reclamation of societal power to which they believe they have lost and are entitled based on their male status.

While previous research has examined the men’s rights movement through printed texts, there remains a lack of research analyzing the online presence and influence of these groups. For example, scholars have chronologically outlined the growth and decline of the men’s rights movement through primary works written by MRA leaders since the 1970s [2] and how this manifested in various publicized civil rights campaigns in the United States [3]. However, no study to date has systematically explored current representations of manhood through the ideologies of MRA websites that exclusively address beliefs surrounding men’s oppression. It is critical to study groups through their online identities as the Internet is highly accessible to people of all social backgrounds and its anonymous nature promotes the sharing of prejudiced beliefs within supportive virtual communities [8]. The present study fills this gap and extends upon contemporary understandings of MRA organizations by examining the rhetoric of online MRAs and the ways in which they argue for the social superiority of men. Through a content analysis of the 12 most prominent, contemporary websites that claim to support men’s rights and men’s issues, this study outlines the strategies that various MRA websites utilize. We argue that these rhetorical strategies constitute a backlash against feminism and gender equality. Before turning to the findings, we outline the literature that informs this study, the bulk of which comes from the social sciences, and sociology, more specifically.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Men’s Social Movements

The men’s rights movement has historical underpinnings in a number of ideological systems that have sought to resolve the so-called crisis of men and masculinity in society, which coincides with an outgrowth of scholarly research on men and masculinities [1]. Ideologically, these collectives have emerged as a backlash against feminism and its supporters. Identified as the historical foundation of men’s movements, mythopoetic men’s groups exhort modern men to pursue a deeper, essentialized essence of masculinity through fraternal, ritualized identity processes that utilize support from other men [9,10]. Additionally, the Promise Keeper movement, founded by evangelical Christian men, focused on the family and church contexts as arenas where men needed to reclaim their leadership and dominance [11]. Both Promise Keeper and mythopoetic ideologies support contemporary men’s rights movements by contributing to divisive gender relations between men and women and reifying the social supremacy of men and masculinity.

The men’s rights movement continues to gain leverage among contemporary men who feel oppressed by society and blame women for usurping their power. Early proponents of the men’s rights movements targeted second wave feminism in the 1970s as the source of fabrications surrounding male privilege and argued that social structures work to disempower men by imbuing women with societal advantage [12]. Contemporary men’s rights groups continue to underscore men’s subjugation in familial issues, such as the prejudice and discrimination they claim fathers experience in custody and divorce proceedings that privilege mothers’ rights [13,14]. Some contemporary men’s rights leaders have taken on more public personas, such as Paul Elam, who actively derogates feminists and women he labels as “sexist” through his website and blog, A Voice for Men. This strategy has

resulted in Elam's creation of an online registry of so-called "offenders", who are primarily women, to be tracked and held accountable for statements that Elam describes as demonizing men, which has led to threats of violence against those listed on the registry [15]. Men's rights groups' foray into online communities underscores the need for a critical understanding of how the Internet can be used as a vehicle for anti-feminist backlash.

In contrast to the men's right activist movement that concertedly disparages feminism, other men's groups have emerged that ally themselves with the goals of gender equity [16,17]. Certain contemporary movements highlight men's support of feminism, such as the "Walk a Mile in Her Shoes" campaign [18]. Relatedly, pro-feminist men desire to support feminism, but do not adopt the feminist label because they argue that they cannot experience what it is to be a woman in society [9,19]. A modern example of this type of group includes the National Organization for Men Against Sexism (NOMAS), which "advocates a perspective that is pro-feminist, gay affirmative, [and] anti-racist" and works to distance itself from the men's rights movements and "the assumption of male superiority" [20]. The existence of men's groups that support feminism is important in underscoring the problematic nature of MRAs and how they can work to undermine social movement activism towards gender equality.

2.2. Representations of Masculinity on the Internet

Scholars draw attention to the Internet and online communities specifically as sites where contestations around the current meaning of manhood and masculinities occur [21]. Some research highlights that online communities can serve as sites that align with progressive social change or work to challenge normative understandings of masculinity. For instance, "Bronies", or primarily heterosexual young adult men who embrace the stereotypically feminine, child-oriented animated series, *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, stands in opposition to traditional gender norms and expectations and have received their own share of backlash in response to their predominantly online community [22,23]. Other groups that have an online presence, such as heterosexual men who enjoy "pegging", or the act of being anally penetrated by a woman, directly challenge heteronormative sexual scripts by promoting a wider range of sexual practices viewed as acceptable and masculine [24–27].

