

Manolo Farci, Nicola Righetti

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Italian men's rights activism and online backlash against feminism

by MANOLO FARCI and NICOLA RIGHETTI

This paper addresses the role of Italian men's groups in fostering antifeminist sentiment against the background of a *masculinist political revival* (Mellström 2016; Kimmel 2015) in different parts of the world, where progress toward gender equality is countered by reactionary politics that invigorate family values, religious piety, nationalism and masculine pride (Kuhar, Paternotte 2017; Righetti 2016). This revival, however, is rather ambivalent, since it oscillates between a narrative explicitly hostile to feminism and a more subtle (albeit still problematic) postfeminist discourse that considers feminism anachronistic and lacking legitimacy because it has seemingly already been largely successful.

Previous studies in Italy have focused on the questions and challenges related to profeminist masculinity politics, looking at groups like *Maschile Plurale (Plural Masculinities)* or *Il Gruppo Uomini in Cammino (Men on the way)* that aim to rethink the traditional identities of men and that are in an open dialogue with feminism (Ruspini 2011). However, there is a lack of research devoted to analysing the influence of men's rights groups and their increasingly widespread online presence. Since the locus of debate and activism has migrated onto the Internet, the discursive tone and communicative politics of men's rights has changed substantially (Schmitz, Kazyak 2016). The technological affordances of online platforms have facilitated new ways of connecting men with misogynistic groups, creating consensus or echo chambers around particular material and contributing to increased misinformation, and further radicalization. Understanding the structure of their antifeminist rhetoric is vital to working out how best to respond to such movements.

1. *A masculinist backlash*

In recent years cyberspace has proven to be an eminently fertile forum for a new backlash against the feminist movement in contemporary American culture (Menziez 2008). This backlash appears to be more complex than the one previously described by Susan Faludi (1991) because its hostility to feminism is based on incompatible but coexisting fronts that cannot be reduced to a monolithic model (Blais, Dupuis-Déri 2012). Alongside a more conservative front that considers feminism to be nothing but the perversion of a traditional gender order (Walby 1993), we are witnessing the emergence of a more subtle form of antifeminist sentiment in the West which, while accepting some of the precepts of feminism, such as the principle of liberal equality, strongly rejects feminism as a political project (Nicholas, Agius 2017). As many scholars point out (Jordan 2016; Anderson 2014), this sentiment can be seen as a consequence of the complexification of the backlash caused by the prominence of postfeminist ideas and the refiguring of feminist concepts like *empowerment* and *choice* into an individualistic discourse that renders any collective action irrelevant and unnecessary (McRobbie 2009). According to Catherine Rottenberg (2018) postfeminism coincides with the increasing hegemony of neoliberal rationality, which produces subjects who are individualized, entrepreneurial, and entirely responsible for their own well-being.

Post and liberal feminist discourses appear to be paradoxically linked with the antifeminist rhetoric carried on by men's rights activists. Many of these groups are not explicitly hostile to feminism; on the contrary, as in the postfeminist narrative, they state that gender equality is socially and morally desirable. However, drawing on the same language of neoliberal governmentality and gender-blind individualism that denies the need for a structural analysis of inequality, they insist that there is no need for feminism anymore because discrimination against women has already been overcome (Clatterbaugh 1997). Claiming that male power is a *feminist fallacy* (Farrell 1993), these groups end up producing a false symmetry between the sexes designed to «mask the oppressive relations between women and men» (Messner 1998, 258). This kind of narrative has shaped the current *masculinist backlash*, which is marked by its ambivalence towards feminism and gender politics and by the mobilization of certain postfe-

minist tropes. Indeed, Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) maintain that significant gender inequalities do still exist; however, this discrimination affects primarily men, not women, thus designating gender equality to be a goal of their collective anti-feminist politics. At the same time, akin to postfeminism, their use of the language of sex roles depoliticizes gender and tends to dissolve it into a matter of individual female responsibility.

