

The Loneliness Remedy

Community-Generated Commodification of Male Loneliness in the
Manosphere

by

Nadine Sabrina Blöchlinger

Nicole Caixeta Arruda

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Abstract

Title: The Loneliness Remedy: Community-Generated Commodification of Male Loneliness in the Manosphere

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Authors: Nadine Sabrina Blöchlinger, Nicole Caixeta Arruda

Supervisor: Jon Bertilsson

Keywords: manosphere, male loneliness, compensatory consumption, consumer responsabilization, netnography

Research Question: How is consumption used as a remedy for male loneliness within digital masculine communities?

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to expand the understanding of how digital communities construct consumption as a collective remedy to affective social problems, examined through the case of male loneliness within the manosphere.

Theoretical perspective: By synthesising three theoretical perspectives (commodity fetishism and disavowal, ritualized transformation, and neo-tribal status economies) this thesis introduces an integrated framework of the rites of self-commodification in order to gain new insights into how digital masculine communities mobilise consumption as a remedy for male isolation.

Method: This qualitative netnographic study examined 48 TikTok videos and 45 Reddit threads alongside their associated comments. The research is grounded in a relativist ontology and social constructionist epistemology, and follows an abductive approach.

Empirical Results: Findings indicate that male loneliness is recast as a measurable bodily deficit and routed into a transformation journey driven by perpetual optimization and consumption. This is reinforced by a communal structure of conditional belonging which ensures that this optimization process continuously expands, ensuring that resolution is never achieved.

Conclusion: The study finds that consumption is constructed as a collective remedy to male isolation through a community-generated optimization spiral in which the community itself manufactures the deficit its prescribed products claim to repair, deferring resolution to sustain market and community engagement indefinitely.

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Nadine Sabrina Blöchlinger

Nicole Caixeta Arruda

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1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the research topic through its background and problematization, leading to the study's purpose and research question. After defining the delimitations of the empirical context, it then reviews relevant literature on compensatory consumption and consumer responsabilization, concluding with a critique of these research streams.

1.1 Background

In contemporary consumer culture, the marketplace has increasingly become the primary arena where individuals attempt to bridge the gap between who they currently are, and their "ideal self" of who they aspire to be (Higgins, 1987). This internal psychological drive to compensate through consumption occurs when individuals use the purchase of products to offset a perceived feeling of inadequacy. These discrepancies often manifest due to perpetual states of unhappiness, ranging from feelings of powerlessness to a lack of social belonging (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008; Mandel et al., 2017). These states of unhappiness are not just private feelings but are increasingly harnessed by the marketplace and drive the modern economy. Whether it's for example buying a luxury watch to mask a lack of social power or a gym membership to fix a perceived physical deficit, the market is often used to repair our sense of self. By positioning market participation as the primary path to resolving these issues, the market has created a fertile ground for the systemic commodification of loneliness.

Loneliness is strongly associated with mental health problems, particularly depression and anxiety (Mann et al., 2022). The Evolutionary Theory of Loneliness (ETL) attributes these long-term mental and physical health consequences to mechanisms such as stress and reduced social support (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018). Further, loneliness has emerged as a systemic public health concern (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015), with men experiencing particularly acute manifestations often referred to as the "male loneliness epidemic" (Card & Delgado-Ron, 2026). Societal pressures around masculinity, which discourage emotional vulnerability and

intimate connections, are thought to worsen this dynamic (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018; Jones et al., 2023).

This deep sense of isolation has contributed to the growth of the "manosphere", a massive digital ecosystem where isolated men negotiate their identities (Ging, 2019). This network includes subcultures such as Men's Rights Activists, Incels, and Pick-Up Artists, which unite around shared grievances, often framing feminism and societal shifts as direct threats to masculinity (Ging, 2019). These communities exploit male vulnerabilities and often promote reactionary gender roles and consumption as solutions to male isolation (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023). Within these communities, loneliness stops being a relational experience and becomes a biological deficit with a price tag. Buying becomes the way out of social failure, and the marketplace becomes the path to social standing.

This systematic reframing of social failure as a personal market deficit is not unique to fringe communities. Rather, it reflects a broader societal trend where human disconnection is increasingly viewed as a commercial opportunity. Currently, male loneliness is increasingly targeted by both subcultures and formal institutions as a problem requiring a consumerist solution. For example, at the institutional level, the newly released dating manual for men produced by the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU, 2026) highlights an organised response. Within the manual, standardized behavioural scripts, ranging from dating app presentation to basic hygiene tips, illustrate a form of consumer responsabilization. In the manosphere, this commodification is far more extreme, visible through the popularity of polarizing figures who monetise male frustration (Marwick & Caplan, 2018).

1.2 Problematization

While sociology and public health have widely examined loneliness as a systemic condition (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018), and gender studies have explored the identity formations emerging in radicalized online spaces (Ging, 2019), consumer research has paid limited attention to how consumption is collectively constructed as a remedy to these conditions.

Within the compensatory consumption literature, studies have largely operated under the assumption that self-discrepancies are pre-existing psychological states that precede and motivate consumer behaviour (Higgins, 1987; Mandel et al., 2017). While existing research has

addressed how men utilise compensatory consumption to navigate a perceived crisis of masculinity (Thompson & Holt, 2004), and how loneliness influences materialistic tendencies (Mendini & Furchheim, 2025), these studies share a common limitation: they treat self-discrepancy as a static psychological condition rather than examining how it is dynamically produced, intensified, and commercially sustained through community mechanisms.

Equally, while the consumer responsabilization literature has examined how neoliberal governance constructs individuals as responsible for solving structural problems through consumption (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Bankel & Solér, 2025a), it has yet to be applied to informal digital communities where this phenomenon is performed not by institutions, but by communities actively constructing and enforcing consumption as the solution to social failure. This study seeks to address this theoretical void by analysing online communities within the manosphere. Focusing on the empirical site of the manosphere, this study seeks to unpack male loneliness as a contemporary social problem that is increasingly being met with consumption-based responses. This case illuminates a broader dynamic within consumer culture, where social problems, ranging from obesity and financial precarity to social isolation, are increasingly reframed as personal deficits, and market participation is positioned as the solution. The manosphere represents a particularly concentrated site where this reframing can be observed in practice, as communities actively construct and reinforce consumption as the pathway through which lonely men are expected to reclaim belonging, status, and their masculine identities. This study further responds to a gap in the consumer literature that has yet to examine how digital communities actively construct and sustain self-discrepancy as an internalised commercial strategy, positioning psychological vulnerability itself as a market opportunity. To address these gaps, this study draws on a theoretical framework combining authors such as Marx (1867), Baudrillard (1981), Van Gennep (1960), Turner (1969), Rook (1985), Cova (1997), and Thornton (1995).

1.2.1 Purpose and Research Question

The primary purpose of this thesis is to fill the theoretical void regarding the redirection of affective social problems into commercialized remedies. This study aims to move beyond seeing the consumer as either an isolated actor or a passive subject. Instead, it seeks to uncover the communal agency of digital masculine communities, specifically how they co-construct consumption scripts that frame market participation as the primary remedy for social isolation.

To address this, the study investigates the following research question:

How is consumption used as a remedy for male loneliness within digital masculine communities?

1.3 Delimitations

This study is strictly confined to the empirical context of the manosphere and male loneliness. This phenomenon is treated as a critical instance of a broader societal pattern where systemic social problems are reframed as personal deficits requiring consumerist resolutions. While other systemic social issues could serve as empirical sites for this argument, the male loneliness epidemic represents a particularly contemporary and relevant case to examine. Further, this research operates at the intersection of psychological and sociological frameworks and is specifically tailored to interrogate the meso-level interactions occurring within digital masculine communities. The focal point of this study is not to measure self-discrepancy's effect on individual behaviour. Instead, the focus is exclusively on the collective construction of the need for consumption. This paper seeks to understand how digital communities co-construct the conditions that make consumption appear as an obligatory remedy to social failure, rather than quantifying individual psychological outcomes.

1.4 Literature Review

This section reviews the two primary, yet interconnected streams of literature: compensatory consumption and consumer responsabilization. Compensatory consumption provides a psychological framework, explaining how individuals use consumption to bridge the gap between their actual and ideal selves. Complementing this, the consumer responsabilization literature provides a sociological lens, illustrating how structural social problems are transferred to the individual as personal consumer responsibilities. Together, these literature streams clarify the internal psychological drivers and external ideological forces that lead lonely men to seek resolution through the marketplace.

1.4.1 Compensatory Consumption

The field of compensatory consumption has experienced a rapid, albeit fragmented growth, with interest particularly picking up since 2020 (Rauber et al., 2024). Previous research has defined the term compensatory consumer behaviour to indicate “any purchase, use, or consumption of products or services motivated by a desire to offset or reduce a self-discrepancy” (Gronmo, 1997; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008; Woodruffe, 1997 cited in Mandel et al., 2017, p. 134).

Self-discrepancy is a central concept in the field of compensatory consumption. It was first explored within the psychology literature, where Higgins (1987), in his Self-Discrepancy Theory, defines three domains of the self: the actual self (who a person currently is), the ideal self (hopes and aspirations), and the ought self (obligations and responsibilities). The ideal and ought self states function as self-guides against which the actual self is evaluated and may reflect either the individual’s standards or those of significant others, such as family members or social groups (Higgins, 1987). Higgins (1987) proposes that different types of self-discrepancies represent different types of negative psychological associations that are associated with different kinds of discomfort: actual/ideal discrepancies produce dejection-related emotions such as disappointment and dissatisfaction, while actual/ought discrepancies produce agitation-related emotions, such as anxiety, fear, and restlessness.

Building on this psychological foundation, Mandel et al. (2017) extend Self-Discrepancy Theory into the consumption sphere, demonstrating that these discrepancies can arise in domains as varied as one’s intelligence, sense of power, or belongingness in a social group (Mandel et al., 2017). Regardless of their origin, these self-discrepancies have the potential to influence consumption patterns, as they often motivate individuals to seek out products that help reduce the perceived gap between their actual and ideal selves (Mandel et al., 2017).

Further, consumers use both “within domain” and “across domain” compensatory consumption in response to self-threats (Brannon, 2019). “Within domain” compensatory consumption involves seeking products and services that directly resolve the self-discrepancy, while “across domain” compensatory consumption involves consuming products that do not directly resolve the self-conflict, but instead affirm some unrelated aspect of the self (Brannon, 2019).

There are numerous sources of self-discrepancy, which Mandel et al. (2017) categorise into three primary sources as related to: one's self-concept, one's perceived standing compared to others, and one's social groups. For the purpose of this thesis, two of these sources are particularly relevant. Discrepancies related to one's self-concept arise once one perceives oneself as inadequate compared to an internal standard. Research has demonstrated that such discrepancies can influence consumption habits, including behaviour related to reinforcing one's masculinity (Willer et al., 2013). Discrepancies can also stem from one's standing compared to others, typically through upward social comparisons where an individual views their own skills or status as inferior to another.

It is important to note that self-discrepancies can occur when individuals feel socially excluded in regard to an important referent group (Mandel et al., 2017). Further, previous studies have demonstrated that when discrepancies arise in terms of one's affiliation with others, people are more likely to consume products that signal status or membership in the social group (Dommer & Swaminathan, 2013; Duclos et al., 2013; Lee & Shrum, 2012; Mead et al., 2011; Wan et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2012, cited in Mandel et al., 2017).

1.4.2 Consumer Responsibilization

The literature stream of consumer responsibilization represents an increasingly prominent perspective within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), offering critical insights into the systemic processes through which risks and responsibilities traditionally managed by institutions are transferred to individual consumers (Bankel & Solér, 2025a). The concept of consumer responsibilization has evolved as a critical topic, especially within the context of neoliberal governance and its impact on consumer behaviour (Bankel & Solér, 2025a).

Consumer responsibilization is deeply rooted in neo-liberal governance and Foucauldian theories of power (Farnsworth & Irving, 2018). Neoliberalism is characterised by principles such as individualism, privatization and minimal state interventions (Farnsworth & Irving, 2018). Foucault (2008) framed neoliberalism as a power that reshapes governance and individual subjectivity. His notion of governmentality emphasises how neoliberalism operates as a structural technology of governance, leveraging mechanisms like surveillance and managerial control to regulate people and align them with market logic (Foucault, 2008). This idea also extends to the self, where individuals are encouraged to self-regulate and internalise

values such as individuality and rationality under the guise of freedom and autonomy (Fraser, 2020). Zimmer (2025) further argues that this neoliberal power commodifies life itself, transforming entire populations into objects of governance and economic calculations. To operationalise these concepts, Giesler and Veresiu (2014) developed the PACT framework, which stands for personalization, authorization, capabilization, and transformation. This framework can be used to analyse how consumers are systematically constructed as moral subjects who are capable of and responsible for solving complex societal problems through their individual consumption choices (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014).

Existing literature has extensively applied the concept of consumer responsabilization to domains such as waste management, and climate-friendly consumption (Cherrier & Türe, 2023; Döbbe & Cederberg, 2024). Consumer responsabilization is especially central in green consumption, where consumers are encouraged to adopt environmentally-friendly behaviours and to internalise responsibility for addressing global issues like climate change (Hosta & Žabkar, 2016; Soneryd & Uggla, 2015). However, this internalization often leads to frustration and resistance in consumers due to overwhelming expectations placed on them (Hosta & Žabkar, 2016; Soneryd & Uggla, 2015). More recent studies have also explored how digital platforms and self-tracking technologies facilitate responsabilization by constructing moral identities and fostering long-term engagement with responsible consumption scripts (Parth et al., 2021).

This logic of responsabilization has also expanded into the management of systemic health concerns (Anderson et al., 2016). Here, responsabilization often involves individuals being held accountable for their health outcomes, such as managing chronic conditions like diabetes (Anderson et al., 2016). This is framed as fostering agency and well-being but can also impose significant psychological and practical burdens on individuals (Anderson et al., 2016). Further, policies and interventions frequently promote mental and physical well-being as a personal responsibility, encouraging individuals to adopt behaviours that enhance their health (Anderson et al., 2016). This process creates inherent structural tensions, as individuals are frequently expected to meet these high standards of self-care while lacking the necessary resources or institutional support to fulfil the expectations placed upon them (Anderson et al., 2016).

This individualistic logic also shapes how structural social problems like loneliness are governed. Policies often frame loneliness as a strain on the national health systems and the economy, emphasizing its systemic cost (Jentoft et al., 2025). This discourse positions

loneliness as an object of governance to justify a shift towards self-management through interventions like social prescribing (Jentoft et al., 2025). By transferring lonely individuals from formal healthcare systems to community-based activities, this approach aligns with neoliberal strategies that responsabilize individuals for their own well-being while often neglecting the broader social determinants of health (Jentoft et al., 2025). A recent study on the rise of the live streaming economy and para-social interaction highlights how loneliness drives consumer behaviour, with individuals seeking social belonging and emotional connection through platforms (Li & Cheng, 2023). While these mechanisms are framed as ways to alleviate isolation, they effectively commodify social interaction, further responsabilizing consumers to manage their emotional needs through consumption practices (Li & Cheng, 2023).

1.4.3 Critique of Prior Literature

While the literature streams of compensatory consumption and consumer responsabilization provide a robust baseline for understanding modern consumer behaviour, their intersection remains underexplored. Current literature tends to treat these two streams as parallel rather than integrated, leaving significant gaps in how community-driven market logic operates.

Within compensatory consumption, Rucker and Galinsky (2008) posit that powerlessness encourages a desire to acquire status-associated products as a form of compensation. Yet, the literature has not addressed how communities intentionally intensify loneliness and feelings of inadequacy, turning them into a self-discrepancy that only consumption promises to close. Conversely, while consumer responsabilization literature has identified the mechanics of responsabilization and applied these to different contexts (Cherrier & Türe, 2023; Döbbe & Cederberg, 2024; Hosta & Žabkar, 2016; Parth et al., 2021; Soneryd & Uggla, 2015), it has also faced growing theoretical critique. A primary critique is the overreliance on Foucauldian governmentality, which often flattens the power dynamic between the state, market and consumer (Bankel & Solér, 2025a; Bankel & Solér, 2025b). By focusing on self-governance there is a risk of marginalizing the top-down exercise of power under neoliberal governance (Bankel & Solér, 2025a; Bankel & Solér, 2025b). This risks reifying neoliberal governance rather than critically examining it (Bankel & Solér, 2025a; Bankel & Solér, 2025b).

Both streams fail to explain how meanings and identities are actively negotiated within niche subcultures such as the manosphere. Existing research has begun to examine the intersection of

social media and compensatory consumption, finding that social exclusion experiences online can trigger conspicuous consumption as individuals attempt to restore their sense of control and belonging (Xu et al., 2022), and that social exclusion concerns can motivate social media engagement itself as a form of compensation (Dwivedi & Lewis, 2021). However, these studies address consumption and social media behaviour at the individual psychological level, leaving unexamined how digital communities actively produce and sustain the conditions of self-discrepancy in the first place.

Within the stream of compensatory consumption, once a self-discrepancy arises, it produces negative consequences that may give rise to the motivation to engage in consumer behaviour to alleviate the self-discrepancy (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Custers & Aarts, 2007; Sela & Shiv, 2009; cited in Mandel et al., 2017). While previous studies have established the idea that once a self-discrepancy arises, it can motivate consumers to reduce or eliminate that discrepancy (Mandel et al., 2017), there is a theoretical gap regarding how these self-discrepancies can be intentionally created, intensified and exploited as a way for people to consume, notably, within digital communities.

Furthermore, within consumer responsabilization literature, critics also argue for a move beyond purely post-structuralist views by incorporating the "embedded" and "embodied" experiences of consumers (Bankel & Solér, 2025b). Drawing on Karl Polanyi (Bankel & Solér, 2025b), the concept of embedded responsabilization has been developed to address theoretical inconsistencies and critiques the neoliberal framing of consumer responsibility. Bankel and Solér (2025b) suggest that responsible consumption is embodied and embedded within neoliberal social structures and is characterised by inherent tensions that will produce strained experiences rather than empowered consumers. Finally, the literature on counter-conduct suggests that while consumers may resist moralistic narratives, their acts of resistance often inadvertently reinforce the underlying premise of individual responsibility (Döbbe & Cederberg, 2024). This creates a paradox where consumer resistance reproduces the neoliberal framework it seeks to challenge (Döbbe & Cederberg, 2024).

Both literature streams leave the space of communal identity construction unexamined. They fail to account for the nuanced interactive spaces where specific meanings such as "Alpha" identities and consumption scripts are actually negotiated and policed within these digital communities. By reducing the consumer to either an isolated psychological actor (micro level) or a passive subject of neoliberal power (macro level), current research overlooks the communal

agency of digital tribes (meso-level), specifically how members collectively co-construct and enforce consumption as a mandatory masculine identity.

This study generates novel insights by transcending established theoretical baselines to interrogate the meso-level relational negotiations occurring within the manosphere. By examining the collective co-construction of identity and the framing of consumption as an obligatory response to social isolation, this research illuminates how digital subcultures transform private vulnerabilities into a shared, commercially-sustained infrastructure for masculine survival.

2 Theory

This chapter presents the theoretical framework of our study combining three distinct but complementary perspectives: commodity fetishism & disavowal, ritualized transformation, and neo-tribal status economies. The integration of these three perspectives aims to open up a new way of understanding and examining how male isolation is managed, performed, and collectively resolved.

2.1 Fetishism, Disavowal, and Sign Value

This section examines the structural logic of commodity fetishism as an ideological concealment and psychological defence mechanism in contemporary consumer culture. It moves from *Marx's (1867)* account of commodity fetishism and reification, in which the social relations of production are concealed beneath the apparent properties of an object, to a structural reading of *Freud's (1927)* concept of disavowal to explain how individuals simultaneously acknowledge and refuse a difficult reality. These foundational perspectives are extended through *Baudrillard's (1981)* theory of sign value to demonstrate how marketplace objects are endowed with a symbolic capacity to remedy systemic loneliness.

Fetishism is commonly defined as “a deliberate or involuntary subordination of an individual to an overwhelmingly powerful, materialized object that is capable of imprisoning the human mind by blocking its supersensible faculties” (Kangal, 2024, p.512). The more nuanced history of the concept has been traced by Pietz (1985, 1987), who tracks fetishism back to late medieval Portugal, where the word *feitico*, described “magical practice or witchcraft performed, often innocently, by the simple, ignorant classes” (Pietz, 1985, p.5). The idea of fetish came about through mercantile intercultural trade and relations between cultures so radically different as to be mutually incomprehensible (Pietz, 1985). When Portuguese merchants began trading on the West African coast in the fifteenth century, they applied this concept to the unfamiliar religious objects and practices of African societies (Pietz, 1987).

