

Polarized Pills vs. Gaming Thrills: Empirical Exploration of r/TheRedPill and r/TheBluePill Users in r/gaming

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ABSTRACT

We examine the intersection between gaming and manosphere communities through a collective analysis of comments in the subreddit r/gaming by users of subreddits r/TheRedPill and r/TheBluePill representing two contrastive manosphere communities. We found a significant number of users of these subreddits who were not only participating in gaming discussions, but also exposing their views on gender and role of women in society. Through computational text analytics, we compare underlying themes of their comments in r/gaming to explore how they differ or are similar. Our results suggest: 1) Users of r/TheRedPill and r/TheBluePill both carry and extend gender-related discussions and claims to the gaming community. 2) The difference when they approach the gaming world is nuanced and ambiguous making it difficult to establish a clear-cut distinction between them. 3) Compared to r/TheBluePill users, r/TheRedPill users tend to deliver focused alt-right political discourse.

Keywords

manosphere, online communities, theredpill, thebluepill, gaming

INTRODUCTION

Gaming culture, encompassing social practices, values, and norms surrounding playing and creation of video games (Consalvo 2009), has a significant internet presence and a diverse community of players and enthusiasts. The online gaming community has faced criticism for its treatment of marginalized groups, particularly women and gender non-conforming individuals (Cassell and Jenkins 2000). We focus on the intersection between manosphere related communities r/TheRedPill, r/TheBluePill and the gaming community r/gaming. Both manosphere and gaming communities (particularly the movement named GamerGate) are linked to the rise of the alt-right activism online (e.g., Bezio 2018; Ging 2019; ODonnell 2022). Indeed, we want to corroborate through an empirical example what has been already theorized in literature about the interconnections between these phenomena.

The manosphere represents a network of online communities and blogs that gained attention for controversial views and ideology. They often discuss topics such as men's rights and male privilege (Copland 2020) and have been criticized for promoting harmful attitudes towards women and gender roles (Kimmel et al. 2008). We focused on two subreddits:

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r/TheRedPill and r/TheBluePill. The first one (nowadays a ‘quarantined’ subreddit (Copland 2020) ¹) describes itself as “*discussion of sexual strategy in a culture increasingly lacking a positive identity for men*” (r/TheRedPill 2022) and promotes an ideology (the so-called red pill) believing traditional gender roles and expectations are natural and should be upheld. This perspective is often associated with Men’s Right Activists (MRAs) promoting rights of men and boys. The second subreddit is a contrastive space within r/TheBluePill (Eddington 2019) which describes itself as “*a satire of /r/TheRedPill and the strategies discussed on that particular sub.*” (r/TheBluePill 2022).

Reddit has proven valuable for studying game culture. Besides a popular forum, Reddit is a participatory culture platform (Massanari 2013), with thousands of subreddits, which can be considered topic-focused communities. The r/gaming subreddit with over 35 million subscribers as of January 2023 is one of the biggest and most representative gaming communities (Maloney et al. 2019). This allows studying gaming culture with specific user groups, investigating their attitudes and beliefs. Reddit comments have been analyzed for purposes including gendered comments (Khan and Golab 2020) and the manosphere (LaViolette and Hogan 2019). Focusing on comments in r/gaming by users who also commented in r/TheRedPill and r/TheBluePill, we aim to understand interplay of manosphere communities on gaming culture and its implications.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Manosphere and red pill philosophy

The term “manosphere” is a word pun between “blogosphere” and “man”. It first appeared in 2009 on a Blogspot blog to describe an online network of mens interest communities and it was later popularized by Ian Ironwood (2013), porn marketer and pseudonymous author of the self-published *The Manosphere: A New Hope for Masculinity* (Ging 2019). The manosphere consists of online communities circulating hateful posts about women (Ging 2019; Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019; Van Valkenburgh 2021). It can be considered a network organized around forums, blogs, boards, websites and subreddits and populated near-exclusively by men. It has received considerable media and academic attention most notably for its extreme misogyny, male supremacist views and association with high-profile, off-line events (Ging 2019), including even several killings. Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019) define the manosphere as a corner of the Internet where forms of masculinity and men’s rights activism take place. Manosphere groups are heterogeneous including “*anti-feminists, fathers rights groups, incels (involuntary celibates), androphiles (same-sex attracted men who dont identify as homosexual), paleomasculinists (who believe male domination is natural) and even more obscure fringe groups*” (Marwick and Lewis 2017, p. 13). What unites them is the desire to regain dominant roles within society and dispute the alleged hegemonic position of feminist movements in political and public debate. The latter are considered guilty of obscuring the natural order based on complementarity between the two sexes and ethical and moral superiority of men over women (Vingelli 2019). This thought adheres to so-called “red pill” philosophy aiming to demystify deceptions of feminism.

The red pill concept is mutated from the movie “Matrix” (Wachowski et al. 1999), where the protagonist must choose between a blue pill, to continue living in the virtual ‘matrix’ and a red pill, which lets him lift the veil of mystification and discover the true nature of

reality. Accordingly, the main objective of manosphere communities is to make people aware of domination that women exercise through seductiveness and sexuality (Vingelli 2019). Those not adhering to red pill philosophy are called “bluepilled”, meaning they have not gained awareness about the “LMS” theory, according to which only looks, money and status (L, M, S) are needed to attract women, while any female body would be enough for men. This theory denounces sexual asymmetry within society and hardships of men who do not reach standards of beauty and socio-economic capital to guarantee reproductive success. A symbolic inversion of the gender inequality concept is thus emerging, where the male gender is discriminated. Particularly, men see themselves as victims of feminism, rather addressed as “misandry”. According to them:

“Women try to subvert the status quo at the expenses of men, and they need to be punished and made once again submissive. As a consequence, the protection of women and condemnation of sexual violence is equated with an attack on men, and misogynist narratives are described as attempts to counteract feminist misandry” (Dickel and Evolvi 2022, p. 13).

However, the manosphere’s political demands are not only a fight against feminism, but against hegemonic masculinity. The manosphere exhibits a hybrid masculinity distancing itself from the hegemonic one (Connell 2003), but simultaneously supporting social and symbolic barriers between the two sexes (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Groups in the manosphere reject some typical aspects of traditional masculinity such as homophobia, exaltation of physical power and economic status, while not renouncing the objective of a masculinity capable of exerting hegemonic action on the female - and feminist - world (Ging 2019). In the wake of Halpin (2022) one can theorize that men weaponize self-perceived subordination to men they consider attractive, desirable and hegemonic (i.e., “Chads”) to legitimize their hegemonic participation in subjugation of women.