The current masculinity backlash, which has become increasingly evident across a range of online networks and platforms, is comprised of different phenomena, such as men's rights activism, Incel (involuntary celibates), MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way) and Pickup artist (PUA) among others (Nagle 2017). Although it cannot be subsumed within a single entity, this loose confederacy of different groups, broadly known as the Manosphere, share the same «Red Pill» philosophy. This name derives from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, in which the main character is given a choice of taking a blue pill to stay in the safe but fake world he has always known, or to take the red pill and tumble down the «rabbit hole» into the harsh real world. Originating on the Reddit forum in 2012, the Red Pill philosophy is based on the belief that feminism is intrinsically prejudicial toward men, that this fact is suppressed by the intellectual conformity and political correctness of the establishment's liberal politics, and that men must fight back against a misandrist culture and resist a world that is becoming more difficult for them (Ging 2017). In this sense, the omnipresent reference to terms like misandry allows ideologically diverse communities to appropriate the language of leftist identity politics and share a victimized stance (Marwick, Caplan 2018) which then helps them to sustain their own ideologies and beliefs. This language is about their feelings of pain. In fact, many of their assumptions are indisputable precisely because affectively charged discourses do not need evidence: emotions cannot be denied, one can only experience them (Allan 2015).

Most men's rights rhetoric across the West functions as a channel for a new politics of emotion and personalization that facilitates greater creativity and ideological fluidity. This seems to appeal more to the younger generation, many of whom do not adhere strongly to hegemonic masculinity but fall into the geek/nerd category (Massanari 2015). The so-called *beta males* reject some embodiments of traditional masculine norms, such as physical activity and sexual prowess, but they often adopt

hegemonic masculinity strategically, when it is desirable (Connell, Messerschmidt 2005). As Ging notes (2017), the ideological elasticity of this hybrid masculinity is not restricted to geek communities but has been spreading among mainstream men's rights groups. These masculine formulations serve to create what Dignam and Rohlinger (2019) call an oppositional framework, through which men can understand their lives and cultivate a sense of *we-ness*. Although such cultivation of oppositional consciousness does not presume that individuals will engage in political action, the ascendancy of Red Pill communities from marginal online forums to electoral politics and today's White House demonstrates that if men act collectively in the name of their (white) pro-male identities, they can affect political change.

2. *Methodology*

This study is aimed at exploring the Italian MRA network on Facebook, the most widely used social media in Italy, in order to expose some of the key drivers of anti-feminist ideologies and the threats they pose to feminism. The research is centred on the following guiding questions: RQ1) What types of men's groups are present on Italian Facebook? RQ2) Which social representations of women and feminists emerge in these groups' discussions and how do they spark criticism of the feminist movement?

To answer these questions the Italian Facebook men's rights movement was reconstructed using Netvizz (Rieder 2013), an application that enables the retrieval of networks of pages interconnected through likes. The module requires one to specify a starting page (the *seed* page) in order to collect other pages that this page likes. In the present study, the page *Antisessismo* (*Antisexism*), a prominent MRA page with over 45,000 followers, was selected as the seed. The resulting network showed 3,177 nodes and 43,933 edges and included Italian and non-Italian Facebook pages.

To detect the Italian pages, a web scraping script in R, a free software environment for statistical computing (Munzert *et al.* 2014), was written in order to automatically collect the descriptions included in the information section of the Facebook pages that composed the network. The dataset enriched with

page details was then analysed by the authors, who labelled each page as Italian or non-Italian and as pertinent or not to the MRA. A total of 46 Facebook pages directly connected to the Italian men's movement were found (fig. 1). Following the use of an inductive methodology (Strauss, Corbin 1998), each page was first identified according to its topic and then reduced to seven more general categories (tab. 1). The content of the posts and the user's comments was then qualitatively analysed to answer the research questions, going back in time from the date of the analysis (April 2019) and moving forward until *theoretical saturation* was reached.