Marx (1867) introduces the notion of commodity fetishism in his book, *Capital*, Volume 1, describing the phenomenon where the social relationships between producers are perceived as objective relationships between the goods themselves. He illustrates this by showing how a relatively simple object, such as a wooden table, is turned into something different once it enters the capitalist system, turning into a commodity. Once that table enters the market, he argues, we encounter it as a commodity with apparently inherent value, while the social labour that produced it disappears from view. Under commodity exchange, the social relations between producers become invisible to those participating in the market. In their place, commodities seem to possess almost mystical qualities, such as value or power, as though these qualities emerged from the objects themselves instead of the labour that created them.

Marx (1867) developed the related concept of reification to describe the phenomenal conversion of production relations among persons into relations of things, which implies a corresponding personification of things and objectification of persons (Tairako, 2025). Reification is the broader concept and operates primarily at the level of consciousness and ideology. It has been widely used by scholars to “criticize the dehumanizing, rationalizing, and alienating tendencies of modernity” (Vandenberghe, 2001, p. 12993). Thingification, on the other hand, refers to something with social-natural properties (Tairako, 2025), and is defined as “the inseparable coalescence between the socially determined and their naturally determined conditions of production elements” (Marx, cited in Tairako, 2025, p.2). It is more specific and refers to an actual structural process within the capitalist mode of production in which social-natural properties become inseparably fused into the commodity form itself.

Though *Marx (1867)* focused his analysis on the production of commodities, the same logic of fetishism can be extended into the realm of consumption. Consumers perceive commodities as objects with mystical properties (such as status, identity, desirability), without seeing the social relations that produced those properties in the first place. The commodity thus appears to naturally embody what is in fact a thingified social relation.

For *Freud (1927)*, fetishism stems from a moment in childhood where a boy realizes that his mother does not possess a penis. This observation terrifies him, for if a woman can be “castrated”, his own penis is in danger. In order to protect himself from the panic, the boy undergoes a psychological process *Freud (1927)* calls disavowal. This acts as a defence mechanism, where the person both recognises a difficult reality and continues to act as though it were not the case.

It is important to note that this study does not employ *Freud's (1927)* theory of fetishism in its original clinical or psychosexual sense. Rather, it draws on the structural logic of disavowal that *Freud (1927)* identified, the mechanism of simultaneously recognizing and refusing a difficult reality. It is in this broader structural sense that disavowal is utilised here, as a framework for understanding a pattern of consumer behaviour that exceeds rational calculation and persists despite partial awareness of its own insufficiency. This structure of simultaneous acknowledgement and refusal will prove useful for analysing how manosphere participants can both be aware that commodified solutions to loneliness do not work, and yet, continue to invest in them.

Though *Marx (1867)* and *Freud (1927)* developed their respective theories of fetishism in entirely different contexts and with different objects of analysis, the two share a common structural logic of substitution and misrecognition. In both frameworks, an object comes to appear as though it possesses inherent properties that are in fact socially constructed and that conceal the relations that produced them. Applied together to the domain of consumer culture, these two frameworks illuminate a double displacement. The social conditions that produce emotional experience are first concealed through reification, and the inadequacy of the object as a resolution is then managed through disavowal. The consumer object appears to resolve what it cannot actually address, and the consumer, knowing that it cannot, continues to act as though it can.

The logic of commodity fetishism that *Marx (1867)* identified within capitalist exchange has been recast into the consumption domain by *Baudrillard (1981)*, who argues that in contemporary consumer culture objects are consumed primarily for their sign value rather than for their use value or exchange value alone. For *Baudrillard (1981)*, consumers acquire objects not to satisfy needs or even to accumulate value but to position themselves within a social order organised around the symbolic meanings that objects carry. This extension of *Marx's (1867)* insight into the consumption sphere provides the bridge between the ideological critique of commodity fetishism and the community-level dynamics of tribal consumption analysed in subsequent sections.

2.2 Rituals, Liminality and Rites of Passage

This subchapter examines the structural and emotional mechanics of ritual consumption, transformation narratives and shared liminal states. It connects *Rook's (1985)* framework of consumer rituals and *Erikson's (1950)* psychosocial model of developmental crises with *Van Gennep's (1960)* and *Turner's (1969)* foundational theories of rites of passage and communitas. Finally, these developments are related to the broader context of consumer responsabilization literature, utilising *Giesler and Veresiu's (2014)* PACT model to examine how structural isolation is reframed as an individualized marketplace responsibility.

The first framework concerns the nature of the consumption itself. In his paper on consumer rituals, *Rook (1985)* argues that much of consumption is deeply embedded in symbolic, ritualistic activities. By viewing consumption through a ritualistic lens, it becomes possible to understand how products accumulate deep, shared meanings that go far beyond their functional utility. *Rook (1985)* defines "ritual" not just as a habit, but as a distinct type of symbolic activity. A ritual is constructed of multiple behaviours that occur in a fixed, episodic sequence and tend to be repeated over time. Unlike simple habits, which are often just convenient or economic shortcuts, rituals are expressive and symbolic. Further, to analyse how consumers engage in these behaviours, *Rook (1985)* identifies four components that structure the ritual experience. First, the consumer products used to perform the ritual are the ritual artifacts. These items are essential props that enable the ritual. Second, the ritual script is the programme that dictates how the ritual should be performed. It identifies the artifacts used, the behavioural sequence, and who uses them. Third, the specific part an individual or group plays in the ritual is referred to as ritual performance roles. These roles can be central or supporting, and they often dictate the specific script a person follows. Lastly, the people who witness the ritual are the ritual audience. Their presence validates the performance, making the ritual authentic and meaningful. These four components can then be utilised to assess ritual vitality. *Rook (1985)* further explains that rituals vary in their strength and vigour with which they are collectively observed. This structural integrity of a ritual is defined by four intersecting dimensions. Artifactual consumption refers to the extent to which specific commercial goods or symbols are utilised to facilitate the ritual, while script definition establishes the formal, agreed-upon rules and sequences that govern the event. Further, role clarity dictates how participants understand their required behaviours and social positioning within the ritual. Finally, audience definition

establishes the presence of a target group, beyond the immediate participants, intended to witness, evaluate or validate the ritualistic performance.

To address why certain rituals acquire the urgency and emotional intensity for those who perform them, *Rook (1985)* embedded his theory within *Erikson's (1950)* model of psychosocial development. He argues that the meanings sustaining consumer rituals are rooted in the resolution of development crises that recur throughout the human lifecycle. *Erikson's (1950)* model proposes that individuals move through sequences of development stages, each defined by a central psychosocial tension whose resolution shapes both identity and behaviour. *Rook (1985)* argues that consumer rituals are the acting-out of these resolutions in the marketplace. Of particular relevance for this study is the stage of young adulthood, which is defined by the crisis of intimacy versus isolation.

To complement *Rook's (1985)* theory on consumer rituals and *Erikson's (1950)* model, *Van Gennep's (1960)* theory of rites of passage is employed. It provides a model for understanding how human societies organise transformative transitions through a three-stage ritual process. *Van Gennep (1960)* observed that across cultures, major life transitions follow a rather homogenous structure, consisting of separation (preliminality), transition (liminality) and incorporation (postliminality). The first stage of separation involves detachment from a previous role or status which symbolized a break from the past. In the transition stage an individual or group enters a liminal phase, a state of ambiguity where old identities are dismantled and new ones are formed. This phase is often marked by rituals that emphasise transformation. The final stage involves the reintegration into society with a new identity or status, often accompanied by ceremonies that affirm the change. These stages represent the process of leaving an old status, undergoing a transformative phase, and being reintegrated into society with a new status.

While *Van Gennep's (1960)* framework established the structural stages of the transformation, it focuses primarily on the individual moving through these stages rather than on the social dynamic that emerges between people who share the liminal experience. This dimension is addressed by *Turner (1969)*, who expanded on *Van Gennep's (1960)* framework by turning sustained analytical attention to the liminal phase itself and to what happens between individuals suspended together within it. *Turner (1969)* introduced the concept of *communitas* to describe the unique social bonding that emerges during this liminal phase. He also emphasised that during the liminal phase, individuals are removed from structured societal roles

and hierarchies. In this state, they experience *communitas*, a form of unstructured, egalitarian social bonding that transcends formal societal structures. *Communitas* is a manifestation of anti-structure and represent a pure, direct form of human connection, where individuals relate to one another on an equal and spontaneous basis. *Turner (1969)* argued that rituals, particularly those involving liminality, can serve as spaces for social transformation. However, while *communitas* is a powerful and transformative experience, they are inherently temporary. Once the liminal phase ends, individuals are reintegrated into the structured world, often with a renewed social identity.

Together these provide a layered analytical architecture for understanding ritualized consumption, overarching transformation narratives and shared liminal states. This ties back to the broader theoretical context of the consumer responsabilization literature, which examines how individuals come to experience themselves as personally responsible for solving structural social problems through their consumption choices. The most influential framework within this literature is *Giesler and Veresiu's (2014)* PACT model, which provides both a theoretical account of how this responsabilization operates and a set of analytical categories through which its mechanisms can be identified and examined. The framework identifies four mechanisms through which this construction operates: personalization, which tailors the social problem to the individual's specific circumstances; authorization, which positions market actors as legitimate authorities on the problem's solution; capabilization, which frames consumption as the empowering vehicle through which the individual can address the problem; and transformation, which promises a fundamental change in the individual's status as the reward for correct consumption.

2.3 Neo-tribes, Linking Value and Subcultural Capital

This section explores the dynamics of contemporary subcultural communities, focusing on how individuals form fluid social bonds and navigate internal hierarchies through marketplace practices. It builds on *Maffesoli's (1996)* foundational theory of neo-tribes and extends this perspective through *Cova's (1997)* linking value to understand how product consumption serves a relational function. It concludes with an examination of status economies as discussed by *Thornton's (1995)* framework of subcultural capital.

The concept of neo-tribes was introduced by French sociologist *Michel Maffesoli (1996)* to describe new forms of social bonds in the context of late modernity. This framework signalled a shift away from traditional, rigid social hierarchies toward more fluid, ephemeral, and emotionally driven groupings. Unlike historical tribes defined by kinship or fixed status, neo-tribes are characterised by transient and flexible affiliations, in which members converge based on shared lifestyles, interest and rituals rather than static social positions. These groups are sustained by emotional resonance and collective sentiments, what *Maffesoli (1996)* terms *puissance*, the collective effervescence that holds the tribe together through shared feelings rather than formal commitment. Neo-tribes further distinguish themselves through their relationship to symbolic rituals and spaces, using both physical and virtual environments as focal points for collective rituals and memory, which serve to solidify a sense of shared identity (*Maffesoli, 1996*). While neo-tribes appear horizontal and elective, they are often sites of intense symbolic boundary formation, leading to internal hierarchies and the exclusion of those who fail to align with the group's shared "affect" (*Le Grand, 2018*). This tension between the promise of open belonging and the reality of enforced conformity is a structural feature of neo-tribal communities and has significant implications for understanding how consumption functions within them.

While *Maffesoli's (1996)* framework established the nature of community, *Cova (1997)* extends this through the concept of linking value. *Cova (1997)* argues that in neo-tribal consumer culture the primary value of a product is not its use value or sign value but its linking value. The capacity to create and sustain social bonds between members of the tribe. Products are consumed not primarily for what they do to the individual, but for what they do to the group relationship. They function as social links whose significance lies in the connections they activate. Consumption becomes the relational act and the products that carry the highest linking value within the community are those most effective at generating social interactions and validation that sustain the tribe's collective life. Therefore, consumption within these neo-tribes often tends to be public and performative rather than private, as the linking value of a product can only be activated through its display and recognition by the community (*Cova, 1997*).

However, to account for the internal dynamics within neo-tribal communities, *Thornton's (1995)* concept of subcultural capital is introduced. *Thornton's (1995)* subcultural capital draws directly on Bourdieu's foundational framework of cultural capital, which refers to the knowledge, skills, and cultural competencies that confer social advantage. While cultural

capital operates at a macro-level to reproduce societal hierarchies, subcultural capital functions at a meso-level, focusing on status within specific subcultural groups. Subcultural capital is a form of symbolic currency that signifies authenticity and expertise within a subculture, often tied to niche knowledge, style, or behaviour that differentiates insiders from outsiders (Thornton, 1995). Subcultural capital is defined by three core principles. First, it is tied to the perception of authenticity and having genuine insider knowledge and access to niche cultural practices. What counts as authentic is determined by the community itself and is continuously renegotiated. *Thornton (1995)* highlights the role of media in shaping subcultural capital. She argues that media representations influence what is valued within subcultures, often commodifying and mainstreaming subcultural practices, which can alter their authenticity and exclusivity. Second, subcultural capital determines social position within the community, with those possessing more subcultural capital often occupying higher positions in the group's hierarchy. Third, the value of subcultural capital is not fixed. It evolves with changing cultural trends and external influences, making the status economy of any subculture a continuously shifting terrain rather than a stable structure (Thornton, 1995).

These three frameworks are mutually reinforcing and provide a complementary account of the community mechanism through which consumption becomes socially obligatory within certain types of communities.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework developed across this chapter combines three distinct but mutually reinforcing perspectives into an integrated lens for analysing how consumption is collectively constructed as a remedy to male loneliness within digital masculine communities. By synthesising theories from all three domains, the framework enables a more holistic view of consumption practices in masculine online spaces.

First, drawing on *Marx's (1867)* commodity fetishism and reification, the framework establishes an ideological foundation through which emotional experience is translated into a commercial problem. Complex social and emotional conditions are converted into objectified metrics that can be measured, diagnosed and addressed through consumption. *Freud's (1927)* structural logic of disavowal extends this by explaining how individuals maintain their

investment in these objects even if they partially recognise their insufficiency. *Baudrillard's (1981)* sign value completes this by showing that the act of consumption is an act of social positioning rather than genuine need satisfaction. The second layer explains how this ideological condition is organised into a structured transformation narrative and enacted through ritualized consumption. *Van Gennep's (1960)* rites of passage framework provides the overarching narrative architecture within which these rituals are organised, while *Turner's (1969)* *communitas* explain the intense social bonds forged between individuals in the liminal phase. The final perspective accounts for the specific community mechanisms through which the transformation narrative is sustained and consumption is rendered socially obligatory. Further, *Thornton's (1995)* subcultural capital explains the status economy that governs these communities and ensures that the group's standards are never permanently met. Together, these combined lenses form a novel perspective of the rites of self-commodification, which represents a new form of consumer responsabilization operating at the meso-level through communal rituals.

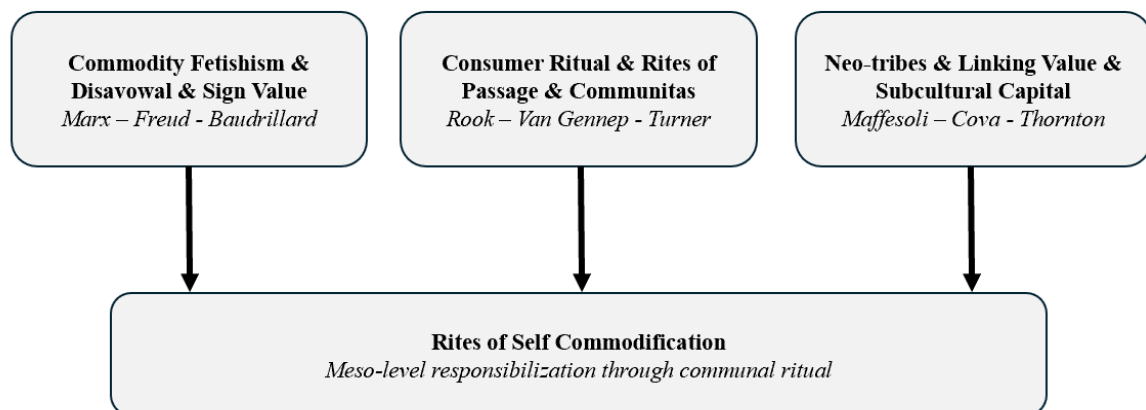


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

3 Methodology

This chapter details the methodological framework and research design employed to investigate how consumption is collectively constructed as a solution to male loneliness within digital masculine communities.

3.1 Philosophical Underpinning

Guided by a relativist ontology and a social constructionist epistemology, this study employs a netnographic lens to navigate the multimodal landscape of the manosphere. Following Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), a relativist ontological stance posits that phenomena depend on the observer's perspective. Rather than seeking a singular reality that can be discovered, this ontological stance acknowledges a plurality of perspectives (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In the context of the present study, this means that we analyse interactions within the manosphere, rather than making claims about what the community participants actually experience. Further, meanings shift and evolve depending on the specific platform, community or ideology involved.

At the level of knowledge, we apply a social constructionist approach, which prioritises the understanding and appreciation of diverse experiences, rather than the pursuit of external causes and fundamental laws to explain behaviour (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Consequently, this thesis does not seek to explain manosphere consumption through predetermined causes, but rather to investigate how meaning is developed within the community's own interactive and symbolic practices. Aligned with these philosophical underpinnings, netnography does not claim to offer a single true self but instead provides access to many selves that people perform across digital contexts (Cavusoglu & Belk, 2025).

Qualitative methods are uniquely positioned to interrogate how and why meanings are constructed, shared, and experienced within specific cultural and situational contexts

(Cavusoglu & Belk, 2025). Netnography is therefore especially suited to capture the unfiltered discourse through which consumption meanings are collectively constructed within these communities.

3.2 Abductive Approach

We employ an abductive approach throughout this study. Abduction refers to a “creative inferential process aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence” (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p.167). In the context of the present study, this means that the theoretical framework was not fully fixed before the data collection process began but was iteratively refined as patterns emerged from the data. This approach thus depends on the researcher's cultivated position, as this type of analysis rests for a large part on the scope and sophistication of the theoretical background the researcher brings (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

The theoretical framework presented in the previous chapter served as a sensitizing lens, directing our attention to culturally relevant consumption patterns within the data. As patterns emerged across netnographic material, these frameworks were iteratively revised, allowing the data to problematize and expand on prior literature. This is particularly important within the manosphere context, as members already produce explanations for their own behaviour. An abductive approach ensures that the analysis maintains critical distance from the community's own accounts, treating these explanations as interpretive practices that require critical deconstruction.

3.3 Research Design

The following sections outline the research design consisting of the research method, sampling strategy, platform selection, data collection and analysis procedures.

3.3.1 Netnography

Netnography, ethnography adapted to the study of online communities (Kozinets, 2002), was selected as the primary method for collecting and analysing empirical material focusing on the manosphere consumption practices and their interactions. Compared to traditional research methods such as interviews and focus groups, it is quicker, simpler, less costly, as well as more naturalistic and unobtrusive (Kozinets, 2002). This makes it particularly well-suited to uncover information on the symbolism, meanings and consumption patterns that emerge within online communities (Kozinets, 2002), and an appropriate lens for examining how consumption practices are collectively constructed in the manosphere.

Because male loneliness and the manosphere itself are highly sensitive and stigmatised topics, men involved in these communities are likely to hide or alter their opinions and views during traditional elicitation methods, such as face-to-face interviews, to seem socially more acceptable, which could hinder gathering meaningful data. Observing these communities in their organic digital environment allows for a more robust analysis of their unfiltered behaviours and consumption rituals. As Cavusoglu and Belk (2025) note, anonymous or pseudonymous online environments often facilitate the disclosure of sensitive experiences more freely than face-to-face interviews; consequently, anonymity offers a distinct, yet equally legitimate form of authenticity.

This study employed a non-participant approach, where we observed content and community interactions across platforms without ourselves interacting with or intervening in those communities. While Costello et al. (2017) caution that passive observation risks limiting the depth of netnographic immersion and forgoing opportunities for co-creation, our positionality as women researchers made active participation methodologically inappropriate in this context. Entering visibly into spaces defined by antagonism toward women would have risked altering community dynamics and producing reactive rather than naturalistic discourse, making non-participation a reflexive and considered methodological choice.

3.3.2 Chosen Platforms

TikTok

TikTok was first launched in China in 2016 as Douyin, and subsequently, in 2017 was introduced to international markets as TikTok (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Owned by the Beijing-based firm ByteDance, the platform is primarily used to create short dance, lip sync, comedy, and talent videos (Weimann & Masri, 2023). TikTok exemplifies strong algorithm-driven curation, tailoring the stream of content towards users' interests based on their behaviour on the platform (Baumann et al., 2026). The platform's "ForYou" page curates each user's content journey primarily based on their interactions with previously encountered videos, such as rewatching, following, or liking content creators (Baumann et al., 2026). Weimann and Masri (2023) contend that the platform's lax security and control have allowed it to become a magnet for pedophiles, profanity, crime, violence, and extremism. Furthermore, TikTok's history is already marked by regulatory friction (Weimann & Masri, 2023).

As of October 2025, 54.5% of TikTok users worldwide are male, and 45.5% are female (DataReportal et al., 2025). Its largest share of active users are 25–34-year-olds, with males in that age range making up 23.6% of active TikTok users (We Are Social et al., 2025b). Following an estimated 1.5 billion monthly active users in late 2022, the platform is projected to reach a 2 billion monthly user milestone by the end of 2026 (Activate, 2022).

