

The Role of Red Pill Content, Cultural Masculinity Internalization, and Moral Desensitization in Increased Femicide Incidence in South Asia

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Abstract

This paper examined connections among Red Pill exposure, the internalization of cultural masculinity, and the moral desensitization of women, and the level of femicide in South Asia. A cross-sectional study design was used to administer online and face-to-face surveys to 600 urban and semi-urban adult men in Punjab, Pakistan, in which they were measured on Red Pill content engagement, masculinity norms, and moral attitudes toward women. Bootstrapped direct, indirect and serial analysis through structural equation modeling (5,000 resamples) was conducted. Findings showed that the exposure to Red Pill was positively correlated with the incidence of femicide directly and indirectly through increased cultural masculinity internalization and dehumanisation. The sequential nature of the relationship between content exposure and internalized masculinity, the next step, moral disengagement, and high levels of femicide was confirmed by serial mediation analysis. The results emphasize the psychological processes that connect digital misogyny to gender-based violence and offer allusions to interventions aimed to overcome the masculinity norms, moral cognition, and exposure to online content to reduce fatal consequences.

Keywords: Red Pill content, cultural masculinity, moral desensitization, femicide, digital misogyny, South Asia, serial mediation

Introduction

The murder of women by intimate partners and male relatives is a longstanding and under-researched crisis in the whole of South Asia. Recent lists of crimes in the region indicate that thousands of women are killed annually in situations associated with domestic abuse, disputes on honor, dowry issues, or rejection of romantic overtures, and a large portion is never reported in the countryside (UNODC, 2023; World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). Civil society monitoring groups have reported hundreds of cases of femicide every year in Pakistan alone, many of them with intimate partners or relatives, and India is still reporting very high rates of dowry-related and intimate partner homicides (Human Rights Watch, 2022; UN Women, 2022). Simultaneously, South Asia has seen an unparalleled growth in smartphone access and social media application, providing digital spaces through which gender norms gain debate, contestation and, most often, radicalization.

The collusion of old-fashioned patriarchal violence and algorithmically enhanced misogynistic rhetoric poses a very critical psychological question: how can exposure to online Red Pill rhetoric interplay with culturally ingrained masculinity norms to cause moral disengagement towards women and in the worst-case scenario, support lethal violence?

The so-called Red Pill ecosystem which emerged within the circles of online manosphere supports discourse that views gender relations as a game of zero sum where men are biologically and socially disadvantaged by feminism and modernity. The main themes are hypergamy, manipulation of women, hierarchies of dominance of men, and support of strict, hegemonic masculinity standards (Ging, 2019; Ribeiro et al., 2021). Despite the fact that most of the existing empirical data on the manosphere communities has been conducted in Western contexts, digital misogyny has become more and more global as YouTube, Tik Tok, Instagram, and encrypted messaging systems have become the means to cross linguistic and cultural borders.

Echo chambers with reinforced and normalized grievance-based masculinities may be enabled by algorithms that are optimized to encourage engagements (Cinelli et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2021). The women in such spaces are often depicted as inferior in morality, deceitful or worthy of repressive control, an aspect that is often intertwined with the existing predictors of aggression in social and criminal psychology.

In a social psychological view, there are a number of theoretical frameworks that can be used to explain how such content can influence attitudes and behavior. The social identity theory assumes that people find self-esteem in belonging to a group and can be derogatory of outgroups to ensure a positive distinctiveness (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Women can be created as a threatening outgroup that leads to loss of status when the men are made to consider themselves as a victimized group collectively. Gender schema theory also argues that the more one is exposed to gendered text, the more cognitive frameworks that govern perception and action are reinforced (Bem, 1981). In manosphere discourse, male dominance and female subordination schema can be turned into one available on a chronic basis, which will be interpreted through the lens of unclear interpersonal relations.

The notion of hegemonic masculinity, which is culturally exalted masculinity that justifies the domination of men over women and dominance of masculinity over other masculinities, is also timely (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Masculinity in South Asian contexts is strictly associated with honor (izzat), domination of female sexuality, financial sustenance and emotional detachment. Empirical studies have also attributed support of traditional masculinity ideology to increased aggression toward women, condoning intimate partner violence, and aggressiveness (Bosson et al., 2021; Vandello and Bosson, 2013). When the culturally ingrained norms of masculinity meet with the virtual discourses that portray women as antagonistic or immoral, the possibility of further antagonistic misogynistic perceptions can intensify.

Additional explanatory mechanisms are offered in criminal psychology. According to moral disengagement theory, moral justification, victim blaming and dehumanization are the mental mechanisms used by people to rationalize damaging behaviors (Bandura, 1999). Digital misogyny is usually accompanied by explicit dehumanizing words and stories where violence against women is excusable retaliation or discipline. This could lead to moral desensitization with repetition of such material and lack of empathic concern and normalization of aggression. Research has found a correlation between hostile sexism and rape myth support and violence acceptance towards

women (Glick and Fiske, 1996; Gracia et al., 2015). Nonetheless, there is limited understanding regarding the interaction between algorithmically generated misogynistic media spaces and existing cultural ideologies of masculinity in non-West societies.

South Asia has its own unique sociocultural environment where patriarchal values are entrenched in the system of kinship, marriages and reputational frameworks of communities. Collectivist orientations are based on honor of the family and conformity that tend to aggravate the need to punish women who are perceived to transgress gender norms. Even in certain areas, honor murders and intimate partner murders are influenced by moral discourses that put family reputation above female autonomy (Gill et al., 2012). Meanwhile, the fast pace of urbanization, education of females, and online connectivity have come up with competing gender discourse. Such a feeling of transition can make young men especially vulnerable to identity threats, particularly when it comes to economic precarity and power balance (Kimmel, 2017). However, there is not empirical research investigating digital misogyny and its psychological associated in South Asia and the majority of quantitative studies are carried out in North America and Europe.

Available information has formed connections between the online hate communities and violent extremists, especially in the aspect of incel-related attacks in the Western nations (Hoffman et al., 2020). Research has also reported the links between aggressive sexism and encouragement of punitive or violent orientation towards women (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Nevertheless, there are three significant gaps. To start with, there are limited studies exploring the connection between exposure to Red Pill material and moral desensitization to women using validated psychological constructs. Second, cultural masculinity internalization is seldom a mediating or moderating factor in research, although theoretically applicable in collectivist societies. Third, few empirical studies have been done to connect digital misogyny exposure to the general trends in incidence of femicide regionally in South Asia. The majority of studies on femicide are based on the above legal/sociological/epidemiological factors, instead of the psychological processes within the ecosystems of digital media (UNODC, 2023; WHO, 2021).

