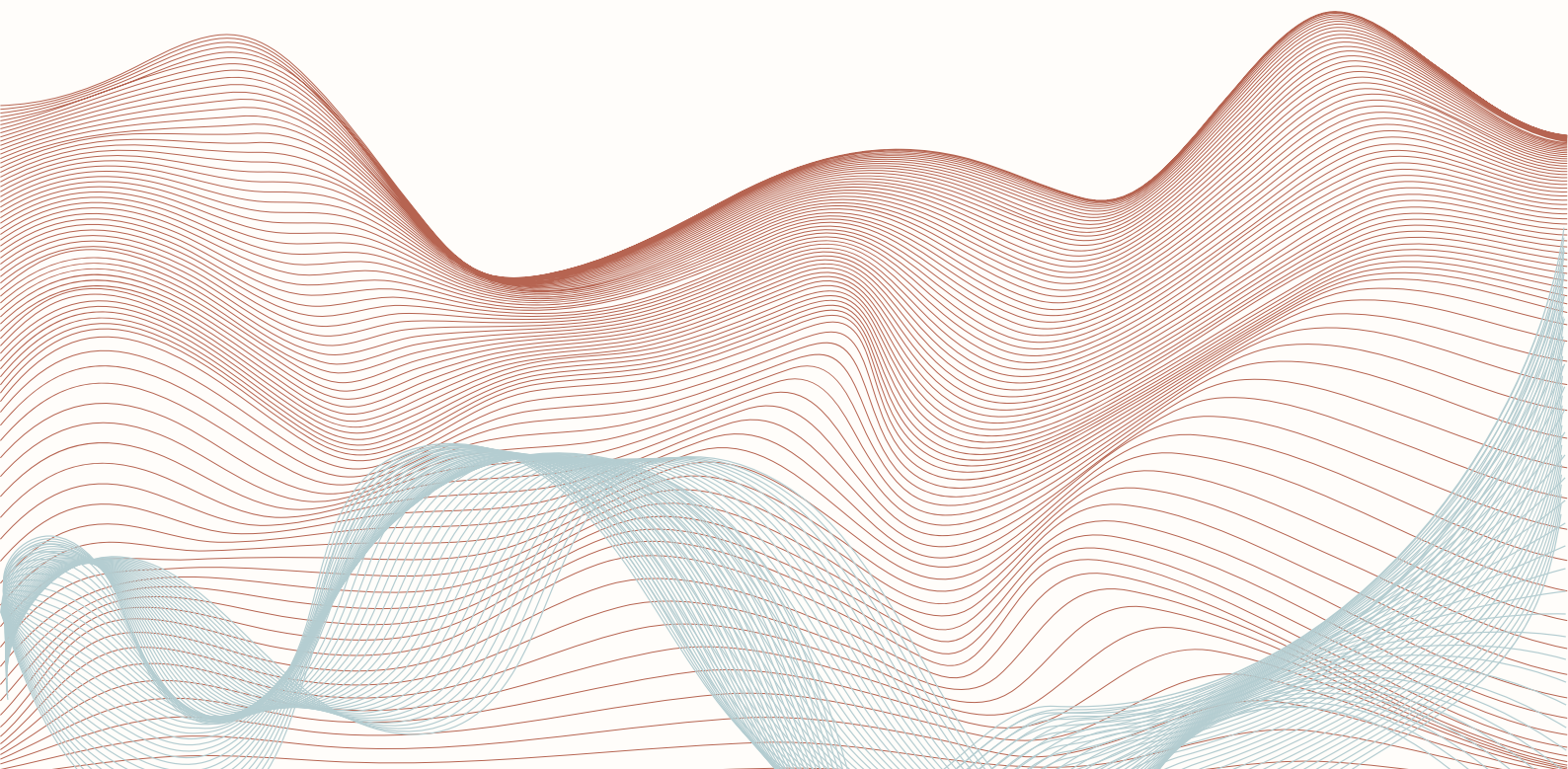# "FACING MY OWN MISOGYNY":

# A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF PERSONAL ESSAYS ON THE SUBREDDIT R/EXREDPILL

**AJ SIEGEL**

**UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHARLOTTE**

**TRIGGER WARNING:** mentions of self-harm and suicide/suicidal ideations, sexism/misogyny

**Introduction**

Although misogyny has existed for centuries, the internet has enabled its spread into new contexts and communities. Most digitized misogyny is housed under the "manosphere," a collection of digital subgroups known for anti-feminist and traditional masculine ideologies (Vallerga & Zurbriggen, 2022). Influencers like Andrew Tate (Lawson, 2022) and Jordan Peterson (Han & Yin, 2022) have brought the manosphere into the public sphere alongside the growing popularity of inceldom and the Red Pill (TRP) (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019). The internet has globalized TRP ideology, but most members are young white men from the United States (Scotto di Carlo, 2022; O'Malley et al., 2020). The manosphere is united by an ideology known as the Red Pill (TRP), which takes inspiration from The Matrix, where "taking the red pill" provides the ability to see the world as it really is (Han & Yin, 2022); TRP has adopted this as their ideology, but rather than seeing through a simulation, "Red Pillers" see how feminism has ruined society and women (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Online, "taking the red pill" is synonymous with being initiated into potentially radical misogyny (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019; Han & Yin, 2022) via extensive misogynistic, nihilistic, and violent rhetoric. While most of TRP is nonviolent, TRP's consequences can be observed with the notable increase in misogyny-based violence, where men, such as Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian, commit violent acts in the name of anti-feminist and incel ideology (Baele et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2020).

