

# The Manosphere and Manfluencers

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# Mainstreaming the manosphere: discourses of contemporary masculinity among Estonian manfluencers

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## Abstract

The misogyny and antifeminism of the manosphere has received considerable academic and journalistic attention. This article addresses a new troubling trend, the mainstreaming of the manosphere by targeting wide audiences via TikTok. We analyse this process with the case of Estonian manfluencers and their use of international ideologies of the manosphere while drawing on the theoretical concepts of gender performativity, hegemonic and hybrid masculinity, and the attention economy logic. The empirical part focuses on the discourse analysis of TikTok videos ( $N=24$ ) from three Estonian manfluencers' accounts to explore how they construct masculinity and adapt globally circulated manosphere content. The results of this study indicate that Estonian manfluencers mix ideologies common in various manosphere communities with minimal regard to their local context. They stress societal decline and men's grievances, placing blame on what they term 'woke society' and women. 'True manhood' is to be achieved through discipline, suffering and domination of women and other non-dominant gender identities. The results of this study demonstrate how previously niche ideologies of the manosphere are increasingly mainstreamed transnationally. In the process of reaching mainstream social media platforms, the various discourses and ideologies common in the international manosphere are combined, advancing the manfluencers' own personal attention-grabbing agenda but, in doing so, also potentially playing a role in the strategic dissemination of gender-based disinformation.

## Techno Music and Luxury Yachts: The Misogynous Audiovisual Affective Codes of TikTok Manfluencers

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## Abstract

The manosphere has rapidly moved from anonymous forum-based communities to mainstream contexts, generating manfluencers with mass followings. While popular and networked misogyny, together with various parts of the manosphere have been well studied, manfluencers as key agents in the mainstreaming of the manosphere have received relatively little academic attention. This article explores how Estonian TikTok manfluencers signal problematic messages through audiovisual elements with such strong connotations to the manosphere that they embody or reference an ideology without any need to mention it explicitly. By using a mixed-methods approach, the study will employ a combination of standardized content analysis and group exercises with audiences (not fans) of this content to conceptualize and explore what in this article is termed "misogynous" – a coded style of content unique to the genre of manfluencers that is able to circulate in mainstream settings. The study elaborates on how manfluencers engage in affective racketeering by using audiovisual elements to evoke affective responses in their audiences. Results indicate that the misogynous is constructed through the connotations of sounds and visuals, which have become symbols of hypermasculinity. These include luxury yachts, cars, a trained physique and daily routines. Misogynous is further employed through a process of affective racketeering, which utilizes the sociosemiotic connotations of audio cues and framing styles. For example, close-up framing facilitates sympathy and intimacy, while the use of techno music projects aggression and intimidation. The results of this study are crucial for understanding the processes behind the mainstreaming of the manosphere and networked misogyny.

# The manosphere

- Online communities focusing on men's perspectives, problems, and grievances, with women as frequent targets of hatred (Farrell et al., 2019).
- Various communities – similar ideologies, emphases differ.
- Usually associated with Reddit and 4chan, recent shifts to more mainstream environments (e.g., TikTok, YouTube, Instagram).
- United by a metaphor from *The Matrix*
  - Blue pill – living a life of obliviousness, while being exploited.
  - Red pill – learning the shocking truth about society.
    - Society as geared against men, feminism as misandry
- Genetic determinism to explain sexual behaviour (Ging, 2019).
  - Women as irrational hypergamous, seeking 'alpha males' and submission.



# The manosphere

- **Incels** – men living in involuntary celibacy.
  - Sex with women as their right, a fundamental part of the male experience (Rothermel et al., 2022)
  - Nihilism, abusive responses (e.g., fantasies and actions of sexual violence for women's perceived promiscuity), ideas for policymaking, mass violence (Rothermel et al., 2022).
- **Pick-up Artists** – focused on seduction, transactional nature to relationships, value is determined by the performance of masculinity.
  - Manipulating women as seduction.
  - Negging – backhanded compliments to lower women's self-esteem (Ging, 2019).
- ...

