



From Front Lines to Policy: Engaging Influencers to Counter Gender-Based Hate and Extremism in Canada

SIGNAL Research Brief #1

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Social Media and Online Gendered Hate

Social media platforms have seen a rise in a form of [gendered disinformation](#) that advances a deeply hierarchical and inequitable vision of men and women's social roles. Much of this disinformation emerges within the sexist and misogynist content of right-wing influencers who simultaneously target feminist and leftist activism as a social threat. A crucial consequence of this is an [increase in the anti-women rhetoric](#), the ongoing [radicalization of young men towards extremist beliefs](#), and social polarization. This moment of online gendered hate is already very well-researched and has become broadly [recognized as a public crisis](#). We are interested in extending this research by considering the work of a very different subset of influencers that challenge these hegemonic gendered narratives through their own social media accounts.

Here at SIGNAL, we believe that research which names the harms of digital media is crucial, but this must also be balanced with evidence around how the internet and technology have and can be used to counter these heightened rates of online misogyny, queerphobia, and transphobia. Our newest research project "[From Front Lines to Policy: Engaging Influencers to Counter Gender-Based Hate and Extremism in Canada](#)" aims to both analyze the toxicity of online hate and come up with strategic and collaborative ways to address these harmful media ecosystems by [speaking and working directly with influencers actively aiming to counter online misogyny](#).

Funded by the [Digital Citizen Contribution Program](#) (Department of Canadian Heritage), this project aims to bridge the divide between influencers and scholars by bringing them into conversation together. Social media influencers and representatives of grassroots organizations engage in what we see as a form of [front-line work](#), experiencing online hate on a daily basis, making them experts that are rife with insider knowledge of the world of online gendered hate and digital technology.



The start of our research into these influencers included archiving and analyzing some of their publicly available content. Cumulatively, we ended up with a sample size of 72 online contents across the influencers' and organizations' platforms. Through a qualitative coding process, we extracted key words that encapsulate the content and format of each post, in order to find themes that were most pertinent across the selected influencers and organizations.



The Meta Subjects

From the identified key words, we found 13 broad meta subjects that were addressed and critiqued in their work collectively. These included: masculinity, femininity, sexism, misogyny, extremism, queerphobia, transphobia, intimacy/relationships, sexual violence/rape culture, moral panic/scapegoating, representation/social media, gender fascism, political figures. Below is a table showing the frequency of each key word and where it was explored.

Table 1: Frequencies of Meta Subjects in Select Examples of Digital Activism Against Online Gendered Hate

Meta subject word list	Influencer Data Collection	Organization Data Collection	Total
Representation/Social Media	23	15	38
Intimacy/Relationships	23	13	36
Misogyny	28	7	35
Sexual Violence	22	11	33
Sexism	18	12	30
Masculinity	22	6	28
Transphobia	8	10	18
Moral Panic/Scapegoating	12	1	13
Gender Fascism	12	0	12
Queerphobia	2	10	12
Political Figures	8	3	11
Extremism	8	1	9
Femininity	3	2	5



Looking at the categories that include more than 25 occurrences across different content examples we see a conversation emerging around how social media is enabling a toxic combination of misogyny, sexism, and targeted violence against women and queer people that is structural in nature. After reviewing this important content, the structural issue at play is rape culture and as many of the content creators note, the perpetuation of rape culture in online environments is not being institutionally address to any satisfactory degree. To this point, much of the content highlighted either names instances of explicit rape culture and misogyny in both online and offline spaces or offers suggestions for mitigation and the protection and support of those targeted.

The highest cumulative concentration of content is around representation/social media. Much of the conversation in this area surrounds the censorship of feminist and other targeted voices on social media platforms. This trend has only increased over the last few years due to the passing of anti-trans legislation in Canada and the repealing of hate speech regulations by companies such as [Meta and X](#). This particular content thus speaks to the lack of regulation around the circulation of gendered hate and violence online and the direct consequence of this – making digital public spaces unsafe and inhospitable to women, gender and racialized minorities.

Intimacy/relationships, misogyny, sexism, and masculinity follow as some of the most highly discussed topics across the collected content. This includes explicit discussions of high profile cases of rape culture online and the troubling rise of non-consensual deep fakes, misogynist manosphere values, and what seems like a zero-sum game for boys and young men who don't ascribe to toxic masculinity. The take away from these is a concentrated effort to illustrate how unsafe the internet is for women, as well as gender and racialized minorities and how endemic the encouragement of gendered violence is in the digital spaces traversed by men and boys.



Much of the content we studied directly confronted and debunked the misogynistic and sexist content pushed out by manosphere influencers. Many of the posts highlight heightened anxiety surrounding gender and how to engage with others in romantic/sexual settings as well as how to support women's safety online. Importantly this content collectively situates these as structural issues where long-standing tropes of rape culture are being activated anew within the context of our current digital technologies. The loneliness of young men and the rise of anti-women sentiments are a symptom of our current social norms that prioritize individualism and feed off of patriarchal control, leading to increased rates of sexism and misogyny, alongside queerphobia and transphobia. This needs to be part of the conversation in spaces of education, government regulation, and in our communities.

We read the relationship between the themes emerging across different organizations and influencer content as a key indicator of the need for supportive systems that advance feminist-centered, relational education. Loneliness is an epidemic, but it is not the fault of feminism, queer and gender-nonconforming communities, or social progress, as manosphere spaces claim.

Next Steps

This research brief outlines only the first step in our larger project to collaboratively identify and document these strategies of feminist and leftist digital activism. We are currently conducting interviews and are holding roundtable discussions to help provide more insights into the experiences of what it means to be a Canadian influencer countering the current digital landscape. We hope that these research findings will culminate in a symposium centered around policy recommendations. Stay tuned for more reports through our website: <https://signalnetwork.org/>.



Suggested Resources

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