

Digitally mediated misogyny and critical discourse studies: Methodological and ethical implications.

By Jessica Aiston

Introduction

In a 2020 report, the British advocacy group *Hope Not Hate* revealed that almost one in five young men in the UK held negative beliefs about feminism and half agreed that feminism had “gone too far” (Carter, 2020, p. 42). While backlash to feminism is not new (Faludi, 1991; Kimmel 1987), anti-feminist sentiment is reinvigorated online in the so-called ‘manosphere’ (Marwick and Caplan, 2018). The manosphere can be described as “constellation of masculinist social media communities loosely unified by an anti-feminist worldview” (van Valkenburgh, 2019, p.1) that comprises multiple groups such as involuntary celibates (incels), men’s rights activists, pick-up artists, and male separatists. These groups share the belief that feminists have duped men and women into believing that society is patriarchal, when in reality men are the true victims of gender-based discrimination (Ging, 2019). While the manosphere is spread out across the Internet, many communities can be found on Reddit, a popular content aggregation and social news platform that attracts over 50 million daily users and is home to over 100,000 communities known as subreddits. At the time of writing (April 2022), the most popular manosphere subreddit has over 1.7 million subscribers.

Academic research into the manosphere has been steadily increasing over the last few years. Many scholars have studied the manosphere using computational or quantitative methods such as natural language processing or topic modelling (e.g. Mountford, 2020; Rafail and Freitas, 2019; LaViolette and Hogan, 2019). These approaches have been important for developing our understanding of hate speech within the manosphere, as these methods can enable researchers to automatically detect or determine the presence of ‘toxic’ or misogynistic language within manosphere communities (e.g. Farrell et al., 2019; Farrell et al., 2020; Jaki et al., 2019; Ribeiro, Blackburn et al., 2021; Trott et al., 2020). Corpus linguists have built multi-million word corpora to study the language of multiple manosphere communities (Krendel et al., forthcoming) or smaller, specialised corpora to

study a single community (Heritage and Koller, 2020). Linguists often combine quantitative corpus methods with qualitative discourse analysis methods (see Baker et al., 2008), for example Krendel (2020) employs appraisal theory and social actor analysis. In addition, there are several examples of qualitative research into the manosphere based on ethnographic (Lin, 2017), thematic or content analysis methodologies (Ging, 2019; Schmitz and Kazyak, 2016). Thus, there is scope for qualitative research into the manosphere from a linguistic and discourse-oriented perspective.

In this paper, I argue that critical discourse studies (CDS) is a useful framework for a study of the manosphere. First, I provide a brief overview of CDS and its main tenets. Next, I chart how I have applied the discourse-historical approach to CDS in my own PhD research. Then, I consider the specific ethical challenges that arise during this sort of research and why traditional ethical guidelines are often ill-equipped to deal with these challenges. Finally, I conclude with a reflection on some of the major challenges that I have faced during the course of my PhD.

Critical Discourse Studies and the Discourse-Historical Approach

A common misconception is that critical discourse studies is a specific *method* of analysis (van Dijk, 2013). Rather, CDS is better characterised as an ‘approach’ or ‘movement’ in which analysts aim to study the ways in which “social power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated and resisted through text and talk” (van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). What unites CDS scholars is “a shared interest in the semiotic dimensions of power, injustice, abuse, and political-economic or cultural change in society” (Fairclough et al., 2011, p. 394). Although researchers may not analyse the same kind of data or investigate the same linguistic features using the same analytical tools, they could still legitimately label their work as CDS so long as it is critical in nature (Wodak and Meyer, 2016). In other words, CDS scholars are defined by a common *goal* rather than a common *method*.

CDS is somewhat distinctive in linguistics as it is not intended as a purely descriptive study of language; instead, researchers aim to critique its potential ideological or transformative effects. Description and interpretation of actual language use are conducted with reference

to concepts such as power, ideology, and discrimination in order to “intervene on the side of dominated and oppressed groups” with the goal of contributing towards a more equal society (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 259). CDS scholars conceptualise discourse as a form of social practice that is both “socially constitutive and socially shaped” (ibid) and consequently any instance of discourse may contribute to a reproduction of, or a challenge to, dominant ideologies and power relations in society. Much CDS research thus derives from leftist intellectual traditions, such as Marxism and poststructuralism (Forchtner, 2017). Researchers may include a positionality statement in their outputs in order to describe their ideological position and explicitly characterise their work as feminist (Lazar, 2017) or socialist (Fairclough, 1989).

This lack of objectivity has generated much criticism, such as accusations of bias or even cherry-picking of results (see Breeze, 2011, for an overview). I accept that many users of the communities I critique may disagree with how I have represented them and may respond to my critiques with their own counter-critiques (and some have already done so). I also acknowledge that my feminist position will inevitably shape my interpretations of my findings and that researchers with different (or even similar) ideological positions would likely arrive at different conclusions even if the same analytical steps were taken and the same linguistic features were identified. However, I agree with Fairclough that writing from a particular position does not entail “writing political propaganda” nor does it preclude the researcher from “arguing rationally or producing evidence” for their statements (1989, p. 5). Barber (2021), Rüdiger and Dayter (2017), have also reflected on the difficulties of maintaining an objective stance while researching the manosphere. I thus embrace my subjectivity and the interpretative nature of my results (see Mackay, 2017). I believe that a feminist perspective is important in order to uncover both overt and covert sexist, misogynistic and patriarchal ideologies produced within the manosphere. At the same time, following the recommendations of Wodak (2013), I endeavour to regularly self-reflect on my ideological position throughout the project and to ensure that my analysis remains systematic and rigorous, keeping description of their language separate from my interpretation of it in order to enable “transparency and retroduction” (pp. xxxviii).