Alt-right activism online

Also important are less obvious connections between manosphere networks and alternative right activism. Communities such as r/TheRedPill “*view themselves as the aggrieved party in an historic trajectory in which they have been repeatedly victimized by the mainstream, by ‘Liberals,’ and by women and minorities who ‘take’ their jobs, social support, and political power in the fight for equality and social justice*” (Bezio 2018, p. 557). The manosphere - together with movements such as Paleoconservatism, White Nationalism and Identitarianism - is one faction contributing to the alt-right movement, a neoconservative subculture that emerged through sites like Reddit and became legitimized through conservative outlets like Breitbart (Eddington 2019). Bokhari and Yiannopoulos (2016) define alt-right as an amorphous movement bursting in the national political scene in 2015, concerning “mostly white, mostly male middle-American radicals, who are unapologetically embracing a new identity politics that prioritizes the interests of their own demographic”². Alt-righters differ from establishment conservatives, who they term “cuckservatives”³ that “care more about the free market than preserving western culture, and who are happy to endanger the latter with mass immigration where it serves the purposes of big business” (ibid.).

Alt-right movement not only emerged online, but is characterized by use of social media and memes. Memes are considered caricatured tools to scandalize older generations and “are often spliced together with Millennial pop culture references, from old 4chan memes

like pepe the frog, to anime and My Little Pony references” (ibid.). Online communities nourishing alt-right activism tend to isolate themselves and create digital echo-chambers of problematic social attitudes. The latter encourage and amplify toxicity of alt-right participants, reverberating in violent reactions full of hatred towards minorities.

GamerGate and online gaming communities

The rise of the alt-right online, as Bezio (2018) demonstrates, is linked to online gaming communities, particularly the movement named 2013 onward as “#GamerGate”: “a decentralized harassment campaign to keep women out of gaming under the guise of a crusade against unethical games journalism” (Butt and Apperley 2016). It started targeting game developer Zoe Quinn, accused by her ex-boyfriend of having offered sexual performances to journalists for favourable reviews of her game “Depression Quest” (The Quinnsspiracy 2013), and feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian, who was launching a crowdfunded web series deconstructing sexist stereotypes in videogames. These stories were used to enrage the “Gaming community” on imageboards, starting a harassment campaign (nominally) aiming to protect the videogame world from corrupted journalists, feminists, and so-called “social justice warriors”.

Soon, “GamerGaters” adopted extreme right wing ideas to fight “Cultural Marxism” threatening videogames, creating numerous conspiracy theories about Jews, Muslims and progressive elites collaborating to subvert the status quo of the “western world” and “white men” by encouraging politically correct games. The movement employed violent and dangerous harassment methods towards enemies, including trolling, threats of death and sexual violence, doxing⁴ and even swatting⁵. It should also be emphasized that the alt-right itself recognizes a precursor in GamerGate. As Eve Keneinan, an exponent of american alt-right, claims: “GG *will* in the end be rightly seen as the first fight in a crucial war”⁶, that against “woke” culture and Social Justice Warriors. As Lees (2022) observed:

“The similarities between GamerGate and [...] the alt-right, are huge, startling and in no way a coincidence. After all, the culture war that began in games now has a senior representative in The White House. As a founder member and former executive chair of Breitbart News, Steve Bannon had a hand in creating media monster Milo Yiannopoulos, who built his fame and Twitter following by supporting and cheerleading GamerGate. This hashtag was the canary in the coalmine, and we ignored it” (Lees 2022).

Thus, GamerGate - like the manosphere - contributed to the rise of alt-right, with discourses on politics, society, and gender inequalities (drawn also by the manosphere itself). Nevertheless, GamerGate offered a platform both to alt-right activists and manosphere members to claim their political demands. Both online communities share a common matrix of meanings used to frame themselves and issues they address. This “framing” attributes meaning to events, conditions, and social actors (Snow 2004), involving “diagnosis” - identification and analysis of a problem in social life and attribution of blame to one or more actors - and “prognosis” - elaboration of a solution to the problem specifying steps the organization should take to overcome it (Snow and Benford 1988).

The existence of this matrix of shared meanings and a common alt-right umbrella including both manosphere networks and GamerGate, leads us to investigate in more depth the

intersections between these phenomena. We investigate:

1. Which are the main topics of the gaming world the manosphere is interested in;
2. How manosphere activists approach the gaming world, specifically how their presence and behaviours are articulated in Reddit, one of the world’s largest forum aggregators;
3. If the persons who feel they belong to the manosphere see moving into online gaming communities as an extension of political activity or merely as entertainment.

METHOD

Data Collection

We collected all comments on r/TheRedPill and r/TheBluePill from January 2015 to July 2018 ⁷ using the Pushshift API ⁸. The user list of these comments is used to collect their commenting history in r/gaming during the same period. We aggregated the comment text in r/gaming for each user as a document for analysis. The number of comments each user made in r/TheRedPill and r/TheBluePill are also collected to represent activity in those communities; activity represents participation in the communities, not necessarily ideological adherence as critical commenters are participants too.

We take care to consider ethical aspects of using the collected data (Proferes et al. 2021). To our knowledge, no restrictions are imposed by the studied subreddits to use the data for research purposes, unlike, e.g., r/depression and r/SuicideWatch where data use requires approval by their community moderators. On the other hand, the data collected from Pushshift API does not exactly mirror the content on Reddit, which means content deleted by users may still be collected. Therefore we do not disclose user account information for a better balance between privacy and discoverability.

Text Analytics

Topic modeling (Blei et al. 2003) is used to analyze collected text data and extract underlying themes. It allows each document to have multiple themes, unlike hard clustering. It represents each document as a mixture of underlying topics, with each topic having a distribution of words that characterize a theme. The probability of words occurring in a document is modeled as a sum over K topics:

$$p(w|d) = \sum_{k=1}^K p(k|d)p(w|k) \quad (1)$$

where $p(k|d)$ is the prevalence of topic k in the document (probability to choose topic k when generating a word), and $p(w|k)$ is the probability to pick word w from topic k .

The probabilities are learned by fitting the model to a document set, optimizing its ability to represent their content. The resulting topics correspond to underlying themes in the data according to what best describes the documents, without requiring pre-specified hypotheses of their content.

