From Manosphere to Mainstream: Representations of Masculinity on TikTok

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Instead of shrinking, the gender gap between young men and women seems to be widening as traditional gender norms are reinvigorated. Social media are seen to shape young people's gender identities, and while representations of femininity have been extensively studied, mainstream online representations of masculinity are underexplored. This article analyses the representation of masculinity on TikTok, based on ethnographic observation and data collection from the "For You" page as well as the search term #masculinity, followed by qualitative thematic analysis of 345 videos. The analysis shows that representations of traditional, hegemonic masculinity are dominant on the platform, while women are portrayed as submissive and untrustworthy. The algorithm directs the user towards increasingly extreme content, thereby mainstreaming ideas initially propagated within the manosphere. In this way, TikTok functions as a form of "public pedagogy," encouraging young men to conform to traditional gender roles.

Keywords: manosphere, masculinity, TikTok, Belgium

Current adolescents and emerging adults, often called "Generation Z" (born between 1997 and 2012; Dimock, 2019), are frequently characterized as the "woke" generation, noted for its progressive stance on gender equality (Holt, 2020; van den Berg & Bleijswijk, 2019) and its acceptance and adoption of fluid gender and sexual identities such as nonbinary and queer (Cover, 2018; Ipsos, 2018). However, support for gender equality and fluid gender notions is not uniformly distributed, with research indicating that the gender gap within this cohort may be widening. For example, in the 2024 U.S. presidential election, a higher proportion of young men voted for Trump, whereas young women predominantly supported Harris (Hill, 2024). Similarly, in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium where this study was conducted, young men increasingly favor right-wing parties, while young women tend to support left-wing parties (Jacobs, Matthieu, & Van Aelst, 2024). Additionally, girls consistently outperform boys in secondary education, a trend partly attributed to the "feminine" nature of school environments (Van Maele, Huyge, Vantieghem, & Van Houtte, 2014). Among other instances where the gender balance has shifted, such as in the workplace, this has fueled a narrative portraying boys and men as victims of feminism and social justice movements (Equimundo, 2022), leading to a backlash reconfirming and even widening rather than questioning the gender binary.

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Social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, are believed to play a crucial role in shaping the gender beliefs and identities of current adolescents and emerging adults (Bailey, Steeves, Burkell, & Regan, 2013; Cardoso, 2024; Simões, Amaral, Flores, & Antunes, 2023). They are the first age cohort to have access to social media from childhood, and they spend more time on social media than older generations. In Flanders, 89% of individuals aged 18 to 24 use Instagram at least once a month, significantly more than the population average of 49%; TikTok usage stands at 63% (population average 16%) and YouTube at 47% (population average 22%; Interuniversitair Micro-Electronica Centrum [IMEC], 2024). While the reproduction of normative feminine gender roles and stereotypes on social media has been extensively studied (Felmlee, Inara, Rodis, & Zhang, 2020; Gerrard & Thornham, 2020), research on masculinity in this context remains scarce.

As elaborated below, the presence of misogynistic and anti-feminist content on social media has garnered academic attention in recent years, yet the emergence of mainstream masculinity influencers on TikTok, the quintessential platform for Generation Z, remains underexplored. Recent research has observed the radicalizing role of "manfluencers" among teenage boys (Haslop, Ringrose, Cambazoglu, & Milne, 2024; Wescott, Roberts, & Zhao, 2024), supported by algorithmically created filter bubbles (Van De Ven & Van Gemert, 2022), which warrants further research into the representation of masculinity on social media.

To address this research gap, the present article first reviews the literature on the representation of masculinity on social media and the increasingly significant role of TikTok in the lives of young people. Subsequently, it presents the findings of a qualitative analysis of TikTok videos, which includes ethnographic observation and data collection from the "For You" page as well as the search term #masculinity, followed by a thematic analysis of 345 videos. The primary objective is to elucidate the representations and messages about masculinity that young people encounter in their daily interactions with social media. While audience research is needed to ascertain the influence of such representations, the analysis of social media content is a necessary first step in understanding the continued and seemingly growing popularity of traditional masculinities among young men.

Masculinity on Social Media

A pivotal concept in masculinity studies is "hegemonic masculinity," defined by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) as the most esteemed form of masculinity, compelling all other men to position themselves in relation to it, while ideologically legitimizing the subordination of women to men. Although Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) resist the essentialist notion of masculinity as linked to fixed traits, contemporary Western culture strongly associates traditional masculinity with attributes such as risk-taking, self-discipline, physical toughness, muscular development, aggression, violence, and emotional control (Hinojosa, 2010).

In the 21st century, social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok have emerged as significant sources of gender (self-)representations, influencing young people's gender identity formation and negotiation. Siibak (2010) observed that traditional, hegemonic representations of men as active figures increasingly made room for more passive, sexualized portrayals from the 1990s. This trend is evident on social media, where men often display their bodies, leading to more "metrosexual" representations of well-

groomed, androgynous men. Several scholars have noted the proliferation of alternative masculinities; Anderson and McCormack (2018) identify "inclusive masculinity" as a less "homohysteric" form of masculinity (e.g., allowing emotional and physical intimacy among heterosexual men), while Bridges and Pascoe (2014) introduced the concept of "hybrid masculinities" to describe the incorporation of elements associated with marginalized masculinities and even femininities, such as softness and sensitivity, into men's gender performances and identities.