Progression into anti-feminist ideology can be rapid and all-encompassing (Thomas & Balint, 2022), making it more difficult for believers to disengage from these communities. While there are online resources that disprove manosphere ideology, they may not be widely accessible or deemed trustworthy, meaning that there are few ways to escape this ideology. Additionally, oppositional narratives and information that outright disproves and argues against manosphere ideology may not be taken seriously by manosphere members (Thorburn, 2023a). However, there is a growing number of online communities remedying this gap. Subreddits like r/IncelExit and r/ExRedPill provide resources and emotional support for people trying to unlearn the Red Pill ideology. In particular, personal essays posted on r/ExRedPill enable community members to share their stories and get help from other former and questioning Red Pillers. Despite the need for rehabilitation and disengagement resources, research regarding such efforts is scarce. To date, Joshua Thorburn (2023a; 2023b) is the only individual to study r/ExRedPill, and while others have studied similar communities like r/IncelExit (Gheorghe & Clement, 2023; Davis & Kettrey, 2024), there is still much work to be done to address rehabilitation efforts from TRP and online misogyny. This study examines the content of personal essays on r/ExRedPill and what role they may play in the authors' healing process. I pull from sociology, media studies, and feminist research on the manosphere and

behavioral studies of self-help groups to frame my analysis of r/ExRedPill essays as a means of community engagement and disengagement from TRP.

## Literature Review
### *The Red Pill*
Most of TRP's ideology pertains to relationships — particularly heterosexual ones. TRP's content is concerned with two ideas: anti-feminism and self-improvement. In TRP's eyes, feminism has ruined society and modern-day women, making the ideology both anti-feminist and anti-women (Ging, 2019; Mountford, 2018). TRP often pulls from pseudo-evolutionary psychology, claiming women are evolutionarily prone to promiscuity and sexual selectivity (Ging, 2019; Krendel, 2020). These warped perceptions are typically paired with objectification and dehumanization of women (Scotto di Carlo, 2022; Van Valkenburgh, 2018). However, amidst their near-constant degradation, TRP still sees women as powerful. The group believes that feminism has given women too much power, and men are suffering because of it. Preston and colleagues explain, "It is not a problem that women are objects, the problem is that they have become overpriced" (2021, p. 835). The unjust female power that TRP refers to tends to manifest in the "sexual marketplace," which is the manosphere's explanation for who has power in the dating scene (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). According to TRP, the proper dynamic in this marketplace places strong, dominant men at the top, meaning they have the most control, dating success, and decision-making capabilities. However, TRP argues that feminism has turned the sexual marketplace on its head and women are now the ones making the decisions, placing men at the mercy of women (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). This supposed male oppression legitimizes male aggression and violence against women and facilitates the spread of anti-women rhetoric (O'Malley et al., 2020; Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

Since TRP considers women to be unfairly authoritative, much of TRP content addresses ways for men to improve themselves (Vallerga & Zurbriggen, 2022), and in doing so, takes power away from feminist women (Van Valkenburgh, 2018). This self-improvement includes working out, dieting, and becoming emotionally distant (Lawson, 2022; Mountford, 2018; Vallerga & Zurbriggen, 2022) to become more dateable. TRP is not interested in correcting social issues resulting from feminism but rather in giving men strategies to overcome them (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019; O'Malley et al., 2020). These goals focus on becoming an alpha male or a Chad: a sexually desirable, physically attractive, and financially successful man (Scotto di Carlo, 2022; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). A contrasting, undesirable status is a beta male: a weak, emasculated man who overly supports women and is more likely to get cheated on (Vallerga & Zurbriggen, 2022; Preston et al., 2021). These subordinate men are often ridiculed, being called anything from "soyboys" and "manginas" to

"cucks," referring to the likelihood of their partner cheating (Jones et al., 2020, p. 1916). Alpha males are at the top of the social hierarchy and, therefore, have more success in the sexual marketplace (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), meaning that alpha status is something that most of TRP aims to achieve, whereas beta status is vilified and avoided at all costs (Baele et al., 2019). TRP's self-improvement guides men towards becoming alpha males or, at a minimum, a more attractive version of themselves. Most of TRP believes that alpha male status can be worked towards and achieved (Han & Yin, 2022; Vallerga & Zurbriggen, 2022), but there is some disagreement between different manosphere subgroups.

The manosphere began as the Men's Rights Movement, which was a response to 1970s feminist movements and argued that sexism and gender roles harm both men and women (Marwick & Caplan, 2018). It has since shifted to largely digital content housed in different subgroups (Farrell et al., 2020; Han & Yin, 2022), with TRP being both a subgroup and the uniting ideology of the manosphere (Ging, 2019). Other manosphere subgroups include Men's Rights Activists who aim to restore high status to heterosexual men (Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Scotto di Carlo, 2022); Pick-Up Artists, who see relationships as sexual conquest (Han & Yin, 2022; Scotto di Carlo, 2022); and Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), masculinist separatists that abstain from relationships with women altogether (Jones et al., 2020; Krendel, 2020). TRP content seeps into all of these communities as it addresses the primary concepts of the manosphere: self-improvement, relationship dynamics, and anti-feminism (Ging, 2019; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Thus, each of these communities — including TRP itself — is part of the greater manosphere, which is united by the Red Pill ideology. TRP is both a distinct subgroup and an overarching ideology within the manosphere, but most manosphere community members refer to the ideology rather than the specific community when discussing TRP.

A direct offshoot of TRP is the Black Pill, a nihilistic version of the Red Pill ideology (Preston et al., 2020; Vallerga & Zurbriggen, 2022). Members of the Black Pill are more commonly known as incels rather than "Black Pillers," but members may self-identify by either term (Preston et al., 2020). Incel, short for "involuntarily celibate," is a self-deprecative identity for men frustrated with their lack of romantic, sexual, or platonic relations (Ging, 2019; Preston et al., 2020). Incels are at the bottom of the sexual hierarchy; they rank below beta and alpha males due to a severe lack of success with women (Glace et al., 2021; Preston et al., 2021). However, incels are not concerned with self-improvement — largely because they see it as an unattainable standard given their status in relation to other men (Preston et al., 2021; Thorburn et al., 2023). Black Pillers also believe that feminism has ruined society beyond recovery, which means they have no hope of overcoming women's present equal status in

society (Baele et al., 2019). Baele and colleagues explain, "Where the 'red pill' keeps category boundaries permeable and permits hope, the 'black pill' closes them and only produces nihilistic despair" (2019, p. 1675). While most incels are nonviolent, incel-based violence is increasing — examples of this include the cases of Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian, both of whom cited failed relationships with women as the motivation behind their deadly attacks (Baele et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2020). Though Rodger and Minassian are extreme examples, the continued glorification of these men (Baele et al., 2019) shows that manosphere-based violence is not only accepted but praised.

