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Digital Masculinities in Crisis: Understanding Virtual Pathways to Male Extremism Across Communities

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Abstract

This paper introduces the Digital Masculinity Radicalisation Pathway (DMRP) framework to understand how digital spaces amplify threatened masculinity towards extremism. We explore how online environments reshape masculine identities by conducting a comparative analysis of 215 young men from ethnic majority and Muslim minority backgrounds in Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, and the UK. We observe support for a distinct Digital Masculinity Crisis driven by economic insecurity, cultural shifts, and digital dynamics (accelerated threats, new status hierarchies, blurred boundaries, and transnational grievance). Findings show algorithms and influencers amplify insecurities and normalise extremism. The DMRP model highlights digital spaces as both refuges and radicalising forces. Examining intersections of race, religion, and class with digital masculinity, we offer insights for sociological theory on gender, technology, and extremism. This research informs policy and practice, addressing online radicalisation by providing a novel understanding of virtual pathways to male extremism across diverse communities.

Keywords

digital masculinity crisis, online radicalisation, echo chambers, social media algorithms, comparative analysis, intersectionality

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Introduction

Digitalisation has fundamentally altered identity construction, and among these, masculinity has undergone significant metamorphoses online, with digital spaces emerging as crucial arenas for negotiating and expressing male identity (Godec et al. 2020). The interplay between masculinity, extremist ideologies, and online radicalisation is an urgent concern for both researchers and policymakers (Ging 2019; Massanari 2017; Baele et al. 2021). Concurrently, the "manosphere", online communities focusing on men's rights and anti-feminism, provides platforms for articulating grievances about perceived threats to traditional masculinity and cultivating new masculine identities (Evans and Riley 2022; Ging 2019; Marwick and Caplan 2018). These digital spaces amplify existing anxieties about masculinity and foster new, often more extreme, conceptions of manhood in the twenty-first century. Digital platforms, especially social media, amplify extremist ideologies and facilitate radicalisation (Braddock et al. 2024; Gallacher, Heerdink, and Hewstone 2021; Zhang and Davis 2024). While previous research has explored online radicalisation and men's rights activism, there remains a scarcity of comprehensive frameworks that can explain these processes from a comparative, interactive and intersectional perspective.

This paper introduces the Digital Masculinity Radicalisation Pathway (DMRP), a process model explaining how online spaces amplify and reshape threatened masculinity, fostering radical male identities. The DMRP serves as a structured process model that delineates a step-by-step pathway from the initial perception of threatened masculinity to the ultimate adoption of extremist ideologies. In this study, we applied this model as our primary analytical framework to organise our findings and illustrate the distinct stages of this process. Crucially, we apply this framework via comparative analysis of young ethnic majority and Muslim minority men (18–25) in Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, and the UK. Examining these distinct groups, shaped by differing socio-political contexts and marginalisation experiences, this study investigates how common digital dynamics intersect with varying identity factors to create pathways towards gendered extremism. Our analysis is not a simple comparison between two equivalent groups but rather an intersectional inquiry into how structurally distinct positions, such as racialised surveillance versus perceived status decline, interact with similar digital affordances. This comparative lens enables a deeper understanding of shared patterns and divergent pathways within the 'Digital Masculinity Crisis', addressing calls for intersectional analyses (Bergmann 2020; Crosset, Tanner, and Campana 2019). While acknowledging distinct extremist ideologies, this study focuses on a shared underlying mechanism: the online mobilisation and performance of aggrieved or threatened masculinity. Our framework examines how online environments provide fertile ground for diverse extremist groups to leverage anxieties of masculinity, despite differing ideologies and grievances.

The DMRP model systematically builds upon extant literature concerning masculinity and extremism, recognising threats to identity as drivers (Kimmel 2017; Mudde 2019); online radicalisation, acknowledging gender's importance (Pearson 2016; Conway 2016; Ralph-Morrow 2022); and intersectionality, where experiences are

shaped by race, class, religion, and nationality (Bergmann 2020; Crosset, Tanner, and Campana 2019). Our research offers several key contributions. By proposing a concept of the Digital Masculinity Crisis, we provide a unique lens on threatened masculinity online, capturing how digital technologies reshape this phenomenon. The DMRP model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding online radicalisation through masculinity, and by delineating the stages from threatened masculinity to extremism, it offers valuable insights for counter-extremism researchers and practitioners. Thirdly, this DMRP model advances our understanding of the intersections between technology and ideology by examining how platform dynamics, algorithms, and online subcultures contribute to the Digital Masculinity Crisis.

Drawing on rich qualitative data from interviews (Norway, Denmark, Netherlands, UK), this paper comparatively examines masculinity, extremist influences, and online radicalisation processes among ethnic majority and Muslim minority men. Our findings reveal how social media platforms and online communities exacerbate male disenfranchisement, provide grievance echo chambers, and offer radical solutions to masculinity threats, manifesting differently based on participants' socio-structural positions. We commence by reviewing relevant literature and theory, then outline the sociopolitical contexts for our comparative groups and our methodology. The findings section presents key themes organised by the DMRP model, analysed comparatively. The discussion explores theoretical and practical implications within the context of gender, extremism, and digital media research. We conclude by summarising contributions and suggesting future study directions. This study offers several significant contributions. First, by proposing a conceptualisation of the Digital Masculinity Crisis, it provides a unique lens on how engagement with digital technologies can act to transform anxieties around masculinity. Second, the DMRP model furnishes a comprehensive, structured framework for understanding online radicalisation via masculinity, delineating processes by which individuals move from experiences of threatened masculinity to engagement in extremism. Third, this paper advances understanding of the intersections between technology and ideology by examining how platform dynamics, algorithms, and online subcultures contribute to the Digital Masculinity Crisis. By offering a more complex view of how digital spaces shape contemporary masculinities and contribute to radicalisation, this research aims to inform more effective strategies for understanding and countering online extremism and promoting positive articulations of digital masculinities, as well as contributing to broader sociological theory on gender, technology, and extremism.