Nevertheless, Farci and Scarcelli (2024) recently observed that although social media have the potential to challenge gender norms, they often reinforce them in practice. This includes traditional male archetypes associated with "rugged individualism, adventurous spirit, risk-taking, displays of physical power, and, most notably, a high degree of self-confidence" (p. 107). Parkins and Parkins (2021) also identified stereotypical displays of masculinity among male influencers on Instagram, who often pose alone, highlighting their strength and physique. Similarly, in their study on "radical" masculinities on TikTok (e.g., heterosexual men kissing same-sex peers or wearing skirts), Foster and Baker (2022) found that traditional notions of masculinity are partially challenged but ultimately reinforced on the platform. Even when male online creators deviate from traditional gender boundaries, they emphasize their heterosexuality and muscularity to avoid perceptions of effeminacy, thereby safeguarding their "masculine capital."

At their most extreme, such displays of hegemonic masculinity online can escalate into anti-feminist hate speech, as seen in the "manosphere." Ging (2019) traces the origins of the manosphere to the 1970s men's liberation movement, whose anti-feminist faction identified as "men's rights activists." Since the 2000s, this movement has thrived on the internet and social media. Online anonymity and algorithmic aggregation have facilitated the formation of "affective publics" (Papacharissi, 2016), united by their anti-feminist stances and opposition to perceived threats to male superiority. The manosphere comprises distinct niches, such as Pick-Up Artists and Involuntary Celibates (Incels), which are active across various platforms but share the belief that masculinity is under siege by feminizing forces (Horta Ribeiro et al., 2021).

The manosphere has been examined across various online platforms. Van Valkenburgh (2021) investigated "The Red Pill" forum on Reddit, highlighting the reliance on evolutionary psychology as a purportedly scientific and objective foundation for their beliefs, in contrast to the perceived subjectivity of feminism. Dickel and Evolvi (2023) analyzed responses to the #MeToo movement on online blogs, characterizing these responses as "networked misogyny," which includes the critique of women's appearance and ideas, the minimization of sexual violence while lamenting the adverse effects of the #MeToo movement on men, and the revival of patriarchal ideals of the "ideal man." Parks, Simon, and Russo (2021) identified YouTube as a highly influential platform for gender performance and socialization, particularly among young men. They examined three YouTube influencers discussing masculinity, including Elliot Hulse, a masculinity guru advocating a return to traditional gender roles and encouraging men to be strong, dominant, and powerful.

Two of the most prominent figures in the manosphere are Jordan Peterson and Andrew Tate. Peterson, a Canadian psychologist, amassed a substantial online following as a public intellectual, leveraging the algorithmic propensity to promote provocative content. By offering simplistic analyses of the postmodern and neo-Marxist takeover of universities, the government, and the public sphere, he became a charismatic

authority, primarily addressing young men with conservative views on masculinity (Van De Ven & Van Gemert, 2022). Andrew Tate, an even more misogynistic and overtly sexist online influencer, promotes stereotypical views of women, claiming that they are men's property. His content was so controversial that it was banned from several online platforms, including TikTok, in August 2022. However, an investigation by journalist Shanti Das in November 2022 revealed that TikTok still actively promoted Tate's misogynistic content to young male viewers at the time (Das, 2022). As Haslop et al. (2024) confirmed, by utilizing popular platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, Tate's ideas gained mainstream acceptance among teenage boys.

Indeed, while originally confined to more obscure platforms, such as 4chan and niche communities on Reddit, the manosphere is becoming increasingly mainstream and normalized on popular social media platforms like YouTube and TikTok. Analyzing Tate's videos on YouTube, Haslop et al. (2024) identified four recurring discursive themes: men as "naturally" dominant; women as subservient and obedient to men; the weaponization and naturalization of gender stereotypes; and male victimhood and aggrieved masculinity. Solea and Sugiura (2023) affirm that figures like Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson contribute to the mainstreaming and normalization of anti-feminist hate speech and rhetoric. They use the term "normiefication" to describe the process by which fringe online cultures and ideas reach larger mainstream audiences, often through more covert, implicit language and by making pseudo-scientific and emotional appeals. Wescott et al. (2024) observed the detrimental impact of these "manfluencers" in Australian schools, leading to a radicalization of boys' views on gender dynamics, including perceptions of women as both oppressors and inferior to men, sometimes resulting in sexual harassment. This dual process of normalization and radicalization urgently calls for a closer examination of mainstream representations of and messages about masculinity on social media.