Most TRP ideology is disseminated within digital communities over social media platforms (Han & Yin, 2022; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). These sub-groups foster a sense of camaraderie while sharing a common enemy: feminism (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019). Given the reported feelings of isolation amongst its members — often caused by a lack of relationships, friends, or social skills — subgroups like TRP are often based on a rejection of social norms (O'Malley et al., 2020; Vallerga & Zurbriggen, 2022). These manosphere groups offer a sense of community that their members lack in other spaces because they address concerns about masculine gender performance and sexuality that would otherwise be dismissed (Thorburn et al., 2023). Community membership is not only dependent on agreeing with their ideology but also on meeting the standards and practices set for its members. Farrell and colleagues (2020) argue that manosphere jargon is a means of separating the ideology — and, by extension, its members — from mainstream society, as only "in-members" can understand the language. TRP uses jargon to describe their concepts, teachings, and community member ranks; and, the proper use of these terms illustrates and facilitates a sense of belonging within the subgroup and greater manosphere discourse. While community-based jargon is not unique to the internet or Reddit, it spreads more rapidly within these sub-groups where members share similar interests and backgrounds (McCulloch, 2019). This suggests that newcomers to TRP quickly grasp the language because of their identification with other TRP members. It is nearly impossible for audiences to engage with and begin to adopt TRP ideology without internalizing its harmful values, which perpetuates this networked harassment (Marwick & Caplan, 2018). Even though TRP often calls for violence towards women, most engagement with the manosphere encourages passive harassment and anti-women ideology as opposed to threats that are actually acted on (Jones et al., 2020). This rhetoric legitimizes and normalizes violence against women regardless of the author's true intentions (O'Malley et al., 2020).

Red Pillers do not become misogynists overnight; rather, engagement and identification with manosphere content are gradual (O'Malley et al., 2020). People are

introduced to this content because it is pushed by social media algorithms (Thomas & Balint, 2022) but also because they are desperate for advice on how to be happy in a world that they believe does not care about young white men. Manosphere influencers like Andrew Tate (Lawson, 2022), Roosh Valizadeh (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), and Jordan Peterson (Han & Yin, 2022) have made TRP mainstream by presenting their philosophy and advice as ways to make sense of and succeed in an uncertain world. TRP is a reaction to societal shifts and is often the only answer these disenfranchised men can find. Jugl (2022) explains that uncertainties and ambiguities may draw people to extreme views due to their craving for structure and black-and-white explanations. Not only does TRP offer explanations for men's struggles, but it also offers simple and seemingly concrete solutions.

### *Unlearning via Support Groups*

Red Pill ideology is harmful, but that does not mean it cannot be unlearned. There is a severe lack of literature surrounding disengagement from the manosphere despite the growing body of literature surrounding the development and influence of the greater manosphere. Thorburn has been the first to address TRP rehabilitation and deradicalization. His work (Thorburn, 2023a; Thorburn, 2023b) classifies r/IncelExit and r/ExRedPill as communities aiming to help members overcome manosphere ideology. He argues these communities, "promisingly demonstrate that some individuals appear to be able to move past these misogynistic belief systems" (Thorburn, 2023b, p. 2). Both r/ExRedPill and r/IncelExit are potential avenues for manosphere rehabilitation, though they differ slightly in focus, with r/IncelExit being aimed at incels; whereas, r/ExRedPill is a community for anyone in the manosphere (Gheorghe & Clement, 2023). Participation in these communities encourages introspection in addition to simply offering counternarratives to TRP content, making these subreddits important spaces that support unlearning to at least some degree. However, Davis and Kettrey (2024) argue that even if these exit spaces are separate from the greater manosphere, these communities still keep members connected to manosphere ideology, which raises concerns about whether true unlearning and rehabilitation are possible within these communities. Regardless, communities like r/ExRedPill and r/IncelExit illustrate an important shift as former Red Pillers use community engagement to aid others and their own rehabilitation.

Although limited scholarship addresses disengagement from TRP and the manosphere, there is established literature regarding extremism deradicalization. Most Red Pillers are not radicalized, extremist misogynists, but their gradual indoctrination into hatred is similar (O'Malley et al., 2020), meaning the unlearning processes may also overlap. Even if every member of TRP is not radicalized, Baele and colleagues (2019) explain that the worldview this ideology constructs reflects

that of extremist groups — namely the overemphasis on impenetrable groups and the consequential "us versus them" mentality. Additionally, TRP certainly has the potential to radicalize its members, given the several cases of incel-based violence (Jones et al., 2020; Baele et al., 2019). Research about terrorist groups (Bjørgo, 2011; Jugl, 2022) and white supremacists (Bubolz & Simi, 2015) has explored the possibility of deradicalization from hate groups. Bubolz and Simi (2015) define deradicalization as a change in values, which takes more cognitive work than mere disengagement. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to deradicalization and disengagement from hate-based groups (Bjørgo, 2011), but self-help groups may provide a path toward unlearning hate, particularly for less radical beliefs.