Theoretical Development

The link between masculinity and extremism has recently gained increasing scholarly attention, often around "threatened masculinity" (Kimmel 2017; Mudde 2019). Such a framework examines how perceived challenges to traditional male roles, stemming from shifting gender norms and economic restructuring (Duina and Carson 2020), can drive men towards extremist beliefs. Mudde (2019) explores how far-right populist movements exploit masculine insecurity, framing their ideologies as defending

traditional masculinity against feminism, immigration, and progressive policies. Such an argument is designed to resonate with men feeling status decline, to offer purpose and belonging.

However, masculinity mobilisation extends beyond the far-right. Bergmann (2020) uses an intersectional approach, examining how race, class, and nationality interact with gender to shape political attitudes, including extremism. He argues men from minority communities might be drawn to hyper-masculine values, perhaps opposing perceived Western decadence or responding to marginalisation. Regehr (2022) discusses how online communities provide belonging for marginalised men, whilst scholarship on racialised masculinities, such as that by Asenbaum (2023), offers a more granular understanding of how race and ethnicity are deeply embedded in the construction of masculine identity online.

Digital technologies have intensely impacted masculinity's construction, performance, and challenge. Ging (2019) examines how online spaces have facilitated anti-feminist ideologies and new masculinities, arguing the "manosphere" signifies a shift in men's rights activism, with platforms enabling rapid transnational idea dissemination. Ging highlights the manosphere as a loose coalition (MRAs, pickup artists, Incels, etc.) united by opposing feminism and believing in men's subordination. Shared lexicons and worldviews foster collective identity. Marwick and Caplan (2018) explore the manosphere's linguistic features, focusing on "misandry" as a unifying framework, reframing gender equality debates and positioning men as victims of feminism. This victimhood narrative is crucial to understanding how online spaces amplify grievances and radicalise men (Pearson 2019, 2024). Scholarship on digital labour, such as by Duffy (2016), further illuminates how platforms create new forms of value and status, which can be co-opted for the performance of masculine identities.

Studies show online communities foster radicalisation via identity formation and ideological reinforcement. Törnberg and Törnberg (2024) describe how spaces such as Stormfront facilitate "discursive community formation" through shared language, strengthening political identities and driving polarisation. Bliuc et al. (2019) show intergroup conflict can reinvigorate online far-right communities. Research increasingly recognises gender's role in online radicalisation. Pearson (2016) notes extremist groups use gendered narratives appealing to traditional masculinity and femininity: jihadist groups, for example, emphasise heroism and brotherhood, while far-right groups use hypermasculine forms of manhood in association with the protection of the white race, particularly women (2023). Conway (2016) provides an overview, stressing online spaces accelerate radicalisation but rarely operate isolated from offline factors, necessitating understanding online radicalisation within a broader ecosystem.

Social media's technological affordances amplify extremist views. Massanari (2017) examines how Reddit's algorithm and structure contributed to toxic techno cultures, including aggrieved masculinity, arguing platform design rewarding popularity creates echo chambers reinforcing extremist viewpoints. Online spaces effectively create echo chambers amplifying grievances (Poole, Giraud, and Quincey 2021; Zhang and Davis 2024). Leidig (2023) examined the 'trad-wife' movement online, considering influencers' role in shaping gender perceptions and mainstreaming far-right content.

An intersectional approach has gained traction, recognising how identities shape vulnerability (Crosset, Tanner, and Campana 2019). Research has increasingly made the case that understanding online extremism and radicalisation requires consideration of how gender, race, class, and religion intersect (Segers, Gelashvili, and Gagnon 2024). This perspective is relevant to the manosphere, where Ging (2017) shows misogyny often blends with racism and xenophobia. Intersectionality allows a more comprehensive view of how marginalisation and privilege interact in online extremism. Baele et al. (2021) applied this approach to incel communities, showing how misogyny combines with racism and classism, making it imperative to consider multiple identities when analysing online extremist communities.

Building on these strands, we propose the "Digital Masculinity Crisis" concept to describe threatened masculinity's unique dynamics online. We use "crisis" cautiously, acknowledging critiques viewing masculinity not as monolithic but as historically unstable (Beasley 2005; Connell 2005). The use of "crisis" is not designed here to reinforce problematic notions of a decline of traditional masculinity, but in recognition that such narratives seem to be increasingly resonant among young men, including in Northern European societies; our use of the term is designed to reflect this, rather than as a comment on its veracity. Our concept highlights how digital affordances (algorithmic amplification, anonymity, transnational communities) intensify and reshape long-standing anxieties around masculine status, creating specific radicalisation pathways. While online and offline borders are porous (Whittaker 2022), online masculinity crises involve distinct processes: amplification and reshaping of traditional masculinity via digital technologies, creating new hostile masculinity patterns. The Digital Masculinity Crisis represents a qualitative shift beyond translating offline anxieties. Online platforms provide arenas for traditional grievances but also foster new masculine identities tied to digital culture. Key features include accelerated and intensified perceived threats via constant online exposure, the emergence of new digital status hierarchies and masculine capital (e.g., follower counts, debate dominance, and trolling), blurred online and offline boundaries, with digital performance shaping real-world attitudes, and the formation of transnational men's communities. These patterns intersect with radicalisation processes. Acceleration and intensification of masculinity, online capital building, blurred boundaries, and transnational communities can strengthen support for violent beliefs or action. The DMRP model provides a framework for understanding how this crisis unfolds, potentially leading men towards radicalisation.