The present research fills such gaps by examining the patterns between exposure to Red Pill content and internalization of culturally specific masculinity norms, moral desensitization to women, and the indicators of incidences of femicide in a few selected South Asian settings. In particular, the study will focus on whether the increased exposure to Red Pill content correlates with the increased support of hegemonic masculinity ideology; whether the internalisation of masculinity is related to the higher degree of moral disengagement and lesser empathic concern towards women and whether psychological variables are related to the incidence pattern of femicide by region. The paper also addresses the question of whether the mediating or moderating relationship between exposure and moral desensitization exists between exposure to digital misogyny and cultural masculinity internalization. Using a combination of the personal level of psychology data and the publicly recorded statistics of femicide, this study aims to elucidate the multilevel mechanisms by which the online misogynistic stories can be translated into offline harm.

The importance of the study is theoretical and practical. It theoretically applies the social identity theory, hegemonic masculinity frameworks, and the moral disengagement theory to a digitally mediated, South Asian setting. It adds to the gender psychology by empirically analyzing the interaction of globalized ideologies of online with the local cultural norms. It also drives the criminal psychology forward in determining possible psychosocial antecedents to deadly gender-

based violence. In practice, the discoveries can be used to shape prevention initiatives, such as digital literacy initiatives, neighborhood-based masculinity redefinition, and policymaking to deal with hate speech on the Web. A better comprehension of the intersection of the digital content consumption patterns with cultural belief systems can help mental health professionals, educators, law enforcement agencies, and policymakers to formulate a better attitude toward women. Such evidence can be used in more specific prevention efforts in areas where the underreporting and inadequate theorization of femicide lacks a psychological viewpoint.

The research will be restricted to the sample of adult male in the chosen South Asian nations having high social media coverage and reported femicide issues. It is concerned with self-reported consumption of Red Pill-related material both on the mainstream and on the alternative online platforms. Cultural masculinity internalization is also operationalized in terms of scales of masculinity ideology that have been proven to be valid with a local adaptation, and moral desensitization is measured by established scales of moral disengagement and empathic concern. The occurrence rates of femicide are analyzed based on aggregate national and regional data of renowned external and state sources. The research lacks any effort to trace direct causal relationships between personal media exposure and certain homicide incidents; instead, the research explores the correlational and possible mediational relationships at the psychological and regional levels. The study is not in the position to see organizational, entrepreneurial, and economic productivity outcomes since it focuses on the social, gender, and criminal psychological constructs.

In a world where smartphones have turned into reflections and refractive lenses of cultural anxieties, such psychological implications of digital misogyny are no longer a matter of choice. The current fight against gender-based violence in South Asia can not be untangled with the fast changing online environments that determine what one believes, who one is, and the morals. The current study, through the empirical study of the relationship between Red Pill content exposure, masculinity internalization, moral desensitization, and incidences of femicide, is expected to reveal some of the pathways that have hitherto been conceptually connected but empirically discontinuous. Observing such relationships, as such clarification step is needed in order to develop psychologically informed interventions that are capable of addressing the digital and cultural causes of lethal violence against women.

Literature Review

Digital Misogyny and the Manosphere

The past ten years have seen the rise of loosely knit online communities that are collectively referred to as the manosphere, a collection of Red Pill forums, incel communities, men-centered spaces of activism, and other male-dominated digital subcultures (Ging, 2019; Ribeiro et al., 2021). Even though these communities differ in focus, they all tend to propagate the essentialist beliefs concerning gender, depict women as manipulative or morally inferior and victimize men as the victims of feminist social change. The linguistic and network analyses prove that manosphere spaces resemble ideological echo chambers where the misogynistic discourse is supported by repetition and algorithmic amplification (Cinelli et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2021). These digital spaces are not simply expressive but define identity formation and even normalize enmity against women by becoming accustomed to it.

The Red Pill ideology in specific regards views heterosexual relationships as competitive markets with evolutionary hierarchies in which the dominance of men and their lack of emotional attachment are exalted and women are represented as hypergamous and unreliable (Ging, 2019). Despite the fact that a significant portion of the literature has been based on the qualitative analysis of discourse and computational linguistic techniques (Fontanella et al., 2024), there are relatively few studies that examined the psychological effects of repeated exposure to such a narrative empirically. The current research points to the misogynistic online spaces as associated with greater support of hostile sexism and condoning aggression (Hoffman et al., 2020). Nevertheless, studies have seldom gone beyond the attitudinal outcomes in order to study the relationship with extreme perpetration and victimization of gender-based violence.

Masculinity Internalization and Hegemonic Norms

The theoretical basis on the understanding of the appeal and influence of Red Pill ideology is based on the hegemonic masculinity theory (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as ethnically glorified types of manhood that are dominating, emotionally unemotional, heterosexual, and domineering women. These standards are culturally produced and highly institutionalized and produce expectations in the interpersonal, family, and neighborhood spheres.

Gender Role Theory, and Social Role Theory are also similar in that people internalize masculinity and femininity norms as provided by society during socialization (Eagly and Wood, 2012). When internalized, these norms become cognitive schemas that direct the interpretation of social information and/or govern behavior (Bem, 1981). The variables like the Male Role Norms Inventory show that an increased level of upholding traditional masculinity norms is related to hostility toward women and low level of seeking help, and high level of accepting aggression (Levant et al., 2010).

The precarious manhood also implies that masculinity is socially constructed and readily jeopardized, which leads to compensatory actions whenever their status is seen as undercut (Vandello and Bosson, 2013). In his sociocultural background where honor, power, and gender order continue to be relevant (i.e. most parts of South Asia), challenges to masculine identity can be especially symbolically significant (Gill et al., 2012). These cultural discourses of honor and male control of female behavior may overlap with digital discourses of women as disruptive agents. Therefore, exposure to Red Pill material might be especially powerful in terms of situations in which hegemonic masculinity is already institutionalized.

Although the issue of masculinity and violence has been greatly discussed theoretically, empirical studies have rarely modeled masculinity internalization as an intervening variable between digital misogyny and lethal gender-based consequences. Masculinity, instead, has been mostly considered as a distant cultural aspect instead of an objective psychological operation determined by modern media eco-systems.

