



# Manfluencers and Young Men's Misogynistic Attitudes: The Role of Perceived Threats to Men's Status

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## Abstract

Misogynistic attitudes have surged in the past few years and the “manosphere” – an online milieu promoting toxic and rigid masculinity norms – is often seen as an arena for spreading such ideas. Within the manosphere, manfluencers (i.e., male influencers who espouse misogynistic content and beliefs) are known for trying to persuade men to view women and feminism as a threat to their masculinity and status as men. In this article, we examine how perceived threats to masculine identity as presented by manfluencers affect the formation of young men's attitudes towards women. In an original survey ( $N=2857$ ) with Swedish men, we found that young men who follow more manfluencers are more likely to dehumanize women. In two experiments ( $N=597, 630$ ), we presented potentially threatening content from a fictive manfluencer to a group of participants and found that young men exposed to such content were more mistrustful of women and misogynistic, especially if they felt like they had been rejected by women in the past. The results highlight the importance of how social media influencers may increase misogyny among young men. This research has important implications for policymakers and practitioners, who should be made aware of the role manfluencers have in the formation of attitudes toward gender equality.

**Keywords** Social media · Manfluencers · Manosphere · Misogyny · Masculinity threat · Intergroup threat theory · Toxic masculinity · Experiment

Misogyny refers to hateful beliefs and contempt toward women, and deeply held prejudices about women (Srivastava et al., 2017). During the past years, gender polarization and misogyny has been on the rise in many countries, and misogynistic extremism has been identified as a growing terrorist threat (DiBranco, 2020). The online milieu that promotes toxic masculinity, misogyny, and resistance to feminism has been labelled the manosphere (Jane, 2017) and is an important arena for misogynistic radicalization (Farrell et al., 2019). Within the manosphere, feminism is often presented as the major threat to men's deprivation and loss of status in society (Baker et al., 2024). Referred to as *manfluencers*, social media influencers within the manosphere promote toxic masculinity and misogyny and have received increased attention among younger men (e.g., Haslop et al.,

2024; Rich & Bujalka, 2023). To date, there is little research specifically examining the effects of social media influencers as political opinion leaders (Peter & Muth, 2023). To better understand the psychological underpinnings of how manfluencers shape the misogynistic attitudes of young men, their target audience, we take our theoretical starting point from the social psychological literature on intergroup threat. Research on intergroup threat suggests that when individuals perceive their social group to be threatened, intergroup animosity increases (Stephan et al., 2015). Further, men who seek out the manosphere have often experienced previous rejection by women (Maxwell et al., 2020). Such rejection can be an important instigator for a radicalization process (Kruglanski et al., 2019; Renström et al., 2020) and may function as a motivation to seek out and adhere to radical messages about toxic masculinity and a desire for retaliation (Renström & Bäck, 2024).

We tested our hypotheses in one large-scale survey and two survey experiments among Swedish men. While Sweden is often considered one of the most egalitarian societies in the world according to aggregated measures (e.g., World Economic Forum, 2024), it also constitutes a paradox when

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it comes to gender equality. For instance, Sweden has the highest prevalence of users on misogynistic online forums per capita (Fernquist et al., 2020). Moreover, the populist radical right in Sweden has increased significantly in popularity and the Sweden Democrats was the third largest party in Sweden in the 2022 election. An important aspect of this party's ideology is conservation of gender stereotypes (e.g., Towns et al., 2014). Previous research by Off (2023) shows that the gap between conservative and liberal voters' gender values has widened in Sweden, and conservative gender values predicted voting for the Sweden Democrats in 2018 but not in 2014. She concludes that the increased salience of liberalizing gender values has triggered a backlash, fueling voting for the radical right. In addition, young men and boys in Sweden increasingly believe that gender equality has gone too far and gender equality is not a priority (Ungdomsbarmetern, 2022). Therefore, Sweden provides a unique and important context for this research.

## Influencers and Manfluencers as Opinion Leaders

During the last few years, several influencers who focus on political and societally relevant topics have appeared on various social media platforms, and influencers, whose primary focus is not political, have also started to take political stances (Byrne et al., 2017; Chwialkowska, 2019). The target audience for many influencers are young people, thus underscoring the need to examine and understand how influencers impact the development of attitudes during these formative phases of life. Research on social media influencers as digital political opinion leaders is relatively scarce (Peter & Muth, 2023; Suuronen et al., 2022). Social media influencers constitute a relatively new group in the social network context (Hudders et al., 2020). These influencers take on a middle position between ordinary users and celebrities and are also called “micro-celebrities” (Senft, 2008). Because of this in-between position, influencers have a broad outreach being close to their audience (“one of them”) and as a political player they can have a powerful influence on this audience (Harff, 2022; Martin & Sharma, 2022). Hence, social media influencers should be conceived of as political opinion leaders to whom young people turn for political information (Allgaier, 2020; Fischer et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2021).

The impact of influencers has been studied in marketing where it is shown that influencers can impact brand attitudes and purchase intentions within topics such as fashion and lifestyle (Casaló et al., 2020; Hudders et al., 2020). Yet, the political effects of influencers have only recently begun to be analyzed. For example, in an interview study with young people, Peter and Muth (2023) find that

political influencers can both reinforce existing opinions, affect the formation of opinions and changes in voting intentions. Another recent study using a two-wave panel design finds that following political influencers increase online political participation, which over time predicted higher offline participation (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022). These studies indicate that influencers can have important effects on political attitudes and behaviors. In addition, a recent study showed that the tendency to see social media influencers as a central source of political information was particularly pronounced among young men (Harff & Schmuck, 2024), which further necessitates the scrutiny of misogynistic influencers. One of the main appeals of social media influencers as news sources and political opinion leaders may be their ability to present political information in a simplified way (Harff, 2022; Schwaiger et al., 2022). However, such simplification risk losing nuances of complex societal problems and may fuel political cynicism. This seems to especially true when it comes to topics such as gender equality (Schmuck et al., 2022).

To our knowledge there is no quantitative research specifically focusing on misogynistic influencers – so called manfluencers – as political opinion leaders and how they affect misogynistic attitudes among their target audience, that is, younger men. In a recent study based on interviews, schoolteachers viewed sexism among young schoolboys as at least partly due to manfluencer Andrew Tate (Wescott et al., 2024). Andrew Tate is one of the most prominent figures of the manosphere, the misogynistic and anti-feminist online milieu said to promote masculinity and men's rights that are perceived to be under threat by women and feminism (Baker et al., 2024; Ging, 2019; Jane, 2017; Jones et al. 2020).

Within the manosphere, women are both appealing and appalling (Bates, 2020). While women are desired for partnership and sex, they are also degraded and seen as fundamentally different and less human than men (Bates, 2020), or even as instruments for sex and men's property (Haslop et al., 2024). Women are frequently depicted as evil creatures that are inherently cruel, evolutionary manipulative and toxic to men (O'Malley et al., 2022). Such dehumanization and objectification of women has been related to violence against women (Morris et al., 2012). Another common perception about women is that they are deceitful and cannot be trusted (Rottweiler & Gill, 2020). It is assumed that women exaggerate sexual harassments and even accuse innocent men of rape (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023). These ideas became clear under the #MeToo movement, which aimed to highlight the frequency and prevalence of sexual harassment against women. However, this movement was seen by many users within the manosphere as a feminist conspiracy with the goal of bringing men down (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023). The manosphere message is that feminism must be fought, and

masculinity reinforced through violence to reach political change (O'Donnell & Shor, 2020).

## Threatened Identities as a Basis for Misogyny

We anchor our discussion in intergroup threat theory, which is derived from social identity theory (Stephan et al., 2015; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and proposes that because people value their social identities, like gender identity, perceived threats against the social groups connected to those identities can increase prejudice and intergroup conflict. In this case, gains in women's rights and decision-making power may be perceived as threatening to men with traditional masculine identities, as they perceive themselves to be losing power and privilege in society, according to manfluencers and the manosphere (Haslop et al., 2024; Vallerga & Zurbriggen, 2022). Such perceived threats would provoke negative reactions toward the source of the threat resulting in increased intergroup animosity and biases (Renström et al., 2023; Rotweiler et al., 2024).

An important aspect of intergroup threat theory is that the threats may be perceived and not actual threats, and still evoke the same negative responses. For instance, believing that immigrants threaten one's job leads to prejudice against immigrants regardless of whether one's job security is in fact threatened by immigrants or not (Esses et al., 2001). In the case of threats to masculinity, past research has shown a threat to masculine social identity leads to increased misogynistic attitudes and willingness to seek out the manosphere (Renström & Bäck, 2024). Such threats also increase support for violence, male supremacist attitudes (Willer et al., 2013) and being less likely to identify sexual coercion (Munsch & Willer, 2012). For instance, a common theme in Andrew Tate's videos is that life is harder for men, especially when it comes to dating since women now have more options (Haslop et al., 2024). The idea that feminism constitutes a fundamental threat to (White) men's higher social status is frequently discussed by manfluencers within the manosphere (Baker et al., 2024).