There are several approaches to CDS, each with a different methodological or theoretical focus (Wodak and Meyer, 2016; Unger, 2016). In this paper, I focus on the discourse-historical approach (DHA) developed by Ruth Wodak and colleagues (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001, 2016; Wodak, 2009). The three major characteristics of the DHA are interdisciplinarity, triangulation, and practical application of results (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016, p. 31). Interdisciplinarity refers to the integration of theoretical insights from multiple disciplines, while triangulation concerns the combination of various theoretical frameworks, types of data, and methods of analysis (ibid). Both of these concepts are aimed at gaining a more holistic understanding of the social issue under investigation. In addition, the results of the research should ideally be shared and have a practical application outside of academia. Furthermore, as the name suggests, an understanding of discourse as historical is crucial to CDS and the DHA (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). Texts and discourses are not thought to exist in isolation, but rather are the product of multiple contextual and historical factors. Within the DHA, researchers orient themselves to four dimensions of context: 1) the immediate language or text-internal co-text; 2) the intertextual and interdiscursive relationships between texts; 3) the social variables and institutional frames of a specific context or situation; 4) the broader socio-political and historical context (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016, p. 30-31).

A major advantage of DHA is its flexibility. Its interdisciplinary and triangulatory nature allow for an eclectic combination of various theoretical concepts and methodological tools in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of complex social phenomena. For instance, it enables the integration of important feminist theoretical concepts such as patriarchy, gender performance, and hegemonic masculinity (see Lazar, 2017, on feminist CDS). Moreover, the four-layered contextual model is particularly useful. A DHA perspective enables an understanding of the manosphere in its historical and socio-political context, rather than a novel or exclusively online phenomenon. In addition, analysts are not required to be neutral or unemotional in their interpretation of results. As a female, feminist scholar, studying the virulently anti-feminist and often sexist or misogynistic language of the manosphere can certainly be difficult on a personal level. However, reflecting on these discomforts rather than pushing them aside can often aid in analysis (Rüdiger and Dayter, 2017).

Finally, qualitative linguistic approaches can complement the findings of quantitative and computational approaches. As Krendel et al., (forthcoming) suggest, more research is needed concerning argumentation and persuasion within manosphere discourse. The DHA is aptly suited for such investigations, considering that the approach is known for its “strong and organised” focus on argumentation (Reisigl, 2014, p. 67). A discourse-historical analysis can facilitate a deeper understanding of manosphere discourse and the anti-feminist arguments produced therein, how these arguments have developed over time, and how discourse and argumentation produced in the manosphere shapes and is shaped by dominant mainstream understandings of gender and gendered power relations.

Methodological implications

Reisigl and Wodak (2016) outline an eight-step approach to conducting a discourse-historical analysis, which has since been elaborated for projects concerning social media (Unger et al., 2016). These steps are typically realised in a recursive rather than linear manner. In what follows, I detail how I have approached these eight steps in my own PhD research into the Reddit community of Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), a group of men who abstain from relationships with women. In this project, I aim to investigate the argumentation strategies used to justify and legitimate their ideology of male separatism and anti-feminism.

Step 1: Activation and consultation of previous theoretical knowledge

As with many other research projects, the first step involved reading previous relevant literature in order to identify research gaps and construct a comprehensive theoretical background. I found that research into MGTOW was relatively scarce in comparison to other manosphere communities such as incels and pick-up artists (see, for example, Heritage and Koller, 2020, on incels, or Dayter and Rüdiger, 2022, for pick-up artists). Given the tenet of interdisciplinarity, a researcher should consult literature from a wide range of fields but avoid combining “theoretically incompatible approaches” (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016, p. 57). For a study of the manosphere, research from sociology, media studies, and gender/women’s

studies is likely to be particularly useful. As Unger et al. (2016, p. 282) recommend, it is also worth considering critical work on social media itself, such as the role of algorithms and platform moderation.

Step 2: Systematic collection of data and context information

As previously discussed, a DHA researcher must orient themselves to four levels of contextual information. While Unger et al. (2016, p. 282) suggest incorporating ethnographic elements or interviews to gain such information, I chose not to engage with the community for reasons that will be detailed later on. Instead, I gleaned contextual information by reading relevant documents such as the subreddit rules and Reddit's content policies, consulting prior literature about Reddit and the manosphere, as well as taking into account my personal experiences as a long-time user of Reddit. This insider perspective meant I could more easily distinguish behaviours or interactional patterns that were characteristic of the broader Reddit platform from those that were characteristic of the manosphere. For example, I was able to recognise certain stock phrases which are common on Reddit, such as "and then everyone clapped" which is used to convey cynicism towards a story's authenticity. It is also important to consider both platform-specific "medium factors" such as the Reddit algorithm and karma system and "situation factors" such as platform demographics and cultural norms (Herring, 2007). Moreover, analysis of textual content on social media must also be linked to its broader socio-political context and its historical context (KhosraviNik, 2017; Reisigl and Wodak, 2016). For example, I consulted literature detailing the historical development of men's movements and considered the parallels that can be discerned with the contemporary manosphere.