However, online spaces can also serve to impede social change or perpetuate normative understandings of masculinity. For instance, online gaming groups have been documented as exhibiting notorious misogyny through their exclusive male membership base that serves to exclude female gamers by creating hostile, and sometimes hateful, interactive environments towards women [28]. Even when women are present in online video game atmospheres, the dominant male constituency continues to uphold hegemonic masculinity through the creation of binaries that equate tech-savviness with masculinity, while femininity is understood as incompetence [29]. More recently, the controversy dubbed "GamerGate" garnered national attention as male gamers took to the Internet to disparage feminism and blame "social justice warriors" for the critiques of misogyny against the gaming industry [30]. In a similar vein, men's rights activist groups that have an online presence use the Internet as a platform for calling for increased attention to men's issues and rallying against feminism [31]. Our work extends research that addresses the backlash against feminism that is occurring online. Specifically, we provide an analysis of the nuances among these cyber manifestations of MRAs and the unique strategies they use to subvert feminist movements. Our analysis is guided by the sociological theoretical conception of hegemonic masculinity, which we outline below.

2.3. Hegemonic Masculinity

The concept of hegemonic masculinity illustrates how a glorified version of masculinity works to systematically subjugate and oppress femininity and women, including men who do not conform to stereotypical ideals of masculinity [32–34]. In this way, men as a collective group possess societal power and privilege even when individual men feel powerless [35]. Manifestations of hegemonic masculinity include cultural representations that illustrate men as physically strong and imposing,

while repressing emotions or other signs of weakness [33,36]. Homophobia works as a guiding force of hegemonic masculinity that staunchly enforces heterosexuality as the only acceptable form of masculine sexuality, thereby encouraging the derogation of femininity and gayness as a method of policing appropriate displays of masculinity [37,38]. In this way, hegemonic masculinity is predicated upon homosocial interactions among men that maintain the exalted ideal of masculine identity [39]. Yet, it is important to note that hegemonic masculinity operates as an ideal that few, if any, men can realistically attain, and not all men benefit equally from patriarchy [33,40]. In fact, gender scholars have addressed how certain privileged forms of masculinity are detrimental to men, particularly with regard to their physical and mental health [41–43].

MRAs are supportive of the tenets of hegemonic masculinity as they seek to maintain a gender hierarchy with white, heterosexual men at the apex of power and privilege, while femininity is deemed inferior. Men's rights groups also rely on the support of a homosocial network to uphold their belief systems. We extend upon previous research on MRAs and conceptions of stereotypical masculinity to explore these groups and their online discourse, where they have more freedom and flexibility to promote anti-feminist dialogue. We first ask: are the sampled MRA groups antithetical to feminism and the goals of gender equality? As anti-feminist rhetoric was evident in all of the websites, we then ask: what strategies do online MRA groups utilize to delegitimize feminism and the goals of gender equality? While these MRAs cannot be subsumed within a single entity, it is clear that they are united in their belief that feminism has led to men's loss of social power and privilege, which they seek to regain using a variety of distinguishing tactics. In this way, MRAs primarily focus their activism on ideals of masculinity and divisive gender relations. This study provides insight into the nuances of how MRAs work to critique feminism utilizing specific strategies that shape their public images through the influential medium of the Internet.

3. Materials and Methods

The following twelve men's rights-affiliated websites comprise the sampling frame for this qualitative content analysis: The Men's Activism News Network (news.mensactivism.org), National Coalition for Men (ncfm.org), The National Center for Men (nationalcenterformen.org), A Voice for Men (avoicemen.com), Men's Rights (mensrights.com), Reaxxion (reaxxion.com), Return of Kings (returnofkings.com), Men Going Their Own Way (mgtow.com), The Red Pill Room (theredpillroom.blogspot.com), Alpha Game (alphagameplan.blogspot.com), Angry Harry (angryharry.com), and Matt Forney (mattforney.com). These 12 websites were chosen based on their active domain status and their accessibility through the search engine Google. The study websites were active at the time of data analysis during the months of March and April of 2015 and were the most prominent and accessible through a Google search using the strategy outlined below.