TikTok as the "Gen Z" App

Since the mid-2000s, social media have been pervasive in the lives of young people, with TikTok emerging as a significant platform from the late 2010s. Launched in 2017 by the Chinese media company ByteDance, TikTok rapidly gained international popularity, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Unlike other social media platforms, TikTok targeted teenagers from its inception, thereby becoming the quintessential app for Generation Z, mirroring their aesthetics and norms (Boffone, 2022). According to Zeng, Abidin, and Schäfer (2021), TikTok's success can be attributed to its technological features and the algorithmic personalization of the "For You" page, which enhances virality and renders it one of the most "addictive" apps. In a digital ethnography of videos on the For You feed, Schellewald (2021) identified six predominant communicative forms: "comedic," "documentary" (particularly on everyday life), "communal" (created with others), "explanatory" (tutorials), "interactive" (challenges), and "meta" (about TikTok itself). Although primarily created by individuals, these forms are communally shared, which, according to Stahl and Literat (2023), makes the platform a "collective online self-portrait" of Generation Z.

Boffone (2022) views TikTok as an ideal space for young people to explore identities, functioning as a form of "public pedagogy" that offers identity blueprints. Influencers and internet celebrities who achieve and monetize high visibility online are particularly prominent in this regard (Abidin, 2020). Through multi-year digital and participant ethnographic observation, Abidin (2020) identified several core characteristics of the platform, such as post-based virality and the significant role of audio memes.

Compared to Instagram, TikTok influencers foster relatability rather than aspiration among followers, creating less "picture-perfect" but more personalized content and demonstrating greater political engagement, especially concerning social justice issues. Contrary to the initial perception of TikTok as frivolous entertainment, Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2023) regard it as a crucial platform for political expression and activism. As a youth-oriented platform that prioritizes relatability, encourages creativity, and fosters collectivity, TikTok aligns well with young people's cultural sensibilities. Consequently, it serves as an ideal platform for their political expression, although it also raises concerns regarding misinformation and polarization.

On one hand, TikTok is a welcoming space for various subcultures, including political and social ones. For example, climate activism is a significant topic on TikTok, highlighting the platform's ambiguous tone, which combines sincerity with humor, irony, and satire (Hautea, Parks, Takahashi, & Zeng, 2021). Queer, non-binary (Skinner, 2022), and trans communities also thrive on TikTok (Rochford & Palmer, 2022). However, the algorithm also drives transphobia, as hate comments constitute engagement (Rochford & Palmer, 2022), so on the other hand, TikTok can equally be toxic. As Weimann and Masri (2023) observe, online platforms such as TikTok are attractive to all forms of extremism because of their affordances, such as ease of access, lack of regulation, vast potential audiences, rapid information flow, and anonymity. Alongside innocuous lip-sync videos, TikTok also harbors a dark side, including far-right voices and masculinity influencers promoting anti-feminism. Given its role as "public pedagogy" for young people (Boffone, 2022) and the importance of social media in shaping young people's gender identities (Bailey et al., 2013; Cardoso, 2024; Simões et al., 2023), it is crucial to better understand the representations of masculinity young men may encounter on TikTok.

Methodology

Given TikTok's pivotal role in the lives and identity formation of young people, this article aims to investigate the nature of masculinity content on the platform. It seeks to answer the question: How is masculinity represented on TikTok, and in connection with which topics and characteristics? Methodologically, the study combines virtual ethnography with thematic content analysis. Inspired by Das (2022), a new TikTok account was created for an imaginary 18-year-old in November 2024. The account was registered using an email address rather than another social media profile to avoid influencing the algorithm towards specific content. Similarly, no additional information, connections, or interests were provided during registration.

In the initial ethnographically inspired stage, suggested videos on the "For You" feed were observed in one-hour sessions, giving particular attention to videos addressing stereotypically "masculine" interests. Videos implicitly or explicitly addressing masculinity were bookmarked as "favorites." Wang and Spronk (2023) refer to this type of online observation, which follows algorithmic recommendations, as "algorithmic ethnography." Drawing on the work of researchers such as Abidin (2020) and Schellewald (2021), this stage served to familiarize the researcher with the range of masculinity-related videos on TikTok and facilitated the collection of a sample for in-depth analysis. In addition to saving relevant posts, field notes were maintained and integrated into a daily research diary. No ethical board approval was sought for this research, which only analyzed publicly available videos, mostly made by (semi-)professional content

creators with a large following. Moreover, following Schellewald (2021), only videos with substantial public recognition are explicitly discussed in this article.

During the first session (on November 22, 2024), 53 videos were bookmarked as favorites; in the second session (on November 25), 133 videos; in the third session (on November 26), 142 videos; and in the fourth session (on December 2), 95 videos. After four sessions, a degree of saturation was reached as similar videos continued to appear, prompting the cessation of For You feed observations. This decision was also inspired by the increasingly radical and toxic tone of the content, which induced a growing sense of discomfort. As a person with liberal views on masculine norms and gender equality, the continuous stream of videos aggressively promoting male dominance was hard to stomach, an experience I further reflect upon below. Following the four sessions following "spontaneous" algorithmic suggestions, during a fifth session (on December 5, 2024), I entered the search term "#masculinity" and saved the first 100 search results to the profile.