Self-help groups are a popular resource for many topics and recovery methods. Powell (1975) defines these groups as voluntary "organization[s] of individuals who are personally affected by a distressing psychological or social condition" (p. 757). These groups are built around shared experiences (Powell, 1975), and their goals can range anywhere from total recovery to temporary support (Adair & Luna-Rose, 2022; Smith-Merry et al., 2019). Group members connect with and learn from each other, and this exchange of knowledge and experience enables self-directed learning, in which people take individual, directive actions to understand and act on something (Herod & Kop, 2017; Smith-Merry et al., 2019). Support groups offer a space for collaborative reflection where members learn from collective and individual experiences, which should lead to new perspectives and behavioral changes (Gold et al., 2015). Gold and colleagues (2015) studied the effectiveness of a self-help group on empowerment and perspective shifts among male batterers. These men made positive changes because they were socially accepted rather than rejected (Gold et al., 2015). Although manosphere-exiting research is still in its infancy, these analogous cases show that hateful ideology can be unlearned, and self-help groups may be a viable method for doing so. The articles written by Thorburn (2023b) and Gheorghe and Clement (2023) echo Gold and colleagues' (2015) sentiment that community members in r/ExRedPill and r/IncelExit are effective at encouraging and supporting new members. Former right-wing extremists expressed a similar idea, in which intervention from "formers" would have been seen as more credible and, therefore, more successful in actually intervening in individuals' radicalization (Scrivens et al., 2019, pp. 671-674). Self-help groups also foster a positive social space that many participants may not have otherwise, particularly when there is little support from friends and family (Chung, 2013). Extremism relies on othering groups from each other (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Scrivens et al., 2019), but having a positive social space made up of members that one identifies with could prove beneficial for disengagement and deradicalization from hateful ideology like TRP.

Recently, online self-help groups have become a popular alternative to in-person ones. Online forums provide instant, asynchronous access to community support that members could not access otherwise (Herod & Kop, 2017). People who seek support are often socially isolated, and online groups provide easy and constant access to a community with similar experiences (Chung, 2013; Smith-Merry et al., 2019). Chung (2013) found that online self-help groups were preferred over in-person ones. The anonymity of online groups also fosters a non-judgemental safe space with fewer repercussions than in-person interactions (Herod & Kop, 2017; Smith-Merry et al., 2019). Thus, online support groups may be particularly useful for those who are isolated or have issues communicating offline (Adair & Luna-Rose, 2022). Digital deradicalization sources can be tailored to individual needs (Jugl, 2022), making these support groups potentially more engaging, as there is not a forced one-size-fits-all approach.

On and offline, sharing personal stories is essential in self-help groups. Since these groups are built on shared experiences, group members can learn from each other through personal narratives (Gold et al., 2015). However, these personal narratives also perform identity work. As Cain posits in her explanation of learning within Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), "Stories do not just describe a life in a learned genre, but are tools for reinterpreting the past, and understanding the self in terms of the AA identity. The initiate begins to identify with AA members, ... and to reinterpret her life as evidence" (qtd. in Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 84). Sharing and engaging with others' narratives helps frame group discussions and learning so they can change their identity and behavior rather than continuing to use destructive strategies and ideas (Gold et al., 2015; Smith-Merry et al., 2019). Participants no longer need to feel defined by their pain. Instead, they can find identity in their community membership and camaraderie (Powell, 1975). While self-help groups are not the only solution or resource, they heal by giving members a place to belong amongst people with similar experiences.

**Present Study**
The present study explores the Reddit-based self-help group r/ExRedPill, which describes itself as being "for former redpillers and others who recognize the damage caused by redpill" (*Former Red Pillers*, n.d.). Thorburn (2023a) explains that r/ExRedPill could provide important firsthand insights into TRP and the harm it can cause, making this community all the more important to study. This subreddit was founded in May 2014 and as of October 2023, has over 22,000 members. While it is impossible to know definitive information about all subreddit members, r/ExRedPill appears to be made up of former Red Pillers, questioning manosphere members, outsiders aiming to provide advice, trolls, and critics of the manosphere who have no clear

connection to the group (Thorburn, 2023b). Members of r/ExRedPill are not required to post, so members trying to disengage from TRP typically post to garner support, input, or advice from fellow community members. Like many online support groups, people can share as much or as little as they are comfortable with, and Reddit's inherently anonymous structure makes this privacy almost effortless. Users may gain a reputation or familiarity with each other, but any identifiable information about their offline identities is protected unless they choose to share it. Anyone can post and share their story, no matter how new they are to TRP or r/ExRedPill. While these posts are made within a specific community, r/ExRedPill is public, meaning anyone could read these stories, regardless of whether they are an actual community member.

This content analysis focuses on the personal essays on r/ExRedPill. In a personal essay, community members detail their experiences with TRP and its adverse effects. The genre allows authors to externalize their struggles and communicate with people who have similar experiences. Thorburn's (2023b) study is the only other investigation of r/Ex= posts and focuses on all kinds of posts, not just personal narratives. I opted to focus on these personal narratives as a genre within r/ExRedPill, given their detail and narrative aspects that provide greater insight into individual recovery processes than more discussion-based content on the subreddit. Based on textual analysis of these essays and research on adjacent online self-help groups and testimonials, this study examines how this writing possibly facilitates unlearning TRP ideology.

**Method**
*Participants and Text Selection*
The sample r/ExRedPill texts were collected from September 30, 2022 to December 23, 2022, with sample text publishing dates ranging from September 11, 2022 to December 23, 2022. I focused on posts I found on the "Hot" page, which included the most recent posts with the most upvotes, because more recent posts provide a better sense of what communication is currently happening in the subreddit. I did not post or comment on the subreddit during the sample selection period, but rather regularly checked r/ExRedPill for new posts that met my sample requirements. There are many types of posts on r/ExRedPill, but personal essays were often titled with short statements referring to TRP's adverse effects, such as "RP messed me up…" and "Trying to detox from redpill ideology." I defined a personal essay as an individual post that is longer than one paragraph; about the author rather than a friend, sibling, or partner; indicative of the author's extended involvement with TRP; and narratively written. Following Fisher's (1984) explanation of the narrative paradigm, a narrative post had to describe at least two events, organize said events in some way, have a

relationship between the events, and contain a unified subject. I also chose to exclude examples written by women who identified with TRP ideology. While there are women who belong to TRP (Jarvis & Eddington, 2020), they often have different experiences with and perceptions of the group. So, I decided to only select posts written by individuals presenting as men. There were also no essays composed by women that met my selection criteria during the data collection period.