Methods

The Horizon 2020 DRIVE project, a 42-month inquiry, explores the relationships between social exclusion, identity formation, and potential gravitation towards extremist ideologies among Muslim minorities and ethnic majorities in four advanced industrial societies: the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, and the United Kingdom. For this paper, we focus primarily on the qualitative data from semi-structured interviews ($n = 415$, with two removed from the final study data sample of 417 due to duplication),

with attention given to the 215 interviews conducted with young people aged 18–25, equally divided between Muslim minorities and (predominantly white) nationalist-identifying ethnic majorities. This comparative approach was chosen because contrasting ethnic majority men with Muslim minority men allows for a robust, yet critical examination of how similar digital dynamics intersect with vastly different experiences of structural positioning, marginalisation (e.g., perceived status loss vs. systemic racism and surveillance), and relationships to national identity within contemporary European discourses on extremism. Analysing these two groups specifically illuminates how shared pressures related to masculinity are uniquely mediated by race, religion, and socio-political context, yielding divergent pathways and experiences within the broader Digital Masculinity Crisis.

The study employed rigorous data collection and analysis protocols, with interviews conducted across major metropolitan centres and peripheral regions to ensure comprehensive representation. The recruitment process involved a mixed-method approach, leveraging both community networks and online outreach to access our target cohorts. The data collection focused on participants lived experiences and perceptions, and interviews were conducted face to face or via secure online platforms, lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. Our semi-structured interview guide explored their online activities, social identities, and political views and allowed for the careful exploration of their views on masculinity and extremism without direct probing. A detailed participant characteristics table is provided below to highlight the demographics, including the class status of the respondents. Our analysis utilised Atlas.ti software for systematic coding and interpretation, following established grounded theory approaches. All research adhered to strict ethical protocols, including informed consent, confidentiality assurances, and data protection measures. Given the sensitive nature of extremism, participants' potential proximity to radical ideologies or engagement with specific online spaces was explored cautiously through open-ended questions about their online activities, social identities, and political views, rather than direct probing for extremist affiliation. Ideological leanings or engagement levels mentioned in the analysis were primarily based on participants' self-descriptions and expressed views during interviews, acknowledging the limitation that such analysis relies on self-reporting and interpretation. The sampling aimed to capture a diverse spectrum of experiences related to digital masculinity, not exclusively individuals formally identifying with or belonging to extremist movements. The study drew upon interviews with 215 young people aged 18–25 across the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, and the United Kingdom, selected from a larger pool of 415 total interviews conducted for the DRIVE project. This youth cohort was intentionally balanced, comprising approximately equal numbers of participants identifying as Muslim minorities and participants identifying with nationalist perspectives from the ethnic majority. See Table 1 for further details on the sample.

Understanding the Digital Masculinity Crisis requires acknowledging the distinct sociopolitical contexts shaping the lives of young men in the studied European nations. For ethnic majority men, particularly those from working-class backgrounds, grievances often intersect with narratives of national decline, economic restructuring

Table 1. Participant characteristics: Young people interviews

	Ethnic majority/Nationalist	Muslim minority/Islam	Total (*N* = 215)
Age range	18–25 years	18–25 years	—
Country			
Denmark	15	32	47
Netherlands	11	21	32
Norway	11	29	40
United Kingdom	18	39	57
Gender			
Male	45	121	166
Female	10	54	64

(e.g., deindustrialisation), cultural shifts perceived as challenging traditional gender roles, and a sense of losing status relative to both women and minority groups (Kimmel 2017; Mudde 2019). Their engagement with online spaces may reflect anxieties about perceived marginalisation and displacement within their own national context, sometimes aligning with populist or far-right narratives (Bergmann 2020). Conversely, young Muslim minority men navigate a different set of structural realities. Their experiences are often shaped in significant ways by legacies of colonialism, contemporary systemic racism, pervasive Islamophobia amplified in political and media discourses, heightened state surveillance (e.g., counter-terrorism measures such as the Prevent strategy in the UK or similar initiatives elsewhere), securitisation frameworks that frame them as inherently suspect, and specific forms of socio-economic exclusion, including discrimination in employment and housing. For this group, online spaces can be vital sites for community building and identity negotiation, balancing heritage cultures, religious identity, and life in Western societies, but also arenas where experiences of marginalisation, alienation from mainstream society, and geopolitical grievances are articulated and potentially amplified (Pearson 2016). Recognising these different structural starting points is crucial for interpreting the comparative findings that follow.

Findings

Our extensive analysis reveals a range of themes that illuminate the intricate processes underpinning the Digital Masculinity Crisis and the concomitant phenomenon of online radicalisation. These thematic strands, organised in accordance with the stages delineated in the Digital Masculinity Radicalisation Pathway (DMRP) model, offer understandings of the labyrinthine ways in which men experience and navigate perceived threats to their masculine identity within the digital sphere. Throughout the Findings, participant quotes are identified by their group membership (e.g., "ethnic majority participant", "Muslim minority participant") and nationality where relevant, to ensure clarity in the comparative analysis. While striving for balance, the illustrative

quotes presented may reflect thematic frequencies in the data; however, the analysis addresses key themes emerging across both cohorts.