Many men seek out the manosphere because they have experienced individual rejection by women (Maxwell et al., 2020), or they want to avoid such rejection, and many manfluencers claim to provide relationship and dating advice (Baker et al., 2024; Haslop et al., 2024), essentially monetizing on men's insecurities (Bujalka et al., 2022). When experiencing rejection, individuals may lose significance – the sense of “being someone,” being valuable and cherished (Kruglanski et al., 2019), which may lead individuals to seek out ways to reinstate a sense of significance. Rejection by women is a central theme within the manosphere, and rejection is one known pathway to radicalization by making

people more vulnerable to radicalizing content (Bäck et al., 2018; Renström et al., 2020). Radicalization is the process by which an individual comes to adopt attitudes and/or behaviors related to extreme ideologies or religious beliefs (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). In the case of misogynistic radicalization, this could mean adopting misogynistic ideas and views of women. Moreover, rejection has been connected to propensity for outgroup violence (Knapton et al., 2015), intimate partner violence (Kowalski & Leary, 2024) and men show more aggression following rejection than women do (Rajchert et al., 2018). Hence, we expect that young men who perceive that they have been rejected by women in the past, will be particularly sensitive to the influence of manfluencer content.

Age is an important factor in explaining misogynistic radicalization and adoption of misogynistic ideas, especially when considering social media influencers as political opinion leaders. Many of these influencers target a younger audience and present politics in a simplified way (Harff, 2022; Schwaiger et al., 2022), such as blaming men's difficulties on feminism. Young men seem to be particularly prone to use such influencers as a central source of political information (Harff & Schmuck, 2024), which may have consequences for how they interpret their own position in society in comparison to women. Moreover, a recent study showed that young men felt more threatened by gender equality than older men (Off et al., 2022). In particular, this finding was attributed to the fact that young men were more likely than older men to perceive advances in women's rights as a threat to men's opportunities, highlighting competition on the labor market and societal status as potential sources of increased misogyny among younger men. In line with this, a survey of 18 000 Swedish youth (15 – 24 years old) showed that 20% of the boys believed that “gender equality has gone too far” (Ungdomsbarometern, 2022).

Another important aspect to consider is that younger men are more likely to be looking for a partner, compared to older men who may already be in a stable relationship, and if they experience difficulties in finding a romantic partner, they may turn to manfluencers for answers (Maxwell et al., 2020). Finally, many manfluencers also seem to in themselves present the ideal picture of masculinity that younger men might idolize (Haslop et al., 2024). We thus expect that the proposed relationships described below will mainly be present when analyzing younger men.

## Current Study

Despite gender polarization and misogyny being on the rise in many countries, and misogynistic extremism being identified as a growing terrorist threat, there is a dearth of research on the role of manfluencer content in the endorsement of

misogynistic attitudes among young men exposed to this content. To our knowledge there is no quantitative research specifically focusing on manfluencers as political opinion leaders and how they affect misogynistic attitudes among young men. Drawing on intergroup threat theory (Stephan et al., 2015), we examine whether being exposed to masculine identity threats in the form of manfluencer content leads to greater endorsement of misogynistic attitudes among men. We also examine whether experiences of being rejected by women amplifies men's misogynistic responses to manfluencer content. Given that misogyny can take different forms, we assess these attitudes in several ways, including the dehumanization of women, mistrust of women, and perceptions of women as manipulative and deceitful. Our specific hypotheses are as follows:

H1a: We predict that exposure to masculine identity threats (through manfluencer content) will increase misogynistic attitudes.

H1b: We further predict that the effect of masculine identity threats on misogynistic attitudes will be magnified among younger men, such that younger men will report stronger misogynistic attitudes than older men under threat.

H2: We predict that the effect of manfluencer content on misogynistic attitudes among younger men will be contingent upon perceptions of being previously rejected by women.

As discussed earlier, having been rejected by women may lead men to the manosphere in search of answers to why they were rejected or what they can do about it. This may lead men that perceive to have been rejected by women in the past to be more open to the ideas presented by manfluencers and hence, we expect that perceived previous rejection by women will moderate the effect of masculinity threat on misogyny, and that this will be particularly pronounced among young men.

## Study 1

Study 1 examines if exposure to masculinity threats will be related to misogynistic attitudes (H1a). Specifically, we explore if there is a relationship between exposure to manfluencer content and dehumanizing views of women by analyzing data from a large-scale survey conducted with Swedish men. We also test if this potential relationship is magnified among younger men (H1b). We expect that following more manfluencers will be related to higher levels of dehumanization and that this relationship will be stronger among the younger men. In the survey, we assessed exposure to masculinity threat, which we measured as the number of

manfluencers the participant follows. To this aim, participants were presented with a list of misogynistic influencers and asked to tick off the ones they followed. The dependent variable misogyny was operationalized as dehumanization of women as dehumanizing views of women are common on the manosphere.

We also included several control variables. First, we included education and income. We also included control variables more directly related to misogyny, such as locus of control and partisanship. Locus of control measures the extent to which an individual feels they have control over their situation or if their fate is decided by others. A common narrative on the manosphere is that women and feminism dictate the lives of men, and we expected more external locus of control to be related to more misogyny. Alt-right and more conservative ideology has been connected to misogyny (DiBranco, 2020), and hence we expect that supporters of the more right-leaning parties, and especially the populist right party the Sweden Democrats will be more misogynous compared to more left-leaning partisans. Finally, research shows that single men tend to be more misogynous than non-single men (Renström, 2023) and hence we included this as a control variable.

The study was ethically reviewed and approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority before data collection (2023–03267-01).

## Study 1 Method

### Participants

A total of 3,213 participants were recruited to participate in a survey about societal issues and about women and men. The target population was heterosexual men. While only men were recruited based on the survey company's background data, we also asked about gender. Here, 129 (4%) of the participants responded that they were women, and eight (0.2%) that they were "something else," and 16 (0.5%) did not respond to the gender question. These were removed from the analysis. We also asked about sexuality and 122 (3.8%) stated that they were homosexual, 95 (3.0%) bisexual, 111 (3.5%) "something else," and 28 (0.9%) did not respond to the sexuality question. These cases were removed from the analysis. In total, 2,857 (88.9%) responded that they were heterosexual men and were included in subsequent analyses. Descriptive analyses for education and income for the final sample are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

The survey was set up in Qualtrics and data was collected by the survey company *Enkätfabriken*. This survey company employs online panels hosted by *Norstat* to collect data. The panels are mostly self-recruited, but it is possible to recruit a sample that is representative on age,

**Table 1** Distribution of Education Levels (Study 1)

| Education                      | <i>N</i> (%) |
|--------------------------------|--------------|
| Basic schooling                | 183 (7%)     |
| Upper secondary school         | 1102 (40%)   |
| Post upper secondary schooling | 331 (12%)    |
| Higher institution education   | 1151 (42%)   |

**Table 2** Distribution of Income Levels (SEK), All Studies

| Income          | Study 1      | Study 2      | Study 3      |
|-----------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
|                 | <i>N</i> (%) | <i>N</i> (%) | <i>N</i> (%) |
| < 10 000        | 211 (7%)     | 32 (5%)      | 145 (23%)    |
| 10 000 – 19 999 | 391 (14%)    | 84 (14%)     | 79 (13%)     |
| 20 000 – 29 999 | 576 (21%)    | 134 (22%)    | 116 (18%)    |
| 30 000 – 39 999 | 764 (28%)    | 165 (28%)    | 124 (20%)    |
| 40 000 – 49 999 | 418 (8%)     | 89 (15%)     | 61 (10%)     |
| 50 000 – 59 999 | 213 (8%)     | 41 (7%)      | 50 (8%)      |
| 60 000 – 69 999 | 79 (3%)      | 17 (3%)      | 17 (3%)      |
| > 70 000        | 95 (3%)      | 36 (6%)      | 35 (5%)      |

gender and area of living. The survey took about 15 min to complete, and participants were reimbursed by the survey company. Participants are reimbursed about 0.10 €/minute.

Power analysis show that small main effects (0.02) would be found with 95% power with a sample of 652 (Faul et al., 2007). The study was sufficiently powered for a small interaction effect (0.05) with a power of 92% (Baranger et al., 2023).

## Procedure

Participants were invited to a survey about gender and societal attitudes and were informed about ethics. First, participants completed demographic questions including age, gender, sexuality, income, education level, civil status, and partisanship, as well as a measure of locus of control to assess and control for the degree to which participants perceive themselves to have control over their situation and environment. Given that manfluencers tend to blame women and feminism for men's problems and consider themselves victims (Brzuszkiewicz, 2020; Haslop et al., 2024), we expect a positive relationship between external locus of control and misogyny, such that men with a higher external locus of control, that is, those feeling that they are not themselves in control of their situation, would endorse misogynistic attitudes more strongly, compared to those with a lower external/more internal locus of control. Then participants indicated which influencers they

followed on social media, selected from a pre-specified list, to assess the degree of exposure to masculinity threat in their everyday social media environment. Next participants completed measures pertaining to the dehumanization of women as the primary dependent variable, and then they were thanked, debriefed about the purpose of the study, and the survey finished.

