



The Manosphere Travels East:

Constructing misogynist social identities on a
Bulgarian online platform

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Abstract

Following a series of terrorist attacks, online communities for men built around misogyny and resistance to feminist values – commonly known as *the manosphere* – have recently become subject of scholarly attention. In research, the manosphere is usually explored as a phenomenon in the Western world, often described as a backlash movement in countries where gender equality is most progressive. This thesis seeks to widen the geographical borders of manosphere research by exploring discursive articulations of tropes related to the international manosphere on an open-access Bulgarian online Q&A platform. By choosing this platform as a case study, this project aims to fill a knowledge gap by exploring whether discourses fundamental to international, largely English-language communities of the manosphere are found relevant on a mainstream online space in an Eastern European, Balkan country like Bulgaria, and what (if any) additional locally specific tropes emerge in this context. Drawing on a discourse-historical approach to critical discourse analysis informed by social identity theory, the study seeks to unpack how these tropes serve the practice of online social identity construction, with a focus on whether the social identities that emerge could be classified as potentially extremist. The research problem is approached both by analyzing discursive elements in a purposeful sample of user comments, and by keeping a focus on the affordances of the online platform as a space where these discourses are co-produced and disseminated.

Keywords: Manosphere; Misogyny; Anti-feminism; Discursive Tropes; Critical Discourse Analysis; Social Identity Theory; Affordances; Bulgaria

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List of Abbreviations

CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
DHA	Discourse-Historical Approach
EU	European Union
LBTQ+	Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and others
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and others
MA	Master of Arts
MGTOW	Men Go Their Own Way
MRA	Men's Rights Activists
NGO	Non-Government Organization
PUA	Pick-Up Artists
Q&A	Question and Answer
SIT	Social Identity Theory
UN	United Nations

1. Introduction

In 2009, at a fitness centre in Bridgeville, Pennsylvania, George Sodini walked into a women's aerobics class and opened fire, killing three and injuring nine more before eventually taking his own life. In 2014, in Isla Vista, California, Elliott Rodger went on a killing spree, resulting in fourteen injured and seven dead, including himself. In 2018, in Toronto, Canada, Alek Minassian drove his van into a crowd, murdering ten and wounding fifteen more. In 2020, in Hanau, Germany, Tobias Rathjen opened fire at a kiosk, causing eleven deaths and injuring five others. What do these incidents have in common? Firstly, that they are just a few of the many recent examples of mass killings committed by male perpetrators driven by their hatred for women. And secondly, that this hatred was fostered on men-only online networks, where they shared their misogynist worldview with like-minded others (Associated Press, 2009; Jasser et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2020).

Following the series of terrorist attacks, online communities for men built around misogyny and resistance to feminist values – commonly known as *the manosphere* – have received a fair share of attention from government bodies, scholars, and media. Nowadays an umbrella term for a number of communities with varying ideological beliefs, but united by antifeminist sentiments and the desire for withholding a patriarchal world order, the manosphere's emergence can be traced back to men's rights activist groups moving their operations online. The emergence of online communities for men shifted the discursive parameters of men's rights movements, fostering an environment favorable to the proliferation of *networked misogyny* – a phenomenon defined as “an especially virulent strain of violence and hostility towards women in online environments” (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016, p. 171), exhibiting a particularly malevolent approach to antifeminism (Ging, 2019). Historically targeting primarily divorced fathers, around the millennium shift men's rights activists (MRA) embraced cyberactivism as a method for intervening in public attitudes about gender-related questions. With this new approach, they increasingly redirected their attention towards young men and sexual politics. Antifeminist claims appeal to a younger male audience, as they resonate with neoliberal discourse's emphasis on gender neutrality, formal equality, and individual responsibility, all while playing upon anxieties about men being the 'victims' of feminism (Gotell & Dutton, 2016). Furthermore, due to their highly emotive character, subjects such as

gender dynamics already hold a virulence potential (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012), and the accessibility and scale of the internet exponentially speed up the dissemination, reproduction, and development of such ideas, reaching more recipients than ever and propelling the mobilization process.

The manosphere, and the communities belonging to it (among which incels – involuntary celibates, men’s rights activists, MGTOW – Men Going Their Own Way, and Pick-Up Artists) have been deemed a threat to national security in several Western countries (DiBranco, 2020), not least due to recent research linking these spaces to radicalization into extremist and in some cases violent belief systems (ADL, 2019), including far-right white supremacist ideas (Askanius et al., forthcoming). In research, the manosphere is usually explored as a problem of the Western world, often seen as a backlash movement and linked to countries where gender equality is most progressive (e.g. Guy, 2021; Messner, 2016). For example, incited by the fact that Swedes are the fourth largest user group on the world’s most famous incel forum *incels.co* (now *incels.is*), the Swedish Defence Research Agency has produced a detailed report on the online behaviors of the incel subgroup. Incels in particular have been flagged as a high-risk manosphere adjacent community, since several violent attackers, among which Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian, self-identified as incels (Fernquist et al., 2020). However, when looking at *incels.is*’ visitor numbers, the third largest user group stands out as it comes – surprisingly – not from a large Western feminist haven, but from a small country in Eastern Europe – Bulgaria (Fernquist et al., 2020).

Despite Bulgaria making the list of the top three countries driving traffic to the world’s largest incel forum, research on this and other manosphere communities outside the Western world is scarce. And while the risk of radicalization and impending danger of terrorist attacks are serious concerns, the transnational applicability of which still needs to be studied, the popularity of such communities and their discourses in Eastern European countries seems to have an even more dire implication. In ‘young’ democracies such as some CEE countries, Roggeband and Kriszán (2020) warn, the danger of opposition to gender equality not only poses a threat of radicalization, but also threatens democracy itself. The networked backlash against women’s rights in CEE has succeeded in reconfiguring both institutional and civic spaces – in institutional spaces, the claim for equal rights between genders is now frequently challenged and delegitimized, and in civic

spaces, legislative restrictions of foreign funding to NGOs are combined with repressions, blacklisting, and smear campaigns towards women's rights NGOs and activists as 'foreign agents' (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020). A noteworthy case in Bulgaria was the backlash against, and subsequent rejection of, the Council of Europe Convention on Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention), to which online alliances of conservative groups were instrumental (Stoenecheva, 2021). The case of opposition to the Istanbul Convention in Bulgaria has been described by researchers as an 'anti-gender campaign,' part of a transnational anti-gender movement constituting a synergy between different conservative, nationalist, religious, and right-wing populist actors aiming to counter social and political gains for gender equality, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights (Darakchi, 2019). Globally, some discursive traits that the manosphere exhibits are characteristic of anti-gender movements (Askanius et al., forthcoming) – much like the anti-gender movement, the manosphere attracts sympathizers through rhetorics of nostalgia for a “lost golden age” of “simpler,” more ‘natural’ gender relations (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017, p. 14), combined with a discursive portrayal of men as “victims of feminism,” and “left behind by society” (Hakola et al., 2021, p. xvi). Hence, I suggest that communities of the manosphere can be understood as occupying their own space within this larger phenomenon.

Previous research has explored some of the manosphere communities' dedicated online spaces, outlining their internal logics and discourses (e.g. Ging, 2019; Gotell & Dutton, 2016; Jones et al., 2020). However, Ging (2019, p. 653) highlights that the manosphere is not a localized phenomenon, as its internet presence allows for dissemination into “whichever spaces [...] threaten [...] male privilege,” thus also affecting mainstream online spaces. Scholars have argued that online spaces where mainstream topics are mixed with more radical or controversial conversations can be considered gateways to radicalization (Åkerlund, 2021; Askanius et al., forthcoming), as any visitor who enters these spaces can potentially be exposed to radical ideas. Simultaneously, circulation in open spaces poses the risk of normalizing these discourses, making them increasingly socially acceptable. Against this background, I argue, while monitoring the (relatively closed-off) communities where these discourses are born is important, it is not enough – we need to follow them as they disseminate into the mainstream.

Considering the fundamental cultural differences between Western and Eastern Europe, and the uneven states of their democracies, this thesis uses Bulgaria as a case study to fill a knowledge gap by exploring whether online misogyny in an Eastern European, Balkan country like Bulgaria shares the discourses fundamental to the international, largely English-language communities of the manosphere, and what (if any) locally specific tropes emerge. Drawing on a discourse-historical approach to critical discourse analysis, informed by social identity theory, the project will consider the evocation of these tropes in combination with discursive practices characteristic of social identity building, with special attention on whether the identified social identities could be classified as potentially extremist. Finally, affordance theory will be instrumental in assessing the role of the online platform under study in shaping the observed discourses.

The research questions to guide the study are formulated as follows:

RQ1: How are discursive tropes related to the manosphere articulated in the Bulgarian context on a public online Q&A platform?

RQ2: How do these discursive articulations contribute to the construction of (extremist) social identities online?

RQ3: How are these discourses shaped by the affordances of the platform?

To address the need for research beyond fringe spaces dedicated to the manosphere, the source of empirical data is strategically selected to target an open-access online platform, whose visitor base is not gendered and the purpose of which lies outside specifically discussing gender struggles. The research problem is approached both by analyzing the discursive elements of user comments in a Bulgarian Q&A platform (*Spodeli.net*), and by keeping a focus on the affordances of this platform as a space where these discourses are co-produced and disseminated.

2. Background

In line with CDA's theoretical framework, this study departs from the standpoint that discourses are a product of, and in turn produce, the environments in which they manifest. Therefore, for a critical discourse analysis to bear fruit, it demands situating the data sample within the Bulgarian socio-political context. Similarly (but not identically) to other CEE countries, some of the factors in play in contemporary Bulgaria are its status

as a recent democracy, its state socialist past, the following decade-long transition to democracy and a market economy, the social effects of the 2008 economic crisis, and joining the EU. Specific to Bulgaria is the country's geographical location on the Balkans, which makes it a part of yet another geopolitical entity, carrying its own socio-cultural specificities. This chapter aims to provide background on the aforementioned factors in order to enhance the understanding of the phenomenon under study.

2.1. Women's social position in socialist and post-socialist Bulgaria

Roggeband and Krizsán (2020, p. 2) describe countries that underwent democratization in the 1970s and 1980s as “third wave democracies” or “recent democracies,” highlighting that this epithet is relevant to most CEE countries. It is certainly relevant to Bulgaria, which was a socialist state and part of the Eastern Bloc from 1946 to 1989. During this period, the country experienced a range of policy reforms, not least concerning women's rights and role in society, the effects of which are still under scrutiny in today's generationally and ideologically divided between socialism and pro-Europeanism Bulgaria.

Importantly, as Slabakova (1992, p. 140) puts it, society during the socialist period “was not so much male-oriented as Communist-party oriented” – which posed an advantage for the women's rights movement at the time. Reforms introduced during the early socialist period equalized the legal status of women and men. In 1944, all women were given the right to vote (Daskalova, 2004). Abortion (with some periods of restrictions and sanctions by the local party apparatus) has been allowed since 1956 (United Nations Population Division, 2002), and free, public-owned, universally available healthcare was introduced in the country after 1950 (Georgieva et al., 2007). Equal access to education was guaranteed, women entered more areas of professional life, and social policies such as paid maternity leave and availability of daycare centers and public canteens were adopted to support working mothers. The Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement developed legislative initiatives in the country and presented Bulgaria at international conferences as a pioneer in women's emancipation, including during the UN Women's Decade, when the country enjoyed recognition for its progress in the advancement of women's rights (Ghodsee, 2012). These initiatives presented a powerful counter-argument to the stereotype that women were to only deal with ‘women's issues.’

