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## Don't blame toxic masculinity for online misogyny – the manosphere is hurting men too

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“Imagine her tenderly pressing her soft lips against yours”, writes one incel on Reddit, before concluding, “you will never get to experience this because your skeleton is too small or the bones in your face are not the right shape”.

In his debut book, [The Male Complaint](#), Simon Copland escorts his readers through the manosphere and into the minds of its inhabitants. He illustrates how boys and men who are “terrifyingly normal” become attracted to the manosphere’s grim logic – and the cognitive distortions of anti-feminist influencers like Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson.

While mainstream debates often cite toxic masculinity as the cause of online misogyny, Copland, a writer and researcher at the Australian National University, shifts the blame to a deeper cultural malaise. It’s caused, he argues, by the cruel optimism of the manosphere, the multiple social and economic crises of [late-stage capitalism](#) and a collective nihilistic misery in which complaint becomes futile and destruction “the only way out”.

## Review: *The Male Complaint* – Simon Copland (Polity)

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The manosphere is a network of loosely related blogs and forums devoted to “men’s interests” – sites like The Rational Male, Game Global and the subreddits ForeverAlone, TheRedPill and MensRights. These online communities, separate in their specific beliefs, are united by their misogynistic ideas – and anti-women and anti-diversity sentiments.

They’re also united by the growing tendency of the men in these communities towards nihilistic violence: not only against others, but also against themselves.

A new book shows how ‘terrifyingly normal’ men are drawn to anti-feminist influencers like Andrew Tate (pictured) and Jordan Peterson. John Locher/AAP

In *The Male Complaint*, Copland relays his dismay at discovering “a constant stream” of suicide notes on Reddit, including a subreddit, IncelGraveyard, which catalogues close to 100 suicide notes and letters posted by self-identified incels.

*Since I was a kid I was fed up with ‘Don’t worry, it will get better’, ‘You will find someone’ [...] it’s not even that I want a SO (significant other) anymore. Women are awful. People are awful. I have no friends.*

For Copland, the violence incels inflict on themselves is a form of passive nihilism. Incels “don’t just express disgust and despair at the world, but in themselves – their looks, body, lives, personality, intelligence, and more”.

## Who’s in the manosphere?

The manosphere includes men’s rights activists, pick-up artists and “Men Going Their Own Way” (male separatists who avoid contact with women altogether). And of course, incels: men who believe they are unable to find a romantic or sexual partner due to their perceived genetic inferiority and oppression.

Incels also blame their problems on women’s alleged hypergamy: the theory women seek out partners of higher social or economic status and therefore marry “up”. Put another way, hypergamy, a concept rooted in evolutionary psychology, is the belief “women are hard-wired to be gold diggers”.

Rollo Tomassi, the so-called “godfather of the manosphere”, complains on his blog that “women love opportunistically”, while “men believe that love matters for the sake of it”.

According to Tomassi, the “cruel reality” of modern dating is that men are romantics who are “forced to be realists”, while women are realists whose use “romanticisms to effect their imperatives”.

Tomassi complains:

*Our girlfriends, our wives, daughters and even our mothers are all incapable of idealized love [...] By order of degrees, hypergamy will define who a woman loves and who she will not, depending upon her own opportunities and capacity to attract it.*

Ten years ago, these communities were largely regarded as fringe groups. Today, their ideology has infiltrated the mainstream.

On Sunday, ABC TV's [Compass](#) reported that misogyny is on the rise in Australian classrooms, with female teachers sharing their experiences of sexual assault and harassment on school grounds – ranging from boys writing stories about gang raping their teachers to masturbating “over them” in the bathrooms. One student even pretended to stab his pregnant teacher as a “joke”.

The ideology of the manosphere is leaking into the mainstream. Soumil Kumar, Pexels

A 2025 report published by [UN Women](#) shows 53% of women have experienced some form of technology-facilitated, gender-based violence. The [dark side of digitalisation](#) disproportionately affects young women aged between 18 and 24, LGBTQI+ women, women who are divorced or who live in the city, and women who participate in online gaming.