The 13 selected texts can be found in the **appendix**, where they are copied with my coding scheme in bold and brackets. These posts varied from 289 to 1134 words long with an average length of 600 words. The body text and title have been recorded, but I chose not to link the original posts to maintain author privacy and preserve the text, should the post or user be deleted. Although Thorburn (2023b) opted to alter his sampled texts to protect user anonymity via the prevention of reverse search-ability, I maintained the text's original structure, diction, and grammar. As such, all grammatical or spelling errors in the **appendix** and quotations reflect the original text. Since I focused on the content of these narratives, I did not want to risk altering the authors' tone and meaning by paraphrasing the content. Maintaining the authors' safety and privacy is of the utmost importance, but given this study's emphasis on the original structure and diction, it was necessary to preserve the original text to have a more concrete understanding of the content housed in these narratives.

### Qualitative Analyses

When beginning this project, I collaborated with one of my classmates to ensure validity in the coding. We worked with the same data set and compared our codes. We began with a rough list of patterns, such as misogyny, self-esteem, and connection to TRP. But we did not limit ourselves to those codes. Rather, we used open coding, enabling the creation and revision of codes as we worked. We first coded each text individually, then read through the text together and compared our codes. Each grammatically independent clause or thought that seemed to be functioning as a separate idea was coded individually. Some clauses were assigned multiple codes, which were separated with a slash. For example, this excerpt was coded as follows:

> If my 13-19 year old self saw me say that, he'd most likely try to hit me with a brick **[SE/F]**. I may be alone with this one but for a long, long time **[SE]**. I did not see woman as people **[M]**. Just pussy **[M]**. Something you text sometimes when you're bored **[M]** and play off when you don't feel like dealing with them **[M]**. (Ex. 5)

Then we compared our classifications and discussed the addition or refinement of codes. We repeated this individually, then comparatively coded for each sample text meaning that our coding scheme continued to evolve throughout the entire coding process. Since we added new codes based on patterns that became more obvious in later texts, we often doubled back to texts we had already coded to revise some classifications.

After finalizing our set of codes and their definitions, we coded each text again individually to maintain reliability and to account for code usage and definition shifts. This ensured that we were applying the same coding process to all texts, and any variation was due to our interpretations rather than the coding scheme. When there was any variation, we discussed the rationale for our classification and decided how it should be coded together. After discussing variations, we read through each text again to ensure we agreed on each code application. The codes fell into five categories: Introspection, Discussing the Red Pill, Commentary on Women, Narrative Information, and Positivity. The full coded texts can be found in the **appendix**. Table 1 outlines the codes, definitions, frequencies, and examples from the data set. **See Table 1.**

**Findings**
*Introspection*
Self-evaluation (14.2%) is the most frequent practice in these essays. While it encompasses a wide range of behaviors, its primary function is to facilitate personal reflection. The authors frequently evaluate their personality traits, beliefs, and behaviors through self-critique. They are often very critical, which may indicate the continued harm of TRP or the initial motivation for seeking it out:

> I think if you are the strongest version of yourself you're datable **[SE]**. The problem is I haven't been anywhere near my strongest and best self for years **[SE/D]** (Ex. 4).

> The only reason I wasn't a total asshole **[SE]** or like your stereotypical alpha male grindset guy **[SE/CRP]** was the mere fact that I am very open minded (hopefully **[SE]**) and non-judgemental **[SE]** (Ex. 7).

These critiques address the author's personal traits and values, many of which have been 'tainted' by TRP. Some authors are complimentary of themselves, but most of the self-evaluation instances are negative. Not all of these self-evaluations make specific reference to TRP ideology, but many critique things like the author's physical appearance, social skills, and personal insecurities, which are indirectly related to TRP content that addresses these traits. These subjects are also frequent points of

discussion within TRP itself, suggesting that the authors' fixation on appearance, social skills, and insecurities could have drawn them to TRP or been heightened due to engaging with TRP in the first place. Regardless, even without explicitly mentioning TRP, evaluating oneself based on these criteria is a clear reflection of TRP's tenets of self-worth. Self-evaluation addressed both past and present beliefs, meaning that these men are actively reflecting on who they were and are.

Introspection also includes emotional expression, namely frustration (9.5%) and despair (9.5%). These emotions refer to past and present feelings and apply to frustration with relationships, TRP, and themselves, which reflect the inner turmoil many of these men have experienced:

> I'm expected to be a rock **[F]**, and always be there to lift the girl up **[F/SE]** but I myself am not allowed to be sad, or show any weakness **[F/D]**. I often wish I was born the other gender **[F/B]**, even though I know I'm a dude at heart **[SE]**. It's just that the life of a man is so lonely **[D]**, and depressing **[D]**, and so much hard work with little pay off **[F/D]** (Ex. 2).

While frustration and despair often appear alongside each other, these codes do very different work. Frustration shows these authors' anger towards their past and present circumstances, which they feel are both in and outside their control. Despair is a much more defeated aspect of the narrative, where the authors show how much TRP has affected them. Many applications of despair are linked to mental health concerns, as some users refer to suicidality, depression, and anxiety — many of which occur at least partially because of TRP. Overall, this emotional expression enables further reflection via externalizing negative emotions. The act of writing and reflecting encourages members to process their own emotions and inner conflict, even if it does occur in a public setting. In addition to facilitating emotional reflection, these expressions also provide clear evidence of the harm TRP can cause:

> I can't help myself letting those intrusive TRP/MGTOW thoughts get in the way of this happiness **[D/EF]**. … I just still always have those intrusive TRP thoughts **[CRP/EF]** "she thinks your a pussy **[SE/D]**" "here comes alpha chad to fuck your girl **[M]** while your at work because you decided to break down emotional barriers that you've had built for years **[SE/D]**" (Ex. 9).

While many of these men indicated that mental health issues were a motivation for engaging with TRP, these issues also seem to be exacerbated by the ideology. Even for users who did manage to find relationships while engaged with TRP, they all express that TRP mindsets lead to or eventually will cause their failure. From these

narratives, it is clear that TRP takes advantage of its members and teaches men to internalize unhealthy conceptions of masculinity and self-image.