Yet soon, the initial improvement for women's social stance was challenged by a significant birth rate decline, which reframed the public discourse. While women and men now had the same legal status as citizens, the state socialist system promoted a traditional view of gender roles and aimed to preserve these. When discussing women, the state primarily referred to them as mothers, fertility was praised and encouraged, and the societal roles assigned to women and men were presented as a natural harmony in which the socialist state guaranteed equality for all (Brunnbauer & Taylor, 2004). Women were treated as a monolithic group, without regards to the specific needs of, for example, LGBTQ+ women, women from ethnic and religious minorities, and women with disabilities.

2.2. The 'transition' period – EU accession, Euroscepticism, and socialist nostalgia

With the fall of socialism, as the transition to a democracy began, Bulgarian society faced a multitude of issues: some due to norms and attitudes carried over from the past, others – the result of the lack and inefficiency of sanctions preventing abuse of political power. As corruption and political elitism flourished, Bulgarians perceived a general deterioration in living conditions. In addition to the cultural challenges that the 'transition' presented, the slow and controversial process of privatization, combined with heavy foreign debt and the local currency's depreciated value also brought economic challenges, and unemployment rates skyrocketed. Women's situation deteriorated drastically, as shrinking state budgets compromised the social welfare system that guaranteed services essential to working mothers, like accessible childcare, healthcare, maternity leave, and child allowances (Ghodsee, 2004), all the while women were also less likely to be employed in the private sector, which offered better wages (Bonfiglioli, 2016).

Considering the post-1989 setbacks to living conditions, Bulgarian society held high hopes for the EU. Ahead of Bulgaria's acceptance as a member state in 2007, 72% of the population were positive towards joining the Union (Dimitrova, 2012). Bulgarians were optimistic that an EU membership would improve their situation, some of the expected benefits being greater economic and political stability, and improved living standard. An EU membership seemed to spell progress in terms of women's rights too, with some of the EU's accession incentives demanding a commitment to the *acquis communautaire* in

the field of equal treatment of women and men, marked most importantly by adopting the Law on Protection against Discrimination (Daskalova, 2005). In reality, however, progress was not as straightforward. As Bulgarian politics focused on meeting EU accession demands for economic targets and macro political criteria, other social issues such as the widening inequality between the sexes were left unattended and a democratic debate on gender equality failed to take place (Luleva, 2016). And with the removal of direct EU conditionality following the accession, development stagnated. Coincidentally, the 2008 global economic crisis happened just a year into Bulgaria's membership, worsening the transition period's "permanent economic crisis" (Kelbetcheva, 2019). Many saw an opportunity for a better life in the newly introduced freedom to live and work anywhere in the EU, and the country observed mass emigration rates, leading to new political challenges such as ageing population, decline of the labor force, and a shortage of human capital resources (Bogdanov & Rangelova, 2012). It was against this background that Bulgarian politicians began promoting Western models of gender equality, insensitive to the reality that Bulgarian society embarked into democracy from a different standpoint and system of ideas than the West. Naturally, the clumsiness of these efforts was met with distrust, opposition, and waves of socialist nostalgia (Ghodsee, 2004).

Considering the counter-reaction to EU policies on issues like ethnic minority rights, gender equality, and LGBTQ+ rights, Kolev (2019, p. 189) describes the current state of Bulgaria's democracy as one of "repressive majoritarianism" rather than subcultural pluralism. This, he argues, can be understood as a manifestation of Bulgarians' dissatisfaction with foreign influence and plebiscitary internal governing, both of which have long been perceived as at odds with societal preferences (Kolev, 2019). To complicate matters, there is still relatively little public discussion about the oppression of the socialist regime and its lasting negative effects on Bulgarians' quality of life, which in turn allows nationalist actors to reframe these as consequences of Europeanization and fuel anti-European sentiments. The frustration over lagging behind Western Europe undermines EU's image as bearer of progress in Bulgarians' minds – despite significant improvements over the last 15 years, living standard remains the worst in the EU, trust in the government – low, and corruption levels – high. The political situation has caused

inter-group tensions between supporters of different ideological systems, leading to democratic backsliding.

2.3. Hegemonic masculinity and new gender order in contemporary Bulgaria

The shift in gender dynamics in Bulgarian culture during the times of transition from socialism to democracy and inclusion into the EU resulted in new realities for both women and men. In describing the distinctive features of ‘the post-socialist gender order,’ Luleva (2016) highlights the re-traditionalizing of gender roles, the deepening inequality between genders in the public sphere, the strengthening of gender stereotypes under populist and nationalist influences, and the rise of a neo-patriarchal gender ideology praising a masculine ideal, part and parcel of which is the figure of the father as ‘head of the family’ and main breadwinner. This last phenomenon could be understood in terms of Connell’s concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ – a form of masculinity that dominates all other expressions of gender identity and constitutes the most powerful and socially respected form of being a man, and whose social practices and identity expressions become a blueprint for men to aspire to. Thus, hegemonic masculinity exerts power over other, marginalized forms of masculinity, as well as over femininity (Connell, 1987, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Importantly, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) point out that the majority of men do not embody this masculine ideal in its entirety, but rather are required to position themselves in relation to it. Hegemonic masculinity’s organizing of male power extends to a diversity of men and masculinities, as long as their gender expression works to uphold the hegemonic masculine ideal as such. For Bulgarian men, high unemployment rates, low wages among the working class, and new types of precarious working conditions create tensions in achieving the hegemonic masculine ideal, challenging their role as providers for their families, and therefore, their identity as men. Thus, strengthening their positioning within the men ‘in-group’ demands the marginalization of an outside ‘Other’ to juxtapose against, such as minorities like the Roma and Turkish Bulgarians, refugees, and LGBTQ+ individuals (Luleva, 2018).

The image of ‘real’ Bulgarian men in Bulgarian culture – described as strong, patriotic protectors of the nation and their families – is often discursively intertwined with references to Christianity, traditional values, and the nuclear Bulgarian family. These

tropes, frequently evoked by far-right populist actors and popularized on social media, are part of a new type of ethno-nationalistic discourse, characterized by xenophobia, anti-Europeanism, Orthodox fundamentalism, and exploitation of hate as a political tool to be directed at whichever ‘Other’ fits their political agenda – ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities (Luleva, 2018). Recently, this rhetoric was instrumental in the anti-gender campaign against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, initiated by the Christian-right NGO ‘Society and Values Association’ and supported by the government-represented far-right party coalition ‘United Patriots.’ In the course of the debate, the Istanbul Convention and the term ‘gender’ were discursively portrayed as threats to Bulgarian ‘traditional values,’ morals, and family (Stoencheva, 2021), echoing repressed masculinities’ existing anxieties and creating a moral panic.

3. The Manosphere: A literature review

Studying the manosphere as a space of significance is a fairly recent academic endeavor. This chapter aims to serve as a scientific point of departure, outlining the state of research in this area and providing an overview of the manosphere’s construction and nature. Further, special attention is paid to European and especially Eastern European/Balkan manosphere-related studies in order to demonstrate the gaps in knowledge about the manosphere as a phenomenon in this region.

Even though misogyny is not a new phenomenon, the proliferation of digital technologies has been instrumental in shaping new kinds of networked misogynistic practices, characterized by their own operational logics. With the help of the internet, opposition to feminism has become more vocal, transnational, and better organized, grouping together long-established and newly emerged actors: masculinist activists, anti-gender and heteroactivist movements, religious groups, conservative actors, and right-wing nationalist and populist groups (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020). Their online conglomeration, Ging (2019) argues, has resulted in a substantial change to the discourses they employ and the communication techniques they utilize when disseminating their ideas. The term ‘manosphere’ is used by researchers as an umbrella term for these loosely related online communities for men grouped around opposition to feminism and sharing beliefs grounded in misogyny and reinforcing male superiority.

Even before the term ‘manosphere’ was popularized among academics and media, researchers were already beginning to point out the distinct features of online-practiced misogyny. For example, Blais and Dupuis-Déri (2012) speak of ‘masculinism,’ arguing that the phenomenon of openly misogynist online networks could be understood as a reactionary countermovement to feminist ideas (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012). They suggest we understand masculinism as a social movement, as it fulfills all seven criteria used to distinguish social movements from other social phenomena: activism; organizational units such as committees or associations; forming and representing a collective identity; advocating for a common cause; opposition to adversaries; extra-institutional protests; and the goal of affecting social relationships (the latter making it possible to determine whether a social movement is progressive or reactionary, depending on whether it aims to change the social system or defend it against threatened changes). Further, they point out a resemblance in the logics of masculinism and racism, in that both movements seek out to ‘scapegoat’ a specific and well-defined out-group as the root of the social issues that their in-group is facing. Both movements, they argue, hold a virality potential, as they are grounded in and address emotive subjects such as social, economic, and political dynamics and power relations between genders. These early findings, demonstrating networked misogyny’s reliance on group identity construction through appeal to emotion, have shown to hold true in subsequent research on the manosphere, inspiring further exploration of both manosphere-adjacent communities’ radicalization potential and their role as gateways into more extreme belief systems.

Venturing to assess the magnitude of their impact, more recent research has made efforts to unpack manosphere communities’ discursive logics and strategies. For example, Baele et al. (2021) set out to outline the discursive characteristics of the incel worldview, using empirical data from the largest international incel forum *Incels.me* (now *Incels.is*). Their study offers a comprehensive guide through incels’ specific in-group language and terminology, used to induce a set of clearly defined social categories, including a minority of ‘alpha’ males and females (‘Chads’ and ‘Stacies’), ‘betas’/‘normies’ constituting the majority of the world’s population, and a minority of ‘incels,’ exclusively males, at the bottom of the social hierarchy. As their findings demonstrate, the worldview promoted on this forum is of extremist character, enabled by the closed-off nature of the forum which allows radical ideas promoting intergroup conflict and violence to flow freely and

escalate the extremity of its participants' feelings, beliefs, and/or behaviors. What's more, Baele et al.'s (2021) research successfully demonstrates the significant role of the Internet in enabling the formation and radicalization of the incel community through echo-chamber effects.

While not all subgroups of the manosphere can be classified as extremist, research has revealed an overarching tendency to diminish the magnitude and impact of gender-based violence as a problem. In their study of MRA's counter-reaction to a campaign about the importance of sexual consent, Gotell and Dutton (2016) explore antifeminist discourses shared by members of four MRA online communities. The common tropes identified by their study include that rape and sexual assault is not a gendered problem, that feminists use false rape accusations to harm men, that domestic/gender-based violence and 'rape culture' are feminist-inspired moral panics, and ultimately that men are 'the victims' of feminism. While the MRA subgroup was not found to actively encourage violence in their sample, they were nevertheless found to justify and normalize it by asserting that 'everybody does it,' both men and women. Moreover, MRA communities have been found to serve as entry points into the manosphere for supporters of the Alt-Right, in that those subscribing to the Alt-Right ideology and MRAs share both the belief that men and women are not equal, and a dissatisfaction with the change towards a more inclusive political climate (Mountford, 2018).