## **‘Biologically bad’?**

Copland argues that simplified critiques of toxic masculinity minimise the problem of male violence. They fail to consider the context and history of gendered behaviour, assuming toxic traits are somehow innate and unique to men, rather than the product of social expectations and relations.

This, in turn, promotes the idea that male violence derives from something “biologically bad” in the nature of masculinity itself. As Copland explains, “this is embedded in the term ‘toxic’, which makes it sound like men’s bodies have become diseased or infected”.

Blaming toxic masculinity for digital misogyny also embraces a form of [smug politics](#) in which disaffected men are dismissed as degenerates who are fundamentally different to “us” (meaning the activist left and leftist elites). They are “cellar dwellers”, “subhuman freaks”, or “virgin losers” who need to be either enlightened or locked up. “We”, on the other hand, are educated, progressive, superior.

This kind of rhetoric, as Copland explains, is unhelpful. It does not create the conditions for changing the opinions, narratives and futures of manosphere men because it does not allow people to understand their complaints and where those concerns come from – even if we do not agree with them.

Belittling attitudes and demeaning discourses alienate men who already feel socially isolated. This pushes those men further to the fringes – into the hands of “manfluencers” who claim to understand.

## **‘Not having love becomes everything’**

The manosphere, Copland observes, is not “an aberration that is different and distinct from the rest of the world”, nor is it a community that exists solely on the “dark corners of the web”.

Rather, the manosphere, as an echo chamber, enables and encourages what Copland calls “the male complaint”: a sense of collective pain or “injury” so intrinsic to the group’s identity, it cannot be redressed.

As injured subjects who believe their problems are caused through no fault of their own, manosphere men cannot mend the “wound” they believe society has inflicted upon them. Their “marginalisation” and injured status are the lens through which they view themselves and the world.

In the Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) community, for example, some men talk about the movement as a hospital where “physicians of the male soul” use different “methods of healing” to treat the “illness of gynocentric-induced disease weighing them down”. These methods include “self-improvement” strategies that are designed to build men’s power and wealth: purchasing gym equipment, investing in the stock market, even abstaining from pornography and sex.

Others in the MGTOW community are vocally anti-victim: “You can live an extraordinary life,” one man says to another, “but you’re wasting your time on complaints and negativity”.

Even when they disagree, though, manosphere men frame women and feminism as the enemy. In this way, the machinery of the manosphere capitalises on men’s discontent, reflects that messaging back to them and displaces their anger and hurt onto an easy scapegoat.

As Copland observes, it is easier for men to blame women for their unhappiness than it is to blame the complex systems of capitalism: “if love and sex is everything, then not having love becomes everything as well”.

## **Blackpilled incels, lookism and anonymity**

This preoccupation with intimacy is central to the incel community. It is exemplified by the various artefacts Copland embeds in his book – memes and posts from the manosphere itself.

Blackpilled incels are a subgroup of incels who believe their access to romantic and sexual relationships is doomed because of “lookism”: the belief women choose sexual partners based solely on their physical features.

Blackpilled ideology attributes romantic failure to genetically unalterable aspects of the human body, such as one’s height or skull shape. Some blackpilled incels, who call themselves wristcels, even blame their lack of sexual success on the width of their wrists.

This logic is countered by research that demonstrates men, in fact, show stronger preferences for physical attractiveness than women, with women tending to prioritise education level and earning potential.

On Reddit, incels often imagine and bitterly dismiss the potential for love and intimacy because of their looks. Ohsineon/Pexels

The manosphere, however, amplifies this type of thinking and filters out information that challenges these ideas and opinions, increasing group polarisation. Despite its promise of solidarity, the manosphere isolates boys and men, and ultimately distances them from their wider community. This segregation results in a deep sense of alienation – these boys and men become stuck in a perpetual cycle of ideological reinforcement.

The manosphere thrives on anonymity, writes Copland, which only reinforces the idea it is not designed to foster deep relationships or connections.

## No silver bullets

The sense of community the manosphere claims to offer is a sham; its alienating structures do not offer boys and men genuine belonging and connection, or real solutions to their problems.