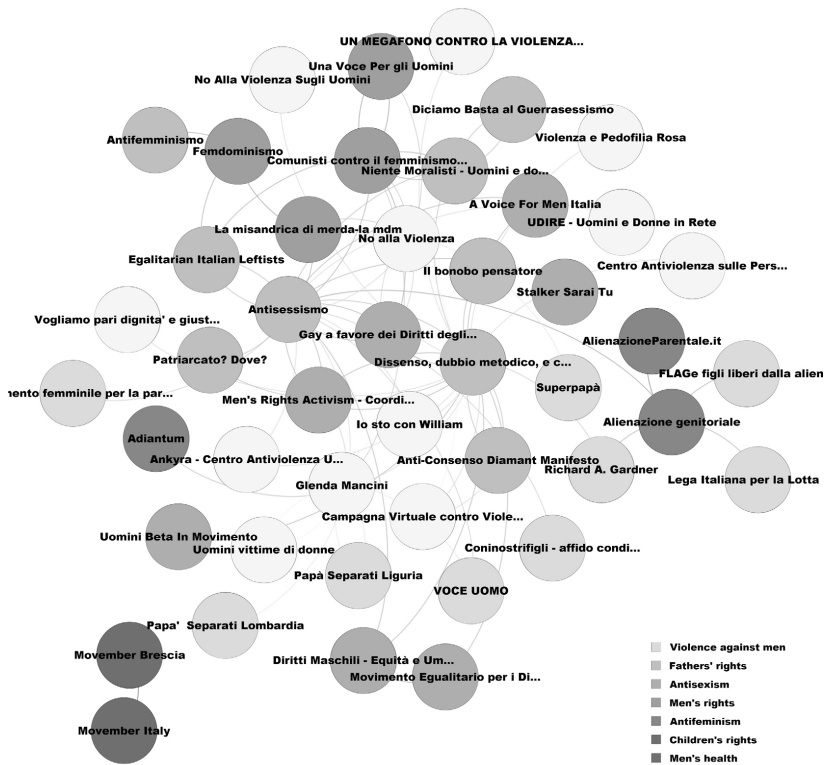


FIG. 1. The Italian men's movement network analysed in the present study. Different shades represent the page categories. The network is visualized through Gephi (https://gephi.org/) with Force Atlas 2 algorithm (LinLog mode).

TAB. 1. *Categories and frequency of the detected Italian men's movement Facebook pages*

Page Category	N	%
Violence against men	12	26,1%
Fathers' rights	9	19,6%
Antisexism	9	19,6%
Men's rights	7	15,2%
Antifeminism	4	8,7%
Children's rights	3	6,5%
Men's health	2	4,3%
Total	46	100,0%

3. Results

Although the men's rights groups identified by our research constitute a conglomeration of different assemblages, the study found two dominant trends in the Italian MRA network. First, the pages revolving around violence against men and fathers' and children's rights usually appeal to the anger of those who have undergone separation and divorce (Flood 2012); these groups promote rather conservative views and a more *aggressive antifeminism* which makes women the main target of their reactionary and violent assertions. Second, *antisexist* pages, focusing more on the costs of being male, are likely to resonate with those mostly younger men who feel disempowered by the shift in gender roles in recent decades; these groups demonstrate an apparently progressive sensibility that makes their *antifeminism ideologically oriented* more against feminists than women in general.