## Measures

### Misogyny

Our main dependent variable is misogyny, which we operationalize in this study as *dehumanization of women*, assessed with one item adapted from the Dehumanization Within Romantic Relationships measure (Pizzirani et al., 2019) and one item from the Dehumanization scale by Bastian and Haslam (2011). We used the items “Generally I treat women as they are only worth what they can offer me” and “Generally I treat women as they are only means to an end.” Answers ranged from 1 = *Do not agree at all* to 7 = *Completely agree*,  $r = .74$ ,  $p < .001$ . The two items were collapsed to produce a mean score.

### Masculinity Threat

The main independent variable was masculinity threat, which we operationalize in this study as the *number of manfluencers* the participant followed. This information was assessed by providing the following list of international and Swedish influencers and asking participants to indicate which influencers they followed: Donald Trump, Paolo Roberto, Andrew Tate, Jordan B Peterson, Roosh V, Milo Yiannopoulos, Rollo Tomassi, Carl Benjamin (Sargon of Akkad), Ben Shapiro. This list was set up with the goal of having both domestic and international influencers who, at least partly, advocated misogyny in some way and whose content mainly focused on women, feminism, misogyny, relationships, and similar content. For instance, we did not include influencers who generated alt-right content as their main content, even though many of these influencers have misogynistic leanings as well. We also aimed for influencers who were known to most, such as Tate and Peterson, and less known influencers, but with more specifically misogynistic content, such as Roosh V. This list is by no means exhaustive but contains some of the most known manfluencers (see Bates, 2020).

We created a threat index by adding the number of influencers each participant followed. Hence, this index ranged from 0 to 9. The distribution of followers for each influencer is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3** Distribution of Followers Across the Manfluencers (Study 1)

| Manfluencer                     | N (%)     |
|---------------------------------|-----------|
| Donald Trump                    | 331 (12%) |
| Paolo Roberto                   | 158 (6%)  |
| Andrew Tate                     | 291 (11%) |
| Jordan Peterson                 | 317 (11%) |
| Roosh V                         | 74 (3%)   |
| Milo Yiannopoulos               | 56 (2%)   |
| Carl Benjamin (Sargon of Akkad) | 71 (3%)   |
| Ben Shapiro                     | 137 (5%)  |

### Age and Control Variables

Age was measured in years and included as a moderator for the effect of number of manfluencers followed in misogyny.

We included *locus of control* as a control variable since a common narrative within the manosphere is that men are the victims of feminist progress and hence are not in control of their situation. Locus of control was measured with 4 items from the Internal–External Locus of Control Short Scale. This instrument measures two dimensions of the personality trait locus of control with two items each. The instrument has shown to have satisfactory test–retest reliability and internal consistency in German and English (Nießen et al., 2022). The items were adapted to better fit with the Swedish context.

The items for internal control are: “I control what happens in my life” and “When I try something out, I usually succeed.” The items for external control are “Sometimes I feel that I don’t have control over what happens in my life” and “I feel that it is difficult to influence how much success I have in my life.” The response scale ranged from 1 = *Do not agree at all* to 7 = *Completely agree*. We reverse-coded the items for internal control so that higher scores indicate more external locus of control and lower values indicate more internal locus of control. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was .60 and the items were collapsed to produce a mean score.

We included several demographic controls. We included *education*, measured on a 4-level scale measuring highest education level, which we treated as a continuous variable in the analyses, and monthly *income* using an 8-level scale with 10 000 SEK increments, which was treated as continuous. We included a dummy variable that measured if the respondent was *single* (1050, 37.8% were single, 1655, 59.6% were in a relationship, 47, 1.7% were widowed). We also included a control variable measuring *partisanship* based on a question asking about the participant’s most preferred party among the eight parties represented in the Swedish parliament (the *Riksdag*). We dummy coded all parties, using the Left party (V) as reference category. The parties ordered from left to right (see Oscarsson et al., 2021) are: Left party

**Table 4** Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Key Variables in Study 1

|                          | <i>M (SD)</i> | Misogyny | Manflu-<br>encers<br>Followed | Age      |
|--------------------------|---------------|----------|-------------------------------|----------|
| Misogyny                 | 2.14 (1.52)   |          |                               |          |
| Manfluencers<br>Followed | 0.54 (1.10)   | 0.67***  |                               |          |
| Age                      | 38.05 (16.41) | -0.21*** | -0.26***                      |          |
| Locus of control         | 3.51 (1.02)   | 0.20***  | 0.07***                       | -0.11*** |

(V), Green party (MP), Social Democrats (S), Center party (C), Liberals (L), Moderate party (M), Christian Democrats (KD) and the right-wing populist party, the Sweden Democrats (SD).

### Study 1 Results and Discussion

We did not impute missing values and used pair-wise deletion for analyses. This approach was employed for all three studies. Misogyny, age, and locus of control were normally distributed with skewness statistics between .06 – 1.17, whereas the number of manfluencers followed was skewed at 2.70 (Hair et al., 2022). Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Table 4. H1a stated that exposure to masculinity threat in the form of number of manfluencers followed would be related to higher misogyny, and H1b stated that this effect would be magnified among young men. To test these hypotheses, we ran a hierarchical regression where the control variables (i.e., age, education, income, single, party affiliation, locus of control entered in the first step) and exposure to masculinity threat (i.e., number of manfluencers followed) was entered in the second step, and the interaction between age and exposure to masculinity threat was entered in the third step. The results are presented in Table 5.

As can be seen in Table 5, younger men reported more misogyny than older men. Higher education was related to less misogyny and higher income and being single were related to more misogyny. Supporters of the right-wing parties (M, KD, SD), compared to the Left party (V) also showed more misogyny.

Number of manfluencers followed predicted more misogyny, even after controlling for all control variables, and the interaction between age and number of manfluencers was also significant (see Table 5). The effect of following manfluencers on misogyny at different values of age was plotted in Fig. 1. As can be seen, the effect of following manfluencers on misogyny was strongest among the youngest men: Masculinity threats, measured as the number of manfluencers the participant follows, was positively related to misogyny (H1a), and this effect was magnified among young

**Table 5** Regression Results for Study 1

|                            | Model 1                | Model 2                | Model 3                |
|----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
|                            | <i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> ) | <i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> ) | <i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> ) |
| Age                        | -0.02 (0.00)***        | -0.01 (0.00)***        | -0.01 (0.00)***        |
| Education                  | -0.08 (0.03)**         | -0.09 (0.03)**         | -0.09 (0.03)**         |
| Income                     | 0.14 (0.02)***         | 0.11 (0.02)***         | 0.11 (0.02)***         |
| Single                     | 0.27 (0.06)***         | 0.26 (0.06)***         | 0.25 (0.06)***         |
| Party: MP                  | 0.28 (0.17)            | 0.17 (0.17)            | 0.16 (0.17)            |
| Party: S                   | 0.19 (0.10)            | 0.16 (0.10)            | 0.16 (0.10)            |
| Party: C                   | 0.01 (0.16)            | 0.01 (0.16)            | 0.00 (0.15)            |
| Party: L                   | 0.26 (0.16)            | 0.22 (0.15)            | 0.21 (0.15)            |
| Party: M                   | 0.23 (0.11)*           | 0.17 (0.10)            | 0.17 (0.11)            |
| Party: KD                  | 0.58 (0.16)***         | 0.31 (0.16)*           | 0.32 (0.16)*           |
| Party: SD                  | 0.41 (0.11)***         | 0.21 (0.10)*           | 0.22 (0.10)*           |
| Locus of Control           | 0.28 (0.03)***         | 0.25 (0.03)***         | 0.25 (0.03)***         |
| Manfluencer                |                        | 0.41 (0.03)***         | 0.62 (0.08)***         |
| Age × Manfluencer          |                        |                        | -0.01 (0.00)**         |
| Adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> | .10                    | .19                    | .19                    |

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Party abbreviations: Green party (MP), Social democrats (S), Centre party (C), Liberals (L), Moderate party (M), Christian democrats (KD), Swedish democrats (SD). Parties are structured from Left to Right using the Left party (V) as reference

men (H1b). While the interaction was significant, the effect was small. Moreover, this study relied on a correlational design with a self-report measure of masculinity threat and therefore cannot draw any conclusions about causal effects.