We also collect the number of comments each user made in r/TheRedPill and r/TheBluePill reflecting their activity in those communities. To use this information, we chose a more

advanced topic model called Structural Topic Model (STM, Roberts et al. 2016). It is used to model and analyze how topic prevalence in documents is affected by document-level covariates. STM models prevalences $p(k|d)$ of all K topics in a document d with a vector $\theta_d = [p(1|d), \dots, p(K|d)]^\top$ drawn from a distribution that depends on the covariates, so that

$$\theta_d \sim \text{LogisticNormal}_{K-1}(\mathbf{\Gamma}^\top \mathbf{x}_d, \mathbf{\Sigma}) \quad (2)$$

where \mathbf{x}_d is a vector of the document-level covariates, $\mathbf{\Sigma}$ is a covariance matrix, and $\mathbf{\Gamma}$ is a coefficient matrix governing interaction between covariates and topic prevalence.

To determine the optimal number of topics that can effectively represent a large comment corpus, the held-out likelihood criterion is used, where 50% of the words in the documents are not used to build the topic distributions, and the STM models are evaluated by their likelihood on this held-out portion. This represents their ability to represent previously unseen text. Though the held-out likelihood has received criticism (Chang et al. 2009), it is a commonly used method to decide the number of topics with STM (Stamolampros et al. 2019).

After deciding the number of topics, model selection is done by a semantic coherence criterion (David et al. 2010), which quantifies how strongly the top most probable words in each topic co-occur over documents, technically as a sum of their pointwise mutual information values. We train 10 models with different initializations. The model having highest semantic coherence was chosen as the final model. In the final model, 50 topics were extracted.

When analyzing model output, we examine top words with highest probabilities and Frex values for each topic. The Frex value for each word v in topic k is computed as

$$FREX_{k,v} = \left(\frac{\omega}{ECDF(\beta_{k,v} / \sum_{j=1}^K \beta_{j,v})} + \frac{1 - \omega}{ECDF(\beta_{k,v})} \right)^{-1} \quad (3)$$

where $ECDF(\cdot)$ denotes the empirical cumulative distribution function (proportion of items smaller than the value inside the parentheses) and ω is the weight balancing word frequency and exclusivity, here $\omega = 0.5$. We consider both top frequent and Frex words to remedy the effect where common uninformative words may be shared by several topics, the Frex score solves this by emphasizing exclusivity of each word of a topic. Each topic is labeled by the authors by examining its top words and example quotes (documents with high prevalence of the topic), similar to “coding” in thematic analysis (Cooper et al. 2012).

RESULTS

Collected Data

We collected data from the Pushshift API for r/TheRedPill, r/TheBluePill, and r/gaming from January 2015 to July 2018. There were 73,655 unique users commenting in r/TheRedPill, and 18,454 in r/TheBluePill. Among them, 17,877 (24.27%) and 5,821 (31.54%) had commented in r/gaming, respectively. This reflects the degree of interaction between online manosphere communities and gaming community.

There were 1131 users who commented in r/TheRedPill, r/TheBluePill, as well as r/gaming, even though r/TheRedPill, r/TheBluePill consist of different perspectives and ideologies. The small number also reflects boundaries within the manosphere related communities.

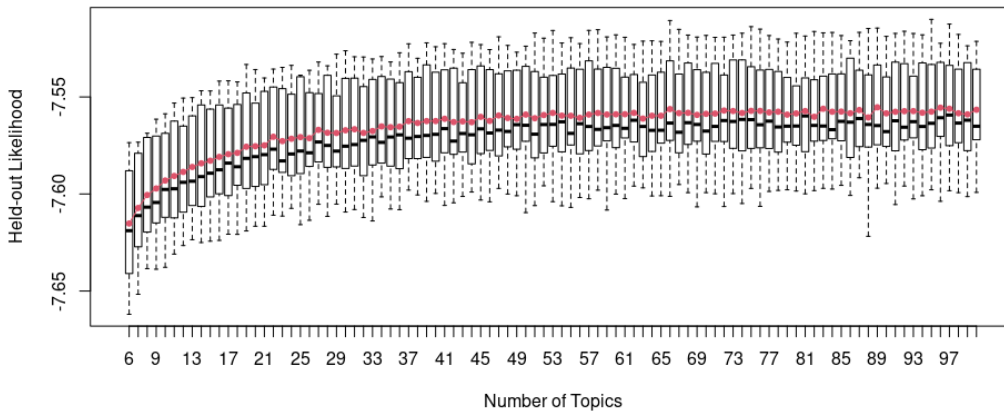


Figure 1: Held-out likelihood over number of topics (horizontal axis). Box-plots show variance: median (bar), 25%-75% quantiles (boxes), 1.5 interquartile range (whiskers), and outliers (circles). The red dot line is the mean value.

Model Selection

Figure 2 shows the model selection process: change of held-out likelihood values of 10 randomly initialized models over different K . The values plateaued after 45 to 60 topics. For simplicity we then chose $K = 50$. We then ran 10 randomly initialized models with this K and picked the one with the best semantic coherence (normalized point-wise mutual information, Mimno et al. 2011) as the final model.

Extracted Topics

Tables 1 to 3 show the top 10 frequent and top 10 Frex words of the extracted 50 topics. The topics reveal a wide range of discussion from gaming and social interactions on the internet to societal implications.

Gaming related topics. A prominent set of topics concern aspects of gaming and gaming culture from general game-play, hardware, and design, to game genres and series. They reflect core interests of the community *r/gaming*.

The topic **Game-Play** with top words such as “game”, “player”, “get”, “team”, and “win” represents general game-play experiences. There are also topics on specific game-play and mechanics. **Combat and Conflict** describes fight scenes. **Shooting Gameplay** with top frequent words “shoot”, “gun”, “kill” and top Frex words “sniper”, “gun”, “rifle” describes gameplay involving shooting and gunplay:

“... Your machine gun wasn’t designed for accuracy though. Also the ones you train on are already pretty shot out. ...”

Online Gaming with top Frex words “friend”, “online”, “play”, and “twitch” emphasizes interaction with other players online:

Table 1: Extracted Topics. Top words with highest probabilities [P] and Frex values [F].