Empirical data from a 2026 study utilising deployed bots with varying interest profiles on TikTok's "ForYou" feed found that interest-aligned content underwent rapid amplification, typically within the first 200 videos watched, and that as this amplification increased, the diversity of hashtags declined sharply (Baumann et al., 2026). This is significant in the context of the manosphere, as the nature of the platform means that users who interact with this type of content are progressively served more of it. This dynamic is closely related to the phenomenon of echo chambers, which is referred to as a condition in which social media users mostly communicate with and are exposed to content from like-minded others (Terren & Borge-Bravo, 2021). Further, the existence of echo chambers is believed to be exacerbated by social media platforms' algorithmic curation of content based on users' past activity, which limits the diversity of content that users are exposed to, and leads to online clustering and polarization (Terren & Borge-Bravo, 2021).

As a critical site for the articulation of social isolation, TikTok's user-generated landscape is permeated by themes of emotional absence and unmet social needs (Harries et al., 2025). Within these polarised clusters, the platform's infrastructure enables the covert spread of manosphere rhetoric, including incel tropes, through emotional appeals and pseudo-scientific narratives to normalize misogynistic beliefs. By linking these tropes to established broader societal sexism, the platform's algorithm amplifies the reach of extremist ideologies, creating a fertile environment for studying their mainstreaming (Solea & Sugiura, 2023). This algorithmic design further drives consumption behaviours, which reinforces TikTok's position as a primary site for this netnography.

Reddit

Reddit is a public platform on which any user can create a community centred around a particular interest, referred to as a subreddit (Massanari, 2017). Because anyone is able to create a subreddit on any topic, niche communities are well represented on the platform (Massanari, 2017). Content visibility within these communities is dictated by a voting mechanism (Proferes et al., 2021), and the platform's algorithm more broadly rewards individual contribution while prioritizing popular and recent content (Massanari, 2017). Further, it has been established that Reddit's design, algorithm and platform implicitly support toxic technocultures, actively enabling the formation of ideological communities (Massanari, 2017), conditions that are particularly conducive to the consolidation of masculine identity communities, such as those found within the manosphere. This makes Reddit particularly valuable for studying how manosphere communities construct and negotiate consumption practices within their bounded online spaces.

As of the second quarter of 2025, it has been estimated that 60% of users are male, 39.4% female, and 0.6% unspecified (We Are Social et al., 2025a). Account creation requires only a username and password, with no email verification, meaning that the use of multiple accounts is a common practice in the platform (Proferes et al., 2021). With the exception of private subreddits, all discussions on the platform are publicly viewable, and each user's post and comment history is accessible to anyone (Proferes et al., 2021). Reddit norms further encourage participation under a pseudonymous username as a way to confer privacy to its users (Proferes et al., 2021). This culture of anonymity encourages uninhibited expression on stigmatised topics (Proferes et al., 2021), particularly relevant in the context of male loneliness and the

manosphere, where social desirability pressures would likely suppress candid disclosure in more visible or identity-linked environments.

3.3.3 Sampling Method

This thesis utilised purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method whereby inclusion criteria are defined in advance, and potential sources are screened against them prior to selection (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Following this purposive frame, the procedure was structured around Kozinets' (2020) five sequential investigative data operations: *simplification*, *searching*, *scouting*, *selecting*, and *saving*.

First, the *simplification* phase involved conducting an initial sweep of relevant literature to identify recurring terminology associated with the manosphere. These keywords were supplemented by researcher immersion and prior familiarity with the discourse to ensure that community-specific slang was also represented (see Appendix A). On Reddit, this process involved cross-referencing known sub-communities identified in Chapter 4 with a targeted keyword search to isolate relevant threads. A comprehensive directory of these subreddits is provided in Appendix B.

Second, *searching* was conducted using these identified terms to locate related content across both platforms. To minimise algorithmic bias, TikTok searches were performed using newly created accounts with no prior engagement history. On Reddit, a platform-wide keyword search was conducted in parallel with manual browsing and immersion within the identified subreddits, ensuring a search logic consistent with the TikTok approach.

Third, *scouting* allowed for the discovery of organic interactions beyond the initial search results. On TikTok, the recommendation algorithm began surfacing related content on our "ForYou" pages (FYP), forming a stream of algorithmically curated material that complemented the manual search data. This phase was critical for capturing the lived digital experiences of the manosphere on TikTok and Reddit.

Fourth, *selecting* involved applying specific criteria to determine what empirical materials should be included in the dataset. All data was restricted to English-language posts. On TikTok, video selection generally prioritised posts with high engagement, typically exceeding 10,000 likes. However, videos with lower engagement were also included when they represented

aspects of manosphere dynamics that were highly analytically relevant to the study. On Reddit, no minimum engagement threshold was applied, since net upvote scores are not comparable to TikTok's like counts and would have introduced an inconsistent selection criterion across platforms. However, more recent posts and discussion were prioritised as well as posts with active comment sections to capture negotiations within the communities and to complement the lack of meaningful comments on TikTok. To ensure data integrity, comments exhibiting repetitive or highly generic phrasing were flagged as potential AI bots and excluded from the observation set.

The final operation, *saving*, involved the structured archiving of all selected material into a master database. This involved sorting the multi-platform data into a centralized Google Sheet for systematic analysis, as further detailed in section 3.3.4.

As Kozinets (2020) notes, the prevailing anonymity of these platforms makes it impossible to verify the exact identity of the posters. While we sought to analyse content produced and engaged with by manosphere participants, the specific affiliations of individual users cannot be confirmed. This study is therefore not framed as an account of manosphere members themselves, but as an interpretive analysis of the digital artifacts, such as posts and comments on Reddit and TikTok, through which manosphere ideologies are articulated, contested, and circulated.

3.3.4 Data Collection

Following the sampling procedure outlined above, empirical material was gathered along two dimensions: multimodal content and textual interactions. Multimodal content refers to the visual and auditory symbols utilised across both platforms, such as music, lighting, editing style, memes, infographics, imagery and general aesthetics. Interactions encompass the highly engaging comments on viral videos and posts within the community, where users actively negotiate meaning and validate their consumption-based identity projects.

For each TikTok video, we documented a detailed description of the content, observations regarding the dynamics in the comment section, reflective fieldnotes capturing subtext and our own emotional reactions. These records were supplemented by screenshots, the source link, and engagement metrics. Similarly, for each Reddit thread, we recorded the name of the subreddit, the copy of the post, relevant screenshots, the source link and corresponding fieldnotes. To

capture the full scope of these consumption practices, the data collection also extended to external websites and commercial courses when linked directly in a creator's social media biography or referenced in the content on TikTok. All material was stored in a structured Google Sheet, which was used both as a data management tool and as the basis for the coding operations described in section 3.3.5. We further included copies of each individual data point analysed to a shared cloud system, in order to mitigate any possible issues with content being deleted.

The empirical material was collected over a 3-week period between April 10 to 28, 2026, resulting in a final dataset of 45 Reddit threads and 48 TikTok videos. Data collection was concluded at this stage upon reaching theoretical saturation, as the continuous review of empirical material no longer yielded any new codes or emerging themes. This includes 33 TikTok videos and their respective comment sections originally collected during a preliminary mock study for the course BUSR33: Research Strategies and Methods (March 2026), which addressed a related research question. This material is reused with the permission of the supervising faculty. Crucially, these data points from the mock study were saved, re-analysed, and re-coded so to align precisely with the new research question and thematic framework established for this thesis.

3.3.5 Data Analysis

Our systematic treatment of the data followed Kozinets' (2020) five analytic operations, providing a structured pathway from raw data to conceptual abstraction. The first step was *collating* the data, where selected videos and threads were transformed into a systematized dataset suitable for analysis. This was operationalised through a structured database that cataloged the metadata and core narrative elements of each video and thread. Kozinets (2020) describes this process as a necessary first step for preparing the data for coding. The second step was *coding*. Following Kozinets (2020), we view codes as the tags used to assign meanings to the data collected and created using netnography. These codes allowed us to find and combine similar pieces of data so that we could cluster, display, and compare conceptually related data with one another. Next, we moved to *combining*, where conceptually related codes were merged into higher-order analytic units known as pattern codes or themes. This stage enabled us to identify more abstract structures and recurring patterns within the dataset. The fourth step involved *counting*, which allowed us to compare the relative prominence of elements

identified during coding. According to Kozinets (2020), this operation helps reveal the cultural weight and prevalence of specific themes, providing objective support for deeper qualitative interpretations. Finally, we conducted *charting*, which supported the visualization and organisation of the data in a structured format.

While Kozinets' (2020) five operations provided the procedural structure for managing and coding our netnographic data, the actual interpretation of the content was conducted through two distinct analytical lenses. First, we utilised a visual analysis to systematically deconstruct the multimodal video content. The visual analysis was structured around specific sites and modalities (Rose, 2001), focusing on the site of the image itself, examining the compositional modalities like aesthetic choices and the social modalities such as the visual meanings and symbols attached to the wider content of hegemonic masculinity. Second, we applied discourse analysis to the interactions in the comments. Aligning with Gergen (2015), we view discourse as an ongoing process of conversation and collective sense-making. This framework allowed us to analyse the language used within comment threads to understand how isolated men collectively negotiate their reality and construct consumption as a solution to male loneliness.

A further consideration in the analytical process concerns our position as outsiders to the manosphere culture. Unlike researchers who share the cultural background of their subjects, we approached these communities with critical distance. This represents an analytical asset in that it guards against uncritical reproduction of community logic, but also a risk in that community-specific language, irony, and in-group references may be misread. To manage this, we maintained reflective fieldnotes throughout data collection to document interpretive uncertainties, and the iterative nature of our abductive process allowed us to return to and interrogate readings that felt insufficiently grounded in the data. We also draw on existing scholarship on manosphere discourse to calibrate our interpretations against established analytical accounts of the community's language and ideological patterns.

3.4 Research Quality

Because this study adopts an ontological stance of relativism and a social constructionist epistemology, traditional positivist metrics of quality are incompatible with our research design. We therefore evaluate the study against the four trustworthiness criteria proposed by Lincoln

and Guba (1985) (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability), together with the criterion of authenticity (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

To ensure *credibility*, and that our findings represent the phenomenon of the manosphere and not just our pre-existing assumptions, we employed an abductive analysis. By anchoring our initial codes in established CCT frameworks and refining them iteratively, we ensured that our interpretations are grounded in the actual interactions of the community. To strengthen this, we created new TikTok accounts to ensure the data reflected the platform's algorithm curation, rather than our personal search histories. We additionally employed investigator triangulation, conducting the research as a pair and using continuous intrateam communication to align our interpretations. Further, theoretical triangulation was achieved by interpreting the material through complementary theoretical lenses, to reveal the multidimensional co-construction of loneliness and consumption. Finally, our analysis was subjected to peer debriefing through regular supervision sessions and a thesis seminar at which fellow students evaluated our work.

Our goal is not statistical generalizability, but *transferability*. Within a naturalistic framework, transferability represents the extent to which our observations, specifically regarding how consumption functions as a collectively negotiated resolution to male isolation, can be applied to alternative social or digital contexts (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Through purposive sampling and a careful description of the cultural and platform-specific context, we provide a thick description (Geertz, 1973, cited in Easterby-Smith et al., 2021) of this specific digital masculine environment. This rich, contextual data provides the necessary foundation for the reader to evaluate the degree of contextual fit between our findings and other online tribes or emerging social media platforms.

Dependability and confirmability rest on consistency and transparency regarding the study's processes (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). We achieve *dependability* by maintaining a structured database retaining raw observations, field notes, and coding decisions; we acknowledge nonetheless that the manosphere and the analysed platforms evolve rapidly, so what we document is best understood as a contextual snapshot. *Confirmability* is supported through reflexive fieldnotes included for each data point of our database, in which we recorded our interpretive notes and our positioning as female researchers analysing manosphere communities. Together, these records provide a clear audit trail of how our raw observations were synthesised into final themes and analyses.

Finally, we address *authenticity* by demonstrating a deep understanding of the phenomenon in its natural context (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). By observing these communities in their organic digital environment, filtering out AI bots and generic comments, and focusing on unprompted discourse, we ensure that our accounts reflect the genuine collective meaning-making within these communities rather than researcher-induced or artificially curated responses.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Although the data collected for this study is publicly accessible, the sensitive nature of the subject matter requires careful ethical considerations. We adhere to the guidelines of contextual integrity (Nissenbaum, 2011), which holds that information flows appropriately only when they match the norms of the context in which they were shared. While TikTok and Reddit are public platforms, users participating in communities within the manosphere often perceive these communities as private and safe spaces, particularly given the stigmatised nature of the topics discussed. To ensure an ethical approach to our data collection, we protected the privacy of individual commenters by redacting their usernames and obscuring any personal photographs shared within the comment threads. By contrast, the original TikTok video creators were not anonymised, as they actively broadcast content to mass audiences and can therefore be understood as public figures.

A further ethical consideration concerns the risk of amplification. Publishing research on communities such as those found in the manosphere carries the risk of increasing their visibility and potentially extending their reach (Colley & Moore, 2022; Phillips, 2018). To manage this, we reproduced the minimum content necessary to support our claims, anonymised all individual contributors, and oriented our analysis towards broader cultural patterns rather than individual users or posts.

Finally, as women entering a male-dominated and potentially hostile online space, we acknowledge that our interpretations are shaped by our positionality and prior perspectives. We therefore do not approach the field as neutral observers. To manage this, we maintained reflective fieldnotes throughout the data collection to document and interrogate our own reactions and assumptions, discussed divergent interpretations between ourselves before

reaching shared conclusions, and drew on existing scholarship on manosphere discourse to calibrate our readings against established analytical accounts of the community's language and ideological patterns.

3.6 Method Limitations

The data has some characteristics that should be noted. On the forum-based platforms, Reddit specifically, each subreddit operates according to its own culture, norms, and moderation practices, meaning that insights drawn from one subreddit community may not translate directly to others (Proferes et al., 2021).

The choice of TikTok as one of the platforms for this netnography presents methodological challenges. Consequently, the data collection process required the development of a platform-specific research strategy tailored to TikTok's nature. Traditional netnography typically focuses on sustained interactions within identified online communities, where members engage in ongoing communication (Kozinets, 2002). On TikTok, however, interaction is largely organised around algorithmically curated video content, where the "ForYou" feed progressively shapes what each user encounters based on prior engagement (Baumann et al., 2026). As a result, interaction often unfolds in comment sections attached to individual videos rather than within stable community spaces, such as discussion forums. Although comment sections sometimes display elements of community exchange, the platform does not facilitate sustained discussion in the same way as forum-based platforms like Reddit. Accordingly, the TikTok portion of the dataset primarily consists of individual videos from the manosphere, and the comment sections attached to them, rather than extended discussions between users. It should be further noted that TikTok videos are subject to removal by the platform or creators themselves, meaning that some content may no longer be publicly accessible after the data collection period. To address this, personal copies of all collected videos were retained.

A further limitation inherent to social media netnography is the potential discrepancy between publicly expressed views and the broader collective sentiment within these communities (Kozinets, 2020). This discrepancy between vocal participants and the broader group identity means that the discourse captured in this study may overrepresent the most ideologically

committed members of the manosphere, rather than reflecting the range of perspectives present within these communities.

4 The Manosphere

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the manosphere, a fragmented network of digital communities, which is largely defined by reactionary responses to contemporary gender equality and a perceived crisis of masculinity. By deconstructing the core ideologies and specific characteristics of its primary sub-tribes, this section establishes the necessary empirical context for the reader. Chapter 4 serves to provide the theoretical background and descriptive foundation required to understand the environment in which collective masculine identity is negotiated.

4.1 The Crisis of Masculinity

The so-called crisis of masculinity is often viewed as a modern product of industrialization, increased competition from women in the workforce, eroding job security, the decline of traditional families and men's increased dependence on compensatory consumption (Thompson & Holt, 2004). Solomon-Godeau (1993) argues that this crisis is a foundation of Western heritage and that masculinity has been characterised by recurrent uncertainty since the 17th century about what it means to be a man and what truly defines manhood. While these ideals may shift, the crisis of masculinity serves as an enduring cultural frame through which socio-economic conditions are interpreted.

4.2 Definition

The manosphere can be defined as a fragmented and detached network of digital communities and social media groups that promotes misogynistic and reactionary discourses (Han & Yin, 2023). These spaces are primarily united by a shared belief that men are the victims of feminism and its influence on society at large. While this ecosystem has existed since the early 2000s, its

growth and activity have intensified with the rise of online feminist movements, such as #MeToo (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023). As a consequence, the manosphere functions as a site for constructing masculine identities rooted in victimization and the critique of contemporary gender equality (Han & Yin, 2023).

Central to understanding the gender dynamics of the manosphere is the framework of hegemonic masculinity, which posits that masculinity is not a fixed biological entity or a static set of personality traits, but rather a dynamic configuration of practices accomplished through social actions (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This framework is anchored by two fundamental features, plurality and hierarchy, which organise gender identities into a complex social order. At the forefront of this order sits an idealized form of masculinity that maintains dominance not only through the subordination of femininity but also through the marginalization of non-hegemonic forms of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

4.3 Ideology

The ideology of the manosphere is fundamentally rooted in the rejection of gender equality and feminism. Central to this worldview is the belief that sexual autonomy is inherently detrimental to the social order. This perspective posits that without patriarchal constraints, women are drawn to a small minority of men, thereby denying the majority of men access to partners (Devlin, 2015). However, the grievance within these communities is not merely the denial of sex, but the perceived denial of a hegemonic masculine identity. Sexual success with women is often treated as a vital marker of true manhood, therefore, female cooperation is viewed as an entitlement necessary for men to achieve their ideal self. In this framework, modern society is viewed as flawed because it is no longer patriarchal (Kennedy-Kollar, 2024).

To sustain this perspective, the manosphere utilises misogyny. Manne (2017) argues that everyday sexism is a byproduct of broader patriarchal structures and power imbalances in which misogyny is fundamentally rooted. While sexism and misogyny are similar terms, they are not identical. Sexism operates through the promotion of female stereotypes and sexual objectification to justify gender inequality. Misogyny serves as the force to punish or correct women who are perceived as non-conforming to traditional gender norms (Richardson-Self, 2018). While misogyny constitutes a long-standing system of oppression, the

institutionalization of men's groups as a specific reactionary response to feminism only emerged a few decades ago (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023).

4.4 Subgroups of the Manosphere

Although the manosphere comprises diverse subgroups with frequently overlapping objectives, significant ideological and structural distinctions exist between them. For the scope of this study, the five most common communities will be introduced.

Men's Rights Movement (MRM)

One of the first and most prominent groups to emerge was the Men's Rights Movement (MRM), also referred to as Men's Rights Activists or MRAs, which started in the 1970s (Messner, 2016). The original concern of the movement focused on men's rights in marriage, parenthood, and divorce law before shifting to contemporary manosphere debates regarding sexuality, consent, and false allegations (Gotell & Dutton, 2016). MRAs gained significant online momentum in the 2000s as a reaction to the institutionalization of women's rights, which they perceived as a threat to male status (Messner, 2016). Modern MRAs utilise digital platforms like Reddit and dedicated blogs to highlight issues they believe disproportionately affect men, such as suicide and homelessness, while maintaining an overtly anti-feminist stance that frames female empowerment as inherently detrimental to men's rights (Cousineau, 2021). Although scholars critique this history as being overly focused on the U.S. context (Ben Salah et al., 2017), the movement is now a global digital phenomenon.

Incels

Among the more extreme factions of this phenomenon is the "incel" subculture. The term "incel" originated in 1997 from a gender-neutral support forum for those struggling with loneliness but has since evolved into a male-dominated subculture defined by sexual entitlement and resentment towards women (Ribeiro et al., 2021; Taylor, 2018). The incel worldview is grounded in two core beliefs: an understanding of society as a hierarchy where one's place is determined mostly by physical characteristics, and the identification of women as the primary culprit for this hierarchy (Hoffman et al., 2020). Central to this ideology is the concept of lookism, discrimination based on appearance and the phenomenon where

unattractive people are treated poorly (Pelzer et al., 2021). Incels operate within this biological hierarchy, which dictates that only the most attractive men can achieve success (Halpin, 2022). They are convinced that their own appearance is to blame for their involuntary celibacy and their difficulties in developing relations with women (Pelzer et al., 2021). While some members believe they can "ascend" this hierarchy through appearance-altering consumption, such as fitness, diet, or plastic surgery, most adopt a fatalistic view of their own genetic inferiority, often referred to as genetic determinism (Ribeiro et al., 2021). Following Reddit's 2017 ban on hate speech and incitement to violence, the community, which is associated with extreme misogyny and mass violence, migrated to fringe platforms like 4chan and dedicated websites such as incels.is (Ribeiro et al., 2021). The incel community is frequently categorised as the most violent demographic within the manosphere, a reputation solidified by numerous mass murders and attempts carried out by self-proclaimed incels (Williams & Arntfield, 2020).