We employed a relevance sampling strategy to identify websites that explicitly claimed affiliation with men's rights organizations and were based in the United States [44]. For example, MRA-identification was operationalized as having the phrase "Men's Rights" present on the website's home page ($n = 5$) or clearly highlighting topics focused on men's issues, such as "Masculinity" or "Men's Voices" on the website's main page or "about" page ($n = 7$). Furthermore, relevant MRA websites were chosen if they had been recently updated within one year of data analysis as this highlighted the website's active online presence. This sampling method is justified based on the current study's concentrated focus on contemporary MRA's and the multiple discourses they use on the Internet. Therefore, a relevance sampling strategy is the most efficient method to filter out websites that did not overtly address men's rights issues. We also chose to exclude men's groups that advertised themselves as "pro-feminist" so as to hone in on groups with an anti-feminist agenda concerning men's rights. The 50 units of analysis for this study consisted of theoretically relevant columns and articles within the websites themselves [45] that explicitly listed an author and these were fairly evenly distributed across the 12 websites. To begin, the first author searched Google using the keywords "Men's Rights", "Men's Rights Activism" and "Men's Rights Movement" as Google employs a complex

algorithm that scours the Internet for the most relevant results and websites based on user popularity and website content [46]. Using this approach, the first author was able to compile a sample of twelve websites that fit these criteria ($n = 12$). Since the relevance of websites significantly tapered off after the fifth page of search results, we are confident that these 12 websites are representative of online MRA groups at the time of the study.

3.1. Data Collection

The first author collected data from the twelve MRA websites using text-based sources from written articles as units of analysis. For the text-based data, the first author copied and pasted primary text from each websites' homepage and major subpages, if applicable, into Microsoft Word documents. Following a relevance sampling strategy [44], the first author limited my inclusion of text-based data to articles and discussions that directly related to MRA ideology (*i.e.*, men's rights, masculinity, gender relations) and identified an author. This process resulted in 12 separate Word documents corresponding with each website. All Word documents were subsequently uploaded into QDA Miner by Provalis (Montreal, Canada) for data analysis.

3.2. Sample Characteristics

The twelve websites ranged in complexity from simple do-it-yourself, grassroots designs to more professional sites that resembled bureaucratic and capitalist organizations. Each MRA website encouraged education about their ideologies and beliefs and provided numerous articles that offered advice in various domains of life, including personal relationships and the workplace. All of these websites rested on arguments of selective examples of acontextual research to support their claims regarding men's rights and gender relations. Each of the groups encouraged visitors to either become a formal member or sign up for an email newsletter. It is also important to note that all of the websites shared an explicit focus of directing their messages towards men, and women are only discussed in terms of their relationship with readers (who are presumably men). Furthermore, five (45%) of the websites sought out some form of monetary support, either through requesting donations or by selling goods to support the MRA group (*i.e.*, bumper stickers, posters).

3.3. Analytic Strategy

While an understanding of hegemonic masculinity guided this study, the final themes emerged naturally from the data. This strategy resulted in a "hybrid" analytic approach that combined codes derived from both the theory of hegemonic masculinity as well as the data itself [47]. I conducted all qualitative data analyses of the text-based data using the computer software QDA Miner. All of the codes and ensuing themes emerged inductively from the data [48]. To begin, I examined all websites separately to develop an understanding of the distinctive strategies used by MRA's to support their masculine ideologies. Processes of open coding followed by focused coding, which were completed to establish the foundations of emergent themes and create linkages to identify commonalities between the websites [48]. Finally, representative examples of the major themes were extracted from the websites that best illustrated the concepts within each theme. For example, the codes of "anti-feminism" and "anti-women humor" combined to contribute to the subtheme of The Evils of Feminism among Cyber Lads in Search of Masculinity. Within the group of Virtual Victims in Search of Equality, the codes of "men's suffering" and "harmful masculinity" emerged to create the subtheme of Men in Crisis. All of the subthemes surrounding each MRA group represent broad patterns across their corresponding websites.

4. Results

In-depth analyses of these 12 MRA websites revealed two distinctive groups that both reflected anti-feminist discourse but each implemented unique strategies in their messages to reinforce the ideology of men's rights. Though both groups promoted men's entitlement to social power, Cyber Lads

in *Search of Masculinity* utilized themes of homosocial policing as a way to reinforce stereotypical masculinity, the demonization of feminist ideology and explicit aggression towards women and their devaluation as a means of establishing social dominance. *Virtual Victims in Search of Equality*, on the other hand, adopted political and social movement rhetoric to address men's issues, such as the themes of men's lives being in crisis, a focus on providing evidence of anti-male institutional prejudice and discrimination and the minimization of women's issues as a way to emphasize their belief of men as victims. The delineation of the nuances of online men's rights groups underscores the complexity of anti-feminist backlash and the various manifestations of Internet-based gender ideologies and beliefs.