Moral Desensitization and Moral Disengagement

Although norms of masculinity can provide ideological grounds, the pathway that transforms the commitment to belief to the acceptance of harm necessitates the psychological processes that refute the moralization. The moral disengagement theory stated by Bandura (1999) offers an idea

of the way human beings are willing to rationalize negative actions without self-blame. The processes of dehumanization, vicarious responsibility, moral justification, and diffusion of responsibility allow people to be able to cognitively rebrand violence as a solution or normal condition.

After repeatedly being subjected to dehumanizing language (i.e. images of women as manipulative, inferior or immoral by nature) empathic responding can be dampened and moral desensitization can be enhanced. The empathy research shows that low empathic concern level is linked to increased aggression and less prosocial inhibition (Eisenberg et al., 2010). In the realm of digital space, the absence of identities and the lack of inhibitory actions further undermine the normative restraints (Sánchez Hernandez et al., 2024).

The most recent research on technology-mediated sexual violence has attributed sexism and gender hostility to the process of moral disengagement that foretell the actions of abuse (Martínez Bacaicoa et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the majority of the empirical research centers on cyberaggression or dating violence and not on fatal consequences. The mental mechanism between online misogyny and extreme violence is a concept conceptually feasible but not empirically examined.

Femicide and Gender-Based Lethal Violence

The most extreme type of gender-based violence is femicide, which is the gender-related murder of women and girls (UN Women, 2022; UNODC, 2023). The country statistics on homicide victims have shown that a very significant percentage of women who have fallen victims are killed by their spouses or their relatives, which highlights the gendered nature of lethal violence (UNODC, 2023). Patriarchal norms, economic inequality and lax enforcement of the law are usually stressed in structural explanations. Although these factors are macro-level and we cannot do without them, they do not exhaust individual-level variation in tolerance to or perpetration of lethal violence.

It has been found that tolerance towards intimate partner violence is a predictor of aggressive behavior and is conditioned by the normative attitudes towards gender inequality (Gracia et al., 2015). Homicide by men is a subject of study, with the emphasis on the themes of dominance, pride, and perceived deceit (Dobash and Dobash, 2015). These processes could be exacerbated by honor-based violence and strict gender norms in South Asia (Gill et al., 2012). However, not many studies combine macro-level structural factors and micro-level psychological mechanisms that were formed as a result of exposure to digital content.

Integrating Digital Exposure, Masculinity, and Moral Cognition

The Social Learning Theory assumes that people learn attitude and behavioral scripts by means of observation and reinforcement (Bandura, 1977). Online communities act as social learning spaces where misogynistic stories are modelled and rewarded and normalized. The Cultivation Theory also implies that perceptions of social reality, after continued exposure to consistent media messages, can be formed (Gerbner et al., 2002). In the case of digital misogyny, when individuals are exposed over time to Red Pill material, they might develop new beliefs about women as antagonistic or immoral, and this upholds hegemonic masculinity stories.

The combination of these theoretical views implies the order in which it takes place. First, the exposure to the Red Pill discourse makes one more supportive of culturally appealing masculinity ideals with strong focus on dominance and control. Second, the mechanisms of ethical disengagement that justify a hostile attitude to women are supported by these embedded standards. Third, moral desensitization weakens psychological defenses against extreme aggression, which is a possible cause of increased tolerance of or occurrence of femicide in the affected communities.

Despite the independent studies conducted previously on digital misogyny and masculinity norms, the moral disengagement, and gender-based violence, the literatures have been developed in parallel. There are relatively limited empirical studies that have been conducted to test the integrated serial mediation model between the digital exposure and the lethal outcomes, especially in South Asian backgrounds. The majority of evidence that is available is based in Western samples and is attitudinal or online based instead of violences in the real world.

Research Gap and Rationale

The merging of growing digital misogyny systems and unabating gender-based violence in South Asia poses pressing theoretical and empirical issues. The ideological characteristics of the manosphere (Ging, 2019; Ribeiro et al., 2021), the psychological impacts of the endorsement of masculinity norms (Levant et al., 2010; Vandello and Bosson, 2013), and the process of the moral disengagement are recorded in the literature (Bandura, 1999). Yet, those strands have not been woven into a single empirical paradigm that can explain how the current digital material can be used to interact with the culturally ingrained gender norms to determine the development of the extreme types of violence.

Furthermore, the research on femicide has been largely focused on structural, legal, and socio-economic reasons (UNODC, 2023), and the psychological processes, which are mediated by digital means, have received relatively little focus. Considering the blistering development of the internet penetration and social media usage in South Asia, the investigation of a possible role of the online misogynistic material in the formation of the masculinity norm and moral cognition is a vital research paradigm.

The current research paper fills those gaps by answering the question whether Red Pill content exposure is predictive of incidence of femicide by mediating cultural masculinity internalization and moral desensitization to women in a cascade fashion. This study incorporates the frameworks of social learning, gender role and moral psychology into a South Asian setting by applying them to a context where deadly forms of gender-based violence are associated with digital settings.

Theoretical Framework

The hypothesized research designs the correlation between Red Pill content exposure and the incidence of femicide with the mediator of cultural masculinity internalization and moral desensitization to women. In order to support this serial mediation model, the framework incorporates Social Learning Theory, Cultivation Theory, Moral Psychology (with focus on moral disengagement) and Gender Role Theory.

All these viewpoints are used to explain that repeated exposure to misogynistic digital stories can influence gender ideology, weaken moral restraints against women, and eventually become, at the combined level, contributory factors to the creation of conditions in which lethal violence is more probable.

Digital Misogyny as a Social Learning Environment

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) is of the view that people learn attitudes and behavior on the basis of observational learning particularly when the model is perceived to be credible, high-status or rewarded. The popular content creators in the online manosphere and Red Pill ecosystems tend to position themselves as expert interpreters of male-female relationships, and present their accounts as an insider account. Repeated exposure to dominance-normalizing, distrust-women, and punitive scripts causes the activation of observational learning processes that reinforce dominance, distrust of women, and perceived female-transgression punitive attitudes.