Step 3: Selection and preparation of data for analysis

There are several tools available to aid in the automatic scraping of data from Reddit (see Proferes et al., 2021, for an overview). I wrote a script in Python using the PRAW wrapper (Boe, 2021) which enabled me to access the Reddit API and retrieve relevant data from my chosen subreddit. The script was programmed to return initial posts and responding

comments, as well as metadata such as the total score (roughly the number of upvotes relative to the number of downvotes) that each post and comment received at the time of collection. For my sampling method, I collected five posts that the Reddit algorithm defines as 'hot' (i.e. posts that are currently receiving a high level of engagement in the form of upvotes and comments) and their subsequent replies once a week until fifty threads were collected, comprising over 46,000 words in total. This allowed me to gain a general overview of the subreddit and what users talk about on a typical week.

However, it is no guarantee that the data will always remain available, especially for research into hate speech and discrimination, as platform moderators or administrators may eventually intervene and remove the content (Gillespie, 2018). It is therefore of crucial importance to devise a back-up plan, which may involve using less data or collecting data from alternative communities. These concerns do not only apply to the written text – researchers must also archive any hyperlinks or external media so that they can be referred to in the future. To exemplify, my initial PhD proposal concerned an incel subreddit. However, the subreddit was banned two weeks before I enrolled, meaning I had to rethink my entire project. Subsequently, I decided to switch my focus to MGTOW given their relative lack of study. I then submitted an application to my university's research ethics committee, but the subreddit became 'quarantined' while waiting for their response. Although the subreddit remained on the platform, its content was no longer publicly available so I was forced to reconsider my ethical decisions and resubmit my application. Once my application was approved, I endeavoured to collect my data as soon as possible in anticipation that the subreddit would soon be removed. By the time the subreddit was officially banned, approximately 15 months later, I had collected all the data that I needed. This underscores the importance of flexibility and having a contingency plan.

Step 4: Specification of the research question and formulation of assumptions

Next, I devised research questions based on prior literature and an initial skimming of the data (Unger et al, 2016, p. 282). These questions were continually reviewed throughout the project and were eventually finalised as such:

RQ1A: How do members of MGTOW represent women and relationships with women?

RQ1B: How do members of MGTOW represent being single and going one's own way?

RQ2A: How do members of MGTOW represent feminism and progressive movements?

RQ2B: How do members of MGTOW represent "red pill" beliefs?

RQ3: How can the discourse-historical approach contribute to the study of digitally mediated misogyny?

This combined questions that I could answer through engaging in critical discourse analysis and a broader evaluative question regarding the suitability of my chosen theoretical framework for a study of the manosphere.

Step 5: Pilot analysis

My pilot analysis began with an initial ten threads in order to test whether the proposed methods and analytical frameworks would be appropriate for the rest of the research project. Analysis in the DHA is three-dimensional. First, the researcher identifies the specific content or topics of the discourse (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016, p. 32). Following KhosraviNik and Sarkoh (2017), I distinguished between primary and secondary discourse topics wherein primary topics were introduced by the user who created the thread and secondary topics were introduced by subsequent repliers. The most frequent topic across the dataset was *women* followed by *men*, *general* (such as evaluative comments like "nice post"), *finances*, and *relationships*. Moreover, users would introduce topics like *women*, *relationships* or *feminism* to threads about seemingly unrelated topics such as *hobbies*, which could be interpreted as paradoxical to a separatist ideology. My findings thus supported previous research regarding the content of MGTOW discussion threads (Wright et al., 2020).

Second, the researcher identifies discursive strategies. Reisigl and Wodak (2016, p. 33) define a strategy as a "more or less intentional plan of practice (including discursive practices) adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic goal." Within the DHA, five discursive strategies are typically investigated which correspond to five key questions (detailed in table 1). In my research, I focussed mainly on argumentation

strategies in order to examine how users justify the ideology and practices of male separatism but investigated the other strategies when I felt they bolstered argumentation - for example if a user attempted to argue against marriage on the basis that it is too expensive and referred to women as “gold diggers” in order to do so.

Third, the researcher examines the “linguistic means (as types) and context-dependent linguistic realisations (as tokens)” (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016, p. 32). The DHA does not prescribe any particular method for the analysis of these discursive strategies, so the researcher may employ a range of analytical frameworks. For example, Van Leeuwen’s (1996) taxonomy of social actor representation is a particularly useful framework for the analysis of nomination strategies.

Table 1: Discursive strategies in the DHA, adapted from Reisigl and Wodak (2016, pp. 32-33).