In the second stage, all bookmarked clips were analyzed using thematic analysis. As developed by Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, and Terry (2019), thematic analysis seeks meaning-based patterns in data, moving beyond mere categorization and emphasizing the researcher's role in the knowledge production process. Inspired by other TikTok researchers (Ging, 2019; Solea & Sugiura, 2023; Stahl & Literat, 2023), coding was inductive, guided by the data. The focus was on the textual aspects of posts, including dialogue in the videos, hashtags, and captions, while user comments were excluded. Schellewald (2021) noted that it is crucial not to over-interpret individual short videos on a platform like TikTok due to their ephemeral nature; instead, the focus should be on their contextual embeddedness within shared trends and memes.

The videos were first analyzed individually in chronological order using an Excel coding grid, with notes taken on the account name and bio, hashtags, and captions, as well as each video's spoken and written text transcribed verbatim, image, and sound. Given the toxic nature of many videos, analysis was done in blocks of only a few hours per day, taking sufficient time off to safeguard my mental well-being. By the time the analysis began on December 9, 2024, several bookmarked videos had been removed from the platform. During the analysis, near-identical videos were also removed from the sample, resulting in a final sample of 245 videos from the For You feed (out of the initial 423). All videos based on the "#masculinity" search were immediately saved and downloaded, maintaining an initial number of 100. Following the initial analysis of individual videos, a second round of analysis was conducted by revisiting the Excel coding grids. This round focused on explicit mentions of masculinity and implicit associations with masculinity, including topics, terms, characteristics, values, and images.

The subsequent sections first reflect on the ethnographic stage, charting the broad evolution of the suggested videos in the For You feed and my experiences as a user. This is followed by a systematic analysis of the videos in the For You feed, highlighting recurring genres, actors, and content focusing on representations of and associations with masculinity. Finally, a more targeted sample based on the search for "#masculinity" is analyzed, also providing some basic quantitative insights. The analysis is deliberately analytical and descriptive at first to provide a fine-grained sense of the content and tone of the videos. Increasingly, particularly in the discussion and conclusion, more synthesis and interpretation are provided.

Down the Rabbit Hole

As a 50-something white gay cisgender man, I occasionally use TikTok but am not an avid fan. My For You feed typically features a mix of comedy, dance, gay content creators, and drag queens. On November 22, 2024, I created a new TikTok account unconnected to my own identity to mimic the experience of a new 18-year-old user. Although I did not indicate my gender or pronouns during registration, I viewed videos with a straight male user in mind: quickly swiping away a few "girly" dance and cooking videos featuring female influencers while spending more time on videos featuring men or stereotypically male-oriented interests such as sports or cars. I did not "like" any videos or follow any accounts, but I attempted to steer the algorithm by varying the time spent viewing each video, which is also how regular users express interest. Moreover, I did bookmark videos presenting interesting connections to masculinity as "favorites" for later analysis. This action did influence the algorithm but is similar to regular users favoring and liking videos or following certain accounts.

I observed how quickly the algorithm "learned" my preferences. In the first few minutes, I encountered videos of young women engaging in stereotypically feminine activities. However, the proposed videos soon began to feature young men, likely reflecting the profile's assumed age. The content quickly shifted to "masculine" topics such as soccer and flashy, expensive cars, often accompanied by rap music in Dutch, reflecting the language region from which I accessed the app.

After approximately 10 minutes, I saw a video featuring Donald Trump and Elon Musk, which was unsurprising given Trump's reelection on November 5 and his widely publicized "bromance" with Musk. Having watched this video in its entirety, the algorithm subsequently proposed similar videos featuring Trump, Musk, and Tesla cars. At this point, I had not yet bookmarked any videos as favorites; this only occurred after viewing a video with motivational quotes from Elon Musk. The algorithm then suggested a Trump motivational video, which I also bookmarked. The genre and tone of the content quickly became more homogeneous, predominantly featuring motivational videos with figures such as Mark Zuckerberg and Joe Rogan. Many of these videos focused on financial issues and offered advice on how to attain wealth.

After 20 minutes, the algorithm suggested the first explicitly misogynistic content: a motivational video featuring Elon Musk warning about seven types of women to avoid. The videos began to emphasize masculine qualities such as strength and endurance, often within professional and financial but also relational contexts. Although the videos appeared to feature real individuals, the voices did not match the images, revealing that many were edited or even AI-generated. This was particularly evident in motivational videos featuring actor Denzel Washington, where the texts were identical to those in videos featuring other individuals, both real people and fictional characters from TV shows.

Despite my primary interest in representations of masculinity, I was predominantly presented with motivational videos. The content, visuals, and tone, including the soundtrack, were remarkably homogeneous: images of "masculine" men (either slick and suited or rough-looking and bearded) offering advice on how to succeed in life, business, and relationships in deep, authoritative voices. A minority of

videos featured young, conventionally attractive women providing similar advice, particularly about relationships and the roles they expected men to play.