Importantly, while the manosphere consists of different sub-groups, among which MRA (men's rights activists), MGTOW (men go their own way), PUA (pick-up artists), Gamer Geeks, and InCels (involuntary celibates), this thesis shares the view that these should not be understood as distinct communities, but rather "as interconnected nodes in a mediated network of misogynistic discourses and practices" (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019, p. 5008). The deep dives into specific manosphere-adjacent communities outlined above strengthen this understanding as they reveal that these communities, albeit slightly distinct, to a large extent rely on similar discourses. Some common discursive elements between them are the usage of terminology referencing the manosphere's discursive symbol, the 'red pill,' the hierarchical view of men in society as "alpha, beta and zeta masculinities" (Ging, 2019, p. 648), and specific communication practices employing a great deal of visual, video- and meme-based articulations. Guy (2021, p. 603) summarizes the content shared across the manosphere as "a mix of self-help, conspiracy theories, and

increasingly extremist indoctrination traded through manifestos, memes, and insults.” Furthermore, Ging (2019, p. 645) describes discourses of the manosphere as highly emotional and characterized by “politics of sentiment,” dealing less with political and more with socio-cultural arguments.

Another attribute of manosphere communities to keep in mind is their systematic character. Manne (2017, p. 27) suggests we think of misogyny as a “socio-political phenomenon with psychological, structural and institutional manifestations,” defining it as “a system of hostile forces that by and large makes sense from the perspective of patriarchal ideology, inasmuch as it works to police and enforce patriarchal order.” Similarly, Ging (2019) calls for understanding the manosphere as a discursive system (or network of systems) and seeking to determine the extent of its power – ideological, psychological, and material. Approaching the manosphere as systematic, I believe, offers a strong advantage to understanding how its core discourses travel across communities, platforms, and cultural contexts.

Academic efforts to understand the manosphere are further complicated by its transnational nature. Local, regional, and global manifestations mix together on open, international, English-language manosphere-dedicated online spaces. In addition, the majority of the users choose to maintain their anonymity, thus making it difficult to determine their nationalities. This results in a dearth of research into individual national and/or regional contexts. In Europe, the European Commission’s Radicalisation Awareness Network has researched the characteristics of the European incel movement, identifying the most popular tropes and narratives on English-language European incel forums (Mogensen, 2021; Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2021a, 2021b). Their analysis of inceldom and incel culture has provided solid ground for further research on the manosphere and its adjacent communities in the European context. However, even though scholars around the globe are beginning to point out that the manosphere is not solely a Western European/North American issue but a transnational phenomenon (see, for example, Pantucci & Ong (2020) who argue for the need of further research into the Asian context), there is lack of research on manosphere-related online spaces operating in languages other than English.

In the Balkan context, Milanović (2021) has attempted to document anti-feminist online discourses specific to Serbia by performing a discourse analysis on a database of posts made from Serbian IPs on the *4chan* board /pol/ (which stands for ‘politically incorrect’). However, a serious limitation of his study is that his empirical sample is also in English and collected from an international forum. Considering that the Balkan countries’ English proficiency is below the average for Europe (EF, 2021), research conducted on English speaking platforms could exclude a significant portion of the Balkan population that could nevertheless be exposed to – and participate in – anti-feminist and/or manosphere-related online environments in their local languages. For Bulgaria, around 25% of residents report a good understanding of English, most of whom under the age of 35 and living in the five largest Bulgarian cities (Eurobarometer, 2012). Therefore, being proficient in Bulgarian is a practical advantage when researching the discourses of the local manosphere. Despite searching for several keyword combinations in both English and Bulgarian, I was not able to locate any research into manosphere-related movements in the Bulgarian context, which proves this project’s potential to make a significant contribution to existing knowledge about anti-feminist movements in the region.

Importantly, online networks and their logics are constantly evolving, and the manosphere’s evolution trends in a direction wherein moderate and more extreme subgroups mingle together on publicly accessible forums such as *Reddit* (Fitzgerald, 2020), thus not only expanding the manosphere’s reach, but also increasingly normalizing its core messages. Thus, by observing a mainstream online platform rather than a dedicated manosphere-adjacent online community, another important contribution this study makes is assessing to what extent such discourses are normalized on open online platforms in Bulgaria.

4. Theoretical Framework

For this project, I draw on critical discourse analysis (CDA) informed by social identity theory (SIT) as a theoretical approach to understanding the discursive in-group and out-group building around manosphere-related tropes that takes place on the online Q&A platform *Spodeli.net*. Further, to account for the role of *Spodeli.net* as a space where communities can form around shared experiences, I employ affordance theory to explore

the ways in which the structure and functions of this particular online platform impact the emergence and proliferation of the observed discourses.

4.1. Social identity theory

Social identity theory, coined by Tajfel and Turner (1979), claims that when put in social situations that involve a high degree of stratification, individuals enact a collective (social) identity based on their experienced group belonging, rather than their individual personal identity. As a theory of intergroup conflict, SIT claims that one's social identity not only strengthens and protects their self-identity, but also fosters an affiliation with an 'in-group' and hence, a juxtaposition against other, 'out-groups.'

Central to SIT is the concept of *identity*. An identity is built around a set of characteristics – *prototypes* – that define the attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and values of members of a certain group, and taken together form a *stereotype* about this group (Berger, 2018, p. 133). Based on these, individuals perform what Tajfel and Turner (2004) call *social categorization* – the act of ascribing a social identity to an individual. This process is followed by *social identification*, whereby an individual identifies themselves as part of their own social group. Self-identification with a social group has a psychological impact on an individual, influencing both their behavior to fit the way they believe their group should behave, and their emotional investment in the group's collective identity. Once having internalized an in-group belonging, individuals engage in *social comparison* between their own group and others, where a positive bias exists towards the experienced in-group, and a negative bias – against out-groups.

Further, Tajfel and Turner (2004) identify a relationship between intergroup conflict and a belief system pertaining to people's social identities that they call *social change* – the notion that one's group belonging is rigid, and it is not possible (or is extremely difficult) to move from one social identity to another, but that it is possible to reposition a disadvantaged social group's social standing. For people conforming to this belief, group identity draws battle lines, inciting in-group members to renegotiate their social identity's position in the hierarchy through intergroup conflict. This insight offers a lens through which to understand the discursive construction of certain tropes around men and women as distinct social groups, pitched against each other in antagonistic relationship.

In his book “Extremism,” Berger (2018) applies SIT to studying different extremist groups and communities, demonstrating how social identity processes can lead to radicalization into violence. He defines extremism as “the belief that an in-group’s success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an outgroup” (Berger, 2018, p. 44). Extremist actors within larger social identity collectives, Berger argues, rely on discursively painting an in-group ‘crisis,’ whether real or imagined, and presenting violence as the only effective solution to said crisis. Defining an out-group, a scapegoat to blame the crisis on, motivates in-group members to protect their group against the evils of the out-group ‘enemy.’ Combined with a tendency to ‘stereotype’ people into in- or out-group members based on external or behavioral attributes, which results in depersonalization, the violence can then be directed at any individual deemed to belong to an out-group, regardless of whether the targeted individuals themselves identify with the identity ascribed to them or not.

Berger (2018) highlights gender and sexual orientation as social attributes on the basis of which extremism has been seen to occur, citing the Men’s Rights Activist (MRA) community as an example of a gender identity-based extremist community. In line with SIT, the manosphere constructs a gender-based social identity, thus appealing to men and inviting them into its in-group. In this thesis, SIT is instrumental in identifying the discursive construction of gender-based social identities based on how groups organize their beliefs about the in-group and its relationship to others. Drawing on Berger’s perspectives on the construction of violent extremist narratives allow me to pay special attention to how ideas of men and women in Bulgaria lend themselves to violent interpretations of gender relations with a potential to not only produce misogyny (hate and hostility towards women) but potentially also to radicalize into violent misogyny against women as a group (violent acts including the killing of women).

4.2. Conceptualizing discourse: A discourse-historical approach to CDA

This thesis aims to unpack the construction of a social identity on an online platform through analyzing the *discourses* that occur there. *Discourse* is understood here as textually mediated social actions, in which texts perform ideological work by “representing and constructing society,” and by “reproduc[ing] unequal relationships of power” (Wodak, 1996, p. 18). Consequently, discourse practice is intrinsically linked to

power dynamics between participants, since it is a product of wider societal structures. Importantly, CDA operates under the assumption that discourses are a product of, and in turn produce, the social environments in which they manifest. As such, a specific event and/or text can be analyzed through the relationship between the event or text as a situated such, and the preexisting social constructions and dominating orders of discourse that both shape the course of the event or text and have the potential to be reshaped by it (Fairclough, 1995).

To reveal the discourses essential to the construction of ‘us’/‘them’-groups of social identities, I draw from the discourse-historical approach (DHA) to critical discourse analysis as developed by Wodak (2001). A central focus of CDA is righting and mitigating social wrongs (Milanović, 2021), and the DHA approach to it aims to reveal discursive contradictions, dilemmas, and manipulations in order to shed light on (and consecutively, contribute to improving) problematic social situations (Zotzmann & O’Regan, 2016).

In terms of identity construction, DHA focuses specifically on the *discursive* construction of identities that manifests itself through “mythicised recollections and narratives that suggest a common origin and set of beliefs, traditions and values” (Zotzmann & O’Regan, 2016, p. 117). In accordance with SIT’s focus on in- and out-group distinctions, DHA deems drawing lines between ‘us’ and ‘them’-groups essential for group identity formation. For example, de Cillia et al. (1999) emphasize the importance of discursive practices of inclusion and exclusion in constructing national identities, and I argue that the same argument could be extended to social identities. Both DHA and SIT share the notion that identity construction relies on positive in-group and negative out-group evaluations, and DHA’s focus on the discursive manifestations of such bias will allow me to identify and expose these in my empirical sample.

4.3. Affordance theory

Affordance theory, first proposed by Gibson (1979), defines affordances as the properties of an object or tool that allow it to function. The concept was later applied to human-computer interaction by Norman (1999), who coined the term ‘perceived affordances’ suggesting that users of a digital service or tool interpret the possible functions of that service or tool based on its design. Design, Norman claims, is what can enable or

constrain user actions on a platform. Expanding on Norman's definition, Gaver suggested that affordances are defined by users' interaction with technology, rather than simply perceived, and proposed the term 'technology affordances' as more accurate. Gaver was first to suggest the idea that affordances have an impact on the social interactions they facilitate. For Gaver, technology affordances play a role in constituting sociality and communicative action on online platforms, making them a relevant object of analysis when researching user-centered uses of technologies (Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

Gaver's idea paved way for applying affordance theory to research on online social interactions, and the field of media and communication studies has embraced the affordance approach and further developed its relevance to digital platforms. For example, Postigo (2016, p. 336) makes an important addition to theorizing the affordance concept by making a distinction between Gaver's 'technological affordances' and digital tools' 'social affordances' that he defines as "the social structures that take shape in association with a given technical structure." Social affordances, he argues, relate to how users interpret the purpose of a given platform based on the technological possibilities it offers. Furthermore, Merrill and Åkelund (2018) argue that online platform affordances' influence the way discourse is produced, spread, and understood on these platforms, and in turn, the construction and mediation of social relationships.

