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“OH, YOU MEAN... GAY?”: RELATIONAL LABOUR AND THE INDUSTRIAL ARTICULATION OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY BY ANDREW TATE AND HIS FOLLOWERS

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Introduction

This paper examines how the figures and imaginaries of hegemonic masculinity are co-produced and contested among a reactionary influencer fandom. It assumes an intersectional masculinities approach to the question of how Andrew Tate and his social media audience(s) mobilise anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ discourses online. Within the manosphere, enjoinders to embody idealised forms of masculinity are embedded within the affective frameworks for the extraction of value that typify influencer media. Such *masculinity injunctions* are here conceptualised as a technique of hegemony and as a galvanising force in the relational labour (Baym, 2018) of Tate and his followers.

Political influencers have become focal figures in the contemporary media environment, bridging commercial and political interests (Riedl et al., 2021) while seeking public engagement through the performance of “authentic” identity (Harris et al., 2023). Most work on influencers focuses on creators, with relatively little attention paid to audiences. As political influencers have become increasingly prominent media figures, however, fan studies frameworks have grown more visible in analyses of the mediation of political life (Petersen et al., 2023), including reactionary politics (Stanfill, 2020).

This paper incorporates perspectives on fandom, labour, and the manosphere to describe how masculinity discourses are enmeshed in the complex interplay of production and labour that animates the creation of reactionary influencer online content. Focusing on Andrew Tate’s role in mediating identity claims through the performance of figures of masculinity highlights the *affective* aspects of his role as an intermediary. This affective intermediation is a key component in the relational labour that serves strategically to bolster Tate’s authority and influence. However, this status is arguably also shaped by the frequently antagonistic engagement of Tate’s followers.

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Affect, Intermediation, and Relational Labour in the Influencer Ecosystem

Affective intermediation is proposed as a concept that situates relational labour within the influencer ecosystem in terms of the affective production of masculinity as a cultural and economic category. In this context, creators serve as ideological intermediaries who promote lifestyles and ways of being to audiences (Arnesson, 2023). By mobilising social identities, such intermediation by influencers can also be seen to have *affective* dimensions. For Mouffe (2018), the anti-pluralist mobilisation of affect typifies the rhetorics of right-wing populism. This framework likewise characterises the networked misogyny (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016) of reactionary influencers.

Examinations of digital intimacies in influencer media emphasise how audience engagement impacts the status and reach of influencers (Dobson et al., 2018). Engagement may motivate influencers' relational labour (Baym, 2018), but creators are also at risk of this strategic intimacy being weaponised by their followers (Glatt, 2023). For partisan media figures, attempts by audiences to determine the content of media is an established hazard (Kelly, 2023). This paper conceives of user contributions, like platformised possessions (Denegri-Knott et al., 2023), as a form of relational labour that is central to the strategic deployment of figures of masculinity within the manosphere.

Articulation, Hegemony, and Masculinity as Analytical Categories

The concepts of articulation, hegemony, and masculinity developed here are rooted primarily in the work of Connell (2005) and Laclau and Mouffe (2001). Laclau and Mouffe's concept of articulation centres the production and performance of collective identities, with articulation viewed as the site of struggle for dominance in defining the nature of the social, i.e., hegemony. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity refers to a configuration of standards defining how to be masculine against which gender performances are judged. Critiques have focused on the distinction between internal and external hegemony (Demetriou, 2001) and the complexity of men's actual practices and motivations (Moller, 2007).

A blended concept of hegemonic masculinity, following Johansson & Ottemo (2015), recognises multiplicity and conflict in how dominant modes of masculinity are defined. It aligns with approaches highlighting the competition that characterises the networking of masculinities (Ging, 2019) and the multiple masculine identities that men must navigate online (García-Gómez, 2020; Trott, 2022). Essential, too, is a sense of how gender identities intersect with other social identities, including race (Dharani et al., 2021). By taking an intersectional masculinities approach to the content created by Andrew Tate and his audience, this paper addresses how reactionary influencer fandoms serve as sites of cultural and economic production with wide-ranging social and political impacts.

Methods and Data

Data for this paper are drawn from the alt-tech video-sharing platform Rumble and X (formerly Twitter). Data consist of a 15-month sample of Andrew Tate's posts on Rumble (n=213) and a purposive sample of 17 posts by Tate on X. The dataset includes all user responses to posts on Rumble (n=112,656) and X (n=14,796). The methods

used here are constructionist thematic analysis, which orients towards the sociocultural contexts of discourse (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and computational discourse analysis, including topic modelling (Gokcimen & Das, 2024). Computational techniques are employed on the complete corpora of user-generated comments and video transcripts, whereas qualitative techniques focus on a limited sub-sample (n=10) of the highest engagement posts.

Preliminary Findings

The preliminary data suggest three key points of tension. First, directives about who Tate should interact with and how he should conduct himself are prevalent within the dataset. Some of the more vocal directives focus on the YouTube creator Adin Ross, who has featured several times in Tate's outputs but who Tate often speaks of derisively. Ross, it is claimed, either is or acts "gay". Anti-Ross invective conflicts with the strategies Tate employs in his attempts to boost reach, impact, and influence by leveraging the online status of other creators.

Second, there is a fine line between support and "simping" that fans and followers must navigate. A simp can be seen as subordinate to women — part of the transactionalisation of sex and sexuality in which any positive treatment of women must result in material benefit — as well as Tate. Comments repeatedly articulate the distinction between alpha and beta (see Ging, 2019), alongside frequent judgments about gender presentation (e.g., voice) and the outward appearance of capacity for violence that inform the masculinity injunctions typifying the data. Fans must learn to express approval in ways that will not be seen as "gay".

Third, the data are shaped inextricably by a sample period that includes Tate's imprisonment and, later, house arrest in Romania on charges of sexual trafficking. The result is a shift not only in his posting cadence but also in the character and timbre of his posts, which have a palpable emphasis on marketing. This transition has resulted in explicit critical commentary from his audience pushing back on Tate's attempts to market a range of his media products. These engagements are indicative of audience expectations — and directives — that Tate should privilege the production of masculinist content in ways they deem appropriate.

Conclusion

Persuasion may be at the root of hegemony (Buttigieg, 2005), but the question remains to what extent Tate's audience accept his messaging without disapproval. This is particularly relevant with respect to content creation, especially attitudes regarding content collaborations. Affective intermediation encompasses the relational labour in which Tate's audience position themselves as stakeholders in the articulation of idealised masculinity and the extraction of economic value that defines this media ecosystem. These preliminary findings illustrate how, in the context of reactionary influencer online content, the relations we term digitally intimate are in practice frequently constituted through acts of audience antagonism.

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