

Centre for Digital Trust and Security

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Project Title:

"You didn't read yourself into this, you felt it": Assessing the use of informal counterspeech in support-focused manosphere subreddits

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Project overview:

This pilot project sought to understand informal, grassroots instances of counterspeech in the manosphere through an analysis of text-based discussion posts in two online forums. Our research examined two grassroots Reddit communities (r/ExRedPill and r/IncelExit) that serve as potential exit pathways from male supremacist spaces (Czerwinsky, 2023; Gheorghe & Yuzva Clement, 2023; Thorburn, 2023). Existing alongside long-standing misogynist incel Reddit communities, these support-focused spaces are important sites of informal counter-speech, mirroring the familiar dynamics and anonymity of manosphere spaces while fostering support and recovery.

Drawing on Lee's (2019, 2020) work tracing uses of informal counter-messaging for ideological extremism, we sought to challenge top-down deradicalisation efforts by examining how naturally occurring peer-driven interactions can drive disengagement from extremism. Our aim was to better understand how informal counter-speech operates at the micro-level, particularly by those who are not part of official government and policing security efforts.

Building on findings from Czerwinsky's recently completed doctoral work, this project examined user-led interactions in a sample of 50 threads, 25 from r/IncelExit and 25 from r/ExRedPill. Page's (2018) mediated narrative analysis revealed how narratives and personal experiences are discussed, countered, and reframed by former, exiting, and non-manosphere users.

Specifically, this pilot study addressed two research questions:

1. How is informal counterspeech constructed in support-focused manosphere communities, and what parts of users' shared stories do they focus on?
2. What strategies do former and non-manosphere users employ in their replies to current and exiting users?

The results illuminate how online spaces can foster bottom-up approaches to countering harmful ideologies, highlighting the importance of citizen-led initiatives to build resilience, resistance, and trust through everyday conversations on public online platforms.

Key findings:

Organic, grassroots approaches to counterspeech by both former and non-manosphere users of r/IncelExit and r/ExRedPill often centre distinct parts of posts, including (1) the belief systems and ideologies shaping and motivating participation in manosphere spaces; (2) the weaponisation of subjective experiences with victimisation, rejection, and harm; and (3) identity-based motivations and emotional impacts of community involvement.

Approaches to informal counterspeech by former and non-manosphere users encompassed six main tactics, each of which were used to respond to certain parts of users' posts within support-focused spaces. These included:

- (1) *Emotional appeals* highlighting shared lived experiences (such as discrimination, rejection, bullying, suicidal ideation, poor mental health, or harm) and attempting to form bonds with community members in discussion threads. Additionally, some former and non-manosphere users offered non-critical validation of subjective life circumstances and negative experiences, attempting to provide avenues for understanding and belonging beyond manosphere communities.
- (2) *Identity-based appeals* that highlighted similar characteristics shared with community members (including race, ethnicity, disability, neurodiversity, queerness, political beliefs, and identifying as former users of manosphere spaces). Identity-based appeals helped some users adopt elements of cultural fluency in their responses, evident in certain phrasing and content associated with lived experiences and different identities.
- (3) *Fact-checking and debunking*, most commonly used to counter the (mis)use of scientific evidence and challenge pseudoscience in community spaces.
- (4) *Practical advice* that aimed to address users' questions or needs, often taking the form of suggesting concrete, tangible steps towards self-improvement and limiting further harmful behaviour (both to the self and others)
- (5) *Counternarratives* that aimed to unpick male supremacist ideologies and community theories and concepts. Much of the use of counternarratives was related to gender essentialist statements and beliefs, including countering the 'logic' often underpinning discussions in manosphere spaces.
- (6) *Alternative narratives* that provided users with additional ways of making sense of subjective experiences and identities outside of the manosphere. This incorporated disrupting clear narratives connecting victimhood and male supremacism, instead encouraging users to rationalise rejection, hurt, and harm through structural issues (i.e. racism, ableism, prejudice) or introspection and agency.