Topic (Prob %)	Top Words
Preferences & Analogues (7.13%)	[P]: like just get thing see people can much game actually [F]: like thing just lot seem actually stuff see something everything
Gratitude (5.34%)	[P]: will good want know get make try thank need can [F]: thank cool haha hope happy guess okay sad want nice
Enjoyment (5.33%)	[P]: game good really play much fun great feel look love [F]: amaze enjoy fun great awesome feel love bore havent favorite
Internet Jargon (4.28%)	[P]: fuck shit like dude look guy yes god make get [F]: fuck dude pussy bro shit jesus christ holy retard cunt
Uncertainty (3.61%)	[P]: one say probably know just yes guy though sure pretty [F]: probably one pretty sure though two guy suppose maybe bunch
Certainty (3.20%)	[P]: can make much also use even get want work try [F]: also without require small lot model depend problem allow possible
Nostalgia (2.67%)	[P]: remember play game back old time year pokemon day beat [F]: pokemon skate tony childhood birthday goldeneye hawk nhl resident pikachu
School (2.63%)	[P]: get kid time tell school hour take week last high [F]: school dad kid college gift grade home christmas teacher mom
Game Purchase (2.61%)	[P]: game will release buy dlc order year pre content developer [F]: pre dlc preorder dev developer release review order ubisoft indie
Time (2.60%)	[P]: now get work ass gonna can see give let name [F]: dat remindme hello sir sauce joe sunday gentleman biden delhi
Body Appearance (2.59%)	[P]: look like face cat eye baby black animal right paint [F]: cat cream toilet poop doo chicken banana dew trevor shirt
Online Gaming (2.49%)	[P]: play friend gaming game time now online people day can [F]: friend online play twitch weekend rekt beta streamer server regret
Money & Transaction (2.43%)	[P]: money pay buy sell people price card will company spend [F]: transaction money gamble pay business sell micro customer cost dollar
Insult (2.38%)	[P]: man can good right die love dog damn first dead [F]: heh song dog scary whoa bastard jason damnit amnesia crawl
Hyperlinks (2.32%)	[P]: com https http www watch youtube comment imgur reddit jpg [F]: gifv jpg imgur png http got youtube robit www tms
Opinions (2.31%)	[P]: think way never point someone literally ever good really matter [F]: point literally way matter think someone never whatever random understand
Game Hardware (2.30%)	[P]: use work can screen computer back around phone drive button [F]: phone button screen computer driver battery window drive cable plug

Table 2: Extracted Topics (2).

Topic (Prob %)	Top Words
Peoples' Opinions (2.20%)	[P]: say people mean know comment talk make wrong opinion care [F]: opinion argue disagree agree wrong discussion statement talk say assumption
Sense and Feelings (2.17%)	[P]: much little feel really even change time will sense life [F]: sense change absolutely feel specifically incredibly effort little towards tend
Game-Play (2.05%)	[P]: game player get team win every good hour shit play [F]: league pubg overwatch battlefront dota csgo competitive fortnite fifa dayz
Daily Activities (2.00%)	[P]: year time take live need house month eat every may [F]: food wife eat rend house healthy weight family chair cook
Shooting Gameplay (1.94%)	[P]: shoot gun kill can get car gta just weapon map [F]: sniper gun rifle bullet norris round shoot pistol grenade helicopter
Appreciation (1.81%)	[P]: good much still may right though need can case etc [F]: feature case etc however option whether improve may simple actual
Reddit Expressions (1.80%)	[P]: lol just thats cant yes even say yea didnt lmao [F]: isnt wouldnt thats doesnt alot theyre cant didnt youve ive
Reddit Functionalities (1.77%)	[P]: post can reddit mean account link karma please bot vote [F]: karma repost post account upvoted upvotes darn reposts upvote request
Humor (1.75%)	[P]: show kind joke see art really think funny now can [F]: kojima humor metal art konami videogame actor voice kind silent
Combat and Conflict (1.70%)	[P]: kill will end get enemy fight attack run power damage [F]: damage heal attack enemy sneak strength opponent guard wander turret
Time and Remakes (1.50%)	[P]: day original first year call can come three ask much [F]: doom row three quake gate original correctly brilliant band reboot
Gender Issues (1.38%)	[P]: woman man female male people much game white gender sex [F]: feminist gender sexist woman sjws feminism sjw male anita female
Gaming Consoles (1.36%)	[P]: console xbox year buy can controller one switch nintendo little [F]: xbox console sony exclusive gen xboxone microsoft controller switch psn
Game Elements & Mechanics (1.34%)	[P]: game story gameplay base good make play mechanic one mission [F]: mechanic genre gameplay mission unique story element puzzle base exploration
Fandom & Paratexts (1.27%)	[P]: character girl cosplay like fantasy look movie final link comic [F]: cosplay costume cosplayers boob kratos naked raiden snake comic mgs
Society & Economics (1.23%)	[P]: term experience market system interest form exist numb definition value [F]: definition individual research behavior maintain ultimately basis production term provide

Table 3: Extracted Topics (3).

Topic (Prob %)	Top Words
American Politics (1.21%)	[P]: much trump country right white government state nazis nazi law [F]: supporter trump democrat nazis republican government socialist nazi hillary liberal
War & Nationalism (1.19%)	[P]: war american also black german city world soldier empire culture [F]: german eastern east asian indian soviet europe greek roman rome
From Software Games (1.14%)	[P]: dark soul boss get level can hard fight easy time [F]: soul demons dark parry bonfire bloodborne smough boss ornstein dodge
First-person Shooter Games (1.08%)	[P]: halo cod map destiny campaign good battlefield multiplayer war shooter [F]: mcc cod titanfall halo destiny bungie chief campaign warfare spartan
Bethesda RPG Games (1.08%)	[P]: fallout skyrim new bethesda good quest vega world oblivion game [F]: morrowind ncr fallout oblivion vega planescape wasteland tes settlement scroll
MMO Games (1.07%)	[P]: space ship planet raid star player back build wow start [F]: raid fleet guild eve planet ship planetside ark tbc wildstar
Graphics&Hardware (1.06%)	[P]: will graphic can game look high new hardware build low [F]: gpu ram fps gtx setting laptop framerate nvidia ssd spec
AAA Action/Adventure Games (1.02%)	[P]: witcher effect mass game series story war make end combat [F]: bioware kotor andromeda witcher horizon mass creed inquisition assassins uncharted
Nintendo Games (1.02%)	[P]: mario zelda game nintendo don super smash wii switch new [F]: splatoon botw zelda don doesn't mario isn't kart didn't oot
Gaming Devices (1.01%)	[P]: run much speed mouse steam key will keyboard hard need [F]: pcpartpicker corsair muda tap headphone mouse keyboard ghz uplay asus
Political ideology (0.99%)	[P]: argument can read say word racist even people bad actually [F]: capitalism communism ignorance insult fallacy racist racism ideology rationalwiki marx
Fantasy (0.98%)	[P]: like can armor one sword use god die say magic [F]: yum lolwaffle hug spaghetti chef triss macaroni arch viking
Modding & Monetization (0.92%)	[P]: mod valve make free get steam pay will community work [F]: modders modder mod valve modding gabe nexus donation piracy workshop
Retrogaming (0.90%)	[P]: game nes nintendo one version sonic sega snes disc release [F]: vita dreamcast nes genesis sonic sega gba snes atari psp
Wiki Resources (0.85%)	[P]: org wiki wikipedia https use english software create non file [F]: org wikipedia pmwiki wiki privacy pdf tvtropes network wikimedia noun
VR Games (0.69%)	[P]: physic game engine much animation look render space control vive [F]: physic vive rick morty oculus asm collision rift render embed
Reddit Bot (0.31%)	[P]: amp gem reddit com https message nbsp compose bot comment [F]: gem nbsp compose faq bloop bleep amp this exclude quot