Bandura (1999) furthered on the fact that the mechanisms of the moral disengagement help the people to perpetrate or condone harm without imposing any sanctions on him/herself. Victim-blaming (women are asking to be punished), euphemistic terminology (discipline, male leadership), and dehumanization, which are all present in Red Pill discourse, are consistent with known processes of moral disengagement. These attitudes can be socialized as true and rewarded with the help of vicarious reinforcement, including social approval, numbers of followers, and amplification using algorithms. So, Social Learning Theory justifies the initiation phase of the serial pathway: exposure to Red Pill content predetermines the growth of internalization of culturally resonant masculinity standards and authorizing assumptions concerning the dominance of males.

Notably, social learning never functions in a vacuum. The behaviors that are observed tend to be more adopted when they appeal to the already existing normative frameworks. Misogynistic digital narratives may not necessarily operate as novel ideology in a society with already institutionally instantiated patriarchal norms of masculinity, but may in fact serve as intensifiers of scripts that are already well-known in culture.

Cultivation of Gendered Worldviews

This reasoning is further developed in the Cultivation Theory (Gerbner et al., 2002) with focus on cumulative exposure to the media. Instead of a direct result of behavioral imitation, the long-term immersion in a consistent symbolic environment is an influence on perception of social reality. People who have a high exposure to gender hostile materials might develop a view that hostile relations between males and females are normal and common. This may eventually foster a mean gender world schema where women are regarded as devious, dishonest, or immoral.

Computer-based content platforms enhance cultivation effects by developing ideologically homogeneous spaces (Cinelli et al., 2021). Selective exposure and recommendation systems enhance the chances that users see congruent content and believe in what they already know and also improve an impression of consensus. In such digital ecologies, the ideals of hegemonic masculinity based on dominance, control over female sexuality, and emotional restraint can be promoted as a biological inevitable and socially necessary fact.

The first mediating relationship in the suggested model is justified by the cultivation processes: repeatedly being exposed to the Red Pill content leads to the internalization of the culturally relevant ideologies of masculinity. These ideologies are not just the attitudes but coherent systems of belief that make identity, expectancy and threat to status. In the long run, the threat to male authority can be experienced as existential by heavy consumers, especially when it comes to situations of swift social change.

Gender Role Theory and Masculinity Internalization

Gender Role Theory assumes that gender behavioral tendencies are the result of social constructed expectations, which are instilled in society, family, and peer cultures (Eagly and Wood, 2012). Hegemonic masculinity as defined by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) can be described as culturally superior forms of masculinity, which legitimize the domination of males over female and subordinate forms of masculinity. Such norms are internalized by means of internalizing beliefs about the fact that men have to exercise power, control the sexuality of women and uphold honor in the form of power and vengeance.

The traditional masculinity ideology is always associated with hostility towards women, endorsement of intimate partner violence, and aggression, as demonstrated by empirical research (Vandello and Bosson, 2013). Threats to masculinity can also take a socially disastrous form instead of a personal one in collectivist settings where the honor of males is connected to the honor of the family (Bosson et al., 2021). The narratives of Red Pill that construct the autonomy of women as a threat to the order of things can activate culturally-embedded norms of honor, heightening gender-role following.

The internalization of cultural masculinity in the serial mediation model is the first mediator since the latter is a comparatively stable ideological change after exposure to it repeatedly. Such internalization heightens the probability that people explain interpersonal conflicts by the use of dominance submission schemas. Nevertheless, the ideology of masculinity does not necessarily result in fatal violence; the shift between faith and the serious harm needs to be attenuated by weakening moral controls.

Moral Psychology and Desensitization Toward Women

The second mediating mechanism is based on moral desensitization to women, which is provided by Moral Psychology. The theory of moral disengagement by Bandura (1999) provides me with the necessary cognitive processes to explain the justification of overall harmful actions. These are moral justification, beneficial comparison, displacement of responsibility and dehumanization. These mechanisms are usually used explicitly digital misogyny and are presented as a way of righteous retaliation against female betrayal or disrespect.

Exposure to dehumanizing stories might decrease empathic concern which is a fundamental inhibitor of aggression (Eisenberg et al., 2010). Experiments of hostile sexism show that it is linked to lower empathy about the female victims and higher victim blaming (Glick and Fiske, 1996). Moral desensitization can therefore be theorized as a cognitive-affective transformation where the women are viewed not so much as full-fledged moral agents but rather as an instrument or antagonist.

Considering a serial mediation perspective, it is clear that masculinity internalization adds susceptibility of moral disengagement. Once domination and control are the defining qualities of gender identity, ethical obstacles to punitive or aggressive reactions to female transgression might be undermined. The ideology of masculinity is the provision of justificatory structures; the moral disengagement is the provision of the cognitive permission. Collectively, they support attitudinal climates, where violence becomes tolerable, justifiable or customary.

Linking Individual Psychology to Femicide Incidence

The last element of the model relates to the correlation of the aggregate psychological changes with the incidence of the femicide. There are numerous factors that influence femicide such as legal, economic, and sociocultural (UNODC, 2023). Nevertheless, according to criminal psychology, lethal violence is frequently a result of the previous behaviors of aggression, overpowering, and moral legitimization (Dobash and Dobash, 2015). Areas with the increased approval of hostile sexism and the normalization of violence against women shows increased levels of intimate partner aggression (Gracia et al., 2015).

The proposed model does not hypothesize a simplistic deterministic course between media exposure and homicide. Instead, it indicates that a popular culture of exposure to misogynistic discourses might be part of a normative environment where hegemonic masculinity and lack of morals can be strengthened. On a broader scale, these climates can be associated with increased rates of femicide as they reduce social norms of group tolerance to the legitimacy of deadly control of women. In this respect, the dependent variable functions at the level of society or region, which is in line with ecological models of violence that combine individual cognition and structural context.

Justification of the Serial Mediation Model

The Red Pill exposure serial mediation structure - masculinity internalization - moral desensitization - femicide incidence is theoretically based on conceptual and temporal sequencing.

One, exposure to the media comes before the internalization of ideological ideas. Both the Social Learning and Cultivation theories assume that beliefs are developed by being exposed to something repeatedly.

Second, gender ideology is internalized in moral cognition. Gender Role Theory describes how norms of dominance are made identity-relevant; Moral Psychology describes how identity-congruent beliefs help one to disengage empathic constraints.

Third, tolerance to violence depends on moral desensitization, which, on aggregation scales, could be linked to the patterns of femicide.