4.1. *Cyber Lads in Search of Masculinity*

The most common type of MRA website that emerged from this analysis includes online communities that offer a breadth of lifestyle advice aimed at empowering men and encouraging them to unapologetically embrace their masculinity. Similarly, these websites act as spaces where men actively derogate women as a collective group and blame "the far left" for stripping the modern man of power. The majority of websites (n = 7) from this content analysis fell into the category of "Cyber Lads in Search of Masculinity", based on their rhetoric of "lad culture" that emphasizes men's independence from the constraints social institutions, such as the family, and critiques the "new man" as feminized and disingenuous [49]. While Cyber Lads focus on men's rights and issues, they did not explicitly call themselves men's rights groups. When authorship was identified, men wrote all of the articles derived from Cyber Lad MRA websites, though many of these authors utilized pseudonyms in lieu of their real names. Relatedly, Cyber Lads also displays highly antagonistic and misogynistic views towards women that relegate both women and femininity to inferior, subordinated social statuses in relation to men. Cyber Lad MRAs purport to be exclusively for traditionally-masculine men, and "women and homosexuals are discouraged from commenting" [50]. These websites' imagery also supported their ideology as it emphasized activities associated with traditional masculinity (*i.e.*, weightlifting, hunting) and the inferiority of women (overly emotional, promiscuous). Three common threads emerged from the Cyber Lad subcategory of online MRAs: Homosocial Policing of Masculinity, The Evils of Feminism, and Women as Sexual Commodities.

4.1.1. Homosocial Policing of Masculinity

One major strategy that the Cyber Lad online MRAs utilize to reinforce stereotypical masculinity is to provide an extensive library of resources for men designed to assist men in taking charge of their lives and enacting what scholars would refer to as a hegemonic version of masculinity. These advice columns and lists of "tips and tricks" include topics such as maximizing muscle-building during workouts, achieving economic success, and markers of traditional masculinity, such as gun ownership and hunting. By rigidly defining what it means to be a true man to an imagined/desired audience of only men, Cyber Lads engage in overt practices of homosocial policing of hegemonic masculinity [37,39]. Referring to the science fiction blockbuster, *The Matrix*, Cyber Lads are adamant that the only way to reclaim men's power is to accept the unpleasant truth of men's subjugation in society by "taking the red pill", and subsequently taking active steps to combat masculine oppression. For example, *The Red Pill Room* [51] dictates the following command: "Don't just breeze by and act appalled-the Manosphere is about Men seeking to make themselves better Men...according to their own interests." Cyber Lads describe their conversion to the "red pill" as one that opens their eyes to reality and allows them to take charge of their lives. Even if this transition is difficult and embittered, men are encouraged to remember that "a woman may be the prize, but she should not be the purpose" [52].

On the other hand, Cyber Lad online communities also aggressively derogate the so-called "blue-pill man" as the antithesis to the man who takes the red pill, and who "works too hard and sets up his thoughts, emotions, and more to please a woman...he can be manipulated" [53] as a way of regulating masculinity. A core tenet of Cyber Lad ideology is the idea that, as a result of feminism, society systematically works to emasculate men and that awareness of these "softening" effects is

vital for men to reclaim and, thus, embrace their masculinity. This notion of extreme independence is exemplified in the common catchphrase used by Cyber Lads, “Men Going Their Own Way”, which is “where the modern man preserves and protects his own sovereignty above all else...refusing to bow, serve and kneel for the opportunity to be treated like a disposable utility” [54]. One Return of Kings author harshly critiques the profeminist men’s movement, “The Good Men Project”, in that it “wants men to be blubbering manginas or outright homosexuals” [55]. From this hegemonic perspective, any connection with behaviors or attitudes related to “the pussification of American men” will lead to feminized, weak men who are passive and content to remain on the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy [56].

4.1.2. The Evils of Feminism

Another theme woven throughout websites designed by Cyber Lads is the insistence that feminism combined with broader social liberalism is the source of men’s downfall and oppression. A commonly used tactic involves the demonization of feminist tenets through a methodical, antifeminist denial of gender inequality: “Feminism is not about equality. It is a revolting ideology that is akin to Nazism” [57]. Additionally, feminism and its principles of gender equity are demeaned through humor and jokes, as one Cyber Lad author states, “But I need feminism, too. I need feminism because I need humor in my life and feminism never ceases to supply an ample quantity of it” [58]. Numerous articles exist in the Cyber Lad online community that claim to highlight the inherent contradictions and irrationality present within feminism by strategically summarizing news stories that fit their agenda. For example, these online communities repeatedly derogate feminists they deem “social justice warriors”, who “venture into the realms of useless, unjustified whining” and possess “the unique ability to simply invent things to offend him/her” [59]. In this way, Cyber Lad groups create a divisive, antagonistic dichotomy between their brand of hegemonic masculinity and “the far left” by demeaning feminist teachings through strategies of myth-busting and debasing humor.