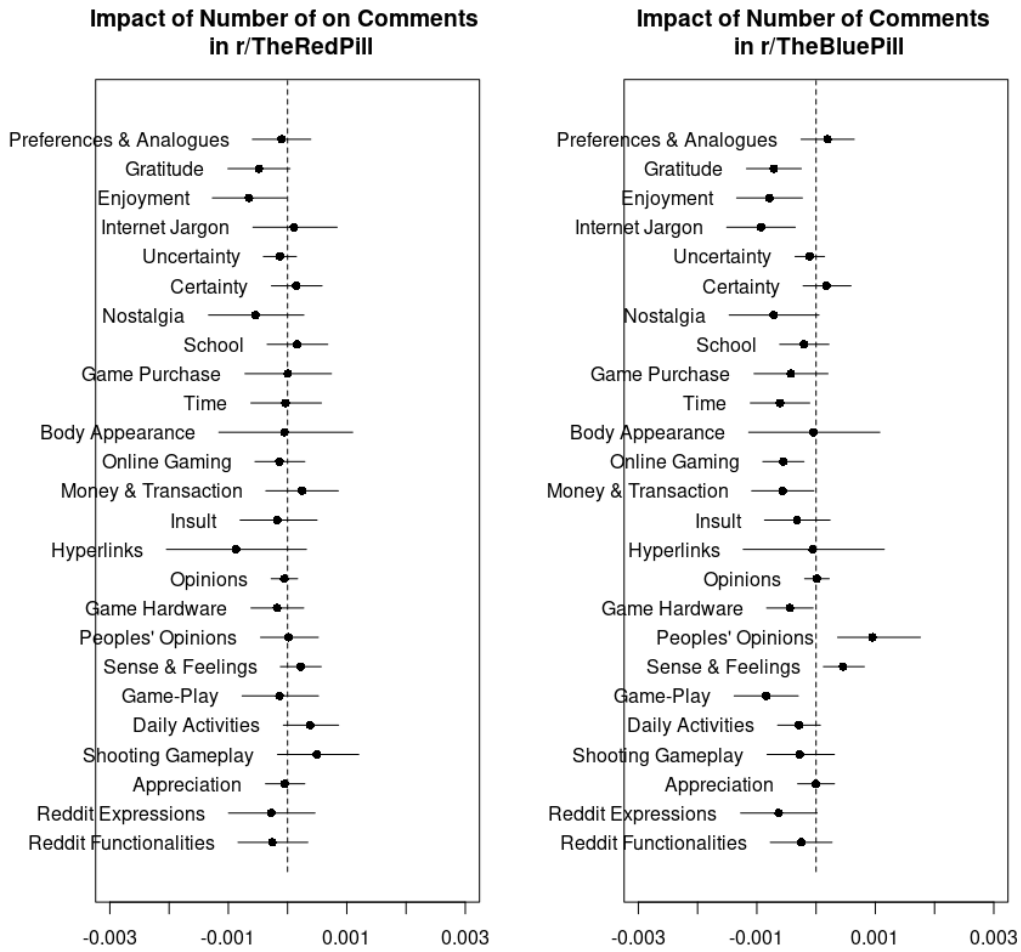


Figure 2: Influence of activities in Manosphere on preferred topics in r/gaming (1)