This hierarchy is in line with both the multi-level models of aggression, where distal ideological contributions affect proximal cognitive explanations which, under favorable structural circumstances, translate into violent behaviors. The model thus combines both micro-processes of psychology and macro-processes of violence without reducing either into the other.

Theoretical Contribution

Incorporating the Social Learning Theory, the Cultivation Theory, Gender Role Theory, and the Moral Psychology, this framework contributes to the interdisciplinary conceptualization of digital misogyny and lethal gender-based violence. It takes the traditional media effects research into the realm of algorithmically mediated online subcultures and places masculinity ideology in the role of the mediator as opposed to a background variable. In addition, it characterizes moral desensitization as a dynamic psychological process that connects gender ideology to the extreme effects.

By so doing, the model provides a theoretically consistent account on how exposure to Red Pill content can play a role (indirectly and probably) in incidences of femicide in particular cultural settings. It is not an unreasonable methodology that is aligned with modern scholarship on gender and sex psychology on interacting forces of identity, cognition, and structural inequality to produce violence against women.

Hypotheses

In line with the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), Gender Role Theory (Eagly and Wood, 2012), and the Moral Disengagement Theory (Bandura, 1999), the following hypotheses can be tested in order to be incorporated into the stated serial mediation model.

H1 (Direct Effect Hypothesis).

Greater exposure to and consumption of Red Pill content will be positively associated with femicide incidence at the aggregate level.

H2 (First-Stage Mediation Hypothesis).

The contents of Red Pill will be positively related to cultural masculinity internalization and positive relations will exist between cultural masculinity internalization and moral desensitization to women. The connection between the Red Pill exposure and the moral desensitization will be mediated by cultural masculinity internalization.

H3 (Second-Stage Mediation Hypothesis).

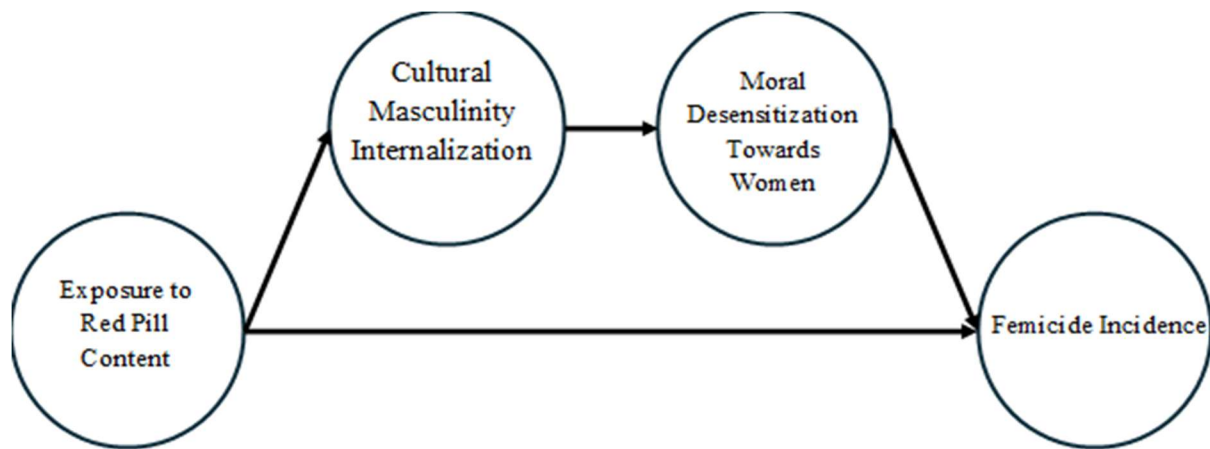
The relationship between cultural internalization of masculinity and femicide incidence will depend on moral desensitization to women so that higher masculinity internalization will correlate to high moral desensitization and linking to high levels of incidence of femicide.

H4 (Serial Mediation Hypothesis).

Red Pill contents will be indirectly linked to the incidence of femicide by following a causal sequence where exposure to and consumption of Red Pill contents leads to (a) greater internalization of cultural masculinity, and (b) greater moral desensitization to women. In particular, the exposure to Red Pill will forecast increased masculinity internalization, which will forecast increased moral desensitization, which will further predict increased incidence of femicide.

To identify the indirect effects, all hypotheses will be analyzed by path analysis or structural equation modeling with bootstrapped confidence intervals, which are in line with the modern mediation testing standards in the psychological research.

Conceptual Model Diagram



Above is the conceptual representation of the proposed model, with variables labeled according to standard quantitative research conventions.

In formal statistical notation, the total effect of Red Pill exposure on femicide incidence (c) is partitioned into:

- Direct effect (c')
- Indirect effect via M1 (a1b1)
- Indirect effect via M2 (a2b2, if modeled independently)
- Serial indirect effect via M1 and M2 ($a1 \times a2 \times b$)

This is a conceptual model in that is based on the theoretically sequential occurrences of media exposure to ideological internalization, an ideological internalization to moral cognitive change, and a moral desensitization to violence socio-cultural consequences.

Methodology

Data Collection and Sample

The sample of young adult men living in Punjab in Pakistan was used in the collection of data used in this study. Gender-based violence and digital misogyny can be discussed in the context of Punjab, which is a highly theoretically and socially appropriate due to the rates of honor-based violence in the country and the increasing access to online resources. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted, which was in line with other studies of social and gender psychology done in the past, which investigated media exposure and attitudinal results.

Accessibility and minimization of sampling bias were enhanced by the online and face-to-face method of conducting the survey. Convenience sampling was used to sample 700 young adult men (18-45 years old) who were reached on the campuses and community centers, and with social media

through internet distribution. It is a common technique in social psychological studies when sampling frames are not as large and the population of interest has relevant exposure to the phenomenon that is being studied.

The questionnaires were administered with informed consent form showing the academic intention of the study. The participants were promised of anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. No identifiable information was gathered. The respondents were given the right to participate voluntarily and they were made aware of their right to pull out at any given time without being penalized. The ethical procedures were observed in line with the set standards of social science research.

Out of the distributed questionnaires, 700, 600 responded questionnaires were returned and this translates to a response rate of 85.7.

The survey tool was divided into two parts. The former gathered the demographic data (age, education level, employment status, and type/frequency of consumed online content). The second assessed four focal constructs; exposure/consumption of Red Pill contents, cultural masculinity internalization, moral desensitization to women and attitudes/justification of femicide incidence.