Perception of Threats to Masculine Identity

Our research has unearthed an intricate web of perceived threats to masculine identity, intricately interweaving economic insecurity, cultural metamorphosis, and intersectional experiences. For many ethnic majority participants, particularly those of a younger demographic and those hailing from working-class backgrounds, deep-seated apprehensions regarding economic instability and its deleterious impact on their sense of masculinity were articulated. The perceived inability to fulfil traditional male provider roles was frequently cited as a wellspring of anxiety and frustration, reflecting the enduring influence of traditional masculine ideals centred around economic provision, often linked to feelings of national or status decline within their specific contexts.

This sentiment was poignantly articulated by an ethnic majority Danish participant, who opined, "It's becoming harder and harder for men to be the breadwinners. Jobs are scarce, and women are competing for the same positions. It makes you feel less of a man when you can't provide for your family." This perspective found resonance in the words of an ethnic majority Dutch participant, who observed, "The economy is changing, and traditional male jobs are disappearing. It's like we're becoming obsolete. Online, you see guys talking about this all the time, sharing stories about losing jobs to automation or outsourcing." A third quote from one young ethnic majority British participant echoed this link between economic insecurity and masculinity: "I was unemployed for two years. And it's just terrible to be unemployed. I mean, it's just, as a man, the feeling that you get from being unemployed and just not doing anything is just degrading, so to speak. It's worse, a man being unemployed."

In contrast, for Muslim minority participants, economic anxieties were frequently filtered through the lens of systemic discrimination, directly impacting their ability to secure employment commensurate with their aspirations or qualifications, irrespective of traditional provider roles. As one Dutch participant of Muslim background articulated, the challenge was often compounded by prejudice: "As a [Dutch] Muslim man, it's not just about finding a job; it's about overcoming stereotypes. Sometimes I feel I have to work twice as hard just to be considered equal." Structural barriers such as racism and Islamophobia, outlined in our contextual discussion, directly shape economic insecurity for this group, adding a layer distinct from the competition-focused anxieties voiced by some ethnic majority men.

These economic anxieties are further compounded by perceived cultural shifts and challenges to traditional gender roles, experienced differently by each group. Ethnic majority participants frequently alluded to feeling threatened by evolving cultural norms, expressing a palpable sense of confusion and resentment towards what they perceived as a devaluation of traditional masculinity in contemporary society. An ethnic majority Norwegian participant encapsulated this frustration, stating, "Everything is about equality now, but it feels like men are being pushed aside. You can't even

compliment a woman without being called sexist. It's confusing, and online forums are full of guys feeling the same way." For Muslim minority participants, navigating cultural shifts often involved managing tensions between familial and community expectations and perceived Western norms. As one British Muslim minority participant stated, "We're caught between two worlds. Our parents expect us to be traditional men, but society tells us that's toxic. It's confusing." This sense of defensiveness and perceived victimisation in response to feminist critiques of traditional masculinity was further elucidated by an ethnic majority British participant, who shared, "There's this constant message that traditional masculinity is toxic. It's like we're being told that everything about being a man is wrong. You go online, and you find all these communities of men who are fed up with it." The digital sphere appears to function as a space where these feelings can be validated and amplified, creating a feedback loop of resentment and confusion for both groups, albeit rooted in different primary grievances.

Adding an additional layer of intricacy to these perceptions of threatened masculinity are the intersections of race and nationality. Our data revealed that white ethnic majority participants often expressed feelings of being unfairly maligned or disadvantaged due to their cultural identity. This intersectionality of threats was vividly illustrated by an ethnic majority British participant, who stated, "It's not just about being a man anymore; it's about being a white man. You're made to feel guilty for everything. Online, you find others who understand this struggle." Conversely, a Muslim minority participant (a young man of Moroccan descent in the Netherlands) shared a divergent perspective on intersectional challenges rooted in migration background and cultural difference: "As an immigrant, you're caught between two worlds. You're not 'man enough' for your traditional culture, but you're seen as too aggressive or patriarchal in Dutch society. Online spaces for guys like me are full of this tension."

These diverse accounts point out the vital role of considering how multiple identity factors and distinct structural positions interact to shape men's experiences of threatened masculinity and their engagement with online communities. The economic insecurities, cultural shifts, and racial dynamics coalesce in the digital space, creating a powerful blend of anxiety, resentment, and confusion. As men navigate these tumultuous waters, online communities can serve as both a refuge and an echo chamber, amplifying grievances and potentially propelling individuals towards more extreme viewpoints, following pathways shaped by their specific social locations.

Echo Chambers and Reinforcement of Grievances

Our research has uncovered an interaction between online spaces and evolving conceptions of masculinity, revealing how these digital environments serve as both amplifiers of existing grievances and incubators of new masculine identities. A significant number of participants described a process of increasing immersion in online communities that not only validated and intensified their feelings of threatened masculinity but reshaped their understanding of what it means to be a man in the digital age.

The echo chamber effect of these online spaces was vividly illustrated by an ethnic majority Danish participant, who observed, "Once you start engaging with content about how men are being sidelined, the algorithms just feed you more and more of it. It's like you're in this bubble where everyone agrees that masculinity is under attack." This sentiment was echoed by an ethnic majority British participant, who shared his experience: "I joined a few men's rights forums, and suddenly my whole feed was full of stories about false accusations, unfair divorce settlements, and how society is rigged against men. It makes you feel like you're constantly under threat." For Muslim minority participants, echo chambers could similarly reinforce grievances, but often centred on experiences of discrimination, Islamophobia, or geopolitical conflicts involving Muslim populations. As one Dutch Muslim minority participant stated, "Online, you find others who understand the struggle of being a Muslim man in the West. But sometimes it feels like we're just reinforcing each other's frustrations." These accounts illustrate how social media algorithms and community dynamics can create self-reinforcing cycles of grievance, potentially accelerating the radicalisation process along different thematic lines.