After 30 minutes, the first Jordan Peterson video was suggested. Although it did not address masculinity directly, I watched it in its entirety and bookmarked it, which led to another set of motivational videos, including a Denzel Washington video titled "8 Things Real Men Should Never Do" (Denzel Sayings, 2024), one of the first explicit appeals to masculinity. These videos implicitly offered masculinity advice, praising qualities like discipline and perseverance.

After 40 minutes, a second Jordan Peterson video was suggested, this time explicitly addressing masculinity. Most videos continued to feature a range of predominantly male motivational speakers making increasingly sexist statements, asserting that men need to be shown respect. A few female content creators echoed this sentiment, stating that "nice guys" are not suitable relationship material. Traditional gender norms and outright sexism began to appear, for instance, in several videos warning men about dangerous types of women to avoid. After an hour, I concluded the first viewing session, surprised by how quickly my interest in masculine content had led me to increasingly normative and misogynistic content.

Due to space constraints, I cannot describe the next three hours of observation in detail, but the overall content and tone from the first session persisted. The motivational and advice genre remained predominant, but the messaging about masculinity became increasingly explicit and extreme. Masculinity was explicitly addressed in videos discussing biological differences between men and women. I also encountered overtly sexist videos warning men about dangerous, narcissistic, and manipulative women. Manosphere references occasionally appeared, such as account names or hashtags with red pill references and frequent videos lauding dominant alpha men. Double standards were prevalent, particularly in videos excusing men but condemning women for cheating. Besides occasional female content creators making similar statements, the second hour consisted of an endless stream of confident men expressing strong opinions about entrepreneurship, fitness, and relationships. Occasionally, the algorithm proposed videos on "related" topics such as antivax ideas, the carnivore diet, and anti-trans content. Right-wing content was prevalent, including videos by Flemish far-right politicians on issues like migration. However, most of the content appeared to be American, with Trump remaining a fixture in the proposed videos, which were almost all in English.

This trend continued into the third one-hour session, with the tone becoming increasingly extreme in its bias towards hegemonic masculinity and right-wing politics. After a first video about dressing well as a man, the second lauded Trump's reelection as president, and the third was by a right-wing Flemish party. More religiously oriented videos also began to appear in my feed, such as anti-abortion videos featuring a liberal woman supposedly saying she loves killing babies. The first anti-trans video was proposed after eight minutes. Anti-woke and anti-Islam content also started to appear between inspirational videos, encouraging me to work hard and either gain a lot of muscles or accumulate wealth and expensive cars. While Andrew Tate was banned from the platform, I saw an increasing number of videos featuring his brother, Tristan.

The fourth session confirmed these tendencies, only becoming more extreme. I saw videos criticizing the notion of toxic masculinity and discussing female narcissism—mostly by women. I also saw videos promoting dominant alpha masculinity and sexist videos claiming that all women are gold diggers. Even though I showed the most interest in content related to masculinity, I continued to receive videos on other topics: Trump and Musk, Republicans, anti-woke, anti-trans, anti-environmentalism, gym tips, food advice on the carnivore diet, conspiracy theories, antivax content, and an increasing amount of far right and racist videos. After about fifteen minutes, I saw a video featuring Adolf Hitler: a vague picture of Hitler with superimposed text from his speeches on the soundtrack. As I watched it, the algorithm proposed several similar videos over the rest of the hour. Similarly, after viewing a clip of a rescue boat with refugees capsizing and drowning, I received variations on the same video that were increasingly manipulated and violent.

Initially, I intended to extend the observation period of the For You feed. However, after conducting four one-hour sessions, I concluded this phase, as I had amassed a substantial amount of material for analysis, and the data exhibited signs of saturation, with recurring similar videos. Additionally, as indicated above, the increasingly radical and toxic tone of the content contributed to my decision to terminate the observation, as it induced a growing sense of discomfort. Although I tried to keep my distance as a researcher, the one-sided focus on masculine dominance and disrespect for women felt like an attack on my core values.

For Me

In this section, I provide a more systematic analysis of the 245 videos encountered and stored on my "For You" page across the four sessions, focusing on their genre, hashtags and captions, visuals and sound, and text.

The predominant *genre* was advisory, motivational, and inspirational videos. Some accounts posting these advisory videos were linked to identifiable content creators, often marketing themselves as coaches. However, many accounts were not associated with identifiable individuals but were connected to celebrity names (such as Elon Musk and Denzel Washington) or referenced the content or goals of the account with terms such as "motivational" or "inspire." Some account names explicitly referenced masculinity or the manosphere, using terms such as "red pill" (Ging, 2019).

In the *hashtags and captions*, success and motivation were the most prominent themes, evoked by hashtags such as #inspiration and #lifelessons. Hashtags such as #motivation, #success, #hustle, and #grind emphasized ambition and hard work, often framing success as a key marker of masculinity. Hashtags like #datingadvice and #relationshipadvice applied this ethos of success to romantic relationships, adopting a traditionally masculine perspective and often promoting a cynical view of women and relationships, as evidenced in captions referencing dangerous women to avoid and female narcissists. Hashtags such as #masculinity and #realmen were used to emphasize traditional notions of manhood, reinforced by captions referencing "true masculinity" and warning against male passivity. Hashtags such as #alphamale and #sigmamale idealized dominant and assertive men who were

portrayed as highly desirable and successful, in contrast with "beta males" or "nice guys," associated with passivity and weakness.