Scholars have previously explored the role of anonymous online forums in cultivating controversial communities. For example, Massanari (2017) argues that the lack of accountability and the anonymity that online platforms such as *Reddit* and *4chan* allow create an environment where anti-feminist, misogynist and potentially violence-inciting discourses could easily spread. Furthermore, Hoffman et al. (2020) point out that the structure of these forums allows for the popularization of controversial content. Similarly, Åkerlund (2021a, 2021b) highlights the instrumentality of an online forum's affordance of anonymity for mainstreaming far-right extremist discourses. These findings indicate that systematically unpacking the affordances of these spaces is an integral part of analyzing the conversations that take place there. If discourses are instrumental in shaping social identities, then platform affordances' role in disseminating these discourses should be assessed in order to determine their reach and thus their potential to accelerate the process of social identification with a given identity.

5. Methodology

This chapter outlines my methodological choice and research design. It situates this study within the research paradigm of social constructionism and presents methodological and ethical reflections and limitations.

5.1. Source of data and sampling

The platform chosen for this analysis is the Bulgarian site *Spodeli.net* ('spodeli' is the Latin transliteration of the Bulgarian word 'сподели,' meaning 'share'). *Spodeli.net* is a Q&A platform that resembles the structure of popular international website *Quora*. Unlike the architectures of online forums like *Reddit* or *incels.is*, where participants join open 'threads' to engage in discussions around broader topics and societal issues, in Q&A sites like *Quora* and *Spodeli.net* users post one-to-many 'questions,' thus starting micro-threads that other users can join by answering. However, *Spodeli.net* differs from *Quora* in several important ways. The first and most significant difference is that anonymity is at the core of their platform, which has inspired the rather unique architectural decision of removing the possibility of creating an account. This is to ensure that all questions and answers on the platform are completely anonymous and no individual user's behavior can be traced. Consequently, users cannot edit or delete their comments, nor can they follow or subscribe to individual users or questions. Moreover, there is no architectural feature allowing a user to reply to a post/comment – all answers in a thread appear in chronological order, as replies to the original question. Images or hyperlinks cannot be included in comments either, which is an important fact when exploring discourses of the manosphere, of which meme culture is part and parcel (Eslen-Ziya, 2022; Ging, 2019; Gotell & Dutton, 2016; Guy, 2021; Jones et al., 2020; Svatoňová, 2020). Another substantial difference is the lack of algorithmic curation – the homepage of *Spodeli.net* features the most recent questions and comments, and the only form of curated feed available on the site is a category called 'Editor's Choice' where moderators lift topics they consider particularly interesting.

Spodeli.net prides itself in being a 'safe environment' for free speech, employing minimal moderation – according to the site's (extremely short) Terms and Conditions page, the only rules that one agrees to by posting a question or answer are not to reveal any personal information, not to post any spam/advertising content, and not to break the law. Rather

than employing the more common online practice of reactive moderation, every single post on *Spodeli.net* requires admin approval to ensure that these three simple rules are met. To create a question on *Spodeli.net*, a user selects one of the 13 available categories, then enters a title (their question) and a description. Visitors can find questions to answer through the ‘Newest’ feed, through navigating to a category or the Editor’s Choice section, or by using the website’s search function.

As of February 2022, *Spodeli.net* has close to 110,000 questions, many of which with hundreds of answers. The nature of the questions varies from mundane topics such as sports, cars, and fashion, to discussions around relationships, politics, and worldviews. Scholars have argued that online spaces where mainstream topics are mixed with more radical or controversial conversations can be considered gateways to radicalization (Åkerlund, 2021; Askanius et al., forthcoming), as any visitor who enters these spaces can potentially be exposed to radical ideas. Anonymity is a distinctive feature of such spaces, as it encourages posters to “deliver their honest thoughts and ideas” without being “bound by regular social norms” (Milanović, 2021, p. 194) and predisposes the expression of behaviors, attitudes, and opinions that may be considered inappropriate or unacceptable in the offline world (Behr et al., 2013).

This study draws from a sample of 3,221 posts from 80 recently active threads published on *Spodeli.net* (Appendix 1). A thread was deemed ‘recently active’ if the last comment in it was posted after January 1st, 2020. The threads were identified through purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method whereby the researcher selects a sample with regard to its relevance to the research questions at hand. Purposeful sampling is typical of qualitative research, the aim of which is “to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many” (Merriam, 2009, p. 223). To identify relevant threads, I searched *Spodeli.net* for incel- and manosphere-related keywords/tropes (Appendix 2). The search feature on the site returns comments rather than threads, and I clicked through each comment to the thread it appeared in. The resulting threads were screened for relevance to the research topic and, if deemed relevant, were included in the sampling in their entirety until the data was deemed to reach saturation.

5.2. Research method

This analysis takes on a discourse-historical approach to CDA to reveal discursive tactics for constructing in- and out-groups as distinct social identities. DHA argues that the discursive construction of identities can be understood through linguistic analysis of (textual) empirical data, with its rhetorical, argumentative, pragmatic, and semantic aspects (Zotzmann & O'Regan, 2016). Here, the identification and articulation of rhetorical tropes will serve both as a starting point and an end goal in the process of revealing ideological influences on discursively constructed social identities. A trope is a rhetorical device defined as “using a word in a way other than what is considered its literal or normal form,” and a rhetorical figure can be regarded as a trope when its words are “turn[ed] away from [their] normal meaning, or turn[ed] into something else” (Academic Dictionaries and Encyclopedias, n.d.). The combination of chosen theories and method allows for a comprehensive analysis of the empirical sample, as it enables constructing a research design that takes into account both the linguistic elements of the analyzed text as such, the societal structures that influence the text production, and the role that the digital medium where the discursive exchange takes place plays on the discourse production, consumption, and interpretation. CDA offers the methodological tools necessary to study the manifestation of tropes as linguistic elements in the discourse, as well as their discursive articulations (RQ1). Informed by the theoretical underpinnings of SIT, a discourse-historical approach to CDA further allows me to reveal how discursive tropes are used to define, assume, and argue for/against in- and out-group social identities (RQ2). By keeping a dual focus on the observed discourses as such on the one hand, and the affordances of the digital platform where they appear on the other (RQ3), this approach becomes an effective means to study potentially extremist narrative construction linked to a digitally mediated phenomenon of societal relevance such the manosphere.

In order to operationalize the categorization of discursive group identity constructs, this thesis applies social identity theory to reveal the discursive dimensions of in- and out-group social identity building. The coding process is inspired by KhosraviNik's (2010) three-level text analysis framework. Drawing on DHA's operational categorization into referential, predicational, and argumentative strategies (Wodak, 2001), he proposes breaking down analyzed texts into three discursive levels: actors, actions, and

argumentations. For each level, then, critical *what* and *how* questions need to be asked, which would help reveal the social groups at play in a given text and their characterizations:

What social actors are present in the text? How are these actors referred to in the text?

What actions are associated to these actors? How are these actions associated to the actors?

What are the arguments for/against the social actors and their actions? How are the arguments put forward?

Answering these questions allowed me to identify elements of social identity theory in the discourse, connected to each of the three levels. As a result, seven discursive themes emerged: identifying ‘us’/’them’ stereotyping; the construction and manifestation of positive in-group and negative out-group bias; discursive practices of social categorization, social identification, and social comparison; attempts to mobilize social change; and discourses implying the existence of an out-group-imposed ‘crisis’ (the last category in order to assess whether the observed discourses can be considered of extremist character). I then went deeper into each theme, again asking *what/how* questions following the same format as the first-level analysis (Table 1). Each comment in the dataset was screened for whether it answered any of these questions, and if so, was categorized into the corresponding theme.

Actor-level	Action-level	Argumentation-level
<p>Social categorization practices</p> <p><i>What group identity epithets appear in the discourse?</i></p> <p><i>How are these used to address different individuals?</i></p>	<p>Social identification practices</p> <p><i>What group identity epithets are used by discourse participants to describe themselves?</i></p> <p><i>How are participants articulating their self-identified group belonging?</i></p>	<p>Social comparison practices</p> <p><i>What in- and out-groups are being compared?</i></p> <p><i>How are these social groups compared against each other?</i></p>
<p>Us/them stereotyping</p> <p><i>What prototypes is each group identity said to possess?</i></p> <p><i>How are these prototypes articulated in the discourse to construct internal/external stereotyping?</i></p>	<p>Mobilizing social change</p> <p><i>What is the perceived social position of participants' self-identified in-group(s)?</i></p> <p><i>How do participants argue for improving their social position?</i></p>	<p>Positive in-group/negative out-group bias</p> <p><i>What characteristics are ascribed to the identified in- and out-groups?</i></p> <p><i>How are these characteristics framed as positive/negative?</i></p>
		<p>Construction of an out-group-imposed crisis</p> <p><i>What challenges/crises are in-group(s) said to face?</i></p> <p><i>How are these challenges/crises framed as the fault of the out-group(s)?</i></p>

Table 1. Social identity discursive themes by level

Importantly, this study does not claim to apply a CDA framework in its entirety, since its empirical limitations as to sample source and size¹ do not allow drawing generalizable conclusions, and thus the CDA-central task of discussing potential solutions to mitigating the ‘social wrongs’ under study is unfeasible here. Rather, the analysis mainly draws on the theoretical underpinnings of CDA in order to unpack the discursive themes and tropes in the sample, allowing me to identify the constructed social identities and their relation to discursive tropes of the international manosphere. A particularly useful element of CDA for this study is that it understands text as a tool allowing access into power dynamics, and so a discourse focus will be instrumental in analyzing the power hierarchies between the different social identities that manifest in the data. Furthermore, focusing on the dialectic relationship between text and the broader social factors that result in its production will allow me to reveal how nationality, race, gender, and class play into social identity construction, and how these social identities negotiate their position vis-à-vis other identities.

Lastly, to assess the influence of *Spodeli.net* as a space where social identity building happens, the identified discursive themes and tropes will be put in relation to the platform’s affordances. In CDA, Merrill and Åkelund (2018, p. 334) suggest, digital platform affordances can be explored as “discursive bridges” between user-generated content and the societal context in which it appears. Therefore, an affordance-focused approach will help unpack how *Spodeli.net* fosters the construction and dissemination of the identified discourses, as well as allow for a better understanding of the socio-cultural phenomena that underpin their relevance.

5.3. Research paradigm

This research is situated within the paradigm of social constructionism. Social constructionism sees knowledge and meaning as “historically and culturally constructed through social processes and actions” (Young & Collin, 2004, p. 373), hence research adhering to this paradigm considers culture and society’s influence on meaning-making. Social constructionism emphasizes the historical and cultural influence on the way we see things, and rather than dealing with understanding reality as such, it focuses on “unmasking [...] the taken-for-granted” with the understanding that “people who are

¹ Further articulated in Chapter 5.5.

positioned differently in time and space also view the world differently and have carrying taken-for-granted understandings” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 190). Of further relevance for this project is social constructionism’s emphasis on the ‘social,’ making it “a community-philosophy in which the group and the interaction between the group members is the sole focus” (De Koster et al., 2004, p. 75).

CDA aligns with social constructionism, recognizing both the impact of language in shaping reality and the role of context in analyzing discourse. Social constructionism understands knowledge as the result of social interactions, of which discourse is an integral part. Discourse enables people to “develop shared constructs,” and thus through analyzing discourse, we can access knowledge (De Koster et al., 2004, p. 75). Through induction, social constructionism allows for deconstructing the processes that play into meaning production. In line with CDA, it also acknowledges the notions of hegemony and power in the discourse (Zein, 2013).