However, the impact of these online spaces extends beyond merely amplifying existing threats. Our research revealed they also foster the creation of new masculine identities rooted in digital culture. This aspect of the Digital Masculinity Crisis framework was eloquently articulated by one ethnic majority British participant, who described an emerging online subculture often associated with the manosphere: "There's this whole online subculture of being an 'alpha male'. It's not just about traditional stuff like being strong or providing. It's about how many followers you have, how you dominate in online debates, and how you 'redpill' others. It's a new kind of masculinity." This transformation of masculine identity in digital spaces was further elaborated by an ethnic majority Danish participant, who shared, "In these online spaces, being a 'real man' is tied to how well you understand and spread certain ideas. It's like a competition to see who can be the most 'based' or 'redpilled'. Your masculinity is measured by how much you reject mainstream 'blue-pilled' thinking." While such specific terminology might be less prevalent in Muslim minority online spaces encountered in this study, similar dynamics of achieving status through demonstrating ideological commitment were observed. These narratives reveal that online spaces are not merely reflecting offline conceptions of masculinity but actively providing the means for shaping new forms of masculine identity specifically tied to digital cultural capital and ideological positions. The echo chambers that reinforce grievances about threatened masculinity also serve as crucibles for these new identities, creating a feedback loop that can potentially drive individuals towards more extreme viewpoints.

Such processes are also inherently linked to the growth of online influencers, particularly those on the reactionary right, who often produce content on themes linked to crises of masculinity (Rothut et al. 2024). As one ethnic majority Norwegian shared, they felt such influencers gain support because they offer explanations of societal trends that speak to traditional forms of masculinity: "Jordan Peterson, he said that the woman must be tamed... Because women say it themselves, a woman doesn't really want to be married to a man who earns less than her." The sentiment was echoed by other

interviewees, with one ethnic majority British individual suggesting that influencers gain support because they talk directly to issues being faced by young men and offer a means of articulating their concerns: "Andrew Tate is getting famous because there is a mental aspect to it. I think that men are stronger than women. He is getting the attention because he's talking about the issue. More people are going to listen to him because they want somebody to speak for them". The links between the popularity of such influencers and a crisis of masculinity were referred to by several interviewees, with one ethnic majority Norwegian suggesting that such influencers have appeal "because there are a lot of young men who are struggling today. For different reasons… men are somewhat overlooked because everything should be focused on the fact that women have it so terrible. Then the men are forgotten." Such influencers not only push hypermasculine ideals that reinforce the resonance of crisis, but they also encourage reactionary political ideas, with many interviewees noting that engagement had led them towards more far-right content.

Exposure to Radical Ideologies

Our research has uncovered a trajectory from initial engagement with online masculinity communities to exposure to radical ideologies, revealing how digital spaces can serve as conduits for extremist ideas. The accessibility of these ideologies in online environments, coupled with their strategic appeal to men experiencing feelings of threatened masculinity, creates a potent formula for potential radicalisation.

A significant number of participants described a gradual process of exposure to increasingly extreme ideas, often beginning with seemingly innocuous content. An ethnic majority Norwegian focus group participant elucidated this progression: "You start with fairly innocent stuff about self-improvement and reclaiming your masculinity. But then you're introduced to more extreme ideas about women, immigrants, and how they're threatening 'real men'. It's a slippery slope, and it all happens so fast online." This account illustrates the potential for seemingly benign content related to masculinity to serve as a gateway to more extreme ideologies within far-right-leaning online ecosystems.

A similar trajectory was described by an ethnic majority Dutch participant, who shared, "I was just looking for advice on being a better man, you know? But these online communities slowly feed you more and more radical ideas. They present it as 'hard truths' about masculinity and society." These narratives illustrate how the boundaries between self-improvement content and radical ideologies can become blurred in online spaces, with users sometimes unaware of the ideological shift they're experiencing.

As men navigate these online spaces, seeking answers to feelings of displacement or inadequacy, they may find themselves increasingly exposed to extremist ideologies tailored to their perceived grievances. Our research found a strong connection between the Digital Masculinity Crisis and the appeal of these extremist viewpoints.

Many ethnic majority participants described being drawn to far-right content that promised a return to traditional gender roles and male dominance, offering a seductive

vision of restored masculine power coupled with promises of economic opportunity. This appeal was articulated by an ethnic majority British participant, who explained, "These far-right groups online talk about returning to a time when men were respected, when we had our proper place in society. It's appealing when you feel like you're losing your footing in the modern world." For some Muslim minority participants, exposure might lead towards different forms of extremism, sometimes framed as resistance to Western hegemony or defence of the global Muslim community (Ummah). As one Danish Muslim minority participant noted, the appeal can stem from shared feelings of alienation: "Some guys online talk about how Western society will never accept us and that we should reject it entirely. It's tempting when you face discrimination." This narrative illustrates how different extremist ideologies can exploit feelings of masculine insecurity and social marginalisation, offering visions of restored power or belonging that resonate with men feeling threatened by societal changes specific to their context.