Pick-Up Artists

Unlike other manosphere factions, the pick-up artist (PUA) community is based on transactional relationships and dedicated to the seduction of women. Historically, one of the earliest manosphere-related subreddits, peaking in popularity between 2011 and 2012, this subculture presents successful social and sexual interaction as a learnable skill attainable through standardized techniques and training (Ribeiro et al., 2021). These techniques have been critiqued for blurring the line between courtship and harassment (O'Neill, 2018).

Red Pill Community

The red pill community utilises the metaphor of the movie *The Matrix* to characterise feminism as a system of male exploitation, urging men to awaken to the reality of their socially subordinate status (Van Valkenburgh, 2021). In this context, taking the blue pill means switching off and living a life of delusion, while taking the red pill means becoming enlightened to life's "ugly truths" and awakening to feminism's alleged misandry and brainwashing (Ging, 2019). Central to this worldview is the commodification of intimacy through "sexual market value," a hierarchy that categorises men as either "Alphas" or "Betas" (Cousineau, 2021). By adopting scripts derived from evolutionary psychology, members attempt to "level up" their market standing through calculated behavioural changes designed to ensure sexual success (Ging, 2017).

While the incel and red pill communities both share anti-feminist views and endorse traditional gender roles, they distinguish themselves by their contrasting responses to frustrations within the manosphere. Red pillers focus more on self-improvement to achieve personal success, while incels have a more victimized perspective rooted in biological determinism, which leads to nihilism and hostility (Han & Yin, 2023).

Men Going Their Own Way

Emerging as an outgrowth of the Men's Rights Movement, MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way) represents the separatist faction of the manosphere (Kennedy-Kollar, 2024). While sharing the "Red Pill" belief in male victimhood, MGTOW offers a unique resolution to male isolation by advocating for a complete retreat from the "marketplace" of traditional relationships (Wright et al., 2020). MGTOW views female sexual autonomy as an inescapable danger, citing divorce laws and false rape allegations as primary risks (Kennedy-Kollar, 2024). By refocusing on personal growth and digital community, members negotiate their loneliness through a separatist lens that maintains core misogynistic values while refusing to engage in a non-patriarchal system (Wright et al., 2020).

4.5 Language, Identity, and Influence

The rapid expansion of the manosphere is largely driven by digital platforms and algorithms that prioritise polarizing gender politics to maximise engagement (Habib et al., 2022). This ecosystem primarily attracts young, disenfranchised men by offering a curated sense of identity and community in response to perceived social disconnection (Wilson et al., 2024). Radicalization within these spaces is often a tiered process, beginning with exposure to moderate anti-feminist content and gradually escalating toward extremist ideologies (Habib et al., 2022). This recruitment is facilitated by narratives of male victimhood and the promise of reclaiming traditional masculinity, ideologies often amplified by influential manosphere figures (Botto & Gottzén, 2024; Habib et al., 2022). A longitudinal language analysis of these forums confirms this trend, revealing a steady intensification of misogyny and violent rhetoric over time (Farrell et al., 2019).

Uniting these diverse subcultures is a collective identity that provides a robust resilience, allowing these communities to survive platform bans, shutdowns, and leadership voids. This

identity is anchored in a specialised, shared language that serves as a foundational tool for reinforcing in-group solidarity (Scotto Di Carlo, 2023). While the different subgroups use distinct but overlapping vernacular, for instance, pick-up artists use objectifying language tied to seduction techniques, while incels emphasise their victimhood narrative (McGlashan & Krendel, 2024), the overarching discourse reinforces misogyny, anti-feminism, and traditional gender roles, including the denial of gender violence, the promotion of male victimhood, and hate speech against women (Marwick & Caplan, 2018). These expressions often rely on metaphors, dark humour, and self-derogatory expressions to further cement communal bonds (Scotto Di Carlo, 2023). To facilitate a nuanced understanding of the specialised and coded discourse analysed in this study, a glossary of the most significant manosphere terminology has been compiled and included in Appendix C. This vernacular permeates every layer of the manosphere, and fluency is seen as a marker of community membership. The ideology is further sustained through the circulation of memes, which function as subcultural capital artifacts (Thornton, 1995). They compress the community's ideology into a format that is immediately understandable to insiders and opaque to outsiders, making comprehension itself a marker of capital. By constructing an "us vs. them" narrative, the manosphere often scapegoats women and feminism for broader societal and economic issues, aligning with neoliberal ideologies that allow men to reconcile economic grievances while maintaining anti-feminist stances (Van Valkenburgh, 2019). Furthermore, this rhetoric is increasingly infiltrating mainstream discourse, legitimizing extremist views and fostering real-world aggression through the amplification of narratives by popular political and media figures (MacDonald et al., 2026). While the manosphere has global commonalities, local cultures influence its discourse and various studies have been conducted such as on the Turkish incel culture and the Italian manosphere trend (Ignazzi et al., 2025; Uzun & Tiryaki, 2024).

Ultimately, this digital aggression has manifested in real-world violence, including domestic terrorism and mass casualty events. Notable examples include the 2014 Isla Vista killings and the 2018 Toronto van attack, both of which were perpetrated by individuals deeply embedded in incel ideologies (Hoffman et al., 2020). The manosphere's rhetoric legitimises such acts by framing violence as a justifiable response to societal injustices, offering a path for men to reclaim power through force (Kennedy-Kollar, 2024). These misogynistic narratives have begun to permeate mainstream discourse, shifting broader societal attitudes toward gender-based violence and extremist gender politics (Ging, 2017).

5 From Isolation to the Marketplace

Drawing upon our netnographic data of 48 TikTok videos and 45 Reddit threads, this section outlines how male loneliness is systematically processed and commodified within the manosphere. We have identified three overarching themes across the dataset to showcase the journey from social isolation to the transformation marketplace.

5.1 Reframing the Loneliness Problem

Across the dataset, the manosphere registers male loneliness as a structural deficit, rather than as a pre-existing emotional state. The manosphere takes diffuse emotional experiences of feeling inadequate or unwanted and systematically recodes them as a measurable male deficit that can be quantified and addressed through consumption. While loneliness as an emotional state is difficult to commodify, once it is recast as a collective biological deficit, it suddenly becomes a problem with a consumable solution. The following two subthemes trace the two moments through which this material conversion is accomplished.

5.1.1 The Construction of Male Deficiency

The manosphere strips male loneliness of its social complexity and reconstitutes it as a measurable property of the individual. This is a reification in Marx's (1867) sense, extended to the consumption sphere. A failed relation between persons is rewritten as a material deficit inherent to the body itself and the social conditions that produced this failure disappear from view behind what is presented as the objective inadequacy of the physical self.

The manosphere offers multiple ways to interpret loneliness, ranging from genetic determinism to social inadequacy, all of which converge on a shared form of response. The Black Pill doctrine offers the most explicit version of this framing, which holds that “a man’s success in the dating market is primarily determined by his physical attractiveness and genetic traits”

(Kennedy-Kollar, 2024, p.134). A post on r/unlovablecirclejerk titled “*Simping never works!*” exemplifies how this doctrine is applied at the individual level. The author inventories his height, ethnicity, jawline, body composition, and more, concluding “*I am a genetic failure in every way*” and “*I barely feel like I’m human*”. The tag used “*It’s over*” implies he has given up on himself. This systematic breakdown of the self directly illustrates the process of reification (Marx, 1867). Instead of viewing his social isolation, such as his lack of college friends and rejections at bars, as a complex, relational failure, the creator rewrites these experiences as the inevitable, direct consequences of his objective physical traits. The social conditions that produce his loneliness disappear from view, replaced by a static inventory of bodily properties.

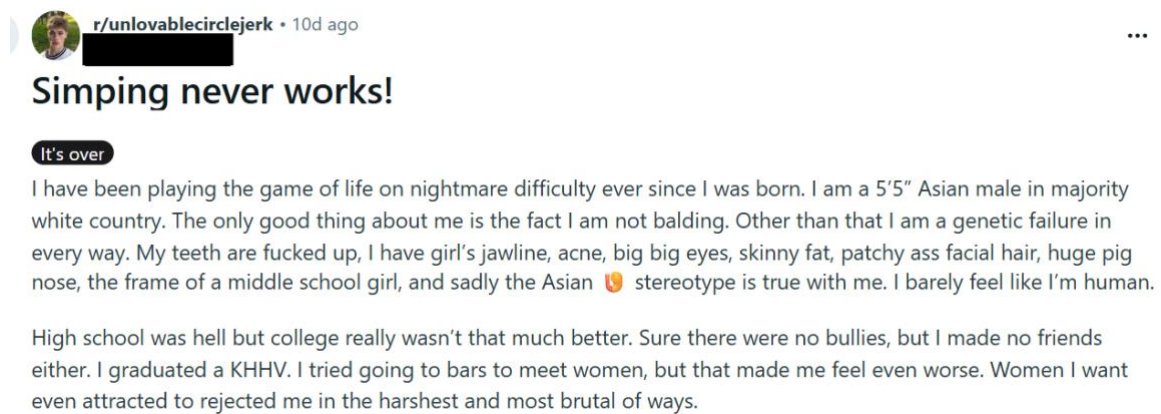


Figure 2: Example of social isolation and genetic determinism on Reddit

What makes this reification particularly effective is that it does not require members to agree on its cause. Comments under a Reddit thread on the decline of male dating illustrate the convergence despite surface disagreement. While one user attributes the decline to “*women’s changing behaviours and worldviews*”; another points to “*porn and dating apps*”; and a third blames the economy. The proposed responses, however, run parallel: “*focus on the things I can actually count on to bring me joy and help secure me financially*”, “*staying sane and surviving in this world*”. Each user, regardless of diagnosis, turns inward towards self-management and individual optimization. This reflects the mechanism of personalization within the PACT framework (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014) but operating at the meso-level of the community rather than through top-down institutional governance.

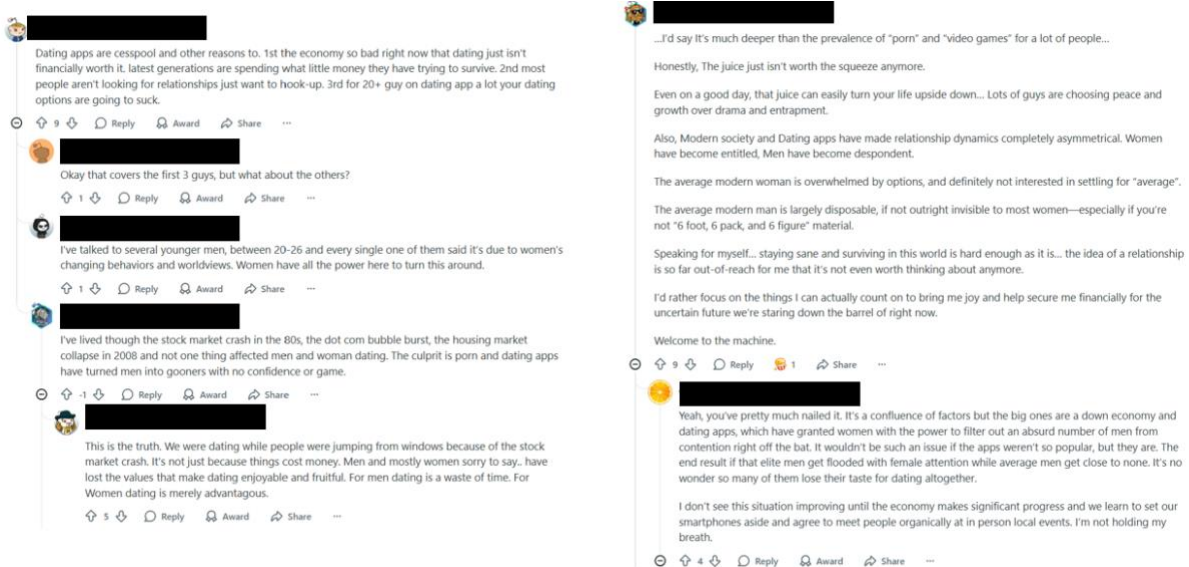


Figure 3: Comments on a Reddit post asking why young men don't date anymore

The resulting narrative of male deficiency is legitimised through what Giesler and Veresiu (2014) identify as authorization, which consists of the positioning of community-produced knowledge as expert knowledge on both the problem and its solution. Anatomy diagrams, hypergamy charts, and biological taxonomies perform this validating work. A widely circulated TikTok shows a hypergamy chart, captioned *"The male loneliness epidemic is caused by hypergamy"*, visualizing the claim that a small share of high status men absorb the majority of female attention. Comments on a related Reddit thread echo the diagram's logic in prose: *"the average modern man is largely disposable, if not outright invisible to most women – especially if you're not "6 foot, 6 pack, and 6 figure" material"*. What the chart and the comment share is a powerful authority effect: a complex social relation is presented as a measurable regularity, positioning the community as the only legitimate site of expertise. Authorization in this context does not require formal institutional credentialing. It only requires that the community validates its own tools through collective deployment. Through this deployment, these pseudoscientific tools acquire sign value (Baudrillard, 1981), converting loneliness into a rigid symbolic code that members must successfully decode to legibly articulate their deficiency within the tribe.

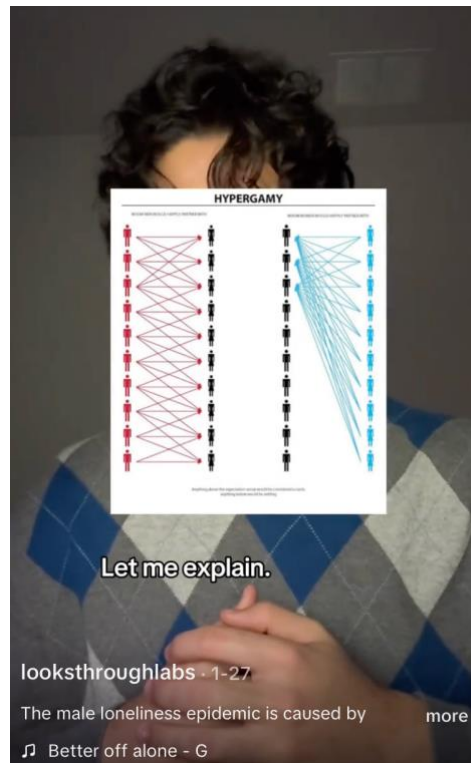


Figure 4: Screenshot showing a widely circulated hypergamy chart

The pseudoscientific frameworks circulating within these digital masculine communities, such as anatomy diagrams, hypergamy charts, biological taxonomies, function as subcultural capital artifacts in Thornton's (1995) sense. Fluency in these frameworks, such as knowing how to read a PSL scale or, how to categorise a face using the community's anatomical vocabulary, is a form of subcultural capital that differentiates insiders from outsiders and high-status members from low-status ones. The members who produce and circulate these pseudoscientific tools are performing high-capital expertise display. Further, Thornton's (1995) insights about authenticity and exclusivity are also applicable. The pseudoscientific frameworks function as exclusive insider knowledge; these are not analyses available in mainstream sources but community-specific tools that mark their users as initiated members rather than just casual observers. This exclusivity is part of what makes them effective as a status display mechanism.

Finally, an internal tension runs between the various manosphere streams. While different factions disagree on how manageable the problem is, they find common ground in the baseline assumption that the problem is of physical nature. From this premise, the logic that follows is that if loneliness is of physical nature, the remedy for it will also be of physical nature, and consumption becomes the primary means through which work on the physical form is made

possible. This conceptual shift marks the separation stage within Van Gennep's (1960) rites of passage framework. It represents the moment at which the individual is symbolically removed from his previous status and declared ready for transformation. While traditionally rites of passage are marked by rituals of stripping the member of previous identity markers, in these masculine online communities this stripping is more symbolic. The community strips the member's loneliness of its emotional complexity and reconstructs it as a biological fact, removing the possibility of social or relational explanations and reconstructing him as a liminal subject. This subject exists in a threshold state between the deficient actual self and the promised masculine ideal whose inadequacy demands the transformation journey.

5.1.2 "Am I Cooked?": Submitting the Self to Collective Judgment

The "Am I Cooked?" practice happens when manosphere members post pictures of themselves and submit them to collective evaluation. While this practice appears across both channels in our data, its visual format makes it highly reproducible on TikTok. Typically, the user publishes a picture of his face or body and pairs it with a short caption: "*Do I have potential I think I am mtn*"; "*I have potential?*", "*Help me out - am I cooked? What do I do*". The framing is so consistent across these posts that a viewer encountering the format recognises immediately what specific type of reply is being solicited. The subcultural vocabulary is very standardized, and the only response the format permits is an aesthetic assessment.

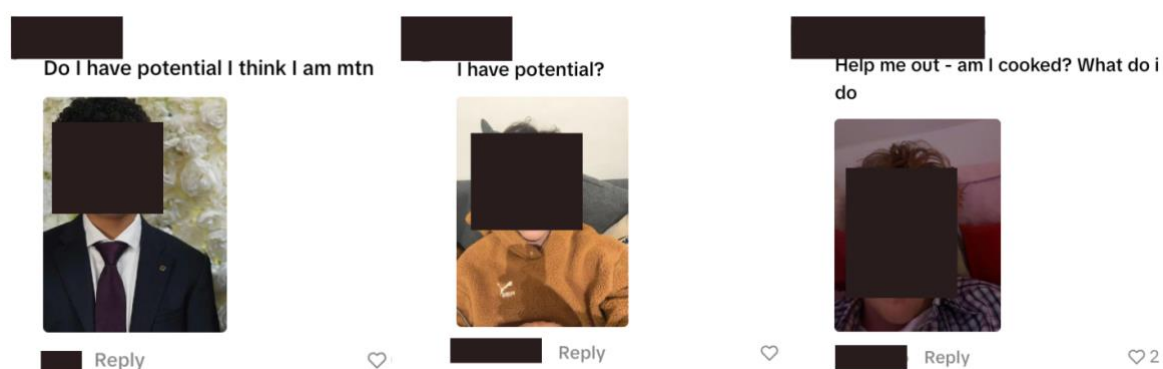


Figure 5: Examples of the "Am I Cooked?" ritual

Analysed through Rook's (1985) four components of ritual experience, the practice qualifies as a fully developed ritual. The pictures submitted for evaluation function as the ritual artifacts, and the standardization of the format signals its artifactual status. Further, the ritual script is

precise and community-enforced. The post must include a photograph, use the recognised community vocabulary, and it also must invite aesthetic evaluation rather than emotional support or general feedback. The creator of the post occupies the central performance role, while community members who rate and diagnose occupy the role of ritual assessors. The broader community that reads without commenting (registered through view counts and likes), constitutes Rook's (1985) ritual audience; these silent witnesses convert the post from a private question into a validated community event. The high reproducibility of these caption styles, framing conventions, and reply structures across the dataset mark the practice an institutionalized collective ritual rather than an isolated individual behaviour. This ritual can also be seen as the acting-out the development crisis between isolation and intimacy as described in the Erikson's (1950) model.

Further, Cova's (1997) concept of linking value clarifies why these photographs are submitted publicly rather than evaluated in private. The utility of the image is fundamentally relational, serving as a social link that requires a public display and community recognition to be activated. Submitting the photograph is the performative act through which the member transitions from spectator to an active participant within the tribe. Because linking value is contingent upon this collective visibility, a private assessment would render the image subculturally meaningless. Its worth lies entirely in the social connections it activates within the comment section. The evaluation portion of the "Am I Cooked Ritual?" also provides empirical evidence of Freud's (1927) structural logic of disavowal, operating simultaneously at both the individual and meso-level. At the individual level, participants are partially aware that a reductive aesthetic rating cannot resolve deep seated loneliness, yet they submit their bodies to the ritual anyway. This internal defence mechanism is stabilized at the meso-level by the very format of the thread. The captions soliciting ratings are not earnest inquiries, but part of highly scripted interactions that predetermine the critical answers it receives. Disavowal is thus collectively organised. The format requires the poster to act as though the community's verdict carries absolute objective weight, even while their repeated submissions of the same question demonstrate a tacit awareness that the metric is hollow. Ultimately, the ritual is performed not despite this underlying awareness of its insufficiency, but through it. By participating in this organised disavowal, the user internalises their self-worth as quantifiable market deficit, effectively preparing the liminal subject to seek out commercial solutions offered in the transformation marketplace.

5.2 The Transformation Marketplace

This theme traces how the manosphere constructs and enacts the transformation pathway itself. This includes the specific narratives, practices, and commercial interventions through which members are expected to move from the deficient self produced in Theme 1 toward the promised masculine ideal. Utilising Van Gennep (1960) and Turner's (1969) theories, this theme represents the liminal phase of the rites of passage. Members get separated from their previous status in Theme 1 and now occupy the threshold state between the deficient self and the promised masculine ideal. The transformation marketplace is the community's management of this liminal phase. It is not a personal project but a collectively scripted, commercially mediated, and community-monitored process. Crucially, the marketplace mechanisms analysed within this theme demonstrate a distinct meso-level manifestation of the consumer responsabilization process that Giesler and Veresiu (2014) describe at the macro-institutional level, showing how a decentralized digital community can autonomously compel individual optimization through market avenues. To systematically dissect this marketized transformation journey, the theme is organised into three analytical subthemes.