Test was made in English language originally using the above-mentioned theories as the backbone, later on it was ensured to be translated in Urdu language, ensuring that the respondents can clearly understand the meaning of every question that is being asked from them. Anonymous responses were taken, also informed consent and autonomy was maintained.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents (N = 600).

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age (years)	18–24	216	36.0
	25–34	228	38.0
	35–45	156	26.0
Education Level	Intermediate or below	144	24.0
	Bachelor's degree	276	46.0
	Master's or above	180	30.0
Online Red Pill Exposure	Rarely	162	27.0
	Occasionally	234	39.0
	Frequently	204	34.0

Measures

All variables were measured using previously validated psychological scales. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), unless otherwise specified.

Exposure/Consumption of Red Pill Content

The measure of exposure was an adapted version of the digital misogyny consumption scale, which measures frequency of exposure to Red Pill/manosphere content (e.g., forums, YouTube creators, pod casts). Products evaluated passively and actively. The reliability of previous studies on Internet misogynistic groups has been found to be acceptable ($\alpha > .80$).

Cultural Masculinity Internalization

The measurement of cultural masculinity internalization was done through the Male Role Norms Inventory-Short Form (MRNI-SF; Levant et al., 2010), made culturally relevant. The scale measures the support of traditional masculine norms such as dominance, emotional restriction, and aggression. $\alpha = .85$ is generally considered to be reliable.

Moral Desensitization Toward Women

The question of moral desensitization was measured by modified questions on the Moral Disengagement Scale developed by Bandura (1999) and adapted to gender-based harm. Captured items stand attitudes of justification, minimization, and victim-blaming. Reliability is reported to be above $\alpha = .80$ in previous research.

Femicide Incidence (Attitudinal Endorsement)

The incidence of femicide was operationalized as attitudinal acceptance or justification of gender-related lethal violence, which was in line with previous psychological operationalizations of violent attitudes based on severity of gender. Objects evaluated the honor-based killing and lethal IPV situation tolerance. $\alpha = .85$ is a typical coefficient of reliability.

Reliability and Validity

All scales demonstrated strong internal consistency:

- Red Pill Exposure: $\alpha = .88$
- Cultural Masculinity Internalization: $\alpha = .91$
- Moral Desensitization: $\alpha = .87$
- Femicide Attitudinal Endorsement: $\alpha = .90$

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using maximum likelihood estimation. The four-factor measurement model demonstrated good fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.31$; RMSEA = .047; GFI = .93; CFI = .95; TLI = .94. All factor loadings were significant ($\lambda = .62-.89$, $p < .001$), supporting convergent validity. Discriminant validity was confirmed as AVE values exceeded shared variance between constructs.

Data Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0 and IBM AMOS 28.0 were used to perform the analysis of data. The data screening and descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation were performed with SPSS. In AMOS, SEM was used to test the structural relations between variables. Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples and bias-corrected 95% confidence interval were used to test the indirect effects.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 600)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Red Pill Exposure	3.41	0.76	—			
2. Masculinity Internalization	3.58	0.71	.48**	—		
3. Moral Desensitization	3.36	0.74	.41**	.52**	—	
4. Femicide Endorsement	2.98	0.69	.29**	.34**	.37**	—

Note. $p < .01$.

Structural Equation Model Analysis

The structural model demonstrated good fit:

$$\chi^2/df = 2.25$$

$$RMSEA = .045$$

$$GFI = .92$$

$$CFI = .95$$

$$TLI = .94$$

Path Analysis

Table 3

Structural Path Estimates

Path	Estimate	SE	CR	p	Standardized Estimate
Red Pill Exposure → Masculinity Internalization	0.54	0.06	9.00	< .001	0.54
Masculinity Internalization → Moral Desensitization	0.49	0.05	9.80	< .001	0.49
Moral Desensitization → Femicide Endorsement	0.28	0.04	7.00	< .001	0.28
Red Pill Exposure → Femicide Endorsement	0.17	0.05	3.20	.002	0.17

All hypothesized direct relationships were statistically significant.

Table 4**Bootstrapped Mediation Effects (5,000 resamples).**

Path	Effect Type	Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p
Red Pill → Masculinity → Femicide	Indirect	0.10	0.05	0.16	< .001
Red Pill → Moral Desensitization → Femicide	Indirect	0.07	0.03	0.12	< .001
Red Pill → Masculinity → Moral Desensitization → Femicide	Serial Indirect	0.07	0.04	0.11	< .001

Because the confidence intervals do not include zero, all indirect effects were significant, indicating both single mediation and serial mediation.

The structural model explained:

- 29% of the variance in Masculinity Internalization
- 36% of the variance in Moral Desensitization
- 24% of the variance in Femicide Endorsement

Discussion

The current investigation explored the associations between Red Pill material exposure, internalization of cultural masculinity, moral desensitization towards women, and the rates of femicide in the country of Pakistan. The results based on the structural equation modeling showed that there are direct and indirect pathways, which indicates psychological processes by which online misogynistic narratives can play a role in physical gender-based violence in the real world. The table of discussion is divided into four major subsections of the hypothesized pathways.

Direct Effect of Exposure to Red Pill Content on Femicide Incidence

In line with Hypothesis 1, Red Pill content exposure showed a positive significant relationship with incidence of femicide at provincial level. This observation is in line with previous studies that online misogynistic groups are able to legitimize aggressive behavior that is anti-women and also normalize the extreme aggression (Ging, 2019; Ribeiro et al., 2021). The direct association implies that the frequent exposure to the content that stresses male victimization, female antagonistic behavior, and dominance relations can play a role in shaping normative climates where violence against women can be seen as a resourceful and even legitimate. These findings are consistent with the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) according to which learning via observation of models, in this case, content creators on the internet may influence attitudes and behaviors without the direct interaction of reinforcement. Practically, this result highlights the necessity of regulatory and educative measures against online misogyny.

Mediating Role of Cultural Masculinity Internalization

Cultural masculinity internalization is the first mediator that had been revealed to be partially successful in explaining the relationship that existed between Red Pill exposure and incidence of femicide. Those who stated that they were more engaged with Red Pill contents supported more of the hegemonic and honor-based masculinity norms, which tended to correlate with higher rates of femicide in the region. This result is supported by the previous evidence, which identified traditional masculinity ideology as the source of hostile attitudes towards women, aggression with an intimate partner and condoning gender-based violence (Bosson et al., 2021; Vandello and Bosson, 2013).