The progression from seeking support or advice in online masculinity communities to embracing extremist ideologies is neither simple nor inevitable. However, the structure and content of these online spaces can facilitate this journey. The initial allure of these communities, which offer understanding, support, and guidance in navigating modern masculinity, can act as a gateway to more extreme ideologies. Groups offer narratives that not only validate feelings of displacement and resentment but also provide clear targets for these negative emotions, whether feminists, immigrants, the state, or broader notions of 'the West'. By framing various societal issues as direct attacks on masculinity or group identity, these ideologies offer compelling worldviews to men experiencing exclusion in a changing society.

Social Media Dynamics and the Digital Masculinity Crisis

Our research has unveiled the significant impact of social media dynamics on the Digital Masculinity Crisis, highlighting how platform algorithms and influencer culture operate in tandem to shape and reinforce certain conceptions of masculinity. These digital mechanisms not only amplify existing narratives about masculinity but also actively contribute to the spread and normalisation of extremist ideologies.

The role of social media algorithms in this process emerged as a significant theme in our study. These algorithms, designed to maximise user engagement, often create echo chambers that reinforce and intensify viewpoints. An ethnic majority British participant provided a vivid description of this phenomenon: "Once you engage with a few posts about men's rights or traditional masculinity, the algorithms just feed you more and more extreme content. It's like they're pushing you towards these radical ideas about masculinity." This account underscores how platform design can potentially accelerate radicalisation processes, creating a digital environment where exposure to extreme content becomes increasingly likely over time. One leader of a far-right group in the Netherlands confirmed that this process of algorithmic radicalisation was regularly used in recruiting young people, stating: "what YouTube does is if you watch one video … then you get offered other videos that are similar. Maybe you get offered our video about the street campaign … And this has led to many young, especially young people,

to more and more increasingly move towards the right in the spectrum." This shows that there is a significant element of awareness by far-right groups on the impact of social media algorithms on young people, as well as a tactical decision taken by such groups in leveraging them to their advantage.

The algorithmic reinforcement of certain types of content dovetails with another powerful force in social media: influencer culture. Our study found that social media influencers play a significant role in promoting and normalising certain forms of masculinity, some of which could be considered toxic or aligned with extremist worldviews. These charismatic online figures, often presenting themselves as experts on masculinity, religion, or politics, wield considerable influence over their followers' perceptions and behaviours. An ethnic majority Danish participant shed light on this aspect of social media dynamics: "There are these YouTube and TikTok personalities who have millions of followers. They present themselves as experts on masculinity, but they're really just promoting really toxic ideas. And young guys eat it up because these influencers seem successful and confident." Influencers targeting Muslim audiences can also play a role. As one British Muslim minority participant noted, "social media can be a double-edged sword. It connects us with other Muslims worldwide, which is great, but it also exposes us to extreme interpretations of our faith and what it means to be a Muslim man." These observations highlight the power of these online figures in shaping conceptions of masculinity, particularly among younger men who may be more susceptible to such influences as they navigate their identity formation.

Our comparative analysis reveals that while both ethnic majorities and Muslim minorities experience aspects of the Digital Masculinity Crisis, the specific manifestations and pathways differ significantly, reflecting their distinct structural positions and the specific ideologies targeting them. Economic insecurities, cultural shifts, and online dynamics interact with ethnic and religious identities to create unique challenges for each group. For ethnic majority men, threats to masculine identity often stem from perceived loss of status and privilege within the national context, with online spaces amplifying narratives of displacement by women and minorities, feeding into far-right ideologies. In contrast, Muslim minority men reported navigating intricate intersections of religious, cultural, and Western masculine ideals, often compounded by experiences of racism and Islamophobia, with online spaces reinforcing feelings of alienation from both their heritage cultures and Western societies. While ethnic majority men may be drawn to far-right ideologies promising a return to traditional gender roles and national identities, Muslim minority men might encounter extremist interpretations that seek to pit Islam against certain constructions of "Western values".

The relationship between algorithmic reinforcement and influencer culture creates a potent ecosystem for the spread of certain ideas about masculinity across different communities. As algorithms push users towards more extreme content, they may increasingly encounter influencers promoting problematic or toxic forms of masculinity aligned with various extremist viewpoints. These influencers, in turn, benefit from the algorithmic amplification of their content, creating a feedback loop that can accelerate the spread of these ideas. The perceived success of these influencers lends credibility to their messages, even when they promote harmful stereotypes or behaviours. Young men

seeking role models and guidance in navigating their masculinity may be particularly vulnerable to these influences. The combination of algorithmic exposure and charismatic presentation can make toxic ideas seem not only normal but also desirable. This dynamic presents a significant challenge in addressing the Digital Masculinity Crisis. The design of social media platforms, optimised for engagement rather than social benefit, can promote harmful content. At the same time, the decentralised nature of influencer culture, combined with the way in which extreme messages are often couched in non-threatening language or imagery, makes it difficult to counter these narratives. Addressing these issues will likely require a multidimensional approach, involving changes to platform design, media literacy education, and the more robust challenging of maladjusted formations of masculinity with the promotion of alternative, healthier models online. Understanding how technology, culture, structure, and identity intersect is crucial in developing effective strategies to counter the spread of toxic masculinity and associated extremisms in digital spaces.

Discussion

The empirical findings of this comprehensive comparative study offer insights into the dynamics of the Digital Masculinity Crisis and its potential role in online radicalisation processes among both ethnic majority and Muslim minority young men in Europe. In this section, we elucidate the implications of our findings, situating them within the broader corpus of literature on masculinity, online radicalisation, digital culture, intersectionality, and critical terrorism and extremism studies; this contextualisation will facilitate a more complex grasp of the phenomenon at hand.