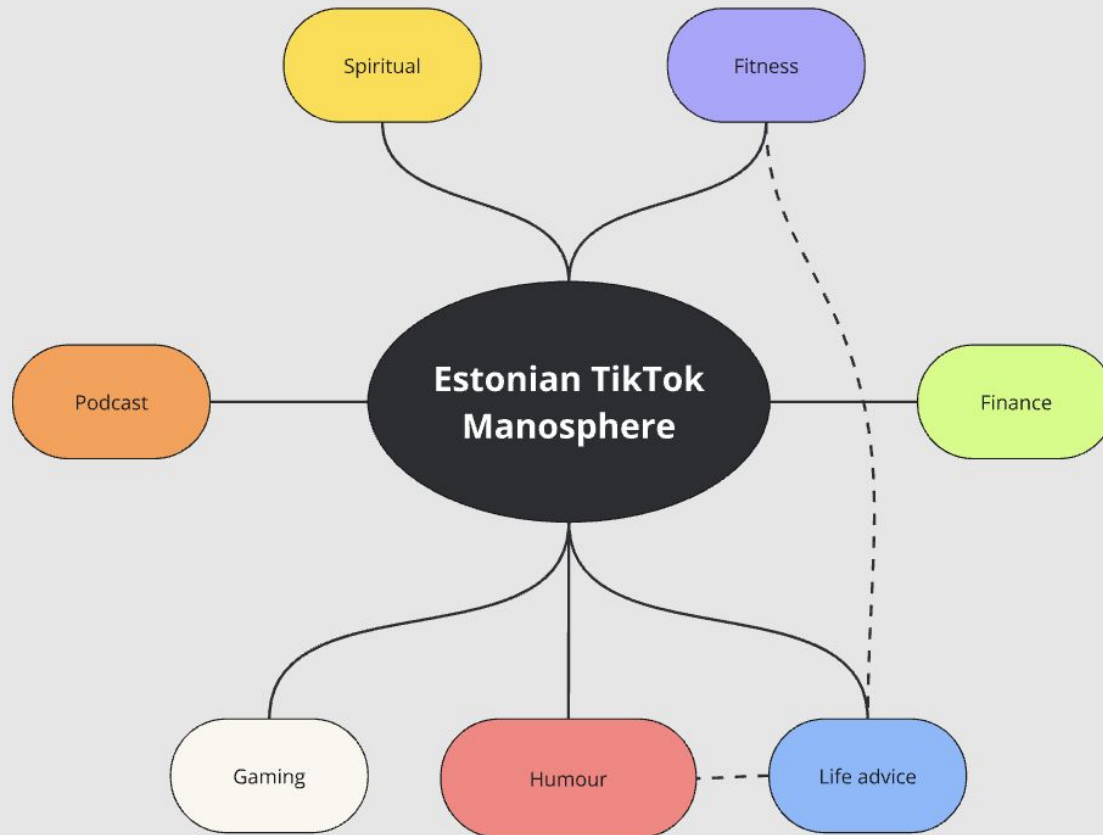


# Mainstreaming of the manosphere

## – manfluencers

- Internet personalities who weaponise highly performative and extremist notions of masculinity, and who promote regressive, sexist ideas about women (Wescott, Roberts & Zhao, 2024).
- Build **masculine capital** (Anderson, 2005) through performing traits associated with hegemonic masculinity, such as heterosexuality, avoiding emotion and being in charge of other men.
- Andrew Tate
  - Ex-boxer, accusations of sexual misconduct, human trafficking, money laundering
- Developed into a category of influencers.







## Doom & Gloom Society

- Social chaos, moral decline.
- The 'true' man is endangered, therefore their coaching is necessary.

### *Longing for the past*

- Opposing progressive contemporary topics

### *Victimhood*

- Brainwashed masses vs good masculine men.
- Slang and profanities to emphasize victim status.

*"Don't mock men, especially nowadays when no one gives a sh\*\* about us."*



## Suffering & Discipline

- If you want to live a better life than the average person, you need self-discipline, restraint, endurance.
- Condemned activities: porn, masturbating, nicotine, partying, gaming, mental health problems.