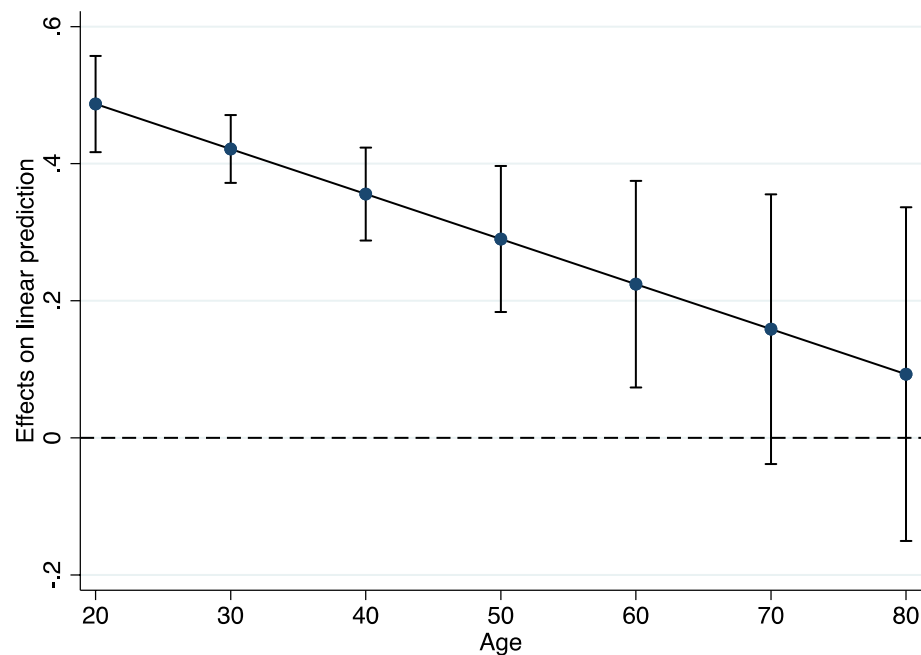
Individuals who hold misogynistic attitudes may be more likely to seek out and follow manfluencers rather than the other way around. We also cannot be certain that the individuals who report that they follow some manfluencers have been exposed to masculinity threats. In addition, there may be unmeasured factors at play. We therefore performed two experiments, which we turn to next.

## Study 2

Study 2 was designed to address some of the limitations of Study 1 and to better understand the causal effect of exposure to masculinity threats in the form of manfluencer content on young men's misogynistic views of women. To this aim, we performed a survey experiment among Swedish men. The study was reviewed and approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority before data collection (2023–03267-01). In this experiment, participants were either exposed to a message posted on social media that included content describing a threat to masculinity ostensibly by a manfluencer or a neutral message that did not include threatening content. We then explored the effect of the threat especially among young men on misogyny.

In this second study we included a different measure of misogynistic attitudes, mistrust of women. A common theme within the manosphere is that women are deceitful and lie about being sexually harassed (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023), hence our dependent measure was designed to tap into this mistrust. We also included a measure of perceived previous rejection by women since this is a common reason

**Fig. 1** The Effect of Following Manfluencers for Different Values of Age (Study 1)



for seeking out the manosphere (Maxwell et al., 2020). In line with H1a, we expected that exposure to masculinity threat would increase misogyny, and in line with H1b, this effect would be magnified among younger men. Further, in line with H2, we expected that young men's reaction to the threatening content would be contingent upon perceived previous rejection by women.

## Study 2 Method

### Design

The experiment was a between-participants design with two conditions – one experimental condition and one control condition. In the experimental condition, participants were presented with a fictive social media post, ostensibly posted by a manfluencer. The posts in the manfluencer condition contained a message that could potentially be perceived as threatening to men's status. An example is: “According to a new survey, women are starting to take over leading positions in society. Researchers say this trend will continue in the future.” The final sentence in the post was always, “This development towards a more male hostile society must be stopped!” While the name and picture were blurred it was clearly sent by a man (see Fig. 2 for an example). Participants in the control condition were shown a non-threatening and unrelated post. The same template with the blurred picture was used in both the experimental and control condition. While the posts in the control condition were unrelated to gender it is unlikely that the sender was perceived to be a manfluencer even though the same template was used in both conditions. Thus, only the content varied between the conditions.

### Participants

The experiment was set up in Qualtrics and data was collected by *Enkätfabriken*. We only invited men based on

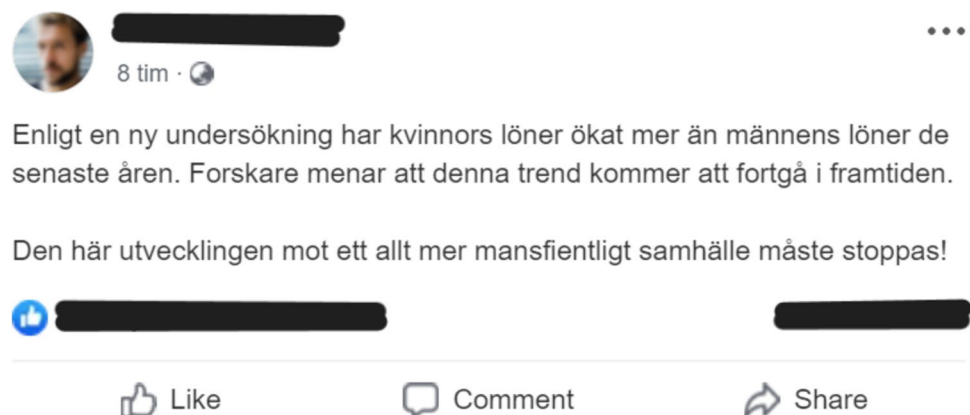
background data but asked about both gender and sexuality to ensure only self-identified heterosexual men participated. In total, 675 participants responded to the survey. Of these, 18 (2.7%) identified as women, and two (0.3%) as “something else.” On the sexuality question, 609 (90.2%) were heterosexual, 22 (3.2%) were homosexual, 27 (4%) were bisexual, and 14 (2%) stated “something else.” Only heterosexual men were included in the analyses, leaving us with 597 participants. Age ranged from 18–88, mean = 51.25,  $SD = 18.47$ . There were 303 participants in the control condition (coded 0) and 296 in the manfluencer condition (coded 1). See Tables 2 and 6 for descriptive analyses of education and income.

Power analyses showed that to find small main effects (0.02) with 95% power, a sample of 652 would be needed (Faul et al., 2007). To find interaction effects in the sample split by condition, the study reached a power of 77% for a medium effect size (0.15). To reach 80% power, a sample of 327 in each condition would be needed to find medium effects (0.15) (Baranger et al., 2023).

**Table 6** Distribution of Education (Study 2 and 3)

| Education                                  | Study 2      | Study 3      |
|--------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|
|                                            | <i>N</i> (%) | <i>N</i> (%) |
| Basic schooling (< 9 years)                | 13 (2%)      | 20 (3%)      |
| Basic schooling (at least 9 years)         | 37 (6%)      | 47 (8%)      |
| Upper secondary school (less than 3 years) | 78 (13%)     | 92 (15%)     |
| Upper secondary school (at least 3 years)  | 145 (24%)    | 238 (38%)    |
| Vocational training (< 3 years)            | 73 (12%)     | 44 (7%)      |
| Vocational training (at least 3 years)     | 17 (3%)      | 25 (4%)      |
| Higher education (< 3 years)               | 57 (10%)     | 46 (7%)      |
| Higher education (3 years)                 | 72 (12%)     | 48 (8%)      |
| Higher education (4 years or more)         | 95 (16%)     | 57 (9%)      |
| Doctoral education                         | 12 (2%)      | 9 (1%)       |

**Fig. 2** Fictive Facebook Post Presented to Participants (Study 2)



## Procedure

Participants were invited to complete a study about gender and societal attitudes. Participants provided informed consent and were also informed that they would be shown a social media post and be asked questions about the post. The first block in the survey was demographic questions including age, gender, sexuality, income, education level, civil status and partisanship. Our main independent variable was perceived rejection by women. Following this, participants were randomly shown one out of 10 fictive Facebook posts which either presented a potentially threatening manfluencer post or a neutral control post. After having read the post, participants were asked a question relating to the mistrustful nature of women often depicted within the manosphere and by misogynistic influencers. Finally, participants were thanked and debriefed.

## Measures

### Manipulation of Threat to Men

The manipulation of threat consisted of fictive social media posts, ostensibly written by a manfluencer. All posts contained one of the following sentences: “According to a new survey, women are starting to take over leading positions in society,” “According to a new survey, more women choose to be single mothers and support themselves,” “According to a new survey, women’s salaries have increased more than men’s the last few years,” “According to a new survey, more women choose to have children on their own,” or “According to a new survey, women’s status on the labor market has increased significantly the last few years.” This sentence was followed by the same final sentence in all variations of the threat condition: “Researchers say this trend will continue in the future. This development towards a more male hostile society must be stopped!”.

The non-threatening posts contained neutral and unrelated information and participants in the control condition were shown one of the following sentences: “According to a new study, the use of cattle in Scandinavia reaches much further back in time than previously thought. Researchers say the early cattle had small horns and were primarily used as draft animals,” “According to a new study, teenagers who play an instrument are better at listening and taking notes in the classroom. Researchers say this could be due to a well-trained attention span,” “According to a new study, traces of stag beetles have been found on Ireland. Researchers say this finding enables better mapping of the ecological development of the stag beetle in Europe,” “According to a new report about research on “blastoids” made of stem cells, researchers have now made a breakthrough about the fetus’ development. Researchers say this knowledge can help to

highlight fertility problems,” or “According to a new study, the Swedes using apps more than ever when they are looking for a job. Researchers say the apps have made the labor market more accessible and easier to navigate.”

We created five threat posts and five control posts. Participants were randomly shown one of the 10 posts. All threat posts were collapsed into one condition and all control posts were collapsed into one condition.