5.2.1 Ascending: The Narrative of Masculine Redemption

The first subtheme analyses the concept of ascension, a redemptive communal narrative that serves as the motivational engine for these masculine communities. After framing loneliness as a biological deficit in the previous theme, the ascension narrative promises a path towards social rebirth as a high-value, sexually successful and masculine man. These success stories, prevalent on both platforms, construct a journey from loneliness to hegemonic success. The transition is framed not merely as a personal achievement, but as a movement within the group's hierarchy, where external validation from women and the community at large functions as the primary metric of a member's successful transformation. One exemplary post in the r/MenAscending thread describes romantic rejection as the moment that justified and initiated the transformation journey, positioning female rejection as the necessary separation that marks the beginning of the ascension arc:

“A friend mentioned that a girl I used to have a massive crush on was going to be there and that she was single again...I approached her hoping for some excitement from her but as soon

as I started talking, I could literally see her face drop. Her expression went into visible disgust, like my presence, completely disgusted her ... From that day onward I decided I was never going to allow myself to experience that kind of humiliation again ... In the end, that incredibly painful, negative experience was the exact wake-up call I needed ... She broke me down, but it forced me to rebuild myself."

Rather than a purely individual aspiration, ascension functions as a collective orientation that binds isolated men together in pursuit of a common, idealized endpoint. The emotional force sustaining the ascension narrative is what Maffesoli (1996) terms *puissance*. It's the collective effervescence generated not by achieved transformation but by shared affective investment in its promise. By framing masculine value as something that must be earned through physical and social optimization, the community converts loneliness into a public project of "leveling up." This collective orientation is made visible in the data across both platforms. On Reddit, members share detailed before-and-after posts, often including pictures and calls-to-action for the community to rate their ascension, give their opinion or even share their own story. An example from the r/LooksmaxingAdvice thread visualizes this narrative, with the community validating and ranking the ascension in the comments, such as *"you went from subhuman to mtn"* or *"you were ugly as a demon but now you a chad"*.

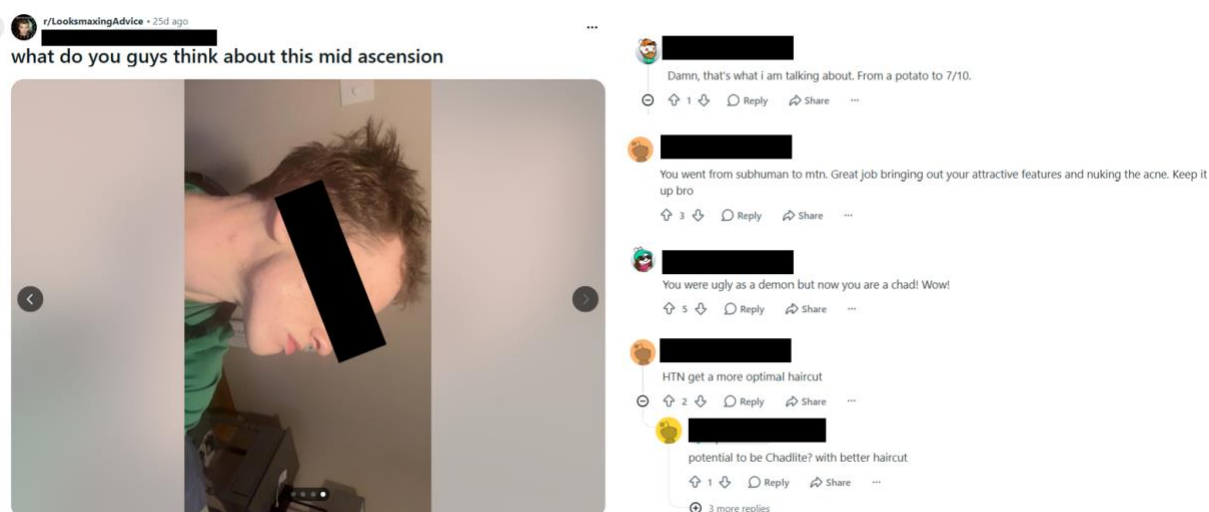


Figure 6: Examples of ascension narrative on Reddit

Identity here is not static but constantly evaluated by the community through validation practices and ranking rituals. Within these collective communities specific language is used to construct a hierarchy that men are expected to follow and attempt to ascend within. This is

clearly visible in the below screenshots from TikTok, where visual ratings systems such as the PSL score and related terms like “LTN (low tier normie)” are utilised to classify men and quantify precisely where each member currently sits in the hierarchy.

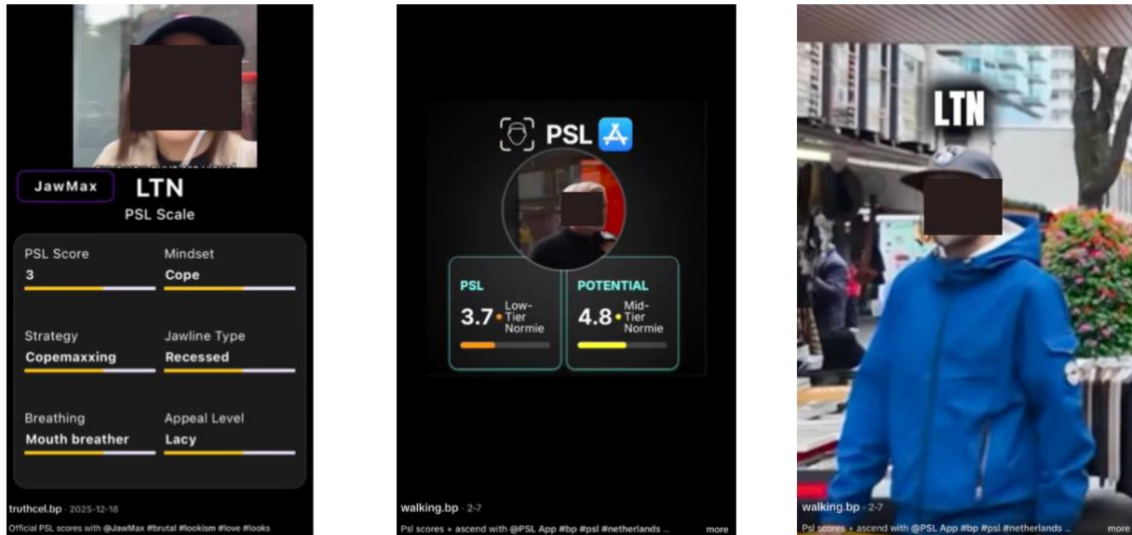


Figure 7: Examples of manosphere rating practices in TikTok videos

Through the lens of Baudrillard (1981), this continuous classification reveals the ultimate destination of the ascension narrative is not an objective physical baseline or psychological state that can be privately achieved. Rather, ascension represents the pursuit of a specific sign value position. The idealized endpoints of the manosphere do not satisfy a functional use-value or reflect an intrinsic state of well-being. They exist purely as signs that derive their meaning entirely from their structural opposition to lower-tier signifiers within the community's code. Because sign value is fundamentally relational and dependent on its location within a publicly shared, group-enforced taxonomy, it cannot exist in isolation. It demands a perpetual public evaluation and communal ranking to be activated and recognised.

Further, through the lens of Turner's (1969) *communitas*, the ascension narrative can be understood as the affective glue of the neo-tribe (Maffesoli, 1996), bonding men in a liminal state and sustaining the collective emotional energy through the shared promise of transformation. While traditional *communitas* are characterised by egalitarian, leveling bonds that strip away social distinctions, these masculine communities represent a distortion. The community bonds men together not despite their status distinctions but through them,

generating the emotional warmth of tribal belonging while simultaneously reproducing the very rankings and exclusions that make belonging conditional.

Connecting this back to the study's broader argument and to the consumer responsabilization literature, the ascension narrative provides the essential bridge between psychological distress and marketplace participation, by converting loneliness reframed as a biological deficit into a compelling commercial logic. This narrative mechanism nurtures the deep conviction that escaping loneliness is entirely contingent upon the individual's capacity to ascend through disciplined consumption and lifestyle reconstruction.

5.2.2 The Maxxing Playbook: Routines for the Ideal Self

This subtheme examines the various maxxng protocols, such as looksmaxxing, gymmaxxing, mewing, heightmaxxing, not as isolated lifestyle choices but as collectively authored and enforced consumer rituals (Rook, 1985). Within these digital spaces, the "maxxing" suffix transforms a wide array of activities from casual hobbies into technical, mandatory disciplines and scripts. These scripts dictate what a member needs to acquire, in what order, and how they must demonstrate their commitment to the transformation journey.

The materialization of these scripts is most visible in look-based subreddits dedicated to mewing, testosterone, biohacking and looksmaxxing, where members frequently share their "stacks", detailed visual and/or textual inventories of supplements, pharmaceuticals, and specialised tools (e.g., jawline trainers). Analysed through Rook's (1985) ritual framework, these items do not function as ordinary, interchangeable consumer objects, but rather as mandatory ritual artifacts. The correct selection and display of a stack are performative requirements to signal ritual competence to the tribe. There are various examples in the dataset such as in the r/Biohackers community on Reddit, where a 20-year-old male shared a picture of this supplement and peptide stack and asked the others to rate it. He is submitting his ritual performance to a ritual audience for validation. The interaction dynamic within these comment threads demonstrates how this ritual audience validates or polices these rituals. The reactions range from positive shock, *"holychrist age 20. Please please report back with the age 30 stack"* to cynical defeat such as *"allat just to still get mogged irl by genetics 😞"*. These posts provide a standardized manual for other members to replicate, negotiate or criticise, ensuring a continuous and collective negotiation of these protocols.

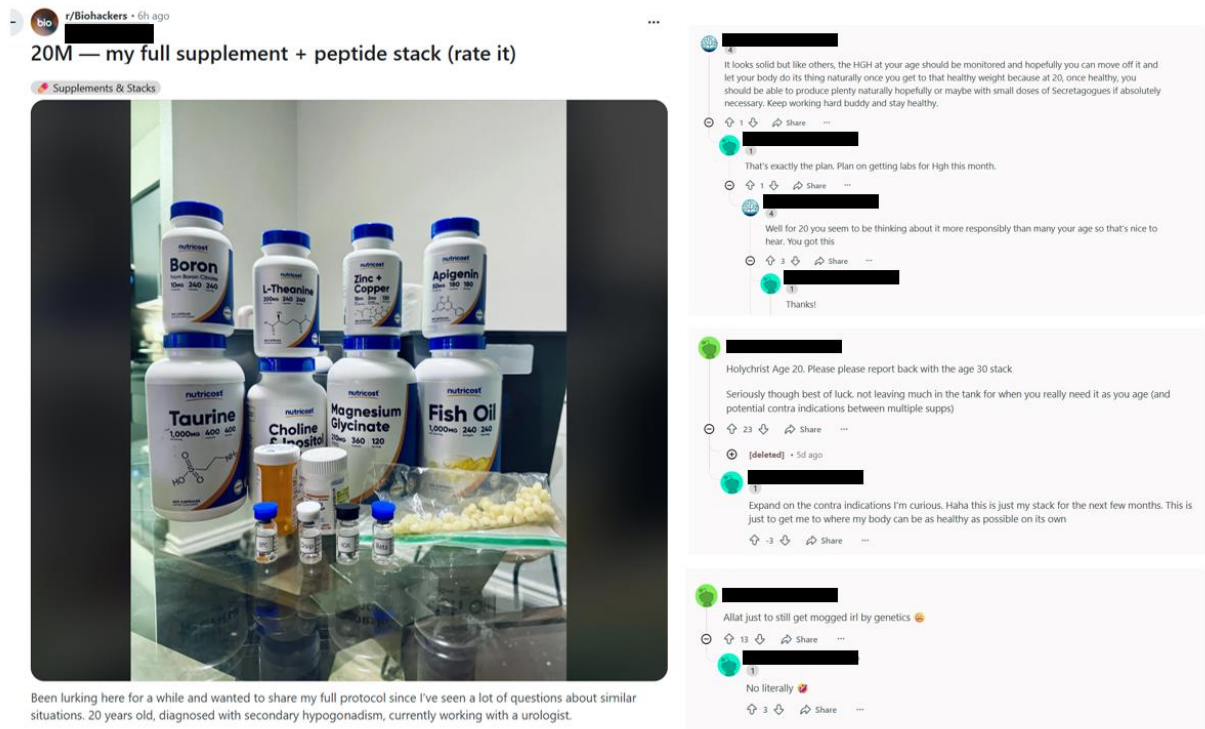


Figure 8: Example of a shared stack and the community negotiation around it

Further, these stacks and routines signal to the other members that the individual is actively engaging within the community and submitting their routine and body to the community's rigorous protocols. This collective authoring of the script dictates clear performance roles within the community (Rook, 1985). The members sharing their stack and submitting their routine for assessment occupy the central performer role. This is visualized in posts such as in the r/Mewing and r/LooksmaxingAdvice community, talking about specific routines and products that helped them improve their looks. The self-fashioned figures in these digital communities who curate product recommendations and ratings occupy the ritual authority role. These authorities curate the scripts and monetise their subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995) through paid educational spaces. This is clearly visible when members justify their routines by citing these authority figures: *“got this from Clavicular’s skool course but apparently the order you put on skincare matters way more...”* and *“Anton Verada has this thing about doing neck curls way slower than normal... Been doing it for a few months and my neck is noticeably thicker which honestly changed how my face looks...”*.

The community's reply to this is a mix between asking for more insider knowledge (*"What Im courses do you think are actually worth the price?"*) and giving their own advice to others and therefore acting in the assessor role (*"Tret and azelaic acid makes the skin glow and creates perfect skin. Yes it depends on the situation but this combo can't be topped when speaking abt topicals"*). These interactions highlight that the value of these posts transcends the mere refinement of routines and resides in their linking value (Cova, 1997) as well. The comments section operates as a vital space for generating and maintaining social bonds within the community.

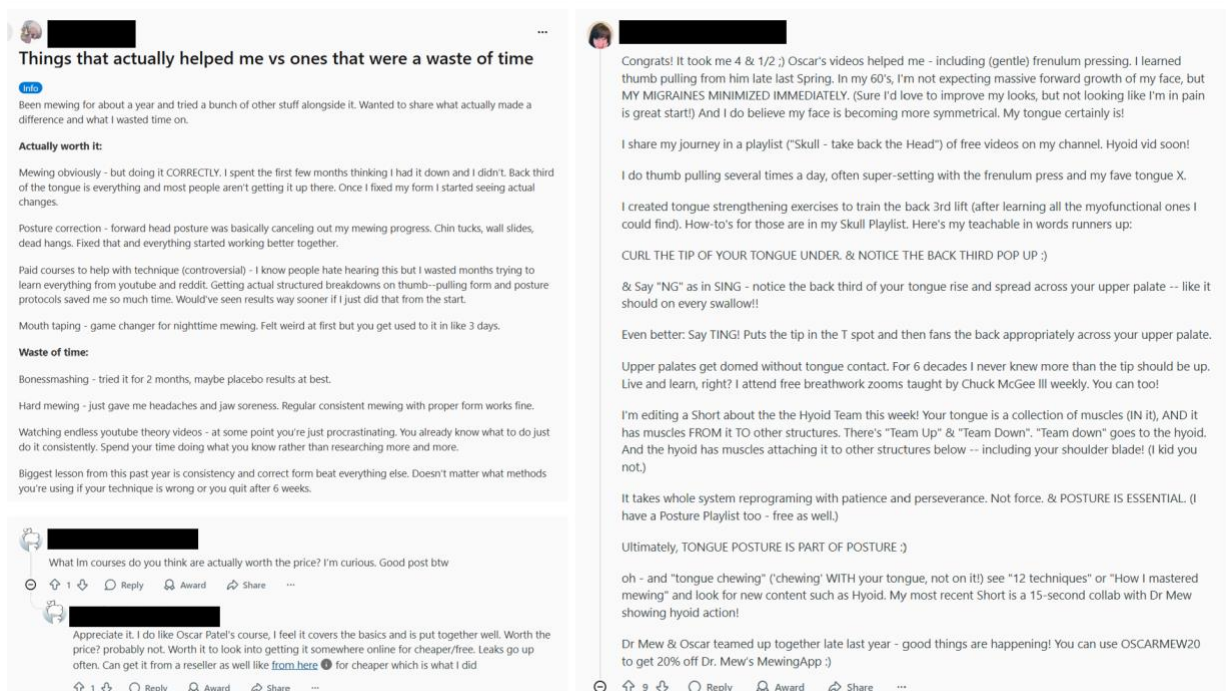


Figure 9: Negotiation around mewing practices and related products on Reddit

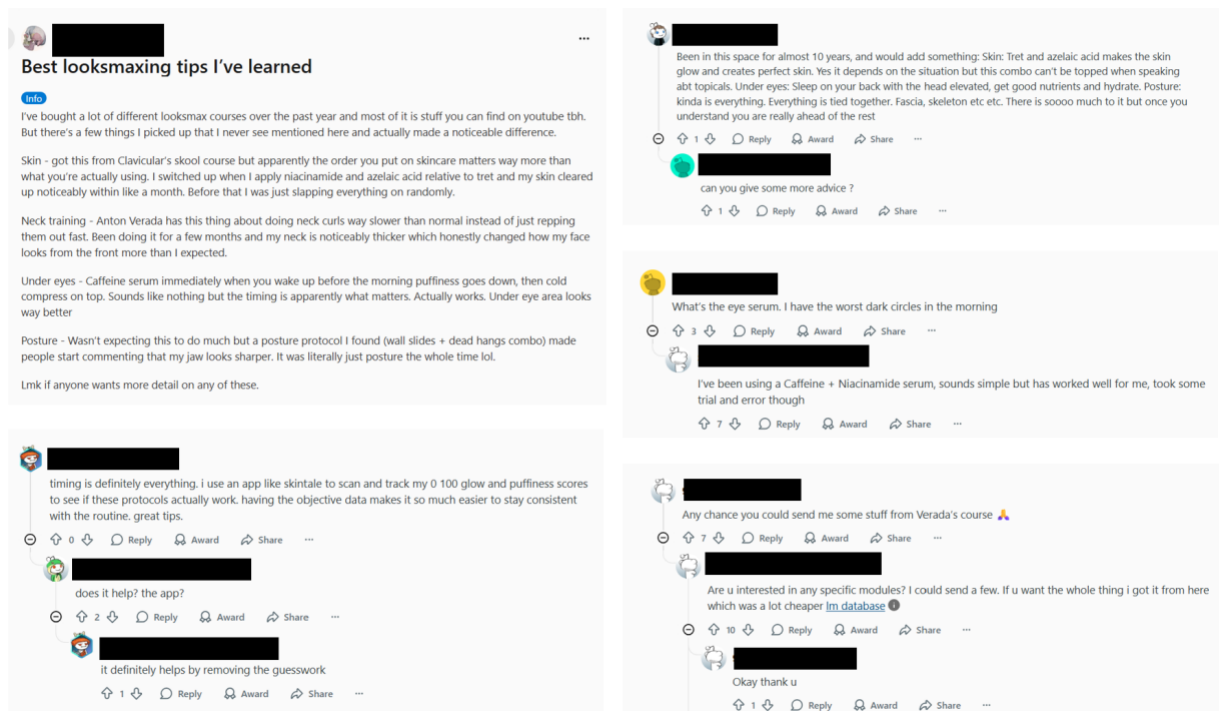


Figure 10: Negotiation around looksmaxxing tips and products on Reddit

Furthermore, following the right protocol is a demonstration of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995), it signals to the community that the member is a legitimate and committed participant in the journey. The communal peer-review board through which members dissect and critique each other's routines operates as a subcultural capital enforcement mechanism. Those with high capital use harsh critique and unsolicited expertise to police the playbook's standards, maintaining the exclusivity that makes their insider knowledge valuable. TikTok's visual heavy environment helps to facilitate the rise of self-proclaimed experts, who hold a high accumulation of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995) and curate content around product recommendations and ratings. Users frequently utilise the comment section on these videos to seek out specific marketplace scripts, asking questions such as *"How are we using castor oil?"* or *"What do you recommend instead of AG1?"* treating these "influencers" as collective consultants.