Visually and aurally, the tone of the videos was predominantly dark and gloomy—not the playful, colorful, and joyful world associated with TikTok music and dance videos. Many videos used a gray filter and stock images of nature and cityscapes, evoking a depressing and slightly threatening atmosphere, which was supported by the recurrent use of eerie electronic or piano music and angelic singing. Other videos were more straightforward images of men speaking to the camera, both the images and the soundtrack reinforcing traditional notions of masculinity. Most of these videos featured men looking and sounding rough and tough: always dominant, confident, deep-voiced, and straight-talking, sometimes expensively suited but mostly casually dressed in T-shirts and caps, gruff and bearded, muscled or potbellied, and sometimes tattooed. A smaller number of female inspirational speakers also appeared, typically young, attractive, conventionally feminine women, echoing the men's statements. Besides the frequent appearance of Denzel Washington, most people featured in the videos were White.

Textually, the videos reinforced traditional binary gender norms. Men were depicted as hard-working, successful providers and protectors who were burdened by societal expectations. The stakes for men were portrayed as high, urging them to be rich and strong and to work hard and compete. This narrative involved taking risks: "We as men have a sacred duty to step up and lead and be dangerous and to take risks and do what is necessary" (Adam Allred Official, 2024b). Men were expected to be fighters to become real men. These traits were presented as positive rather than toxic: "Masculinity isn't toxic. Masculinity is what protects women and children from predators" (Adam Allred Official, 2024a). Throughout these videos, the recurring message was that being a man is hard work, full of obligations, reinforcing traditional notions of masculinity (Farci & Scarcelli, 2024; Hinojosa, 2010).

Another key argument throughout the videos was that these characteristics are what women seek in men. Many videos showed attractive young women stating that girls like men to be driven and dominant, and that they prefer "bad boys" over "nice guys." This aligns with the recurring message that women desire to be dominated by men, mostly proclaimed by men: "A woman really secretly wants a man to put her in her place" (Better Than Perfect Podcast, 2024). Gender equality was dismissed, as differences between men and women were emphasized: "How are you equal, if the men are the ones that have to fight and die to defend the country? The men are the ones that build and maintain all the infrastructure" (Deco Ramsey Million, 2024). Women were expected to respect men and provide a peaceful home: "We're out there every day fighting battles, at work and in life, wherever. And when we come home we don't wanna be battling there too" (Life Lessons, 2024). Note the violent language metaphorically evoking warfare by referencing fighting and battling, again supporting traditional notions of masculinity as strong and aggressive.

While men were lauded as responsible, women were depicted as manipulative, emotionally driven, selfish, and untrustworthy. Men were warned about certain women and female behaviors: "Narcissistic woman, easygoing guy. This is a common dynamic that I see, where the narcissistic woman will usually have a very strong personality and she'll be controlling" (Revenge Of The Black Sheep, 2024). Double standards were prevalent, especially regarding infidelity: "When a man cheats on a woman it is purely

physical. (. . .) We are men and we are designed to spread our seed to several and multiple women. When a woman cheats on a man, her emotions are involved" (CzarDanya, 2024). While male infidelity was justified as biologically driven, female infidelity was presented as unforgivable.

This is Masculinity

The above account outlines the key tendencies observed on my fictitious 18-year-old's For You page, where I attempted to focus on masculinity but was also presented with a wide range of "related" topics, predominantly far-right, including conspiracy and anti-trans content. Within just four hours of scrolling, I encountered videos praising Adolf Hitler and mocking the deaths of refugees. This led me to wonder: What content would I be presented with if I explicitly searched for videos about masculinity? Analyzing the top 100 results based on the search term "#masculinity," I found very similar content—more explicitly focused on masculinity than the For You page, but with many recurring figures and themes.

The prevalence of some tendencies observed on the For You page (where I did not count the total number of videos presented) could be quantified in the search results. Similar to the For You page, most videos featured a male speaker (67), with a smaller number featuring a female speaker (20); in one video, both a man and a woman were speaking, while in the remaining videos (12), no individuals were visible on screen. Despite the presence of several women, the ideas about masculinity in the majority of search results (88) corresponded to traditional notions of masculinity (Farci & Scarcelli, 2024; Hinojosa, 2010), with 10 videos presenting alternative masculinities, and the remaining two not taking a clear stance. Although 10 videos featuring alternative representations of masculinity may seem limited, it is noteworthy that among the hundreds of videos presented to me on the For You page, hardly any offered alternative views on masculinity, so the search function seems to be less steered by my supposed interests. This is confirmed by the fact that the 100 search results closely resembled those of the same search on my personal TikTok account.