5.4. Reflexivity

In line with social constructionism’s assumption of subjectivity, the subjectivity of the researcher also needs to be accounted for. This invites reflexivity, and I wish to make explicit my own position in relation to the matter under study. Being born and raised in Bulgaria, much of the socio-cultural context is just as ‘natural’ to me as to other Bulgarians and accounting for it in this thesis constitutes a process of ‘denaturalization’ for myself as well. However, having lived in Western Europe for the last 10 years, I have observed the unfolding of recent political and cultural events from a distance, which puts me in a more of an ‘outside-looking-in’ position. I consider this duality an advantage in my research, as I was able to put both the national and international perspectives at work, which I believe enriched my understanding of the discourses under analysis.

Another aspect requiring reflexivity is my research agenda. As a Bulgarian woman, my personal interest in this topic stems from my wish and hope to see the Bulgarian population engage in a constructive conversation around gender equality. For my first-year MA thesis, I researched the online engagement with the (non-)ratification of the Istanbul Convention in Bulgaria, where I got familiar with the Bulgarian anti-gender and anti-feminist movement(s). Having realized the societal importance of understanding anti-feminist online discourses, I believe that in addition to its academic importance

outlined earlier, this project holds potential to contribute to the societal discussion in the country in times of democratic backsliding and backlash against women's rights.

Finally, being a Bulgarian woman analyzing discourses that are to a large extent *about* Bulgarian women, a lot of times I found it difficult to stay emotionally detached. However, my emotional involvement with the topic also served as a driving force to perform this research to the best of my abilities. I believe in the topic's significance, and if there is a larger phenomenon that this study is an example of, then leaving it unattended risks bringing about negative consequences for women in Bulgaria, and for Bulgarian society at large.

5.5. Ethics and limitations

When studying user-generated data, the key ethical considerations should be about privacy, informed consent, anonymity, and risk of harm (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). First, we should consider whether the collected data could be considered private. Since *Spodeli.net* is an open platform and requires no registration to access, the data is deemed public. Furthermore, the condition of anonymity is met since as there are no user profiles, it is not possible to single out or identify individual users. Another ethical concern is the lack of informed consent from the participants. Because the dataset is public, and because even I as a researcher have no access to users' identities, which makes acquiring informed consent from each participant unfeasible, I have chosen to proceed without explicit consent from the participants, but with taking extra steps to ensure complete anonymity through translation of direct quotes. Since the research project is conducted in English, while the dataset is in Bulgarian, translating direct citations mitigates the possibility of readers locating the original comments via search engines, in turn compromising any attempts to trace these back to a person. Meeting the condition of anonymity also reduces the risk of harm; however, as an extra precaution, I will not store any raw data locally upon completion of the project or share it with any third party.

Using online platforms as data sources comes with some limitations. In this case, as there are no user accounts, I have no way of knowing how many people were involved in the production of the studied content, neither do I have any demographic information about them. Furthermore, there is no feasible way to identify to what extent users on *Spodeli.net* engage in 'trolling' – deliberately provoking others online via outrageous or insincere

posts (Birkbak, 2018). As a result, this thesis does not claim to make any representative or generalizable findings beyond the scope of this sample.

6. Analysis

As will become clear from the analysis, ideas characteristic of the manosphere clearly find their way into the discourse on *Spodeli.net*, but the arguments used to support them mix international tropes of men as victims, women as enemies, and gender power hierarchies with locally specific articulations of these rhetorical devices. Postulations around feminism as a ‘source of evil,’ typical of manosphere-adjacent discourse internationally, are mixed with ideas around ‘the Bulgarian man’ and ‘the Bulgarian woman’ – constructs whose use does not simply relate to men and women’s nationality but signifies specific social identities possessing unique characteristics, negotiated vis-à-vis other social identities distinct to the Bulgarian context. As research has shown to be the case with international communities of the manosphere (Ging, 2019), here, too, discourses are contradictory, varied, and do not present a unified opinion, but nevertheless rest on shared beliefs about society, gender, and gender roles. The comments constitute a mix of ‘casual’ and extreme misogyny, sexism, and resistance to feminism and gender equality, and the prevalence of these discourses is amplified by some of the platform’s key affordances – i.e., anonymity and low level of moderation.

Importantly, while many of the arguments stemming from the international manosphere were found to have taken roots in Bulgaria, judging by the discussions in this sample, references to the manosphere’s specific language tropes were the exception rather than the norm. Words like ‘alpha,’ ‘beta,’ ‘Chad,’ ‘Stacy,’ and ‘red pill’ appear seldomly in the data, and the same can be said of mentions of manosphere-adjacent online communities such as ‘incels,’ ‘MGTOW,’ and ‘PUA.’ However, the same ideas and philosophies that these terms refer to are recycled and adapted to the Bulgarian context, mixed with locally specific tropes: conspiracy theories and superficial and/or angled interpretations of scientific and philosophical theories appear alongside discourses of ‘traditional values’ characteristic of the Christian right and references to Bulgaria’s socio-political situation.

The first section of the analysis unpacks the trope of the ‘Bulgarian man’ and the various ‘Others’ that are contrasted against it. It shows how the ‘Bulgarian man’ trope is

constructed to signify a social identity positioned vis-à-vis three out-groups of ‘Other’ men – ‘soft men’ (including LGBTQ+ individuals), men of Roma ethnicity, and ‘Westerners.’ The next section explores how ‘Bulgarian men’ discuss, and position themselves against, the out-group of ‘women,’ and reveals the construction of a ‘Bulgarian woman’ as a distinct out-group social identity, defined as simultaneously an object of desire and a destructor of masculinity. The final section deals with the role *Spodeli.net* affordances play on the construction and proliferation of these discourses.

6.1. “Bulgarian men” and their “Others”

The discursive figure of the ‘Bulgarian man’ is frequently evoked in the analyzed online discussions, and it is through this expression that male participants are invited to adopt a collective social identity. Departing from the hegemonic masculine ideal of the ‘traditional patriarchal male,’ the phrase incorporates the father-protector-breadwinner model. However, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 841) point out, masculinity “represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices,” and since in praxis, not many users on the forum express a belief that they live up to this ideal, part of the agenda becomes renegotiating the characteristics of the ‘Bulgarian man’ trope to include themselves.

It is worth highlighting here that a significant difference emerged between the international manosphere’s idea of hegemonic masculinity and the one that manifested itself in this data: the reduced importance of lookism, replaced by the elevated importance of materialism. While the international manosphere’s male ideal is mainly centered around physical appearance (e.g. Baele et al., 2021; Fernquist et al., 2020; Sugiura, 2021), looks were mentioned less frequently in *Spodeli.net*. Instead, the main identifier determining a man’s social status (and consecutively, his success with women) is wealth. As one user puts it:

For women of our generation, social status is paramount. It is, figuratively speaking, the "one" ahead of a multiple sequence of zeros, which makes a meaningful number (1000...). Other factors like education, manners, and physique each add another zero and raise your "price," but only provided that the "one" is already there.

(Thread #15, Sexual Market Value – On the love market, how much do you cost as a man/woman?)

The primary obstacle to achieving this type of hegemonic masculinity – scarcity of financial resources – becomes a source of tension among the participants in the forum, as it challenges their role as providers for their families, and therefore, their identity as men. Negotiating this tension relies on the marginalization of an outside ‘Other’ to juxtapose against. Therefore, the trope of the ‘Bulgarian man’ is frequently positioned vis-à-vis different ‘scapegoats’ to strengthen participants’ social identification with it. Discourses on the forum reveal how self-identifying ‘Bulgarian men’ negotiate notions of masculinity through social comparison against other, ‘outside’ groups of men. There is a consensus among the participants that the phrase ‘Bulgarian man’ signifies an ethnic Bulgarian, white, heterosexual, cis-gender male, who is born, raised, and lives in Bulgaria. But beyond that, the ‘Bulgarian man’ is not so much defined by what he is and does than by what he is not and does not do – and anything that does not fit the users’ way of living is discursively ascribed to various groups of ‘Others.’ Notably, both the in-group depiction of ‘Bulgarian men’ and out-group constructions of ‘Others’ as collective social identities rely heavily on stereotyping and de-individualization. Three out-groups of ‘Other’ masculinities stand out as tropes – ‘genders’ (grouping together LGBTQ+ individuals and ‘soft men’), the Roma minority and ‘foreign’ (Western) men.

6.1.1. “Genders”

One group of ‘Others’ that users actively distinguish themselves from is men who ‘relinquish their masculinity’ by acting and/or being ‘feminine’ and are therefore unworthy of respect. This includes, and discursively groups together, homosexual, transsexual, queer, and gender-fluid individuals with ‘soft men,’ ‘cucks,’ and ‘simps’ – terms used to refer to any type of male self-expression that does not fit the ‘macho male’ hegemonic masculine ideal. Discussants mix ‘casual’ homophobia with discourses spurring out of the anti-gender movement’s signature rhetoric to express their aversion and lack of respect towards these groups. The word ‘gender,’ that received a new popular meaning during the anti-Istanbul Convention anti-gender campaign to become discursively synonymous with ‘faggot’ or ‘queer’ (Stoencheva, 2021), is frequently invoked with a strong negative undertone and used as an insult to target any ways of being that deviate from the constructed image of the ‘traditional Bulgarian man.’ The convergence of these ‘other’ masculinities into one discursive group demonstrates the importance that users ascribe to the physical appearance of ‘manliness’ for determining a

man's belonging to the in-group of 'Bulgarian men,' deeming it as significant as sexual orientation. In terms of social comparison, attached to this homogenized group is a set of values that discussants perceive as negative, such as support for feminism, left-wing 'neo-Marxist' beliefs, and a pro-European attitude – as one comment puts it, “you can't be a man and glorify feminism unless you're a gender” (Thread #61, *Why do most Bulgarian women have an extremely unrealistic opinion of themselves?*).

Such rhetoric corresponds to a popular belief across the manosphere, according to which female emancipation has brought about a crisis of masculinity and a mass-scale emasculation of men (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012). This idea is frequently addressed on the platform, with participants arguing that in Bulgaria, the 'unreasonable and unnatural feminization of men' is a result of post-transition political and societal processes, often expressed with sentiments of socialist nostalgia. Men considered to have fallen victims to this 'crisis of masculinity' are not object of sympathy but of disgust, described with harsh humiliating epithets. For example, in making the case for a connection between the popularization of feminism and discontinuing mandatory military service, one user writes:

I spent two years in the socialist army, followed by a few years in the democratic army as an officer. The army is not a panacea, it's a reflection of society. You cannot expect, in a sick and degraded society like the Bulgarian where neither the family nor school teach order and morals, that a year in the army will re-educate the mommy's boys-turned-faggots, drug addicts or just weak and disoriented bastards. Contemporary "democracy" is the source of the contagion. Military service will only make sense if we live in a healthy and disciplined society under totalitarian or authoritarian rule.

(Thread #9, Do you see a connection between feminism, homosexuality, dehumanization, and the end of mandatory military service and weakening of the army?)