Discursive strategy	Key question	Linguistic examples from data
Nomination	How are persons, objects, phenomena/events, processes and actions named and referred to linguistically?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender classification + functionalisation (Van Leeuwen, 1996): <i>one female co-worker; female teachers; the project manager (a female); XX-heavy upper management.</i> • Derogation of out-groups: <i>cunt; sluts; beta provider; NPC [non-playable character].</i>
Predication	What characteristics, qualities, and features are attributed to them?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women: <i>crazy; manipulative; only in it for the money; have advantages over men.</i> • Feminism: <i>a supremacist hate movement; cancer; a multi-trillion dollar industry worldwide; a brief moment in evolutionary history.</i>

Argumentation	What arguments are employed in the discourse in question?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topos of threat: if an action bears dangerous consequences, then the action should not be performed. • Topos of abuse: if an offer for help is abused, then the offer should be withdrawn and/or action should be taken against the abusers. • Topos of justice: if two groups or situations are equal, then they should be treated in the same way
Perspectivisation	From what perspective are these nominations, attributions, and arguments expressed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriation of female or feminist voice, signalled by quotative markers, sarcasm or an /s tag: <i>“He... he yelled at me for getting drunk and fucking chad!”; That’s rape. /S.</i>
Mitigation and intensification	Are the respective utterances articulated overtly, intensified or mitigated?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extreme case formulation: <i>AWALT [all women are like that]; the girl is always favored; society will never be fair to men.</i>

My examination of argumentation strategies involved identification of *topoi* utilised in argumentation about marriage and feminism (see table 2 for an example). A *topos*, also called a conclusion rule, justifies the transition from the supporting evidence/data to the overall claim/conclusion and are typically realised as causal or conditional paraphrases, such as “if x, then y” (Reisigl, 2014, p. 75). For example, the *topos of finance* can be paraphrased as “if an action is too expensive, or causes a loss in revenue, then we should act to diminish these costs” (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001, p. 78). To identify *topoi*, I began with the list of *topoi* supplied by Reisigl and Wodak (2001) in their analysis of discourse on migration, but due to the difference in topic I found that several of their *topoi* were not relevant and new *topoi* labels had to be created. Therefore, using ready-made lists of *topoi* can be a useful starting point for analysis but should not be applied in a purely taxonomic or deductive manner.

Table 2: A breakdown of the argumentation used by Commenter15 in thread 4.

Text	Topos	Data and claim
<p>Commenter15 (9): This is the stuff that makes me laugh at guys who try to sell me on marriage.</p> <p>They make it sound like you split costs. But I start digging and quickly have them reveal how they pay and she just enjoys a free ride. (thread 4)</p>	<p>Finance</p>	<p>Men have to pay for everything in a marriage while women enjoy a free ride.</p> <p>Therefore men should not get married to women.</p>

Step 6: Detailed case studies

After I completed my initial analysis of ten threads, I moved to analysis of the remaining 40 threads using the same methods as detailed above. Here, the researcher should aim to produce “detailed case studies on the macro-, meso- and micro-levels of linguistic analysis, as well as on the level of context” where results of linguistic analysis are interpreted within the “social, historical and political contexts” of the discourse(s) in question (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016, p. 55). While Reisigl and Wodak specify “qualitative” analysis and case studies, I would argue that the pilot analysis and detailed case studies could also include quantitative or mixed-methods approaches.

As a result of the analysis, the researcher can create general descriptions of the discourse in question, including features such as but not limited to: the typical topics and social actors involved; contradictions in argumentation or ideological stances; interdiscursive relationships with other discourses (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016). I discovered that MGTOW discourse on marriage exhibited heavy interdiscursivity with discourse on economics. Marriage and relationships were often referred to as an “investment” and women were thought to possess a “sexual market value” which depreciates as their age and number of sexual partners increases. In addition, marriage was conceptualised as a series of financial

transactions to which both partners should equally contribute. Women were perceived as freeloaders and any non-financial contributions to a relationship were ignored. Through the application of argumentation strategies such as the *topoi of abuse, finance, and justice* (elaborated in table 1) and the use of nomination and predication strategies which highlighted women's greed (e.g., *gold digger, financial vampire*) and men's exploitation (e.g., *beta provider, workhorse*), MGTOW users are able to justify their ideology of male separatism on the basis that marriage is a site of economic oppression for men.

Step 7: Formulation of critique

The formulation of critique is an essential element of CDS. Critique should not be understood as an entirely negative endeavour and may encompass an assessment of a text or discourse's positive aspects or transformational potential. In the DHA, critique comprises three major aspects: text-immanent critique, socio-diagnostic critique, and prospective critique (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016, p. 25).

Text-immanent or discourse-immanent critique entails critique of the text or discourse itself, such as identifying contradictions or fallacies. While the point of my thesis was not to fact-check all of the claims made within r/MGTOW, I endeavoured to critique explicitly fallacious argumentative strategies, such as attacking a *straw feminist* argument or advancing completely unsourced claims (for instance, one user asserted that women in the UK are paid £11,000 for filing a police report). Socio-diagnostic critique relates to demystifying the manipulative, persuasive or ideological character of the discourse (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016, p. 25), such as assessing the extent to which the discourse could be characterised as sexist and/or misogynistic and critiquing the reproduction of patriarchal gender stereotypes. Finally, prospective critique is transformational and aims to improve future communication (ibid). Through my research, I hope to raise awareness of the sexist and misogynistic ideologies prevalent in MGTOW discourse, who are sometimes overlooked in comparison to other manosphere communities (Jones et al., 2019).