Key terms in the videos presenting traditional notions of masculinity were "alpha" and "alpha male," often featured in account names or hashtags. Echoing central discourses in the manosphere (Ging, 2019), alpha men were described as strong, assertive, confident, decisive, leading, competitive, successful, financially secure, risk-prone, willing to make sacrifices, protective of their wives and families, hard-working, responsible, reliable, trustworthy, emotionally stable, and stoic. This was presented as natural:

> This is man, forged by nature, wired to survive. Since the dawn of time testosterone has flowed through his veins like fire, driving him to conquer, endure and protect. It's in his DNA, coded deep within, the instinct to lead, the drive to push beyond pain. (Uprising_Millionaires, 2024)

These references to nature are reminiscent of manosphere references to evolutionary psychology as a purportedly scientific foundation for their beliefs (Van Valkenburgh, 2021).

Women were presented—and presented themselves—as drawn to this kind of man: "Show me an alpha man that is in his true alpha, not in his wounded masculine but in his full-on masculine, and watch

me become a sweet soft little girl" (Melissa Marie, 2023). More generally, the videos addressing traditional masculinity also implicitly or explicitly prescribed femininity, asserting that women should be "feminine," characterized as soft, submissive, faithful, respectful of men, non-critical, and non-controlling—thus reinforcing normative feminine gender roles and stereotypes, as is often the case on social media (Felmlee et al., 2020; Gerrard & Thornham, 2020).

Even the videos that did not explicitly mention "alpha men" conveyed similar ideas. For instance, in the very first search result, Jordan Peterson encouraged men to be aggressive. Other videos discussed "real men," depicted as protective but also confident and potentially violent:

> My definition of a man is someone that can slit a throat and hold a baby in the same day. Some of the most masculine men you'll ever meet are the ones that are soft-spoken, that have a quiet confidence about them. And will probably punch you in the mouth if you get sideways with them. (White Rabbit, 2024)

A related category is that of the sigma male, portrayed as a dangerous and unpredictable loner.

These types of masculinity were contrasted with weak men, often labeled as "beta." They were depicted as nice guys seeking validation and allowing women to control them: "The nice guy is somebody that doesn't say no, it's somebody that allows people to walk all over them, allows girls to take full advantage of them" (Motivation Mentality, 2024). Being nice was even presented as toxic: "There is no such thing as toxic masculinity. You're either masculine, or you're toxic. Now someone who's toxic is typically a nice guy. Nice guys are passive aggressive" (Thequotecircle, 2023).

While ranging in tone from benevolently defending the gender binary to outright sexism and misogyny, these 88 videos presented a surprisingly coherent view of traditional masculinity. Like the videos on the For You page, they featured confident, slickly suited or tough men, bearded, muscled, bare-chested or wearing T-shirts and caps, as well as conventionally feminine, long-haired women wearing make-up. Most of the 10 videos presenting alternative forms of masculinity were also homogeneous, featuring similarly tough, confident men. While still supporting the idea of "real" and "strong" men, they expanded this to include self-acceptance, emotionality, and affection.

Only three videos offered radically different views of masculinity. One was a slideshow depicting a young man's daily life. In contrast to almost all the other videos, the pictures showed a slender (not muscular) young man with medium-length (not buzz-cut) tousled hair. Another alternative view appeared in a clip of the band Lucky Love, where a queer man questions if he is masculine enough: "Tell me baby do I walk like a boy, do I speak like a boy, do I stand like a boy" (LUCKY LOVE, 2023). Singing in a high voice and dressed like Freddie Mercury, this was a rare divergence from the dominant representation of masculinity. One final alternative video featured a feminine-presenting man wearing a crop top, makeup, and jewelry who used to identify as gay but is now in a relationship with a masculine-presenting woman, representing the most blatantly alternative depiction of masculinity in the sample. The last two videos were the only ones (overtly) featuring non-straight men.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article aimed to answer the question: How is masculinity represented on TikTok, and in connection with which topics and characteristics? Based on the analysis of videos on the For You page as well as those proposed when searching for "#masculinity," it became clear that men were predominantly presented with or encouraged to conform to traditional Western notions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), including risk-taking, self-discipline, toughness, and emotional control (Hinojosa, 2010), in line with recent research on social media (Farci & Scarcelli, 2024; Parkins & Parkins, 2021; Parks et al., 2021). Contrary to the overarching comedic tone and prominence of audio memes on the platform (Abidin, 2020; Schellewald, 2021), the tone of the videos in this research was dark and serious, often even threatening, further confirming masculine toughness. As noted by Schellewald (2021), it is important not to over-interpret individual videos, as they are extremely ephemeral. Zooming out and considering the overarching themes, a stream of consciousness emerged: similar-looking and -sounding videos making similar statements about masculinity and (seemingly) related "tough" and right-wing content.