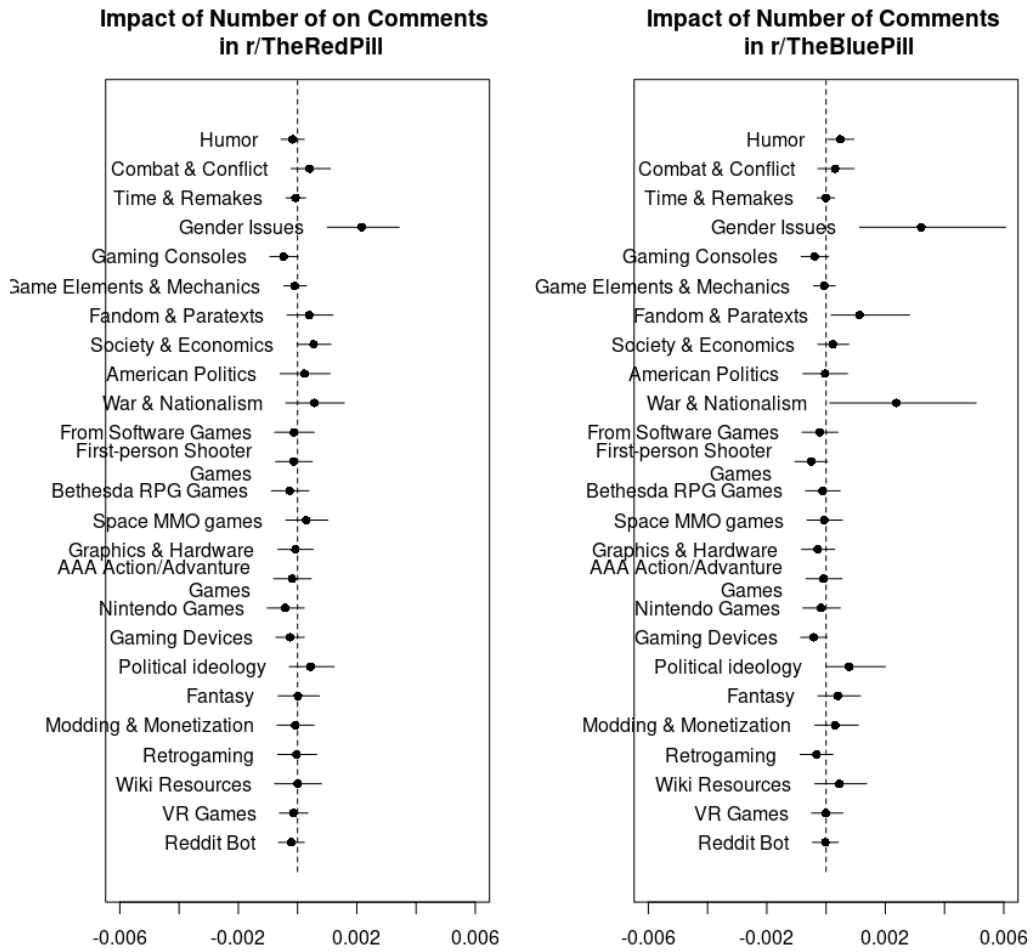


Figure 3: Influences of activities in Manosphere on preferred topics in r/gaming (2)

“... I’m looking for a list of games for PC that let you play locally with a friend and let’s you play online... my friend and I ... 2 strangers from the internet are on the orange team....”

Besides game-play, a collection of topics discuss gaming platforms and hardware. **Gaming Devices** with top words including “speed”, “mouse”, and “keyboard” is about performance of devices and hardware, and, **Gaming Consoles** with top words including “console”, “xbox”, and “controller” is about gaming consoles. Other similar topics include **Game Hardware** , and **VR Games** (top Frex words “physic”, “vive”, “rick”, “morty”, and “oculus”):

“... Lie down on your bed with a VR headset ...That’s because your body’s interpretation of motion is based on both visual and physical cues... ”.

Another topic group concerns game genres, such as **Bethesda RPG Games** , **First-person Shooter Games** and **Space MMO games** (top frequent words “space”, “ship”, “planet”, and “raid”):

“...Ships are some of the worse looking spaceships I have ever seen in my life. 3 archetypes: Lego bricks with wings, bulldozers with wings, and the decent ones copied from Star Wars...”

Some topics concern game design and settings, such as **Game Setting** with top Frex words “mechanic”, “mission”, and “puzzle”; and **Computer Graphics** with top Frex words “gifv”, “jpg”, “imgur”.

Interactions on Social Media. Several topics concern social media interactions as r/gaming is a discussion platform. They characterize tones and language in social media communications between players.

Most of those topics concern expressions such as **Humor** (top frequent words “show”, “kind”, “joke”) and **Opinions** (top frequent words “think”, “way”, “never”, and “point”):

“... I hadn’t considered the matter from that perspective before. That is a decent point. I had not thought about it that way before...”

Other similar topics include **Sense and Feelings** (top words “much”, “little”, “feel”, “really”), **Appreciation** (top words “good”, “much”, “still”, “may”), and **Internet Jargon** (top words “fuck”, “shit”, “like”, “dude”).

Implications outside of gaming. We also found topics discuss broader implications, such as **Fandom & Paratext** (with top frequent words “character”, “girl”, “cosplay”, “like”) and topics on politics. A notable topic **Political Ideology** contains top Frex words “capitalism”, “communism”, and “ignorance” demonstrating that politicized discussions occur in the gaming community:

“...capitalists require every other community to be just like them...destroy communist societies en masse... any ideology would fail if it was put in place in a world where...”

Gender Issues with top frequent words including “woman”, “man”, “female”, and top Frex words “feminist”, “gender”, “sexist” reflects how gendered discussions also take place in r/gaming:

“... Men are douchebags, women are victims of a shitty culture...”

Topics **War & Nationalism** with top words “american”, “soldier”, “empire”, “culture” and **American Politics** with top words such as “trump”, “country”, “right”, “white”, and “government” emphasize American politics and its relations to other countries.

Association to activities in r/TheRedPill and r/TheBluePill

Figures 2 and 3 display the influence of users’ number of comments in r/TheRedPill and r/TheBluePill on the topics of their comments in r/gaming. Bars represent 95% simulated intervals. For most topics, activities in manosphere related communities do not show significant associations to topic prevalences. However, the number of comments in r/TheRedPill, positively influences prevalence of topics **Gender Issues**, **Society & Economics** and negative impacts **Enjoyment**. The number of comments in r/TheBluePill positively influences not only prevalence of **Gender Issues** but also **People’s Opinions, Sense & Feelings, Fandom & Paratexts, War & Nationalism**, and **Political Ideology**. It also negatively impacts topics **Game-play, Money and Transaction, Gratitude, Enjoyment, Internet Jargon, Time, Game Hardware, and Game-play**. Activity in r/TheBluePill seems to show more influences on their users’ commenting in r/gaming, both positively and negatively.

DISCUSSION

Intriguingly, r/TheRedPill, and r/TheBluePill both show significant interest in discussing **Gender Issues** in r/gaming. Besides shared dimensions, our results reveal nuance between the r/TheRedPill, and r/TheBluePill. The r/TheRedPill community appears focused having a specific direction and political agenda. Besides **Gender Issues**, the users also show interest in discussing **Society & Economics** in r/gaming. Although sharing a similar topic preference on **Gender Issues**, r/TheBluePill shows a more mixed, even contradictory profile. Their users in r/gaming are not particularly interested in **American Politics** but tend to discuss **Political Ideologies** and **War and Nationalism** at the same time. Comparing to r/TheRedPill, the more significant impact intervals in Figures 2 and 3 imply stronger preferences and more diverse interests for topics in r/gaming. The characteristics of r/TheBluePill may be due to inherent ambiguity of the community which presents itself as satirical and meme-oriented. It appears a variegated group of manosphere true believers, critics of red pill philosophy trying to debunk it, trolls and not-openly aligned users mainly interested in memes. The tendency to the topic **Humor** corroborates the profile. We outline characteristics and nuance of the two communities on three macro groups of selected previous topics: gender relationships, politics and gaming community. We analyze in-depth example comments having high prevalence of topics in these focused groups.