Step 8: Application of the detailed analytical results

Reisigl and Wodak (2016, p. 56) highlight the value of sharing insights with the general public as well as academics. There are now multiple books written on the manosphere for non-academic audiences (e.g. Bates, 2020; Zuckerberg, 2018) and the online men's magazine *MEL* has a regular feature entitled "Dispatches from the Manosphere" suggesting increasing interest in the manosphere among the general public. It has also been recommended that researchers share their results on social media, particularly on the original platform from which data was taken (Unger et al, 2016; Proferes et al., 2021). However, discretion is needed – it is doubtful that an online anti-feminist community would appreciate the results of a study critiquing their sexism and misogyny and so feminist researchers may need to undertake "safety work" (Vera-Gray, 2017) in order to protect themselves from potential backlash from anti-feminists.

Results may also have valuable practical application. My PhD research forms part of the 'MANTRaP' project, a collaboration between linguists at Lancaster University and Birmingham City University. We have worked with various Internet safety charities to help raise awareness about the potential harms of the manosphere and create research-informed tools to combat these harms. Other potential practical applications of manosphere research could include the creation of glossaries so that parents, caregivers or platform moderators know what sort of language to look out for.

Ethical implications

Studying the manosphere from a CDS perspective involves unique ethical challenges (see Aiston, forthcoming). Ideally, CDS should entail self-reflection and self-critique at each stage of the research project (Wodak and Meyer, 2016). Despite this, accounts of the ethical decision-making process within CDS tend to be infrequent or insubstantial (Gorup, 2019; Stommel and de Rijk, 2021). As I have argued (Aiston, forthcoming), reflexivity and transparency regarding ethical decisions is especially important for CDS scholars given the emancipatory aims of the discipline.

However, most resources and guidelines which discuss research ethics were not written with CDS in mind. For instance, guidance which recommends paraphrasing or modifying data from social media to prevent reverse searching (Markham, 2012) is unsuitable for linguistic and discursive analyses (Herring, 1996). Furthermore, many guidelines presuppose that the community under study would be cooperative and so there would be no risks to the researcher when interacting with the community, such as when asking for informed consent. Such assumptions are inapplicable to my research for several reasons. First, there is the concern that users would be hesitant to give consent for their posts to be used in critical research (Herring, 1996). In a so-called ‘post-feminist’ society, many people would deny that they are sexist (Gill, 2007) and may object to having their posts scrutinised as such, even when the research does not aim to critique individual behaviour (Fuchs, 2018; Herring, 1996). Rüdiger and Dayter (2017) acknowledge that groups with “stigmatised” opinions, like the manosphere, may refuse to consent out of concern that they will be poorly represented, or only consent to what they perceive as “objective” research. Because CDS is upfront about its non-objectivity and ideological stance, there is little chance that members of the manosphere would agree to partake in research conducted by someone they perceive as an ideological or political opponent. Moreover, I also did not feel I would be welcome in the community simply due to the fact I am a woman, let alone a feminist in the ‘unobjective’ social sciences. In one of the earliest studies of the manosphere, Lin (2017) performed interviews with members of MGTOW and found members were hesitant to respond and chastised those who did. While some researchers may argue that this means the community should be left alone, others warn of a “chilling effect” in which researchers avoid potentially controversial subjects (Herring, 1996; Fuchs, 2018). It would mean that that overtly racist or misogynistic groups online would remain unresearched, which in my opinion would be unethical for its own reasons.

Therefore, with the approval of my ethical review board, I made the decision to refrain from contacting the users. In the absence of informed consent, I ensured to replace usernames with a generic label like “Commenter5” and remove references to potentially identifying information. This practice of ‘double anonymisation’ appears to be a common practice in discourse analysis, even when there is no explicit discussion of ethics (Stommel and de Rijk, 2021). However, an issue I did not foresee was the frequent sharing of screenshots with the

intent of mocking the users depicted within. Often, these screenshots included the original usernames, faces, and on one occasion a woman's partially naked body. I felt it would be unethical to anonymise MGTOW users who mock other Internet users, but not those who are being mocked. Consequently, I chose to remove usernames and identifying information from such images as well.

Due to the linguistic nature of my research, I decided to use verbatim quotes despite concerns of retrievability. However, this is where MGTOW's quarantine and eventual ban became an unexpected benefit. When a subreddit is placed in a quarantine, the content is no longer available through internal or external search engines. Later on, the subreddit was banned entirely and all content that had ever been submitted to r/MGTOW was removed. This meant that even if a reader copied and pasted the direct quote into Google, they would not find a link to the original post. Consequently, I felt it was more acceptable to publish verbatim quotes, though I maintained my decision to practice double anonymisation because many users still remained active on Reddit after the ban. On the other hand, there are issues with using deleted data (see Pihlaja, 2017, for further discussion). To this end, I would argue that there is a difference between data that was removed because the users no longer wish for others to see it and data that was removed against the will of the users. Many MGTOW users vehemently disagreed with the quarantine and ban, as evidenced by multiple comment threads within my dataset which critiqued the decision and suggested a desire to for their posts to be public. Nonetheless, I make it clear in my research outputs that the data is no longer available. I also did not include any comments within my dataset that had been removed by the users themselves despite this being a functionality of some Reddit API scraping tools.