Across the threads, several talking points typical of broader manosphere movements are evoked to construct this argument. For instance, contemporary 'weak,' supposedly emasculated men are discursively contrasted to war heroes of the past, athletes, and other historical figures considered to embody the traditional masculine ideal, in a prominent manifestation of longing for a 'lost golden age' for masculinity. Furthermore, in an echo of the manosphere's belief that this alleged crisis of masculinity is part of a global conspiracy with the goal of 'white genocide' and a new world order (Askanius et al.,

forthcoming), for users on *Spodeli.net* the ‘disappearance’ of ‘real masculinity’ means the collapse of society and extinction of the native Bulgarian nation. Such discourses demonstrate the link between the manosphere’s core beliefs and far-right ideology, in visualizing how white supremacist ideas are employed in the context of gender-related discussions.

6.1.2. The Roma as an “internal threat”

This idea of the native Bulgarian race being under threat of extinction is further contextualized when we consider another group that is negatively depicted on this forum – the Roma. For context, it is important to state here that discrimination against the Roma minority is still widespread in Bulgarian society (Canut, 2019). As Canut (2019, p. 401) writes, the Roma are a societally legitimized scapegoat for Bulgarians, and any person of Roma ethnicity is ascribed to a discursively constructed homogenized ‘out-group’ with a set of fixed characteristics including “poverty, illiteracy (or un-culturedness), insubordination, theft, cheating, lying, laziness, savagery, deviance, [...] uncontrolled reproduction, and [...] terrorism.” In the observed threads, when discussing Roma men, participants echo widespread discriminatory and racist discourses against the Roma minority, referring to them with the derogatory term ‘gypsies’ (*cigani*) and portraying them as a uniform outlaw group with primitive ways of living which are implied to be essential and inherent to the Roma ethnicity.

Religion also plays a role in these discourses, with the Roma out-group being uniformly defined as Islamist, in an act of discursively homogenizing an out-group – while the majority of the Roma in Bulgaria do identify as Muslim, a significant portion of Roma communities practice Christianity, and a smaller number identify with other or no religions (Encyclopedia.com, n.d.; European Commission, 2012). Nevertheless, portraying Roma men as islamists helps construct them as an ‘Other’ in opposition to ‘traditional Christian (family) virtues’ – a phrase that is considered a cornerstone of ‘Bulgarian men’s’ belief system, although it is rarely defined what these virtues are or how they relate to the Christian religion. Ironically, however, even though an Islamist society is understood as a danger to Bulgaria, this view is mixed with subtle sentiments of appreciation for their gender norms. Namely, users argue that since Islam preaches authority of Muslim men over Muslim women, ‘their civilization’ is increasing in

numbers while the (Christian) ethnic Bulgarians are declining. The following comment illustrates this dissonance:

*As it's already been said in several threads on this site, when women are given a lot of freedom, things go wrong. It is clear that societies where women are "successful," wear pants and pretend to be men, will one day be eradicated by those where women are only used for breeding and housework, have no practical rights and are generally crushed by the man (this is surely an extreme, but it clearly prevails over the other extreme with excessive freedom). While the modern "successful" Bulgarian woman has 20 "partners" (read f*ckers), "uses" men for sex and barely gives birth to 1-2 children when she turns 40 (if at all), the gypsies, who are already almost as many as the Bulgarians, already have several children and grandchildren. With this tempo, somewhere in this "modern" century, Bulgaria will become a country inhabited mainly by gypsies and will eventually be forced to conform to their way of life. Which on the one hand will make the woman inferior to the man again, but on the other hand will lead to economic destruction and primitive behavior of society. That's why balance is important, but it is a fact that the one extreme (where the woman is totally crushed) will prevail over the other (where the woman is a symbol of debauchery and vulgarity rather than mother and wife).*

(Thread #18, *To successful women*)

This comment also demonstrates a 'crisis' construction characteristic of extremist narratives: in an echo of the popular far-right conspiracy theory of "The Great Replacement," and in line with how far-right extremist discourses from the West portray refugees and immigrants from Arabic countries as a threat to society and a tool for eradicating the white race (Lewis, 2019), users on *Spodeli.net* argue that Bulgaria is in danger of being 'taken over' by the Roma, both in number (due to their high birth rates compared to native Bulgarians) and culturally. Since the Roma out-group is strongly stigmatized as 'savage,' this 'cultural takeover' proposition induces a moral panic that resonates with Bulgarians and entices response.

6.1.3. The West and their "Other" men

A third group of men that the 'Bulgarian man' is discursively positioned against are foreigners, and particularly, Western men. This to reinforce that their national and ethnic identity as Bulgarians is an integral part of their social identity, but also to signify a disassociation from a set of values they perceive as 'foreign' and hostile to Bulgarian tradition. In fact, opposition to Western values is framed on the forum as a point of national pride and a righteous goal of any 'Bulgarian man.' Comments like the following are frequently encountered across threads:

There's a proverb: everything new is well-forgotten old, and so it is with these pseudo-ideologies that are now imposing a "new normal" on us. The good thing is that here in Bulgaria, although we are poorer and not as developed as the Western world, we have kept some common sense and traditions and do not accept everything that is offered to us at face value, because as a nation we have suffered for many centuries. Let them laugh at us "primitive Balkans" – in some areas, Western nations will never catch up with us ;)

(Thread #9, Do you see a connection between feminism, homosexuality, dehumanization, and the end of mandatory military service and weakening of the army?)

There is a dissonance in the attitude towards this group too, an aggrievement at the notion that Western men, with their financial resources (that they're indisputably assumed to have), will always be preferred by Bulgarian women. To contest the implication that Western men's financial means would in any way make them superior to 'Bulgarian men,' discussants are careful to always invoke the trope in a negative light, often framing them as emasculated, cheated, delusional men of a race that, despite contributing to 'the extinction of the Bulgarian nation' by 'seducing' Bulgarian women, is itself going extinct as 'a victim of its own ideology.' In an act of social comparison, they are mocked and framed as 'cucks,' similarly to the 'beta' men referred to in the manosphere's mantra "alpha fux beta bux" (i.e., the theory that women seek out strong, attractive 'alpha' males for sex, but would settle for a 'beta' man as a provider) (Ging, 2019, p. 650) where 'Bulgarian men' themselves are the 'alphas.' For example, in discussing 'why Bulgarian women prefer to marry Westerners rather than Bulgarians,' a user speculates:

Why do you think Bulgarian women prefer Westerners? The truth is that they're simply easier to manipulate. A friend of mine has an affair with a woman who is married to a Westerner. There are countless cases like her that most brazenly and arrogantly use Western cucks as providers, but keep fucking Bulgarians because they're more manly and attractive. And since the law protects their shamelessness and mockery of masculine dignity, women can freely fuck others while in official cohabitation with a man, and should he want to end the relationship, the woman can kick him out of his home, in which she did not invest a penny nor any effort.

(Thread #67, The truth about why Bulgarian women prefer to marry Westerners rather than Bulgarians)

A related, but distinct sub-group of the 'Western men' trope are ethnic Bulgarians who have emigrated abroad. Contrary to Western manosphere, where immigration of men from the Middle East is discussed as a factor (Askanius et al., forthcoming; Guy, 2021;

Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2021a), in Bulgaria emigration from the country takes the center stage as an issue of concern. In a reinforcement of their anxieties about the ‘extinction of the Bulgarian nation,’ users discuss emigration as yet another phenomenon that threatens the nation’s existence. Some express aversion at male emigrants who choose to create a family with a foreign partner, but even more frequently, it is argued that when going abroad, Bulgarians get ‘infected’ with Western values which they then import back to Bulgaria (through communication with friends and family or by returning to the country), thus acting as ‘foreign agents.’

I love it when Bulgarian emigrants who live in the West as white slaves and henpecked husbands of "emancipated women" come back to Bulgaria to lecture the locals on what's wrong with our country, as if they were some higher authority. There is no place in Bulgaria for such "elevated," "intelligent," "cultured" individuals, so well "integrated" in New Muslimia (Western Europe).

(Thread #45, *The Bulgarian woman*)

A component to social identity theory is the notion that in-group members consider ‘betraying’ one’s assigned social group by attempting to move to another an immoral and sanctionable act (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Since nationalism is considered a virtue of the ‘Bulgarian man’ social identity, by calling out emigrant men as ‘traitors,’ users enact fantasies of heroism by discursively framing the choice of staying in Bulgaria as a heroic act of ‘protecting’ and ‘standing up for’ the Bulgarian ethnicity, country, and nation. Commenters reinforce their in-group superiority through a chain of arguments framing male emigrants as ‘scammed’ for having fallen into the ‘Western trap’ of becoming cheap labor to foreign employers. While emigrants, similarly to Western men, are believed to be in higher demand among women than ‘Bulgarian men’ are, they are nevertheless considered an out-group inferior to both ‘real’ Western men and ‘real’ Bulgarians and often mocked for this implied inferiority as ‘wannabe-Westerners.’

The Bai Ganyos pick mushrooms and strawberries on the British fields for petty cash, only to be able to buy a few drinks to a chalgarka² in a dance club when they come back to Bulgaria and feel like “they made it.”

(Thread #22, *Why do you have to be a murderer or a thief to be wanted and respected by women?*)

² See section 6.2.1. *Bulgarian women as “gold diggers”* for a definition of this trope.

Bai Ganyo, referred to in the example above, is a distinctively Bulgarian trope, frequently invoked on the forum. Bai Ganyo is a fictional character created by Bulgarian satire writer Aleko Konstantinov in 1889 as a mockery of the ‘soon-to-be-modern/European’ rural Bulgarian. In a popular satirical book series criticizing the Bulgarian inability to change due to continuously reproducing the historically situated behaviors that keep Bulgarians in a subordinate social and economic situation, Bai Ganyo is a merchant trying to ‘make it’ in Europe, but always ending up embarrassing himself with his vulgar, opportunistic, and uncivilized behavior. Sotirova (2015, p. 34) describes Bai Ganyo as the epitome of “everything one should be ashamed of within Bulgarianness.” The trope is evoked on the forum as an insult, mocking emigrant Bulgarians for believing that moving to Western Europe would offer them self-improvement and success.

By giving into the ‘false promise’ of a better life abroad, Bulgarians who emigrated are thought to have betrayed their national identity and thus lost the essence of what constitutes a ‘Bulgarian man,’ thus becoming morally inferior to ‘Bulgarian men’ while remaining financially inferior to Westerners.

6.2. Feminism and “men as victims”

Having explored how participants in the observed threads create a common social identity of ‘Bulgarian men’ by discursively constructing out-groups of ‘Other’ men, we now explore how this social identity is positioned vis-à-vis women. In this aspect, we find resemblances of international manosphere discourses as well – just like research on Western countries has shown to be the case with platforms like *Reddit* and *4chan* (Ging, 2019; Jones et al., 2020; Preston et al., 2021), on this forum, too, nostalgic longing for a ‘lost golden age’ of patriarchic rule are mixed with a notion of ‘Bulgarian men’ as ‘victims of (Western) feminism.’ The argument goes that feminists nowadays do not fight for equality, but for female domination, thus disadvantaging men in various ways, such as ‘feminazi laws’ that permit false rape allegations and material benefits for women following separation. In a process of discursive crisis-construction, feminism is frequently described as a ‘social engineering’ process driven by global elites to ‘keep men in check’ and thus control the population:

Feminism cannot exist by itself. It was imposed and funded by billionaire bastards who want to control the world this way. With women in power and with women's rule, society becomes too weak and easily controlled, and in the event

of an outside invasion, it cannot defend itself. The perversions have become too widespread. Women have gained enormous legal power and challenge men in every way. It comes to the point of women subjugating men by accusing them of rape, violence, discrimination, and other "crimes" without any truth to their accusations.