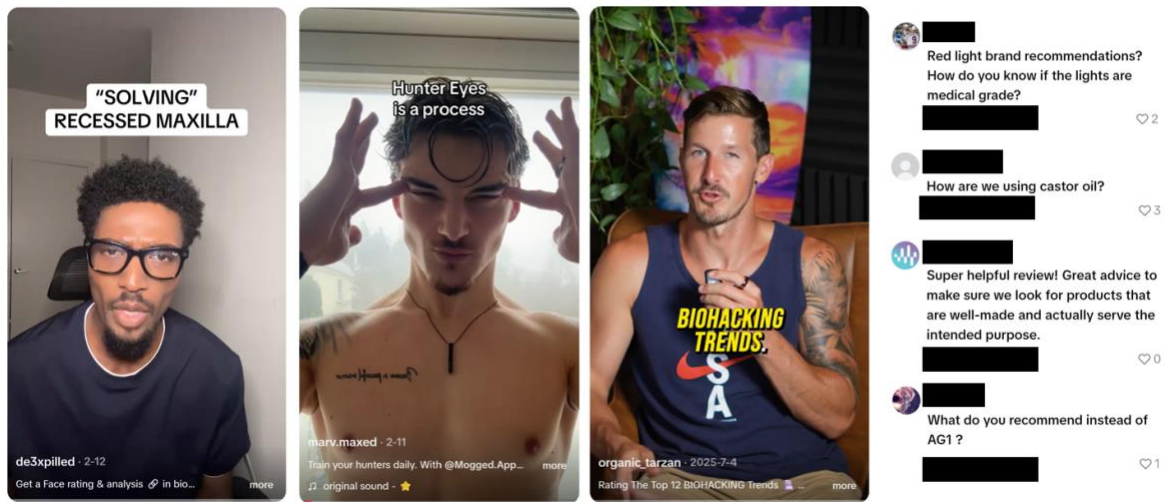


Figure 11: Self-proclaimed experts rating & sharing their routines

These maxxng playbooks treat the isolated male body as a project that can be optimized through the standardized application of market goods. While this rigid standardization process offers a sense of control and predictability to men experiencing loneliness, it does so by replacing personal identity with a commercialized script. To remain credible and maintain status within the tribe, the individual is directed into continuous financial and physical investment, ensuring that their participation in the community and the marketplace is sustained.

5.2.3 The Transformation Market: Consumption and the Never-Finished Self

This subtheme analyses how the commercial dimension of the transformation journey is structured around the logic of perpetual incompleteness through the community. This incompleteness is not a failure of the marketplace but its primary principle. Rather than offering solutions to loneliness, the community frames products, varying from mewing apps and skincare protocols to biohacking interventions and supplements stacks, as an ongoing investment in a self that is always capable of further optimization.

Within this marketplace, the body is reconstructed as a never finished project, a site of continuous intervention. On TikTok, link-in-bio storefronts attached to self-improvements frame the various products they sell, such as coaching courses or mewing devices, not as a final solution to a specific deficit but as entry points into an ongoing optimization journey. These ads

are often presented as continuous investments and unlike in the previous themes the commercial layer is strongly visible here and addresses the individual directly. The two examples below from TikTok showcase how these posts look like, how they link to their bio for more content and then to their websites, where they offer courses centred around ascending and transforming, made visible in call-to-action buttons such as “*start your transformation*”. These range from online manuals to private 1:1 coaching on behaviour and physical attractiveness.

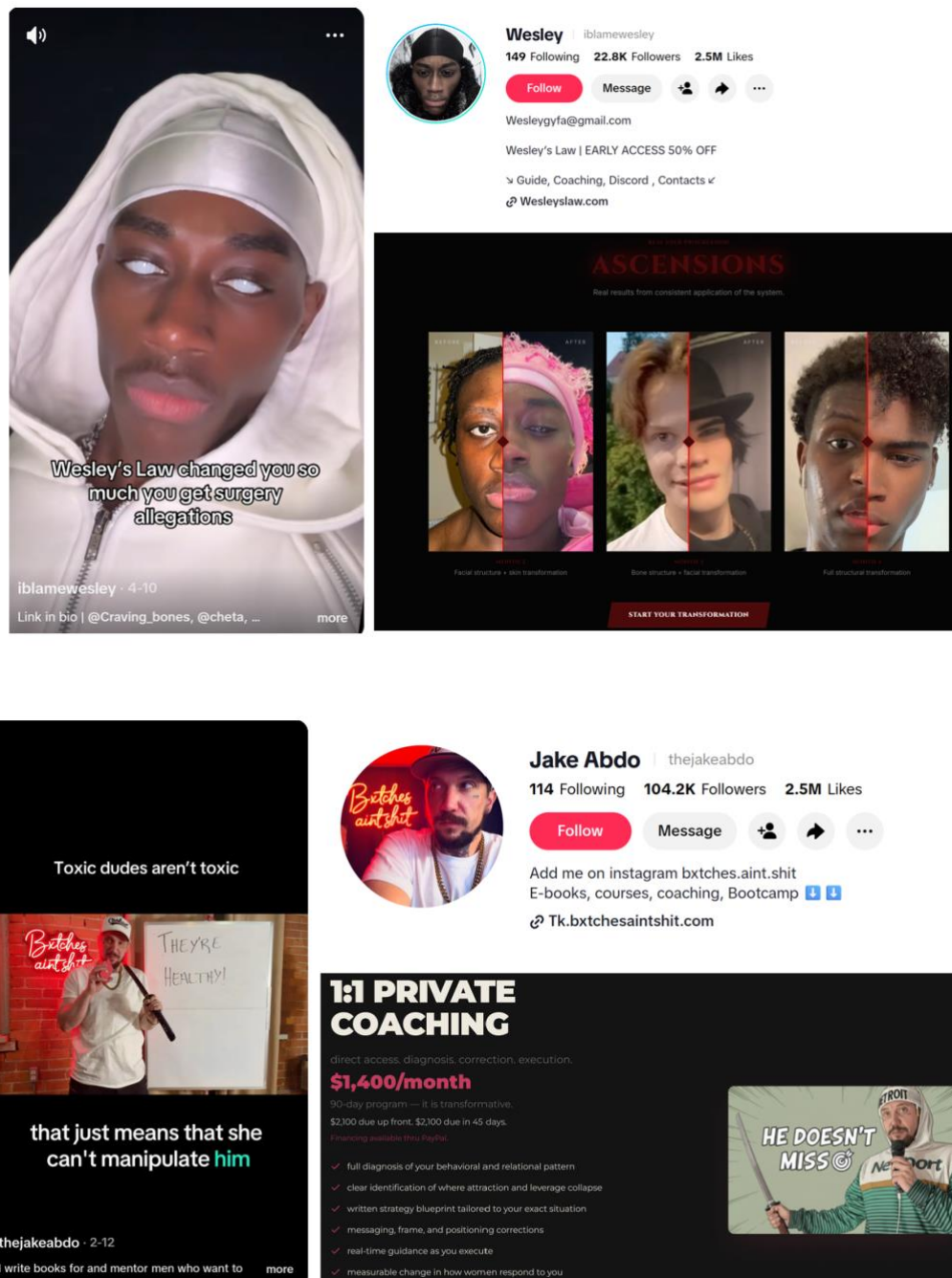


Figure 12: Examples of "Link-in-Bio" storefronts promoting self-improvement courses and products through TikTok.

This framing is reinforced in the Reddit data through the community protocols identified in the previous theme. Posts where members document physical or social progress are often met with comments that invalidate the progress or suggest further improvements implying the current transformation is not “good enough yet”. This is visualized in the r/Mewing community where a member shared his mewing progress using before-and-after pictures of his 4 year mewing transformation and mentioned his current routines and stats. In a dedicated section titled “*future plans*” the user details his future improvements: “... *next I'm cutting some facial fat and reducing water retention to get a more visible jawline. I've also started using minoxidil on my eyebrows so interested to see how that goes.*” The comments section contains multiple remarks on his lack of progress, such as “*I see no difference in maxilla*” and “*Nothing changed but better posture your jaws still recessed*” invalidating his current progress and furthering the need to continue his transformation.



Figure 13: Example of never-ending transformation post & comments

This community interaction shows that this process of perpetual transformation is community-enforced. The community collectively constructs consumption as the only viable mechanism to bridge the self-discrepancy gap between a user’s current isolated state and their high-status

ideal. However, this ideal is intentionally moving and success stories in these communities rarely signal an end to the journey. Instead, they are punctuated by declarations that the transformation is “not yet” finished, followed by new and often more extreme protocols to achieve the next level of ascension. This internal escalation logic aligns with Thornton’s (1995) insights regarding subcultural media dynamics. As commercial promotion thrusts these maxxng practices into mainstream visibility, their exclusive subcultural capital rapidly depreciates, compelling the community to aggressively raise the standard toward more extreme, uncommodified interventions to preserve their insider status. Through Cova’s (1997) linking value, the transformation's structural deferral can be understood as the community maintenance mechanism. If the journey were to be completed, the linking value of the products would dissolve. The community therefore has a structural interest in keeping the members in transformation to sustain the tribe's collective life.

To explain the user’s willingness to accept these extreme scripts despite their obvious financial and physical costs, Freud's (1927) structural logic of disavowal is employed here. The transformation market does not need to deceive members into believing its products will resolve their loneliness. It succeeds by providing just enough evidence of partial progress to sustain the simultaneous acknowledgement and refusal of the inadequacy of these offered commercial solutions. The supplements, coaching courses, and biohacking devices can be read as substitutes for what these isolated men cannot acknowledge wanting: vulnerable human connection, emotional intimacy, the experience of being loved without having to earn it through status-performance. The product takes the place of the unbearable acknowledgement of this need. Linking this to Erikson's (1950) model, the perpetual marketplace investments in the body is the continuous acting out of the crisis between intimacy and isolation. Because the development crisis is never resolved through consumption, the ritualized consumption must be repeated indefinitely, driven by the unresolved psychosocial tensions that initiated it.

This intersection of material consumption and psychological defence exposes the precise mechanics of the double displacement established within the theoretical framework. Through the first displacement (reification) the fluid, socio-relational conditions that produce male loneliness are structurally concealed, stripped of their emotional complexity, and mapped onto the physical body as an objective biological deficit. The second displacement (disavowal) then steps in to manage the inevitable functional failure of the market's solutions. The consumer object appears to resolve what it cannot actually address, a discrepancy the participant tolerates

by maintaining a split awareness that both recognises and refuses the commodity's insufficiency. Together, reification thingifies the emotional experience, while disavowal neutralizes the object's inadequacy through organised refusal. These two operations insulate the community's commercial machinery from critique and lock the individual into a self-perpetuating spiral of consumption. This is the exact mechanism that this thesis sets out to trace.

This tribal policing shifts the burden of solving loneliness onto the individual's ability to "hack" their own biology, providing a stark empirical manifestation of Erikson's (1950) psychosocial crisis between intimacy and isolation. A post in the r/LooksmaxingAdvice demonstrates this dynamic. The creator posted a picture of himself titled *"hi, i hate myself."* and additional text: *"How do i improve my looks so i can get people to actually like me. All my life i hated how i look, i started the gym about 9 months ago and i've noticed only a small bit of progress. I'm hoping to get a bit of tips for my gym progress and how to debloat. Also on how i can make my jawline a bit more visible. Really, any tips would help. Thank you."* This wording shows that he connects his looks to his lack of friends and intimacy (people who actually like him) and therefore loneliness. He asks for advice on how to improve his looks and while some users comment encouraging words and tips not centred around looks there is also a stream of people commenting specific tips on how to "hack his looks" such as *"you just lack a bit more bonemass and staying lean. try to go with a maxillofacial surgeon and make an evaluation to point your actual structure flaws. if you need surgery to fix recession or implants to maximize your bone mass (being over htn is to have features that stand out, like zygotes, gonions, maxilla, chin etc etc) he'll tell you. You should also go to an endocrinologist to create a testosterone pinning plan and evaluation. this will ascend you probably to chadlite+"* to which the original creator replies with *"ait, thank you dude."*, showcasing that the creator is reading and internalizing his kind of advice. Rather than resolving this developmental crisis through the emotional vulnerability required to forge authentic human relationships, the community forces him to process his relational needs through marketized optimization scripts. Grounded in Giesler and Veresiu's (2014) PACT framework, this interaction captures the precise moment of consumer capabilization. By translating a complex structural crisis of male loneliness into a highly biological, actionable checklist, the community frames market consumption as the ultimate empowering vehicle. The individual is re-engineered into an active, capable economic agent who accepts full responsibility for their social exclusion.



Figure 14: Example of framing social isolation as failure to optimize personal looks & community enforcing this mindset

By framing loneliness as a failure of personal optimization, the community ensures that the quest for belonging is permanently deferred, replaced by a never-ending spiral of market-based self-improvement. It is here that Marx's (1867) logic completes this commercial circuit. The boy who was reified into a measurable deficit in the first theme is now systematically addressed as a commercial object. This initial reification of the self functions as the structural preconditions for the community-generated commercial ecosystem. Ultimately, these masculine online communities reproduce themselves through the deferral of success. To remain a member, the individual must remain in transformation. This intentional reconstruction of the body as a never-finished project, effectively redirects underlying social needs into commercial needs, stabilizing the neo-tribe through a self-perpetuating spiral of market-based self-correction.

What emerges across these subthemes is a community that produces the commodification of its own members. The maxxng protocols, ranking rituals, and validation practices analysed above are community-generated mechanisms through which men are taught to reconstruct themselves as optimizable products. The market does not impose these scripts from outside; the community itself authors and enforces them. Self-commodification in the manosphere is therefore a collective, peer-driven process in which belonging itself becomes contingent on one's willingness to submit the self to continuous market-based transformation. The following theme examines the structural environment that makes these scripts impossible to complete.

5.3 The Community That Cannot Deliver

The previous themes traced how loneliness is understood as a deficit, and remediated through prescribed consumption. This final theme turns to the structural environment that sustains the optimization spiral, which is the community itself. Collective validation pulls members in by rewarding visible transformation; collective hostility keeps them in by ensuring transformation is never finished; and transformation heroes and role models come to embody the ascension scripts, directing communal aspiration toward the products and routines they promote. The communal policing and myth-making scrutinised throughout this theme reveal that responsabilization (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014) does not require top-down institutional enforcement, rather it operates as a meso-level governance architecture sustained entirely by the affective, tribal bonds of the community itself. Together these mechanisms produce the theme's title: a community that reproduces belonging by withholding its completion.

5.3.1 Collective Validation: Witnessing and Controlling Progress

On the surface, the manosphere offers what looks like a supportive community, with members validating each other's progress, and exchanging encouragement. The analysis below shows that this validation is highly conditional, and is organised through documented compliance with the transformation script. The reddit threads pictured below show a pattern of conditional praise: *"You look great. I think you are ready for summer. Great job!"*; *"Damn what a transformation"*; *"Nice work dude! How many calories did you eat in your last weeks of the diet?"*; *"From chud to chad, well done man"*. Each comment ties recognition to documented progress. By making peer acceptance strictly contingent upon an unceasing display of physical optimization, the community ensures that the initiate can never claim a finished status, effectively prolonging the liminal phase identity (Van Gennep, 1960). This conditional reward system directly instantiates the distorted communitas (Turner, 1969) established in Theme 2, demonstrating that the tribe generates the emotional warmth of belonging not by dissolving social distinctions but by aggressively reinforcing the very rankings, metrics and exclusions that make that belonging precarious.



Figure 15: Conditional validation examples on Reddit. Communal praise is offered in response to a posted transformation or progress on the transformation.

Within the dataset, this dynamic emerged most clearly in posts documenting transformations (see previous theme) , where users encouraged one another, praised progress, and sought advice from individuals perceived as successful. These narratives of self-improvement appeared to function both as social validation and as motivation for continued engagement within the community. These interactions exemplify Cova’s (1997) concept of linking value, wherein the significance of the consumption experience lies not in the self-optimization itself, but in the social bonds it facilitates.

A subset of the analysed data demonstrates that validation is also sought around romantic deficits, and that the community responds with recognition. The r/MenAscending post titled “Shoutout to the girl who mocked me” recounts being met with visible disgust by a woman he had approached at a party. The post's structure converts that humiliation into communal currency by offering it as the origin story the community can validate. Replies echo this framing: “Your ascension will only be complete once you realize her validation is meaningless”; “She can go fuck her self dude”. Cova’s (1997) theory of linking value clarifies how social cohesion is maintained through an adversarial stance toward women as was observed in some posts of the dataset. This collective antagonism provides a sense of belonging that serves as a functional substitute for individual loneliness. While this provides immediate social connection, it merely displaces the original deficit by centring the group around an external conflict. The follow up by the creator, however, shows that this displacement remains

incomplete: “I know it sounds weird but I just want to show her the transformed version of myself. I mean her mocking helped me in the end but I still kind of want the validation from her... I know I sound stupid”. His admission fits the structural logic of disavowal that Freud (1927) identified, as the user simultaneously recognises what the framework requires (that her validation should be meaningless to an ascended man) and refuses that recognition by continuing to want it.



Figure 16: An ascension narrative posted as confession and redemption where rejection is framed as the catalyst that justified the transformation.

5.3.2 Collective Hostility: Moving Goalposts of Masculine Worth

While the manosphere fosters a sense of solidarity and provides its members with occasional validation (as described above), these online environments are marked by hostility, which is fundamental to their ability in retaining members. If collective validation draws members in, collective hostility retains them. The two mechanisms are not opposites but complementary components. Despite being toxic, this environment provides a sense of belonging that functions as a commercial engine. The pressure to fix flaws makes sure that participants remain tied to a spiral of continuous consumption, driven to purchase "solutions" for the insecurities the community reinforces.

This culture operates through the public ranking system previously mentioned. A submitted picture on TikTok is met with a diagnosis: *“Eyes are set too far apart, prey eye structure. No cheek bone definition, zero jaw density. MTN, to LTN depending on height”*. Subsequent commenters follow the same script: *“Hairstyle is lowkey nerfing him so much, also coloring and skin could see some improvements”*; *“His bone structure is better than htn, eye area great, thick hair good nose”*. The face is converted into a ranked classification using community vocabulary (MTN, LTN, HTN), and the disagreement among raters is itself part of the form, as it generates the impression of ongoing assessment.



Figure 17: Examples of appearance-based hierarchies and hostility.

Understood through Thornton (1995), hostility is the medium through which subcultural capital is performed. Fluent deployment of community vocabulary, confident anatomical critique, and the absence of any softening register all index insider status. The cruelty is the credential. It does community work by policing the boundary between initiated members and casual observers, and it forecloses in advance the relational responses that would dissolve the deficit. Because no rating ever closes the assessment, (there is always another flaw to identify, another

rater who disagrees), the consumption spiral remains open by design, and each turn raises the bar at which adequacy is conditionally granted.

The hostility's structuring power is most visible in cases where members reject the ideology but remain unable to escape its pull. For example, the existence of r/IncelExit, a subreddit for people who have rejected the manosphere ideologically but struggle to escape its categories, illustrates how the community's hostility persists beyond exit. A post titled *"Lookism" and "looksmax" have ruined my life... how do I leave it behind me again?* describes a user who recognises the ideology as harmful but reports that its categories have restructured his self-perception to the point of binge eating, depressive episodes, and a damaged self-image he cannot reverse. He writes that he went from *"I'm decent-looking and gotta keep working on myself"* to *"I hate being ugly"* in no time, and asks: *"How do I 'unlearn' lookism?"*.

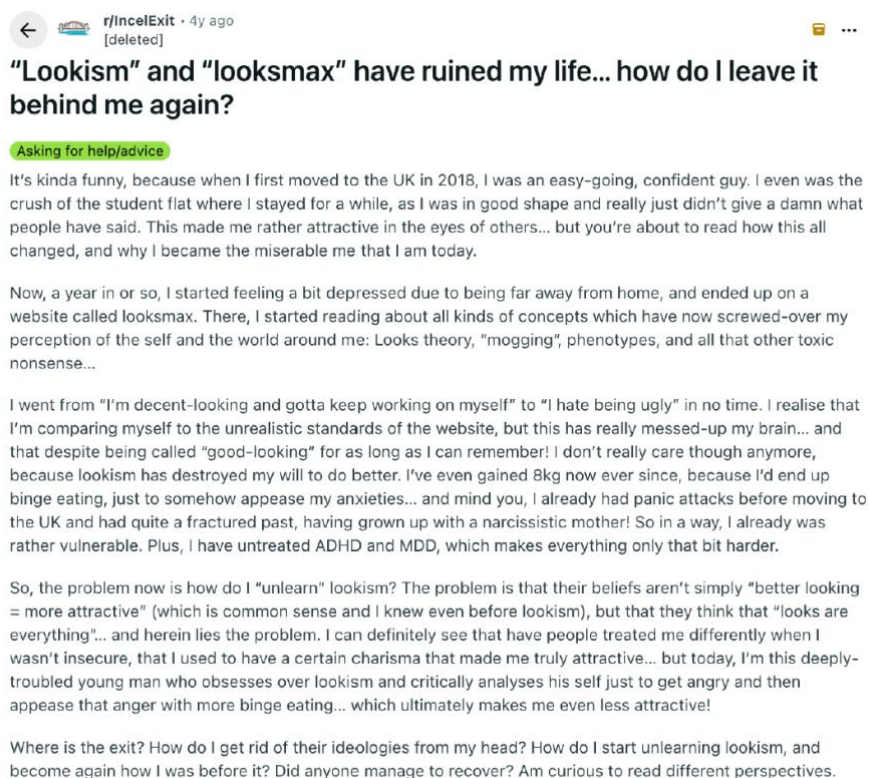


Figure 18: An account of the struggle to leave the manosphere and unlearn the hostility embedded in the culture.