Our research shows that the Digital Masculinity Crisis represents a distinct phenomenon that goes beyond traditional conceptions of threatened masculinity. While incorporating elements of Kimmel's (2017) "aggrieved entitlement", particularly relevant to some ethnic majority narratives, the digital context fundamentally reshapes how masculinity is perceived and performed, with economic insecurities and cultural anxieties being amplified and transmuted in online spaces in group-specific ways. The incessant exposure to narratives of male decline or group victimisation intensifies these feelings of threat exponentially, facilitated by sophisticated social media algorithms and insular online communities. This observation aligns with Massanari's (2017) analysis of how platform dynamics can reinforce and exacerbate certain viewpoints, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of grievance and resentment. Moreover, our findings on the genesis of new masculine identities in digital spaces extend Ging's (2017) pioneering work on the manosphere but also highlight analogous processes in other online subcultures, including those relevant to Muslim minorities. The emergence of distinctly online forms of masculine capital, whether the ability to "redpill" others in manosphere spaces or to demonstrate piety or resistance in religious and political online communities, suggests that the Digital Masculinity Crisis is not merely a translation of offline anxieties into digital spaces but a qualitatively new phenomenon shaped by digital affordances and intersecting identities that merits further scholarly inquiry.

The intersections of race, nationality, religion, and masculinity revealed in our study demonstrate the need for an intersectional approach to understanding online radicalisation as cogently advocated by Crosset, Tanner, and Campana (2019). Our findings show that the Digital Masculinity Crisis is not confined to majority communities in Europe but is experienced heterogeneously by men from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, challenging monolithic conceptions of threatened masculinity. The accounts from white ethnic majority participants feeling unfairly blamed align with Bergmann's (2020) observations on the role of perceived victimhood in far-right ideologies. The experiences shared by Muslim minority participants reveal a more multilayered picture, highlighting the tensions between different cultural expectations of masculinity alongside navigating structural racism and Islamophobia, all within rapidly evolving digital landscapes. This intersectional complexity suggests that interventions aimed at addressing the Digital Masculinity Crisis need to be culturally sensitive, recognising the diverse ways in which men may experience and express feelings of threatened masculinity online and the different extremist narratives they may encounter.

The Digital Masculinity Crisis is also shown to intersect heavily with depressed levels of both economic and cultural capital, and responses to radicalisation therefore also require careful consideration of wealth and class within an intersectional framework. Far-right extremism often plays upon issues of poverty, inequality, and deprivation, stoking fears around economic decline and responding to financial scarcity through the scapegoating of minorities. Similarly, other extremist narratives may exploit feelings of marginalisation and injustice linked to socioeconomic status within minority communities. The integration of economic fear and experiences of structural inequality into the Digital Masculinity Radicalisation Pathway implies careful consideration not just of how to address inequality offline but also of how inequality is perpetrated online and how financial and cultural capital is used on social media platforms to target and radicalise those who are economically and socially struggling.

Our findings on the role of echo chambers and algorithmic reinforcement in amplifying grievances related to masculinity provide robust empirical support for Conway's (2016) arguments about the internet's potential to accelerate radicalisation processes. The progressive exposure to increasingly extreme content described by our participants aligns with the "slippery slope" model of online radicalisation proposed by Wojcieszak (2010), suggesting a potential trajectory for individuals deeply engaged in these online spaces. Our research also suggests that the relationship between online engagement and radicalisation is not linear or deterministic; rather, it is characterised by intricate feedback loops and tipping points that merit further investigation. The formation of new masculine identities that are solely and inextricably tied to digital culture indicates that online spaces are not merely amplifying existing grievances but actively shaping new forms of masculinity that may be more susceptible to radical ideologies. This finding extends Marwick and Caplan's (2018) seminal work on the linguistic features of the manosphere, suggesting that engagement with these online communities may fundamentally reshape men's conceptions of masculinity in ways that have significant implications for their offline behaviours and attitudes.

Our results on the appeal of extremist ideologies to men experiencing the Digital Masculinity Crisis provide novel insights into the gendered dimensions of online extremism. The promises of a restoration of male dominance, group status, or righteous struggle offered by various extremist groups online, as described by our participants, align with analyses of how populist and extremist movements exploit feelings of masculine insecurity (Mudde 2019; Pearson 2019). Our research suggests that the digital context adds new dimensions to this dynamic, creating a potent synergy between threatened masculinity, other forms of insecurity (economic, social, and cultural), and extremist ideologies, including those targeting both ethnic majority and Muslim minority groups (Downing and Dron 2022). The accessibility of radical ideologies online, combined with the creation of new masculine identities tied to the rejection of mainstream narratives, appears to create fertile ground for recruitment across the extremist spectrum. This extends Baele et al.'s (2021) work on incel communities by demonstrating how a range of online masculine identities may interact with processes of radicalisation.

Future research could expand the scope of inquiry to explore how women engage with and are affected by the Digital Masculinity Crisis and related online phenomena, as well as examine the experiences of non-binary and transgender individuals in these online spaces. These perspectives would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how gender dynamics play out in online environments and contribute to or mitigate radicalisation processes. Additionally, comparative studies across diverse cultural contexts beyond Europe could illuminate how the Digital Masculinity Crisis is manifested in diverse societal settings, informing more culturally engaged intervention strategies on deradicalisation and promoting healthy expressions of masculinity in the digital age.