In particular, Cyber Lad MRA websites blame feminism for a number of issues with which modern men must contend, especially in regards to difficulty with romantic relationships with women. For example, one article explicitly derogates numerous feminist issues, such as rape culture and patriarchal privilege, as “bizarre invented concepts” that create “dishonest feminist panics” and “leave male sexuality in crisis” [60]. Cyber Lads also attribute women’s increased likelihood to turn against men and “instinctively side with their class against the men in their lives on every issue of importance” to the “antagonistic gender feminism loved by American women” [61]. By attacking particular aspects of feminism, such as women’s sexual independence and autonomy and the notion of women’s solidarity, Cyber Lad MRAs establish a rhetoric of feminism as evil and something that directly detracts from men’s interests and entitlement.

4.1.3. Women as Sexual Commodities

All of the Cyber Lad websites stressed an exclusive heteronormative environment, whereby sexual relationships with women are exalted as the primary marker of idealized masculinity [37]. Women are a prominent point of discussion and concern throughout Cyber Lad websites, and they are generally characterized as immoral, irresponsible, and unworthy of men. According to these websites, the majority of women are unreliable and cannot be trusted to follow through with their promises, especially as they relate to men, because a large number of them suffer from what one author terms “The Flakey Chick Phenomenon”, also known as “Entitlement Princess Syndrome” [62]. Furthermore, the sense of male sexual entitlement often underscores the derogation of women. As exemplified in one author’s attempt to explain the murder/suicide of a male airline pilot: “It is somewhat haunting to think about how many lives might be saved each year if the sluts of the world were just a little less picky and a little more equitable in their distribution of blowjobs” [63]. Negative portrayals of women serve to reinforce the Cyber Lads’ gender hierarchy that privileges men and subordinates women and their social value.

Conversely, however, there are numerous articles outlining ways to establish dominance within one's heterosexual romantic relationships with women, thus highlighting the phenomenon identified by scholars as the Madonna-whore dichotomy where women are simultaneously put on a pedestal as desirable and thrown to the gutter as detestable [64]. In an attempt to reconcile their apparent contradictory views towards women as simultaneously repugnant and desirable, Cyber Lads reduce women to objects and commodities to be used as currency in their masculine endeavors. One Cyber Lad MRA advocates for strategic intimate partner violence by equating a female partner with a beast of burden: "Girls naturally chafe at the yoke of the man they have submitted to, even if all they end up doing is finding another master. So how do you discipline an unruly girl without permanently disfiguring her?" [65]. This message is especially problematic, as it not only normalizes interpersonal violence, but also advocates for violence against women. These online groups emphasize that women's ultimate worth in relation to men is inherently bound up in their physical attractiveness as it pleases the male gaze. The gaming website Reaxxion unapologetically refuses to hire female staff, as it "was founded as a gaming site for masculine men, and it's going to stay that way" [66], yet they advocate for the continued use of women as objects to sell products at convention booths [67]. Contradictory views of women's roles in men's lives throughout the Cyber Lads websites create a discourse of contentious gender relations grounded in misogyny that dually cast women as repellant, unsavory creatures at the same time that they are coveted as objects to be won.

4.2. *Virtual Victims in Search of Equality*

The second type of MRA website revealed in this analysis relates to men who feel victimized by society and argue that men are equally oppressed compared to women, if not more so. These websites (n = 5) are subsumed under the category of "Virtual Victims in Search of Equality" based on a discourse of "equality" that highlights men's societal oppression from a political and criminal justice perspective in relation to women. In contrast to the Cyber Lad MRAs, a combination of both men and women comprised the authorship of articles derived from the Virtual Victims websites and authors appeared to use authentic-sounding names, rather than invented screen names (*i.e.*, "GetItGoing"), which adds a sense of legitimacy to these articles that is lacking in the Cyber Lad sites. Similarly, these groups openly identified with the men's rights label and also sought to expose the failings of feminism regarding issues facing men. Virtual Victim MRAs operate under the implicit assumption that, while men are societally repressed, pro-male activism will socially empower men. These MRAs are unique, however, from Cyber Lads in that they strive for social legitimacy by using language typically associated with feminism that is designed to be tactful and nondiscriminatory, such as "equality", "fairness" and "justice". In fact, Virtual Victims at times address how men suffer because of unrealistic societal stereotypes, which aligns with feminist analyses of these same issues. Despite this common focus on issues that feminists agree are harmful to men, Virtual Victim MRAs ultimately blame feminism for this suffering. Indeed, they lack a rhetoric of violence against women that is prevalent in Cyber Lad websites, however, Virtual Victims also blame feminism for giving women too much power that has, in effect, subordinated men. Virtual Victim MRAs also claim to be inclusive of views and ideas and assert that they "want to help foster a dialogue between those with differing views on men's rights issues" [68]. Further, the minimal use of images among Virtual Victims Men's groups places the emphasis on their textual messages, and the images present are used to call attention to men's lack of rights (*i.e.*, a physically abused man). Three common subthemes materialized from the Virtual Victims subcategory of online MRAs: Men in Crisis, Combating Institutional Misandry and Delegitimizing Women's Issues.