This case is analytically significant because the user has already done the cognitive work of identifying the framework as toxic, and the categories persist anyway. The hostility has not merely communicated a set of beliefs that can be rejected once identified, it has restructured

the perceptual grammar through which he relates to his own body, producing an internalised evaluative framework that operated independently of his conscious endorsement of it. This enduring internal policing demonstrates Maffesoli's (1996) insight regarding the structural tension of the neo-tribe, which hides a highly punitive, enforced conformity beneath its surface-level promise of fluid, organic openness. This dynamic demonstrates thingification (Marx, cited in Tairako, 2025) operating at the level of individual identity. The member who cannot unlearn lookism even after consciously rejecting it, is a person whose self-perception has been thoroughly thingified. The construction of inadequacy is so thoroughly fused with his experience of his own body that it cannot be separated out by cognitive refusal. This cognitive split provides observable empirical proof of Freud's (1927) logic of disavowal operating at its most extreme level within the dataset. The departing member simultaneously recognises the manosphere framework as explicitly destructive yet continues to apply its punitive categories to himself anyway. Analysed through Van Gennep (1960), this thingification is consistent with how rites of passage are designed to permanently restructure the initiate. The crucial difference is that these manosphere rites have no incorporation stage that would release the subject from the liminal frame with a stable identity. The result is a permanent liminality. A state of continuous transformation aspiration without resolution. The r/IncelExit community is the empirical evidence for this structural claim and suggests that the inability to exit is a predictable structural outcome of a thingified identity rather than an individual failure.

5.3.3 The Success Story as Myth: Transformation Heroes

The third mechanism sustaining the liminal phase addresses the structural problem the first two subthemes create. Validation and hostility together ensure that transformation is perpetually in-progress and never complete, but a community organised entirely around deferral risks losing members who eventually conclude that the promised destination does not exist. The transformation hero narrative resolves this problem by providing periodic, exceptional proof that the promised outcome is real and achievable, sustaining belief in the destination. Across both platforms, a recurring genre of success stories appears, and once members "ascend", they often take on the role of a community advisor, fielding requests for product recommendations as if they were experts in such matters. The r/AsianMasculinity post "*From nerd to Chang: how looksmaxxing changed my life*" documents the user's transformation and is followed by an exchange in the comments in which other members request his routine, skincare, and his

clothing sources. The user offers an ebook (*“I just released my ebook breaking down my entire journey: the routines, the mindset shifts, the resources that actually work...”*) to anyone who DMs him and lists specific products (COSRX Salicylic Acid Clear cleanser, COSRX Hyaluronic Acid moisturizer, COSRX Aqua Tone-up Sunscreen). Other commenters solicit further detail: *“Bro what’s your skin care and exercise routine?”*; *“what subtle shifts in behaviour have you seen in others?”*.



Figure 19: Example of an ascended member endorsing his own ebook and community members soliciting his expertise.

This is the moment at which the transformation testimony also becomes commercial endorsement, and the transition is seamless because the products appear as evidence of the user’s authority. The products worked on him, and the proof is the documented transformation journey. Understood through Rook (1985), the before-and-after post functions as a ritual artifact whose standardized form (timeline, photographs, product list, mindset narrative) authorizes its content. Through Thornton (1995), the ascended member accumulates the highest available tier of subcultural capital, as he combines fluent expertise display with embodied proof of the framework’s efficacy. This is also the structural point at which community discourse and consumption become indistinguishable, as there is no longer a separation between advice and endorsement.

Alongside internal “ascended” members, the community sustains a cadre of external figures (looksmaxxing influencers and broader masculinity figures), whose function is to embody the script’s promised endpoint. TikTok content from the looksmaxxing influencer Clavicular is present in the analysed data both in original form and as fan edits that recirculate his image with new captions and music, showcasing extreme worshipping behaviour (“I BELIEVE IN LOOKSMAXXING”). Adjacent comments on related content frame figures such as Andrew Tate in redemptive terms: “Andrew Tate saved a generation”.

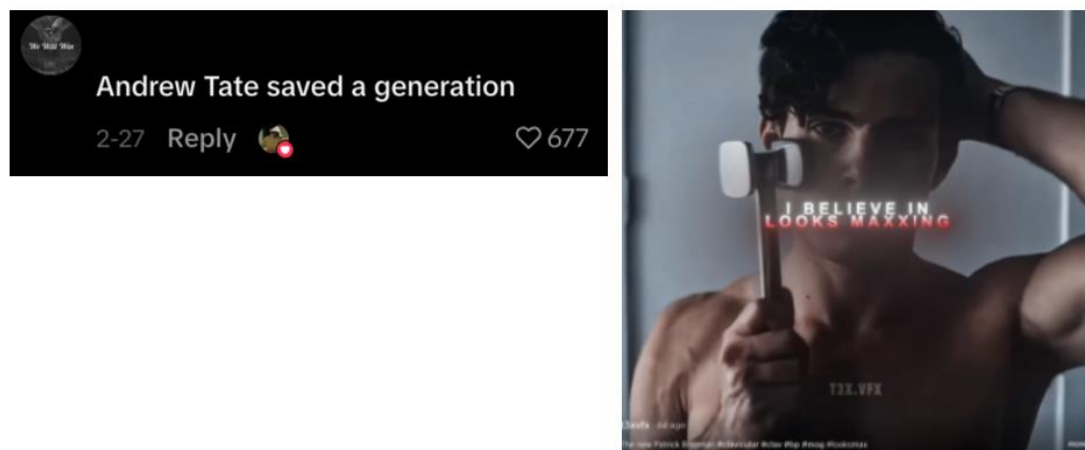


Figure 20: Examples of worshipping manosphere influencers on TikTok such as Andrew Tate and Clavicular

Further, some creators use their success stories solely to promote their own products. Testimonies from community members who have “ascended” carry an important weight in helping to market these products. In one of the analysed videos, for instance, the creator directs viewers to the link in his bio, where he sells a course titled “The Sigma Society”. The course claims to teach men how to attract women, and the website features multiple videos and screenshots of testimonials from users who purchased it. This empirical case introduces a second analytically distinct figure, the commercial actor who mobilised the sign of ascension as a marketing mechanism. These featured testimonials do not necessarily demonstrate a genuine “ascension”, yet the idea of ascension itself is mobilised as proof of the course’s effectiveness to encourage others to buy it. These testimonials operate as signs in Baudrillard’s (1981) sense. Their function is symbolic positioning rather than proof and the course is sold on what the testimonials signify (that ascension is real, purchasable and reproducible) rather than on what they demonstrate. The distinction between the r/AsianMasculinity example and the

Sigma Society case is analytically significant. Where the r/AsianMasculinity member's authority is derived from a documented transformation that community members can scrutinise and seek to replicate, the Sigma Society creator's authority is derived from the circulation of signs of transformation that cannot be scrutinised in the same way. What both cases share is that the products they endorse carry their authority not from clinical evidence but from their association with the ascension narrative.

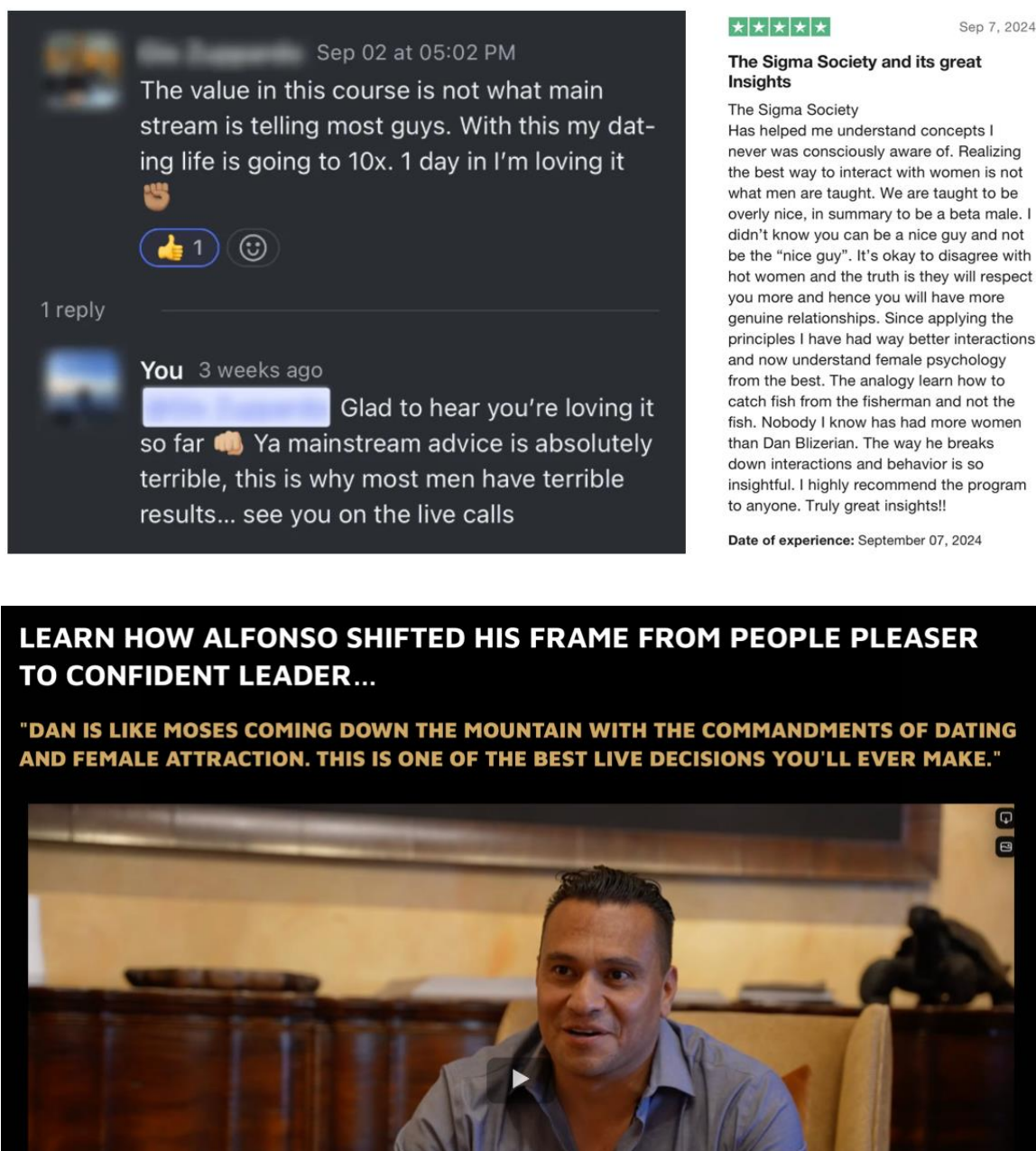


Figure 21: Examples of user testimonials on the course “The Sigma Society”.

In Van Gennep's (1960) rites of passage framework, the transformation hero performs the incorporation ceremony, publicly announcing and celebrating the completion of the transformation journey, but his structural function within the community depends on his success remaining exceptional. If ascension were generally achieved, the shared liminality that generates the community's intense social bonds would dissolve, making the hero's singular success a structural requirement for sustaining Turner's (1969) *communitas*. Consequently, these transformation hero posts function as highly affective events within the neo-tribe that replenish the community's emotional energy. Rather than merely communicating data, the before-and-after post operates as a collective emotional experience that channels the tribe's shared aspiration into a concrete and compelling narrative, temporarily intensifying the puissance that sustains tribal cohesion and commercial participation (Maffesoli, 1996).

Crucially, the hero's capacity to sustain this collective aspiration relies on a mechanism that Freud's (1927) structural logic of disavowal illuminates. Members of these communities are not naive about the statistical rarity of genuine ascension; the exceptionality of the transformation hero is visible in the data itself, where ascended members are treated as remarkable figures rather than as typical outcomes. At some level the community recognises that most of its members will never replicate those results. Yet, it continues to orient toward the playbook as though the hero's success were universally accessible. This is disavowal operating at the collective rather than the individual level. The community simultaneously acknowledges the rarity of the outcome and refuses to acknowledge that it generally cannot be achieved. By doing so the tribe displaces the inadequacy onto the individual member's insufficient effort rather than onto the category of the solution itself. The hero's existence is the object around which this collective disavowal is organised. He provides just enough evidence of the possibility to make the simultaneous refusal of the general impossibility sustainable. This explains why transformation heroes are structurally necessary rather than incidental to it.

The transformation hero narrative is also the point at which the community's responsabilization logic becomes most legible. In Giesler and Veresiu's (2014) PACT framework, capabilization frames consumption as the empowering vehicle through which the individual can address the structural problem, and transformation promises a fundamental change in the individual's status as the reward for correct consumption. The hero embodies both promises simultaneously, he is living proof that the right products and protocols, applied with sufficient discipline, can deliver the transformation the community prescribes. His existence is the capabilization argument

made flesh. Where PACT (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014) describes responsabilization imposed through formal governance mechanisms, what our data reveals is a responsabilization produced and sustained by the community itself, through the collective emotional investment in the hero's success and the disavowal of the statistical improbability of his outcome. The individual is made responsible by the community's own myth-making rather than institutional instruction. This form of responsabilization is more intimate and harder to exit because it operates through the affective bonds of tribal belonging, and not through external authority.

Ultimately, this is why the community cannot deliver what it promises and why its structural inability to do so is a design feature, rather than a failure. The community returns the member not to where he started but to a worse version of it: lonely as before, but now equipped with a set of biological categories through which his loneliness appears as a personal deficit, a commercial problem, and a failure of individual optimization rather than a social condition with structural causes. Consumption is offered as a collective remedy for male loneliness, yet the remedy does not resolve the condition. It reshapes loneliness into a problem that seems to be exclusively solvable through the marketplace. This pursuit is sustained indefinitely by validation, hostility, and success myths that ensure resolution never arrives.

6 Discussion

Through a critical discussion of the empirical findings, this chapter illuminates how the manosphere commodifies male loneliness, and subsequently considers the theoretical contributions and wider societal implications of the analysis. The central argument advanced here is that this commodification is not driven by external market forces but is collectively generated by the community itself as a form of self-commodification. The empirical evidence uncovers a never-ending spiral, where consumption fails to remedy loneliness, and instead propels further consumption. Ultimately, this spiral is structurally reproduced to return the individual to a structurally worse baseline. It reproduces the initial deficit through newly acquired categories of self-critique and a higher floor of acceptable inadequacy.

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study identifies three interlinked themes through which male loneliness is produced, commodified, and sustained within the manosphere.

The first key finding is that the community performs a reification in Marx's (1867) sense. Diffuse experiences of being unseen and unloved are systematically converted into a measurable bodily deficit, causing the social conditions producing the perceived failure to disappear behind the apparent inadequacy of the physical self. This diagnostic shift drives personalization at the community level, which leads community members to respond to structural issues by turning inward toward individual self-management and self-optimization. Further, this community-produced knowledge is legitimised through a modified form of authorization within the PACT framework (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). The deployment of pseudo-scientific tools, such as anatomy diagrams, hypergamy charts, and PSL scales, establishes the subculture as the authoritative site of expert knowledge on the deficit it has just produced. Instead of cultivating the moralized, prudent consumer of institutional responsabilization (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014), the manosphere cultivates the attractive male.

The second key finding focuses explicitly on consumption. It examines how community members attempt to resolve the deficits identified in the first theme through the transformation marketplace. Through this, the body is reframed as a project to be perpetually optimized. The community converts loneliness into a public project of masculine redemption, where each documented gain generates the conditions for the next assessment of insufficiency. The arc that the ascension narrative promises is the first turn of a spiral. This is where capabilization and transformation operate, but through community rituals, such as looksmaxxing stacks, mewing protocols, before-and-after transformation pictures. What Freud (1927) described as disavowal accounts for the persistence of this pattern, in which members continue to pursue physical optimization as the answer to loneliness, even when they recognise that no physical fix can deliver what they are actually missing. However, the self-improvement protocols and collective validation practices that constitute the transformation journey are not external forces. They are community-generated mechanisms through which men are collectively taught to reconstruct themselves. Where existing consumer research treats self-discrepancy as a psychological condition (Higgins, 1987; Mandel et al., 2017), this study shows that the community itself manufactures this discrepancy and therefore reconstructs individual identity as something to be optimized and ranked. The community produces the commodification of its own members; it does not merely direct them toward a pre-existing marketplace.

The third key finding is that the community sustains the spiral through conditional belonging. Validation rewards documented progress along the script, hostility raises the bar that progress must meet, and transformation heroes serve as proof of possibility, but only as long as their arrival remains rare. These three interlocking mechanisms ensure that the script is pursued without ever being completed. The depth of this entrenchment is visible in members who have cognitively rejected the ideology but cannot unlearn its structural categories or return to their pre-entry state. It returns them to a worse version of it, equipped with new categories of self-criticism and stronger feelings of inadequacy.

Together, these three findings answer the research question. Within digital masculine communities, consumption is used as a remedy for male loneliness, though the remedy never resolves the condition it claims to treat. Instead, it converts loneliness into a form that only the marketplace appears able to address. The community produces this conversion through reification, self-commodification and conditional belonging, which ensure that the remedy is perpetually needed but insufficient.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes its primary contribution to the compensatory consumption literature by challenging the foundational assumption that self-discrepancy is a static psychological condition that precedes and motivates consumer behaviour (Higgins, 1987; Mandel et al., 2017). Our findings demonstrate that within the manosphere, self-discrepancy is not a pre-existing state that the marketplace responds to, but a condition that the community itself actively produces, intensifies and commercially sustains. More specifically, this study introduces self-commodification as a community-generated process through which this discrepancy is managed. The community reconstructs individual identity as something to be optimized and sold back in improved form. The subject is not merely made responsible for resolving his loneliness through consumption, he is remade as the product that consumption is meant to improve. This reframes compensatory consumption as a collectively authored identity reconstruction process in which the community is both the producer of the deficit and the architect of its commercial resolution.

This finding simultaneously extends the consumer responsabilization literature. In its original formulation, the PACT framework (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014) describes a process operated by formal institutions through top-down governance mechanisms that construct consumers as responsible subjects from above. This study identifies a structurally analogous but mechanistically distinct process operating at the meso level, in which the PACT logic (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014) is not imposed by institutions but collectively produced and enforced by the community itself, through the ritual structures of Rook (1985), the developmental urgency of Erikson (1950), the transformation narrative of Van Gennep (1960), and the social bonds of Turner (1969). This community-produced responsabilization operates through affective bonds of tribal belonging rather than external authority. This suggests that the PACT framework (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014) requires an additional category to account for meso-level community-generated responsabilization.

These contributions to the literature are grounded in a set of theoretical extensions that the empirical analysis makes possible. In Van Gennep's (1960) classical formulation, liminality is a temporary threshold state, uncomfortable and disorienting, but ultimately resolved through the ceremony of incorporation that returns the individual to the social world with a new and recognised status. This study, however, identifies a context in which the liminal phase is not

temporary but commercially sustained. The manosphere constructs a rite of passage, in which the separation stage is carefully engineered through the deficit narratives of Theme 1, where the liminal phase is actively prolonged through the consumption rituals and community mechanisms analysed in subsequent themes, and the incorporation stage is perpetually promised but structurally deferred. This inversion, the deliberate extension of liminality as a commercial strategy rather than its resolution as a social ritual, constitutes the central theoretical contribution of this study. It distinguishes the manosphere's transformation journey from both conventional self-improvement culture and the institutional responsabilization described in existing consumer research (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). This structural suspension of the ritual pathway fundamentally warps the social dynamics that occur within the threshold itself. It challenges Turner's (1969) assumption that *communitas* operates as an inherently levelling force. Whereas Turner (1969) assumed that the bonds formed in liminality transcended rather than reproduced hierarchy, the manosphere inverts this assumption. Rather than suspending hierarchy within the liminal phase, the community intensifies it through ranking systems, subcultural capital enforcement, and gatekeeping practices that reproduce stratification in new and more quantified forms. The promise of *communitas* is present in the manosphere's rhetoric of masculine brotherhood and shared struggle, but what the community actually delivers is a distorted *communitas*, one organised around hierarchical aspiration rather than hierarchical suspension, and one that sustains itself through the commercial logic that the original framework did not anticipate.

Further, the findings of this thesis contribute to Marx's (1867) reification literature and Freud's (1927) disavowal logic. Our analysis shows that the logic of commodity fetishism operates at the level of the consumer's own identity, not just at the level of the produced commodity. Existing consumer literature has applied reification mainly to commodities and labour, while this study shows reification operating on the consumer's self. Freud's (1927) disavowal has been applied primarily at the individual level, rather than the collective community level. This study shows disavowal operating as a collective mechanism, organised by the community's format, sustained by the community's ritual structure, and reproduced through the transformation hero's exceptional success. This collective disavowal is a theoretically novel application that extends Freud's (1927) structural logic beyond individual psychology into community dynamics. Additionally, this thesis extends Baudrillard's (1981) theory of sign value by demonstrating how manosphere communities operate through a system of social positioning that is defined entirely by the community's internal hierarchy rather than by broader social signs. While

consumer culture literature traditionally examines sign value through macro-societal markers of distinction, this study reveals a far more contained and intensely micro-managed semiotic system. Archetypes like “Chad” or “Alpha” operate as pure sign-value positions whose meaning is produced and policed entirely within the community's internal taxonomic hierarchy, independent of broader cultural signifiers.