3.1. *Violence against men, fathers' and children's rights*

The last two decades have witnessed numerous legislative, political and educational initiatives regarding family law, violence against women and gender equality, making women's issues increasingly visible in the mass media and public opinion and challenging long-established aspects of masculine identity (Taurino

2003). During this same period, the first men's rights groups started to appear in Italy. While all previous associations of the 90s were mainly dedicated to fathers' support in their experience of divorce and fights over child custody, these new formations appeared more interested in identifying a wide range of injustices and harms suffered by men and in blaming women and feminism for their problems. An important moment in the rise of the movement was March 26, 2012, when the *Manifesto of the Italian Male Movement* (MoMas) was signed by several MRA organizations together with some politicians and the *Movement for Life*, an Italian Catholic antiabortion association founded in 1975. These years also witnessed the appearance of considerable number of pages dedicated to men's issues on Facebook, mostly revolving around violence against men and children and questioning the enforcement of prevention measures against domestic abuse. The blog *Stalker sarai tu (You Will Be a Stalker)* was created to oppose Law n. 38/2009 that instituted the crime of stalking in the Italian legal system; *A Voice for Men Italia* was founded to reaffirm the legal principle of gender equality against the current situation in which «men are discriminated». Other Facebook pages, like *No alla violenza (No to Violence)* or *No alla violenza sugli uomini (No to Violence Against Men)*, dedicate particular attention to the media coverage of the stories of female cruelty to prove that women can be as evil as men (Gotell, Dutton 2016), like the drama of William Pezzullo, a young man disfigured by acid by his jealous ex-girlfriend. By continually sharing articles that focus on cases of false rape accusations, domestic abuse, sexual assault and paedophilia committed by women, these groups claim to oppose the entrenched narrative of women as victims and men as perpetrators. Therefore, the problem of male violence against women dissolves in the image of men as subjugated, scapegoated, and silenced victims of women who are also portrayed as responsible for men's violence, when it does happen. Some men justify their resentment against women by blaming their partners for provocative or humiliating behaviour (Dragiewicz 2011). What emerges from many comments is the figure of a manipulative partner: for example, one finds comments like:

I know no man whose wife doesn't make him suffer. Violence is often psychological, and subtle... [women] say they have a headache so as not to

make love, they always badmouth other men, or praise richer husbands, or they complain about [our] sexual performance while praising other husbands... it is a constant war, women do nothing, but anything we do is always wrong.

This trope is accompanied by an image of an abusive mother:

Mothers are those who educate children... mothers are those who perform female circumcision on their daughters and tell kids that being gay sucks or that whoever doesn't provide for his wife is a piece of sh*t...

Thus, women are said to be at the root of men's violence, because they are responsible for raising children. Therefore, since men become cruel because of women, «women should talk among themselves and try to break this vicious circle of violence».

Another common figure is that of sexual manipulators and/or gold diggers, that emerges even on more moderate pages like *Superpapà (Superdad)*. Generally representing the idea of a spouse as an idealized and romantic complement of man's existence, this page still contains some spiteful comments in response to a post talking about a woman driving a SUV, purportedly the gift of an alleged «rich husband», who stole the parking spot of its author: «Who knows what kind of 'services' she had to offer to her husband to get that car?». Even though such comments do not seem to be widespread on the page, the remark was neither censored by the administrators, nor criticized by other members of the community, which may suggest that the romantic attitude to a woman can quickly give way to a violent reaction when she steps out of her traditional role as «quiet and lovely caregiver».

Through an insistent repetition of these stereotypes against women, MRA groups strive to legitimate their rhetoric of «privileged women and exploited men». Feminism is said to be the power that monopolizes the legal and political systems, favouring «these shameless lunatics who kill us with false accusations or by tearing us from our children's lives or literally murdering us». As a result, they oppose any legal intervention or socio-economic programs that favour women, stating that they only serve the interests of «ruthless and corrupt feminist lawyers» who help «divorced slanderous mothers to take away children» and receive substantial alimony payments. By mobilizing men against the feminist movement these pages end up reaffirming the legitimacy of a traditional patriarchal system.