Overall, navigating these ethical dilemmas has proven to be huge challenge. The lack of formal guidelines for conducting critical, linguistic research into a hostile online community made it more difficult to come to ethical decisions in the first place and incidents of platform intervention meant those decisions had to be continually reviewed. Because of these difficulties, I believe it is important for researchers to think carefully about ethics, reflect on their decisions, and make these decisions transparent in order to provide guidance for others in the field.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued for the value of the discourse-historical approach to critical discourse studies as a theoretical and methodological framework for a study of the manosphere. The principles of interdisciplinarity and triangulation enable the researcher to tackle a social problem from multiple angles and perspectives, applying a wide variety of methods to different sources of data. The DHA is also a practical framework, offering several useful analytical tools, concepts, and methodological steps. Moreover, the approach does not require the analyst to take a neutral position on a controversial subject, but without sacrificing analytical rigour.

However, there are also several challenges when studying hostile online communities like the manosphere. While previous DHA work has included ethnographic elements (e.g., Wodak, 2009), this is likely to be difficult in a study of the manosphere, though not impossible (see Lin, 2017; Basu, 2018). In addition, there are challenges regarding the temporality of online data. Reddit administrators are much less tolerant of hateful content than they were in the past, meaning I have had to change my PhD research plans on multiple occasions. While this may be frustrating as a researcher, there are of course benefits to platform intervention (see Krendel, 2021). Chandrasekharan et al. (2015) found that subreddit bans were effective at reducing the level of hate speech on Reddit as a whole. However, the quarantine measure may be less effective. In a later study, Chandrasekharan et al. (2021) found that although there was a sharp decrease in the number of new users to r/TheRedPill after it was quarantined, there did not appear to be any significant decrease in the amount of misogynistic language or hate speech produced. Furthermore, there is also the possibility that users could migrate to other platforms where hate speech is more tolerated. For example, Ribeiro, Jhaver et al. (2021) found an increase in racism and general toxicity when users of the banned pro-Trump subreddit r/The_Donald migrated to their own self-hosted website. On the other hand, these self-hosted communities are much smaller in their reach and don't appear alongside mainstream content like they would on Reddit. Overall, platform intervention can at least mitigate the reach and potential impact of hateful speech, even if it does not prevent it entirely.

Finally, DHA researchers advocate that researchers share their results widely and outside of academia, including on social media (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016; Unger et al., 2016). However, I have occasionally received unpleasant messages in response to sharing my research on Twitter. One interaction that stands out is a user who sent me a multi-tweet rebuttal of a blog post I wrote for *Internet Matters*, concluding that I should have “productive conversations” with my students regarding my sexual preferences. Unfortunately, such responses to feminist research are not uncommon (Parson, 2019; Vera-Gray, 2017). While the positive interactions outweigh the negative ones, there have certainly been times when I have questioned why I chose such a divisive topic for my PhD and I am often hesitant to discuss my research online. However, as Parson (2019) inspiringly argues, while attacks on feminist research can be demotivating, we must not allow our critics to silence us and prevent us from engaging in socially important, impactful feminist work.

References

- Aiston, (forthcoming). Ethical challenges for using social media data in critical discourse studies. In M. KhosraviNik & E. Esposito (Eds.) *Discourse in the digital age: Rigour and context across emerging discourses on digital participatory spaces*. Manuscript submitted for publication. Publisher TBC
- Baker, P., Gabrielatos, C., KhosraviNik, M., Krzyżanowski, M., McEnery, T., & Wodak, R. (2008). A useful methodological synergy? Combining critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to examine discourses of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK press. *Discourse & Society*, 19(3), 273-306. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0957926508088962>
- Barber, K., (2021). From the outside looking in: The risks and challenges of analysing extremist discourses on far-right and manosphere websites. In. C. Cunningham & C. J. Hall (Eds.), *Vulnerabilities, challenges and risks in applied linguistics* (pp. 284-316). Multilingual Matters.
- Basu, S. (2018). Hiding in plain sight: Disclosure, identity, and the Indian men’s rights movement. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 5(3), 117-129. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/717245#info_wrap
- Bates, L. (2020). *Men who hate women: From incels to pickup artists, the truth about extreme misogyny and how it affects us all*. Simon & Schuster.

Boe, B. (2021). PRAW: The Python Reddit API Wrapper.

<https://praw.readthedocs.io/en/latest/>

Breeze, R. (2011). Critical discourse analysis and its critics. *Pragmatics*, 21(4), 493-525.

<https://doi.org/10.1075/prag.21.4.01bre>

Carter, R. (2020). Young people in the time of COVID-19: a fear and hope study of 16-24 year olds. *Hope Not Hate*. [https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-](https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/youth-fear-and-hope-2020-07-v2final.pdf)

[content/uploads/2020/08/youth-fear-and-hope-2020-07-v2final.pdf](https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/youth-fear-and-hope-2020-07-v2final.pdf)

Chandrasekharan, E., Jhaver, S., Bruckman, A., & Gilbert, E. (2021). Quarantined! Examining the effects of a community-wide moderation intervention on Reddit.