*"I don't f\*\*\*\*\* want to do most things. That's discipline. Discipline doesn't care about your feelings. I have to work. I have to exercise. This is the mentality of a man."*

## Judgement

- Between other men, subordinating non-dominant masculinities (Tsuda, 2022; Rothermel et al., 2022).
- Metrics: financial success, family status, physique, mental health.







## Dominance & Violence

- The need to be dangerous and violent, dominating women.

### *Combat*

- Men as territorial, women as part of this territory.
- Protection is compulsory for women.

*“Why would you put yourself in a situation where something can happen to you? Anything can happen because men are very territorial.”*

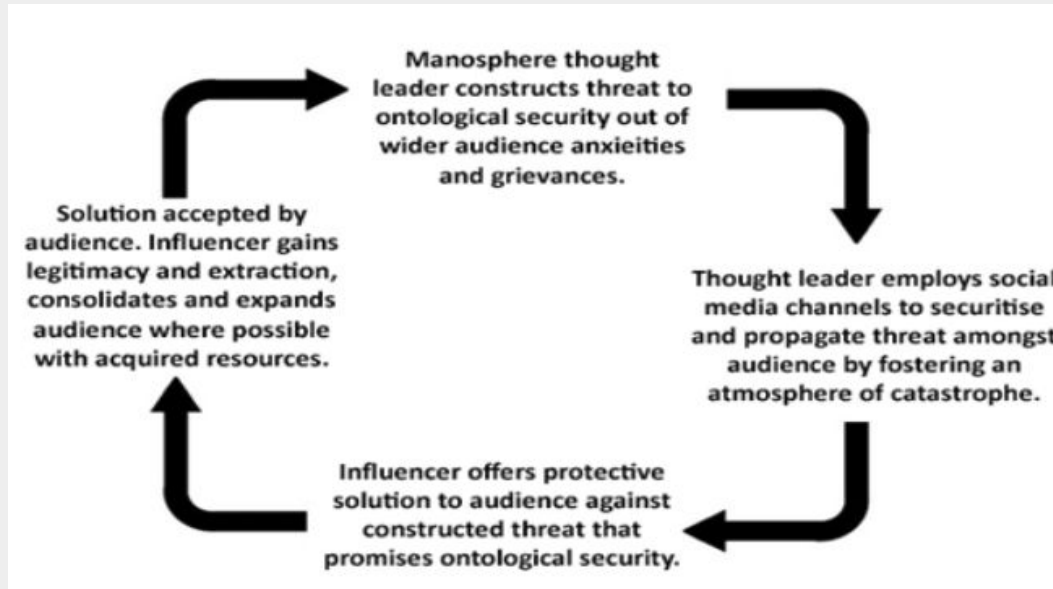
### *Vilifying Women*

- Blamed for men’s low self-esteem.
- Objectification, condescending language.

*“And then, once you’ve given in a couple of times, she is like a dog at a table and you give her food once and she continues to beg.”*

# Ontological Racketeering (Bujalka et al., 2022)

- In its broadest sense, ontological security can be considered as “confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic existential parameters of self and social identity” (Giddens, 1984, p. 375).



## Affective Racketeering (Lott, 2026)

- The use of audiovisual elements, aiming to evoke affective emotional reactions from online audiences.
- Manipulating the emotional state of audiences so that they would be more receptive to ideas.
- More about the mood and atmosphere of the audios and the technical framing of the manfluencers' videos.

# Recent shifts among manfluencers



Self-censorship, financial  
advice, fitness

# Why are these ideas successful?

- Rage-baiting, recommendation algorithms.
- Amplifying the anxieties of audiences.
  - Precarity of the contemporary society: inflation, wage cuts and stagnation, trouble finding a job, burnout, houses crisis, cost of education, privatisation of the health sector, political instability (Bujalka et al., 2022).
  - General context of trends facilitating insecurity, gender standards (looksmxing, mewing, extreme gym culture).
- Searching for answers a sense of control.
- Community, support, etc.
  - Homosocial bonding through manfluencers' and the manosphere's content.
- Potential use for gender disinformation in hybrid warfare (Wong, 2024).



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