4.2.1. Men in Crisis

A prevalent theme throughout the Virtual Victims MRAs is a growing concern for men's lack of social support that has resulted in men's subordinated position in a number of contexts, including education, the workforce, and the family. The National Center For Men devotes an entire page to

outlining the unique issues facing men, such as homelessness, suicide, and the burden of initiating romantic relationships, which underscores the group's tagline: "Demanding an end to unfair double standards" [69]. These groups argue that both men and women are equally bound by rigid, harmful cultural gender roles, however, society has failed to address the adverse effects of these expectations on men as it has for women. From this viewpoint, men are "emotionally adrift...searching for a new identity; yet they find few viable alternatives to traditional masculine behavior" [70], which they believe to be harmful to men. Virtual Victims, thus, seek to provide homosocial support for all men in crisis, ranging from the individual and interpersonal levels to broader, macro social structures. From this perspective, all of the MRA websites in this category strongly encourage visitors to become advocates for men and engage in activism that supports men's rights through combating harmful stereotypes and working to change social policies they deem anti-male.

Virtual Victim MRAs also argue that a number of unrealistic societal standards hold men to expectations that are harmful to their physical, mental, and emotional health. Although this line of thinking might align with feminist perspectives, Virtual Victim groups blame feminism for taking focus away from men's health needs. In response, they assert the need to (re)center the focus on men and addressing what they call the "men's 'silent health crisis'". Specifically, they note: "The need for an Office of Men's Health is acute, and the evidence that men's health is being ignored can't be ignored" [71]. This quote illustrates their framing that men's health is being "ignored" by mainstream society, for which they blame feminism. Furthermore, some Virtual Victim groups also highlight the unique issues faced by boys and young men by citing particular figures that show the health risks contributing to the "Boy Crisis": "Boys are twice as likely to be diagnosed with 'ADHD' as girls...boys commit suicide at 4 times the rate girls do...boys are far more likely to be victims of a violent crime" [72]. This strategy of constructing men not only as being in crisis in terms of health but also as being ignored by mainstream society lays the foundation for the additional tactics Virtual Victims implement in exposing what they view to be a societal-wide prejudice against men that resulted from feminism.

4.2.2. Combating Institutional Misandry

Virtual Victim MRA ideology embodied by their online persona is strongly characterized by a political agenda that critiques numerous social institutions as being biased towards women and prejudiced and discriminatory against men. One Virtual Victim MRA, Men's Rights, addresses this lack of equitable treatment of men by the criminal justice system by providing contact information for a law firm concerned with men's rights and stating, "Over the years, men have been set back with an increasing amount of unfair rulings in the areas of child custody, alimony, child support, paternity, and abuse" [73]. These MRAs establish an effective framework of blaming social institutions for men's oppression by strategically framing political issues through a narrow lens that only focuses on "men's issues" seemingly in a contextual vacuum. For example, The Men's Activism News Network is careful to selectively extract excerpts from particular contemporary news stories regarding unlawful injustices against men, such as those that make conjectures (often based on opinion) regarding judicial anti-male biases (*i.e.*, false rape accusations and the criminalization of men who owe child support). This cherry-picking of evidence used to support these groups' claims of men's victimization serves to legitimate their viewpoint and provide indirect support for hegemonic masculinity by reinforcing their sense of social entitlement.