### Misogyny

The main dependent variable was misogyny, here operationalized as *mistrust of women*. This variable was measured by participants indicating their estimated percentage of reported sexual harassment cases that are believed to be falsely made up by women. False allegations of rape and sexual harassment is a common idea within the manosphere and indicates the deceitful nature of women (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023). The responses were made on a sliding scale from 0 (no reported sexual harassment cases are false) to 100 (all reported sexual harassment cases are falsely made up by women).

### Perceived Previous Rejection by Women

The second main independent variable was *perceived rejection by women*, which was assessed with four items from the Unwanted Celibacy Scale (Grunau et al., 2022) reflecting perceived rejection by women. The original scale consists of eight items tapping into both perceived rejection and negative comparisons to others and shown to have high internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .92$ ; Grunau et al., 2022). We were mainly interested in the items related to perceived previous rejection: “I have tried to date, but nobody wants to date me;” “I have tried online dating (app or website), but it did not work out for me;” “I have tried to get a partner, but I have been repeatedly rejected;” and “Nobody of the opposite sex seems interested in me.” Answers ranged from 1 = *Do not agree at all* to 7 = *Completely agree*. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was .84 and the items were collapsed into a mean perceived rejection score.

### Age and Control Variables

Age was measured in years. We also included control variables. We included *education* (measured on a 10-level scale) and *income* as measured in Study 1 (see Tables 2 and 6). We also included being *single* (coded as 1 for single, otherwise 0). There were 108 participants who were single, and 188 who were not single, coded as 1 = *single*, 0 = *not single*. We used a continuous measure of left–right *ideology*, to avoid too small groups in this smaller data set. Answers ranged from 1 = *Clearly to the left* to 10 = *Clearly to the right* ( $M = 5.82$ ,  $SD = 2.65$ ).

## Study 2 Results and Discussion

We first tested normality for the main study variables, including mistrust, perceived previous rejection, and age. All variables were normally distributed with a skewness statistic varying from -0.02 for age to 1.07 for perceived rejection and 0.59 for mistrust. Descriptive statistics and correlations for the main study variables included mistrust of women, perceived previous rejection, and age are presented in Table 7.

### Testing the Effect of Threat to Men Among Young Men

H1a stated that exposure to threats to men would increase misogyny, and H1b stated that this effect would be magnified among young men. We ran a hierarchical regression to test the effect of a two-way interaction between condition (exposure to manfluencer content vs. control) and age. In Step 1, we included the control variables and perceived previous rejection by women, Step 2 included the condition, and Step 3 included all possible two-way interactions between treatment, age, and perceived rejection. As presented in Table 8, there were no main effects of age, education, income, or being single. Right-leaning men were more mistrustful of

women than left-leaning men, mirroring the results from Study 1 and research showing ties between alt-right and the manosphere (DiBranco, 2020; Hoffman et al., 2020). There was a main positive effect of perceived previous rejection by women on mistrust of women, but no main effect of condition (threat vs. no threat), and thus H1a was not supported.

To test H1b, we expected an interaction between condition and age. This expected interaction was not significant; however, there was an interaction between perceptions of being rejected and age such that younger men who perceived themselves to have been rejected by women in the past were more mistrustful of women. The trend for the effect of perceived rejection on mistrust of women for different values of age is plotted in Fig. 3. As can be seen, the effect of rejection on mistrust is strongest for the younger men, providing some support for hypothesis H1b.

### Moderating Effect of Perceived Previous Rejection by Women

H2 stated that the effect of threats to men's status communicated by manfluencers on misogyny among younger men would be contingent upon perceptions of previous rejection by women and hence, we expected a three-way interaction between treatment, age, and perceived rejection by women. Due to high multicollinearity for the three-way interaction term in the full model (tolerance = 0.02, VIF = 46), we decided to run the analyses separately for the experimental and control condition. This improved the tolerance values to 0.09 and 0.12 in the control and influencer conditions respectively (VIFs = 11 and 9). The results are presented in Table 9. The full model is presented in Table 8.

As can be seen in Table 9, there was a significant interaction between perceived rejection by women and age among men in the threat condition, but not among those in the

**Table 7** Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Between Main Variables (Study 2)

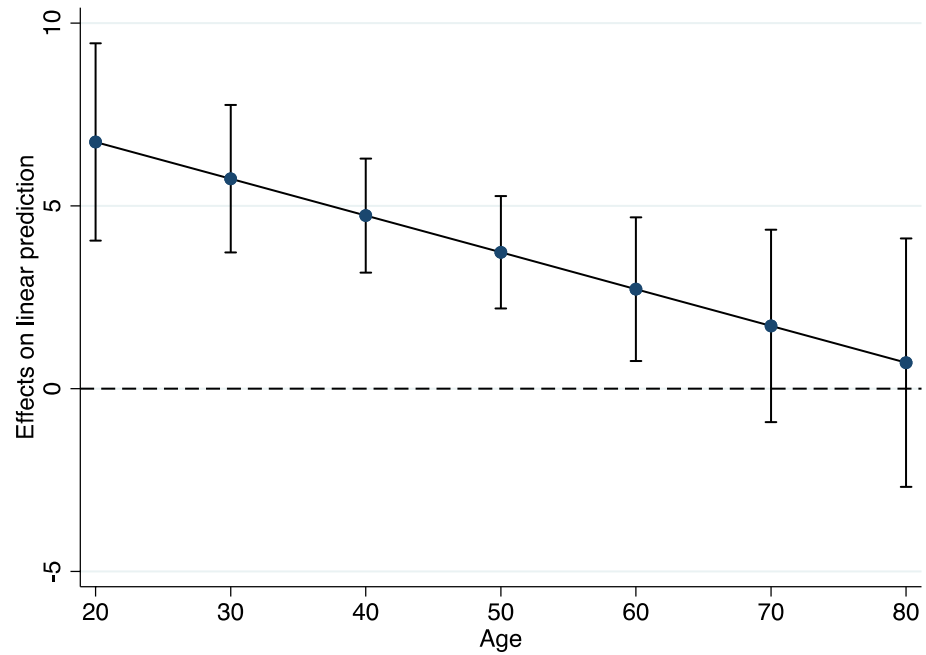
|           | <i>M (SD)</i> | Mistrust | Rejection |
|-----------|---------------|----------|-----------|
| Mistrust  | 34.11 (24.49) |          |           |
| Rejection | 2.28 (1.4)    | 0.29***  |           |
| Age       | 51.25 (18.47) | -0.14**  | -0.37***  |

**Table 8** Regression Results for Mistrust of Women (Study 2)

|                             | Model 1        | Model 2        | Model 3         | Model 4        |
|-----------------------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|
|                             | <i>B (SE)</i>  | <i>B (SE)</i>  | <i>B (SE)</i>   | <i>B (SE)</i>  |
| Age                         | -0.07 (0.06)   | -0.07 (0.06)   | 0.22 (0.12)     | 0.15 (0.15)    |
| Education                   | -0.78 (0.44)   | -0.78 (0.44)   | -0.82 (0.44)    | -0.81 (0.44)   |
| Income                      | 0.27 (0.63)    | 0.27 (0.64)    | 0.12 (0.64)     | 0.14 (0.63)    |
| Single                      | 1.29 (2.19)    | 1.30 (2.20)    | 2.25 (2.22)     | 2.20 (2.22)    |
| Left–right                  | 1.26 (0.38)**  | 1.26 (0.38)**  | 1.25 (0.38)**   | 1.23 (0.38)*** |
| Rejection                   | 4.28 (0.75)*** | 4.29 (0.76)*** | 11.53 (7.96)*** | 7.91 (3.09)*   |
| Treatment                   |                | -0.40 (1.96)   | 9.96 (8.01)     | 4.38 (12.16)   |
| Treatment × Rejection       |                |                | -1.52 (1.45)    | 1.65 (4.32)    |
| Treatment × age             |                |                | -0.17 (0.11)    | -0.03 (0.22)   |
| Rejection × age             |                |                | -0.10 (0.05)*   | -0.07 (0.06)   |
| Treatment × rejection × age |                |                |                 | -0.07 (0.09)   |
| Adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>  | .10            | .10            | .11             | 0.11           |

Note. \**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01, \*\*\**p* < .001

**Fig. 3** The Effect of Perceived Rejection by Women for Different Values of Age on Mistrust of Women (Study 2)



control condition. The trend for the effect of perceived rejection by women for different values of age is plotted in Fig. 4. As can be seen, the effect of perceived rejection by women on mistrust of women was stronger for younger men. Importantly, this effect emerged only when the participants had been exposed to potentially threatening manfluencer content indicating that such online content may play a role in young men's endorsement of misogynistic attitudes.

To sum up, the results of Study 2 demonstrated that exposure to content that threatens men's status increases misogynistic attitudes among young men, as specified in H1a and H1b. We also found some support for H2 suggesting that younger men who are exposed to a potential threat are more likely to become misogynistic if they perceive that they have been rejected by women. However, the effects were

relatively small, and thus we ran a second experiment with only young men.