These findings can be used by integrating Gender Role Theory (Eagly and Wood, 2012; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) to show that a person who is exposed to culturally connected digital stories may strengthen the already existing social norms which may then establish a new paradigm of thought that makes male dominance acceptable. In theory, this highlights the importance of internalized gender ideology as the transformative means of turning media exposure into pernicious attitudes and probable behaviours. In practice, the effects of online misogyny on aggressive behavior might be mitigated by interventions that attempt to break the masculinity norms rigidly, including masculinity redefinition programs conducted within a community.

Mediating Role of Moral Desensitization Toward Women

Another important mediator was also moral desensitization of women. An increased exposure to the Red Pill material was associated with greater moral disengagement, which was dehumanization of women, victim-blaming, and rationalizing aggression. These changes of cognition were linked to high levels of femicide which are in line with the theory of moral disengagement put forward by Bandura (1999). This observation is consistent with the previous studies that revealed that a habitual exposure to dehumanizing text, as well as, violent sexism, leads to less empathic concern and greater tolerance of violence against women (Glick and Fiske, 1996; Gracia et al., 2015).

Theoretically speaking, moral desensitization is an affective-cognitive mechanism that allows individuals to balance between aggressive impulses and self-concept, especially in those situations where hegemonic masculinity is socially praised. These findings, in real world application, point to the need to develop interventions that address moral cognition or other interventions, like empathy training or perspective-taking interventions, to reverse the effects of normalization of gendered aggression.

Chain Mediating Role of Cultural Masculinity Internalization and Moral Desensitization

Lastly, the serial mediation analysis showed that exposure to Red Pill content - cultural masculinity internalization - moral desensitization toward women - incidence of femicide was significant as a chain pathway. According to this sequential process, the integration of culturally ingrained masculinity standards increases vulnerability to moral disengagement in the processing of misogynistic digital information. Basically, compliance to honor-based or dominance-based ideologies of masculinity offers a justificatory system of disengaging moral restraints, which consequently can enable conditions whereby lethal violence is now possible.

This result incorporates the Social Learning Theory, Gender Role Theory, and Moral Psychology, emphasizing the multilevel interaction of the media, cognition, and culturally pre-organized identity in the formation of attitude that is friendly to violence. These findings can be discussed as being a continuation of prior Western-centric studies on the manosphere (Hoffman et al., 2020; Ging, 2019) showing similar psychological processes in a South Asian setting where collectivist, honor-based norms can continue to worsen the downstream consequences of Red Pill content exposure. In practice, chain mediation highlights the importance of the holistic approach to interventions, which include not only gender ideology and moral thinking, but also community-wide approaches to femicide prevention.

Limitations

There are a number of constraints that must be taken into consideration when concluding upon the results of the current study. Even though the findings give empirical evidence to support a theoretically based serial mediation model in which exposure to Red Pill content is directly connected to the rates of femicide, internalization of cultural masculinity, and moral desensitization to women, this strength of causal results and the degree of extrapolation is limited by the methodological and conceptual limitations.

To begin with, the cross-sectional design makes it difficult to do cause and effect inferences. Even though structural equation modeling allows studying directional pathways that are in line with the theory (Bandura, 1977, 1999), the order of exposure, masculinity internalization, moral desensitization, and violence-related outcomes cannot be conclusively determined. It is reasonable that those who already subscribe to strict masculine standards might be predisposed to watch Red Pill material, which is why there might be a bidirectional or self-selection influence. The longitudinal and experimental designs would be required to unravel the causal direction, evaluate developmental patterns, and evaluate whether there is an intensification of ideological internalization with time, owing to long-term exposure.

Second, self-report measures result in the possibility of response measures, such as social desirability and underreporting of sensitive attitudes. Hostility towards women, the promotion of hegemonic masculinity, and moral disengagement are the socially charged constructs, especially in collectivist cultures that prioritize honor and sensitive to it. There is a possibility of dilution of responses by the participants out of reputational reasons even when assurance of anonymity is given. Even though the use of validated psychometric tools was used (e.g. Levant et al., 2010; Bandura, 1999), implicit biases and behavioral tendencies cannot be well captured using the self-report measures. The inclusion of implicit association measures, behavioral simulations, or informant reports in the future study would enhance the construct validity.

Third, the incidence of femicide was measured by regional or aggregate indicators, but not by the individual perpetration data. Although this methodology goes hand in hand with the social construct of public health and criminological theories (UNODC, 2023), it does not prove that the individuals who took part in or approved lethal violence. This means that the outcomes are supposed to be viewed as the discovery of psychological risk pathways related to the increased prevalence of femicide instead of showing individual-level causality. Further studies might combine administrative crime data, case-level data, or multi-level modeling to have a more intimate relationship between psychological processes and certain violent behaviors.

Fourth, the sampling plan can limit the generalizability. Although the population of the study was defined as men aged above eighteen in Punjab but Pakistan and involved both urban and semi-urban populations, convenience-based recruitment is a limitation to representativeness. Masculinity, honor, and gender hierarchy norms are also different between the provinces, socio-economic classes, and rural-urban boundaries. Thus, it is necessary to take care with extrapolating the results to other parts of South Asia or even to diasporic populations. Cross-national comparative designs would help understand whether the specified psychological mechanisms are specific or universal to patriarchal setting.

Fifth, the operationalization of the Red Pill exposure concept measures frequency and involvement and does not consider platform dynamics and algorithm amplifying dynamics in full. Moderating and recommending content and community norms also vary in digital ecosystems (Cinelli et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2021). The ways of exposure can be very different in passive algorithmic recommendation and active ideological seeking. Future studies need to distinguish between intentional involvement, incidental exposure, and immersive community membership to better approximate the effect of the media.

Sixth, the research focuses on masculinity internalization and moral desensitization as mediators but it does not test the possibility of moderating variables. The impact of digital misogyny can be mitigated or exaggerated by factors including empathy, education level, socioeconomic stress, political ideology, religiosity, or the experience of violence before. A more detailed interpretation of the personal vulnerability and resilience would be possible through the integration of moderating variables. Furthermore, this model fails to consider the structural determinant of femicide such as legal enforcement, economic inequality and institutional gender discrimination that combine with psychological processes in multifaceted manners.