### Discussing the Red Pill

Since this community advertises itself as a resource for people grappling with the Red Pill ideology, it is assumed that members have some connection to TRP. However, to establish themselves as a former member and present victim of TRP, authors must reference their familiarity and connection with the community. This is often performed by using Discourse-specific terminology that demonstrates the writer's engagement with TRP Discourse. Commenting on TRP is also common in these essays, making up 9.7% of the text. After all, it is impossible to talk about TRP's effects without bringing up TRP. Authors vary in how they comment on TRP, as they critique and praise it alongside comparing it to their present beliefs. Much of this commentary occurs when the author describes what he believes in connection to TRP. Additionally, authors must acknowledge the Red Pill concepts to justify participation in this community rather than another self-help group. Thus, commenting on TRP illustrates familiarity and potential internalization of the ideology while also legitimizing the author's participation in r/ExRedPill.

Explanations of their experience with TRP (5%) often prelude commentary on TRP (9.7%) to provide context for how much the authors engaged with TRP. Many describe watching videos that appeared in their algorithm and being unable to look away. Eleven of the thirteen essays make specific references to the type and quantity of TRP content they consumed. Authors' explanations of their TRP experiences often include when and whom they started watching:

> Well, I can't remember why or how, but RP content started appearing in my YouTube recommended **[ERP]**. And being the naïve 16yo I was **[SE]**, not knowing anything about dating at all really **[RE]**, I took to it **[ERP]**. I was watching all day long to podcasts and videos about RP while I was doing HW and such **[ERP]**, reading the Rollo books and everything **[ERP]** (Ex. 1).

> After the end of a 3-year relationship back in February this year **[RE]**, I came across self-improvement/redpill channels such as Hamza, 1stMan, Fresh&Fit and Andrew Tate **[ERP]** (Ex. 11).

Several authors reference specific manosphere communities like Pick-Up Artists, MGTOW, and the Black Pill. Even though none of them specifically use the word "manosphere," it is clear that they are familiar with the manosphere subgroups and how they are related to each other. Explanations of TRP experience are often toward

the beginning of the essays, indicating that the authors feel they need to establish their engagement with TRP before showing how they are affected by it.

Effects of TRP (5.3%) reflect the authors' additional introspection and establish them as victims of TRP. While r/ExRedPill does welcome those still engaged with TRP, actively communicating in a support group like r/ExRedPill invokes victimization. Authors illustrate TRP's effects differently:

> RP has simultaneously helped me see that there are so many ways to view the world **[EF]**, but also degraded my self-esteem **[SE]**, view on women **[M]**, and confused me in terms of how to date **[RE]** (Ex. 1).
>
> I can't help myself letting those intrusive TRP/MGTOW thoughts get in the way of this happiness **[D/EF]**. I guess I'm asking for assistance or stories from everyone here **[ASC]** in how they finally broke that tumor the TRP mindset grows in the subconscious **[EF/D]** (Ex. 9).

This practice reflects the merging of the authors' engagement with TRP and their introspection and reflection. Discussing TRP's effects enables the author to reflect directly on the community's consequences. While introspection is important, this practice frames the author's struggle not as a personal one but as one at least partially caused by TRP. In other words, discussing the experience and effects of TRP are both narrative elements that establish the authors' ethos as victims, which further justifies their participation in the community in the first place.

Although these personal essays appear to be a means of unlearning TRP ideology, the authors only refer to their attempts of unlearning it 4.2% of the time. Some authors specifically describe resources they have explored and why those were ineffective, whereas others are more reflective and focus on what the author has learned. Authors vary in describing their unlearning, from recounting non-TRP sources to a change in mindset:

> I've desperately tried to find articles and videos debunking Blackpill talking points **[AU/D]**, but ones that bring up actual scientific rebuttals are few and far between **[AU]**, and most amount to nothing but ad-hominem attacks and nothing of substance **[AU]** (Ex. 3).
>
> I realized my scope of reality has been crafted in a way that prevents me from being a complete person **[AU/SE]**. Crippled by fear of rejection **[D]**, albeit painful is a part of life **[AU]** (Ex. 5).

Many of these attempts did not seem totally successful, as the authors often pair their previous attempts with frustration and residual TRP effects. Only two of the authors seem content with their stage in recovery. The range in learning success is unsurprising, given the personal nature of this genre. Individuals are at different stages of unlearning TRP ideology, so some authors have had more experience with it. Given that for many of these men, recovering and unlearning this ideology has been an individual and reflective endeavor, completely recovering from TRP is no easy task. However, the very discussion of prior unlearning attempts illustrates that these men are actively working on improving themselves.

***Commentary on Women***

Romantic and sexual experience (10.3%) is the second most common code, suggesting that the authors are concerned with their sexual and romantic prowess as well as TRP's connection to it. Many men reference their lack of romantic experience as motivation for seeking out advice from TRP, with four essays making specific references to the author's virginity. Discussing romantic and sexual relationships follows two patterns: failure prior to engaging with TRP and TRP's effects on subsequent relationships. This practice can be seen in the following two examples:

> My First relationship ever was very toxic **[RE]** and it somehow ended in engagement **[RE]**. I was cheated on and burned hard **[RE/F]**. So obviously my next logical step in life was to find TRP **[ERP]** (Ex. 9).

> The first girlfriend I ever had was perfect **[RE/H]**, but I had it in my mind that because I was a man **[CRP]**, I HAD to be into hookup culture **[F/CRP]**, HAD to be fucking as many women as possible **[F/M]**, or I was lesser **[SE]**. So I refused to commit **[RE/M]**, led her on **[M]**, and she put up with me for about 2 years before we broke up **[RE]** (Ex. 12).

Discussions of relationships are often intertwined with discussions of the Red Pill content, as early failed relationships were a motivation and justification for TRP involvement, and subsequent relationships were tainted because of TRP ideology. Relationships are often used as a narrative tool, where the author's progression in and out of TRP is based on their relationship experience. TRP overemphasizes relationships in its own content, so these essays mirror the perceived importance of experience — or lack thereof — with women.