3.2. Antisexist groups

A more sophisticated antifeminism emanates from seemingly less aggressive antisexist and equalitarian groups like *Antisessismo*, or *Diritti Maschili – Equità e Umanità* (*Men's rights – Equity and Humanity*). At first glance, many of the issues raised by these groups seem to intersect with feminist discourses: both argue that a rigid notion of socially acceptable male/female behaviour has negative consequences for men, limiting their self-expression (Seidler 1989) and creating unrealistic expectations of physical strength and financial success (Kaufman 1994). At the same time, their discourses rest on an individualized concept of victimization that rejects gender as a symbolic system that not only shapes how we experience and comprehend ourselves as men and women, but that also intersects with other aspects of how we experience the world. These groups use a distinctive set of discursive strategies – reverse discrimination, victimization, *whataboutism* – to discredit any feminist analysis of structural and political inequalities as unnecessary and unreasonable. These groups also caricature feminists as an out-of-control angry women's rights activists who mask their unspoken hate against men behind the struggle for gender equality. Feminists are described as «deceitful», «despotic», having «persecution fantasies», and «chronically dissatisfied»: «They DON'T want to know anything about us at all, they hate us. FULL STOP. And when they seem 'to be open to a dialogue' sure enough they lie, pretend, and change the subject to patriarchy... trust me... few people in the world are as mean as feminists». If the figure of the angry and unladylike feminist is used to make the goals of feminism repellent (Anderson 2015), the image of the brainwashed feminist targets the moral self-flattery of these women who see sexism and inequality everywhere. They are called «self-obsessed», «prickly», «hypersensitive», incapable of dealing with opposing opinions and seeking support for their emotional problems in the safe sanctuary of feminist culture. Brainwashed feminists are unable to think with their own mind: «90% of the time you discuss something with a feminist, she simply doesn't understand what you write, they are functional illiterates... you say logical things and they respond with slogans... it's disturbing».

Criticism of a different nature comes from another group *Uomini Beta* (*Beta Men*) which characteristically applies a socialist

critique to the matter and rejects the role of men as oppressors assigned to them by what they call a feminist revision of history. *Uomini Beta* claims that contemporary neoliberal feminists are a tool of capitalism and fight against the oppression of women irrespective of the class structure, ignoring that women have more sexual power than men. Although the page presents itself as a forum for critical reflection, many of its users endorse this idea of an irresponsible ally of the capitalist system: «Feminism is a misleading, manipulative, sexist and interclass ideology that serves the dominant system»; the neoliberal feminist is «a parasite, demanding ‘pink quotas’ for women managers and politicians, while men break their backs in the mines».

In spite of their differences, all of these discourses perpetuate a normative gender dualism between «what the West has characterised as masculine (logic, reason, conflict, individualism) [...] and what has been, and continues to be, feminised (emotion, collectivity, cooperation, being other-oriented)» (Nicholas, Agius 2017, 37). Consequently, the apparently less abusive statement «I don’t hate women but feminists» ends up legitimizing the same misogynistic arguments against women that can be found in the more orthodox men’s movements.

4. *Discussion*

The *masculinist backlash* has started to spread across Italian MRA communities on Facebook as a reaction to the changes and challenges in the social organization of gender in the country over the last two decades. Studying the phenomenon, we have discovered that the two dominant trends circulating in the network address different aspects of men’s movements. The pages revolving around domestic violence and father’s rights represent the interests of specific groups reacting against a perceived threat to their rights; they mobilize their members not only against the feminist movement but also for the defence of traditional society and the traditional gender order. Their anti-feminist rhetoric is imbued with *heteropaternalism*, and, as a result, their assumptions about sexuality and family life considerably overlap with the political stances of right-wing parties regarding divorce, child custody, same-sex civil unions and gender education at school. By contrast, the antisexist pages address the costs of assuming

the masculine role; they endorse a social construction theory of gender, refusing biological determinism and (sometimes) supporting LGBT rights. As Clatterbaugh (1997) has highlighted: «This perspective shares with feminism a rejection of the conservative ideal of traditional gender roles. But the men's rights perspective rejects these roles not because they give men power over women but because they give women power over men – and they are lethal to men» (*ibidem*, 79). As a consequence, their antifeminism is a defensive posture permeated by a sense of *victimhood* and one that offers a powerful gateway to the misogynistic discourses of the Incel and MGTOW. Indeed, they all share similar ideas about men being subjected to the power of women (and feminists).