6.3 Societal Implications

Even though the empirical site of this thesis lies in the manosphere, its architecture is not unique to digital masculine communities. The reification of an emotional or relational condition as a measurable physical deficit, followed by a direction of that deficit into consumption, and the conditional belonging of a community that sustains the spiral by raising its standards faster than they can be met, describe a generalizable pattern in contemporary consumer culture. While the manosphere represents an acute and extreme iteration of this dynamic, the evidence suggests that this spiral architecture may function as a broader conceptual model for other digital subcultures organised around self-optimization. What makes the manosphere analytically valuable is that its visibility is increased due to its more extreme nature and discourse, making it easier for it to be identified.

The broader significance of this research lies in how it frames the intersection of systemic alienation and market consumption, offering a theoretical foundation for future consumer research. While empirical boundaries of this study are contained, the data remains consistent with a wider capitalist logic that translates socio-economic loneliness into discrete, physical bodily deficits. By mimicking the core mechanism of Marx's (1867) commodity fetishism, this community generated process effectively displaces relational distress into an individual optimization problem. This generates a permanent commercial circuit modelled as an expanding spiral. Because the community requires the deficit to persist to sustain its own existence, each turn of consumption fails to resolve the underlying loneliness, instead expanding outward to establish higher, unachievable thresholds of personal adequacy.

Beyond its structural dimensions, the optimization spiral exacts a severe human cost, while reflecting broader societal shifts in contemporary intimacy. As empirical testimonies from our study demonstrate, this system causes genuine psychological harm by reframing relational

alienation as a localized physical deficit, pathologizing the vulnerabilities at the core of the male loneliness epidemic (Card & Delgado-Ron, 2026). This crisis is aggravated by a wider societal landscape where organic face-to-face interactions are being replaced by digital platforms (Turkle, 2015). Social media architectures amplify these superficial physical metrics, accelerating the foundational loneliness and social anxieties of their users (Ariel & Nir, 2025). Consequently, instead of alleviating this public health crisis, the spiral weaponizes it. It traps subjects in a cycle of self-correction that never arrives at resolution.

7 Conclusion

This section presents the conclusions drawn from this research, and identifies avenues for future research into adjacent fields.

This thesis set out to examine how communities in the manosphere commodify male loneliness and offer consumption as its collective remedy. The findings demonstrate that this commodification operates through three interlocking mechanisms that form a spiral structured so that the promised resolution can never arrive. These mechanisms are not sequential phases through which members pass in order, but mutually reinforcing dynamics that together sustain the spiral.

In the first stage, the community performs reification of loneliness in Marx's (1867) sense. The social and relational conditions that produce male loneliness disappear from view and in their place, a seemingly natural biological deficit emerges. This deficit takes shape in a measurable bodily inadequacy whose form makes consumption the only plausible response. The pseudoscientific tools through which this deficit is produced and circulated (PSL scales, hypergamy charts, anatomical taxonomies) function simultaneously as the community's authorization of its own expertise and as subcultural capital artifacts through which insider status is performed and enforced. The “Am I Cooked?” ritual then operationalises this ideology at the individual level, converting the community's abstract deficit framework into a personal verdict. This verdict formally marks the entry into the transformation journey as a liminal subject, separated from his previous identity and suspended in the threshold state between the deficient actual self and the promised masculine ideal, in Van Gennep's (1960) sense.

Second, the community prescribes a commercially mediated transformation journey through which the liminal subject is supposed to move toward incorporation into a higher status. The ascension narrative provides the motivational engine that generates the affective bonds of Turner's (1969) *communitas* among men suspended together in shared inadequacy. The maxxing playbook translates this narrative into specific consumer rituals whose linking value (Cova, 1997) lies in the social bonds their public performance generates within the neo-tribe.

This mechanism goes beyond directing members towards a pre-existing marketplace; it actively produces the participants as commodities within one. This self-commodification is not a byproduct of market participation but is collectively authored and community enforced. Freud's (1927) structural logic of disavowal accounts for its persistence. Members continue to invest in products and protocols that they partially recognise as insufficient resolutions to the loneliness driving their participation. They know and do not know simultaneously, and this collective disavowal is organised and sustained by the community's format.

Third, the community environment ensures the liminal phase is never resolved into incorporation. Collective validation rewards visible transformation performance while conditioning belonging on its continuation. Collective hostility continuously raises the standard against which performance is assessed, ensuring no transformation is ever declared sufficient. Transformation heroes sustain belief in the community's promise while their exceptionality guarantees that the majority of members remain in the liminal phase whose communal bond depends on their continued aspiration rather than their achieved arrival. The result is the never-ending spiral. Each turn of consumption does not return members to a prior state but expands the deficit, adding new categories of self-criticism. Consumption is offered as a collective remedy for male loneliness, but it does not resolve that deficit. It reshapes it into something that seemingly only the marketplace is able to resolve.

This study has shown that digital communities, such as the manosphere, can produce a form of consumer responsabilization that is more immersive and identity-constitutive than institutional alternatives. This occurs because the process operates through the intimate mechanisms of shared identity, tribal belonging, and collective disavowal rather than through external governance. This responsabilization is enacted through self-commodification, not imposed from above by external market actors, but collectively authored by the community itself. The wider significance of this finding lies in what it suggests about the contemporary relationship between consumer capitalism and subjective emotional experiences. It helps to explain why emotional distress can persist, and even deepen, alongside conditions of material abundance. In these environments, it is the community itself (and not the market) that shapes how emotional conditions come to be understood as problems that products can solve. It is also the community that has structural reasons to preserve the very deficits whose remedies it sells, because doing so sustains the belonging it offers. In such societies, the persistence of widespread affective distress reflects, at least in part, this community-generated commercial arrangement. While

these claims rest on a single empirical site, restricted to English-language content, collected through non-participant netnographic observation, these limits shape both what the analysis can claim and where the framework could usefully be applied next.

7.1 Future Research

The most substantive direction for future research lies in the empirical testing of the spiral architecture beyond the manosphere itself to determine its broader generalizability within contemporary consumer culture. The mechanisms identified in this study are not specific to the manosphere, and warrant investigation across adjacent sites. For instance, female-coded communities organised around skin, weight, hair, and ageing represent the closest empirical parallel and would offer a particularly informative comparison. Beyond this, the wider influencer community, such as in the wellness and fitness niches, as well as productivity and beauty content, invites scrutiny through the same framework. Further, comparing this study's meso-level responsabilization against formal institutional frameworks (such as the RFSU dating manual referenced in Chapter 1) provides a potential avenue to refine Giesler and Veresiu's (2014) PACT framework. This juxtaposition would evaluate how top-down institutional capabilization scripts compete with, accelerate, or are entirely replaced when consumers enter decentralized digital neo-tribes. Finally, adopting longitudinal research designs presents a possibility for tracking the long-term trajectories of this commercially sustained liminality. Future studies could draw on in-depth interviews or extended netnographic observation to follow how individuals actually move through the spiral.

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Declaration of AI Use

We declare that AI tools were used during the preparation of this thesis in a limited and supported capacity.

Scopus AI was used to identify relevant literature within the Scopus database and to support familiarization with existing research. However, all sources cited and referenced in this thesis were independently read and evaluated by the authors before being included. Large Language Models (LLMs), such as Claude and Gemini, were used to assist with language refinement and minor structural suggestions, including support in compiling the manosphere terminology glossary presented in Appendix C.

These tools were used solely to support linguistic clarity and organisational tasks, and were not used to paraphrase, analyse, or generate substantive sections of the text. The data collection process, coding, interpretation, and the construction of the theoretical framework were deliberately kept outside of the scope of AI use, as the researchers' own interpretations are central to this thesis' methodology. At no point was unedited AI-generated text incorporated into the manuscript. Writing, analysis, and interpretations are the authors' own work, and AI was used to complement rather than replace original research and critical thinking. The use of AI tools complies with the responsible use guidelines of the Lund University School of Economics and Management (LUSEM), and all final research decisions remain the responsibility of the authors.

Appendix A: Thematic Framework

Note: This appendix is adapted from a preliminary research assignment conducted by the authors for BUSR33 - Research Strategies and Methods (March 2026), which addressed a related research question. This material is adapted with the permission of the supervising faculty.

Reframing the Loneliness Problem	The Transformation Marketplace	The Community That Cannot Deliver
<i>Genetic determinism</i>	<i>Alpha/Beta Male</i>	Normie (LTN, MTN, HTN)
Incels & Inceldom	PSL Scales	<i>Alpha/Beta Male</i>
Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW)	<i>Looksmaxxing</i>	<i>Cooked</i>
Men's Rights Activists (MRA)/Movement (MRM)	<i>Biohacking</i>	<i>Chopped</i>
<i>Lookism</i>	High value man	<i>Ascend</i>
<i>Black Pill (bp)</i>	Sexual Market Value (SMV)	Subhuman
Male Supremacy	Looks, Money, Status (LMS)	Beta Bux
Lookism	Chad & Stacy	<i>Hypergamy</i>
<i>Hypergamy</i>	Red Pill/Red Pillers/Pilling	Simp
Femoids/Foids	<i>Mog/Mogging</i>	Cope/Coping
Feminazi	<i>Black Pill (bp)</i>	Manosphere

Misandry	Simp	Chad & Stacy
Manosphere	<i>Subhuman</i>	High value man
<i>Cooked</i>	<i>Ascend</i>	Incels & Inceldom
<i>Chopped</i>	<i>Chopped</i>	
	<i>Cooked</i>	
	<i>Testosterone</i>	
	<i>Mewing</i>	
	Juice	
	Gooning	
	Manosphere	

Terms in *italics* represent those that appeared most frequently.

Appendix B: Overview Reddit Communities

Community	Description	Statistics
r/LooksmaxingAdvice	A community dedicated to aesthetic self-improvement, beauty, and grooming advice for men and women.	Weekly Visitors: 67K Contributions: 11K
r/MenAscending	A forum for men focused on personal development through discipline, fitness, and accountability to reach an "ideal self"	Weekly Visitors: 38K Contributions: 810
r/unlovablecirclejerk	A community focused on shared experiences of social isolation and romantic rejection.	Weekly Visitors: 9.7K Contributions: 410
r/ForeverAlone	A community centred on the collective articulation of chronic romantic and social isolation for men and women.	Weekly Visitors: 35K Contributions: 1.4K
r/Mewing	A community dedicated to facial restructuring and aesthetic looksmaxxing through specific physical exercises and orthodontic devices.	Weekly Visitors: 33K Contributions: 934
r/Testosterone	A community dedicated to the medical and natural optimization of testosterone, exploring replacement therapy (TRT) and lifestyle interventions like nutrition and exercise as tools for hormonal self-improvement.	Weekly Visitors: 137K Contributions: 7.9K
r/Biohackers	A community dedicated to DIY biology and human enhancement, focusing on the use of pharmacology, supplements, and experimental techniques to optimize health, longevity, and physical performance.	Weekly Visitors: 752K Contributions: 18K

r/BodyHackGuide	An optimization hub focused on hormonal health and longevity, where members discuss the use of peptides, nootropics, and metabolic tracking to achieve peak physical performance.	Weekly Visitors: 209K Contributions: 10K
r/TheRedPill (quarantined)	Forum centred on the negotiation of sexual strategy and masculine identity. The community serves as a discursive space for developing "Red Pill" scripts.	No information available
r/IncelExit	A community designed to assist individuals seeking to exit the incel community. It provides a non-mocking, advisory environment centred on unlearning radicalized narratives, processing lived experiences, and fostering psychological exit strategies.	Weekly Visitors: 13K Contributions: 722

This is an overview of active and relevant Reddit communities in regard to our observed empirical problem. The above statistics were collected on April 6, 2026.

Appendix C: Glossary of Manosphere Terminology

Note: This appendix is adapted from a preliminary research assignment conducted by the authors for BUSR33 - Research Strategies and Methods (March 2026), which addressed a related research question. This material is reused with the permission of the supervising faculty.

This glossary defines specialised manosphere terminology to aid comprehension of the text. Academic sources identified through Scopus (via Scopus AI) are cited where available. Terms marked with an asterisk () lack formal academic documentation; their definitions were generated with the assistance of Large Language Models (LLMs) and reflect observed usage within the analysed content.*

Alphas and Betas: An alpha male is a confident, dominant, high-status leader who is sexually attractive to women. A beta male is a non-alpha. He is low-status, subordinate, unassertive and sexually unattractive to women (Kennedy-Kollar, 2024).

Ascend*: A term describing the transition from "incel" status to a state of sexual or romantic activity. Within these communities, to ascend is the ultimate goal of "maxxing" (self-improvement) and signifies that an individual has successfully navigated the social or physical hierarchy to gain a partner.

Beta bux*: A derogatory term for a "beta male" who provides financial security to a woman. The underlying narrative suggests the woman is not genuinely attracted to him, but is using him solely for his resources after she has aged out of the sexual marketplace.

Biohacking: Generally defined as a do-it-yourself (DIY) approach to body modification and enhancement, involves individuals experimenting with technology and biology to improve their physical and cognitive abilities (Yetisen, 2018).

Blackpill/bp: What Incels believe to be the "harsh truth" about sex and dating. Generally, that a man's success in the dating market is primarily determined by his physical attractiveness and genetic traits (Kennedy-Kollar, 2024).

Chad: A physically attractive and sexually active man (Kennedy-Kollar, 2024).

Chopped*: A derogatory term used to describe someone who is perceived as being physically unattractive or having a "broken" appearance.

Cooked*: A slang term describing an individual perceived as having no remaining chances for social, romantic, or status-based success. While similar to being chopped (physically unattractive), being "cooked" implies a total and irreversible state of failure within the social or dating market.

Cope: Accepting a non-Red or Blackpilled belief because the real truth is upsetting or painful. For example, an incel would say that believing that personality can make up for unattractive looks is a cope (Kennedy-Kollar, 2024).

Feminazi: Portmanteau of feminist and Nazi popularized by conservative personality Rush Limbaugh. Generally used throughout the manosphere and alt-right to refer to feminists or any politically active or outspoken women that they do not agree with (Kennedy-Kollar, 2024).

Foid: An incel term for women. It is a shortened version of "femoid", a term incels used that was a portmanteau of "female humanoid" (Kennedy-Kollar, 2024).

Genetic Determinism: Within the manosphere context can be defined as the belief that inherent genetic differences between men and women dictate their respective roles and behaviours in society, reinforcing traditional gender roles and justifying male superiority and female subordination. This perspective often disregards the influence of environmental and social factors, promoting a fixed and unchangeable view of gender differences (Lindsay, 2022; Gericke et al., 2017).

Gooning*: A term used to describe a state of intense, prolonged physiological and psychological preoccupation with sexual content, often facilitated by high-frequency digital consumption. This behaviour is typically characterised by a "trance-like" or hypnotic state where the individual becomes detached from their immediate surroundings due to overstimulation.

Heightmaxxing*: The practice of attempting to increase one's physical stature through various methods, ranging from the use of elevator shoes and thick-soled footwear to invasive surgical interventions like limb-lengthening surgery. This is driven by the belief that being taller directly correlates with higher social status and increased romantic success.

Hypergamy: In the social sciences, the term hypergamy is used to describe the cultural practice of marrying someone of a higher social class or caste. In the manosphere, it describes a female biological compulsion to always seek out the highest status mate that she is able to find (Kennedy-Kollar, 2024).

Incel: A man who is involuntarily celibate (Kennedy-Kollar, 2024).

The Juice*: A slang term referring to anabolic steroids or performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs). Within the manosphere and fitness subcultures, "being on the juice" refers to using pharmacological assistance to achieve a muscular physique that exceeds natural genetic limits, often as a component of gymmaxxing.

Lookism: Refers to discrimination based on an individual's physical appearance. It involves comparing individuals to societal stereotypes of physical attractiveness, which can result in either advantages or disadvantages for the individuals concerned. This form of discrimination is pervasive and systematic, affecting various aspects of social and professional life, including employment opportunities and social status (Granleese, 2016).

Looksmaxxing: Incel term for improving one's physical appearance as much as they can (Kennedy-Kollar, 2024).

LMS (Looks, Money, Status)*: An acronym representing the three primary metrics by which the manosphere calculates a man's overall worth in the dating market.

Male Supremacy: A sociopolitical ideology and system where men hold primary power and authority across various aspects of society, including political, economic, social, and familial structures. This system is deeply rooted in patriarchal norms, which prioritise male perspectives, interests, and values, often resulting in the marginalization and oppression of women and non-binary individuals (Tabassum & Nayak, 2024).

Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW): A separatist Manosphere group (digital manifestation of the Men's Liberation Movement) who focus on individualistic, self-empowering actions as opposed to traditional collective actions typical of Men's Rights Activists and Incels (Jones et al., 2020).

Men's Rights Activists (MRAs): Individuals or groups who believe that men are systematically disadvantaged because of their gender and seek to address these perceived

injustices. The movement emerged in the 1970s and has since grown, with active participation in several countries (Carian, 2013).

Men's Rights Movement (MRM): A social movement that emerged in the 1960s and gained momentum in the 1970s, with the aim of addressing issues that its members believe systematically disadvantage men due to their gender. The movement is primarily composed of straight, white men who feel that societal shifts and feminist movements have marginalized them (Carian, 2013; Carian, 2022).

Mewing*: A practice promoted within certain online communities, including those in the manosphere, aimed at improving facial aesthetics by altering tongue posture. This practice involves pressing the tongue against the roof of the mouth to purportedly enhance jawline definition and overall facial structure.

Misandry: In the context of the manosphere, is often framed as a form of prejudice or hatred against men. This term is used strategically within these communities to counter feminist narratives and to position men as victims of gender-based discrimination (Marwick & Caplan, 2018).

Normies: A non-incel person who has little to no difficulty in social or romantic functioning (Kennedy-Kollar, 2024).

Pilling: Refers to the process of ideological persuasion where individuals are convinced to adopt the manosphere's worldview. This term is derived from the metaphor of the "red pill" from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where taking the red pill symbolizes awakening to a harsh reality, as opposed to remaining in blissful ignorance by taking the blue pill (Gray & Bernatzky, 2013).

Red Pill: A metaphor for the unvarnished "truth" about the way the world and the nature of sexual selection. "Taking the red pill" means coming to understand and accept the true nature of female mate selection. Red Pill men understand this nature and seek to manipulate it and use it for their own benefit (Kennedy-Kollar, 2024).

Sexual Market Value (SMV): Level of sexual desirability. SMV determines the quality of mate one can attract (Kennedy-Kollar, 2024).

Simp: A man who is so desperate for sex and female validation that he becomes subservient to women and allows them to use him for money, gifts, and attention. Often used in a derogatory way for any man who is nice to or who defends women (Kennedy-Kollar, 2024).

Stacy: A physically attractive woman who is sought after by men (Kennedy-Kollar, 2024).

Subhuman*: An extreme derogatory term within blackpill and incel communities for those perceived as being at the absolute bottom of the biological hierarchy. It implies a permanent, genetic exclusion from social and romantic life that cannot be fixed by self-improvement.

Surgerymaxxing*: The practice of undergoing invasive cosmetic procedures, such as jaw implants, rhinoplasty, or bone-lengthening, to drastically alter one's physical appearance. This is often framed within online communities as a necessary intervention to achieve idealized masculine features and overcome perceived genetic disadvantages.

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Appendix D: Overview Themes & Coding

Note: the subthemes never-finished transformation and product promotion were separated for the coding but combined in the analysis section. The subthemes collective validation and collective hostility were combined for the coding as most posts feature both but separated for the analysis section to show the contradiction between them.

Theme	Subtheme	Codes	Description
Reframing Loneliness	Experience of Loneliness & Deficiency	Loneliness, rating, social isolation, relationship, dating, simping, cooked	This theme examines how the manosphere collectively produces male loneliness not as a diffuse social feeling but as a biological and measurable deficit.
	Am i Cooked Ritual		
The Transformation Marketplace	Ascension Narrative	Transformation, before-and-after, looksmaxxing, testosterone, mewing, biohacking, product promotion, supplements, self-worth, status, advice, routine, stacks	This theme traces how the manosphere constructs the transformation journey through a shared redemptive narrative, collectively enforced consumption scripts, and a body-optimization logic that is structurally designed never to reach completion, sustaining continuous participation in the process.
	Prescribed Routines		
	Never-finished transformation		
	Product Promotion		
The Community	Collective Validation	Journey, testimonies, success stories, language, memes, slang, hostility, bullying, support, worshiping	This theme examines the paradox at the heart of the manosphere: that the community which offers relief from loneliness is organised through validation, hostility, specialised language, and heroic myths in ways that ensure neither transformation nor genuine belonging is ever achieved.
	Collective Hostility		
	Transformation Heroes		