Misogyny (8.7%) appears less in relationships and sexual experiences. While this could stem from the essay's focus on the authors' personal experiences rather than general societal critiques, it also indicates shifting priorities. Most of these authors

are part of r/ExRedPill because they want to unlearn TRP beliefs, so it would be counterproductive to put these undesirable ideas into an essay meant to help these men move on from them. This separation between the author's underlying beliefs and what he *wants* to believe is reflected through their expression of misogyny. For instance, some make repeated, detailed remarks about women's promiscuity and physical appearance, seemingly because they feel that information is essential to the narrative:

> I had just gotten rejected again **[RE/F]** by an unattractive lady **[M]** whom I went on a date with … This woman was an overweight but kind woman **[M]**. Probably 400lbs but I loved her personality and positive energy **[M]** (Ex. 6).

Of course, commenting on a woman's appearance is not inherently misogynistic. However, the emphasis on these details shows that the author is still in the habit of objectifying women and critiquing their sexuality and appearance — practices that are nearly inseparable from TRP ideology. However, other authors' misogynistic writing refers to their past beliefs. While still misogynistic, it is a critique of themselves and their own beliefs rather than women:

> Although I am a hypocrite for wanting casual sex **[SE]**, I couldn't see a woman with a high bodycount as good material **[M]** as she likely has a lot of emotional baggage **[M]** and is more likely to cheat on me **[M]** (Ex. 8).

> Well, my mindset was "oh she fucked all these other dudes back then but won't fuck me now on the first date, fuck this" **[M]** and basically never talked to her again **[RE]**. What the fuck was wrong with me **[SE/F]**? (Ex. 12).

This variation reinforces that these authors are at different stages of unlearning TRP ideology. Most authors avoid directly criticizing women when referring to their present beliefs but rather focus on the issues regarding their misogynistic mindsets. While this is not the case for every author, most misogynistic content illustrates the author's growing disillusion with TRP content. In other words, by discussing their former misogyny, the authors show they are unlearning it.

### *Narrative Information*
Narrative information (8.9%) enables the storytelling aspect of these essays. This code includes personal information like age and narrative details, which work together to provide context for the rest of the post. Ten of the thirteen essays begin with the author introducing himself, often with his age, gender, and identity as a TRP victim. The narrative information through the essays provides more detail about the

authors' relationships, life history, and path in and out of TRP. This code often appears alongside stories about relationships and experiences with TRP:

> I was just being an asshole **[SE]**, after those events she went cold and didn't speak to me in one month **[I/D]**. I just texted her: "is everything alright?" **[I]** And left it there to don't appear too eager so I'd look like a creep **[I/SE]** (Ex. 10).

Since these posts are personal testimonials, telling stories helps make these narratives more detailed and personal. It is one thing to say that TRP harmed the author, but providing detailed narratives of how it did so supports his victimhood, encourages deeper reflection, and enables a more engaging story for the author and reader.

### *Positivity*

Positive content is the least common practice in this sample, making up only 3.4% of the content. This low frequency suggests that authors are not prioritizing expressions of hope and happiness (1.7%) or aspirations (1.7%). Since these essays are often a way to work through distress or vent, it makes sense that there is not much positivity. When authors do express happiness or aspirations, it is often juxtaposed with present despair:

> She was smart, gorgeous, kind, I mean, just perfect **[H]**. Everything was amazing **[H]**. Then, the Redpill kicked in **[EF]** (Ex. 10).

> I'm legitimately afraid for my future right now **[D]** because I want to have a girlfriend **[ASP]**, I want to be married **[ASP]**, and I want to have kids in the near future **[ASP]**. I really don't want to fall down this rabbithole **[D]**, but it feels like I'm one stiff breeze away from falling and never coming back **[D]** (Ex. 3).

By expressing past or future happiness, only to claim that TRP destroyed it, the author reinforces their claim that TRP harmed him. It also illustrates that recovery is not a linear process. Even for authors who may feel like they have made progress, TRP's effects are vast and do not disappear overnight. However, while there are very few expressions of present happiness, there are some more positive posts written by those seemingly further along in their recovery, showing that life beyond TRP is possible:

> It isn't all hopeless though **[H]**. It's looking like I'll move out eventually **[H]**, there's some new opportunities coming **[H]** and I'm making new friends here **[H]**. I have coworkers I really get along with **[H]** (Ex. 4).

Though positive content was the least frequent practice, authors use it to highlight TRP's persistence, as the overall lack of positive content shows how distressed these men are.

**Discussion**

While r/ExRedPill classifies itself as a discussion forum, it also functions as a self-help group. Smith-Merry and colleagues (2019) consider forum-based peer support to be based on individual reflection via storytelling and providing support to others. These personal essays are a few of the many examples of this reflective storytelling on r/ExRedPill, and the rhetorical moves within them signal the aims of the group: to collaboratively reflect, learn, and heal. While the essays more clearly indicate individual reflection, they also illustrate community support. Several make specific requests for advice from community members, but it also seems like merely posting invites community support. Every essay in this sample has several responses offering advice and empathy from other members, even if the author did not directly ask for it.

These personal narratives enable identity and emotional work for the authors and r/ExRedPill as a whole. Within self-help groups, sharing stories is a way to reinterpret and learn from the past (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which, in turn, informs the author's identity. The introspection and discussions facilitate active reflections about the author's beliefs and TRP itself. The commentary on women illustrates shifting priorities as these authors learn from successful strategies and relationships to lessen their hatred. Not only do these essays enable the author to share his stories, but they also cultivate their identity as a former Red Piller. Even if they are still struggling to unlearn this ideology, classifying and shaming their former beliefs is a key step in moving forward. Both these narratives and r/ExRedPill as a whole also reflect the greater harm of the manosphere (Thorburn, 2023a). Many of the sampled texts made specific references to how TRP has affected their self-esteem, self-worth, and relationship success. As Thorburn (2023a; 2023b) also notes, rehabilitation-based communities like r/ExRedPill and r/IncelExit are not only valuable data sets regarding efforts to disengage from the manosphere but also provide first-hand accounts of the actual effects TRP can have on its members.