(Thread #9, Do you see a connection between feminism, homosexuality, dehumanization, and the end of mandatory military service and weakening of the army?)

Users regularly express anti-feminist and misogynist beliefs in constructing an image of women as an out-group ‘enemy,’ as having ‘forgotten their place in society’ and turned into ‘oppressors’ and ‘tyrants.’ These discourses are evoked in order to strengthen the in-group bond by appealing to emotions, but also to incite action against this common enemy, thus justifying discrimination and even violent tendencies towards women. For example, a user suggests that “the evil of feminism can only be defeated by physical force,” and that the consequences of not acting would be catastrophic for men in the short term and for the human race in the long run (Thread #9, *Do you see a connection between feminism, homosexuality, dehumanization, and the end of mandatory military service and weakening of the army?*). In another thread, it is argued that domestic violence was a result of the ‘provocative’ nature of feminism:

In France, murders of women have more than doubled since the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Why? The answer is simple and there is an explanation. Feminism is to blame. Feminism encourages women to mock male authority and the masculine nature, deceiving them that they'd get away with it thanks to their feminazi laws. Well guess what – a man can only take so much, and eventually he has no choice but to ignore the law and beat up the impudent woman.

(Thread #48, Do you hit your women?)

This kind of endorsement of violence shows a clear pattern of an extremist narrative, demonstrating a form of ‘gender extremism’ which legitimates, and can thus lead to, real-world violence against women (Berger, 2018).

The West is blamed as the source of the feminism ‘contagion,’ which, participants argue, has spread to Bulgaria as a result of globalization and mass emigration, but also through NGO ‘sell-outs’ who have ‘betrayed’ the nation for profit. Since Bulgaria has a long history of NGO civic engagement, and Bulgarian NGOs actively participate in political debates (Vasileva, 2020), suspicions that they are paid to disseminate pro-European, pro-

Western ideological influences are taken seriously on the forum. Western philanthropists such as George Soros and Bill Gates are often cited as playing a role in ‘importing’ feminism to Bulgaria through NGO funds.

However, discussants seem to disagree on the extent to which ‘Western feminism’ has taken roots in Bulgaria. Some argue that, unlike in the West, in Bulgaria ‘the feminist contagion’ has not yet taken over all aspects of political and social life, and can thus still be stopped. In some comments, ‘Western’ feminism is portrayed as a malicious version of ‘real’ feminism that was happening during the Socialist regime:

In Bulgaria, women have long now been an established part of the working class thanks to socialism. We don't have gender pay gaps, we have as many women as men in high-paid jobs such as IT, law, medicine. Women have the right to vote, to drive, to study. And this has never come at the expense of having a family. On the contrary, during the socialist regime women were supported in having both children and careers, unlike now. Western feminism tries to convince us it's either-or, but Bulgarians know what real feminism looks like – men and women as equal, not as the same.

(Thread #61, *Why do most Bulgarian women have an extremely unrealistic opinion of themselves?*)

This helps cement feminism as an ‘imported ideology’ that addresses problems of little relevance to Bulgarian women. This notion is also often accompanied by calls for anti-feminist action, with appeals to ‘stop the spread’ appearing across the observed threads. A frequently proposed solution in this context is voting for far-right nationalist parties – which reinforces the relevance of international research findings on the convergence between anti-feminism and far-right nationalism (e.g. Askanius et al., forthcoming; Ging, 2019). In a further reinforcement of this convergence, contemporary Bulgarian far-right politicians are often positively depicted in the context of these discourses, portrayed as examples of ‘real Bulgarian men’ who ‘stand up for the Bulgarian nation.’³

6.2.1. Bulgarian women as “gold diggers”

While discussions on feminism often addressed the out-group of ‘women’ in general, ‘Bulgarian women’ constitute a separate out-group trope possessing unique characteristics. The predominant theme in the data – money as the defining factor of a

³ More recently, Kostadin Kostadinov – the leader of parliament-represented far-right party *Възраждане* (Revival) – appears particularly frequently in such contexts.

man's success with women – is at the roots of the discursive image of the 'Bulgarian woman' painted on the forum, where Bulgarian women are portrayed as materialists and 'gold diggers,' obsessed with money and status. This could be interpreted as simply an echo of the manosphere's idea that women would seek out alpha males for sex but would settle with a beta male in order to financially exploit him; however, a closer look at the data reveals that this idea is somewhat distorted in its Bulgarian manifestation compared to its international use. In the discourse exhibited in the observed threads, wealth appears to be more of a defining factor to determine which men have access to sex than looks are. In fact, some users propose the understanding that possession of wealth is a prerequisite for a man's 'alpha' status. In Bulgaria, due to the overall low living standard and the dysfunctional welfare state, money becomes a source of concern of a higher level than in the West. Mixed with the hegemonic masculinity ideal of the man-provider, wealth is not only understood as purchasing currency guaranteeing access to goods, services, and experiences, but also as means to acquire social status. The participants in this forum exhibit a strong belief that money equals a high social standing, and the ones with the means have priority on any sort of access, including romantic access.

Interestingly, the discourses in the observed threads rarely focus on the acquisition of financial capital as a responsibility for men. Neither are wealthy or attractive men discursively 'blamed' for their 'unjust' social position. Rather, discussions circle around the trope of the 'mercantile Bulgarian woman,' devoid of 'values,' who offers herself to a man in exchange for financial benefits. Many comments imply that Bulgarian women today initiate a relationship not out of love or attraction, but out of desire for access to money, and hence prioritize the richest men who can offer them status and a luxury life:

The mercantile woman exists! I don't know if she's a product of our time, or if this sort of women has always existed. How unfortunate, gentlemen, but if you lack a shiny jeep, an expensive suit, if you do not drink branded alcohol, then you seem doomed to be alone.

(Thread #1, *Men without sex*)

This fixation with money in addition to looks, spurring out of the socio-cultural consequences of the transition, has nuanced the Bulgarian counterparts of the international manosphere figures of 'Chad' and 'Stacy' – the *mutra* and his moll, the *chalgarka*. In their core, these terms signify 'the most desired man' and 'the most desired

woman,' just like 'Chad' and 'Stacy' do internationally, but are laden with additional locally specific historical and cultural meanings which merit further clarification in order to better grasp the essence of the discourses that evoke them.

The male trope of the *mutra* literally translates to 'mean mug.' However, in the early 1990s, the word took on a new popular meaning when, after the fall of the socialist regime, professional sportsmen (primarily wrestlers) holding favorable positions among the newly dismantled Communist government took over significant properties and businesses and used their wealth and power to establish criminal mafia organizations. The *mutra* became one of the transition period's most popular discursive tropes, signifying "a large, physically strong, unintelligent mobster, hostile and prone to violence against ordinary people" (Bankov, 1996). The term continued to evolve throughout the 2000s to incorporate an idea of post-transition male 'success,' and while in contemporary popular culture the *mutra* trope no longer necessarily implies involvement in criminal organizations, it continues to signify an oligarch-like performance of hyper-masculinity combining power, wealth, an athletic build, and violent tendencies.

The female trope of the *chalgarka* relates to 'chalga culture,' the transition *highlife*'s musical/performative depiction in popular culture. Chalga is a pop-folk music style popularized in Bulgaria in the 1990s, deriving out of Bulgarian folklore music but also incorporating Ottoman, Romani, and Balkan musical influences. The lyrics and visual expression of chalga music deal with the "eroticizing of power" through representing "interactions of seduction mediated by money" (Muharska, 2019, p. 215). The original meaning of the word *chalgarka* refers to a female performer of chalga music. Female chalga artists exhibit a specific, overly sexualized look, characterized by heavy make-up, fake eyelashes/hair, promiscuous clothing, and obvious signs of plastic surgery such as large silicone breasts and lip fillers. Nowadays, the term extends to include women who do not perform chalga music but practice the chalga lifestyle by exhibiting all or some of these visual characteristics, in addition to displaying wealth through status symbols such as designer clothes and opulent jewellery, expensive cars, and access to luxury travel.

Both these tropes are discussed among users with a mix of aversion, envy and an undertone of fascination and respect. In this sense, the lifestyle they signify becomes simultaneously an object of mockery and acts like a sort of twisted role model for male

triumph. In her analysis of chalga culture's influence on the 2018 Istanbul Convention debate, Muharska (2019, p. 218) observes a similar trend and offers an explanation for this dissonance, arguing that “[t]he precarious insecure masculinity of subaltern classes compensates for the sense of missing power with hyper-manifestations so they endorse narcissistic displays, bluster and bragging, enhanced by historically insecure intersections of identities.” She also highlights the importance of male “homo-sociality” for men of lower social classes – the intergrouping around a unified social identity in order to reaffirm and amplify their masculinity.

6.3. The role of *Spodeli.net* affordances

The observed sample reveals the widespreadness of manosphere-adjacent discourses on *Spodeli.net*, ranging from moderate to extreme. ‘Casual’ sexism and misogyny expressions are the norm, but moreover, users frequently resort to explicit sexual and vulgar language, and derogatory sexist, racist, and homophobic terms are used without censoring. Even though the platform claims not to approve posts that break national law, the data reveals instances of posts openly justifying (and at times even encouraging) violence, murder, and femicide. In a publicly accessible space such as *Spodeli.net*, the presence of such discourses risks contributing to their normalization.

Arguably, what allows these discourses to thrive on *Spodeli.net* is a combination of two of the platform's key affordances – anonymity and minimal moderation. In her exploration of far-right online discourse, Åkerlund (2022) argues that anonymity further enables the proliferation of extreme discourses online, as it removes the personal accountability barrier for users, thus ‘liberating’ them from the ‘constraint’ of behaving in socially acceptable ways. Similarly, in the context of the manosphere, Ging (2019) argues that anonymity “facilitates hostile and often illegal performances of masculinity [...] which would not go unchecked in face-to-face contexts.” Moreover, a negative correlation has been found between online platforms’ level of moderation and hate speech – the less a platform is moderated, the more hate speech proliferates on it (Lima et al., 2018, 2020). This combination of anonymity and low level of moderation (often under the pretense of a commitment to ‘free speech’) has proven particularly significant for fostering hate (Åkerlund, 2021b). Anonymous ‘mainstream’ forums, where “seemingly mundane topics [mix] with politicizing and radicalizing terminology,” have been

previously found to act as gateways to radical views and ideas (Askanius et al., forthcoming). Their congregation in the same virtual space increasingly blurs the lines and pushes the limits of what is considered acceptable language among participants. Through rhetorics encouraging social identification, many self-stated ‘first-time posters’ on *Spodeli.net* were drawn into engaging with radical and extreme discourses.