### Study 3

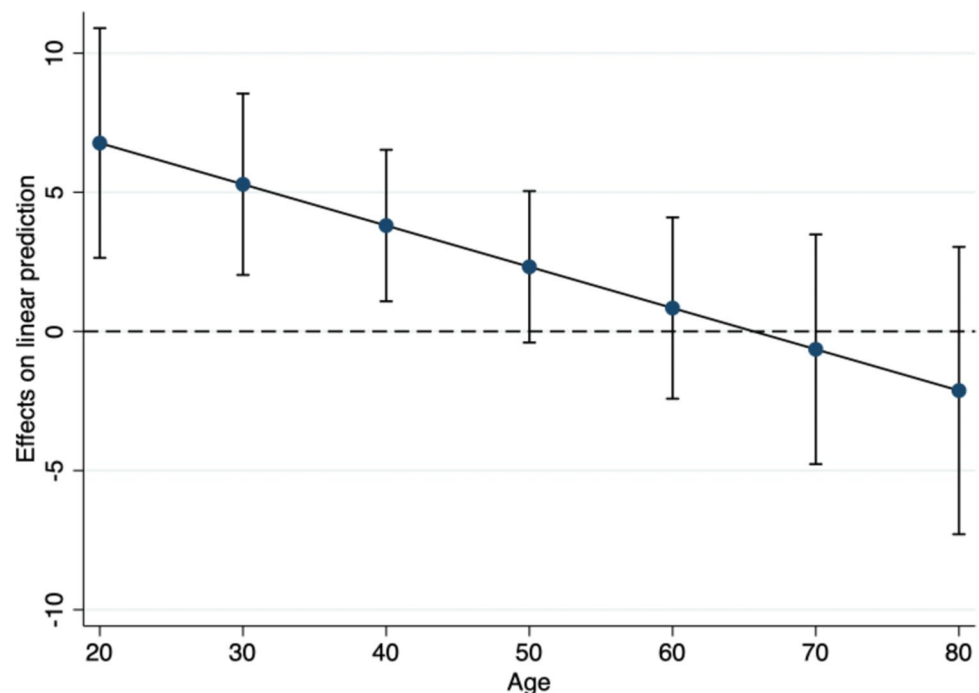
Study 3 aimed to further examine the effects that manfluencers posts about threats to men's status may have on young men. In this study we only included young men (18–25) to see if the results would emerge more clearly when including a larger sample with the target age group. We expected that we would see a main effect of threat and that perceptions of previous rejection by women would moderate the effect of threat on misogyny, in line with H2. The study was ethically reviewed and approved by the

**Table 9** Regression Results for Mistrust of Women Split on Condition (Study 2)

|                            | Manfluencer condition  |                        | Control condition      |                        |
|----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
|                            | Model 1                | Model 2                | Model 1                | Model 2                |
|                            | <i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> ) | <i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> ) | <i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> ) | <i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> ) |
| Age                        | -0.17 (0.08)*          | 0.12 (0.16)            | 0.02 (0.08)            | 0.14 (0.15)            |
| Education                  | -0.18 (0.62)           | -0.24 (0.62)           | -1.30 (0.62)*          | -1.35 (0.63)*          |
| Income                     | -0.17 (0.93)           | -0.31 (0.93)           | 0.57 (0.88)            | 0.48 (0.89)            |
| Single                     | 2.48 (3.02)            | 3.22 (3.02)            | 0.46 (3.24)            | 1.01 (3.29)            |
| Left-right                 | 1.55 (0.54)**          | 1.45 (0.54)**          | 1.06 (0.53)*           | 1.08 (0.53)*           |
| Rejection                  | 3.27 (1.11)**          | 9.32 (3.07)**          | 4.99 (1.04)***         | 7.97 (3.14)*           |
| Rejection × age            |                        | -0.13 (0.06)*          |                        | -0.07 (0.06)           |
| Adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> | .10                    | .11                    | .11                    | .11                    |

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Fig. 4** The Effect of Perceived Rejection by Women for Different Values of Age on Mistrust of Women, for Participants Exposed to Manfluencer Content (Study 2)



Swedish Ethical Review Authority before data collection (2024–00098-02).

As in Study 2, we used an experimental design in Study 3 and again manipulated potentially threatening manfluencer content. We extended the study in several ways. First, we developed our stimulus material to clearly convey feminism as the threat being communicated by manfluencer content and focused on specific harms to individual men (e.g., difficulty finding a partner). Moreover, given that the sample was young, we expected to find stronger effects than those found in Study 2. Second, we used a different indicator of misogyny. Third, we measured the perception that men are the discriminated group in society, called “belief in a sexism shift” (Zehnter et al., 2021). Perceived discrimination is sometimes considered an igniting factor in the radicalization process (Knapton et al., 2022; Kruglanski et al., 2019) and could capture group-based threats to complement the more individually based threats captured in the measure of perceived previous rejection by women.

## Study 3 Method

### Design

The overall design was the same as in Study 2; in two conditions, participants read fictive Facebook posts containing either potentially threatening content or neutral information, also presented as being posted by an individual. In both

conditions, we used the same fictive Facebook templates as in Study 2, with the blurred picture (see Fig. 2). Hence, only the content varied between the conditions. Within the manosphere, feminism is often accused of being the source of men’s deprivation (Baker et al., 2024; Haslop et al., 2024) and hence the stimulus material was designed to capture this idea and how it affects men. We also formulated the material so that it would more clearly represent a political opinion. The control condition consisted of texts unrelated to feminism or gender, such as new figures of applications to higher education. These were also presented as opinions and to balance we created both a positive and a negative version. We included the same measure of perceived rejection by women as in Study 2 and expected that this would moderate the effect of the threatening content on misogyny. We also used a broader measure of misogynistic attitudes inspired by the misogyny scale (Rottweiler & Gill, 2020).

### Participants

The experiment was set up in Qualtrics and data was collected by *Enkätfabriken*. We only invited men to participate but asked about gender and sexuality to ensure only self-identified heterosexual men participated. After removing participants that identified as women and non-heterosexual, the total sample size was 630 men between 18 and 25 years old (Mean age = 21.00,  $SD = 2.33$ ). There were 316 participants in the control condition (0) and 314 in the threat condition (1). Descriptive statistics for education and income are presented in Tables 2 and 6. Power analyses showed that to

find small main effects (0.02) with 95% power, a sample of 652 would be needed (Faul et al., 2007). To find interaction effects the study reached a power of 96% for a medium effect size (0.15) (Baranger et al., 2023).

## Procedure

Participants were invited to a survey about societal issues and gender and provided informed consent. They were also informed that they would be shown a social media post and be asked questions about the post. The first block in the survey was demographic questions including age, gender, sexuality, income, education level, civil status and partisanship. We also included beliefs that men are the discriminated group in society and our main independent variable was perceived rejection by women. Following this, participants were randomly shown one out of eight fictive Facebook posts which either presented perceived threat to men communicated by a manfluencer or neutral content. After having read the post, participants were asked questions relating to misogyny. Finally, participants were thanked and debriefed.

## Measures

### Manipulation of Threat Communicated by Manfluencer

We aimed to make the posts clearly political by including a statement blaming feminism for various behaviors observed among women that could be perceived as negative for men. All posts in the experimental condition thus started with, “The feminists have taught women...” and this was followed by one out of four possible experimental stimulus texts. The four variations were “...that they can charge any man for sexual harassments and rape – this is not OK! Men need to know that they can date and have sex with women without risk of punishment,” “...to prioritize work and career instead of taking care of home and kids – this is not OK! Men must now that their women will stay at home and take care of them and their children,” “...that it’s positive to have many sex partners but this only lowers their value – this is not OK! Men must know that their women are worthy of them,” and “...that it’s ok to flirt with other men – this is not OK! Men must know that their women don’t talk to other men.” The final sentence in all variations was “This development must stop!” An example of the full text shown to participants is, “The feminists have taught women that they can report any man for sexual harassment and rape – this is not OK! Men must know that they can date and have sex with women without risk of being punished. This development must stop!”.

The non-threatening control-content referred to applications to higher education or employee movement and were

formulated as either positive or negative to balance valence of the message. The text read, “New figures show that the number of applications to higher education has increased/decreased. This is positive/negative for Sweden’s development.” and “New figures show that fewer/more employees changed workplace last year compared to 2022. This is positive/negative for Sweden’s development.”

## Misogyny

The main dependent variable, misogyny, was measured with six adapted items from the misogyny scale (Rottweiler & Gill, 2020) capturing misogynistic attitudes. The full scale contains 10 items consisting of three sub-scales (manipulative and exploitative nature of women, devaluation of women, and distrust of women). Answers range from 1 = *Do not agree at all* to 7 = *Completely agree*. To keep the survey short and not fatigue participants, we selected six items. The items from the subscale *Manipulative and Exploitative Nature of Women* were: “Women exploit men for their own agendas,” “Women use their sexuality to manipulate men,” and “If things don’t go their way, women will play the victim.” The items from the *Distrust of Women* subscale were: “When it comes down to it, a lot of women are deceitful,” “I think that most women would lie just to get ahead,” and “It is generally safer not to trust women too much” (due to none of the original items being reverse-coded we reversed the latter two into: “I think very few women would lie to get ahead” and “I generally trust women”). After reverse-scoring the reversed items so that higher values reflect more misogyny, Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was .67. After inspecting the  $\alpha$  with various items deleted, we found that the reverse-scored items did not work as intended and we decided to remove these two, resulting in a mean index based on four items and an  $\alpha$  of .80.