<https://arxiv.org/abs/2009.11483>

Chandrasekharan, E., Pavalanathan, U., Srinivasan, A., Glynn, A., Eisenstein, J. & Gilbert, E. (2017). You can't stay here: the efficacy of Reddit's 2015 ban examined through hate speech. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 31, 1-22.

<https://doi.org/10.1145/3134666>

Dayter, D., & Rüdiger, S. (2022). *The language of pick-up artists: Online discourses of the seduction industry*. Routledge.

Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. Longman.

Fairclough, N., & Wodak, R. (1997). Critical discourse analysis. In T. A. Van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse as social interaction* (pp. 258-284). SAGE Publications.

Fairclough, N., Mulderrig, J., & Wodak, R. (2011). Critical discourse analysis. In T. A. Van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse studies: A multi-disciplinary introduction* (pp. 394-417). SAGE Publications.

Faludi, S. (1991). *Backlash: The undeclared war against American women*. Vintage.

Farrell, T., Araque, O., Fernandez, M., & Harith, A. (2020). On the use of jargon and word embeddings to explore subculture within Reddit's manosphere. *Proceedings of WebSci'20: 12th ACM Conference on Web Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3394231.3397912>

Farrell, T., Fernandez, M., Novotny, J., & Harith, A. (2019). Exploring misogyny across the manosphere in Reddit. *WebSci '19 Proceedings of the 10th ACM Conference on Web Science*, 87-96. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3292522.3326045>

- Forchtner, B. (2017). Critical discourse studies and social theory. In J. Flowerdew & J. E. Richardson (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of critical discourse studies* (pp. 259-271). Routledge.
- Fuchs, C. (2018). 'Dear Mr. Neo-Nazi, can you please give me your informed consent so that I can quote your fascist tweet?' Questions of social media research ethics in online ideology critique. In G. Meikle (Ed.), *The Routledge companion to media and activism* (pp. 385-394). Routledge.
- Gill, R. (2007). Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 147-166. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F136754940707589>
- Gillespie, T. (2018). Regulation of and by platforms. In J. Burgess, A. Marwick & T. Poell (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of social media* (pp. 254-278). SAGE Publications.
- Ging, D. (2019). Alphas, betas, and Incels: Theorizing the masculinities of the manosphere. *Men and Masculinities*, 22(4), 638-657. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1097184X17706401>
- Gorup, M. (2019). Ethics of discourse analysis. In R. Iphofen (Ed.). *Handbook of research ethics and scientific integrity*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76040-7_22-1
- Heritage, F., & Koller, V. (2020). Incels, in-groups and ideologies: the representation of gendered social actors in a sexuality-based online community. *Journal of Language and Sexuality*, 9(2), 152-178. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jls.19014.her>
- Herring, S. C. (1996). Linguistic and critical analysis of computer-mediated communication: Some ethical and scholarly considerations. *The Information Society*, 12(2): 153–168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/911232343>
- Herring, S. C. (2007). A faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse. *Language@Internet*, 4. <https://www.languageatinternet.org/articles/2007/761>
- Jaki, S., De Smedt, T., Gwóźdz, M., Panchal, R., Rossa, A., & De Pauw, G. (2019). Online hatred of women in the Incels.me forum: Linguistic analysis and automatic detection. *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, 7(2), 240-268. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlac.00026.jak>

Jones, C., Trott, V., & Wright, S. (2019). Sluts and soyboys: MGTOW and the production of misogynistic online harassment. *New Media & Society*, 22(10), 1903-1921.

<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1461444819887141>

KhosraviNik, M. (2017). Social media critical discourse studies (SM-CDS). In J. Flowerdew & J. E. Richardson (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of critical discourse studies* (pp.582-596). Routledge.

KhosraviNik, M., & Sarkoh, N. (2017). Arabism and anti-Persian sentiments on participatory web platforms: A social media critical discourse study. *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 3614-3633

Kimmel, M. S. (1987). Men's responses to feminism at the turn of the century. *Gender & Society*, 1(3), 261-83. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F089124387001003003>

Krendel, A. (2020). The men and women, guys and girls of the 'manosphere': a corpus-assisted discourse approach. *Discourse & Society*, 31(6), 607-630.

<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0957926520939690>

Krendel, A. (2021). From sexism to misogyny: Can online echo chambers stay quarantined? In I. Zempi & J. Smith (Eds.), *Misogyny as a hate crime* (pp. 99-118). Taylor & Francis.

Krendel, A., McGlashan, M., & Koller, V. (forthcoming, 2022). The representation of gendered social actors across five manosphere communities on Reddit. *Corpora*, 17(2).

LaViolette, J., & Hogan, B. (2019). Using platform signals for distinguishing discourses: The case of men's rights and men's liberation on Reddit. *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, 13(1), 323-334.

<https://ojs.aaai.org/index.php/ICWSM/article/view/3357>

Lazar, M. M. (2017). Feminist critical discourse analysis. In J. Flowerdew & J. E. Richardson (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of critical discourse studies* (pp. 487-506). Routledge.

Lin, J. L. (2017). Antifeminism online: MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way). In U. U. Frömring, S. Köhn, S. Fox & M. Terry (Eds.), *Digital environments: Ethnographic perspectives across global online and offline spaces* (pp. 77-96). Transcript Verlag.