A third finding centres how these approaches impacted conversations with current and exiting members of manosphere communities, prompting either repeated engagement in replies or stymying opportunities for additional support:

- (1) *Approaches that matched the concerns outlined in posts prompted further engagement with original posters (OPs)*. Replies that directly matched key concerns in OPs' posts often prompted additional opportunities for discussion, alongside opening up new avenues for informal counterspeech within further replies. Conversely, a mis-match between posters' needs and the tone, language, or content in replies resulted in aggression, dog-piling, or limiting further engagement. For instance, responses to a user's request for practical advice and emotional support that used fact-checking or counternarratives may not prompt further engagement in replies, as posters may not be ready to discuss their beliefs or have them challenged at this stage.
- (2) *Signals of cultural fluency (or a lack thereof) influenced the credibility of responses from former and non-manosphere users, which can impact further engagement with OPs*. Demonstrating an awareness of community language and concepts within responses can help build trust in the message being delivered. Additionally, demonstrating a willingness to learn and an acceptance of knowledge gaps (particularly from non-manosphere users) helped build opportunities for productive communication in replies. Conversely,

approaches that challenged community members' own understandings of cultural concepts (such as assertions by non-manosphere users around the *true* definitions of theories or ideologies in community spaces) were met with hostility and a lack of further engagement from original posters.

- (3) *Empathy – both non-judgmental and critical – is important for prompting further engagement within support-focused spaces.* Meeting OPs with empathy often prompted additional engagement in replies, particularly when former or non-manosphere users replied without judgment and validated the subjective experiences that shaped users' involvement in manosphere spaces. Additionally, some instances of critical empathy – whereby users validated OPs' experiences while critiquing or challenging the weaponisation of those experiences to legitimise harming others – allowed for additional discussion within replies from OPs. However, the use of empathy within support-focused spaces is uneven, as each user has different capacities for support, validation, and critique.

The strategies employed by former and non-manosphere users also map on to existing research around persuasive communication and identity-based mis- and disinformation (Kurata, 2024; Oyserman & Dawson, 2020; Schwarz & Jalbert, 2020), demonstrating evidence for existing theoretical approaches to counterspeech. Additionally, this research indicates the importance of observing how certain strategies can impact the direction of conversations, adding further knowledge to what shapes successes in existing approaches to counterspeech interventions for manosphere involvement.

Outputs to date:

Research dissemination and presentations:

- A. Czerwinsky. (2025). *"Ideologies, Ascension, and Narrative Shifts: Shared Stories of Exiting the Incelosphere"*. Presentation to be given to the Home Office's RICU Knowledge Hub in September.
- A. Czerwinsky. (2025). *"You didn't read yourself into this, you felt it": Assessing the use of informal counterspeech in support-focused manosphere subreddits.* Accepted for presentation at EuroCrim 2025 in Athens, Greece in September.

Works in progress:

- Blog posts for VOX-Pol and GNET outlining key findings, alongside the need to incorporate organic forms of online counterspeech to shape and complement top-down approaches to intervention.
- Manuscripts outlining key findings and areas for future research, to be written and submitted in the fall of 2025.

Impact:

- Included in written evidence to the Home Affairs Committee's Inquiry, *Combating new forms of extremism* (forthcoming) and the Women and Equalities Commission's Inquiry, *Misogyny: the manosphere and online content* (MIS0050).
- Featured in two episodes of the International Risk Podcast in 2025 ("*Male Supremacism and Misogynist Extremism with Allysa Czerwinsky*" [Ep. 230], and "*The growing role of AI within the Manosphere with Dr. Allysa Czerwinsky*" [Ep. 249]).

Were all planned outcomes achieved?
If not, how did you mitigate non-achievement?

Due to difficulties with securing a work contract and visa stipulations, research for this project began at the end of March 2025, leaving four months for part-time work on data collection, analysis, and dissemination. Despite this, the majority of outcomes were met, and additional dissemination work will be undertaken outside of this project's timeline.

At its core, this project acted as a pilot study exploring a small sample of threads within two support-focused forums to better understand the role organic counterspeech efforts can play in supporting disengagement. Findings indicate a promising – yet underresearched – area for manosphere-focused work, and present an important use-case for additional research.

Planned activities post-project:

- Apply for a larger call for funding in September of 2025 through the Network Plus for Analytical Behavioural Science for Security and Defence (NABS+), centring on research for understanding and mitigating risks to security and defence.
- Collaborate with members of CREST, VOX-Pol, and IRMS to find parallels between other forms of counterspeech and existing tactics observed within manosphere forums.
- Continue efforts for results dissemination, including submitting to conferences (STR 2026, TASM 2026, AVERT 2026, and BASS 2026, among others).
- Draft policy report with assistance of Policy@Manchester to share with key stakeholders and other academics.
- Explore opportunities for visual and audio approaches to counterspeech, aligning with shifting approaches to radicalisation through TikTok and alt-tech platforms.