### Perceived Previous Rejection by Women

Besides the treatment variable, the main independent variable was *perceived rejection by women*, which was measured with 3 items from the Unwanted Celibacy Scale (Grunau et al., 2022). Answers ranged from 1 = *Do not agree at all* to 7 = *Completely agree*. The reliability was high, Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  = .81 and the items were collapsed into a mean score.

## Age and Control Variables

Age was measured in years. We also included the control variables *education* and *income* measured as in Study 2. We also included being *single* (coded as 1 for single ( $n=333$ ), otherwise 0 ( $n=297$ )), and left–right *ideology*, as measured in Study 2. Finally, we included 7 items from the Belief in a Sexism Shift Scale (Zehnter, et al., 2021) to measure

*perceived discrimination*. This scale captures the idea that it is in fact men who are the group that is now discriminated against in society. Sample items are: “Discrimination against men is increasing in Sweden,” and “In today’s society, women can say things that men are not allowed to say.” Answers ranged from 1 = *Do not agree at all* to 7 = *Completely agree*. The reliability was high, Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .83$  and the items were collapsed into a mean score.

### Study 3 Results and Discussion

We first tested normality for the main variables, which were all normally distributed (misogynistic attitudes = -0.11, perceived rejection = 0.60, and perceived discrimination = -0.11). Descriptive statistics and correlations for misogyny, perceived previous rejection by women, and perceived discrimination are presented in Table 10.

#### Effect of Threat to Men’s Status on Misogyny

We ran a hierarchical regression model to test H1b that stated that exposure to threats to men as communicated by manfluencers would increase misogynistic attitudes among young men. Because this sample consisted only of young men between ages 18 and 25, we expected a main effect of the experimental condition. In Step 1, we included the control variables and perceived rejection by women, adding

treatment condition in Step 2. As can be seen in Table 11, higher education among young men predicted more misogynistic attitudes, as did being more right-wing. Higher income and education predicted less misogyny among young men. Perceiving men to be a discriminated group in society also predicted more misogyny, but there was no effect of perceptions of previous rejection by women. Also, there was no main effect of condition, thus we did not find support for H1b.

#### Moderating Effect of Perceived Previous Rejection by Women

H2 stated that the effect of threat content on misogyny should be contingent upon perceptions of previous rejection by women. Thus, we expected an interaction between experimental condition and perceived rejection by women. This interaction term was added in Step 3. In an exploratory analysis, we also included the interaction between perceived discrimination and experimental condition in Step 3. The results are presented in Table 11.

There was an interaction between being exposed to threat content and perceived rejection. The effect of perceived rejection on misogynistic attitudes in the experimental condition is plotted in Fig. 5. As can be seen, there is a positive effect of perceived rejection by women on misogynistic attitudes for young men in the threat condition, especially among those who scored high (6 or 7 on average) on perceived rejection. This gives support to H2, showing that young men who perceive that they have been rejected by women in the past, and who are exposed to threats to men’s status by manfluencers become increasingly misogynistic. This is likely a negative spiral where men with misogynistic attitudes have trouble finding a partner leading to rejection, which may spur them further to seek out online content that narrates their situation as being caused by women, leading to more hatred for women.

**Table 10** Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Between Main Variables (Study 3)

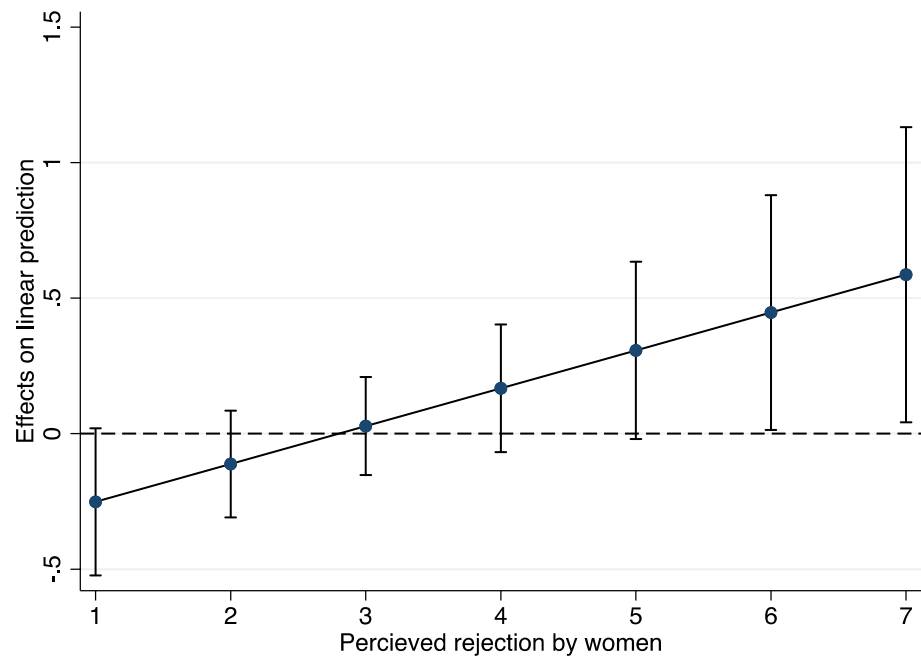
|                | <i>M (SD)</i> | Misogyny | Rejection |
|----------------|---------------|----------|-----------|
| Misogyny       | 4.06 (1.33)   |          |           |
| Rejection      | 2.75 (1.50)   | 0.17***  |           |
| Discrimination | 4.17 (1.30)   | 0.60***  | 0.20***   |

**Table 11** Regression Results for Misogynistic Attitudes (Study 3)

|                            | Model 1        | Model 2        | Model 3        |
|----------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|                            | <i>B (SE)</i>  | <i>B (SE)</i>  | <i>B (SE)</i>  |
| Education                  | 0.05 (0.23)*   | 0.05 (0.02)*   | 0.05 (0.02)*   |
| Income                     | -0.06 (0.03)*  | -0.06 (0.03)*  | -0.06 (0.03)*  |
| Single                     | -0.01 (0.09)   | -0.01 (0.09)   | -0.02 (0.09)   |
| Left–right                 | 0.04 (0.02)*   | 0.04 (0.02)*   | 0.04 (0.02)*   |
| Discrimination             | 0.59 (0.04)*** | 0.59 (0.04)*** | 0.64 (0.05)*** |
| Rejection                  | 0.05 (0.03)    | 0.05 (0.03)    | -0.01 (0.04)   |
| Treatment                  |                | -0.01 (0.09)   | 0.00 (0.32)    |
| Treatment × Rejection      |                |                | 0.14 (0.06)*   |
| Treatment × Discrimination |                |                | -0.09 (0.07)   |
| Adj. $R^2$                 | .36            | .36            | .37            |

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Fig. 5** The Effect of Being Exposed to Threatening Manfluencer Content for Different Values of Perceived Rejection by Women on Misogynistic Attitudes (Study 3)



## General Discussion

The present research set out to examine the impact of threats of women and feminism to men's status communicated by manfluencers to their audiences. We expected that exposure to such threats would increase misogynistic attitudes, especially among young men. Anchored in intergroup threat theory (Stephan et al., 2015), we argued that manfluencers presenting women and feminism as a threat to men is likely to evoke intergroup animosity in the shape of misogynistic attitudes. According to intergroup threat theory, when individuals' social identities are under threat from another social group, people may react with animosity and prejudice (Stephan et al., 2015). Hence, when young men perceive that women and feminism threaten their masculine identities and status, they may react with negativity towards women.

In addition, we expected that experiences of rejection may play an important role in the association between perceived threats to men and misogynistic attitudes. Experiences of rejection by women seems to function as a motivation to seek out the manosphere (Maxwell et al., 2020), and rejection has been shown to be an important instigator for a radicalization process (Kruglanski et al., 2019; Renström et al., 2020) and adhering to radical messages about toxic masculinity and a desire for retaliation (Renström & Bäck, 2024). We thus hypothesized that the effect of perceived threats on misogynistic attitudes would be stronger among young men who perceive that they have been rejected by women.

In three empirical studies, based on a large-scale survey and two experiments performed in Sweden, we found that intergroup threat in the shape of manfluencer content that warns of the threats to men's status by women and feminism was related to more misogynistic attitudes among younger men. In a survey with Swedish men, we found that the higher the number of manfluencers young men follow, the more likely they are to hold dehumanizing views of women. In two experiments that manipulated exposure to potentially threatening fictive manfluencer content, we found that young men exposed to such content became increasingly mistrustful of women and adopted more misogynistic attitudes compared to a control group. Moreover, this effect was contingent upon individual perceptions of being previously rejected by women. Hence, we found support for our hypotheses that exposure to threats would increase misogynistic attitudes among younger men, especially if they perceive that they had been rejected by women.