As noted above, the language of gender roles seems particularly persuasive to these groups because it proposes a cultural model of the world where there is no patriarchy, only sexism, which is equally harmful to both women and men. In this way, the seemingly egalitarian stance of MRAs taps into the same neoliberal notion of individual capacity embraced by postfeminism (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009) that sees systemic sexism as a problem that can be solved simply by individual's overcoming it. In addition, these pages use research studies and statistics regarding existing issues – men's health problems or higher suicide and mortality rates – to underplay broader gender inequality in society, such as women's statistical overrepresentation as victims of rape, by labelling them inaccurate or biased. To do this, these groups adopt an affective mode of addressing the public that Banet-Weiser (2018) calls *sentimental earnestness*, and that is exploited in many recent feminist campaigns that present girls and women as being «in crisis» – a crisis due to insecurity or a lack of self-confidence, among other things. MRAs mirror the same logic but in a way that distorts and transforms the target of empowerment so that it is men who are discriminated against and in need of recuperation and reparation.

Although the ideological roots of these groups are likely to be dissimilar, what unites them is the same narrative of feminist decadence and betrayal that characterizes the contemporary online community of men's movements in the Anglosphere. These findings align with the results of other studies suggesting that while the more orthodox men's movement is in decline (Ging 2017), the migration of these groups into the realm of social

media has facilitated the transformation of antifeminist discourses into a sometimes illogical and contradictory system of shared interconnections and links, where a *kinder* form of men's rights discourse, one more likely to resonate with educated young people who do not want to appear backward misogynists (Messner 2016), can be juxtaposed with the growing anger of white men against women and minorities (Kimmel 2015).

This *adaptability* of antifeminist rhetoric is significantly shaped by the technologies and economies of the Internet. First, the logics of *platform capitalism* (Srnicek 2016) – composed of metrics, numbers, clicks, and *likes* – enable digital media to hyperbolize and bifurcate political positions, thus helping to generate a discursive climate of extreme views even on «egalitarian» pages, as administrators refrain from moderating the hateful comments of the users in order to increase visibility. Second, the algorithmic clustering of social media creates connections between different groups, based on similar interests, content and shared users (Gillespie 2015). These groups authorize and validate one another, even if they give the appearance of being distinct. Third, the technologies and affordances of the media environment contribute to creating a form of *mobilization* that is connective but not necessarily collective, as the information-sharing practices are not coordinated or planned, but driven by expressive needs (Bennett, Segerberg 2012). In other words, online antifeminist discourses are collaboratively organized through affectively charged posts that invite people's diverse performative responses and connect their feelings of engagement. Individuals imitate, repeat, and comment on posts without necessitating a collective negotiation of what they mean, what their consequences might be, or how they align with a particular ideology (Papacharissi 2015).

Thus, antifeminist discourse takes shape around *affective practices* that make little distinction between speech acts formulating reasons and thoughts, or action plans and goals, and speech acts formulating emotions (Wetherell 2012). On the one hand, they offer a set of *feeling rules* that men can use to translate their emotional intensities into pleasing and relatable posts, the posts that give them the right feelings at the right time and resonate with their lives (Kanai 2019). On the other hand, we can see how these affective practices, spilling from one group to another, sketch out the boundaries of a particular community (Döveling *et al.* 2018). That is, affective practices are *onto-formative*, meaning

that they work to bring about a differentiation between *us* and *them*, whereby *they* are constituted as the cause of *our* feelings (Ahmed 2004). In this sense, the stereotypical representations of women and feminists can be considered affective responses, «which work to align subjects with collectives by attributing *others* as the *source* of their feelings» (*ibidem*, 1).