Online self-help groups like r/ExRedPill are becoming a more popular and viable option for support and recovery (Chung, 2013). TRP preys on men's insecurities and loneliness (Vallerga & Zurbriggen, 2022), so having a community that provides actual support, advice, and camaraderie is essential for their recovery process. The subreddit r/ExRedPill is a relatively small but thriving self-help group that provides a community for former misogynists to help and support each other. It has a constant

influx of discussions, debates, and questions in addition to these essays. These posts and comments develop into vibrant discussions as group members offer their advice and support to each author. While posting an essay on r/ExRedPill seems to benefit an individual, the author also helps other community members. He shows other TRP victims that they are not alone. Thorburn (2023b) and Gheorghe and Clement (2023) consider groups like r/ExRedPill and r/IncelExit to be successful because they are created and facilitated by people actually affected by TRP. Having a community of people with analogous experiences seems to facilitate a welcoming and supportive community where members, who are perhaps most disparaged by TRP, feel comfortable being emotionally vulnerable — a practice that TRP so often ridicules. Given that r/ExRedPill is made up of former and present Red Pillers, having regular, active support from former ideology members further facilitates disengagement and unlearning. Scrivens and colleagues (2019) explain that collaboration between former and present members of an extreme ideology enables recovery because former members have an ethos within these communities as 'one of us.' This subreddit mimics this relationship, where both active and former Red Pillers work together to help each other disengage and maintain their distance from this harmful ideology.

However, r/ExRedPill is not a complete or the only solution to TRP indoctrination. While having a community to vent and converse with is certainly important, TRP's harm may extend beyond what a support group can treat. Several sample texts make reference to depression, anxiety, and suicidality, which are more serious ailments that warrant professional advice. Community members are aware of this and often reply to these narratives with suggestions for therapy and other resources. Thorburn (2023b) notes similar limitations regarding the effectiveness and extent of mental health support that r/ExRedPill may provide. This is by no means saying that the work r/ExRedPill and other online communities do is worthless, but they do have a limited scope.

## Limitations

While this study continues to fill the vast gap regarding manosphere rehabilitation, we are far from understanding the full rehabilitation process and what role communities like r/ExRedPill could play in such processes. This study provides insight into a small subset of r/ExRedPill, and while this data set does illustrate composition and engagement trends regarding this particular type of post on r/ExRedPill, the subreddit contains many other types of posts besides personal essays. This study aimed to be an initial investigation into this particular genre, but as we begin to focus more on manosphere rehabilitation, r/ExRedPill warrants more in-depth inquiry. Thorburn (2023b) explores different types of posts and comments on r/ExRedPill, but

his analysis is also limited to a relatively small data set. Additionally, both my and Thorburn's work on r/ExRedPill, along with the investigation into r/IncelExit (Gheorghe & Clement, 2023; Davis & Kettrey, 2024) is largely qualitative. It is possible to see how members of r/ExRedPill engage with this community based on their posts, but their posts do not provide any quantitative information regarding their rehabilitation, engagement, and perception of TRP and r/ExRedPill. This subreddit is also just one example of manosphere rehabilitation-based communities. Other groups, like r/IncelExit, could serve a similar purpose for their members. All of these communities deserve investigation so that we may gain a more well-rounded understanding of how different individuals and groups approach rehabilitation efforts.

Regarding methodology, the biggest limitation is the difficulty regarding the anonymity of the data set. Ethics regarding the use of online posts in research are still debated, but there is a general consensus that researchers should attempt to protect user information as much as possible. Given that retrieving consent from every author would be nearly impossible, the best practice is to anonymize data; I have done so by excluding URLs and author usernames, but it is still quite easy to locate the original posts based on quotations, as shown in Reagle's (2022) investigation into the efficacy of researchers' source disguising. However, given the lack of research in r/ExRedPill as a whole, I felt that illustrating the application of my coding scheme to the original text was necessary to truly illustrate what work these narratives are doing. Though more effective in protecting users, Thorburn's (2023b) alteration of the original text did seem to degrade the form and style. Maintaining the stylistic integrity of the data is a top priority for communication, rhetorical, and content inquiries. Future studies could benefit from excluding the source texts and, instead, crafting example quotations that mimic the sampled texts; doing so could present the same type of content without quoting users. With research regarding rehabilitation from the manosphere and other online extremist groups, it is vital to consider novel ways of maintaining data safety, particularly given the personal nature of the content.

**Conclusion**

The community r/ExRedPill serves a unique purpose for a small but growing group of people victimized by TRP and the manosphere. While there is not yet definitive data about recovery rates from TRP-based misogyny, this subreddit illustrates that there are places where unlearning is taking place and succeeding to some degree. These personal essays offer a glimpse into the inner turmoil of these men and show the importance of community for their recovery and overall well-being. Authors can do important rhetorical and healing work that helps them externalize internal struggles,

share experiences, and educate themselves and others. The personal essays are evidence of this emotional and cognitive work on an individual and a community level. Each author seems to use their essay to reflect on their own choices, disposition, and behavior while framing it around TRP.

There is much more work to be done in studying this genre and community. Future research should further explore the authors' motivations and how this writing has helped them. We also need to understand how this community affects its members as a whole; interviews or surveys would be effective, as textual analysis is largely inference-based and qualitative. It would also be worthwhile to study r/ExRedPill as a whole, along with similar subreddits like r/IncelExit. Though such inquiry has begun, it lacks quantitative data. These personal essays are just one type of post, but people also share resources, ask questions, and provide commentary on manosphere content. All of these posts work together to create a writing-based, online self-help group, and it is crucial to develop a more holistic understanding of this discourse community. TRP ideology is harmful, and while r/ExRedPill provides one avenue for unlearning it, this disengagement and deradicalization is a demanding and alarmingly understudied consequence of TRP ideology. As we continue to grapple with the effects of hate groups like TRP, communities and resources like r/ExRedPill will only become more important. We are finally coming to terms with the danger of the manosphere, but now it is time to understand how we can help people escape it.

**References**

**Appendix**