THE PROFESSIONALISATION OF NETWORKED AND REFRACTED MISOGYNY AMONG ESTONIAN MANFLUENCERS ON TIKTOK

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Introduction

As media devices and media services are increasingly omnipresent (Paus-Hasebrink, Kulterer & Sinner, 2019), nearly all walks of life have to accommodate the "influencer creep" (Bishop, 2023) – self-branding, optimisation, and performance of authenticity – if they want to benefit from attention economy (Goldhaber, 1997; Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019). In recent years, manfluencers as a specific type of influencers has notoriously popularised. Manfluencers are content creators who 'weaponise highly performative and extremist notions of masculinity' while promoting sexist ideas about women (Wescott, Roberts & Zhao, 2024, pp. 167-168). While popular and networked misogyny (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016) and various parts of the manosphere, together with related conceptualisations have been well studied, manfluencers as such have received relatively little academic attention.

This mixed-method, dominantly ethnographic study will focus on manfluencers in Estonia, exploring the strategic circulation of their misogynist content in networked publics (boyd, 2010) on social media. By viewing professionalisation as a sociological process, this study analyses how these aspirational influencers cultivate and internalise various values, norms, symbols, slang, ideologies, etc (Greenwood, 1966; Trice, 1993), along with how they monetise their social media presence and how these communities keep registering 'under the radar' (Abidin, 2021).

Background and Theoretical Framework

Over the last few years, former kickboxer Andrew Tate has gained immense global popularity on social media. Despite facing charges related to rape, human trafficking, and organised crime, Tate has amassed a large following, particularly for promoting misogynistic views and advocating male supremacy and violence against women (Das, 2022). The issue is severe, as school teachers have reported a concerning rise in

misogynist discourse among young boys who have been engaging with Tate's online content (Weale, 2023; Will, 2023). Although he has now been deplatformed from all mainstream social media platforms, Tate seems to be an indicator of a whole genre of manfluencers all over the world, including the context of this research, Estonia.

In terms of gender equality and stereotypes, Estonia is at the very bottom group of EU countries, ranking 22nd in the EU on the Gender Equality Index (European…, 2023). To name a few notable factors for the indirect context of this study: the gender pay gap is around 15% (Eesti Statistika, 2021); gender equality and feminism are still largely perceived as tools and principles which work mainly in favour of women; and rigid gender stereotypes persist, especially in older generations' perceptions and beliefs (Marling, 2017). A recent study among Estonian 15-year-olds found that boys' and girls' attitudes are moving rapidly in opposite directions, creating a gaping divide in values and attitudes towards gender roles and equality (Ümarik et al., 2022). In simplest terms, whilst Estonian girls share liberal and progressive views, Estonian boys align with traditional value worlds with echoes of mindsets from Soviet occupation times (Saar, 2023).

Networked misogyny seems to utilise both the advantages of networked as well as refracted publics in its operations. Some manfluencers seek the viral spread that networked publics facilitate. Persistence guarantees that content is difficult to delete; searchability ensures that content is easily found; replicability allows for the copying of information and lastly, scalability enables the viral spread of misogynist content (boyd, 2010). Other manfluencers and communities utilise refracted publics, preferring to hide in plain sight – a possibility often sought after by communities engaging in subversive, risky and hidden practices on social media (Abidin, 2021). Here, transcience ensures the possibility of creating ephemeral content; discoverability supports content to be 'stumbled upon'; decodability allows for content to be incomprehensible without context; and silosociality enables to show content only to those in a particular community (Abidin, 2021). This study will focus on content among both networked and refracted publics by using a mixed-method approach.

Methods and Data

First, digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016; Markham, 2017) is conducted to deeply immerse the researcher in misogynist content on various social media platforms. The ethnographic approach has several advantages in the context of this study. Firstly, the method is dynamic – the use of participant observation, multiple modes of capturing data of interesting content (videos, screenshots, etc) and personal reflections supports a deeper understanding of the discursive field (Markham, 2017). Secondly, the method is suitable for studying social groups that are otherwise hard to access (Buscatto, 2018) and groups expressing hate against other social groups are known to often use different ways of hiding and staying under the radar (Bhat & Klein, 2020).

The ethnographic stage has two objectives. Firstly, as many manfluencers are active on TikTok, ethnography enables to fill the aim of exploring how the platform's algorithm circulates misogynist content to the user. Here, the study draws on Seaver's (2017) call for studying algorithms as culture, not just code or formulae, by analysing the everyday

practices that constitute, sustain and change algorithms by utilising ethnographic methods. Secondly, the ethnographic approach is used to analyse how the professionalisation and monetisation of misogyny is occurring on various platforms.

The second method employed in this study is a combination of qualitative content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and socio-semiotic visual analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020) to study the textual and visual methods of social steganography (boyd & Marwick, 2011). This includes dog whistling, where a layer of meaning is added that only the target audience understands and adopting 'parallel literacies,' where different meanings are created for the target audiences (Abidin, 2021). The objective of this stage is to explore how these methods are utilised by manfluencers as well as their followers. Data collection and analysis is conducted from January to June 2024.

Preliminary Results

A very preliminary peek into the results shows that in the process of professionalisation, ideologies of masculinities are created, each of which emphasises different aspects. So far, ideologies regarding financial, spiritual, sexual, relationship and physique-related success have been distinguished. In order to register below the radar, users signify the existence of an in-group by creating 'misogynesque' content – a certain coded style of content for the community – by using coded musical background, a tone/way of speaking or visuals in their content, emojis that carry several layers of meanings, etc. Different forms of capital (e.g. economic, symbolic, social, technical, celebrity, attention capital – (Abidin, 2018; Brooks et al., 2021; Mears, 2023)) flow on social media and monetisation usually happens in the form of webinars, training plans, books, paid content, etc.

The results of this study are crucial for understanding the circulation of misogynistic content together with the dynamics between influencers and their audiences. Within the context of this year's conference theme, we can view professionalised misogyny as an important phenomenon related to the influencer industry. By gaining insight into how these potential networks operate, the study contributes to understanding the professionalisation of networked misogyny. Without such understanding, we would be caught in an endless game of Whac-A-Mole, where the sanctioning of one manfluencer is swiftly followed by the emergence of another using similar discourse.

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