Gender Relationships

Despite its internal differences, fighting against feminism is a core principle of the manosphere. This topic is often present in both r/TheRedPill and r/TheBluePill users’ conversations in r/gaming. The gaming community is perceived among the “last strongholds” of the male

dominated world where feminists and other corrupting forces have not completely unbalanced the ideal societal order (Bezio 2018). We investigate comments where the **Gender Issues** topic is prevalent, noting comments from users having high numbers of comments in r/TheRedPill and r/TheBluePill, respectively. As seen in the examples, the most obvious way to try to control this space is aggressively policing its imagined boundaries. The goal is delegitimizing subjectivities presenting themselves as female and those who are not sufficiently hostile towards them:

“Why do all you sweaty virgins upvote this just because its a girl?”

“Pics of the box of legos or it didnt happen Are you even a real girl?”

Comments from r/TheRedpill users seem more active in such activity which usually features aggressive and vulgar language as these excerpts show. The rhetorical operation tries to depict the categories of “woman” and “gamer” as mutually exclusive. Either users who present themselves as women are not really women but just looking for attention or are really women and need to give proofs they are actually gamers, something never required from male counterparts. Men who do not show a conflictual attitude towards women are defined with derogatory terms like “virgin” or “simp”. The latter indicates someone who would do anything to attract women’s attention. The term is insidious implying a world view where a man positively interacts with a woman only for sexual gains. This delegitimizing approach is not the only one, but the most obvious and vulgar. A more complex operation is using videogames (and more generally entertainment media) as starting points for introducing “redpilled” narration. Videogame stories, characters and settings are used to underline the manosphere narration “double standard” of today’s society where men are forced to be ashamed of who they are while women are always understood and/or justified:

“Men are called toxic for enjoying things feminists don’t approve of. To be equal women should be called toxic if they enjoy anything a feminist dislikes. Men are criticized all the time for their choice of entertainment.”

“They say that muscly/attractive men are also a male power fantasy, then why plaster them all over the cover of female targeted “romance” novels? Men don’t buy those.”

In these quotes from r/TheBluePill users the narration of the gaming world is more reasoned than the delegitimizing one, shared by users of the less radical r/TheBluePill subreddit. Agreeable starting points, like body objectification of men in romance entertainment, are used to introduce more radical concepts.

Another subtle expression of traditional gender related-manosphere beliefs is “benevolent sexism” (Glick and Fiske 2018), denoting apparently positive attitudes towards women (e.g., that women should be cherished and protected). In reality these attitudes imply an idea of women as inferior to men, having (supposedly) inherent emotional fragility, lack of competences and/or leadership capabilities.

*“I like to think Lydia is the competent one, assigned by Balgruuf to keep this moron who just happens to be dragonborn alive ...I find I enjoy the game a lot more when I think of things that way. ... I *adore* Lydia. The childlike innocence ... the reckless disregard for her own*

*life and being snarky toward a literal hero of myth (“I am *sworn* to carry your burdens.”) is everything I’ve ever wanted in an NPC companion.” (Redpill redditor)*

Lydia above is a non-playable character in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks 2011). She can accompany the player throughout the game and has fun (and funny) interactions with the protagonist, but, while a competent warrior, is represented as subservient to her master. Upon meeting her, she is commanded by her feudal lord to become the player’s adjutant and from then on she obeys the player’s every order. The player can also marry Lydia who accepts the proposal like every other command. As in other research on r/gaming (Maloney et al. 2019), results show a complex picture of toxic, positive and indifferent practices. The less extremist stance of r/TheBluePill users appears in several comments and even sympathetic opinions towards harassment suffered by Anita Sarkeesian:

*“Fucking hell man, I don’t know why you think this discussion is about you and the way you talk about Anita Sarkeesian. It’s a post about Sarkeesian talking about the threats and attacks she *does* get...Nobody’s fuckin’ saying *everything* she gets is an attack, just that she *does* get attacked, and if you’re trying to claim otherwise then you’re being massively disingenuous...No matter people’s opinions on her, I hope at least a few watch this and realize that, you know, she is still a human being.” (BluePill redditor)*

This is relevant as she was a favorite GamerGate target and harassment towards her was brutal. That this community is not unanimous on polarizing issues like GamerGate suggests that complete identification of r/TheBluePill with the manosphere and the alt-right may not be possible.

Society and Politics

Similarly to the previous topic group we find framing of political narration typical of alt-right movements, especially in comments with prominent topic prevalence of **American Politics**:

“ U leftards want the country to fail. Bill maher said it himself. Because u hate success. Because u are basement dwelling bernout soyboys.”

“Democrats founded the KKK Nazis were socialists Bernie wrote gang rape porn. Hillary defended pedophiles for a living.”

These comments seem to validate the idea, introduced by alt-right members like Allum Bokhari and Milo Yannopoulos, that alt-right is not defined by how society should be but by what should not be allowed to exist. The main commonality among the movement is what they want to destroy: feminism, multiculturalism and left-wing leaning ideologies.

As happened with the gender relationship topic, the considered redditors use videogames as examples or political commentaries of what they believe are societal trends:

“Under his rule, the economy is up with gold literally falling from the skies. He is for a strong national defense. He supports meritocracy in the political appointments of subordinate bosses. He kicked out all the previous monarch’s fungus cronies and made them get real jobs supporting local economies. Clearly, we should all support the Bowser/Koopa Presidential

Ticket in 2016.”

“AC is typical we wuz kangz Negro propaganda, Wolfenstein is anti-American, anti-white propaganda and Horizon is strong, empowered white women propaganda. That leaves you with Bloodborne.”

Compared to gender related discourse, seem to contain more humor and irony making interpretation more difficult. The first excerpt is identifiable as a friendly joke about Super Mario; while referring to topics like state administration, it is not linkable to any structured political position. The second excerpt is very explicit, but this makes it much more difficult to interpret. Mocking language shrouds the writer’s intentions. The commentator may believe what it writes but may as well be critical of the red pill theories, expressing criticism by aping its enemies. This ambiguity is an essential part of the manosphere (and de-facto of alt-right) and forces us to be careful when interpreting comments. The alt-right took pains to separate their image from far-right activist stereotypes seen as little more than dull and violent brutes. Clever use of humor in political narration is one centerpiece of alt-right strategy to renovate the image of far-right politics.