In response to their claim of widespread prejudice and discrimination against men across social structures, Virtual Victim MRAs proposed a number of different venues for activism and advocacy that men should undertake to combat institutional misandry. For example, National Coalition for Men boasts an entire section entitled "Action", which encourages site visitors and members of their group to become involved with local and national movements to "stop the war on men" by filing a federal complaint showing evidence of "discrimination against male domestic violence victims" [74]. They seek to address the major issue of what they claim to be "the discredited claim that domestic violence is about masculinity" and that all men are wrongfully targeted as sexual predators by law

enforcement and the media [75]. Furthermore, The Men's Activism News Network explicitly calls for supporters to boycott particular industries based on evidence of their misandric behavior, such as Ford Motor Company, because of their "blatant discrimination against men (particularly white men) toward both its employees and its buying public (via a male bashing commercial)" [76]. Through the strategy of institutional exposure and encouraging direct action from its supporters, Virtual Victims create a community of solidarity through suffering that strengthens their cause and provides legitimacy to their victimized ideology.

4.2.3. Delegitimizing Women's Issues

Language of gender and wider social equality characterizes much of these MRAs' ideology, underscored by an emphasis on addressing both men's and women's social rights, whereas previously only women's issues received attention. This tactic is exemplified in one Virtual Victims groups' outline of a divisive gender dichotomy: "In many ways, women receive special privilege and protection, while male pain and suffering are trivialized or ignored by our society" [69]. By creating an adversarial binary between women and men, these MRA organizations delegitimize women's issues and dismiss broader social gender inequality, such as women's statistical overrepresentation as victims of rape or the gender wage gap, by labeling these issues inaccurate or biased. The National Coalition for Men denounces the gender pay gap rhetoric as a ploy "used by Power Elite Feminists to push their agendas" and "only exists because men work far more hours at high-stress jobs they hate with longer commutes, less flexibility, more physical risk, etc." [77]. While these issues facing men are certainly important in improving men's social support and well-being, these websites utilize an oversimplified discussion of these issues that not only fails to account for perspectives of women or the nuances of situations, which has the effect of belittling women's rights, but it also assumes that feminism can only benefit either women or men but not both.

This hierarchical framing of which gender suffers more as a result of culturally prescribed gender roles is at odds with these groups' emphasis on inclusivity and equality. For example, one Virtual Victims group declares, "We cannot limp forward as a society on concerns for only one sex, just as we cannot advance as two equal sexes by continuing to address the problems of only one of them" [78]. While on the surface this rhetoric advocates for gender equality, further inspection reveals that this framework continues to create antagonistic, oppositional stances between men and women. One such article advocates for stripping mothers of their rights in choosing how they parent: "Stop looking at what is best for the mother, and look at what is best for the child. Then, you will clearly see that white working-class women should not raise kids alone" [79]. Men's rights discourse that operates on a self-proclaimed platform of equality is problematic in that it effectively disparages issues that disproportionately face women or are experienced by women in distinctive, unique ways.

5. Discussion

Findings from this content analysis of contemporary manifestations of men's rights activist groups on the Internet provide insight into how online spaces facilitate backlash against feminism. Both subtypes of online men's rights groups are united in their demonization of feminism as the source of men's social oppression [2]. Cyber Lads and Virtual Victims both characterized feminist ideology as harmful and flawed in its focus on gender inequality and subsequent disempowerment of men. In effect, MRAs in this study believed that feminism strips men of numerous social rights and privileges, which are then afforded to women. These groups position feminism as having created what one of the Virtual Victims group termed "the war on men". Our finding that online MRA groups derogate feminism as a social ill is in line with previous research [31]. Examining the manifestations of MRAs in the online atmosphere is especially critical as it provides a more legitimate, accessible space for anti-feminist backlash to cultivate and spread across regions and cultural contexts.

This study contributes to understandings of the men's rights movement by exploring the strategies they use to establish their online identities, delegitimize feminism, and create a sense of community

founded on fighting against the detrimental impact of feminism. Specifically, this analysis illustrates the nuanced ways that MRA groups support hegemonic masculinity online. We show that their strategies vary. Cyber Lads in Search of Masculinity are unique in their extreme derogation of women and emphasis on men's entitlement to social superiority over women. Cyber Lads are much more extreme in their anti-feminist hatred, to the point of advocating for violence against women. In contrast to such explicit anti-feminist rhetoric, Virtual Victims in Search of Equality promote a framework that draws on language typically associated with feminism. They also reference news stories and research findings to support and legitimate their views, many of which coincide with feminist concerns surrounding the damaging effects of stereotypical masculinity [41]. The rhetoric and strategies of Virtual Victims, however, ultimately pit men against women in arguments of which gender suffers more oppression and asserts that feminism is detrimental to men. Overall, this analysis shows how MRA groups utilize diverse strategies in online spaces to encourage divisive gender relations and the derision of feminist perspectives.