Unlike the manosphere discussed in the literature review, explicit attacks on feminism were scarce in the TikTok videos. However, sexist and misogynistic remarks were prevalent, with women being told to be submissive while being criticized for being disrespectful and unfaithful. Further reinforcing the gender binary, the For You feed contained many anti-trans videos mocking transgender people and criticizing gender-affirming surgery for children, gender-neutral bathrooms, and trans athletes. This aligns with Rochford and Palmer's (2022) observation that the TikTok algorithm drives transphobia.

While Andrew Tate was only implicitly referenced, his brother Tristan featured prominently, as did Jordan Peterson, another key voice of the manosphere (Solea & Sugiura, 2023; Van De Ven & Van Gemert, 2022). Explicit manosphere references also appeared in account names and hashtags featuring alpha masculinity and red pill references, in line with recent research on TikTok (Das, 2022; Haslop et al., 2024; Wescott et al., 2024). All these insights confirm Solea and Sugiura's (2023) claims about the "normiefication" of the manosphere, which is transitioning from fringe online culture to mainstream audiences, using more covert, implicit language.

Although it is hard to deduce the creators' intentions from the content they post, there are indications that some of the creators of the videos analyzed in this article were primarily interested in garnering views, likes, and followers. Most were anonymous, presenting similar-looking and heavily formatted content, often using the same texts or images. Drawing attention and monetizing user engagement appeared to be their primary goal, achievable through TikTok's creator reward program. This program requires at least 10,000 followers and 100,000 video views in the last 30 days. Some accounts explicitly referenced these goals in their bios. For these content creators, it seemed to be more about making money than spreading specific content, highlighting the negative side effects of purely attention-driven algorithms on commercial social media platforms. Thus, commercial motivations intermingle with ideological ones in mainstreaming the manosphere on TikTok.

As indicated in the introduction, the method used does not allow us to assess the actual influence of these representations of masculinity. Audience research is warranted to investigate how such content,

on TikTok but also in the wider media repertoire of young men, may have contributed to the continued and seemingly growing popularity of traditional masculinities among young men. However, based on this research, some preliminary observations can be made. First, the predominant genre I encountered— advisory, inspirational, or motivational—aims to instigate users to think and act differently. It explicitly aims to influence them, acting as a form of "public pedagogy" (Boffone, 2022). Watching this content, even with the more analytical look of a researcher, felt very much like being preached to, force-fed even, close to brainwashing.

Second, the For You suggestions I got as a (supposedly) young man were one-sidedly right-wing and Republican, while Democrats and liberals were mocked or criticized, which at least reflects (but probably also contributed to) the fact that young men increasingly vote right-wing and Republican (Hill, 2024; Jacobs et al., 2024). One important avenue for further research is to further explore the overlap between the manosphere and right-wing influencers, who also have a strong presence on digital platforms like YouTube and often present themselves as hypermasculine (Lewis, 2018).

Similarly, the notion that Gen Z would be the "woke" generation (Holt, 2020; van den Berg & Bleijswijk, 2019) was contradicted by the For You suggestions in this research, which were anything but woke. In this account, supposedly belonging to an 18-year-old male, wokeness was consistently mocked and criticized, mostly implicitly but sometimes explicitly. Again, the actual influence of these representations cannot be assessed here, but their close correspondence with recent evolutions in attitudes among young men is striking.

One of the main difficulties of researching TikTok, leading to one of the main shortcomings of this article, is grasping the content actual young men are viewing and how they respond to it. Even though I tried to simulate the TikTok uses and interests of a young man, my interventions (such as my deliberate focus on masculinity) undoubtedly influenced the content presented to me. Moreover, due to the algorithmic personalization that is so central to TikTok as a platform (Abidin, 2020; Zeng et al., 2021), actual young men are presented with different content adapted to their specific preferences. The algorithm picks up the slightest user interest and amplifies it—which makes it so appealing and addictive, but also attractive for the spread of more extreme views (Weimann & Masri, 2023). Attention is key, whether due to sympathy or shock over the extremity of the videos. The end effect, in any case, is a rabbit hole or "silo" (Abidin, 2020) of related videos. Based on the user's behavioral data, the TikTok algorithm constructs a datafied digital self (Wang & Spronk, 2023), in this case clearly a young straight cisgender male, which leads it to recommend similar content.

This process brings to mind the notions of "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles," which are prominent in the literature on online affective polarization and describe how users are separated into partisan (political) camps due to selective exposure (Oden & Porter, 2023). While Oden and Porter (2023) found no evidence of affective polarization among young TikTok users, the current research suggests a process of radicalization. In line with Van De Ven and Van Gemert's (2022) analysis of Jordan Peterson's success on YouTube, the TikTok algorithm pushes extreme and polarizing content, normalizing it and guiding users towards more radical content, thus creating "epistemological filter bubbles" (p. 295). The result is a "manosphere light," not as toxic as the more extreme forms studied in earlier research (Dickel & Evolvi,

2023; Ging, 2019; Horta Ribeiro et al., 2021), but perhaps more pernicious as it reaches a larger audience on a more mainstream platform. Further research on young men's TikTok uses is urgently needed to assess the actual influence of the representations of masculinity identified in this article.

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