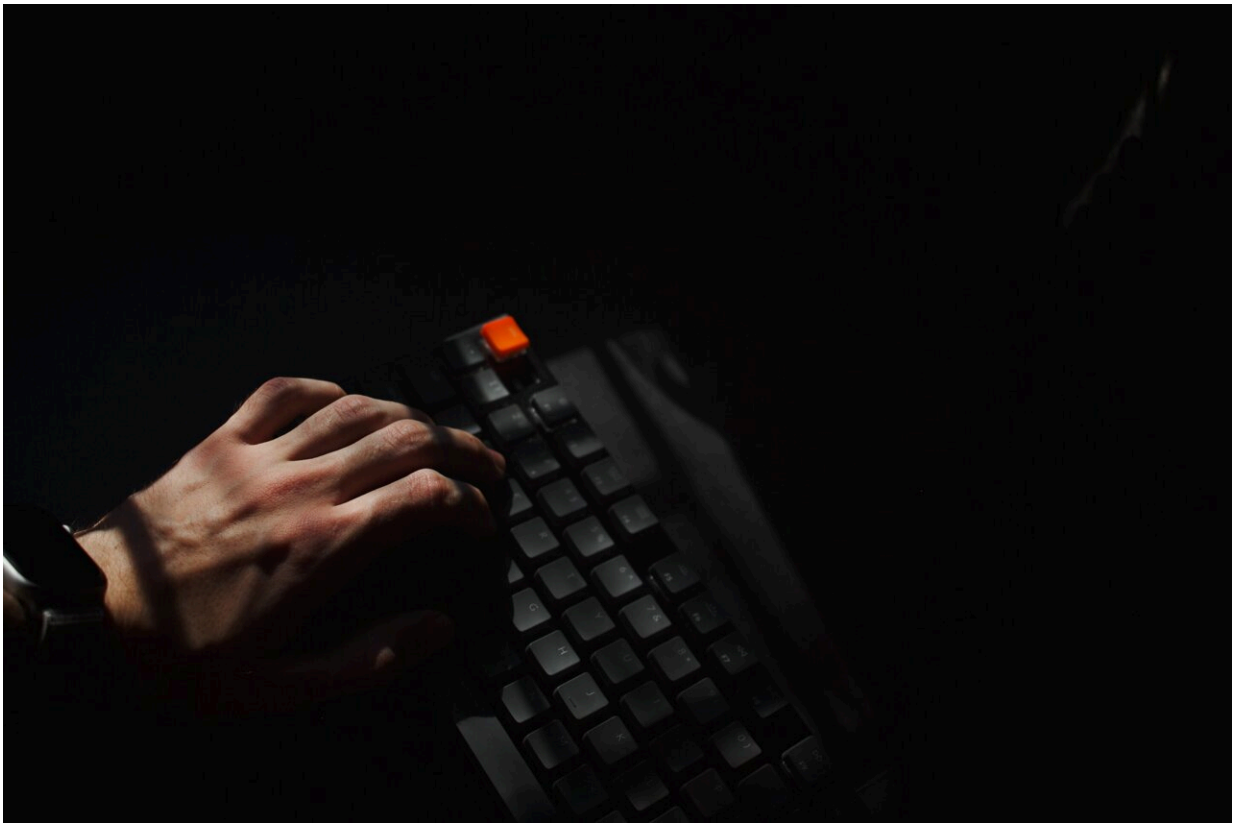


Examining the clash of masculine identities on an internet hate site

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As a biracial woman, it wasn't easy for Jillian Sunderland to spend countless hours studying a website devoted to racism, misogyny and hate.

But she persevered with her research on the internet hate site Stormfront.org, which promotes white nationalism and the alt-right [movement](#). Created by former Alabama Ku Klux Klan leader and long-time white supremacist Don Black in 1995, the site's 300,000 members openly share their racist, violent and misogynistic views.

"It's the longest running white nationalist forum for hate, and originally, I wanted to look at the common ideology of the people in this white supremacist forum," says Sunderland, a Ph.D. student in the University of Toronto's department of sociology in the Faculty of Arts & Science.