It is clear that MRA discourse, as espoused in these websites, is grounded in an ideology of hegemonic masculinity through its focus on men's social superiority and problematizing women and femininity [33]. MRAs' online strategies are ideologically-charged in their attempts to make sense of complex realities that they interpret to be largely detrimental to men, which they argue is the result of feminism [80]. For example, MRAs construct over-simplified cultural models of the social world, such as by obfuscating the multiple goals of equality inherent to feminism and reducing it to a concept that only seeks to derogate men and masculinity. Similarly, both MRA groups strive to persuade its audience of its hegemonic ideology by isolating social practices and phenomena that they believe are uniquely harmful to men (*i.e.*, child custody), thereby situating their belief system in a social vacuum that fails to consider intersecting social dynamics [81]. Virtual Victim MRAs' effectiveness, however, is perhaps much stronger compared to that of Cyber Lads because of their ability to adeptly conceal their anti-feminist discourse through the use of legitimated sources (research studies) and issues grounded in truth (men's health inequities). Indeed, visitors to the websites may be unaware that many of the ills facing men discussed by Virtual Victims are the same ones that feminists have also examined. Despite the extreme misogynistic ideological discourse of Cyber Lads, and the more masked strategies favored by Virtual Victims, MRAs gain social legitimacy by distorting social inequalities that do impact men in distinctive ways, such as stereotypical norms of masculinity.

Historically, backlash against feminism has continually presented itself as women have fought for equitable rights in the arenas of politics, the workforce and the family [82]. In many ways, the anti-feminist rhetoric of online MRA groups is indicative of a wider social movement enacted by conduits such as popular media and conservative policymakers that promote negative stereotypes of feminists and label it as nothing more than misandry [83]. Negative depictions of feminism have led to a misunderstanding of its core tenets, which then propagates fear and an aversion to identifying as a feminist, especially among men [84]. Anti-feminist discourse, such as that promoted by MRAs, has contributed to feminism's conceptualization as the new "F-word" [85].

Despite this study's unique contributions to understanding the various strategies MRAs use online, it is not without limitations. This study only analyzed MRA websites that were publicly available; therefore, different tactics may be used among other groups that require membership to access content. Since this study was limited by the availability of active MRA websites because several sites were shut down during the period of data analysis, scholars should continue to explore how online MRA groups ebb and flow in their presence and how this potentially shapes anti-feminist discourse. Additionally, as many of these active groups advertised face-to-face group meetings and events, future research should explore how MRAs' online strategies compare to those they utilize in-person [86]. Although this study's focus was through a lens of anti-feminist backlash, it is critical to also examine how individual women and men interpret the strategies espoused by different segments of MRAs to gauge the effectiveness of their discourse among various audiences. In particular, it is necessary to understand how individual men interpret and internalize online MRAs' messages to

determine their effect on men's masculine identities and gender ideologies, especially considering that men are more likely to identify as feminist when they are exposed to positive portrayals of other profeminist men [87].

The implications of this analysis of online MRA groups are vast in how the ideology of both Cyber Lads and Virtual Victims can influence individual men and women. For men who already feel powerless in a society that is described by feminists as patriarchal [35], seeking out support from MRAs on the Internet represents one way that these men can reclaim their masculinity. The prevalence and accessibility of the Internet allows men from all over the world to identify and connect with each other through various MRA groups, with MRAs being active beyond the United States in countries such as Australia [14] and Canada [88]. Furthermore, the extreme misogyny of some of these websites is troubling in considering how these messages may shape young men's beliefs about women and gender equality, especially when they normalize violence against women. This mentality could perpetuate a binary of gendered violence whereby men blame women for their own violent behaviors and men are cast as victims of feminized social systems [89]. The promises that online MRA groups make to men visiting their websites regarding how to achieve masculinity and social power is predatory in that they establish a rigid framework of acceptable manhood, so ideological conversion will be most likely among men who already feel disempowered.

Online MRA groups utilize the immense, ephemeral nature of the Internet to their advantage by selectively representing both news stories and research to promote their ideological agenda. In this unique online environment, Virtual Victims can omit important contextual information regarding news and research studies and Cyber Lads can promote hateful, anti-women teachings using the anonymity of the Internet. Online hate groups can be especially persuasive to young people when their messages are conveyed indirectly through a detailed narrative [90], highlighting the potential effectiveness of the Virtual Victims' use of legitimate sources to support their anti-feminist rhetoric. Future work should continue to explore these online communities and their effects.

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