The results emerged more clearly in Study 3 compared to Study 2 for several potential reasons. First, in Study 3, we analyzed only young men allowing us to leave out age as an independent variable leading to a study with higher power and less collinearity. In addition, in Study 3 we formulated the threats so that they clearly blamed feminism as the source of men's disadvantaged positions, and that the consequence of feminism is something that each individual man could be afflicted by. For instance, the stimuli material described that feminism has taught women that they can report any man for sexual harassment whenever they feel

like it. The aim of using such a material was to make the threats more personal and relevant to each individual participant. In Study 2, the threats were formulated to target men as a social group, for instance that women's salaries have increased more than men's. While this may be perceived as threatening since they state the plausible downfall of men as a socially privileged group in society, they may feel less threatening to an individual man, compared to threats more clearly directed towards their everyday life and relationships.

In support of this argument, the results showed that threats against men's status increased misogynistic attitudes among men who perceived that they had been rejected by women. Hence, perceiving to be rejected by women seems to be an important moderator when analyzing the effect of threat perceptions, and has been suggested to be an important motivator to seek out the manosphere (Maxwell et al., 2020). This finding means that young men who perceive to be rejected, or who are afraid to experience rejection, may seek out the manosphere and its manfluencers. When these men are on the manosphere they are fed with the narrative that their situation is in fact not their fault, but that feminism is to blame.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

Some limitations and directions for future research are worth noting. First, while Study 1 was correlational and we could not establish a causal relationship in this study, we believe that the two subsequent experiments point to a causal direction where perceived threats to men lead to increased misogyny among young men. That said, in real-life contexts, the causal direction could also be reversed such that young men with misogynistic attitudes seek out the manosphere and its manfluencers where they find support.

Also, while the sample in Study 1 was large, relatively few men followed the presented manfluencers (see Table 3), and this variable was skewed. A reason for this could be that our list did not include all relevant manfluencers, even though we took great care to include a variety of both national and international manfluencers, many of which are discussed in Bates (2020). Future research may get around this problem by letting participants freely write which manfluencers they follow. Nonetheless, this approach may result in problems in identifying and classifying each influencer.

Another reason for the skewness in the manfluencer variable may be that the sample was not specifically targeting young men and many manfluencers target a young audience (Baker et al., 2024; Haslop et al., 2024). Hence, most of the older participants were unlikely to follow the listed manfluencers. Moreover, even though misogynistic attitudes are prevalent in Sweden this does not mean that men follow

manfluencers on a regular basis. The main reason as to why we wanted to include a variation in age was to show that the effects in fact differ between younger and older men, which is in line with research showing that younger men perceive increased gender equality as more threatening than older men (Off et al., 2022).

In a large-scale survey with Swedish youth, it has also been shown that boys and young men believe that gender equality is an issue that has gone too far and that it should not be prioritized. Interestingly, the opposite is true for girls and young women, who claim that gender equality is one of the most important issues. In fact, the share of girls and young women who believe gender equality was important has increased during the last years, which points to a growing polarization of gender- and equality related attitudes among the young (Ungdomsbarometern, 2022). We believe this is important since it indicates that gender polarization is increasing and not decreasing, at least in a Swedish context, which could lead to increased intergroup tensions and more violence against women. Hence this is a development in need of political attention.

Another limitation of our research has to do with the fact that misogyny is not straightforward to measure. We used three different indicators of misogynistic attitudes in the three studies, focusing on dehumanization, mistrust of women, or misogynistic attitudes more generally. The aim was to include various aspects of misogyny, but these specific indicators may also have different consequences. Dehumanization is an important precursor to inflict violence. Research on moral disengagement show that people may engage in cognitive maneuvers so that they can “safely” proceed with unethical behaviors without self-blame when engaging in dehumanization (Bandura, 1999). For instance, harming others feels justified when the others are dehumanized, and when violence is portrayed as morally justified to reach a higher goal.

That women are deceitful, and that their aim is to control men by manipulation and withholding sex, is a common narrative within the manosphere and presented by manfluencers (Baker et al., 2024). In relation to the #metoo movement, some subgroups of the manosphere advocated the conspiracy idea that this was an attempt made by women and feminists to “bring men down” (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023). In Study 2, we found that being exposed to content threatening men as a social group (for instance that women are taking on more positions of power in society) increased mistrust of women among young men. Young men who were exposed to the threatening stimuli were more likely to believe that sexual harassment cases were falsely made up by women, compared to those not exposed to this material. This effect was magnified among young men who also perceived that they had previously been rejected by women.

In Study 3, we used a broader and more general measure of misogynistic attitudes (Rottweiler & Gill, 2020). This measure for example included items about women using men for their own gain, that women manipulate men using their sexuality and that many women are false for example. All items are based on ideas connected to the narrative within the manosphere. However, they are also in line with hostile sexism, which highlights the difficulty to separate misogyny from sexism.

A definition of misogyny, put forth by Manne (2018), is that misogyny is “a political phenomenon whose purpose is to police and enforce women’s subordination and to uphold male dominance” (p. 33). This definition highlights the political aspect, which is very important since it does not “only” affect individual women but aims to actively subjugate women as a social group (Hoffman et al., 2020). This way of operationalizing misogyny also points to the importance of including misogyny in the radicalization literature and further scrutinize the mechanisms of men’s misogynistic radicalization (Renström & Bäck, 2024). This definition is quite different to the more common way to see misogyny as an individual attitude encompassing hatred and/or hostility towards women in general. Regardless of how misogyny is conceptualized, greater efforts are required to better understand the causes and consequences both for individuals and for society.

It is also important here to note that our measures of perceived rejection were inspired by the “unwanted celibacy” scale (Grunau et al., 2022) and the items tap into subjective perceptions of being rejected. Such experiences may vary greatly between different individuals and may also have different impacts on the individual. For instance, people vary in how sensitive they are to rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996) and previous research shows that individuals experiencing rejection and who are highly sensitive to rejection show increased tendencies to comply with radical groups (Bäck et al., 2018; Renström et al., 2020). While we did not measure rejection sensitivity, it seems plausible that men who report a high level of such rejection may be more sensitive and may then also react more strongly to experiences of rejection.

Finally, an important aspect to discuss regarding the present research is ethics. All materials were approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. While the stimulus material was formulated to plausibly be considered as coming from a manfluencer, the content was not particularly extreme and was likely less extreme compared to what any given individual user would encounter daily online on the manosphere. For instance, we took care that the content in Study 2 was not false but simply highlighted a fact about women’s liberation and societal status that some men could perceive as uncomfortable. In Study 3, the material was

re-phrased to represent more of a political opinion. Some specific steps were taken to ensure ethical concerns. First, in the introductory text for the studies, we included a sentence informing participants that some content in the study may be provocative. Second, we gave them our contact information and informed the participants that they could contact us if they experienced discomfort. Participants were also debriefed after the study.

## Practice Implications

The results found here provide important practice implications. Taken together our studies indicate the problematic impact that manfluencers have on young men. While it has been suggested that young men turn to the manosphere in search of support for a troubled love life, the effect that these manfluencers have stands in stark contrast to the opportunities to find a partner. This seems especially true given that attitudes toward gender equality seem to become increasingly polarized among young women and men. While women are becoming increasingly aware, and less accepting of things like emotional labor and men’s use of strategic incompetence, the manosphere drives young men in the opposite direction, encouraging male oppression. Thus, manfluencers and the content they provide are likely to add to the growing divide between young women and men in equality related matters, creating a negative spiral. This increasing divide is demanding swift political attention as it may lead to increased violence against women.

Our research has focused on younger *men*, but research also shows that young *boys* follow and are inspired by misogynistic influencers such as Andrew Tate, which is likely to have consequences for how they come to treat girls and women (Haslop et al., 2024; Wescott et al., 2024). While society has a major responsibility for countering such negative influences, practitioners working with young people should be made aware of the impact these manfluencers have. Importantly, young men must learn to face rejection from women and accept that instead of seeking out misogyny as a remedy. Policy makers should provide educational materials based in this kind of research for teachers and parents, making those who can influence younger men’s attitudes on gender-related issues more aware of the potential consequences of following manfluencers on social media.

Our study complements recent research showing that user algorithms provide young boys’ accounts with misogynistic (and right-wing) content alarmingly quickly. This was true even when the user did not engage or search for manosphere related content, and even more so when they did (Baker et al., 2024). This suggests that policymakers should make further efforts to regulate how social media companies use algorithms to provide content to users.

## Conclusion

The present research aimed to provide a better understanding of the effect that manfluencers have on young men's attitudes towards women and the processes behind the increased gender related polarization observed. The results show that manfluencers seem to impact men's views of women negatively. This was particularly true for men who perceived to have been rejected by women, indicating that men perceiving themselves in a vulnerable position seem to believe the rhetoric from some manfluencers that feminism and the advancement of women's rights are to blame for their troubles, which may lead to further intergroup animosity and potentially violence. Overall, these findings contribute to a better understanding of how manfluencers who present a narrative of feminism as threatening to men's identities and status may influence the formation of hostile attitudes towards women and progress toward gender equality among young men.

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## Declarations

**Conflicts of interest** We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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