"But what I found were two groups: one prioritizing the hatred of women and one prioritizing the hatred of non-white people—and a lot of disagreements that led to a fracture within the movement. I wasn't expecting to find this at all."

Her work—"Fighting for Masculine Hegemony: Contestation Between Alt-Right and White Nationalist Masculinities on Stormfront.org"—was recently published in the journal *Men and Masculinities*. "It felt really, really great—and it was a long time coming," says Sunderland of learning that her first peer-reviewed paper had been accepted.

Sunderland says she was fascinated by her findings in what she described as a relatively understudied area, noting they could be used to help disrupt hate movements. But she adds that her long engagement with the platform affected her on a personal level.

"Spending hours a day reading hateful comments was sometimes very upsetting," she says, adding that she relied on support from her academic supervisors and from fellow academics studying the same field.

"I'm one of the people the forum targets in terms of saying horrible things about Black women, Black men and how biracial people are

abominations," she says. "And I couldn't believe the level of hatred of women. There was a lot of racism but the way they talked about women was shocking."

Sunderland used the label "alt-misogynists" for the group of Stormfront.org users who formed their identities around the opposition to women. Men in this group, she says, were usually under 40, though some were much younger. Many were single and opposed marriage.

"They see women as representing the breakdown of civilization," says Sunderland. "In their minds, women are irresponsible, opportunistic, as well as promiscuous, continually seeking to take advantage of, and exploit, men."

The other group Sunderland called "Aryan men." Defining themselves through race, not gender, they were often older, more established and had families.

"They identify as defending themselves against Black men, Jewish men and other groups," says Sunderland, adding that they portray themselves as superior to other cultures and races with respect to raising families and possessing traditional family values.

Sunderland was shocked to see just how much "alt-misogynists" and "Aryan men" quarreled on the site.

"In my paper, I show fighting between these two groups where they try to invalidate and criticize each other," she says. "The 'alt-misogynists' were often critical of the older members, accusing them of being out of touch with contemporary society. The fighting got so bad on some occasions, the 'alt-misogynists' would leave the platform altogether."

Often that fighting centered around women and their role in society.

"The older 'Aryan' members have established gender norms that men and women are complementary—that the man takes care of the woman," says Sunderland. "Their base idea is to create a white homeland with growing white families."

The "alt-misogynists," by contrast, have vastly different views on gender—and many of them expressed their belief and support for a society that's based on the total domination of women.

"They're very different from the traditional white nationalists who see women as a part of their movement," says Sunderland. "A lot of the older white nationalist members found these views offensive."

Sunderland says she was jarred by the number of posts devoted to victimization.

"A big part of the far-right is the sense of superiority, but also this deep sense that society is no longer set up in their favor," she says.

Any kind of boost in diversity or a shift in equity was regarded as a threat to their way of life.

"They were referencing divorce rates, declining marriage rates, declining fertility—and they viewed these things as examples of a society that was now gynocentric, dominated by women and feminism. And that it's actively disadvantaging them.

"There's this phrase that 'equality feels like oppression when you're used to having more privileges.' So, they see themselves as victims."

Sunderland says she would sometimes step back and totally disengage from the site and her paper for a week or two to clear her head and then return with a renewed sense of purpose.

"My goal is to better understand these movements to help disrupt them, so that kept me level-headed," she says. "But studying the extreme right is not for everyone; it's studying people who literally advocate for a genocide of non-white people. That's why it's very understudied."

Her paper concluded with the idea that this split between these two groups could offer an opportunity to further impede the wave of hate.

"Within social movements, if it's a successful movement, there tends to be a unification within a masculine or feminine strategy," she says.

"But on this site, that didn't happen. It's a more fractured movement and I think acknowledging their internal dynamics can provide an entry point in how people desist, leave—or migrate to and from—the far-right."

But to pursue this idea, much more research is needed, Sunderland says.

"Future research can lead to more clarity when attempting to deradicalize or prevent radicalization from happening, and I hope my paper offers a way for experts to really grapple with the complexity of hate/far-right movements."

More information: Jillian Sunderland, Fighting for Masculine Hegemony: Contestation Between Alt-Right and White Nationalist Masculinities on Stormfront.org, *Men and Masculinities* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/1097184X221120664](https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X221120664)

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