The platform’s affordance of anonymity is ostensibly strengthened by the absence of user accounts, since it ensures that no post can be traced back to a person and thus, prevents other users from knowing whether any two posts were made by the same individual. In the data sample, many users express appreciation for the ‘liberating’ nature of not having their posts tied to one’s individual identity. This makes *Spodeli.net* a particularly suitable site for fostering collective social identity expression over individual identity performance. However, some users also perceive complete anonymity as a limitation. User popularity serves as a powerful motivator for content creation and engagement with a platform (Åkerlund, 2021b), and to improve their own ‘social standing’ and establish themselves as ‘influencers’ within their social group on *Spodeli.net*, certain users choose to ‘sign off’ their comments with a pseudonym. This practice occurs across the forum, with some of the same signatures found across several threads. Nevertheless, this cannot effectively guarantee that the same person always stands behind the same pseudonym – a few instances in the data show posters challenging this claim, with statements like “I am [nickname], but I didn’t write comment #n.” This practice could afford trolling in that users can use each other’s pseudonyms maliciously, in order to undermine the social standing of other users; on the other hand, it could also serve as testing social limits, as one could always denounce their authorship of a comment should it not be received well.

The architectural specificities of *Spodeli.net* show a design intent for simplicity, authenticity of answers, and a one-directional question-answer communication where the respondents are not to engage in discussions with each other. In practice, however, users create tactics to adapt the platform’s structures to their own intended purposes – an example of creating ‘social affordances’ whereby the users interpret a platform’s technical structure in creating social structures within it (Postigo, 2016). Back-and-forth discussions are afforded on the platform through user-created tactics for responding to each other’s answers within a thread – either by referring to the number of the comment they intend to respond to, addressing the comment poster by their pseudonym if such is

available, or copy-pasting the statement they are responding to. Moreover, as a tactic for going around the inability to link to external websites, users frequently encourage each other to ‘google’ (often manosphere-related) terms, visit specific online spaces, and look up content on YouTube or other social platforms. While referring to other online communities is considered ‘advertising’ and thus not allowed by the platform, users frequently encourage one another to engage with manosphere-adjacent content outside of *Spodeli.net*, thus drawing them deeper into the manosphere’s online world while also ‘mainstreaming’ such content.

7. Conclusion

The manosphere and its related communities have been linked to cases of radicalization in North America and Western Europe, with the most notable manifestations of possible outcomes being terrorist attacks and instances of public violence. This thesis contributes to knowledge on the manosphere phenomenon by addressing two important research gaps. First and foremost, it makes an empirical contribution by expanding the geographical borders of (the so far primarily Western-centered) manosphere-related research to include Eastern Europe, and Bulgaria specifically. Secondly, rather than exploring the fringe, closed-off internet ‘corners’ exclusively dedicated to distinct communities of the manosphere, it seeks to assess whether and how discourses characterizing these communities penetrate more mainstream online spaces, where they gain exposure to a wider audience, thus both reaching new potential sympathizers and increasingly normalizing these discourses in wider society. In so doing, this project challenges the notion that the manosphere is a ‘Western problem’ by identifying local applications of discourses typical of the international manosphere in an Eastern European country like Bulgaria. Furthermore, it reveals the malleable nature of the manosphere’s discursive tropes, demonstrating how their conspirative character turns them into empty signifiers with virulent potential that travel well across contexts and lend themselves to molding to fit distinct national circumstances.

By analyzing manosphere-related discourses on a public Bulgarian Q&A platform through the lens of social identity theory, this thesis demonstrates how these discourses encourage the self-identification of men with a social identity in-group, and how this self-identification then poses the risk of polarization, and in some cases, radicalization, as it

is juxtaposed against groups of ‘Others’ portrayed as enemy out-groups endangering the constructed in-group. The in-group social identity in the analyzed threads, signified through the discursive trope of the ‘Bulgarian man,’ represents a conflicting act of quasi-hegemonic masculinity, glorifying physical and gendered power while navigating many of the in-group members’ perceived position of financial inferiority. Importantly, the discourses constituting each of the ‘Other’ social identities that the ‘Bulgarian man’ trope is opposed against were found to contain elements of radical character, in line with Berger’s (2018) definition – specifically, they are all implied to bring about a ‘crisis’ upon the ‘Bulgarian men’ in-group. Three groups of ‘Other’ men were frequently invoked – ‘Genders,’ a flexible trope serving as ‘symbolic glue’ (Kováts & Põim, 2015) for anything from perceived ‘soft men’ to homosexual, transsexual, or gender-queer individuals, said to embody the ‘crisis’ of ‘male emasculation’; Roma men, discursively portrayed as an ethnicity-based unified social identity alleged to impend a ‘racial, religious, and cultural takeover’ of Bulgaria; and ‘Western men,’ assumed to pose a double threat to the ‘Bulgarian nation’ by both ‘stealing Bulgarian women’ away from ‘Bulgarian men’ due to their access to wealth, and (especially in their sub-trope of ‘wannabe-Westerners,’ referring to ethnic Bulgarian emigrants to the West) acting as ‘foreign agents’ importing ‘the dangerous ideology of the West’ to Bulgaria. This ‘dangerous ideology’ they refer to is feminism, and (feminist) women are depicted as another ‘enemy’ out-group threatening to ‘destroy gender order and the traditional family.’ Feminism was discursively portrayed as a ‘source of evil’ and targeted by discourses characteristic of gender extremism (Berger, 2018) – from portraying feminism itself as an extremist ideology (i.e., through the ‘feminazi’ trope), to promoting physical violence as inevitable means to defeating its ‘harmful’ effects. A sub-group of women that was said to constitute a distinct social identity with its own specific characteristics was the ‘Bulgarian woman,’ portrayed as both an object of desire and a ‘destructor’ of masculinity through her ‘mercantile,’ ‘simple-minded,’ and ‘devoid of values’ nature.

In addition, some locally specific tropes emerged, symbolizing socio-cultural specificities of the Bulgarian context, and in turn pointing to the societal influences that play into their creation. In an exhibition of gender hierarchies, the Bulgarian tropes mirroring the international manosphere’s ‘Chad’ and ‘Stacy’ – the *mutra* and the *chalgarka* – embody nationally-specific struggles of transition challenges, mug rule, materialism, fixation with

wealth, and ‘chalga culture.’ Another locally specific trope, *Bai Ganyo*, derives from a famous 19th-century fictional character, but has evolved into a trope signifying the ‘delusional’ Bulgarian emigrant man believing he could ‘make it’ abroad.

An analytic focus on the affordances of *Spodeli.net* as a platform reveals that two of the platform’s key affordances – anonymity and minimal moderation – play a significant role in fostering potentially radical discourses to thrive. In addition, some user strategies for bypassing the technological affordances of the platform were observed, whereby users created social affordances to facilitate their intended use of the platform. Some examples of these tendencies include signing off comments with pseudonyms, engaging in discussions between participants in a thread by addressing other users’ comments in various ways, and bypassing the inability to hyperlink by encouraging users to search for specific, often manosphere-related terms on other platforms.

In sum, this analysis demonstrates that *Spodeli.net* constitutes a potent environment for manosphere-related discourses, fostering expressions of both ‘casual’ and extreme misogyny. Commenters resort to a mix of conspiracy theories, racism, nationalism, homophobia, and sexism to articulate a social identity in dialogue with hegemonic masculinity, thus not only making such discourses more widespread and increasingly normalized, but also serving as a gateway to more radical belief systems.

In conclusion, it is important to reiterate that we cannot generalize these findings. The purposeful sampling employed here allowed me to explore threads around a specific phenomenon, on a single online platform, within a limited time frame. Thus, this analysis does not lay claim to being representative of all *Spodeli.net* users or the Bulgarian population as a whole. Assessing the implications of these findings for the broader national context of Bulgaria requires more empirical research, both qualitative and quantitative, to understand how widespread networked misogyny practices are in Bulgaria, whether there is a ‘Bulgarian manosphere’ to speak of, and, if so, what constitutes it. Nevertheless, if we are to learn from North American and Western European scholarship on the matter, we should treat these findings as early indications of a phenomenon with a radicalization potential that merits further scholarly attention, since, if left unattended, not only could it result in terrorist violence, but also pose a threat to gender equality, democracy, and society at large.

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Appendix 1 – List of threads

1. Men without sex
2. Is it true that there are that many virgin men in Bulgaria?
3. What advice would you give to a virgin man over 30?
4. Is it weird, or completely normal?
5. Virgin and lonely
6. Prostitutes are my only option
7. I envy women – they are much more privileged, socially and biologically. We men are much unhappier
8. Do you think a man should keep a woman dependent and submissive?
9. Do you see a connection between feminism, homosexuality, dehumanization, and the end of mandatory military service and weakening of the army?
10. Am I a misogynist?
11. Incels, seek help
12. The "Universe 25" experiment or why there are more and more single mothers, incels and homosexuals
13. What happened to men's self-respect – bowing to the hens for a sh*g
14. Are there any men thinking with the heads on their shoulders?
15. Sexual Market Value – On the love market, how much do you cost as a man/woman?
16. So many threads about hussies and bad boys
17. You're ugly, but you want to f*ck
18. To successful women
19. Dating after 30
20. I'm gonna die alone
21. Rape
22. Why do you have to be a murderer or a thief to be wanted and respected by women?
23. Mental health
24. My experience with dating sites
25. Why do women suffer so little?

26. Hatred, aversion to people
27. The “disoriented Bulgarian woman” syndrome
28. Any men here who know about Red pill/MGTOW?
29. Ugly men are screwed
30. PUA sites and women's perspective
31. I’m starting to hate women
32. Why is it so hard nowadays?
33. Why don't women over 25 want to accept that they’re old, and no man wants them anymore?
34. Where do I find a girlfriend?
35. To all the men on here who think they’re “ugly”
36. 30 and virgin
37. If that's how married women think, I’ll pass...
38. The biggest lie of the 21st century
39. As a man, I give up on flirting
40. Again about the commercialism of some women
41. Why did almost all women start behaving so immaturely?
42. I have the feeling that I’ll be forever alone
43. Double standards against men
44. A problem that torments me more and more with time...
45. The Bulgarian woman
46. Boys, this is the truth – if you know, you know
47. A question to lonely men
48. Do you hit your women?
49. Mercantile women
50. I have no luck with women at all
51. How to find a partner
52. Third year without a woman. I’m going crazy!
53. How do you deal with women?
54. What’s wrong with me, why am I like this?

55. To virgin men:
56. How does a man have to be like to be desired and approached by women?
57. I hate women
58. On the topic of mercantile Bulgarian women
59. How do I become a man
60. I can't find a girlfriend
61. Why do most Bulgarian women have an extremely unrealistic opinion of themselves?
62. How I became a loser, and how to get over it
63. The good boy-bad boy balance
64. 29 without much experience with flirting
65. I'm desperate
66. I give up women
67. The truth about why Bulgarian women prefer to marry Westerners rather than Bulgarians
68. It's high time you stopped bullying men about money and size
69. Misogynist or realist
70. To the misandrists who accuse us of misogyny
71. No women left!
72. Women always mistreat me, why? Are there others in the same situation?
73. I'd rather stay single
74. I think all women are bad
75. To men: do you hate working with many women?
76. How do you flirt with women?
77. Women are bitches
78. For virgin men over 25
79. Hate towards women
80. Dudes, beware of female chameleons

Appendix 2 – List of search words

Red pill/redpill

Incel/инцел/инсел

MGTOW/men go their own way

PUA/pick-up artist/pickup artist/ПУА/ПЪА/пикъп артист

Alpha male/алфа мъж

Beta male/бета мъж

Omega male/Омега мъж

Zeta male/зета мъж

Женомразец [Bulgarian word for *misogynist*]

Мъжемразка [Bulgarian word for *misandrist*]

Sexual market value

Феминаци/феминацистка [Bulgarian words for *feminazi*]