Conclusion

This study has introduced and explored the concept of the Digital Masculinity Crisis, a phenomenon that represents a significant evolution in how masculinity is perceived, performed, and challenged in the digital age. Through our extensive qualitative and comparative research across four European countries, we have illuminated the intricate processes by which both ethnic majority and Muslim minority men navigate perceived threats to their masculine identity in online spaces and how these experiences can potentially lead to radicalisation.

This study's comparative approach between ethnic majority (often nationalist-leaning) and Muslim minorities has provided a deeper appreciation for how the Digital Masculinity Crisis manifests across different demographic groups, shaped by their distinct structural positions and the specific extremist narratives they encounter. By examining these diverse experiences side by side, we have identified both universal themes in online radicalisation processes (e.g., algorithmic influence, echo chambers) and group-specific vulnerabilities and resilience factors. Our findings emphasise the value of tailored interventions that address the unique challenges faced by different communities. For ethnic majority men, these initiatives may involve efforts to address

economic insecurities, challenge narratives of victimhood based on perceived status loss, and provide alternative narratives to counter anti-immigration sentiments. For Muslim minorities, interventions should focus on combating online Islamophobia and racism, addressing state surveillance concerns, providing support for positive identity formation that navigates intricate cultural belonging, and encouraging an active sense of inclusion within broader society.

Our research has uncovered an intricate network of interconnected factors contributing to the Digital Masculinity Crisis and its potential role in online radicalisation. Men experience a wide range of perceived threats to their masculine identity, including economic insecurity, rapidly changing cultural norms, and evolving gender roles. These threats are significantly amplified and reshaped within digital spaces, with online communities actively shaping new forms of masculine identity that are intricately tied to digital cultural capital and ideological positions. Our research also revealed the significant role of echo chambers and algorithmic reinforcement in perpetuating and exacerbating the Digital Masculinity Crisis. Online spaces often serve as echo chambers, reinforcing and amplifying grievances related to masculinity. Social media algorithms play a crucial role in this process, creating feedback loops that can intensify feelings of threat and marginalisation among male users and are recognised and co-opted by extremist groups relevant to radicalisation. Importantly, we found that the Digital Masculinity Crisis is not experienced uniformly across all groups of men, with those from various racial, cultural, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds experiencing this phenomenon differently.

The accessibility of radical ideologies in online spaces emerged as another pivotal factor in our study. These digital environments make extreme ideologies more accessible and appealing to men feeling threatened, often through an incremental process of exposure to increasingly radical ideas. This gradual process, facilitated by online platforms, presents a significant challenge for prevention and intervention efforts, requiring sophisticated strategies that can disrupt these pathways to extremism. Lastly, our research highlighted the appeal of various extremist narratives in the context of the Digital Masculinity Crisis. Ideologies that promise a return to traditional gender roles, restoration of group status, or righteous struggle can be especially attractive to men experiencing feelings of threat or displacement in their masculine identity, as well as a sense of powerlessness in other aspects of their life. This finding underscores the potential links between threatened masculinity, online radicalisation, and the rise of various forms of extremism.

In conclusion, the Digital Masculinity Crisis represents a complex issue that lies at the intersection of gender, technology, socio-structural context, and extremism. By providing a comparative and intersectional understanding of this phenomenon, our research aims to contribute to more informed public discourse and policy-making around issues of online radicalisation and gender in the digital age. As we navigate the evolving landscape of digital masculinities, it is crucial that we continue to critically examine and address the ways in which online spaces shape our understandings of gender, identity, and social relations. Only through such sustained scholarly inquiry and evidence-based interventions can we hope to

mitigate the negative effects of the Digital Masculinity Crisis and foster more inclusive, equitable digital spaces for all.

Authors' Note

This research was conducted during my time as the Scientific Coordinator of the DRIVE Project (959200) and as a Professor of Radicalisation Studies at Leiden University. I have assumed the position of Professor of Criminology and Global Studies and Director of the Centre for Radicalisation, Inclusion, and Social Equity (The RISE Centre) at Aston University in the United Kingdom as of 1 August 2025.

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Professor Tahir Abbas is a distinguished social scientist with nearly three decades of interdisciplinary expertise that integrates political sociology with critical theory. His academic focus is centred upon the dynamics of radicalisation, Islamophobia, and ethnic relations. Professor Abbas has conducted pioneering research into extremism and social exclusion, notably as the Scientific Coordinator for the European Commission-funded H2020 DRIVE project, which examined the causes of radicalisation in Northwestern Europe. His extensive publication record includes numerous monographs, edited collections, and peer-reviewed articles that have substantially shaped academic and policy debates surrounding counter-terrorism, integration, and identity. A Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences and the Royal Society of Arts, his work consistently bridges the gap between academic insight and policy impact, contributing to significant national and international discussions on these critical contemporary issues. His research interests also encompass gender and violence, as well as polarisation and extremism more broadly.

Dr Richard McNeil-Willson is a respected academic whose work specialises in critical approaches to counter-terrorism and counter-extremism. His research provides a detailed examination of contentious activism, Islamophobia, and state repression, primarily within a European context. Dr McNeil-Willson's scholarship often engages with the ethical dimensions of researching the far right and scrutinises the language and frameworks employed by states to address terrorism and extremism. He has contributed to public discourse on the shortcomings of counter-terrorism strategies and the ways in which fears surrounding religious and cultural issues are constructed and instrumentalised. His academic perspective is informed by a commitment to decolonising the field of far-right studies and rethinking the established terminology. Through his research, he explores the impact of counter-terrorism policies on civil liberties and the dynamics of social and political activism in response to state measures.