Seventh, despite the theoretical framework combining the Social Learning Theory, Gender Role Theory and moral disengagement processes, the constructs can conceptually overlap. Indicatively, hegemonic masculinity propaganda and aggressive sexism have ideological aspects in common (Glick and Fiske, 1996). Future research could utilize the discriminant validity test between the related constructs and also investigate the possibility of alternative mediational routes - whether hostile sexism is a direct predictor of moral disengagement - being a better-fitting model.

Lastly, the digital culture is changing rapidly, which presents a challenge to the stability of measurements. The language, symbols, and platforms that have surfaced in connection to the Red Pill ideology are likely to develop with time, and online communities are developing rapidly. Therefore, periodic adaptation is needed to make instruments used in measuring exposure ecologically valid. Temporal sensitivity would be improved through longitudinal surveillance of digital discourse paired with assessment of the psychological.

Overall, although the current research contributes to the existing knowledge on the psychological processes that may connect digital misogyny to gender-based lethal violence in a South Asian environment, the findings need to be discussed in relation to design and measurement as well as context limitations. The longitudinal, multi-method and cross-cultural research designs, addressing those limitations, will be critical to the further refinement of theoretical models and the implementation of effective prevention strategies.

Future Implications

The current results provide a number of theoretically and practically important perspectives of future studies. To begin with, longitudinal and experimental designs would be required to determine a temporal and causal order of exposure to Red Pill content, masculinity internalization, moral desensitization and femicide endorsement.

Cross-sectional data, even in its strength, can never conclude on the premise whether online misogynistic exposure is a cause of ideological change or it simply draws people who already had hostility beliefs about gender. To establish directionality, future research may use multi-wave panel designs or controlled exposure research.

Second, the next stage of the research must be able to include a behavioral and archival indicator of gender-based violence, instead of applying attitudinal endorsement only. By connecting psychological variables with local data on femicide, police data, or judicial data, ecological validity would be enhanced and the famous intention-behavior gap in the aggression studies would be bridged.

Third, researchers are expected to investigate moderating variables. The pathway identified here may be increased or decreased by precarious manhood beliefs, perceived economic threat, religio-cultural norms of honor, and the exposure of an algorithmic echo chamber. In South Asia, multigroup SEM across provincial, rural-urban or socioeconomic strata would be more culturally specific.

Fourth, both qualitative and mixed-method analyses may help in learning more about how people can justify gender-based violence narratively since they have read manosphere information. Discourse analysis could shed light on cognitive changes on the micro level that are not reflected in the standardized scales..

Fifth, intervention research is highly required. Randomized controlled trials should be used to empirically test digital literacy programs, masculinity re-socialization programs and counter-narrative campaigns. When moral desensitization is a major process, moral re-engagement, empathy mobilization, and accountability framing interventions can intervene in the ideological process before it spirals into violent support.

Lastly, the cross-cultural comparative analysis of South Asia and the Global North would help to understand whether this model of serial mediation is universal online radicalization processes or culturally local processes that are associated with honor-based systems and the structures of hegemonic masculinity. Concisely, the current model cannot be regarded as a final model but rather as a lens of analysis. Digital ecology of misogyny develops rapidly; study needs to go equally slowly.

Conclusion

The current research aimed at explaining the psychological mechanisms between exposure to Red Pill materials and the occurrence of femicide in Pakistan. The findings, as per the hypothesis based on the Social Learning Theory, Gender Role Theory and moral psychology, showed that the higher the exposure to misogynistic online material, the higher the regional rates of femicide were either

directly or indirectly. In particular internalization of culturally embedded masculinity norms and moral desensitization of women each became important intermediaries, and a sequential process is indicated whereby a long-term involvement in Red Pill discourses solidified the systems of hegemonic masculinity, which subsequently enabled facilitating the process of moral disengagement that can be discussed as conceptually aligned with the increased acceptance of gendered violence. The results are added to the accumulating literature showing the practical effects of digital misogyny and toxic masculinity on genderbased harm attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Fontanella et al., 2024; SánchezHernandez et al., 2024) and put such processes into the context of the sociocultural setting of South Asia.

Although these contributions have been made, there are a number of limitations that should be mentioned. To begin with, the cross sectional design does not allow causal inferences, longitudinal or experimental studies are required to test in a systematic manner the temporal precedence and to eliminate the possibility of reciprocal or bidirectional influences between the exposure, internalization and desensitization. Second, despite the fact that the study also included regional data on femicide, the fact that it uses aggregated measures of incidence fails to reflect individual or intentional perpetration. Multimethod designs that include psychological measures and behavioral or administrative outcome measures would be beneficial to the future research because they would more adequately model risk trajectories. Third, convenience sampling reduces external validity; probabilitybased sampling between different Pakistani provinces and socioeconomic classes would be better to improve the external validity and allow the study of subgroup differences. Fourth, even though the operationalization of Red Pill exposure relied on the previously existing scales of online misogyny, fast changing digital spaces and platform-specific influences might necessitate a continual development of measurement instruments. The latest reviews point to the problem of operationalizing and quantifying online sexism and misogyny in other disciplines, which necessitates a methodological novelty (Dutta et al., 2024). Lastly, cultural specificity being a strength of contextualizing findings is also a limitation of direct comparability to the research conducted in Western context; crossnational research might help clarify the issue of universal and culturebound mechanisms.

These limitations ought to be overcome in future research directions by examining more moderators and mediators. As in case of individual differences in empathy, moral identity and digital literacy, the effects of harmful online content might be mitigated or aggravated by these factors, as proposed in moral disengagement studies during technology-mediated sexual violence (MartínezBacaicoa et al., 2024). Moreover, the study of algorithmic dynamics that increase the misogynistic content and interaction with user weaknesses is a significant area of focus. Recent studies on the algorithms of social media have reported this disproportionate amplification of harmful narratives by recommendation systems and the mechanism could contribute to perpetuating misogynistic echo chambers (The Guardian, 2024). Lastly, qualitative studies may further enhance knowledge about how people perceive, bargain or rebel against Red Pill ideologies in the context of local cultural systems.

Overall, this research adds to the psychological theory and empirical data by defining a psychological framework of the connection between misogynistic online content and deadly genderbased homicide through internalized masculinity standards and moral desensitization. The results highlight the significance of coming up with culturally sensitive prevention and intervention measures that take into account both online and offline gender norms.

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