Mackay, R. R. (2017). *Real women: Objectivity versus situatedness in critical discourse studies*. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 14(5), 548-568.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2017.1320297>

Markham, A. (2012). Fabrication as ethical practice: Qualitative inquiry in ambiguous internet contexts. *Information, Communication, and Society*, 15(3), 334-353.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2011.641993>

Marwick, A. E., & Caplan, R. (2018). Drinking male tears: Language, the manosphere, and networked harassment. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(4), 543-449.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1450568>

Mountford, J. B. (2018). Topic modelling the red pill. *Social Sciences*, 7(3), 1-16.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7030042>

Parson, L. (2019). Digital media responses to a feminist scholarly article: A critical discourse analysis. *Feminist Media Studies*, 19(4), 576-592.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1468348>

Pihlaja, S. (2017). More than fifty shades of grey: Copyright on social network sites. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 8(2-3), 213-228. <https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2016-1036>

Proferes, N., Jones, N., Gilbert, S., Fiesler, C., & Zimmer, M. (2021). Studying Reddit: A systematic overview of disciplines, approaches, methods, and ethics. *Social Media + Society*, 1-14.

<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F205630512111019004>

Rafail, P., & Freitas, I. (2019). Grievance articulation and community reactions in the men's rights movement online. *Social Media + Society*, 5(2), 1-11.

<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2056305119841387>

Reisigl, M. (2014). Argumentation analysis and the discourse-historical approach: a methodological framework. In C. Hart & P. Cap (Eds.), *Contemporary critical discourse studies* (pp. 67-96). Bloomsbury.

Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2001). *Discourse and discrimination: Rhetorics of racism and antisemitism*. Routledge.

Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2016). The discourse-historical approach (DHA). In M. Meyer & R. Wodak (Eds.). *Methods of critical discourse studies* (3rd ed) (pp. 23-61). SAGE Publications.

Ribeiro, M. H., Blackburn, J., Bradlyn, B., de Cristofaro, E., Stringhini, G., Long, S., Greenberg, S., & Zannettou, S. (2021). The evolution of the manosphere across the web. *Proceedings of the 15th International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media (ICWSM 2021)*, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2001.07600>

Ribeiro, M. H., Jhaver, S., Zannettou, S., Blackburn, J., Stringhini, G., de Cristofaro, E., & West, R. (2021). Do platform migrations compromise content moderation? Evidence from r/The_Donald and r/incels. *Proceedings of the ACM On Human-Computer Interaction*, 5, 1-124. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3476057>

Rüdiger, S., & Dayter, D. (2017). The ethics of researching unlikeable subjects: Language in an online community. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 8(2-3), 251-269. <https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2016-1038>

Schmitz, R. M., & Kazyak, E. (2016). Masculinities in cyberspace: An analysis of portrayals of manhood in men's rights activist websites. *Social Sciences*, 5(2), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci5020018>

Stommel, W., & de Rijk, L. (2021). Ethical approval: none sought. How discourse analysts report ethical issues around publicly available online data. *Research Ethics*, 17(3), 275-297. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1747016120988767>

Unger, J. W. (2016). The interdisciplinarity of critical discourse studies research. *Palgrave Communications*, 2(15037), 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2015.37>

Unger, J. W., Wodak, R., & KhosraviNik, M. (2016). Critical discourse studies and social media data. In D. Silverman (Ed.) *Qualitative research* (4th ed.) (pp. 277-294). SAGE Publications.

van Dijk, T. A. (2013). CDA is NOT a method of critical discourse analysis. *Ediso*. <https://www.edisoportal.org/debate/115-cda-not-method-critical-discourse-analysis>

van Dijk, T. A. (2015). Critical discourse analysis. In D. Tannen, H. E. Hamilton & D. Schiffrin (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 466-485). John Wiley & Sons.

van Leeuwen, T. (1996). The representation of social actors. In C.R. Caldas-Coulthard & M. Coulthard (Eds.), *Text and practices: Readings in critical discourse analysis* (pp.32-70). Routledge.

van Valkenburgh, S. P. (2019). "She thinks of him as a machine": On the entanglements of neoliberal ideology and misogynist cybercrime. *Social Media + Society*, 5(3), 1-12.

<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2056305119872953>

Vera-Gray, F. (2017). 'Talk about a cunt with too much idle time': Trolling feminist research.

Feminist Review, 115(1), 61-78. <https://doi.org/10.1057%2Fs41305-017-0038-y>

Wodak, R. (2009). *The discourse of politics in action: Politics as usual*. Springer.

Wodak, R. (2013). Critical discourse analysis: Challenges and perspectives. In R. Wodak (Ed.), *Critical discourse analysis: Volume I concepts, history, theory* (pp. xix-xliii). SAGE

Publications.

Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2016). Critical discourse studies: history, agenda, theory and methodology. *Methods of critical discourse studies* (3rd ed.) (pp. 1-22). SAGE publications.

Wright, S., Trott, V., & Jones, C. (2020). 'The pussy ain't worth it, bro': Assessing the discourse and structure of MGTOW, *Information, Communication & Society*, 23(6), 908-925.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1751867>

Zuckerberg, D. (2018). *Not all dead white men: Misogyny and classics in the digital age*.

Harvard University Press.