“From one day to the next, the ability to communicate depends on the whims of hidden engineers,” writes media studies professor Mark Andrejevic of online networks more broadly. The manosphere, like other virtual constructs, is subject to manipulation by those who control the infrastructure and the rules of engagement.

More than this, the manosphere does not provide an alternative to complaint. When complaint is the only option, writes Copland, nihilism and violence are the inevitable result.

*When nothing matters, there are no consequences to anything, including violence [...]*

*Manosphere men do not look to convince others, but rather seek their destruction.*

*Destruction is the outlet they find to deal with their complaint.*

That's what makes the manosphere so dangerous.

## ‘Popular boys must be punished’

In 2014, 22-year-old Elliot Rodger, a British-American college student, embarked on an hours-long stabbing and shooting spree in the university town of Isla Vista, California, killing six and injuring 14. On the morning of May 23 – the “Day of Retribution” – Rodger emailed a 140-page “manifesto” to his family, friends and therapists. He also uploaded several YouTube videos in which he lamented his inability to find a girlfriend, the “hedonistic pleasures” of his peers and his painful existence of “loneliness, rejection, and unfilled desires”.

In his memoir-manifesto, Rodger – the supposed “patron saint of incelism” – explains the motive for his violence:

*I had nothing left to live for but revenge. Women must be punished for their crimes of rejecting such a magnificent gentleman as myself. All of those popular boys must be punished for enjoying heavenly lives and having sex with all the girls while I had to suffer in lonely virginity.*

Four years later, in April 2018, Alek Minassian, a self-described incel, drove a rented van onto a busy sidewalk in Toronto, killing 11 (nine of them women) and injuring many more. On Facebook, Minassian explained that his actions were part of the “incel rebellion” led by the “Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger”. Later, [Minassian told police](#), “I feel like I accomplished my mission”.

Rodger, too, ended his final YouTube video with a similar message: “If I can’t have you girls, I will destroy you”.

In his book, Copland even draws a parallel between the Westfield Bondi Junction attack and the explanation for attacker Joel Cauchi’s violence, put forward by his father just two days after the attack: “To you, he is a monster. To me, he was a very sick boy [...] he wanted a girlfriend and he’s got no social skills and he was frustrated out of his brain”.

In fact, Cauchi suffered from treatment-resistant schizophrenia and had been unmedicated [at the time of the attack](#): “after almost two decades of treatment, Cauchi had no regular psychiatrist, was not on any medications to treat his schizophrenia and had no family living nearby”. The multifaceted causes of Cauchi’s crime are more complex than misogynistic violence.

Indeed, the pieces of the manosphere puzzle, when put together, reveal a sobering image of the male complaint. However, they demonstrate misogyny is bad for everyone – not just women and girls.

As Copland concludes:

*The manosphere promises men that it can make their lives better [...] But it really cannot deliver. The promises it offers are not real, and in many cases make things worse [...] This is how cruel optimism works, always offering, but never delivering.*

## **‘It’s the combinations’**

[Recent evidence](#) suggests there is no single route to radicalisation, and no single cause of violent extremism. Rather, complex interactions between [push, pull, and personal factors](#) are the root causes of male violence.

The Netflix sensation *Adolescence* – the harrowing story of a 13-year-old boy who is arrested and charged with murder – is powered by a single question: why did Jamie kill Katie?

In attempting to answer this question, critics and fans have offered a range of explanations: bullying, low self-esteem, emotional dysregulation, obsession with love and sex, deprivation of love and sex, the manosphere. The real answer is less obvious and infinitely more complex. It can be found in a simple line of dialogue, spoken at the end of the series by Jamie's sister.

"It's the combinations," Lisa says. "Combinations are everything."

In this moment, Lisa is justifying her outfit to her parents as they await Jamie's trial. But subtextually, her statement doubles as the most likely explanation for his actions. And it's the closest explanation for why some boys and men commit extreme acts of violence: the combinations.

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*If this article has raised issues for you, or if you're concerned about someone you know, call Lifeline on 13 11 14.*