5. Conclusion

The above findings involve important theoretical implications for future research on men, masculinities and emotions (de Boise, Hearn 2017), especially in the context of digital culture where technological affordances facilitate the circulation of feelings as well as help construct alliances of emotional and relational congruence. Even though affective practices can be easily channelled into anger and rage, reaffirming normative gender constructs, the continuous appeals to emotions and feelings may be considered a signal of men in crisis, men who desperately want to speak about their anxieties over masculinity but can find no way to do so. If *feeling at ease* is the quintessential aspect of a masculine stance and constitutive of hegemonic masculinity, men who are nervous and express their emotional discomfort represent a potential break from standard patriarchal gender ideology (Reeser, Gottzén 2018). In this context, regarding such discomfort only as a strategic call for victimhood may be counterproductive. As Gotell and Dutton (2016) point out: «Feminist denial of the realities (though unequal) of men's victimization plays into the vilifying rhetoric of MRAs» (*ibidem*, 76). Thus, adopting a *gender-inclusive* view of victimization – overcoming the *natural* association of masculinity with violence, conceptualizing the violence between men as a gender problem too or accepting vulnerability as part of a shared cultural conception of masculinity – may create the potential for a dialogue between feminists and those moderate members of the men's rights movement who are *genuinely* interested in challenging gender norms ideology.

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Italian men's rights activism and online backlash against feminism

In recent years, we have witnessed an *online backlash* against feminism (Menzies 2008). This backlash is mobilizing a loose confederacy of interconnected communities from more traditional men's rights activists (MRAs) to the new misogynistic techno-cultures of the Manosphere (Nagle 2015). Despite their differences, in all of these groups, feminism is reconfigured as intrinsically prejudicial and threatening towards men (Blais, Dupuis-Déri 2012) and labelled as nothing more than misandry (Marwick, Caplan 2018). The use of misandry as synonym for «man-hating» serves both misogynist subcultures and more moderate men's rights interests, in that it allows these groups to appropriate the language of identity politics in order to place men as the silenced victims of a reverse discrimination in every political, economic, and social arena (Savran 1992; Farrell 1993) and reinforce their sense of aggrieved entitlement (Kimmel 2015). Situating their belief system in a social vacuum that fails to consider intersecting social dynamics, MRAs construct an over-simplified cultural model of the social world that isolates practices and phenomena that they believe are uniquely harmful to men (Schmitz, Kazyak 2016). In this way, their anti-feminist rhetoric takes the form of a neoliberal and seemingly neutral strategy that avoids any analysis of structural inequalities in favour of a common-sense celebration of individual choice for women and men (Nicholas, Agius 2018). This «*pro-male*» *anti-feminism* (Ging 2017) is indicative of a wider complex backlash (McRobbie 2004) that both accepts some of the precepts of feminism such as the principle of liberal equality, alongside a strong rejection of feminism as a label and political project.

Given the theoretical framework outlined above, the general aim of this study is to explore the Italian MRA and Manosphere online network to take stock of the current situation and the risk it represents for feminism. More precisely, the study aims to unveil some of the key drivers of anti-feminist ideologies and will be guided by the following questions: which representations of feminism and feminists emerge in Italian online communities and how they spark criticism of feminism? Is neoliberal feminism a specific target of this criticism? Are MRA and manosphere communities both represented online and, if so, how are they bound together? How does the Italian situation differ from the international one?

Keywords: men's rights, anti-feminism, social media activism, misogyny, affective practices.

Manolo Farci, Dipartimento di Scienze della Comunicazione, Studi Umanistici e Internazionali (DISCUI), Università di Urbino, Via Saffi 15, I-61029 Urbino. E-mail: manolo.farci@uniurb.it.

Nicola Righetti, Dipartimento di Scienze della Comunicazione, Studi Umanistici e Internazionali (DISCUI), Università di Urbino, Via Saffi 15, I-61029 Urbino. E-mail: nicola.righetti@uniurb.it.