Gaming Community Wellbeing

The comments, especially from r/TheBluePill users show constant concern about wellbeing of gaming communities. Users often discuss how gaming experiences are worsened by predatory practices by corporations that own their favorite videogames or boardgames, as shown in two comments with high prevalence of the topic **Money & Transaction**:

“The whole secondary market where a few guys are lucky and get rare, powerful cards ... It is gambling, and nothing in the gameplay dictates that the packs have to be random.”

“Magic cards have no inherent value. ...Paying upwards for a small piece of mass-produced card is ridiculous; ... it does not support the creators; and the chief reason I’m bothered - it locks people out of the game.”

In these excerpts redditors lament that the secondary market around the trading card game *Magic: the Gathering* (Wizards of the Coast 1993) raises price of game pieces and locks poorest gamers out of the hobby. Gaming is seen as a safe haven with real world worries cast aside, and people should be allowed to have fun. This evokes the classic interpretation of Caillois defining games as “*free, separate, uncertain, and unproductive*” (Caillois 2001). The astronomical values of certain game pieces on the secondary market are seen as forces polluting them. They stop being for enjoyment and become an investment; they are ripped from the pure world of fun and become part of the impure “real world” where manosphere supporters feel their place in the order of things is challenged.

Aversion to monetization is even more pronounced when what is bought and sold is something perceived as created by the community, like videogame mods, demonstrated by a comment from the topic **Modding & Monetization**:

“Most modders don’t mind minor copying. Everyone is learning how to create, and it is all in good fun. Modding is a hobby, and mods are available for free... Modding will not disappear, but it will be transformed into something it shouldn’t be.”

Concerning economization of the hobby, there is widespread belief that franchises are “dumbed down” by developers in narration and gameplay to appeal to less refined audiences even when it comes to **Bethesda RPG Games**:

“Fallout 1 and 2 were top down, turn based RPGs, with focus on character-building, dialogue, and choice/consequence. Fallout 3 is a first person shooter with virtually no emphasis put on dialogue, a rail-roaded plot, limited (and meaningless) character options, and very few choices to be made in terms of how to solve quests. Bethesda has been dumbing down RPGs for a long time.”

These framings resemble the alt-right’s assessment of the political scenario. The problem diagnosis sees the gaming community as one of the last safe havens in a difficult world or a mythical and golden age. External forces which may be greedy corporations and game developers, dogmatic feminists or Social Justice Warriors try to corrupt what is seen as the natural and pure order of things. The prognosis compels the community to protect their spaces and recover what they have lost to corrupting forces.

CONCLUSION

This paper explores the intersections between gaming, the heterogenous manosphere community and the alt-right galaxy where this community is an essential part. We analyze quantitatively and qualitatively comments by r/TheRedPill and r/TheBluePill users in r/gaming. Note that in this research we have focused on a limited selection of subreddits. Nevertheless, we expect that our findings can offer a basis for future research investigating a more comprehensive coverage of online communities.

We found that neither of the two community seems to show preferences on usual macro topics linked to gaming activities like **Game-play**, **Game Hardware** or **Online Gaming**. On the other hand, and rather unsurprisingly, both communities seems very interested in Gender Issues. r/RedPill seems to be interested in **Society & Economics** while especially r/BluePill users show a high tendency of the topic **Humor**. This last proclivity is particularly relevant since the qualitative analysis shows that both the considered Reddit communities deliberately express themselves through humor, irony and ambiguity. Memes and troll behavior are essential in their political strategy and let them avoid full responsibility of their statements. This ambiguity often makes reaching univocal interpretation of comments difficult. This cannot be avoided but only considered during careful analysis.

Our results suggest that while the two communities maintain different profiles, it is difficult to delineate a clear-cut difference, especially due to ambiguous nature of r/TheBluePill. However, when commenting on r/gaming, r/TheRedPill redditors seem to be more interested in proposing coherent alt-right political discourse regarding gender relationships; r/TheBluePill users are more interested to discuss what they perceive as injustices in communities of their favorite hobbies. Targets of their anger are at times coherent with traditional enemies of alt-right narration (like feminists, or Social Justice Warriors), but also include gaming specific issues such as predatory videogame market practices.

Both communities reproduce classic alt-right framing presenting a positive status quo challenged by external forces. However, r/TheBluePill seem to use this prognosis out of concern

for the gaming community, while r/TheRedPill users appear to consider gaming only as another battlefield in their “culture war” against left-wing politics.

While these conclusions shed a relevant light on political strategies and narrations of the manosphere world and its approach to the issue of gaming, our research also had some limitations. Firstly, while r/gaming is by far the most relevant subreddit on the topic, it does not represent the entirety of the gaming community; similarly, the manosphere-related subreddits we considered are not the only eligible proxies of that political niche. Secondly, we only considered comments written in English, thus de-facto excluding all non-English speakers from the sample. Lastly, with the instruments at our disposal, we were not able to discern for all analyzed comments whether they were posted by actual users, bots or some kind of “fake accounts”. Nevertheless, we believe our approach yielded a good approximation of the phenomenon we set to study. The English language is one of the most used languages on both Reddit and 4Chan, both websites of primary importance for the manosphere; the manifesto of the Isla Vista shooter, which held deep consequences in the subculture, was also in English. Likewise, even if some comments we considered were not written by genuine authors, their effectiveness in pushing a political agenda is very much real. This paper suggests relevance of gaming communities as a tool of political struggle and shows some of the strategies employed by the far-right to colonize this environment with its political discourse. We expect it lays a foundation for future works in facets of this relationship.

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ENDNOTES

Notes

1. According to Reddit, the content of the quarantined subreddit is prevented “*from being accidentally viewed by those who do not knowingly wish to do so, or viewed without appropriate context.*” (<https://reddit.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/360043069012-Quarantined-Subreddits>)
2. <https://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right/>
3. A combination of “cuckold” and “conservative”.
4. Publicly revealing private information about an individual through the Internet.
5. Deceiving an emergency service into sending a police response team into a person’s domicile. The practice is named after “SWAT” units of US police forces, and is extremely dangerous since the risk of excessive violence by the police or the victims is very high.
6. <https://twitter.com/EveKeneinan/status/1476483075563470850>
7. This chosen time period covers much of the history of both subreddits, and precedes the quarantine of r/TheRedPill in September 2018 .
8. <https://github.com/pushshift/api>

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